deviations: domination

by Chris Owen & Jodi Payne

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Chapter 1

Wednesday. It had been a long, drawn-out week, and Tobias couldn't believe it was still only Wednesday.

He'd had a full day, out of town as usual in the morning, helping a mare to foal. She threw a beautiful dark bay colt that presented very much like his particularly handsome sire, and Tobias had considered making a bid for him right then and there but restrained himself. He was already training Noah; he didn't need another colt to complicate their weekends. Things were busy enough in his life without adding a new horse to his stables, a new responsibility to his already full plate.

In the few weeks since he'd met Noah at his club, Tobias had swung from one rush of feeling to another. Sexually, they were more than compatible, Noah's natural submissive tendencies meshing well with Tobias' own need to dominate. It went deeper than just mere sex, however, and in very short order Tobias and Noah had signed a six-month contract binding them together in a more tangible power exchange.

It was serious, it was important, and it was very heady. Tobias found almost all of his time taken up with thinking about his new submissive, lost in plans and a fair number of daydreams. It made his hours working as a large animal veterinarian seem almost relaxing by comparison. He only hoped that Noah's daydreams were confined to when he wasn't in his patrol car—a police officer with his mind on his relationship wasn't good for anyone. When Tobias walked in the door of his uptown condo, he set his keys down on the hall table and hit the play button on the answering machine as he pulled off his boots. After a long beep a rich male voice began to speak. "Hello, Tobias, it's Bradford. I haven't seen you or your boy around the club in nearly a month. I trust this is a good sign? I'd like to get together and hear about how things are going. Yes, as a matter of fact, I am checking up on you; don't get your knickers in a twist, friend, it's just that ... well, I worry. Oh, thank you for sending me a copy of your contract, I've put that in your files. Give me a call, Tobias, and let's have dinner. I'd like to catch up."

Tobias sighed ruefully and nodded to himself. On some level he'd expected the call, though he hadn't really thought about it in terms of Bradford checking up on them. Still, it wouldn't be a trial to talk about Noah and where things stood at the moment; in fact, he'd welcome another perspective. He had a plan for the weekend and it might be a good idea to talk it over with someone who knew them both.

After stopping in the kitchen long enough to determine that he needed to order out for dinner, Tobias picked up the phone and called Bradford's direct line at the club. If the man didn't pick up, he'd at least be able to leave a message.

"Hello?" Bradford was a man who'd done very, very well for himself. Part of his success was due to the fact that he could always be relied upon to respect the anonymity and privacy of his members and guests. Case in point, he never answered the phone with his own name or the name of the

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club, just a simple, discreet greeting, giving away nothing until he knew who was on the other end of the line.

"Good evening, Bradford," Tobias said with a smile. "I got your message, Mother."

"Ah, sonny-boy, so good to hear from you." Bradford snorted. "Don't give me that crap, Tobias. I set the two of you up, you're both important members, and I want to know how it's going for you. That's called integrity, hmm? Trust me, I haven't a maternal bone in my body."

Tobias grinned, not buying it for a moment. "Sure. Whatever you say. You can stop worrying, though; things are fine." He crossed to the big window in his living room and looked out at the city lights, counting blocks until he found Noah's.

"'Fine' is such a drab, generic word, Tobias. Tell me what you really mean," Bradford encouraged.

"I mean ... fine. Good. Great. He's coming along nicely; we've established a base level trust, I think." He turned and leaned on the window sill, facing the room. "He had dinner with Phantom last week." Tobias resisted the urge to cringe at the thought of the two men, his new lover and his past lover, chatting happily over dinner. They both tended toward the unpredictable, and that worried him.

"Oh, yes, I know he did. That's part of the reason for my call. I gather it went well? Phan thought he was 'hot.'" Bradford loved gossip and made himself privy to all the rumors around the club. At first glance one might call it catty, but Tobias knew better—he was simply protecting his own. "It seemed to go well. Noah was fine when I saw him later. Calm, steady ... he seemed to think Phan was—look, how deep do you want to go here? I'd rather do this in person if you're looking for a long debrief. If you're just needing quiet assurances, both Noah and I are fine. The weekends are going well, and we're in touch through the week as well."

Tobias knew as soon as he spoke that he'd sounded snappish and protective and that Bradford wouldn't miss it. The trouble was, he wasn't sure why he suddenly felt like pulling back—and that meant he needed to talk it out. He sighed. "Damn circular logic," he muttered.

"Tobias," Bradford sighed and made a clicking sound with his tongue. "Be my guest tomorrow night for dinner. Here. What would you like to eat? I'll make sure it's prepared for you."

Tobias rolled his eyes, safely several miles out of Bradford's view. "Something gentle. Linguini in clam sauce?" He hoped the tacit acceptance would be enough.

"Done. I look forward to seeing you, Tobias, it's been long enough," Bradford said softly, and Tobias could practically hear the man's very genuine smile.

He found himself smiling in reply. "I'll see you tomorrow night, old friend. Around seven, I think." He hung up and turned once more to look out over the city, watching the cars cruise along Lincoln, toward downtown and Noah.

* * * *

He had Jorge drop him off. He would have taken the car himself, but he wasn't entirely positive that he'd be in a fit state to drive by the time he left, so he erred on the side of caution. He'd dressed carefully in a dark, conservative suit, not a bit of leather to be seen. He wanted to look taken, not like he was prowling. Rumors would not be appreciated.

At the gate, and then again at the door, he was greeted with warm smiles and barely hidden curiosity—and Brian had nearly tripped when he'd seen Tobias. Apparently Bradford hadn't told the kitchen exactly whom he'd be dining with and Tobias' sudden appearance after a long absence at the club was stirring up the staff.

Bradford met him at the bar but had arranged for a private dining room, and that was where they were escorted as soon as Tobias made it through the door. "I didn't tell anyone you were coming; I thought it better not to advertise. This place goes into such a tailspin when the boys know you're expected." Bradford smiled and let Brian into the room as well. "Especially this one, eh, boy?" Bradford teased. "What can Brian get you to drink, Tobias?"

"Chardonnay, pup," Tobias said to Brian with a wink. "And you can let the kitchen know I'm not playing."

"Yes, sir. Damn it, sir," Brian said with a grin as he scurried off.

"That boy needs a spanking." Tobias grinned as he sat down. "When are you going to hook him up with someone?"

"I tried; he was too vanilla for you, remember?" Bradford laughed. "Actually, he enjoys those spankings too much. I think he's a born slave if you really want to know, but I enjoy him around too much to let him go yet. You're right, though," he admitted with a wistful sigh. "It's time. He's starting to get spoiled."

"He was too young for me," Tobias said. "Sweet and fun, but too much play and not enough depth. He'll get there, but I'll be about seventy when it happens."

"Only thirty years, then! Fortunately, you're already taken, yes? I looked over your contract; he left you a lot of leeway. I was surprised." Bradford leaned back and sipped his drink, then favored Tobias with a curious smile.

Tobias shrugged. "He didn't know his limits. From our previous sessions here, he trusted me not to damage him and he gave me the tools I'd need to help him. It was a move of self-preservation, I think, not carelessness." Tobias leaned back and looked at the ceiling for a moment, thinking. "He's very smart. He's fairly self-aware, just struggling for the fine details. He wants this, Bradford, so badly that he can almost taste it. His instinct tells him I can help."

"And what does your instinct tell you?"

"That I can." Tobias shrugged again and leaned forward, playing with the cutlery for a moment. "It's really very simple. We work well together. He learns quickly, tries hard."

"I knew he would. He'd been begging me to get him the chance. And simple is a gift, Tobias, a real gift." Bradford let the room fall silent for a moment before speaking again. "But Noah's really just one of my boys. A good boy, one of the most intriguing, but a boy all the same. I want to know how my friend is doing." Bradford set his glass down on the table. "So how is it for you? Are you getting what you need?" "He's not just a boy," Tobias said immediately, the need to defend stronger than the need to merely state that, yes, his needs were met. Easier to confront than think. He heard the heat in his voice and sighed. "Damn it, Bradford. How do you do this to me? Anyone else on the planet and I can keep my mouth shut."

Bradford's smile was softer now. "I'm not doing anything to you, friend; you're doing this to yourself. You're quite right, of course, he's not just a boy. I can see you're very protective, very defensive about him—I know he's safe with you. To tell you the truth, I'm not concerned about him at all. Ah, ah..." Bradford raised a hand before Tobias could say anything at all. "Don't try to tell me I needn't be concerned about you, you've snapped at me about him twice now. Out with it."

"I don't know," Tobias insisted. "It's ... it's good. It's happy and fun, and it's supposed to be work." Tobias looked at the table as the words came faster, the dam cracked. "He learns and we move on. The last week has been one orgasm after another, and I think I've lost the point—I'm not pushing him anymore, it's only been a month and I'm already letting him coast. I'm screwing up, Bradford, because I don't want to see him ache. I don't want to open up wounds and drag out the crap that he's got to deal with because it hurts me to see him hurt. I'm being unfair to him and perpetuating his lack of understanding about himself for purely selfish reasons, and it's just so damn frightening to be back here." He took a deep breath and raised his eyes to meet Bradford's. "There appear to be some issues," he said dryly. Again, Bradford let the room go silent, this time as Brian brought a chilled bottle of Chardonnay and a glass for Tobias and a fresh gin and tonic for Bradford.

"Thank you, boy," Bradford said, "I'll ring when we're ready for our meal."

"Yes, sir," Brian answered with a slight bow and then disappeared.

Bradford lifted the bottle and filled Tobias' glass. "I know you feel better having just told me all of that," he said gently. "We, as Doms, are not expected to be perfect, right? Just careful. What you've told me is more or less exactly what I would have expected, and it's not at all uncommon. It's been a month, you've worked out your dynamic a bit, gotten off with each other, gotten comfortable." He glanced up at Tobias. "It's going to be difficult for both of you to push past it."

He set the bottle down on the table. "I knew when your boy called me about setting up a meeting with Phantom that you'd reached this point. That was kind of you, perhaps, letting him deal with his issues his way, but it's not our way. It was sloppy, Tobias, indulgent. You're not looking for a lover—excuse me—not just for a lover. You need a submissive."

"I know." Tobias sighed and said it again. "I know. And it wasn't even as indulgent as he'd wanted—he honestly thought he could just deal with it without me knowing and present me with a nice little package. 'See, I dealt with my feelings about Phan.' I appreciate the sentiment, but I had to be a part of it. You know." Unable to sit still any longer, Tobias got up, thankful for the private room. "When I called him on it, he was hurt that I'd ... interfered. I explained. Hell, Phan explained. But it didn't make it hurt less. And it didn't make the fact that I'd hurt his feelings hurt less." He walked the length of the room as he spoke and then turned. "Forced submission isn't what I want; I don't want a robot. He's a natural, Bradford, through and through, but I can't seem to get him to where he takes real joy in it. Sexual release, yes, but not the rest."

Bradford nodded. "That's a big step. And as much as Noah is experienced with the sex and the whips, emotionally he's way behind. He hasn't had a joyful experience yet. He's allowed himself to be abused without knowing any better with one Master, spending copious amounts of emotional energy feeling like a failure, feeling like he wasn't good enough. And having those feelings validated by a man that ... ah."

Bradford sipped his drink and took a deep breath. "I'm sure you've been over it with him, you don't need me to give you the details. My point is that David took joy away from Noah and then when Brett tried to help him get it back ... well, that was perhaps a bad call on my part. Brett's an excellent Dom, really, he was simply too green at the time."

"Noah's very fond of him," Tobias said, keeping his tone neutral. "And Brett knows he messed up. He learned from it. They both did. But I have to help Noah heal. He's going to resist."

"And that's what's got you apprehensive? Throwing a wrench into a good thing?" Bradford, damn him, wasn't letting Tobias get away with shifting the focus of the conversation back to Noah. "Maybe you're afraid of scaring him off?"

"Not scaring him so much as..." Tobias sighed and came back to the table. He sat down and picked up his knife and tapped it on the edge of the table for a moment before dropping it and whispering, "I'm worried that if the experience is less than pleasant he'll leave me. I don't want to be left again, not by him."

Bradford nodded and frowned slightly. "Sure. That's something to be concerned about, of course," he said finally. "It feels like a risk to you, and I know you, you don't like to take risks. But, Tobias, how are you helping him find that freedom and joy he craves, and frankly, that you do as well, by keeping him sheltered from the things that haunt him? They will only continue to do so. Noah is, as you say, very smart. He'll figure out he's not being challenged the way he needs to be. You don't want him to come to you and say that either, do you? If you're really as well suited as you seem to feel, then thinking about his goals will ensure that you reach yours." Bradford picked up his drink again. "Or, as a wise but younger Tobias once said to me—nothing ventured, nothing gained."

"I know all that." Tobias shook his head and frowned. "Intellectually, I know that. I understand it as more than theory. I know very well that if he's not challenged he'll walk. I can't deny that my fears are based on something outside of the situation, but it's still valid; from experience I know what it feels like when it falls apart, when I can't satisfy a submissive's needs." He growled in frustration. "I feel like I'm damned if I do and I'm fucked if I don't."

"Tobias." Bradford looked at him thoughtfully. "I don't like to meddle in affairs of the heart so I'm only going to say this once. It's time to let the guilt go. You know damn well that things with Phantom didn't fall apart simply because you couldn't satisfy his needs. He couldn't satisfy yours, either. Things naturally came to an end because you had both grown beyond the status quo. It was very sad, but it's not an excuse not to trust again."

"I'm well aware of why the relationship ended," Tobias said peevishly. He knew he was being stubborn and avoiding the real issue, and he found himself studying the top of the table as he tried to order his thoughts.

Bradford set his glass down. "Are you hearing me? Why are you taking this all on yourself? I know you care about him, but Tobias, this isn't just about you taking care of Noah—this is about the two of you taking care of each other. You understand? Do you see what you're doing? The boy has a responsibility to you, too." He leaned across the table and tapped it, making sure Tobias met his eyes. "You say he trusts you. But do you trust him? Do you believe in him? You'd better. If you don't by now, then it's time to re-examine things."

Tobias didn't answer right away; he couldn't. He reached for his neglected wine and sipped it, trying to think calmly. It was far too easy to insist that of course he trusted Noah, but Bradford was right; they'd get nowhere without an honest examination of the idea. The trouble, he decided, was that the thought of Noah brought up so many emotions at once that it was hard to identify them all and get to the essence of the relationship. There were all the sexual feelings, some of which were becoming rather complex, and then the affection and admiration. The enjoyment of his conversation and his smile, of his teasing and his laughter.

The sounds of him coming and begging. The tears. The discussion and Noah finally understanding that the safe words weren't a contest. The willingness to play. To learn to cook. To meet with Phan.

"Yes," Tobias said quietly, setting his glass down. "I trust him. He'll resist the work, but he'll tell me his limits when we hit them. He'll do what I need or tell me he can't." His voice was rough and he looked at Bradford with a small, weak smile. "You're far better at this sort of thing than I am. Good thing you have the club and I don't."

"Pshaw." Bradford waved dramatically. "It's like everything else—it's easy to say, harder to do. I wouldn't want to be in your shoes right now. You have some very difficult and emotional struggles ahead of you. You have cages to get past, hmm? I don't. I'm just here to make sure you don't chicken out. So what do you think your next move should be?"

"Warning him, I suppose. We've had a bit of a honeymoon. And then ... back to basics. I have to pick a boundary and push it. Pain isn't a real issue, nor is bondage." He thought for a moment, considering the cage, and shook his head. "I'm not ready to address the cage itself, but I think I can make him be still. Given enough time with nothing to do but think, he'll give me something to work with."

Bradford nodded. "The cage is a symbolic thing now, anyway. I think you have a good approach in mind. And don't forget to draw your lines," he suggested. "Stop rewarding him for merely doing what you expect of him. Save his favorite rewards for breakthroughs, or for when he exceeds your expectations, and he'll work harder."

"I don't want to let him think I'm withdrawing anything my affection or my respect." God, it really had been far too long since he'd had a steady sub. He felt like a rank beginner, and wouldn't that just thrill the legion of boys out in the club who thought he really was the top Dom? He was just lucky he had Bradford around to get him back on track after a few years off.

"No, no, affection isn't a reward, really. Sleeping in your bed, getting off, free time, those things are rewards. But, of course, I wouldn't change your style or your methods without discussing it with him, explaining that this is a new phase of your relationship. That you still care for him, respect him, love him, whatever terms you use."

Tobias sighed. "Jesus. I'm so out of practice. Remind me where my reputation came from?"

"Out of practice, my ass," Bradford snorted. "Man or mouse, Tobias?" Bradford stood and walked over to lean on a wall, crossing his arms over his chest. "Come here."

Tobias eyed him warily before standing up. He knew from experience that a flat no would be a bad idea, but he wasn't terribly reassured by his friend's stance. He deliberately made sure his clothes were neat and crisp before walking to Bradford, his chin up.

Bradford didn't move, didn't change his tone of voice, and didn't take his eyes off of Tobias. "Eyes down, forehead against the wall, hands behind your back—oh, and give me your jacket."

Tobias froze. "You're not serious."

Bradford calmly raised an eyebrow. "Do it."

"Fuck," Tobias said as succinctly as possible. Then he unbuttoned his jacket and handed it to Bradford before lowering his eyes, leaning his forehead against the wall and crossing his wrists behind his back. With a loud sigh he started looking for the place inside him that would let this happen. The place that needed this.

"Oh, dear, was that disrespect? I think it was. Take off your tie," Bradford ordered.

Carefully keeping his forehead to the wall, Tobias loosened his tie and undid the knot. As he pulled it from his neck and held it out, he had to stifle another sigh. He really hadn't intended to spend his evening like this, and he fervently hoped that Noah—and Phan—never found out.

"Drop it."

Tobias let the tie go and it fell to the floor.

"You haven't forgotten how to follow directions, that's something anyway. Here's one more for you. When I ask a question, I want a concise, truthful answer. You can take as much time as you need to answer me, but when you do, I want a clear response, and I want it to be the truth. Understand?" Tobias closed his eyes for a moment. "Yes, sir," he said, keeping his tone matter-of-fact.

"Oh, that was very nice. Thank you. Keep that up and you might end this session somewhat clothed." Bradford approached him and bent down to pick up Tobias' tie. He ran it through his fingers, just inside Tobias' peripheral vision, and leaned close to Tobias' ear. "You have the potential to do two vastly divergent things to Noah. You can help him, or you can harm him." His voice was soft. "Every time you raise your flogger, every time you open your mouth, every time you reward, scold, bind, blindfold, fuck, tease, kiss, ask, or order him, you are either helping him or harming him. If you're not doing one—you're doing the other."

He stepped away again, leaving Tobias' line of sight. "So. What exactly are you telling me when you say you are out of practice?" Bradford raised his voice. "Are you telling me that you actually raise that flogger and let it land on his back without being completely confident of your stroke?"

"No, sir," Tobias said evenly. "I always know what my flogger will do."

"If you restrain him, are you unsure of how tight the cuffs should be?"

"No, sir. I always check the restraints."

"Hmm. Do you know where his pleasure/pain threshold is?"

Tobias fought back yet another sigh and kept his voice calm. "Yes, sir. I do."

"Are you sure? Maybe that's the problem. Are you secondguessing yourself? Can you make him beg? Can you stripe him neatly? Is he wild and disrespectful? Hmm? What's the problem?"

"I can make him beg, I can make him plead. I make him ache, I make him come, I make him cry. He tells me the truth, he shows me respect, he gives me affection, and does everything I ask," Tobias said rapidly as if it were a litany. "Everything is right. He does everything right, and when he does make mistakes he learns from them. He's a better show sub than I am a Master."

Bradford stepped close again, putting a hand in the center of Tobias' back and speaking softly in his ear. "Do you really believe that?"

Tobias blinked at the wall. "What? That his show is better than my Mastery? Yes, sir. His show is perfect—I'm not. His real submission is buried."

"I see," Bradford said, stepping out of sight again. "And whose fault is that?"

"Mine, sir. It's my job to make him submit, to draw his nature out of him."

"Just so. You've let him lull you, let him float on the surface, let him get away with too much, Tobias. You've let him castrate you. Why? Where is your backbone? Where is your edge? Is he a submissive? Are you going to let him pick up the flogger next? Bend you over a bench? Are you?"

"No, sir," Tobias whispered. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, thankful for the wall.

"What are you doing to the boy when you let him coast? Helping him or harming him?"

"It's not like that," Tobias protested.

"Disrespectful. Take off your shirt," Bradford ordered.

Tobias opened his mouth to argue the point, but thought better of it. He unbuttoned his shirt and slipped it off his shoulders, fighting with the cuffs for a moment before he held it out.

Bradford snatched it from his hands. "Are you helping him or harming him?"

"Both," Tobias snapped. "He has to be secure before he can be strong enough to let go. I let it go too long is all, but—

"Stop," Bradford ordered. "Don't you snap at me. Is my question not clear, boy? I didn't ask for explanations, I asked for one word. Are you helping him, Tobias, or are you harming him? You're his Master, you're not pushing him to perform, you're letting him coast. Is that helpful, or harmful?"

Tobias ground his teeth. "Harmful."

"Now, you may explain."

He took a breath to calm down. "I had to build trust. The first weekend at my place he refused to use his safe words, to the point where it was getting dangerous. The second, we revisited the scene and worked it out. The reward was appropriate. Every weekend he learns more, plays more ... he needs to know I won't leave him, that I'll be true to the terms of our contract. That requires positive reinforcement. Affection. Touches."

"He held back his safe words?"

"Phan didn't tell you?"

Bradford snorted. "Disrespectful ... kick those shoes off."

Tobias sighed and toed off his shoes, almost losing his balance as he did so. "Yes, he played dangerously, sir. He had a skewed idea about safe words. It's fixed."

"I was going to say that no, Phan didn't tell me, and I'm rather impressed."

"Impressed with what, sir? Phantom's discretion?"

"You're funny, boy. So that must have been a bit traumatic for you." Bradford's voice sounded closer, but Tobias still couldn't see him.

"It was ... not pleasant," Tobias admitted. How could he not? Bradford of all people would understand. "Phan helped."

"I'm glad to hear it. Now tell me, in all this time that you've spent soothing and coddling your boy, what have you gained yourself?"

"Noah," Tobias said immediately. "A ... a submissive who tries. A submissive who wants to please me. A sexually compatible partner. A lover."

"You sound like you're in your initiate year. That's pathetic, Tobias." Bradford snorted and backed off again.

"What do you want from me, Bradford? I already know I screwed up," Tobias said with another sigh.

"I want you to tell me that Noah is not Phan. I want you to tell me that you trust Noah not to walk out on you. I want you to tell me that you are getting your needs met. Not as a lover or a partner, but as a Dom. I want you to give up the Mickey Mouse crap and tell me why you're so afraid to just get to work. And if I have to humiliate it out of you, Tobias, so help me God, I will." "Fine. I'm not getting my needs met. Happy? Jesus Christ, one weekend that we took it easy and you're making sound like I'm letting him flog me." He stood back from the wall and rolled his shoulders.

Tobias felt the blow to the backs of his knees and went down like a stone.

"One weekend is enough to let him down, Tobias. It's enough to harm him. It's enough to instill bad habits, and worse, it's enough for him to lose respect for you."

"He's happy," Tobias said, pushing himself up.

"Is that the goal? Is it? Maybe you two just need to give up the scene and get married." Bradford snorted.

"I have too much money invested in that damn stable to do that," Tobias said snidely.

Bradford sighed. "Look, Tobias. It's an object lesson, okay? You're not getting your needs met. He's sitting pretty thinking he's doing everything right, and now you have to go tell him he's not. He may be happy now, but he'll be happier when you make him work for it. He'll be thrilled when he earns his rewards. He'll be devoted to you if you take him places that frighten him, show him he can handle it, and bring him back safely." Bradford put his hand on Tobias' shoulder and his tone was reassuring. "That's your job. But it's not all about him. He's not Phan. If you hit Phan hard enough, he'll lick your boots. Noah is far more complicated. Right now, he's got you shackled."

Tobias turned and sat on the floor, his bare back against the wall. "Phantom loved me," he said softly, looking at the floor. "He still loves me, at some level. And he left. He had to leave me, no matter what I did. I don't know if I can do that again, Bradford."

Bradford, with apparent disregard for his suit, sat crosslegged on the floor in front of Tobias. "Do you honestly believe, in your heart of hearts, that you are solely to blame for your break up with Phantom?"

"No," Tobias sighed. "Of course not. It's not my fault I can't do what he needs anymore than it's his fault he needs it. We could have stayed together anyway, made some sort of arrangement for his needs, but ... it was time. I know that."

"Okay. Then it's time to let it go. You can't completely commit yourself to Noah until you do. It's time to trust the boy, Tobias. Really trust him. You might find it's not as big of a risk as you think." Bradford reached forward and rested his hands on Tobias' knees. "And the rewards may be far greater than you expected. Throw yourself into the game, Tobias. Live it. Breathe it. You know if you run into any trouble with Noah that I'll help any way I can."

Tobias nodded mutely and finally lifted his eyes to meet Bradford's. "You already have, old friend."

Bradford winked and got to his feet. "It's been forever since I've seen you without a shirt. You look great," he said in his jovial way and retrieved Tobias' clothing for him.

Tobias grinned and flexed his arms, something he'd never do for Noah. "Thanks. I have to keep up with my boy. It's a challenge."

Bradford grinned, helping Tobias on with his shirt and offering him his tie. "Do you have a plan for the weekend?"

"Mmm, I think so." Tobias knotted his tie and checked his cuffs before reaching for his jacket. "Talk. Deep subspace for the duration, strict limits, enforced rules. Suspension bondage and near sensory deprivation—not full dep, though. It's going to be hard enough. How do I look?"

Bradford took a moment to smooth Tobias' jacket and straighten his tie. "Hungry." He grinned. "I'm calling for our food," he said and walked back to the intercom. In moments Brian was there with their plates.

Tobias expected a curious look as the dinner had been delayed and that was sure to stir some interest, but Brian was on his best behavior and soon bowed his head and left.

"So tell me," Tobias said as he took a moment to appreciate the look and smell of the linguini. "How is Phan? What did he say about his dinner with Noah?"

Bradford laughed. "I, sir, am no gossip monger." He winked. "You're really hung up on the phone call. What are you worried about?"

"I'm not sure," Tobias admitted as he picked up his fork. "Those two alone together, though. Talking about me. It's ... unsettling."

"I think it sounds hot," Bradford teased. "Phan is fine, Tobias, he really is. He misses you, asks about you occasionally. We have a session once a week, generally. I can't find anyone else who can ... well, I wouldn't do it myself except that I love the kid and he needs it."

Tobias nodded and picked at his linguini. "I'm glad it's you," he said softly.

"I try, Tobias. I try to talk him down every time. I try to explain that bleeding for me won't fix it for him, but he cries and begs me. I..." Bradford blinked and looked up at Tobias as if he wanted to say something, but instead he shook his head. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't burden you with this stuff. Especially when we're trying to eat."

"It's Phantom. I'll always listen. To either of you—dinner or not. You know that." He set down his fork and picked up his wine glass, pleased that it was still almost full. He thought he might need it.

"All right." Bradford looked at him thoughtfully. "I'm thinking of shutting him in for a long weekend. Here, with me."

Tobias tilted his head and considered that for a moment. "A power session? Can you do that, physically? It would be intense—you'd need a spotter. Security might not be up to it."

"Ah. Well, the twist is that I'm going to say no this time. I'll let him come here expecting a session and refuse to touch him with anything but my bare hands. Three days, maybe four, see if I can get him to let some of the demons out. What do you think?"

Tobias stared. "I think you'd better make damn sure the doors are locked tight and that security checks on you every hour. Sight, not voice alone. And if it works, you're a damn genius."

"And if it doesn't work I'm shooting myself in the foot and he'll never trust me again." Bradford sighed. "It's very risky, but I really think ... I've got a feel for him now and I really believe it could work. And, of course, if I need backup, I'm hoping I can call you."

"Of course you can call me. God, you don't have to ask. I'll be here."

"He's starting to scar, you know? I can't keep doing this to him." Bradford sighed heavily. "I can't. I'm fucking going to hell. I don't sleep for two days when I'm done with him. This has to stop."

Tobias nodded, feeling sick. "It's gotten worse, hasn't it? God, it's been three years since ... since he moved out. Does he sleep here when you're done? Nightmares?"

"Yeah, he sleeps here, I stay with him. He's a wreck." Bradford sucked down the rest of his drink.

"He's worse before," Tobias assured him. He pushed his plate away and drained his glass. "Do you mind?" he asked, standing up. Without waiting for an answer he crossed to the intercom and asked for a bottle of scotch. "You have to try this, Bradford. Not just for him. Would you like me to give you back your speech or merely point out that you're both dying doing this? It's not helping anymore."

"I don't need the speech; I have it memorized, thank you." Bradford shook his head. "And I'm well aware it's killing me. I don't think he understands what it's doing to him, though."

Bradford stopped talking as Brian came in with a bottle and two glasses, and he stood to take them from the boy. "Thank you, Brian, honey," he said softly and shooed Brian back out the door. Tobias took the scotch and filled his glass. "So are you going to explain it to him or merely let him throw himself about the room until he starts to talk?"

"I haven't gotten that far in my planning, yet," Bradford answered, filling his glass with the scotch. "I know I can't tell him ahead of time, or he'll just disappear on me. So I have to let him believe that it's our regular Thursday night thing, just moved to Friday for some reason. Once he's here I'm going to have security bolt the door from the outside and, yes, check on us often. I'm thinking I'll give you fair warning and then give security your pager number."

"Can you let me know which weekend? I won't put Noah in complicated bondage, and if you're planning to drag it out until Monday or Tuesday—if he makes it that long—I'll let Dee know I might have to bail." His partner in his vet practice wasn't exactly used to Tobias making himself unavailable during the week, but she'd understand. He hoped, anyway.

"Oh, yes," Bradford assured him. "I'll plan it a couple of weeks in advance."

"All right, then." Tobias drained his glass again. "I suggest we find a nice room and get staggeringly drunk, my friend. I suspect I'll be getting emotional later, and I'd rather not have Brian see me curled up in a ball under your table."

"I can arrange that."

Chapter 2

It wasn't a good day. The hangover had settled into a lingering headache by lunchtime, and Deidre had been merciless, making him do as much of the paperwork as she could get away with and frowning when he finally left at two in the afternoon.

"Have a nice weekend," she'd said acidly.

Tobias sighed and rubbed his head, then called a florist from the truck and had an apology bouquet sent to her house. She really didn't deserve to pay the price for his overindulgence, and she was already a little touchy about not knowing much about the new man in Tobias' life.

He drove the hour to his farm for his usual weekend visit and found his housekeeper Mrs. Miller's son, Robert, there to pick her up. It was an unexpected pleasure that gave them a chance to confirm plans for Tobias' Christmas gift to them both. Mrs. Miller, an elderly woman of eighty-three, had always wanted to return to Italy, where she'd been once as a young woman before her marriage, and Tobias was sending her—with Robert and his wife as chaperones. Lord only knew what kind of trouble Mrs. Miller could work up on her own.

After seeing them off, Tobias went to his office to wait for Noah. The headache lingered, and he had a feeling it was going to get worse.

Noah, on the other hand, arrived in good spirits, wearing jeans, a white T-shirt, and his leather jacket, and carrying a small cooler in one hand. "Ravioli." He smiled as he stepped

into Tobias' office. "Oh, you look terrible, sir, are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Tobias swiveled his chair slightly and rubbed at his forehead. Keeping his tone calm and his voice soft, he said, "Put that in the kitchen, please, and go up to the safe room. Strip and kneel, I'll be there in a few minutes. We have to talk."

"Yes, sir."

Tobias noted the almost panicked look on Noah's face before he fled the room as ordered. He heard Noah moving in the kitchen for a moment and then hurrying up the stairs.

He waited for only a few minutes, knowing that Noah wouldn't waste time and not wanting to let Noah's panic grow. When Tobias judged that Noah would be naked and kneeling, he sighed and got up, walking slowly up the stairs.

As he entered the safe room, the room reserved for discussion and trying on ideas for play, the first thing he saw, of course, was Noah, in position in the middle of the room. His head was up, his eyes were down, and his hands were behind his back. "Very good," Tobias said, again using the low tone of voice that was meant to be calming and serious but not frightening. "I'll take your gun down in a few moments and lock it away in the safe. Remind me to put the pagers in the bedroom, please."

"Yes, sir, thank you," Noah answered him. He seemed a bit calmer, but it didn't stop him from asking, "I hope I'm not the cause of your agitation, sir?"

"Silence." Tobias walked to the armoire and pulled one of the drawers open, taking out a leather cock ring. It had a padlock attached and would certainly make his point. He turned to face Noah and showed it to him, then knelt down and took Noah's flaccid penis in his hand. "You don't get to come this weekend," he said as he stroked Noah to semihardness and locked the ring on. The key he put in his pocket as he stood up.

"I might not either, I don't know yet," he said. "But you certainly won't, so don't ask. If you understand, reply with 'Yes, sir' or 'Yes, Master.'"

"Yes, Master," Noah answered him softly.

Tobias nodded and sighed again as he went to his chair. He sat on the floor in front of it and leaned back, his legs spread and his arms open. "Come here, sweetheart. Affirmation."

Noah moved to him silently, leaning against him back to chest as Tobias pinned his arms and legs with his own.

"You haven't done anything wrong," he whispered in Noah's ear, his thumbs brushing Noah's arms. "I need you to understand that. I am not angry with you. Before we go on, do you understand that?"

"Yes, sir," Noah answered, but he didn't need to speak for Tobias to know he understood. He relaxed, leaning into Tobias a bit farther and sighing softly. "Thank you, sir."

"Don't thank me yet," Tobias murmured. "We have a lot of work to do, pet. The last week has been wonderful, but I'm afraid I've let us get too relaxed. I made it more about sex than submission, and now it's time to get back to basics. I need your submission, Noah. You need to submit. So we're going to push you this weekend, find a limit and work with it. Do you understand?"

Noah nodded slowly. "I ... I do understand, sir," he said, answering more with his tone than just the question he'd been asked. He sounded a little disappointed, perhaps, to be leaving the comfortable haze they'd been floating in all week, but accepting as well, of the work he knew they needed to do.

"All right then." Tobias stroked Noah's arms and shifted his weight slightly, holding him closer. "Tonight you will make supper and we'll eat. You will not speak unless I ask you a question, and your eyes will be lowered at all times, as usual. When you are finished eating you will kneel next to me until I am done. When you have finished cleaning the kitchen you will join me in my office. I have some paperwork to do for the farm, and you will kneel next to me while I complete it.

"Basically, pet, things are being tightened up this weekend. You serve me. You service me. That's all. I'll take care of you. When you are kneeling I expect you to maintain your posture and to spend your time thinking about your submission. What it means, what you and I both need, and new ways to serve me. Understood?"

Noah took a deep breath before answering and nodded once. "I understand, sir."

"I'll explain more later," Tobias said. In fact, he had a list of things to tell Noah at supper and over the course of the evening; he hoped they'd both remember them all. "Do you have any questions or comments before I send you down to make supper? This is not general conversation, boy, but if you have something to ask, do it now." "Only if you'd prefer a red sauce or a white sauce, sir," Noah replied quietly. It seemed as if he was ready to bolt, and Tobias could sense that he hadn't quite found his headspace yet. Hopefully, some time alone to prepare dinner would help him with that.

"Red. Thank you." Slowly Tobias unwrapped himself from Noah, freeing him from the bondage. "You may go now. And, pet—trust me on this. We need it."

"You know best. I trust you on everything, Master," Noah assured him quite earnestly. He turned and left the room, disappearing downstairs in a hurry.

"I hope you don't regret it," Tobias said to the empty room. He got up slowly and went through Noah's clothes, getting his firearm and pager, and then went to his room. He lined the pagers up on his dresser and then checked that Noah's chain was secured to the bed frame and that his collar was in good shape. As he examined the buckle he thought it was about time he started shopping for Noah's collar—the real one.

If this worked, he would have earned the right to wear it.

With that thought buoying his spirits, Tobias went to his office and locked the weapon away and then went to the dining room to await his supper.

Chapter 3

Noah appeared with ice water a few minutes after Tobias sat down and set the glass down silently. Tobias watched him set the table and took note of his breathing, which was generally a reliable barometer for where Noah's head was. It was deep and even, an indication that he was at least searching for his subspace, if not completely there yet.

Noah disappeared into the kitchen again but wasn't gone long, re-emerging with a plate of fresh cheese ravioli in a spicy-smelling red sauce that he set in front of Tobias along with a crusty garlic bread. He slipped back into the kitchen and returned with a plate for himself, which he set down at his place.

Tobias began to eat, tasting the ravioli with care and attention. "This is very nice, pet. Well done."

"Tha..." Noah began, but interrupted himself instantly and sighed. "That wasn't a question. I'm sorry, sir."

"It will take some getting used to. One stroke." Tobias kept his voice calm and matter-of-fact, as if it was no big deal. Slowly, he could feel himself give up on his misgivings. It felt right; it was his nature, and he trusted Noah to be true to his own nature. There didn't have to be a struggle.

"Now, there are some things you'll need to know," Tobias said as he continued to eat. "After I finish the paperwork tonight, you will feed the horses and put them in the barn before we go to bed. In the morning, you will wake me as usual and then make breakfast. You will have your morning discipline, and we will do our chores. Through all of this, you will speak only when I say you may. In the afternoon we will go to the playroom in the stable. Questions?" He picked up his water glass and waited, eyes on Noah.

Noah paused with his fork near his mouth and answered before taking a bite. "Yes, sir. I have three. One, should I shower after putting the horses away before coming to bed; two, should I continue to anticipate you and offer to draw you a bath or get you tea—for which I would need to speak—or should I simply await your orders; and three, when you say wake you as usual..." he said tentatively, "what exactly do you mean?"

Tobias sipped his water for a moment and nodded. "Good questions. Yes, shower after dealing with the horses and if you need an enema do that as well or ask me to help. Do not anticipate me, but if you'd like to do something for me—such as the tea or bath—you may ask first. Along those lines, if you need to go to the bathroom you can just go—don't ask, just be quick and quiet, and come back immediately, resuming your position. If you are unsure of anything you may ask—you may not question orders or attempt to justify not doing them unless it is a matter of physical restrictions or fear. In which case, I expect you to say 'yellow' and we'll discuss it."

Tobias ate some more ravioli before going on. "As for waking me up, I meant merely that—I prefer you waking me to the alarm. But if you need specifics, I won't order you to suck me off or rim me every morning, although I'd hardly punish you for it. Anything else?"

Noah barely hid his smile and answered simply, "No, sir."

"Wonderful. Now, I'm going to finish this lovely pasta, and we're going to get on with it." He smiled and stabbed another ravioli. "And, once more, it's really good, pet."

Noah said nothing in response this time, but silently finished his meal. He ate well, with the understanding that they were not going to the barn that evening, instead of the half meal he usually forced down when he thought they were going to play, and when he was finished he took another sip of his water and then stood, moving slowly to Tobias' side and kneeling beside the chair.

With one hand Tobias gently stroked Noah's hair; other than that, he ignored Noah until he'd finished his meal. He swallowed the last of his water and stood up. "Thank you, pet. Come to the office when you've finished cleaning up."

Without looking back, Tobias left the dining room and went down the hall, turning on the outdoor lights as he passed the switches. When he was seated at his desk, he opened the files he was planning to review and stared at them, a slow smile crossing his face. It felt good. Right. He was half-hard with just doing what he needed, and he actually felt himself let go of a lot of his fears about pushing Noah too hard. The test would be in the stable, but it was a good start.

Tobias set about his paperwork, listening to the distant clattering of dishes and running water, but it wasn't long before the house went quiet again. Noah appeared in the study a few minutes later with tea and a couple of Mrs. Miller's oatmeal cookies on a plate. He set the tea and cookies down wordlessly and then took his place as he had been instructed, directly beside Tobias' chair, on his knees. Acknowledging him with a touch on the top of his head, a quick caress of his hair, Tobias continued to work. He ate the cookies absently as he finished up, and when the paperwork had been tidied up and squared away he sat back in his chair and sipped the tea. "Thank you, pet," he said, once more stroking Noah's hair. "Please go get dressed and tend to the horses. When you're done we'll deal with your punishment and talk for a little while."

Noah hesitated, then started to speak, seemed to think better of it, and then got up and left the office silently. He was gone close to an hour, but bringing the horses in after dark wasn't the easiest of tasks so Tobias did his best not to worry. Noah returned looking a little annoyed, but quite whole. He started to head for the shower but backtracked a few steps to the office and knelt by Tobias.

"I'm sorry, sir, I have a question."

"Ask," Tobias ordered, curious. He hoped things were all right in the barn; he really didn't want to go out.

"I ... well, I don't want to ruin your leather ring in the shower, sir. Would you prefer me to remove it?"

Tobias grinned and pulled the key from his pocket. "Good boy—to tell the truth, I hadn't even thought of it. Thank you for thinking about my property." He motioned for Noah to stand and take down his pants. He unlocked the padlock and removed the ring, taking a few moments to play with Noah's cock. "Just so we're clear, you only touch yourself for purposes of personal hygiene. It's very pretty, but it's mine." He stroked Noah again and cupped the heavy balls. "In fact ... I don't want you jerking off at all for the next week." "Y ... yes, sir," Noah answered with a stutter, sounding a bit thrown by his order.

"Good. Except it wasn't a question, so that's another stroke. Go shower, and we'll get this underway."

"I'm sorry, sir, I'm confused. I have another question," Noah said very tentatively.

Tobias raised an eyebrow. "Ask."

"Do you want me to verbally acknowledge your orders? Do you want me to acknowledge them at all?" He sounded a little frustrated.

Tobias leaned back in his chair and considered. "If I explicitly ask if you understand, I want a verbal acknowledgment, and I trust you'll let me know if you don't. When I give an order—such as not to jerk off, or do your chores, or something similar, it is enough that you merely do it. Accepting my will is a huge part of what I need from you. Keep in mind our contract. If I order you to do something that could damage you mentally, emotionally, or physically you are free to refuse. Everything else I expect you to do to the best of your ability." He smiled softly. "Things won't always be as they are right now—we'll relax again. But for now, we have work to do. Questions?"

"No, sir," Noah answered.

"Okay. Go take your shower." Tobias smiled as Noah tugged his jeans back up and left, his steps sounding light on the stairs. He was still smiling as he fingered the cock ring and went up the stairs himself, going to fetch the crop from the safe room before crossing the hall to his bedroom to wait. He was looking forward to this, the feeling a little different Deviations: Domination by Chris Owen, Jodi Payne

than it had been in the previous weeks. There was a bite to the anticipation, a joy in it that he'd been smothering until now. He turned the crop over and over, fingered the leather and traced it. He'd lost the thrill of this somewhere along the way.

When Noah finally reappeared from his shower he looked more relaxed and smelled of soap and shaving cream. He stopped in the doorway and his eyes lingered on the crop in Tobias' fingers. He settled into his Grace position, placing his hands flat on the wall, his ass out.

"Two strokes," Tobias said quietly as he stood up. He admired Noah for a moment, appreciating the lines of his body and the curve of his ass, so nicely offered up. He felt a tightening in his groin and took a deep breath. "Ready?"

Noah nodded. "Ready, sir."

Tobias struck. The first blow landed hard and the line it raised was immediate and beautiful. Noah gasped with the sting of it and seemed to hold his breath. The second was identical, just above the first. Noah let his air out in a rush, and Tobias watched the tension in his shoulders go with it. He had to bite back a moan; the feeling surging through him was so raw and powerful. "Good boy," he said roughly.

Noah remained dutifully silent.

Tobias set the crop down on the dresser and glanced at the pagers. All were blank, something that always made him grateful. He picked up the cock ring and its key, his own shaft feeling heavy between his thighs. "Standing display, Noah," he said softly, sitting on the edge of the bed and watching as Noah turned to face him, Noah's arms going behind his back and his shoulders squaring nicely.

"How do you feel?" Tobias asked, fingering the cock ring. "Fine, sir," Noah said. "Focused, calm ... safe."

"Good. Tomorrow will be hard. I want you to know that I understand that. Also, this isn't something I'm doing lightly; we both have needs, and I have a duty to make sure they are fulfilled. I promised I would help you find your limits and I would help you work through them. I can't promise to make it a pleasant journey, however. I want you to spend some time tonight preparing yourself for it. Do you have any questions at the moment?"

Noah only asked one question. "Do you need anything before you turn in, sir?"

"No. Thank you for asking." Tobias stood up and neatly threaded Noah's cock into the ring and locked it. "You'll be sleeping on your pallet," he said, picking up the collar and chain. "Were you warm enough last time?"

"Yes, thank you, sir." Noah lifted his chin, making it easier for Tobias to fasten the collar.

Tobias nodded and made sure the collar wasn't too tight and that there was an adequate length of chain binding him to the bed frame. "You did well today, sweetheart," he said softly. Then he tipped Noah's head up by his chin and kissed him gently, sucking at his lower lip for a brief moment before pulling away. "Goodnight, Noah."

Noah opened his mouth, presumably to return the sentiment, but bit down on his lip instead and walked to his pallet to lie down. He settled on his side with a sigh, tucking

one arm under his pillow and settling the soft blanket over his legs.

Tobias smiled at him and imagined him with a teddy bear. It took all of his willpower not to laugh, so he began to undress and get ready for bed. He made sure the alarm was set, though he hoped he wouldn't need it, and then he turned out the lights in the hall and in the room.

He disliked the empty spot next to him in bed, and he had to remind himself that there was a damn good reason for it. With a sigh, he rolled over and waited for sleep to overtake him. Chapter 4

Apparently sleep had indeed come to Tobias at some point, and he must have slept well, because he neither heard the alarm clock nor felt Noah join him in bed. He damn well felt Noah's tongue bathing his prick, though, and Noah's fingers cupping and warming his balls. He thought vaguely and faintly of telling him to stop, but the idea died as soon as Noah's tongue lapped at the head of his cock.

With a sigh, Tobias slipped a hand under the blanket to settle on Noah's head, urging him on.

Noah moaned. He must have been waiting for Tobias to wake, because as soon as Tobias touched him, Noah swallowed Tobias whole, sucking and stroking him with merciless enthusiasm.

Tobias shuddered and gave in, his thighs spreading to allow Noah greater access to his balls. He rocked his hips, thrusting gently into the wet heat of his boy's mouth. "So good," he slurred, the words mangled through sleep and arousal.

He gasped as Noah dragged his tongue over the tip of his cock, shocks sparking up and down his spine. His fingers found Tobias' opening and stroked it gently, teasing and tracing, coaxing and caressing. He licked up the length of Tobias' shaft and down again then once again mouthed the head and sucked him in hard.

"Oh, God," Tobias groaned, arching his back off the bed as he tried to simultaneously get deeper into Noah's mouth and also rock back on his finger. His feet braced flat on the bed, he writhed, his hand slipping from Noah's head to his shoulder. His fingers brushed leather and he traced the collar around Noah's neck, another groan ripping from his throat.

Noah moaned loudly around him and pushed the tip of his finger past Tobias' tight ring of muscle. At the same time he opened his throat to allow Tobias to thrust as he pleased.

It wasn't something Tobias had any interest in ignoring, and he let his body do what it had to. He pushed deep into Noah's hungry mouth, grunting as he felt the head of his cock bump the back of Noah's throat, and then he rocked back, his hole spasming and tingling as he worked himself onto Noah's finger.

It felt like no time at all before the tension coiled so tightly in him that he thought he'd break. "Going to come, boy," he warned, and as he spoke the dam broke and he growled, his body tensing as he began to shoot. His cock pulsed and throbbed and his ass clenched; he felt like he was soaring.

Noah took him gracefully as always, swallowing down every drop and bathing him until he'd gone soft. Noah took a moment to nuzzle him before kneeling upright in his display position silently, his eyes so low they might very well have been closed entirely.

"Come here, sweetheart," Tobias said, opening his arms.

Noah moved into them easily and pressed close, resting his head on Tobias's shoulder and wrapping one arm across his chest.

"Thank you," Tobias whispered to him, pressing a kiss on him. They lay quietly for a few minutes, warm and relaxed, and slowly Tobias came back to himself. With a contented sigh he finally rubbed Noah's back and sat up to remove the collar that chained his boy to the bed, "Time to get up, pet. Fetch me your paddle."

* * * *

Tobias had planned carefully. The initial idea had been almost fully formed when he'd had it, but the details had been worthy of a lot of thought. A good part of Friday's hangover had been spent making lists and notes about it and then trying to get caught up on the paperwork at the clinic; it was no wonder Deidre had been unhappy with him.

He'd dressed deliberately, Noah kneeling in the middle of his bedroom, presumably watching with lowered eyes; Tobias hadn't checked to make sure. He wore tight leather pants styled like five pocket jeans and a black T-shirt. His boots were tall and black with thick and heavy soles.

Noah wore his cock ring.

In the interests of modesty out of doors, Tobias had added a long cloak and soft soled shoes to Noah's attire for the walk across the driveway to the playroom, all of which was taken away again as soon as they got inside.

Formerly horse stables and a small indoor riding ring, Tobias' playroom was extensive and well equipped. Years of renovations had transformed the building into a space to rival any club. The stalls had been made over and fitted for a variety of scenes, and the ring itself was full of equipment and toys. It was Tobias' pride and joy, a place he'd designed for his taste and pleasure. Tobias led Noah to a plain white stall, pristine and barren save for the elaborate sling suspended from the ceiling and a metal cart. "This is where I do a lot of full sensory deprivation," he said quietly, watching Noah. He had been in subspace all morning, being quiet and working hard. "I am not going to do that today. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Noah said softly with a slow nod of his head.

"I don't think we're ready to push on something we know you have a problem with. I am, however, going to get close to it. I'm going to bind and suspend you. I am going to gag you. I am going to blindfold you. You will be able to hear me at all times, and I will touch you. Do you think you can handle that without panicking?"

