



deviations:
submission
by Chris Owen &
Jodi Payne

CONTACT

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by Jodi Payne, Chris Owen

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Chapter 1

There were many truths in this life, Tobias decided as he knotted his tie for the evening. Death comes to all, taxes must be paid, and fortieth birthdays were a reason for one's friends to buy nice wine, make lavish cakes, and throw dinner parties. Forty-first birthdays, on the other hand, went unremarked upon by all but one's nearest and dearest. As he had cards from a few friends and a message from Phan, he thought he'd just about exhausted the expected well wishes.

But turning forty-one did not mean he was dead or unable to make his own fun. He'd made his arrangements for the evening, planning with as much detail as he could-which, admittedly, wasn't much. He knew what to wear for his mood; he knew where he'd go and what he'd eat; he knew what he wanted. But there were an amazing number of variables at play, more than he usually allowed.

He was thinking about that as he straightened his dinner jacket and pocketed his keys. It was a highly planned evening of spontaneity that lay ahead of him, the novelty of which made him smile. Perhaps letting the fates blow once in a while was a good thing. In any case, he'd find out shortly; the worst he could do was have an evening of fine dining and a bottle of wine. The best would be far, far better, but it was rare to find exactly what he sought.

Tobias ran a comb through his hair one last time as he waited for his car, the light in the entry to his condo making the few stray silver hairs shine among the darker brown. Forty-one wasn't too old, he decided. It was a fine age to be,

the height of his success and skill. He lacked for nothing, really.

Only someone to share his birthday with.

The phone rang and he pushed the thought away, startled to realize it wasn't the house phone signaling his car, but his landline. "Dr. Vincent," he said as he answered. God, he hoped it wasn't an emergency-he really wasn't dressed to have a lamb be born, or to nurse a horse through colic.

"Good evening, Doctor, I'm sorry to call like this. I'm sure you have plans," came the smooth and cheerful voice of his elderly housekeeper.

"Oh, Mrs. Miller, hello. I do, yes-I'm just on my way out, but I have a few minutes." He smiled to himself ruefully; he would talk for as long as the lady decided, and he knew it. No matter how successful he got or how many birthdays he had, there would always be Mrs. Miller to defer to.

"I'm merely calling to wish you a happy birthday," she said, "and to ask if you'll be out to the farm this weekend."

Tobias' smile grew. "Thank you, Mrs. Miller, that's really very kind of you. And yes, I'm planning to drive out tomorrow afternoon until Monday."

"Should I tell Peter not to come then, or would you like him to exercise the horses?"

"No, I'll do it," he decided. It was one of the best things about going to the country, and he wouldn't happily pay someone to do it for him when he was there. The house phone buzzed at him, two shorts. "Thank you again, Mrs. Miller."

"I'll see you tomorrow, Doctor," she said, and he could picture her grinning. "Enjoy your evening."

"I hope to," he said with a smile. He hung up, buzzed the front desk, and headed to his club.

* * * *

The car pulled up in front of the building and Tobias lowered his window for the security guard. "Good evening, Tobias," the man said with a smile that was entirely professional, despite his use of Tobias' first name. It was a club rule that all members were to be treated equally until there was an agreement in place between individuals, and as last names were not used at all in order to preserve anonymity, given names were expected.

"Timothy," Tobias said with a warm smile. "When did you start out here?" The last time Tobias had been to the club Timothy had been inside.

"About five months ago. I like it, though I'm called back inside if needed." Timothy made a note of the number on Tobias' membership card and smiled at him again. "Have a nice evening, Tobias. And welcome back."

The car moved slowly ahead and stopped at the wide front steps; by the time Tobias had opened his door the driver was there, and the front door was opening.

"Tobias! Timothy said you were here."

Tobias shook his head and smiled again. "I trust you don't mind me appearing again after all this time?" he asked Bradford.

Bradford met him on the steps and shook his hand. Tobias' friendship with Bradford went back far too many years to count anymore, and even after Tobias' long absence from the club, the man's firm handshake felt as familiar and comforting as a favorite sweater. "The day we turn you from here, my friend," Bradford told him with a warm smile, "is the day I close the old place up. Now, come in! Eat. Enjoy your birthday. I have a room reserved for you, as you requested. You're not meeting anyone are you?"

The club had a small, exclusive membership made up of carefully screened Dominant and submissive men. These men had been screened not just for their level of training but also style and personality, thereby keeping the membership diverse and varied. It wasn't a BDSM club in the common sense; it was more a place for men to meet, socialize and fulfill each others' needs and fantasies in a safe and monitored environment. Bradford had taken over management of the club a number of years ago, and eventually assumed ownership as well when his mentor, a smooth, confident Dom who had also been a mentor of Tobias', was ready to retire. Bradford was a natural host; he knew his membership well, and he had a knack for making everyone feel right at home.

Tobias shook his head again and allowed himself to be led inside. The solid doors closed behind him and he took a deep breath, immediately relaxing. There was just something about the dark interior, the plush fabrics and deep wingback chairs that called to him. Or perhaps it was the crossed whips decorating the walls.

"I don't have a guest, if that's what you mean," he told Bradford as they made their way to the small bar. "But I'm open to possibilities."

"I was hoping you would say that." Bradford suddenly looked speculative. "In which case..."

"Wait," Tobias said, laughing. "I'm not saying I want you to find me a date. I'm just saying I want to have a pleasant evening—a nice meal, people I like around me—"

"And it's been eight months since you've been here, Tobias. I know you spend your weekends on the farm and your weeknights in town. I'd certainly have heard if you had someone new." He shook his head sadly, making Tobias grin. "No, my friend, you deserve to play. And I might just have the right someone for you."

Tobias tilted his head and considered his friend. Bradford had been running the club for a number of years, had been an integral part of Tobias' own training. There was perhaps no one more capable of knowing the type of partner Tobias needed, liked ... desired.

"Tell me," Tobias invited, accepting a glass of ice water from the bartender.

Bradford beamed at him, delighted. "I can, and will, do you one better. Come."

Tobias had little choice but to follow as Bradford crossed the room with purpose to a small table. Tobias, being behind, could see little other than a man sitting alone. He rose quickly as Bradford made a direct path to him.

"Tobias," Bradford said grandly, "I would like you to meet Noah. Noah, this is Tobias. It is my opinion that the two of

you are well suited. Of course, you may decide otherwise, but I encourage you to at least discuss the matter." He then bowed his head and stepped back, wishing them good evening with a knowing grin before turning and walking away, leaving Tobias to face this stranger alone, knowing no more than his name.

Chapter 2

Due to long practice and natural inclination, Tobias studied the man before him, sweeping him with a fast look. He noticed first the masculine squareness of Noah's jaw, and the relaxed posture in his shoulders. Black leather vest, round collared dress shirt, blue jeans that hugged and wrinkled in all the right places, all topped off with brown hair shaved tight over his ears and the back and just barely long enough to tug on up top.

"Hello," Tobias said calmly. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Noah offered his hand and met Tobias' eyes, though neither gesture seemed to sit comfortably with him. "The pleasure is mine," he replied, his voice sweet and his smile handsome. He seemed a bit better prepared for this meeting than Tobias had been. "I was just going to order some dinner, would you like to join me?"

Tobias smiled slightly. "Actually, I called ahead and made arrangements with the kitchen staff for something special. Please, join me in the dining room-if you don't care for trout I'm sure there will be something to satisfy your tastes."

Noah blinked a moment, the invitation clearly unexpected though apparently not unwelcome. He nodded and stepped out from behind the table. He was taller than he'd looked a moment ago, and broader as well, though still shorter than Tobias. "That's very kind, thank you. I love trout."

"Wonderful." Tobias allowed his smile to grow and turned smartly on his heel. He gestured with his glass toward the door of the bar area and across the wide hall to the dining

room. "I believe they have a table for me as well." He walked ahead of Noah, barely conscious of the fact. It wasn't until they were in the hall itself that he noticed and cut his stride slightly.

The dining room was half-empty, but he knew that they would be seated against the far wall. He had no idea why, but it had always been that way; no matter who was waiting tables, he was always taken to the same general area.

"Sir!"

Tobias suppressed both a grin and an eyeroll as a slight young man bounded over to him, his apron flapping. "Pup. Mind yourself," he said gently.

For that he got a grin and a wink. "Yes, sir. Table for two?"

Tobias sighed dramatically and nodded. "Really, Brian, try to at least act like a waiter when you're at work," he teased.

Noah covered a grin with the backs of his fingers and nodded a greeting to Brian, then followed Tobias to the table. Tobias noted with some interest that Noah waited for him to sit first, seemingly out of habit, before pulling out a chair for himself.

"Would you like something to drink?" Tobias asked as he shook out his napkin.

"San Pellegrino for me, please? With a twist," Noah answered smoothly.

Tobias nodded to Brian. "Ice water is fine for me, and Noah will be joining me for the trout, thank you."

Brian nodded once and flashed them both a grin before darting away.

"You do know," Tobias said thoughtfully, "that we've just become the discussion in the kitchen?"

Noah looked over his shoulder as Brian disappeared around a corner then looked back at Tobias. "Really? Are you that popular?" He leaned back in his chair. "Forgive me, I don't mean to be rude, but ... I'm here nearly every weekend and I can't say I've ever seen you around before. How do you know Brian?"

Tobias sipped his water as he studied the man before him. A player, a trained sub, that much was obvious. But at the club every weekend and, Tobias assumed, usually unattached, which meant he was looking for something. Interesting. Military haircut, but without the usual bravado-though that could have been trained out of him.

He'd learned long ago that there was little to be gained from hiding the truth for no reason, so he set his glass down and sat back in his chair. "I've been a member here for nineteen years," he said. "My visits have been somewhat sporadic over the last few years, however. Brian and I had a session about a year ago-he was badly in need of a spanking."

The last was timed to coincide with Brian's arrival at the table with Noah's drink. He set it down and whispered something to Noah, then fled.

Noah snorted and grinned, then laughed softly. "He corroborates your story," he informed Tobias, reaching for his lime to squeeze it into his glass. "Nineteen years. I see why we're now the subject of discussion in the kitchen. Impressive." He picked up his glass and raised it to Tobias

before taking a sip. "So what brings you here tonight in particular, other than dinner, of course?"

There was, Tobias allowed, also a time to decide how much truth to let out. In this case it might just be best to keep the important aspects to the fore-especially with a man who used words like corroborates. "Probably the same thing that brings you here-a need to fulfill, a hunger to satisfy."

"Bradford hasn't steered me wrong yet," Noah said and swallowed back another sip of his water. "So I'm going to presume I'm capable of what you're looking for, unless you see any reason to feel differently?"

"That depends entirely on what your particular taste is," Tobias said evenly. "There's little sense in going into any situation blind, as I'm sure you're aware. That Bradford thinks we'd do well together is a good sign, but we can make up our minds. Do you like pain?"

Noah leaned backing his chair and looked at Tobias thoughtfully. "That's a relative question. Do I like stubbing my toe on the coffee table, no. Do I appreciate the sting of a flogger wielded by a man that knows how to use it? Absolutely. I'm rather versatile and I have a lot of depth in that regard, though I'd prefer it to be purposeful."

"Purposeful." Tobias nodded slowly and saw Brian returning with a tray. "For punishment or discipline?" he asked. "You may wish to wait a moment before answering."

Brian, trained to recognize the signs of negotiation, waited until Tobias nodded before approaching this time. Quickly and efficiently he began to lay out the plates, placing Tobias' carefully in front of him.

Noah sat up. "This smells great." He smiled and set his glass down on the table. "Can I get another?" he asked, pointing to it. "Thanks." He waited until Brian had moved away before answering and, Tobias noted, didn't pick up his fork. "Tonight? Discipline. My terms are simple: no humiliation, water sports, full deprivation or cages, the usual limits with regard to marks."

Tobias nodded. "What tools do you like? I can use them all, and well, but I prefer a flogger or crop. And do you have limits on bondage, aside from full deprivation?" He picked up his fork and flaked the trout carefully. "Oh, this is lovely," he murmured as the meat came off the bone.

"Crops and floggers are fine, whatever toys turn you on," Noah grinned at Tobias and tried a bite of the trout. "Very nice," he commented and mulled over another bite before continuing. "Hm. Bondage I'll defer to your comfort level, I'm broad in that regard as well-oh, and I don't feel the need for safe words ... unless that makes you uncomfortable?" Noah was a bit more confident about meeting his eyes this time, and seemed to be studying Tobias' reaction carefully.

Tobias raised an eyebrow and set his fork down. "Only in the sense that it's incredibly stupid. You'll use both a warning word and a safeword with me." He picked up his glass and leaned back in his chair, watching the man.

Noah didn't agree or disagree immediately. Instead he took a taste of the rice pilaf and considered it carefully before swallowing. His words felt like a test, as if Noah were trying to size him up without asking direct questions. "You know, I joined this club for a reason. The Doms here are well

screened. Most I've had sessions with are quite skilled and know their own abilities-within this pool of men, I don't think it's quite as stupid as you seem to feel."

Tobias found the man intriguing, though he doubted very much that Noah would use a safeword at this point even if he needed it. He wasn't sure if he could trust him to play entirely safely, which meant ... which meant that they would play Tobias' way. Entirely.

Oh, this was a lovely birthday gift. He'd have to thank Bradford, even if Noah didn't.

"All right," he said, finishing his trout and turning to the rice at last. "My way. Two words of your choice, or we don't play. Bondage choice is mine, I'll use a flogger, no warm up, and you give me a convincing reason why you need to be disciplined. No blood, no marks, but you will ache. We stop when you say the word or I tire. I may start again. If you're interested in actually giving up real control when it matters, we can discuss that once you've earned a little trust. Oh, and do you want to be fucked?"

Noah nodded and seemed satisfied by Tobias' rules, appearing to be just as intrigued with Tobias. He washed down what was evidently his last bite of a still more than half-full plate and put his fork down. "Fine. Yellow and red, we'll discuss real control when and if you feel it's appropriate, dinner was a fine warm up, and sex is preferable in my opinion, but then let's see where the session takes us. I'll leave the do-or-don't up to you. We have an agreement?"

Smiling at the man's attitude, Tobias finished a mouthful of rice and gathered another, taking his time. He'd always found

the opening negotiations to be an apéritif of sorts, and this one was no exception. Noah was a complete unknown and already wonderfully complex. "I'd say so," he said in a low voice, looking at Noah to watch him submit. To enjoy it. "Yes."

Noah nodded, took one more long sip of his water, then straightened his shoulders, folded his hands in his lap and dropped his eyes to the table. "If it pleases you, sir, and since we are working with safe words," Noah paused, choosing his words carefully. "I need most to be still and to let go. To trust. It's been too long since I've been able to do that." He sighed, and it was clear to Tobias that Noah was giving him not teasing, playful words to fill an evening, but an honest account of his needs. They weren't given lightly, and Tobias had to wonder if Noah was this open with everyone, or if he had seen something in Tobias that made him want to take a more honest leap. "I need to focus on pleasing you, and not require reasons where there is only your will. I need to fully submit."

Tobias said nothing for a moment, merely ate his rice and let himself settle into the proper headspace. "All right then," he said in a low voice. "You may kneel beside me while I finish my supper, and then we'll go upstairs. You will be still, but you needn't be silent; if you have questions, feel free to ask, though I will answer at my discretion."

"Thank you, sir," Noah answered softly. He stood, moved alongside Tobias and knelt slowly at his side.

Tobias watched him, pleased that the man had good posture. His back was straight, his head was up and his eyes

were down. His hands, folded in his lap again, were still. He was definitely well trained; Tobias drank the last of his water and wondered idly who'd had the pleasure of teaching him, and if he'd learned from fear or affection.

Brian stood watching in the doorway, and Tobias raised his glass, asking for more water. Immediately the waiter walked over, ignoring Noah. "Sir?"

Tobias smiled at him and held out his glass for Brian to fill. "Thank you. Please fetch my room key from the desk. We'll be going up in a few minutes."

"Of course," Brian murmured, leaving quickly. He really was a good boy, if a little unrestrained at times. He knew when to behave, though-for the most part.

Tobias glanced down at Noah and wondered if he knew the same thing. "No questions, boy?"

Noah took advantage of the opening. "With your permission to ask, sir, earlier this evening you spoke of a hunger and a need to fulfill. I can satisfy you better if I understand what it is you hunger for." Noah didn't move; only the slow rise and fall of his shoulders as he breathed caused him to stir at all.

It was a fair question, if a piercing one. Tobias considered his answer as he finished the rice, making sure he'd swept up each grain. "I have several," he said, laying his fork across his empty plate and picking up his water glass. "Some are more pressing than others, at the moment. Tonight I require the use of your body-mine to pose, to tie, to manipulate. I need to control your reactions, which means that all you really need to do is feel and be honest. If I want you to

scream, it's up to me to make it happen. That's what I hunger for. I want your submission and your honesty."

Noah nodded. "Thank you, sir," he said, "I have one other question. I am curious whether you have a regular sub, or if your reappearance at the club means you have recently lost one?" This was uncertain territory for a submissive to enter, and its weight was evident in Noah's respectful tone.

Tobias' smile faded a little, and he quirked an eyebrow. "I'd tell you that it's none of your business, but I suspect that there are many who'd happily tell you," he said calmly. "I have no regular submissive, and I have not recently lost one. In point of fact, I've never 'lost' one. The rest is not something I'm prepared to discuss at this point."

Noah nodded, "Yes, sir," he answered and fell silent and, Tobias suspected, thoughtful.

Brian once more appeared in the door and Tobias stood, not looking down at Noah but utterly confident that the man's training would be basic enough to not disappoint him at this point. "Come, boy," he said softly.

Chapter 3

Brian waited, his body still for once, and held a key out to Tobias as he approached. "Room three, sir. Have a pleasant evening."

"Thank you, Brian. Good night." He turned right and walked to the staircase, not able to resist glancing in the wall mirror as he passed it. The mirror was actually placed there for just such a reason-for Doms to check their subs without turning their heads. Very much an effective tool; the Doms either used it or didn't, and the subs tended to loathe it if their training was weak-or if they were.

The glance at the mirror didn't disappoint, and as Tobias had expected it had a profound effect even on one with Noah's apparent experience. Noah's shoulders went straighter still, his chin up, but his eyes remained studiously lowered. He didn't reach for the handrail or check his stride but remained carefully in step behind Tobias as they ascended to the second floor.

Tobias moved a little more quickly, satisfied that he'd get at least part of what he wanted, and he was eager to find out if he'd have the rest. It had been far too long since he'd been here, and he knew it. But now he felt it too, a frisson of excitement tingling its way up his spine. He unlocked the door and strode in, crossing to the large armoire while he listened for the door to latch behind Noah.

He heard the click, the rest of the sound deadened by thick carpet and soundproofed walls. "Strip," he ordered as he threw open the doors to the cabinet. The scent of leather

poured over him and he loosened his tie absently, then turned to watch Noah undress.

"Yes, sir," Noah answered and began with his boots, bending over to loosen the buckle before toeing them off and setting them by the door. His vest was next, and Tobias could see a little of Noah's perfectionist streak as he tried to find a way to set the vest down without creasing the fine leather. Noah settled on draping it gently over his boots. Tobias hid a grin, thinking Noah would have been much happier with a coat hanger.

Next, Noah unbuttoned his shirt, leaving it open and hanging on his shoulders as he slid out of his jeans to reveal black boxer briefs.

Tobias let himself enjoy the sight; he'd often found that frank appreciation of another man's body was worth almost as much as an encouraging word, and this was certainly a body worthy of admiration. Strong legs with well-formed thighs, narrow hips, and then a tight, flat belly; the open shirt was a tease, hanging from broad shoulders. He nodded, mostly to himself. Definitely a body that worked hard, but not built up to levels which suggested obsession.

Noah folded his jeans neatly and set them beside his boots, tugged off his socks and tossed them aside, and then let his shirt slide from his shoulders to reveal smooth and slightly tanned skin. The shirt joined his vest, carefully folded and rested on top, and then Noah paused, thumbs looped in the waistband of his briefs, long enough to make Tobias twitch, before sliding them down his legs and stepping out of them.

He dropped them on top of his jeans and then stood straight again, awaiting Tobias' approval.

Tobias made him wait, just a few moments, then he walked forward and said, "Very pretty, boy." He began to circle Noah slowly, not touching him but close enough to feel the heat from his body. He was smooth, almost everywhere. "Hands behind your back, hold your wrists-yes, like that. Good. When I ask you to display I'll want you like this, feet spread and arms back."

Tobias moved around Noah again, finally gazing down at the half-erect cock on show for him. "Also very pretty. Don't fight it if you don't want to; for this evening at least you have permission to get hard, even to come whenever you want to, as long as you don't attempt to deny me my pleasure."

Noah shifted a bit, settling into Tobias' preferred posture, making it comfortable. "Thank you, sir."

Tobias nodded once and removed his tie, tossing it toward the large bed. The room was large, but the bed was certainly the focal point, its iron frame matte black and its dressings dark red. "Rather bordello, I think," Tobias said, throwing his dinner jacket on top of his tie. "Not that it matters, we won't be using it. Fetch the pillows and put them on the floor in a pile."

"Yes, sir." Noah broke his stance and moved obediently to the bed to gather the pillows and pile them on the floor.

Tobias unbuttoned his sleeves and began to roll them to his elbows as he walked to the house phone. He picked up the phone, a direct line to the front desk, watched Noah move. A lovely ass to go with the rest, he thought.

"Front desk, how may I help you?" said a polite voice.

"It's Tobias. I need a half dozen water bottles, please, sent up immediately. Could you tell me who's on security this evening?"

"Certainly, sir. Matthew and Pat are in the control room."

"Would you patch me through?"

"Of course. Is there a problem?"

Tobias smiled to himself. One day his quirks were going to upset someone. "Not at all."

"One moment, then. And your water will be delivered in a few moments."

There was a click on the line and Tobias adjusted his sleeves, ignoring Noah completely though he was sure the man was listening intently.

"Control room."

"Pat?"

"Yes, sir?"

"It's Tobias."

"Tobias! Nice to hear from you, sir. Is there a problem?"

Tobias laughed, delighted once more to be remembered with obvious fondness. "No, I'm just being me. I'm going to test the panic button. Would you be so good as to call the room when I do?"

"Of course." Pat, no doubt, remembered Tobias' routine well.

"Within the minute, Pat. Room three."

"We'll call."

Tobias hung up and walked directly to the red button by the door, counted to five and pushed it. Seconds later the phone rang.

"All's well, Tobias."

"Thank you, Pat."

"Not at all. Have a pleasant night."

Tobias hung up and turned to Noah. "Now we begin. Lie on the pillows, face down. I want your feet together, your ass up, and your body relaxed. You're going to be like this for a very long time, so make sure you can breathe, that your knees are spread for balance, and that you have enough support for your shoulders. Do you understand?"

"I think so, sir." Noah had knelt by the pillows while Tobias finished his phone conversation, but now he moved over the pillows, shifting them and stacking them as he needed to make the position comfortable and sustainable. He started to lay his head on a pillow but hesitated for a moment. "Forgive me, sir, but where would you like my hands?"

Tobias looked down at him and considered. The one thing he didn't want was for Noah to use his hands; his feet would be taken care of shortly, but the hands, if left free, could be a problem.

"I think," he said slowly, "that if you fold your arms and rest your head on them you will have added support for your shoulders. Like I said, you'll be like this for a long time, and you won't be allowed to move." He crossed to the armoire and picked up a small green ball. "Yes, I like that. Fold your arms and make yourself as comfortable as possible."

"Yes, sir." Noah folded his arms, and again he shifted and adjusted the position slightly until he seemed to find it comfortable. He was very conscientious about it, Tobias noted, and that was just as well. After another moment or two, Noah rested his forehead on his arms and went still.

"Good boy," Tobias said softly. He crouched down by Noah's head and showed him the ball, shaking it gently so the bell inside it jingled. "Do you know what this is?"

Noah lifted his head to have a look. "A bell ball, sir?" Noah answered uncertainly.

Tobias nodded. "Typically, I use it as a surrogate safeword if I have someone gagged and bound. But tonight, I'm skipping the gag and you'll be bound by my word and your own body." He stood up and walked to Noah's feet, positioned just as he'd asked. Noah's knees were spread, but his feet were together from heel to toe, curving nicely along the floor. Gently Tobias placed the ball in the cup they formed, and then he smiled. "If you move, the ball will fall and ring. And I'll stop. Do you understand?"

Noah seemed to stiffen slightly. "Yes, sir," he answered dutifully, and with slightly more meaningful emphasis he added, "I understand."

"Good," Tobias said, letting a little purr escape into his voice. "I'm so glad you do."

He rose once more and went to the cabinet, selecting one of the floggers. Because of what he wanted to do and the time it would take, he was limited in his choice. Luckily, the club kept tools in a wide variety, and he found what he needed with only a little trouble.

He was about to show it to Noah when there was a quiet tap at the door. Smiling again, he crossed to the door, neatly stepping over the naked man on the floor, and opened it, letting in one of the waiters with his bottles of water.

"Put them on the desk, please," he said, slapping his leg gently with the long handled flogger.

The waiter—one he hadn't seen before—moved quickly, apparently ignoring Noah. He wished Tobias a good evening and was gone again in moments.

"Are you comfortable?" Tobias asked Noah, once more inspecting the flogger.

"Yes, sir. I am," Noah answered confidently.

"You can breathe easily?" Tobias asked, walking to Noah's side.

Noah took a deep breath experimentally and then exhaled slowly. "I believe so, sir."

"Good." Tobias widened his stance a little and looked down at the naked body before him. "I do still require words, boy. Give them to me now."

Noah answered quickly. "Yellow for a warning, not to stop the session but to stop what you're doing, and red to end the session immediately."

Tobias smiled, calm settling on him like a lover, moving in him like a living thing. "You may talk, if you wish. I would like to hear you, any sounds you like. I will most certainly talk. You may not move; your body is mine. You may ask, demand, beg ... your will doesn't matter. You may come; I won't stop until I wish. Do you understand?"

"I do, sir," Noah confirmed, and Tobias watched Noah's skin break suddenly into goose bumps, followed by a warm blush. Anticipation was a lovely, if brief, moment.

Without another word, without warning, Tobias began. The flogger he'd chosen had many tails, all of soft deer hide, and a very long handle. He could lay it down with ease across Noah's back with a mere flick of his wrist, not needing to bend at all. He did somewhat more than flick his wrist however; this was not a tease. He measured the weight behind it carefully, putting just enough force behind the stroke that Noah would feel it as a slap, but not so much that it would hurt.

The hurt would come from sheer repetition. There was little strain to Tobias; his upper body strength was more than adequate to maintain the light blows for a considerable time, and he had every intention of taking breaks when he needed to; between stopping every once in a while and switching arms, he was reasonably sure that he could do this for two hours if he had to.

"Shall I tell you what I know of you?" he asked, laying another stroke across Noah's back.

"Yes, please, sir." Noah sounded curious. His skin reacted slightly to the blows but not his body, not yet anyway. There was no strain in his voice at all.

Tobias continued to lay down the flogger, the blows steady and rhythmic. "Well, you yourself let me know that you're looking for something that you've yet to find. Your preference to avoid safe words and your paradoxical aversion to sensory deprivation tells me that you crave to give up control utterly,

but fear it as well. Perhaps you seek the ultimate adrenaline rush."

Again the flogger fell, and again, the sound of the leather almost soothing to Tobias as it struck naked, warm skin. "You are in law enforcement, I think. Probably a police officer of some variety, given your haircut. You love your work. You take care of your body-something for which, incidentally, I thank you. You really are lovely."

"Thank you, sir. And you are..." Noah's speech was interrupted by a slap of the flogger and Tobias made a mental note of the location, "very perceptive, sir." He took an audible breath and went on. "Total sensory deprivation holds some fear for me, it's true, though not simple blindfolding and ... ah..." Tobias grinned as Noah's thoughts were interrupted by a well-placed blow. His back arched slightly and then relaxed again. "I'm a patrol officer; I have a downtown beat."

"Really?" Tobias asked, his arm moving easily. "Interesting." He let the flogger fall for a few minutes, studying the glow that was forming nicely. "You have a scar which needed stitches on your shoulder. As an educated guess, I'd say you got it playing, not working. And yet you still seek to be dominated without boundaries. Tell me, do you get off on the pain itself, or is it the surrender?"

"Both, though it's more the surrender, sir." Noah licked his lips. "The pain is a present, active reminder that someone else is in control. The scar is an unpleasant reminder that even a skilled and seasoned Dom has weaknesses."

Noah didn't move, breathing evenly as he spoke, and Tobias had to wonder if his words were meant to soothe or to cut.

"Of course," he said finally. "We are, after all, human, even if we strive to be somewhat more for our submissives." He thought for a moment, his arm and the flogger keeping up the rhythm. He was unsurprised to find that his attention kept straying to the scar on Noah's back, and with an effort he pushed his curiosity away. This was not the time to dwell on Noah's past but to focus on his current state.

He spread the blows out, concentrating on the areas that made Noah arch, never making the strokes harder. For an instant he wanted to touch the forming red patches, to feel the heat rise from the smooth skin, and that too, he pushed away.

"You should see your back," he said casually. "It's a wonderful canvas. I can picture you striped from knee to shoulder, decorated by a fine hand."

"The fine hand would be yours, sir," Noah answered quickly. Tobias heard his breath catch and then he moaned, a sound related more to arousal than the steady stinging blows, and he knew without looking that Noah was hard. So much for his insistence that he didn't get off on pain. And from that moment, every slap and sting seemed to register more acutely with Noah. His back would arch to meet one blow, shrink from the next, and his breathing was shallow and light.

Finally Noah hissed and whimpered a soft, almost reluctant, "Oh, God."

Tobias didn't allow himself to hit harder or faster, though his own body asked for it. He said nothing, concentrating on the steady blows until he'd earned another moan, and then he stopped. "Stay," he said calmly, expecting to be obeyed. He crossed to the desk and opened a bottle of water, leaning back on the desk to drink.

"Do you want a cock ring?" he asked mildly.

Noah seemed pleased to be asked. "Yes, sir, yes, please," he answered, apparently forcing himself to breathe deeper, slower, balancing that ball on his feet with stubborn determination.

Tobias set his bottle down and went to the cabinet, rummaging around for a moment. He took his time selecting a simple leather ring with a snap closure before standing over Noah. "Roll over."

"I'll drop the ball, sir," Noah reminded him, and clearly that wasn't acceptable to him.

Tobias grinned, utterly pleased. "Very good, boy." He bent and scooped up the ball ringing it merrily. "Now, roll over."

"Thank you, sir." Noah complied with the request, rolling onto his back and fixing his eyes on the ceiling.

His erection was thick and heavy, angled nicely to just the spot Noah seemed to be staring at. Tobias shook his head in amusement and crouched down, gently handling it.

"Remember, you can come. Though it will be harder now. I have faith, however." He snapped the ring on and stroked Noah rapidly a few times. "You like my arm?" he asked.

"Ah!" Noah hissed and arched into Tobias' hand reflexively. "Yes. Yes, sir, very steady, consistent ... very good," he

panted and lowered his hips to the pillows again. He shifted, as if lying on his back wasn't comfortable.

"Good. Roll over, back the way you were." Tobias stood easily and retrieved the flogger while Noah did as he was told. He found himself eager to hear more sounds, to see Noah shift; ruefully, he took a moment to adjust his own erection before returning to replace the ball in Noah's feet.

Again without warning he resumed his strokes, beginning in a sensitive area and moving to Noah's ass, open and high for him.

"Ah!" Noah flinched and groaned at the first stroke as the flogger hit already reddened skin and he lifted his head, a beautiful wince on his face rewarding Tobias' efforts. The blows to his as yet untouched ass were less stinging at first and Noah was able to relax a bit, dropping his head back to his arms.

Still, with his legs open it couldn't be avoided, and even if it could, Tobias wasn't inclined to. As the biting tails of the flogger stung the soft skin of Noah's balls he shifted forward, recoiling slightly. "Uh, fuck," Noah cursed at the sting, his voice tight now, and his body seeming to buzz with tension.

Carefully, Tobias moved back up Noah's ass and then down again, making the strokes lighter. He had no wish to injure the man, but he wanted to hear him beg, to hear him ask for something-anything. He wanted a word, an orgasm, a reaction to make Noah break for him, to give him something.

He wanted a gift.

Noah was rocking a bit now; perhaps he'd found some friction in the pillows beneath him, or perhaps the sting of the

flogger was making it difficult for him to keep still. Either way it was a sign that he was letting go, that sensation was becoming more important to him than composure. He moaned, and gripped the pillows by his head with his fingers. "Uh ... sir ... sir, permission to-please, sir, permission to touch myself?" Noah's request was earnest.

"Denied." Tobias kept the flogger steady in its rhythm, but far lighter in its touch, caressing Noah's balls. Then he went back to the regular strength on Noah's back for a few moments before resuming the subtle torture between Noah's legs.

Noah's composure slipped completely at the denial. He groaned and whimpered, but Tobias knew that without permission he wouldn't touch himself. Instead Noah arched his hips lower, definitely seeking friction this time, and panted harshly. Noah moaned for him again. "So hard, sir." Noah grunted under the slap of the flogger, and whimpered pitifully when Tobias teased him with it, folding quickly under Tobias' skillful hand. "Sir, sir, please remove the ring? Sir? Will you please? Oh, God I need it now, please, sir?"

Tobias smiled. "I just put it on, boy. You seem to have trouble making up your mind."

"Oh, please!" Noah begged, almost shouting, the strain in his voice making Tobias tingle. "Mercy, sir, please, please, please..." Noah sounded on the verge of weeping.

Quickly Tobias bent, unsnapping the ring. It threw his rhythm off, but the gift had been given and Noah deserved a reward. "You're mine," he whispered. "Right now, you belong

to me." Standing, he trailed the tails of the flogger over Noah's ass, waiting.

Noah made a strangled sound, his body jerked and shook as he came instantly, spraying the pillows as he jerked his hips into them. Along with the physical release came a litany of gratitude. "Sir! Oh, yes, yes, yours ... thank you ... thank you, sir," Noah panted, riding out his climax.

And, as if that wasn't a lovely enough thing to behold, as Noah started to come back to himself, as the grip of his arousal lessened and he relaxed, his toes curled innocently, and the ball he'd so stubbornly held steady to this point rolled from its cradle and rang cheerfully, mockingly, as it hit the floor.

Noah froze at first, then bent to one side to watch the ball roll away from him. A moment later he seemed to collapse inwardly, disappointment registering in his shoulders as he punched the pillows under him with one angry fist and dropped his head heavily onto his arms again. "Fuck!" he spat bitterly, brokenly, and Tobias watched in surprise as he began to sob softly.

Tobias dropped the flogger and knelt beside Noah, one hand stroking his hair as he figured out how best to maneuver the man's body without hurting his tender back. "Shh," he said calmly. "Shhh. I'm going to move you, Noah. Listen to my voice, boy." Carefully, talking softly the entire time he pulled Noah onto his lap.

Cradling the distraught man, Tobias kept talking, stroking his hair softly. "Noah, come back, sweetheart. You were beautiful, boy." He waited for the man to calm, his touch and

voice soothing and constant. It occurred to him that the last time he'd used that particular tone he'd been dealing with a sow who'd had a run in with a fox. The comparison didn't really seem apt.

As Noah's sobbing subsided, he became heavier in Tobias' lap. "I'm sorry, sir," he apologized and cleared his throat. "Shit," he swore again and took a deep breath, exhaling it heavily. He seemed to be Noah again, though his voice was still unsteady, even a bit timid. "If it pleases you, sir, may I have a sip of your water?"

"Certainly. Stay here." Tobias leaned over, depositing Noah back on the pillows. "Lie or sit however you wish," he said as he fetched two of the bottles, opening them on the way back.

He sat down beside the pillows and looked at Noah, trying to catch his eye. "Are you all right?" he asked, passing him a bottle.

Noah kept his eyes down, and chose to kneel, even though it wasn't asked of him. Refuge in the familiar, Tobias suspected. Noah took the bottle gratefully. "Thank you, sir, yes, sir, I'm fine. You are very skilled. I'm sorry." He took a sip of the water and sighed.

Tobias drank from his own bottle, trying to decide how to handle this. He had a lot of experience with tears, with catharsis, with anger from subs when they broke, but nothing like the disappointment Noah was showing. He'd fought a battle with himself and lost, and no matter what he said, Tobias wasn't ready to believe that Noah was entirely fine.

"Apology accepted," he said, using the same soothing tone. "And thank you. It was a pleasure to watch you. Your submission was beautiful. Your failure to hold the ball, however, seems to bother you much more than it does me. Tell me why."

Noah tilted his head to the side and bit his lip, looking thoughtful. "I'm not sure, sir. It started out a stubborn need to prove something to you, I suppose, but then as I gave over I stopped remembering why I shouldn't drop it and just had this awful feeling that whatever I did, I had to hang into it, anything but let myself drop it. So when I heard it drop, and even now, sitting here, it felt like, it feels like failure, like I let you down, like I let myself down. I don't know. It's not about the safeword itself, it's about finding limits."

Tobias thought about that for a moment and leaned back, shifting so his legs were out straight in front of him, his ankles crossed. His trousers weren't even creased, he noticed, and Noah was red, sore and come splattered. "Limits are important," he said slowly. "You know that. You set them when you play, you live by them in your work. What you are doing, sweetheart, is trying to find yours, to test yourself to get beyond them without knowing where they are. How long has it been since you've had a steady Dom?"

"Close to eighteen months, sir," Noah told him. "But he was too—he was hesitant, uneasy with really pushing me. I haven't been truly challenged since before him. More like two years? This was good, sir, it felt good. It felt ... honest. Clarifying. It's just serving to strengthen my conviction that this is the right path for me. Finally, something." He

swallowed back more water and sighed. "I used to know myself so well, but..." Noah shrugged. "You're right, I'm not sure I know where my limits are anymore."

With a shrug of his own Tobias said, "That's because they've changed. They change all the time, Noah, and if you've gone years without a true exploration of them, of course they've changed. You've grown, you've learned, you're a new person. It takes time and care and honesty with yourself to find them again. Tonight ... it may have felt good, but it was nothing really, not what it could be. All that happened tonight is that I made you be still, made you listen to your body. I made you come is all. I know none of your boundaries, I only know what I like. Lucky for you, it worked this once."

Noah carefully placed the cap back on his bottle of water and handed it back to Tobias. "Forgive me for interrupting our session, sir." His eyes were still fixed on an invisible spot on the floor.

Tobias reached out and touched his hair again, then stroked his cheek softly. "There's nothing to forgive, boy. This is a session, probably the important part. It's my job to meet your needs as much as it is yours to meet mine, no?"

Noah pressed his cheek into Tobias' fingers with a sigh, letting his eyes slide closed. "I'm grateful for your comfort, sir. Please, tell me, what can I do to meet your needs now? Would you like my body? My hands on you? My mouth? It would be my honor to please you."

Tobias' long forgotten erection renewed itself almost immediately, the speed of his hardening almost

embarrassing. "You're sure you feel better?" he asked, not willing to satisfy himself with a less than willing partner.

"Yes, sir," Noah said. "Really, I am. Please ... let me pleasure you?"

Tobias' cock throbbed, encouraging him, pushing him. He let go of Noah's face slowly, tracing his lower lip with one finger. "Suck me," he whispered. "Slow and long. Please me, and you earn a kiss."

Noah scooted closer and reached for Tobias' trousers. He popped the button at his waist easily and, taking his time, he lowered the zipper. Gently, he slid fingers into Tobias' briefs and released his straining cock and heavy, silky balls. Noah hummed approval to him and ran his fingers gently over the shaft.

Tobias caught his smile and watched as Noah shifted to lie on his stomach, so that Tobias was able to examine his's his pink cheeks and the red stripes on Noah's back-his own handiwork-while Noah lowered a wet tongue and hot breath to his neglected erection.

He seemed in no hurry as he ran his tongue in circles around the head and then lower to bathe his balls. Gently he took each one into his mouth and sucked on it, pressing it to the roof of his mouth before releasing it to cater to the other.

It was slow, exquisite torture until Noah's attentions went back to his cock, licking up its length, gripping the base tightly in his fingers, taking the head into his mouth.

Tobias watched, entranced with the sight of his erection slowly sliding between Noah's lips, for as long as he could hold a breath. It wasn't intentional; the air in his lungs simply

refused to leave until forced out in a long stream that roused him slightly. He lifted one hand to Noah's hair and petted him, encouraged him until the next breath was forced out.

"Good boy," he said, surprised at how tight his voice was. "God, such a good boy." He let himself fall back on the pillows, his eyes closing as all his senses centered on his groin.

Encouraged, Noah opened his mouth wider and took Tobias in, moving slowly up and down, increasing and then easing off on the suction in turns. He made soft, wet sounds and hummed, which proved to Tobias his willingness and pleasure at being able to serve. Over and over he swallowed Tobias down, keeping a slow and rhythmic pace, but just as Tobias felt himself tense Noah pulled up, licked his lips, and asked in an innocent tone, "Do I please you, sir? Does it feel good? Shall I continue?"

"Whelp," Tobias growled before he could stop himself. He glared down at his boy, fighting off a smile and frustration in equal measures. "Suck me," he ordered again.

"Yes, sir," Noah responded and dutifully swallowed him down again, all the way into his throat as he gave Tobias' balls a squeeze.

Reflexively, Tobias thrust, both of his hands flying to Noah's head, keeping him there. He wanted, he needed ... God, how he wanted. "Can you take it?" he asked, forcing himself not to growl this time.

Noah braced a hand on Tobias' hip for leverage and then nodded as best he could manage around Tobias' thick erection.

It was all Tobias required. Noah may have misplaced his limits, but surely he knew if he could handle this. With a low groan he began to thrust, keeping Noah's head still. Deep and hard, faster as his breath betrayed him again, Tobias took what he needed, pushing into the clinging wet heat of Noah's mouth and throat.

"Oh, yes," he gasped out when he felt Noah's tongue dance on him. "Take it. Suck my cock, boy." Faster, deeper, harder, his hips lifting off the floor, he moved. Claimed Noah's mouth, bruised his lips and dove into his heat until he felt his orgasm unfurl, start to travel through him.

"Soon. God, yes, take it, take it—" Heat surged through him and he pulled Noah away with one hand, his cock wet and slick as it slapped onto his belly. "Stay," he growled, one hand grabbing his shaft as he started to come, letting it fountain up over his fist to arc onto Noah's face.

Noah shut his eyes and grinned, allowing Tobias to bathe his face in his come. When he was finally empty, Noah wiped his eyes, mouth and nose clean with his fingers and spread the sticky slickness down his chest to mingle with his own.

Breath finally coming in regular if rapid intervals, Tobias smiled. "That's a good look on you, boy. Well done."

"Thank you, sir." Noah smiled back. "Permission to fetch a towel, sir?" His look was amused.

"Granted. And then I want you right back here, understood?" Tobias concentrated on his breathing, on calming himself as quickly as he could. He was still in charge, and no matter how much he wanted to stretch and nap, he had a responsibility to take care of.

"Yes, sir." Noah hopped up and disappeared briefly into the tiny bathroom, returning in a hurry with his towel. He knelt beside Tobias and offered it to him first.

Tobias raised an eyebrow. "Yes? I believe it's your fault I'm a mess."

Noah nodded. "Of course it is, sir," he said and set about cleaning Tobias up himself before he scrubbed his own face and chest dry. When he was done he set the towel aside and folded his hands in his lap, lowering his soft brown eyes once again to the floor.

Tobias looked at him for a long moment, drinking in the pose and the smooth skin. He was well aware of the endorphins he was riding, but it didn't really seem to matter. "Come here, Noah," he said softly, holding out one arm and gesturing for him to lie down with him. "You earned your reward."

The smile Noah gave him was worthy of every shuddering tear Tobias had forced from him earlier. Noah stretched out in the pillows with Tobias, though once settled, he looked a little uneasy. "Forgive me, but I've never been kissed by a Dom before; I'm unsure where to look, sir."

Tobias stared for a moment, utterly stunned and unable to hide it. "Never? Oh, sweetheart, you've missed so much." He took a breath and reined himself in. "How about you close them, then? Would that work?"

Noah nodded. "Thank you, sir," he answered and closed his eyes as Tobias suggested.

Tobias studied the face before him for a moment, touching Noah's hair to let him know he was there. Noah's lips were

still slightly swollen, his eyelashes spiked from dried tears, and Tobias could feel him start to tense as he waited. Slowly, carefully, he moved closer and brought their mouths together in a gentle caress, kissing him slowly, waiting for Noah to respond.

Noah, in true submissive fashion, opened his mouth, welcoming Tobias' tongue. Tangling his tongue with Tobias', he moaned softly and rolled a little closer to him. Tobias deepened the kiss slowly, keeping it gentle and smooth. He stroked his tongue along Noah's, tasted him and teased him, and then withdrew, nibbling on his lower lip before he drew away.

"Another boundary moved?" he asked, amused and pleased by Noah's acceptance of the kiss.

"Obliterated, I think, sir." Noah grinned, eyes still closed. He licked his lips. "You taste good."

Absurdly pleased, Tobias said, "Thank you." Then he started to laugh, unable to stop it. He was more relaxed than he'd been in weeks, more at ease in his own skin. He hadn't known how badly he'd needed this particular release, these conversations. "Thank you," he said again, for an entirely different reason.

"It is my delight and my honor to please you, sir," Noah answered, a genuine smile on his lips as well.

"You did, boy," Tobias assured him. "You really did." Tobias finally gave into the urge to stretch and sighed, utterly content. He could get used to this again, this feeling of pride in a sub learning about himself. He could get used to guiding.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he stood and went to the bed, to his jacket. In the inside pocket he found a pen, and on the desk some paper. He had to think a moment before he remembered the number but it came to him, and he neatly printed his first name above it.

"This is a pager number," he said, turning to show it to Noah. "Only one other person has this. If you decide you'd like to play again, explore your boundaries with me, call. I may not be able to call back immediately, so make sure you have time to wait, up to an hour. If I don't call back, it's because of something unavoidable having to do with my work. Also, don't call this weekend-I'll be away. Leave only a phone number, and the usual code if it's needed-911 for an emergency, 411 if you need to know something. And, of course, it's your choice to call at all. Do you understand?"

Noah nodded, though the look on his face was difficult to read, especially with his eyes once again on the floor. "I understand, sir. Thank you, sir, it's a high compliment and it does not go unappreciated."

"It's not entirely selfless, boy. You're damn good at what you do, and..." Tobias paused, "Well. You have the number. I'll trust that it stays with you or vanishes." He walked over to where Noah knelt and touched his shoulder gently. "Come. Lie on the bed and I'll tend to your back. You can sleep here if you wish."

"Thank you, sir." Noah stood and made his way to the bed, stretching out comfortably on his stomach and pillowing his head on his arms.

Tobias examined Noah's skin carefully, making sure he wasn't overly abraded or raw anywhere, that the skin had not broken. Satisfied that he was merely well-warmed and tender, Tobias wet a face cloth in the bathroom with cool water and laid it gently over Noah's back to take the sting out. Methodically, he made sure that Noah was as comfortable as he could be, and then he got one of the fresh water bottles to leave by the bedside.

"Goodnight, Noah," he said quietly, not sure if the man was awake or asleep.

"Thank you, sir, goodnight," Noah mumbled, eyes closed, evidently already sinking into sleep.

Tobias picked up his tie and jacket and let himself out of the room, making sure to leave the key. If Noah didn't need it, the cleaning staff would get it in the morning. Quickly, he headed down the stairs and right into the bar, still unrolling his shirt sleeves. He really needed a drink.

Chapter 4

Bradford was dressed in a stylish suit and leaning on the bar, talking with yet another waiter that Tobias didn't recognize, but when he spotted Tobias coming Bradford smiled and made his way over.

"Tobias! Let me get you a drink," he said, ushering Tobias to a table where he could sit more comfortably than at the bar. Without needing to ask what he wanted to drink, Bradford moved away and ordered and then joined him at the table. "I'm concerned to see you downstairs so soon. I hope you weren't disappointed by Noah."

Tobias glared at him and pointedly stuffed his tie in the pocket of his dinner jacket. "This," he said vehemently, "is entirely your fault."

Bradford looked stunned and was immediately apologetic. "Ah ... Tobias, I really thought he would be a good match for you. I apologize profusely. Your dinner will of course be on the house, and if there is anything I can do to remedy the situation, I am at your disposal." The poor man looked about ready to kiss Tobias' ass if that were what he wanted.

Completely disgusted with himself, Tobias waved it off. "No, not that. You were entirely too correct, damn you." He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I'm afraid I've done something rather foolish, Bradford," he admitted.

Bradford looked puzzled. He raised his hand and called to one of the waiters. "Nikki! Where are our drinks? Ah, never mind, just bring two glasses and the damn bottle. Hurry up

now." He looked back at Tobias. "Nikki is new, I've taken him in hand for the time being."

Tobias watched as Bradford leaned back in his chair and a timid-looking young man with unruly blond hair and enormous blue eyes set a bottle of scotch and two glasses in front of him. He started to kneel by Bradford, but Bradford waved him off. "That's all right; confidential conversation, pup, run along."

Nikki was gone in an instant.

After pouring them each a glass, Bradford took a sip, and looked at Tobias expectantly. "All right. I'll bite. Do I have a mess to clean up upstairs?"

Tobias stared, not sure he could take so many shocks in an evening. "No! What do you take me for? He's all nicely asleep, tended to and tucked in. The mess is sitting across from you—you could have warned me, you know."

Bradford regarded Tobias a moment and then burst into hearty laughter, loud enough to draw the attention of some of the men at the bar. Tobias sat uncomfortably, waiting for Bradford to be able to breathe again. "What sort of warning were you looking for, Tobias? I knew he'd break for you. I knew he would pique your interest." The man looked pleased with himself. "You don't pay to be warned, you pay for the experience. Besides, if I had warned you, you know very well you'd have passed him up."

"Yes, well." Tobias picked up his glass and swallowed a healthy mouthful. "When one expects a pleasant night and walks away having been ... piqued into handing out a specific pager number, one tends to be a little unsettled." He looked

at his glass and sighed. "Oh, Bradford. He needs so much. He's lost and looking and ... Damn."

"You gave him your pager?" Bradford looked shocked. "Well." He lifted his glass and sipped it slowly before speaking again. "Noah hasn't found what he's looking for in nearly two years of trying, Tobias. He's got a lot of depth and a lot of issues and he hasn't found anyone ... challenging enough. Two years of searching and practically begging me for someone to work with and not one Dom here has been able to satisfy him, despite reporting excellent experiences themselves. I was beginning to worry we'd lose his business before long and then, wonder of wonders, your name showed up on the reservation list."

"Lovely," Tobias grumbled. "Just what I was looking for." He drank again, slower this time. "He's going to get hurt, Bradford," he said quietly. "He's ... He dislikes safe words, but I think it's more a matter of not knowing what his limits are, or how to push them. He needs to be taught. Don't get me wrong, he knows all the pretty tricks, almost too well. He lowers his eyes and acts the part perfectly, naturally. He gave it up to me for an orgasm, but he utterly lost it over a minor failure which he couldn't really have won. He was shattered by letting himself down, even though he's still looking to reach true submission. And he's been abused."

Bradford nodded slowly, and Tobias realized that he already knew everything Tobias was telling him. "Forgive me if I'm a little smug," he said, reaching for the bottle and refilling both glasses. "So what do you need to know about him?"

Tobias shook his head, suddenly tired. "I don't know. Who he's played with, who his last exclusive was. What kind of fight I'm facing."

Bradford shook his head. "Well, for starters, the question really is who hasn't he played with? But if you're looking for his last exclusive, he's at the end of the bar in the cowboy hat. His name is Brett. They both insist it was a mutual parting, and they've been friendly since. I have some idea what kind of fight you're facing but he'll have more specifics."

Tobias had never dropped a drink in his life, but it was a close call. "His last Dom is a member?" he asked sharply. Noah hadn't said. He looked over at the man in the cowboy hat and frowned slightly. "I don't know him. Does he know me?"

Bradford laughed again, but it was quieter this time. "Tobias, my friend, everyone knows you."

"Of course," he sighed. Usually it was to his advantage, but in this particular matter, perhaps not. "Noah didn't."

"Oh, I assure you he knows of you, he just didn't make the connection, and I didn't clarify it for him."