Noah's jaw tightened and he swallowed, but after a brief, tense moment he nodded. "Yes, sir. What will be used in lieu of a safe word, sir?"

With a smile Tobias went to the cart and pulled out a tray. "Bell ball," he said, holding one up. It was purple, not green like the one they'd used the first time they'd played, but he knew Noah would recognize it. "Comments or questions before we begin?"

"Only that I..." Noah paused to choose his words, "will try to please you, sir. I'm ready."

"I know you will, pet." Tobias set the ball down on the top of the cart and began to gather the other things he needed. A leather gag. A black satin-lined blindfold. A light flogger. He laid them all out in a precise row and then gently moved Noah until he was in the right spot to be bound into the sling. "Okay?" "Yes, sir, I'm okay." Noah was speaking slowly, being thoughtful about his answers, and seemed securely in his subspace. It was very reassuring.

Tobias took his time. The sling was down and loose, and he made sure to check every joint, every buckle, and every tie. He secured Noah's legs and arms and wrapped a wide support belt around his middle. "When I tell you to lean back, I'll raise your feet. You'll swing out and it will be disorienting, but I'll be here and you won't fall. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," Noah answered, closing his eyes. Tobias noted his purposeful breathing.

"Okay. Lean back slowly and let the belt and your arms take your weight. Your feet will lift..." Tobias spoke softly and urged Noah back, watching carefully and smoothly sweeping Noah's feet up. "...now. Well done. Okay?"

"Ho..." Noah reflexively tried to reach for something to hold on to as his feet left the floor, but the restraints prevented much movement. He exhaled heavily and squeezed his eyes shut, taking a couple of steadying breaths. He seemed all right, really, just disoriented as he'd been warned. Next time he'd know what to expect.

Tobias waited until Noah's breathing evened out and then moved to the remote control box. "Going up now. This will lift you to the right height. Don't fight the restraints or the sling, just let it take your weight." Slowly the sling lifted Noah until he was about three and a half feet above the floor, mostly reclined, with his head and shoulders slightly elevated. "Okay?"

"Fine, sir," Noah sounded much more confident.

"Good." Tobias went to him and adjusted the pad supporting his head, making sure there was no stress on his neck. "Now. I want you to tell me if there is anywhere on your body where you feel like you need more support or the leather is uncomfortable. You'll be here for a while, so just relax for a couple of moments and listen to your body."

Noah wiggled his toes and his fingers, shifted his hips slightly, and raised and lowered his head. Then he went still for a few minutes, eyes closed, and just relaxed. "It feels all right, sir," he said at last, his voice soft. He seemed to be adjusting well to the suspension.

Tobias nodded and picked up the blindfold. "Lift your head a little, please." He fastened the blindfold carefully and gently guided Noah's head back down, shifting him slightly to keep his spine straight. "Can you see anything?"

"No, sir."

"Okay. I'm going to put the ball in your right hand now. Shake it once for me." Tobias folded Noah's fingers around the ball and listened to the bell chime. "Use it if you start to panic or if you have pain from the bindings. Do not use it if you start to feel like you're floating—that's common, and part of where you might go. If the floating makes you panic, then by all means use it. Don't use it if you're bored—your ass will pay for that. Do you understand so far?"

Tobias caught a grin as it passed over Noah's lips and disappeared again quickly. "I understand, sir," he answered in a steady voice.

Tobias picked up the gag and looked at his boy, tied in black in the white room. Blindfold in place, cock bound ... all

for him. He felt a flush of pride in his sub, a mere glow of what he hoped for. "Time for the gag. If you have any questions or concerns, please say so now."

"I'm all right, sir," Noah assured him. He licked his lips once and opened his mouth to accept the gag.

Tobias fit the gag and fastened it snugly, then once more settled Noah's head. He stepped back, one hand still on Noah's shoulder and said, "We're going to start now, pet. Use the ball if you need it. I will take off the gag and we'll talk. If you need me to, I can get you out in a matter of moments. You can move your head, but I'd like you to stay as still as you can."

Noah nodded once to acknowledge Tobias and otherwise went completely still except for the slow, measured rise and fall of his chest as he breathed.

"Good boy." Tobias lowered his voice, made it deliberately slower and deeper, pitching it into the soothing tones he used with the animals when they were being stubborn. "I'm right here, and I won't leave you. If you can't hear my voice, listen for me moving. You will be able to hear me breathe. You will hear my steps."

He let go of Noah's shoulder and began to move about the room, walking slowly. "You're lovely, pet. Relax. Let the sling hold you. Think about it, the way it holds you. I'm going to touch you. I'm going to change your bindings every once in a while. I will bring your legs together and bind them. I will raise or lower you at random. It is my will—your body is mine to play with." As he stood at Noah's feet, Tobias couldn't help but smile. His boy was lovely, so beautiful. The leather hugged and held him; his skin was tanned and smooth. Nipples tight and peaked, his cock half-hard and ringed in leather. The lock caught the light and glittered, and Tobias moved, touched it.

Noah's breath caught for a moment. His cock was so ready to respond it twitched in anticipation, and Noah exhaled loudly through his nose.

"Mine," Tobias repeated. "All you have to do is be. Just exist and don't worry about anything at all except being what you are. You are mine. You are my boy, my toy. You see to my needs and I see to yours." He traced Noah's cock with one finger and then stepped back. "I can touch you or not and both should please you because it pleases me."

He picked up the flogger and dragged the tails lightly down one of Noah's legs. "Mine to hit. Because I want to. Mine to bind. You must be still because I want it. You must let go, because I want it."

Noah made no sound, apart from his breathing, but his skin pimpled with sensitive goose bumps as the leather slid over his thigh. His toes twitched reflexively but otherwise there was no movement.

Tobias nodded, satisfied. Noah was in great shape, both physically and mentally. He'd sunk well into subspace and was reacting well to the sling; it was time to step things up. He ran one hand over Noah's leg and slowly moved back, bringing Noah's legs together. Going slowly, he wound a strip of leather around Noah's legs, fitting it through D-rings and making sure that he would still be able to release Noah quickly if he had to. Without speaking, he made sure Noah was bound firmly and then moved again, walking around him and this time not touching.

"Think about me, pet. About what you are. About what you want to be. About what you can be."

The only outward signs of Noah's concentration were a slightly thoughtful wrinkle in his forehead and an almost imperceptible turn of his head toward the direction of Tobias' voice. Most likely it wasn't even a conscious move.

"You're gagged, Noah. You're bound and naked and far from the city. You have a blindfold on, a ring around your cock, and not only do you like it, but you need it. Think about that. What is it that drives you? Why do you need this; this subtle humiliation, this voluntary loss of control? And why do you think I need the control?"

Tobias walked slowly around Noah, going silent. He touched randomly, sometimes with his hand, sometimes with the flogger. It was becoming work now, the gentle longing he'd felt earlier fading away until all that remained was concentration and the need to reach Noah on a new level. He watched Noah's breathing. Touched his skin. Listened for the bell. He monitored Noah's physical condition and fed his mental state by being present in one of the two senses Noah had available.

Noah made a sound that wasn't quite vocal, wasn't quite a moan. It was a sound from deep in his belly, a long, low, guttural hum that started gently and quietly and faded away slowly into silence. A soulful, comforting sound. And it was accompanied by simple and complete stillness.

Tobias leaned on the wall and watched Noah. He moved the flogger back and forth, making sure there was always sound, but most of his attention was on Noah. He watched and saw Noah's chest rise and fall, watched carefully to make sure he wasn't sleeping. At one point Noah's cock twitched and stretched, and he wondered if the poor boy would actually wind up with an erection—one he'd have trouble ridding himself of, given the ring. It didn't form, however, and slowly what blood had begun the process seeped out.

After a while he could see Noah twitch. Not a full body twitch, just random muscles here and there, as if he'd thought about moving but aborted the effort. Noah was floating. He'd gotten to a place where he was reaching new layers or surfing old ones; perspectives were shifting, and he was likely losing his train of thought and leaping to new conclusions. This was the work, the breakthrough for Noah; Tobias' job was to bring him back.

He waited. He watched. He moved slowly, beginning his pacing in careful, measured steps. He circled Noah and then added touches. Softly, he stroked bare skin. He moved at the same speed, but over a few minutes' time he gave his touches more weight, touched a little more firmly. He added the flogger, dragging it over Noah's legs and belly, over his arms. Lightly, he slapped Noah's thighs with it, over and over.

Noah swallowed. His breathing gradually grew lighter and faster. The fingers of his left hand uncurled and his hand went flat as if reaching for something or waiting for something to come to him. "I'm here," Tobias said softly, still using the flogger on Noah's thighs. "I'm right here and I won't leave. Come back to me, pet. All the way back, so we can talk. All the way back so you can serve me and I can take care of you."

Noah's fingers tightened into fists and the ball made a muted metallic sound, but it wasn't a ring, didn't seem to be a ring. He took in a deep, deliberate and audible breath, forcing air into his lungs and the increase in circulation was visible in the warming color of his skin.

Tobias set the flogger down and began to rub Noah's arms and legs with his hands. "Good boy. Come back to me, pet," he said calmly. As he unwound the leather from Noah's legs he repeated the words, his cadence slow and easy. When Noah's legs were unbound from each other but left attached to the sling, Tobias ran a hand through Noah's hair. "Soon, boy. You're almost back and I'm waiting for you. Soon you'll be here and on solid ground."

Noah swallowed again, cleared his throat, moved each of his limbs just a little, and turned his head, very noticeably this time, toward Tobias' voice.

"That's it," Tobias purred. "Okay, going to take the gag off. Don't talk yet." Quickly he took the gag off and let Noah work his jaw for a few moments while he took the bell ball and put it away. "Now the blindfold. Keep your eyes closed against the light, pet." In short order Tobias had Noah ready to be released; though his eyes were still closed and he wasn't allowed to talk, the sling had been adjusted so he was more sitting up than reclining and it would take only a moment to pull the quick releases. "Back with me?" Tobias asked. "Nod if you are." Noah nodded and licked his lips.

"Okay. I'm going to let you go now." Tobias released the waist belt and braced himself, one arm around Noah's waist. With a few quick tugs he had Noah free and in his arms, somewhat trembly but not panicked. Whole.

"Now you can talk, pet," he whispered, carefully lowering them both to the floor and holding Noah close to him.

Noah leaned heavily into Tobias, resting his head on Tobias' shoulder as he spoke. "So much on my mind, Master," he began speaking softly, seeming eager to share. "I don't need reasons. It doesn't matter why you need, only that you do. It's so tempting to weave complicated reasons and justifications into this, so easy for men like David to spin complicated webs of lies that get so thick they seem like the truth, when really it's all so much simpler than I thought. So much simpler. So ... easy." Noah's voice was light and high, and his words felt more like a stream of consciousness than well-formed thoughts.

"Is it?" Tobias asked softly, gently stroking Noah's back.

Noah sighed. "That didn't make any sense, did it?" he said, blinking a bit and sitting up a little. "What I mean to say is ... that was ... incredible, sir—floating like that, flying like that. With you. I didn't know it could be like that, so simple."

"Tell me about it, if you can," Tobias urged. "I'd like to know."

Noah sat up straight and looked past Tobias at the wall, as if visualizing it for him. "Did you ever, as a kid, play that

game 'light as a feather, stiff as a board'? Were you ever the one lying in the middle?"

Tobias nodded, an image of himself, Terry Bruckell and Nicky Kregan on the front lawn at Nicky's house springing to mind. He smiled. "When I was about ten, yes."

"Okay, so you know how if you shifted your weight or concentrated on one person's fingers too much or laughed or whatever, it never worked. But if you trusted that it would..." Noah bit his lip thoughtfully, then nodded and went on. "If you believed it could work, and the kids you were playing the game with believed it could work, then it did? You know that feeling, that ... elation when you suddenly realize you're four feet off the floor but it's okay? And you feel light, and hopeful ... am I making any sense? It feels like you're being carried on a cloud."

Tobias nodded again. "Okay, so you felt physically free. That's good. Floating and trusting. And could you relate that to submission and our relationship?"

Noah nodded. "Yes, sir. It's clear, I think," he said seriously. "That if I can just relax and trust you, believe in you, serve you, and concentrate on my submission to you ... if I just give over and I don't fight it ... then the kind of freedom I'm looking for is well within my reach."

"Did you think about, or get any ideas about what's been stopping you in your journey? About what you've been fighting against?"

Noah licked his lips again. "Pictures mostly. David and Brett. My work. Sex. I'm having a hard time pinning it down to any one thing. I think it's just a lot of noise, you know? A lot of input, a lot of distraction ... trying too hard. And trust, I think. There are things I trusted you with implicitly the moment I met you and other things I just ... didn't. And I need to. You need me to."

"I do," Tobias agreed quietly. "And you need it, too. When you're finally able to just ... let everything go, you'll find the real joy in submitting. You'll be able to really know how cherished you are and what I can do with the gift. I can take care of you, sweetheart. Protect you. When it happens we'll be able to walk into the club and do anything at all, and they'll know. They'll be able to look at us and know we're right, that it all fits. And how very proud of you I am." He kissed Noah's temple softly. "I am. You've done so well today, pet."

"I don't feel as if I've done anything at all, sir," Noah said softly.

"You've thought. You've done everything I asked. You trusted me. You went deep into yourself and learned. How can that not be something?"

"I suppose work always felt ... difficult to me before, sir."

"Sometimes it does," Tobias agreed. "But often the biggest steps are made simply by doing what we're supposed to. By listening to ourselves."

"By listening to you, sir." Noah leaned on him again. "It's really amazing how even though you stopped touching me, stopped talking, I knew you were there. I was very confident that you were, whether I could hear you at a given moment or not. I never panicked about it ... I'd expected to." Deviations: Domination by Chris Owen, Jodi Payne

"I know." Tobias held him a little closer. "I know you worried about it. Honestly, it went much better than I'd expected. Your headspace has been wonderful this weekend."

"To be honest, you haven't challenged me much on it, sir. It's been easy to hold on to because you've been very communicative, very reassuring. You've made it easy for me."

"Too easy?" Tobias asked sharply.

"For the first time down this road? No, sir. If you hadn't been so gentle with me..." Noah shook his head. "Sir, I was very apprehensive about it. I wanted to trust you, but I needed that little jingle-ball. It felt like a security blanket. The first thing I thought when I saw that sling was how long would I make it before I had to ask for a break. I expected to safe word."

Tobias' throat tightened, and he had to force himself not to shout in triumph. "Then I'm even prouder of you, boy," he said thickly. "Thank you."

"Oh, no, sir." Noah reached up and touched Tobias' cheek, careful to keep his gaze no higher than his chin. "Thank you. I can't tell you how good I feel. Please, Master, tell me how I can properly show my gratitude."

Success, the thrill of control, the ultimate turn-on of having a willing and compliant submissive in his arms all conspired against Tobias' plans. "It's not supposed to be about sex," he whispered. But even as he spoke, his cock was filling and pressing against Noah through the leather of his pants. His blood was up and he could feel the tension already coiling in his groin. "Tell me, sir," Noah said, his voice going low. "Tell me exactly what you want."

"Want you," Tobias growled, and he took Noah's mouth in a deep kiss, turning them so they were lying on the floor, Noah stretched on top of him. He growled again and rocked up hard. "Cart. Condom and lube."

Noah slid off of Tobias and dove for the cart, retrieving both quickly, while Tobias tore at his fly, shoving his pants down his hips with undignified haste. Noah straddled Tobias' thighs, tore the condom wrapper and rolled the rubber on, sliding his fingers over Tobias' prick and giving it a squeeze. "Want you, Master," Noah breathed, followed by a low moan. Lube followed, and then Noah was on all fours, kissing Tobias' face and rubbing his ass along the hard, straining length of Tobias' shaft.

Panting and somewhat disgusted at his own lack of patience, Tobias slicked his fingers with the lube on his own cock and began to open Noah roughly. "You can't come," he reminded Noah, the thrill of even that making his cock jerk. "God. Come on, pet. Ride me."

"Yes, sir. I won't come." Noah reached back and shoved Tobias' hand away with a grunt. Slowly, he sat upright and lowered himself onto Tobias' prick. He hissed with it and panted for air. "Master," he managed to choke out. He reached back and braced his hands behind him on Tobias' thighs, using them for leverage as he started to move. "Oh, God, good..."

Tobias agreed. His eyes closed tight and his fingers dug into Noah's hips for a moment before he forced himself to let go and let his boy move at his own pace. "Jesus Christ," he said hoarsely. He brought his legs up and began to push, thrusting up to meet Noah. "God, yes. Come on, pet. Come on, more." He had no real idea what he was saying or why, but he couldn't not talk, the pressure was too great. "Noah. Oh, God, oh, God—"

"Yes, sir..." Noah said with a groan, leaning forward and bracing his hands on the floor. He essentially stopped moving on his own, letting Tobias control the pace and just pushed downward to meet him, taking him deep and grunting with each thrust. "Yes, Master, take me, take everything you want. Oh, God, yes."

Hands back on Noah's hips, Tobias strained, arching off the floor as he moved. Noah was so tight it was like nothing else, his ass squeezing around Tobias' cock. Balls tight, the thread of restraint he'd been clinging to snapped and Tobias roared, shoved his cock as deep into Noah as he could, and came.

It was fast and bright and entirely without grace or care, but it felt wonderful. Like marking his territory, scenting Noah so everyone would know he was taken. A prized possession, to be cherished and well taken care of—and well used.

Still panting, Tobias opened his eyes and grinned. "Well done, boy," he said smugly.

"God. Hard," Noah panted. His eyes were closed and he was frowning as he took several deep breaths, apparently trying to let go of his arousal. "Damn," he swore.

Tobias glanced down at Noah's cock and nodded. "Pretty. Too bad," he said sympathetically. "But I get to enjoy it anyway, and mind your place, sweetheart." He pressed a quick kiss to Noah's mouth and then lifted him off his own fading erection. "Messy," he said with a grimace.

"Let me get something to clean you up, sir," Noah said, climbing stiffly off him. He cautiously removed the condom and took it with him as he walked a little awkwardly out of the stall. He returned with a warm wet washcloth from one of the supply stalls and ran it over Tobias gently. "You look tired, Master, I wonder if you don't need a hot bath and a nap. May I go start a bath for you?"

Tobias nodded, his breathing finally back to normal. "Thank you, pet. Then you may come back and clean up here and then go start supper. Wake me at six, or if you have any questions." He climbed to his feet with Noah's help and stretched. "Understood?" he asked, once more back in control of himself and his voice.

"Understood, Master," Noah answered him, kneeling automatically in his display position, waiting to be dismissed.

"Wonderful. Off you go then. I'll be over in a few moments." He smiled to himself as Noah left, hurrying off to run the bath. He'd really have to thank Bradford at some point, but carefully. It wouldn't do to have his old friend feeling too good about the scene in the dining room. Tobias heard the stable door close behind Noah and threw back his head, laughing in sheer delight. Things were working nicely. Chapter 5

The next time, Tobias didn't warn him. On Sunday afternoon he took Noah to the ring and had him strip once more, dangling the nipple clamps and their chain where Noah could see them, and that was all. Noah knew it was time to train to heel, and he was good about standing still while Tobias put the clamps on his nipples; everything was very smooth, as the whole weekend had been.

Success was carrying them, Tobias knew. It was time to push a little harder. In the morning he'd come out here while Noah was doing the morning chores, and he'd made an addition to the ring; the large steel cage, Noah's greatest fear, was currently draped in black cloth.

It wouldn't be for long.

Slowly he began to walk Noah around the ring, taking his time and not saying a word. Noah was to his heel, as he had been the last few times they'd done this. Noah had become very good at walking like this, rarely stumbling anymore. Around the ring, past the cross, the table, the trunks and cupboards. And then to the draped cage. As they passed, Tobias grabbed a corner and tugged the cloth off.

It took Noah one glance to lose his concentration. He hissed with the pinch of the clamps as he fell out of step, not for one stride, or two, but several before he got back in line with Tobias. His physical reaction—uneven breathing and tension—was palpable at Tobias' back.

Tobias stifled the urge to ask how he was; he knew. "I'm right here," he said calmly. He continued to walk, his pace

measured and steady. He didn't take it easy on his boy, changing direction a number of times before heading back to the cage.

Noah followed him, but Tobias could sense it was taking real effort for Noah to stay in step. The approach to the cage was fine, but the first turn around it went very badly, and Noah whimpered loudly with the tug he took for it. "Master..." he said softly, breaking a rule he hadn't broken since Friday night.

"Trust me."

Noah's sigh was heavy, but he managed to keep in step, following Tobias around the cage in another slow circle. He was trembling, Tobias knew, but he was trying.

To let Noah breathe, he moved them away from it, taking a long loop around the ring, right at the very edge. Then he circled the table. The Saint Andrew's Cross. Three trunks. And back to the cage.

It was better this time. Noah was nothing resembling relaxed, but he stayed in step and at Tobias' heel smoothly. Noah was walking so close to him, though, that Tobias could feel his still uneven breath on the back of his neck. It seemed, as they took one more swing around the cage, that Noah might be calming a bit, but then, unexpectedly, his hand reached up and tightened on Tobias' shoulder.

"Yellow."

Tobias dropped his end of the lead and took Noah's hand to move him away from the cage. He slipped an arm around Noah's waist and made sure he was facing away from it, then calmly asked, "All right?" Deviations: Domination by Chris Owen, Jodi Payne

"Dizzy, sir. Hard to breathe." Noah whispered, shaking his head and trying to get a deep breath, but it did seem like he was having difficulty. "I thought we ... would talk before you..." Noah gasped and swayed against him slightly.

Tobias turned him again, literally picking Noah up in his arms and holding him as he went to his chair in the middle of the ring. "It's okay, I have you. Trust me, pet. Believe in me. I won't put you in it, never intended to. Not today." He sat with Noah in his lap and stroked Noah's back lightly. "Breathe."

"I do trust you," Noah insisted, fighting for a deep breath and finally managing one. "I do. I do!" Noah reached up and angrily pushed away tears. He took another deep breath that he used to swear at himself in frustration, the situation uncomfortably reminiscent of their first night together at the club. He slammed a clenched fist down solidly on the library table. "Fuck!"

"Don't hurt yourself," Tobias said calmly. He stood up, still holding Noah, and walked two steps before sitting on the floor. "Affirmation, if I must restrain you."

Noah seemed more than willing, practically enthusiastic about the idea, and settled against Tobias without needing any coaxing at all. Once settled, he just started to talk. "It's a knee-jerk thing, I didn't even think about it, it just got my heart racing the moment I saw it. I know you wouldn't put me in it unless you really believed I was ready. I know that. And regardless, it's your call to make, so why am I so upset about this? You would never lock me in there and walk away. Not you, not ever," Noah shook his head, as words spilled from him, good words, trusting words, but emotional ones.

Tobias held him tightly, letting him talk. He had faith that Noah would deal with this, only needing to be supported and pushed to make his breakthrough. At this point he thought it was more important that Noah hear himself than Tobias, so he kept his words to a minimum, his tone as calm and matter-of-fact as possible. "I will never leave you like that."

"I know, sir, I believe that," Noah said. "It's not rational," he mumbled, "I don't even know what I was thinking about when I first saw it, I was just—it scared me. I was scared. I know you were right there, I know that training-to-heel hasn't a thing to do with that damn cage..." Noah sighed. "It's like a nightmare that I know I could shake if I could just wake up," he said softly. "I want to wake up. I don't want to be afraid of that fucking thing anymore."

Tobias nodded. "I'd like to try something, if you're up to it. We'll go slowly and I'll count us still in time out—you can talk and do as you need."

Noah nodded agreement. "I trust you, sir."

Tobias unwrapped himself from Noah and together they stood up. Holding Noah's hand, he said, "We're going to go look at it. That's all for now. We're just going to walk over there, as slowly as you like, and we're going to look at it as if we were in a store, looking for something for a puppy. Shopping. We're going to examine the structure of it, the workmanship. Be as detached from it as you can be. All right?"

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Noah glanced over at the cage and nodded, but he kept a tight hold of Tobias' hand. He let Tobias lead him over and stood beside it, staring down at it with a frown.

"Okay. So it's ... what?" Tobias prompted. "A big box. The steel isn't terribly thick, and some of the welds along the top are a little messy. What do you think?"

"I, uh..." Noah seemed to search for words in order to play along. "It's ... got a nice paint job? Looks like an airbrush thing, kind of like a car. Shiny." He cleared his throat and then swallowed.

"Uh-huh. Don't think that'll matter much to the dog, though." Tobias knelt down, still holding Noah's hand. "The floor is set in nicely and is really smooth—nothing to get scratched on."

Noah knelt beside him. "It's ... it's a good size, you think we can get it in the back of the car?"

"Sure. It's collapsible, see? The clips are hidden in the top corners, and the bottom folds up the side. The top comes off. It'll fit fine." Tobias squeezed Noah's fingers to let him know Tobias was there, to let him know he was doing a fine job.

"Well, that's..." Noah swallowed hard. "That's handy. Is it heavy?"

"Not very," Tobias said softly. "I can move it. You can try, if you like."

Noah shook his head. "No," he said quickly. "That is, um, you can handle the heavy lifting, dear." For all his creativity, he wasn't terrible convincing.

Tobias smiled softly. "Okay, pet. I can do it." He stood up again, bringing Noah with him by the simple means of

dragging him up by his hand. "Well done, sweetheart," he said, then kissed Noah deeply, not very subtly turning him away from the cage.

Noah went with Tobias, taking a deep breath as soon as the cage was no longer in his sight. He lifted the hand that was still in Tobias', turning it palm up. He pointed to a fading, ragged scar, not more than an inch long, right along the base of his thumb. "Cut myself on David's," he said softly, looking at the scar. "Your floor is much safer."

"Oh, Jesus." Tobias hugged him, pulled him as close as he could. "I had no idea. I'm sorry."

"I'd forgotten. It's okay. I actually meant that as a ... well, a good thing," Noah said, but hugged back with a sigh, pressing his face into Tobias' shoulder.

"I know, pet. But I'm still sorry." Tobias kissed the top of Noah's head and stroked his back. "I think we're done for the day. I suggest we go to the house and curl up with a pot of tea and a movie. Then supper, an early night ... maybe a fire in the fireplace before bed. Sort of recharge our batteries."

"That sounds so nice, sir," Noah agreed. He paused. "Fucking thing," Noah said tiredly. "Are you going to leave it there? I think ... I think maybe you should."

"For a few weeks, yes," Tobias said. "The next goal is to walk by it with ease. Then you'll touch it. When you're comfortable with that, we'll move on. But not before. And then it will go back into its stall; I doubt we'll use it for play, but it's important you get past what happened. It's not the cage itself; it's the fear, and the trust." Deviations: Domination by Chris Owen, Jodi Payne

Noah nodded, stepping back from Tobias with a hiss at his clamps as one caught in Tobias' shirt. "Ow. I understand, sir." Tobias grinned and pulled him back. "Silly boy. Stand still." He unscrewed the clamps, easing one nipple with the flat of his tongue and the other with his fingers. "Better?"

Noah nodded, and smirked. "Oh, yes. Yes, sir."

"Good. Now, brat. Back to the house; I have an urge to make you watch musicals."

Chapter 6

Monday morning Deidre was in a better mood and the flowers he'd sent were being displayed on the front counter of the clinic.

"I'm sorry," he said, leaning in the door of her office.

"I know. You're an ass, and when you're hung over and lovesick you're a grumpy ass." She looked up and grinned. "But I forgive you. Have a nice weekend?"

"I did," he said with a smile.

"Ah, gave him flowers, too?" she asked with an arched eyebrow.

"Nope. Gave him something better." He fled before he could hear her reply.

The day passed easily and he was still in a relaxed mood when he got home. The light was flashing on the answering machine, so he turned up the volume and pressed play as he passed through to the kitchen for a glass of water.

"Hello, Tobias. This is your official but informal invitation to my New Year's party. Give me a call and we'll discuss the details. I hope you had a good weekend. Talk to you soon."

Ah, Bradford, with an actually plausible excuse for calling, other than just checking up on him. With a grin, Tobias grabbed the phone and dialed the man's direct line.

"Hello?" Bradford answered with his usual smooth discretion, though he sounded a bit distracted.

"Hi, Mom! Had a nice weekend, thanks."

"Tobias! Sweetheart!" Bradford answered in a mockmotherly tone. "So good to hear from you. How was school today? You shit. Are you bringing your boy to my party or what?" There was laughter in his voice.

Tobias grinned and opened the freezer, looking for ice. "New Year's Eve? I'd think so. He should be ready by then. It would also depend on his work schedule, of course."

"All right. I'm putting you down as a 'yes.' You're at my table for dinner," Bradford informed him. "I was considering asking Phan to serve me that evening; will that be a problem? He could end up kneeling a foot way from your boy, hmm? I'll invite someone else if you feel uncomfortable about it."

Tobias considered it, one hand in the ice bucket. "That could be ... interesting. What do you think? Phan wouldn't have a problem with it at all, I'm sure." He grabbed a couple of ice cubes and dropped them into his glass.

"You want my honest opinion? Silly me, of course you do. I think it's time your boy got over it. You've gone well out of your way to accommodate his neurosis." Bradford snorted. "And, besides, we can only benefit from a little healthy competition. That's just my opinion, of course."

Tobias laughed. "So you want to set them off against each other just after I've smoothed the way? You do know they'll act up just to see who gets spanked better?"

"And the problem with that is...?" Bradford laughed. "Phan, as you well know, handles these parties like a pro. Noah, on the other hand, well, he's generally been very reserved, and I've never seen him have a problem, but he'd have a hell of a time keeping up with Phan, if that's his aim. I think there's something to it, but I don't want to shake anything that's not solid yet if you know what I mean, so you make the call, Tobias."

Tobias rolled his eyes and added water to his ice. Drink finally made, he headed to the living room. "Very subtle. You're getting better at that." He turned on a lamp and more or less fell onto the couch. "Things are solid. And I owe you my thanks."

"I'm very glad to hear it," Bradford replied and Tobias knew it was sincere. To his credit, he didn't ask Tobias any questions at all. "Very glad. You must feel great today."

Tobias nodded to himself. "Top's high, you know it. I'll settle." He would; he knew from experience that he would, and that he'd be fine. "I'll call Noah tomorrow night. So, any idea when you're going to deal with Phantom?"

"Yes. I'm aiming for the weekend after the party. I'll arrange to meet him Friday night, and he won't be leaving until either he has a breakthrough or I have a heart attack." Bradford sighed. "Whichever happens first. Are you good to spot me if I need you that weekend?"

"Of course. I said I would." Tobias closed his eyes. "You're going to need me, I'm afraid, simply because it's going to take time and you're only human. No matter how hard you try not to be."

"Pshaw. Doms aren't human, are they?" Bradford was joking, but he didn't sound like he was laughing. "Barring a miracle, I'm sure I will need you. I suspect Phan will, too."

"You know I'll do what I can. Would you like me to stay in town, then? Noah's not even seen my playroom here." Bradford sounded relieved. "Would you mind doing that, Tobias? I'd hate to interfere with your plans for Noah, but in case I make an unholy mess of this..."

There were very few people Bradford trusted enough to ever look fallible in front of, and Tobias knew well that he was one of them. Even so, he knew it took some doing for Bradford to let himself seem anything less than confident.

Tobias smiled a little. "You. Phantom. Like I'd be able to say no and ever look at myself again? I'll be here." He sipped his water and decided to change the subject, if only to give Bradford a break from thinking about Phan's issues. "What's the dress code for this party of yours?"

"Oh! I'm so glad you asked. The details will be in the formal invitation—those are in the mail, I should think you will have it any day now." Bradford transitioned easily into more pleasant conversation. "This year, rather than going with a theme for the party in general, I'm looking for a theme among couples. Not role play; save that for Halloween." He chuckled. "Really, I'm going for ensembles that complement each other. Something about what you're wearing echoed in his outfit, or vice versa. Make sense? Sounds like fun doesn't it? And everyone will look so good together."

Tobias snorted. "Several dead cows' worth of leather ... and it's at the club or your place?"

"Oh, this is the club party," Bradford answered. "But the Valentine's party will be at my place, and you'll be getting that invitation later. That's a much smaller, more ... intimate affair." Tobias laughed softly. "And Noah might be ready for that by then, too. We'll see—I might just make him watch."

"Well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it, eh? Listen, I'm glad things went well for you this weekend. I'm sorry I had to ... well, you know anything that went on in that room will never leave it."

"And that's the only way you ever get me like that," Tobias said flatly. "I might have needed it, but I really don't like it." He softened his tone and added, "You're the only one left who could do it, you know. Thank you."

"You're welcome, my friend, and that train goes both ways, you know." Bradford said seriously. "There's nothing to like about it, it just sets your teeth on edge enough to remember why you do what you do. I hardly did anything but straight talk you. I haven't had a contracted submissive in years, as you know. The rewards are high, but it's a great deal of work—I'm not sure I could do it myself anymore."

Tobias shrugged a shoulder. "It's not for everyone—and sometimes it just takes the right partner. What you do is immensely valuable—not just for men like Phan and your Nikki and Brian, but the whole club. You keep us all safe."

"I should call you more often, you're so good for my ego." Bradford laughed and Tobias heard another voice in the room. "All right, my friend, make sure you RSVP with your meal choices."

"Of course. I'll talk to Noah tomorrow night and let you know. Goodnight, Bradford." Tobias hung up and looked thoughtfully at the city lights. A party. Phantom and Noah on their knees next to each other. Deviations: Domination by Chris Owen, Jodi Payne

Oh, this could be interesting.

Chapter 7

Apart from a quick phone call to confirm Noah's availability for New Year's Eve, Tobias hadn't spoken to or heard from Noah all week. He had settled a bit after his high from the weekend as the days passed, but he was still looking forward to seeing Noah on Friday. He checked with Jorge by cell phone to be sure Noah was in the car and to get an estimated arrival time, then went to his study to pay a few bills and wait.

The car came up the drive in due time. It was early winter and quite dark at six in the evening; Tobias could see the car lights sweep past the windows of his office before it stopped to let Noah out by the front door.

Noah had apparently learned a good lesson the week before and had thought about it a good deal; he came in, dropped his bag by the stairs, and went straight to Tobias' office. He arrived silently, knelt just inside the doorway with his eyes down, and simply waited.

"Hello, pet." Tobias got up and walked to him, one hand out to ruffle Noah's hair. "I trust you had a good week. Did you behave yourself?"

"Yes, sir. I did as I was told, sir," Noah assured him.

Tobias grinned and dropped his hand a little lower to stroke along Noah's jaw. "And how are you feeling now?" The order not to masturbate all week likely had his pet stirred up; Tobias was confident Noah had done as he'd been told—or not done, as was the case—but he thought Noah would at least like to talk about it a little, express what he was surely feeling.

"At the moment I'm ... a little irritable, sir," Noah admitted, and his voice did sound a bit tight come to think of it. "And it won't take much to..." He sighed, leaned into Tobias' hand, and then swallowed hard. "Not much at all."

"Oh, you poor thing," Tobias said softly. He wasn't entirely unsympathetic—he'd been in Noah's place once and hadn't been happy about it. "You did as you were told, and that's wonderful, thank you. But it's also merely what I expect. An order is an order and your obedience is simply my due. To be rewarded for only doing as you're told would be ... well."

Tobias stepped back a little and shook his head. Noah looked amazing—a little distraught, a lot aroused, and on the verge of desperate. "Ask me for what you want. Ask me for ... precisely what you'd like, and I'll see what I can do for you."

"I would like ... what I would like is..." Noah stopped, as if trying to work out his phrasing. "All I want is to please you, sir," Noah replied with a sigh.

"I know, and I appreciate it." Tobias leaned back against his desk and very deliberately lowered the pitch of his voice. "Right now it would please me to know how you want to come. Do you want to me suck you off? Do you want to masturbate? Do you want to be fucked over my desk? Would you like to make out on the couch?"

Noah's eyes practically popped out of his head. He damn near stared at Tobias, but caught himself just in time. "S ... suck me off? You would ... I mean, would you, sir? We could even make out first..." Noah stammered, looking as if he'd been offered the Holy Grail.

Tobias laughed happily and moved back to him in two long strides. "Of course—if you ask. I enjoy sex and affection just like anyone else, sweetheart." He took Noah's arms just above the elbows and urged him to his feet. "Making out is one of the main joys in life—why on earth would I give that up?" He leaned forward and slipped an arm around Noah's waist. "Ask me," he whispered into Noah's ear. "Tell me what you want."

Noah leaned into Tobias for a moment before answering, then lifted his chin and whispered, "I want you to take me out to the couch, put on some of your sexy jazz, kiss me breathless, make love to me, and let me come with my cock in your mouth," he breathed to Tobias. Then he added, in a low voice, "Please, sir."

Tobias smiled and licked the rim of Noah's ear. "All right," he whispered softly. "Come with me." He turned, taking Noah's hand in his own, and walked them across the hall into the living room.

It wasn't a large room, but it was comfortable, with both a long couch and a smaller love seat. There was a cabinet with a TV and stereo at one end; the weekend before they'd sat on the couch and watched musicals. Tobias left Noah standing by the couch while he went to put in a CD, easily settling on Miles Davis for the simple fact that it was on top. As the music started up he smiled and went back to Noah, a hand out once more. "Come here, pet. Sit with me." Noah moved to Tobias, his hard cock still pressing against his button fly. He slid his hand into Tobias' and sat beside him, mindful of his eyes, but quite obviously admiring the rest of Tobias's body. "I like this," he said, gesturing to the stereo as he sat, the other hand sliding along Tobias' thigh.

"Good," Tobias said, smoothly slipping an arm around Noah's shoulders and turning slightly. "I like this." He leaned forward and kissed Noah softly on the mouth, almost chastely. There was little chaste about the hand he rested high on Noah's thigh, however, an inch or so away from Noah's groin.

Noah moaned, and he responded in kind by tracing Tobias' lower lip with his tongue and then sucking on it gently. His fingers found their way under Tobias' shirt and rested warmly on his belly. "I thought about you a lot this week. Wrote about you in my journal, fantasized about you. I missed you," Noah told him honestly.

"I missed you, too," Tobias said with a smile. He kissed Noah again, his hand curving up over Noah's hip to slide under his shirt and stroke the small of his back. "I missed the way you smell. The way you taste." His hand moved higher and he kissed a trail along Noah's jaw.

Noah sighed softly and lifted his chin, giving Tobias free range of his jaw and neck. His fingers slowly unbuttoned Tobias' shirt and he slid his hands along bare skin, over abs and ribs, and through the soft hair on Tobias' chest.

Tobias found himself smiling into Noah's warm skin; down his neck, around his collar bone and back up. He tasted good; sweet and alive and a little wild. The hand Tobias had around Noah's shoulders moved and twisted so he could ease Noah back on the couch, so he could push Noah's shirt up and off, so he could move lower. He licked at one nipple, his hands busy mapping tight abs. "God, you're gorgeous," he murmured.

"So are you," Noah returned the compliment, sliding his hands over Tobias' back as he settled into the couch. "Strong shoulders, lean ... so clever, so gentle." Noah gasped lightly and raised one knee, giving Tobias more room on the couch but also shifting Tobias off of his sensitive erection. "Oh, God."

Tobias bit lightly in response, dragging his teeth over Noah's nipple and then settling in to suck on it, drawing it into his mouth. He made an approving noise, loving the way Noah's breathing caught and sped up, the feel of muscles tensing and relaxing under his hands. He drew his fingers lower and teased around the waistband of Noah's jeans, dipping under it ever so slightly before retreating.

Noah arched to Tobias' mouth and shivered as he pulled his hand away. Fingers tangled in Tobias' hair and tugged, and Noah's other hand circled his upper arm and squeezed. "Master," came in his low voice, a simple word exhaled on hot breath.

"Yes." Tobias moved back up Noah's body, covering him and taking his mouth in a deep kiss. His own erection scraped along Noah's hip and he groaned. Sucking on Noah's tongue, he began to unfasten the taut button fly.

Noah's hips jerked and he pressed upward against Tobias' hand, making it harder to get the jeans open. Tobias' face

was cupped in Noah's hands as they kissed, Noah's moan smothered by Tobias' mouth.

Noah's need seemed to be cycling upward and Tobias' vague plans of a slow and lingering make out session began to crumble. Tobias kissed Noah a little deeper, fed him back his sounds, and finally pushed a hand into Noah's jeans. He curled his fingers around Noah's rigid cock and tore his mouth away, breathing heavily. "Feels good, pet," he purred before dipping his head to once more ravish a tight nipple.

"Oh, Jesus!" Noah gasped. "Oh, God, yes..." He grunted, tugging on Tobias' hair again and panting. He bit an already swollen lip and shoved his other hand down, tightening his fingers around Tobias'. Tobias would have smirked if he hadn't been busy. He stroked Noah hard, knowing there was no way he was going to hold off, and bit down on his nipple.

Noah rose so quickly it was a wonder he'd been able to hold off at all. Still, it was something to watch his need seize him, sense him step over the threshold, feel him begin to come. Noah's groans were a constant keening now and he pushed his cock through Tobias' fingers.

"That's it," Tobias whispered. "Want you to come for me. Take the edge off, sweetheart." He slid down Noah's body and sucked the head of Noah's cock in, his mouth following their hands down until he could suck, his tongue pressing hard against the shaft.

"Master!" Noah gasped, forcing in air so he could scream. His hips left the couch as he came and filled Tobias' mouth with hot, salty spunk. "Oh, fuck, yes, so good. Thank you..." he babbled, panting harshly. Tobias kept sucking, kept playing. He swallowed everything that Noah gave him and cleaned him up, licking and teasing and doing what he could to keep him from going soft. He buried his head in Noah's lap and tugged at Noah's jeans, pulling them down far enough to free Noah's balls, and then he turned his attention to them, moaning happily as he sucked one and then the other into his mouth.

Noah was trying to find control again, forcing himself to take deep breaths. "Oh, fucking hell, why couldn't I hold out for a real blow job?" He laughed softly, his voice hoarse. "That was a tough week. This, though? This could be the beginning of a long, long night." He tugged on Tobias, pulling him up into another kiss. He moaned, licking along Tobias' jaw. "I'll be back for more in a minute, no worries."

Oh, to be twenty-nine again.

"I'm sure you will," Tobias said with a grin and another kiss to Noah's jaw. He was making his way back to Noah's earlobe. "And then what shall we do?"

"Anything, everything..." Noah sighed. "Stay up all night, wear out the CD, screw on the couch and over the coffee table, maybe up against the wall ... watch the sunrise, drink coffee naked in the kitchen..."

Tobias laughed. "Well, I'll give you screwing on the couch. After that I'm afraid I'm going to turn into a mean Master and demand my dinner and my faithful submissive at my feet. Oh, but there is a treat for later, if you're a very, very good boy. If not tonight, maybe tomorrow."

"It was just an idea," Noah answered, grinning. "Screwing on the couch works for me." Tobias felt Noah's fingers working the button of his pants and then lowering his zipper. "I can be a good boy."

Tobias shifted his hips, let Noah have room to work. "I know you can," he agreed easily. "But just how good are you going to be?"

"Now? Or when your faithful sub comes back?" Noah answered, still grinning. "Now, I'm going to be very, very naughty. Later, I'll be very, very good." He shifted, giving Tobias a tug that ended up with Tobias on his back and Noah looking down at him. Noah started in with his tongue, tracing lines and drawing circles, tasting every inch of Tobias' chest before teasing a nipple to hardness.

"Not to give you the wrong idea," Tobias said, watching and admiring as Noah moved on him, "but in this particular case naughty isn't a bad thing. Oh, do that again, pet. A little harder." He hissed as Noah's teeth scraped over the now peaked nipple, sending a tug to his groin. "More."

"In this ... particular ... case," Noah answered, licking his nipple between words. "I'll take that under advisement." Noah pinched it between his teeth, not painfully, but hard enough to feel it, while he slipped his fingers into Tobias' open fly.

Tobias groaned and arched toward Noah's mouth, enjoying the attention. His dick would get its share, he knew; right then he just wanted the burn, the tease. He rocked his hips and moaned happily as Noah's fingers teased at his cock, then buried a hand in Noah's hair and kept him tight to his chest.

Noah didn't tug or stroke him, just smoothed fingers over and around him. Noah removed them again moments later and cupped Tobias through his pants instead. Moving on to Tobias' other nipple, he assaulted it with his tongue, flicking at it and blowing cold air over the wet skin until it tightened into a button. "Feel that chill? Looks damn good," he said, closing his teeth over it.

Tobias groaned. "Feels good." Then with a growl he played back, turning them again and pinning Noah to the back of the couch, one hand on Noah's mostly stiff cock. "So does this. Nice recovery, boy."

Noah winked at him, a wicked smirk on his lips. "You are so handsome. You must know it. You dress like you know it, walk like you know it ... but, God, you're just beautiful."

"Flattery, pet? And don't think I'm missing the gleam in your eye—the mere fact that I can see your eyes means I'm going to stripe your ass tonight." He grinned and pushed his cock along Noah's hip. "Gets me hard, you know. Love doing that to you."

"I know. But I never get to admire these," Noah told him, and ran a thumb under one of Tobias' eyes. Then he stroked the back of his fingers down Tobias' cheek. "I'll take the strokes, gladly. It wasn't flattery, it was the truth. I can only tell you the truth anymore."

"Noah." He whispered the name just before he kissed him. His lover. It was a kiss to rival any other, slower and more intense than the frantic, passionate embraces they'd shared earlier. Tobias held Noah close and simply kissed him, felt him.

Noah responded with a soft sound, wrapping an arm around Tobias and tangling his fingers in Tobias' hair. He

remained gentle and pliable in Tobias' arms and returned the kiss, unhurried, melting into Tobias' chest. Tobias wasn't sure how long they stayed like that, trading kisses and long looks as they lay on the couch, mostly undressed but not quite naked. Miles Davis played through once and started over. Tobias ran a hand down Noah's back and up again, cradling Noah's head as he took another long kiss. "Nice," he whispered, pulling back to look into the eyes he hardly ever saw.

"Worth every stripe," Noah said with a soft smile, finally breaking a silence that had become almost painful with other things they didn't say, weren't ready to say, shouldn't say. "You want me, you brute?" He grinned, and with some absurd angling and difficulty he wiggled himself out of his jeans and his boxers and dropped them over the back of the couch. "I want to feel you inside me."

"You're getting very forward, young man." Tobias grinned as he stripped and pulled Noah against him again. "Is this going to happen every time I deny you for a week or more?"

"Please don't say, 'or more' ... it'll ruin the moment," Noah groaned. "This can happen without you having to deny me for an hour."

"Ah, now you are teasing. I don't suppose you happen to have lube with you? A handy condom?"

"What? You, of all people, you don't have lube in your living room?" Noah might have been teasing, but he looked seriously shocked.

Tobias snorted. "I happen to have a submissive who's responsible for that. Remember?"

"I don't recall being told I should stock them in the living room," Noah said with a grunt as he hauled himself over Tobias and off the couch. "However, after a certain encounter involving dinner, I happen to have stocked some in the kitchen, well hidden so we don't scandalize Mrs. M." He winked at Tobias and then disappeared, padding barefoot and naked out into the hall.

Tobias laughed, unable not to. Smartass sub. Part of him was busily pointing out that he was, in fact, coddling Noah again and that they were quickly regressing to the honeymoon stage, but he knew that his plans for the weekend would snap them both back into the headspace they needed. And there really was nothing wrong with happily enjoying sex on a couch once in a while. He was just about to begin enjoying it on his own, one hand wrapping lightly around his erection, when Noah came back.

Noah licked his lips and knelt by the couch, leaning over it to kiss across Tobias' stomach. "Is that for me, or have you gotten selfish?" he teased, waving the condom in front of Tobias' eyes.

"I am not selfish, merely aware of what's mine and who's in charge. If you'd like this..." he idly began to stroke himself and smirked as Noah's gaze followed his hand, "you can ask nicely. Again. I'm finding I really like it when you ask, pet."

Noah grinned, once again meeting his eyes. "I want to feel you sink slowly inside me, balls deep, deeper." Noah said in his most seductive voice. He was truly shameless. "Will you gift me, sir, with the warmth and weight of your body over mine?" he went on, lowering his eyes and kissing over Tobias' chest. "Let me enjoy your cock inside me? Make me forget anything but you, me, and this couch?" He looked back up at Tobias, eyes smoldering. "Please, sir?"

"You are so going to pay for this," Tobias grinned. "I hope it's worth it." Laughing, he pulled Noah down onto the couch and rolled, pinning him down on his back. Wedged between Noah's spread thighs, he bent low for another searing kiss, licking and biting at Noah's lips.

Noah lifted his knees higher and returned the kiss, opening his mouth and groaning. His hands traveled over Tobias' skin, groping, grasping, digging into skin anywhere they could. "So worth it," he panted.

"I'm glad you think so," Tobias said, his voice taking on a growl. "Lube?"

Noah gasped and one hand opened, revealing one of the sample-sized tubes Tobias had in various places.

"Good boy," Tobias praised, dipping his head to bite at a nipple for a moment as he slicked his fingers and tossed the lube on the floor. He watched Noah's eyes flutter as he breached Noah with two fingers and probed him gently. "Love your ass. Love the way your whole body begs for me."

Noah gripped Tobias' biceps with his fingers and bore down on the intrusion. "Want you. Want this. You do it to me, make me beg, make me shameless." Noah's eyes closed and his brow furrowed. "So good."

Tobias shook his head, sliding his fingers deeper. "You were born to beg, boy; to be wanton and hedonistic. You've just spent a lot of time hiding." He fingered Noah again and then pulled his hand away, smiling at the whimper of disappointment. In a moment he'd sheathed himself with the rubber and was nudging at Noah's hole with his cock.

"Yes, please yes," Noah begged on cue, breathlessly and with urgency in his voice. He rolled his hips up as if he was trying to take Tobias in himself. Rushing things. It was typical of him. "Sir. Master..."

Tobias chuckled, the sound cutting off into a moan as he pushed in. Noah was tight, squeezing and caressing him from the almost too sensitive head of his cock all the way down the shaft as he plunged deeper. "God. Oh, God, Noah," Tobias sighed.

"Ah, fuck, you're so ... thick," Noah said with a groan. "Burns so good." He lay fairly still now, just moving gently with Tobias' hips, not rushing anything now that Tobias was inside. He leaned up and nipped at Tobias' chin and slid his fingers over Tobias' chest, pinching and twisting a nipple slowly.

With a deep groan Tobias moved, slowing down as much as he could. He kissed Noah when and where he could, his concentration divided between slowing his thrusts and what Noah was doing to his nipples. Every tug made his dick throb, and he wound up grinding down, almost shuddering as Noah teased him.

"You really like this, don't you?" Noah asked with a grin, though it was more of a statement than a question. "Every time I do this..." he teased, rolling Tobias' other nipple in his fingers. "See? Your cock goes mad."

Tobias tried to reply with more than a grunt, but fell short. His cock was twitching wildly and he couldn't seem to get close enough, deep enough into Noah. It felt amazing. He took a deep breath and rallied slightly, enough to pull back and thrust in again, aiming for Noah's gland. "I like it," he agreed hoarsely. "And you like this."

Noah answered him with something completely unintelligible. It might have been an attempt at words, but Tobias couldn't even venture a guess as to what Noah was saying. It hardly mattered; he knew damn well he'd found the spot.

He watched as Noah slid one hand away from his chest, finding his own shaft and giving it a none-too-subtle squeeze. "Oh, God," he panted. "Do that again."

He grinned. "I will if you will," he said, lifting Noah's head to his chest with one hand. With the other he braced himself and stabbed into Noah's ass again, ramming himself against Noah's prostate.

As he thrust, he felt Noah's breath on his chest. Noah shouted and shivered, and his teeth closed around Tobias' nipple, biting down hard as he clung to Tobias' shoulder and hip.

It was exquisite. Tobias shook and groaned, his hips stuttering as he slammed into Noah again and again, the intense sensations zinging from his nipple to his cock. With a gasp he pulled away and reared back, buried in his boy. "God. Jesus, pet." He breathed hard, frozen in place as he fought not to come. "Stay with me, Noah. Just a little longer, sweetheart."

Noah opened his eyes and stared into Tobias'. He nodded, panting heavily, and let his hand fall away from his cock. He

tightened his heels around Tobias' ass and gripped Tobias' arms again. "Yes, yes. Okay ... Oh, God. Tobias." He squeezed his eyes shut again and shivered, but he was holding out, waiting, panting, bearing down hard to let Tobias go deeper still.

Tobias thought he just might shatter, then. Noah was everywhere, everything, and with every breath they drew closer. Closer to each other, closer to coming, closer to dying, closer to weeping. He was as much a part of his boy as he could be.

He lowered his head the few inches he needed, curled right over his boy and kissed Noah softly. "Noah," he whispered. "My boy. It's time. It has to be." And staring into Noah's eyes he began to move again, slowly thrusting and rocking, sliding in and out of his lover, letting his orgasm ease over him, welcoming it as it began to sweep him away.

Noah gasped and arched to meet the thrusts, holding Tobias' eyes for a moment but then squeezing his own shut as he came, panting through the waves of tension as they left his body, moaning softly until he was spent and Tobias was soft and he was able to collapse back onto the couch. He was still trembling slightly, his breath was thin, and his arms were resting around Tobias' shoulders.

There was little to do but relax forward and rest his head on Noah's chest. He listened to Noah's heart race and knew his own was pounding just as fast; their breathing was matched, harsh pants slowly evening out. He had no idea what to say, so he merely purred, shifting his body slightly so Noah wouldn't be in agony, bent as he was. In a moment he'd managed to reverse their positions, so he could hold Noah, cradle him. That they were on the floor was a minor issue he didn't feel like thinking about.

They lay there for a long moment, but Noah sighed finally and took the burden of speaking first on himself. "I'm sorry, Master," he apologized, and Tobias felt the calm in Noah of just a moment before drain away. Noah's heart even started beating faster. "You've been kind about offenses in the heat of the moment, but that was outright breaking the rules. Your name was out of my mouth before I ... I was not being mindful. I deserve to be punished, I'm sorry." Even Noah's voice was shaky as he started to pull away.

Tobias held him tighter. "I thought you said it would be worth it, Noah," he said softly. "I'm sorry if you've changed your mind."

"Oh! No! No, no. God, I haven't changed my mind, not at all." Noah stuttered. "It's worth any number of stripes to me, that was ... I've never felt so close to anyone as that, it was wonderful. Fulfilling. More than I'd asked for. You're amazing." Noah relaxed against him. "I just thought ... I assumed you'd be angry with me."

Tobias frowned to himself, gently stroking Noah's skin along his arm and side. "What did I do to make you think I'd be angry? Sweetheart, I've never been angry with you. I was having fun, I was enjoying myself. It was wonderful, intense. It ... I'm not angry."

"I'm so glad it was the same for you," Noah said earnestly. "It's not that you gave me any reason to ... I just..." Noah stopped himself. "I haven't called you by name in over two months, if you can believe it's been that long. I guess I was being paranoid. And now I'm ruining a perfectly wonderful afterglow, aren't I? Do me a favor, just tell me to shut up and be happy."

"Shut up and be happy," Tobias said softly. He turned Noah's head with his fingers and tried to get him to meet his eyes. "Right after you tell me why you instinctively felt like using my name in the heat of ... of making love would make me angry."

Noah didn't meet his eyes, he just shook his head. "No, not now, okay?" He leaned up and kissed Tobias. "Not now, he intrudes on everything, ruins everything for me and I don't want him to walk all over this, too. This is too perfect; this isn't his moment, it's ours."

Tobias nodded, already pulling Noah closer. He'd let it go for now, but not long. Not even until morning—this would be dealt with before bed, before punishment. But right then it was more important to reassure Noah and enjoy the moment, as Noah put it.

"All right, sweetheart. It's not for him." He kissed Noah again, hands skimming rapidly cooling skin. He curled around Noah and grabbed for the cotton blanket on the loveseat, draping it over them, and said, "Just us. And it was perfect." He scattered more kisses along Noah's jaw.

Noah sniffled and smiled and kissed back. "It was. It is," Noah agreed, sighing softly. "How do you feel?"

"Boneless. Brainless." Tobias smiled. "Happy. Like I've just had an amazing experience I don't want to forget or take for granted. You? Did I hurt you?" "Hurt me?" Noah laughed softly. "Not even close. You were incredibly gentle and everything was so slow and ... intimate, don't you think? It continues to astound me that on the one hand you can wield a crop or a paddle or a flogger and stripe me and make me scream and beg, but on the other hand you can handle me so carefully, touch me so softly..." His eyes flicked up and met Tobias'. "I sound like a sap, don't I?" He grinned. "This is the kind of shit I write in my journal."

Tobias laughed softly. "I try very hard not to wonder what you write about—that isn't helping." He sighed again and spent a few moments happily kissing a path along Noah's neck. "I like you sappy," he said finally. "I like touching you like this, I like being like this. It's as much a high as the other, just as necessary ... maybe it's what I need to balance the other? I don't know."

"Maybe it reminds you it's not all about ... pain?" Noah said softly. He kissed the top of Tobias' head and ran his fingers through Tobias' hair.

"Perhaps. But I like the pain—or, rather, the control I need to inflict a specific pain. I just also like being able to touch softly, to soothe and make love and simply be close." He nuzzled Noah for a moment. "It's just as grounding, I think. I need the other, we both do. It's what makes us who we are. However, there's nothing that says we can't enjoy this, too, we simply have to keep our relationship in mind and put times like this in a context that works for us."

Noah nodded. "I think we can do that. I know we can, we already have. Times like this make the transfer of power better in a way. Fuller, maybe? More meaningful. To know we

both need that and want that and still have this? Anyway, I'm the compartmentalization expert, remember?"

"True." Tobias thought about for a moment or two, casually pulling Noah even closer to him. "Do you think we need rules about it? A set framework where certain freedoms are understood to be given?"

"Oh, God, no more rules!" Noah said with a laugh. "I'm kidding. I think the question is, do you think we need rules about it? I think organically we've been all right so far, but maybe you think we'll be too indulgent without rules?"

"Not so much rules..." Tobias frowned, trying to order his thoughts. "You're naked."

"Oh, yes," Noah answered smiling. "I spend a lot of time naked around you; I should think you'd be tired of looking at me."

Tobias snorted. "I tend to plan and figure things out when you're not here. I'm much too busy when you're naked to make changes to our relationship—usually spanking you or whipping your back. Now, behave a moment, boy." He smiled to himself as Noah pouted quite obviously. "Now, as I was saying, I don't think I mean rules, really—more like, perhaps we should have a way to let each other know when we need this. When it's time to be tender and when we can relax a few of the restrictions. Treat it as a special kind of scene because I do see this as a needed part of our relationship but not something to be taken for granted. I still expect a certain level of behavior from you—but I like to look in your eyes when we make love like this." Noah shifted and looked Tobias in the eyes. "Sir ... Tobias," Noah said gently, using Tobias' name deliberately this time. "I have a safe word ... if it's something I need, I have a way to tell you, don't I? Do you feel like you have a hard time telling me it's what you need? Do you need a way to tell me you want me to look into your eyes? Is it a difficult thing for you to do?"

Tobias' mouth went dry. "It ... As a general rule, I tend to take what I need. But, yes, I have a hard time asking—it's complicated."

Noah smiled. "Because you can't take this, this is something I have to give you; that we have to share. A Dom doesn't ask for anything, he gives orders. There's no safe word for a Dom."

"Ah, but Doms don't need safe words—we either do a scene or we don't."

"You're so literal. Were you like this in school? Because it must have driven your professors mad." Noah sighed dramatically. "Doms don't need a safe word, no. But they can have signals? Code words? Things they can say or do to get their point across without being too ... verbose?"

He laughed. He had to; the entire thing was just so silly. "You mean I don't have to meet you at the door and say 'Dear, I want to make love and not fuck your brains out. Please look at me and we'll go have fun. Tomorrow I'll flog you until you cry, promise'?"

"You're such a smartass," Noah said, laughing and giving Tobias a shove. "But as long as you're on it ... what's so hard for you about just saying it? What's so complicated about it?" Deviations: Domination by Chris Owen, Jodi Payne

"It ... well, it goes a little against my nature, wouldn't you say? I give orders. I take charge. I manipulate things—I meant what I said when you got here this evening, Noah. What we did in here wasn't a reward for you not jerking off all week. I completely expect you to follow orders if I reward you or not. But I was able to get to you to ask, I was able ... I needed it to start from you."

Noah nodded. "Okay, we can work with that. We just need a way for you to get the message to me." Noah bit his lip thoughtfully, then raised an eyebrow. "I have a very simple idea." He propped himself up on one elbow. "It's Friday night and I walk in the door. If the hall table has nothing on it but the bills that need to go into the mail on Monday, I know we're having a regular weekend. If you've left me something, a flower maybe, then I know what you need and I can come in and ask for it, hmm? Or ... different scenario, it's Saturday and I've just come in from the barn after wrestling with Dusky Dianna, again," he winked. "And look! A flower! Or, not. Simple. You never have to ask, and I get the message."

"Dusky Dianna's been giving you a rough time?" Tobias asked with a grin. "That bitch. God, I like that horse." He laughed at Noah's raised eyebrow and pulled him down for a kiss. "All right, sweetheart. Flowers it is. And I don't want to hear any bitching about 'you never leave me flowers anymore' or anything like it. You have your words. You need, we talk. Yes?"

"That's my responsibility, yes. And yes, Dianna is a bitch." Noah snorted.

"Ah, my poor baby. What's she doing to you?"

"Nothing." Noah snorted again. "She does nothing. She plants her stupid, stubborn feet and that's it. And I have to wait until she decides she's ready to cooperate. She 'accidentally' stepped on me last weekend. Grouchy nag."

Tobias grinned. "Maybe you should try lowering your eyes and calling her Mistress. She's my sweetie, you know. She's a lady—not to be ordered around, but coaxed and pampered. Maybe bribed, if she's in the right mood."

"She's spoiled rotten is what she is, and now I see why. She's no lady around me, I assure you."

Tobias smacked Noah's ass as best he could, which wasn't very well considering the blanket and the way they were wrapped around each other. "She is not spoiled, I promise you. And if she's not a lady to you I suggest you try a little harder—take her some sugar." Okay, he'd have to stop grinning if Noah was going to take his advice seriously. And he might have to have a word with Dusky Dianna as well.

Noah snorted. "A little sugar, maybe some grain ... maybe let her chew on me. Right. I'm guessing you'd been doing all her turn out yourself? She's spoiled, she wants her human." He grinned. "Was that your stomach? Are you getting hungry? What time is it?"

"Late, and yes, I'm hungry." Tobias sat up, pulling the blanket off Noah. "Peter turns her out during the week, but yes, I'll come out with you tonight and give the girl some love. And save your tender self from a gentle mare."

"Peter. I haven't met Peter. Is he hot?" Noah joked, sitting up as well. "Don't give me a hard time about the bitch; Spot and the other boys love me. What do you want to eat—it's kind of late for a big meal. You want some comfort food or something? A Reuben? Mac and cheese? Spaghetti?" Noah got up and started fishing around for his clothing. "Is it cold or is it me?"

"It's you. You're naked." Tobias wrapped the blanket around himself and stood up. "Peter is about sixty. Spot loves everyone. Crispin is a slut. Don't even get me started on Ace. And I think I'd like soup for supper. Maybe grilled cheese and tomato soup?"

"Believe it or not, I can do that," Noah grinned. "Peter's sixty? Why, he's your age!" He ran around the back side of the couch to grab his jeans.

"Do you want to get laid again? Ever? Because I can spend the rest of our contract with you tied to that library table. I can use a bullwhip. And I have four horses who shit an awful lot. So ... you can either come here and kiss me properly to say sorry or you can keep on running."

"Aww. I love it when you let me off easy." Noah pulled his jeans on and walked over to Tobias. "You are the hottest man alive," he said, and kissed him soundly.

"I know." Tobias grinned and turned Noah around with a firm hand. "Now. Feed me, boy."

Chapter 8

Noah wasn't happy, and it was all Tobias could do not to laugh at him. Dusky Dianna, his lovely lady, had been the perfect princess for him, loving and sweet, just like always. Which isn't to say that Tobias thought Noah was making up his tale of woe—no, he knew Dianna could be a bitch. But it was kind of funny to watch Noah glare and pout when she was perfectly ladylike and did everything she was supposed to. She'd nuzzled up to Tobias and been a good girl, with a distinct air of "This is my human. You may go to hell, minion."

Noah didn't exactly stomp back to the house, but he came close.

With another grin Tobias sent Noah to shower while he got the house ready for the night, turning out the lights and making sure everything was locked up. Then he fetched the crop and went to his room, ready to give Noah his punishment and then tuck him into his pallet.

But they had unfinished business, and no matter how much Noah wanted to leave it, Tobias knew he couldn't.

When Noah came into the room Tobias beckoned him over and waited until Noah was kneeling, his eyes down. "We have to talk about what happened earlier, pet. About David. We will be using the Affirmation position; I won't make you do this alone. Do you want to do it here or in the safe room?"

Noah chose the safe room, and he probably had the right of it. The bedroom was really Tobias' space, after all, and the safe room was somewhere they shared, somewhere Noah could relax and talk. Tobias sat on the floor as usual, with his back against his chair, and held his arms out to Noah, who settled easily enough between his legs but stayed leaning forward for a moment.

"It's about that scar on my shoulder, sir," Noah told him, and Tobias traced it lightly with his finger before pulling Noah back against him and locking his arms around Noah's chest.

"All right," Tobias said, prompting him to go on.

Noah sighed. "And about the night he left me in his cage." He swallowed. "It's hard to talk about, I felt very ... unsafe. Very scared, very insecure that night. There are whole bits of it I don't remember very well because I was either trying to hide in subspace or was just ... too busy trying to figure out how I was going to get away."

"I'm right here," Tobias said softly. "Tell me what happened."

"David had been drinking, which by this point was a fairly regular thing. He wasn't a falling down drunk, but he got mean and sometimes he forgot rules or made them up to suit his temper. I had been living with him for a while, a few months or so. When I moved in he was sober, and I really don't even know what started him drinking.

"I had already decided that this was going to be our last session. In fact, I hadn't planned on having a session at all, I was going to kneel, ask for permission to speak, and then try to politely end it. Tell him I couldn't do it anymore. And then I had planned to leave him.

"He didn't give me permission to speak. He was in a foul mood, told me so, and suggested that I be ... a good boy or

he'd punish me. I got to my feet and I used my safe word, which was completely useless at that point, and he ignored me. Instead he ... he hit me ... in the face with his flogger. I closed my eyes to protect them and turned around so he actually only hit the side of my face, but I was off balance, and he shoved me, and the next thing I knew he was on my back. He cuffed my hands together and he tugged a full black-out hood over my head."

Tobias was grateful that Noah wasn't looking at him; he wasn't sure if his anger would help or not, and there wasn't any way he could keep it off his face. He kept his touch light, but he made sure Noah knew he was there, that Noah was safe now.

"I struggled, but I knew that wasn't going to help, so I decided I needed to wait him out a while, see if I could say something later. I ended up kind of hanging by my shoulders from something, I think it might have been his cross? I'm blurry on how I ended up undressed and how many times he flogged me and that stuff. But I do remember that he undid the hood enough to gag me, which was when I shouted his name at him.

"I said something like 'David, let me down, my fingers are asleep and I need to talk,' and that," Noah's voice caught and he cleared his throat. "That was when he went after me with the blade. He put his ball gag in my mouth, pulled the hood down and ... and he told me not to ever use his name again before he carved into my back. It hurt like hell and I knew I was probably bleeding. I had no idea how deep the cut was, and I panicked. "I struggled like mad and I actually think I freaked him out this time because he let me down and he put something on the cut, I have no idea what it was, but it stung so badly I screamed, loud even with the gag. He spent some time trying to tell me that if I'd only behaved this wouldn't have happened, he was speaking softly as if he was being reasonable ... but he was drunk, and I knew I needed to get out of there.

"I tried to placate him. I leaned on him, whimpered a little, stayed on my knees—anything to get him to take the cuffs off, but none of it worked. He told me I needed to think about it, and then all of a sudden he was dragging me, and he shoved me in his cage and locked it."

Tobias said nothing. He couldn't, there weren't any words; he had no breath. He tightened his hold, wrapped himself around Noah, and kissed his shoulder. He wanted to take it all away. He wanted to kill this David creature, tie him to a cross and flay the skin from his back.

He wanted to be what Noah needed.

Noah was quiet for a bit. He dropped his head low and sighed. His voice was whisper quiet. "I couldn't see. I couldn't speak. I couldn't hear anything through the hood that wasn't said close to my ear ... the cuffs dug into my wrists ... I sat there for a long time, afraid even to move. A long time. I kind of dozed or passed out or something. And when I finally figured out that it had to have been hours since I'd seen him, I started trying to get out."

Noah lifted his head again and took a deep breath. "I don't know how long I tried, but it was completely useless. It might

have been a day, maybe days before I saw him again. I don't really know. But he did come back, and he let me out. He took my cuffs off first which was ... a mistake."

"You lashed out?" Tobias asked, almost afraid of the answer. Only the fact that Noah was alive and in his arms and entirely whole reassured him.

Noah's voice went cold. "I hit him with my fists until he stopped moving. I didn't even take the hood off first."

Tobias moved his arms so he was hugging and not restraining. "Then what?"

Noah shrugged. "Then I dropped the hood and his gag on the floor, got a good look at him, found my jeans, and walked out. I went home ... I remember the first thing I did was check in with work. I told them I'd had a family emergency and needed a couple more days off. Then I made a ham and cheese sandwich that I ate so fast I barely tasted it, and then I slept forever. I never saw him again." Noah sighed. "He tried to get in touch once, just after I'd started seeing Brett. I never returned his call."

"You didn't think about filing charges?" Tobias asked, because he thought he should. He wasn't stupid, and he'd been in the scene for more than half his life. He was fully aware of what would have happened. But he'd never been hurt like that, never been abused. What had happened to Noah was so far into illegal and criminal it had no resemblance to SM at all.

"Are you kidding?" Noah asked with a bitter laugh. "I'm a cop. I know exactly how public things become after you press charges." He swallowed hard. "I wasn't about to put myself

through that. Bad enough to talk about it in private, but to have to justify my lifestyle to a judge or a jury? To my coworkers? To have a lawyer ask me why I didn't get out sooner? Or worse, to have to listen to someone try to say that I deserved it because it's a risky lifestyle ... no. Risk losing my job, or at the very least my reputation at the precinct? No way. No way, sir." He shook his head vehemently. "No way."

"Shh," Tobias soothed. "I know, pet. I know. Calm down, Noah. Breathe."

Tobias waited while Noah took deep breaths to expel a trembling anger that had nothing to do with Tobias but was very present in Noah all the same. It took some time and a lot of stroking and petting and quiet words in Noah's ear before Noah had relaxed enough to be rational again.

"I used to wonder who he was hurting, who he'd poisoned next, who he was abusing because I wasn't ... man enough to try to put him in his place. I was thinking about tracking him down about a year ago and Bradford told me not to; he said he'd already taken care of it—that he'd blacklisted him. I don't know how that works, but I hope to God it did."

"It should have," Tobias said softly.

It should have. That it actually did was unlikely, but Noah didn't need to know that. It would have driven David underground, into the bars where guys who liked it really rough were, where the kids just finding themselves and who didn't know any better were. The fact that David had a problem with drinking and drugs would have kept him from playing more than Bradford's blacklisting—but there was always a slim chance that Noah really had been the last one he'd abused.

Tobias decided he'd find out.

"It's taken care of," he said softly, whispering to Noah. "He's gone. You're here."

Noah took Tobias' reassurance at face value. "Yes, sir." Noah nodded. "I'm lucky, sir," he told Tobias and hugged Tobias' arms to his chest.

"We are, pet. Both of us." Tobias sat there with Noah in his arms for a long time, both of them calming and finding solace in each other's embrace, in their breath, and in the soft touches they exchanged.

Finally, though, it was time to put the matter to rest, if possible. "Do you feel better now? Safer?" Tobias asked. Before Noah could answer he went on, "Think, boy. Your instinct when you used my name was to expect anger ... there's a lot of fear built into you that I have to work against. Do you feel like you're making headway with me or are we going to have to try something else, another way?"

Noah took a moment before answering. "I feel better that you know about that night," he said slowly. "You needed to know eventually, just as well you found out now. And I do feel safe. I feel very safe. The walk around the cage last weekend made me very uncomfortable, very afraid, but I trusted you. I relied on that trust. Every time I'm able to do that it gets easier to do it the next time, you know? I'm learning to rely on my trust in you, and I'm learning to let go. I am." Tobias kissed Noah's head again. "Okay. Are you ready to go to bed, or do you need more time to just be here?"

Noah took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm ready for my punishment, sir."

Tobias hid a wince. The last thing he really wanted to do was punish Noah, but it was part of his commitment to Noah and to himself. It was a duty and a privilege, and he wouldn't let Noah down by shirking it.

"How many strokes?" he asked, unwrapping himself from around Noah.

"We didn't discuss a count, sir," Noah said thoughtfully as he got to his feet. "Meeting your eyes, disrespect, the use of your proper name...? I'm just not sure."

"And I'm inclined to go light over heavy at the moment," Tobias said with a sigh. "Let's call it four, boy. It's more than I like, but fewer than you deserve."

"Yes, sir."

Noah didn't seem like he wanted any further comfort; he seemed ready to shake it off and move on. Maybe punishment and his reflection on it would help him sleep tonight. Noah made his way into the bedroom and laid his hands flat on the wall.

"Four, sir," he confirmed.

Tobias started fast, the first two stripes landing in quick succession. Noah jumped and began to breathe through the pain, and Tobias slowed down. Rushing wouldn't help, wouldn't make this what they needed; he looked at the crop and then at Noah's ass.

"Three," he said, raising the third mark. That felt better.

"Thank you, sir," Noah managed, his voice tight with the sting.

"Four." Stroke. That felt right. Noah was panting and his ass was a lovely array of stripes. Sometimes Noah had the right of it.

"Thank you, sir," Noah said as he turned around. He took a quick look at his ass in the full-length mirror and barely hid a grin. "Would you care for some tea before you turn in?" Chapter 9

As it turned out, they both slept well, and Tobias retreated to his study while Noah did his morning chores. He was still there when he heard Noah muttering impatiently on the front porch. He couldn't quite make out what Noah was saying, but he took that as his cue to go ahead up to the safe room and prepare for their afternoon activities. It was quite some time before Tobias heard Noah's footsteps on the stairs, however, and when he finally poked his head into the safe room to check in before his shower, Noah was practically naked and one side of his face, his neck, and one arm, were covered in dried mud.

"That ... spoiled ... mare," he spat out. "She hates me, sir." He was barely keeping his temper. "I had best get in the shower now."

He would not laugh. He would not, even if he ruptured something holding it in. "Noah? Come here, please," he said calmly as he set aside the box he'd been holding and turned to fully look at his boy.

Noah kept his eyes low as he approached Tobias, but his jaw was set and he just looked ... frustrated.

"What did she do?" Tobias asked softly. He bit his lip, sympathy taking over the urge to laugh. Although Noah did look rather ... adorable.

"She tricked me," Noah explained. "I went out to get her, and she actually let me put her halter and lead on her without much fuss. I was shocked. Next thing I know, she's walking away from the barn. So I decide to try your trick and be nice to her. I say 'excuse me,' and I'm trying to be polite. I offer her sugar, but she just keeps walking away. Well, she gets her body between a thick mud puddle and me so I can't see it and she takes off. I take two steps to follow her, my boot gets bogged down, and I fall right into it." Noah huffed. "She stood fifteen feet away and watched me."

Tobias looked at the floor. "Oh. Um. And then what did you do?"

"And then what did I do? Then I got up and I cursed her out! She ran back to the barn without me and it was a good thing, too. I'd have shanked her if I'd gotten hold of her lead. The bitch." Noah swallowed. "...Sir."

Tobias turned and walked to the window. He hoped to hell that his shoulders weren't shaking enough for Noah to notice. "She's ... spirited. I'll give you that. And she seems to prefer a ... heavy hand. Or maybe her Master's voice. Or ... something." He took a deep breath and composed himself before turning around. "How would you like to deal with this?"

"We have to come to an understanding on our own, sir. Maybe tonight at turn out—"

"Yes? Tonight ... she'll bite you? You actually will shank her? Come now. There has to be a way that you two can accommodate one another."

"She'd be very docile in a bottle of glue," Noah muttered.

"And you would be docile strung up by your ankles," Tobias said smoothly. "One stroke. Now. Try again."

Noah bit his lip. "I suppose we need to start over, sir. Maybe tomorrow morning I could spend some quiet time with her, see if we can call a truce." "That sounds like a start. Take her a present. Talk to her. And maybe don't glare. Or call her a bitch. She's really quite sweet, if in the right mood." Tobias stepped away from the window and walked to Noah, one hand hovering over a mudcaked arm. "Not unlike me, actually."

"I would never call you a bitch, sir," Noah joked with a grin.

"That's good to know. Go get in the shower. I think one of my pets needs help getting clean."

"Yes, sir," Noah said and headed off to the bathroom.

Tobias waited until he heard water running and then picked up the box he'd had when Noah'd come in. His boy needed cheering up and a little torture—nothing said it couldn't be the same thing. He took the box and some lube and went into the hall, then thought again and went back for condoms. No need to torture himself.

Tobias opened the door to the bathroom quietly. Noah had left his boxers and his muddy wife-beater in a pile on the floor and the mirror was already fogged. He wasn't kidding when he said he liked a hot shower.

"I feel that draft, sir," came a coy voice from behind the shower curtain. Noah reached around and pulled the curtain back. "You really meant you wanted to join me, sir?" he asked, probably well aware of the stream of water that was running over his shoulder, down his chest and into his groin. "You need some help getting undressed?"

"I think I can manage, thanks," Tobias said dryly. He set the box on the counter and tossed Noah the lube. "Get ready," he said, pulling off his shirt. Deviations: Domination by Chris Owen, Jodi Payne

Noah fumbled it with slippery wet fingers and let the curtain fall back into place as he bent to pick it up. His voice rang slightly against the tiles. "My pleasure, sir." Tobias heard the tube pop open and then shut again and then a long sigh.

Grinning, he shucked his pants and socks as fast as he could, then pulled the shower curtain back to watch. "Tease."

"Just following orders, sir," Noah said, followed by a soft groan. He had one foot up on the edge of the tub, one hand braced on the tiled wall, and two fingers up his ass.

"Uh-huh. You're very good at following orders," Tobias said, his cock immediately hardening. He reached for the box and opened it, taking out a lovely new dildo. It was one of the glass ones, his current favorite material. It was smooth and tapered, save for a bulb at the tip, thicker than his shaft at the base. The outer glass was clear and inside it were red and blue bands twined around each other. He held it under the spray for a moment, still watching Noah.

"Oh, that's awfully pretty; what a lucky boy I am," Noah said softly, eyes on the toy.

"Me, too. Come on, pet. Open up." Tobias dropped a hand to his nearly hard erection and stroked himself, watching Noah's hand.

Noah grinned and then opened his mouth, dropping his jaw almost obscenely wide.

Tobias slipped the warm dildo into Noah's mouth and let it sit there, let Noah suck on the tip and draw it in a little more. "That's it. Suck it, pet. Play with it."

Noah made another soft noise and Tobias watched as his tongue caressed the glass, worked the bulb and then down

the shaft. The fingers in his ass moved a little faster, and his cock was nice and hard. Tobias had to stop stroking himself, his chest rising a little faster than he liked. "That's enough," he said, pulling the dildo from Noah's mouth with a pop. He handed it to Noah and climbed into the shower, standing in the spray. "Lube it up, boy. I want to watch you ride it—and don't come."

Noah removed his fingers and reached for the lube, slicking the glass shaft with one hand and then turning his back to Tobias again and using the hand that wasn't slippery to breach himself with the toy and press it in slowly and fully. "Oh, warm," Noah said and began to move on it, gliding it in and out slowly. "The glass is heavy and—ah—thick," he said, giving Tobias a status report. "It's good."

Tobias watched. He watched the glass slide in and out; he watched Noah's body take it. He watched Noah's ass clench around it, the lube slicking him, the toy opening him. "Slower," he said, putting a hand on Noah's back. He knelt down behind Noah, watching. "Nice and slow."

Noah nodded and slowed down, groaning with the sensation. He ducked his head forward and stuck his ass out a bit further as he pushed the glass phallus in and let it slide out, in again, and out, his breath coming in shallow pants. "Oh."

"Don't come," Tobias warned. He took the end of the dildo in his hand, pushing Noah's hand away, and wiggled it a tiny bit.

Noah hissed in air between his teeth and added his free hand to the wall for balance. "Won't..." he breathed.

"Good boy." Tobias held the toy as still as he could, leaned forward and licked it. From the wide end right to Noah's hole, he licked the glass and traced where it was breaching Noah. Between his thighs his cock throbbed and his balls drew up tight.

Noah gasped and whimpered, his fingers turning to fists and his body shivering. "Oh, Jesus."

Tobias groaned. His cock was rigid, aching. He moved the dildo in Noah, twisted it, and then pulled it out all the way, his fingers taking its place. "Don't come," he ordered once again, his voice tight as he held off his own orgasm by force of will.

Noah nodded again, taking a deep breath and letting it out in a long hiss. "Won't, sir," he said stubbornly, but his thighs were trembling and his body was tight. It had to be so hard for him to hold off. It made Tobias smile.

He looked around and cursed to himself when he realized he'd left the condoms on the counter. With a shrug he changed his plan and spread Noah's ass cheeks, happy enough to torture him with his tongue. For all of the eight seconds it was going to take for him to lose control and come himself, anyway.

"Sir!" Noah shouted, his voice an echoing ring in the tiled room. "Oh ... fuck! No, no, Master!" Noah sobbed, fighting his orgasm.

Four seconds. Tobias jerked and tore himself away, rearing back as he came with a roar. "Oh, fuck, yes!" It was the same as it always was this way, and he had no idea why. He didn't know if it was the shower, the dildo play, licking his sub's ass, or the denial and begging, but nothing else ever made him come this hard, this fast. He was literally dizzy with it, the world going gray as his cock throbbed and pulsed, ribbons of come splashing out of him and being swept away by the shower. Exhausted, he leaned back on the edge of the tub.

"Sir ... Master..." Noah's voice was hoarse and imploring. "Please can I ... if it ... pleases you. Please, sir." He was practically doubled over, bent low and leaning on the shower wall.

"No," he whispered. "Not this time, pet."

Noah looked crushed. "Please," he begged brokenly and gave up on his failing legs, kneeling on the floor of the tub.

"I said no." Tobias pulled himself up with an effort and turned down the hot water before getting out of the tub. "That should help."

Noah yelped at the suddenly cold water, but he didn't move from his knees until Tobias had let the curtain fall closed again. Then Tobias could hear him getting up from his knees and fumbling with the water taps.

"Problem with the temperature, boy?" he asked, wrapping a towel around his waist.

"A little bit too cold, sir," Noah said. "Unless ... is that," Tobias could hear the dread in Noah's voice as he asked the question. "Unless you meant for me to leave it there, sir."

"I did, in fact, but we can trade it for something else. Are you under control again?"

"Better, sir. Still hard."

"Then it's up to you. Cold water now, or an extra stroke at bedtime for changing the water temperature and begging when I'd already said no." Deviations: Domination by Chris Owen, Jodi Payne

Tobias heard a long-suffering sigh and then a sharp yelp as Noah shifted the water back to cold.

"Good choice, pet." Tobias grinned at himself in the mirror. "I'll see you in the safe room when you're ready." Still smiling, Tobias left to get dressed. Chapter 10

On Monday night Tobias didn't even take off his coat before he picked up the phone and called Bradford. He'd spent Saturday and Sunday putting Noah through his paces and keeping him in subspace, with a fair amount of success; pain and denial of orgasm after Friday night seemed to do the trick. But he himself had been unable to completely let go of what Noah had told him in the safe room, and Tobias needed to know more.

He stalked through the apartment, heading to the liquor cabinet as the phone rang in his ear.

One of the advantages of calling Bradford was he could almost always be counted on to pick up the phone. "Hello?" came the familiar reply.

"It's me. Got a minute?" He wedged the phone between his ear and shoulder as he turned over one of the cut glass lowball glasses and reached for the scotch.

"Uh-oh. I always have a minute for you, but you sound like you need more than that. Shoot."

Tobias spilled a couple of fingers worth of whiskey into his glass. "Had a talk with Noah on Friday—well, he talked, I listened. I need some information."

"Hmm." Bradford seemed to chew that over. "Hold on, I'm moving into my office," he said and the phone went quiet for a few moments. There was a soft click and Bradford was back. "All right, friend, we're private now; what can I tell you?" "David. How well did your blacklisting take and where can I find him?" Tobias didn't bother with the ice, simply took a healthy swallow and poured more.

"Blacklistings only work in the respectable community, Tobias, you know that," Bradford said with a sigh. "You can believe he's not operating in reputable circles, so he's fairly unhampered by it, unfortunately. In fact, as sick as it seems, in some places it's cred to be blacklisted. I don't recommend explaining that problem to Noah, however." Tobias heard the clink of bottle and glass and knew he wasn't the only one who'd decided he needed a drink. "As for where you can find David, you can't be serious. I'm not telling you that."

Tobias snorted. "I am serious. And Noah thinks the sick fuck isn't hurting anyone—leave it like that. Tell me, Bradford. I'm going to find him anyway."

"Tobias, have you lost your mind?" Bradford snapped into the phone. "You're not going to help Noah by tracking him down."

Tobias let silence fall for a long moment. He sipped his scotch and waited Bradford out.

A pained sigh finally broke through the quiet. "All right. Tell me why you want to know."

Tobias smiled coldly. "I just want to check in. See what he's up to. I promise I won't kill him, if that's what you're worried about."

"Honestly, my friend, I'm not sure what I should be worried about. Killing him would be a very poor idea, but talking to him would be a poor idea, too. So you see, I have serious misgivings about telling you anything at all." Tobias waited as Bradford took a sip of his drink. "Last I heard he was a fan of the south side clubs. He is a regular at Sting; that's Sam White's bar, remember him?"

"Vaguely. Didn't he come close to being blacklisted, too? Liked the twinks and a bullwhip?" Tobias took his usual spot at the window. "Why shouldn't I talk to him, Bradford? He almost killed my boy. He's a fuck up, and he needs to stop."

"Did Noah ask you to talk to him?" Bradford asked plainly.

"Good God, no." He had to try not to laugh. "Noah seems to think you rode in and saved the day, that David is no one's trouble anymore. I'd like to keep it that way."

"I would, too," Bradford agreed. "Listen, don't take this wrong, Tobias, but if Noah didn't ask you to track him down, then how is David any of your business? And are you actually considering finding him, reading him the riot act about Noah, and then not telling the boy about it? How does that benefit your partnership?" Tobias heard Bradford sip his drink and swallow again. "All I'm saying, Tobias, is don't let your hot head rule you. I'm not telling you not to do what you need to do. Just think about it first."

"You know as well as I do that sometimes someone needs to step up and step in. Chances are I won't even talk to David. But there's something I need to do."

There was another long silence that Tobias waited through. "All right, Tobias," Bradford said reluctantly. "David's last name is Rungren. Look for Sam, I'm sure he'll point David out to you. Sam might be a slimy pervert, but he plays by the rules. He's not such a bad egg. Any problems, call me and I'll come back you up, okay?" Deviations: Domination by Chris Owen, Jodi Payne

"Yeah, okay," Tobias said, almost absently. He drained his glass and set it down, his thoughts already getting jumbled in a conflicted swirl of what he wanted to do and what he should do—both as a man and as a Master. "Thanks, Bradford. I'll talk to you soon."

* * * *

It wasn't a total dive, but it certainly wasn't like the bars and clubs Tobias was used to, which was good in that it made it easier for him to make an impression. He'd changed into his best suit, dark gray with a pristine white shirt and dark tie, and added a silk scarf to his overcoat. He stood just inside the door to Sting and looked around, keeping his face impassive.

There were more people around than he'd expected, given that it was a Monday night. A few tables near the door were full and the bar was lined with men; more than a few were kneeling next to their Masters, and there was a cluster of kids along one wall—at a glance Tobias put their median age at twenty-one, with the underaged ones standing in the middle.

As he stood there, he became aware of pockets of silence developing. The room never became completely silent, but he could almost see words being passed around. It was obvious in the guarded looks of Doms he'd never met and outright hostility in the few he had. He got a couple of nods and one look of frank respect from a Top he'd helped train, and then there was a quiet voice next to him.

"May I buy you a drink, sir?"

He looked over and then down at the boy, one of the children from the wall. He was slight, almost as small as

Phan, but in an underfed way, not as if he was naturally tiny and fit.

"Thank you, but no," Tobias replied politely.

"Can I do anything for you, sir? Anything at all?" The boy's voice was hopeful and awed, his eyes flicking from the floor up to about Tobias' chin. "Please?"

"Sorry. I won't be here long." Tobias stepped forward and finally began to make his way to the bar.

"Run along, boy," came a smooth voice beside Tobias, and a tall man with brown hair and large eyes sent the child away. "Looking for something specific? You could ask Sam, he'll hook you up."

"Not looking to play," Tobias said.

"Shame, the boys are all whispering about you already."

Tobias shrugged. "I'm used to it."

"I would imagine so. I'm Adam," the man said, holding out his hand as he followed Tobias to the bar.

He shook Adam's hand. "Tobias," he said softly, watching for a reaction.

"Tobias? Tobias Vincent? Damn, this isn't your part of town." Adam pulled out a stool for him at the bar.

"No. No, it's not," Tobias agreed. "But it's gratifying to know that my reputation precedes me—saves time."

"Reputation? You're a fucking legend."

"Who's a fucking legend, Adam?" asked one of the men behind the bar. He had a hard face and was wearing a leather vest that was open to the waist and leather pants. His arms were so tattooed Tobias could barely make out any actual skin. He had the handle of a leather flogger tucked into his back pocket and a bullwhip looped at his hip. "This guy?"

Adam grinned. "Tobias Vincent, meet Sam White, the owner."

Tobias met the man's eyes and waited, not looking away and not overtly challenging. He wasn't there for a fight or a fuck; he owed this man nothing. The fact that he thought Sam White's tastes were a little unpleasant didn't color his expression—some of his own kinks were a little out of the norm, and he hadn't heard of White actually causing lasting harm. Unlike David Rungren.

"Really?" Sam drawled. "The Tobias Vincent? I ought to have guessed by the posh overcoat and the artfully arranged scarf. Slumming are you? Well, I'm sorry, Mr. Vincent, we don't stock anything top shelf behind the bar, but if you'd like to step into my office I've got a nice brandy you could sample while we talk some business."

"And what kind of business would that be?" Tobias asked coldly. He let his gaze flick down Sam's body and back up, showing some of his distaste.

Sam arched an eyebrow, noticing the look. "Why don't you tell me what you're looking for, Mr. Vincent?"

"He's not here to play, Sam."

"Shut up, Adam, and leave us alone," Sam snapped. Adam snorted but left as requested. "So tell me, Mr. Vincent, what are you looking for that Bradford can't provide for you? Young?" He pointed to the wallflowers Tobias had seen earlier. "Or," he went on, pointing to a pair of men about Noah's age with spiked hair and heavy eyeliner. "Maybe someone you can mark?"

Tobias didn't even glance over. "No, thank you. I have what I need. I'm here for information."

"Can I get you a drink?" Sam asked, ignoring him.

"Bottled water." Tobias passed him a twenty. "A few years ago there was a ... creature on the scene who played rough and pretended otherwise. He caused some damage."

Sam took the money easily enough and put a bottle of water on the bar. "That describes a good percentage of my clientele, Mr. Vincent, perhaps you can be more specific?"

"David Rungren."

Sam raised an eyebrow and nodded. "What about him?" He put Tobias' twenty in his pocket and made no attempt to make change.

"You tell me." Tobias didn't put his wallet back in his pocket.

"He comes in sometimes," Sam said. "He still plays rough, and he still does damage now and then.He's an asshole, but he pays his tab and I haven't had many complaints."

Tobias clenched his jaw. "Many. Lovely. And does he still drink when he plays? Ignore safe words?"

"Why are you asking?"

"Like I said, he did some damage. What he hurt is now mine, and I want to know. Are you going to share what you know or am I going to have to go through your client list?"

"Fifty bucks, I'll tell you everything you want to know," Sam said, opening Tobias' water for him. Tobias ignored the water and handed Sam another thirty dollars. The essential difference between them, right there, he thought.

Sam looked at the cash then back at Tobias. "All right, thirty then." He took the money and added it to the twenty in his pocket. "He doesn't drink here, ever. His tab consists of sodas and bottled water. Far as I know, he's dry," Sam told him. "As for safe words, I require them, but I've had a couple of complaints that he's pushed beyond them once or twice. Mind you, he's been here four nights out of seven for two years and I've only had maybe a dozen complaints of that nature."

"Jesus Christ." Tobias stared. "A dozen times at least he's caused safe wording, let alone ignored it, and you think that's acceptable?"

"I don't know of any sub that has refused a second round with him, complaints or no. And, yes, what we do here pushes people to safe word. It's not like your cushy, whiteglove, men's club, Mr. Vincent. This place has a different reputation, you with me? No one is forced to walk through that door."

Tobias raised an eyebrow. "And now I see why the notalent hacks wind up here. Thanks for the information."

"There's no need to be insulting, Mr. Vincent, I answered your questions. I'd appreciate it if you'd lower your voice."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Do you think any of your clientele will be surprised to find out they can get what they need with a little respect added in? That they don't need to be debased to hurt and bleed?" "I don't suppose it's occurred to you that maybe that being 'debased' or made to bleed is exactly what they come here for, Mr. Vincent?" Sam looked him in the eye. "Has it? Not everyone lives in your ideal world. Now are you leaving or are you going to stand here and continue to insult my clients?"

"Not your clients, Sam. You. I could take any one of these boys and meet whatever need he has. However, I have what I need, and I have what I came for. You might want to let David know that he's not quite far enough under the radar, however."

"Is that a threat, Mr. Vincent? Maybe you'd like to make it yourself. He's just walking in."

Coming through the front door was a large man with blonde hair, wearing dark glasses. He had wide shoulders and wide hips; everything about him was wide. He must have weighed three hundred pounds. At his side, bent at the waist and almost literally being dragged by his collar, was a darkhaired boy in leather shorts whose wrists were bound in front of him. The man exchanged greetings and nods with almost everyone. He approached the bar, looked Tobias up and down slowly, snorted at him, and continued walking.

Bile rose in his throat at the thought of this man ever having touched Noah. The image of this creature whipping his boy, hurting him ... laying one hand on him in either anger or pleasure made Tobias want to vomit.

"Mr. Rungren," he heard himself say, his voice hard and icy. Silence finally fell over the bar, the boys on the wall shifting closer and then back like a living wave.

The man stopped and turned to look at Tobias. "Yeah?"

"My name is Tobias Vincent." There was a hushed murmur in one corner and whispers started before being shushed again by those who were more eager to listen than to talk. Tobias ignored them and moved to the middle of the floor, facing off with Rungren. He stood straight, his shoulders back and his hands clasped behind his back.

David glanced nervously at Sam behind the bar who shrugged at him. "What do you want?" he asked finally, as his boy knelt beside him.

"Only to make one thing perfectly clear." Tobias didn't move and he took a moment to appreciate the acoustics of the bar. His audience was listening avidly, which was nice; it made him feel at home, if home had vipers. "If what happened to Noah Dolan happens to anyone ever again, you will regret it. If that boy at your feet has to beat you bloody to seek medical attention, you will regret it. If you ever leave anyone in a cage for days at a time, you will regret it. I will know, and I will make you suffer. Do you understand?"

David swallowed hard and although his lips moved, no sound passed through them. He licked them suddenly and shook his head a couple of times, giving Tobias an incredulous look, but finally the man nodded and lowered his eyes to the floor.

"Good boy." Tobias turned and began to walk out of the bar, hoping to make it out before any more of the young ones made an effort to latch onto him. With any luck, one of them would have seen what he needed—a Master who could take on a room and win by sheer force of will. Chapter 11

Tobias checked his pockets as he walked into Noah's building on Tuesday night. He wasn't expected, and it was just past eight—he wouldn't have been surprised to run into Allison on her way out after their weekly cooking lesson. After making sure the gift he'd brought for Noah was still in the pocket of his overcoat, he walked down the hall and knocked at the door, stepping back and staring at the spy hole with what he hoped wasn't too much impatience.

"What did you forget, baby?" Noah said through the door. "Oh ... Sir!" Noah turned a thousand locks and opened the door for him, smiling, eyes low. "This time you really are a surprise. Come in, sir." Noah stepped out of his way to let him into the narrow hall. "Can I take your coat?"

Tobias smiled and took his coat off, pointedly taking the package from the pocket before giving the coat to Noah. "Good evening, boy. I assume we're alone?"

"We are, sir." Noah took the coat and hung it in a tiny hall closet. "Can I get you something to drink? Ugh, this hall is so claustrophobic." Noah stepped into the kitchen where there was more room. "Is it cold out there? Allison said the wind got her on the way over here."

"It's not warm." Tobias followed Noah into the kitchen and set the small box on the counter. "Water would be fine, thank you." He sniffed the air and asked, "What did you learn tonight?"

"Tonight was a disaster, sir. You don't want to know. I guess I was due for one, right? Allison and I had a good laugh

over it after I was done feeling completely useless. And then we scrubbed the oven." Noah shook his head. He was grinning, so it couldn't have been that traumatic, but he did look embarrassed.

Tobias smiled and stepped closer, cupping Noah's jaw with his hand. "Aw, poor thing. The learning curve caught up is all. Do you need cheering?" he asked softly, his tone light. He had no real worry over the answer; in fact he was fairly certain he'd get to where he wanted—needed—to be. After the night before, he had an intense urge to re-establish his equilibrium, and perhaps his claim. In either case, thoughts of food and drink were far from his mind as he pinned Noah against a handy counter.

"Oh ... yes, sir." Noah swallowed. "Yes. Though I've been feeling much better since you walked through the door, sir," he said softly. He licked his lips and rested his fingers on Tobias' arms.

"You're so easy," Tobias teased. He moved the hand on Noah's jaw around to the back of his head. "Do you know how proud I am of you, pet?"

Noah smiled. "I know you think I'm doing well, sir. I know you're pleased with me. It feels good to know those things."

"It's true," Tobias insisted, his fingers kneading the back of Noah's neck. He moved a step closer, molding his body along Noah's from ankle to waist. "I've been thinking you deserve a ... token. A trifle. A small expression of how far you've come."

Noah bit his lip. "A ... token, sir?" Noah was well distracted already and Tobias could feel him stir. Noah braced one arm

on the counter as he arched slightly. "I am humbled that you think so, sir. I don't need anythingbut your approval."

"That's what makes a gift a gift, sweetheart," Tobias whispered, dipping his head to nuzzle Noah's neck. "But that can wait for a few minutes anyway. I'm also a selfish bastard and you smell ... wonderful." He inhaled deeply and had to shift his weight a little to let his lengthening erection have more room. "You smell like ... garlic and rosemary and like you didn't shower after work. You smell like cop." His voice was beginning to growl.

"Like cop? What's that, sir? A little sweat and gunpowder? Or maybe the vinyl of the patrol car," Noah joked softly, arching his neck. He crossed his arms over his waist and tugged his shirt off over his head.

"Sweat and coffee and adrenalin." Tobias purred as he ran his hands over Noah's skin and tugged at his nipples. "Very sexy. Very intense."