"Oh, thank you ever so." He knew he was crossing the line into petulance and that it was neither here nor there if Noah had known or not. What mattered now was if he was going to cross the bar to talk to Brett or not. If he was willing to make that choice. "Oh, damn," he said again, draining his glass. He stood up and straightened his jacket, looping his wrinkled tie around his neck. "Thank you, Bradford. It's been a memorable evening, as always." And then he poured himself another drink and crossed the floor to the bar.

Brett didn't turn his head as Tobias approached, but it was likely that he was watching in the mirror behind the bar.

"Good evening," Tobias said politely, taking the seat next to him. "I'm Tobias. I wonder if you're willing to discuss Noah with me?"

"Nothing like the forward approach." Brett grinned, turning at last and offering his hand. "A pleasure. I'm Brett, but I suppose Bradford told you that." He was rough looking and had a five o'clock shadow. "I saw you take him upstairs, how'd it go?" He didn't hide his skepticism.

"Depends on your definition, I suppose," Tobias said, shaking Brett's hand. "He broke and we talked a lot about limits. He's messed up and I want to know how to avoid making it worse."

Brett raised his eyebrows over his beer as he sipped it, then set his bottle down on the counter before speaking. "Broke?" He sounded surprised. "Then you might already know more than I do," Brett admitted. "That's a step further than I got in the last six months of our sessions. I guess they're right about you."

Tobias resisted the urge to scream. He'd earned his reputation, earned his place, but sometimes it got in the way. He shrugged a shoulder and took a quick sip of his scotch. "He told me he wanted discipline, that he couldn't be still. I think he wanted to see what I'd do with bondage, so I didn't use any. He submitted beautifully, begged to come, but when he did his body relaxed and my bell ball rolled off his feet. That's what broke him. Not me, but his own expectations."

Brett nodded. "Noah's got some issues. Not many, but the couple he's got are pervasive." He picked up his beer again and took a swig before continuing. "His pride is one major one. His fears are another, and they're deep-seated."

Brett waved at the bartender for another beer. "What you really want to know is why we're not doing scenes together anymore, right?" He pulled a cigarette out of the pack on the bar in front of him and lit it, continuing without waiting for a response. "Right. Well, it's my fault, not his. The first year Noah and I worked together we did pretty well. He was a little tentative, I was a little green. At first, it didn't take much to push him and he didn't ask me for more. Then we got into a rhythm with each other and he started to test and push me more and more. So in one of our sessions I had promised him punishment for disobedience. I had bought a cage-by this time we were meeting almost exclusively at my place. He expressed some concern, told me he was afraid of it, asked me to keep an eye on him, that kind of thing. He seems anxious, but I had no idea...

"So I sent him to it, made him lock himself in and throw me the key ... I sat and did some work. I excused myself for a moment to use the restroom, told him where I was going and promised him I'd be right back, and then I left the room. I couldn't hear him protesting once I'd left the room. I wasn't gone five minutes, but when I came back he had bruised himself bloody trying to get out. I have no idea what happened, why he freaked, and he would never tell me. When I grabbed the key and went to let him out he swore at me. He

just wanted to leave. It didn't matter what I said, he wouldn't let me comfort him."

Brett shook his head and sipped his beer again. "I let him go. I didn't really have much choice, you know? Anyway, a few days later he called me. We met up here at the club and we talked a lot and he told me about this guy he'd been with for a while before me who he'd really trusted, but I guess this Dom got into drinking or something and betrayed him. We were just never the same after that. He would get angry if I didn't push him hard enough, and I was honestly afraid to go too far with him. I admit, I was way outside my comfort zone. I never could win him over again.

"What I can tell you is he's a natural sub, he's loyal as anything, and he will never, ever lie to you. If anything, he can be too honest, tell you too much. I imagine that was his downfall with the first guy."

Tobias put down his glass carefully and told himself that he wasn't there to train a top or alienate Noah's last steady Dom. If Bradford was right, the two men were still friendly. So he wouldn't call the man an idiot for leaving a sub in bondage, for not supervising him, for not doing his job. He wanted to, though, very badly.

He focused on his glass and tried to order his thoughts, squashing all the violent ones. God, he wanted a cigarette. "So the guy before you is the one who cut Noah's shoulder?" he asked, making a mental list of other questions. It was a neutral start.

Brett had let his gaze fall back to his beer and seemed to be in his own thoughts before Tobias finally spoke up. He

glanced over at Tobias. "I don't work with knives yet," he said softly. "Look, I know what you're thinking and I've made my peace with Noah. I've learned from that mistake, so please, it's between him and me now, all right?" He must have sensed Tobias eyeballing his pack of cigarettes and slid them over in front of him.

Tobias didn't even bother fighting the urge, just took a cigarette and lit up. "All right," he said, blowing out a stream of smoke. He could tell by the way his lungs didn't even protest that he'd had one drink too many, and that it wouldn't be the last of the night. "All right. Not my business. Well, maybe it is. Christ." He inhaled again and sipped his scotch. "So what are the main things? No cage, no sensory dep ... is he a pain slut?" Tobias was fairly certain, even in his current state, that he couldn't go through that again.

"God, no. He won't balk at the bullwhip, but he really gets off on a simple flogger or a crop. You can tie him in knots if you want to, but he's not into blinding pain. He'll take whatever you dish out, but you're not going to get better results if you hit him harder or with something more intimidating, you know what I mean? He's just not like that. You'd do better just to keep him off guard, stay unpredictable. Seems like you figured that out already. Hm ... the sensory thing, blindfolds are fine, gags, ear plugs, just not all at once, he'll freak."

Tobias nodded. "Makes sense. He reacted really well to gentle stimulation and praise-I held him and he calmed really well." He thought about that for a moment, staring at the back wall. "Actually I think I got more of a response out of

him with one kiss than I did fucking his mouth." Tobias pondered that absently, swirling his drink and smoking steadily.

"You kissed him?" Brett lit up a cigarette as well. "Maybe I need to change my technique." He snorted. "He's very sensual, it doesn't surprise me. I've gotten him to beg by refusing to touch him at all. I've talked him into coming just standing behind him and talking in his ear." Brett sighed. "Fuck, I miss him sometimes. He's complicated and demanding, but he'll be good to you."

Tobias closed his eyes against the image of talking Noah into an orgasm. Oh, dear Lord, he really had to go home to somewhere sane. The farm, that would help. "He earned the kiss," he said, stubbing out the cigarette. "I have no idea if I have what he wants, or if he'd know it if I do. In any event, it's up to him now." He drained his glass and waved the bartender over. "Have the desk call my car, please," he said, then he turned to Brett again. "Have you tried to work with him again?"

"No, we decided that we make better friends. He won't trust me; he wants to, but he can't. I don't blame him." Brett said, stubbing out his cigarette.

Speaking of the devil, Tobias thought, catching sight of Noah in the mirror.

"This is cozy," Noah said, stopping between them and looking them both in the eye purposefully. "Learning anything?" he asked Tobias. He looked pleasantly disheveled. He'd left his shirt untucked and hadn't put his vest back on. He had Tobias' pager number in his fingers.

"Yes, actually." Tobias stood up. "Thank you, Brett, for the talk and the cigarette." He turned to Noah and nodded, schooling his features as best he could, considering the Scotch. "And thank you, again. I had a wonderful birthday."

"Oh ho! I thought the birthday boy was supposed to get the spanking," Noah remarked, smirking. "Let me guess, twenty-nine again?"

Tobias inclined his head slightly. "Forty-one, whelp. And I thought it was the smart ass who got the spanking-oh, wait, it was." Behind him he heard Brett snicker and mutter something that sounded vaguely like "not hard enough, apparently".

Tobias gestured to the slip of paper with one hand, doing up his jacket with the other. "Use it if you like, Noah," he said seriously.

"Hey, don't let me break this up," Noah protested, "I was just leaving." He waved the pager number in front of Tobias and slipped it into his back pocket. "I need a shower. Some guy came in my hair." He winked, then sauntered a little stiffly out of the bar.

Tobias grinned a little. "It's a good look on him," he said to Brett. "I've really had too much to drink."

Brett snickered into his beer, and Nikki appeared at Tobias' elbow. "Tobias, your car has arrived, sir," he said a bit nervously.

"Thank you, Nikki," he replied as gently as he could. The boy looked like he'd fly apart at anything resembling a less than polite response. "Think he'll call me?" he asked Brett.

Brett shook his head and grinned. "There's no telling with him. But he made a joke at your expense just now; I'd say that's a positive sign."

"Ah, but is that a good thing?" Tobias asked rhetorically. He waved and left the bar, stopped to say goodnight at the desk. He still didn't know the answer by the time he got home.

Chapter 5

Through sheer force of will and the distraction of his horses, Tobias put Noah and the club out of his mind for the weekend. He rode, had tea with Mrs. Miller, and worked in the garden with Peter, planning out rows of sweet corn and discussing whether they would be able to save his mother's asparagus patch after it had been neglected for so many years. In short, he thought nothing of subs, pagers, or taking care of humans.

Monday night, however, he found himself at the mall, trading in his old pager for a new one. They were smaller now, sleeker and more discreet. He was now wearing two and he needed them both to be reliable and easy to use, as one was for emergency calls and the other for ... well. Maybe just for the fashion statement, as he was strongly suspecting by Wednesday night when the thing had failed to even whisper a chirp at him.

He came home from the office where he'd been doing catch up paperwork with his partner, Deidre, and found a phone message from Phan.

The club's in an uproar, call me and tell me all about it. Really. I want to hear this. You actually went into the bar in a less than perfect state and got drunk? You talked to Brett? Jesus, call me.

He didn't. The last person he wanted to talk to was Phan, the last person he wanted to think about was Noah.

Thursday he began putting his head back in order. He didn't need the headaches of taking care of a new submissive.

He didn't want to have to untrain any bad habits. He didn't need the stress of timing, of finding out what other horrors the man had endured. He really wasn't interested in taking Noah on.

So when his pager went off on Friday morning, he merely swore. "Deidre?" he asked with exaggerated politeness. "Would you be a dear and turn that damn thing off? I'm a little tied up at the moment."

Deidre, bless her heart, stuck her tongue out at him and delicately felt her way around his waist to the pagers, taking both of them. "New toy, Tobias?" she asked absently.

His head snapped around to see that the chirping was coming from the newer of the two. Of course. The man would decide to call when Tobias had his arm up a cow's ass. "What's it say?" he demanded abruptly. The cow protested by shifting a little and he swore again.

"Just a number," Deidre said calmly.

"Don't you dare lose it."

Deidre raised an eyebrow at him. "I sense good coffee talk. Phan?"

"No. God, help me here, would you?" Their conversation effectively ended by an angry and uncomfortable cow, it was almost forty-five minutes before Tobias could get time to call the number.

He walked to the truck while Deidre talked to the farmer, promising to be back in a few moments. The cell phone was charged but he had to wander a little before he got a decent signal, finally winding up just outside the barn again, away

from the door, though. He dialed and leaned back, closing his eyes against the sun as the call connected and ringing began.

There was a click, and the voice on the other end of the phone was both familiar and not.

"Yeah. Dolan here."

Tobias noted the name in some part of his brain and waited a brief moment. "Tobias. I got your page at a bad time, I'm afraid."

"Oh, yes, hello, thank you for calling back." It sounded more like Noah this time, but judging by his tone he wasn't alone. "Uh. Listen, I thought maybe you'd wanna hang out tonight? Maybe meet at the bar?"

Nothing like the last minute, Tobias thought uncharitably. Come up with a scene, play it out, clean up the aftermath-and the night before he had the farrier coming to the farm. But he knew that if he said no he'd never get another call. "We could," he answered cautiously. "I'll have to make it an early night, however; I have plans for tomorrow morning. Do you think we could wrap it up by eleven or so?"

"Oh, yeah, and hey, I'm up for anything you want. Sorry for the last minute call. I get off work at four. You want to grab some food?"

Tobias looked down at his jeans and boots and sniffed the air delicately. "I don't think I'll be back to town in time for that." Two more stops, grab something to eat at his place, shower four or five times; as a plan, it had merit. "I can be at the club by seven. Meet me in the bar, tell Bradford I want room six, and have iced water ready for me."

"I'll be th ... hello? Did I just hear a cow? Or don't I want to know?" Noah chuckled.

Tobias grinned to himself. "You heard a cow. By the tone of her voice, I have to get back to work before she does herself any more damage. You were saying you'd be there?"

"I will, and I'll make the reservation. Dress code?"

"That hardly matters, as you'll be naked as soon as possible."

Noah laughed. "You got it. See you at seven."

Tobias disconnected and went to put the cell back in the truck, already working out possible scenarios based on what little he knew of Noah's tastes. The cow and Deidre both bellowed, however, and he had to put the matter from his mind.

Chapter 6

When he arrived at the club he was greeted with stunned surprise by everyone who saw him.

"Sir?" Brian blinked at him as they passed in the hallway. "Oh, my."

"Mind your manners, pup," Tobias said, knowing that if the club had been worked up last week, this was about to send the place into a tailspin. He walked into the bar, ignoring the speed with which Brian had fled to the kitchen and the muted whispers that seemed to spread before him. He'd endured this before, years ago, and he knew it would calm down.

He stood in the doorway for a moment, knowing he looked every inch the expected presence his name seemed to call to mind. He'd put on black leather pants, but that was his only concession to the point-his boots were normal dress boots, his sweater a soft gray cashmere.

Noah was sitting at the same table he'd had the week before, and Tobias moved toward him, deliberately slowing his pace.

"Tobias," a familiar voice said to his right, and he bit the inside of his cheek to keep from swearing.

He turned casually and said, "Phantom. How are you?"

Phan looked good, happy and bright, like a new copper penny. His mop of red hair was a lovely mess, his tiny, tiny body was encased in tight leather pants and a leather chest harness. He was already standing, coming to him, and Tobias steeled himself for what he knew was about to happen. There was every chance he'd have to kill Phan for this.

"Better now," Phan purred, dropping to the floor. He kissed Tobias' shoes, slithered up to kiss each wrist and then indiscreetly mouthed Tobias' cock through the leather before standing. "Call me," he hissed.

Tobias blinked slowly at him and turned away, going to Noah. Yes, he would have to deal with Phan, and soon.

"Good evening, Noah," he said as he approached the table.

Judging by the look on Noah's face, he had observed the exchange with Phan with some interest. Tobias noted the point Noah made of looking him in the eyes while he took a seat opposite Noah at the table and assumed that Noah needed further negotiation before the evening got under way.

"Evening." Noah greeted him, looking casual in a comfortable oxford shirt and blue jeans.

"Was there any trouble getting the room arranged?" Tobias asked, admiring the shirt. The fabric looked rich and soft and he decided suddenly that he would make a point of finding out if it was.

"Hardly, I told Bradford it was for you and he said he'd take care of it." Noah was clean-shaven and evidently recently showered, judging by the clean scent of soap and aftershave coming from Noah's side of the table. "I apologize for my tone on the telephone. I was in the squad car, my partner was sitting right there, you know." He smiled and gave Tobias a helpless shrug.

"I assumed as much," Tobias said easily. "There is always a certain amount of leeway for things like that-such as having to wait for me to call, who could be around during phone conversations ... and then, the sudden appearance of people

you don't expect to see. As long as you remain polite and respectful, I'll accept the situation as it happens."

"The sudden appearance of people like him?" Noah asked, indicating Phan with his eyes. Tobias sighed, but he knew Noah was going to inquire at some point. Noah sipped his water and leaned back in his chair, waiting on Tobias expectantly.

He had always found it a little difficult, explaining Phan. But then, he'd never had to say anything to someone in the lifestyle, so this was, oddly, easier than explaining to Deidre or Mrs. Miller. The latter experience had him taking a long trip away before he could face her again, only to be greeted with, "Tell that lad he needs a tailor. And a hair cut."

"Phantom is an active member," he said. "He travels on weekends, however, so I'm not surprised you've never met him. He was also mine for a rather long time."

"I noticed," Noah answered. He wasn't hiding his distaste for Phan's display very well. "Live-in? Slave?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"I want to know if that's what you're looking for."

"I was looking for someone to play with on my birthday. I seem to have found more already," Tobias said smoothly, pushing gently but watching for agitation or fear. He wanted to know, needed to know as much about Noah's thinking as possible. His reactions, his intentions-even those that he wasn't even aware of. His instant dislike of Phan had probably given away more than he knew, which interested Tobias very much.

Noah seemed to chew that over and find it bitter. "I don't share well."

Tobias laughed, honestly pleased with the answer. "Oh, we do have a lot to discuss, don't we? If it'll make you feel better and help to erase that line on your forehead, Phan and I don't play anymore."

"I'm glad to hear that." Noah sipped his water. He did look relieved. "So did Brett clarify anything or are you more confused?" He grinned slightly. "He's a sweetheart, isn't he?"

"He's..." Tobias sighed. "I have no intention of sitting here discussing your past or mine or our old relationships. If you want to play, fine, I'm more than happy to do so. If you want to discuss everything that has led us to this point, I suggest we meet sometime next week. Clear?"

Noah nodded. "Of course. I was just making small talk. Anything you need to ask me before we begin? Do you have anything planned that wasn't covered by our discussion last week?"

"I have very little need for small talk, you'll find," Tobias said. He finished his water and set down the empty glass, turning it to watch the condensation drip on the sides. "I'm afraid my plans are somewhat rudimentary this evening; given more time I would happily create elaborate scenes, but perhaps next time. I'm ready if you are."

Noah swallowed down the last of his water and set the glass down on the table. After one last look into Tobias' eyes, he slid from his chair to his knees.

"Good boy. Display." Tobias didn't move as he watched Noah's hands go behind his back, his chest and hips moving

forward for balance. He really was good at this, the motions smooth and easy. A natural, who had no idea what he couldn't take.

Tobias glanced toward the bar and found Phan watching, his face interested as he studied Noah's form. Tobias smiled inwardly as he saw Phan nod slightly to himself, a gesture Tobias knew to be unconscious. Phan always gave away too much; in some ways Noah was very like him.

That thought was uncomfortable and it took him a moment to push it away. "Come, boy," he said softly. He stood and walked away, knowing without a doubt that Noah was following perfectly; he had to, Phan was watching. It would have been comical if it wasn't so obvious that Noah was insecure about it.

They went up the stairs slowly, two flights this time to the larger rooms on the third floor. "Key," Tobias said as they walked down the hall to room six. "You may open the door."

"My pleasure, sir." Noah obeyed, pulling the key from his pocket and opening the door. It was heavy and swung wide, revealing immediately the large Saint Andrew's Cross against the far wall. Bradford had always had excellent taste in furniture, but this cross was new since the last time Tobias had been in this room. It stood floor to ceiling and was upholstered in black leather, with heavy rings at ankle, hip, and neck, adjustable cuffs on either side above head-height, and lace-up foot bindings. Optional wrist cuffs that hung from the ceiling by thick chains were neatly hooked to the wall.

There was a matching studded leather armoire in one corner, a gymnastic horse in another, and a rack of various

whips, chains, cuffs, masks and hardware decorating a third wall. And, as Tobias was well aware, there was an enormous bathroom, complete with mirrors and a cleverly equipped shower and tub just beyond the leather-covered door on the right.

Noah turned and locked the door with his key once they had entered the room then dropped to his knees on the hardwood floor and held the key out in front of him for Tobias to take.

"So, boy," Tobias murmured as he stood in front of him to claim the key. "As this is our second time playing together, I won't go through the elaborate security check I did last time. You understand that I have your safety in mind and that I expect you to use your safe words if you want to. Will you use the same safe words?" He stroked the top of Noah's head absently. A sensualist, Brett had said. He could work with that. Surround him, soothe him, hurt him. The thought of it, the smell of leather, the smell of Noah's soap all combined to half-drown Tobias himself, and he felt his cock begin to grow hard.

"If it pleases you, sir," Noah responded. Tobias felt him lean unconsciously into his touch.

"It does," Tobias said softly, enjoying the arousal in him. He rarely took the time to just feel it; usually he was well into a scene before it started. He'd have to wait, of course, but he was happy enough to let things be like this for a few minutes. He stroked Noah's hair some more, down to his neck and back. "You want to please me," he whispered.

"Yes, sir. It's important to me that I be everything you need, sir," Noah's response was creative.

It was also the one thing that could tear Tobias in two if everything fell apart, the one thing that could make his cock throb and his control drift long enough that he wondered what it would be like to take this boy to the country house, to the stables. To bed.

"Good," he made himself say. "That's good, sweetheart." He took a hated step backward and cleared his throat. "I wish to inspect you. Stand and undress, take your time." He pulled the one large chair to the middle of the room and sat, leaning back into it. He wanted to cross his legs, but currently it didn't seem wise; instead he made very sure that he was sitting where Noah would be perfectly aware of the effect he had on Tobias' body.

Noah stood. His shoulders were square and confident, a hint of a smile tugged at one corner of his lips, and his gaze landed directly between Tobias' legs.

He untucked his shirt, then bent to unbuckle his boots slowly, letting Tobias get a better look at them this time. They were made of a stiff, black leather and had a heavy sole with a bit of a heel, so that when Noah stepped out of them he was a good two inches shorter than he had been a moment ago. The boots set aside, Noah tugged off his socks and reached under his shirttails to unbutton the top button of his jeans.

Noah's fingers paused for a moment at his waist and then he changed his mind, deciding, it seemed, to remove his shirt first. He unbuttoned it slowly, the soft fabric tugging at his

shoulders and his hips. He spent a moment unbuttoning the cuffs, too, and then rolled his shoulders backwards and caught it in his fingers as its own weight caused it to slide to the floor.

He then went back to his jeans, button-flies, which he undid one button at a time before sliding them off and stepping out of them, leaving him bare except his briefs. They were white this time, and they left nothing to the imagination as Noah's erection pressed against them. He folded his jeans and set them aside, then wiggled out of his briefs and tossed them on top of the pile.

Tobias nodded, pleased at the show and at the end result. He stood slowly. "Display," he ordered.

Noah's hands went behind his back, once more squaring his shoulders. The benefit to Tobias this time was that Noah's cock was thrust out, bobbing gently. Tobias smiled and gathered Noah's balls in one hand, rolling them. "You don't come until I say so," he purred.

Noah hissed first and answered second. "Yes, sir."

"You will warn me if you get close-there is nothing wrong with that. It isn't a failure, it is a way to please me, do you understand? I will be trying to make you come; it's your job to tell me your reactions."

"Yes, sir," Noah replied with a short nod, and Tobias was pleased to see his shoulders relax, responding well to the absolution.

"Good. Now, I said I was going to inspect you, and that's exactly what I'm going to do. Stand in front of the chair, bent at the waist, your legs apart." It was a humiliating pose,

Tobias knew, but it also let Noah look down and distance himself from the hands roaming over his skin. Tobias wanted to touch everywhere, every inch of him. He wanted to know every scar, so he could work them into his mental map of Noah's life.

Noah obeyed silently, stepping forward and bending at the waist. He was limber and probably could have braced his hands on the floor if he needed to, but instead he rested them on the arms of the chair. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

"This won't hurt," Tobias said, opening the toy cabinet. "But it won't be terribly fun. Call it a necessity, if you want." He opened a bottom drawer and got a fresh tube of lubricant, setting it down just out of Noah's possible line of sight. He began his inspection with Noah's feet, tapping at the ankle to make Noah lift up. He suddenly remembered Phan hating that, laughing later when he realized that's what Tobias did for the animals.

Noah was in wonderful shape physically, Tobias decided as he slid his hands over the smooth skin. His muscles were strong and well developed, and he had every appearance of having a balanced diet. He wasn't terribly defined, but that was perfectly acceptable to Tobias, preferable even.

His tan lines were sharp and crisp, his skin clear and healthy. The only marks Tobias could find were typical of most people, in the scene or not—an occasional pock mark, a healed scratch which could have happened in childhood. Carefully, Tobias ran his hands over Noah's head, searching for scar tissue and finding none.

"You're in wonderful shape," he said casually as he reached for the lube.

Noah was giving every impression that he was comfortable with the examination thus far. "The better to serve you, sir," he answered in his clever fashion.

"Yes, well. That would be a good point if you'd known me for longer than a week." Tobias walked up behind Noah and stroked a hand over his hip, then between his legs to cradle his erection. "But I'll take you at your word." He played his fingers over the warm skin and felt it twitch. "I do like your cock," he whispered. "Hold still and relax as best you can."

"Thank you, sir. Yes, sir." Noah clearly wasn't immune to the warm touch of Tobias' hands. His breath caught briefly and his struggle to relax was evident. He took a deep breath and exhaled, and his toes curled against the hardwood floor.

Tobias pushed a slick finger against Noah's entrance, slipping in a very short way. He twisted, gently rubbing the muscle and feeling for abrasions, listening to Noah breathe.

Noah gasped, the sound apparently involuntary even though Tobias believed Noah had been prepared for the intrusion. He clenched around Tobias' finger reflexively. His admission, when it came, was lovely and truthful. "I'm very hard, sir. Very..."

"Close?" Tobias asked, freezing.

"No. Not just yet, sir," Noah answered quickly.

"All right," Tobias said calmly. "If that changes, tell me. Breathe. In through your nose, out through your mouth. Relax."

Noah nodded, breathing in through his nose and exhaling through his mouth as he was told, if a bit more exaggerated than Tobias had had in mind. Noah was making an effort to relax; his shoulders fell a little, and he spread his feet a few more inches apart.

Tobias gently moved his finger in and out a tiny bit, spreading the lube before going any deeper. "Are you all right?" he asked, feeling Noah's ass relax fractionally.

"Fine," Noah breathed. "Feels good, sir."

Tobias wondered about the truth in that, but he pushed in a little deeper, taking care to move slowly. For every motion forward he drew back again, spreading lube and opening Noah to him bit by bit, fucking him with one finger. He was seriously beginning to wonder if Noah had ever been used this way.

"Oh, God." Noah's words were so soft they could easily have been mistaken for breath, except the moan that followed gave him away. "Oh, God."

Tobias waited for a warning but he didn't get one. Deciding that Noah would either comply or feel the sting of punishment, Tobias moved a little faster, going deeper. He slid a second finger around Noah's hole, not pushing in, just teasing and smoothing lube around.

"Sir! Close, sir, oh, God." Noah leaned forward instinctively, as if trying to break contact. He hissed through his teeth, followed by several urgent pants, while he gripped the arms of the chair so hard his knuckles went white.

Tobias instantly withdrew, stopping all stimulation to Noah's body. "Good boy," he said softly. "Breathe through it."

"I'm proud of you." He smiled broadly, pleased with Noah's effort. He'd waited a little too long, perhaps, but he'd done as asked. Tobias rested his hand on Noah's smooth back and rubbed gently. "Good boy," he whispered again.

Noah's head dropped heavily between his shoulders and his ribs expanded broadly with each controlled, calming, centering breath. He wiggled his fingers, shifted and replanted each foot and finally raised his head again, the tension in his shoulders and hips all but gone. He may have waited too long, but at least he regained control quickly.

"Nicely done," Tobias said. "When was the last time you had anal sex?"

"I'm not exactly sure, sir. A year ago? It could be longer." He sounded a little embarrassed.

Tobias nodded his head. Okay, so not a virgin, but damn near. That could be a very useful tool. "As a general rule, do you enjoy it?" he asked, reopening the lube.

"When I'm permitted to, sir," Noah sighed.

"When you're permitted to come?" Tobias asked, slightly confused.

"When I am permitted to enjoy it, sir." Noah shifted. "At all."

Tobias frowned. He'd never used sex as a punishment, but as a reward. He'd created long and involved sessions around sex, sessions that were by turns agony and pleasure for his submissive, but there was never a question of enjoyment. Even when he denied orgasm to his sub he made sure that there were enough endorphins flowing, other needs met that

the sexual aspect was little more than a wish unfulfilled. "Tell me," he said. "Actually, come here and tell me."

He guided Noah to stand and then he sat in the chair, pointing to the floor. "Sit, rest your head on my leg. Tell me what happened."

Noah hesitated. His fingers seemed to twitch with indecision. Physically, he was trying to obey, but Noah finally shook his head no.

Tobias sighed and stood up. "Will you let me hold you, then? I won't make it an order, but I want to discuss this. Not so you relive pain, but so I don't cause you harm by accident. When we are here, I am responsible for your physical and mental health. I need to know."

Noah's shoulders dropped in defeat but he nodded this time. "Yes, sir."

Tobias gave an internal sigh of relief. This might be horrible, but it would be far worse if he'd merely started a game and triggered something without knowing what to expect. He reached out and took Noah's arm, gently moving them both until they were in the wide chair. "It's a good chair," he said lightly, running his hands over Noah's back and arms. "I suspect it's held up more weight than just us."

"I've never ... oh. May I have permission to speak casually, sir?" Noah asked, nearly forgetting himself.

"For this? Absolutely."

"Thank you." Noah settled against him; he was surprisingly light. "I can't remember the last time a Dom asked me if I enjoyed sex; I suppose it was just assumed. But then, many Doms here don't include sex as part of their sessions, I've

found. In any case, Brett and I usually didn't have a sexual aspect to many of our sessions at all. And Master ... that is, my former master, he used penetration only as punishment." Noah shrugged.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Tobias rubbed Noah's back and sighed. "There are many forms of domination, you know that. I seem to have made a rather large error in assuming, on the evidence of our last session, that you also enjoy sexual submission." He shook his head quickly. "I'm not saying this right. I personally use many methods to gain my sub's attention and his submission. I know how to use the toys, I can inflict pain, though I prefer not to do that past a certain level. I enjoy bondage, I like taking away choices. But I also enjoy a sexual aspect to play. I never use sex as a form of punishment. There's sometimes pain, but the variables ... God, I really should just make a detailed list one of these days and pass it out as a handy reference guide to playing with me."

Noah chuckled softly. "Finding out this way is better." He smiled and shifted a bit. "I didn't mean that I don't enjoy sexual submission. You wanted to know what I meant by being permitted to enjoy it, and it's just that I spent a lot of time in the past being expressly told not to." Noah shook his head and sighed. "And, in any case, it's been so long I'm not sure about anything anymore-all I know is I was damn near coming a moment ago and that wasn't at all unpleasant, as you might imagine. And sitting here like this is ... well, I'd really like to let you finish your exam, sir."

Tobias smiled broadly. "I also like to deny sex as a method of domination."

Noah grinned. "You Doms are all alike."

With a snort Tobias slapped Noah's leg. "Not hardly. All right, as you were, boy. I think we'll explore a few boundaries tonight."

"Yes, sir." Noah got up, waited for Tobias to move away from the chair and leaned over it again, settling into a wide stance. "Thank you, sir," he added softly.

Tobias smiled to himself. "You're welcome. We'll see how you do in about five minutes." He reached for the tube and snapped the top loudly. "If you're very, very good tonight you may even get to come."

"I hope to be, sir," Noah said, a river of goose bumps breaking out across his back.

"Do better than hope." Tobias slicked two fingers and showed them to Noah. "Just to make you slick, boy. And then the games can start." He stood behind Noah again and slowly worked one finger in, waiting for Noah to relax.

Noah's low moan gave him away. If there had been any waning in his erection during their chat it had just returned with a vengeance. But to his credit, he took a few deep, even breaths and remained relaxed.

Tobias had a sinking feeling that he was well and truly caught. Responsive, submissive, honest, apparently wanting to learn his own boundaries ... it was like being thrown back eight years. Quickly, before he could tax Noah's will too much, he inserted the second finger and moved them both in and out quickly.

Noah lifted his head and arched back, then dropped it again with a grunt. "Oh, oh, God." He bent one knee slightly, going up on his toes.

"Careful," Tobias said, sliding his fingers free. "Catch your breath and go stand in front of the cross."

Noah straightened up and took his time walking over to the cross. He stopped about a foot from it, facing the wall. "As you wish, sir," he answered, carefully correcting his posture despite his arousal.

Tobias went to the cabinet and took a deep breath, knowing that it was only his years of experience that kept him from simply throwing the man down and taking him. "Christ," he whispered to himself. He stared into the cabinet and berated himself. This was not what he was supposed to be thinking, not what he was supposed to be doing. His role was to take Noah out of his head, to get to that place they both craved and loved. Dominate. Take control, use whatever method he saw fit to gain Noah's trust and submission.

Sex was a nice side effect, but not the goal.

He turned his attention to the cabinet and found a small towel, with which he wiped his hand. A drawer revealed dildos and clamps, condoms and plugs. Smiling to himself, he selected a long narrow plug and a condom; what he wouldn't give to be in his own playroom with his own supplies. However, he could make do, he supposed. Another drawer produced a lavish locking cock ring made of soft leather and steel, with fine chains that attached to nipple clamps. He considered it for a long moment, finally replacing it with regret. Another time, maybe. If Noah called him again.

A plain cock ring and the plug in hand, he walked to a small table near the cross and laid them out, pointedly lubing the plug. "I'm not going to gag you," he said to Noah, "but I am going to restrain you. You will use your words, and you will tell me if you're close to coming."

"Yes, sir. Words if I need them, and tell you if I am close," Noah repeated his instructions, Tobias suspected, more for his own benefit, which would mean he was nicely distracted already. "I understand, sir."

"Good. Now, I rather suspect that a ring might be of some use," Tobias said dryly, holding it up. "Come here, and no shooting on me. Leather is a bitch to get stains out of."

Tobias waited as Noah turned and took the few steps to him slowly, concerned that the look on his boy's face meant that Noah wasn't confident about not coming. It really was a good thing that the ring was simple; fiddling with locks would have been too much for either of them, he thought. Quickly, he squeezed the base of Noah's shaft and snapped the ring on. "There you go. That should hold you for a bit."

Noah still didn't seem sure, but Tobias pointed to the cross again. "Face the cross, arms above your head."

Silently, Noah approached the cross again, feet together for the moment, and raised his arms up over his head. "Like this, sir?"

Tobias stood behind him and reached up for one wrist, pulling it away. "Like this." Smoothly, he cuffed Noah's right wrist to the cross, not quite fully extended. As he reached for the other one and cuffed it as well, he leaned into Noah, rubbing his leather-encased erection along Noah's ass.

"I am so happy you are pleased, sir," Noah remarked, a little lilt in his voice. He made a show of tugging on his wrists and pressed backwards.

"You're wanton," Tobias said calmly. He knew that a great deal of his domination was in his voice; he'd worked hard to be that way. Still, it had been a great deal of time since he'd done this, and it was no longer second nature for him to be powerfully aroused and able to keep it from his voice. He was a little annoyed that he had to work at it.

"I'm sorry, sir," Noah responded softly, bowing his head, contrite.

"Now, your legs," he said, sliding down Noah's body in a move reminiscent of Phan's earlier display in the bar. As he moved, he caressed Noah's leg, teasing him until he lifted Noah's foot and placed it at the bottom of the X the cross formed. The feet were bound by lacing them in, up the calves, and Tobias took full advantage, smoothing his fingers over Noah's skin.

"Mmm ... sir," Noah sighed at Tobias' touch. He moved his other foot into place himself, his fingers spreading flat against the cross, then tilted his head forward and took a deep breath.

"That's it," Tobias said softly. He laced Noah in, taking care to be just as tactile with the second leg. He could feel the muscles twitch under his hands and he smiled to himself before he leaned forward and licked the inside of Noah's thigh.

"Oh, God." It sounded as if Noah was biting his lip, and he shifted a bit. He couldn't shift very far, though, certainly not

far enough to escape Tobias' tongue or fingers. Tobias licked the other leg as well, and the crease between Noah's thigh and his ass. Then Tobias slipped the tip of one finger into Noah's ass for a brief moment.

"Oh, my God," Noah hissed as Tobias' finger entered him, and he raised his ass slightly to meet it, which apparently served to disappoint him further when Tobias rolled to his feet and moved away. He whimpered and turned his head to look over his shoulder, careful not to look directly at Tobias but attempting to keep him in his peripheral vision.

"Eyes front, boy, or I'll put a mask on you," Tobias said almost absently. He was looking at the wall, trying to find a crop that would sting and make a lot of noise.

Noah's head snapped back to face the wall. "I'm sorry, sir."

"I'm sure you are," Tobias replied. "However, I won't warn you a second time." He peered at the wall, finally seeing something suitable. He lifted the crop and tested it on the arm of the chair, satisfied with both weight and the snap. "This will do," he said, putting it on the table near the cross. He pulled off his sweater and tossed it onto the chair, then picked up the crop and stood next to Noah. "Don't you agree?"

"You know best, sir," Noah answered with a strain in his voice that betrayed more than just arousal.

"I do. Trust that, boy. I know best." Tobias stepped back and swung quickly, laying a stripe across Noah's left shoulder. Another stroke, and the right matched.

"Oh!" Noah yelled in surprise at the blow.

"You know," Tobias said easily, "I firmly believe that regular discipline lessens the need for punishment." Another snap and the two lines were neatly connected. "But then, punishment is often a rewarding experience. What do you think?"

Noah hunched his shoulders and then flexed them. He puffed out air with a rough sound and cleared his throat. "Punishment is about learning from mistakes, discipline is about learning not to make them," he said quickly. It was obviously a phrase he'd studied carefully at some point. He took two quick breaths, held them a moment, and when he exhaled he relaxed somewhat.

"I'll accept the first, not the second." Tobias laid a fourth stroke on Noah's back and stepped close, pressing one finger into him and slowly thrusting back and forth.

Noah groaned. "Oh, God." His head dropped forward.

"Mistakes are allowed, made up for, and forgiven. Discipline lets you know yourself, lets you gain strength."

"Yes. Yes, sir. I ... that's better. Know myself. So good to me." Noah's breathing was shallow, his body responsive, as his fingers scratched at the leather.

"I can be so good to you," Tobias whispered, thrusting his finger in slowly and twisting it. "I can take you out of yourself and put you back. I can teach you, find you, and hurt you." With that he pulled his hand away and stepped back, snapping the crop again and raising a red welt on Noah's thigh. Noah swayed slightly to the side after the blow, but he reacted as if the pain were almost incidental to the conversation they were having.

A critical look at the mark reassured Tobias that he'd selected his tool well; there was a sting certainly, and he hoped Noah didn't have to do a lot of moving or running over the weekend, but the sound the crop made had almost as much punch as the actual strike. In Noah's current state, he could actually back off on the weight of the blows and let the sound do his work.

"Pain can cleanse," Tobias said aloud, letting his tone return to normal. "Regular spankings, regular chores, they can give you a sense of place, of what you are. When you know in your heart that you are submitting, you can take joy in these things."

"God, yes, I need that, to go there, to come back whole again, need it so much." Noah's voice held tension and emotion, but he deliberately squared himself on the cross again and straightened his shoulders.

"Knowing your place brings peace," Tobias said, making a second mark on Noah's thigh. "Knowing you're cherished brings serenity." Another mark and he snatched the plug from the table, dropping the crop. "Believing you are your Dom's most important responsibility brings ecstasy," he whispered, none too gently thrusting the plug into Noah. Noah gasped loudly and then went silent and still. "Your needs are met, your body is cycled through pain and pleasure, and your Dom's pleasure becomes your own."

Tobias was a bit concerned until Noah exhaled and nodded. Noah had gone a little beyond speech for a moment, but he came back quickly enough.

"Oh God, sir, I ache ... so hard it hurts..." The poor boy whimpered again and dropped his head back. His eyes were closed tightly, his face flushed. He licked his lips.

"I know, sweetheart. Because I want it, because I ask it of you." Tobias seated the plug in Noah and made sure it was secure before he stepped back and picked up the crop.

"Because you're mine," he said, swinging the crop again, doubling the stripes on Noah's back. Noah whimpered at the blows and rocked forward, pressing his face into one of his arms. "Because I can take you where you need to go."

Noah was still trying to breathe deliberately, but he seemed to be losing that battle quickly now, too. He hung there and moaned softly.

Tobias smiled, watched Noah fly away from himself. He put the crop down and moved close, noticed the sheen of sweat on Noah's body and on his own. His own breath was coming quicker, his cock throbbing mercilessly. He traced one of Noah's marks with one finger, then gently twisted the plug, jostling it slightly, intentionally.

"Ah..." Noah squirmed and gasped as Tobias unseated and resealed the plug.

"And I can bring you back," Tobias whispered softly. "Time and again, boy. Your pleasure can be made from mine, if you submit."

"Anything to please," Noah gasped again, "to please you, sir." He tried to straighten up without much success. "So good to me."

"Try, and you please me. Fail and try again? I'll go to the end of the world to protect you." Tobias tugged on the plug

once more, dragging it out of Noah's body and replacing it with his fingers, two of them stretching and opening the muscle, seeking Noah's gland. "Beg me," he said, biting on Noah's shoulder. "Beg me to fuck you and I'll show you how good my pleasure can be."

"God, yes!" Noah jumped at the chance. "Please, please, sir, please ... Fuck me, love me, please, sir, will you? Oh, God!" Noah keened and sobbed and Tobias knew he'd found the spot. "Fuck me sir, please!" He tugged on his wrists and arched hard into Tobias' hand.

Tobias groaned and thrust his fingers faster, stroking inside his boy quickly. His boy, he was sure, he hoped; his hurt and aching sub, begging to be taken, to be loved. He gave up any further attempts to fool himself; he needed to possess this man, to care for him, to teach him.

"Please, sir!" Noah begged, writhing against him, and Tobias forced himself to move, to pull away. "No!" The cry was piteous, and Tobias immediately touched Noah's hip.

"I'm right here, I'm not going. I promise you, I won't." One handed, he undid his trousers and released his aching erection, gasping as he touched himself. "I'm right here, sweetheart. Just getting the condom."

"Sorry, oh, God, thank you, yes, sir," Noah babbled, apparently unsure what the proper response ought to be. He was panting hard now, and every third breath or so he'd sob audibly. He was in almost constant motion, swaying, trembling, tugging on his arms, his need rendering him totally incapable of keeping still. "Want you, want you, sir, want to please you, need you so much."

Tobias wasted no time at all getting the condom and smoothing it on; it still took more time than he'd have liked, and he cursed himself for not having thought to open the foil before he'd begun. But then he was lining up and pushing into Noah, surrounded in his warmth and scent, and it didn't matter.

"You please me," he said softly, pushing in as slowly as he could make himself go. He held Noah steady with one hand, the other sliding over sweat-slicked skin to find the cock ring.

"Ah! Yes, oh, God." Noah gasped as Tobias filled him, bending slightly to improve the angle.

"You please me," Tobias said again, unsnapping the ring and letting it fall away as he took Noah in his hand.

"Thank you!" Noah sobbed at Tobias' words, relief in his shoulders and joy in his voice. And then, to complete the moment, he came as soon as Tobias' hand was on him, shooting so hard that he was left gulping for air, tears streaming down his face. "Thank you, so good, oh thank you ... Oh sir..."

It was a good thing Noah was bound, or Tobias would have ended up holding him up himself. As it was, Tobias had to lock his legs to brace himself against the contractions of Noah's orgasm. "Noah," he said hoarsely. "My boy." He let go, partly not wanting to fuck Noah raw by taking too long, but mostly because he had to, he couldn't not move, thrusting deep into Noah's body over and over.

Noah was tight and pliant and felt so much better than anything else, and the sounds of them, the smell of them and the cross and leather swelled around Tobias until he was

clinging to control by a fine thread. He slammed into Noah again and the thread broke as he came, seemingly for ages, a low growl filling the air. "My boy."

"Sir," came a quiet reply. Noah's voice sounded hoarse.

Noah was almost rag-doll limp, every muscle having been stretched to its limit, and Tobias forced himself to find his legs for the sake of his submissive. He pulled away, disposed of his condom, and deftly hooked a foot around the leg of the chair to pull it over. He released Noah's hands quickly and caught him under the arms to put him in the chair before bending to unlace his feet.

Noah winced a bit as he was seated, but he settled all right. He was spent and drenched with sweat and was beautiful. "Thank you," he said again, starting to come back to himself.

Tobias smiled, kneeling in front of the chair. "Thank you. Do you feel up to standing for a moment? You're in my spot." He winked and touched Noah's face, hoping it would be taken for the tease it was and not a criticism.

Noah grinned. "I think I still have legs," he answered, holding out a hand by way of asking for help to get up.

"Yes, but do they work?" Tobias rose and helped Noah up, catching him around the waist as he swiftly turned them. A gentle tug and he was happily seated with a warm and satiated Noah on his lap. "Better?" he asked, cradling him close.

"Oh yes, sir." Noah leaned into him. "You're wonderful. I feel so good."

"I'm glad," Tobias said, kissing the top of Noah's head. He sighed softly, every bone in his body content. "Rest, boy. Relax with me, and know you made me happy."

Noah did relax, and they stayed there for a long while just listening to each other breathe. Noah eventually excused himself to clean up a bit and returned a few moments later with some lemon scented towels from a warmer in the bathroom. One he used to pat Tobias' face and then left it in Tobias' hands, and the other he used to gently clean Tobias' spent cock before kneeling at his feet.

"Permission to speak frankly, sir?"

Tobias nodded. "If you're respectful."

Noah nodded. "Of course, sir, always," he responded, sounding genuinely surprised that Tobias would expect anything less of him. "I need this. I need you. I haven't felt like this-like I did after our last session, like I do right now-felt like myself in so long. I don't want to make any in-the-moment decisions, but I need to ask you if you will consider meeting me, out of this context, perhaps Monday for lunch to talk. I would be very grateful, sir."

Tobias felt relief flood through him like a drug, and he was grateful he was sitting so that he could concentrate on his expression. He tried not to let Noah see how desperate he'd been for just such an offer, how glad he was that he hadn't been forced to sit and wait for another phone call. "It means a great deal to me that you're asking," he said after a moment. "And it means even more that you're thinking rationally about it, aware that you're floating right now. It

shows not only respect for me but for yourself, and that's important."

"Thank you, sir. I hope that you will consider it. I don't want you to feel pressured into answering right now, though. You have my cell number and it's yours to use."

Tobias smiled and shook his head. "I will, but I can agree to meeting now. I'm just not sure if Monday is good, I'll have to check with my partner and see what our rounds look like. Usually I'm in late on Mondays and she drags me around until dinner time."

Noah nodded. "I have a scheduled lunch break every day at noon, or if it's more convenient, I can arrange an evening meeting. I'll wait to hear from you on it, sir."

"I'll call you on Monday, then, but I suggest you plan for Tuesday instead. Just to be on the safe side." Tobias smiled and stretched, the light glinting off his watch as he did so. He glanced at and sighed. "Ah, damn. I'm going to have to go soon," he said regretfully.

Noah nodded. "I understand, sir. Have a shower, the bathroom is amazing."

Tobias nodded and stood up, considering inviting Noah in with him. Then he thought of the time and the fact that Noah would probably keel over at the invitation and he kept on walking. He didn't let himself grin with his success until he was standing under the spray of three shower heads, the noise sufficient to mask his delighted laughter.

Chapter 7

It was still dark when Tobias left his apartment complex, his travel mug of coffee filling the cab of the truck with steam and the promise of caffeine. The sun would be up by the time he arrived at the farm, he knew, but that did nothing to dim his enjoyment of the empty city streets, the glow of street and traffic lights leading him away from one life and into another.

He thought that the image was lovely and romantic, would perhaps be suitably symbolic for a movie or a mediocre novel, but upon even the smallest reflection it shattered around him and there he was, just him, driving from one home to another. There was no danger of one of his lives spilling into the other; they were the same, there was only one. He was the same, no matter where he went or who he talked to. He was Tobias Vincent, veterinarian, boss, partner, Dom, hobby farmer, and lucky bastard. And that was all there was to it.

The drive passed quickly and smoothly, a welcome routine despite the early start and despite the lingering effects of the night before. He knew very well he was still slightly off kilter, more by the realization of how terribly out of practice he was than anything else. It had felt good-damn good-and he'd enjoy thinking about it later. He'd enjoy debating and listing and going over his own needs as well as those he wanted to help Noah with. Alone in his big bed he'd—

Later. For now, there were horses to tend to and Mrs. Miller to check in with and a hundred little things to see to. Everything had its time, and at the moment it was time to

make tea for Mrs. Miller, with just a hint of honey and a drip of lemon. Personally, he loathed it that way, but she enjoyed it, and at eighty-three she was well set in her ways.

He walked into the house quietly, well aware that even five years ago she would have met him at the door, her day already an hour gone. She still did almost as much as she'd done then, simply at a slower pace, and he was happy enough to look the other way when she hired on the Spence girls to do the dusting. Of course, they all insisted that the teens were there to visit. Three times a week, like clockwork.

Pondering making some toast to go with the tea, Tobias was almost to the kitchen when Mrs. Miller popped out of the sunshine at him, teapot in hand.

"Good morning," he said, knowing that she'd seen him jump.

She beamed at him, looking extraordinarily happy to have finally done something shocking. "Good morning, Doctor. Sit right down, and I'll fetch your coffee and the toast rack."

He shook his head in admiration and did as he was told, making himself comfortable at the round kitchen table. He usually had breakfast in the sunny room, with or without Mrs. Miller, but luncheon was frequently outside and supper was always in the dining room. He rather enjoyed the mornings in the kitchen, these days.

Mrs. Miller returned from the pantry with a tray bearing his mug and the toast, a carafe of coffee next to the creamer. As she set the massive thing down on the table she looked at him out of the corner of her eye and said, "Sweetie-pie called me last night."

"Damn," Tobias said without thinking, then made a show of biting his tongue. Cussing was not allowed at any table laid by Mrs. Miller. "Sorry. What did the brat want, if I may ask?"

She rolled her eyes at him and sat down, picking up her teacup delicately. "What he always wants, of course. He wants you to call him, he insists it's important." Her expression grew suddenly sly. "I think he'd like to come back to you," she said confidently.

Tobias rolled his eyes, subtlety long worn out on Mrs. Miller. "No, he does not. Nor would I have him back-I'm afraid, Madam, your sweetie-pie is relegated to ex-sweetie-pie."

She tsked at him and nudged the toast closer, waiting until he'd dutifully taken a slice to say, "A girl can dream, no? Phantom brought so much energy to the house."

Tobias firmly told himself not to look at her. Phan had done that, there was no denying it. "I can ask him to visit," he said, suddenly inspired. "As long as you promise to drop your idea of us getting back together. Phantom's moved on-I'm moving on."

"You are?" She pounced on it like a barn cat upon a reckless mouse and he groaned.

"Which is probably what Phan wants to talk about," he said. "Now, dear lady, I have a farrier to meet, a Phantom to call, and a farm to play on. You and I will gossip after supper, all right?"

"Yes, Doctor," she agreed, smiling up at him. "Is he a nice boy?"

Tobias smiled back at her, thinking about Noah for a moment. "He's a good boy. You'll like him."

Chapter 8

At two-thirty Tobias rounded the side of the house and climbed the front porch, ready to sit for a while and have something cool to drink. It was a warm day, even if a tad damp from a sudden mid-morning rain storm, and he thought he'd earned a little time in a sunny spot with a glass of Mrs. Miller's iced tea.

She had anticipated him yet again, and he found her nicely tucked into her chair, rocking happily next to the table. He paused to take in the picture fondly: his housekeeper, some cookies and iced tea, and her knitting basket. His own chair beckoned, and he smiled as he walked toward her.

She reached into her knitting basket and handed him the portable phone. "Number six on the speed dial. And then you may have some iced tea."

Tobias debated saying no if only to establish himself as an adult, but the thought of her merely smiling and sending him into the house anyway stopped him cold. He did have some pride, quite a lot of it actually, and he chose his battles well. With a sigh he nodded and walked into the house, careful not to slam the door.

He pulled off his boots in the front hall and pushed the required speed dial button on his way up the stairs, determined to at least have this conversation in the relative privacy of his bedroom. The phone chirped in his ear three times before Phan picked up.

"Yellow."

"You want me to slow down all ready?" Tobias asked, blinking at the odd greeting. "We've not even begun."

There was a stunned silence and then Phan began to laugh. "I said 'hello', not 'yellow'. I'm on an accent kick."

"Get over it."

"I guess I have to, or I'll have no fun at all. Jesus."

Tobias listened to Phan laugh again and sat on the edge of the bed. "Mrs. Miller misses you," he said when Phan calmed.

"Ah, my Elizabeth. How is she? She sounded great on the phone."

"She's doing well. I told her I'd ask you to visit."

"Really? When?"

Tobias frowned slightly, thinking of his date book. "I'm not sure really, not next week. Maybe the week after?"

He could hear pages turning as Phan flipped through his ever-present diary. "No can do," he said regretfully. "Tell you what, I'll see what I can do about popping about during the day sometime-I'll clear it with you, of course."

During the day, Tobias knew, meant "when you aren't there and I can pick her brain and she can pick mine and we can plot." Really, it wasn't an issue. He knew they worried about him, probably more than anyone else had ever done. "Sure," he agreed. "Bring her something nice."

"Absolutely. So, you wanna know the gossip about you, or do you want to tell me what's going on?"

Tobias sighed and fell back on the bed. "I don't suppose we can skip this conversation?"

"Do you really want me showing up in the bar again just to see?"

"I would have happily killed you, you know."

"I know," Phan said sadly.

There was a long silence before Tobias finally said, "You don't need to worry so much, Phan. But thank you for caring."

"Thank you," came the whispered reply. "But I disagree. Especially if what I've heard is true, Tobias."

Tobias winced. "All right, tell me how badly the story is mucked up."

He could almost feel Phan cheer up a little; gossip was like a little treat to him, and the chance to share it-especially to the object of said gossip-was like a gift. "Right, so the basic story is that you called and said you'd be in, and that you wanted trout—"

"Good Lord, are you going to tell me everything?"

"-so the kitchen already knew, and Brian—"

"Ah."

"-was almost having orgasms. Well, a bunch of 'em were-really, your reputation could get you laid every night for a year, I swear, with no repeats."

"Phan."

"No, really. Guys would walk on water to be picked, and no one ever talks about it. They just kind of float around for a few days looking blissed out. Well, except for Pat-what the hell did you do to him, anyway? I mean, five days? He's like a legend, going upstairs with you on a Friday and not coming down until Wednesday morning..."

"Never mind." There were very, very few things that Tobias would never talk about, and his time with Pat was one of them. He hadn't intended five days, indeed it had begun as

an evening not unlike the first one he'd had with Noah. But it had been only a few months since he'd set Phan free, and it was too soon. A long session on Friday had led to Saturday and Sunday crying in Pat's arms, talking, rationalizing ... and Monday through Tuesday had been regrouping sessions as a reward and thank you for them both. He never wanted to live through that again.

Suddenly he saw himself, a year or two into the future, doing just that, Noah seriously and honestly explaining that it was time for him to move on, to find something new.

He gasped, the image so sharp and bright it could have cut him. "Phan, I—"

"Right. So the place was in an uproar, 'cause you hadn't booked a room, and then there was that thing in the dining room. Brian tells everyone that Noah went to his knees and the general feeling is that he's gonna get his mind blown, that he'd finally worked his way around to the top top and he'd be a puddle for someone to mop up. Generally, everyone was sorry it wasn't them, and hey, maybe when you came back in a few months they'd get another shot, you know?"

Tobias swallowed, barely paying attention. He could see Noah on the bed, sleeping it off, could taste the tears Noah'd shed. "Yes."

"Then you show up in the bar in less than pristine condition and not only freak on Bradford, but talk to Brett and get drunk. The place went quietly nuts, everyone was dying of curiosity."

"Not to mention calling me."

"Yeah, well. I worry. Sue me."

Tobias snorted into the phone.

"Nothing for a week, it kind of dies off, but word is there's a betting pool on if Noah shows up on Friday, and then what do you know? He calls and books a room for you."

"How do you know that?" Tobias asked, curious.

"I was with Bradford when the call came through."

Oh. Tobias decided not to think about it.

"You asked," Phan said softly.

"I did. Go on."

He heard Phan sigh, could imagine him pushing his hand through his hair and making it all stick up. "So the place exploded. Everyone just ... Jesus, Tobias. Three years since you've taken anyone upstairs more than once. Hell, eight years, if you don't count me. There's guys there that had no idea you'd ever been anything but a one time only man. And Noah ... he goes through tops like most people go through ... well, he goes through a lot of tops. So I decided to get Sandy to cover me for a few hours on Friday and I stuck around."

"I wasn't pleased with that, Phantom," Tobias said mildly. "Your display was over the top, intimidating and rude."

Phan snorted. "I'd accept that if you said I was rude to you."

"You were. How you act to me reflects, you know that. That was an essential fact of your training and an absolute of your slavery."

There was a long pause. "You don't own me anymore, Tobias," he said softly.

Tobias closed his eyes. "No. I don't."

"Look," Phan said calmly. "I worshiped you. He wasn't even your sub yet, just a guy. Yeah, I was making a point-the point being that you're important to me, that I'd do anything for you, even kiss your feet in public. If he wants to do that too, fine-but he's not alone. He's gotta be the best."

Oddly, because it made no sense, that touched Tobias. "Phantom, you never change, do you?" he asked with a smile.

"Nope. And now ... well, the scoop is that you blew out early but happy and Noah fucking floated down the stairs. There's wailing and rending of clothes and hell of a lot of subs cursing their misfortune. Tell me-is it true? Is he your boy now?"

Tobias sat up, rubbing his jeans with one hand. "I don't know. I-there's nothing official, if that's what you want to know. We're going to talk later in the week, outside of the club. But..."

"But?" Phan's voice had dropped to match his own.

"I screwed up, Phan. You were right, you and Bradford, I waited too long. My control was off, enough to distract me, and I had to fight to keep my voice calm. I want to sleep with him, to hold him and care for him, and more than anything I want him. It's like ... going back eight years. I feel like I'm about to walk off the edge of the cliff."

"Oh, sir..." Phan's voice was full of sympathy, probably the only person on the planet who would really understand what Tobias meant, what he was worried about.

"I asked Brett if Noah's a pain slut," Tobias whispered. "I knew already that I couldn't go there, and the thought that I

knew that, that I was already thinking long-term, wanting it ... God, Phan. What do I do?"

"You talk to him about what he wants. You make fucking sure your needs are met. And you take the chance. Last night was as good as the rumors?"

"Probably better. I was so proud of him, Phan. He's so willing to learn, he's so giving ... it's like he's been starving and just found food. And I feel like I have a farm to give him."

"Then stop being scared of something that might happen in the future and live for today."

The words seemed too familiar, too pat to be something natural to Phan, and Tobias had to search for the memory. Him, out in the stable with Phan on his knees, weeping, asking to be released. The two of them talking long into the night, and beyond it, finally accepting that the slavery had to end, that it wasn't the correct boundary Phan needed pushed. That the need for pain drove him, was a part of him he needed to nurture and that Tobias couldn't take that journey with him. That sometimes love wasn't enough.

"Phan?"

"Here."

"If you're going to quote me, at least pick something a little more original," he said with a slight smile.

"Yes, Tobias. You okay?"

"I will be. I'll talk to you next week."

Chapter 9

Tobias had a hell of a time finding parking.

It was bad enough that the streets in Chinatown were narrow, but added to that was the hassle of the tail end of rush hour. The streets were packed with cars and people, he continually hit red lights, and by the time he finally shut off his engine he was fit to be tied. To add insult to injury, the lot attendant wanted twenty dollars to leave his car there for three hours, in cash, which was a bit of a sticking point. It took Tobias five minutes to find the emergency money in the glove compartment, buried under maps and theater programs.

So he was running a few minutes late and was mentally cursing his watch as he made his way to dinner.

The restaurant Noah had chosen was busy, but when Tobias gave his name he was smiled at and greeted in an unhurried manner and then ushered politely to the rear of the dining room. There, he was led past several high-sided booths, all decorated in brightly colored Asian fabrics. His guide stopped by one of the booths and made a gesture for Tobias to enter.

The booths were more like tiny private rooms, and inside each was a low table, surrounded by cushions instead of chairs. Noah greeted him with a smile and little bow. "They expect you to take off your shoes," Noah told him. "You won't be allowed any tea until you're barefoot." He grinned and picked up his own cup.

Raising an eyebrow, Tobias merely held Noah's eyes as he lifted one foot and then other, removing his shoes and socks. "I suggest that you make the most of this evening," he said dryly. "It might be your last chance for repercussion-free fun." He had to try not to smile, his anxiety fading.

"Then I had better make sure that you kneel and bow when they bring you your tea, too," Noah teased, and then more seriously he added, "The food here is excellent, you'll like it. And it's very private."

"It is indeed." Tobias glanced around the tiny room as he sat down, thankful he was flexible enough to sit at the low table without trouble. He listened carefully but couldn't make out words from anyone nearby; the voices of the other diners were quite muted, in fact. "I admit that this wasn't what I had pictured when you asked to meet on ... what did you say? Your turf?"

"I did say that. What did you picture? I'm curious."

"Something with chairs." Tobias smiled and then thought about it. "Well, I guess I had actually expected Italian over Chinese, and lively, homey. Somewhere in a family neighborhood or right downtown. A place with full-bodied wine, waitresses with lovely, rich accents, and the scent of fresh bread and garlic. I may have been hungry when I called you."

Noah laughed. "Well, since I don't drink, I never think of wine, and as I spend half my life kneeling, I suppose chairs aren't much of a consideration either." He was smiling and in a great mood, and he seemed very relaxed as he handed over a menu. "Seriously. This is not your corner Chinese take-out."

Tobias glanced at the menu and smiled back. It was ornate and lengthy, the descriptions detailed. He didn't see anything spelled Moo Goo Guy Pan or anything like it. Delighted, he said, "So I see. I'll admit I've probably had one or two of these dishes-possibly even several-but I'd never know it. What would you recommend for someone who likes spicy over sweet and sour and seafood over pork?"

"Hmm ... they have this Szechwan shrimp thing over glass noodles. Don't ask me to pronounce it, but it's delicious," Noah suggested with a confident smile. "Shall we share? Would you like an appetizer?"

Flirting. Tobias was almost surprised he recognized it, it had been so long since someone who actually knew what he was had flirted at him.

"Wonton soup would be nice," he said, not precisely sure how to react. His natural inclination was to flirt back, but considering why they were there he wasn't sure if it was entirely appropriate. He was also a little surprised, given that he couldn't bring to mind a single sub who'd ever flirted with him, outside of Phan-and that had taken about three months. "We could share," he finally said, his stomach giving a little lurch. "As long as I get what's owed me."

Noah held his eyes for a moment and then nodded. "I always pay my debts."

"That's good. Do you make them wisely?" Tobias asked, keeping his voice low and smooth.

"Oh," Noah sighed. "Well, all right, if you want to get right to it-no, I haven't always. But I do learn from my mistakes." He leaned back and picked up his tea again.

"That's usually more important, I've found." Tobias smiled and picked up his own tea cup, frowning when he realized it was empty. "So, shall we share? I promise not to make you feed me."

Noah chuckled again. "Two wonton soups, and spicy Szechwan shrimp." He reached behind him and tugged on an ornate bell-pull that hung against the back wall and an adorable little waitress appeared instantly. She came in with a tray and knelt next to Tobias to pour him his tea, then bowed to him, took their order, and disappeared.

Noah looked at him again. "I'm not interested in a slave position. I won't sign on for a year right off, but I'll agree to six months contracted submission. At the end of six months we can sign a continuance as is for another six, renegotiate for another term, or split up."

Tobias nodded, not surprised at the sudden turn of the conversation. "Agreed. I require you wear a pager at all times-I know that as a police officer you have a duty to the people of this city, and during your shift that takes precedence for your time. Every Sunday I will ask for your weekly schedule-work, any obligations you've made to family, friends ... whatever. I want to know where you are as well as I can. Your weekends are mine." The basics-how long Noah would be his, and the pager-were the easiest to get through; they were the deal breakers, so to speak. If either of them had major issues with such fundamentals, there was little point in continuing.

"Agreed." Noah hadn't hesitated, and Tobias let himself relax a bit more so that he was finally able to take in a few

more details. As he watched, Noah shifted and crossed his legs, leaning back on one arm. He looked good, casual khakis, white shirt, blue vest. "I have a pager at home, I'll write the number down for you."

Tobias shook his head, dismissing the notion. "No, I'll provide one." He leaned forward a little, intent. "It won't be easy, Noah. You'll hate me at times. I demand obedience, respect and thoughtfulness. I'll want you to think about me, about what would make me happy. I'll put you through your paces and expect you to work harder on yourself than you ever have before."

Noah searched Tobias' eyes for a moment. "Nothing in life that's worth doing is easy. And I have good reason to trust you."

It made him smile. "You want to. You may have even started to, and I truly want you to. In return for your submission I will promise never to lie to you, trick you, or damage you. I will be responsible for you when we are together or when I send you somewhere on my behalf. I will protect you, guide you, and teach you. Is that acceptable?"

"Accepted and appreciated." Noah nodded.

Tobias took a breath. His promises, sincerely made, were easy for him. He'd do no less for anyone under his control. But there were things he needed as well. "I'll still require safe words. I'd also like an itemized list of implements you like and ones you hate, with reasons for the ones you dislike." He shrugged one shoulder. "I may decide to use them anyway. The same with scenes or situations you fear or loathe-you don't have to give me details, but I want to know what your

reasoning is before I'll agree not to try something. If you give me everything I need, you won't have to worry about my choices."

After a moment Noah nodded. "All right, I can do that," he conceded. "You ready for my issues?"

Tobias grinned, relieved. "I guess I better be."

Noah chuckled and watched as the food arrived, waiting to continue until they were alone again. "I want to do this, I know I need it. I'm offering it freely and without reservation, Tobias." He sighed and stirred his soup and then turned soulful brown eyes on Tobias. "But I need you to understand that I am honestly terrified of losing my identity to this."

Nodding, Tobias picked up his spoon. "I can't tell you it's never happened before. Part of what I do is make sure that doesn't happen, that you get grounded within yourself, not in me, not in subspace. Do you spend your time in the evenings doing anything in particular?"

"Depends on the night. I play basketball on Wednesdays with a boys club at the Y downtown, and I volunteer as a counselor for teenagers Thursdays ... otherwise I'm watching a game with guys from work or hanging out at home."

Tobias thought about that as he sipped his soup. The broth was a little more sour than he usually liked, but the wontons were heaven. "You keep Wednesday and Thursday, no question-especially Thursday. It's routine, it's balance, and it's outside of your head. Aside from that, it's important work." He smiled at Noah, pleased with his interests. It boded well for the man and his personality. "I may call you on the other evenings. But understand that part of what you and I

do will be so that you can have a set place and time to give yourself over, utterly and completely. Safely. I'll bring you back. It's my job to keep you whole."

Noah took another taste of his soup and then sat back again. "I only have a couple of things I need to be in the agreement. I love my job. I'm good at it, and I feel like I'm out there every day making a difference, you know? So I appreciate that you understand I need that to be my space. Also, because I'm a cop and all kinds of people know me on the street, if we're together in a contracted capacity outside of the club I need you to make sure I'm wearing an eye mask at the very least." Noah swallowed, looking Tobias in the eye. "And the second thing-and please don't be insulted because I do believe you know better-I need you to agree to be sober if I'm bound and can't get free on my own. Stone cold sober. And if you're not, I must retain the right to proceed as I see fit without risk of punishment, including the right to break the contract instantly if I wish. It's not a reflection on you, Tobias, it's just ... a protection I have to have. I need it in writing."

Tobias didn't even blink. It was utterly vital that Noah believe-and trust-him on this matter. "I never participate in any scene when I've had anything to drink, Noah. If I ever do, you may do exactly as you wish. I will not leave you alone when you are bound. The two together is ... well." He shook his head, unable to imagine the fear that Noah must have felt. "I won't abuse you."

He pretended not to notice Noah's eyes well up for a moment, or the way he covered it by sipping his tea and looking down at his food. When Noah looked up again, there

wasn't any evidence of it at all, but he also made no further comment on the subject.

Tobias sat a little straighter and gestured with his hand toward Noah. "As for the other-I doubt we'll be out anywhere for some time, but certainly. Discretion is always a good idea. I'm assuming that you're open to playing outside of the club, however-I much prefer my own tools, my own spaces."

"I'm open to whatever you need," Noah answered. "At home, at the club, or out."

"Are you sure?" Tobias said softly. "If I were to tell you that every Friday I will send a car for you and you will leave the city, would you do that? If I asked you to kiss my feet and lick my cock, like Phan did, would you do that? If I needed it, like breath?"

"If you needed it like breath?" Noah looked into his eyes again. "Of course. That is my responsibility to you as your sub-to see your needs are met, to put your needs before mine. I'll admit I'm not thrilled about the idea of licking your boots, but if you asked it of me? If I knew you needed it? Yes. Yes, I would." He looked down again and speared a piece of shrimp with his fork. "And as for my weekends, we agreed that they're yours. I'll go wherever you say."

Tobias grinned. "Lucky for you, I don't need that sort of service, and my farm is only an hour or so out of town." He finally let himself enjoy the spicy hot shrimp. "However, I'm more than sure I'll eventually ask you to do something ... distasteful. But you're far too good a submissive to deny me-and if you do, there's always the punishments. I am a strict master, Noah. There will be chores, obligations, and

discipline. Punishments will be easy to earn and hard to avoid, although not outrageous."

"Respect is far more difficult to earn, I think," Noah said. "Not one Dom I've had a session with at the club has challenged me the way I need to be. I'm a good sub, I know that much. The easy stuff comes naturally. With most Doms, if I remembered to call them sir and did what I was told, that was enough." He glanced at Tobias. "That's not enough for me."

"Of course it's not, this isn't a game for you." Tobias wanted to move around the table, wanted to be physically closer-and that was the rip in his control he'd been waiting for, his signal to himself to back off. "I'll send a car for you on Friday," he said, passing Noah a blank card and his pen. "I'll need your address and the time you get home. Don't bring anything except a change of clothes for Monday. If there is a problem between now and then, please page me."

"You'll make sure I get enough sleep Sunday night to function at work on Monday morning, right? I don't really want to have to explain to my partner why I'm dozing in the squad car." Noah winked and took the pen, leaning over the table to write. He wrote down his address, and Tobias recognized it as a one of the downtown neighborhoods. "I usually walk in the door about four-thirty, give or take a few minutes if the subways are off. How should I reach you if I get stuck late with an arrest or something? Your pager?"

Tobias nodded. "That's fine. I'll send the car for quarter to five; that should let you get home, gather your bag and start shedding your ... occupation. Will the hour in the car give you

enough time to adjust your frame of mind, or will you need some help when you get there?"

"The hour should be enough, thanks for thinking of that." Noah smiled. "Do you want the session to start as soon as I'm out of the car, or will you have a contract for me to look over first?"

Tobias stopped to think about that, considering how to word his reply. "I think ... I hope that reading over the contract will be sufficient, and that changes will not be needed. But once it's signed, Noah, you'll be my sub. Exclusively. There will not be a time for the next six months that you will not call me sir or master, and it won't stop unless you safeword. There will be scenes, of course, with defined times ... but once you sign, that's it."

Noah nodded, also appearing to think over his reply carefully. He chewed on his lip a moment and then took a deep breath and sighed. "Right. I understand that." He took a sip of his tea. "So, how about if I read the contract, we negotiate whatever changes there might be, if any, and then we behave as if it's been signed for the weekend? Then you give me the week to think it over and sign it, or decide not to, when I'm in my own space. Is that fair?"

"A trial run?" Tobias wasn't terribly happy with the idea. "You'll know it's not real."

"Hm. You'd rather I either sign it or not, on the spot. You really want me to need those safe words, don't you?" Noah winked. "All right, we'll do it your way. I either sign it or I don't on Friday. Will you agree to give me, say, thirty minutes alone to make up my mind?"

Tobias smiled, a wide, teasing grin. "If you take much longer than that you'll be cleaning stalls. Naked. You've had a tetanus shot, haven't you?"

"Hopefully I won't even need that long, right? Wait ... stalls? You have horses? Or cows? Was that the reason I heard a cow on the phone the other day?" Noah grinned.

Tobias merely smiled, made sure he had his pen and Noah's address safely in his pocket, and stood up.

"Goodnight, Noah. The driver's name is Jorge, the car is a Mercedes, and I'll see you Friday."

Without another glance at Noah, for fear he'd succumb to idle talk and the man's charisma, he opened the door and slipped out, pausing only long enough to make sure that the meal was paid for before he escaped into the street. He had a great deal of shopping to do, and only three days to arrange it.

Chapter 10

Noah stayed and finished his dinner, a little disappointed by Tobias' hasty retreat. He'd been hoping that he and Tobias could talk a little, get to know each other. But the longer he sat there alone the more he realized that getting to know each other wasn't the point, and Tobias had probably left abruptly to make sure business stayed business. Noah could respect that. He had been surprised to find the bill paid though; he'd rather wanted to do that himself.

Well. This was the beginning of something, wasn't it?

He sprang for a cab ride home instead of waiting for the subway and paged Brett on the way. He needed a reality check, he needed to hear that he was ready, that it was okay to be scared, that it was natural to be nervous. He needed to hear these things, even though he knew them already, even though Tobias had told him he'd be safe, because he didn't trust himself to make a decision like this alone anymore.

He waited about ten minutes for his cell phone to ring, and it did at last, just as he was walking in the door. He dug it out of his pocket and flipped it open. "Hello?"

"Noah? Noah, what's wrong? Are you all right?"

Noah breathed a sigh of relief. "Hey, Brett. Yeah. Yeah I'm okay. I was just..."

"Are you stuck someplace? You need a ride or something?"

"No. Nothing like that, I'm fine, Brett."

"You know you paged me with 911."

"Yeah. Yeah, I know, I'm sorry. I needed you to call me right away." Noah started pacing in the hall.

Brett snorted, clearly annoyed. "Noah, this had better be an emergency, I'm not at your beck and call anymore."

Noah wondered if this was a bad idea after all, but he had to talk to someone, and Brett was his only real friend on the scene. "I know! I know, I know, I'm sorry, Brett. Jesus." He rubbed his fingers into his forehead.

It was Brett's turn to sigh and his tone became more sympathetic. "Okay, baby, okay, calm down. What's the matter? You haven't used that code in months."

Many months. In fact, he couldn't remember the last time he had. "Brett, I think I'm going to sign a contract." There was a long silence on the other end of the line. "Did you hear me? I was out tonight negotiating ... Brett?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm here. With Dr. Vincent?"

"He's a doctor?" Noah stopped pacing to let that sink in.

"He's a veterinarian." Brett informed him.

Noah sat on his sofa, his train of thought interrupted. "Huh. No shit."

"Wait, you're about to sign a contract with the guy and you don't even know what he does for a living?"

"Fuck," Noah groaned.

"Not for a living..."

"Cows."

"Excuse me?"

"I can't believe I didn't ask him what he does for a living!" Noah slapped his palm into his forehead.

"Noah, you're not connecting your dots, baby." Brett's tone was a little condescending.

"Stop calling me 'baby', Brett."

Brett sighed into the phone. "Oh shit. I didn't even notice."

"You never notice." Noah hadn't been able to break him of the habit since the day they split up.

"Must have been the 911 on my pager. I'm feeling all protective."

"I'm sorry about that."

"Okay, look. We've just come full circle here, right? Why did you call me?"

"I want to sign on with Tobias," Noah told him flatly.

"Exclusive?"

"Yeah."

"Full-time sub?"

"Apart from my work and my volunteer stuff, yeah. And not live-in or anything. Full time headwork though."

"It sounds like just what you need, ba ... Noah."

Noah was pacing again. "I'm scared, Brett. I'm terrified. I'm nervous."

"I know." Brett's voice was calm, reassuring, exactly what Noah had been looking for. "But you're ready."

"Do you really think so?"

"Yeah, I think so. For starters, when was the last time you had two sessions in as many weeks with anyone? He's the right Dom for you and you know it. And anyway he's ... you're not going to find anyone better than he is."

"You think?"

"He's tough as nails, Noah, and he's interested in you."

"Yeah? He said that? What did you guys talk about?"

"He didn't say it in those words, but he talked to me, he talked to Bradford. You don't do that if you're not considering long-term."

"What did he say, Brett?"

"He wanted to know about your hang-ups, he wanted to know your buttons..."

"You told him about the cage, didn't you?" Noah sank into his couch again. Sometimes he wished he was a drinker.

"Yeah, baby, I had to. But don't worry, he thinks I should be shot at dawn and you came out smelling like a rose."

Noah sighed. "Brett..."

"I'm glad you found someone, Noah. Someone good."

"You were good, Brett. You still are." Noah had always felt bad for Brett. Sure Brett had made a mistake, and yes, it had been a bad one, but even Noah hadn't anticipated he'd panic like that. Noah's fears weren't caused by Brett, Brett just wasn't ever able to get past them.

Brett growled at him. "Fuck you. Don't say that, Noah." Noah's wounds from that day had healed. Brett's hadn't.

"Brett, come on, we're past this."

"You're past it, and I'm glad you are." Noah could hear Brett lighting up in the background.

"You should be."

"I know I should be, but I'm not. I might never be." Noah felt bad about the emotion in Brett's voice.

"It's been over a year—"

"I'm not yet, Noah, okay?" Brett interrupted. "But I'm glad you're moving on, baby, I am. I'm happy for you."

Noah didn't know what to say, so he didn't say anything at all.

"Are you still there?"

"Yeah."

"Look, I'm sorry. This is about you, right? And I think you should do it, Noah. Sign the contract. Tobias has an incredible reputation. He's gonna rock your world, baby, I know it."

"Yeah, okay, Brett. I will." Noah knew it was the right thing; he really didn't need Brett to tell him so after all, but it was still good to hear. Validating. It was the reality check he'd been looking for. "Thanks for calling back, Brett."

"I love you."

"I ... know." Noah shook his head at himself. Damn it. He didn't miss Brett as a Dom, but he didn't hold a grudge either. After the incident, Brett needed someone to help him regain his confidence and Noah had tried to stay on with him and make it work but in the end it had been too hard on them both.

Brett sighed. "He'll never do better than you either, you know."

"Thanks, Brett. Hey, are you okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I am. I'm just happy for you and sort of sad too, you know?"

"I know. Be good, go kick someone's ass." He tried to sound like he was smiling.

Brett chuckled. "Goodnight, baby."

"Goodnight." Noah hung up the phone and collapsed back in the couch.

Chapter 11

"Are you sure you have everything?" Mrs. Miller asked as she gathered her things. "Everything is all right for supper?"

Tobias leaned against the wall of the kitchen and watched her fret. "We'll be fine," he told her.

"I'm not sure if there are enough eggs for Sunday breakfast," she said, disappearing again into the pantry, making worried noises.

He knew it was an act. He was aware that she knew he knew. But still they danced around each other, him insisting that everything was fine and ready for the weekend, and her stalling with all reasonableness so she could meet the new boy.

"How long have you known him?" she'd asked him earlier in the week. "Are you good friends?"

He'd rolled his eyes at the phone, safely an hour's drive from her, and had calmly said, "He's coming for the weekend, I'll be down first on Friday. Don't do anything, I'll take care of—"

She'd interrupted with a delicate snort. "Honestly, you always say that, but I doubt very much if you can manage three days' worth of meals on your own—I'm well aware that Phantom did your cooking for you, and I'm quite sure he's not going to come and do that for your new ... friend. Noah, you said?"

"Yes," he'd sighed. "Noah." And then he'd realized that there was no way Noah would see the inside of the house

without Mrs. Miller being there. He made a note to call and warn him, as soon as possible. "I'll see you Friday."

He'd immediately called Noah, sending the poor man into a fairly well-hidden panic. He'd felt bad, but it was best for all of them that Noah be aware that they wouldn't be entirely alone until Jorge had taken Mrs. Miller back with him. He didn't, however, warn Noah of anything other than the fact that his housekeeper would be there for a few minutes; it was far more fun to watch the lady work with raw material.

Mrs. Miller came bustling out of the pantry with a fair amount of speed, and went to her bag. She looked determined, and Tobias had to bite his lip to keep from laughing-he could only assume the car was coming up the drive. He hoped Noah had some experience with domineering women as well as men.

He followed her to the door and watched the Mercedes pull up, Jorge in front, Noah in back. The sun was on the other side of the house, and the shadows were just beginning to stretch out across the fields. It was rather pretty, he thought absently as Jorge and Noah both climbed out of the car.

"Ready?" he asked Mrs. Miller as he opened the door.

"Of course, Doctor," she said, her tone heavily implying that she was always ready for anything.

"Are you ever going to call me 'Tobias' again?"

"No. I earned the degree with you, lad. I like using the proof."

He smiled and shook his head, absurdly pleased he'd finally asked. They went out to the porch just as Noah and

Jorge started up the stairs. "Hello, Noah," he said smoothly. "Glad you could come."

"Hello, Tobias," Noah smiled cheerfully. He didn't appear to be nervous, so either he was covering it well for Mrs. Miller's benefit or he'd grown more confident since their phone call. However, Tobias noted with a bit of a frown that his request that Noah leave everything at home had apparently been ignored. Jorge had pulled a rather large duffel bag out of the trunk. "Thank you for the car. Your property is beautiful."

"Thank you." Tobias let his gaze linger on the bag for a moment and then gestured toward Mrs. Miller. "Noah, this is my housekeeper, Mrs. Miller. Mrs. Miller, Noah Dolan." He stepped back and to the side, letting Mrs. Miller bully her way closer as she held out her hand.

"Mrs. Miller." Noah smiled boyishly, taking her hand, "Tobias has told me such nice things about you, I'm so glad for the opportunity to meet you." He smiled at her and then kissed the back of her hand.

She blinked. Tobias clearly saw her blink, and he bit down on the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing.

"Well, Mr. Dolan, I wish I could say the same-the doctor has been frustratingly silent about you." She smiled gently at Jorge and allowed him to take her bag as he left Noah's. "You will forgive the state of the place, I hope, and I'm afraid that the meals will be nowhere near the standard I set when given my head."

"Please, call me Noah. And I doubt anyone would be capable of upholding your standards from what I've heard." He released her hand and stepped out of the way. Tobias

noted that he was making damn sure to make a good impression; he'd even dressed conservatively in his jeans and a soft blue sweater. "I know you'll be missed. I hope you have a lovely weekend."

Tobias smiled to himself when a spark flared in Mrs. Miller's eyes.

"I doubt if I'll be missed, but thank you." She turned to Tobias and winked. "I'll talk to you on Monday evening, Doctor?"

"Of course." He took her arm to help her on the stairs, earning him the expected snort as she shook him off and strode down.

Jorge, silent as ever, opened the front door for her, and she sank onto the leather seat with a sigh. "Watch him, he's a smooth one," she teased. "Almost had me blushing, the darling."

"He's very smooth," Tobias agreed slyly, just to see the blush actually creep up her cheeks.

"Your mother would be shocked!" she said in a stage whisper.

With a laugh Tobias nodded. "But you're not." He closed her door gently, still thrilled with the quiet snick as the latch caught, and waited as the window slid down, just as quietly.

"No, I'm not," she agreed. "He's ... young." She seemed to want a response.

"I suppose he is." Tobias looked back at the porch where Noah waited. "As much energy as Phan, do you think?"

"Lord above, I hope not. Mind, if he cleans as well, I'll be happy." And with that she powered her window closed and waved for Jorge to help her make an exit.

He waited until the car was down the drive a bit before turning and going back up the stairs, his boots thumping solidly.

"Come in, Noah," he said, pulling open the door. "We have some things to discuss, I believe, and then I'll show you around. Bring your bag."

Noah shouldered his bag and followed Tobias inside. "She's sweet," he remarked as the screen door slammed behind him. "Oops. Sorry about that."

"You'll get used to it. And she's scary," Tobias corrected. "She's been here since I was five ... I don't know what I'd do without her." He turned at the bottom of the stairs and looked at Noah. "Put your bag there, on the bench, and come into the office. What did you bring?"

Noah dropped his bag and followed Tobias into the office, an embarrassed smile on his face. "Just my uniform and boots for work on Monday like you told me. But I didn't know how much she knew so I stuffed a pillow in there so it looked like I had a weekend's worth of stuff." Noah chuckled softly. "She's pretty progressive for eighty-three."

Tobias nodded. "She knows I'm gay, she thinks you're my lover. She doesn't know about the rest, although it wouldn't surprise me if she's guessed a lot of it."

Noah acknowledged the information with a nod and said, "Oh, and I brought two other things." He lifted his sweater and took off his belt, attached to which was a shiny black

Berretta in a black nylon holster. He set the gun on the desk, then he reached in his pocket and pulled out a clip, his badge, and tiny black pager, all of which he set beside it. "Since all the terrorist stuff started, we're under orders not to go anywhere without our firearm, and that pager which goes off in the case of an emergency which would require all hands."

He shrugged. "The gun's not loaded. You could lock up in a safe if you have one, or just put it in a drawer. The pager needs to be left somewhere that you can check it a couple of times a day for me. I've never been interrupted by it, but I suppose it could happen. I know it's a hassle, I'm sorry."

Picking up the gun Tobias nodded, feeling the weight of it. "I'll put it in the wall safe-you'll remind me to get it on Monday morning." He reached for the clip and badge as well and crossed the room to the bookshelf where he swung out the panel that hid the safe. Turning the combination quickly, he asked, "You don't need the pager with you?"

"I don't want it with me," Noah responded, shaking his head. "I look at the pager, I think 'work' and I lose my headspace, you know? If I can trust you to check it a couple of times a day for me then I can forget about it. There will be a series of numbers that come through if it goes off."

Tobias set the weapon and clip in the safe and nodded. "Of course. I won't have my own work pager with me, and as you're here I hardly expect my personal pager will go off. I'll take care of it, check them all once in a while."

"Thank you."

He got a file folder from the safe and went back to the desk, motioning for Noah to sit. "Are you ready to take a look

at the contract? I would like the list I asked for, as well." He kept his voice neutral, but his stomach was already tightening in anticipation; these were heady moments, times at which he felt the weight of his need quite keenly. He wanted and he desired, and he knew it would be a turbulent evening for them both.

He had no doubt that Noah would be his within the hour. That he would change his mind now and decide to leave was unthinkable.

"Oh. Yes, I brought that, too." Noah tugged a piece of paper folded in quarters out of his back pocket before he sat down. "I should probably have typed that up ages go, but I really hadn't expected I'd need it any time soon." Tobias noted that Noah's nerves were finally beginning to show. Noah unfolded the list and leaned toward the desk to hand it over. "I hope it's what you were looking for?"

Tobias smiled and took the paper in one hand, sliding the file folder across the desk to Noah with the other. "I'm sure it will be fine."

He leaned back in his chair, waiting until Noah had opened the folder before looking down at the list in his hand and scanning it quickly.

Favorites

Leather Cat o' Nine

Hot Wax

Directed masturbation

Oral sex (giving with hands bound or getting while in bondage)

Cock rings

Orgasms

He smiled and looked up. "I suspect our favorites will mesh-mine more often than yours, probably, as I fully expect to achieve many more orgasms than I'll allow you."

Noah sighed melodramatically, then grinned at Tobias, blushing slightly. "I expected as much."

"Of course," Tobias chuckled. He turned his attention back to the list, nodding at several of the items and making note of things that could be used for discipline or punishment-withholding a favorite or using a disliked tool could be powerful inducements.

It was with most of his attention, however, that he studied the items Noah had marked as strong dislikes or to be discussed in detail. Interestingly, he hadn't said a flat no to cages; in fact, there wasn't an outright refusal anywhere. He had strong reasons for not wanting to do specific scenes or use implements that could mark him, and in Tobias' opinion the entire list was well thought out, perhaps leaning a little far away from self-preservation.

"Why do you not simply refuse to allow knives or breath play?" he asked curiously.

Noah shook his head thoughtfully. "They're both things I've had positive and negative experience with in the past. Quite frankly, if my trust in a Dom were unshakeable, they would be both on my favorites list," Noah said calmly. "But I used to live too dangerously and once I made an error in judgment, putting my trust in someone I shouldn't have, and you've seen the result."

He looked down a moment as if gathering his thoughts and went on. "It's a turn on to walk that line with someone. Knives, if used well, can be very erotic. And oxygen deprivation heightens everything in a way." He made a vague gesture by his head and then looked at Tobias. "It's risky and dangerous and it's hot as hell. I'm sure you know what I mean."

He was still blushing a bit, but he continued to speak frankly. "I don't want to draw a line when there might be something I can learn there. But I don't want to go down that road until I'm ready, either." Noah rubbed his palms on his knees and looked at the top of the desk. He seemed a little lost in his own thoughts. "I know Brett told you what happened. I'm not drawing a line there either, because I know one day I have to go back to that cage or I won't get past it. Eventually I have to go back, hooded and blind and deaf and trust ... trust that my master won't..." His eyes flicked up and Tobias got a look into Noah's soul. "I hope you can help me understand when that time has come, if it comes. We can discuss it more then."

Tobias wasn't sure if he could form an eloquent reply; Noah was so earnest, so clearly focused on doing everything he could, everything Tobias sensed he was capable of ... it was overwhelming, and he was at once honored to be starting this journey and also worried that Noah would try to direct things, move too quickly to reach his goals.

That, at least, he knew he could control.

He stood up and set the list on the desk, centering it carefully. "I have no problem with any of this. I'll attach it to the contract once you've had time to make your decision."

Without looking back he left the office, closing the door quietly behind him, and made his way to the kitchen, where he would wait. Moments later Tobias caught movement out of the corner of his eye and looked up to spot Noah meandering slowly past the kitchen window, contract in hand and reading it closely. Tobias wondered if it was a bad sign that Noah wanted some air, though if he knew Noah at all it was more likely that he wanted to look it over in a place that wasn't as dominated by Tobias' presence as his office.

He watched Noah round the side of the house and wander a bit further up the drive where he climbed the horse fence and perched his blue-jean-clad ass on the top rung. He was silhouetted against the red-orange-pink glow of the sunset as he lowered the contract into his lap and looked out over the pasture. He appeared quietly thoughtful from what Tobias could see, and it was easy to merely stand on the other side of the glass and watch. However, it seemed almost like an invasion, and as Tobias had every intention of taking as much privacy he could away from Noah, he thought it best to leave him this small time of it.

He turned from the window and, after checking to see if the oven was on to warm dinner, he sat at the table and waited. As it turned out, he didn't have to wait very long.

"His needs outweigh his preferences, and it is my duty to ensure he understands that," came Noah's voice from the kitchen doorway. "I like that line." He grinned as Tobias

turned to him. "I gave you a lot of leeway with my list because between my own experience and Bradford's reassurances, I instinctively knew you would give me a high level of comfort in our contract in return. It's very compassionate and clear, and I want you to know it's appreciated."

Tobias regarded Noah carefully. "It's a fairly standard contract, I think..."

"Oh no," Noah interrupted. "No, it's not. I mean, some of it is, like the obligation to get regular blood tests for STDs, and thanks for including both of us in that, by the way. But the promises you make-to make sure your sub understands why you make decisions, to be clear about when he has pleased you and why-those things are gifts, Tobias, to me anyway. Subs aren't always promised that kind of communication, that kind of empathy. It's expected that the Dom will learn a great deal about the sub, but to promise to give your sub the ability to learn about you, rather than just obey? That's not standard. That's extraordinary. That's a promise of partnership."

Noah pushed off the wall and stepped into the kitchen, approaching the table. "Got a pen? Or should I hit the men's room before I sign?"

"It's a house. There is no men's room, merely a bathroom," Tobias said, letting himself smile a little, letting Noah see it. "It's at the top of the stairs, but I think you're safe for the next hour or so." He stood up and walked to Noah, picking a pen from the cup by the phone. "Sign." His voice was low, serious. Determined.

Noah took the pen from him and held his eyes a moment. He seemed to be looking for something and whatever it was, he evidently found it. When he looked away he took a deep breath, leaned over the table, and put his disjointed scrawl of a signature on the contract. Then he turned the paper to face Tobias and offered him the pen.

Tobias only looked at the sheet long enough to make sure his signature would be on the right line; he signed, looking at Noah, watching his eyes drop, his breathing deepen, his shoulders settle. There was silence in the kitchen while Tobias wrote in the date and set the contract on the counter.

"Boy."

"Yes, sir?" Tobias watched as Noah blinked a moment.

"Oh!" he gasped, then slid to his knees at Tobias' feet.

"Please accept my apologies, sir."

Tobias threw back his head and laughed, relief and exhilaration flooding through him. "No, sweetheart, I was just tasting the word. But I do like you there." Still laughing he bent at the waist and tipped Noah's face up to him quickly, pressing a hard kiss to the startled man's mouth. "All right, let's take a walk. I'll give you a quick rundown as we go, and later we'll go over everything again, when we're fed."

"I am anxious to see your property, sir, it's beautiful." Noah stood, eyes still low.

"It is," Tobias agreed. "You'll see more of it tomorrow, right now I want to show you the house. We'll eat, and I'll take you to the stable tonight, and then we'll go to bed early. Tomorrow will be long and full. Come on, now."

He walked to the pantry, knowing Noah was right behind him. He stepped into the small room and pointed to the shelves. "You will become familiar with all of this tomorrow morning, as you are responsible for our meals. Mrs. Miller will do the shopping, but you will cook for us while we are here."

Noah looked around the pantry. "You should know I am a terrible cook, sir." He bit his lip.

"Learn," Tobias said bluntly. "And quickly. This way..." He led Noah back through the kitchen and down the hall to the stairs, gesturing with his arms. "Mrs. Miller is eighty-three. She has girls come in to dust, though officially I don't know that, and we hire out the heavy stuff, but once a weekend you will sweep and vacuum the house, top to bottom. If I am cross, you will also polish the woodwork."

"Understood, sir," Noah nodded, following dutifully.

Upstairs, Tobias pointed to the bathroom. "I expect it to be kept neat and tidy-I don't make a mess, but I want you aware of it. Also, there will be times when I want you to run a bath for me-that means you'll run it, make sure I have a towel, all those things. You're in charge of making sure there's lube and condoms in there as well."

He barely waited before continuing down the hall. "That is Mrs. Miller's room, off limits. Always. The guestroom-you'll air it if it is sunny, treat it as any other room. No toys in there." Walking quickly he went into the fourth bedroom, the only one other than his own left. "Come in and sit. Look around."

Tobias sat on the edge of the bed, watching Noah as he looked at his safe room. Two walls of books, a third had cabinets hiding toys and tools, and the fourth was dominated

by a large wardrobe. The bed was in the middle of the floor, with access from all sides. "It's a safe room, not a playroom," Tobias said softly.

Noah took a seat in one of the chairs as instructed. "I'm not sure that I know what you mean by a safe room, sir."

"It's where you-or I-can come to explore an idea, a feeling, a desire without having to put it through a scene. If I have something I want to think about but I'm not quite ready to do in a full scene I may bring you here to talk about it. In here we can touch the edges of things and still back away from them." He stood up and opened the wardrobe, showing an array of fabrics. "For example, these costumes. We can either try a scene on, or simply use the texture. In here things can be as simple as talking about a new crop or discussing a fantasy, or as deep as revealing soul shattering secrets. It's a midway point between my bedroom and the playroom."

Noah smiled, and Tobias could see that he wanted to meet his eyes this time, that it was a struggle to keep them low. "That is very considerate, sir," was all Noah said, but his tone spoke volumes more.

"It's not just for you," Tobias warned. "There will be times when I bring you in here because I have a wisp of an idea and it will be hours before we leave. I'll make you talk in here, and I'll make you listen. Right now, it's time to listen."

Noah went still. "All right. I'm listening, sir."

"I know I'm about to give you a lot of rules, so if you have any questions over the next couple of days, speak up. I'd rather remind you than have you mess up. In fact, I'll make it

an order-if you forget any of the rules, you're under order to ask for clarification. Understood?"

"Understood, sir." Noah nodded.

Tobias nodded and went to the toy cabinet, opening a low drawer and fetching nipple clamps. He played with them for a moment, trying to get his phrasing correct, but finally he just started to talk. "Phantom was my sub for just over five years, the last eight months of that as my slave, twenty-four/seven. It was incredibly difficult and ultimately failed, which is part of the reason I don't want a slave. You are my submissive, not my slave, and I won't treat you as such. However, there are some trappings of ownership which I became enamored of."

"May I have permission to speak frankly, sir?" Noah asked. His train of thought was predictable, and Tobias considered saying no-knew he should say no. But he also had to weigh Noah's need to get his feelings out, and once they were aired perhaps he would be able to deal with them effectively.

"Briefly," he said firmly.

"Thank you, sir. I am uncomfortable with discussing Phan. It is of course your discretion to use any device or a toy or dress me as you please, but, with all due respect, if it is something that you used to use on Phan, or dressed him in, I would rather not know about it, sir." Noah kept his eyes studiously low as he spoke.

Tobias stared at the clamps in his hand. "I'm fairly sure that using toys I never did with Phan would mean spending thousands of dollars to replace items. Now, you're more than welcome to pay for it..."

"I understand that, sir. I only meant that I'd rather he not be part of a discussion involving you and me, sir."

"Tough. Now, as I was saying, I grew to like parts of having a slave very much. One of those things was having him walk to heel. I won't lead you on a leash in public, but I will be training you. Using these." He dropped the nipple clamps at Noah's feet and returned to the cabinet. "I will also be position training you. I'm sure you know most of the positions, but tomorrow or later on tonight we'll run through a few and see if there's anything about your posture I want changed. Understand so far?"

"I understand, sir," Noah answered a bit tightly, eyes on the clamps at his feet.

"Wonderful. Good boy." Tobias opened another drawer and lifted out a black fabric bag, not bothering to hide his smile. If Noah was annoyed about Phan's name, this could possibly make him lose his temper by Saturday night. "Get undressed and go to the washroom. I suggest you clean yourself rather well."

"Would you like me to shower, sir? Or just freshen up?" Noah asked, standing and tugging his sweater off over his head.

"I want you to clean yourself inside and out. Take a shower if you want..." Tobias tilted his head, suddenly realizing that Noah possibly had no idea what he meant. "Enema. Can you do it yourself, or would you like me to help?"

Noah paused a moment, jeans half off, and licked his lips. "Ah. No, sir, I can manage it. I'll find what I need in the

bathroom, sir?" he asked and removed his jeans, folding them and setting them on the chair with his sweater.

"In the cabinet under the sink." Tobias softened his tone, cursing himself for being thoughtless. "If you want me to help, or to be there, I will. I know it can be uncomfortable."

Noah slid out of his briefs and straightened up, his smooth skin and his slack cock drawing the eye. "No thank you, sir, I can manage. If I may be excused, sir?"

Tobias nodded and opened the door, waving him out. He watched Noah walk down the hall, his back stiff, and hoped to hell he wouldn't have to rescue him. With a shake of his head he opened the bag and dumped the harness on the bed, checking the locks and joints carefully. Satisfied that everything was in good shape, he got a small plug, the smallest he had, and fitted it into the back.

Tobias grinned as he realized Phan had probably never had anything this small up his ass in his entire, twisted life.

The cock cage was new, purchased with Noah in mind, and Tobias listened to the water run in the bathroom as he got it ready.

Tobias waited for a while but all he heard was the constant gentle spray of the shower running. When he finally got concerned he made his way down the hall to the bathroom door and put his ear to it. Nothing. Just as he raised his hand to knock, however, he heard Noah groan.

"Uh," came the sound and Tobias looked at the closed door wishing he could see through it. Noah groaned again and hissed slightly. Tobias' fingers itched to turn the knob, and he was just about to when the water shut off. Noah sighed, and

Tobias heard the medicine cabinet open and close. He headed off to the safe room again so as not to embarrass him.

Moments later, Noah returned, naked and squeaky clean with slightly damp hair. He walked into the safe room and stood silently awaiting Tobias' orders.

"Come here, please," Tobias said softly. Noah came to him, eyes down, and stood where Tobias pointed. "Are you all right? Light-headed at all?"

Noah shook his head. "No, I'm just fine, thank you, sir."

Tobias smiled and ran his hand down Noah's arm, the first touch he'd allowed himself since kissing him in the kitchen.

"Good. Well done, sweetheart. Now, the bad news."

"It's not bad news if it pleases you, sir," Noah answered gamely.

"That's the spirit!" Tobias laughed and held up the leather harness. "Let's see if you can maintain that attitude all weekend. Your list of favorites is going to be distinctly one-sided-in my favor. I doubt you'll be coming at all, I'm afraid. I, however, intend to enjoy myself."

Noah eyed the harness. He tilted his head to one side and then the other as if puzzling it out and then his eyes went wide. "Oh. That's quite a contraption, sir," he observed uncertainly.

"It is indeed. You'll love it. When I take it off, anyway." Really, Tobias thought he might be enjoying this a bit too much. "It's a chastity device. You will not be allowed to orgasm-in fact, with this cock cage, you won't even be able to get hard. With your own sexual pleasure removed utterly from the equation you will be able to focus more on mine."

"I can see how well that suits you, sir," Noah replied with a hint of a groan in his voice, though it wasn't entirely humorless. "Shall I try it on, then?"

Tobias grinned. "Actually, you should bend over so I can get you ready for the plug."

"Oh." Noah sounded slightly less enthusiastic this time. "I hadn't noticed the plug, sir." He bent over and braced his arms on the chair.

"It's small, I promise," Tobias assured him. "You'll have the plug in until morning unless you ask to use the bathroom; I don't want to irritate your tissues." He got a fresh packet of lube from the cabinet and tore it open, smoothing most of it over the tiny plug. "Spread a little more, sweetheart. Thank you."

As he teased a slick finger over Noah's opening he noted very little redness. He had been careful with the enema, which was good. "If you get hard you'll regret it," he advised, dipping his finger into Noah's ass.

Noah's breathing changed instantly. Tobias wickedly imagined him thinking of grannies in their underwear and swimming pools filled with ice cubes to keep from getting hard. "I ... imagine so, sir," Noah managed, but went very quiet after that.

Tobias didn't play or waste time—he wasn't really trying to be cruel, and he knew Noah would have enough struggle with his arousal over the next few hours. He slipped the plug in and wound the wide leather strap that held it in place between Noah's butt cheeks, moving quickly to thread Noah's genitals through the metal cock ring. The top strap, attached

to the waistband and going down to the ring, was locked in place and he fitted the cage around Noah's penis, locking it in place as well.

"All trussed up," he said, making sure the straps were all adjusted to taut but not tight. "The cage is plastic and has a hole, so if you have to relieve yourself, you can." He stood up and admired his work, his boy. "Beautiful."

Noah shifted slightly from foot to foot, letting the leather settle more comfortably on his hips. "Thank you, sir," he said softly.

"You're welcome." Tobias sat in his chair once more, just looking at Noah. He really was beautiful, leather around his hips, his cock bound and almost hidden, his skin lightly flushed. "I suppose if I had your balls shaved it would be noticed at work."

"Possibly, sir. In the showers."

"Damn. Oh well, it can't be helped, I suppose," Tobias said regretfully. Perhaps he'd have a chance to play when Noah took vacation time. Tobias spread his legs, let his own shaft have room as it began to fill. "Now, more rules. Unless I specifically say, you don't have to ask me to speak. To speak frankly, yes, but you seem to have that worked out. You will not speak to me with disrespect, nor yell, nor threaten. You will not call me names nor will you curse at me. I know that things happen in scenes, of course-I'm speaking generally. You will move quickly when I tell you to. You will think of my needs-if you are thirsty, offer me a drink. But don't neglect your needs-if you are thirsty, tell me that as well.

"Note I said needs, not wishes. Needs are defined by your body-heat, food, liquid. If your restraints hurt and you don't think they should, ask me to check them. Understood?"

Noah nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Very good. Now, are you hungry?"

"Yes, sir. Are you?"

"Yes. There is a casserole in the oven. Put on your jeans-if they don't fit over the cage I have sweatpants for you."

Tobias stood up, rather regretfully. He liked watching Noah like this and would have preferred to stay, letting his desire build. However, eating meant that he could take Noah out to the playroom-and there was plenty of opportunity there for him to indulge in other, baser hungers.

Noah reached for his jeans and took his time stepping into them. They were loose and hung slightly on his hips anyway, so he didn't have any problem getting them on over the belt. He paused for a moment as if thinking over what he might be forgetting to do, but evidently came up with nothing and squared his shoulders again. "I'm ready, sir."

Tobias smiled. "I hope so." He left the room, leaving the nipple clamps on the floor and Noah's other clothes on the chair. He listened to Noah's breathing as they went down the stairs and smiled to himself as the plug made itself known.

In the kitchen he showed Noah where the dishes were, the serving spoons, and everything else he'd need, then sat at the table to watch. Mostly he wanted to be available for questions before they moved to the dining room to eat, but he wasn't immune to the pleasure of watching Noah move.

Noah moved about the kitchen, albeit slowly as the apparatus shifted and tugged against his jeans. He took a few minutes to set the dining room table, and Tobias went to the larger room with him.

"What can I get you to drink, sir?" Noah asked before hunting down the oven mitts and removing the casserole from the oven.

"Just ice water, please."

Noah ended up pouring them both glasses before he brought the casserole to the table to serve Tobias. "This smells wonderful, I suppose Mrs. Miller made it? She's a genius; I'm going to have to ask her for some tips." He spooned out a serving of the casserole onto Tobias' plate.