Noah hissed at the touch. "Sir." He lifted his chin, then ran his tongue over Tobias' lips and kissed him greedily.

Tobias' growl was swallowed in Noah's moan. There wasn't really a struggle for control of the kiss, but Noah gave as good as he got, and they devoured each other's mouths. Tongues thrust and pushed, and teeth bit down; it was a feast more than a mere kiss.

Tobias ground his hips into Noah, pushing hard and rubbing his erection along Noah's. He tugged Noah's nipples again and then dropped his hand to cup Noah's ass, pulling him in tight and close, lifting him off the floor. "Want you," he growled, diving back into the kiss. Deviations: Domination by Chris Owen, Jodi Payne

"Take me," Noah responded breathlessly. "Fuck me." He shoved a hand into Tobias' groin and gave a hard squeeze.

Tobias' growl was part groan as he turned them both, holding Noah up as he took the three steps to the table. "Right here," he promised, biting down on Noah's neck. He set Noah's ass on the table and began to fumble with the button of his pet's jeans. "Right here. Now."

Noah reached around his hands and tugged Tobias' belt open, followed by the button at his waist. "Ah, damn," Noah breathed as the button came off in his hand. He showed it to Tobias and then set the button behind him on the table and returned to lowering Tobias' fly.

Meanwhile, his jeans were more difficult and Tobias grunted impatiently. Noah ended up helping after shoving Tobias' pants down so they fell around his ankles. "Got it ... hang on ... there," he said and shimmied them down along with his briefs as far as his knees.

Tobias was too turned on to even laugh at the struggle, at the thought of what they must look like. Desperate, needy, horny ... both of them in a rush as they kissed and fumbled. "Jesus," Tobias muttered, finally stepping back and going to his knees. He pulled off Noah's shoes and tugged the jeans and shorts the rest of the way off. He heard them land next to the counter as he took Noah's cock into his mouth for a fast, hard suck.

"Master!" Noah screamed and plunged his fingers into Tobias' hair and pushed his hips forward. "Oh, fuck, yes!"

Tobias took him all the way in, felt the head of Noah's cock push into his throat, and swallowed. Noah screamed again, and Tobias took that as the warning it probably was and stopped, coming off the head of Noah's prick with a pop. He kissed his way up Noah's body to take his mouth in another frenzied kiss. "Lube," he said harshly. "Where is it?"

Noah pointed. "Drawer," he panted. "By the sink."

Tobias pulled away from him and lunged, almost pulling the drawer all the way out. He would have if it hadn't had a stopper at the back to keep just that from happening. He growled in his throat as he tossed the aluminum foil and the wax paper to the floor, finally getting the small tube at the back. "Clever boy," he praised. Fingers slick, he moved back to Noah and pushed two in. "Good boy."

"Thank you, sir," Noah grunted. Whether he was thanking Tobias for the fingers or the compliment hardly mattered as Noah lay the rest of the way back on the table and rested his heels on the edge, his knees spread wantonly. "Oh, God, sir..."

Oh, God, indeed. Tobias was past making any but the most primal of noises, his fingers plunging into Noah with a noted lack of care. He knew enough not to hurt, but he was far from gentle as he made his way ready. His erection was heavy and full, swaying between his legs and urging him on.

He swiped more lubricant onto his hand and looked at Noah, finally groaning with how much he wanted him, wanted his heat and the press of his body, the taste of his mouth. His cock throbbed and he grabbed it, his slippery hand sliding sweetly over his skin. "Noah," he said tightly, almost pleading. Noah reached out a hand to Tobias and the heel of one foot hooked around Tobias' ass. "Sir," he beckoned, his voice just as tight. "Just like that, sir, want to? Bare? Do it, sir. It's okay, we know it is. Come on, please..."

"We should talk—" Tobias said, but he was moving forward, letting Noah pull him, letting his need overrule his good sense.

"You know I'm clean! God, fuck me, please!"

His conscience twinged at him despite the blood tests they'd both had as part of their contract. But still, despite knowing they really should have been talking and not fucking, he pressed the head of his cock against Noah's hole, gasping at the feeling of slick, hot skin. "Oh, dear God. Noah—"

He pushed. This was about more than simple health matters, but he pushed anyway, sinking into Noah with a groan. "Should talk—" he said again.

Noah showed no interest in talking now. He shuddered and arched, closing both knees around Tobias' hips and whimpering. "Master, yes." He clenched around Tobias deliberately and gasped for air. "Oh, sir!"

"Ah, fuck," Tobias gasped, thrusting in hard. "Fuck, fuck, fuck." Noah's body clung to him, the heat somehow more intense, the sensations somehow more. Tobias stopped, as far into Noah as he could get. "Kiss me."

"Oh, sir—" Noah reached up and grabbed the back of Tobias' neck, pulling himself up to meet his lips and kissed him savagely, moaning as Tobias opened his mouth for him and grinding downward against his prick. Tobias felt like he was swimming in sensation. He tried to breathe and merely drew Noah into himself, into his lungs; he tried to move and only wrapped himself further in Noah's scent, the taste of his mouth, and the feel of him contracting around Tobias' cock. He couldn't speak, was damn near unable to pull air into his lungs. He pulled Noah closer, grabbed Noah's hips and thrust. With each shuddering stab he pulled Noah harder onto him, pounding into his boy.

"Ah, fuck," he gasped again, his eyes starting to roll up, his heart pounding in his chest. "Christ, Noah. Come for me, want to feel you come on me."

"Yes ... Sir!" Noah grunted, and grabbed his cock, making Tobias' own prick throb. Noah gasped and cried out as his climax moved through his body.

At the first spasm, the first tightening of Noah's ass as he clamped down, Tobias grunted and thrust deeper, unable not to. His voice was tight and hoarse, raspy as he swore and tried to ride out Noah's orgasm without shooting too soon. He wanted to enjoy it all.

Noah threw his head back and coated Tobias' belly with hot liquid. "Master," he mumbled, and hung from the hand around Tobias' neck, his other hand gripping the table edge as he gulped for air.

As the spunk hit his skin Tobias let go and slammed into Noah again, a few short, rough thrusts that destroyed him, his eyes squeezed tightly against the ecstatic shock of spilling into Noah's body, filling Noah and not a latex sheath. Dimly, he heard himself roaring, "Mine!" Noah let go and let himself lie back flat on the table again, his hands moving to cover Tobias' where they still dug into his hips. "Oh, fuck," he groaned, looking sated and soaked with sweat. "So very yours."

Tobias nodded, unable to breathe without panting. "Mine," he said again. "Oh, God." He leaned forward, his forehead on Noah's chest. They were both slick with come and sweat, and he was sure the room stank of sex. He wondered idly why the neighbors weren't banging on the walls. Inside Noah, his erection faded and softened. "Oh, shit," he muttered. "Did I hurt you?"

"What?" Noah asked incredulously. "No ... no, sir. No."

Tobias stood up and carefully pulled out. "Sure? That wasn't very close to gentle, pet."

"It was rough, sure, but it was so good. I'm fine, sir. Really." Noah smiled, and with a grunt he forced himself to sit up and dangled his legs over the side of the table.

Tobias looked at him and tried to judge for himself, concluding that Noah merely looked well fucked. Happy, messy, naked, and well-fucked. He grinned. "Almost as good a look as come in your hair, boy."

"Do I look as good as I feel, sir?" Noah asked, grinning.

"I'd say so." Tobias pulled up his trousers and went to the sink for a wet cloth. "That was really ... not smart of us, pet," he said carefully as he came back.

"Not smart, sir?" He looked confused.

Tobias considered his words. "Perhaps 'rushed' is better," he said, passing the cloth to Noah. "All I mean is that I fully intended to talk to you about the condoms before simply not using one. I pushed, and I apologize."

"You didn't push, I begged," Noah said with a knowing grin and without a hint of a blush. He took the cloth and cleaned up quickly.

Tobias couldn't help but smirk a little. "Still," he said, pushing pride away. "It's my job to make sure our choices are the best ones possible. I hardly think that nailing you on the table without a rubber and without talking to you about it first is one of the more responsible choices I've made to date."

Noah leaned forward and kissed Tobias. "Stop," he said, and kissed him again. "I appreciate what you're saying, sir," Noah told him softly, speaking just inches from his face. "Thank you." He grinned and punctuated his words with yet another kiss. "But it was hot!" Noah breathed in Tobias' ear. "Tell me it wasn't hot. I loved it. Besides, you've seen my results, I've seen yours. We're both clean. What was there to talk about? It's what I wanted, I would have said yes anyway."

Tobias' smirk came back. "It was hot," he agreed, unable to deny that at least. "It just isn't a shining example of my respect for you, pet."

"You're impossible, sir." Noah smirked right back at him. "Fine," He snorted and gave Tobias a light shove. "If it makes you feel better you can punish me later for forcing you with my, hmm ... selfish begging and willful insistence, to lose your resolve. We'll call it three strokes. Feel better?" Noah looked like he was making an effort not to stick his tongue out at him. Tobias rolled his eyes. "I think you'd enjoy it too much, and that's hardly punishment," he teased. "All right, then." He stepped back and let Noah get off the table and reached for the box he'd left on the counter. The current conversation wasn't really going anywhere, so perhaps a distraction was in order. "I think I mentioned a token?" he said, shaking the box a little.

"Yes, sir," Noah said, sliding off the table and padding over to Tobias "Is that it?" He sounded a little like a kid on Christmas.

Tobias shook the box. "You know, I think it is," he teased.

Noah tossed the cloth into the sink. "I've been an awfully good boy," he said, and pressed close. "Haven't I? Can I open it?"

"Sure." Tobias handed him the box and tried not to grin. He wasn't sure which aspect of the gift Noah would react to first—the fact that it was a solid steel ring for his cock, or the fact that it was engraved with their names.

Noah opened the box and pulled back the tissue paper. "Whoa ... oh, my God," he whispered on sight, his eyes going wide. "Oh, my God!" he said again, and louder this time, when he lifted it out of the box and saw the engraving. He ran his fingers over the names and then weighed it in his hand. "And our names!" Noah sounded awed and a grinned widely.

"You like it?" Tobias asked, suddenly relieved. He hadn't even considered that Noah wouldn't like it, but to see him so obviously pleased was nice. "It's far more decorative than functional, and you have to wear it, you know. My gifts tend to be ... bonds, of a sort." "I'll wear it, of course, I'll wear it." Noah nodded and leaned up to kiss him.

Tobias kissed back, grinning as he did so. Their tongues slid together and he was still grinning. "All the time," he added, then he nibbled at Noah's bottom lip.

"Almost all the time," Noah said softly. "Not at work." Tobias sighed. "Not at work. But you walk in that door..."

"First thing I do after I hang up my keys and take a piss. I promise, sir." He grinned, nibbling back. "I wouldn't mind wearing it at work, too, but the metal detectors ... well, you can see the problem." He laughed softly.

Tobias shrugged. "Bet you wouldn't be the only one, if there was a little leeway," he said with a wink. "Half the force is kinky, I'm sure."

"Probably, but I'd rather not be the one to tell anyone that." Noah stepped back, setting the empty box on the counter. He reached down and maneuvered the ring on. "Oh, man. That's heavy, sir," he grinned, looking down to admire the ring.

"It's gorgeous," Tobias said. It was. Noah was. And Tobias found himself pulling Noah into his arms and kissing him fiercely. "Mine," he said again.

"Yes, my Master, I am yours," Noah nodded, and pressed his lips to Tobias' shoulder.

Tobias held him tight, refusing to think of a time when that wouldn't be true.

Chapter 12

Tobias picked up the cell phone and dialed. He was stuck in traffic and bored, which meant he'd been thinking of Noah to make himself feel better. It was the middle of December, as well, so everything was gray and dull, and he suddenly wanted to add a spark of excitement to life. The holidays didn't really do it for him; they hadn't since his parents had died. He and Phan had usually gone on a trip and ignored the season, but this year things were different.

And he was going to make things as interesting as he could.

He tapped the steering wheel as he waited for Bradford to answer, impatient now that he was ready to make plans.

"Happy holidays!" Bradford snickered into the phone as he answered it.

"Not you, too." Tobias sighed and traffic crept forward about three inches.

"Tobias? Sorry ... uh, hang on." Tobias heard Bradford put the phone down. "I said no. Knees, boy," he ordered sternly before coming back to the phone. "Tobias, I'm starting to worry about the frequency of your phone calls. If you killed him I don't want to know about it," Bradford joked. Or at least Tobias hoped it was a joke.

He also wasn't exactly sure which "him" Bradford meant, which was further cause for alarm. "Everyone is alive," Tobias said, covering all the bases. "Noah, David, Sam, and even Phantom. I need your help, though. Unless you're tied up with whomever you have on his knees?" "No, he's tied up, I've got all the time in the world," Bradford laughed. "I can't believe you set me up for that one."

"It was a gift," Tobias deadpanned. "Happy holidays. I'm thinking of taking Noah out on Saturday night. Would you care to meet us for drinks and bring about three or nine friends?"

"Having a party? It's not his birthday yet..."

"No, that's March. I just need an audience. Call it another gift, if you'd like." Tobias turned on his windshield wipers as the mist became sleet.

"Ohhhh, very nice," Bradford said. "Happy holidays, indeed. Yes, I would love to join you. Who am I bringing?"

Tobias smiled. "Oh, let's see. Tops who you want to impress, Brian because he needs a night out, Phan because he'll have fun ... Nikki, if you want. About ten or twelve of you should do it, I think. I was thinking we'd all just happen to be at the Domino at around the same time. Nothing formal, just ... there."

"Mmm ... Hang on. Brian, are you on the schedule for Saturday night?"

"No, sir," came a familiar voice.

"You're totally off then?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good," Bradford said and then turned his attention back to Tobias. "Looks like I've just reserved Brian for the evening. What time do you want everyone? I can make the arrangements." Tobias grinned. "Around eleven, I think. You have Brian tied up? Lucky boy. Tell him I said so."

"Boy, Master Tobias wants me to tell you you're a very lucky boy."

"Yes, sir," Brian answered.

"Tsk. Boy? Was that a question?" Bradford sighed.

"No, sir," Brian sounded pouty.

"As you pointed out, the boy really does need a spanking," Bradford said cheerfully into the phone. "Eleven is fine, anything I need to tell everyone? Or do we just show and go from there?"

Tobias grinned. "That's the best part, my friend." He was still grinning as he filled Bradford in on the details, making sure that it was perfectly clear what was needed and that it was an absolute surprise for Noah. "So make sure everyone is just friendly and acts as they would at any other time. Usual scene rules and all that."

"So walking in en masse at exactly eleven would be ... wrong," Bradford joked. "I got it, Tobias, count on us. Sounds like fun; your boy should be very surprised."

"I hope so," Tobias said. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I have some shopping to do and you have a Brian to spank. Have fun!"

* * * *

It was the first time Tobias had taken Noah out. It was the first time they'd gone anywhere at all and only the second time since they'd signed their contract that they were spending the night in the city. It was simply too far to drive back out to the country, and it was going to be a late night.

Dinner had been wonderful, the two of them enjoying the understated elegance of La Vie En Rose; they'd lingered for more than two hours over their meal. Part of that, Tobias was willing to admit, was that he'd wanted to spend as much time as possible with Noah in a suit. He was stunningly attractive, all legs and shoulders and toned body. For a time it was entirely possible that Tobias might have pushed the absolute letter of their contract and encouraged a little risky making out in the bathroom, but there was a plan in place.

When they were finally forced to admit that they couldn't really justify staying any longer, Tobias signaled for the bill. "But the night is still young," he assured Noah. "We're not done yet."

Noah smiled at Tobias and finished his iced tea. "This was wonderful, I can't imagine topping a dinner like this," he told Tobias.

"Ah, but we're going dancing." The waiter brought the bill and Tobias handed him his credit card. Quickly and discreetly the waiter made an impression that Tobias signed, adding a sizable tip before the young man beamed at him and scurried off, wishing them a pleasant evening. "We're going to the Domino for a bit," Tobias explained as he stood up.

Noah stood with him. "Dancing? God, I haven't been dancing in ... well, forever." He was grinning and he slipped his hand into Tobias' as they left the restaurant. "I wouldn't have guessed you liked to dance." Tobias grinned. "I love to dance. I'm quite good at it." He squeezed Noah's fingers as they walked the half block to the car. "Have you ever been to the Domino?" he asked curiously.

"A hundred years ago," Noah said, laughing. "You?"

"Not in a while. About four years, I guess." He unlocked the car with the remote on his key chain. "I heard they redecorated. Put in a larger dance floor and took down the neon." Tobias opened Noah's door and squeezed his hand again before letting go. "I got you a present to wear, pet."

Noah had started to comment on the neon, but the mention of a present distracted him. "What? Another one? It's a little early for Christmas." He winked. "I'm wearing the other one you gave me."

"You better be," Tobias growled as he closed the door. He rounded the front of the car and climbed in, reaching under his seat for the flat box he'd left there. He'd picked it up just after talking to Bradford earlier in the week, knowing it was perfect as soon as he'd seen it. "Here you are, pet," he said, passing it over as he started the car.

Noah grinned and opened the box right up. He reached in and pulled out the graceful, polished chrome cat mask. "Ohhh..." he gasped. "This is ... wow, gorgeous, sir. Wow." He pulled down his visor and flipped open the lighted mirror, then placed the mask over his eyes and fastened it on. He smiled at himself in the mirror. "This is beautiful, so different, I love it."

Tobias smiled. The mask was even lovelier on him than it had been in the black velvet display. It fit him well, concealing the upper part of his face and drawing attention; anyone who knew he was into the scene would be able to pick him out, but the casual onlooker wouldn't match this man with the beat cop Noah was in the daylight hours.

And it was incredibly sexy, Tobias couldn't help but notice. He'd have the most attractive submissive in the bar, without doubt.

He smiled broadly as he drove.

The Domino wasn't far away, merely hidden down an alley in a rather unexpected way. When the club had first opened, there had been a lot of trouble with people in the scene being spotted coming and going and being outed, so the club had shut down. When they'd reopened, the entrance was relocated to the back, and the parking was private, in a courtyard that was guarded on all sides by the brick walls of the surrounding buildings—it was literally in the middle of the city block and secured by the club and private security.

Tobias parked and exchanged a knowing glance with the current guard. Word had been passed on, which was nice to know. "Come along, pet," he said, holding out his hand. "Dancing awaits."

"Yes, sir." Noah followed Tobias, keeping tightly to heel. The club was busy, of course; it was a Saturday night, after all. Tobias glanced around and easily spotted Nikki on the dance floor despite the press of bodies. Logan, one of the other Doms from the club, was sitting at the bar, talking with a man Tobias didn't recognize.

"Familiar faces, pet," he said into Noah's ear, slipping an arm around Noah's waist. "Dance or drink? They have fresh juice." "I'm on my best behavior, sir," Noah teased. "How about a dance and then a drink to cool down?"

"Sure." Tobias smiled and nodded to Logan as they passed. He led his masked pet onto the dance floor, gathering up the admiring glances as they made their way through the crowd. There were others in masks, of course, but none as striking as Noah's. Tobias was fairly sure that none of the other subs looked quite as dignified in their masks, either.

They danced well together, Tobias was pleased to find. A lifetime in the saddle for each of them seemed to give them an understanding of movement and how to use their bodies; sex had taught them how to move together to the best effect. Noah's heel-training made him very adept at following Tobias' lead as well. So when they weren't bumping and grinding to whatever house music was playing, they swayed together nicely to the slower songs instead.

Noah had ditched his suit jacket and his tie early on, and his shirt was almost, but not quite, shamelessly unbuttoned. The mask reflected the lighting, drawing attention to them both, and Noah seemed to love every minute of it.

"Not fair that he's prettier than me," came a familiar voice, and Tobias grinned.

"Ah, but that's the trouble with life, Phan," he said, pulling Noah to him. "It's rarely fair. However ... we all get to look at him, and that's nice, hmm?"

"Oh, absolutely." Phan was openly leering, and Tobias' grin grew. Phan had gone all-out in full leather from head to toe, including leather ribbons in his hair. He looked luscious. Phan looked Noah up and down and then flicked a look at Tobias. "Bradford would like a quick word. He sent me to watch your boy."

Tobias laughed. "Trust you with Noah? What do you think of that, pet?"

"Only if he dances, sir," Noah replied with a grin.

Tobias snorted before Phan could. "Oh, he dances." He held Noah to him, but talked to Phan. "You will behave."

"Define?" Phan asked with a grin.

Tobias sighed and let go of Noah. "Don't hurt each other and no sex. Understood?"

"Understood, sir," Noah replied, but he was laughing. He turned to Phan. "Bradford is here, too? This place is popular tonight. Did you see; Logan's at the bar also."

"Yeah, said hi. And I think I saw Brian in the bathroom," Phan said, casually moving Noah away from Tobias.

Tobias grinned and backed away, then turned to find Bradford. He didn't have to look far—the man was at the bar, watching the spectacle.

"Having fun?" Tobias asked, leaning on the bar and turning to watch Noah and Phan dance.

"I think the more pertinent question is, are you?" Bradford winked.

"I'm having a ball," Tobias said with a grin. "Noah seems to be having fun, but he's seeing a lot of faces—he might figure something's up if Phan doesn't distract him."

"Oh, I think Phan is distracting him." Bradford grinned as they watched the boys dance. Phan had his back to Noah and Noah's hands rested on his hips. "I guess I didn't realize that Noah could be as shameless as Phan. You must have brought out his inner slut."

"I think it was barely hidden. And Phan's good at that, too." He grinned and turned to look at Bradford. "Were you in the club the first night Phan showed up to see who Noah was? I thought Noah would sooner kill him before—doing that." He gestured to where the crowd was pulling back to watch the two dancing, Phan's hands now linked behind Noah's neck and Noah's hands still on Phan's hips. Phan had his head tilted up to talk to Noah and Tobias could see his stomach muscles working as he writhed.

"I did tell them no sex," Tobias said mildly, watching as Phan turned in Noah's arms and faced him.

"That's not sex. Quite." Bradford cleared his throat and changed the subject. "Oh, yes, I was in the club that night. Watched the whole thing from the foyer. Phantom told me that he wanted Noah to know you weren't for just anybody," Bradford grinned. "So you think you could get Noah to do that now?"

Tobias tilted his head and thought about it as he watched Phan attempt to molest his boy. Phan's hands were firmly on Noah's ass, although there did appear to be a little bit of room between their groins—he was fairly sure he could get a piece of paper between them if he tried. "I think I could," he said. "But only if I needed it. And as I don't, I'd say Noah's safe."

"Well, he can certainly take care of himself, anyway," Bradford observed as Noah reached back and peeled Phan's fingers off his ass and took a step backward, putting a little air between them. Neither of them stopped dancing, however.

Tobias laughed and watched for a moment longer, not missing Phan's pout or Noah's look of exasperation. "Does everyone know what to do, before I go save my boy from Phan?"

"We're ready when you are. I've got a small crowd, maybe seventeen guys? Seems like the idea of you and Noah together was appealing. Go save him." Bradford gave him a little shove.

"Right, then." Tobias felt the first flicks of arousal start twisting in his belly as he pushed his way back to Noah. Tobias landed a hand on Phan's shoulder and growled at him. "Time's up, Phantom."

"Damn." Phan grinned up at him and winked. "You sure? I like him."

Tobias rolled his eyes. "So do I. Go play, Phan, it's time I took my boy home. I don't share." He softened the words with a grin, knowing that Phan would know the slight lie for what it was. He pulled Noah to him and spun him around with a grin, then held him as Noah had danced with Phan. "Ready to go, sweetheart?"

"This is nice, but we could do this in your living room, I suppose. Right, sir?" Noah said leaning into him.

Phan sniffed dramatically. "I'm feeling unwanted. I think I'll go bother Logan—he thinks that more is all the merrier."

"Goodnight, Phan," Tobias said with a grin.

"Goodnight." Phan grinned as he backed away. "Got him warmed up for you, sir."

"Go!"

Laughing, Phan finally turned and left, his tiny ass wiggling as he ran.

"Well, I can't say that's not true," Noah admitted, turning to face Tobias and pressing his half hard prick into Tobias' thigh. "So maybe it is a good time to go, sir."

Tobias licked Noah's lips and shifted back, letting himself get hard, letting himself feel every eye on them. "I think you're right, boy. Tell you what, you take the keys and go to the car—the guard saw you with me, it'll be all right. I'll be there in about five minutes. Bradford wants me to have quiet word with someone."

"Yes, sir. Hope everything's all right, sir?" Noah asked, taking the keys.

"Just one of the subs playing in the wrong spots. I get to put the fear of God in him." He rolled his eyes and tried not to cross his fingers behind his back. He kissed Noah again and pulled him a little closer. "I'll hurry. Promise."

"Yes, sir. I'll be at the car, sir." Noah stretched up on his toes and kissed Tobias and then headed through the crowd toward the door. All Tobias needed was a quick glance toward the bar and Bradford began rallying people together.

Tobias nodded and set off to the back door at a fast clip, feeling like he was leading a parade. He was gathering a few curious looks by the time he got to the back door. One of the club guards met him and Bradford with a nod, holding the door open, and Tobias headed out to the parking lot, trusting the two men to only let out the invited guests and to keep the interested rabble inside. He figured he had less than two minutes to get in place he doubted Noah was going to take his time—so he moved quickly along the nearest wall, counting rows of cars until he knew they would be in a prime location. Noah had to pass him to get to their car, and they were between lights. They'd be seen, but they wouldn't be in a spotlight. Behind him he heard steps as almost twenty men took places where they'd be hidden from Noah.

There was silence. Tobias heard himself breathing, felt his heartbeat in his cock as blood surged south. This was the ultimate high for him; he hadn't done a public scene in years, and he'd never done fantasy play for an audience. He bit his lip and adjusted his erection, listening for Noah's steps coming down the alley.

The first indication of his approach was an innocent jingling of his keys. The headlights and interior lights of Tobias' car came on and the alarm bleeped off as Noah approached it, oblivious and humming as he ran his fingers along the hood on his way to the passenger side.

Tobias moved. He didn't run, but he rushed up against Noah and propelled him into the brick wall ahead of the car, one hand up and out to keep Noah from being hurt by the impact. He pressed along Noah's body, his other hand on Noah's mouth. "You think you can dance like that and just walk out? That you can tease and put on a show and leave a man wanting? Slut."

Noah was quiet for a moment. He struggled a bit, disoriented, but turned his head far enough to get a look at Tobias and went still. He was breathing hard and his heart was pounding. It only took him a few seconds to form an appropriate response. "I ... never promised you anything," he growled.

Tobias allowed himself a flicker of a smile as Noah jumped into the game.

He shoved a little harder, willing to be rougher now that Noah was at least aware that he was even there. "You made a promise to every man watching, Pretty Boy," Tobias said, a little louder. "Just that I'm the one who got out here to collect." He dragged his hand down Noah's body, fingers digging into muscle and pulling at cloth.

"Gentlemen ask first," Noah drawled. "But you're not a gentleman, are you? What if I told you I already have someone waiting for me? What then?"

"Then I'd say you don't seem to care much either way." Tobias dropped his hand lower and grabbed Noah's cock through his trousers. "Hard as a rock, slut." He licked Noah's ear and laughed softly. "You want it."

Noah didn't bother to cover his groan. "How do you know what I want? Who the hell do you think you are?" he asked, pressing his ass back into Tobias' hips. "Out here in the fucking parking lot..."

"Did you see him leave?" Came a voice off to their right. Logan.

"No, but it looks like we're too late, man," Bradford said in reply.

"Jesus, look at him. The fucking slut."

"There's no point in butting in, Tobias doesn't share."

Deviations: Domination by Chris Owen, Jodi Payne

Noah groaned again and glanced over his shoulder at Tobias again, his mask reflecting the shadowy light. "Jesus..."

Tobias laughed again, his hand rubbing Noah's erection and slipping down to cup his balls for a moment. "Good evening, gentlemen. You're a little slow." He ground his own prick against Noah's ass, his breath speeding.

"Or you're a little fast," came a voice on the left. Tobias had to actually turn his head to see who it was thistime. "Let that tease go, Tobias, he's not worth it, take me instead," Nikki offered.

Tobias grinned and looked him over slowly. "Sorry, kid. You're a little ... well. You're not this one." He gave Noah's cock a squeeze. "Gonna fuck you, Pretty Boy," he said to Noah. He flicked his wrist and undid the button on Noah's trousers.

"Oh, God." Noah was half in the scene and half in a fog of arousal, Tobias realized with smug satisfaction. "No, no," Noah mock-protested quite convincingly. "You can't, not here—I have a Master, he's waiting." His body betrayed him, however, and he groaned again. Tobias could feel the adrenaline pumping in him, feel his pulse race, his temperature rise.

"Do it, man!" came another voice behind him, and another one followed.

"Rip his shirt off!"

"Don't let him give you that crap, I can see his woody from here, man, give it a squeeze!" Bradford's wolf whistle joined in and it started to become difficult to make any one voice out at all as sound washed through them and echoed against the brick wall.

Noah gasped, reaching down and grabbing his stiff cock, still held lightly in check by Tobias' heavy steel ring.

Tobias slapped his hand away. "Don't you dare. You'll take it the way I give it."

Noah moaned again and shifted, almost like he was fighting to get away, but his ass was rubbing against Tobias very nicely.

"Oh, yes," Tobias said, pinning Noah's hands to the wall. "You want it. Whore."

"Relax and enjoy it, kiddo," Phan said from somewhere off to the side. "Best fucking lay in the country."

Tobias grinned. "You just want to see him."

"That, too. Come on, Tobias. Get on with it. Fuck him. I want to see you take him."

"Do it," someone else said. "Nail him."

Tobias bit down on Noah's neck. "You're gonna ride me, baby. And you're gonna love it." He reached down and took the lube from his pocket, then transferred it to the hand holding Noah's so he could undo his own pants.

Noah glanced furtively at the onlookers and shivered. "Ah, fuck..." he groaned, and rocked back against Tobias again. "All these people..." he panted.

"Oh, yeah, Tobias, you tell the bitch." Logan grunted at him. "Boys like him need to know who's boss, yeah?" "He's a nice piece of ass, Tobias; if you don't get a move on I'm comin' in there to finish what you started. Hey, kid! How about that, boy?"

Noah whined and shoved his pants down, and the parking lot erupted in catcalls and applause.

Tobias laughed, rubbing himself along Noah's ass. "Such a slut," he said admiringly. "And all mine. But there's a line up, whore, so I better get a move on."

"You know it, Tobias. Don't break him, and go easy—sloppy seconds aren't my thing."

Tobias growled as he opened the lube. "None of you are touching him, hear? I got here first and this ass is mine." Fingers slick, he pressed into Noah with another growl. "Oh, fuck, nice and tight."

Someone behind them moaned and someone else whistled. "Do him, man. Make him scream."

"Ah, Jesus," Noah moaned and pressed back against Tobias' fingers, his forearms braced and pinned in place by Tobias' hands and his ass presented for Tobias.

"Here it comes, you slut!"

People started closing in. Bradford got close enough to speak in a conversational tone. "Tell him you want it, boy," he ordered. "Go on, tell him, you know you do, you fucking slut, tell him. His cock in your ass, boy, is that what you like? Go on. He wants to hear it. Tell him!"

"Ah! Yes, God, please ... want it! Oh, God," Noah choked out and bore down on Tobias' fingers.

Bradford winked at Tobias and backed off a couple of steps.

"Such a willing slut," Tobias purred. He fingered Noah for a moment more and then pulled his hand away and squeezed out more lube. The catcalls picked up, and there were more than a few cheers and whistles when he shoved his trousers out of the way.

But when he slicked his cock and thrust into Noah's ass there was dead silence for a long moment and then a whispered, "Fucking hell," before the noises started up again.

Tobias grinned and buried his head in Noah's neck. It was like marking his property, doing this; not just fucking him, but fucking him bare with everyone knowing it. He thrust in hard, panting as he took in the scent of Noah's excitement and arousal. "God damn it, you feel good," he whispered.

Noah grunted and groaned and rocked back into Tobias, riding him as Tobias thrust into his ass.

"Oh, yeah, take him, son." Bradford encouraged with a growl. Noah whimpered in response and tossed his head.

"Show them who I fucking belong to, sir," Noah whispered to him and Tobias was sure Noah was hiding a grin.

Tobias would have chuckled if he'd had breath. He grabbed Noah's hips and dragged him back onto his cock, changing the angle until Noah screamed, the muscles in Noah's back rippling.

"Do it, Tobias," Logan yelled. "Nail him. Make him fucking beg to come."

"Me, too!" someone yelled, and there was a smattering of laughter.

"Fucking hot," Phan said from nearby. "He's got a gorgeous cock, and look at that ring..."

"No touching," Tobias growled, slamming into Noah again. "Don't see your name on him," one of the Tops said with a wink, letting Tobias know he was playing nice.

"That's because you're not reading the damn cock ring," Tobias panted. "Oh, fuck."

Phan shuddered. "Jesus, sir. Make him come? Please?"

Noah was grunting with every thrust now, and his body was starting to tremble. Voices surrounded them, shouting, swearing, encouraging, begging, all kinds of words and breath and arousal filled their ears. "Oh, God, so good! Please!" Noah begged, still moving with Tobias, his body taking and taking and still asking for more.

"Come on!" someone yelled, maybe Logan, maybe Nikki.

"I want to see him shoot on the wall, Tobias, make him come, make him come!"

That voice was definitely Bradford.

Tobias wrapped a hand around Noah's erection and stroked him hard, matching every thrust. He bit down on Noah's neck, just dragged his teeth over the skin and began to whisper in Noah's ear. "They want you, slut. They all wanted you, but not as much as me. Can't help myself, have to have you, need to bury myself in your ass and make you mine. Drive me out of my mind with need, Noah. I think about you all the time, want you so bad—you make me hard with a look, have me jerking off in my office. No one's made me want this like you, pet. No one's gotten to me like you."

Noah groaned heavily and Tobias shoved hard into him again and again, thumb sweeping over the head of Noah's cock, spreading fluid. "Want to feel you coming around me, want to hear it. Want to watch you shoot; you're so fucking beautiful when you come, so lovely when you hurt. Come on, sweetheart. Come for me. Make me shoot in your ass."

Noah squeezed his eyes shut and clenched hard around Tobias as he came, barely making a sound at first. As the first wave passed over him, he gulped in air and sobbed out a long moan, letting go of some of the tension and clearly enjoying the ride. "Oh, fuck, yeah! Yes! Oh, Jesus!"

A loud cheer went up and Tobias sighed, still stroking Noah through his orgasm, reveling in the feel of his boy's cock throbbing in his hand, body shuddering. "Oh, God, I love you," he whispered in Noah's ear as he started to come.

"Oh, yes, yes, me, too, love you, oh, God," Noah whispered back, slipping one of his hands free while Tobias was distracted with his own climax. He cupped Tobias' face and held it close to his ear. "Say it again, say it again, please," he begged softly.

"I love you, Noah," Tobias whispered. He took a shuddering breath and kissed Noah's jaw under his ear, nuzzling until Noah turned to kiss him back. "Love you," he whispered again, just before he took Noah's mouth in a deep kiss.

The voices around them faded from his awareness, leaving him with Noah, his boy, in his arms, kissing him just as hard.

Tobias thought there might have been tears on their cheeks.

Someone was calling his name, shouting congratulations, and complimenting his boy. He could barely pay attention.

Noah shifted and let Tobias slip from him, turning quickly in Tobias' arms and pulling on him until Noah's back hit the wall. Their kiss was deep as their souls, and Noah was tugging on him so hard it seemed as if he was trying to crawl into Tobias' skin with him. "Love you," he breathed around Tobias' lips.

"We'll just be leaving," someone announced and laughter rang out.

"Pull up your pants, sir!" Phan yelled, quickly followed by, "Ow! I didn't ask for that!" and more laughter.

"Love you," Tobias whispered, kissing Noah again.

"Five minutes, Tobias. Can't keep the rabble locked in forever."

Tobias waved a hand and kissed Noah again.

"Thank you, Tobias," a new voice said. "And thank your boy for us."

Tobias waved a hand once more and kissed Noah again. "Let's go home," he whispered. "We can dance in my living room."

Noah, breathless again, nodded. "Yes, sir." He ended the kiss reluctantly and pulled away first to dress.

"Thank you. Thanks. Yes, I'm going back to the club. Night. Goodnight. Will you leave them alone?" Bradford was running interference, but it didn't stop Noah from blushing beet-red and glancing around to see who'd been watching.

"Nice show, Tobias, Noah," Logan said with a grin, and then more unexpectedly, "Hey, Phan, who're you headed off with?" "Not me," Bradford said quickly, probably in case Phan was hoping for a session tonight.

"Need me to drive?" Noah asked Tobias softly.

Tobias nodded. "Thanks, pet." He blinked a few times, trying to reorganize his headspace. "Jesus." Leaning on the wall he tugged his trousers back up and shook his head, utterly bemused.

"Sir."

He looked up to see Phantom standing in front of him, Logan glancing back and forth with a resigned look. But Phan didn't look upset, merely patient, which wasn't something anyone often saw.

"Yes?" Tobias said softly.

Phan smiled at him and stepped forward. "Told you it wasn't so bad, stepping off the cliff."

Tobias grinned. "That's not what you said." He pulled Phan to him and hugged him hard. "Thanks, brat."

"I'm glad you're happy, sir," Phantom whispered. He pulled back and grinned, then turned to Logan. "Okay, take me away. Wanna whip me?"

Logan rolled his eyes. "No. Sorry. But I'll give you a ride." "Just as good! My place or yours?"

Tobias shook his head and turned to Bradford. "Thank you, old friend," he said, offering his hand.

Bradford gave Tobias a genuine smile. "My pleasure." He took Tobias' hand and shook it, then covered their grasp with his other hand and squeezed a moment before letting go. "And thank you," he said, in a different tone entirely. "You two are sizzling. Would you like to do that for me at the New Year's bash? Think about it." Bradford stepped away, putting his arm around Brian's shoulders as they walked off together.

Noah had been searching for the keys and finally recovered them just under the front tire. "Come on, sir." Noah tugged Tobias gently and opened the passenger door for him. In moments they were alone in the quiet of the darkened car, traveling toward Tobias' apartment on deserted streets. Chapter 13

Dancing in the living room had seemed like such a good idea when they'd gotten in the car, but in actuality Tobias remembered the elevator, the shower, Noah, and precious little else. He'd almost completely lost the car ride home, and if there had been any conversation between them, he didn't remember it at all. He'd slept like the dead and eventually had been awakened gently as Noah wrapped around him and whispered "I love you" and something about coffee in his ear.

When he'd finally looked at the clock he'd noted that it was much more like lunchtime than breakfast, and yet in came Noah carrying a tray piled high with eggs, bacon, toast, two mugs of coffee, and fresh juice.

"Good morning, sir," Noah said, smiling cheerfully. He waited for Tobias to sit up, set the tray on the bed and climbed up to join him. "That coffee is yours," he pointed out and picked up his own to sip it. He looked good in nothing but his heavy cock ring. He was freshly showered and cleanshaven and smelled faintly of toothpaste.

"Thank you, pet," Tobias managed, sleep still trying to cling to the edges of his awareness. He sipped his coffee carefully and tried in vain to remember if he'd even made an attempt to make sure Noah was all right the night before, feeling vaguely horrified with the surety that he hadn't. He hadn't been that wrecked after a scene in years, that emotionally blasted open.

"Sweetheart?" he asked carefully. Noah smiled. "Yes, sir?" Tobias thought a moment longer. Obviously Noah had been pleased with the scene itself, and there was little doubt that he was happy. He didn't seem to be injured in any way, so Tobias refrained from nagging him about that. Which only left ... Tobias shied away from the overwhelming swell of emotion that suddenly coursed through him. "You got up early. I apologize for passing out on you like that, pet."

"You were totally exhausted, sir. Don't apologize, everything was ... the whole night was just..." The silly grin stayed on Noah's lips as he struggled for words. "Transcendent. Unbelievable. And slightly embarrassing." He laughed.

Tobias smirked. "What on earth could be embarrassing about begging to be fucked in front of twenty men?" His cock twitched at the memory and he sipped his coffee, ignoring it.

"Oh, God." Noah shook his head. "I can't imagine." He was blushing, not as red as the previous night but a decidedly warm color on his cheeks and ears. "I really did look like a slut, didn't I?" he grinned.

"You were..." Tobias reached for the right words. "Amazing. Such a beautiful slut; my slut. Gorgeous and needy and so wanton." His cock stretched again, and he sighed. "Change the subject, boy," he warned with a slight smile.

Noah laughed. "I think I'll do that, because you wouldn't believe how sore I am today, sir." He took a bite of the eggs and handed Tobias a fork as well. "So ... what are your holiday plans?"

"Depends on your schedule, frankly." Tobias gave Noah an even look. "Are you going to see your family again?" He wasn't pouting. But only because he didn't pout. He hadn't sent Mrs. Miller away just to spend the holidays alone in the farmhouse. "And you're sore? Bad?"

"No, good. I'm fine, sir. I just think it would be a good idea to avoid ... well, that's not changing the subject, is it?" Noah sipped his coffee. "I am not going anywhere for the holidays; I have to work part of it anyway, it's mandatory. I was thinking with Mrs. M away and with all my vacation time..." He left the suggestion open ended.

"Smart of you, you just saved your ass a nice whipping." Tobias grinned. "I'll be at the farm. Except for New Year's Eve, of course. When do you have to work?"

Noah shifted closer. "Well, I have to work Christmas Eve and New Year's Day second shift, that's what I pulled this year. Pretty lucky I think, sir. And there will be a day that I'm on call for the counseling thing, probably the day after Christmas, but I've been doing it for three years now and they've rarely called me in over the holidays."

Tobias nodded. "Shall I send Jorge around then? No, better. I'll take the truck, leave you the car keys. How's that?"

"That would be great." Noah munched on some bacon. "I can get next week and the week after, if that works for you other than those two mandatory days, of course," he said, mouth still slightly full.

"Well, Mrs. Miller is away until the sixteenth of January, so I'll be out at the farm for all of that; I'll be on call part of the time—Deidre is taking Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, I've got the twentieth through the twenty-third. And I have special rounds on the twenty-seventh and twenty-eighth, but that should only take a few hours each day." He helped himself to some bacon as well and grinned. "Maybe some one on one time with Dusky Dianna will do you both good."

"We reached a very tentative peace last weekend, sir," Noah told him with a soft laugh. "Things between us can only improve."

"Did you?" Tobias asked, surprised. "What did you do?" He smiled again and nudged Noah's arm. "Did you go all Dom on her? She likes that. Maybe you two are just too much alike to really be friends," he teased.

"I wouldn't presume, sir," Noah said with a laugh. In fact, he hadn't stopped grinning and laughing since the moment he arrived with breakfast. He was positively joyful. "I just slowed down and touched her a lot, talked to her quietly, tried to make sure she felt safe." He chuckled. "Well, okay, so maybe there were some Dom techniques involved."

"It sounds like," Tobias agreed softly. He looked at his boy and the rush of emotion came back, fast and furious. Tobias stared, taking in the grin and his color, the utter contentment in his posture. "God," he whispered. "You're beautiful."

Noah looked embarrassed by the compliment. "Thank you, sir. You're pretty damn handsome yourself."

"I'm ... weathered, with perhaps a touch of 'distinguished'. But you..." Tobias set down his coffee cup and touched Noah's cheek with the back of his hand. "You're glowing, pet." He smiled, basking in it. "That would be entirely your doing." Noah sighed, taking Tobias' hand and kissing it. "I can't remember ever, ever being this ... at ease. This happy."

"I just ... Well. Maybe we're just lucky. We happened at the right time, for the right reasons. You make me happy, both as my sub and as my lover. I'll keep telling you."

"I'll keep listening, sir. We're definitely lucky." Noah leaned over and laid his head on Tobias' shoulder. "I realize that I'm risking strokes, but I just have to ask. How did you manage to pull that off?"

Tobias grinned. "I made some calls. Bradford organized the audience and I got permission from the club for a closed scene in the lot. Security kept out anyone we didn't invite. You liked it?" He knew very well that Noah had, but he wanted to hear it from Noah's perspective.

"Oh, my God. Liked it is ... way too tame, sir." Noah looped an arm through Tobias'. "You scared the fuck out of me at first; even though I was sure I recognized the voice I had to look. And then it was just, well, I had no idea what you had planned until Bradford and Logan started talking, so then it was just hot—pressed up against that wall with you everywhere I looked."

"We weren't sure how you'd react to such an ... active audience. And I'll admit that Bradford threw in his own touches as well." Tobias grinned, watching Noah remember. It appeared that the scene had been as much a success as he'd hoped—even with his own unforeseen reaction. "I got totally lost in the scene, totally lost..." Noah said quietly. "It was such a ... well, a fantasy is what it was, and it was amazing. Thank you."

"I got lost in you," Tobias replied. "I was so busy making it real and safe that I could get to where I was really that ... selfish. But I got lost in you, in your need and your passion."

"And then to hear you say—" Noah's voice caught. He cleared his throat of emotion and tried again. "When you told me you loved me I just ... I'm completely yours, you know that, don't you? Anytime, anywhere—you know I love you, sir. Don't you?"

Tobias nodded. "I thought for a long time that you'd fallen in love with your Dom—which I expected and welcomed. But ... I'd hoped that there was more, without really paying a lot of attention to my own feelings." He smiled ruefully. "I do that," he admitted with a shrug.

"I was ... last night, I was worried about you, sir. After. On the drive home."

"I know, pet. I'm sorry." Tobias lifted the tray out of the way and wrapped an arm around Noah. "I'm not sure exactly what happened, to tell the truth. I haven't been like that after a scene in years—the last time was a reaction to Phan leaving, and before that I could mark it up to inexperience. I'm sorry I left you like that; it's my job to see that you're safe and back in your head, not go skipping about on the outer reality myself."

Noah shook his head in protest. "No, sir. I wasn't asking for an apology. You don't have anything to apologize for. It's my responsibility to look after you, too, sir. You have very important, very real issues of your own, if I may be so bold, sir, and I hope you'll allow me to support you through them."

"I don't have issues," Tobias protested immediately. "Well, none that we talk about, anyway."

"None that you're willing to talk about, no."

Tobias sighed. "Do you really want to talk about my abandonment issues? Or maybe my father issues? Or perhaps the ones I've already worked out, such as the sexual deviance and perversion issues? Frankly, I'd rather just be deviant and perverted and tell you I love you again."

"Fine." Noah snorted, and shifted so he was straddling Tobias' lap. "Be deviant and perverted and tell me you love me."

"I love you," Tobias stated. He said it as matter-of-factly as he could, but he was betrayed by the smile he couldn't quite suppress. "I love you," he said again, this time softly. His hands were on Noah's hips and he pushed up slightly. "Every battered and sorely misused bit of you."

"Mmm. 'Battered and sorely misused.' You make me sound positively pitiful. Thank the God of all things deviant and perverted that you came along," Noah said haughtily, drawing a finger along Tobias' jaw.

"Hardly pitiful. Well fucked. Ridden hard and put away wet would best describe you, I think." Tobias grinned and tried to bite Noah's finger.

"I love it when you talk cowboy," Noah grinned, letting Tobias snare the finger between his front teeth. "Always sounds so dirty." Tobias growled happily. "Speaking of dirty—" He rolled suddenly and pinned Noah to the bed, knocking the tray to the floor in the process. "Oops." He winced. "Good thing I have someone to clean that up for me."

"Oh, my, how clumsy of you. Well, you better let me up so I can get to it," Noah teased.

"In a minute." Tobias lowered his head and kissed Noah gently. "I need a shower. Badly. Desperately. And more coffee, I think."

Noah returned the kiss, lingering over it a bit before speaking. "I'd offer to join you in the shower, sir, but I must respectfully request that certain rear entries be declared out of commission for at least twenty-four hours," Noah smiled. "But I'll start the water for you and I'll certainly get you more coffee."

"You have a mouth, pet." Tobias grinned down at Noah and kissed him again before rolling off. "Don't worry about the water—start the coffee and join me when you can; I'll apologize for the tray in the shower."

Noah grinned. "Oh, yes, that part of my anatomy is working just fine, sir," Noah assured him, sliding off the bed and kneeling beside it to pick up the contents of their breakfast tray.

"Oh, good. Mine, too," Tobias said with a grin as he walked out of the bedroom. His grin grew as he heard Noah drop a plate.

Chapter 14

His mother had always waited until Christmas Eve to put the tree up. She'd said that it was more magical that way, that the scent of the tree and spending the day decorating it was one of the best things of Christmas, and it seemed a shame to do it too early. When Tobias was growing up the tree always went in the front window, where anyone coming up the lane would see the lights after Midnight Mass. His father would spend the morning fighting to get the lights on, and Tobias and his mother would untangle the garland and talk about stringing popcorn, though they never got around to it. There was music all day long, and they ate a good portion of the cookies in the house as they hung the tiny silver and gold balls on the tree, the smell of mince pies wafting out from the kitchen.

For just the three of them it had been lovely. For Tobias on his own it took a lot longer. The tree went up well, at least, and the music was a constant. Mrs. Miller had left cookies, but he couldn't bring himself to eat the pecan logs; they'd been his father's treat, and the man was particularly absent as Tobias wound the strings of lights around the tree. The mince pies he'd made himself, and he was fairly sure they were poor imitations of his mother's; it didn't matter.

He spent the day wandering back and forth between the tree, properly standing in the front window, and the kitchen, where he was making ready for Christmas dinner. Tobias knew that Noah had assumed he'd be cooking and part of his gift from Tobias was a day out of the kitchen. Just because Tobias preferred not to cook didn't mean he wasn't able—Mrs. Miller had made sure he could fend for himself from an early age.

The turkey was in its pan, waiting to go in the oven. The potatoes were, of course, not on the stove, but at least he'd remembered them. The cranberry sauce was Mrs. Miller's own, though he assumed her daughter-in-law had done the actually canning. Vegetables were ready, the stuffing was in the final stages of preparation, and he'd made quiche for later in the day.