"Salt and pepper, sir?"

"No, thank you."

He'd decided early on that he wouldn't make Noah kneel to eat-the man really wasn't a slave, and Tobias still remembered the indignity of eating that way during his own training; as far as he was concerned, it would make Noah feel humiliated, and that was not acceptable. They both sat at the table, and once more Noah waited for Tobias to begin eating before lifting his fork.

Tobias ate slowly, enjoying the meal. Mrs. Miller really had pulled out the stops, making a simple casserole a thing of beauty-Tobias suspected she was trying to impress Noah, which was nice to know. He really hadn't been sure how she'd react to his having a guest once more. "If you'd like, you're free to leave a note," he told Noah. "As you get more used to our routine you may even want to try specific recipes or

meals. You'll be able to leave lists for her to make sure she has the things you need." He smiled, watching Noah keep his eyes on his plate. "She adores flattery, and there's little more flattering than a request for advice."

Sitting seemed a bit of a challenge for Noah and Tobias did his best not to laugh at him.

"I did make an effort to make a good impression, sir. I'm sure it was over the top, but at least she knew I wanted her to like me." Noah said. "And you really hadn't told me anything about her, so I'm glad she didn't press that point." He grinned and took another bite of his dinner.

Tobias could tell that Noah was hungry and could have eaten more, but he stopped after only a few bites. He did, however, finish his water. "Can I get you more water, sir?"

"No, thank you. You can, however, eat more-you'll do me little good if you pass out from hunger. I won't be giving you a hard workout tonight, merely a taste." Tobias finished his own plate a little more quickly, his eagerness to show Noah the playroom getting the better of him. He'd spent a good portion of the afternoon out there, putting the new things away and making sure the equipment was in perfect order.

"And please remind me to have flowers sent to my partner-I left her rather abruptly today, and I'm sure she thinks I've lost my mind." He smiled, remembering the look on Deidre's face as he fled the clinic. She hadn't been angry, but she'd been knowing; a bribe was in order merely to avoid the questions.

"Yes, sir, I'll remind you." Noah took several more bites, slowly but obediently. When he was finished, he shifted once

more in his seat and stood, letting the leather settle again. He started to reach for Tobias' plate but pulled his hand back quickly. "Would you care for seconds or are you finished, sir?"

Sighing, Tobias pointed to the floor and watched Noah kneel, a sharp inhale accompanying the shift of his harness. Gently, Tobias said, "I know you're nervous and probably have first night jitters, but we might as well start right. Each night you will have your day's punishment and each morning will begin with your daily discipline. That was one stroke for tonight; you'll keep track. If your count is different from mine we'll combine them. Now, I am done in fact, so you may take my plate and do the dishes. When you're done, come back upstairs to the safe room, and we'll continue."

"Yes, sir," Noah answered with a quiet sigh. He took a moment and then stood, picking up both plates from the table and putting them in the sink. Tobias went upstairs and heard nothing but the sound of running water and the clink of dishes until Noah appeared in the doorway of the safe room.

Chapter 12

Tobias went to Noah and stroked his cheek with the back of his hand. "Well done, boy. We're leaving the house so I want you to put your sweater on-it's a little chilly out. It's not far so we won't worry about socks, just shoes."

"Yes, sir." Noah went to the chair and retrieved his sweater, then waited while Tobias got the stable keys from the cabinet.

"I've been looking forward to this," Tobias said softly. "I've spent a good part of this week finding new toys to use on you, boy."

He noted that Noah fell in stride behind him with ease. "Thank you, sir," Noah said. "I have been looking forward to the weekend as well." He followed Tobias down the stairs, Tobias moving them as quickly as Noah could manage, and then out the door into the chilly fall air.

Tobias pointed to the largest of his three buildings as they walked up the hard packed lane. "That's the stable and barn. There's a paddock out behind, and on the other side of the barn is the start of an indoor riding ring. It's not a pressing project and looks like it'll cost more than I'd expected so I'm letting it slide for now. There are four horses at the moment; if you ride, I'd like some help exercising them. If not, you'll have to merely be content with cleaning the stalls."

Noah followed Tobias, looking out at the buildings as Tobias pointed them out. "I ride, sir," Noah told him with a smile. "Or, rode my whole life until I moved to the city,

anyway. I grew up with horses. I haven't been in the saddle for a few years, but I'm sure it will come back to me."

Tobias grinned. "I might even take out the plug. If you're a very good boy."

"Thank you, sir. I will be." Tobias heard Noah chuckle softly over his shoulder.

"You'll still be doing stalls," Tobias pointed out. He felt good-light on his feet, full of energy ... and calm. He couldn't seem to stop smiling, which was something he'd have to get a bit more control over. He pointed to the smallest building, to their left. "That's storage, mostly equipment. The tractor, the plow, that sort of thing. Any chemicals. And this used to be the old stables."

Instead of taking Noah to the door he walked them along the side and pointed to the windows. "The light is bad right now, but in the daytime you can tell the shutters are actually solid. They won't open. There's a door at either end and a fire exit built in halfway, but any functional windows are high up. The interior has been entirely soundproofed and reinforced, with new plumbing and wiring in the last fifteen years."

Tobias heard a light whistling sound as Noah ran his fingers over a shutter. "Whoa." Clearly Noah was so awed by Tobias' description that the words came out unbidden.

"Thank you." Tobias was proud of his playroom, he'd never deny it. However, it really only inspired awe in other players, and as he rarely brought anyone here it was still a novelty to see someone else's admiration. "It's been a lot of work. Come on in-the interior should take your breath away."

He led Noah back to the door, and this time he unlocked the main bolt and the two hidden ones. He reached in to turn on the lights, making sure that only the center track went on before he threw the door open.

"Welcome, Noah. You'll be spending a lot of time here, so I hope you like it."

Noah followed Tobias inside. He was wide-eyed to say the very least. "Oh, my God," he said several times as he made his way down the long center aisle peering into the stalls. "Oh, my God."

Standing at the door, by what had originally been the tack room, Tobias watched Noah explore and flicked lights on to illuminate areas just ahead of him, enticing him forward. Past the first set of stalls, one on either side, which contained little more than supplies, to the second set, decorated for scenes. The one on the left had been Phan's favorite, a room set up to look like an office. He'd liked to play student and headmaster. On the right, a pile of pillows, the wall lined with chains. A third set, these larger than the others, with manacles on the wall and pulleys. Chains fell from the ceiling and each had a sling. The last set of stalls, save one set-one white, one black.

He watched Noah move, noted which stalls he lingered over, which he passed by quickly but came back to. The entire time, Noah whispered to himself, exclamations of joy, of wonder, and of surprise at the sheer number of stalls all set up and ready to be used. As he moved to the last set of stalls Tobias turned on the lights beyond them, revealing the ring. As the lights went up, showing off the huge area, he

dimmed the rest, making it look like the prize at the end of a long journey.

The last stalls he left dark, knowing that the ring would distract Noah nicely.

"Go on," he urged softly as he walked up behind his boy. "Go look. Strip naked and wander in my playroom, sweetheart. I want to watch you explore, I want to watch you move, on display for me."

Noah gave every impression of a kid in a candy store. He obeyed quickly, removing his sweater first and then his jeans. Moving about seemed easier for him now, or maybe he was just too distracted by the enormous ring to notice any discomfort.

He put his things discreetly in a corner and then wandered the room slowly, touching everything, running his fingers over smooth, rich leather, testing the strength of restraints, even standing or sitting or kneeling to test them out. "I've never seen a place like this outside of the club." He stopped by the padded, leather-clad spanking bench and lay down on his stomach across it. Then he grinned and stood up again and moved on to the next piece. "This is incredible, sir."

"I prefer it to a club," Tobias said honestly. He watched Noah move to examine the Saint Andrew's Cross and then the faux antique library table, crouching down to see the iron rings at the corners. His ass was a beautiful thing, taut and sweet, marked by the leather holding the plug. "If only because here I know the weight of every tool, know exactly what it will do."

Tobias walked to the center of the huge space, to where as a child he'd held the end of the lunge line and put the horses through their paces. He'd placed his chair there, a massive thing of walnut and leather, almost a throne but more ... ominous. He sat, once more spreading his legs to allow his erection some comfort. From this vantage he could watch every twitch of Noah's muscles.

"Take a look in the boxes, if you'd like. The steamer trunks have toys, the wooden chests have floggers, whips. There's fur in one of them, leather in another ... it's safe to say that if there is a sensation you crave, I can give it to you."

Sensation, in Tobias' mind, was second only to meeting, accepting, and rejoicing in one's own nature. Sensation drove him, sensation pulled him, sensation was what he sought to give and to take. With one hand he idly rubbed his cock, with both eyes he watched Noah seek.

"Thank you, sir." Noah reached for one of the trunks, opened it, and peered in. He pulled out a flogger and looked it over, trading it for another and trying this second one out lightly on his thigh. "Nice," he murmured, then set those back and moved onto the next trunk, peering in for a long moment. He knelt next to this one and pulled out a length of silk. He ran it over his thighs, and across his cock which twitched with interest but could do little else locked in its cage. He put it back and pulled out a length of mink, which he rubbed his cheek against for a moment. "Soft things are nice too," he whispered quietly before returning the fur to its box and standing to close it.

The steamer trunk he opened drew a gasp from him, and he stared into it for a long moment. "Oh my God," he said wonderingly, pulling out a slender glass dildo and holding it up to the light. "Beautiful, sir."

"I'm glad you like it." He was. He'd been shopping for something new, something glorious and wonderful when he'd seen it-when he'd seen them; an entire collection of glass dildos, all different and wonderful. The one Noah held was simple, elegantly ridged, with color shot through it; long and smooth to the touch. It was utterly alien and beautiful. "Lick it for me."

In his lap, his hand stilled, waiting for the right moment to move again.

"Your pleasure is my pleasure, sir." Noah responded coyly, turning to face Tobias and sinking slowly to his knees. He held the heavy glass object in front of him and licked slowly up the length of its graceful shaft, then circled the head of the piece with his tongue. He bathed it slowly and sensually for a few more moments and then, after a sly grin, he took the head of the dildo into his mouth.

Tobias watched, refusing to shift in his chair, refusing to do anything but enjoy watching Noah perform for him. "Deeper," he said, his voice low. "I want to see what you can take. I want to see it slick from your mouth."

Noah released the dildo and gave the shaft one more thorough lick. He sucked on the head, then lifted his chin and lowered into his mouth, swallowing it deep into his throat. He held it there a moment before releasing it a bit to breathe and then thrust the toy down his gullet once more.

Tobias' fingers twitched and slid along his dick. He found himself unable to breathe for a long moment, catching himself before he could moan. "Good boy," he said, pleased that his voice was steady.

Noah pulled the dildo from his throat and let the weight of it rest wetly against his chin. He dropped his head back, baring his throat, and with great care he drew a damp line down his neck, over the hollow divot at its base, and then diagonally down his chest to rest against a dark nipple. He teased that one and then the other with it and moaned softly as both nipples grew stiff in response.

"It is a lovely instrument, sir. I like the weight of it, I like the smooth shaft, I like how it feels in my mouth." And just as he said the word, he thrust the glass cock back into his mouth, sucking on it hard enough to make his cheeks hollow.

"Good." Tobias couldn't sit any longer without risking losing control. He stood slowly, unfolding his body from the chair and walked to Noah, watching him fellate the glass. "It will look lovely when I let you slide it in and out of your ass. Put it back, boy, and come with me."

Walking slowly, more from need than any stately desire, he moved back toward the stable, listening as behind him Noah put the toy back in the box and came after him, his feet padding on the floor.

"There will be chores for you in here as well," Tobias said, leading him down the hall past the dark stalls. "You will make sure the floors are clear, and when we play in here you are responsible for cleaning up. Toys, tools, stalls. Not immediately, of course, but before you leave."

"Yes, sir." Noah answered, following right behind him. "I'll remember to clean that dildo."

"You're smart," Tobias said with a grin. He went right to the control room, by the door. "Now, here are all the switches. Lights-the main track, the ring, and each stall. These ones are motion sensors, I don't use them much-they come on at the wrong moment, and go off when I least want them to. Heat-if you're cold to the point of discomfort, tell me. A little chill keeps you nice and perky, but cold isn't fun. And here are the first aid supplies. Landline. Intercom to the house-so you can tell me you're done or if you need to ask a question. The refrigerator should be kept stocked with water." Tobias turned to face Noah, whose eyes immediately dropped. "Clear so far?"

"Yes, sir, you've thought of everything. I am very impressed." Noah kept his eyes down, and licked his lips. His face was a little flushed from his display with the glass phallus, and he was clearly anything but chilled at the moment.

"Noah?" Tobias asked softly, making his voice as much of a caress as he could.

"How may I please you, sir?" Noah responded in a similarly soothing tone.

"Pick a stall." Tobias leaned on the nearest wall and blatantly fondled himself, watching Noah's eyes catch the movement.

Noah watched him handle himself for a brief moment. "Thank you, sir," he seemed to force himself to say, and then he turned deliberately and made his way down the center

aisle again. Ironically, he lingered outside the office for a moment, worrying his lip, but ended up moving on. He passed the suspension cell by without a thought and lingered again outside the room with all the pillows and the chains on the walls. He disappeared into the stall a moment and Tobias heard the chains clink. When he reappeared, he knelt silently by the door to the stall to indicate that this one was his choice.

Tobias nodded once and walked to him, his pace steady and his feet falling heavily. The sound of his shoes was muted by the sound proofing, but the steps were measured, determined. He stopped in front of Noah, one hand still rubbing his erection, and asked, "Why this one? The chains or the pillows?"

"The chains, sir," Noah answered evenly.

"Okay." Tobias walked past him and looked around. The pillows, large and square, plump and lush, were scattered about, carefully arranged to make lying down or lounging inviting. The chains dangled from the ceiling, huge steel rings embedded in the joists, leather manacles at the ends. They were adjustable, able to lift a man off his feet or spread his arms wide. Along one wall was a cabinet, an antique sideboard Tobias had purchased at an estate sale as a convenient place for toys and tools.

"Come, boy." Tobias had spent the afternoon making sure all the cuffs and manacles he had were in pristine condition; these had two buckles each and were padded, lined with soft leather. New, they would, he hoped, become saturated with

Noah's sweat and scent over time. He heard Noah rise and he rattled the chain. "Here. Give me your wrists."

"As you wish, sir." Noah stood facing Tobias and held his wrists out.

Silently, Tobias fitted the cuffs, tightening them carefully before moving to adjust the chains. The noise of them pulling through the rings was loud, the steel ringing and clattering. Tobias stopped when Noah's arms were just far enough from his own body that he wouldn't be able to touch himself anywhere. They were not above his head, nor were they stretched; he was merely held in place, unable to leave.

Casually, Tobias moved about the small space, running a hand over Noah's skin when he was close enough to. A caress on his shoulder, a tug on his nipple. A pat on his ass and a jiggle of the plug. When he moved in front of Noah, Tobias pulled off his shirt and then bent his head to bite Noah's nipple, soothing it with his tongue.

Noah hissed at the bite and then groaned, and his chains rattled lightly. Tobias felt as Noah shifted, jostling the plug himself this time. Noah flipped his wrists over so he was able to grab hold of the chains with his fingers and tug on them.

"Shhh," Tobias soothed. Then he bit the other one, sucking hard on it before letting go. He went to the sideboard and removed his shoes. "Sometimes torture doesn't hurt," he said calmly. He lifted one foot and removed his sock, then the other. "Sometimes it does, however." He walked back to Noah and latched onto his nipple again, one hand going to Noah's ass, pulling him closer and playing with the leather straps.

"Oh!" Noah moaned, toes curling. He spread his legs a bit and tried to press his hips into Tobias'. "Sometimes it's harder to bear when it doesn't, sir," Noah whispered to him gently.

Tobias knew the truth of that. He lifted his head, licking a swath across Noah's chest before moving away again. Slowly, almost casually, he backed away from where Noah stood and began to undo his jeans, sliding the zipper down smoothly. "Watch me," he said softly. "Know me." He stopped moving when he reached the pillows, lowering himself gracefully. He lay back with a sigh, enjoying the feel of the fabric as it slid along his back. Closing his eyes for a moment he lost himself in the clink of the chains and the sound of Noah breathing.

"Watch," he whispered again, opening his eyes and running his hands over his chest, dragging his fingers through the soft patch of hair there to tweak his nipples. They hardened immediately, growing taut under his fingers, and he lingered there, feeling every tug in his groin.

"You have a lovely body, sir. Tight, seasoned, tanned; very handsome." Noah offered as he watched as he'd been told to, drinking in Tobias' body with his eyes. "And your cock looks as good as it felt last weekend. Hard and thick." His voice was low and intense. "I am a very, very lucky boy."

Tobias' control only extended so far; his erection leapt at the praise it received, twitching further out of his unfastened jeans. He glanced down his body, almost smiling at the obscene picture of his cock reaching for the ceiling. He reached for it, wrapping his hand gently around the shaft and pumping it lightly for a short time.

It felt good, better than masturbation had in a long time. Taking his time, he eased his jeans a little lower, lifting his balls free and cupping them gently. He moaned quietly and let go, his hands sweeping over his skin and returning to his nipples.

"Don't you want my mouth on you, sir?" Noah continued speaking, his voice low and husky, each word spoken slowly and emphasized for effect. "I'll swallow you down like I did that pretty glass dildo. Hot breath on your skin, wet tongue bathing you ... let me pleasure you, sir. You're so beautiful."

"You please me by watching." Tobias wiggled slightly, pushing his jeans farther down. "By learning, by submitting. You can't touch, you can't get hard, you can't get off. You can only watch, can only be my audience." He lifted his legs, finally removing his jeans so he could sprawl on the pillows, his cock hard and aching in his hand. "You can only watch and smell and hear."

"This is what you meant by torture that isn't painful, sir, isn't it?" Noah breathed and then continued with a barrage of sensual, sexual words. "Because watching you and not being able to get my hands on that gorgeous cock is torture. But I wish to please you, so I am watching. I'm watching your chest rise and fall as you start to lose your breath. I'm watching your hips roll slightly when you tighten your fingers around your cock. I'm watching the blush rise from your belly and spread over your shoulders into your face. Are you aching, sir? Is it wonderful?"

Tobias listened to the chains shift and clink, to Noah's voice, and let his hand speed slightly. He lifted one leg, bent

it at the knee, and bared himself, strong fingers stroking over his perineum. "Your voice is," he said. "Give me more, give me yourself."

His body felt tighter, warming to hot as he stroked the moist head of his cock with his thumb. He spread the fluid and gasped, suddenly hungry, starved for release, needing to feel more. Reflexively his fingers tightened and he forced himself to back off, to calm his breathing. "Tell me what you think about when you jerk off."

"In all honesty, lately it's been you, sir." Noah admitted and it sounded more like truth than flattery. "I've been thinking about you." Tobias heard Noah's breath catch and then he moaned. "God, I want to be hard so badly, sir. The cage is ... frustrating." He cleared his throat. "I've been remembering the way you took me at the club, fucked me hard when I was bound to that cross. How full I felt, how much I wanted." Tobias heard Noah swallow and pant lightly. "How badly I needed you. Oh, God, I want you."

Noah cleared his throat. "I ... I have a fantasy, though, about walking into a bar, being picked up and fucked in the alley against a rough wall. If I close my eyes when I'm masturbating I can almost feel the scrape of the bricks," Noah's voice trembled a bit and the chains rattled. "I can hear the grunts of this man I've never seen before in my life in my ear ... deep and low, and then all of a sudden the alley is filled with people and they're shouting at us to come. Gets me off every time."

Tobias filed that away without really thinking about it, part of his mind already making a note to call Bradford. His hand

moved faster, this time with deliberation, and he tugged at his balls. "You like to be filled; the unknown excites you, having your control ripped away instead of given. Would that feel more real?" His voice was less steady now, the constant pressure of his hand building. Deliberately, he moved his fingers back and circled his entrance.

"It's more that I am so accustomed to giving it when it's asked for. I love being taken. I love the idea that someone is just going to have you if they want you, and it's not that I would count for nothing, it's just that they would want me so badly that they had to have me whether I needed it or not ... if that makes any sense, sir."

"To be desired. To be someone's everything..." Tobias gasped suddenly, his back arching off the pillows. "To ... to be the one ... solid thing..." Groaning, he pushed a dry finger into himself, his head falling back as he panted.

Noah jumped on his analogy. "Yes, exactly that. To fill someone's thoughts. To be the only one they want. Oh, God, sir, you are so fucking hot right now, you can't image what it's like to watch you. You know your body so well. And I'm watching and learning, sir." He moaned. "Oh, God, I'm watching you fuck yourself with that finger, tugging on your cock but trying not to come yet, not too soon, not while it feels this good. But it's so hard isn't it? You want it and it's right there but if you take that leap it'll be over and right now ... it's good right, sir? So good..."

"You're good, sweetheart," Tobias whispered. "I'll make you fly." And he let go, let himself relax, let relief flow through him and out his cock in wracking spasms. Heat

splashed on him, around him, and he felt himself growl, deep in his chest.

Noah made a sound, stifled like he was biting his lip. "I could have come without touching myself just watching that, sir. Watching you come, that lovely look on your face. You could make me fly that easily." He shifted, looking like he was trying to ride the plug without much success.

Tobias laughed, boneless on the pillows. "Stop that, sweetheart. It's not going to work, and you'll just hurt your dick if you manage to get your blood flowing."

Noah sighed. "I know, I know; it's frustrating as hell, sir." He shook his head and took two steps forward, then back again, his chains rattling.

"I know," Tobias agreed easily. He stretched and sighed, not quite ready to get up yet. "I told you it would be an easy night, boy. Tomorrow will be more ... in depth."

Noah nodded, keeping his eyes on Tobias' body. "You are lovely, sir, that was a pleasure to watch, thank you."

Tobias smiled, not really able to stop himself. With a groan he rolled over on his side and then got to his feet, moving to stand in front of Noah so he could undo the cuffs. "Wrists okay?" he asked. The chains fell away with soft clinking sounds, and he absently swiped at the come on his belly.

"Just fine, sir, they're very comfortable. You must have chosen them with great care." He dropped his arms to his sides. "Would you like me to clean you up, sir?"

Tobias nodded, walking to the wall to release the chains. "Yes, please. First me, then check the pillows."

Quickly, Noah left the stall, the sound of his steps soft as he padded down to the supply room. He returned just as quietly, with a warm damp towel, and as soon as he was clean Tobias began to dress.

"After you make sure the pillows are clean," he told Noah, "I want you to set the chains back to the way they were, and make sure that glass dildo is clean. Dress and come back to the house-I'll set the door to lock behind you, so just turn off the light. I'll be in my office."

"With pleasure, sir. I will come to your office shortly." Noah waited for Tobias to turn and leave the stall before setting about his chores.

Chapter 13

The air had cooled further, Tobias noted as he walked back to the house. When he went inside he immediately turned up the heat, then went to the office. He needed a few moments to review the evening so far.

Noah had been in good form, and allowances were made for the first night-he knew very well that they were both feeling their nerves. However, there was work to be done and trust to be won; his own hunger dealt with, he could now move on.

He would set Noah's routine carefully, make it something he could rely on. There were things that he had to work around-the horses needed to be fed at a certain time, as did he himself, but there was also leeway. He was thinking about what to make a permanent part of Noah's routine when he heard the front door close followed by Noah's steps in the hall.

Noah appeared moments later in the doorway to his office, eyes on the ground and shoulders square. He had put his jeans and sweater back on for the walk over to the house. He waited patiently for Tobias to acknowledge him before speaking. "Everything is done, sir, and I double-checked that the door was locked before I came back to the house."

"Good, thank you." Tobias leaned back in his chair and considered the figure in the doorway. Tall and strong, lean-hipped and healthy ... he really was remarkable to look at. "Undress, please. Leave your clothes; I'll have things for you to wear tomorrow. I'd like to look at you without barrier."

"Yes, sir." Noah crossed his arms over himself and tugged his sweater off over his head, revealing his tight, tanned abs. He folded the sweater neatly and then his jeans before moving further into the room and kneeling at Tobias' side.

"It was a good start," Tobias said softly, one hand reaching out to pet Noah's hair. "You did well, sweetheart."

Noah's voice was soft as he answered. "Thank you, sir."

"I know it's early, but we're going to bed. I think Fridays will typically be early for us, though we'll usually do a longer, more intense scene. Saturday will be even more intense, and you'll need your rest." Tobias stood up. "In the morning you will make us breakfast, then we'll go to the barn. The horses will be fed, and then I'll let you go for your run. The horses will get their exercise, and after that ... well, I'll tell you tomorrow."

Noah followed him out the door and up the stairs, silent except for the whisper of bare feet on the hardwood floor. At the door to the safe room Tobias allowed himself a smile. "I believe we have something to take care of before we sleep."

"Yes, sir. My punishment, sir. One offense today, for reaching for your plate before asking if you were finished eating," Noah reminded him.

"Correct." Tobias touched the door with his fingertips. "Punishment will not be given in this room. It will happen in the playroom, in my office, or in the bedroom. Discipline will be with a paddle each morning, punishment with a crop. Please fetch one of each and come to the bedroom."

Without watching to see which tools Noah would select, trusting he'd pick from among the harsher crops and the

widest paddles, Tobias went to his room and waited. He sat on the edge of his bed, wondering why he was so sure about Noah's choices. He didn't really know the man that well, by all rights he shouldn't be sure at all. He found himself making a bet with himself about what Noah would bring him.

It wasn't long before Noah joined him in his bedroom, his chosen implements in his hands. The crop was leather with a long handle and a wide leather loop at the end. The paddle was rectangular in shape and was set with three rows of small studs. Noah knelt in front of Tobias and held them out in front of him.

Carefully, Tobias took the crop. "This will do nicely," he said. "It'll hurt. The paddle, on the other hand, will hurt, too. Quite a lot, in fact."

"Yes, sir." Noah nodded, eyes on the floor.

"And you intend to run in the morning and go riding with an ass which is ... more than warmed?"

Noah frowned. "Oh, you're right, sir, I hadn't thought about the run." He bit his lip.

Tobias grinned. "But you liked the studs, huh? Think they'd bite a bit?"

"The studs have a short-lived sting that I..." Noah cleared his throat. "That turns me on, sir." He bit his lip again and Tobias caught a hint of his embarrassment.

"All right," Tobias said, setting the paddle down on the bed. "Next weekend I'll work it into a scene for you, maybe on Saturday. You'll have a day to earn it. For discipline, I'll use something more utilitarian-get the one with the leather back, please."

"Yes, sir." Noah stood and hurried out of the room to bring Tobias the paddle he'd asked for. When he returned he knelt again and held out the paddle. "Is this the one you meant, sir?"

"Yes, thank you." Tobias put the paddle on the bed and fingered the crop. "Tomorrow we're going to go over positions and their names. For now, I want you to stand facing the wall, arms braced and butt out."

Noah obeyed silently, placing his palms flat against the wall. He spread his legs slightly and stuck his lovely rounded ass out, presenting it for Tobias' review.

"You are being punished for rushing me, for presuming instead of anticipating. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. I understand, sir," Noah answered softly.

"One stroke," Tobias said firmly. Just as firmly he brought the crop down, raising a red line across Noah's ass, neatly bisected by the leather harness.

Noah hissed and swallowed a sound, clearing his throat instead. His ass clenched for a moment and then relaxed, the momentary tension draining from his shoulders and back as well. "Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome, boy." Tobias smiled and stepped away, still admiring the stripe. "Now. You can brush your teeth and wash while I get your chains ready," he said, pointing to a length of metal on the floor. "I suggest you use the facilities, as you'll have to wake me up if you suddenly need them in the night. I don't encourage that." Quickly, he undid Noah's harness and set it aside.

Noah disappeared to the bathroom. It was quiet for a short while and then Tobias could hear the toilet flush, the water running, and the unmistakable sound of gargling, which made him grin. When Noah reappeared his hair was combed, he was clean-shaven, and he smelled like minty mouthwash.

Tobias smiled broadly. "Lovely, sweetheart." He redid the harness, making sure the cage and plug were neatly in place, and said, "Kneel for me and I'll put on your collar." He held up a plain strip of black leather. Noah knelt instantly, and Tobias caught a grin on his face even though his eyes remained appropriately lowered.

"So eager," Tobias teased. "Pity I have to ruin it. This is merely to keep you in place overnight. My collar-the one that matters-must be earned, boy. It won't be easy, but when you do it you'll know that it's because you've made me very proud."

Tobias watched as Noah nodded. "I understand, sir," he said, and he worked his lower lip in his teeth again. He'd tried to hide the disappointment in his voice, but Tobias heard it there all the same.

"I know," Tobias said softly. "But it's not all games here, is it? That's the reward, sweetheart. Make me happy, submit to me ... complete us both and you'll earn it. I know you can do this."

Noah nodded confidently. "I won't disappoint you, sir."

"I'm sure you won't." Tobias nudged Noah's chin with one finger and fastened the collar. "You'll be chained to the end of the bed. There's a large pillow there, enough to curl up on

comfortably, and a blanket. The chain is long enough for you to stand up, but you can't leave the room."

That seemed to disappoint Noah a bit, too, but he was very good about making his way to the end of the bed and picking up the loose end of the chain to hand to Tobias. Clipping the chain to the collar, Tobias said, "If it helps, it's easier to earn your way into my bed for a night than it is to earn the collar."

Noah laughed softly, his smile returning. "I'll remember that, sir."

"I'm sure you will," Tobias smiled. "Okay, boy. Bed time. The alarm will go off at five, so sleep. You'll have discipline first, then I'll let you go make breakfast. And remember-my pleasure is your only goal. Make me happy, and you'll be happy, I promise."

Chapter 14

If the alarm clock had gone off, Tobias hadn't heard it. He hadn't heard Noah wake, or the gentle clinking sound of the boy's chain as he pulled himself up off the floor. He hadn't been awake when the bed shifted as Noah climbed onto it gingerly, either.

The first thing his sleeping mind had been dimly aware of was heat; hot breath in his curls, hot tongue on his cock, which apparently had been wide awake long before his mind. He hadn't even opened his eyes yet. When he did he found that Noah's upper body was a lump under his comforter but his ass stuck out just within reach of Tobias' hands, still bound in its leather harness.

Noah made a soft humming sound that was muffled by the bed linens. Tobias bent a knee to the side to give Noah better access, and his sub took full advantage. Noah's tongue circled each of his balls slowly and gently. Tobias wasn't at all sure how long he'd been at it, but Noah was clearly not in any kind of hurry.

"I don't recall telling you to do this," Tobias said, attempting to sound stern. Then he closed his eyes and moaned as Noah's tongue danced over a particularly sensitive part.

"No, sir," came a muffled voice from under the comforter. Noah's hand wrapped around his cock and pumped him vigorously several times. "But you did ask me to wake you up when the clock went off."

"Oh, Christ," Tobias whispered, his hips twitching. He snaked a hand under the covers to trace Noah's face, urging him to get on with it. "I do like initiative," he allowed graciously.

"Yes, sir," Noah acknowledged and then went silent. Tobias felt himself swallowed deftly and released, slowly at first but then with ever-increasing urgency. Noah massaged his balls firmly with one hand and the fingers of his other hand dug into Tobias' thigh.

Tobias really saw no point in holding off; sometimes it felt better to wait, sometimes it was just good to. But there were times when coming hard and fast felt like nirvana, so he let it happen, hips pushing, cock aching and throbbing, and Noah took him, worked him harder until Tobias had to cry out, his back arching as he held on long enough to warn him. "Noah, I'm coming."

Noah slid his hands under Tobias' ass and squeezed, not allowing him to pull away.

"God, yes—" Tobias hadn't time for anything more as he started to shoot, coming in Noah's mouth with great shudders. He was spent and panting, eyes closed as he growled in his chest, one hand still in Noah's hair as his boy licked him clean. "Thank you, Noah," he said softly. "That was lovely."

Noah finished his task and then slid out from under the comforter, considerately leaving the covers in place so Tobias didn't get cold. He knelt beside Tobias on the bed and smiled. "Good morning, sir. I hope you slept well."

"I did." Tobias grinned at him and winked. "I woke up better. I'm going to assume you did that to please me and not to up your chances of light discipline, yes?"

"I wanted to wake you pleasantly, sir, and to thank you again for your understanding of my jitters last night."

Tobias sat up, still smiling. He was really going to have to work on controlling his endorphin rush if Noah was going to make wake-ups like that a habit. "I'll always try to understand, sweetheart. Now, we have a full day ahead of us, so if you would be so good as to get yourself across my lap, we can move this right along." He reached for the paddle on the nightstand.

"Yes, sir," Noah shifted and lay across Tobias' lap, his smooth ass, still clad in its leather harness, presenting itself for Tobias' paddle.

"This is to ground you, boy. This is to remind you that you can count on me to correct your mistakes. It is a promise that I'll be consistent. It is a reminder that you submit to me. Each morning we're together I'll remind you. Do you understand?"

Before Noah answered he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Tobias knew he was attempting to center himself, concentrating on Tobias' voice to the exclusion of all other thoughts. When Noah finally did answer, he felt heavier in Tobias lap. "I understand, sir."

Tobias trailed his free hand over the upturned ass in his lap, feeling smooth skin and the strip of leather still holding the plug in place, bisected faintly with the mark of his crop. He spread his legs a little, letting the cage keeping Noah's cock soft rest between his thighs.

After taking a single breath he began, methodically striking each cheek until it was rosy red, making sure not to nudge the plug any more than once or twice. He worked smoothly, quickly, the leather paddle sounding sharp in the large room. Under it, across his lap, Noah stayed physically relaxed but panted lightly with each stroke. He was pliant, willing, and accepting of his discipline.

Just as Tobias was starting to think he was satisfied with the pink blush, Noah hissed and grunted softly. "You are my master and it is my responsibility to please you, sir," he said, the words flowing freely from him, even though they were unbidden.

Tobias slowed and lightened the rain of blows, knowing that if he simply stopped it would throw Noah from the space he'd found in his head. "Good boy," he said softly. "Very good, Noah."

After a moment he helped Noah up, and stood himself, letting the bedclothes fall away. He took off Noah's collar, leaving it attached to the chain, and once more put his hand on Noah's ass, now nicely warm. "Breakfast, sweetheart. Then I'll take this off you. I'll be down in fifteen minutes."

Chapter 15

Tobias walked into the safe room to find Noah exactly as he'd expected; on his knees, eyes down. He was dressed in clean jeans and a white t-shirt, his hair still slightly damp from the shower, and his toes were bare. He was a lovely picture of submission.

With a smile Tobias moved closer, knowing he was about to make that submission a little more real. He sat on the floor behind Noah without saying a word, his back braced on the wall, and spread his legs. "Come here, boy. I'm going to hold you for a bit, and we're going to talk."

Noah shifted and turned his back to Tobias before leaning tentatively into his chest. "Like this, sir?" he asked, grunting a bit as he tried to make the position comfortable with the plug in place. He'd been very happy to have the thing out in the morning, but his run and their riding only lasted so long; this new plug was a little bigger as well.

"Mm. Yes. But more like this, I think." Tobias moved quickly, not really sure how Noah would react and wanting him effectively restrained as fast as possible. His arms went around Noah's biceps, holding him close to Tobias' chest and pinning his arms down. Tobias' legs came up and over Noah's thighs, holding him fast.

It wasn't any form of bondage that Noah couldn't throw off by merely standing up, but it was effective. Held tightly, close to his Dom's body, Tobias hoped that Noah would feel both restricted and safe. Warm, held, cherished ... and not able to

move. It was a step to the side from the way Tobias had made Noah still during their first session.

Tobias held Noah so close he could feel him swallow and gasp softly in response to being restrained. Noah took a deep breath and his chest expanded and strained for room against Tobias' grip but he was careful not to loosen it. Noah didn't fight the bondage, or test it at all. Instead he let his weight fall fully into Tobias' chest and let his deep breath out in a sigh. He kept his chin and his eyes low, however, and stayed silent.

"I've been watching you, getting to know you, judging you," Tobias said softly. "And if we were playing once in a while that might be enough. However, I want more of you- you want more. I'm going to be pushing you, and it starts now. We'll find your boundaries, and then we'll move past them. When did you first know you were submissive?"

"High school, I think, sir." Noah answered easily. "Right about when I realized I was gay, too. But I don't think I understood that what I needed was a lot more involved than just wanting someone else to take all the initiative. I didn't understand what it was that I needed until after the academy, when I met a guy who was into light BDSM, cuffs and spanking, that kind of thing. I was about twenty-two, I guess." Tobias could feel Noah relaxing a bit as he spoke. The words seemed familiar, easy on his tongue; he'd obviously told this story before.

"What does submission mean to you?" Tobias asked, rejecting the pat answers. They were what he expected but not what he wanted; the truth wouldn't be found on the

surface, and he suspected it would take weeks to get where he needed to be.

"What does it mean to me," Noah repeated, and then considered his answer silently for a moment. "It means that I give over control to you and in return I hope to be rewarded with a kind of freedom I couldn't experience otherwise. I hope to find joy in pleasing you. I hope to leave mundane worries to you so they don't weigh me down." He sighed, apparently searching for words. "It's not just me on my knees to you, it's a partnership where we both get our needs fulfilled. I'm not sure I'm explaining it well, sir."

"You're doing fine," Tobias assured him. "Will you talk about your job, in general terms? I won't push if that's too ... intrusive. Not right now, anyway."

"Yes, if you need me to, sir," Noah nodded.

"All right. You say you found the SM aspects after the academy. Was the pain an escape at that point?"

"More like a reminder," Noah answered. "By that point I'd seen so many beatings and shootings and rapes ... they were, well, they still can be an everyday occurrence. The pain kept me feeling, kept it real."

Tobias tilted his head and considered that. "You were going numb."

Noah nodded. "We'd been warned that it could happen, and I really didn't want it to. I didn't want to end up one of those cops that can't talk softly to a victim or empathize with a mother. I didn't want to be thinking about my coffee break when there was bloodshed right in front of my eyes."

Tobias swallowed. Right then he knew he'd made the right choice, that there was going to be a reward at the end of all the work. This man was worth every worry he'd have. "So you found the scene. How?"

"The guy I met that was into cuffs, he took me to a hardcore bar. He said he thought I'd be into it." Noah cleared his throat. "He was right. I had no idea the scene even existed like that. Whips and leather, men and women in gags and tied to crosses. My heart pounded, my blood was racing in my ears, it was such a rush. And I knew I'd be going back to that bar on my own soon." Underneath Tobias' arms he could feel Noah's heartbeat increase as his boy described the experience.

"I assume you did. Alone?" Tobias kept his voice calm and gentle, as if he were dealing with a skittish animal.

"Yes, sir," Noah replied, nodding his head with his words. "I went back the very next night alone. I was so curious that I went back several nights in a row, in fact. Finally the bartender told me that if I wanted in, he would set me up."

"What happened?"

"Well, I did just that. He got me a session for that weekend, a public spanking thing on stage, which I guess they considered initiation for newbies, and then he got me a private session with a Dom for the weekend after that. I met some people, started negotiating for myself, became a regular. That's where I met Mas ... David." Noah's voice caught for a moment and he cleared his throat. "We negotiated a short term, part-time sub contract, only a month at first because I was nervous."

"Little quick to contract," Tobias said mildly. He knew Noah had paid for rushing, knew he was still paying, in a way. He slowly tightened his hold on Noah's arms, binding them further. "He should have made you wait, should have encouraged you to play more. However. Did it start all right?"

Noah nodded. "Live and learn. He told me he could teach me, he told me that he needed the contract so that he knew he wasn't wasting his time. It started out fine as far as I knew. I only saw him on the weekends and we spent a lot of time at the bar. I signed on for a second month and then a six-month." Noah sighed. "It was the six-month that was the beginning of a really big mistake."

"You're with me now," Tobias whispered. "Remember that. Tell me what happened." Mentally, he braced himself against the rage he knew would build, the anger he would make sure Noah would never see.

"It just didn't work out like I'd hoped. It wasn't good for me, and I didn't realize it until it was too late." Noah shrugged, steering away from details. "As it turned out he was far more interested in his own needs and desires than mine."

"Not good enough, sweetheart. Tell me about the first time he hurt you."

Noah shook his head. When he answered his voice was tight. He was searching for words, and these didn't seem to come easily to him at all. "I'm not sure I can narrow it down that way. It was more subtle than that. He hurt me all the time, every day, constantly. I was really into the pain aspect at the time because I thought that was what the scene was

about. That's what I understood my role as a submissive to be, then. I thought how much pain I could take was a measure of me. I thought the point was to let someone push you until nothing existed but your physical self, until all you could do was beg for it to stop."

Tobias felt Noah stiffen in his arms.

"He used comfort to manipulate me emotionally into loving him, you know? He'd tell me that the pain was what he needed from me, and that the more I endured the more he would love me. To the point where I..." Noah raised his head and stared at the wall across from them. "I didn't know what I would do without him. There was no me anymore, at all."

"Of course," Tobias said smoothly, ignoring his sudden urge to let go, to distance himself from comforting as manipulation. "He was emotionally abusive as well as physically. You do recognize the essential difference here, I hope? Where his goals and mine are different?"

"The difference is night and day, sir." Noah turned his head as if he wanted to reassure Tobias this time. "For one thing, he never would have had a conversation like this with me. He wouldn't have given me this much thought. I didn't require it in his eyes. I was his, everything was about him."

Tobias sighed, both for Noah's past trauma and the fact that he was beginning to suspect Noah still believed some of it. "Noah, I don't want a robot. I want someone interesting, lively, able to interact with me. I want your imagination, your wit, and your charm. I want your submission, I want you on your knees for me-because we both need that. What I don't want is for you to ever submit to me from a sense of fear.

Ever. You can worry about disappointing me, about not trying hard enough-but you have to know that even if you stood up right now and said you were leaving I wouldn't hurt you."

Noah suddenly tried to lean forward as if he'd been struck in the stomach, straining against Tobias' arms. "Who the hell have you been talking to?" He tried to spread his elbows, suddenly fighting might for might against Tobias' hold on him, but he wasn't winning. "Did Brett tell you to say that?"

"No," Tobias said, forcing his voice to remain level. He let go of Noah's arms slowly, carefully. He maintained just enough contact to slide his hands around to Noah's back, petting him. "Noah, listen to my voice. Brett said nothing. It's my truth. I will let you go if you want to. Always. I will not keep an unwilling sub, and I will not hold you against your will." Just as slowly he lifted his legs from Noah's, releasing him completely. "But I'd like you to stay."

Noah crossed his arms over his chest, and Tobias held his breath. They sat there, quietly, while Noah worked through something in his mind. He shook his head a couple of times, sighed, cleared his throat and said nothing, but he didn't make any effort to get up. He seemed a little high-strung, but he gave no indication that he was ready to run. At last his breathing slowed, his shoulders relaxed and finally, he leaned back against Tobias' chest of his own accord.

"I'm sorry, sir," Noah offered, his voice soft. "Bradford warned me you were perceptive, I just had no idea you'd ... well, you hit something there and I wasn't ready for it at all."

Tobias took a deep breath and eased his arms back around Noah. "It's all right, pet," he said gently. "There will be

moments that leap up at us, I suspect, and we'll deal with them as they come. Are you willing to go on?"

Noah shook his head. "I'm not sure. What's next?"

Tobias wanted to explore David further, but he knew Noah would resist-or at least resent him for pushing at the moment. "I want to know how you got to the club," he said finally.

"Oh." Noah seemed relieved for the change of subject. "Well, I'd heard about the club on the scene someplace. I think David had applied for membership at one point. But the first time I went there I was actually responding to a medical emergency. I escorted an ambulance over there and that's how I met Bradford."

"I didn't hear about that," Tobias said curiously.

"It wasn't as sinister as it sounds, though it was a sad day. Mr. O'Connor, one of the Doms, had a heart attack in the middle of a session. Did you know him? Were you around much then?" Noah rested a hand on Tobias' thigh.

"O'Connor?" Tobias thought for a moment. "Oh, Derek. Yes, of course. I'd been away from the club for a year or so by then, maybe longer." He held Noah a little closer, draping one leg back over Noah's thigh.

Noah laid his head back on Tobias' shoulder. "Anyway, I called Bradford the next day, allegedly on police business, but when I showed up I asked about membership, too. He was skeptical, but receptive to the idea, asked me for references, though I didn't have many. I don't know what it was like when you joined, but Bradford did a thorough background

check; you'd have thought I was applying for membership with the FBI."

Tobias grinned. "It's always been like that. Bradford learned from the best; when I joined I had to be sponsored and already have someone willing to train me and a Dom in place to make sure I subbed as well. So, three members to vouch, a background check, and of course the financial checks, too. I doubt you had that-the submissives didn't back then, anyway."

"Our membership fees are lower." Noah laughed softly. "I didn't need members to vouch, he asked me about my experience though, and a few questions about David, too. He was more concerned with my mental state than my financial one."

"Of course he was. He's a good man. And as he's running the only top-heavy club around, he wanted to make sure you'd be fit and healthy-it would kill him if he helped to damage you further. Did he set up your first few sessions?"

"My first three sessions were all with him, actually," Noah answered easily. "And after that he set up nearly all of them for me. I think he was being deliberate about it, setting me up with people he knew well, that kind of thing. And then eventually he set me up with you, of course."

"So he did." Tobias moved his other leg, and as easily as that they were back as they'd started. "So Brett was before the club, or during?"

"Oh, during. Bradford set us up one night, and we hit it off. I told Bradford that I thought it was a good experience and though Bradford said he was a little green, he thought we'd

be good for each other. He'd been trying to help me find someone steady, he'd always said that's what I should have. So I started doing regular sessions with Brett on the weekends."

"And why is it so important that you have someone steady, pet?" Tobias eased back toward what he wanted to know, ready to back off again. He hoped that Noah would eventually open up, and part of him feared how hard he'd have to push to get there.

"I suppose because I have things that I need to work through, and one-nighters aren't going to dig beyond the scene for the evening."

"And what would those things be?" Tobias whispered, his hands stroking Noah's arms.

"Trust, largely. In Doms, in myself to make a good decision, in a partnership. And fear, I think, too. Rational or no. I know I need someone that will be strong enough to push me where I clearly don't want to go." Noah gave Tobias' knee a squeeze and sighed. "Bradford told me that if I was really ready to work through things that you were the man I needed to meet."

Tobias considered his answer but before he could speak, Noah interrupted his train of thought with a question of his own. "So, why do you do this?" Noah asked him. "Why do you Dom?"

"Because I have to. The alternative is unacceptable." Tobias shifted his weight slightly, tightening his legs around Noah's. "Tell me what you picture in your head as perfect submission. What is the ultimate goal for you personally?"

"I think it's different for different people. But for me," Noah sighed, now completely relaxed again, "I crave a relationship that feels natural, as natural as breathing, where I don't worry about trust because there is no reason not to trust." Noah spoke slowly and deliberately. "I'd like to get to know my Dom on a different level too, a more personal one, so that knowing what my Dom needs becomes intuitive. The kind of partnership that has infinite room for growth, you know? I think that's the ideal. I have no idea if it's even possible."

Tobias smiled to himself. "And you're prepared to work toward that?"

"I want to." Noah nodded.

"Wonderful." Tobias smoothed his hands over Noah's arms again. "Today you began your routine. After lunch we'll go to the playroom and I'll put you through the positions I expect you to know and we'll practice them. We'll start training you to heel. And then we'll talk again. Understood?"

"Understood, sir," Noah agreed.

"Good. What's for lunch?"

Chapter 16

Tobias led Noah to the play stables, the sun streaking through the trees behind the house. Lunch had been pleasant, and they'd relaxed for a while after it, letting it settle. Tobias had seated them out on the porch and pointed out the few local landmarks they could see, which seemed to entertain Noah. Noah'd also been quiet and pliable when Tobias had taken him upstairs and switched his plug for a slightly larger one, enduring Tobias' inspection with gritted teeth and a whimper as his caged cock tried to respond.

"Poor baby," Tobias teased cheerfully. "Tomorrow night, boy. Not before."

"Yes, sir," Noah agreed, his eyes down.

He'd kept his eyes down the entire way out of the house and they were still down as Tobias unlocked the door and took them inside. As he flipped the main light switch Tobias said, "Strip and meet me in the ring. Bring two bottles of water, please."

Tobias watched as Noah did as he was told, taking two bottles out of the fridge after leaving his clothing neatly on a shelf by the door. He made his way down the long corridor to the ring, the new plug making him walk just a little more carefully. When he reached Tobias he knelt and offered him the bottles.

"Thank you, boy. Now, we're going to do some simple things, and you can't make mistakes at this point. I want to see if we're in the same book, let alone on the same page. I'll name a position, you tell me if you don't know it or show me

the pose. If we call poses different things, we'll work with that. Clear?"

Noah nodded. "Yes, sir. That's clear."

Tobias walked to one of the wooden chests and threw it open, lifting out his favorite short handled flogger. "Okay, Grace position."

Noah stood, turning his back to Tobias. He placed his hands flat on the table top in the center of the ring and pushed away from it, spreading his legs slightly and giving Tobias access to his ass. "Grace, sir."

"Excellent. We'll use this for your evening punishment among other things. I know you can display-show me." Absently, he slapped his thigh with the flogger and then ran the tails over his hand.

Noah stood upright and turned to face Tobias, clasping his wrists behind his back and spreading his legs slightly. His eyes were lowered respectfully. He stood there a moment and then squared his shoulders and lifted his chin some making last minute adjustments before saying, "Display, sir."

"Very nice. Same word for when you're kneeling, boy-just do your best, I'll tell you if I want you to stand or kneel." Tobias walked around Noah, admiring the lines of the man. "How about Present?"

Noah bent over at the waist, resting his hands on his shins. He spread his legs wide enough that Tobias would have easy access to his ass or his cock. "Present, sir."

"Oh. Pretty," Tobias said with a grin. "Trust me, I might keep this one. But no. Hands and knees, please."

Noah sank to his hands and knees quickly. "I'm sorry, sir," he said softly. "Every Dom seems to have something different in mind for that one."

"I said you couldn't make a mistake at this point, boy." Tobias nudged Noah's knees a little further apart. "It's a pretty personal position, and the word 'present' has different connotations for different people. Now, down to your elbows—yes, like that. Arch your back so your ass is raised."

Tobias stood back and admired his boy for a moment. "Absolutely lovely. Now, from here I can play with your ass, your balls ... I can spank you, fuck you, flog you. When I say 'present' you will immediately drop and arrange yourself like this. I think we'll have to come up with a name for the other one, though; it's too nice to lose."

Noah grinned and chuckled. "Yes, sir."

"We can figure that out later. I think we'll keep what we did in the safe room too-good-for-talking, I think. Discussing what we are ... affirmation. So, Affirmation, and you can expect that at least once a weekend here, more if I feel you need it."

"Affirmation. I'll remember that, sir."

Tobias nodded. "Stand and display, please." He waited a moment while Noah righted himself and got into position, and once more he circled the man. "Have you ever walked on a lead? I know you said you disliked it because of the humiliation, but do you have experience?"

"I have some, sir, though not much. It's not anything I've done in public, for example, or for any length of time." Noah's

tone didn't change, so at least the discussion of leads and leashes was something he seemed comfortable with.

Tobias opened a trunk and lifted out a set of nipple clamps and a fine chain. "And how do you feel about being clamped?"

"They hurt like hell at first, and when they come off, but I don't mind them once I warm up a bit, sir." Noah kept his eyes forward but checked his shoulders and his chin again.

"They'll ... sting a bit if you lag. Just so you know." Tobias stepped close in front of him and casually rubbed a thumb over Noah's left nipple, making it stand out. "You'll want to keep up," he added as he tugged it and put the clamp on.

Noah bit his lip and sucked in air, hissing as the clamp closed around his nipple. Tobias resisted the urge to grin as Noah's shoulder twitched reflexively like he was trying to back away from the pinch. Noah bit back a groan and forced his shoulders square again.

Tobias did the second one quickly and without warning, rather enjoying the stifled gasp and the accompanying wriggle. As he attached the chain to one clamp and then the other he explained, "The chain will be connected to a light lead-if you keep to heel there will be only a slight added pressure. Fall back-or worse, try to anticipate me-and you'll get a sharp tug. I won't jerk the lead, I won't pull you. I also won't rush-but I turn suddenly. You must pay attention, sweetheart, or you'll ache. Ready?"

Noah seemed a little nervous. All things considered, Tobias thought, it was a good thing to keep him on his toes. "Yes, sir, I'm ready," he answered gamely.

"Good boy. The key is to keep right at my heel, one step behind. I stop, you stop. Simple." And with that Tobias started to walk. He walked slowly at first, keeping his pace even as Noah found his bearings and how close he could be without crowding Tobias. When Tobias moved to the right in order to go around the table, he was delighted that Noah came with him, a smile flickering over his face.

They walked around the ring, one complete circuit, and Tobias felt that Noah had the gist of it. Without comment he picked up the pace and moved to the left, as if suddenly remembering something in a trunk. The hiss of pain and stumbled step behind him made him wince, but he kept moving, knowing that Noah would recover as quickly as he could.

"Subspace is your friend, right about now," he said in a low voice. "Just lose yourself in following me."

"Yes, sir. I am thinking too hard about it, sir," Noah responded, right on Tobias' heels again. Several more abrupt turns went fine, and Noah had apparently found his comfortable distance and had begun matching Tobias' stride. Tobias imagined they looked good together, moving as a unit, Noah obediently at his heel.

Tobias stopped walking and Noah halted a little abruptly behind him. When he started walking again his pace was far slower and Noah walked right into his back. Tobias gave him the promised tug and heard Noah swear at himself and whimper softly over his shoulder.

There was a fine line between training and hurting, Tobias knew, and he was fairly sure he was getting close to it. He

decided that Noah could stand a few more minutes, but he'd make sure that if there were anymore serious errors he'd stop. With the idea of having something soft and soothing ready for his boy's nipples, he turned once more and started for the supply room, going for ice.

Noah followed carefully this time, and Tobias knew that his deep breathing and soft steps meant that he had finally found his space. This time he left Noah at the door and the boy waited, automatically assuming his display pose. When Tobias returned he picked up the lead again and made his way back down the corridor, Noah falling flawlessly in step behind him this time.

For better or worse, it did seem as though Noah achieved his subspace quickly with small doses of real pain. It wasn't Tobias' preferred method, but it was good to know that if he needed Noah there quickly, the effect could be easily obtained. Noah didn't make any further errors as Tobias walked him one more time around the ring, and it seemed best to end this lesson on a positive note.

"Well done, sweetheart," Tobias praised him, finally stopping him by the trunk that had held the clamps and lead. He took an ice cube in one hand and said, "Taking it off now, breathe through it..." He undid one clamp, immediately putting the ice to the nipple.

"Uh." Noah dropped his head and panted as the clamp came off. He was well distracted by the ice though, and moaned softly, covering Tobias' hand with his own.

"Oh, good idea," Tobias said brightly. "You hold this ice cube and I'll hold the other one." A fast movement later and Tobias released the other nipple and pressed ice to it as well.

Noah winced and moaned and his eyes closed tightly. He dutifully held the chilly ice cube to his nipple, circling it slowly. "Thank you, sir," he sighed finally opening his eyes again.

Tobias grinned. "You're welcome, boy. I think we'll move along now, while you're in this lovely frame of mind. Kneel over the spanking horse, please, and hold on to the handles underneath. I'm going to treat you to the kangaroo flogger."

Noah handed the ice back to Tobias and walked over to the horse, kneeling and leaning over it. He reached for the handles. "I don't think I've ever experienced a kangaroo flogger before, sir," he said softly, shifting his knees into a position he could hold for a while.

"Lighter than leather and deer hide," Tobias said disposing of the cubes before opening the chest. "It's one of my favorites, actually. Nice high impact with a good sting, but not much chance of marks. And it's not black, which is a nice change." He held it up for a moment and shook out the tails for the simple pleasure of looking at it, the tan tails swaying nicely.

"Hang on, boy, and remember where you are-my playroom, with me. You know the rules and you know your words."

"Yes, sir. With you. I'll remember," Noah responded and relaxed, his fingers working the leather on the handles a moment before settling down.

Tobias started at a moderate pace, not needing to get Noah into the right mindset. He spread his blows out, finding his natural rhythm, and began to work Noah over at a steady rate. He had no wish to hurt the man or leave him in pain, but he knew that the release they both wanted was at the end of such pain. He didn't have any idea, however, if this would be the time for that or not.

"Ah, stings..." Noah told Tobias after the first few blows. His words sounding a bit strained. He grunted with each stroke after that, and his fingers tightened around the handles. He managed the silence well enough for a few more measured blows, but it must have gotten to him finally because he broke it himself. "Sir! Ah! Say something, sir? Please?" Tobias could hear the tension in his voice, but it was hard to tell yet if it was bordering on the emotion Tobias was hoping for.

"What would you have me say?" Tobias asked. "Do you want to hear how beautiful you are? Do you want to hear about the way your skin is coloring for me? Or do you merely want my voice?" He struck again and again, harder and a little faster. "I want you to let go, boy. Just feel, don't worry. I'm here."

"Thank you, sir, anything. Anything you want, just ... just need your voice, sir. Ah!" Noah arched his back. "Thank you, thank you." He started breathing audibly, exhaling in soft moans that increased in volume until the sound filled Tobias' ears. "I am yours, Master, yours." Noah flinched from the blows and his shoulders began to shake as the sounds turned to keening and his grip on the bench handles went slack. "Oh!

Master, please," Noah sobbed, boneless against the bench, but he still staunchly and stubbornly chose not to use his safe words.

"Please what, boy?" Tobias demanded, putting the little thrill he got at the word "Master" aside until later. Later, he'd savor it. For now, he'd be it.

Noah actually slid away from the blows briefly, and Tobias imagined himself chasing Noah into a corner with his flogger and still not getting the admission he was looking for.

"Master ... ah!"

"Tell me what you want, boy."

It didn't serve Noah to continue to pretend like he didn't have limits, and it was, after all, Tobias' responsibility to find them. Tobias continued with the flogger, though his strokes were a bit lighter. Noah was sore enough at this point that he didn't need the strikes to be heavy;; they'd be painful in any case.

"Please." Noah's shoulders shook and his chest expanded and contracted with his sobs. "Mas ... Master..."

Tobias watched him struggle, and with a stinging snap to his ego he realized Noah wasn't going to use his words, that he wasn't at the point where he fully understood yet. Unable to go forward for fear of doing real harm to Noah, Tobias slowed his strokes as quickly as he could, possibly too fast. He would have simply dropped the flogger, but he wasn't sure yet how Noah would react to a dead stop.

In moments, however, he'd pulled back enough that he could start talking, his voice low and soothing as he used the crop to lightly brush over Noah's skin, bringing him back from

wherever he'd gone. Tears streamed down Noah's face and Tobias let the flogger fall, then knelt beside him, one hand on Noah's shoulder for a moment before he gathered Noah carefully into his arms.

"It's okay, it's over. Noah, listen, it's done, you're safe. Breathe. Just breathe and be, sweetheart, I'm right here. I'm here, and I've got you, and it's over." He was shaking, he knew he was, and he had to fight to keep calm. The last thing they needed right now was his guilt and self-recrimination. "Noah. Tell me what you need."

Noah sobbed and clung to Tobias for a long moment before sobbing out one simple word. "This," he told Tobias, and repeated the word again. "This." Noah was clearly trying to calm himself down as well, taking deep breaths, though he kept his face buried in Tobias' chest. "Just this, Master."

Tobias gathered him closer, soothing him with hands and words, his tone soft as whispers. "I'm here. I'll hold you, always. You're mine, sweetheart, and I'll always hold you when you need me to."

Noah leaned into Tobias harder. He lifted a hand and placed it flat over Tobias' heart. "Your heart is pounding," Noah observed with quiet awe. "Are you all right, Master?" He moved his hand in slow circles, eyes respectfully low as always. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry Master, I'm fine. It hurt, but I'm all right."

Tobias shook his head. "We'll talk about it later, boy. Rest, and then we'll get you cleaned up. I think we could both use a soak in the tub." The last thing he was going to do was start talking right then. Not about this, not when Noah was still in

his head as far as he was. "Can you walk yet? I'd like to check your back for bruising."

"I think so, sir." Noah moved away, wincing slightly as he got slowly to his feet with Tobias' help. "Just feels tight, master, and hot. I think it's all right."

He knew he was fussing as he herded Noah into better light, and he knew he was fussing as he felt every inch of skin and probed muscles. He knew himself well enough to know that he was setting up a classic pattern of avoidance and if he wasn't careful he'd coddle Noah, and everything would be lost, wasted.

"Okay," he said finally. "Get dressed. I'll clean up in here-meet me by the door, and I want you to drink at least one bottle of water. Understood?"

"All right, sir," Noah said and moved slowly to the table to pick up a bottle of water before walking stiffly down the center corridor toward his clothing. His back was an angry red, but Tobias hadn't harmed him in any permanent way.

Sighing, Tobias picked up the flogger and crossed to the trunk. "Damn," he said under his breath, dropping it in. "Stubborn fool." He wasn't sure which of them he meant.

Chapter 17

The walk across the yard was perhaps the strangest Tobias had ever had. Noah was looking down, of course, but he was anxious and probably insecure and there really wasn't any way Tobias could reassure him. Not when he was walking with lead in his feet and confusion clouding his judgment. Later, yes, of course-as soon as he got them both inside and into the safe room.

Up the stairs, and he still hadn't said anything. In the hallway he pointed to the safe room and said, "I'm going to check the pagers. I'd like you to strip down again so I can take off your harness, and then we're going to talk, pet. I'll just be a minute."

Noah hesitated, but after a moment he managed, "Yes, sir," and disappeared into the safe room. Tobias could hear him sigh from the hall and then the tell-tale creaks of the harness leather as Noah started to undress.

Tobias shook his head, mostly at himself, and went into the bedroom. He'd put all the pagers on his dresser-his two, Noah's work pager, and the one he would give Noah Monday morning. They were all lined up, all four of them with blank faces, still and silent. No one needed them, thank God. He suspected that they weren't good for much at the moment.

And it was his job to fix that.

Standing taller he looked at his reflection in the mirror, studying himself. Serious face, set jaw ... consciously, he forced himself to relax. That lessened the tightness around his eyes, made his face more gentle. Still stern, strong ... but

not angry. He wasn't angry, not at Noah. Not really; Noah would learn and they would be fine.

He rolled his shoulders once and turned on his heel, going to the safe room in easy strides. He knew what he had to say and what to do to restore the balance; it was time to make a few things plain to his strong-willed sub.

Noah was kneeling in the middle of the room, head bowed and arms back, nicely into his display position.

"Are you all right?" Tobias asked softly. "Physically? There's no broken skin, and I couldn't find any damaged muscle, but I'm not in your skin."

Noah shifted and twisted his back slightly as if to be sure of himself before he answered, "I'm still a bit tender, sir, but I'll be all right, thank you." His voice was still soft, however, and seemed lacking a bit of its usual confidence.

"Good." Tobias went to him and urged him to move a little, carefully unlocking the harness. The cage was lifted away, and Tobias smoothed his fingers along skin where the leather had pressed in. "Okay? I'm going to take out the plug. You'll feel odd for a bit, I'm sure."

Noah nodded in answer, and shifted to accommodate Tobias.

The plug was eased out and set aside, and Tobias made sure that the leather hadn't chafed, that Noah was in as good shape, physically, as could be expected. "All right, then," he said, standing up. "Here's what's going to happen. You're going to dress—" he crossed to the closet and got out clean sweat pants, boxer shorts and a t-shirt, "-and I'm going to

talk. Then you are going to reflect, and we'll discuss what happens next."

He held out the clothes and waited while Noah wordlessly dressed. Tobias watched impassively and then went to lean on the cabinet, his ankles crossed as he leaned back on it.

"You seem to have misunderstood what I mean by submission, pet," Tobias said evenly. "I'm not looking to make you scream in pain. The fact that you let me hit you, that you do my chores and suck me off isn't the submission I'm after."

Noah looked up sharply, but caught himself before his eyes got above Tobias' waist. Tobias waited as Noah struggled with his desire to speak, probably to protest, and after a moment Noah sighed and lowered his eyes to the floor again. He wasn't relaxed entirely, but he seemed ready to listen.

"The fact that you let me hit you until you almost couldn't take it anymore isn't submission, Noah. It's a contest within yourself, and it brings me no pleasure-and I know it didn't bring you any either. So what's the point? I don't care how long you can hold out. How hard I can hit you doesn't matter. I wouldn't care if you couldn't take any more than five strokes, pet-it's not the pain for me. It is for you, to a point, and I can give it, but I want something in return. I want you to trust me. I want you to be honest with me."

Tobias stood up, pushing away from the cabinet. "How can I guide you to your limits and then past them if I don't know where they are? You had a yellow-and if you'd been honest in your reactions you would have used it. You were past that point, you were almost to red, and I could have really

damaged you. When I strike you, you can do anything, boy. Yell, scream, beg ... anything you want. Show me your reactions, let me know you. Let me work with you, not be a barrier for you to throw yourself against. Do you understand?"

Noah's brow furrowed as Tobias spoke and he took his time about answering, chewing his lip thoughtfully. He nodded to himself several times before finally voicing his answer. "Yes, sir," he sighed, "I think I understand now."

"I want to control what you feel," Tobias said firmly. He walked around Noah slowly, pacing himself and deliberately hardening his tone of voice. "I want to know what your senses are telling you, I want to know without a doubt what you're experiencing. I will be in charge. If you're holding out then it doesn't matter who's topping you, all that matters is that someone is hitting you. And I won't be that. You and I are past that, boy, and it's not a game. You're mine, and I'm your Master, and I will have your honest submission. Are we clear?"

"Yes sir, we're clear," Noah answered more quickly, and much more confidently.

"Good." Tobias stopped walking when he was behind Noah and touched his shoulder. "We'll be fine, sweetheart. But right now we have another issue to think about. What happened today will not happen again. To reinforce the lesson, there will be punishment tonight. So you've earned yourself an hour facing the corner so you can think. I have a few things to take care of, but I'll leave a timer. When it goes off you may leave the corner, but not the room. When I come back, you will tell

me how many strokes you're owed, and what your new perspective on submission is."

Noah reached up and touched Tobias' fingers with his own. "Yes, sir. I'll think about it carefully, sir," he assured Tobias before letting his hand fall back into his lap.

Tobias nodded. "Corner, then. You have an hour."

Noah rose carefully and went to the corner, going naturally into a display pose while he looked at the wall. Tobias found the timer in the cabinet and set it for an hour, turning the dial slowly. "This will likely scare the crap out of you when it goes off, and I apologize for that-I keep forgetting to replace it." He set it down on the chair, hoping the cushion would muffle the bell a little. "I'll be back later," he said softly, then turned and left the room quietly.

Chapter 18

The house was eerily silent as he went down the stairs-he hadn't noticed it before. There wasn't even a creak of the floorboards as he went into his office and opened the very bottom drawer, reaching to the back for his stash of cigarettes. They were dry again, he noted clinically. Not unusual, since he usually only had about three out of a pack before they were too old and had to be thrown away. However ... this was his second cigarette in as many weeks and that wasn't good.

He stared at the one in his hand and debated not having it all, but he knew that the only reason he was even considering it was because of the frequency, not from any real fear he'd become addicted again-once an addict, always an addict, even if it was only cigarettes. No, this was merely one addiction he'd beaten down to an acceptable level.

Tobias suddenly realized he'd been contemplating whether or not to smoke it for longer than actually smoking it would take; he rolled his eyes at himself and grabbed his lighter. On the way out of the house he picked up the portable phone from its cradle in the hall and hit six on the speed dial.

"Yo." Phan sounded sleepy.

"That's better than yellow," Tobias said easily, stomping down the stairs, the cigarette tucked between his lips.

"Uh huh. Hey, how are you?"

"Great." He paused halfway to his truck and lit the cigarette. "Can I see you Wednesday night?"

There was a long silence, which Tobias filled by walking to the truck and climbing into the bed. He sat with his back to the cab and smoked, watching as the plumes drifted off and vanished.

"It's ... not quite four o'clock on a Saturday. You're smoking, and I thought your boy was going to be at the farm this weekend," Phan said carefully. "What happened?"

Tobias took another drag off the cigarette. Part of him wanted to tell Phan, part of him just wanted to talk about it and have someone give him a new perspective. But most of him knew he couldn't. "None of your business, baby," he said finally, regretfully.

"Then no, I can't see you on Wednesday." Phan's voice was soft too, sad. "Can't help if I don't know."

Tobias sighed. "I know. I'm sorry."

"Are you okay?"

Tobias thought about it for a moment and looked at his cigarette. "Not so much. But I will be."

"Is it worth it?" Phan asked, and then immediately said, "I'm sorry. God, Tobias, forget I said that, please."

"Don't worry about it," Tobias said, knowing he'd have to push the question away again and again over the next few days. Unbidden, he was suddenly awash with memories he'd thought he'd dealt with: him telling Phan that of course it was worth it as they packed the last of Phan's things. The first time Phan had used his safe words with him, and the anger they'd both had about it. The second time, when he couldn't stop because to stop would mean living a lie. "Jesus," he gasped. "Phan, I need you."

"On my way." The phone went dead and Tobias swore, hit six again and threw the cigarette away.

"What?" Phan demanded, out of breath. "I said—"

"Don't come!" Tobias begged. "I'm sorry, I just ... God, Phan, you can't come here. Not now. Meet me on Wednesday, my place?"

"Will you tell me what happened?"

Tobias sighed. "Yes."

"All right."

Chapter 19

He smoked two more cigarettes and finally went in, stopping in the kitchen to drink a glass of water before going upstairs. By his watch he'd been gone just over an hour and a half, so he didn't waste a lot of time, just brushed his teeth and tried to get the horrid smell of smoke off of him before he went in the safe room.

Noah had his arms crossed and a shoulder braced against the window as he looked out over the property. He was very still and relaxed. The light from the window washed over his slightly rumpled hair and his slightly rumpled t-shirt, making him look young. He appeared to be lost in thoughts until he heard Tobias enter the room, and then he turned to face Tobias in his display position and silently lowered his eyes to the floor.

"Feeling better?" Tobias asked softly. He was taken aback by how beautiful Noah looked, how sweet he could be. It was a little disturbing, the way he wanted to reach out and draw him closer.

Noah smiled. "Yes, sir, very much so. Are you?"

"I'm fine," Tobias said smoothly. "Now, tell me about submission." He crossed to his chair and sat, leaning back expectantly. He was more than a little interested to know what Noah had been thinking; if nothing else, it would help his own thoughts to settle, to find direction.

"It's hard to know exactly where to start, sir," Noah admitted. He licked his lips and squinted, and then went on. "Being your sub, I really only have one responsibility to you.

It's my duty to please you, sir. We have discussed in detail what this means to you, and it's also spelled out clearly by our contract. I understand that it means putting your needs ahead of mine, but harder than that, it means rearranging my thinking so that when I do need to think about myself, it is in terms of you, and your pleasure, not my ego."

Noah shifted his feet slightly and looked a little more nervous about what he was about to say next. "I was thinking about myself. I wasn't thinking about you first. It's a pretty simple distinction, and I overlooked it completely. I was focused all wrong, totally inward, paying attention to the pain and working through it. I thought at the time that it would please you if I kept it together, if I let you flog me until you had had enough. It's the same mistake I made before ... while the pain is meant to help me focus, it's not about me, it's about you. That's where I went wrong. It's not about how long I can hold out-as you said-it's about you knowing what each sting of your whip does to me. You need to know how I'm feeling because that is something you are to have control over, not me. I was, just like you said, I was playing a game with myself. I wasn't in the moment. I was thinking more about when it was going to be over than how I felt as it was happening."

He cleared his throat. "Also, I chose not to use my safe words. Before I signed our contract, it had been a measure of pride for me to say that I didn't need them, never used them, and pride of that nature is not something a sub needs. Pride in my work, in how well I please my master, yes, but not in how well I can stand up to you. That's not only unnecessary

with you but it's also insulting, and I want to apologize, sir. We are past that, I know. I didn't see it this way before. I didn't understand it at all. It's a bad habit I've gotten into since Brett and I split up, and I want to let it go. I'll do my best to let it go."

Noah swallowed and fell silent, but Tobias watched him worry his lip again and knew that he was nervous about his Master's response.

Tobias tilted his head and let the moment draw out a little before relenting. "Do you want me to take you out of yourself? Do you seriously want to take this journey? Because it won't be easy-but you're making a decent start, right now."

Noah dropped his head forward and sighed as his shoulders slumped along with it. "Yes. Yes, sir." He shook his head. "I didn't mean to make you doubt me." He stepped forward suddenly and knelt at Tobias' feet. "No one has ever made me work this hard. I haven't even considered trusting anyone as much as I trust you already. I need this, I need you, Master. Please don't doubt me."

Tobias winced. "I don't doubt you, sweetheart," he confessed. He demanded honesty, he reminded himself, and could do no less than give it back. "I doubt myself. I'm sorry, Noah."

"I..." Noah started to speak and then stopped himself, cleared his throat, and started again. "You had every right to expect me to use my words, sir."

"Yes. I did." Tobias sighed and stood up, one hand stroking Noah's hair. "How many strokes did you decide?"

Noah straightened up. He seemed to have thought this answer through just as carefully, and he spoke slowly. "One for breaking my contractual duty to please you, one for not using my safe words, one for misplaced pride, one for worrying you needlessly, one for insulting you, and ... one, at least, for not putting your needs ahead of mine? I'm not sure if one is enough, sir."

Tobias smiled, impressed despite himself. He'd expected a somewhat random number, not this neat ordering of Noah's errors. "I think one will do in this case, as the effect of it led to the others. Six in total seems reasonable to me." He ruffled Noah's hair and added, "Let's hope you don't add to it by bedtime, yes?"

"I think right now I should just concentrate on not poisoning you with dinner, sir." Noah grinned. He seemed to be trying to lighten the mood a bit, and appeared to be much more relaxed now.

"You'll do fine, pet. I'm sure of it." On impulse, Tobias bent and kissed his boy on the mouth, parting surprised lips easily. He didn't linger, merely made himself at home and tasted what was his. "Shoo. Go make supper, and then we can play a little. Tomorrow will be mostly outdoor chores, I'm afraid. Enjoy what you can of tonight."

Tobias partly hid his grin as Noah froze a moment, disoriented in the wake of his kiss. The element of surprise had many uses. Noah got to his feet with an adorably silly smile on his lips. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. I'll let you know when dinner is ready." He took a couple of measured steps out of the room and then hurried down the stairs.

Chapter 20

Tuesday Tobias' pager went off when he was at the office. He reached for the phone, already set to dial Noah's cell phone, when he looked at the display and saw Phan's number, followed by a 411.

Frowning, he punched in the number and closed his door, letting Deidre deal with the rather disgruntled farmer currently berating Sally about something. In his ear, Phan's phone was ringing.

"Phantom Shaw."

"It's me."

"Oh, hey. Still need me tomorrow night? 'Cause I got a thing, and I figure you're over your panic now and you didn't call me back and whoa! Not that one, put it back. Thanks, man. Anyway, Tobias?"

"Here." Tobias sighed and rubbed his eyes, suddenly tired.

"So, need me?"

"Always."

"Not funny."

There was a long, tense pause and they both sighed.

"No, Phan. If you have something to do, I don't need to see you."

"But you want to."

"Yes. Aside from your little act at the club I haven't see you in over a month. I miss you."

Phan sighed again. "All right. I'll be 'round about ten."

Tobias raised an eyebrow. "Ten?"

"Got a—"

"-thing, yes, I know."

"It's not like that," Phan said, sounding uncomfortable, almost embarrassed. "It's a ... well, it's a party. For the girl downstairs."

Tobias thought for a moment and finally said, "I give up. What girl downstairs?"

"Tom's girl."

"Tom's girl is eight. Oh my God, you're chaperoning a birthday party."

"Shut up."

Tobias laughed softly. "How long have you waited to tell me that?"

"Not long enough-it's oddly unsatisfying to say it over something like this and not a lecture."

Tobias grinned. "Have fun at your party, brat."

"Yes, sir."

* * * *

It was closer to quarter past ten when Phan let himself into Tobias' condo, setting his keys down on the table by the door. "Tobias?"

"Right here." He was lying on the couch in the living room, looking out at the city lights. It was a far different view than anything he'd find at the farm and only served to distance him from what he was doing with Noah. He was fairly sure he disliked it. "How was the party?" he asked as he sat up.

"Wild. Too much cake." Phan came in and flopped down on the couch next to him. "How are you doing?"

"Better."

"Figured. What happened?"

Tobias shrugged. "He refused to use his safe words, and I took it too far."

Phan looked at him, eyes wide. "Hurt?"

Tobias nodded, hating it. "No physical damage, but yes. I think, anyway. I don't know."

But Phan was shaking his head. "Nope. Well, maybe, but no. Looks like you're the one hurting. You thought he'd use them, help you find the line, and instead he let you coast right over it, right? And you're upset because you misread him."

Tobias shrugged, not sure what to say. He thought Phan was likely right, but he didn't at all like what that said about him.

They were quiet for a moment.

"So. You stopped. Then what?"

Tobias sat up again, pushing his shirt sleeves up. "I cleaned him up, held him. Calmed him down, and we went to the house." Mechanically, Tobias told Phan what had happened as he stared out his windows at the city. "I made sure again that he was okay, and then I talked about submission, told him he was playing games with himself and not submitting to me. I told him it wasn't good enough."

Phan nodded, merely listening as Tobias talked about sitting outside and smoking. When he started telling Phan what Noah had said about submission and what punishment he'd earned, Tobias began to straighten up without being really conscious of it, and by the time he'd told Phan about

Noah taking his strokes of the crop he was standing, looking down at Phan, who lowered his eyes.

"So that's it," he finished, his mouth suddenly dry. "Phan?"
"Sir?"

"I think I've done a very foolish thing." It hit him suddenly, like a summer storm out of the west. Phan's submission didn't stir him, didn't do anything more than make him long to see Noah there. The tightening in his groin was for a larger man, a different person.

"Sir."

"Why are your eyes down? I'm not your Master, your owner, or your lover."

"No. You're his." Phan dropped to his knees and pressed his face against Tobias' thigh. "Aren't you?"

Tobias nodded slowly, his fingers tangling in Phan's hair.
"Yes. I am. I'm scared, Phan."

"I know. But it will be okay. And if it's not, we'll take care of you. I promise."

Chapter 21

Tobias had to wonder how much time Noah had put into learning to cook since last weekend. He clearly remained uncomfortable in the kitchen. To his credit, Noah was assembling what seemed to have the potential to become a delicious stir-fry, but in the process he was making a colossal mess of the kitchen, considering it was a dish one could make in a single stove-top wok. Tobias was pleased to see that his pet had apparently been in contact with Mrs. Miller about what to shop for, but Noah had two cutting boards out and there were vegetable cuttings in the sink and on one of the counters, as well. At the moment, the poor thing was balancing on one foot and holding the refrigerator open with the other, which would have been absurd-looking except for the lovely stretch it made in the fabric of his jeans where they hugged his ass, and the way that his shirt rode up around the waist baring the small of his back.

"Ah, fuck," Noah snorted, dropping the foot that held the refrigerator open to the floor.

"Problem?" Tobias asked, trying very, very hard not to laugh. He walked a little closer and tried to find that patch of skin, now hidden again, with his hand.

Noah set his jaw, sounding frustrated as he spoke, "I have made several overtures, but the kitchen and I are not friendly yet, sir."

Skin found, Tobias used that hand to firmly attach himself to Noah and pulled a little. "Oh, that's too bad. Maybe you should be friendly with me for a while instead."

Noah carefully put down the knife that was in his hand. "That sounds like a much better idea, sir." He braced a hand on the edge of the counter, and Tobias felt Noah's ass thrust into his hips.

Tobias smiled and leaned forward to bite at Noah's neck. He smelled good. He smelled a little like what he'd been chopping, but he smelled of leather, too, and soap and musk. Tobias growled a little, suddenly hungry. It had been almost a week since he'd enjoyed Noah at all, and longer since he'd taken him. Really, that was far, far too long. He rubbed at the hot skin of Noah's belly and dropped his hand lower, groping him shamelessly. "Missed you," he said calmly, even as he hardened against Noah's ass.

"Oh, God," Noah moaned and pressed his cock into Tobias' hand. "Missed you, too, sir."

Tobias thought that was fairly evident and he grinned, leaving a flash of teeth across Noah's shoulder. Noah turned slowly in Tobias' arms and then sank to his knees to mouth at Tobias' bulge through his pants. Moments later Noah's fingers were expertly working open his fly.

Tobias held onto the counter with one hand, the other stroking Noah's hair. He sighed as Noah's fingers finally closed around him, stroked him loosely. "More," he whispered. "Harder. Make me feel it."

Noah complied, tightening warm fingers around his shaft purposefully. He lengthened his strokes and took the head of Tobias' cock between his lips.

Tobias' hips rocked, just a little. He smiled, looking down and watching his cock slide in and out of Noah's mouth. It

was a lovely picture; Noah in denim and leather, his knees spread for balance and showing off his own erection, a hard ridge pressed against his zipper. He tightened his fingers on Noah's head and thrust a little deeper, a tiny bit faster. "Don't make me come. Just ... yeah, like that. I want to fuck you."

Tobias gathered that Noah liked that idea too, as he groaned around his cock. Noah's tongue was gliding lightly along the underside of his erection but he took direction marvelously, sucking but not too hard, swallowing, but not too deep, fingers firm but not pumping so hard as to make him want to come.

Noah moaned again, and his free hand slid into his lap to press into the stiff bulk between his own thighs.

"Do it," Tobias said, his voice harsh in his own ears. He swallowed, rotated his hips a little and plunged into Noah's mouth once before backing off. "Take it out. Touch yourself for me."

Noah licked his lips and his fingers went directly to his jeans. He unbuttoned them and quickly worked the zipper down, then wiggled the waistband to around his knees, baring his hips and the roundness of his ass too. He took himself in hand and gently slid his fingers along his shaft with a soft hiss. His eyes remained low, riveted on his work.

"Feels good, sir," Noah said, adding his low, tight voice to the picture.

"Looks good." Tobias reached for his own prick, stroking in time with Noah. "Keep doing it," he ordered, using his other hand to tip Noah's head up so he could guide himself back into that warm, wet mouth.

Noah moaned as Tobias filled his mouth again. Tobias felt Noah's hand slide around his hip and cup his ass. Noah's eyes closed, but the noises continued, wet sucking sounds, moans that betrayed his own arousal, short gasps for air.

"Oh, God," Tobias moaned before he could stop himself. The cycling pleasure was building, his own excitement being pushed by Noah's far more quickly than he'd intended. With a groan he pulled away again and grinned down at Noah's upturned face. Eyes closed and lips swollen, he was even more attractive than usual.

"I'm not Superman, I fear," he said regretfully. "So I'll just have to ask you to present for me-ass up, please, sweetheart."

"Thank you, sir," Noah panted at him and turned around and rested one of his elbows on the tile floor, ass in the air for Tobias and his jeans still binding his knees together. His other hand stayed tight around his cock, and his leather shirt made stretching sounds as he moved, pulling tight around his shoulders and upper arms.

Tobias glanced around the kitchen and sighed. "You are a very lucky sub, you know that?"

"Oh, yes, sir, I know, sir," Noah moaned and nodded. He was more than convincing, he was sincere.

Tobias laughed, going to his knees behind Noah and rummaging in his own pocket. "And do you know why you're a lucky sub?"

Noah groaned. "To have you for a Master." Noah sounded like he almost asked rather than stated the fact. "Or maybe,"

he panted, "because you carry lube in your pockets? Oh, God, sir. I hope so, I need you."

"Smart. You're very smart," Tobias said a little unevenly. He got the lube open, a condom obligingly falling out of the same pocket, and slicked his fingers. "Keep talking, boy," he instructed as he slowly pushed two fingers into Noah's ass. "I like hearing you talk."

Noah gasped. "Oh, yes. Feels so good, sir. Feels..." Noah's voice trailed off for a moment and he dropped his head down and loosened his grip on his erection slightly, slowing his strokes. Tobias felt Noah bear down on his fingers. "Your fingers feel good but," Noah hissed in air through his teeth and then continued, "I long for more, sir. Want you. Want you in me, sir. Please."

Tobias really wasn't Superman, and his forty-first birthday was gone by; he forgave himself the rather unseemly rush he went through getting the condom rolled on—he could make up with time later; they had all weekend. "Brace yourself, sweetheart," he advised, starting to nudge his way into Noah's body, almost overwhelmed with the need to just do it, just to sink into the tight channel.

"Yes, yes, oh, God," Noah begged. He arched a bit harder improving Tobias' angle, making it easier on both of them. He panted with the entry, relaxing some, but considering Tobias was the first to touch him in over a year, Noah was still very tight around his cock. "Fuck, yes," Noah breathed as Tobias sank deep and their bodies pressed together. "So good, so ... ah!" Noah's body went stiff for a moment and Tobias watched him take his hand off his cock and place it gingerly on the

floor. "That was close, sir." Noah warned, amusement in his voice along with the need.

With a grin and a strained laugh of his own, Tobias rolled his hips. "Well, now. Maybe we should just rest. What do you think?"

"I think it might be your turn for a spanking, sir," Noah laughed and then moaned. "Oh, God."

"You would be so very, very wrong, pet." Tobias wiggled a little, going a bit deeper before sliding out slowly, his hands on Noah's hips. "No one gets spanked but you. Your ass is mine, to spank, to flog, to grope, to fuck." He pushed in again, just as slowly, stifling a groan. "Tight. Love your ass, boy. Mine to look at, mine to play with."

"Yes, sir, yours. Oh, fuck," Noah babbled in response. He arched and pressed back into Tobias as he slid in slowly. "Yours in everything," he whimpered, fingers turning to fists on the cold floor. "Yours to fuck ... God, please fuck me, sir. Master. Please." Noah rolled his hips a bit, begging with his body as well as his words, lowering his shoulders toward the floor, thrusting his ass upwards toward Tobias. "Harder, sir, please!"

"Jesus." It was about all Tobias could say for a moment, his breath whooshing out of him in a rush of need and greedy desire. His fingers tightened around Noah's hips and Tobias pulled hard, dragging Noah back onto him again and again. "My boy," he growled, stabbing into Noah. "Is this what you wanted, how you like it? Hard and fast, your tight hole clinging to me? Are you close? When you come are you going to shoot all over my kitchen floor? Will you scream for me?"

"Yes! Close! Like it hard, like it fast, like it any way you do it, sir, just please don't stop!" Noah grunted and Tobias could feel his hips start to shake in his fingers, feel his body tighten in waves; he could read him like a book. "So close, Master!" Noah's volume had increased considerably along with his almost desperate gulps for air. Tobias' grip slipped slightly as Noah's body broke out in a damp sweat and he had to dig his fingers in harder to hold on.

Through sheer force of will and a naturally contrary nature-he liked to call it a sense of humor-Tobias slowed down. "Any way I like it? How about if I stopped? What if I took you upstairs to my bed and laid you down? What if I slipped into you like this, so slowly it made us both ache? What if I kissed your face and stroked your cock and just ... did ... this...?"

Noah whimpered pitifully. He was panting harshly, sucking in huge breaths and trying to regain control. "I would..." He swallowed hard and cleared his throat. He took a deep breath and seemed to force himself to speak coherently. "I crave your kisses, Master. I am yours to do with as you please, where you please. It is my honor to ache-ache for you." He sucked in another breath and choked out a needy sound. "Oh, God."

"What if I called you my slut, my boy, my lover? What if I told you there's nowhere I'd rather be than right here, with you?" Tobias shut his eyes tight against the truth, his hips starting to jerk out of control. "What if I ... God. Talk to me, sweetheart. I need to hear you."

Noah shifted and took him deep. "I am those things, Master! Your slut." He sucked in air and went on, talking quickly, breathlessly. "Your boy, yours, your lover, please, please, I want that, I want this! Yes! Gonna come ... God!" Tobias felt Noah's hips tighten, felt the squeeze of Noah's climax around his own cock, held onto him as he shouted and slicked the kitchen floor with his seed. "Master!"

Tobias stilled for a moment, letting Noah's orgasm roll over him, feeling it ripple along his cock and up through his body where something magical happened and in a brief shiny explosion his own was triggered. "Noah." He knew he said it, had no idea if Noah heard it, and then it didn't matter because he was coming, pushing deep and hard into Noah's heat, letting Noah take his weight. "Mine."

Noah reached back and fumbled blindly, finally getting hold of Tobias' wrist and giving it a squeeze. "Master," he breathed, trying to press closer, and sighing in frustration when he didn't get the closeness he seemed to be looking for.

Tobias smiled a little, utterly exhausted. "You might be the end of me, pet," he said, shifting enough so he could gather Noah into his arms. "Sex in the kitchen and cuddling, too. You're spoiled."

"Yes, sir. I know how lucky I am." Noah sighed and smiled, relieved, leaning into Tobias.

"That's good." Tobias kissed Noah's hair and nuzzled him gently. "And I'm lucky. Because you're still making supper. And that was the best kitchen sex this floor's ever seen."

Noah groaned. "That's the best kitchen sex I've ever had," Noah admitted with that same silly grin Tobias remembered

from their kiss last weekend. "Uh. The best kitchen sex I've ever had, sir. Damn it. Sorry, sir."

Tobias laughed, he couldn't help it. "Don't worry about it, boy. I'm in a good mood, so we'll call that a swat on the ass barehanded. Whenever I feel like it." Noah looked like he recognized both the reprieve and the open declaration of intent to grope, and he met Tobias' grin with one of his own.

"Now," Tobias said, rolling slightly away, "let's get cleaned up and get dinner going. I'd hate to fall over from hunger."

Chapter 22

Tobias was pleasantly surprised with supper when it finally appeared on the table-Noah had made a wonderful stir-fry once he'd been relaxed. Tobias made a mental note to remember that—if Noah was having a hard time in the kitchen, sex wasn't a bad thing.

After the dishes had been done and put away Tobias had taken a pliable and eager Noah across the yard to the playroom and had him strip just inside the door. He didn't use a plug or any form of chastity device, telling Noah that it wouldn't be needed. "We're going to try this again, boy. Just your back and my flogger. If you get hard, fine-the point of it this time is for me to know you."

Led into the ring, Noah obediently went to the spanking bench and arranged himself over it, holding onto the handles underneath. Tobias watched him, made sure that he was balanced and steady before turning to the trunks and getting the kangaroo flogger. "Are you ready?" he asked softly, rolling up his sleeves. "Do you know what I need?"

Noah took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. It would have been understandable had he been a bit nervous, but Tobias didn't sense that he was uneasy about this encounter. "Yes, sir, I've given this a lot of thought. I was hoping you would bring me back here tonight. I think I understand what you need now." Noah answered him with confidence, although the truth of his statement remained to be seen. "I'm ready."

"Okay, then." Tobias showed him the flogger, once more spreading the tails. "You have your words, and if you don't

use them when you have to, you'll regret it. I want honest reactions, Noah-it's my job to work within your limits until we both know them. We can push them later."

Tobias made sure that Noah took a good look at the flogger as he spread the tails in front of him. "I understand, sir. I will be honest," Noah assured him with a deeper, quieter voice this time, as he began to carefully control his breathing.

Tobias moved to Noah's side, keeping all of his movements calm and steady, not even letting his foot move one iota faster than his most reassuring pace. He felt calm as well, part of his mind noted; he'd worried that he wouldn't be. When he'd decided to take Noah right back to this he thought he might, perhaps, be a little nervous, a little too uptight; thankfully, his training and instinct seemed to be working well.

He raised his arm and began, keeping to the same steady, unrelenting stroke pattern he'd used the weekend before, the tails landing with a solid thud.

Noah hissed at first and sighed. "It's a beautiful flogger, sir," he said almost casually. "Feels different than conventional leather." He grunted. "Stings a little more ... especially when the tails wrap."

He was fairly relaxed for the first set of strokes, breathing carefully through the slap of the flogger, keeping control. But it wasn't long before Tobias was treated to the effects of his work as Noah allowed himself to react outwardly to the sensations he'd held too close the week before.

They were subtle at first, low moans, soft grunts, a wince or a sharp hiss. He watched as Noah found his space,

watched as his boy's head dropped forward and his shoulders rounded. And then, at last, he got what he'd been waiting for.

"Sir..." Noah gasped softly. His breathing became more erratic. "Stings. Feels like needles and ... uhn!"

Tobias nodded, keeping his rhythm exactly the same. "Yes. Do you want more or less? Could you stay in this space for a time, or is it too intense?"

"Rhythm is fine, sir." Noah hissed and then continued, "Little less strength if you ... ah ... if you need me here awhile, sir." Noah bit his lip and grunted, then took a deep breath and let it out slow. His back was a nice hot pink, not too red yet, no stripes.

Tobias eased up. "Good boy. Thank you, Noah. You look lovely, you know."

"Thank you, sir, I want to please you," Noah sighed, and Tobias took note of the way that Noah's body stretched around the block as his blows eased up. He could see that Noah was comfortably settled in his subspace. "That's a light sting there, sir. I definitely feel it, but ... but I can take it for a while."

Noah let out a long, low moan. A quick glance confirmed his pet's arousal, though it was new yet and Noah wasn't fully erect.

"And if I merely continued like this I could make you beg, couldn't I?" Tobias asked, making sure to keep his voice low. He was fully aware of his tone, his cadence and diction-they were as much a part of his tool chest as the flogger in his hand. His voice was perhaps his favorite implement of domination, and he'd been well aware of Noah's reactions,

almost from the beginning. "I could soothe you with it, no matter the sting-I could make you cry," he continued. "You like the pain, you need it. Not a lot of it-you don't like to hurt, you just like the focus, and now I know the point ... you've really done well, sweetheart."

Noah's erection was swelling, his breath coming faster, and Tobias watched him carefully, making sure that the strokes were even and perhaps a little lighter; the effect had been started, the trick now was to ride the edge of it, not topple Noah off into pain and not back too far away from it.

It made Tobias hard, the power he had. The pride he felt in Noah's reactions.

"Thank you, sir. I am yours, Master, I will beg for you, cry for you, anything you want I will do for you." In this space, Noah was only capable of his truth. He wasn't deliberately crafting his words to please Tobias, he was speaking from the heart-from the space where subs learn to give over. "Your voice is so..." Noah moaned again. "So rich, sir, I love it when you speak to me."

"I'll always speak to you if you need it. I'll always speak the truth. When I'm silent it's for you to learn from, not a punishment." Lessons, always lessons to give, and if Noah would learn them at any point, now was a good time to start. "I will always tell you what you need to know, boy. Not what you want to hear, sometimes, but the truth. You can trust my voice, my word. I'll protect you."

It seemed at first as if Noah was going to let his body speak for him. He shifted backward a bit, making more room for his straining cock, which pointed away from his body

stiffly. He lifted his head and whined almost pitifully before dropping his head down again, letting it hang from his shoulders heavily.

Noah groaned and sighed, and when he finally spoke to Tobias, his tone was almost imploring. "Everything in me wants to trust you, Master. I do trust you, I need to, I need it like I need air to breathe and the sting of your whip."

"So let me," Tobias urged, his arm falling faster, lighter still. "Let me hide you from the world and let you fly. Let me be your champion."

Noah gasped. "Yes! Yes, Master. My champion, my savior! I have no thoughts but you, no needs but yours. Take me, have me." His skin broke out in gooseflesh. "Tell me what you need from me. Touch me, Master, will you? Please, touch me?"

Tobias slowed the flogger, merely caressing Noah with it. He didn't need it, didn't require it. All he needed was Tobias, and Tobias knew he'd broken through. He was there.

"Mine," he whispered, resting a hand heavily on the back of Noah's neck. "You're mine, sweetheart. And I'm proud of you."

"Thank you, thank you, Master." Noah lifted his head and gulped in air, releasing it in a short relieved sob. "So good to me. So good for me. Tell me what you need, please. Tell me what I can do for you."

Tobias smiled broadly, peace floating over him like a mantle. "Come for me. Now."

Noah threw his head back and gasped, his shoulders tensed and his back arched steeply. All it took was two rapid,

shallow breaths and Noah shot hard, come soaking his knees, and the floor beneath him. "Oh! God ... Master, Master," Noah sobbed Tobias' title as his climax shuddered through him. The look on his face was priceless, stunned and surprised by how easy it had been to follow his Master's command.

"Such a good boy," Tobias purred, kneeling down to touch Noah's face. "Beautiful. So good to me." He stood up smoothly, one hand still holding the flogger, the other undoing his trousers. "Now open up, boy. You earned a reward."

"Thank you, sir." Noah smiled slightly and rubbed his lips together, eyes on Tobias' cock as he freed it. As Tobias stepped closer, Noah pushed up on his elbows for better leverage and opened his mouth wide to accept him, giving Tobias an unobstructed path right to the back of his throat.

It felt incredible, the warm, wet heat and suction made somehow even better with his success. Tobias took his pleasure eagerly, his cock throbbing and aching, making his blood surge. He knew he was gasping, could hear himself groaning out words of praise and need, filthy demands that Noah take it, suck him, and then he was coming, exploding into Noah's throat with a roar.

Noah swallowed easily, or at least that's how it felt through the heavy fog of orgasm, and then his boy was licking him clean, admiring, worshipping his cock and balls from his perch on the spanking bench. By the time he had the presence of mind to let go of Noah's hair, Noah had thanked him profusely and had settled back into position on the bench, his

fingers resting loosely on the handholds and his eyes on the floor.

Grinning, flush with success and riding the bliss from his orgasm, Tobias sank to the floor in front of Noah and smiled up at him, barely suppressing delighted laughter. "Well done, boy." He lay back on the floor and looked up at the ceiling, stretching languidly as he tucked himself away again. "How do you feel?"

Noah smiled, but it wasn't the silly smile from earlier, it was more subtle, almost sentimental. "I feel very relaxed, sir," he answered softly. "Relieved, happy." He shrugged and absently reached up to run fingers through his hair. "I feel good."

"That's the way it's supposed to feel," Tobias said softly. "Not like you've been through a train wreck. It's supposed to make us both feel ... better. Whole."

"I have so much to learn." Noah reached out and laid a warm hand on Tobias' ribs, just letting it rest there, lazily. "Do you feel whole, Master?"

Tobias felt his smile grow and he tangled their fingers together. "I think I do, sweetheart." He sighed and gave Noah's fingers a squeeze before sitting up. "Time to clean up, I'm afraid. And then I think we'll go back to the house-the bed's waiting."

"Yes, sir. Would you like me to go with you first and draw you a bath? I can come back and clean up while you relax." Noah stood up and made his way down the aisle to the supply stalls.

"Thank you, Noah," Tobias said, genuinely pleased. It was really the first time Noah had spontaneously and naturally suggested a way he could serve, without any leading or prompting. "I'd like that very much."

He got up and together they dressed enough for the elements; Tobias briefly thought it would be nice to have a tub in the playroom, but once again he admitted that if he did that he'd have to set up a bedroom as well. It was an internal discussion he had every time he felt this good. He disliked having to walk across the yard to his bath and bed, but he needed the playroom separate from where he lived ... otherwise he might never leave the converted stables.

Tobias let Noah settle him in the bath with scented salts, an equestrian journal, and a glass of ice water, and relaxed while Noah disappeared to tidy himself up and then clean the barn. It was hard to say how long Noah was gone as Tobias had been dozing a bit, but when Noah returned, he'd left his clothing elsewhere. He appeared with a towel in his hands and Tobias' robe over one arm.

"Would you like me to warm up the water for you, sir?"

Tobias looked at him through heavy lidded eyes. "That would be nice. And then you can join me-I'm too lazy at the moment to actually get out, and I want to hold you for a bit."

Noah set down the towel and the robe, pulled the drain to let some of the cooling water out and refilled the tub with hot water. Then he slipped into the large tub with Tobias and stretched out along his side, resting his head under Tobias' chin.

Noah sighed as he settled into the water. "Are you comfortable, sir?"

"I am now," Tobias said quietly. "Did you have any trouble getting things put away?" He doubted it, but he was warm and comfortable and he had his boy with him in the big tub, and for some reason Tobias found himself wanting to talk. Nothing deep or intense, just simple domestic things that made him think of staying right there for a year or so.

"No, sir, but I hope I got the floor clean enough. It felt a little slippery to me, but it was still wet, it was hard to tell. I'll run out and look it over in the morning." Noah ran his fingers lazily over Tobias' skin. "I'm going to have a lot to put down in my journal this week, that's for sure."

"You're journaling about this?" Tobias didn't know why that surprised him, but it did. Not in a bad way; on the contrary, he liked the idea, it meant Noah was really thinking about his circumstances, getting to know himself. He was also insatiably curious about it, which he put down to be being all too human.

"Yes, sir. I've kept a journal about various things since I was a teenager. But this one I started after our first session together, and it's only about our relationship and things I'm thinking about, and..." Noah cleared his throat. "And you. It's a way to record my journey, write down things I want to remember or things I need to work out. It's also so that in a month from now or six, I can read back and see where I am then compared to where I am now. I feel like it's important, I'm not even sure why, I just knew I needed to do it."

"I think it's a good idea," Tobias assured him. "There is never anything wrong with knowing yourself, and this journey is going to take many turns ... a map might be nice, even if you can only use it in hindsight." He settled a little more in the tub, hot water lapping at him soothingly. "If you'd like me to make sure you have time to write or reflect over the weekend, I'm sure we can work something out."

"Thank you, sir. If time for reflection seems appropriate to you, or maybe if I request the time to write about something specific, that would be helpful. Otherwise I don't think it needs to be structured." Noah settled a bit lower and sighed. "You smell good, Master."

Tobias matched his sigh with one of his own, a smile playing at his lips. "Thank you, pet. And we'll play it by ear then." They sat quietly for a time, Tobias simply enjoying the heat and the way Noah felt against him. "When's your birthday?" he asked suddenly. He had a vision of finding out about it a week or so after the date and winced. Another thought occurred, hard on the heels of the first. "And how old are you?"

Noah laughed softly. "Not until March, sir. The fourth of March, and I'm the much-dreaded twenty-nine. Unfortunately. I already know I've missed your birthday, you'll have to hold out for forty-two to get a gift."

"Ah, you're a baby," Tobias said with a smile. "I remember twenty-nine. Mostly. Oh, that means I get to plan for the big thirtieth though, don't I?"

"That's not necessary, sir," Noah responded a little defensively. "It's just a birthday."

"I didn't say I have to, boy, I said I get to." Tobias smirked, thinking he could quite possibly drive his pet crazy by March. "A big huge party, so I can show you off..." he mused.

"Well, I do enjoy a good party, sir," Noah admitted, and Tobias sensed what might be a kink in him, which made him grin.

"We can invite ... oh, your partner, your parents..." Tobias couldn't help laughing as he teased. "No, seriously. A lovely big bash, you at my feet ... I think it sounds wonderful."

Noah reached a hand out and splashed him. "As if!"

"You don't think you'd look lovely at my feet?" Tobias chuckled again, having captured Noah's hand to avoid another splash. "I'll assume your partner and parents don't know about the kink then." Still smiling, they settled a little, Tobias absently noting the feel of Noah's legs against his in the water. "Do they know you're gay?" he asked curiously.

"Oh, yeah, everyone knows I'm gay. Actually, I think my partner has some idea of what I do-well, what I used to do with my weekends, too. She's no shrinking violet, I could probably tell her and she'd get it, but I wouldn't dream of telling anyone else. I'd get laughed out of a job."

Tobias tilted his head to look at Noah. "That's interesting. How long have you been with her?"

Noah drew circles on Tobias' chest. "We've had the same beat together for about three years."

"Are you trying to distract me? Because I don't mind, really. Keep doing that. I'm going to keep talking, however."

"No, I wasn't trying to distract you exactly, sir. I was just enjoying these curls." Noah gave them a gentle tug. "Do keep talking; I like the sound of your voice."

Tobias smiled again and ran his hand over Noah's side, down to his hip. "You certainly seem to. One of these days I'm going to try talking you into coming-just tie you up and talk to you."

"It's worked before," Noah admitted with a grin. "Does that make me easy?"

Tobias frowned. "No, it merely means I'll have to make you beg first. I have something to live up to, and frankly that always makes me more ... intense. Brett made it sound like fun."

"Oh, no. You two really did compare notes," Noah was quick to respond, running his hand flat across Tobias' chest and ribs. "I look forward to it. I think your voice is your most unique quality, sir."

Tobias tried to think about that and not the way Noah's fingers were beginning to stir him. There really wasn't a lot of room in the tub, and the water was getting cool; it was almost time to head to bed. "I'll assume that unique is good. And speaking of ... be a good boy and get the towel, sweetheart. Time for bed-five-thirty comes early."