The house smelled right. It sounded right, with "Silent Night" and "What Child is This?" and "Oh, Holy Night." There was the smell of snow in the air and the tree was perfectly straight.

So it was entirely natural that at midnight Tobias put the turkey in the oven and set the timer for the oven to turn itself on later before he grabbed his cigarettes and a bottle of scotch and went to the front porch. Noah would be there in the morning, he knew. He had plenty time to indulge himself in remembering Christmases past and shedding a few tears for the family he'd lost.

He smoked one cigarette before he even opened the bottle and went back into the house for a blanket. He remembered to turn on the tree lights as he passed it, and it seemed a little more cheerful outside with them on, shining through the window. "Merry Christmas, Dad," he whispered as he poured an inch or two of whiskey into his glass. "You'd have liked the tree this year." He sipped his drink and lit another cigarette. "Mom, you'd be pleased with the stuffing, I think. Last year's was too dry, but I ate it anyway."

He sat in silence for a moment, looking out over his land. "Phan, you'd hate this. Too cold for you, dear. You need Hawaii."

He brushed a tear from his cheek and sipped his drink again, turning to look at the lights of his tree. "But you'd be all right, Dad. Wonder if you'd have let me do the lights or if you'd have done it yourself?"

He pitched the cigarette and turned around, looking at his glass. It was good scotch, smooth and mellow, and not to be swallowed too quickly. He savored it for a while, managing to drink almost half of what he'd poured before giving in and lighting his third cigarette. With a sigh he sat down on the bench and pulled the blanket tighter.

There were lights coming up the lane. He looked at his watch and swore. One o'clock in the morning, and he knew who it had to be. He looked at the drink in his hand and sighed. He hoped Noah'd had a good day at work.

The car pulled in slowly, and Noah parked right out in front. The engine shut off and the porch went dark again, save for the tree lights coming through the front window. Noah got out and squinted toward him. "Sir? You're still awake?" he called as he pulled a duffel bag out of the trunk.

He was wearing jeans and a leather coat, under which he had a cozy-looking cable knit turtleneck. He took the stairs two at a time and left his bag by the front door before joining Tobias. "The tree looks great, sir!" he said with a grin and bent down for a quick kiss. "Surprise. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Noah. I'm sorry—I wasn't expecting you and I've had some whiskey, just so you know. I apologize, sweetheart." Tobias smiled. "I'm glad you're here, though."

"I know you weren't expecting me, it's fine," Noah smiled, sitting beside him. "It's a little selfish of me to come this late, I know, but I couldn't imagine waking up alone in my apartment on Christmas morning when I could wake up here with you, you know? What are you doing out here, sir? Aren't you freezing?"

"Ah, but that's what the blanket's for," Tobias said. He lifted his hand to show off the latest cigarette. "And one does not smoke indoors." He took the last drag and threw the butt off the end of the porch. "Remind me to clean those up before the sixteenth of January, please."

Noah frowned and made a thoughtful sound while maneuvering the blanket to share. "What can I do, sir?"

"I don't know, pet." Tobias sighed again. "If I'd have known you were coming, I would've left a flower for you, I think."

Noah nodded and winked at him, then got up and disappeared into the house without a word, taking his suitcase with him. He wasn't gone but a minute, returning with a throw pillow from the couch that he propped up against the arm of the bench. He sat and leaned his back into the pillow and made a "gimme" gesture with one gloved hand. "Come here," he said, beckoning. "Come lie right here." He patted the front of his coat. "Cozy up, I've got all night." Tobias raised an eyebrow but set his glass down out of harm's way and turned on the bench. It was barely wide enough for good cuddling, but it was nice and long, and he had a blanket. "You're odd," he told Noah as he did as instructed, making sure to share the blanket. They shifted and moved until Tobias at least was comfortable, his head resting on Noah's chest. "All right?" he asked.

"I'm not odd. If you're going to insist on poisoning your body with tobacco we have to be out here on this bench, don't we?" Noah said in the sort of tone that made it clear he was only partially joking.

Tobias snorted. "It's not like I smoke a lot, Noah. Spare me the lecture, please, I'm not in the mood." He snuggled a little to take any sting out. "Only when I'm ... upset," he added with a sigh.

"I know, baby, I'm sorry." Noah answered softly and tucked his arms around Tobias.

"It's just Christmas, I guess," Tobias offered. "And being here. Usually I'm away, or with friends, or just ... not here." He swallowed and closed his eyes. "I don't think about it that much. The first few years were harder. Sometimes it hurts, though. You know?"

"I know. Seems like I only miss my Dad on Christmas anymore. It does hurt." Noah pulled off a glove and ran his fingers through Tobias' hair. "How long has it been since you spent the holidays here?"

"Hmm. Before Phan, so close to ten years? I was here the two right after they died and then away for several. Two in a row, and then Phan. We always took a trip, went south or to Spain or Italy."

Noah sighed. "And because I had to work, you ended up here alone on Christmas Eve. Shit, I'm really sorry, Tobias."

"Not your fault. I planned for this; you just weren't supposed to see it."

"It ... uh," Noah did his best to change the subject. "It really smells great in there."

"Better than cigarette smoke, you mean?"

Noah laughed and swatted Tobias gently on the head. "No, you idiot, I mean you've been baking."

"Ah. Not only that, but the turkey is in the oven and the timer is set. It'll start cooking in a few hours." Tobias, if called on it, would have admitted to a certain amount of pride at that. He tugged the blanket a little closer.

"Thanks, I appreciate that. Now we'll eat at a decent early hour. What am I making to go with it?" Noah, who seemed like he was warm as toast, rubbed Tobias' arms.

"Not a thing. Everything is ready and you are out of the kitchen for the day. Merry Christmas." Tobias grinned to himself and wiggled a bit.

"What?" Noah sounded shocked. "Are you kidding? Nothing at all? Oh, my God, thank you!" He bent over Tobias and kissed the top of his head. "I had no idea you knew your way around the kitchen."

"I grew up with Mrs. Miller," he said dryly. "And then, after the accident ... well, she made sure I'd be able to impress. I think she was afraid I'd graduate, leave the school cafeterias, and never have anything but takeout again." He smiled softly and added, "My mother always let me help her bake when I was a boy."

"Yeah?" Noah asked. "Did you bake something she taught you tonight?"

"Mince pies is all. The cookies are all Mrs. Miller's, I'm afraid."

"Oh, cookies." Noah sounded like a kid. "I've never had mince pie."

Tobias looked up. "Never? Want a snack? I hope you like raisins."

"Actually, I'm kind of starving," Noah admitted. "Isn't that cheating to have the pie before Christmas?"

"By whose rules? Come on, let's go in. We can snuggle on the couch and I'll get over this mood before daylight and Christmas morning." It was a struggle, but he forced himself to leave Noah's heat and sat up.

"That's true, it's our rules around here. Or yours, at least," Noah laughed and got up, grabbing the blanket and pillow.

Tobias led him into the house and turned on a lamp in the living room. "Sit. Make yourself comfortable, I'll bring it in."

It felt oddly comfortable to do it, he found. He cut the pie and put the kettle on for tea, then loaded up a tray with cookies and cream and sugar. With a grin, he added a couple of carrots to the tray, thinking they'd toss them outside for the reindeer. Or they'd eat them. When the tea was ready he carried it all out to the living room and found Noah looking at the tree.

"Well? How did I do?" he asked, putting the tray on the coffee table. "Tree look okay?"

Deviations: Domination by Chris Owen, Jodi Payne

"It looks nice," Noah said. "It's so ... adult. All the balls match, the garland matches, the lights are a nice, conservative white ... it's pretty. I grew up with trees covered in absurd ornaments like the Grinch and snowmen and reindeer and these stupid little pigs with angel wings that my mother adored..."

Tobias nodded and sat down. "The little wooden reindeer with fake snow on his antlers." He looked at his tree and suppressed the urge to sigh again. "I lost all her ornaments about five years after they died. I was getting things out of the cellar—tossing old jars of forgotten pickles and throwing out ancient crap. Found a nest of mice in the box, everything was wrecked." He shrugged a shoulder, suddenly feeling ancient. "I went years after that without a tree. This is ... just stuff. I picked a color and ordered a bunch of things. It doesn't matter."

"It matters." Noah moved across the room and sat beside Tobias. "It matters. You took the time to put it all up, didn't you? It's the thought, right? You were thinking about them and maybe about Mrs. Miller or Phan or me when you were decorating and baking those pies, right? Everything matters." He took Tobias' hand in his. "Anyway, I can see it must have taken a good bit of time because you are so anal retentive that you've made everything all symmetrical and hung the garland just so." Tobias watched him try to smile. "I'm sorry, baby, I know this has got to be tough on you. I'm glad I'm here."

Tobias found himself blinking rapidly against sudden and unwanted tears. "I'm sorry, Noah. I've been brooding all day and it's hard to shake the mood." He smiled weakly and squeezed Noah's fingers. "I really am glad you're here, though. Even if I am a mess."

"It's never too late to make some new memories, hmm? So you'll have something happier to think about next year." Noah kissed Tobias. "You want to talk, I'm listening. You want to sit here and just look at the tree and let me hold you and drink your scotch or your tea, that's okay too, baby. Really. But first..." He grinned mischievously. "Let's have some of this pie."

So they ate pie. And cookies. And Tobias drank his tea without a splash of scotch and watched as Noah deliberated between more cookies or more pie. He found himself smiling more and touching more; but under it he was still sad and couldn't quite banish the specter of Christmas past. He suspected it was a fault of his nature—he'd planned to brood, so he was, unable to completely change gears. He watched Noah and wondered about that, the way Noah had been able to go from "sir" to "Tobias" merely because he needed it that way.

"I love you," he said suddenly. "I love that you're who you are and can be who you are so easily."

Noah considered Tobias for a long moment, searching his face, his eyes, smoothing a hand over his shoulder. "It's not as easy as you think, Tobias. Being who I am. Especially this time of year. But you make it easier. Around you, I can drop the excuses and the uniform and relax. You know most of my truths. Everything is easier here. I even sleep better." "That's good," Tobias whispered. He bit his lip and laughed hoarsely. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart. I feel like I'm going to fall apart. I ... You're right, I spent most of today thinking about my family and what I've lost. I should have been thinking about what I have. Do you know how long I've resisted letting anyone get to this point? How hard it is to ... to spend a lifetime knowing that I was meant to care for people like you—like Phantom—and not be able to let myself get attached? It's a war, two things that just won't mesh. So I lose and I get lost and—" He had to stop, had to breathe and ease the ache in his chest. "Oh, God, I'm sorry," he said softly, horrified at the flood of words and the immensity of the darkness he'd just shown.

Noah put his pie down and shoved the tray aside so he could sit on the coffee table and face Tobias. He was just inches away. "Just talk, baby. Anything you say stays here, I swear to you. Get it out. Say anything you need to and let me listen. Help me understand. Let me comfort you." He ran warm hands over Tobias' thighs and finally let them rest on Tobias' knees. "Come on, tell me."

Tobias blinked slowly, trying to get his equilibrium. "I'm ... I am what I am. I've known I'm gay since puberty, known I'm kinky since I first found out about it. I knew instinctively that not only was I a Dom but a Master. I'm not whole unless I have a submissive, someone I can care for and train and cherish. Someone I can teach and protect." He stared straight ahead as he talked, the words coming faster and smoother as he let himself go. Let himself trust Noah to catch him. "But I lose," he said softly. "I lost Danny when I was twelve, and I lost my parents. I couldn't get through my training fast enough and then I spent years practicing and playing and building my stables and the ring, and then I found Phantom." He met Noah's eyes and tried to apologize with a look. "Did he tell you about when we split up?"

"No, no. He said it was for you to tell me about it if you wanted me to know."

Tobias nodded. "You know he was my slave. That we were trying ... to satisfy a need. We tried so hard, Noah. You can't imagine the pain we went through to make it work, and it was ... futile. He was calm, we were working, and everything was good. We were happy." He took a deep breath and ignored the shaking in his hands.

"I was sitting on the couch one afternoon, reading the paper. Phan was in the kitchen, doing the dishes. I remember he came into the living room and knelt down next to me, and I touched his hair, just like normal. We sat there for about an hour, until I was almost done reading, and then he stood up. I glanced up, because he never did that—ever. He was the perfect slave.

"There were tears streaming down his cheeks and he said his safe word. But I couldn't stop—because I was being me. There wasn't anything I could do, there was nothing to stop. He just looked at me and said it again. And I couldn't do anything for him."

"Oh, baby," Noah whispered, and tangled his fingers with Tobias'.

"I ... I couldn't stop," Tobias said again, feeling the prickling behind his eyes. "And he had to leave because he couldn't stay, and I had to let him go because I couldn't help him. Oh, God." He closed his eyes against the wash of selfloathing and pain. "And here we are, and I can't help but worry, and that's not fair to you, and I don't know what to say or how to stop myself from hurting you."

Noah slid off the coffee table and knelt between Tobias' knees, looking up at him. "Tell me what you're worried about, baby. Don't think it, don't try to couch it in soft words. Voice it. Say it exactly."

"I think you'll leave me. I'll meet your needs until they change and then you'll go and I'll be alone again." The words were stark and real and it was like a physical pain to get them out.

Noah let his head drop to Tobias' knees for a moment and when he looked up he wasn't hiding his emotions well either. "Can you look at me, baby? Look at me."

Tobias shook his head for a moment but lifted his eyes anyway. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"Please don't be." Noah shook his head. "Listen, I know only a fool makes forever promises, so I won't. But you have a way of consistently meeting needs that I don't even know I have. You have taken me places I never dreamed I would go, or was too afraid to, and you've guided me there and brought me back feeling safe and free. I don't want to leave you. Ever. And besides all of that, I love you, Tobias. I've never loved anyone in my life like this. I've never wanted a lover the way that I want you. This is my truth, Tobias. I'm not afraid. I don't worry. I trust you."

"But I am, sweetheart. I worry. I trust you to know yourself, but I'm ... I lose. It's just the way things have always been—the only constant in my life is an eighty-three year old woman who thinks you and Phan hung the moon. Not that she's wrong, but ... God." He stood up and pushed a hand through his hair. "Can we just agree that I'm neurotic and pretend this conversation never happened? That you didn't see me like this?"

"No," Noah stood with him. "Look, I understand what you're telling me. You hate feeling helpless. You couldn't help ... Danny, was it? Or your parents or Phan, and they all left you. I'm hearing you, baby. But you can help me. You are helping me.... Look. Would you rather stand here and worry about a year from now or enjoy this moment? That's what I'm saying. Look in my eyes, believe that I'm yours right now, and let the rest go."

Tobias tried his best not to cry. He really did, but the prickling behind his eyes was stronger and he could feel the shake in his hands moving up his arms. "I know, Noah," he said softly. "I hate feeling like this. And I know it's something I have to get past." He stood in front of Noah and rubbed at one eye. "I love you. I know you love me, and believe me usually the joy of being with you is enough to push the rest away. It's just ... about eighteen hours of building up to a good cry, you know?" He took one of Noah's hands in his and tried to smile. "Okay, baby," Noah said. He went up on his toes and placed kisses all over Tobias' face. "Cry if you want to." Noah kissed his chin, his lips, his cheeks, his forehead, his eyes ... anywhere he could reach. "I love you."

"I don't want to." He rested his hands on Noah's hips and intercepted a kiss meant for his chin with his mouth. "I might need to, but I don't want to. Can I suggest bed, though?"

"You can." Noah smiled. "You go on up, I'll get the tree lights and shut the kitchen down. I'll join you in a minute."

Tobias nodded and took another kiss. "I really am sorry, sweetheart. Not a great Christmas Eve."

"I think it depends on how you look at it." Noah gave his hand a squeeze and let it go.

Tobias smiled to himself and headed up to his room, taking the stairs slowly. He liked hearing Noah moving around downstairs, liked being able to tell that he was looking in the fridge and taking stock of what food he didn't have to cook. He liked having Noah there, quite simply.

What he didn't like was losing control and letting his submissive see him being so weak. The conundrum of having a romantic, loving relationship with his sub had bitten him once before. Losing Phan had been the hardest thing he'd had to endure, barring the first horrible weeks after his parents' death. The pain of not being what Phan needed and not being willing to become what was necessary had been horrible; losing his lover had been worse.

But Noah was right. Worrying about an eventuality that may or may not come to pass was foolish, even if it was human nature. That his lover was so understanding was almost a comfort to the part of him that cringed to think of how he appeared to his sub.

"He's better integrated than I am," Tobias murmured to himself as he turned on the bedroom lamps and stripped. He went into the bathroom and brushed his teeth, then washed his face and hands to rid himself of as much of the cigarette smell as he could without showering. He could hear Noah coming up the stairs as he climbed into bed.

Noah stopped by the bathroom where Tobias could hear him brushing his teeth and getting ready for bed. When Noah joined Tobias, he had already pulled off his sweater, which he set on the chair. Slowly, he stripped off his blue jeans and briefs and added them to the pile, then he crawled onto the bed. "Hey," he said softly.

"Hey," Tobias whispered back. "Want to curl up with an old, old man?"

"No, I want to curl up with you," Noah said with a soft laugh, sliding under the covers with him.

"Flatterer." Tobias held out an arm and Noah curled into him. In a moment they'd tangled their legs together and wrapped their arms around one another. "You feel good," Tobias said, running his hand down Noah's back.

"Yes, yes I do. I feel very good. I have been essentially alone for Christmas since I left home. I'm looking forward to waking up on Christmas morning with ... wait a minute, it is Christmas morning!" Noah smiled and kissed Tobias. "It'll be dawn in, oh ... minutes." Noah slid his hand down Tobias' back and over his ass, giving it a squeeze. "Really?" Tobias wasn't sure which surprised him more, that it was so late or that Noah spent his Christmases on his own. Or that there was a hand on his ass. It was going to take some getting used to, this side of Noah. He moved his hand a little lower and returned the favor, adding in a little rock of his hips. "I'm glad you're here," he whispered, taking another kiss.

"Me, too." Noah wiggled a bit and gave Tobias a light push onto his back. "Me, too." He moved over Tobias, spreading Tobias' knees to kneel between them, and started kissing down his chest, stopping to give full attention to each nipple in turn. His tongue was nimble and he didn't spare Tobias his teeth as he teased and nibbled.

"Oh." Tobias knew he sounded somewhat strangled, but it was better than just moaning wordlessly. "God, that feels good." He arched a little and held Noah in place, his hips shifting restlessly as his cock filled. "Your method of cheering me up is ... oh, nice. Very nice."

"Christmas cheer," Noah mumbled around one nipple then slipped his fingers around Tobias' erection. "Perverted and deviant Christmas cheer." He released the nipple and sampled every inch of Tobias' skin on the way down, over his ribs, around his navel, into his curls. "You taste so good," he told Tobias in his bedroom voice.

Tobias merely moaned and spread his legs, his hands going back to grab the headboard. Between the high emotion and the lack of sleep, Tobias felt like he was drugged, floating on sensation and need for Noah to do whatever it was he was going to do next. Softly, Noah bathed Tobias' erection, his balls, and the sensitive skin on his thighs with his tongue. He took his time, too, moving from one to the next in no particular order, and in no particular hurry. When he finally settled down on Tobias' cock, he was hungry, and he devoured Tobias singlemindedly, all the while clamping his fingers tightly around the base of Tobias' shaft.

"Oh, God," Tobias gasped. His hands tightened on the headboard and he thrust up, aching. Noah's tongue dragged over his skin, rasped over the head of his dick. "Please, pet. More." He needed to feel it, needed something sharp and bright. He planted his feet and let his legs splay open, let himself open up.

"Oh, my ... now look who's being wanton." Noah purred.

Tobias felt a brief pause and squinted in time to catch Noah pushing himself out flat before his head ducked lower, his fingers spread Tobias' ass even more open, and his tongue began to tease slowly around Tobias' hole.

"Oh, fuck!" Tobias cried out and let go of the headboard. He didn't care what he looked like, didn't care what anyone thought. Right then the only thing that mattered was Noah and Noah's tongue and what he was doing with it. "God, yes, please. Oh, please!" He caught his legs behind the knee and pulled them back, surpassing wanton and diving right into begging slut, needing it, wanting it. "Noah!"

Noah's tongue went instantly from teasing to full-blown fucking. He made growling, hungry sounds, moaned and breathed on Tobias. He feasted on Tobias enthusiastically, pressing his thumbs inside him to stretch him and scraping his teeth along sensitive skin.

Tobias screamed. His cock spasmed and he thought he was going to shoot, but it was too good, too rare a treat for him to let it end. He held off by holding his breath and forcing himself to work past the urge until he could talk again. "Drawer. God, Noah, please. The drawer, now, now, now. Please."

Noah dove for the drawer and yanked it open. The tube of lube practically propelled itself into Noah's fingers, but Tobias shook his head. After another second of fumbling Noah came up with what Tobias was after.

The dildo was red and ribbed, tapered from the quite narrow tip to its wide base. Noah stared at it before finally asking, "This?" Tobias hoped the look on his face was answer enough because the words were gone again.

Noah mumbled something quietly that Tobias didn't understand as he lubed the toy up and then pressed it gingerly, ring by ring, into Tobias, past the muscle, until the flat, round base seated itself flush against Tobias' ass.

And then it started to move. Noah pumped him with it slowly. Painfully slowly. Too fucking slow.

"Noah." He attempted to put a slight bit of dominance in his voice, but he suspected he was merely whining. "Fuck me or I'll do it myself," he growled. That was better; the growl turned into a groan at the end, but he'd made his point and he could concentrate on just moving his hips and feeling the burn and shouting nonsense.

"God, I hate pushy bottoms," Noah complained.

He was probably joking. He better have been joking, but Tobias wasn't about to stop and find out because Noah complied with his orders and slammed him with the toy. Noah got his gland once, then again, then started to pump him steadily with the dildo and lowered his mouth over the head of Tobias' cock.

"Oh, shit!" Tobias jerked and shuddered, the dildo sliding over his gland, his hole stretched wide, and Noah's tongue doing indescribable things to him. He couldn't see; his eyes were wide open but there was just a haze of white that had to be the ceiling. He panted, pulling air into his lungs by reflex, his body beginning to spasm.

"Noah—" He tried to yell a warning, attempted to let Noah know that his body was shorting out and that orgasm was imminent, but it was too late. He said Noah's name and started to come, his cock pulsing and his ass clenching tight as he slammed his body down, trying to get as much of the toy into him as he could, grinding down on it as he screamed.

Noah swallowed every drop of him, then spent some time gently kissing and licking him until he'd gone soft. "You wanna give this a push?" he asked, tugging gently on the toy. Tobias tried to help, and Noah wiggled it free, then slid off the bed and disappeared, returning without it, but with a soft, warm washcloth instead.

Tobias tried to lift his head. Then he tried to roll over, or lift his arm; anything at all. He appeared to be unable to move and was possibly boneless. "You?" he asked hoarsely. "Sweetheart?" Deviations: Domination by Chris Owen, Jodi Payne

Noah tossed the washcloth on the floor. "Me?" he asked, crawling into bed beside Tobias again. "I love you and you're absolutely beautiful. Go to sleep."

Tobias shook his head. "Okay. Love you. Sweetheart. Mine." His eyes closed and he whispered, "Thank you."

Noah pressed close and put an arm over his chest. "You're welcome," Noah whispered, and then let silence fall over the room just as the sun was starting to make an appearance.

Chapter 15

When Tobias woke up, the sun was streaming in the window and spilling across the bed. It had been years since he'd seen the sun at quite that angle and it took him a few moments to realize what was wrong.

"Oh, God." He rolled over and found Noah sound asleep next to him, one hand firmly attached to Tobias' hip. And over Noah's shoulder he could see the clock, mocking him. "Noon. Oh, fuck."

He tried to get out of bed quietly, so Noah could sleep a bit longer. He wanted Noah to relax, yes, but he also wanted to save Christmas dinner without Noah knowing he'd nearly screwed it up in the first place. Trouble was, it had also been quite some time since Tobias had tried to sneak anywhere so soon after being rather vigorously fucked. He got halfway to the bathroom before he registered the ache, and then he groaned. Piteously.

"A hot bath will help," Noah mumbled sleepily, pushing up on his elbows in bed. He squinted at Tobias. "That's my fault. I'm sorry ... a little." He grinned.

Tobias tried to grin. "I'm not. Sorry, that is. And I don't have time for a bath right now. Go back to sleep, sweetheart. Presents soon, I have to deal with some—oh, shit. The horses." He sighed and rubbed his forehead. "Pet?"

"Oh, goodie," Noah said dryly as he slid out of bed. "Dusky Dianna on a Christmas morning..." "I can do it," Tobias said calmly, while in his head he was frantically trying to rearrange his order of business to get everything done in a somewhat timely manner.

"Oh, stop. I'm happy to do it." Noah stopped in front of Tobias on the way to get his jeans and kissed him. "I don't think you could walk that far, anyway. Take a bath. What's the hurry?"

"Nothing that you need to worry about, boy." Tobias grinned and pulled Noah back for another kiss. "Thank you. And Merry Christmas."

Noah's grin grew wide. "Merry Christmas!" He threw his arms around Tobias' shoulders briefly and hugged him and then let him go to get dressed.

Tobias made a point of not wincing as he pulled on his trousers. He really should have known better, and he was more than a little chagrinned at the sheer neediness he'd shown the night before. He was a man who had spent a lot of time becoming comfortable with his sexuality and there wasn't a lot that could shake him or make him feel like any one sexual desire was less than any other. He wasn't particularly bothered about needing to bottom once in a while—he liked it, and that was a simple fact. The problem was all the pathetic and needy emotion that led up to it in this particular case, the way he'd pretty much forced Noah to take care of him. He sighed and made his way down to the kitchen to make sure Noah didn't have to save him again by having to recreate Christmas dinner.

The turkey had just over an hour left to go, which made the rest of the preparations a bit of a rush, but with concentrated energy he made it happen. He merely blocked out anything else and sacrificed his visions of a relaxed time in the kitchen. He had a memory of his mother dashing like mad around the same kitchen, with exactly the same expression he assumed he was wearing. The thought made him smile and he grabbed a cookie to nibble on as he set out the serving china.

By the time Noah made it back in from the barn, things in the kitchen were mostly under control. Tobias heard the screen door slam and then Noah's voice yelling, "Oh, it smells so good in here!" as he made his way upstairs to shower.

He made a few final touches to the table and then Noah appeared in the doorway. He was clean shaven, his hair was damp, and he was wearing red plaid flannel pajamas. He leaned his shoulder into the door jamb. "Smells like Mom's kitchen," he said with a smile.

"Mine, too." Tobias smiled and looked around. "Looks like it, as well."

"Everyone's fed, Spot was so happy to see me he peed in his fresh bedding and I had to rake it out all over again, the other boys were hungry and ignored me in favor of breakfast, and Dianna was ... tolerant." Noah snickered and stepped into the kitchen. He ran a soothing hand over Tobias' back as he made his way to a drawer where he pulled out a spoon and dipped it in the gravy. "What can I do to help?" he asked, lifting the spoon to his lips.

Tobias stared at him and finally shook his head. "You can stop eating gravy with a spoon," he said, laughing. "Yuck. Wait until there's some potatoes under it, at least." He pointed to the dining room. "Go. Sit. I'll be right in—oh, you can take the cranberry dish and put it next to the turkey, though; I don't have enough hands."

"I was just tasting it!" Noah laughed, and dropped his spoon into the sink. He scooped up the cranberry dish. "This is weird." He shook his head, grinning. "Very weird. Good, sweet, thoughtful, but very, very weird..." his words trailed off as he disappeared into the dining room.

Tobias grinned and shook his head again. "It certainly is," he agreed softly, picking up the china-ladentray. His grin grew as he walked into the dining room. "Don't get used to it, boy."

Noah snorted and raised an eyebrow at him. "You're really making me tap dance this morning," he said with a knowing laugh. "Your 'boy' won't get used to it, but he is deliriously happy. Your lover, on the other hand, appreciates a little pampering. You want some help with that tray, old man?"

"I've got it, thanks," Tobias said, carefully putting the tray on the sideboard. "Thought you said I wasn't old," he teased as he began moving dishes to the table.

Noah laughed. "Well, if you persist in telling someone something, after a while they start to believe it." Tobias could almost see Noah start to salivate. "Oh, my God, look at the stuffing. Mrs. M would be proud."

"I hope so," Tobias said as he sat down. "You know, I think this is the first Christmas I've ever had dinner before opening a single gift. Not counting the years that Christmas didn't happen, of course." He passed Noah the potatoes and inched the gravy boat a little closer to him. "Personally, I would blame that thoughtless sub of yours for keeping you up all night. You can flog him for it later." Noah winked at Tobias, piling an obscene heap of potatoes on his plate.

"Only as a reward," Tobias promised.

They filled their plates, Tobias already planning what to have seconds of. As they began to eat, Tobias noted that they were still smiling at each other and that Noah was eating far more than he usually did, which made Tobias' smile grow again. "Do you have calls to make today? Your mother at least?" he asked, adding more broccoli to his plate.

Noah nodded with his mouth full and chewed through a bit more silence until he could finally speak. "Yeah, I need to call my mom and Katherine and Emily, and if you don't mind, I'd like to call Brett. I'll keep it short, but you know, it's Christmas."

Tobias raised an eyebrow but nodded; Phan would be calling, he knew, and it wasn't like he had any objection. "Sure. Did you want to do all that before or after the presents?" He looked at the potatoes and wondered if he had room for more, or if he should stick to the turkey. Or if he'd have to fight Noah for them.

Mouth full again, Noah shook his head no. When he swallowed he said "After, later. This is our time." He smiled and reached for the potatoes before Tobias had made up his own mind. Really, he was making a pig of himself. "Everything is delicious. Did you make the cranberry stuff, too? And the turkey is perfect. I'm not going to need to eat for days." "I'm beginning to think that," Tobias said with a grin. He sat back and just watched Noah stuff it in. "I'll tell Mrs. Miller her cranberries were a hit, but I'll take the credit for the turkey. Thank you." He leaned forward and dropped his voice a little. "I was kind of thinking, however, that some of the gifts might prove a little ... distracting. You should make sure to keep an eye on the clock."

"Oh. Distracting. Montana is two hours behind us. I'm not worried," Noah winked. They ate steadily for a time, food disappearing rapidly. Noah leaned forward. "Did you see I put your presents under the tree?" he asked in a loud whisper.

"Nope." Tobias grinned. "I didn't even go in there—I have a certain level of restraint, unlike some. Tell me, did you shake any boxes with your name on them?"

Noah was probably very good at hiding things from other people, but Tobias knew him too well now. He watched the thought process flash across Noah's face—the stoic look, the indecisive lip-biting one, and then finally that adorable, silly smile. "Only one, I swear. And I didn't hear anything. And I put it right back." His mouth twitched as he tried not to laugh at himself, but he lost the battle. "My God, when did I become such a goon?"

"Right about the time that you really started working with me," Tobias said with a smile. "Now, are you almost done or should I go make more potatoes? There's plenty of gravy left."

"Oh, I'm done. I am so full. That was delicious, thank you so much." He smiled over the table at Tobias. "And I thinkyou're right about the timing," he said softly. Tobias found his breath catching in his chest. He cleared his throat as he stood up and leaned over to kiss Noah before picking up his plate. "Help me clear the table?" he asked, his voice husky. "I won't make you do dishes, promise."

"Of course. I need to walk off some of this food, anyway. I can't remember the last time I ate so much."

Noah followed Tobias into the kitchen, carrying his plate and the bowl of stuffing. While Tobias parked himself at the sink, Noah shuttled dishes out and put away leftovers in containers from the pantry. They made an efficient team, and toward the end, while Tobias finished loading the dishwasher, Noah sat himself at the kitchen table and looked out the window.

Tobias watched him for a moment, just enjoying the sight of him, before going to stand behind him. He put his hands on Noah's shoulders and looked into the yard. He could see the real stables to the right, the paddock just behind. Crispin's rump was wedged up against the fence.

"How pleasant," Tobias said with a grin.

"He's a slut," Noah joked and crossed an arm over his chest to put a hand over Tobias', then dropped his head back and looked at Tobias upside down.

Tobias squeezed Noah's shoulders. "How are you doing, sweetheart?"

"I'm ... wonderful. I feel really good. I haven't got much else on my mind, really; maybe it's a food coma. How are you doing?"

"Better. Much ... better." He smiled down at Noah and winked. "And pleasantly sore, thank you."

Noah winced. "Still?" He shifted in his chair and stood. "Well, it wasn't a small toy, I guess, but ... sore is good? You're sure?"

"Sore is fine, and it's not so much the toy as the ... lack of use, shall we say?" Tobias took Noah's hand and pulled him closer. "I'm fine. And I want to say thank you—for being so quick to change gears, for being what I needed. You helped me clear my head, and I appreciate it, even if I'd rather you'd not seen me like that."

Noah moved the last couple of inches and slipped his arms around Tobias' middle. "I want to be ... I hope to be everything you need, Tobias. I've said it before, and I mean it. I can understand that you wouldn't want your sub to see your vulnerabilities, but I promise it will only make things better. We're just that much more intimate now."

Tobias nodded and took a slow, sweet kiss, firmly quashing the urge to talk it all out right then. There would be time for that later; right now there were presents. And more presents.

"Tree," he whispered into the next kiss. "There's good stuff there."

"Tree!" Noah smiled, threading his fingers into Tobias'. "There is good stuff there, it's true." He pulled Tobias along until they were standing right in front of the tree. "I shook that one," he said, pointing at the box.

"Of course you did." Tobias rolled his eyes dramatically. "You like them big." With a sigh he bent down and picked up the long, flat box and shook it. "Hmm. Doesn't sound like chains..." Tobias could tell as he shook the box that Noah was itching to get his fingers on it. "Chains would be very hard to conceal at work," Noah said with a snort, sitting down on the floor, right next to the tree. He looked like a kid sitting there, still in his flannel pajamas. "Well? Are you just going to tease me or let me open it?"

It was too easy to just let his eyebrows drift up. "You're asking if I'm going to tease? Oh, dear, I do think you've forgotten a few things." He shook the box again and grinned.

Noah reached over the gifts and picked up a package he'd brought. "Oh, look. This one is for you."

"Brat." Tobias handed him the box and sat down next to him. "Tell me you're a shredder and not a saver. Please."

"I thought you knew me better than that," Noah said with a grin. He handed Tobias the gift and then gracelessly tore into his own.

Tobias sat with the box Noah had given him and watched as Noah ripped the red and green paper away, glad that he'd had the bright idea to switch the boxes before wrapping Noah's gifts. So much could be guessed by the name of a shop or company, and Tobias loved the way Noah's eyes lit up as the scent of leather drifted up from the box.

"Ooh, smells good." Noah opened the box and his eyes grew wide. "Oh. Oh, wow." He pulled the leather pants out of the box slowly and held them up. "Oh, my God, the ... the crotch laces up. Oh, my God, the sides lace! Oh, I love them!" He pulled them to his nose and sniffed the new leather and then jumped to his feet to hold them up against his legs. "You are a very, very kinky man." "I've heard that before. It seems to be a drawing point." Tobias laughed as Noah tried to figure out how the pants would look without actually putting them on. "I thought maybe you could wear them on New Year's Eve."

Noah grinned. "Great idea, I will. I'd love to. God, they're gorgeous."

"There's a couple of other things to go with them..." Tobias said, tilting his head toward the tree.

Noah sat back down again and folded his pants carefully. He petted them a couple of times while he eyed the other things under the tree. He reached for another box and pulled it into his lap. "You want me to keep going or do you want to open one?"

"Up to you, sweetheart," Tobias said honestly. "We have all day, and I'm sure we'll get around to all of them eventually."

"All right, then you open that one." He indicated the box in Tobias' hands. "I'll just pet these a little longer."

"You get hard for the pants, that's okay. Don't mess them up, though." He looked down at the box in his hands and grinned at the wrapping job. If the flannel pajamas didn't identify Noah as a kid, the wrinkled paper and ridiculous amount of tape would have. Cautiously, he shook the box and heard a thump as something shifted. "Not chains in this one, either."

"Like you need more chains," Noah said with a snort. "You're impossible to buy for, I want you to know. You're a wealthy man that has everything. But I think Santa managed." "I hardly have everything," Tobias protested, skipping over the impossible-to-deny wealthy part. He ripped the paper from the box and lifted the lid slowly, not sure what would thump quite like that. "Oh, clever boy," he praised as he saw the book. "Nice disguise." With interest he lifted the volume out and read, "Beneath the Skins. Interesting—intellect and kink. Well done, Noah, thank you."

"Not one you've read? I know it's not as sexy as leather pants." Noah winked at him.

"Not read it, no." Tobias was already thumbing through the pages. "And sexy is in the brain. Don't forget that."

"Yes, sir." Noah flipped the box in his fingers over and then over again, listening to something light slide around inside. "And fun is usually under fancy wrapping." He tore the paper and added it to the pile they'd started.

Tobias suddenly realized which box Noah had and put his book down, reaching for his boy's wrist. "Wait. I want you to understand something before you open the box."

Noah jumped and he stared at Tobias silently for a moment. "What is it?" he asked uncertainly.

"Nothing bad," Tobias said with a smile. "It's a step in a process. That ring on your cock was a step. So is this. It's not the last one, but it's close, and I picked this out because I think it'll look stunning on you. You'll make me proud at the party, I know you will." He leaned forward and kissed Noah quickly, then let go of his wrist. "Go ahead, boy."

"Jesus," Noah sighed, his smile returning. "You scared me." He opened up the box and blinked at its contents. Carefully, he lifted the collar out of the box. It wasn't a typical collar, this one was an ornate, curling vine of leather. "It's beautiful," Noah said softly, running his fingers over the wandering curls and tangles. "I've never seen anything like it."

"It's lovely, isn't it?" Tobias agreed. "I saw it online and had to have it. It's ... wild and free and the paradox of it being a collar appealed. It's elegant and sexy and you'll look wonderful." He smiled, thinking of the last item he'd dress Noah in, and suddenly wished the party were the next day and not a week away.

"Want to see how it looks?" Noah grinned and scooted over to Tobias to hand it to him.

"It hardly goes with flannel, pet."

"Hmm." Noah looked at him. "Oh, all right, we'll save it for next week." He slid back to the box and put the collar in it. "It really is gorgeous, thank you so much."

"Don't pout, Noah." Tobias grinned and shook his head. "Think of the impact—I'll have to lace you into your pants, make sure you're bound up nicely, collar you, mask you ... I wouldn't want to spoil your fun."

"Well, when you put it that way..." Noah laughed. "It does sound good, doesn't it?" He reached under the tree and handed Tobias a small, flat present. "Your turn."

Tobias smiled and tore the paper, not surprised to find an envelope in the box, it was so light. He raised an eyebrow to tease Noah and then pulled out the gift certificate. "Oh, massage, how ... oh my, this is great. A real massage, not someone pretending." He read a little farther and his eyebrow shot up for real. "At my apartment?" "Four-hand Shiatsu, aromatherapy, and me kneeling and watching and bringing you ice water," Noah told him, painting an indulgent picture.

"Oh, my." Tobias blinked and smiled. "That's the best idea anyone on the planet has ever had," he said, laughing. "Thank you." He leaned over and took a long kiss before pulling back and sighing. "Okay, two more from me. The green box, pet. More decorations for you."

"More?" Noah reached for the box. "I can't imagine..." He tore the paper and lifted the top off the box hastily, then folded back the tissue paper much more gingerly. "My God, I'm going to look positively mythical." He held the mask in his fingers.

"Icarus," Tobias said softly. "The leather shaped to flame and fly around your eyes ... it's almost art."

"It really is." Noah held it up and smiled at it, then set it carefully back in its box. He glanced sidelong at Tobias and grinned slyly. "Icarus died because he didn't listen to his father; is there something you're trying to tell me?"

"Would I do that?" Tobias asked, his nose in the air.

"Remind me to reread the myth before I get an 'I told you so," Noah laughed. "Only one more from me, in the big box there."

Tobias pulled the box closer and then lifted it. "Hmm. Heavier than a book." He shook the box carefully and got twin thumps. "Oh, now that's interesting." He winked at Noah and tore the paper off, closing his eyes at the familiar scent of leather. "Noah? Did you buy me something to tie you up with?" "Oh, that would have been a good idea. But no." He grinned.

Tobias lifted the lid and stared at the boots. "These are gorgeous," he said softly, lifting them out of the box.

Noah smiled. "Well, I'd noticed when we were riding a couple of weeks ago that your boot heels are really worn and the leather is, well, let's just say they needed to be replaced. The guy who sold me those told me that the ribbed leather upper gives you better bend to walk without losing shape when you've got your heel in the stirrup." The boots were a traditional cowboy style and the legs were stamped with a fancy leaf or star-like pattern. "I checked the sizing, but if they're tight in the calf he said to bring them in and he'd give them a stretch for you."

"I think they'll be fine," Tobias said, caressing the leather and tracing the design. "Dianna will love them."

Noah snorted. "Make sure you tell her I gave them to you; maybe I'll get on her good side finally."

Tobias merely laughed and pointed to the last box. "I took the same course in disguise you did," he said.

Noah peered at him suspiciously but unwrapped the gift with just as much enthusiasm as he had the others. When he saw the thick envelope at the bottom the box he laughed and took it out, immediately opening it and spilling out the contents.

Tobias had chosen them carefully and had made sure that the mix was complete. Brochures from hotels, museums, restaurants, boutiques. Clubs, resorts, theaters. Galleries, tours, and events. The Eiffel Tower. The Arc de Triumph. The Louvre.

"One week in April," Tobias said softly. "The dates are up to you."

Noah's jaw dropped open as he flipped through the stack of colorful brochures. "Paris? You want to take me to Paris?" He looked up at Tobias. "Paris!" He slid over to Tobias and threw his arms around him. "I've never been to Paris. I've never been anywhere. Oh, my God. April? I can do that. I can totally do that. Hell, I'd quit my job to do that."

"You will not!" Tobias laughed. "Just get a passport, make sure you can get time off. I'll take care of the rest—I have access to a private jet, so we don't have to worry about lastminute changes the way we would for a commercial carrier, but I do have to set things up fairly soon."

"A private jet? You're taking me to Paris in a private jet? I think I might faint. Or hyperventilate. Or die." Noah kissed him soundly. "Paris. Would you like a blow job under the Christmas tree?"

Tobias laughed. "Yes?" Like anyone sane would turn down a blow job under a Christmas tree. "So long as you don't actually hyperventilate."

Chapter 16

Noah appeared in the living room after making his Christmas phone calls and sat down on the couch, looking a little stunned. "Brett has a lover visiting for Christmas," he said softly. "He has a lover with him and he sounds happy. On Christmas. He's never happy on Christmas."

"That's good, isn't it?" Tobias asked, his voice cautious.

"Yeah. That's great. That's ... almost as good a Christmas present as Paris." His eyes flicked up and met Tobias' and he winked. "But not quite."

"You'll forgive me if I'm relieved that a trip to France rates higher than your ... than Brett finally moving on." Tobias sighed. "Sorry. How's your family?"

Noah raised an eyebrow at him. "My family is fine. And since you suddenly seem to need reminding that you're the most important man in my life..." Noah said, moving to Tobias. "I told my mother that I was spending Christmas on a farm with the man I'm in love with."

Tobias raised an eyebrow right back at him and pulled Noah into his arms. "You did? What did she say? God, you didn't tell her I'm ancient, did you?"

"Will you stop with the one foot in the grave nonsense?" Noah laughed. "I told my sister you're hot." Noah grinned. "My mother tells me that men don't fall in love with each other. Were you aware of this fact? I feel so na?ve."

Tobias snorted. "Ah, the 'men only have sex' argument." He took Noah's chin in one hand. "I love you. I love what we have together." Deviations: Domination by Chris Owen, Jodi Payne

"You mean this isn't just about fucking my brains out?" Noah laughed. "Well, who says mother knows best, anyway?"

"I can fuck your brains out if you want," Tobias offered with a smile. "I probably should, after the stellar blow job I got under the tree. But then I'd have to drag you across the yard to the stables to do it; strap you down to the library table..." He was warming to the subject and to Noah's look when the phone rang. "Oops. Maybe later?" he teased, dumping Noah on the couch and crossing the room to answer the phone.

Noah laughed. "Now, later, I don't care, I'm on vacation."

"I love vacation," Tobias said as he picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Vacations are sweet. How long is he there for?" Phantom said in his ear.

Tobias grinned. "Awhile. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, sir," Phan replied, a smile evident in his voice. "Noah give you a happy wake up?"

"None of your business," Tobias said primly. "Did Santa give you coal for being a naughty boy?"

"Nah, he didn't even make it here."

Tobias sighed. "Phan—"

"Hey, it's cool." Phan reassured him. "I've got better things to deal with than some fat guy in red. Bradford sent me some stuff and I'm going around to the club later to thank him."

Noah stood and called out, "Merry Christmas, Phan!" He looked meaningfully at Tobias and whispered, "You want some privacy?" Tobias shook his head, wincing as Phan yelled, "Merry Christmas, Noah!" in his ear. "Phan wishes you a Merry Christmas," he said dryly as he leaned back. "How's your day been, then?" he asked.

"Pretty good," Phan said. Tobias watched as Noah pulled his Paris brochures out from under the tree and settled himself on the couch. "Probably not as good as yours, what with lack of sex and no spankings, but not bad at all. I talked to my parents—"

"You what?" Tobias sat up.

"Relax, they called me, didn't make any mention of anything at all, and wished me a Happy Christmas. They asked for my address, which I didn't give them, and they didn't push. They said that they'd send me something through the lawyers if I'd agree."

"Send what? More money?"

"Tobias..."

"I just hate them thinking that throwing money at you will fix it."

"They don't think that," Phan said quietly. "They're trying, sir. Okay?"

Tobias sighed. "I'm here, pet. When it comes crashing down, I'm here."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"That's not what I mean."

"That's what I'm hearing."

Tobias took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Phantom. I apologize."

He heard Phan taking a matching breath. "Accepted. I know you're just worried. They ... they asked about you. Sort of."

Tobias rolled his eyes. "Ah, yes. The pervert who lured you into a corrupt and evil lifestyle."

"Nah. The replacement for the spook."

"Oh, they've been reading," Tobias said, honestly impressed. "To be fair, you do have some father issues."

"And you don't?"

"Of course I do. But in yours I at least get to be the daddy."

Phan laughed. "I never once called you 'Daddy.'"

"Thank fuck."

"You know it."

Tobias grinned. "So, what's left for today?"

"Dunno. The club for dinner, see if I can land in someone's stocking, I guess." He sounded calm again and as if he was looking forward to it.

Tobias shook his head. "I'm sure you will. We'll see you on New Year's Eve?"

"Yep. I'm looking forward to seeing your boy all decked out."

"Me, too," Tobias said with a grin.

Phan laughed softly in his ear. "Merry Christmas, Tobias." "You too, Phan. Bye."

He hung up and sighed, then looked at Noah, who was staring at him. Tobias blinked a couple of times, suddenly realizing how that call must have sounded from his end. "So ... uh," Noah said, gently breaking the silence. "Is everything okay? Phan's not in trouble, is he?"

He shook his head. "No, not really. At least, no more so than usual. It's just ... Christmas and family stuff." He smiled wryly. "I worry. I don't know if you'd noticed..."

Noah frowned. "'When it all comes crashing down' doesn't sound like your run-of-the-mill Christmas family stuff."

Tobias shrugged. "It's typical for Phan, unfortunately. Well, I think so, anyway—he disagrees, and I apologized." He sighed again and held out a hand to Noah. "Come here, sweetheart. I want to hold you while I talk about this."

Noah got up and made his way over. He put a hand on Tobias' cheek and kissed him lightly before settling into his arms. "So who's throwing money at him?"

Tobias opened his mouth and then closed it again. "Actually, he said they weren't and then I got sidetracked." Tobias thought about it for a moment as he arranged Noah to his liking and got himself comfortable. "Doesn't matter, I suppose, not really." He kissed Noah's hair and held him a little tighter. "Phantom's family life has always been a little unusual," he began. "His parents were never supposed to meet, let alone fall in love and run off. But they did, and Phan was born into a situation that was ... precarious at best. His mother had been placed in a witness protection program and his father was a federal agent."

"Ah, the ghost and the spook."

Tobias nodded, recognizing Phan's usual terms for his parents. "Yes, there was a lot of pressure, a lot of moving around from place to place." "That sucks." Noah picked up one of Tobias' hands and played with his fingers.

"It does. Did. What was worse was that they were so concerned with getting things settled for themselves and making things happen that they neglected Phan from a rather early age. And of course, things happened." He snorted. "Their side is a little different from mine, naturally."

"So they know about you?" Noah asked with a sleepy sounding sigh.

"Oh, yes. I'm the bastard that took their boy from them, kept him locked up, seduced him, turned him into a deviant, and controlled his mind." Tobias felt his back stiffen as he spoke and forced himself to breathe evenly. "We've met," he added. "It was ... unpleasant. I accused them of abusing him. They returned the charge. Phan was unhappy with all of us."

"I can understand that," Noah said with a nod. "It doesn't sound at all ... pleasant."

Tobias kissed the top of Noah's head again. "Yes, well. In any event, they retreated again and began to ... Phan started getting a lot of letters from lawyers. His parents wanted him in therapy—only about ten years too late—and wanted to pay for it. He asked me, I said of course. And then they locked him up, away from me."

"What?" Noah sat upright and turned to face Tobias. His eyes were wide. "Locked him up?"

"They had him committed and told me that he was with them, at their home. It took me a day and a half to realize that he wasn't 'sleeping' or 'out for a moment' and three more to find him. The only reason I got him out was because he'd had his insurance through work changed to reflect me as contact person and de facto next of kin. I had his power of attorney and a decent lawyer."

Noah shook his head. "Jesus. Thank God he had you."