"Yes, sir, all right," Noah said with a reluctant sigh and crawled out of the tub. He picked up the towel, and held it out for Tobias, and stood there dripping himself while Tobias got out of the tub.

He spent some time carefully drying Tobias and toweling his hair before wrapping the now-damp towel around himself and helping Tobias on with his robe.

"No punishment tonight, boy," Tobias said with a smile. "Well done."

"Thank you, sir." Noah's eyes were down of course, but his grin was obvious. "I'm glad I've pleased you."

"You have-and you've been rewarded, pet. Come, time for bed." Tobias led the way into his room and picked up the collar attached to Noah's chain. "I want you to rest well, tomorrow starts early, and will be long. Chores in the morning, and then I have plans for the day."

Noah's gaze was fixed on the collar and Tobias forced himself to ignore the disappointment he knew Noah felt; part of him was more than willing to merely let Noah sleep in the bed, in his arms ... but years of experience told him that it was better to wait, even the extra day. This was, after all, training. "Please me, boy," he said softly.

"What is your pleasure, sir?" Noah asked him softly.

"You are, sweetheart." Tobias lifted the collar, finally, and put it around Noah's neck. "You are my pleasure."

"Thank you, sir. I want to be." Noah was still and quiet, and his voice still held disappointment, but he was obedient and accepted the collar and chain gracefully.

"Tomorrow night, boy. If there are no strokes tomorrow night, you can sleep in the bed with me." Tobias lifted Noah's chin with a finger and kissed him quickly. "Now, sleep. It's late."

"Yes, sir. Goodnight, sir."

"Goodnight, Noah."

Chapter 23

It had been, in Tobias' estimation, one of the better days he'd had in a long time. Noah had done his morning chores quickly and easily, remembering almost everything he'd been told the week before. In the house he'd been flawless, every bit of his attention focused on producing breakfast, tending to Tobias, and doing the cleaning to Mrs. Miller's standards. In the barn he'd cleaned the stalls and done as instructed with Spot-this time not turning his back on the brat, and thus avoiding any bites-and then they'd been able to ride out on Dusky Dianna and Crispin for a couple of hours, enjoying the autumn morning.

After lunch they'd gone to the playroom and Noah had easily performed each position Tobias had asked, and shown that he was getting faster with each as well. He'd only smiled when Tobias had teased him about practicing every evening, which Tobias had rather liked the thought of. The image of Noah spending his time going through poses in an unknown room, just so he'd be the best he could be for his Master, had its appeal, unsurprisingly.

On the lead once more, it had taken a small amount of pain to drop Noah to the right subspace, but once there he'd been wonderful; so good in fact, that when Tobias had decided to use the studded paddle he'd had to sigh and declare that the only reason Noah was getting a good hard spanking was because Tobias wanted it.

And then, with Noah's ass reddened and his cock so hard it looked painful, Tobias had found his release in Noah's mouth,

leaving his boy wanting and hungry-but grateful for the attention paid him.

Yes, a good day, Tobias thought as he finished dressing after his shower. He could smell garlic and something else, possibly sausage, and he hurried his movements. He wanted to watch Noah cook, his still-red ass neatly on display in the leather jock strap Tobias had put him in.

Halfway down the stairs he heard a chirping noise and froze, trying to identify it. It seemed to be coming from his office ... one of the pagers. He'd laid the four of them on his desk that morning, planning to check them just before supper. He skipped every second remaining step and rushed into the office, reaching for the slimmest pager of the four, the one Noah used for work.

It was blank, and with a sinking feeling his mind quickly pointed out that the noise couldn't be his own work pager, as it was turned off, and it was rather unlikely that Noah was paging himself on the pager Tobias had given him, which left the last pager. The one Tobias wore for Noah-and for Phantom.

He turned it off and checked to make sure there wasn't a 911 code before hanging his head and giving in to a reluctant smile. Phan knew how to pick his moments. With a rueful sigh Tobias picked up the portable phone and hit the speed dial on his way into the kitchen. Phan answered immediately, the sound of his voice coinciding with Tobias' appearance in the pantry, where Noah was hard at work.

"Hello?"

"I got your page," Tobias said lightly.

Noah looked up at the sound of Tobias' voice and he nodded to him, taking a sniff of the sauce on the stove with the phone to his ear.

"Work, sir?" Noah whispered softly.

Tobias shook his head no. "Good," he mouthed at Noah, pointing into the skillet and then headed over to the window. He felt Noah's eyes on him as he moved, and glanced over in time to catch him turning back to the stove.

"That was fast," Phan said cheerfully. "Not interrupting, then?"

"Do you think I'd call if you were?" Tobias looked out the window for a moment and then turned to lean on the sill. "You know me better than that."

"I do! I know you so well that I can tell you've had a good day and your boy is making your supper right now." Phan laughed happily. "Tell me I'm wrong."

Tobias looked up at Noah and grinned. "No, you're not wrong. It was a good day."

Noah glanced in his direction, smiling at first, but the longer he lingered the more the smile faded, until he finally turned back to the stove again with a sigh.

"See, I knew it," Phan said gleefully in his ear. "So? What happened? Things are smoothed out? I was talking to my darling Elizabeth, you know."

"Were you?" Tobias asked distractedly, watching Noah. He seemed to be keeping busy at the stove, stirring his sauce, nursing his pasta along, but the slight and sudden stiffness in Noah's shoulders was unmistakable.

"Yep. And she says he's been learning to cook and that he cleans as well as me."

"That's nice. I'm glad she's noticed." He stood up and walked toward Noah, sliding one hand over Noah's shoulder. The muscle tensed under his touch and he frowned. "I better go, Phan."

There was a startled pause. "I thought I wasn't interrupting."

"You're not, but I think I have a problem here."

Noah snorted in response, and reached over to turn the heat down under the cream sauce.

"Oh, dear. Glad it's not my ass. Call me next week?"

"Soon, Phan. Goodbye." Deliberately, Tobias disconnected and placed the phone on the counter. "Noah."

"Yes, sir?" Noah's reply was terse.

"Do I have a problem here?" He moved to the side and leaned against the counter, making sure he could see Noah's face.

Noah shook his head. "You're off the phone, sir. That solves the problem for now."

Tobias narrowed his eyes. "I beg your pardon?"

"No problem, sir. Dinner is almost ready. I'll go set the table." Noah turned and walked past Tobias toward the dining room.

Tobias stood straight, away from the counter and steeled himself. "You will not. You will come here, immediately, and explain yourself."

Noah stopped and made his way back to Tobias' side. "Permission to speak frankly, sir?" Noah's tone hadn't warmed

up one bit, and his usual respectful words were bordering on disrespect as he spat them through his lips.

"Denied. I don't think your current frame of mind will allow for anything resembling sense, let alone frank and respectful. Unless you have solid reasons for wishing I not make personal calls from my own home?"

Noah frowned further. "I can't discuss this without your permission to speak frankly, sir, so I hope that you will accept my apologies and allow me to go set the table."

Tobias sighed. "Fine. Talk. But know that you're already up to four strokes tonight for showing disrespect and saying 'no problem' when there obviously is."

Noah shook his head in response. "Very well, four it is, sir." He took a deep breath, worrying his lip a moment before letting it out. He seemed to be choosing his words carefully. "You are already aware of how uneasy it makes me to discuss Phantom, sir. Unfortunately, I see little use in expressing my feelings about your phone call with him at this point. I remember well the response I got when I asked you with all due respect not to bring him up in the safe room. I believe your exact words were 'tough.'" He shifted, crossing his arms over his chest, and his voice grew softer and less angry. "You're not at all receptive to discussion about my feelings with regard to him, and so explaining myself would be a waste of time, sir."

"It is a waste of time simply because as my submissive you have no say in who my friends are, Noah," Tobias said softly, his voice serious. "You have no right-granted or otherwise-to be disrespectful of anyone in my life. Phantom

was my lover and he is now a dear friend. I have no intention of pretending otherwise, nor do I intend to monitor my speech about him. However, I will do what it takes to rid you of your obvious insecurity about him, within those limits."

"I see. And would you say that you were in love with him, sir?" Noah asked boldly.

"Yes, of course," Tobias said easily. "I'm not any longer."

"And you really believe that discussion of your last love-interest is appropriate with me? Let alone calling him in my presence after a weekend like this? You're right that who your friends are is none of my business."

Tobias was stunned when Noah deliberately broke the first cardinal rule of submission and lifted his eyes to meet his Master's. He continued, speaking slowly and clearly.

"Unless you have expressly ruled out the possibility of an emotional relationship between the two of us, I think that Phan is my business." Noah swallowed hard, with a kind of discomfort that wasn't inflicted by whips in his eyes. "Have you ruled that out, sir? It's possible that I have grossly misread you, but I don't think so."

Tobias met Noah's eyes and he hoped he looked as firm as he felt, "I have not ruled it out, no. However, I happen to think that discussion about my last sub and the experience I gained with him is highly relevant to what I need from you. Also, I fail to see why my calling him-ever-is an issue with you. I am not with Phan. He is not my slave, my lover, or my sub. I do not spend my weeks planning how to meet his needs, nor do I spend my weekends helping him, lying with him, enjoying him."

Noah sighed and lowered his eyes again. He cleared his throat before he spoke, but his voice still sounded rough. "It feels like a competition, sir. Ever since he drooled all over you at the club that day, in front of me. He knew what he was doing. And he knew exactly when to call today, didn't he? His timing was deliberate. Surely you see that. It's possible that he is just playing games with you, but I feel as though they are at my expense and I ... I don't like it. It's hurtful." He let his arms fall to his sides and sighed. "It's distracting and it's destroyed my headspace, sir."

Tobias reached out and pulled Noah into his arms, not letting Noah's initial resistance stop him. "Sweetheart. He knew when to call because he knows what time I eat on the weekends and that you would be cooking it. Therefore, he wouldn't be interrupting anything. And at the club, he was making a point-I'm cherished, and if you wanted to be mine, you had to try. You had to know that I don't settle." He ran one hand down Noah's back. "I don't settle, pet. And you're mine. Understand?"

After a quiet moment, Tobias felt Noah's arms snake slowly around his waist. Noah's chest expanded and he exhaled audibly. "Yes, sir," came the reply, muffled into his shoulder, and Noah relaxed slightly. "I'm sorry, sir. Please forgive me." Noah's arms tightened around him for a brief moment and then he dutifully slipped to his knees at Tobias' feet, bowing his head over them. "I wish to beg your mercy, sir, for my disrespect, though I feel better for having been honest."

"I'm sure you do," Tobias agreed. "Mercy will only get you so far, though, pet. I don't think we're completely done with this topic, and I'm a little concerned with how quickly you were able to jump out of your position. I know your emotions were high, but I can't let it slide completely. Two strokes, this time. If it happens again I won't be so generous."

"Six total, sir. Thank you." Noah seemed to have a handle on his emotions for the moment. He stood and moved to the stove to give his sauce a stir. "This will burn if I let it go much longer; have a seat please, sir, and let me serve you."

With his perfect day now sporting a lovely red blemish, Tobias did just that. He sat in his dining room, perfectly aware that the topics of Phantom, their relationship, and Noah's insecurity were only displaced for the moment, not dealt with in any real manner. And now he had a sub to punish before bed-on a night when he'd looked forward to sharing his bed until morning.

The only real way around that, Tobias decided, was to allow Noah to redeem himself. After all, what fun was it being the boss if you couldn't occasionally swing things to get what you wanted? A nice warm Noah in his bed was worth the six strokes, he was sure.

Chapter 24

Tobias allowed Noah to be thoughtful over dinner, and as a result the meal was almost painfully quiet. They did chat a little about the horses-Noah seemed to be taking a shine to Spot-but apart from that it was, "Pass the salt, please," and, "Would you like more water, sir?" and that was about all. The meal was delicious, although the pasta had been just a bit soft. If they hadn't had that unpleasant interruption, it would have been perfect.

When he'd had his fill, Tobias left Noah to clean up and excused himself to go to his safe room to mull things over a bit. He supposed he ought to be flattered in a way that Noah was feeling protective of their relationship, but that unfortunate element of control had begun to rear its head again. They'd been working through it since last weekend and would be for some time to come, he feared. Clearly, Noah needed another lesson.

Noah seemed to take his time about the dishes. Or maybe Tobias was just impatient, in anticipation of Noah's opportunity to make up for his earlier transgressions. He finally heard footsteps on the stairs and brushed himself off, fixed his hair, and schooled his expression. My, that was a fine jock strap he'd put his boy in, the soft leather hugging his curves in all the right places.

"I'm finished, sir," Noah told him, coming into the safe room and kneeling at his feet.

"Good. I assume that the amount of time you spent speaks to a dedication to detail which will make Mrs. Miller weep with

joy." Tobias rested a hand on Noah's head, playing with his hair for a moment. "I think I'd rather like to weep with joy, boy."

"I want to make you happy, sir. Tell me how I can please you."

"Well, see, there's the thing, whelp. I like control, and you seem to have a bit of trouble giving it to me. So I'm going to give you utter control over your own ability to orgasm this evening. I forbid you to do so, but I'm not going to ring you or help you at all. In fact, I'm going to go down on you, my sweet boy, and I'm going to fuck you-I'm going to have such a wonderful time with your body."

Noah's eyes widened and he actually stuttered as he spoke. If it weren't for wanting to seem stern, Tobias would have laughed at the poor thing. "It's ... I ... without a...?" he stammered, blinking incredulously. "Sir, did you say without a ring?"

"I did." Tobias stepped back and moved around Noah to the cabinet, pulling open the drawers with fanfare. As he tossed a tube of lube and a handful of condoms on the bed he said, "You'll control yourself-you'll love it. Such control is to be admired, pet. Mind you, I'll let you come if you beg me nicely enough, and admit that you don't have control-that control is mine." Tobias casually began to undo his shirt buttons, trying to look utterly unconcerned with the state of his sub.

Noah seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. Apparently the idea that he could beg seemed more reasonable to him. Poor disillusioned boy. He stood and moved to Tobias to help him

undress. "As you wish, sir," he answered, though his voice still sounded uneasy.

"Always," Tobias said cheerfully. He tweaked both of Noah's nipples and grinned at him. "Now, I think this would work better on the bed, boy. On your back, if you'd be so kind." With a sweep of his arm Tobias motioned to the middle of the bed, neatly cleared of all pillows, the cluster of condoms looking like a challenge.

"Yes, sir," Noah looked at the bed a moment as if it were the enemy and then climbed up on it, rolling onto his back lengthwise up the middle. He trained his eyes studiously on the ceiling.

Tobias, still fully dressed save his unbuttoned and untucked shirt, pounced. He curled along Noah's side, one hand immediately massaging Noah's cock as he thrust his tongue into Noah's mouth in a deep, claiming kiss. He growled for effect and rubbed himself shamelessly on Noah's leg.

For a brief disoriented moment Noah responded, pressing his cock into Tobias' fingers, opening his mouth wide. But he recoiled at the first hint of arousal, the first answering twitch of his prick. He puffed out a breath, went completely still and closed his eyes.

So Tobias moaned into his mouth and dragged his tongue down Noah's jaw, biting at his neck. "My boy, my beautiful boy," he whispered, his hand still rubbing and massaging as he feasted on one tight nipple. His other hand found its mate and Tobias made sure to turn up the volume on his own

sounds as he tasted his pet. He was having a wonderful time, and wanted Noah to know it.

For long moments, Noah did nothing but breathe, taking in air and letting it out almost desperately, as if oxygen were his only defense. But even air, as necessary as it was, was no match for a Master's touch, and Tobias knew it. "Oh, God," Noah groaned at last. It was a lovely, deep-chested sound of arousal and defeat, and his body arched to Tobias' attentions.

"Mine," Tobias purred, feeling Noah harden under his fingers. Not wasting time, and hoping to keep Noah confused and disoriented, he replaced his hand with his mouth, licking and sucking at the leather covering Noah's erection. His hand momentarily free, he stripped off his shirt and tossed it away with another growl.

"No, no, no..." Noah moaned and whined softly, pushing gently at Tobias' shoulder. At first Tobias thought the words were meant for him, but then he noted the way that the leather stretched away from Noah's body as his shaft filled fully and pushed in frustrated defiance at the jock strap. "Oh, fuck," Noah groaned.

"Oh, yes," Tobias countered with glee. "Definitely yes, pet." He sat up, hands tugging the strap off and away with a minimum of fuss. "Such a pretty cock," he informed Noah. "It's about time I got to know it better, don't you think?" Without waiting for a reaction he swooped down again, his tongue happily bathing Noah's balls while his hand held the stiff shaft loosely.

Tobias measured his success by the length of Noah's frustrated moan. It seemed to go on and on, until Noah was

finally forced to gasp in air. He grunted, and in a different scenario the sound might have had accompanying curses, but Noah knew better. Still, his resistance was waning steadily, and Tobias wondered idly when the last time anyone sucked Noah off might have been. Noah puffed again, and he relaxed back into the mattress. Impressive. Score one for the boy.

"Good work," Tobias said, lifting his head. "Nice control. I'm rather glad I don't have to do that." He rolled to the side and, grinning broadly, stripped off his trousers and boxers in a few short movements.

"Me, too," Noah responded, and, in a deft and unexpected move, Noah rolled toward him, giving Tobias a light shove onto his back while he was off-balance with this clothing. Before Tobias could breathe a protest, Noah had swallowed his erection, surrounding it in hungry, wet heat.

"Jesus!" Tobias gasped, the sound quickly becoming a moan as he let Noah have his way. It was lovely and wonderful, and frankly he'd be thankful to have the edge taken off; it would give him more time to play with his boy. So he tangled his hand in Noah's hair and let him go to town.

Noah reached one arm up his body, and Tobias winced as Noah tangled fingers in his curls and tugged on a nipple. With his other hand, Noah was juggling his balls, rolling them from fingers to palm. But his tongue, well trained and well practiced, was where Tobias focused, as Noah pulled on his cock and bathed his shaft and head, skillfully teasing and taunting.

Deciding that Noah really didn't seem to be getting the idea of who was in charge, no matter how pleasant the effect

could be, Tobias pulled away, his fingers tugging at Noah's hair. "Cute, boy," he said with a grin. "But I still get to come-you don't." He rolled, pushing Noah to the bed and straddling one thigh, bringing their spit-slicked erections together and rocking gently. Noah gasped as he ended up on his back again, and while he didn't look happy about it, he didn't seem unhappy either.

"You can suck me off if you want-the other choice is I rub off on you right now." He had to fight to keep from rolling his eyes as he thrust, the sensation was so sweet, his need spiking suddenly. "Never mind. Hold on, boy."

Tobias watched Noah watching, watched as Noah trained his eyes down his body, finally reaching down and slowly tightening his fingers around both their cocks, binding them together with both hands. Foolish on his part under the circumstances, but selfless, Tobias allowed in what was close to his very last coherent thought before giving in to his body.

Noah's fingers were the perfect touch, the friction of his cock a wicked lick of flame that sent him over the edge with-he admitted to himself-unseemly haste. He heard himself grunt Noah's name, but buried it hastily under a bruising kiss as he pumped his fluid onto his boy's belly. A tiny part of his mind reminded him that he was supposed to be paying attention to Noah's status; thankfully, his own much relieved prick was slick and sliding along a nicely rigid erection.

He smiled into the kiss before backing off and falling to the side, panting. "Well done, sweetheart. Really. I'm impressed."

"Fuck, you're hot when you come, sir," Noah panted at him, eyes a little glazed and his face flushed. But the words

had barely left his mouth before his eyes widened and his lips twitched. "Oh, God, I'm in for it now, aren't I?" he asked rhetorically.

Tobias laughed, the sound rich and full of joy, even to his own ears. God, how long since he'd heard that sound, how long since he'd felt it? "Oh, yes, my pretty boy. You are completely and totally in for it. One of the joys of age, Noah. I won't be ready as soon as you would have been, but when I am? You'll be begging me in no time. And until that happens I get to use your wonderful body as a playground." He leered outrageously and laughed again, trying to decide where to begin.

Noah groaned. "Well at least you're joyful; wasn't that the goal, sir?"

"I want to weep with joy," Tobias corrected with a chuckle, rolling into Noah's side again. "And to do that, I need ... another orgasm or two, both mine, and for you to either comply with my control or prove yours. Now, I think I've got my breath back, and you need to be thanked for having such a lovely touch." He curled his hand around Noah's hip and squeezed. "Any suggestions, pet?"

"Yes, sir," Noah answered easily. "Let me just admit that I'm not going to be able to prove anything to you and tell you now that you should have and do have a control over my body and my mind that even I can't emulate." Noah took one of Tobias' hands in his and kissed the knuckles. "Thank me, sir, by letting me focus on you again and not myself."

"Nice try," Tobias smirked. "But no. There's a lesson here." He dropped a kiss on Noah's shoulder as he leaned forward a

bit, pressing him into the mattress. When he eased back he had the lube in his hand. "You'll figure it out, I'm sure."

"I was afraid you'd say that, sir," Noah sighed. For all his protesting his tone was playful, and the worry and tension from earlier seemed to have left him.

"Poor tortured pet," Tobias sympathized, arranging him on the bed by the expedient manner of flipping him over onto his belly and smacking his ass. "Hands and knees, boy. Show me your assets." Really, he was having far too much fun.

Noah hissed at the slap and pushed up onto his hands and knees obediently. "My assets, sir," he snorted. "I know you're supposed to be joyful, sir, but you are enjoying this way too much."

"Give me a minute, you'll be right at my level," Tobias said dryly. "Promise." With that he ran one finger down the crease of Noah's ass and followed it with his tongue.

"Oh!" Noah gasped, surprised by the move. Tobias grinned silently to himself. "Oh, Jesus fucking God, no." Noah shook and spread his legs a bit further; Tobias could feel him resist the movement and his grin broadened, his tongue lapping delicately at its goal.

Tobias took his time. He sent himself on an extended tour of Noah's ass, traveling from tailbone to balls and back again, using his tongue and his lube-slicked fingers. He slipped the tip of one finger into Noah and listened to him gasp, felt a shudder roll through his body, and bit lightly at one cheek.

"I love how tight your ass is, pet," he purred. "You fit around me better than anything, tighter than anyone I've had before. You move like music on me. Honestly, it's a thing of

beauty." Clinically, except for the grin, he slipped the finger in and out again.

Noah was holding on better than Tobias had expected, though he was far from composed. Noah rocked away from his intrusion, presumably protecting his prostate, and his panting and the slight sheen of sweat across his back and thighs gave him away as his body betrayed him. "Ah, fuck," Noah hissed and moaned, focused so singularly on his order not to come that Tobias had to wonder if Noah had heard a word of his Master's praise.

Shrugging, Tobias removed his finger and dove in with his tongue again, pushing hard. He felt Noah drop to his elbows, and Noah's cry was muffled in the pillows. Tobias ignored him and kept at it, licking around his hole and then pushing in, his hands spreading Noah's cheeks wide. Between his own thighs he could feel himself stiffen, the taste of Noah, the sounds he was filling the room with making Tobias' blood flow faster. He only hoped Noah would hold out long enough for him to actually start the fucking before he blew.

Noah pushed up on one arm and Tobias could hear him better now. He was alternating harsh panting breaths with straining groans, and just as Tobias was about to consider him too stubborn, he broke.

"No, no, I ca ... I can't ... sir, Master I," Noah babbled at him, "Oh, fucking hell, Master, I—! Yellow! Yellow, Jesus!" he sobbed out and choked on a gasp, coughing.

Tobias rolled away, panting himself, but one hand was reaching for the lube and another for a condom. "Okay, pet. Stopped. Breathe for me, Noah. I'm listening." He tore the

condom packet open as he spoke, his cock twitching hard as he thought about sinking into Noah's sweet ass.

Noah panted harshly, sucking in air. "Whoo. Couldn't fucking breathe ... ah..." he groaned, and after two or three more breaths he sighed. "Okay, better now." He ran fingers through his sweaty hair and licked his lips.

"Oh, good," Tobias said, his voice dripping honey as he smoothed the rubber on. "I'd hate to have to do mouth to mouth. Oh wait! I like that. Right." He shoved Noah's hip and grabbed at the nearest leg as Noah rolled, smoothly hooking it over his own shoulder. "Don't forget I listen to begging," he said with a smile, popping the lid on the lube again and making sure Noah saw it.

"Oh, right, right." Noah's eyes tracked Tobias' movements and he whimpered at the tube of lube. "Stand by."

"But it has to be convincing," Tobias added with a grin. "And about control." He slicked his fingers and his erection slowly, deliberately. When he was utterly convinced he had Noah's complete and undivided attention he slid two fingers into Noah's body and began to move them just as slowly. "I can do this for a long, long time, pet."

"I can't," Noah admitted with a groan, tilting his head back in the pillows. "Oh, fuck."

"That's nice, sweetheart." Tobias fingered him a little more and began to stroke Noah's cock in time. He thought he could possibly have tried to be a little more sincere, but decided it would have been lost on Noah anyway. He watched as Noah moaned again, his hips rocking, and made a quick choice.

In a second he'd swallowed Noah's cock to the root, found Noah's prostate with his finger and pushed it. Hard.

Noah screamed.

Noah's hands flew over his head and gripped the rungs of the sturdy headboard, white-knuckled, and he arched his back hard. "MASTER!" he shouted, "I have to come, please God, let me come! This is all you, you did this to me. I have no control, never did, don't want it! Please, please, please!"

Tobias groaned. There was no way Noah was going to hold off for more than a moment or two, certainly not long enough for Tobias to enter him. He lifted his head quickly and ordered, "Come." He pushed with his fingers, massaged the right spot, and watched as Noah began to come. Some orders he had no issues with at all, apparently.

Noah burst into relieved tears, and they soaked his cheeks and mingled with his sweat. Tobias drank in his body, his expression, as Noah's hips jerked and his shoulders shook with the force of his climax. Long moaning sounds were forced from his lungs, proving without a doubt that he indeed had no control left, no fight, no will. When it was done Noah collapsed back into the pillows, his arms falling flat beside his head. He was a lovely puddle, spent and panting, drenched with sweat and come and moaning softly.

"Lovely, pet," Tobias whispered. "So amazing when you submit, when you give me what I need." Once more he draped Noah's legs over his shoulders-he wasn't even sure Noah knew what was going on as he pressed inside, his cock sliding past muscles that were now relaxed and giving.

Noah sighed and moaned. He slid one of his hands down his body and covered Tobias' hand with it, giving it a light squeeze, but his eyes stayed closed and his body pliant as Tobias took him.

"Want to be what you need, have no control, not with you, don't want it, don't need it, have to let go..." Noah was babbling-very in his space, very willing, and oh, so very, very his.

"That's good," Tobias whispered, stroking into him and then back out, the friction and heat exactly what he needed. "Just let me take care of you, sweetheart. My boy, my perfect, sweet boy."

He slid in once more, a slow, languid thrust that stopped only when he was fully buried in Noah's ass. "So good," he said again, watching Noah's face as he moved a little faster, began to take what he wanted from the pliant body under his.

The praise had been well-placed, it seemed, because Noah smiled slightly, and blinked his eyes open. "Master," he gasped lightly, and his body began to come back to life.

With a low moan Tobias thrust again, his pace steady. "I like the way that sounds, you know. God, you're beautiful." Inside Noah, Tobias' cock twitched, wanting more.

"Master? It's ... oh, God, that feels so good. It's meaningful ... with you," Noah told him. "Feels right to say it." Noah wasn't aroused; Tobias doubted Noah would be good for another round tonight, but he was definitely enjoying Tobias' measured thrusts. "Master," Noah repeated the word, seemingly with no other purpose than for Tobias to hear him say it. "My Master."

Tobias spent long minutes just moving like that, stretching it out as long as he could. Noah would occasionally shift under him, push back in a counter motion that made Tobias' eyes roll and both of them laugh breathlessly. It was ... fun. Tobias took his boy, took his time, and took his own arousal higher at exactly the pace he wanted. They whispered to each other, repetitions of "Master" and "my boy", until Tobias felt his need begin to catch up with him.

"Soon, sweetheart," he warned, his breath coming faster and beginning to catch as his blood pounded in his ears.

"Love to watch you come, love the look on your face, the tension in your shoulders, love the sounds you make, Master." Noah lowered his tone, making it husky and dark as he whispered to Tobias, "Fuck me, Master, make me feel it, take me, have me ... ah ... yes, so hot."

"Oh, God." Tobias slammed into Noah faster, his rhythm fracturing. He could feel the growl build in his chest, couldn't hold back his grunts as he felt his climax begin to move through him. "God, yes," he panted. "So good."

Noah continued whispering to him, dirty, dark, begging words that pushed Tobias past the point of no return. As he came, Tobias leaned forward, almost bending Noah in two, so he could take Noah's mouth in a deep kiss. His hips twitched and ground against Noah's ass and his growling triumph was muffled against Noah's lips until he had to lift his head and roar, the last of his orgasm forcing its way out of his body in a victorious rush.

He was left panting and laughing, draped over Noah like a blanket.

"Mmm ... sizzling," Noah grinned. "Let me see those tears of joy, sir," he teased, stroking his fingers through Tobias' hair and, thankfully, keeping still.

Tobias knew his face was streaked with sweat and couldn't swear that there weren't tears mixed in. He grinned back and tried to catch his breath, half laughing. "You'll be the end of me, boy," he teased. His cock twitched once more in surrender and they both groaned. "God, we need a bath," he added, trying to lift himself off Noah's bent legs.

"Oh, yes. We stink. In that well-fucked kind of way." Noah, bless him, had regained a bit of himself and helped Tobias get untangled. Noah placed an affectionate kiss on Tobias' forehead as he settled in the pillows and then slipped out of bed. "I'll run a bath and come get you when it's ready, sir. You relax."

"Thank you, sweetheart," Tobias said as he rolled over and closed his eyes. Five minute nap, a nice bath ... and then the matter of punishment. Ah, well, with that out of the way he could take Noah to bed and hold onto him, imparting all sorts of comfort to take the sting away.

His weekend was nicely back on track, he thought.

Chapter 25

Morning brought calm and quiet to the farm. Tobias woke minutes before the alarm clock was due to go off and admired his boy for those few quiet moments in the pre-dawn half-light. Noah looked even younger asleep. His eyes were closed, his chest rose and fell gently with his soft breathing, his hair, what little there was of it, stuck straight up off the top of his head. The tell-tale lines of age that Tobias had come to accept about his own face hadn't settled on Noah yet—no laugh-lines, no furrowed brow lines, nothing but smooth skin, soft eyelashes, and pale lips.

Tobias was just letting his protective urges settle on him when the alarm finally interrupted. Noah opened his eyes, awake in an instant. He yawned and stretched, then reached over to shut the thing off.

"Good morning, sir," he said with a sleepy sigh when he saw Tobias was already awake.

In short order Tobias kissed him, paddled him, and sent him off to make breakfast.

Apparently the morning calm was working its magic on Noah as well, because there was no panic in the kitchen, no fuss over the percolator, and no swearing associated with breakfast at all. Noah's omelet was lovely, and as soon as they finished eating, Noah warmed up Tobias' coffee and disappeared to turn the horses out.

Tobias sat and read a bit of the Sunday paper, trying to dissuade himself from peering out the window. There was no need to check up on Noah after all; it wasn't his first

experience with horses and they'd turned them out together the Sunday before.

Still, though, he could watch. One of his pleasures, right? One of his rights? On the one hand, it would go further with Noah if he simply let the boy do his chores and rewarded him for a job well done. But on the other, how would he know how well the job was done if he didn't check up on him?

He was actually still mulling it over and trying to decide if he was terribly concerned about his horses or merely smitten with his sub when Noah came in, evidently finished.

"All done, sir," Noah told him with a smile from the other side of the screen door where he was removing his muck boots. "The horses are out, stalls raked." He set the boots aside to be hosed off later and came inside. He was a lovely mess with his stained hands, a smudge on his cheek, and dirty jeans. "And it's about to rain, hard by the look of it."

"A good day to stay in and play then," Tobias said with a smile. "Or at least plan, and then-perhaps-a mad dash through the elements to our lair." He stood up and walked to Noah, startling him with the gift of a quick kiss. "Take a shower, pet. I'll make some tea, and we can be warm and cozy in the safe room."

God, he smelled good. Sweat and dirt and outdoors ... oh, and horse. Yes, a shower was still a good idea.

"Our lair." Noah grinned. "I like the sound of that, sir." He backed away from Tobias a couple of steps and then turned and hurried upstairs.

He was quick about his shower and joined Tobias in the safe room only moments after Tobias had arrived with the

tea. "You should have waited, I'd have made that for you, sir."

"I know," Tobias replied with a smile. "But then it would be too hot at this very moment, and this way we can enjoy it immediately. Now, come here and warm me."

He sat back on the bed and gathered Noah's naked body into his arms, still warm and moist from his shower. He smelled good again, although Tobias missed the scent of his sweat. "You're warm," he purred approvingly.

"Yes, you're generous with the hot water, sir," Noah agreed. "I love a hot, hot shower, especially when it's getting colder out." Noah leaned into Tobias, resting damp hair on his shoulder. "I like that soap, it smells like ... I'm not sure, jasmine is it? Wakes you up a little."

"Gingerlily." Tobias stroked a hand over Noah's side, enjoying the smooth feel of his skin, how soft it was just out of the shower. "I want to play," he whispered. "I think ... I think we should make up a story."

"A story. I'd like that, too." Noah reached for their tea, handing Tobias his mug first and then taking his own off the side table. "Once upon a time ... hmmm," Noah grinned and chuckled softly. "Well, what are you in the mood for, sir? Pliant and willing? Reluctant but seducible? First time virgin? Quid pro quo? Or maybe adamantly unwilling?"

Noah's voice was playful. He sipped his tea and continued wooing Tobias with his words. "Maybe you want to hear me scream? Beg you to leave me alone and you can have your wicked way with me anyway?"

"That has merit." Tobias sipped his tea and studied Noah's body, curled around him, one leg tossed just so. "Are you actually able to pull off reluctant virgin, or is that a pipe dream?"

Noah gasped. "I swear I've never done anything like this before," he said, adding a touch of air to his voice for effect. It worked. "I haven't done that one in a while, but if you want it, I can pull anything off, sir." He sipped his tea again.

Tobias chuckled. "I see. Could you pull off ... pirates? Or maybe a prince I've stolen from his castle as a spoil of war? A hustler I've bought and paid for?"

"Pirates? Arrr ... only if I don't have to talk like one," Noah chuckled. "Avast ye matey! That's the extent of my pirate talk. Oh, but a spoil of war! Lovely, I like that one. 'My father will come for me!'" Noah was enjoying this, it was nice to see.

Tobias relaxed back a little and sipped at his tea again, considering. "I don't know about that one, actually. Some day, certainly, when I'm feeling more energetic and can subdue you while fending off your father. Today ... today I see you in white, all innocent and unsuspecting. Or ... maybe already fallen and full of deception..." He laughed and stroked a hand over Noah's skin again. "I really don't know, pet. Do you have bite today, or will you come quietly?"

"I can have a bite if you want one, sir, but I'm sensing you want something more like naïve, fearful reluctance turned wide-eyed worship. Like ... a college freshman, or a new boy in your harem? Maybe a young entry-level associate in your firm. Hustling the new boy in town into the back room of a local club." Noah set his mug down having finished his tea.

"Am I reading you wrong? If you'd prefer I can try to dig up a hustle."

"I think we can wait on the hustle, pet," Tobias said with a grin. "You've given me an idea, however." Reluctantly Tobias moved away from the warm body and got off the bed. "I'm not sure if I have the proper costume for you, though. I know I don't have a suit jacket that'll fit your shoulders, but I might have a shirt ... and I certainly have a tie."

He crossed to the wardrobe and opened the large doors, exposing all sorts of fabrics and designs. As he flipped through hangers until he found black silk trousers and a suitable dress shirt, he noted a few other things he'd like to try on Noah sometime soon-he was born to wear leather, really.

"What's your shoe size?" he asked absently, almost ready to dress Noah up as a business tycoon.

"I'm usually a ten, sir," Noah answered, flipping around to lie on his stomach so he could watch. "I'm intrigued. What's on your mind? I might need time to get into character." He winked and laughed softly.

"You'll have time. Trust me, I'll walk you through the set up when we get to the playroom-if I do it now we'll be all ready and then boom! Pasture, not a club. Which would sort of throw us out of it, yes?"

"You know best, as always, sir," Noah agreed playfully and slid off the bed to get dressed.

Tobias held out a pile of clothes: silk trousers, dress shirt in a rich cream color, shiny black shoes. "Here you go; I'm

thinking underwear will be useless, but I'll get socks and a tie from my room. You dress here, I'll be right back."

Noah took the clothing, and set it on the bed, and by the time Tobias returned with his socks and tie, he was dressed. The pants were a tad tight in the hips and ass and the shirt was a bit taut across his shoulders, but they were pressed and crisp and would work well. Noah had even combed his hair to look more conservative and corporate, which was an excellent touch.

He handed Noah his tie and Noah wrestled with it a bit. "Did you know cop ties are clip-ons? They do that so we can't get choked with them. Oh, wait." Noah tugged and the proper knot appeared. He tightened it around his throat. "Ah. I've got it, sir." He grinned, clearly proud of himself, and sat on the edge of the bed to put his socks on.

"Good job," Tobias said with a smile. "Now, I'm going to get dressed; you ... ponder. I'm your boss, you've been working with me for about a month. You're not sure if the vibe you're getting is real or your imagination-you just know I'm more friendly with you than with the others, that you've suddenly started subconsciously leaning back when I walk behind your desk so I brush against you. There's a tension building, but you're not sure what it is."

Tobias walked to the door and smiled, building his world in his head. "We've been out with clients for dinner, and we've just sent them off to their hotel. I'm to drive you home, but I've suggested we stop somewhere first..." He shook his head and grinned at Noah. "Ponder. I'll dress."

Noah was sitting in the chair in the safe room, dressed and waiting by the time Tobias returned. After complimenting Tobias on his suit, he stood up and followed him down the stairs, moving eagerly. Thankfully, Noah thought to grab an umbrella on their way out the door and he held it over Tobias' head as they walked, leaning into him to keep dry.

Once inside the door, Tobias had Noah shake out the dripping umbrella while he set the lighting. He didn't turn on the track lighting down the middle of the aisle, but instead turned on every second stall light on the left hand side, and on the right only the light in the black stall. The effect was muted, shadows playing out in odd angles and changing the look of the entire area.

With a flick through a small box Tobias selected a CD he'd had made for just this sort of thing, and in moments the sound of wild electronica with a pounding backbeat filled the space, the soundproofing keeping the music from being jarring.

Noah had finished with the umbrella and stood looking down the row of stalls, taking it all in. Tobias moved behind him and, wrapping an arm around his waist, began to whisper in his ear.

"I've brought you here, to a seedy little bar I know. You've sat with me, watched men dancing and kissing, listened as people I know came over to greet me. You've been wide-eyed and a little shocked, but not quite daring to leave. You've even watched as I kissed a man right in front of you, leaving him with blood on his lip. I've pretended not to notice as you looked around, the color on your cheeks growing. The music

has gotten to you, and I invite you to walk with me. We go down a hallway, there's a man leaning on the wall getting sucked off. I let you watch, feel your breath speed up. Can you see it, pet?"

Just like that Noah's breathing changed-a little shallower, a little quicker, and Tobias could feel his heart begin to pound in his chest. Noah swallowed and took two steps forward out of Tobias' grasp, then turned and looked right at him. The uncertainty in his eyes appeared genuine.

"I, uh..." He glanced over his shoulder and then back at Tobias, backing very slowly down the corridor. "I don't know if this was a good idea. I mean, I'm sure you're very ... I should probably go." He swallowed hard and tugged at his collar, loosening the tie a bit.

"You don't want to," Tobias said smoothly. "I know you don't, I can feel it, the way you lean into me, the way your heart is pounding." He let Noah take another step. "The way your cock is hard in your pants." Tobias slipped his hands into his pockets. "I promise I won't do anything you don't want. Just ... come and see with me. Watch. There are men here who can open your eyes to a whole new world, Noah."

Noah stopped walking and ran his fingers through his hair anxiously. "Is this right, though? I mean, we have to work together-you're my boss. Even if I wanted to ... to ... and I don't know if I do, okay? Shouldn't we, you know, be keeping a professional distance?"

"Certainly, if you wish," Tobias said with a smile. "I have great success in keeping my personal life out of the office, however. It really doesn't effect my work if I know what your

prick tastes like or not, or if I know that you like to watch men being flogged."

Noah blinked and froze, rooted to the spot. "F-flogged?" His eyes went wide and he swallowed again, then glanced back over his shoulder and ran his hand slowly across his own chest. "They do that here? You're into that stuff?"

Tobias allowed himself a slow smile and stepped toward his prey. "Yes. And yes. Come with me. Watch. You can leave whenever you want, Noah. I just thought that you might be ... interested." He let his gaze roam freely and obviously over the man, the tip of his tongue teasing along his lower lip.

Noah's brow furrowed slightly and he looked into Tobias' eyes for a long, still moment, working his lip between his teeth. Finally, after a deep breath and a steadying sigh, he moved cautiously back to Tobias' side.

"All right."

Satisfied, and feeling not unlike a cat who'd found a bowl of cream, Tobias looped an arm around Noah's waist and leaned close once more to whisper in his ear as they walked. Each measured step moved them down the aisle between the stalls. He pointed to the left and said, "A man leans on the wall, his Dom taking a crop to his bare back. He's silent, but his body shudders with every stroke, his eyes squeezed shut. He comes without a sound."

They moved past a darkened stall, the music making them sway ever so slightly as Tobias wove his voice into the rhythm. "Men are bent over. Spankings, begging ... a man in a mask is fellating two men at once, his own cock bound up so pretty. We can hear the cries, the sound of leather on skin,

the slap of skin and lube as someone is taken in a dark corner. We can hear the sounds of a man about to scream as he's flogged and I make you stop to watch."

He turned Noah to face a blank wall and pulled him tight against his chest, one hand dropping to squeeze the hard length filling Noah's trousers. "Do you like what you see, Noah?"

Noah gasped and looked down as Tobias touched him, then moaned and lifted his eyes back to the wall. He licked his dry lips and answered Tobias breathlessly. "It scares me. It looks so painful," he answered, eyes still wide and cock stiff in Tobias' fingers. "But..."

Lazily, Tobias stroked Noah through his trousers. "But you want to try? You want to watch? You want to think about it?"

Noah moaned again, leaning against Tobias. "Watch ... think about it ... God, that feels good."

Tobias smiled and bit at his boy's neck. "Can you imagine it? The feeling of baring yourself to someone, just leaning forward and holding on? The anticipation as you wait for the crop or flogger to fall?" He cupped Noah's balls and squeezed gently. "Can you imagine the bite on your skin?"

He turned them, easing Noah toward the stall on the right, its walls painted black. They looked in, the area illuminated by a bare light bulb, the scene stark and bare. A naked mattress on a steel cot, a wooden chair ... black leather tools on the walls, interspersed by graffiti. "Can you picture it, Noah?" Tobias purred, grinding his own erection against Noah's ass.

"Yes," Noah answered softly, timidly. "I ... I can picture it- waiting for it, taking it." He reached up and loosened his tie further as if he felt restricted, unbuttoning the top button and taking another deep breath. "Hot in here."

"Is it?" Tobias moved against Noah's back, swaying with the beat of the music. "You're hard. You're hot. You want it. Tell me I'm wrong ... we can go. We can pretend you never saw, never thought about it. We can go to work tomorrow and I'll never let on I know about you."

Noah moved with him and reached up to hook his fingers behind Tobias' neck. "Don't want to go." He shook his head. "Too hot. It stays between us, right? No one has to know?"

"No one will ever know," Tobias whispered. He kissed Noah's neck, dragging his teeth over the skin; one hand brushed over Noah's chest, the other still massaged his balls. "Our secret," he promised.

"You're going to have to tell me what to do," Noah said softly. "I..." He cleared his throat, sounding embarrassed. "I've never done anything like this before."

"First thing is ... you pick," Tobias purred. "Want me to spank you? Want to feel the crop? A flogger? Go touch them, baby. Pick them up and imagine what you want. Show me what's got you so hot." He let go of Noah and reach up to pull his boy's hand away. With a gentle shove he sent Noah into the stall.

Noah stepped forward to stand in front of the wall of implements for a long moment before picking up the crop. He slid his fingers along its length and fondled the leather loop at the end before he hung it back up. Next he selected the

flogger and ran his fingers through the tails. He tried it out lightly several times on his own thigh, then against the wall, then hung that back up as well.

He reached for the paddle, pulling it down and turning it over in his fingers, but his eyes strayed back to the flogger, and he made the trade decisively before turning back to Tobias and holding it out to him. "This," he said softly. "This is what I want."

"You're sure?" Tobias asked intently, a thrill running up his spine. Noah had thrown himself so well into the role that it was easy to play, as arousing and exciting as actually playing in a new place and not the stall he'd used for years.

He took off his suit jacket and hung it on the back of the chair before taking the flogger and unbuttoning his cuffs. "Are you sure?" he asked again, stepping close enough to feel Noah's heat.

Noah looked up at him, naïve and doe-eyed. "Shouldn't I be? You're scaring me. What did I do wrong?"

Tobias smiled and held up the flogger, trailing the tails over his own arm. "Nothing. There's nothing to be scared of, Noah, I merely need to know that you're in your right mind. If it's too much, you say 'yellow' and I'll stop and ask you how you are. If you want me to stop completely and take you home, say 'red.'"

He leaned in the needed inches and kissed Noah's mouth. "Now," he breathed. "Are you sure?"

Noah hung on the kiss a moment, unmoving and eyes closed. When he finally opened his eyes, he reached for the

flogger and ran the fingers of both hands through its tails again. He nodded. "I'm sure."

"Good boy." Tobias smiled and stepped back. "Take off your shirt, please," he requested politely.

Noah reached up and removed his tie, draping it over Tobias' jacket. He unbuttoned his shirt slowly, button by button, untucking his shirttails last of all and dropping the shirt on the chair as well.

His shoulders reflected the stark light of the overhead bulb, making his skin look pale and illuminating every ridge and line in his pecs. He shivered in the slight chill and his nipples hardened fast in response.

Noah reached up to help Tobias off with his tie, but Tobias stopped him with the handle of his whip. "No," he admonished softly. "Not until I'm ready."

Noah stepped back and unbuttoned just the top button of the silk dress pants and let his arms fall to his sides.

"Nice," Tobias said, his voice low and soothing. He meant the compliment. He stepped close and ran his fingers over Noah's chest, circling each nipple. "Very nice. Now the trousers."

"Thank you," Noah hissed softly as Tobias' hands caressed him. "I work out." Noah kicked off his shoes. He hesitated with his fingers in the waistband for just a moment, then cleared his throat and removed his trousers and socks, tossing them onto the pile of his clothing.

"It shows, and I thank you for it." Tobias ran his hand over Noah's hip and stared frankly at his erection. "Okay, baby. Now you can help with my shirt."

Noah stepped forward and reached up, first working the knot on Tobias' tie open and then slowly undoing his buttons. Once it was open, he ran his fingers over Tobias' chest and kissed the exposed skin lightly. "You smell good," Noah said softly, then stepped around behind Tobias to slide the shirt off of his shoulders.

Tobias shrugged out of the shirt and let Noah take it, switching the flogger from hand to hand. It was black leather, a little rougher than he'd used on Noah yet, and he hoped that it would provide a little extra punch to the scene. When Noah came back around in front of him, Tobias smiled and pulled him close again. "Ready, baby?" he asked, his voice husky. Before Noah could answer, he captured his boy's mouth in a biting kiss.

Tobias felt Noah melt against him as they kissed and whimper softly in response to Tobias' teeth. Noah sighed as Tobias released him and answered him breathlessly, "I'm ready."

With a gentle shove Tobias spun him to face the wall. "You can either hold onto the rings there, or bend over and hold onto the chair. I suggest the rings." He slapped the flogger against his thigh.

Noah looked for the rings and found them, threading his fingers around them and working them until they were comfortable, a tiny betrayal of his training and experience—the first Tobias had caught since they entered the barn. He twisted and looked over his shoulder. "Like ... like this?" he asked, sounding nervous and looking wide-eyed, and Tobias was pulled right back into the scene.

He nodded and stepped back to drink in the sight. This lovely strong body, harshly lit in such a barren space, the solid thump of the music just slightly faster than his heartbeat ... it was awe-inspiring, really. And he got to play with it, to make it his own. It was his scene to claim, his game, his boy, and his skin to mark.

"So beautiful, Noah," he said softly. "Out of the suit and into the fire-see how alive you can feel by being what you are? See how hard it makes you, how freeing it is?"

Noah eyed the flogger and then looked himself over. Tobias watched as his eyes roamed his own body, from his feet, planted and spread slightly, over his erection and belly, and down the length of one arm to where his fingers held the ring. "It's really something," he said, looking upward and then to the side, taking in the atmosphere of their surroundings. "Do you do this a lot? I mean with other guys and all?"

"Some. It's ... a hobby. I like basketball, too. Do you want to chat, or would you like me to flog you now?" Tobias bit the inside of his cheek to keep from grinning. Noah was very good at this, and the fun of having someone willing to just jump in and play was wonderful. He waved the flogger meaningfully and tried to look serious.

Noah gave every impression that he'd been stalling and had just been caught. "Oh! Oh, sorry. Uh. I suppose we ought to get started," he answered.

"Wonderful," Tobias deadpanned. "Hang on tight." He brought his arm back and swung, bringing the tails slapping down on Noah's shoulder blades.

"Ah! Jesus!" Noah panted, pushing off the wall a step and giving his hands a shake. He rolled his shoulders and whined, keeping his back to Tobias. "That fucking hurt!" he said, as if naïvely surprised by that fact. "People enjoy this ... those men out there, they like this?"

"They seem to," Tobias said, raising the flogger again. "Do you?"

"I ... don't know yet," Noah admitted, and returned to the rings. He wrapped his fingers around them again. "I don't know."

Tobias nodded once. "Well, let's find out, shall we?" he asked as he brought his arm down again, this time on the opposite shoulder. "You're still hard," he observed clinically. "Seems okay so far."

"Ah, that leather stings," Noah observed with a soft whimper, shifting slightly from foot to foot but hanging onto the rings this time.

"It does indeed. Harsher than deer skin, more bite than kangaroo..." Tobias struck him again. "It's rather abrupt in its impact, don't you think?"

"Bites," Noah nodded, groaning softly and glancing down at his cock. "Oh, God, it's good." He inhaled sharply. "Sounds great, too."

"The snap?" Again the tails fell, and again Tobias brought his arm back. "Oh, yes. Lovely racket with this one. I knew you'd like this, Noah. I could tell, the way you move, the way you skirt the edges of appropriate. It's gratifying to see you like this, baby. Holding on, back starting to glow, dick hard ... makes me hot."

"I've been watching you in the office," Noah shivered and groaned. "I've felt ... something. I knew you felt it, too."

"Of course I did," Tobias acknowledged. "But did you know it was this? A need within us both for something like this?" He brought his arm down again and again, his breath speeding. He was so hard he ached, a fact he hadn't even noticed until his balls throbbed with it. He glanced down and saw the wet spot forming on his trousers and grinned. He'd have to do something about that.

Noah writhed slowly under the sting of the flogger. "No, I would never have ... never have dreamed that ... oh, God," he panted, and Tobias heard more of the Noah he knew than the Noah he'd seduced in the way that he swore. "Never dreamed I could do this ... would do this."

He shoved thoughts of his own arousal away in the face of Noah's need. "Would do what?" Tobias asked, slapping the tops of Noah's thighs. "Give in to pain? Let someone take charge of you like this? Or do you mean that you never thought you'd be a whisper away from coming due to being hit like this?"

Noah dropped his forehead against the rough wall and groaned heavily. "Never thought I'd give in, enjoy this, need pain ... Uh!" he grunted and his body tensed. "Tobias, so close ... please, please..."

"Please what, baby?" Tobias stepped a little closer, struck him a little lighter. "What do you want me to do?"

"Touch. Touch me. Kiss me. I don't know what you're doing to me but it's so fucking good." Noah moaned, letting go of the rings and placing his palms flat on the wall.

Tobias' erection leapt and he dropped the flogger, crossing the space between them in two strides. He wrapped his right hand around Noah's erection and stroked him in long pulls, the left he used to caress the red patches of skin. "So beautiful, baby," he murmured. "Red and raw and all mine-so sexy in pain. Does it hurt, angel? Does it make you want more? Deeper and harder? Does it make you ache in your bones?"