Tobias shrugged. "It was a bad week. And then a month of fallout. And then another month of his parents finally realizing he was staying with me and there wasn't anything they could do about it. He stuck with therapy, though I think it did him little good, and I made sure he had a place to run to if he needed it. His parents send him money through the lawyers, call when he lets them, and are trying to fix what they broke, in their own half-assed way."

Tobias realized he was sitting straight again, his back tight and his jaw starting to ache. "I'm sorry, pet. This really has nothing to do with us; I just ... worry. But he's on his way to the club and seems to be in good spirits, so that's all right. And I'm here, with you, and things are definitely all right here."

"Uh-huh." Noah went quiet for a moment and ran his fingers over Tobias' thighs, looking thoughtful. When he spoke again he caught Tobias' eyes. "So, his place to run ... is it your place?"

Tobias lifted a shoulder. "When it happened, it was 'our place,' but yes. He still has a key to the apartment, and his name is on the deed. If he needs it, the agreement is that I move out here and he keeps it." Tobias closed his eyes and leaned back a little. "Please don't be upset about it, Noah. He's never asked, never presumed. But I need to know he at least has a place to live if things go bad." "I'm not upset about it, Tobias," Noah shook his head and sighed. "But I do feel a little like I'm being forced to ask the right questions if I want the whole picture."

Tobias winced. "I'm sorry. But so much of it is his story that I'm not sure how much I can tell. The apartment thing didn't even occur to me. You can ask whatever you like; if I can answer, I will. And if anything else comes up, I promise I'll explain as soon as I can and tell you what I can. Would that help?"

"Yeah. Yeah, that would help." Noah turned again and leaned against him. "Just seems like as soon as I think I understand you two and I digest it and make my peace with it, something else comes up. I know it's my problem—my issue. I know that. Still, it seems like getting to the bottom of it just digs up another layer I wasn't expecting." Noah sat up quickly again. "You know what?" he asked. "Never mind all of that, I'm just ... that's not really what I want to say. What I want to say is please don't call him 'pet' around me anymore." Noah held his eyes for another moment and then dropped his gaze into his lap.

Tobias tried not to stare. If Noah heard him say it, he must have done so, but damned if he could remember. "All right. I'll try my best." He tilted his head and considered his boy, his lover. "My sweetheart," he said softly. "That's you. My sweetheart and my boy. Others have been 'pup' and 'pet,' and once upon a time Phantom was my boy, not just a boy. But no one has ever been sweetheart. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." Noah answered softly. He didn't look up.

"Good. You know your place, and it's with me. There is no one else, boy. Remember that, as well."

"Yes, sir." Noah's brow furrowed and he frowned, looking disappointed in himself. "I know, sir."

Tobias clicked his tongue. "And I won't have an unhappy boy on Christmas Day, Noah Dolan," he declared. With a push and roll he shoved Noah to the floor and landed on top, grinning down at his startled lover. "Kiss me. Let's make love on the floor and then eat leftovers and read the book you gave me and go to bed early. Smile."

Noah blinked up at Tobias. He seemed genuinely confused for a moment, and Tobias was strangely smug about it. Finally, Noah appeared to give up on reason and just smiled and kissed him.

Chapter 17

The sun was shining when he woke up, but the other side of the bed was cold, and he was alone. With a frown, Tobias rolled over and peered at the clock; it was almost seven. He lay there for a moment, waking up and trying to figure out where Noah was.

"Horses," he said to himself as he threw off the bed covers and got up to take his shower. "Damn horses."

He wasn't actually annoyed about the horses, he admitted to himself when the hot water began to wake him. And he wasn't even particularly annoyed that Noah had slipped out to do the chores without waking him for a morning cuddle or more. But he did have an itch in his spine, a deep down restlessness that made him twitchy and made him want to stomp. With a sigh he decided that he really should have gone out to the horses himself, since he was acting like Crispin in a foul mood.

He finished his shower and got dressed, then paused to finger the chain at the foot of his bed, not really thinking about it. He looked up, across the hall to the safe room, the itch in his spine starting to burn. That's what he needed. His boy. He dropped the chain with a thunk and went down to the kitchen, searching for coffee, and making plans as he went.

There was fresh coffee awaiting him in the kitchen when he arrived. There was a thin layer of frost on the ground as well, he noted as he peered out the window toward the barn. Noah had finished turn-out and the horses were busy stretching their legs and trying to graze in the frozen grass. And then, as if he'd been summoned, Noah emerged from the barn, all bundled up in Tobias' field coat, ear muffs and gloves, and made his way up to the house at a jog.

Tobias watched Noah come, the burn making him shift his weight until he gave up and met Noah at the door. "Go shower," he said as soon as Noah stepped in. "Have you eaten?"

Noah started pulling off the heavy coat and blinked at him, eyes watering some from the cold. Apparently, he picked up on Tobias' mood. "Yes, sir. I had a quick bowl of oatmeal before I ran out to the barn." He hung the coat up and set the gloves and ear muffs on the hall table. "Shall I make you breakfast as soon as I'm out of the shower, sir?"

"No, I'll do it. Get clean and warm and wait for me in the safe room. On your knees." Tobias could feel something tight inside him start to loosen, his breath coming a little easier.

"Yes, sir." Noah nodded to him, eyes low, and then turned and hurried up the stairs.

Tobias took his time with breakfast, sipping his coffee and thinking over his needs and the plans for the day. By the time he made his way to the safe room Noah was there, on his knees, neatly in his display position and wearing nothing but his cock ring. His cheeks still looked a little pink from the cold, but otherwise he seemed plenty warm.

"Good boy," Tobias said, going to the cabinet. "How were the horses this morning?" He pulled the doors open and got out a set of nipple clamps, glancing back at Noah and considering which cuffs to use. He thought the ones he wanted might actually be in the stables. Of course. Noah answered without moving a muscle. "They were cold, sir. Everything was cold. Even your girl was glad to see me coming with her turn-out blanket. I had to chip the ice out of the waterers in the pasture. I'll need to go out and check on those again this afternoon at some point."

"Fine." Tobias nodded and picked up a flogger. "Need to move," he said softly to himself and put it down again. "Okay, pet. We're going to play. It's cold, so you'll dress for the walk, but no talking unless it's important, understood?"

"Understood, sir."

With a quick nod Tobias went to the dresser and pulled out a pair of fleece sweatpants for Noah and a warm shirt. He set them down on the chair and said, "Purely functional; you'll be naked soon. However, I think I want a bit of style."

He pulled off his shirt and toed his shoes off, easily and efficiently stripping himself before walking naked back to the cabinet. He found what he needed readily enough and took his time pulling on the leather pants. They were tight, but he could move, and he was perfectly aware that they fit him well. They should, for the amount the tailor had charged. Still shirtless, he got the black jackboots from the closet. "Help me with these," he said softly.

Noah hopped up quickly and silently. After just a second or two of searching, he found the boot hook in the armoire. He threaded the hook through the loops on one boot and turned it so that Tobias could step into it. Tobias was fully aware that his leather-clad ass was in his boy's face as he stomped into the first boot and then the other. Noah put the hook away and then pulled on the sweatpants and the shirt Tobias had taken out for him to wear. He knelt again while Tobias finished dressing.

Tobias did up the silver buckles of his vest and nodded to Noah. "All right, boy. Let's go. Everything else we need should be there." He jingled the nipple clamps and smiled to himself.

The walk over was as cold as Noah had led him to believe, the air damp and chilly. The play stables, thank goodness, were warmer, and Tobias edged the heat up a little more as he told Noah to strip.

"The ring, pet," he said softly. "Take two bottles of water with you. Find a dildo you like, and make sure there's lube. I'll be with you in a moment, I need to find a few things first."

Noah pulled off his clothes and left them by the door before making his way down the long center aisle to the ring. He disappeared behind the lid of one of Tobias' trunks as he searched for a dildo.

Tobias watched him for a moment and played with the lights, setting the spotlight over the library table on high and dimming everything else. He had to go to two stalls before he found the heavy leather cuffs he wanted and one more to fetch the snap-on cock ring; he made a mental note to have Noah catalog the toys for him sometime soon. Or maybe they'd just spend a lot more time out here.

With his toys in hand, he walked down the aisle, making damn sure Noah heard him coming, every step loud and sure and carefully measured for impact. He stepped into the darkened ring and said, "On the table. Now. Face up." Noah closed the trunk and hurried over. He set one of the elegant glass dildos and the lube down on the table and climbed up onto it, then stretched out on his back. He'd chosen a dildo they hadn't used before, one with a knobby surface made of blue and clear glass, with a clear glass handle attached to the base.

Without saying anything at all, Tobias began to work, carefully attaching the heavy cuffs to Noah's wrists before chaining them to the iron rings on the underside of the table. The short lengths of chain he used clanked pleasantly, the sound ominous and deep.

"I'm going to leave your feet free," he said, teasing one of Noah's nipples to hardness so he could clamp it.

Noah didn't answer, but he ground his teeth and grimaced as Tobias fastened the first clamp on his nipple. He inhaled, the breath making a hissing sound as it passed through his teeth.

"One more thing, pet," Tobias purred. He pulled open the one drawer in the table and retrieved a bell ball, then put it in one of Noah's hands. He bent his head to suck up the other nipple for its clamp, teasing and licking it until it stood proud and tight. That done and the clamp on, he grinned down at his boy. "Ball gag or leather strip? Your choice. Choose well, though—it's the only choice you get today."

"Leather strip, please, sir," Noah answered quickly.

Tobias nodded and got a gag from a nearby trunk, slapping it on the table once before holding it up. "Use the ball if you need to, pet," he said seriously. "I'm not going to go easy. The rules are simple; you can't come until I say so. I have a cock ring here, so don't panic. You can move your lower body. You're chained to the table, and you can't talk. The chains have enough give that I can flip you if I want to and I might. I'm not sure if I'm going to flog you now or later. Questions before I gag you?"

Noah tested his grip on the ball and it chimed softly. "No, sir, no questions." His voice was thick. He licked his lips and opened his mouth to accept the gag.

Tobias bent his head and kissed Noah quickly. "Trust me," he said easily before slipping the gag into his boy's mouth. As he fastened it he said, "Test the ball for me, please."

Noah shook the ball more deliberately and Tobias nodded once. "Thank you." He moved to the side of the table and gathered Noah's flaccid penis into his hand. Stroking lightly, he watched almost dispassionately as it filled and thickened for him, and eventually he snapped the cock ring on. "Okay," he said stepping back. "Let's begin, hmm?"

He walked to a trunk, his feet falling heavily and his steps sounding loud in the ring. "You can move all you want so long as you don't hurt yourself or fight back. No escaping, pet." He threw back the lid of a trunk and picked up a bullwhip. "I have to practice."

Out of the corner of his eye, Tobias caught Noah lifting his head off the table. He imagined Noah staring wide-eyed, and frankly he hoped that he was.

"It's been too long since I concentrated on this," Tobias remarked, coiling the whip. "So I'll spare your back. You can watch, however." He pointed to the far side of the ring, to a shrouded shape. He'd walked Noah around it countless times, and Noah had never mentioned it; Tobias had assumed Noah knew what it was, but perhaps not.

"Meet the whipping boy," he said with a grin. He crossed to the dummy and flipped the drape off of it. As a practice dummy it wasn't terribly attractive, marked and scored in a dozen places. As a training tool, it was wonderful, taking the blows of just about any implement well and showing them for a short time so a stroke could be examined. He carefully maneuvered the thing to a spot where Noah would see both it and Tobias as he worked.

Satisfied after a few adjustments, Tobias set to showing off, cracking his whip once in the air before he began to use it in earnest.

He let the floor take the brunt of each blow, the tail snapping up to strike the dummy, leaving what would have been welts on a human. Crack after crack he worked, his cock getting harder with every snap, every sound, every time he let his arm fly.

Noah would look beautiful with marks like these.

Noah propped himself up on his elbows to watch. Other than that he was completely still. Tobias heard Noah moan after the fourth or fifth crack of the whip, and his grin grew wider. It was impossible not to like that sound, that satisfying pop and snap. That sound was practically the trademark of their lifestyle.

"I'm a little out of shape," Tobias admitted as he started to sweat. He took off the vest and tossed it away, then cracked the whip once more before resuming his practice. The rhythm was easy to pick up, and in short order he was placing the marks just as he wanted them. With a sigh he adjusted his erection and looked over to Noah with a smile. "Some day, boy. Maybe to celebrate, when I grant you your collar."

Noah sighed. He seemed disappointed that it wasn't to be used today, but that was just as well. He rolled up on one hip to watch as Tobias' blows became steadier and more on target, his own erection firmly evident.

Tobias worked steadily until his arm began to ache. He was certainly in need of more work; he decided to call Bradford for a few sessions, see if he'd lost any technique or merely stamina. Every third or fourth stroke he'd look over at Noah, check to see his interest, which never flagged.

Finally he put the whip away and shook his arm out, his breath a little more rapid than he liked. "I need practice," he said, walking to the table, his dick leading the way. "I'll expect you to take the whip when it's time, pet." He wrapped one hand around Noah's cock and tugged a little, stroking over the head. "Lie back," he coaxed. "I want to play with you for a while."

Noah rolled gently onto his back and shifted a bit until he was comfortable. He had a tight grip on the bell ball so that it made a clicking sound instead of a jingle as he let his hands fall back, just above his head. He was warm, aroused by the whip, and hard, too.

"Such a pretty boy." Tobias was almost purring as he stroked a hand over Noah's belly and back down to his cock again. The itch in his spine was almost gone, the whip and Noah in chains easing him. "Only a week to the party," he commented casually, picking up the lube. "I'll expect you to be on your best behavior. There will be people to impress, pet." He snapped open the lid on the lube and squeezed some onto his hand, then picked up the glass dildo and coated it. "Nice choice. Pretty." He examined the toy and leaned on the table, stroking the dildo with one slick hand. "Phan is looking forward to seeing you there. He likes you, you know. He wants to work with you—him at Bradford's knee, you at mine. I suspect he has visions of earning Bradford's praise and wants to ... share the glory, so to speak." He raised an eyebrow and stroked the dildo again. "Or he just wants to see if I'll let you kiss him. One or the other."

Noah couldn't speak or respond, of course, but Tobias noted the wicked grin around the gag and the inquiring twitch in his eyebrows. Noah lifted one foot and pressed it gently but firmly into Tobias' crotch.

"You'd like that, I assume," Tobias said with a grin. Just as gently, he removed Noah's foot. "We'll see, then. I might just make you both beg for it. That could be fun." He held up the glistening glass dildo. "It's warm now. Do you want it?"

Noah didn't lose his grin. He made a sound around his gag and nodded, then lifted his knees and placed his feet wide apart and flat on the table.

Tobias smiled and set the toy down to one side, out of the way so it wouldn't get kicked off the table. "No." He did, however, ease a single finger into Noah's ass. "I don't think you've earned it, merely by lying here and watching me, pet. You haven't even hurt."

Noah tightened around Tobias' finger then turned his head to the side and pointed a finger to the trunk that contained Tobias' floggers. The chain attached to that wrist slid heavily off the table, pooling on the floor with a satisfying clunk.

"You wish," Tobias snorted. "Who's in charge here, boy?"

Noah pulled his wrist back above his head and went still, the grin on his face replaced with a quiet, unreadable expression as he stared at the ceiling.

Tobias considered for a moment and decided to push the point. Things had been entirely too relaxed lately; Bradford would have his balls if he let Noah get complacent—if he let himself get complacent.

"I make the rules," Tobias said softly, his finger moving slightly inside Noah. "I do what you need, I take care of you. I go as far as I safely can." He removed his finger, swung around so he was on the table with Noah, and crawled up, framing his boy in with his own body. "I can fuck you in a crowd, I can whip you, I can tease you. We need it. So long as that ball is still or you don't say your words, I'm the boss."

He lowered himself, dragged his leather-clad hip along Noah's cock, and whispered, "I can chain you to a table, I can tie you to my cross. It's up to me, isn't it, boy? I can do what I want with you like this—fuck you, whip you, talk to you until you sleep. I could use you any way I like."

Noah bit down on his gag and groaned. He nodded, too, but he was definitely distracted by the friction between his legs. One knee went flat out to the side and the fingers of one hand tangled in his own hair.

"That's it, pet," Tobias purred. "Just feel. Let me drive—it's better that way." He moved once more, grinding against Noah's erection, and then lifted off. With a click of his tongue Tobias stood up, towering above Noah on the table. He looked down, past his bare chest and stomach, past his throbbing cock, swollen in his leather pants, past the shiny boots to where his boy lay.

His breath caught in his chest. "You're beautiful," he whispered, one hand stroking his shaft, feeling the heat of it through the leather. "And mine." He turned and carefully stepped over Noah and jumped off the table, landing with a solid thump. He strode to a cabinet and swung the doors open, showing an array of tools, from blades that he ignored, to crops and tipped floggers, which he took out at random before putting back. He picked up a heavy black leather strap and turned back to Noah, holding it up so he could see it.

Noah eyed the strap. He went up on his elbows to get a better look, and Tobias saw him swallow.

"Roll over," Tobias said calmly.

Noah turned and then rolled flat onto his stomach, hissing as his weight pressed the nipple clamps into his skin. The chains were just long enough that his arms could cross above his head comfortably. Noah watched Tobias for as long as he stayed in his line of sight.

"This is going to hurt, pet," Tobias said, smoothing a hand over Noah's thighs. "Let me hear the bell, please."

Noah rang it, the gentle, melodic chimes standing out in strange contrast to the strap and the pain that Tobias knew would come. Noah took a deep breath, and Tobias knew he was looking for his space. He'd find it soon enough.

"This won't last long. I know the clamps hurt, and I want you to be functional later on." Tobias stroked over Noah's ass and teased a finger between his cheeks. "Not going to hurt your ass, boy. There's a very pretty glass dick waiting for you."

Almost solemnly Tobias raised the strap and brought it down on the top of one thigh, just under Noah's ass.

Noah flinched, gasped air in, swearing as he exhaled despite the gag. His whole body tensed, he lifted his head, his toes curled, and he bent the leg that didn't get the slap as if trying to protect it. It took a couple of harsh breaths before he managed to relax again, straightening his leg and lowering his forehead onto one of his arms. His breathing became deep, and the tension drained visibly from his shoulders.

"That's it. Such a good boy," Tobias praised. "You amaze me, you know. You can just turn it on and off, be neatly submissive and then ... lie with me when I cry. It's a rare thing, Noah." He raised his arm again and struck the other thigh, watched the red mark form and knew it would hurt for a good while.

"I can't turn it off, pet," he said, walking around the table and running a hand through Noah's hair as he gasped through the pain. "I'm just ... this. And it's what I have to be. I can't be like I was on Christmas Eve again, Noah. It won't happen, I won't let it."

Noah lifted his head but winced at his clamps and lowered it again with a heavy sigh. He shifted on the table, pulled on one of his wrist chains and then seemed to give up, going limp on the table with another resigned sigh.

"I'm going to take care of you, pet," Tobias said softly. "Roll over, now. Come on, I'll take off the clamps and you can breathe a bit. I'll always take care of you, Noah, push you and protect you. It's what I am."

Noah lay perfectly still. He appeared to be disobeying orders, though he'd never done so before. It didn't make much sense anyway; getting rid of the clamps would only make him feel better.

"Noah..." Tobias started to repeat his order, but he was interrupted as the jingle ball in Noah's fingers went flying across the ring, smacked into the whipping dummy, and landed loudly, singing cheerfully, on the floor.

Training and instinct moved Tobias past the shock, and his fingers undid the gag without thinking about it. First rule safe word meant stop and make sure the submissive is okay, and that meant the gag came off.

The leather came free and Tobias reached for a wrist cuff. "Noah?" he asked, his heart seeming to stutter. "What's wrong? Wrists? Did I bruise—?"

"No!" Noah interrupted him and grabbed at Tobias' fingers with his newly freed hand. "No. You didn't hurt me, sir, not yet."

Confused, Tobias stood there for a long moment looking down at his boy. Slowly, he made himself move to the other wrist, and when he'd undone the buckle he turned and walked to his chair, unwilling to believe that it was happening again, that he'd misread everything so badly.

Noah removed the clamps himself with a hiss, and then silence fell between them, while Tobias waited and Noah seemed to be lost in himself, or in thought. Noah finally spoke first. "Sir," he said quietly. "With all due respect, sir, I need to think about what I need to say before I say it. I'm a little emotional right now and ... I don't want to upset you ... I don't want to hurt you with things I don't mean. I'd like your permission to spend an hour in the safe room. Alone."

"Go ahead," Tobias said, his voice sounding dead to his own ears. He stared ahead of him, unblinking and unseeing. "Call down when you're ready to ... Just buzz."

Noah slid off the table, leaving the leather cock ring behind as well. He approached Tobias first, put his hands on either arm of the chair and leaned forward, pressing his forehead to Tobias'.

"We can fix this," he whispered. "I'm not leaving you. Not even close. But it's important, and I want to get the words right." He cupped Tobias' cheek and kissed him, then turned and made his way down the aisle.

Tobias drew his knees up and sat in his huge chair, hugging his knees and waiting for the buzzer to sound. Chapter 18

When Noah finally buzzed a while later, the sound startled Tobias. Whether it was an hour later or five he couldn't say; he hadn't moved since Noah had walked out of the barn. The walk up to the house was horrible, every step feeling heavier and heavier the closer he got to the porch and to his ... to Noah.

He climbed the stairs, the numbness leaving him and a feeling of dread making him want to turn and run instead. He reached the top step, stared at the door to the safe room, and slowly made his way inside.

Noah was sitting cross-legged on the bed. He'd taken off the sweatshirt but had kept the pants on. As soon as he looked at Tobias his face fell, and he jumped off the bed and hurried to him. "Sir ... come sit." Noah pulled Tobias over to the bed.

"Stop." Tobias twisted away and said it again, his voice softer. "Just stop, Noah. I can get there myself."

Noah took his hands off of Tobias and held them up in a hands-off gesture. "Don't snap at me, I have every right to be upset with you."

Tobias snorted. "Of course you do. And I can be pissed, too, so deal." He moved to his chair instead of the bed and sat down with a sigh. "All right. What the hell happened out there, Noah?"

"You were in your own head. That wasn't you caring for me, or taking care of me, or whatever it was you said. That was you proving something. To yourself." Tobias' head snapped up. "Bullshit."

"No, Tobias, it's not." Noah's tone was soft. He leaned against the bed and went on. "I don't need you to remind me of my place. I know it. It took me two seconds to find my headspace because I know what's expected of me. I trust you, and I understand what you need. You, on the other hand, couldn't make the switch. You called me by name. You mixed up the scene with emotions from yesterday and stayed stuck there. I totally lost my space and I couldn't get it back."

Tobias stared and tried to protest, but he couldn't. He worked his jaw for a moment and finally swallowed. "I'll be right back," he said woodenly. "I'm cold." He looked down at his bare chest and nodded. "Cold."

"Whoa, wait. Tobias." Noah put his hands on Tobias' thighs so he couldn't get up and then knelt between his knees. "Baby, are you all right?"

"No, I don't think so," Tobias said. "I really need a shirt, pet."

Noah stood and hurried out of the room, returning with a cozy flannel. He held it open so Tobias could put it on. "Here, come on, stand up."

Tobias stood and let Noah wrap him up and then allowed himself to be coaxed to the bed. It wasn't until Noah had him sitting down that he woke up a little. "No. I need to ... I can't do this. I just can't, not right now." He stood up again and looked around. "I'll be outside."

Noah stepped back, letting Tobias move past him. "Can't...?" He sounded confused. "Can't do what?" He followed Tobias down the stairs and into the office. "I can't sit there and listen to you tell me that what I am is not what you need. I've done this once, Noah. Jesus Christ, didn't I just spend two fucking days telling you all about it?" Tobias turned, anger filling up the dead places in him as he got his cigarettes from his desk. "I can't hear you say it, too. Not right now."

Noah stared at him. "What?" Noah barely got out. He sounded winded, like he'd just been punched in the stomach. "Is this how every disagreement is going to go, Tobias? I have something I want to work out with you and you make the mental leap to I'm leaving you? Is that it?"

Noah stalked after him in nothing but his sweatpants. "Am I going to have to prove myself to you every...?" Noah stopped, shook his head, and then looked at Tobias again. "You don't trust me." Noah paced away a few steps and then back again. "You don't trust me. I've spent weeks believing you when you said I could trust you, letting go for you, giving over ... but I haven't earned your trust yet? What do I have to do, Tobias?"

"What?" Tobias stared and then shook his head. "Are we in the same conversation? Where the hell do you get off? I trust you like I've never trusted anyone, Noah. I let you in deeper and faster, and now you're saying I don't trust you?" He swept his arm around the room, gesturing to the house in general. "I give you what you need. I get what I need. I love you, damn it, and I can't..." He stopped and took a deep breath. "Christmas Eve was horrible. I never want to be like that again, not with you or anyone. And right now you're doing exactly what Phantom did, and you're doing it with the knowledge of what I went through with him."

"I am not!" Noah shouted. "Goddamn it, Tobias, I am not doing what Phantom did."

"Then what are you doing?" Tobias shouted back. "Looks like you're leaving from where I am."

Noah's brow furrowed and he frowned. He started to speak and then stopped, swallowed, and started again. His voice was much softer, even sympathetic. "Baby, I told you in the stable that I wasn't going anywhere."

Tobias rocked back and leaned on the desk. "No, you didn't. You asked to use the safe room and then you left me. You said ... You said you didn't want to hurt me with things you didn't mean and you left me there." Tobias swallowed around the lump in his throat and reached for the lighter by the desk phone.

"No, baby," Noah told him quietly. "I walked over to you before I left. I kissed you. I told you that we'd fix this and that I wasn't leaving you." He stepped close and touched Tobias' cheek. "You don't remember?"

Tobias shook his head numbly. "No. I don't remember anything after you said you wanted to be alone," he whispered.

"Oh, God. I'm sorry." Noah slid his arms around Tobias' waist and rested his head on his chest. "Let me say it again. I am not leaving you. I couldn't leave you. Nothing could drag me away from this farm. I need you. I'm not going anywhere." "But..." Tobias looked around his office, not seeing anything, really. "I'm so confused," he said quietly. "Where did I mess up?"

Noah sighed. "You spent a lot of time trying to remind me about role boundaries that I already have firmly in place and then disregarded them yourself. And you, despite the fact that you say it's bullshit, you were in your own head." He pulled away from Tobias to look at him. "It was one bad scene; it wasn't the end of the world. I just need to talk it out. And I think you need to look at what you were doing, even if you think I'm wrong, and try to at least figure out how you gave me that impression. That's all, baby, that's all it is. One bad scene. Out of countless good ones. No one is perfect all the time."

Tobias shrugged one shoulder sadly. "I am."

"Oh, baby." Noah pressed his forehead into Tobias' chest.

"I'm sorry, Noah," Tobias whispered, running a hand through Noah's hair. "I really am."

"I know." Noah nodded against him. "Me, too. And I love you."

"I love you, too." Tobias took a deep breath. "Now what?" he asked softly, not letting Noah go.

"Well, for starters, I've been a very bad boy, throwing that ball..." Noah pushed back from Tobias and slid out of his sweatpants. He dropped them on a chair and went to his knees, then bent low over them, only wincing slightly at the sting on the back of his thighs. "I shouldn't need to be reminded that you know what's best for me, sir. Always. I am yours, Master, and as your submissive I trust you to take care of me. I should only be concerned with ... with what you need."

Tobias found himself once more staring at Noah in confusion. It was tempered somewhat by what was so obviously being offered, freely given, but still ... Noah's ability to switch gears was once more leaving him breathless and trying to catch up. He took a breath and considered both Noah's ass and the situation.

He could only do this one way—the right way. He was now painfully aware that it took him longer to go from being himself to a partner in a relationship of equals and back again—so he'd take his time. He walked forward, aware of the sound of his boots on the hardwood and the mess he was making of the floor. He stopped by Noah's head and took two more steps along his side and then turned. Pacing beside Noah, he said, "And do you know what I need, boy?"

"You need to be respected and trusted, sir. You need to be in control. You need me. You need to remind me who you are." Noah's voice was confident, and the words seemed to tumble from him easily.

"Hmm." Tobias nodded to himself, knowing the truth when he heard it. "I need to deserve that trust and respect, however. I earn the control you give me, or I should. Agree?"

"Yes, sir."

"And today I took the control you offered, but I didn't earn it." Tobias turned on his heel and paced again. "I needed something," he stated.

"I think so, sir," Noah agreed.

Turn. Pace. "I do need to remind you, but not because you need to hear it. I need to hear it," Tobias said. "I like to hear that you're mine, that I'm in charge. It's part of the thrill, it gets me hard. It's going to keep happening." Turn. Pace. "But today was different, yes?"

Noah nodded. "Today felt different, sir, yes."

Tobias stopped and thought for a moment, looking down on Noah, on the supple and bent form. He loved him. They loved each other. They'd said it, they'd spent days wrapped up in it, they'd made love and played, and Noah had seen him at his most vulnerable.

Oh.

"I needed to balance," Tobias said softly. "I require balance. I lost that balance two nights ago and I desperately need it back, pet. I'm far more comfortable being like this than I am with knowing you saw me like that."

"Tell me how I can help you get it back, sir," Noah said earnestly. "Only please don't say that it won't happen again because I think that was important to the other part of our relationship. Tell me what I can do, what you need me to do, to help you get balance back."

"I don't know," Tobias said, feeling more than a little helpless. "This is new to me. The only other long-term relationship I've had wasn't like this—it was more this way than the other, and I don't know how to transition. This is me, sweetheart. The other is as well, of course, but I'm much more comfortable at this level. I agree that both are needed but if we're going to spend any amount of time like we were the last couple of days, there's going to be a price, I'm afraid."

"Understood, sir. And now that I know that, I am willing to pay it if you are."

Tobias looked at the red marks on Noah's thighs and winced. "I suspect you already have, pet."

"I'm fine, sir. Those are fine stripes. You have a very practiced hand." Tobias thought Noah sounded almost coy.

Tobias snorted. "You want more? You're already getting a set with the crop for making me wake up in a cold bed this morning."

"Yes, sir. My mistake sir, I thought you would prefer to sleep in on your vacation."

"Only if there is a reason to. Waking up alone is not a reason." Tobias turned and paced just to hear the boots on the floor. "Now that you know, I assume it won't happen again. So. Stripes for that. And I do believe that there is a new paddle in the cabinet upstairs as well." He shrugged and turned. "And if there isn't, I'm sure there's something in there I haven't tried on you yet."

"You're always keeping me on my toes, sir," Noah replied with a soft laugh. "Perhaps what you might need to help you with your balance, since it's vacation after all, is a week of keeping your house warm enough that I can walk around naked until Friday, sir."

"Ah, see now you're just trying to seduce me. Naked all week." Tobias grinned. "Mind you, I could shave you and mark you ... that would balance me nicely, I think." "I am yours to do with as you please, Master." There was no hint of laughter in that statement.

"Yes," Tobias agreed softly, just as seriously. "I believe you are. All right then, pet. Upstairs again. You're going over my knee."

Noah got to his feet and made his way out of the study and slowly up the stairs, giving Tobias a good long look at his naked ass all the way. He stepped into the safe room and Tobias stepped around him to forage in the armoire for something new to try out.

He discarded the crops and anything really long; Noah across his lap was a goal more than a position by that point. Tobias' body was feeling relief and the rebound of the stress, and he found himself adjusting his erection as he picked up a wooden paddle. Thoughtfully, he put it back, an image forming in his mind.

"I'll be right back, pet," he said as he turned to the door. "I need something from my room."

He didn't even glance at Noah as he left, crossing the hall in quick strides and going to his dresser. He found what he wanted in the ornate box on the end, a gift from a grateful submissive he'd once whipped into shape. Literally. He lifted the lid and picked up the wooden brush, smiling as he rubbed the back of it. Perfect.

Noah was displaying on his knees when Tobias returned, and he squinted at the instrument in Tobias' fingers as if trying to make it out. "What is that, sir?"

Tobias smiled. "You'll find out. Stand up, boy. Let me see you." Noah rose and Tobias ignored the look on his face as he tried to see the brush. "Eyes front." He also ignored the stifled sigh.

The marks on Noah's thighs were still red and looked like they'd ache; the brush really was perfect. Tobias sat on the end of the bed. "Come here, pet. Over my legs, ass up for me. I'm going to put some color on your cheeks."

"Yes, sir." Noah moved over to him and bent over his knees, placing his hands on the floor on the other side with a grunt. It was a little too high to kneel, so he stayed on his feet, which pushed his ass up in the air nicely.

Tobias efficiently made sure Noah's cock and balls weren't about to get spanked or squashed and then rubbed the back of the brush over Noah's ass. "I can spank you because I want to, boy. I don't need a reason, other than the fact that I like to do it, correct?" He kept his voice soft and calm, pitched just slightly deeper than normal.

"Yes, sir. Your pleasure, sir," Noah agreed, starting to settle into his familiar deep breathing.

"My pleasure." Tobias gave him a swat with the brush, just a warm up tap. And then he did it again, and again, peppering Noah's ass with light taps until it started to pink.

Noah didn't flinch, the blows weren't hard enough, but Tobias felt him twitch and his prick started to stiffen against Tobias' thigh. Noah ran one hand down Tobias' calf and moaned appreciatively. The muscles in Noah's thighs popped a bit, and he shifted slowly from foot to foot, which caused his ass to flex and wiggle enticingly.

Tobias smiled and started to spank a little harder, moving the brush to cover as much of Noah's ass as he could. His own breathing was speeding a little, but he kept the rhythm of the brush as constant as he could. "Such a pretty ass," he commented. "You color so well, pet. And the shape—it really is one of the best asses I've seen. Certainly the best one to fuck."

"Thank you ... ah." Noah gasped lightly. "Thank you, sir." He went up on his toes and then down again. "Feels good, sir, nice slap, good sound." Ever since Tobias taught him the significance of a safe word, Noah had been good about telling Tobias exactly what he was feeling.

"Good boy," Tobias praised, his own erection full and heavy and beginning to ache a bit. "A little harder now, pet." He let his hand fall with more weight, the sound louder, the wooden handle heating in his hand. "Is it warm?" he asked, curious.

Noah nodded, his voice a bit tighter. "Yes, sir. Warm." He panted lightly. "Hot sting almost, in some places."

"Good," Tobias said, smiling. "It's a hairbrush, the old fashioned style. Wooden and wide and practically made for this." He spanked harder, seriously punishing strokes now, his cock throbbing with every smack.

Noah tensed a bit and curled around Tobias' knees. One of his hands looped under and around Tobias' thigh and held on for support and balance, and Tobias' knees took much more of Noah's weight.

Noah was making lovely sounds, grunts and hisses and begging moans, and, not surprisingly, his cock had grown rigid and poked between Tobias' thighs. "Don't come," Tobias whispered. "Tell me when you're close." He spanked Noah again, catching the bottom of his ass and the very tip of the red marks from earlier.

"Ahahh!"

Teasing the sore marks from the strap nearly caused Noah to jump off of his lap. If it wasn't for the arm anchoring him to Tobias' thigh, he may very well have. Instead he let his knees buckle and hung over Tobias' thighs, which now completely supported his weight, and panted harshly through the sting. "Ah, God ... that felt like fire," he said breathlessly.

Tobias nodded. "I'm sure. Again?"

Noah took a very deep breath and exhaled slowly, taking his time before answering. "Yes, sir," he said finally, his voice low and dark.

Tobias moaned, not really able not to. He was suddenly more worried about his own willpower than Noah's. He inhaled and brought the brush down on the other cheek, low down on the ass, up high on the thigh, just catching the red.

Noah whimpered, and he held his breath as his body went tense. Tobias felt him exhale through sheer force of will, practice and experience telling them both that breathing was better, letting the tension go was more pleasurable.

"Oh, God," Noah breathed, and just as he was letting the tension go it was suddenly back and his fingers dug into Tobias' thigh. "Close, sir," he warned, the words catching in his throat.

Tobias dropped the brush and turned, dumping Noah on the bed. He spread Noah's legs roughly, knowing he was dragging tender skin across the bedspread, but not caring. In one move he pushed a finger into Noah's ass and bent down to swallow his erection, sucking hard.

"Master!" Noah shivered and grunted, and both hands went into Tobias hair and tangled there. He arched, bearing down on Tobias' fingers and sobbing as his climax started to come over him. "Sir, oh, God..." he babbled, and Tobias tasted the first hint of Noah's spunk, salty and hot on his tongue.

Tobias licked and lapped at him, drawing the flavor of him in and moaning. He wanted more, wanted to taste and savor his boy. He lifted his head for a moment, only long enough to growl, "Come for me," before he sucked Noah in again.

"Oh, fuck." Noah rolled his hips into Tobias' throat and sobbed breathlessly, coming on command, on Tobias order coming because Tobias wanted him to. "Master!" he shouted and his body went tense and still, his hips just off the mattress as he shot into Tobias' mouth.

After the first wave Noah was trembling. His hips sank into the bed and his fingers went slack on the top of Tobias' head. "Master, sir, so good."

Tobias licked him, swallowed him. "Yes," he agreed, nuzzling Noah's thigh. "Good." He stood up on shaky legs and fingered the button at his fly, feeling clumsy with need. "Lube?" he asked, his voice scratchy.

Noah rolled onto his stomach with a groan, showing off Tobias' handiwork. His ass was hotly pink and a little swollen, and the stripes from the strap were still very evident. He stretched up, pulled open the little drawer in the nightstand by the bed, and fished out the lube. Tobias groaned deep in his chest, the sound a deep rumble that rolled through him as he got his pants open, the leather hot and like a second skin. His cock throbbed and leapt into his hand, rigid and aching.

"Hurry, pet," Tobias urged, stroking himself. "Hands and knees."

Noah twisted to hand Tobias the lube and winced as sensitive skin stretched. "Want you, sir," he growled, his voice low and dark again. He was clearly in subspace, his eyes low as he went to his hands and knees. He arched his reddened ass toward Tobias shamelessly. "Please."

Tobias rumbled as he slicked his cock and slid his fingers into Noah. He was still tight, but getting used to being taken, and he relaxed fairly quickly, wiggling back to take Tobias' fingers deeper. Still, he wasn't completely loosened, and Tobias' need was taking over.

"Ready?" he demanded, stroking over Noah's gland.

Noah gasped and moaned and leaned into Tobias' fingers. "Yes, sir, so ready for you."

"Thank God," he muttered, pushing in. It was possibly the fastest he'd taken his boy, just slamming in and not stopping until he was balls deep, pressed tight up against hot, hot skin.

Noah grunted and shifted as leather rubbed against sore skin. "You feel so good, Master, thick and hard and..." Noah rolled his hips, riding Tobias gently. "Oh, God."

Tobias gasped and swore. "'Oh, God' is right. Pet. Hell—" He held onto Noah's hips and tried to just let it happen, let Noah set the pace for once, but he was so damn close. He slid in as Noah moved back, angling to make it good for them both. Three more strokes, three more times that Noah pushed back onto him just as sweet as could be, and Tobias was panting. "Close. God, so close, boy."

Noah groaned. "Take what you need, sir," he said in that same husky voice, and clenched around him. "I'm yours, just because it pleases you, whatever you need."

Tobias growled, the sound turning to a roar as he slammed into Noah again, pride and love overtaking him and rushing him to his climax. He couldn't even speak as he came, the roar filling the room with his ownership of his submissive, his lover. The silence that fell as his prick twitched and throbbed in Noah's ass was ringing and sustained, broken only by their pants and Noah's soft sounds.

Chapter 19

The days between Christmas and New Year's Eve were some of the best Tobias had enjoyed in years. Noah seemed to attain a new level of his submission, easily and naturally staying in subspace for a much longer period than Tobias would ever have asked of him; it was the gift Tobias had waited for.

The day Tobias came home from his shortened rounds and was met at the door by a naked and silent Noah, he knew there had been a breakthrough. Noah, eyes down, had helped him put his things away and had then brought him his lunch in the office. While Tobias ate and did his paperwork, Noah knelt at his side, still and silent, only moving to get more water. Tobias found himself absently petting him, taking comfort in his presence and the subtle ways he served.

Noah did his chores easily, quickly, and well. He needed no prompting to run Tobias' bath, to feed him or bring him things. He seemed somehow tied to Tobias' awareness, and twice Tobias felt nimble fingers at his fly only moments after becoming aware of his own arousal. That Noah simply knew and lived to serve made him orgasm harder than ever, made his erections harder, made him want his boy even more.

Mornings were amazing, never waking to a cold bed but instead to a hot mouth. Noah pleased him in every way, took care of him, made sure he was happy. In return Tobias made sure that Noah had nice long sessions every day and that he was made aware of how much his submission was appreciated. Tobias didn't let Noah's marks fade; he kept Noah's ass rosy and the suction marks bright until he had to leave them to heal in time for Noah's return to work.

He shaved Noah's balls and spent ages playing with the smooth, soft skin, letting his boy come again and again before keeping his cock caged for the next three days. Tobias made Noah beg, made him ask for the crop, made him sleep on the floor one night just because he could.

And on the day of New Year's Eve, Tobias knew that Noah had earned his collar. He called Bradford when Noah was turning out the horses, knowing that the timing was poor for the other man, given the party preparations, but some things couldn't wait.

Bradford didn't answer the phone, Nikki did. That was evidence in itself that Tobias was disturbing a busy man. He held for several minutes until Bradford made it to the phone.

"Tobias! Please don't tell me you're canceling on me."

"God, no!" Tobias hastened to assure the man. "We'll be there, and I think you'll be impressed. No, I'm calling about something else altogether."

"Well, it better be important, friend, I've got my hands full here, as you might well imagine." Bradford laughed in his ear.

Tobias grinned and got right to the point. "He earned his collar this week," he said, not able to keep a note of pride out of his voice. "I need a new silversmith since Tansy left town and ideas for the collaring ceremony."

"Stop the presses!" Bradford shouted into the phone. "You're collaring him? Honestly, Tobias, I wasn't sure the two of you would get this far. I'm just ... thrilled. Elated. Congratulations." Tobias heard a voice in the background. "Oh, sorry, just a moment ... There's a tub in the basement, fill it with ice and let the champagne cool there. Yes, just leave it in the basement, we'll bring it up at midnight." Bradford sighed melodramatically and spoke into the receiver again. "Good help is so hard to find. So you needed a silversmith? I'll give you a name tonight. Oh, this is so exciting. Will you have the ceremony here?"

Tobias beamed, a thrill going through him. "I'm not sure. Actually, I think I'd like to do it here, in my ring. What do you think?"

"I think it's extremely thoughtless of you to deprive me of the opportunity to throw a party," Bradford said petulantly. "However, it is a good idea, and it might be more meaningful to the boy, so you're forgiven this time."

"I am letting you help," Tobias pointed out, still smiling. "I have some ideas, but I know you're the man with the ability to pull things together. Food, dishes, linens, all those things. I'm useless that way."

"You want me to handle the catering, you're saying? Happy to. When are you thinking? Not this coming weekend, I hope," Bradford sighed. "I have that Phan thing planned, remember. So does the boy know he's earned it? Are you going to tell him about it? Do you have thoughts for the ceremony itself? How many people are you inviting?"

"Stop," Tobias laughed. "Ideally, in two weeks, but certainly not until Phan is settled. I'll need you both whole. And no, Noah doesn't know and I'm not telling him." Tobias pulled out a pad of paper and began to doodle. "The ceremony will involve a show of his submission, then I'll collar him—and no, I'm not telling you what I'll say—and then present him to you all. Guests ... I don't know. Ideas?"

"You can't mention the word party and not expect me to start planning, Tobias, I'm hardwired for it." Bradford laughed. "For guests ... well, the way I see it, you can throw it open to members, or you can make it a small intimate thing. I know people that have chosen to only invite Doms because they feel it's a status thing, and I've seen people invite mostly submissives because they felt it would mean more to their sub to be honored in front of their peers. I've also known people only to invite Doms and subs who are long-term or collared themselves. It's a philosophical thing. Whatdo you think?"

"I think..." Tobias leaned back. "I think smaller, rather than larger. But I want to show him off, let him show off. Subs he knows, a few of the Tops who he played with. You, of course, Logan, Brian, Nikki ... Do you think I should ask Phan? What about Brett?"

"Mmm, yes. Phan, provided he's up to it, and Brett, too. If nothing else, it's closure for both of them, but I think they'd both want to be supportive in any case. I can draw up a quick list for you of the Tops Noah got on with the best and a few of the subs he's friendly with if you'd like me to. And I think smaller is better, too, good choice."

"That would be great," Tobias said, feeling more than a little relieved. "You do know that as much as I loathe that part of things, I still have the harder part? Oh, God, I forgot— I need you to fit me into your schedule next week, maybe two nights." "I can manage that, but whatever for? I thought things were going well?"

"Bullwhip; I need a spotter. I think I let it go too long." The admission hurt, but there was no way he was going to go near Noah's back with that whip until he'd had his technique checked by a Master.

"Sure. I have ... Tuesday and Wednesday. Thursday's out, I'll be prepping for Phan. Work for you? Don't get too frustrated about it; it's a tricky skill that goes away fast. It usually comes back fairly quickly."

"I know, I'm just annoyed that I let it slip. I've been practicing out here, but I think you better check me, is all. Can I help get you ready for Phan?"

"Thanks, I'll let you know about that when I see you. I think I just need to be in the right frame of mind; maybe we can talk. I need to empty the white room, too."

Tobias nodded to himself and rocked back in his chair. "All right then. We can talk on Wednesday after we finish up." He heard the door open and glanced at the clock. "Go get ready for your party, my friend. I have a boy to prepare. Oh, will you be talking to Phantom later? Before you take him down?"

"Yes, I expect him any minute."

"Tell him that if he's on his best behavior he might be able to ... interact with Noah. Possibly." Tobias turned in the chair and listened as Noah shed his boots. "And that's all I can say at the moment."

"You're a wicked deviant, Tobias, no wonder we're such good friends." Bradford laughed. "Go take care of your boy. I look forward to seeing you both tonight." "See you soon," Tobias said with a smile. Still smiling, he hung up the phone and stood up, waiting for Noah to come to him.

His boy came in quietly, moving right to Tobias' side, and knelt. "Would you like some more coffee, sir?" he asked from his spot at Tobias' knee.

"Yes, thank you, pet. And then you and I are going to begin our preparations for this evening. Please bring my coffee to the safe room." He smiled down at Noah and stroked a hand over his hair. "Are you looking forward to it?"

Noah smiled. "Yes, sir. I'm very much looking forward to it, I love parties. I've been waiting impatiently all week to wear the things you gave me. I keep taking them out and looking at them." He stood and picked up Tobias' coffee mug.

"Wonderful," Tobias said with a smile. "I'll see you upstairs then."

Tobias was still smiling when Noah arrived with his coffee several minutes later. It actually took a concerted effort to stop; deciding to collar him seemed to have opened up a reserve of happiness that would actually be counterproductive if not channeled correctly. He took his cup with a murmured thanks and had Noah kneel in display position.

"There are two things I want to discuss," Tobias began. "The first is a matter for us both to decide, the second is the list of rules and expectations for this evening."

Noah nodded, his eyes down.

Tobias sipped his coffee and sat in his chair. "As per our contract, I have a request. I would like to give you a piercing for the night, but you have the final say on this. If you take out the ring at the end of the evening and we take proper care, it will be temporary and will heal over with ease. Please consider it now."

Noah thought about it, but not for very long. "I have no objections to a temporary piercing, sir. If it pleases you to do so, I'll agree to it. Depending on what it is, I might even be able to keep it."

Tobias smiled. "Wonderful. We'll go across to the stables shortly and do that, then. Now, there are several things that I expect of you tonight. Ready?"

Noah took a deep breath, that centering kind of breath that meant he was concentrating, and nodded. "Ready, sir."

"First, you will not speak unless I give permission. If someone addresses you, wait for me to reply or give permission for you to answer. Chances are that won't happen anyway, as it's a private party, but it could. This includes other submissives, not just Doms. When you go to the bar to get me a drink, point or hold up a finger; they'll know I'm only drinking water. You may drink as much water or juice as you wish, you don't need to ask me.

"Second, I expect you to remain at my side at all times, except for the following: when you are at the bar, when you are in the bathroom, or when you are dancing. You dance only when I say it's all right. Questions so far?"

Noah looked thoughtful. "Yes, sir. If someone, say another sub, speaks to me when you are not there, maybe on my way to the bar or the bathroom, may I answer them? And when I am at your side, do you want me to assume standing or kneeling, or will you tell me which?" "I want you kneeling at all times unless I say," Tobias clarified. "You may walk, I won't make you crawl, but you will be walking to heel and go to your knees as soon as I stop. When I'm seated you'll be at my side, when I'm standing you'll be at my feet. If someone speaks to you when I am not there, shake your head, keep your eyes down, and say nothing. If you need help, grab a Dom you know and say my name."

Noah nodded. "All right. Understood, sir."

Tobias nodded. "Good boy. Also, if at any time you are in distress you may speak to me, that should go without saying. If you wish to use the bathroom, just get my attention and let me know where you're going. The whole point of you not speaking is for show, not to torture either of us. If I should know something, tell me. I will be paying close attention to you, so you don't have to worry."

"Yes, sir. Your expectations are very straightforward, sir." Smiling again, Tobias stood up and went to Noah once more. "And then there is the matter of appearance and posture. You know what to do, so I'll only stress that what you do reflects on me and I intend to look like the best Master there, am I clear?

Now he looked nervous. It had to happen sooner or later. "Yes, sir," he said, his voice a bit thin. "I'll do my best, sir."

"I know you will. Which brings me to Phantom." Tobias waited for the reaction with interest, not sure which way he'd go, hot or cold.

"Phantom, sir?" Noah asked, cleverly playing dumb. But he couldn't quite hide the slight smile on his lips.