Noah nodded, and he wasn't acting when he said he was close, Tobias could feel his body strain and his hips pushed into Tobias' hand. "Never hurt like this, never wanted ... like this," he breathed. "Yes ... oh, yes."

"Come for me, sweetheart," Tobias whispered. "Let me watch you fly."

Noah groaned deep in his chest and as he started to come he rolled his head back onto Tobias' shoulder and pressed his reddened back into Tobias' chest, hissing slightly with the heat. "Oh, God, Tobias," he moaned, spraying the wall and shivering, eventually going soft in Tobias' hand.

"That's it," Tobias said in a low voice. He eased Noah away from the wall and laid him down on the cot, letting him roll bonelessly onto his side. "Such a lovely boy," he said as he finally undid his trousers and grasped his rigid erection. "Mine."

Noah moaned and rolled flat on his stomach so his striped back caught the light. "Yours. Take me."

Tobias' breath caught in his chest as he realized what Noah meant, what was being literally offered up; all thoughts of masturbating over his boy vanished as he pulled a rubber

from his pocket and skinned it on. Lube was as far away as his other pocket, and in short order he had two fingers opening Noah's ass.

"Tell me when you're ready," he ordered. "But, God, make it fast, boy."

Noah grunted impatiently. "Now, now, do it. Fuck me!"

He didn't wait for a second invitation. It was short and hard, his entry swift and deep as he stabbed into Noah's body. "Jesus Christ," he hissed. "God, so tight." Again and again he thrust, hips rocking quickly without rhythm. It was graceless and wonderful, rutting at its finest as he chased his orgasm.

"Yeah ... yes, come on, come on! Do it!" Noah growled at him, pressing his hips back to meet Tobias' thrusts. The cot made ominous creaking metallic sounds as it slammed into the wall.

"Noah!" Tobias' back arched and he pressed himself as deep as he could as he came, his body rocked by waves of pleasure. He could feel his hips stutter with it, the short jerky movements that drew everything out and made it that much better. He could hear Noah's panted breaths as his own air was stuck in his lungs, ready to whoosh out when he finally relaxed. He rode the edge of it as long as he could, white heat shooting out of his body, his blood roaring in his ears ... and then he came back to himself in a rush, air and sound and feeling.

"Oh, God." He thought he might have whimpered.

Noah panted out the last of his tension and started to laugh. "Woo!" he hooted, snickering as he caught his breath. "Oh, yeah."

"Oh, God," Tobias said again. "You killed me, sweetheart. Jesus."

"That's my job, sir," Noah grinned, shifting and expelling Tobias so he could make room for the larger man on the narrow cot. "That was great ... you pervert." He was still laughing softly as Tobias stretched out beside him.

"Me? You're the one who likes getting whacked with leather things," Tobias teased. He tugged at Noah's hair and grinned. "I'm more a deviant than pervert. I just seduce young men and lead them astray."

"And what a lovely job you did of it, too. Was I convincing? Did I pull it off? God, I love that whip."

"Like that one? It's nasty-the tips are cut on an angle, the workmanship isn't great. But you know where to find it, pet." Tobias stretched and moaned happily, enjoying the endorphins. "You were wonderful. I had no idea you would throw yourself so easily into something like this, or enjoy it so much. Tell you what-next weekend, you come up with the idea. Pick a scenario, give me a basic rundown, and we'll play." He closed his eyes and wondered how long he could stay there before he had to make a mad dash for the shower.

"Sounds like fun," Noah answered. He leaned over and kissed Tobias lightly. "You want to lie here a bit? Want some water? I can run back and start a bath," he suggested.

"Mmm, bath. You read my mind, boy. I didn't think you were allowed to do that yet."

"Oh, were there rules about that, sir?" Noah asked, sliding off the cot so Tobias could get more comfortable. He dug around and found his clothing, pulling on the pants and leaving the shirt untucked. "I'll get it started, you relax. I can call down when it's ready, okay? I'll clean up here after."

"Such a good boy," Tobias said, almost dozing already. "I'll check the rulebook." He heard Noah laugh softly and a few moments later he became aware that he was alone in the stable. He smiled to himself and thought of the bath that would shortly be waiting for him, the dinner Noah would make, and the fact that he didn't have to clean the stall ... and smiled. He was content, for the first time in a long, long time.

Chapter 26

Monday's rounds had been fairly easy for Tobias, for which he'd been grateful; he'd needed his strength to survive the phone conversation he'd had with Phan on Monday evening. After explaining in small words why it was a bad thing that Noah was jealous, and in even smaller words why Phan was showing horribly bad taste in gloating, Tobias had had a headache.

"It just shows that he's trying too hard," Phan had insisted.

"Or maybe he sees you as a threat, what with the display you put on and calling me on what he sees as 'his' pager. On the weekend. Which is his time."

"So I can't call you?" Lovely, Phan was hurt, and possibly it was a real hurt.

Tobias had sighed. "Of course you can call me. I'll always be there for you, you know that. But perhaps you should limit calls to the country on Noah's weekends for a time. Until he understands."

"Maybe you should explain it to him a bit better."

"Are you sulking?"

"Maybe a little."

After that the conversation had gone downhill and Tobias had given up.

Tuesday had been long. It was after seven when he'd gotten home, nearly eight before he'd finished his meal and changed clothes. He was tired as he sat in his living room, looking out over the city, but not ready to call it a night. He

didn't want to watch television or get caught up on paperwork; he wanted to talk to Noah. Not about anything in particular, just ... like it had been in the tub.

He picked up the remote for his stereo and pressed play, smiling as Sarah Vaughn's voice filled the condo. He thumbed down the volume as he picked up the phone and dialed Noah's cell phone, then settled back in his overstuffed wingback chair.

The phone rang several times but Noah finally answered. "Hello, sir," he said as he answered the phone. He must have recognized the number.

"Hello, boy," Tobias said with a smile. "How was your day?"

"My day was ... well, since you're asking, it was very good, sir. I took another scumbag off the streets, got a kitten out of a sewer drain, and met my quota for speeding tickets." He laughed a little and then asked, "I was just writing about you, actually. Is everything all right?"

"Everything's fine, I just wanted to talk to you." Tobias closed his eyes as the music swelled around him for a moment. "You really have quotas on speeding tickets?"

"Yep. I think that's how they can make sure we're not sleeping in our squad cars." Noah chuckled. "I have to file so many a month, you know?"

"I'd always thought that was an urban legend. Tell me, what kind of music do you like?"

"Music? That's an unusual question, sir."

"Random questions seem to be par for my day, to tell you the truth."

Noah chuckled. "Um. Rock I guess, mostly. Classic rock. I know, a lot of it is 'before my time', I get teased about it all the time. I mean, mostly my tastes are pretty broad, but I have this thing for the fathers of rock." Tobias could almost hear Noah grinning on the other end of the phone. "I have this feeling that wouldn't be your answer."

"I suppose not," Tobias agreed. "At the moment I'm listening to Sarah Vaughn, later it may be something older. Or newer. I'm ... eclectic."

"I remember as a kid sitting with my mother and listening to her version of 'Over the Rainbow'. Listening to her used to make my mother cry." Tobias heard Noah sigh and shift on the other end of the line. "So you're a jazz man, huh? Suits you. Slow, sexy." Noah drew out the words to give them more meaning.

Tobias laughed softly. "Thank you. I think. As long as you don't mean 'old.'"

"Oh, no. You're not old, sir, you're absolutely in your prime," Noah answered smoothly. "It was a compliment."

"Well, thank you, then." Tobias opened his eyes and looked out over the city again, trying to guess roughly where Noah was. "So, that's the very general musical tastes discussion-how about books? Movies? Ways to spend your evenings?"

"This is Noah Dolan 101?" Noah teased.

Tobias grinned. "If you like. Tell you what-you can ask, too. I still reserve the right to refuse to answer, though. Of course."

"I'm liking this," Noah's tone was amused. "Okay, let's see," Noah sounded thoughtful and then he began to babble. "My favorite book ever is-don't laugh-Les Liaisons Dangereux. It's so wicked and devious and sexy. My favorite movie ... um ... I don't know. I love movies, all kinds. A classic maybe? Dark Victory or maybe Jezebel, I adore Bette Davis. How I like to spend my evenings is ... complicated."

Tobias found himself tilting his head as he thought about that. "Okay, do you read Les Liaisons Dangereux in French? I'll admit to liking the movie, both in English and French, if there are subtitles. And what does complicated mean?"

"No, no, I read it in English. Foreign languages are not my friend. I read Les Misérables in English too. The editions I have kept the French titles," Noah said and Tobias could hear him pouring something to drink in the background.

"Complicated means that I don't have a lot of free time," he explained. "So what little I have I need to spend wisely. My job is-well it's a totally different headspace than where I need to be when I'm with you. So a lot of my free time is spent recovering whatever headspace I need to be in. If I've just left you, then I'm all about the newspaper and the football game and what the hell the mayor is doing to our pensions. If I'm on my way to you, then I'm thinking about, well, I'm thinking about you. If I'm somewhere in between? Okay, so tonight I had a cooking lesson and tomorrow I'm playing basketball. My free time is ... compartmentalized."

Tobias felt his smile grow. "Cooking lessons? That's wonderful, pet. Thank you."

"Ah, damn, I gave my secret away. Oh, well. I recall a certain someone ordering me to learn to cook quickly, so I ran home and called a friend of mine in a panic," Noah said with a sigh.

Tobias laughed softly. "You're learning well, and the effort is appreciated. Does it bother you to compartmentalize your time like this?" The concept wasn't exactly foreign to Tobias, but the process was very different from what he went through.

"It doesn't bother me. I want to be a cop, and I want to be a sub. If I want to be both of those things, I have to manage it somehow, right? But it does take a bit of effort, though I'm getting faster at the switchover. It's not a simple lifestyle. Actually, this is a good conversation because I want you to know these things, to understand what I need to do to balance who I am and who you need me to be. It's a bit of a mental trip from cop to sub."

"I'm sure it is," Tobias said easily. He stood and walked to the window, turning out the dim table light as he passed it so he could see the lights better. "Do you have trouble with it sometimes? Is the duality difficult?"

"It's a mental trick, you know? It's like meditation. The more I do it, the better I get at the transitions. The Monday after our first weekend together was tough. I wasn't quite clear-headed all day. But this time I was ready for that and I spent the time in the car more seriously. It was better. Next week, it will be easier still. Wow, have you seen the moon tonight? It's huge. And the sky over the city is clear as glass."

"It's beautiful," Tobias agreed. "The lights are nice tonight-I think the streets are wet, though, they're reflecting a lot, up and down Lincoln. So when you're in the car on the way home what do you think about? Or even when you're at your cooking lesson-which is a sub thing in your vanilla life."

"Lincoln. Nice neighborhood," Noah remarked casually. "Those are two different things. In the car on the way home, or to work to be more clear, I've been trying to think about work and nothing else. This week, instead of changing in the locker room I was thinking of bringing my full uniform with me, I think that might help. Anyway, I think just about work. What paperwork I need to do, what mess might be in the papers that might affect my day, my partner, people I want to check up on, that kind of thing. But cooking? I'm thinking about," Noah laughed softly. "I'm thinking about how to 'seduce you with food'. That's what Allison says cooking is. She says food is a turn on."

"Allison is very smart-that stir-fry got things going quite well, if I recall." Tobias turned and went back to his chair, settling into it easily. "Would it help if I got Jorge to bring the morning paper for you to read on the way back to town?"

Noah chuckled in Tobias' ear. "Yes. Yes, it would. Thank you, sir."

"Done. So tell me. What did you cook tonight?"

"Tonight was pasta night. A little bird dropped a none-too-subtle hint about how much you like pasta, so I learned to make a couple of sauces. Next week I'm learning to make ravioli." Noah sounded a lot like a kid talking about what he did in school that day; it was adorable. "But what we made

was a really nice lamb stew, which I'm freezing and bringing with me for dinner Friday night."

"Oh, stew," Tobias said happily. He was fairly sure he was the very picture of a spoiled and pampered man, but he didn't much care; he was getting stew. "So you know about me and pasta-and stew, apparently. What else did she tell you? She lies, you know. Sneaky lady."

"I don't think she'd lie to me, sir," Noah laughed. "And unless you make it a direct order, anything else she told me I'm keeping to myself. Leave me a few surprises; it'll be better for you in the long run, I promise."

"Surprise is a wonderful weapon, I agree," Tobias said with a grin. "And in order to surprise you, I'll be needing more background. Now, I'm no police officer, so I'm afraid investigation is out ... which leaves me merely asking more questions."

"Ask me anything," Noah replied easily, he seemed to be in a good mood. "Just remember," he admonished playfully, "you promised me a shot when you're done, sir."

"I did-but I also reserved my right." Tobias laughed softly, enjoying the teasing. "Tell me a little about your family; where are you from? Siblings? Pets? Take your pick, I've got a few hours to listen." He grinned again and started picking his way through the dark condo toward the kitchen.

"I'm from big sky country, cowboy and horse country, in Montana. We didn't own a farm, actually my father was a sheriff, but my grandparents did, and I spent all kinds of time over there. I have two sisters, Katherine is older, and Emily is younger ... hm. Dad had a heart attack and passed away

before I came out. Mom knows, though, and she's still living out there with Katherine and her husband, Curt. Emily moved to Los Angeles-she's a little hipper and we're starting to talk more. It's nice. Good so far?" Noah asked. Tobias could hear horns honking in the background.

"Katherine, Emily, Mom, cowboys. Got it." Tobias filled his kettle in the dark, not willing to face the harsh lighting of the kitchen after the dim of the living room. "So you traded horses for cars, country living for ... what? How come you're not up for sheriff out there?"

"I'll give you one guess."

Tobias nodded to himself as he tried to sort peppermint tea from chamomile in the dark; luckily he didn't even have to open the boxes before scent told him which one was the peppermint. "The preference for dick over breasts?" he said, thinking himself somewhat crude. He shrugged mentally; he'd said far worse to Noah.

"Got it in one," Noah said. "It's really not that big a deal, I wanted to be in the city anyway. There was no one like me where I grew up, it was tough on my mom, and I really wanted to make a difference with my work. Aside from escorting pregnant women to the hospital and mediating land and livestock disputes, there's not much to being a sheriff where I'm from. So I left home out of high school, worked to put myself through Community College, and then a year at the academy."

"And the academy was good?" Tobias wandered back out to the living room while he waited for his water to boil. "Being away from home was a good move?"

"Yeah. The academy was good. I met some great people, trained my ass off. Getting away from home was a good move for me."

Tobias nodded. "Yeah, me, too," he said softly. "So. Any pets? Now, I mean. Cats, fish? A turtle? You seem like a turtle kind of guy." He bit his lip to keep from laughing.

"Fuck off, sir," Noah laughed. "No pets. Unless I can count you."

"Oh, what a tragedy! You've forgotten your place already. Such a shame, you were coming along so well at walking to heel. I think I'll have to train you in the house as well now."

"I look forward to it, sir," Noah breathed into the phone.

"I know you do, pet." Tobias grinned and returned to the kitchen as the kettle began to whistle. "Favorite hobbies?"

"Hm. Well, working out, basketball," Noah paused. "My journal."

"That's working well, then? I'm glad." Tobias poured water into his mug and wondered if he should ask more.

"The journal? Yeah, I guess so, it's helpful. Um," Noah stopped mid-thought. "It's not like, I mean if you feel like you should read it..."

"I don't," Tobias said. "It's yours, it's your journey. I'm curious, of course, but I'm not going to make you let me read it, Noah. Ideally, if it brings up something you think we should discuss I'd hope you'd come to me and tell me you wanted to talk."

"I would always discuss my concerns with you, sir," Noah assured him. "So what's the next question? Or is it my turn?"

Tobias picked up his mug and fished the tea bag out of it. "Oh, I suppose I can let you have a go; you've been patient." He smiled and walked out into the living room, heading once more to the window. Behind him, the stereo finished with Sarah Vaughn and quiet filled the space.

"All right then, sir. I want to know ... hm ... tell me how you got into the scene."

Tobias grinned and sipped his tea. Of course. Noah wasn't one to shy away from Tobias' past, even if he'd have Tobias leave parts of it far, far behind. "I was sixteen the first time I had sex," Tobias said. "I was seventeen the first time my lover asked me to spank him. It grew from there, and when I was twenty I was taken to the club for the first time. At twenty-one I started my training officially-we had to wait until I was of legal age to drink and thus safely within the bounds of allowance, by any means."

"The rumor is you trained with Bradford..."

"It depends on definitions," Tobias said. "He didn't train me-he's only a few years older than me. But he was part of my training, yes. We were ... contemporaries. Are still, I suppose."

"So did you sub for him?"

"Occasionally. And he subbed for me. Part of training was making sure we knew the tools intimately. Knew the feel of it in our hands and on our backs. When I flog you I know exactly what it feels like, Noah."

"Of course," Noah said. "Okay, so, didn't you tell me that you grew up on that farm?"

Tobias blinked at the change of topic. "Uh, yes. The farm was my grandfather's and then my father's."

"Right. So when did you leave home?"

Tobias looked out the window and down at the street below his apartment. "I was eighteen-the summer before I went to college."

"Were you out?"

"Ah." Tobias sighed and walked to the coffee table. "No. Well, not really. I think my parents knew. I'm positive Mrs. Miller knew the whole time."

"I can't imagine you'd get anything past her," Noah said with a laugh. "So you took off for college and vet school and never went back? When did you tell them?"

Tobias set his mug down carefully on the table. "I didn't. They died when I was nineteen."

Tobias heard Noah's sigh on the other end of the line. "Ah, hell, I'm sorry. But nineteen? What happened?"

"Car accident on the way home from a horse show." Tobias sat in his chair again. "I was at college. I took a semester to make sure the farm was going to be fine with me not there, and to learn about money. My father had made a great deal of money investing, and I had to establish a relationship with the brokers and the accountant; oddly enough, one doesn't attain this level of wealth as a vet." He smiled and went on. "I convinced Mrs. Miller to stay, and then I went back to school." He shrugged. "So now I have the farm. I started the renovations on the old stables when I was ... twenty-six or so."

"Oh, God, that's awful." Noah sounded genuinely sympathetic. "I guess that was half a lifetime ago for you, but still, I'm sorry."

"Thank you." Tobias wasn't sure what else to say; he did appreciate the sentiment, but Noah was right ... the loss was a long time ago. "In any event, I never came out to them, and I highly doubt they had the slightest inkling that I like to use leather whips to hit men."

Noah chuckled. "No, I suppose not." Tobias heard the creak of a couch or chair mixing with the sounds of the city at night; Noah must be near an open window. With another sweeping subject change, Noah surprised him. "So, sir ... why did you call, really?"

"Really?" Tobias smiled broadly. "Because I could."

"Just because you could? No bad day you want to hash out, not lonely or horny or bored? Just because you knew I'd sit here and shoot the breeze with you?"

"Exactly. I called you because you're mine, sweetheart, and because I can. If I want to talk to you, I can just call. And there you are, and now I know all sorts of lovely things about you. I did try not to make it a horrible experience for you," he teased.

"Oh, now, it wasn't horrible it all. Actually I've enjoyed it. If you'd given me some warning I might have had better questions for you."

"Ah, but we've already decided that surprise is a wonderful weapon." Tobias smiled and leaned back in his chair. "What time do you go to sleep at night?"

"I'm a night owl. I'm one of those fortunate people that doesn't need eight hours every night. If I'm out playing basketball, or if I had a tough counseling night, then I'm usually up until midnight, or even later, unwinding. If I'm home right after work I try to be in bed by ten. Which means that you're keeping me up past my bedtime," Noah teased. "What about you, sir? Early to bed, early to rise?"

"Not really. It depends on where I have to be in the morning, but I'm usually in bed at eleven or shortly after. I try to keep it to the same time each night." Tobias stretched out his legs in front of him, warm and comfortable after his tea. "Are you ready for bed now? You said you were writing in your journal-is that part of your evening ritual, or is it more a matter of when you want to write, you write?"

Noah sighed. "Tuesday night is my debriefing from the weekend. I've been giving myself a day to digest and then I sit down with my journal and I go over what was good, what I need to remember, and uh ... well, where I went wrong. I was on the where I went wrong part when you called."

Tobias ran the weekend through his mind and winced. "Do you want to talk about it, sweetheart?" he asked gently.

"I don't know. Do I? Is there something else that needs to be said?" Tobias heard the window close on Noah's end and heard Noah rummaging around for something. "I do know that I want to apologize. I was going to wait for the weekend, but now is as good a time as any, so, yeah. I've apparently got a jealous streak that I wasn't completely aware of. I'm not sure what else I want to say about that, yet. But Phan was right, you're not just any Dom, sir. You're an artist. You

need to be appreciated and respected, and I need to be deserving. I'm sorry."

"I'm not exactly sure what you're apologizing for," Tobias said slowly. "You show me appreciation and respect when you submit; that I signed the same contract you did shows I think you're deserving. You let that respect slip on Saturday-is that what you're apologizing for, or somehow being undeserving of me? Because that's..." Tobias paused as he tried to find precisely the right word. "...a crock."

The other end of the line was quiet for a long moment. Longer than Tobias necessarily felt comfortable with, but finally Noah answered him. "I've accepted my punishment for what happened on Saturday, sir, and I know you've forgiven me. It's not about that," Noah said softly. "So it must be that I'm insecure about..." He seemed to be thinking out loud and so Tobias let him finish. Noah cleared his throat. "I know I'm making every effort," he said after a moment. "You inspire me to do that. But it's difficult, finding out there's so much I didn't know about myself, places I haven't been, being pushed-it shakes me a little. I used to be very confident, but now I worry sometimes that I'm not living up to..." He sighed. "I know this sounds really immature. I know I sound like a child."

"You don't sound like a child," Tobias said softly. He leaned forward, concentrating. He wished he could see Noah's face, could hold him in his arms. "You sound like you're making breakthroughs. You're finding things out about yourself that you didn't know, and from those things we can learn where your limits are, you see? This is good, and I'd like to explore

it a bit more next weekend. As for the other thing-why do you feel like you have to live up to Phantom? We broke up, I set him free, and we are not together anymore. So unless that's your goal, I suggest you try to let go of that as well."

"It's not that I feel like I have to live up to him," Noah protested, but then he changed his tune slightly. "Maybe that is part of it. That's not terribly rational, is it? You're right."

"It's..." Tobias sighed. "It's something I hope we can get past. But I do understand, Noah. Phan has a certain ... presence."

"Tell me about it." Noah snorted. "I want to get past it. We will. Do you think he's over you, too?"

"Phan?" Tobias almost laughed. "God, yes. We have a fair amount of affection for one another, but that's all."

Noah sighed. "I'll get used to it, sir."

"I hope you can be comfortable with it, ultimately." Tobias leaned back once more and added, "Maybe talking to Phan would help."

"Getting to know him?" Noah sounded agreeable. "Like ... maybe I should ask him to dinner or something? If I tried to be friendly I might digest it better?" Noah sounded more intrigued than upset by the thought, which was interesting.

"It's an idea," Tobias said, trying to sound neutral. "Think about it. If you'd like to set something up, just let me know. If you decide not to, that's okay too, as long as we find a way to deal with this."

"We'll find a way," Noah assured him. "So uh, anyway, yeah, I write in my journal when the needs strikes me, except for Tuesdays I always write."

"Okay," Tobias said with a soft laugh. "Dropping it for now. And I really am glad you're doing this, pet-it's working for you, and that's important."

"I think it is, and will be," Noah agreed. "So, what do you do besides Dom and stick your arm up cows?"

"Stick my arm up horses. Seriously, colic isn't something to fool around with. And then there's the sheep and the pigs and..."

"I get it, I get it," Noah snorted. "I meant at night, in the city. Like tonight, if you hadn't called me. What do you do?"

"Oh, that!" Tobias laughed. "I read a lot. I do paperwork. I listen to music sometimes and look at the city lights. I dine out, I watch the occasional film, and I meet up with friends once in a while. Really, it's pretty boring. Oh, and I spend a lot of time planning what to do to you."

"Do you have a lot of friends in the city? Do they know that you spend so much time thinking about what you're going to do to your boy on the weekend? Do you tell them about me?" Noah's tone was coy.

"Brat." Tobias paused for a long moment, trying not to laugh. "Several, possibly, and not yet. How's that?"

"Disappointing, sir, but I suppose you're not going to give me more detail, are you?"

"Not at all. Now, I understand you're up past your bedtime?"

"If I'm on the phone with you then it's only my bedtime if you say so, sir." Tobias couldn't quite tell whether Noah's answer was sarcastic.

"I suppose you're right. So what do you have left to do before you go to bed, boy?"

"Well, finish my journal entry, though that I might do over breakfast. Brush my teeth, shower, watch the local news ... oh, see if the stew is cool and put it in the freezer."

Tobias looked at his watch and realized he was squinting in the dim light. Frowning, he pressed the light button on the side and tsked. "Well, then. It's about that time, isn't it? The news is going to be on in fifteen minutes, so I'll send you off now-and Noah?"

"Yes, sir?" Noah answered automatically.

"If you're good, next time I'll see if I can talk you into coming."

"I'd like that, sir," Noah breathed into the phone.

"Hopefully you'll let me return the favor."

"You're welcome to earn the privilege of trying." Tobias grinned and stood up, stretching. "Goodnight, sweetheart."

"Goodnight, sir. It was good to talk to you." Dutifully, Noah waited and did not hang up first.

"You, too," Tobias chuckled. "You, too." Gently, he hung up the phone and set it down. The apartment was still and quiet, the dark warm and comfortable. Smiling, Tobias stood at his window and looked at the lights of the city, still trying to find his boy in the maze of streets and knowing it didn't matter. Noah was right where he belonged-tied to him.

Chapter 27

Tobias thought it was really very cute the way Noah had been so protective of the dish he'd brought with him. He'd greeted Tobias with all due attention, of course, but he was obviously worried about supper, so Tobias sent him off with a barely hidden grin. Noah looked like he was trying not to rush into the kitchen, but failing to be casual; his rueful grin said he was well aware of the fact.

The lamb stew was wonderful, and Tobias made a point of saying so as soon as he'd tasted it. "Very nice, pet. It's easy to overdo the broth-add too much liquid, or leave too much fat, but you've really done well." He smiled and speared a piece of lamb, which flaked nicely-tender but not falling apart. "It's good. Is that winter or summer savory?"

Noah visibly relaxed and picked up his own fork to try it himself. "Summer savory, sir. And I used a little more rosemary than usual, but Allison said the amount of garlic should—"

"It's wonderful," Tobias insisted with a smile.

Noah's nervous chatter dried up and he smiled a little. "I'm glad you like it."

"I do."

They ate quietly for a time, Noah picking at his food as usual and Tobias savoring every bite. Noah finally seemed reassured that Tobias was pleased, and Tobias nodded to himself. "Phantom called me Wednesday," he said quietly.

Noah set his water glass down on the table gently, and his hands fell into his lap. "Did he?" Noah answered neutrally.

"Of course," Tobias said easily. "Bradford had called him for you, and Phan wanted my permission to meet with you. Which I gave."

Noah sighed. "I know you said to call you, sir, but I had hoped to do this on my own."

"I know, but unfortunately there's another dynamic at play. Phan simply wouldn't have agreed until he knew that I was aware and approved-he won't interfere with our relationship, Noah. If he'd agreed and found out later that I hadn't approved or hadn't been comfortable with it, he'd have seen that as a betrayal. If it helps, he didn't call me after he'd spoken with you."

Noah shrugged. "We're meeting for dinner on Monday."

Tobias nodded. "That's good. Were you going to tell me on your own?"

"Yes," Noah said. "At some point, probably afterwards."

Tobias smirked. "Which would have been a very bad idea, pet. Can you tell me why?"

"No, sir, I don't know why." Noah seemed genuinely confused. "I had your permission to talk to him; I was hoping to be able to come to you and tell you I'd worked everything out. I thought that would please you."

Tobias nodded. "That makes sense and I see why you think that. I do. But primarily I want to be involved in you reaching for your limits-and Phantom, my relationship with him, is something you're really working against. If I'm to help you I need to know what's going on. As your Dom I am involved. Also-on Sunday nights I ask for your plans for the week. If you wished to hide this from me you'd have to tell

me something. I'm going to assume you weren't planning to lie."

"I wasn't going to lie!" Noah protested, but he bit his lip and rubbed his face, looking frustrated. "I wasn't going to lie. I hadn't even thought about that. I suppose I ... I don't know what I would have done."

Tobias picked up his water glass and sipped it thoughtfully. "I know you weren't, pet. And I understand why you wanted to do this on your own-I really do. But you have to understand something important about this, sweetheart. You don't get to do this on your own. Not from a desire to please me, not for any reason. Because you're my submissive. You are obligated to give up a certain amount of control to me-pretty much all your control, in fact. Outside of working hours you're mine, and it's my obligation to help you. It's hard to get, but it's a step to true submission."

Noah went quiet. He played with the edge of his plate for a bit, tapped the side of his water glass thoughtfully, all the while looking exceedingly unhappy. "I'm going to constantly fuck this up, aren't I?" he said, mostly to himself. "You're right, of course. I'm sorry, sir."

"No." Tobias put his glass down a little harder than he'd intended, startling them both. "You are not fucking up. You're learning, you're trying and you're doing everything you can to please me-that isn't fucking up by any definition. It's a process. Understood?"

Noah eyes widened. He sat up, squared his shoulders, and blinked a couple of times before answering, "Understood, sir."

"Good. Now, I think we'll reinforce the lesson later on-but not with the crop. I don't think this is a punishment offense as you truly didn't understand. It needs something, however." Tobias tilted his head and considered Noah carefully for a moment. With a smile and a slight stirring in his groin he said, "A spanking, I think. With you over my knees. Yes, that'll do."

Noah kept a careful check on his posture, but he blushed a little and he couldn't quite hide his embarrassed grin. "Thank you, sir."

* * * *

Hopefully Noah learned his lesson without ever knowing that Tobias had been looking forward to the paddling since he'd hung up the phone with Phan. Tobias had gotten everything he wanted out of it, too. As spankings go, it had been fairly heavy, and Noah's ass had blushed a beautiful crimson. Noah had been grateful when Tobias fed him his erection and so enthusiastic about it that Tobias was unable to hold out very long. Afterwards, Tobias doctored Noah a bit and put him to bed on his pallet, on his stomach.

Noah had been a bit stiff this morning, but it was nothing that a little moisturizer couldn't soothe. He'd even managed a decently long ride after morning chores, only wincing when they dismounted near the barn. Tobias pretended not to notice and made his way back to the house to clean up, leaving Noah to hang their tack and groom their mounts before finally turning them out.

Tobias had popped his head into the bathroom while Noah was showering to ask that he meet him in the safe room after but otherwise had left him alone. In the safe room, Tobias fondled some of the costumes in his wardrobe trying to guess what Noah might have dreamed up for them to play.

"All clean, sir," Noah said with a smile as he joined Tobias, naked and freshly shaved and still warm from his shower.

"You are indeed." Tobias looked him over, from damp top to still-pink bottom. "Not a bit of dirt anywhere, pet." He held out a hand and grinned. "Come sit with me and tell me your story, boy."

Noah took Tobias' hand and sat gingerly on the edge of the bed, sighing in relief. "Ah, soft," he said, grinning.

Tobias laughed. "Poor little pup. You'll live."

"Oh, it's good. I'm fine, sir," Noah said in return, laughing softly. "So, my story starts with a desperate thief, imprisoned and sentenced to death for stealing a bauble from the king—a brooch or a ring, something the king could buy a dozen of without thinking about it, but the value of which could, by itself, feed and clothe the thief's family through the winter."

"Poor innocent thief," Tobias teased. "Chained to a wall, perhaps, and dressed in rags?"

"Oh, shackled, manacles, the whole bit," Noah tried to sound sorry for the poor thief, but Tobias wasn't buying it. "So, of course he's asked time and time again for an audience with the king in order to explain his actions and beg for his life—he's willing to endure lashes, of course, if that will please the king—but he has had no answer to his pleas. Until," Noah grinned, "until a duke, counsel or friend to the king, who has

heard of his plight, comes to see him in his cell to discuss possible terms under which his life might be spared."

"Oh, I see. Find out what the thief has to offer along with his sincere apologies?" Tobias winked. "That could be illuminating. I think we can work with this, pet. Would you like to select the costumes?"

"Oh, no, sir, you had best do that." Noah was grinning again.

"You think I know what a Duke wears?" Tobias shook his head and got up. "Careful, or you'll be wearing nothing but a cock cage next weekend." He winked to take the threat out of his words and crossed to the open wardrobe again. "Silks and satins, and I am not wearing tights. Don't even think it."

"You see, this is why you should pick out the costumes, sir, I would certainly have put you in tights," Noah said with a laugh.

"The cage is looking better, boy." Tobias growled for effect, pretending not to notice as Noah's grin grew. "All right. Velvet trousers, silk shirt. I think there's a waistcoat in here that will do ... what do you suggest for a coat?"

Noah slipped off the bed and helped thumb through the hangers. "Well, it really doesn't matter too much since the duke won't be wearing it long, but..." He pulled out a long tailored overcoat. "This could work, sir."

"Oh, very nice. Yes, I agree, that'll do." Tobias added the overcoat to the pile he'd gathered and stepped back. "Now, you ... you need a loose tunic. Artfully smudged. What else?"

"Have pants that tie at the waist?" Noah searched through the armoire. "Or just something soft? Otherwise, I'm thinking

barefoot, and I'll muss the hair, or as mussed as it gets anyway."

"Too short to be really messy," Tobias agreed. "Oh, I think there's loose pants in there with a drawstring-cotton, so not really correct, but they'll do. Anything else you can think of?"

Noah tugged the pants off their hanger. "These will work, and yeah, what does one call a duke? 'Your Excellency'? 'My Lord'? I can't remember." Noah tugged the pants on and cinched them at the waist with a drawstring.

"Your Grace," Tobias said absently. "You know, I much prefer you naked."

"I prefer me naked than wearing these things, too, sir. Maybe you should tell the duke to be quick about it." He chuckled, pulling a plain, nondescript tunic over his head.

"I'll do that," Tobias promised. He looked at the clothes in his arms and grinned. "I'll change over there, I think. After I chain you to the wall, you lucky thief."

"Too bad I can't manage the chains myself, sir," Noah said, running his fingers through the short hair on the top of his head. "Ready when you are."

Tobias snorted. "It looks the same. And really-I don't mind chaining you up, boy. Think of it as another way to please me." He grinned broadly and dumped his armload of clothes into Noah's arms. "Don't drop them in the mud," he advised cheerfully as he left the room.

"What? And ruin my only chance at avoiding the death penalty? Are you nuts?"

Noah went out the door after Tobias, foregoing shoes and a coat in an effort to 'get in character'. He stopped along the

way and picked up a handful of dirt, which he smudged on his forehead and arms, and scuffed his bare feet to dirty them. Once inside, he was right at Tobias' heel, following him to the appropriate stall.

Once more, they were on the right hand side of the barn, this time between the stall with the pillows and the barren stall they'd used the weekend before. It only took Tobias a moment to detach the sling that usually hung there and stow it away, leaving the chains hanging. He ignored them and gestured to the wall. "I trust these meet with your approval," he said, indicating the heavy steel manacles lying on the floor.

Noah grinned. "Oh, very nice," he said, licking his lips. "I think I just shivered." Noah made his way over and sat on the floor, leaning against the wall with his knees bent so Tobias had access to his ankles. "These are ... very authentic."

"They'll keep you here," Tobias agreed. He locked the ankle restraints and adjusted a length of chain to cuff Noah's wrists and leave him with a fair amount of slack. "I thought about getting a steel collar to match."

"You should," Noah answered casually and in all seriousness, holding his wrists out to be cuffed. "We could probably figure out a way to hide some padding in it so it wouldn't bruise me."

Tobias flicked a glance at Noah's neck as he locked one wrist. "Probably. You'd look pretty." He finished restraining Noah and stood up. "Now, this is important. I'm going to change, and you are bound. I will not leave you, understand?

However, I neglected to grab a blindfold, so you're going to have to close your eyes until I say you can open them."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," Noah answered, shifting his tunic off one shoulder as he settled back against the wall. He rested his wrist manacles on his knees and dropped his forehead against them, closing his eyes.

Tobias took his time. He wasn't particularly quiet, knowing that Noah needed some sensory connection to him when he was bound, but he didn't talk. He stripped swiftly, tossing his regular clothes out of the stall, and slowly dressed in his costume. He lingered over the shirt, enjoying the fabric on his skin as he imagined himself an important Duke being sent to deal with a pathetic thief.

Once dressed, he waited. Noah was motionless against the wall, his breathing steady. Tobias went to the small cupboard and fetched lube and condoms, putting them in his pocket, and a woven strap. It was short and thin, nothing much to look at, but he knew it made a nasty cracking sound when it struck something hard. He wouldn't use it on Noah, as it tended to mark badly, but he could at least wave it around and scare the "thief".

Moving to the door he cleared his throat softly and Noah lifted his head. Before he could say anything or even react, Tobias sneered and said, "I would've thought that a begging gutter rat would be too busy praying for his skin to sleep."

Noah lifted his head looked Tobias in the eye briefly, then lowered his gaze and shifted noisily to his knees, the shackles and chains making satisfying scraping and clanking sounds against the floor as he moved. "Forgive me, I have given up

on God, your Grace. Do I dare now to hope that he is sending his poor, humble servant a miracle?"

Tobias threw back his head and laughed. "I've never been called that before. And no, I'm not from God, whelp. He rarely casts his sight down quite so low, I've found. Besides, I'm given to understand that theft is a sin against God as well as the king. Tell me, why do you presume to think you deserve any leniency?"

"I do not. I do not deserve it." Noah moved toward him on his knees. "I ask, I beg for his mercy on behalf of my family, who will have no one to provide for them this winter if I do not return to them. I did not covet the ring, Your Grace, I was desperate. So desperate." Noah dropped his chin to his chest and let his arms hang at his sides. "Will he hear me? Will you take pity on me, Your Grace?"

Tobias pretended to consider, which was mostly wasted on Noah, he assumed, as Noah was looking at the floor. He took a few heavy steps forward and stopped, just in front of the bowed head. "I do not know if I'll take pity, as I've been roused from my day and made to come down here just for you, to listen to your piteous case. It's an inconvenience, whelp, and it's put me in a poor frame of mind. However, the king has his ring back and cares little for what is done to you, so he's put it in my hands. Tell me, what will sway me, do you think?"

"Anything, I'll do anything to sway you. Anything, Your Grace," Noah reached forward and grabbed hold of his trousers, tugging on them imploringly. "I'll kiss your feet, stand for lashes, promise you anything, or..." Noah raised his

head and stared directly at Tobias' stirring cock. "Or even..." he cleared his throat then boldly leaned forward to nuzzle it.

"You're a forward one, aren't you?" Tobias looked down at Noah, bemused. "Usually I hear long stories of poverty and need and begging before this is reluctantly offered." He grabbed what he could of Noah's hair and pressed against him, rubbing against his cheek and stiffening further. "Do you want it, thief?"

"I am not new to such service, sir," Noah managed to say around the fabric. His voice was shaky and he shoved back, pushing against Tobias' thighs.

"So you know what to do, then?" Tobias tugged hard at Noah's hair and then let him go, stepping back. "I'd hate to have to punish you," he said ominously. He raised one boot and struck it with the strap. Noah flinched at the sound, and Tobias had to hide a smile as he tossed the strap away.

"I ... I know. You fine men in your fine clothes are all alike," Noah answered with a snort.

"Are we now? And what would that be?" Tobias asked dangerously.

Noah's response was calculated and deliberate. "Your proper, frigid wives won't do it for you, so you have to find another more willing, or more desperate."

"Hmm, that would sting if I had a wife, frigid or otherwise. Does that make you willing or merely desperate? And bear in mind that your response dictates only how I'll have you, not if I will or not."

"As I am in shackles and not in the bed of some wealthy noble, I should say that it makes me merely desperate, Your Grace."

Tobias sighed dramatically. "And none too bright-a quick lie would have saved your ... assets; I was quite looking forward to your mouth, too. Ah, well. I'll not be putting my prick where there are teeth." He bent suddenly and pushed Noah to the side, knocking him over, and grasped his shirt. Tobias wasn't sure which of them was more surprised when the cotton ripped with a loud sound. He grinned at Noah and pulled again, literally tearing the tunic from his body.

Noah landed with his hands flat on the floor, panting. "Wait! Wait ... so rough, Your Grace, wouldn't it be better slow?" Noah let his voice go soft and low. "Wouldn't you like it better that way?"

"Indeed, I would," Tobias agreed. "But you admit yourself that your offer was made in desperation and not from any real need."

Noah pulled himself into a sitting position. "Yes, yes, Your Grace, I am desperate. I have a family and I have some shame left. But I ... want you to be well pleased. I need my freedom, my life. I want you to think well of me when you leave me."

His head tilted to the side, Tobias studied the form before him, taking in the smooth, smudged skin and the dark, pert nipples. Noah's breathing had accelerated, and judging by the tenting of the loose cotton pants he wasn't at all dissuaded by the situation. "I have a feeling I'll be thinking very highly of you by the time we're done, whelp," he said finally. He rocked

back on his heels and stood once more. "Slow it is, then. Earn your mercy."

Noah swallowed hard and nodded. "You won't regret it, Your Grace," he said, getting slowly to his feet. He managed the chains reasonably well as he reached for Tobias' silk shirt. "You wouldn't want to ruin this fine fabric, would you, Your Grace?" he asked, helping Tobias off with it. Then he ran cool fingers over Tobias' skin, starting at his shoulders and making his way over Tobias' nipples and down to his navel.

Tobias growled, pleased when Noah's breath caught. "You have a nice touch, boy. More."

"Anything you ask, Your Grace," Noah answered, moving to stand close at Tobias' back, close enough to feel heat between them and to press his erection against Tobias' thigh. He ran his hands up Tobias' arms and into his hair and tugged gently.

This time the growl happened on its own and he felt Noah's cock twitch against him. Catching one hand he pulled it down, across his chest and lower, until he was able to cup his own erection with Noah's hand. "Touch me," he ordered.

"Impressive, Your Grace," Noah murmured softly, moving his hand only long enough to open Tobias' pants and get his hand inside. He gripped Tobias and thumbed the head of his cock as he pressed his lips to Tobias' bare shoulder. "Mmm ... Your Grace," he whispered. "What a pleasure to find that fine men are not so alike after all."

"I suspect ... I suspect the pleasure is mine," Tobias said, leaning back a little. He reached back for Noah's thigh and rocked his hips, thrusting slightly.

"I certainly hope so," Noah answered, and Tobias felt his hot breath on his shoulder. Noah rocked his hips with Tobias, allowing Tobias' shaft to slide firmly through his fist. Noah's chains jangled gently as they moved together and one manacle rested heavily against Tobias' pelvis.

He didn't say anything in reply, just enjoyed the press of Noah's fingers on him, the sweep of his thumb around the glans and down the shaft. The manacle was cool to the touch, the metal a solid, hard reminder that Noah was in chains for him. Countered by the feel of Noah warm along his back was the sharp, sweet bite of need that fed his arousal. His balls began to ache.

"Stop, boy, or we'll spoil our fun," he said, his fingers digging into Noah's leg.

Silently, Noah released Tobias and pulled his hand away. The warmth of his chest was replaced with a sweep of cool air as Noah stepped away, moving around in front of Tobias again. He glanced at Tobias, and then in a swift, decisive move Noah tore into the fabric of his own pants with the clasp of his manacle, ripping and tearing until they fell to the floor in shreds.

He stood, naked and chained, regarding Tobias with deep brown eyes for a moment and then just as silently, he walked to the wall and placed his hands on it, presenting his still-pink ass for the "duke's" inspection. "Your fun, Your Grace."

Tobias was glad Noah wasn't looking at him, as he was fairly sure the broad grin he wore was terribly out of character. He took his time getting the lube out of his pocket and tearing the foil on the condom. With slick fingers he

approached Noah, one hand beside Noah's own on the wall, the other plunging two fingers into Noah's ass. "I do like my fun," he murmured.

Noah gasped and his body went tense for a moment. He exhaled and groaned, arching slightly to meet Tobias' fingers. "Thank you, s-Your Grace."

"You're welcome, boy." Tobias thrust again, a little more slowly. He didn't want to damage his boy, but he did want him to feel it. He carefully spread his fingers, coaxing Noah to open for him, and deliberately brushed against his gland. "Now. Tell me how sorry you are that you stole from the king."

"Ah! So sorry," Noah choked out. "It was wrong of me, so wrong. I'm not fit to lick your boots, Your Grace. Please, I beg you, show me mercy."

"Mercy? I should just stop and let you walk out of here, stop and tell you to dress?" Tobias added a twist of his wrist and another finger.

"No! Oh, no, no ... don't stop, oh, God," Noah gasped in protest, and Tobias grinned a bit as his distracted boy wavered between the thief and the sub.

"You wish for mercy and you don't want me to stop ... you like my fingers in your ass, whelp, and yet you offer out of desperation." Tobias sighed like he imagined a long-suffering duke should and stood back, his fingers slipping out of Noah.

"Ah!" Noah looked over his shoulder. "Your Grace?"

Tobias waved the condom at him. "Eyes front, thief."

Noah's head snapped forward again. "Your Grace, leave me some pride and do not force me to own up to secret,

shameful lusts," he said, and Tobias heard the grin even if he didn't see it.

In reply, Tobias snorted. "I begin to suspect that your earlier protests were not at all sincere." The rubber smoothed on, his trousers about his thighs, he ran his hand down Noah's spine.

"They were made by the man I wish to be, Your Grace."

"And instead you're ... what?" Tobias nudged Noah's entrance with the head of his cock and began to press in as slowly as he could.

Noah moaned, ducking his head. "A sinner, Your Grace, a man of impure thoughts. A man who prefers the stab of another man's prick to the arms of his own wife. Oh ... so slow, so good."

Tobias had to grit his teeth to keep from speeding up. The stab of another man's prick indeed. His own ass throbbed and he closed his eyes, pushing incrementally deeper until he was snug against Noah's ass. "You need this? A rod in your ass, a man's arms pinning you? Do you dream of a man's mouth around your cock, sucking you hard? Are you slut enough to want two at once?" he whispered, begin to thrust shallowly.

"Yes! Yes, I need it. Yes. I think about men, dream about them touching me, find them sometimes, in dark, seedy places where no one knows me." Noah was panting. He lowered one hand to grip himself and the other he overlapped slightly with Tobias' against the wall. "One, two, five, sucking me, fucking me, I don't care as long as they want me." He grunted, tugging on his cock.

Tobias' thrusts grew longer, smoother, as he pulled almost all the way out and began to slam back in, one hand steadying Noah's hip, the other turning just enough to tangle their fingers. Noah's hand sped, and Tobias could feel him tense, his back tightening and his legs starting to shake. Finally, he allowed himself to push deep, grinding his hips against Noah's ass. "Come for me," he whispered urgently. "Make me come in your ass, boy. I want to feel you around me, want to feel your hungry body quiver and shake for me. Want to see you, want to smell it, want to hear you come because of me."

Noah made a strangled whining sound and nodded. "Yes ... for you," he sobbed out and gasped as his climax surged through him. Tobias could feel it, from the very first moment as his toes curled and his body went rigid, to the moment when Noah tightened around him and shot hot liquid over his fingers. He squeezed Tobias' fingers and rolled his hips slowly as he came down, panting hard. "For you," he repeated.

"For me." Tobias moaned and withdrew a tiny bit, just enough for friction, and he plunged in again and came, his cock throbbing. "My boy. Oh, God, Noah! Sweetheart!"

"Yes, yes, sir. God, yes," Noah mumbled softly, pressing his back into Tobias' chest and gripping his fingers that much tighter. "So good, so hot," he said, turning his head until his lips touched Tobias' hair. "Love you, sir. Love you."

Tobias forced himself to breathe properly, not to gasp or say anything stupid-but it was a close call. He'd been there before, in a moment so intense that things got said, and he wasn't about to let Noah panic over it. They could talk later,

and would, but at the moment he had to take care of his boy. So he gently pulled away, just enough for his softening cock to slip free, and then he turned Noah around and kissed him breathless.

Noah kissed him back hungrily, and when they finally broke apart he was panting and grinning. "Pardon me, sir," he said, chuckling softly. "I just have to breathe a minute..."

"If you insist." Tobias smiled at him and kissed the tip of his nose. He made a show of propping him against the wall and went to fetch the key, disposing of the condom on the way. "Better now?" he asked, kneeling to unlock Noah's ankles.

"Good. Great, yes, sir," Noah said, nodding slowly. "Man, those shackles are heavy."

Tobias laughed, the chains clinking loudly as the fell away from Noah's feet. "I imagine they are. Still want a steel collar, boy?"

"Oh, yeah. Even more now," Noah said, still smiling but coming down a bit. He sighed. "Did I blow the end of the scene there? Sorry about that, sir."

Tobias grimaced as he undid Noah's wrists. "No, that would be me. I doubt if a duke would fondly call his thief 'sweetheart', hmm?"

"True. But I liked it anyway."

"Oh, good." Tobias smiled at him and kissed his nose again. "And now we're at the part I like. The part where you get to clean up, I get to watch, and then we take a bath. Get to work, my little thief, and you can wear my clothes back to the house. Yours seem to have ... died."

"A tragic, but very sexy, death." Noah grinned and scooped the shreds off the floor and disappeared to one of supply stalls to fetch cleaning supplies.

Chapter 28

Blue jeans, Harley boots, black turtleneck sweater, leather jacket. It was important to him that he look every bit the off-duty cop. There had been a message from Phan on Noah's voicemail when he returned from the country saying, no, not Thai after all, he was in the mood for Indian, and he knew this little dive with great food. Great food Noah was ready for, the location of the restaurant he wasn't. He knew this neighborhood and the ones around it very well. He drove it regularly; in fact, he and his partner had passed this very restaurant six or eight times today alone.

Noah stood outside a moment wondering if tonight would be the night he finally started drinking. He was definitely nervous. He just hoped no one he knew would be inside to overhear their conversation. Taking a deep breath and trying to look friendly, he opened the door and made his way in. He was hit by the smell of warm, spicy curry, one of his favorites, and suddenly the idea of Indian food seemed very much better.

He hadn't quite adjusted to the light when a hand landed on his wrist and Phan popped up next to him. "Noah, hey, great timing. Got a table near the back, c'mon." And then he was gone, slipping through the tiny spaces between tables that were supposed to be room for the waiters. Phan's hair was still like bright copper, but the rest of him wasn't really what Noah'd expected; gone was the leather and showy display, leaving Phan looking rather like a normal person. Still

high energy, but pretty nondescript in jeans and a light blue sweatshirt.

Noah followed him, having no real choice in the matter, and sure enough, they were at the back—all the way at the back, and Phan sat with his back to the door, letting Noah have a clear view of the room.

Noah grinned. "Hello to you, too," he said with a laugh. "Did you know this was my beat, or is that a coincidence?"

Phan grinned and shrugged a shoulder. "Took a guess. Figured if you worked uptown you needed to see my part of town—and if you knew it, even better. Got your gun with you? And are you sure you don't top at all—you look fucking hot, man."

Noah tilted his boot and lifted his jeans just a bit to show Phan his ankle holster; that was all he was going to say about his gun. "I've topped a few times, it wasn't really my thing. Besides, I'm in this sub contract at the moment, in case you hadn't noticed." He wondered how much of the compliment was genuine and how much was an ice breaker ice-breaker, but what did it matter, really? Phan was making an effort to be friendly, and Noah had to appreciate it.

He shrugged out of his coat and hung it over the back of his chair. "So you live around here? I'm about six blocks north. We're practically neighbors. God, this place smells great, I haven't had Indian food in ages."

"Me neither." Phan grinned at him again and tilted his head to the side, making him look like a curious puppy. "I live a few blocks east. Used to spend a lot of my lunch hours in here. And you don't have to be a Dom to top, if you know

what I mean, but that's none of my business. So, how was your weekend?"

Well, Noah wouldn't have guessed that about Tobias, but he decided, despite his discomfort with the idea, that he'd better not rule it out. "Hm. Thanks for the tip, pun not intended. The weekend was wonderful, thank you."

"Cool. So, why am I here? Aside from the food and all?"

Nothing like getting right to the point, was there? Noah looked at Phan and sighed. "Honestly? Because for whatever reason, I've let the fact that you and Tobias are still friends get a rise out of me and I need to let it go. I'm hoping that getting to know you a little will allow me to do that."