"Phantom. I think you're rather pretty together," Tobias said casually. He was leading, he knew, and not playing entirely fairly. He had a lot to say on the subject and many reassurances to give, but he rather enjoyed playing with Noah when he was in a good mood. If he'd gone the other way, Tobias would have played it out differently.

"Phantom is rather attractive, sir." Noah played right back. "I imagine we'll be spending a good deal of time in each other's company this evening, since you and Bradford are such close friends."

"Exactly right," Tobias said with a grin. "And as Bradford is hosting the party, he'll be rather busy. Now, Phantom is freelance, so to speak, and everyone knows it. He does not poach Tops, and he acts utterly respectful toward any known relationship. Which is meant to reassure you, pet. I think I'd rather like to keep an eye on him tonight, have you both at my feet. Both of you taking care of me. He will not overstep bounds and I am not making any claims, is that perfectly clear?"

Noah didn't seem either surprised or upset about Phan, but he did frown, as if trying to work something out. "Very clear, sir, but ... I'm concerned about things getting confusing if we're both serving you."

"You are primary. You are all." Tobias slid a hand over Noah's shoulder. "If Phan does anything besides sit there and look pretty it'll be at my specific request. I won't let him upstage you, pet." Noah leaned a bit into Tobias' hand, and Tobias wondered if he even realized he'd been looking for that small comfort. "All right. Thank you, sir."

Tobias smiled as he rubbed Noah's shoulder. "And I expect you to maintain an erection all evening."

Noah blinked a few times and then finally answered, "I wish to please you, sir."

"I know. And it would please me to see you laced into those lovely leather pants, cock hard, all night." Tobias' smile grew. "A ring in your nipple, your collar of leather vines, a mask fit for a god, and all mine. It'll be glorious."

"I hope I live up to your imagination, sir," Noah said coyly.

Tobias laughed. "I hope you do, too. You inspire it." He walked around Noah and back to his chair. "So. We have a few hours. We'll make sure your headspace is right and I'll do your nipple. Then ... we'll dress. Jorge will be here to drive us in, and we'll spend the night at the apartment."

"Yes, sir. I'll need to bring my pager and my firearm ... I have to work tomorrow night. I have a fresh uniform at my place."

Tobias nodded. "All right, not a problem. I'll have the weapon put in Bradford's office instead of leaving it in the car. Anything else, pet?"

"No, sir. Just that I am looking forward to this." Noah smiled.

"Glad to hear it," Tobias said. "You're going to make me so proud, boy. I know it."

Chapter 20

The drive into the city was quiet. Tobias had requested that Jorge play no music, and he sat perfectly still next to Noah. Noah had done so well that afternoon, taking the piercing with ease and getting a very impressive erection from it. Tobias had put a more functional cock ring on him and he'd been hard ever since.

Tobias had dressed him, taking care with the pants to show off Noah's attributes to their very best. On Noah's feet he'd put socks and soft boots, not wanting him barefoot at the club although he preferred it overall. The ring in his nipple flashed beautifully in the light as Noah had helped him get dressed, drawing the eye and Tobias' fervent wish that he could touch it with his fingers and tongue.

Tobias hoped Noah would keep it.

The collar had gone on just as Jorge had pulled up, and Tobias hadn't missed the look of longing Noah gave the leather. The mask was in the box on Tobias' lap.

He looked out the window and watched buildings go by, counting blocks. They eased up at a light and he stirred, opening the box and lifting the Icarus mask. "Turn your head, please," he said softly.

Noah smiled and turned his head so that Tobias could fasten the mask on him. He put his fingers up and held it in place where it was comfortable and presumably where he could see clearly through it. "New leather," he said softly. "I love that smell, sir." "You and me both, pet. Only a few more blocks. Is there anything you want to say before we go on stage, as it were?"

Noah was still smiling. "Only that it's been an incredible week, Master. An amazingly comfortable, week. Right now, everything feels so right, sir."

Tobias kissed Noah's shoulder. "That it does, boy. And tonight will be its crown. Oh, look at the lights; Bradford has really outdone himself."

Noah leaned forward and partially across Tobias' lap to look out the window. "Oh, my. Look at all the cars. Is that Bradford, sir? Oh, he looks so hot in a tux."

Tobias snorted. "I'll pass that along. Now, at my heel, or you'll hurt, pet. And, Noah?"

"Yes, sir?

"Make me proud. I know you can. And the rewards are ... amazing."

Noah smiled. "I intend to, sir."

Tobias nodded and traced Noah's jaw with a finger, not saying anything as Jorge pulled up at the steps and got out of the car. As his door opened, Tobias turned from Noah and said, "At my heel." He climbed out of the car and stepped forward, ignoring everyone but Bradford, whom he greeted with a wide smile. Noah knelt at Tobias' feet as soon as he stopped walking.

"Tobias! Welcome, welcome." Bradford shook his hand enthusiastically. "Don't you look edible." He put his finger on the silver brooch holding Tobias' shirt closed. "And this design echoes your boy's lovely collar; very stylish and clever." Bradford let go of Tobias' hand. "Feel free to mill around, the entire downstairs is at our disposal. If you'd like some quiet, there's a seat reserved for you next to mine in the parlor. You've done a lovely job with your boy; he looks beautiful. Not at all the scruff he was before I introduced you."

"He's come along well," Tobias said with a smile. "Everything looks wonderful, old friend, you've outdone yourself." He glanced down at Bradford's right, to the bowed head there. "Phantom looks well."

"He's very well. He's spoiled. He was a bad boy this afternoon, but he'll make up for it tonight." Bradford didn't so much as look down at the top of Phan's head.

"Oh, dear." Tobias smiled. "I'll watch him for you later, if you'd like. He knows I won't put up with anything, and I'm sure you'll need to check on things off and on."

"I'd appreciate that, Tobias, thank you. Go on inside and get yourself your ice water, I'll be along in a bit." Bradford winked and patted Tobias on the shoulder.

Tobias smiled again and bowed his head before moving off. He was aware of Noah rising gracefully and following closely, perfectly in step. He was also aware of several other people noting the same thing. He gave his boy a mental checkmark and began planning Noah's rewards; if he managed to keep himself at this level Tobias would be willing to give him the very moon.

They went into the building and immediately people began to greet him. The Doms nodded and smiled and said hello, and Tobias moved instinctively to where three men stood. "Good evening, Logan," he said, holding his hand out to the man.

"Good evening, Tobias," Logan said, shaking his hand. "Have you met Gareth and Oliver?" The other two men offered hands and greetings. Neither had a submissive with them, but Logan had a blonde boy in silver shorts and silver platform boots kneeling at his feet. "Is this Noah? What an unusual mask. Make him stand, Tobias, so we can get a look at him."

Tobias merely raised an eyebrow and waited.

"May we see your boy?" the man named Oliver finally said, his tone polite, but far from submissive.

"Certainly," Tobias said with a smile. "Pet?"

Noah stood silently, assuming his display position that showed off his new piercing and his stiff erection equally well. He was perfectly relaxed; Tobias could almost feel his subspace.

Logan nodded approvingly. "Stunning, Tobias, more so even than in the parking lot scene."

"That mask is beautiful. That's Noah under there?" Gareth asked with a smile. "Oh, of course it is, I'd recognize him anywhere. I thought I'd heard you'd taken him under contract."

Tobias nodded, pleased with their reactions. "Yes, we signed in the fall. He's worked very hard since then, and I'm quite proud of him." He looked at Logan and winked. "The mask was a Christmas gift. I'm rather disappointed that you prefer it to the scene, however; that was some of my best work." "I only meant that I preferred his look to how he looked then. The scene was ... well, people are still talking about it." Logan grinned at him. "Gutsy, brazen, and hot."

Noah's cheeks pinked slightly and he pointed at the bar, mutely asking if Tobias wanted something to drink.

"Yes, pet. Thank you." Tobias grinned as Noah walked to the bar and turned to Logan, laughing. "He might not thank you, but I do. So, may I ask who this is?" he asked, gesturing to the sub at Logan's feet. "I don't think I've ever seen him."

"Ah, this is James. Jamie, he goes by. He's not a member of the club; I actually met him at a party. As it turns out, Bradford was already scoping him for membership, so I've brought him to the best party of the year to persuade him to join. Jamie, stand up, boy. I'm sure you've heard of Master Tobias. Let him see you."

Jamie stood, looking a bit nervous. He kept his head lower than he needed to and his posture wasn't perfect, but he was pretty. He appeared to be about Noah's age, but smaller in stature and not as muscular.

Logan ran a hand down the boy's arm. "Good boy, you're doing fine," he told Jamie softly.

"You are indeed, lad," Tobias said with a smile. "We're an intimidating lot, but Logan will treat you well and make sure you're safe. Frankly, I suspect he'll be beating the others off with a very large stick." He backed up a step and looked toward the bar where Noah seemed to be waiting patiently and gathering looks. "Forgive me, gentlemen, but I think I'll go and use my own large stick to keep my boy from starting a riot." Logan winked his thanks at Tobias and coaxed his boy back to his knees as Tobias made his way to the bar.

"One ice water," Tobias heard the bartender say as he slid a tall glass garnished with lime over to Noah. He also sat a shorter water glass in front of Noah. Noah picked up the shorter one first and took a couple of sips, then swallowed the rest down. As he picked up Tobias' glass and turned away from the bar, he spotted Tobias on his way over and went to his knees, holding the glass at about head height for Tobias to take.

Tobias took the glass and stroked Noah's hair in thanks. He was about to walk to a table or at least take a look in the parlor, but a stir in the crowd drew his attention. "The entertainment has started, boy." He moved to follow the others.

He heard the scene before he could see it, of course, and paused. Noah stopped behind him, perfectly timed, and knelt. "Tell me, pet. Does that sound like a crop or a paddle to you?"

Noah answered him easily. "Paddle, sir. A crop has more snap."

"Very good. Come along." He walked forward, the crowd slowing him a little. Then the man in front of him moved aside and Tobias was given a lovely view of a familiar bottom. The rest of the sub was draped over the spanking horse, and a Dom Tobias didn't know brought the paddle down.

"Brian." Tobias smiled. "Who's the Top?" he asked Noah, glancing down to where he was kneeling.

"His name is Aaron, sir. He's ... fetishy but fun." Noah grinned.

"Brian will love him."

"He likes to be the daddy," Bradford added, smoothly moving shoulder to shoulder with Tobias. Phan was at heel and knelt at Bradford's feet. "Brian's wet dream. That boy has an ass that just begs to be spanked, doesn't he?"

"He does. But he begs for it and acts out. Takes the fun out of it, if it happens too much."

"Yes, point well taken. I've spoiled him. I'm still looking for a contract for him."

"Sir?" Nikki was suddenly at Bradford's elbow and whispered something to him.

"Oh, yes, thank you, boy. Tobias? Watch Phan for me? I may be a bit."

"Of course." Tobias nodded and let himself smile widely. "Come, boys. Let's get out of the way, shall we?" He turned and began to walk toward the parlor, trying desperately to resist the urge to look and see how Phan and Noah were reacting.

"You have your work cut out for you," a deep voice said to his right, the tone teasing.

Tobias turned, his own smile growing. "Luca!" he said, utterly delighted to see his old friend. "Bradford didn't tell me you were in town; shame on you for not calling."

Luca looked good, better than he had in years. His hair had more gray, but no more so than Tobias' own, and his eyes had a few more crinkles; he looked damn good, really. He had a boy at his feet, posture perfect and a dreamy smile on his face. Luca's hand was playing with the boy's hair almost absently. "Just arrived this morning, I promise. Is that Phantom?"

With a nod Tobias said, "Phantom? Would you like to greet Master Luca?"

Phan rose to his feet with catlike grace and stood on display, his eyes down. "It's wonderful to see you, Master," Phan said softly. "We've missed you. And, if I may, we've missed Danny as well."

Luca smiled. "Thank you, Phantom. Danny has missed you as well, haven't you, boy?"

"Yes, sir," the boy said, his tone as dreamy as his face.

Phan sank to his knees again and Tobias said, "And this is my sub, Noah. Noah?"

Noah stood, drawing himself up to his full height, and displayed, inclining his head politely to Luca, his eyes remaining low. "Pleased to meet you, sir," he said, his voice clear and confident.

"And you, Noah." Luca looked Noah over carefully, clinically, and Tobias noticed the tug of a smile as the man admired Noah's erection. "That's a beautiful collar, Tobias."

"It is, isn't it? It's not the official one, but he's well on his way to earning that. We're very happy together."

Luca's smile grew. "I'm glad to hear that. More than you know, really. May I suggest we go sit for a spell?"

"Of course," Tobias said, giving himself a mental kick. "My apologies, I should have suggested that myself. The parlor?"

Luca nodded, his boy and Phan both standing. "Don't trouble yourself, dear one," he said gently. "I've been in

remission for ages now and simply want some quiet so we can catch up with each other."

Relieved, but still annoyed with himself, Tobias led their party into the parlor, looking for two chairs alone with a fair amount of space around them. Three subs took up a lot of space, especially if things got interesting. "Should we make sure there's room for Bradford?" he asked.

Luca smiled. "I believe he's arranged that already," he said, pointing to a cluster of three chairs, each with a small table next to it. The grouping was more or less at center stage, and it was already attracting interest.

"Of course," Tobias smiled. "You were to be a surprise, then?"

"Surprise!"

Tobias laughed. "Oh, I have missed you." He walked to one of the chairs and settled himself happily, relishing the way they were being watched. Noah placed a hand on his knee and glanced in Luca's direction. "Go ahead," Tobias said in answer.

"May I get you something to drink, Master Luca?" Noah asked. "Master Tobias has water, but I'd like to get some juice for myself and Phantom. I am going to the bar, it will save your boy the trip."

Luca shook his head as Danny stood up. "I won't deprive him of the chance to serve, but thank you, Noah."

Danny stood and slipped his hand into Noah's, and Tobias caught the flicker of surprise on Noah's face before he settled, gently holding Danny's hand as they moved to the bar. "He's down deep," Tobias remarked, his hand absently petting Phan's curls and waves and random tufts of hair.

Luca grinned. "He spent the day in tight bondage. He'll be like that until sometime tomorrow, I expect." He sat back and looked at Tobias, his look becoming speculative. "I thought you two split up."

"We did," Tobias said easily. "But we're still fond of one another, aren't we, Phan?"

"Yes, sir," Phan said, his eyes on the floor.

"And you play?" Luca pressed.

"No."

"Shame." Luca grinned, this time with some heat in the look. "You were lovely together, and I can see Phantom and your Noah stopping time."

Bradford came through the parlor door with a drink in one hand and a grin on his face. "Tobias and Phantom were lovely together," he said, joining in on the conversation and taking his seat. "But I am sure even Phantom would have to agree that Tobias and Noah are a much better fit. And if you ask around about a certain parking lot scene a couple of weeks ago, anyone will tell you how good they are together." Bradford sipped his drink. "I think it's remarkable, Luca. Noah was completely lost when Tobias met him. They've been good for each other. It's a beautiful thing to see." Bradford reached down and ran soothing fingers through Phantom's hair.

Tobias smiled his thanks. "Noah wasn't lost so much as ... he wasn't found."

Luca tilted his head. "You love him."

Phan's shoulders moved and Tobias raised an eyebrow. "Phantom?"

"Sir?"

"Issue?"

"No, sir. I think it's adorable. And wonderful. And perfectly, obviously, right." There was nothing but truth in his voice, and Tobias felt a swell of pride.

"Thank you, Phan," Tobias said softly. "That means a great deal to me."

Bradford nodded. "Ah, love," he teased. "Phan's right, Tobias. It's very clear, not just in watching you, but in watching Noah. He's reallyblossomed with you. And if you don't mind me saying so, I think you've grown a bit as well."

Noah and Danny returned then, still hand in hand. Noah set Phan's glass down in front of him as he knelt neatly at Tobias' knees.

"Phan," Bradford said coyly. "Tell me honestly, what do you think of Tobias' boy?"

Luca chuckled and stroked a hand over Danny's hair. "Oh, do tell."

Tobias merely looked at Noah to catch his reaction; he knew Phan well enough to know that he'd tell the truth and delight in doing it.

Noah bit his lip and glanced sidelong at Phan. He wasn't technically breaking any rules by looking at another sub, but he schooled himself quickly and looked back at the floor in front of him.

"Noah and Phan have had dinner together, Luca," Bradford added. Tobias assumed he was partly getting Luca up to

speed, but partly teasing Noah as well. "So Phan has quite a bit to base an opinion on. Go on, Phan, tell us."

Phan smiled quickly, his eyes still down. "Sir's boy is a wonderful submissive," he said clearly. "His first desire is to please sir, to make sure sir is happy. His second desire is to better serve sir. He tries, he learns, he doesn't make the same mistakes twice. He asks questions to learn what sir likes, and he, I can only assume, uses his knowledge to make sir happy."

Tobias stared, utterly floored.

"Sir is happier than he has been in years, and that is directly because of sir's boy," Phantom went on, his voice rising as the men in the room drew nearer. "And I for one am thrilled that they've found each other."

There was a moment's silence and then a few voices started whispering. Tobias's hand went to Noah's shoulder, and Luca smiled softly.

"Of course, I wish sir's boy would at least pretend to top, 'cause he's totally hot and I keep hoping sir will strip him naked and oil him up. But that could just be me." Phan beamed, his eyes still low but his smile very, very naughty.

Bradford laughed out loud. "Thankfully, I know to expect the unexpected when I ask Phantom for honesty," he said, still laughing. "That was ... very kind and ... complimentary, Phan. Well said."

Noah had flushed pink and he swallowed hard, but to his credit, he managed to hold his tongue.

Bradford looked at Luca. "I wonder what Tobias' boy has to say to that."

"So do I," Tobias said softly. He glanced around the room taking in the gathering crowd of Doms and subs. He picked up his glass and settled back in his chair. "Pet? Tell us. What do you think of Phantom's assessment, for a start?"

Noah lifted his chin so he could be heard, but left his eyes low. He licked his lips, a little nervous at first, but his smile grew and his shoulders squared further as he spoke. "I think Phantom was very generous with his words, sir, and I appreciate them very much. I'm proud that my desire to please is that apparent, and I'm confident in my ability to serve your needs. I feel happy and privileged to be able to do so."

"You have, boy," Tobias said, loudly enough that everyone could hear him. He was getting hard in his leather trousers, thankful that the cut of this pair would allow his pride its chosen expression. "And what do you think of Phantom?" he asked smoothly, trusting Noah to be honest and open, even in front of everyone he knew in the scene.

"Phantom has had to overcome great obstacles and has been very brave in his journey. He's dealt with more adversity than anyone should have to and is growing past it to become a polished, accomplished and skilled sub. He's aware of his skills, and while he has every right to be very proud of them, I think he slights himself on that score."

Noah grinned then and licked his lips before continuing. "He is also graceful as a cat and undeniably beautiful, and if I ever were inclined to top, he would be the first person I would corner." There was a general round of laughter at that, and Tobias grinned. He winked at Luca and again at Bradford as he leaned forward to whisper in Noah's ear. "Would you now, pet? I doubt I'd let that happen, but it would be pretty. Would you like to be closer to him? Right now, I mean. Tonight. Sit with him?"

Out of the corner of his eye he could see everyone watching them curiously, those outside of the immediate circle unable to hear a word.

"Yes, sir," Noah said plainly. "I think he would, as well."

Bradford petted Phan on the shoulder. "You may respond if you wish, Phan," he offered.

"I'd very much like permission to sit with Noah and please Master Tobias," Phan said just as plainly.

Tobias looked at Bradford and cocked an eyebrow. He wasn't going to poach the man's submissive for the night without it being Bradford's choice as well. Not even if it was Phantom.

"Granted, and make sure you do so," Bradford told Phantom. "I'm being indulgent with you because it pleases me to do so. You'll answer to Master Tobias first for the remainder of evening, and any stripes you earn with him tonight will be doubled by me when the party is over, is that clear?"

"Yes, Master Bradford, of course, sir." Phan stayed where he was, holding his position until Bradford nodded and signaled he could move. "Come, boy," Tobias said, pointing to a spot next to Noah. He looked at Luca and smirked. "I do seem to have my hands full, don't I?"

"You'll manage, Tobias. You always do." Luca smiled at him, still petting Danny. "We all sit in awe, don't we, Bradford?"

"I don't know about awe, he just stole the loyalties of my sub for the evening," Bradford joked. "But it's just as well, really. I'll be called away again any moment."

Bradford looked over at Tobias' pair of subs. "They do look good together, Tobias, whatever will you do with them?"

"Rub them together and see if they spark?" Tobias suggested, eyeing the boys. Phantom's lips twitched into a grin and Noah bit his lip in an effort to curb a smile of his own.

"That would be something to see," Bradford winked.

"Hmm. You may see it yet," Tobias said lightly.

* * * *

Tobias grinned and started up the stairs, watching as word of the event spread. By the time he got to the mirror that ran up the length of the staircase there was a group gathered at the bottom of the stairs. He admitted to himself that he could get used to it; not so much the two subs, because that was far too much work and the balance would be so difficult it would approach impossible, but the sheer amount of attention they brought.

He might have strutted a little.

"And this is how you maintain a reputation," Luca remarked.

"I thought it was my good looks and skill," Tobias teased. "Nope, just sheer balls and showmanship."

"Ah. How very disappointing."

"Not for the boys."

Tobias smiled at that and led them all down the hall to the harem room. He'd chosen the room both for its spaciousness and because it was well-suited to the scene he had planned. He held up the key and said, "Noah."

Obediently, Noah took the key and opened the door, then held it open for everyone to enter. Noah closed it after them and turned the lock, then approached Tobias with the key and knelt at his feet.

"Thank you, pet," Tobias said, taking the key and setting it down on the one small table near the door. "Phantom? The fridge."

Phan rose and walked to the small refrigerator, pulling it open. A moment later he said, "Seven, sir, and a large amount of grapes." He sounded amused.

Tobias grinned. "Okay. One for Luca, one for me, and lose the wrist cuffs. Noah. Front and center, pet. Standing display."

Noah stood as directed and locked his eyes low, back straight, chin up, the picture of a perfect sub. His erection was still evident, laced tightly into his pants, and his nipple ring reflected the soft light in the harem room. Deviations: Domination by Chris Owen, Jodi Payne

Tobias looked him over, not bothering to disguise his feelings. His pride, his love, his arousal. "I'm going to take your mask off, pet. Just so it doesn't get damaged."

Noah nodded and stood still while Tobias removed the mask and passed it back to Luca.

"Phantom. Here." Tobias pointed to the floor next to Noah and took the water bottles Phan had retrieved from the fridge from him as Phan knelt next to Noah.

"This is impromptu, and I haven't discussed boundaries with anyone," Tobias said. "I haven't made rules. Therefore I want it perfectly understood that if at any time either of you is uncomfortable, you can stop the scene. Noah's words are yellow and red, Phan's are drake and gander. Those words are to be respected by everyone present, is that clear? Phan?"

"Yes, sir. Yellow and red for Noah," Phan said.

"Noah?"

"Drake and gander for Phan, yes, sir," Noah responded. "Luca?"

"Of course. Danny and I will assist if needed."

"Wonderful, thank you." He turned and looked around the room, smiling slightly. "We seem to have a lack of chairs, Luca." There was, in fact, only one chair. There were masses of pillows and a divan, a sweetly decorated stockade, and a hidden spanking horse, but only the one chair.

"And it's yours, of course," Luca said smoothly. "Danny?"

Danny nodded and stood up, moved two feet and knelt in front of Tobias. "If it pleases, sir, my Master has a fondness for divans. We fit very well." Tobias smiled. "Of course. Move it out of the way, please. Boys, help Danny and then get the pillows where you'd like them. Oh, and Noah, you may speak, of course."

"Thank you, sir," Noah said, moving to assist Danny with the divan. He and Phan stopped to exchange a couple of whispered words about the pillows and then set about arranging the larger ones flat on the floor with the smaller ones scattered around. Tobias watched as they worked together and was fairly sure it was deliberate that they were in almost constant physical contact as they made their nest.

He shook his head and enjoyed the show, liking the fact that it hadn't really even started and he was smiling. He moved to the chair and stood next to it for a moment before deciding it was in a good location where it was. He nodded to Luca and settled himself, his water bottle close at hand.

Luca nodded back and removed his jacket then lay back on the divan, rolling onto his side so he could have Danny lie in front of him and still see the show.

"Almost ready, boys?" Tobias asked, noting that Phan had stopped fluffing pillows and was playing with the laces on Noah's pants.

"Yes, sir, I think we are." Noah was looking at Phan and grinning as he spoke. He leaned close to Phan as if to kiss him, but didn't quite, just took in Phan's scent, running his nose along the shorter boy's jaw.

Tobias snorted. "One's as bad as the other," he noted out loud. "Tell me, what's the one thing you want to do to, or with, Phantom?" Noah sighed, taking liberties now that he was permitted to speak. "If I must choose only one, sir, then I would like..." He paused, looking into Phan's eyes, "I would like to kiss him." He grinned and turned his head in Tobias' direction. "All over."

"I can work with that, sir!" Phan said quickly. "Really, really."

Tobias rolled his eyes. "Do I have to remind you two who's in charge already?"

Luca laughed softly. "Sweet Tobias. Save face while you can, dear one. It's hopeless."

Tobias did not stick out his tongue. He did sigh.

Noah stepped around Phan and turned him to face Tobias, then stood behind him and kissed one shoulder lightly. Once. Twice. And then the other shoulder. They were teasing, light kisses, ones that Tobias knew the sensation of well. Kisses that brought goose bumps to the skin.

Phantom was not immune, his arms coming up so his hands could lock behind Noah's neck, his slim fingers tracing the swoops of Noah's collar.

Tobias swallowed. "All right, boys. Your way. No fucking, everything else is fine by me if it is with you. Supplies are in the usual places. Make me happy."

Luca merely grinned, his hand tracing patterns on Danny's stomach.

"Thank you, sir," Phantom whispered.

"Yes, sir. We will," Noah answered. He sunk his teeth into Phantom's shoulder. Tobias raised an eyebrow and bit his lip to hide a smile as Phan's eyes flew wide open. "I think he has your card, boy."

"Yes, sir. But I have his, too," Phan said with a wink. He ran the back of one hand down Noah's chest in a move Tobias knew to be featherlight. His head was back, resting on Noah's collarbone, and Phan was looking up, watching Noah's face. He smiled slightly and then traced a finger around Noah's new nipple ring, very gently.

Noah hissed softly. "Feels good," he told Phan in that familiar dark tone and then lowered his head and kissed Phan square on the mouth. His hands found their way around Phan's chest and rolled Phan's nipples between his fingers.

Tobias felt his breath catch and he reached for his water bottle. Something in his hands would be a good idea.

Phan, on the other hand, writhed. He moaned softly, the sound lush, and opened his mouth wide to take Noah's tongue. His hands dropped and went to Noah's hips, just behind him, and he arched slightly, letting Noah pluck at his nipples.

"He tastes good, sir," Noah informed them all. "Like vanilla and ... something else." Noah kissed over Phan's jaw and down his neck, turning him slightly to explore Phan's collarbone and shoulders, and then back to his mouth for a deeper kiss. He wrapped one arm around Phan's waist to support him.

"Careful," Tobias said softly. "Lie down. You'll fall."

Noah, being the taller and stronger, practically lifted Phan off his feet and set him in the pillows. He tucked one of the smaller ones under Phan's head. "Is that better?" he asked, his eyes on Phan's. His voice was full of teasing and heat. "Can't have you falling, now can we?"

Phan shook his head rapidly, his grin bright. "Oh, no, not that. Falling would be bad. I'd get hurt and then you'd have to kiss me better." One slim hand lifted and tugged at the laces of Noah's pants. "These are sexy as fuck. Got everyone going, you know."

Tobias could hardly argue with that.

Phantom's hand dropped a little lower, cupping Noah's balls. "Gonna kiss me again?"

Noah groaned. "Oh, yeah. You're a great kisser. Are you going to unlace those? They took forever to lace up." He cut off Phan's answer, pressing his lips over Phan's and playing tongue hockey. His fingers moved to Phan's pants, looking for the zipper that held them closed.

Tobias was fairly sure he'd been forgotten, which wasn't a bad thing, really. It was ... well, nice was an understatement, not really describing what it was like watching the boys play with each other. Tobias glanced over at Luca, unsurprised to see him openly fondling Danny and Danny looking blissedout.

He looked back at the pillows where Noah was still kissing Phan, both of them with beautiful, wide mouths, tongues dancing. Phan, the hedonist, was moving constantly; he played with all the laces he could find, traced Noah's cock, tweaked the ringless nipple. And the sounds ... he filled the air with the sounds of his need. "Oh, yeah," Phan moaned when Noah got his pants unzipped, his heavy and full cock standing proud. Ringed, thank God.

Tobias began to wish he had a ring himself.

"Oh, that's very nice. Very nice," Noah breathed, wrapping his fingers around Phan's shaft. "Hot. Hard. Beautiful." Noah leaned over and whispered something in Phan's ear and Phan nodded. Tobias considered demanding to know what they were up to, but he found out soon enough, as Noah started to kiss and lick and tease his way south.

It was Luca who moaned, but Tobias didn't bother looking over, too captivated with the sight in front of him. The water bottle wasn't enough, and he found himself pressing the palm of his hand to the base of his erection.

"Oh, sweet," Phan said, leaning up on his elbows to watch Noah's progress. He bit his lip as Noah neared his belly button and Tobias smiled.

"Noah. His left hip," Tobias said softly.

Noah looked up at Phan. "Left hip, sir?" he asked Tobias, but his eyes were watching for Phan's reaction. "All right." He lowered his mouth again and kissed over Phan's stomach, settling in to lick and kiss and nibble at Phan's left hip.

Phan bucked, his legs falling apart despite the leather pants still around his hips. "Oh, shit," he gasped. "That's not fair. Oh, God, Noah, not your teeth!"

Noah laughed softly, his fingers working the length of Phan slowly. "Oh, yes, my teeth. I'm not hearing safe words," he teased and bathed a swath of exposed skin before closing his teeth around it. "Oh, God!" Phan moved, his hips rolling and his feet fighting to kick off the shoes he had on. "Noah. Come on, for fuck's sake, I'm only human!"

"Phantom. Don't come," Tobias ordered, his voice sharp as a whip.

Danny moaned.

Phan went still, instinct and training snapping him into role. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Tobias smiled. "Noah. Strip him."

Noah pulled up onto his knees and wiggled Phan out of his pants. "My God, these are tight, sir," he told Tobias, finally getting them over Phantom's feet. He tugged off the socks next and then crawled up Phan's body to remove the leather tie and shirt collar.

"Yes, Phan favors tight leather," Tobias commented.

"Well, it suits, doesn't it?" Luca said.

"Of course. Noah, too. And Danny, I presume."

"Naked suits Danny."

Tobias laughed, eyes on Phantom, who seemed to be controlling his breathing. "Okay, Phan?"

"Yes, sir."

"Noah, I suggest you take as much advantage as you can. He's not quite under control."

"Yes, sir," Noah grinned. But before he did anything, he moved up Phan's body and spoke to him softly. Tobias wasn't exactly sure what he said, something about breathing, but it was in that tone that Noah used on Tobias' horses when they were spooked by a puddle. Noah ran both hands down Phan's body and resumed his tasting where he'd left off, leaving the sensitive hip for now and working his way down the inside of Phan's thigh. "Do you want me to taste his cock, sir?" Noah asked, still nibbling on sensitive skin.

Tobias shifted in his chair. "Yes."

Noah licked his lips and grinned. "All right?" he asked Phan while fondling his balls.

Phan stared down at him. "Like I'd say no? Sir, I think your boy is crazy."

Tobias snorted. "Settle down and take it like a man, you."

Noah snorted. "This is what I get for trying to respect boundaries?" he asked rhetorically. "You're going to be sorry, Phantom." He teased the head of Phan's erection briefly and then, without warning, swallowed Phan right into his throat.

Phan gasped, his head falling back and his hands drifting to Noah's head. "Oh, God. Nice. More? Suck me, Noah."

Tobias leaned forward.

Noah slid a hand under Phan's ass and gripped the base of his cock with his other hand. He let up a little, working Phan with more skill and less hunger. Tobias saw flashes of tongue and teeth, listened to Noah's moans around Phan's prick, and every so often Noah would devour him down and let up again, keeping him off guard.

Phan's legs spread, and Tobias knew it was instinct. The moans couldn't be stopped, the way he was rocking back and forth, the near frantic movements of his hand on a pillow. Order or not, if it weren't for the ring around his prick, Tobias was sure he'd have come by now.

He wondered when the last time was that anyone had done this for Phan.

"Sir," Phan gasped. "Please, sir. It's too much. Too ... God, please, sir!"

"Noah, the ring," Tobias said, his voice thick, his own balls starting to ache.

"Yes, sir." Noah reached up and unsnapped the cock ring quickly and closed his lips around Phan to swallow him.

"Oh, God!" Phan arched, his hips lifting off the pillows as he shot into Noah's mouth. Tobias watched his face, his lovely face, so expressive at all times, watched his face contort as pleasure stormed through him. Tobias watched Phan's stomach muscles work, his hips twitch ... and he could almost taste it himself.

He stood up and crossed to them, knelt down with one hand playing through Phantom's hair and took a kiss from Noah as soon as his boy's head came up. He swept his tongue through Noah's mouth, stealing the flavor of them both, and he moaned.

Noah pushed a hand into Tobias' groin and squeezed as Tobias kissed him.

Gently, regretfully, Tobias removed Noah's hand. "Later, pet. Right now I want Phantom to enjoy you. And for you to enjoy him." He kissed Noah again and tugged Phan's hair playfully.

"Well done, boy," he said to Phan. "You may thank Noah now." He stood up and walked back to his chair, smiling as Luca whispered something to Danny and began to undo his trousers. Noah seemed reluctant to see Tobias go, but eventually he leaned over Phan again and kissed him. "You taste so good," he whispered, just loud enough for Tobias to hear.

Tobias smiled. "He does," he agreed, settling back in his chair. "And the two of you together are amazing."

Phantom smiled, somehow looking both shy and pleased at the same time. "I'm glad you approve, sir," he said, his hands skimming Noah's back and going back down to rest on Noah's ass. "Noah has a talented mouth."

Tobias laughed, idly rubbing his erection with one hand. "Oh, yes. There's no denying that."

Phan squeezed Noah's ass and took another kiss. "Wonderful mouth," he said softly. "Hot and wet and sir is a very lucky man, Noah. Let me show you how much I appreciate you making him happy." His hands drifted to the side laces of Noah's pants. "These are so fucking sexy. God. You're hotter than hell, you know that?"

"They were a Christmas gift from sir," Noah said, grinning. "Along with the mask and this collar. Isn't it gorgeous?" Noah ran his fingers over the collar and traced its contours. "Oh, and thank you."

Phan grinned back. Tobias knew that grin and had to bite his lip to keep back a chuckle; he wouldn't ruin the surprise for Noah.

With a quick move, Phan pressed another kiss to Noah's mouth and shoved, rolling Noah back on the pillows, his balance completely gone so he wound up in a wanton sprawl. Quick fingers tugged at laces and a quicker mouth kept Noah distracted while Phan bared him. Tobias was fairly sure Noah didn't even realize what was going on until Phan had his cock out and was pumping it happily.

"Pretty, pretty dick, too," Phan said with a wink.

"Jesus fuck," Noah said with a long groan. "Where the hell did you learn that move? Oh, God." He was already panting, his cock straining against the ring Tobias had put in place earlier. He reached down and cupped his fingers around Phan's.

"I forget," Phan said with another grin. "You sure you don't top?"

"Phantom," Tobias said, his voice even. He popped the button on his pants and brushed his fingers just under the waistband.

"Yes, sir. Just checking, sir." Phantom leaned down and whispered something to Noah, his hand still working.

Noah stared at Phan for a moment, and Tobias was dying to know what Phan had said to him, but he was suddenly distracted by the way Noah took Phan's chin in his fingers and kissed him. He raised one knee, putting his foot flat in the pillows and rolling his hips, shoving his cock through Phan's fist. He groaned again, deeper and longer, the sound muffled by Phan's mouth.

Phan groaned, too, and Tobias couldn't miss the way Phan's dick was coming back to life. Luca hissed and Tobias instinctively glanced over, smirking as he saw Luca's thick erection being swallowed down.

Blow jobs all around, then.

"We'll talk about that later," Phan said with a grin, letting Noah go. "You just stay there for a second, I gotta get some stuff. Entertain sir."

Tobias raised an eyebrow as Phan went to the supply cupboard, and then he turned his full attention to Noah. Well, almost full. He watched Noah as he lowered his own zipper, his erection desperately needing room to stretch.

Noah laughed. "He worries me," he said with a grin, taking his cock in his fingers and picking up where Phan left off, stroking himself slowly. "Ah ... yeah," he said, curling slightly, his head coming up off the pillows. With the fingers of his other hand he circled his new piercing. "Are you hard, sir?" he breathed. "You look hard as hell. God, I love your cock."

Tobias smirked and parted his fly, letting his erection stand out from his body.

Noah sat up, still working his own erection gingerly. He bit his lip, eyes riveted on Tobias' cock. "Fuck, that's hot, sir, clad in your leather, watching you watch me." He licked his lips. "Don't you want me, sir? Want to fuck me? Want to show Master Luca I'm yours?"

"He knows," Tobias said, his voice rough. "Everyone knows, pet. It's undeniable." He began to stroke himself slowly, hyper-aware of Noah's eyes, of Phan's look, of Luca and Danny. "You're all mine."

Phan settled behind Noah and nodded. "It's true, Noah. You wear his mark, right on your soul. It shines out, everyone knows you're his."

Noah might have missed Phan slicking his fingers as he spoke, but he didn't miss it when Phan tugged at his pants

again. "Off. Going to finger you while you watch sir. Keep your eyes on him, watch him."

"Jesus..." Noah swallowed. He tugged and wiggled until he was free of his pants and then knelt facing Tobias and with his back to Phan. He moaned as Phan slid a slick finger in and spread his legs a bit more. "Phan..." He glanced over his shoulder at the other boy for a moment and then turned back, training his eyes on Tobias' cock again.

Tobias stroked himself, making sure his pace was slow and steady. "Talk to me, Phantom."

"Tight," Phan said without hesitation. "One in and he's just ... God, sir. He's tight and warm, his ass is clinging to me. He's pushing back, wanting more. Every time you stroke the head of your cock he clamps down on me."

Tobias smiled and let his legs part a little more. "Put two in him. I want to watch you fuck him with your fingers, I want to watch my boy feel good."

"Yes, sir," Phan said, his voice silky. Tobias could see him stroking his own prick and tugging at his balls.

Noah's eyes widened, and Tobias was fairly sure the second finger was in.

"Talk to me, pet. What do you feel?" he asked, pulling at his cock. He was leaking and he smeared the fluid a little, a soft moan escaping as he watched the boys.

"A stretch, sir. I want him ... deeper, it's not enough," Noah moaned. "I want ... ah!" Noah went still for a moment and then panted harshly. "Oh, fuck, yes, right there..." He hissed and Tobias watched him push back onto Phan's fingers. "More, Phantom." Tobias stood up and walked to them, his cock aching and throbbing as he slid his hand along its length. "Noah, you can't come. Not until I say so. Understood?"

He stared down as Phantom slid a third finger into his boy, hand slowing, making every stroke count as it went deep.

"Yes ... ah! Yes, sir." Noah let go of his cock and tangled both hands in the pillows. He was flushed from his cheeks down across his shoulders and was moaning more or less continually. "Phan ... good," he stuttered and swallowed hard.

Phan groaned and nodded. "Sir?"

Tobias bit his lip and nodded, mainly to himself. Standing behind the boys he reached out and pushed Noah's shoulders down toward the floor, so his ass rose nicely. He watched Phantom's fingers plunge in and out, watched as Phan stroked himself.

Listened as Danny gasped and Luca moaned.

He watched and he reached for the lubricant Phantom had tossed aside, slicking himself quickly with hands that were starting to shake. He bent, without any grace at all, his voice low and tight as he whispered in Phan's ear. "Suck him. Take it all, boy. Make me happy."

"Yes, sir," Phantom said, his breath catching. "Anything, sir."

Tobias grabbed Phan's wrist and stopped his hand, pulled him away from Noah easily. He didn't think at all, merely sank down and pushed his cock into his boy's ass, stabbing into him without a word.

Noah howled, tossing his head back and then dropping it again as he gulped in air. "Yes! Oh, yes!" He whimpered and

gasped as Phan moved beneath him and took him into his mouth. "Phan! Master! Oh, oh, oh—"

Tobias sat back on his heels, one arm going around Noah to pull him up and back, so Noah was sitting on him, riding him, and Phan's head was buried in Noah's lap.

"My boy," he whispered in Noah's ear as he fucked him. "Mine. My pet, my boy. Yes?"

Noah leaned back against his chest. "Yes ... yours." He moaned and tangled the fingers of one hand in Phan's hair. The other he looped around behind Tobias' neck. "Your boy, your pet, your sub, yours, Master, only you..." He'd started to tremble and the words just flowed from him. His breathing was shallow and light, his body damp with sweat. "Master, please ... may I? Oh, God, please can I ... can I ... fuck! Sir, please!" he begged urgently.

With a groan Tobias bit down on Noah's shoulder and reached for the cock ring, tugging at the snap. As it fell away, Phantom groaned, sucking Noah in with a needy look in his eyes.

Luca called out Danny's name.

Tobias thrust as deep as he could, pushing Noah farther into Phan's mouth.

Noah gasped and went right over the edge as soon as Tobias removed the ring. His body spasmed against Tobias, and he thrust into Phan's mouth convulsively for long moments. Tobias felt each wave move through Noah as he held his boy close. It took some time before the tension released Noah and he slumped into Tobias' chest, panting harshly. "Master," he crooned when he finally had enough air.

Phan pulled away and rolled onto his back, his hand flying and his hips twitching as he jerked off. Moans spilled from him, his eyes staring at Tobias and Noah.

"Mine," Tobias said again, holding Noah close. "Mine." His eyes rolled back and he came hard, shooting deep in Noah's body.

"Sir!" Phantom called out, and Tobias knew that he had come again, flying on the scene, on Noah. On him.

There was silence for a long moment and then Luca clapped his hands together, the applause slow and measured. "Well done, dear one. Remarkable, what they'll do for you. What you'll do for them."

Tobias moved sideways, holding Noah to him; he curled them together on the pillows and held an arm out to Phantom, drawing him in as well. "Thank you," he whispered, kissing Noah. "And you," he added, turning his head to look at Phan. "Well done."

Phan smiled at him. "Thank you, sir." Phantom bent down, across Tobias' chest to kiss Noah. "And you. Thank you, Noah. Thank you for taking care of him."

"He takes care of me," Noah answered Phan softly, and kissed him lightly in return. He pressed against Tobias and sighed. "God, I feel boneless," Noah commented.

Tobias laughed softly. "We all do. A rest is in order, boys. And then you can help me dress again, we'll get you two clothed, and we'll make yet another grand entrance." He relaxed into the pillows, petting them, feeling warm and satiated.

Phan giggled against him and wiggled a bit. "What?"

"I don't think I was supposed to get off that second time. Bradford is gonna whip my ass." He sounded delighted.

Tobias snorted. "I should tell him you were good."

"You wouldn't!" Phan sounded shocked.

Tobias grinned and kissed Noah. "What do you think, pet? Should we get him in trouble or make him suffer?"

Luca laughed quietly from the divan and Tobias looked up to see him neatly redressed. "Yes, Noah. Whatever shall we do with Phantom? Danny, water for them, please."

"Well, to be honest, I don't recall sir giving Phantom permission to come that second time, Master Luca," Noah said with a grin. "And I think Master Bradford deserves to know the truth. How many stripes is that, sir? For coming without permission? Oh, thank you, Danny." He took the water, opened the bottle and drank half of it down in a long gulp.

Tobias accepted his own bottle and sat up, one hand tugging at Phan's hair again. "Me? I'd say five, but Bradford is notorious. I suppose it depends on his temperament when we get down there."

* * * *

Tobias shook his head and watched the boys fuss over each other. It was amusing and slightly more than adorable, but even as he straightened his own clothes he admitted that if he had to deal with them both full-time one of them would wind up chained to a wall. Full-time.

Eventually, even Phantom had to stop groping and they were ready to go down.

"Come," Tobias said, leading the way. "And do me proud, boys. Eyes down, smiles smug. I want a stir and I expect you to be perfect."

"Yes, sir," Noah and Phan answered in perfect unison. That was a damn good start.

They made their way down the staircase. Bradford's band must have gotten underway while they were all indisposed, and there was music in the ballroom. The bar was crowded with people, and heads turned as Tobias and the boys came into view, reactions ranging from stares to whispers to grins. Noah and Phan were practically glued to Tobias, moving when he did and stopping when he chose to.

Bradford was instantly at his elbow. "I trust you found the room in order?" he asked, escorting Tobias through the parting sea of onlookers. He was headed for the parlor.

"It was lovely, thank you," Tobias assured him. "Everything went just fine. Although Phantom ... well, he had rather too good a time at the end, I'm afraid."

"Without permission?" Bradford raised an eyebrow.

"Ah, the first time he had permission. The second, no. I'm afraid I was rather distracted at the time, being in mid-climax myself."

Bradford nodded. "When do you plan to administer them, Tobias?"

"At your leisure. I suppose that the audience here is big enough?" Tobias glanced about the room, taking the passing whispers and knowing looks. Overall, a triumph.

"Indeed. Have him fetch a crop whenever you're ready. I suggest you do it before midnight, because I have a fine champagne you'll wish to indulge in."

Noah pulled out a chair for Tobias and then knelt neatly at his knee. Phan sank down next to him, his expression both wary and eager. It was an interesting mix.

Tobias nodded and petted Noah's hair. There was more than one handy apparatus in the room, and as he looked around his eye was caught by a simple Saint Andrew's Cross. There were cuffs and manacles attached to it, but also wide rings for the sub to hold onto. It appealed.

"Phantom. Bring me a crop, boy. We'll deal with this now and not disrupt Bradford's party any longer."

"Yes, sir," Phantom whispered. He moved quickly to a cabinet near the door and silence fell as he opened it, returning promptly, sinking to his knees in front of Tobias, and offering him the crop. It was a good tool, wound with black leather and having a nice, solid weight. "Sir."

Tobias took it in his hand and nodded again. "Strip and go to the cross."

Bradford watched as Phan did as he was told. "Tell us what the punishment is for, boy," he ordered.

"Yes, Master Bradford. I'm being punished for having an orgasm without Master Tobias' permission, sir." He stood on display, his eyes down and his latest erection evident. "Good boy. Now tell us how many lashes you will be receiving, from whom, and why."

"I will receive five from Master Tobias as punishment from him for the infraction. From you, I will receive ten, as you said you would double any punishment earned when you charged Master Tobias with me." His erection stiffened further, his prick curving up.

Tobias wondered if he'd manage to get off again when being whipped. Casually, he smoothed a hand over Noah's head and shoulders. Noah remained still and silent at Tobias' side.

"Good boy. Now, tell me why you chose this crop and not the lighter one that is also in the armoire?" Bradford looked over at Tobias and winked.

"Because fifteen lashes hurt like hell, sir." Phantom grinned at the floor. There were a couple of titters from subs, Tobias noted, and he barely stopped himself from laughing.

Bradford grinned behind Phan's back, but he didn't allow Phan to hear his amusement. "Indeed. Turn and face the cross, boy. Take hold of the rings and present for us." He turned to Tobias and leaned into his ear. "Have fun."

Tobias smiled and stood up. "Stay here, pet. You were perfect this evening and will be rewarded later. I'm proud of you."

Bradford took Tobias' seat and looked at Noah. He put a hand on Noah's shoulder and Tobias heard him say, "You should be very proud, boy. Tobias is not easy to please."

Phantom had turned as instructed and was holding the rings tightly. Tobias stepped up behind him and said, "I know

your words. As a matter of form, I'm telling you to use them if you need to." He grinned as Phan snorted. "Yeah, I know. But, public scene, boy. You know the rules."

"I do, sir." Phantom said. "I'll use my words if I have to. Thank you, sir."

Tobias nodded and stepped back. "You will count them and thank me for every stroke, boy."

"Yes, sir."

Tobias raised his arm and swung, sure of his aim and the weight behind the stroke. Phan flinched as a red stripe rose on his ass.

"One, sir. Thank you, sir."

Tobias flogged him four more times, each stroke exactly the same as the first, five lines rising and five flinches, followed by Phantom's thanks. He didn't use as heavy a stroke as he would have at home with Noah; at home, Noah would not be getting fifteen lashes.

At the end of the five Tobias said, "You may thank me now."

Phantom let go of the rings and turned, his erection rigid. He knelt low and kissed Tobias' boots, then said, "Thank you for a wonderful evening, sir. Thank you for punishing me, sir."

"You're welcome, Phantom. Return to the cross and wait for Master Bradford." He turned and held the crop out to his friend, smiling. "And thank you for sitting with my Noah."

Bradford stood and nodded to Tobias. "He's a well behaved boy," he said, loud enough for Phan to overhear. He took the crop and approached Phan, squaring his shoulders and pacing slowly behind him. "You and I have been working on your issues with taking pleasure in punishment," Bradford said for the benefit of the gathered crowd. His tone was stern and serious. "Is punishment a reward, Phan?" he asked as the tension in the room intensified.

Phantom stilled. He hadn't even been moving and Tobias could see the change. "No, sir. It is not." His voice was quiet.

"No. It is not. You are being punished for breaking a rule, for disobeying your Master, for displeasing him. If your Master is not pleased, than neither should you be. Punishment is not a scene. Punishment is not for your pleasure or mine." Bradford stopped close to him, facing his side. "What is the point of punishment, Phan?"

"To deter. It is a consequence for my actions and meant to teach."

"Good boy. Just so. I want you to reflect on that as I administer the crop. Clear?"

"Yes, sir." Phantom sounded subdued, and Tobias found himself nodding. Bradford might not have taken him on fulltime, but the man had Phan where he needed to be.