Phan looked at him for a long moment, his eyes serious and his mouth set in a straight line. Then he suddenly beamed and laughed, a delighted sound that could have been infectious if Noah hadn't been so tense. "All right then. Get to know me. You'll either love me or use your gun, and it'll be a trip finding out which." Phantom leaned back and grinned. "Bet Tobias just loves this. I can hear him now, all concerned and firm. God, that used to make me almost cream my jeans."

Noah didn't laugh with him; he didn't much feel like it just then. "I'm sure Tobias told you what he thought of it when you checked with him before accepting my invitation."

Phan's grin grew a little wider. "Uh huh. Sir was real happy you'd called. Told me he didn't mind-that he wants you to be comfortable with my ... presence in his life. You pissed I called him?"

"Pissed? Not really. A little annoyed. I'm not much used to people making my mistakes for me." Noah sighed. "It might have been wrong of me to call you without telling him, but blowing the whistle on me wasn't really necessary, was it?"

Phan shook his head. "Had nothing to do with you, kiddo. Was all about me and Tobias-no fucking way am I meeting with his new boy without clearing it through him. I owe him my life-it'd be piss poor of me to go behind his back on something, now wouldn't it?"

"Hm. Well, you have a point. Of course, he didn't spin it that way, but maybe he was looking for a reason to paddle me." Noah grinned that time and took a sip of his water.

Phan laughed. "Yeah, I bet that was horrible for you." He tilted his head again and Noah saw light glint off a gold earring. "How did he spin it, then?"

"That my time is his and if I want to make dinner engagements I had better be ready to ask him for permission first..." Something nagged at him, something Phan had said a moment ago. "Wait, what do you mean you owe him your life?"

Phan waved his hand. "He's right you know," he said, ignoring Noah's question. "You signed a contract-he gets to know where you are and what you're doing, and baby, if he wants you, you better jump. Not that it's bad-it's what you want, right? You want someone to care that much, to want to protect you, that you'll give up control of your free time." Phan leaned over the table and stared at him. "Don't you?"

Noah leaned across the table mimicking Phan and stared right back. "Yes. It's exactly what I want. And I know he's

right. He's generally right. My ass is still delightfully sore for it."

"Good. Then what the fuck is this shit about me ratting you out? Ditch the attitude, you'll get further." Phan glared at him, inches away and then suddenly darted forward and kissed his nose before falling back into his chair, laughing. "Feel better now?"

Noah snorted, sitting back and staring at him. This one was definitely a live wire. He was caught hopelessly between annoyed and amused. "I can't decide if you're insane or just fucking with me," he said softly. "I've decided you're fucking with me, and I can't blame you, really. I know I probably seem pathetically needy to you, but do me a favor? This is my beat so don't kiss me again, okay?"

Phan's eyes widened almost comically. "Oh for ... all right. Like anyone here would care-or like I'd take a chance of damaging Sir's boy." He pouted for a moment and then rolled his eyes. "Fine. No more kissing. Now what?"

"Just here, on my beat. You can kiss me elsewhere as long as it's okay with Tobias, fair?" Noah winked at him. He figured he needed to get better at this game or Phan was going to walk away thinking he was a stuck up ass. Which he wasn't. Well, not usually anyway. "Anywhere else, I'd be flattered. You're lovely, I see what Tobias is on about with you."

Phan preened. He actually sat up and preened, his head angled just right and his lower lip full and pouty. "So blow jobs aren't out of the question then? Cool." Noah was almost sure he was kidding. "What do you mean Tobias is on about me?"

"Oh, he just speaks highly of you. Have we ordered yet? I don't think we ordered," Noah said, blinking the image of Phan giving him a blow job out of his mind. "It's on me; have a drink or two if you like."

"Don't drink, thanks anyway," Phan said, waving a waitress over. "Katie, this is my friend Noah. Give him the best, okay?"

The tiny girl, who couldn't have been much over sixteen, nodded shyly. "And you?"

"Your momma knows, honey. Oh, and lots of ice water-plus what Noah wants."

Noah glanced at Phan, and then back at the waitress. "I'll just have what he's having, and you might as well make the water a pitcher." Noah watched as the girl nodded and hurried off. "I don't drink either."

"How come?" The question was casual, but there was a slight change in Phan's posture. He was suddenly intent, like he wasn't going to treat this like a big joke. A serious Phan was like another creature entirely, yet the change was subtle.

His reasons were simple, and he didn't mind discussing them. "Alcohol is as dangerous as any other drug," Noah shrugged. "It impairs one's judgment," he said with a grin, "and I have enough issues with bad judgment without it. You?"

"Tobias. Said I owe him my life-meant it."

"I don't doubt you meant it. He's saving me from all kinds of things. Do you mind if I ask what happened?"

Phan shrugged. "He took me upstairs at the club one night. I wanted more, and he said no. I asked why and he

said I was heading for a fall and he wouldn't take me on unless I could give him everything, let him help. So I left town, found a week-long party and lost a couple of days. Woke up miserable and sick and headed into detox. Tobias came to visit me."

Noah nodded slowly. Most people thought that his decision not to drink, and in fact his strong aversion to anyone who overindulged, was some kind of activism or holier-than-thou kind of thing. At least that's why he usually got teased about it when he was out with the guys from work. But this was really the reason, people that just didn't know when they were out of control. People who needed help. People like David.

"He cares about you, of course he would." He did his best to be serious about it, to let Phan know that he understood. "It was brave of you to go."

"It was ... necessary. I was scared, see? I was losing time, losing my job, losing it all-and I had nowhere to go and no one to lean on." Phan looked at him intently. "Tobias looked for me. When I didn't show up at the club again he asked around. He made a point of knowing when I could have company, when I was clean. And then he showed up and asked if I was going to stay straight."

"And then he took you on?" Noah was starting to understand their connection, that it went much further than a contract.

Phan grinned. "Nope. Wouldn't have anything to do with me until I convinced him I didn't want to drink anymore, that I knew I was going to need help to stay sober. Then he took

me. Put me in deep submission for about two months, I think-it was wild. First time I didn't have to think, ever. The only thing that mattered was taking care of him. He picked my clothes, my food, told me when to sleep. All I did was the chores and stuff."

Noah sighed. "Well, I see what you mean by saving your life. Did you always live with him?"

"Pretty much. Didn't have sex with him for ... oh, months. And we weren't lovers until damn near a year after he moved me in." Phan leaned back as Katie appeared with a tray laden with dishes. Chicken, rice, beef and vegetable plates filled the table in short order and Phan looked at it critically. "Better bring more water, Katie."

"This has that extremely spicy look about it," Noah remarked.

"Aw, come on, man. You like hot and spicy-you're with Tobias." Phan winked.

"No, spicy is good. Spicy is great," Noah insisted, picking up his fork.

"Okay, your turn. How come you need him so bad that you're freaked I'll take him away? Because that is so not going to happen. We've been down that road and it didn't work."

It was a fair question, especially in light of how honest Phan had just been with him, but that didn't make it easier to answer. "Call it insecurity. I'd had a couple of bad experiences in a row and I'd honestly given up on finding a Dom that suited me, let alone one that could deal with my issues. I'd been through almost everyone at the club. So when Bradford

hooked me up with Tobias, who didn't know me at all, and I was actually about to give it up for him that night for the first time in over a year-I trusted him that quickly-it was frightening. And then to have him give me his pager number to meet again, when I was sure there was no way he'd want someone broken like me..." Noah sighed. That was far more babbling than he'd meant to do, but somehow Phan, too, inspired trust. "I firmly believe he has what it takes to put Humpty back together again, if you know what I mean. And now that I have it..." He poked at some rice, shook his head and went silent.

"You don't want anyone fucking it up. I get that." Phan poked at the chicken. "I don't know how much I can tell you about our breakup. I mean, it's his shit too, you know? I can try though, 'cause I don't think you'll get it until you hear at least part of it."

Noah looked up at Phan. He'd planned to ask, he wanted to know, but he didn't know how to bring it up. Phan thankfully, just did it for him. "So just give me your shit. He'll give me his when he's ready."

Surprisingly, Phan didn't agree right away. "Yeah, maybe. He can be kind of ... well, he keeps it close. If he doesn't want to talk about it, he won't. And then he goes the other way, too, talking and talking..." Phan ate some rice and lifted his water glass. "But my part. Yeah, okay."

"So, after the first year, we're together. We live together, we're doing the D/s thing 24/7, but not full on, just ... I do for him, he takes care of me. I can do what I want, I just respect him enough to let him know where I'm going, you know?"

"Sounds like a nice arrangement." Noah had to admit to himself that it sounded like a damn good arrangement, in fact. Noah started in on the rice, sipping water between bites, to avoid getting emotional about it.

"It was. And it lasted for three years like that. Except he didn't hit me hard enough, didn't use the bullwhip unless I begged so hard I thought I'd break, and then only because it broke his heart to see me like that. We started going to Bradford; Tobias would watch as I bled and tend to my wounds, both of us crying."

"Tobias did tell me that you needed more pain than he was able to give you," Noah said with a nod but avoided telling Phan that one of the first questions Tobias had asked him was if he was a pain slut. Noah was also well aware of Bradford's range, and tears could come quickly with him.

Phan shrugged, but he was looking at the table, not at Noah. "Man's a vet. He spends his time soothing animals, making sure they don't hurt. I don't think it's in his nature." He glanced up for a moment and smiled weakly. "But we loved each other, right? So we tried to push the boundary another way. He took away everything, every right I had, every dollar, every means I had to live without him. And I signed the contract making him my owner."

Noah already knew that was the road to disaster for them and hated for Phan to have to rehash it, but he really did believe this was what he needed to know to get over this jealousy nonsense once and for all. He was sure he was almost there already and that this meeting had been an excellent idea after all. He decided to help Phan out by telling

him the little he already knew. "Tobias told me it wasn't the right boundary, he told me it eventually led to your break-up."

Phan laughed humorlessly. "Yeah. Turns out I needed something he couldn't give me no matter what he took."

"I'm sorry," Noah said, reaching across the table impulsively, and with little regard for who might see, to touch Phan's hand. "How did you finally figure it out? Did you break the contract or wait for it to end?"

"I, um. I had to—" Phan stopped suddenly and blinked rapidly. "Sorry, kiddo. That part's his. But trust me—we were both hurting. Look—I love him, all right? I always will. But I'm not in love with him anymore. We hurt for a long, long time after we broke up, even tried to get back together once. But we split up for all the right reasons. I'm fierce about him, and I'll stand by him forever—but he's not mine." Bright blue eyes met his, and Noah found himself thinking that Phan couldn't live his life like this, so raw and open; he'd go mad. "He's yours. Do your best, okay? He deserves it."

Noah held Phan's eyes, thinking carefully about his response before finally answering him. "I promise," he said in all seriousness. "He does deserve it." He considered his words again and then gave Phan's hand a squeeze. "Listen, I can see there's no way I could pry the two of you apart if I wanted to, and you need to know that I don't. I don't want to. I respect what the two of you have, okay? It's a really rare kind of friendship. I'm glad we did this, it's made a world of difference for me, and I hope you're getting something out of it, too."

"I get to eat with a hot cop," Phan said with a weak grin. He squeezed Noah's hand back. "I'm glad, too," he said softly. "You're doing what you have to do, and you're obviously serious about him. That makes me happy. Wanna know how to blow his mind?"

"That was going to be the million dollar question, after asking you why you broke up," Noah joked, helping Phan lighten the mood.

Phan grinned and finally let go of Noah's hand with a last squeeze. "You're sleeping chained to the bed, or in the bed? 'Cause you can do this two ways." He picked up his fork and attacked a dish of marinated green beans.

"Depends on the night, equal amounts of both so far," Noah answered.

"Okay, so if you're a smart little sub you've figured out you've got enough chain that you can get in the bed and blow him in the morning, yeah? And if you're in the bed chances are he's gonna do something anyway, right?"

Noah laughed. "Been there done that, a couple of times."

"Good. Now here's the thing. At night, before you go to bed, bring him tea-herbal stuff, no caffeine. For some reason tea makes him change positions more often closer to dawn-he could probably tell you why, but frankly I don't care. And right around when the alarm goes off he should be on his belly. If you're lucky, anyway."

Noah raised an eyebrow, pausing just long enough to say, "This is getting interesting," before taking a bite of the spiciest chicken he had ever tasted. "Oh, my God." He dove for the water.

"Watch the chicken, it bites back," Phan deadpanned. "Anyway, if you can get him on his stomach, get in the bed from the bottom, same as you have to so you can blow him. And then just ... lick him behind one knee. It'll shoot up and he'll be wide open. Go to town and listen to him scream-he goes wild. Better than any morning blow job."

"No way, really?" Noah knew he was grinning entirely too widely about something as simple as a rim-job but hey, if it made the man crazy he was all over it. "That's excellent advice; the blow job wake-up call was getting a little ... overdone."

"He screams."

"He'll know what's up when I offer to bring him tea before bed." Noah laughed.

Phan shook his head. "Nope. I don't think he ever clued in. Oh, and if you're sleeping in the bed?"

"Uh huh?" Noah braved the chicken again; it was hot, but man, was it good.

Phan winked and licked his lips, looking particularly naughty, sort of like a demented sprite. "Go to bed lubed if you can, or slip out when he's dead to the world and get yourself ready. When it's time to get him ... up, go down on him like usual, but just before he pops, crawl up his body and sit on his cock."

"Ohhhh," Noah breathed and felt his own cock react to that suggestion. "Oh, that is wicked. Lovely. You're far more creative than I am."

"Possibly just more of a pervert," Phan said with a wink. "Is he training you to heel?"

"Ouch, yes," Noah winced visibly. "Fucking clamps."

Phan snorted. "Be glad it's not your dick. Anyway, walk to heel all the time if you can-like when you go out to the stables or something? He doesn't even notice but it makes him ... happy. Content. And that earns you kisses and touches and sleeping in the bed."

"I've been doing a bit of that, mostly just for my own practice without those damn clamps." Noah grinned; this was fun. He wondered if Tobias would be pleased or not, but he figured the man had to know they'd trade secrets. "I'll do it more often. So, hot spots beside the obvious? I found the one on his right shoulder Saturday by mistake."

"Oh, that's a nice one. Another right above his belly button, and for God's sake don't forget his nipples. His fascination with yours is rooted in his own dick." Phan nodded thoughtfully and finished with the beans. "If you get a chance, ask to bring some of the dildos into the house. He really, really likes them, but for some reason he thinks they're an indulgence in the house."

"I wondered about that, I thought it was odd that he left most of the toys in the barn," Noah said putting his fork down. "That was delicious."

"Glad you liked it," Phan said with another grin. "I think that'll keep me warm for a few days. And yeah-he likes them out there, but if you can talk him into a few in the house that'll be a good thing for you both. He tends to compartmentalize without knowing it."

"Everything in its place," Noah teased. "So, hey, are you with anyone now?"

Phan shrugged. "Not really. I play a bit, but it's not like what you have. Mostly I have a need and Bradford fills it. We're friends, too, so that helps." He looked at Noah and tilted his head again. "You looked for this for a long time, kiddo. He'll do everything he can, and you're meeting him halfway, which is ... well, if it's not me, you'll do." He winked and raised his glass in a casual salute.

Noah shook his head. "I'm going to have to watch you, aren't I? Listen, you have my number, yeah? Let's do this again. I don't have enough friends in the scene, and it's nice to have a conversation where I don't have to watch my Ps and Qs once in a while." Noah waved his credit card at the waitress and she hurried over to collect it.

"Sure, if you'd like. Um. You going to get bent if we clear things with the man, though?"

Noah looked up and caught the grin on Phan's face. Little troublemaker. He laughed. "No. Next time I'll ask him before we make any plans." He patted his ass lightly. "I've learned my lesson, 'kiddo.'"

"That's Mr. Kiddo to you. Or even 'Phantom the fabulous'. Possibly, 'Oh yes, right there, I love your tongue', if we play it right." And then he was just laughing and bouncing and so small that Noah remembered that he was, in fact, possibly crazy after all.

"Well, Phantom the Fabulous, I'd offer you a ride home but my feet are my ride. Where did you get a name like Phantom?"

"Mamma was a ghost and daddy was a spook." He appeared to be serious. "And like I said, I'm only a few blocks

away, so I'm good. Thanks for supper, Noah. Tell Sir I said hi and I'll still lick his boots if he'll let me."

Noah signed the check and slid his card back into his wallet. "Will do. He'll probably call me tomorrow and ask me about it." He winked, standing and pulling on his jacket. "Great to meet you, thank you for your candor, it's appreciated," he said and stuck out his hand.

"Not a problem," Phan said, shaking his hand. "Always nice to talk about Tobias. I miss him, you know? Take care of him."

Noah nodded, knowing Phan meant that very sincerely. "Take care of yourself, too," Noah replied, and not being fond of lingering exits, he turned and headed out of the restaurant.

Chapter 29

Tobias was not fretting. He wasn't worried. At all.

Noah and Phan could have a dinner together without either of them getting hurt, he knew it.

Mostly.

Tobias had every light on in the apartment and the stereo was playing early Bowie. He suspected he was in a mood, and he didn't know how to break out of it, aside from calling Noah to check up on him. He looked at the clock again and wondered how long a dinner would last between those two. With a grimace he realized it would either be very fast or far too long. Middle ground with Phan and Noah seemed unlikely at best.

At nine-thirty he had the phone in his hand and refused to dial. At nine forty-five he called himself an idiot and put the phone down. At ten, he called.

The phone rang, and rang again. Tobias considered hanging up, but Noah answered on the third ring. "Everything went fine, sir," he said, instead of "hello, sir" or whatever else Tobias might have been expecting. His boy was on to him.

Tobias snorted. "I loathe Caller-ID."

"I'm sorry, sir. Let me try that again," Noah cleared his throat, and Tobias could hear him chuckle as he said, "Hello?"

"Hello, brat." He rolled his eyes, safe in the knowledge that Noah couldn't see him. "I trust you didn't damage each other?"

"You thought we'd have a cat fight?" Noah laughed. "No, no ... we had one or two moments in the beginning where I

was nervous and defensive and he was ... I don't know, having a mood swing or something, maybe he was a little apprehensive, too. But we worked that out, and then we ended up having a very nice, adult, enlightening conversation. I like him. I see why you like him. And up close like that, oh man, those eyes..."

Tobias wasn't really sure where to start with that. "How enlightening? And that wasn't a mood swing, that was Phan being Phan. His eyes are lovely, yes." He sat down, hard. He was fairly sure he should have been on the couch before he even dialed.

"Enlightening, but we talked mostly about him, sir. I think it started when he asked me why I didn't drink. I told him, and then I asked him in return. He told me about his alcoholism and detox-that was heavy personal stuff and I was able to sympathize a bit. He told me how you came for him and took him home with you and looked after him. He told me about the lengths the two of you went to try to make things work, getting Bradford's help and then finally the slavery contract."

Noah sighed and went on. "Phan gave me a real gift, sir. He helped me to understand why your connection is so strong, and to see that your ties go way beyond friendship. He's a remarkable person. He owes you a great deal and he knows it. He credits you with saving his life, and I think he's right about that. He loves you very much. He just wants you to be happy, and I promised him I'd do my best."

Tobias sank back on the couch and closed his eyes. "Phan talks too much," he said, not surprised that his voice was

thick. "It ... I'm glad you two were able to talk to each other about such ... personal things."

"Sir," Noah said; he must have picked up something. "Phan was very discreet. He wanted me to understand, but he didn't give me a lot of detail. Also, he chose not to tell me anything about how the two of you ended things, just what I know already from you." Noah's voice was soft and reassuring. "I didn't push for more, sir. If you want me to know or need to talk about it, I trust that you will. Until then, there is no reason for me to know, it's none of my business."

"No, no. I..." Tobias sighed. "I'm sorry, pet. I'm a little thrown, I guess. I had more or less supposed that you two would talk about more general things and not get right into the deep end. And I don't want you to think I'm hiding anything from you, because I'm not; I'm just not ... ready to talk about what happened at the end."

"It's okay. I know that, he knew it, and we just didn't go there. I respect that, sir. We probably would have just skimmed the surface of everything else if we hadn't ended up with the not-drinking thing in common." Noah sighed into the phone again, and Tobias could hear him rummaging around on his end. "Sir, are you all right? Would you like me to come by? We don't have to talk about anything but maybe you don't want to be alone. I could run you a bath, get you some tea ... I've got lots of sick time, I'm not worried about not getting enough sleep."

He thought about it for a moment and rather deliberately set aside any guilt he'd have about dragging Noah all over

town on a weeknight. A bath and tea, a warm body to sleep with ... it sounded lovely.

"I'm fine, sweetheart," he assured Noah. "But the offer of tea is impossible to resist, to be honest. I'll send the car around-pack a bag and be ready in about fifteen minutes."

"I'll be ready, sir," Noah replied, sounding a bit relieved.

"Good. See you soon." Tobias disconnected, knowing Noah wouldn't hang up first, and then dialed his garage. In short order he'd arranged for someone to pick up Noah and for another driver to be ready in the morning to deliver him to either his home or the station house.

Given the time of night he assumed Noah would arrive within half an hour, traffic being light, so he called the building's security desk and let them know he was expecting a guest, and then he tried to fill his time. Looking out at the lights wasn't the distraction it usually was, and he resorted to the television, flipping channels automatically until he found something less annoying than the reality-based shows.

When the house phone buzzed to let him know Noah was on the way up he felt himself relax a little. Opening the hall door, he told himself he wasn't hovering, he was merely avoiding making Noah wait.

Noah arrived in what he'd presumably worn to dinner, a black turtleneck sweater and jeans, and he had a duffel bag over one shoulder. He smiled and caught Tobias' eyes briefly as he stepped off the elevator, lowering them appropriately as he got closer.

"That is the way to travel, I must say," he joked while still in the hallway, then kissed Tobias and slipped past him into his apartment. "And this is a great building. Wow."

Tobias smiled and set the alarm. "I like it. You're getting attached to the car, pet. Or is it the driver?" he teased.

"Jorge? He's cute, but, no, it's definitely the wheels." Noah wandered a bit, poking his nose into the living room. "Oh, look at the view." He made his way over to the window. "Fifteen minutes ago I was right ... there." Noah stuck his finger on the window to point out the spot, squinting one eye.

Tobias walked up behind him and fitted his body along Noah's. "Where?" he asked, slipping his arms around Noah's waist.

"Where exactly?" Noah asked, hugging Tobias' arms to him. "Well, this is Lincoln, right? So, one, two, three, four, five ... six lights down, see that purple billboard?"

"Yes," Tobias answered.

"Okay, well go right from there and you'll see a yellow neon blinking light? That's the Sun Club, you know where that is? I'm about two blocks south of there. It's farther than it looks from here. Phan and I are practically neighbors. He lives a few blocks east." Noah leaned into Tobias. "But you don't really care about that, do you? You want me to put a kettle on," he teased.

"Tea would be lovely." He didn't let go. "I know where Phan lives, but I didn't realize you were so close. You two really did talk about a lot of things, didn't you?"

"The food was spicy, we couldn't eat too quickly," Noah turned in Tobias' arms and rested his head against Tobias' shoulder. "It was a great little place, he has good taste."

"Do you think so?" Tobias held his boy close, enjoying the feel of him, the scent of his hair and the warmth of his body. "I'm glad it went well, Noah. Thank you."

"Thank you for suggesting it, sir. It made a difference, really. And we agreed we should meet up again sometime. Oh, Phan asked me to say hello for him, and also that he'll still lick your boots if you'll let him," Noah laughed. "He misses you."

Tobias snorted. "He just misses the boots," he said, not meaning it. Feeling a little raw and unexpectedly emotional, he pulled back a bit and kissed Noah's forehead. "All right. Enough about Phan for now, boy. I believe I was promised tea and a bath."

Noah was apparently perceptive enough to know when to let something go. "You were, indeed. Where's the bathroom?"

Tobias pointed Noah in the right direction and in short order Noah was voluntarily naked and Tobias was in a hot bath. He could hear Noah humming something he didn't recognize, and his voice echoed a bit in the large kitchen. Moments later the kettle started to whistle.

He smiled as he listened to Noah moving around, opening and closing cupboard doors. He heard cutlery rattle, presumably as Noah got a spoon, and then a brief silence. They were homey sounds, and it had been a long time since he'd heard anything like it in the apartment. Eyes closed, he soaked it in along with the heat of the bath.

When he opened his eyes again there was a cup of tea on the counter and Noah was kneeling, silent and still, beside the tub, eyes also closed. Tobias wondered if he'd dozed off, and if so, how long Noah had been kneeling there waiting on him.

"Sweetheart? Are you okay?" he asked softly.

Noah opened his eyes. "Yes, sir, just didn't want to wake you up," he said softly. "Would you like your tea?" He got up and took the cup off of the counter, sitting on the edge of the tub to hand it over to Tobias.

"Is it still hot? How long was I out?" Tobias sat up slightly, water sloshing gently around him.

"Oh, not that long, still feels hot to me." Noah said handing him the cup. Once it was safely in Tobias' hand he leaned over to let out some of the cooling water and added more hot to the tub. "If it's not hot enough I'll go refresh it for you, sir."

Tobias sipped. "It's fine, pet. Thank you." He leaned back again and let his eyes drift to half closed. "So what were you thinking about?"

"Well, it started with wondering what scene you would have in mind for the weekend and that reminded me that I needed to call Mrs. M and ask her to pick up a few things at the market for me, which reminded me that Allison is coming over tomorrow night and she told me to make sure I had flour ... hm ... Oh, and then I was thinking that I might try to make a pumpkin pie but I didn't know if you liked pumpkin..." Noah stopped talking and glanced up enough that he could read the expression on Tobias' face without meeting his eyes. "Well? You asked."

Tobias chuckled. "You never get bored, do you? And yes, I like pumpkin. Does she know you call her Mrs. M? I think she'd get a kick out of it. She calls you 'the darling.'"

"Well, I left her a note the first weekend that I stayed with you, remember? And I addressed it, Dear Mrs. M. So then when I talked to her later on the phone she said "My darling, it's a very good thing I'm the only Mrs. M in the house" or something like that, teasing me, and she's been 'Mrs. M' ever since. I can't call her Elizabeth, she's old enough to be my grandmother. It just feels ... disrespectful." Noah smiled and tested the water, then reached for the loofah. "If you sit forward, I'll do your back, sir."

Tobias nodded and finished his tea, thankful that it had cooled a little while he'd slept. He sat up and leaned forward, saying, "I've never called her Elizabeth-she's just always been Mrs. Miller. When I was fourteen, I think I tried to call her Bessy, which is what Mr. Miller called her. That went over like a lead balloon."

Noah laughed. "Well, she seems to like Mrs. M, and if she likes it, it works for me. I know whose house it really is." Tobias bent forward a bit further as Noah started in on his back with the loofah and a citrus-scented bath gel.

"Oh, there's little doubt about that," he agreed. "God, that feels good." Tobias closed his eyes and rested his head on his arms. "I'm so glad I dragged you across town," he said, hiding his smile.

"I am, too," Noah answered in a low, husky voice that seemed to come right from his chest. He turned the loofah and scrubbed gently over Tobias' shoulders.

Tobias' smile grew. "Are you, now? Tell me, pet. Just how glad are you to be here washing my back?"

"I would rather be here scrubbing your back than anywhere else I can imagine, sir." Noah said easily, in that same seductive tone.

Tobias purred. He'd hoped to make it more of a growl, but he was too warm and too contented to pull it off. "Keep it up, boy. You're doing fine."

"Yes, sir." Noah scrubbed a bit longer, then set the loofah aside and rinsed Tobias' back. With a sigh he slid his wet fingers over Tobias' shoulders and began to rub them firmly. "Your back is a lovely pink now, sir," he teased.

"I can make your bottom match," Tobias said evenly, though his smile grew. With a groan he shifted one arm and let Noah work out a knot. "God, that's good. I didn't notice that I was even tense."

"You sounded stressed on the phone, sir," Noah told him honestly. "I know you said you were all right, but I really am glad that you let me come over to help you relax."

Tobias nodded and let Noah finish with his shoulders before sitting back. "Okay, sweetheart. I've had my bath, had my tea, and it's got to be close to midnight. Time for bed, I think."

"Yes, sir." Noah stood and fetched a towel, then flipped the lever on the tub to let it drain. Tobias got out of the tub and Noah spent a few moments rubbing him down with the towel before searching a bit for his robe. "Um ... robe, sir?"

Tobias shrugged. "Don't have one here. Or, rather, I have this awful silk thing that makes me look like a dandy. It's blue

and long and ... no." He grinned and looked down at himself. "I'm afraid you'll have to deal with me naked."

"Yum. I think I'll manage," Noah said, turning his back to hang up Tobias' towel.

"I should hope so." Tobias crossed the hall into his bedroom and turned on the lamps. "What time do you need to be at work?" he asked, picking up the alarm clock.

"Well that depends, sir, if you're planning on keeping me up for a while yet, I'll make a quick call and take the morning off. If not, then I need to leave here seven-ish."

"Can you function well on six hours' sleep?" Tobias looked at him seriously and put a hand on his arm. "I don't want to be the cause of you missing work. But I refuse to send you out there in less than perfect shape."

"I can function just fine on six hours of sleep, sir, thank you," Noah replied, eyes low. "But I also have over a month of sick time banked. So you tell me how you want to spend the time and I'll make a call if I need to."

"Honestly? I have to be on a farm by nine and I just want to sleep with you next to me. I want to hold you, sweetheart," Tobias said softly as he set the alarm for six.

"That sounds very nice, sir," Noah said as he set about turning down the bed.

Tobias slipped between cool cotton sheets and sighed. The bed was softer than the one in the country, and a little wider, but somehow it was the sheets that made it feel luxurious. They were of an obscenely high thread count and cost so much he was actually embarrassed by the amount, but the feel of them made it worth it. The only thing better was the

body crawling in next to him. "Come here," he whispered, pulling Noah to him. "Thank you." He meant for everything and he hoped Noah understood that. He reached out to turn off the light then spooned up behind his boy, holding him close. "Goodnight, Noah."

"My pleasure, sir." Noah sighed as well, settling into the soft pillows and leaning into him. He laced his fingers with Tobias'. "Goodnight."

Chapter 30

Tobias slept well, deeply. He knew he was warm, he was well taken care of ... and he assumed that what stress he'd had about Phan and Noah meeting had exhausted him. He slept so deeply that when he was suddenly awakened he had no idea what time it was or if the alarm had gone off-all of his attention was utterly focused on his ass.

"Jesus Christ!" A basic, impossible-to-refuse instinct pulled his bent knee even higher and he pushed back against Noah's invading tongue. "Oh, God!"

"Mmm," came Noah's response, and then more hot tongue, as Noah explored his hole, teasing it open with short, insistent jabs. One of Noah's hands gripped his ass, pushing back slightly against Tobias.

He couldn't think. There wasn't anything to think about anyway, it was all very simple; his hips rocked and he moaned, Noah's tongue licked over his hole again and he cried out. When Noah started to tongue fuck him, he whimpered, lifting his ass and begging for more. "Please. God, please, pet." His right hand pushed down and he grabbed his cock, already leaking, and he rocked again between mouth and hand. "God, yes!"

"Yes, sir," Noah panted as he took a quick break to breathe and lap at Tobias' perineum. He replaced his tongue temporarily with a spit-slick finger, invading Tobias with it insistently, keeping up the pressure and speed he'd had with his tongue. "So hot, sir," he said, finally shifting again to attack Tobias with his mouth.

Tobias moaned, his hand tightening around his erection. "Baby, please. God, yes. So good, feels so good," he babbled. He sucking in a huge breath while he could and moaned again as Noah licked and stabbed at him. "Jesus, yes, God, please, please, please—"

Noah carefully engaged his teeth along sensitive skin and brought his finger back, pressing it slowly into Tobias and curling the tip slightly. He twisted it one way and then the other before settling on his target.

Tobias screamed. He knew he did, and he tried to stop it, but some things happen despite the best of efforts and in this case there was a scream and an orgasm. It wasn't so much a storm crashing over him as a tidal wave destroying him. He came for ages, his cock pounding in his fist, his ass clenching around Noah's finger as he soaked the sheets. And when it was over he fell to the side, not sure if he was completely conscious or not.

Distantly, Tobias thought he heard the sound of laughter. "Ah, fuck, that was so hot, sir." The voice was familiar. The hands on his back and ass and the lips in his hair and on his neck were soothing. "Fucking beautiful, oh, my God."

"Did you come?" Tobias asked, his words slurred a little. He tried to open his eyes and got one working. God, Noah had an amazing smile when he was proud of himself.

"Oh, yeah, somewhere around when you started begging me ... surprised the hell out of me. 'Please' out of your mouth is enough to make anyone rocket." Noah was still giggling and grinning brilliantly.

"I'm always polite," Tobias protested. "Don't suppose you could get it up again and jerk off for me then? No? Ah, well."

"I'll save it for you next time, sir," Noah promised, kissing him on the temple.

"I'll hold you to that," Tobias said weakly. "All right, what time is it? And what possessed you to do that? And do you have to get up now?" He held onto Noah's arm and tried to tug him back down to lie with him.

"What do you mean what possessed me? Have you seen your ass?" Noah patted Tobias' hand but didn't let Tobias pull him down. "It's a little after six and I recall that someone has to be on a farm by nine? You rest for a minute and try to get your strength back," Noah said smugly. "Let me take a quick shower and then I'll see to your breakfast."

"Just coffee, sweetheart," Tobias said, snuggling into his pillow a bit. "Maybe some toast." Maybe he could sleep for a bit. Be nicer with a warm Noah, but Noah had to work, and he'd said he wouldn't interfere with that. Damn it.

Tobias slept through Noah's shower, and woke to the smell of hot fresh coffee and toast. "It's about quarter to seven, sir," Noah said as he shook Tobias gently and kissed him on the cheek. He felt Noah step away and could hear him rummaging in his duffel.

With one eye open he rolled onto his back and stretched, then sat up. Noah had his back turned and was still searching for something so Tobias enjoyed the view for a moment before he realized Noah was in uniform. "Stand up," Tobias said, his voice thick with sleep and a sudden reawakening of his libido.

"Hm?" Noah said, pulling his gun belt from his bag as he straightened up. He turned around to face Tobias as he buckled it around his waist. "Did I make the coffee too weak again, sir?" he asked, settling the belt on his hips.

Tobias stared. "Jesus." Noah was amazing, a poster boy for the police recruitment. Tall and fit, neat as a pin and so sexy Tobias was glad he was already in bed.

Noah grinned slowly, apparently catching on. Wordlessly he walked over to Tobias' dresser and picked up his badge, affixing it to his chest. He left his gun and his pager on the dresser and made his way over to the bed.

"I have to leave in ten minutes," he said with a wink, and kissed Tobias squarely on the lips.

"Will you get in trouble if you're mussed up?" Tobias asked, winding one arm around Noah's neck, the other hand skimming his hip and moving quickly to his ass. "God, you look good." His cock twitched in agreement.

"I should say yes, so you'll have to invite me to stay over again," Noah said, sliding his fingers under the sheets.

Tobias arched. Ten minutes wasn't very long. "I'll invite you," he promised. "And we'll wake up earlier, or you'll be in late, or something." He would have kissed Noah, but he was having too much fun looking at him.

"Thank you, sir," Noah breathed, pulling his hand back. The brat. He stepped back over to the dresser and picked up his gun, loading the clip in place, checking the safety and then snapping it into its holster at his hip.

"You are a very, very bad sub," Tobias growled. "Get out of here before this becomes more of a problem than it already

is." He threw back the sheet and pointed to his half erect cock. "And you're owed a spanking."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," Noah grinned, tucking both of his pagers onto his belt. He shouldered his duffel. "Allison and I are cooking at my place tonight, should be done around eight," he said over his shoulder as he left the room.

"Good. Noah?"

Noah poked his head back through the bedroom door.

"Yes, sir?"

"Be safe."

* * * *

He got to the barn by ten to nine and started his day in fairly decent humor. He examined the cows he was there to see, took a very serious look at a three-year-old child's stuffed horsey, and met a litter of kittens. By lunch time he was on his way back to town by way of a little country restaurant he knew; they served the best pecan pie he knew of outside of Mrs. Miller's.

He was just finishing his pie and washing it down with tea when the door opened and a pair of troopers came in, laughing about something. The uniform wasn't the same at all, but the sight of them went right to his dick anyway. He left his money on the table, along with a nice tip, and fled.

He stuck strictly to the speed limit and thought about various unpleasant things he'd seen on the inside of animals. By the time he made it almost all the way back to the office he was at least able to walk without damaging himself and he'd assigned an extra spanking to Noah.

And then he saw a patrol car just as he pulled into the clinic's parking lot. With a sigh he got out of the car and hurried into his office, locking the door behind him. Damn Noah and his uniform anyway.

Eyes closed, leaning against the door of his office, he held his cell phone in one hand and his rigid cock in the other. With long, sure strokes he brought himself close to coming, images of Noah in uniform moving through his head. Broad shoulders, trim waist, gun belt ... He hit Noah's cell number on his speed dial.

"Dolan," a very official sounding voice came over the line. Apparently his boy hadn't looked to see who was calling.

"It's me." Tobias inhaled sharply. "Got a minute?"

"Hold on," Noah said and Tobias heard him excuse himself. A few quiet moments passed and then he was back. "Yeah, I got a minute. Are you all right, sir?"

Tobias laughed, the sound evolving into a groan. "Oh, yes. I'm just fine. No thanks-ah! No thanks to you, brat." He tightened his fingers and thumbed the head of his aching cock, smearing fluid. He was close, so close he could feel it starting to move through him.

"Are you..." Noah's voice got quieter, a heavy whisper into the phone, "Are you jerking off, sir? Are you close? You sound it. You sound so hot, sir. I wish I was there, I'd have my mouth around you ... I'd suck you so hard."

"Coming," he ground out through gritted teeth, his eyes closing as he shot. When his dick stopped throbbing he took a deep breath and licked his lips. "Have a nice day," he said as evenly as he could. Then he hung up.

Chapter 31

At five to eight Tobias parked his car on the street and locked it. He was a block away from Noah's building, unable to park closer, and he suspected he was an utter fool for being there. He hadn't called, hadn't talked to Noah since their few sentences in the afternoon, and Noah had no idea that Tobias was on his way.

Unpredictability was one of Tobias' weapons, but he had a bad feeling that he was being entirely too predictable about this. He'd be amazed if Noah was surprised with his arrival.

He approached the building and located Noah's apartment without difficulty; the hall outside smelled wonderful. Smiling to himself, Tobias knocked on the door and stepped back, making sure he was in plain view of the security peep hole.

When the door opened, a petite, energetic little blonde smiled at him. She didn't look a day over twenty, but Tobias' age perception got worse and worse as he got older. Everyone under thirty looked like a baby to him these days. "You must be Tobias!" she exclaimed and stood back to let him in when he nodded. "I'm Allison. Noah said you might come by—come in. And don't worry, I'm just about to leave." She winked at him and turned to lead him, presumably, to Noah.

Noah's apartment was warm from the evening's kitchen activities, and there was rock music playing entirely too loudly in the living room.

"You're just in time for dinner," she said, leading him through a narrow front hall. There was a very small bathroom

on the left, and then the hall emptied into a nice sized living room with tall windows, hardwood floors, and even a small fireplace. The couch was leather, the lighting was modern, and there was a funky woven rug under his feet.

"Is that him?" came Noah's voice from the kitchen.

"Yes, honey," Allison answered, leading Tobias into the kitchen.

"Just checking up on you," Tobias said smoothly, still looking around. "Making sure that you don't make Allison's life difficult. She's far too good a teacher for you to drive insane." He smiled winningly at Allison and walked into the kitchen, where Noah was getting something out of the oven. "Far too good a teacher-that smells wonderful."

"It's a pork loin," Allison said, pulling on her coat. "Come here and kiss me, hon, I'm leaving."

Noah set the broiling pan on a trivet and scooted around Tobias. "Asserting a little ownership of our own, are we?" he teased her and kissed her soundly on the mouth.

"Oh, haha," she snorted.

"Goodnight, baby. Thank you."

"Be good," Allison admonished and let herself out of the apartment.

"You're lucky I could concentrate on this," Noah complained to Tobias jokingly after she'd gone. "I've been half-hard since your phone call."

"And I'm supposed to feel sorry for you?" Tobias asked. "Poor baby. Welcome to life as mine, pet. You don't get to tease me in the morning and not pay for it a little." He grinned and looked at the pork loin. "Nice job with the pig."

"It put up a fight, but I got the better of it," Noah said, sliding by Tobias just a little too closely and pulling plates and glasses out of the cabinet. "Can I get you something to drink? I actually do have a couple of beers, my fee to Allison for her help."

"No, thank you, ice water is fine. And please-feel free to brush up against me all you want. You're not allowed to get off though," he warned in a matter of fact tone. He smiled at Noah's exasperated sigh and sat at the table. "I like your apartment; it's actually bigger than I'd thought it would be. Do you use the fireplace at all?"

"Thank you, sir. The front hall is deceiving because it's so narrow. The bathroom is tiny but I love how roomy the living room is. The kitchen is tight, too, but I manage. I used to use the fireplace a lot more when I was around on the weekends. I haven't in a while."

Noah set the plates out and the silverware and then got two glasses of ice water.

Tobias was still smiling as Noah began to slice up the pork. "You knew I'd come. I should have stayed at home, I know, but sometimes it pays to be a little selfish, and dinner really does smell wonderful. Tell me, how much does Allison know?"

Noah paused a moment and then went back to carving. "She knows who you are, she knows the nature of our relationship, and she knows where I spend my weekends, sir," Noah told him. "I haven't given her any details, and I don't think she wants them, she just knows I'm a lousy cook. She's not in the scene."

"You're not a lousy cook, you merely don't know a whole box full of recipes yet. You're doing just fine." Tobias sat back to watch Noah finish his preparations. "I've been thinking about this weekend."

Noah grinned. "Yeah?" he said, and set the serving plate on the table. "Sorry I don't have a full dinner, sir. If I'd known for sure you'd be coming I'd have arranged something."

Tobias waved it off. "I wasn't sure there would be anything to eat; for all I knew, you two might have eaten all ready and I would've had to be content merely with the blow job I'm going to get."

The amused but knowing look on Noah's face made it clear that he was quite aware that this was payback. "Yeah, dessert." He served Tobias first and then served himself.

The pork was tender and juicy, the spices and herbs delicate. Tobias approved vocally, making his moans as close to sexual as he could. "Well done, pet. You're learning quickly."

"Thank you, sir." Noah swallowed a bite and sipped his water to cover it, but there was no question his voice was tight. "Allison is a chef; she's been a huge help. I actually think I could improvise a bit if I needed to."

Tobias moaned around another bite and shifted in his chair slightly. "Improvising is good. Inventive is better. Don't you think?"

Noah put his fork down. "Yes, sir. Inventive is better. I hope to get to that stage eventually."

"I wasn't referring to cooking, and trust me, you're inventive. Your mere existence inspires me, pet." Tobias took

another bite and closed his eyes. It really was very good, and almost gone; he savored it for a moment.

"I'm feeling a bit ... inspired myself, sir," Noah said softly with just a hint of a whine.

"Mm. Poor thing. I remember being inspired several times today. Supper was lovely, pet, thank you." Tobias finished his pork and sat back, grinning at his boy.

Noah stood and made his way over to Tobias. With a slight hop he straddled Tobias' lap and sat down. "What can I do to make up for this morning so that you'll let me come tonight, sir?" he asked earnestly. "I don't have a paddle, but I have handcuffs and a belt ... I have a flogger but it's light, it's more for fun than anything serious. Oh, and a crop."

Tobias shook his head, trying not to laugh. "Tell me the truth, boy. You didn't sneak off to any bathrooms today? You haven't come since this morning?"

"No, sir, I was pretty sure you'd be by here tonight, and I promised I'd save it for you."

Tobias very deliberately put his hands on Noah's hips and pulled him forward the crucial few inches he needed. "Good boy. See, you've got a wonderful memory, a great imagination ... an incredible body. I'm a very happy man, you know. And in about thirty seconds I'm going to be a happy man with his dick down your throat, aren't I?"

Noah groaned at the contact and swallowed hard. "Yes, sir. May I suggest the couch, sir?"

Tobias bit at Noah's neck, careful not to scrape the skin and leave a mark. "Certainly. Lead on, and don't waste time, pet."

Noah sighed and slid off of Tobias' lap. He headed right for the living room, where he turned the music way down but left it playing in the background, and Tobias nodded his thanks. He didn't really mind the music, but the volume was more suited to opera than whatever Noah was playing.

The leather couch was deep and soft, and Tobias sank onto it happily, his legs spread wide. He knew he was smiling like a cat who'd been into the cream, but that was okay; he was rather looking forward to the cream.

"You like the couch, sir?" Noah asked, sliding the coffee table a couple of feet out of the way. He stood a couple of feet back and tugged his t-shirt off over his head, letting it fall to the floor.

"I like leather. I like luxury. I love the couch." Tobias tried not to smirk as he leaned back a little more, letting his shoulders and head relax. He felt good; he knew he was going to feel better.

"I bought it with some extra money I came into after doing some off-duty security work." He turned his back and unbuttoned his jeans, letting them fall around his ankles. Tobias was treated to a lovely view of Noah's ass in his black boxer-briefs.

Tobias growled. "Boy..."

"Sir." Noah answered him, sliding out of his boxers as well. He turned slowly to show off a tight erection.

"It's lovely." It was. "And you're teasing," he said in the most lecturing tone he could manage. "Now. Give me a very convincing reason why I should let you come."

"I can do that," Noah assured him and knelt slowly in front of him on the floor. He put his hands on Tobias' thighs and slid them along the fabric, past his cock, over his hips, until he reached the waistband, where he went to work lowering the zipper and releasing the clasp.

Tobias watched, looking down his body to Noah's hands. It had taken him time not to feel self-conscious as he watched someone love him; now it was a huge turn on, and as Noah peeled his trousers away his erection throbbed, pushing up against the silk of his boxers.

"You'll want to lift your hips a bit, sir," Noah suggested, and when he did so Noah slid the boxers and his pants over his ass and down his thighs, far enough to free him completely. "Oh, that's beautiful," Noah breathed, lowering his mouth into Tobias' lap and cupping his balls in warm fingers.

Tobias bit back a groan. It really wouldn't pay to make this easy for Noah. Not yet, anyway. He arched his back slightly and let his hands fall on Noah's head, stroking over the short hair. "Don't tease, pet," he warned.

Noah took direction well and opened his mouth wide, instantly lowering it down over Tobias' cock and turning on the suction. He hummed, gripping Tobias' prick and putting pressure against it with his tongue. It was nice and steady, just what Tobias knew Noah could do. He sucked and licked, his tongue caressing the shaft and teasing at the head ... but Tobias wanted more. The morning encounter had set fire to him and left him burning most of the day; the relief he'd gotten from his own hand was enough to merely hold off the

flames, not put them out, and he found himself wanting to move, to take. He heard a growl and realized it was from his own chest.

Noah must have felt something, sensed Tobias' tension, because he moved his hands from Tobias and clasped them together behind his own back, giving over control of his speed and depth to his Master. The weight of Tobias' hand alone forced Noah lower, made his boy open his throat, made him grunt with the effort.

Tobias thrust, mindful of the angle and trying to make sure he didn't choke Noah, but when the head of his cock hit the back of Noah's throat he almost roared. Power surged through him, need and desire and outright hunger to stake his claim. He tangled his fingers in Noah's hair and pulled him off, dragging him off his cock with a loud, sucking pop. "Kneel up," he ordered, pushing himself off the couch so he could stand.

Noah hurried to move, confusion plain in his face. "Sir?"

"Changing angles so I don't kill you, boy. Now, open up." Tobias bent slightly at the waist and grabbed the arm of the couch, just behind Noah's head. With something to hold onto, and with Noah's throat open properly, he could move. Thrust. Fuck. Take. Claim.

And he did. Noah moaned, sending shock waves through Tobias from the head of his dick to his scalp. He shoved in hard, felt Noah's throat around him, and growled. "That's it, boy. Take it. Suck me, you said you'd suck me so hard. My hand around my cock, locked in my office, and you said you'd suck me off-I'm here now, pet. Prove it to me."

Noah's hands reached out suddenly and grabbed Tobias' ass, his fingers digging in hard. After a couple of attempts at deep breaths through his nose, Noah sealed his lips around Tobias' slick cock and sucked so hard that his cheeks caved in.

Tight and wet and warm and, God, the sounds they made together. Noah's moans, the slick sounds as Tobias pulled his cock out and pushed it in again, the near constant panting ... it was heady. Noah sucked. He licked. He moaned and to Tobias it felt like Noah was trying to eat him alive. "That's it," Tobias praised. "God, yes. More. Take me. Make me come, Noah."

Technically it was cheating, Tobias considered in a brief moment of lucidity, Noah's fingers sliding closer to his hole, tugging him open, teasing him, but the less lucid part of his brain won out and he moaned. Noah maneuvered the tip of his tongue to stroke along the underside of his cock and Noah moaned encouragingly when he could get enough air.

"Jesus," Tobias gasped. "Close, pet. God." He threw back his head and thrust again and again, reaching for his orgasm, his body screaming for it, his cock solid and aching, his hole spasming.

Noah pressed harder with his tongue and with a grunt he abruptly shoved a dry finger in an inch, just past Tobias' muscle. It was enough, and the roar that had been building since Noah had left his apartment that morning rang free as Tobias came in spurts, his hands holding Noah's head still. With a final gasp he pulled away and fell back onto the couch, boneless.

Noah sat back on his ankles, panting hard. He reached out and laid a hand on Tobias' knee, squeezing it lightly, but still a little too breathless to say much of anything. When he'd calmed a bit he scooted forward and leaned against the couch and pressed his forehead into Tobias' knee. "So fucking hard, sir," he moaned pitifully. "Please, please."

Tobias took deep breaths as he pretended to think about it. His boy was indeed hard, his erection becoming redder, the head gleaming with fluid. He would have nodded under other circumstances, but he had something specific in mind and he wanted to be calmed down enough to enjoy it. Noah waited, his head down, but Tobias didn't draw it out any longer than he had to. As soon as his heart rate approached normal, he sat up a bit and touched Noah's shoulder.

"Give me a show, sweetheart."

Noah exhaled heavily. "Thank you. Thank you, sir," he said, shamelessly relieved. He stayed on the floor and shifted back a couple of feet so Tobias had a clear view of his body. He sat on his butt, with one leg bent up and one out straight, and leaned back on one arm as he shifted his gaze to his straining cock. "Don't know how long I can make this last, sir," he warned as he wrapped his fingers around himself and sighed. "Oh, yeah..." he groaned and started to pump, keeping it slow and breathing through the urgency. "Thank you, sir, thank you..."

"Talk to me, pet." Tobias said softly, his voice deep and satisfied. He made himself a little more comfortable on the couch, ignoring the disarray of his own clothes. "Tell me what

you feel, what you think about. Show me how much you need to shoot and tell me why."

"I think about you," Noah panted and his eyes slid closed. His hand moved steadily, but his grip was loose as he tried to hold back his climax. The control he was forcing on himself was physically evident and his voice was tight. "All the time now, you." He grunted and opened his legs wider. "I'm not blowing smoke ... I'm not. On my mind all the time. Apartment is lonely now, waiting for the weekend to ... fuck ... oh, God..." His fingers tightened and he started pumping faster. "To see you ... It's like fire, sir! Burns, pressure, starts in my ... In my belly, my thighs, everything trembling. Hard to breathe ... need to ... need it, sir, please, please!"

Tobias swallowed, his body suddenly tense. "Come for me, sweetheart. Show me," he whispered.

"Yes, yes, thank you! Thank ... Master!" Noah cried out and came hard, leaning back a bit so it soaked his thighs, buckets of the stuff that had been boiling under his skin all day long like some kind of sticky sweet magma finally being set free. "Ah..." Noah gasped, speechless and stunned, and at last, completely spent.

Tobias rolled off the couch and pulled his boy into his arms. Panting and weak, still trembling with the aftershocks, Noah accepted the kisses Tobias pressed on him, responding when he began to come back to himself.

"That was beautiful," Tobias told him. "One day soon I'm going to start you cold and watch while you arouse yourself. But this ... this was wonderful. Thank you."

Noah pressed his face into Tobias' neck with a sigh and leaned on him heavily. "Thank you, Master."

"And next time?"

"Yes, Master?"

"We're going to finish somewhere that isn't a hardwood floor."

END

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