"And," Bradford reached around and unsnapped Phan's cock ring with a quick jerk. "You're not to come. You're not to beg me to let you. You're not even to wish you could. Otherwise, you may do as you like, as long as you don't let go of the rings. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," Phan said, his voice calm. Tobias gave him four strokes before that changed.

"Good boy." Bradford paced away and tried the crop out in the air. It made a wicked swoosh. "Are you ready?" Phantom's shoulder's rolled and then he seemed to relax. "Yes, sir."

Bradford's eyes narrowed, and at that moment they might have been the only two people in the room. The parlor had gone positively silent and still, and Bradford was concentrating on Phan to the exclusion of everything else. He raised his arm and laid two parallel stripes low on Phan's ass, just above the thigh. The swoop of the crop was audible and the snap cut into the silence in the room like a razor.

Phantom's back arched, but he remained silent.

Bradford shook out his arm and stepped back, regarding the stripes critically. A moment later he added two more to the other side, just as dark and heavy as the first.

"Punishment, Phan," Bradford reminded him softly.

"Yes, sir," Phantom said, his voice tight. "Thank you, sir. That's four. More please, Master Bradford."

"More to come, boy. One at a time. Count for me."

Bradford laid out a fifth stroke and then a sixth, crossing them in an X on his right buttock.

Phan's head dropped back as he arched and swayed. "Five, sir. Six. Oh, God. I'm sorry."

Bradford nodded to himself in satisfaction, but said nothing to Phan. The seventh stroke went diagonally across his left cheek.

"Seven! I'm sorry, Master Tobias. I apologize. Oh, God!"

Bradford paused and looked over his shoulder and made a gesture, offering to let Tobias respond if he wished.

Tobias shook his head; Phantom wouldn't hear him, not yet. And he still had three strokes to go.

He crossed the X with the eighth stroke and then approached Phan, standing close to his back.

"Two more, boy," he told Phan gently. "Stay focused. Don't come."

"No, sir. I. Oh, God. No. I won't." Phan shifted his weight, his hands tightening on the rings. "Eight,sir."

Bradford nodded and laid the ninth stroke across the center of the X, making a star pattern, and the tenth he added immediately in the same spot on the other side.

Phantom hung from the rings, his shoulders shaking. "Nine, sir," he sobbed. "And ten. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Noah."

Noah raised his head and stared at him. Bradford raised an eyebrow and glanced over his shoulder at Tobias, but the look was brief as Bradford hurried to Phan to soothe him.

"Good boy." Bradford said softly. "Tell me why you're sorry."

"I didn't even ask for permission," Phantom said through his tears. "I got off on Noah's pleasure, on Master Tobias' pride in his boy. They're so beautiful." He hung his head, his hands still clutching the rings, and sobbed. One more shaking breath and he added, "I intruded."

"Oh, no, darling one, you did not intrude." Bradford corrected him gently, stroking fingers over his back. "You were an important part of the scene. Tobias?" He looked over at Tobias, asking for his reassurance.

Tobias stood and walked to them, beckoning for Noah to follow. "Not only that, Phantom, you were invited, were you not? I told you what to do, until the two of you turned into puppies on me. There was no slight, no point at which you were not bound to us, through word or motion. Correct?" He stopped at Phantom's side and brushed the tears from his cheek.

"Yes, sir," Phantom whispered. "But at the end I was just ... I was lost, sir. It was so ... intense, I forgot to ask. I just ... I just acted. I felt connected to it, to you and to Noah. A part of you."

Noah's voice interrupted from where he was kneeling on the floor beside Tobias. "May I please have permission to speak to Phantom, sir?"

Tobias looked down and smiled. "Granted, pet," he said, stepping back to Bradford's side.

Noah stood and ducked under one of Phan's arms so that he was standing close to Phan and could look into his face. "You are beautiful and inspirational and I'm glad you were there, Phan. Not asking for permission is one thing, but you weren't intruding. Not at all. You were connected to us. I felt it, and I believe that sir did too." He leaned forward and kissed Phan on the cheek.

Phan was silent for a moment and Tobias couldn't see his face, only Noah's as they looked at each other. He saw Noah's smile and then Phantom let go of the rings, his arms slipping around Noah for a moment. "Thank you," he heard Phantom whisper.

Noah smiled and hugged Phan in return. "You're welcome," he said softly, and stroked a hand over Phan's hair.

"Boy," Bradford said, interrupting them. He stepped closer and tapped Noah on the shoulder, and Noah went back to Tobias' feet and knelt there. Bradford stood in front of Phan and smiled while he petted the boy's hair, easing him back. "You understand that you were only being punished for not asking permission?"

"Yes, sir. Master Tobias and Noah have been very patient with me," Phantom said with a sigh.

"Good boy. I'm very proud of you." Bradford pulled the cock ring out of his pocket. "Now, I know that you want to, but you understand that I can't let you come now, Phan. I can't reward you for merely taking your punishment. But you've done well, and I'm proud of you. You were very thoughtful and did exactly what I asked of you. I am very pleased." He placated Phan with soothing words as he leaned around him and gingerly fastened the ring back in place.

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," Phantom said, his tone resigned.

Tobias bit his lip to keep from grinning. He glanced down at Noah and said, "Do you suppose that if I left you and Phantom together for a few moments you could keep out of trouble? I have something to discuss with Bradford. And I'll admit I like the idea of the two of you curled up in a corner being good together."

"Yes, sir. He looks a little like he could use the break anyway." Noah grinned.

"Oh, yes, I'd agree with that." Tobias petted Noah's hair and looked around. "All right then, boys. Phantom, please go with Noah. There is an empty corner over there. You'll sit and you will not talk with anyonebut each other. Noah, please see to Phan's marks as best you can—I'll ask for spray and cold cloths to be brought to you." Deviations: Domination by Chris Owen, Jodi Payne

Phantom nodded, his eyes still on the floor. "Yes, Master Tobias. Thank you, sir, for your attention and care."

"Anytime, Phan," Tobias said softly. "You need me, I'm there."

Phantom swayed slightly and nodded. "Yes, sir. I know."

* * * *

Tobias made sure Noah and Phan were settled and then led Bradford to a quiet end of the bar area. "So, Bradford. What do you think of that?" he asked casually, leaning against the bar.

Bradford raised an eyebrow. "Thinking he's intruding? I think it's rooted in something that has little if anything to do with you or Noah or that scene." He made his way to the armoire to put the crop away. "What do you make of it?"

"Honestly? He needs affection. I'm not saying you're failing him, I'm just saying ... he needs a relationship. Not even a permanent Dom, just ... a warm body. Someone to care for him." Tobias sighed and shrugged a shoulder. "Maybe it's something that can be dealt with after next weekend. By the way, I haven't told Noah yet that we're staying in town. It keeps slipping my mind. But after seeing them together, I'm fairly sure he won't mind."

"I agree, Tobias. I give him what I can after our sessions together, but he doesn't come to me unless it's to ask me to session with him." Bradford sighed. "I'm going to kill him with kindness next weekend; hopefully we'll get in some of that, too." He was looking toward Phan and Noah as he spoke, and his anxiety about his upcoming session with Phan was evident in his face. "I'm definitely going to need to decompress before next weekend."

"What can I do?"

"I think I might need a sounding board. A chance to practice my words, you know? Have some ready answers to his arguments. Maybe we can do that once your whipping arm gives out." Bradford winked at him.

Tobias snorted. "I hope that takes a long time, though I fear it won't. And certainly, we can do that. I can play devil's advocate, as well. I know him well enough, I should think." He looked over to where Noah and Phan were curled up together. "Could you send Nikki to them with supplies, please? And then I'd like a moment to throw some names at you for a guest list."

"Ah, yes. Of course." He turned to call for the boy, and Nikki was at his elbow.

"Yes, sir?"

"Ah. Good boy," Bradford said, startled. "Phan needs tending. You'll bring Noah what he needs."

"Yes, sir." Nikki nodded and disappeared.

"He scares me occasionally," Bradford said with a laugh.

Tobias smiled. "He seems very ... in tune with you. Have you hit his limits yet?"

"Yes, just the other night in fact. I've been pushing in bits because I honestly thought he wasn't using his words when he should. But he got close enough to use his warning word the other night. He's not as broad as Phan, and he's not nearly as resilient as Phan either. Phan will bleed happily and recover in an hour or so. Nikki won't go quite that far and it takes him hours, even overnight to recover. It really does him in."

"I'm not sure if I'm relieved for Nikki or devastated for Phan, in that case." Tobias sighed and watched Noah start to work on Phantom's stripes. "Nikki will be devoted to you, Bradford. And I have a young sub in need of being celebrated. Do you have a silversmith for me?"

"Ah, yes." Bradford dug in one of his pockets and pulled out a business card. "He does beautiful work, all custom."

"Wonderful, thank you. I hope he works fast, as well—I want that boy decorated and claimed." Tobias turned toward Bradford and lowered his voice. "I've decided to have the party at my farm. I'll arrange for transportation there and back for anyone who wants it—and as much as I'd love to put anyone up for the night who wants to stay, I lack the space. I'll pay for any rooms here the guests would like, and of course my stables will be open for play after the ceremony."

"Oh, that sounds lovely. I can't wait. Do you know who you're inviting?"

Tobias shrugged. "You, Nikki, Brian and I suppose Aaron, Logan and his new sub—he intrigues me—Phantom, Brett. Luca and Danny, although I'm sure they won't be able to attend. A couple of the other Tops, any of the subs Noah was friendly with before I swept him out of here ... I'm thinking a limit of about twenty, though."

Bradford nodded. "Hmm. I'll have to give you Brett's new number, I think I have it."

"He hasn't been in lately?"

Bradford raised an eyebrow. "You didn't know? He's not a member anymore."

"And how would I know?" Tobias asked. "Noah said he seemed to have a new ... relationship. That he was happy when they spoke at Christmas."

"Well, I thought for sure he'd have told Noah by now. He's decided to leave the scene, he's taken a lover..." Bradford looked surprised. "He seemed very sure of his decision. I think he's in love."

"Oh." Tobias shook his head, smiling a little. "He may or may not have told Noah. I didn't press for details. Brett ... well. I'm glad he's happy. Maybe I shouldn't invite him? Would he want to witness a scene, do you think? If he's moved away from it, it might be upsetting. Or it might be closure, given his history with Noah. Opinion?"

"Invite him and give him the option to politely decline. I would."

"All right, then." Tobias looked around. "It must be almost time for that champagne you've been promising me. Would you like Phantom back now?"

Bradford looked at his watch. "Ah, yes, close to midnight. And, yes, if you don't mind, I would." He smiled at Tobias and made his way over to the boys. Phan looked very much better and was reclining somewhat in Noah's arms as they talked quietly.

The champagne, in fact, was already being poured at the bar. Bradford and Phan disappeared into the ballroom and up onto the stage, and Noah stuck close to Tobias' shoulder as they made their way through the crowd for a better view. Luca and Danny were right behind them.

"Champagne, Master Tobias?" Nikki offered a tray. "And I have cider for your boy, sir."

"Thank you, Nikki," Tobias said, accepting a flute of the champagne. He passed a glass of cider down to Noah, who was once more on his knees. "I won't have this if you mind, pet. Hold it for show and not insult Bradford."

"It's all right Master, it's New Years. Enjoy a glass," Noah smiled.

Tobias smiled back and lifted his glass in a silent toast to his boy. "Did you have a pleasant chat with Phantom, pet?"

"Yes, sir. Wow, he heals up fast, I was surprised. I think he appreciated a little closeness, it was very nice," Noah told him, not offering up any specifics of their conversation.

Tobias nodded and sipped his champagne. He was about to comment on Phan's pain threshold, but Bradford cleared his throat on the stage and the room fell silent.

"Good evening, everyone!" Bradford called out with a wide, friendly grin and held up his own glass of champagne. "What a crowd this year. Everyone looks wonderful, I might add. Some of you got very creative, and others are your usual dapper selves with a clever twist. Good to see."

He shifted from one foot to the other. "I'm going to start with a welcome. I greeted most of you at the door, except for those of you that were late ... Anderson." He coughed to cover the name and got a laugh. "I do want to say a special welcome to two very close friends, whom you have all seen plenty of tonight, but they are a big part of the reason this club exists, having inspired me to take a small business risk and buy this place from the original owner. They are a good deal of the reason you all are able to enjoy the freedom of a safe environment in which to play to your kinks." He grinned and raised his glass. "Luca, thank you for coming. We've been worried about you, we've missed you terribly, and I'm very honored that you and your lovely boy, Danny, were able to join us. Thank you for coming."

"And coming and coming," Luca deadpanned, drawing a choked giggle from Danny.

"You've obviously had too much fun, Luca." Bradford winked at him. "And, the man whose reputation precedes him everywhere he goes. A man who has managed to tame and temper one of our highest strung subs, andmy very closest friend, Tobias. Thank you, and your boy, Noah, for entertaining us this evening and for continuing to support the club after ... so very many years." He grinned and raised his glass again.

Tobias rolled his eyes even as he raised his glass, his free hand on Noah's shoulder. "You're too kind," he murmured. Really, he'd have to get back at Bradford for that.

"I look forward to another prosperous year with all of you. Remember, I'm here to see that your needs are met, and you should always feel free to drop me a line or take me aside to discuss them. Here's to another year of joyous, satisfying play!" He raised his glass to cheers, and moments later the countdown to midnight began.

"Stand up, pet," Tobias said softly.

The count went on, voices getting louder until they were raised in a chorus of "Happy New Year!" and Tobias took Noah into his arms and kissed him deeply.

Noah melted against him, and Tobias felt rather than heard Noah's moan. It was hard to hear anything over the noisemakers and the chorus of "Auld Lang Syne." There were streamers flying through the air and confetti, and it landed in their hair and settled on their shoulders.

"So proud of you, boy," Tobias growled into the kiss. "I think it's time to go."

"Yes, sir." Noah nodded. "Thank you, sir. I had a wonderful time."

"You made it wonderful," Tobias assured him. "Come." He turned and led his boy from the ballroom, not stopping to say goodnight as they made their escape.

Let the others talk. He knew they would, and this way he got to leave without an hour of pleasantries. This way Tobias got to take his boy home and take him to bed. This way they let their reputation grow and won their privacy.

This way, he could love his boy into the new year all the sooner, and that was all that mattered.

Chapter 21

Noah lay on his side with Tobias curled protectively around him. Or perhaps it was possessively, Noah thought with a grin and snuggled that much closer. Tobias had been true to his word and the rewards for pulling off a perfect evening were indeed great. Tobias had been very slow, very attentive, and Noah ought to have been well on his way to sleep, but his mind just wouldn't stop. He still felt too wired to close his eyes.

The breathing in his ear was deep and even, and Noah knew that Tobias had finally drifted off. He hugged the arm that held him close to Tobias' chest and sighed, the events of the evening running like a movie in his mind.

All his training had snapped into place so well once he was dressed and there were eyes on him. It hadn't felt like effort; he'd been securely in his space, and everything came as naturally as breathing. It was exhilarating, it was a rush that had kept him confident and kept his cock hard for, well, most of the evening.

The scene with Phan was incredible. First of all, who would argue with being asked to blow someone as beautiful as Phan? But what it did to Tobias ... his sounds, the way he palmed his own cock, was so hot. Heady.

The lashes, though, all those stripes on Phan's bare skin, that was hard. The sound of Bradford's crop as it connected with flesh sent shivers like lightening up Noah's spine. Noah was quite sure that neither Tobias nor Bradford had ever hit him that hard. Bradford was amazing to watch, very sure of Deviations: Domination by Chris Owen, Jodi Payne

himself, and he knew Phan so well. The way he sent Phan right where he wanted, and kept him there ... that was something to see. But Noah remembered the way Phan swayed on his feet as they made their way over to the corner. And he remembered a few other enlightening details as well. He leaned into Tobias' arms and closed his eyes, recalling their conversation.

* * * *

"Just a few more steps, you probably don't want to sit ... oh, here." Noah pulled over a footstool for Phan to lean over. "Nikki's bringing some stuff over, I'll cool those stripes for you, okay?"

Phan nodded, his breathing shallow. "That was intense," he said, his tone almost casual in contradiction to both his breathing and his marks. "I didn't realize I was so emotional about it."

"About what?" Noah asked. It was probably an absurd question, but Noah didn't think he meant coming without permission. Nikki arrived with the towels right then and Noah reached for the first one. "This is going to feel cold..." he warned before laying the cool, damp cloths over Phan's backside. They were medicated, Noah knew, with something that took the sting out quickly. Some kind of topical anesthetic. "Nikki, bring Phan's pants over?"

"Sure." Nikki hurried off to do just that.

"Ah! Hate that part." Phan took a breath. "About playing with sir again. About seeing you two together. You really

work, you know? There's ... you have the connection. It's beautiful to witness."

Noah smiled. "Thanks. Was this the first time you two have had a scene together since you split up?"

Phan nodded slowly. "We tried once, about a year ago. No, closer to a year and a half. It was an utter disaster."

"Shit, I'm sorry." Noah sighed. "I didn't realize. I would have been more sensitive or ... something." His words sounded dumb, even to him. But what else to say? Phan and Tobias still had a connection, too, Noah hadn't missed it.

Phantom giggled. "Uh-huh. Like maybe you'd have caved in and convinced sir to let you fuck me? That's the only way you'd have beat out what you did. You made me feel ... wanted."

"Oh, I wanted you all right," Noah said with a wink, though the idea that it might have been a while since Phan felt wanted wasn't lost on him. "I can't remember the last time I topped anyway, I'd probably have been miserable at it."

Phan glanced back at him, eyes unreadable. "Oh, really? Huh."

Noah shifted so he could see Phan's face better. "What? How many subs do you know that top?"

"Well, it would depend on their Doms, now wouldn't it?" Phan replied. "I mean, some Doms don't get all hung up on ... societal perceptions and know themselves well enough to know what they like, right? And some Doms know very well that merely taking it up the ass doesn't mean they're weak. Or effeminate." Noah stared at Phan a moment, recalling Christmas morning and fucking Tobias with that dildo. Jesus Christ. "Whoa, wait a minute. Are you saying sir ... wants me to ... is that what you're saying?" He peeled the cloths off Phan gently, hoping to hide his blush. Damn fair skin.

Phantom gave him a sympathetic look. "If it helps, I didn't figure it out for almost two years. I can't tell you how many times he chained me to a wall and got himself off with a dildo or something. And after rimming him I'd wind up using one on him about half the time—and it still took me ages to clue in."

Noah sighed. "I just did that the other morning..."

"Lucky you," Phan said, to all appearances sincerely. "Makes him nuts. Once you get used to the idea, it's actually kind of fun. Promise."

Noah was trying not to look as dismayed as he felt. It wasn't that the idea bothered him; he just had zero confidence in his ability to execute it well. "You ready for your pants?" he asked.

"Yeah. You want to talk about it?" Phantom looked at him intently. "I can help. Or at least let you freak out."

"I can count the number of times I've fucked anyone on one less than the fingers of one hand," he blurted, not really meaning to. It just kind of leapt out of him. He stood up to help wiggle Phan back into the tight leather.

Phan nodded and fought with the pants, not answering until he was done up. "Noah, I know what you mean. Really, I do. I've only ever fucked him. That's it. I know how freaky it can be." Noah glanced up at Phan. "I was freaked out by the dildo thing. He actually had to order me to use the damn thing once I got it in him." He shook his head and sat on the ornate loveseat that was tucked into the corner.

Phan sat next to him and more or less curled around him like a big cat. "And then what? You did and he got off, yeah? And he didn't say a word about it later."

"Well, only that he was sore. He seemed happy." He smiled a bit and snuggled up with Phan. "You're warm."

"You're hot." Phan grinned at him. "Okay, here's the thing, kiddo. He likes it. A lot. But he's never ever going to demand you stick your cock in him, and the only time he'll get pushy about the dildo is when it's been a long time since he's done it and you're rimming him. But if you want my advice? Just try it. You'll know when. And he'll ... well. He'll be appreciative of any effort. Trust me."

"I'll be glad for the ring; I wouldn't want to go soft on him because I'm self-conscious..." Noah snorted. "Why do I feel like a teenager?"

"Because it's essentially a new experience we're talking about," Phan said calmly. "What was it like the first time you let someone flog you? You were all nervy then, right? Same deal."

Noah nodded. "I guess so, but it's easier to be on the receiving end, if you know what I mean. Plus, what if I pick the wrong time and he looks at me like I've completely blown it?"

Phan threw back his head and laughed. "He's as much a hedonist as you are—honestly, the first time you make a

move like that? It'll be sheer willpower that keeps him from popping right then."

Noah couldn't help the grin that took over his face. He laughed softly. "You should have seen him the first time I rimmed him. Oh, my God, was that good advice. He really did scream. Like, loudly. He was totally stunned."

"Told you." Phan grinned up at him, looking almost proud. "Has he caught onto the tea thing?"

"Nope, he has no clue." Noah snickered. "Not one sweet clue. I always feel so evil asking him if he'd like tea before bed."

"It's a good evil though. As opposed to his evil—just so you know, nothing good ever comes of him, a shower, and a dildo. That's all for him, and don't even—"

"Oh, don't tell me, I know," Noah held up his hand. "We've been there. He turned the cold on full blast before getting out of the shower, too."

Phan laughed. "I usually got cold water, a few stripes, and chained to the bed. I think it makes him even more dominant, you know? He goes off like ... wow. And he's looking at us right now, kiddo. Think we're in trouble?"

"I have a feeling he's ready to go home, actually. Are you all right? I don't care what either of you say, you two still have a connection. It might not be good in a scene, but he's got your back, Phan. And I want you to know that I'm glad about it."

He got a warm smile. "I know it. I'm glad he's got you and you him. There's no one I trust like him, Noah. No one who cares about me like he does. I'm glad you're okay with that." "I needed to be a little more secure about myself before I got it, but I do now. Really." He meant it. Especially after tonight, everything just seemed to have its place and Phan had his place with Tobias, that was a fact. "I think Bradford would run a close second, if you're in a pinch. God, he's something to watch."

"He's got a hell of an arm," Phantom said with a grin. "And yeah, he cares about me. It's not the same, and miles away from love, but he does care. I know it."

"I'll let you know if I can bring myself to ... you know." Phan looked amused. "Practice saying it before you try doing it. Just a tip."

Noah laughed out loud. "Fuck. I can say fuck."

"Good for you! Now say, 'I can fuck Master.' I dare you."

"I ... can't say that." Noah shook his head and then frowned. "Wait. You dare me?" Damn that Phan, daring him. He sighed. What was the big deal? They were just words.

"I double dog dare you."

Noah laughed and shook his head. "You're a little shit, you know that?"

"I am indeed. But I can do it. Can you?" Phantom was laughing at him.

"I ... shit," Noah cursed, laughing at himself. "I can fuck ... Master." Suddenly he felt like he might pass out.

Phan wrapped an arm around him. "Breathe, Noah. Come on, it's not as bad as all that. You don't have to do it tonight—hell, ever. Breathe."

"Shut up," Noah said sullenly, and playfully pushed at Phan.

"Tell you what. You can practice on me!" Phan grinned at him brightly.

"You wish!" He winked and jabbed a finger into Phan's ribs.

"That's what I'm telling you!" Phan insisted. "Want you," he giggled. "Had a taste now. Watch out or I'll just show up and demand you cuddle me."

Noah looked at him. "Hey, I'm totally up for that."

Phan's smile got softer. "That'd be nice," he said quietly. He looked around for a moment, as if eye contact was hard, and said, "Um, they're coming. Listen to me—call if you want. Just ask sir; if he says it's okay, he'll give you my number. And thank you, Noah. Tonight was special."

"Yeah, it was something to remember. And hot. You're a very rare soul, Phan. Happy New Year."

* * * *

And just like that one of the most surreal conversations he'd ever had was over. Tobias hadn't asked for tea, thankfully, so he didn't need to think about anything too hard right then. He did, however, have to work in the morning, so he forced himself to make an attempt at sleep. Chapter 22

Tobias' arm ached. His back was slick with sweat and he could feel it trickle down his chest. "Enough?" he asked Bradford, coiling the whip again.

"Hardly. That was your warm-up." Bradford moved to the whipping dummy and pushed it flush against the wall then started to unbutton his shirt.

"You can't be serious," Tobias protested, knowing the man was.

"Like hell I'm not. You think I'm going to let you use that whip on Noah without knowing for sure you've got the subtleties down?" Bradford tossed his shirt aside. "You ought to have asked me before now." He faced the wall and placed his hands squarely in front of him. "Start with a tickle. If it's anything more than that, we're going back to the dummy and it'll be a long night."

Tobias sighed and rolled his shoulders. "My point is that I've been doing this for two nights. My arm is tired. There isn't any way I'd ever take a whip to Noah when I'm like this, so the test isn't fair."

"Tobias," Bradford sighed, not turning around. "We're talking four, maybe five strokes, tops. Do it, or I'll take the whip to you myself."

"Of all the goddamn pushy Tops in all the world, I couldn't have had Luca here, could I?" Tobias mused under his breath. "No, no. I get Badass Bradford and his Fucking Magic Whip." He finished coiling the whip and stepped back. "Ready?" he inquired politely. Bradford snorted. "Luca would have you knocking apples off his head. Yes. Ready."

"You weren't supposed to hear that. Get old like the rest of us, would you?" Tobias brought his arm back and let fly, the tip of the whip cracking on the floor before licking Bradford's right shoulder blade.

Bradford rolled his shoulder. "That was nice. Very light sting. Almost felt like a pinch. Sounded like the recoil was a little rough, though; watch it or you'll take off your own fingers." Tobias had a bullwhip in his hand and yet the man was being a smartass. That was trust for you. "Okay, warmup sting, pick a different location."

Tobias considered snapping him on the ass, but decided to wait. He was sure he'd want to again. He lifted the whip and struck once more, pleased with the weight and sound as the tip flicked over Bradford's other shoulder blade.

"Ow!" Bradford yelped. "Why did I think this was a good idea?" He shook his head. "Um ... nips at first, then burns for a bit after. Seems to be fading quickly, though. Nice stroke."

"Thanks," Tobias said dryly, coiling the whip again. "More?"

"Yeah, you need two more. A medium stroke and one real whopper. Where's Phan when you need him?" Bradford chuckled.

"Speaking of..." Tobias said as his arm came up. "How is he?" He flicked his wrist as he brought his arm down, fast and hard. A welt rose up on Bradford's back as the crack sounded. Tobias considered the mark and nodded to himself. Bradford's yelp, he ignored. "Jesus fucking ... fuck," Bradford swore, spitting the words out. "Ah, man. Why these boys like this shit, I'll never know." He stepped away from the wall and walked in a slow circle. "Um. Phan's all right. I'm a wreck, however. Everything is on for Friday. I've got extra security, medics on call; logistically, everything's ready." He took a deep breath and headed for the wall again. "Okay that one still burns, hurt like fuck at first, we'll call it a ... bite. Or a stab. Like a knife. Fucking hell." He put his hands back on the wall. "It's been a long time since I've been here."

Tobias held the whip and considered Bradford's back. "So, do you really want to test me on the last one, or are you just punishing yourself in advance for what you're going to do to Phantom?"

"I think Phantom will punish me quite enough, thank you," Bradford snorted. "But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't thinking about him." He took a very deep breath. "Look, if you want a steady hand with Noah you need to do this to someone else first and let them hurt instead of him or it might be tough to keep your cool, you know? And hell, I'm a convenient back with guilt to work through, okay? Stop psychoanalyzing me and just get it over with."

"Ah, yes, how safe, sane, and consensual we all are," Tobias said. "All right, then. Breathe through it, and I promise to be fast with the towels." He didn't hesitate, just brought his arm up and back and then struck, the whip sounding shockingly loud to his ears.

Bradford hissed long and loudly, and that was all. Otherwise he was completely silent and completely still. Tobias heard him exhale heavily a moment later and that was followed by shallow, soft pants. "How does he do it?" he mumbled, resting his forehead against the wall. "He can take eight or ten of those before his knees get weak."

Bradford took another deep breath and exhaled again, this time wiping tears from his eyes with the back of his hand. "Please tell me I'm not going to fuck this up."

"You aren't." Tobias gathered up a cold towel and pressed it to Bradford's back. "You are not going to fuck it up. Your instincts are top notch, you know what to expect, and you've set things up to deal with the variables. You love him enough to keep going when it gets to the hardest parts. And you have back-up if you need it." Tobias put every bit of strength and belief he had in him into his voice. Things would most certainly go badly if Bradford didn't feel like he could deal with it. "He doesn't know yet?"

"No, I was concerned that if I told him he wouldn't show up. That burned like fuck, incidentally, if you're looking for a mental reference." Bradford lifted his head and steadied his breathing.

"I know it did. That's the one that always made me want to puke." Tobias reached for the spray to numb Bradford's back. "So, he gets here, you take him upstairs, and ... he'll go to the white room all right? He's been there before?"

"He's been there before. He might be curious, but he'll go there because I tell him to; it's not like he'd fight me on my choice of rooms. The thing is, the room is empty right now, have you seen it? Ohh ... that feels good." Tobias was liberal with the spray. Deviations: Domination by Chris Owen, Jodi Payne

"No, I haven't. Come, sit down over here." Tobias led the man to a chair, guiding him to lean forward. "I assume you've stripped it down. The first danger is more what he'll do to himself than to you—hurting you wouldn't be something he'd do without a lot of provocation. You know his triggers."

"Stripped down completely; it's bare walls. He'll strip outside the room and I won't have so much as a belt on me. And he's going to know something is up as soon as they lock us in, so it's not like we're going to get a warm-up. Honestly, I wouldn't be doing it if I didn't think it needed to be done, and that I could handle it. I'm sure I can. I just can't cave."

Tobias nodded and knelt down beside him. "He'll accuse you of being like them. Of trapping him and scaring him. He'll say horrible things, Bradford."

Bradford nodded, meeting Tobias' eyes. "All aimed at someone other than me, I know."

"He'll try to seduce you, buy you. He'll promise you anything as long as you let him out, don't make him talk about it."

"Okay, so I tell him his only hope of leaving that room is to start talking ... he'll try to wait me out, right?"

"Yes. He'll entertain you, tell you stories, make things up. Have you ever had sex with him?" Tobias really didn't want to know and hated to ask, but he couldn't help if he didn't have all the details he could get.

Bradford didn't seem to mind the question in the least. He shook his head no. "I won't."

"You might feel like you have by the time he's done. He'll masturbate, use his body, play with yours. It's what he was

trained to do, what his instincts tell him will save him. It's the root of it, Bradford. His entire sense of worth was tied to sex at such a young age that it hurts him to fight it. Intellectually, he knows differently. It's security that gets to him—the more stable his life, the more he has to counter it with pain. We know the reasons ... I just couldn't get him to give them up."

Tobias swallowed hard, got up, and walked away from Bradford. "He has to talk about what happened. About who's to blame and why he still lets it shape him." He turned around and looked at his friend, feeling only sympathy. "And you have to listen."

"Yeah." Bradford stood and paced away a bit himself. "I know. It's going to be perfectly awful, but I need to encourage him to tell me every little detail. Get it out of himself. Believe me, I know this is going to very, very unpleasant, but I do care about him, and honestly? I can't hit him hard enough anymore, Tobias. That's far more upsetting. I'm worried about who he looks up when I'm not enough for him anymore. I have to do this."

Tobias nodded and sighed. "It will save his life, Bradford. He and Noah are getting along. Phan and I are getting along. He's stabilizing—and that means the pain needs to be that much more. He sees it as some sort of price to pay. And you're right—the next guy out there will be ... well. Phantom will die. We both know it. So you and I have little choice." He squared his shoulders and shivered a little, feeling sweaty, dirty, and stressed. "I expect to be told what happens, and I've arranged to take Monday and Tuesday off. I told Dee that it was about Phan, so she knows it's important. You'll call me if I'm needed. I'm going to tell Noah the basics as well, and he won't be tied at all over the weekend in case I need to leave him suddenly."

"I'll call you, of that I am certain. The only question is when. When I need a rest, or if I need backup ... or maybe if I decide it's going to take both of us ... You'll hear from me." Bradford picked his shirt up and shrugged it on. "You want a drink?"

"God, yes. And you can call me whenever you want," Tobias assured him. "For your sake, as well as Phantom's." Chapter 23

As it turned out, it was for both their sakes, Bradford being too tired to be what Phantom needed when the breakthrough finally happened. Tobias hadn't really been sleeping, half expecting the phone to ring at any time, so when it did ring he merely rolled over in bed and picked up the receiver.

"Tobias," he said, petting Noah's hair as he stirred against him.

"Master Tobias, it's Nikki, sir. I'm sorry to wake you." The boy sounded positively panicked.

"It's all right, Nikki. What's happened?" Tobias used the same tone he used on scared animals and swung himself out of bed, turning on the light as he moved.

"I don't know, sir, but Master Bradford asked that I call you. He says he needs you right away."

"Sir?" Noah said with a yawn.

"I'm on my way, Nikki. Tell Bradford and have someone waiting at the door for me—I don't have time to fuck with security, clear?" He grabbed his jeans and started pulling them on. To Noah he said, "Phantom and Bradford need me, pet."

Noah nodded. "All set with Deirdre, sir? Or do you need me to make a call?"

"Wait until you're ready to go to work," he said, reaching for his shirt. "Nikki? Tell them." He hung up and tossed the phone to Noah, then pulled the shirt on, buttoning it fast. "Call the garage for me, please, it's ... um. Four on the speed dial, tell them to have the car ready, I'll drive myself. Call Dee in the morning and tell her I'll be in on Wednesday or I'll call."

He opened a drawer, grabbing a pair of socks before he launched himself back at Noah. "I love you," he said vehemently, taking a hard kiss. "I'll call."

"I'll hope for the best. Please do call, I'll worry," Noah said as he hit the speed dial. "Yes, good evening. Please pull Dr. Vincent's car aroundimmediately, it's an emergency ... no, he'll drive himself." He hung up the phone. "Are you sure you don't want me to drive you over?"

Tobias finished with his socks and pushed his feet into his shoes. "I'll do it, sweetheart. Thank you. Sleep if you can, and be safe at work for me, all right?" He reached for his keys and tried to smile. "I'll need you later. When this is done."

"I know. I love you. Drive carefully." Noah looked small, alone in Tobias' big bed.

"I will." Tobias took a last, long look at Noah and fled down the hall, grabbing his coat and gloves as he went. At least the streets would be deserted at this time of night.

He made good time and as he'd hoped, security was a non-issue at the club. Pat met him outside to valet the car, and he flew through the front doors, his coat already off his shoulders.

Nikki took his coat as soon as made the foyer. "The white room, sir. Master Bradford wants a moment with you before you go in, he said to knock. Here's the key."

"Thank you," Tobias managed as he snatched the key from Nikki's hand. He'd apologize later. Grateful that the main floor was empty, he took the stairs two at a time and jogged down the hall to the white room. He slowed and knocked at the door, not sure if he should wait for Bradford's voice or not, but a moment later Bradford knocked back, and Tobias unlocked the door. Bradford slipped out of the room quickly, but Tobias could hear Phantom inside.

"He broke this afternoon," Bradford slurred. Tobias couldn't recall ever seeing Bradford as disheveled as he was right then. He was always so put together, it was a shock to see his clothes a wrinkled mess and his eyes hollow, with dark circles under them.

Tobias nodded and put a hand on Bradford's shoulder. "What happened?"

Bradford shook his head. "Actually, he hasn't told me a thing. We'd kind of hit a stalemate and he was quiet for a long, long time and then he just started to weep. Tobias, he's been in tears all evening. Hours. I can't ... I'm not up to it anymore. He needs more than I have right now."

"All right." Tobias physically turned Bradford around and pointed him to the stairs. "Go find Nikki. Tell him to come back up and lock the door." He gave the man a shove. "Shoo."

Bradford started walking and Tobias opened the door to the white room, his breath still in his chest. He could hear Phantom weeping, but it wasn't until he was in and had closed the door that he saw him, curled into a ball in a corner.

The room was hot. Phantom was naked and there were no blankets or anything else at all in the room, so it made sense that the heat would be turned up. Tobias slipped off his shoes and slowly walked toward Phan, unbuttoning his shirt as he went.

He didn't say a word, didn't say Phan's name. Phantom would know who it was as soon as Tobias touched him. Slowly, Tobias sank down next to the huddled and shaking man, sliding one hand over his shoulders and drawing him close.

Phantom went to him easily, curling up in his lap, the crying a steady stream. "Master," he wept.

"No. I'm not your Master. Use my name, Phantom," Tobias said softly. He wrapped his arms around Phan and held him as the weeping turned to a wail at his words.

"No. If I do that, then ... then you're just being nice." Phan sniffled and new tears wet his cheeks. "Nothing in it for you."

"That's bullshit," Tobias said mildly.

Phantom cried for another few minutes, then seemed to catch his breath. The tears still fell, but the sobs had passed, at least for a time. He rested his head on Tobias' chest, his tears soaking Tobias' shirt. "Why did they do this to me?" he asked softly.

"Your parents? Because they trusted the wrong people with you. That bastard? Because he was sick. And evil, if there is such a thing."

Phan shuddered. "Evil. But why did I believe him? For so long, even when I had you to tell me it wasn't true?"

Tobias sighed. "Because I failed you, Phan. How could I convince you that you didn't have to balance that way when I'm unable to control my own need for balance? I'm sorry, dear."

Phan shifted but didn't say anything. The tears didn't stop. "Will you sleep?" Tobias asked softly.

Phantom shook his head. "I ... I have to talk," he whispered. "If I don't now, I might not, ever."

"I'm here," Tobias assured Phan, shifting a little to make himself more comfortable.

Phan nodded and buried his face in Tobias' chest for a moment. "You smell like Noah," he said softly. "You left him for me?"

Tobias shook his head. "We're not here to talk about Noah. Not right now."

"But I feel bad for dragging you away from him," Phan said coyly, unfolding himself and stretching a little.

"If you can get it up, I'd be surprised," Tobias said easily. "And I've seen it all before, right? I thought you had to talk?" Phantom glared at him. "You used to like watching me."

"I do like watching you. And I absolutely adore it when

you're honest and work hard."

"Bastard," Phan spit at him.

Tobias merely sat back. "I'm fresh. You're not. Save your words for talking about what happened and how it affected you. And after that, you can sleep. When you wake up, I'll tell you what arrangements I'm going to make."

Phan's glare grew. "You're taking care of me again."

"No. I'm allowing you to care for yourself. You're not coming back to me, Phantom. Not as a submissive or a lover. You will live, you will go to therapy, and you will take your strength where you find it. Me. Bradford. Noah. Brian. Luca. Logan. Everyone will help." Deviations: Domination by Chris Owen, Jodi Payne

The tears after that lasted a longer time than Tobias planned on, but eventually, when Tobias' internal clock told him that the sun was well up, Phantom began to talk.

Chapter 24

It was late afternoon, almost supper time before Tobias was ready to leave the club. He'd listened to Phantom, cried with him, held him. And then he'd let Phan sleep in his arms until Bradford had come back into the room.

The arrangements were fairly simple, as Bradford had space already. "He can't be alone," Tobias said simply, and Bradford just nodded. So Phantom moved into Bradford's townhouse, right next to the club, without even waking.

Tobias made a few other calls and talked to Bradford for an hour or so, then fled. He needed a shower in the worst way—and Noah. Noah had called the club mid-afternoon, as Phantom slept in Tobias' arms, still crying a little in his sleep. Somehow, the thought of Noah worrying about them made Tobias feel a little stronger.

Clean, and only slightly shaky, he presented himself at Noah's door just after seven-thirty.

Noah met him with a quiet hello. He let Tobias in, took Tobias' coat, and then put his arms around Tobias right there in the narrow hallway. "I'm so glad you came. I've been worried." His words were muffled in Tobias' shoulder.

"I know. I'm sorry I didn't call." Tobias held him tighter. "I just had to see you, the phone seemed ... too far."

"If you'd called, I'd have asked you to send a car for me anyway." They stood there for a long while just holding each other. Finally, Noah sighed and pulled away gently. "Come on in," he said, tugging on Tobias lightly. "Are you hungry? Or maybe you want some coffee? Tea? Or ... well, the best I can offer you is a beer, I don't really have anything else to drink."

Tobias shook his head as he walked to the living room. "Water or tea. Later. Just sit with me for a bit, sweetheart? I don't want to just dump it on you, but I think I should at least bring you up to speed." He pointed to the leather couch.

Noah bit his lip and followed Tobias to the couch. "Of course, sir." He sat first, pulling Tobias down with him and then he ran his fingers along Tobias' jaw. "You look ... well, you look tired. Are you all right?"

"Utterly exhausted," Tobias admitted. "But I think Phantom will be all right, in the long run. He's ... well, he's mostly out of it right now. He didn't sleep until this morning and he went through hell to get there."

Noah had one of Tobias' hands in his and he was stroking his fingers over it soothingly. "That had to be awful for him. They told me that Bradford was asleep when I called. It's got to be so difficult."

"The abuse Phan survived," Tobias said softly. "The physical and sexual abuse was ... well, it was awful, but to be perfectly honest I've heard more horrific stories. It affects everyone differently, I understand, and I suspect that with a good therapist early on, Phantom would have been able to move past that part of it." Tobias looked at Noah and asked, "Does that make me sound horrible? To think of it that way?"

"What, that you've heard worse? No, sir." Noah shook his head. "It sounds to me like if he'd had parents that ... well, it sounds like it turned into something it might not have, had he gotten help earlier. Maybe that's a good thing. Maybe he can get some perspective now."

Tobias shook his head. "That's part of it, yes. But what happened to Phantom on a psychological level is ... stunning. His parents placed him in the care of a monster, I think. Everything about Phan's perception of himself and the way the world works is utterly skewed. You remember talking about balance with me?"

"Sure, how hard it is for you."

"With Phan it's a bit more complex," Tobias said with a sigh. "I admit, I don't completely understand it, so I'm making sure he gets a good run at therapy. But in essence, it's like ... the happier he is, the more he has to suffer. Like it's a payment." He held Noah closer to him. "God, it was awful. He actively tries to keep the price down by sabotaging himself."

Tobias held Noah even tighter, fighting to be closer to his warmth. "He's moving into Bradford's for a bit. He can't be alone and, honestly, I suspect he'll be glued to the man for a long while."

"Nothing pleasurable comes without a price." Noah whispered and shook his head. He seemed distant.

Tobias sighed. "Noah, don't be like that. It's ... not healthy, the way Phan thinks. When he was my slave he was happy, and he needed the pain to balance it, to an extreme. He was programmed to believe that he was only allowed to maintain a specific level of pleasure; any more, he had to pay with screams. It's not the same as what we do." "Oh, no, sir. I'm not talking about us." Noah turned to face Tobias, but stopped just shy of meeting his eyes. "It's a theory of accountability. David would use it on me, too. I think it's more common than it should be; the idea that if you want pleasure, you have to pay somehow, through denial or by suffering in some way to "balance" it. It was his excuse for leveling punishment on me even if I hadn't technically earned it. I totally get it."

"Oh." Tobias sighed and kissed Noah's forehead. "I'm sorry, sweetheart." He sighed again and closed his eyes. "Phantom was taught that way since he was about five. It's ingrained. When he realized that it wasn't true, actually began to believe it ... he's a mess, pet."

"Poor thing. I'm sorry. This has got to be hard on you, too, sir." Noah said in a quiet voice as he leaned forward to kiss Tobias' lightly. "What do you need?" Noah kissed him again.

"You." Tobias smiled softly. "I'd love to say let's go to bed and make love, but I'm too damn tired, sweetheart. Let's go to bed so I can hold you, yes?" He kissed Noah back. "Oh, and remind me to call Bradford in the morning so I can, in turn, remind him that Dr. Brewer will see Phan at ten. None of us are really that good at remembering right now."

"Yes, sir. I'll do that." Noah stood and helped Tobias off the couch. "Come on. Being held sounds good to me, too."

He took Tobias into his small bedroom. The bed was not as big as Tobias', but it looked inviting and comfortable. After digging out a toothbrush for him, Noah stripped and climbed into bed. He was waiting for Tobias when he returned from the tiny bathroom. Tobias smiled and sat on the edge of the bed as he began to undress. "Thank you for calling the club, pet. I appreciate that you were worried; how was your day?"

"Fine. Long, though, I was tired. It was hard sleeping in your bed by myself, and then I couldn't stop thinking about Phan, and you. Oh, you're out of TP." He grinned and rolled up on his side.

Tobias snorted and stood up to shuck his trousers and underwear. "Did you get more?" he asked with a grin.

"No, sir. I wanted to, but I was running late to work this morning." Noah pulled back the covers and patted the bed. "It's much warmer in here."

"I'm sure it is." Tobias slipped into the bed and pulled Noah to him. "I'll steal some of yours in the morning," he teased. He kissed Noah softly and laid his head down. "Look at that, in bed before eight-thirty. And to sleep, no less." His eyelids were already heavy and his head felt weighted to the pillow.

Noah pressed to his side and rested his head in the crook of Tobias' shoulder. "Sleep. Maybe I'll call out in the morning."

"Don't get in trouble," Tobias warned as he closed his eyes. "I'd hate to have to delay your surprise next weekend."

Noah picked up his head and turned it to kiss Tobias' chin. "You have a surprise for me next weekend?" he asked, grinning.

Tobias smiled, his eyes still closed. "Only if you're a good boy and don't get in trouble at work. And have enough TP for me to take. Now go to sleep."

Chapter 25

Bradford had assured Tobias that the arrival of the guests would be efficient and discreet, which was certainly true. Either Bradford's timing was impeccable, the arrival of several cars being timed for when Tobias had Noah in the safe room, or there was no one there yet. It was impossible to tell, as the cars would all be on the far side of the barn. He'd find out when he got Noah out there, after dressing him.

He knew Bradford was planning to put Phantom in charge of showing everyone around the stables, basically keeping everyone occupied until it was time to take Noah out. That, of course, was purely to keep Phan busy and having a good time. It had the potential to be disastrous, but Tobias suspected that Phan would do his very best—and the sub knew just about every inch of those stables anyway, barring the new toys Tobias had brought in for Noah.

He couldn't help feeling a little nervous, though. It was a huge day, for him as well as for Noah. He could hear Noah finish in the shower and he straightened up, looking at himself in the mirror. It was a day for pageantry, and he'd primed Noah for it, beginning as soon as Noah had arrived the night before. It had been an evening of fantasy play and deep submission, followed by a heavy bondage scene in the morning; Noah was deep into subspace and Tobias planned to keep him there.

Thus, he'd smoothed tight leather pants on and a plain black T-shirt, his only real concession being that the shirt was silk rather than cotton. Noah would be naked, other than his steel cock ring, although he'd wear a cloak across the snowy yard.

"Help me with my boots," he said as Noah came into the safe room. He kept his voice low, calm. Authoritative.

Noah didn't speak. He'd been deep for so long that Tobias didn't need to instruct him not to speak, he just did it naturally. Noah stepped to the armoire to pull out his boot hook. With Noah's help, Tobias stamped one boot on and then the other, and after Noah returned the hook to its place, he knelt in front of Tobias just as silently.

"Time for a walk, boy." Tobias rested his hand on Noah's head in something less than a pet but more than a mere touch. "It's cold. There are shoes at the door. You'll wear the cloak on the back of the chair. Come."

Tobias walked slowly to the door, hearing Noah rise and sweep the heavy cloak over his shoulders. It was long, dragging on the floor, and there was little fear of Noah getting chilled on the way to the stables. He walked to heel to the stairs, down them, and then paused, slipping the shoes on. His eyes were down, his entire body relaxed and calm.

Tobias didn't speak as they walked up the lane, his eyes down as he looked for footsteps. He didn't see any, which meant he still had no idea if the plans were going well or had fallen apart.

He got to the door and found it unlocked. That answered the question, then. He hid the fact from Noah and pulled the heavy door open. "Stay with me," he said, flipping the heat up a bit and taking Noah's cloak. He slid the lights up in the ring and the center aisle, leaving the rest dark. "Shoes."

Naked and barefoot, Noah walked behind him down the aisle and into the ring.

"Greetings, friends," Tobias said, striding to the middle of the floor and sitting in his chair.

Noah stopped, facing Tobias' chair in a brief moment of confusion, but his training won out quickly and he knelt obediently alongside Tobias' chair by his feet. His posture was flawless and his eyes were low.

"Bradford, I trust all is well?"

Bradford stepped out of a dark stall and gave Tobias a nod. Behind him came a line of men, Doms and their subs mostly, who moved down the aisle and took places around the outside of the ring.

"We're all here, Tobias," Bradford said, taking his place at the edge of the ring. Phan, looking reasonably well, knelt silently at his feet.

"Wonderful. Thank you all for coming," Tobias said smoothly. He made a point of looking at each Dom, reserving a nod of his head for Bradford, Logan, and Brett. "All of you," he said softly.

Standing, he glanced at the table and saw the black box Bradford had been so kind as to bring for him, and he smiled to himself. "Today is a special day," he said. With one hand he indicated that Noah was to stay where he was, and he crossed to the trunk with his whips. The larger pieces had all been moved, shoved to the side of the ring, save the chair, the table, and the Saint Andrew's Cross.

"Today," he continued, opening the trunk, "today, I show you my boy. What he's learned. How far he's come and what a wonderful gift he has given me."

He bent and lifted the bullwhip out, letting the coils fall to the floor.

"Noah. To the cross, please. Face it. Arms above your head, legs spread. Logan, if you'd be so kind, would you put the kidney belt on him?"

"My pleasure." Logan smiled and moved to the cross to wait for Noah.

Noah stood slowly and with measured steps made his way to the cross. Tobias could see goose bumps on his arms as he walked past, and Noah grew hard with just a look at the whip and the realization that they had an audience. He took his position on the cross, legs spread and arms above his head as Logan fastened the safety belt in place. When he was done, Logan nodded to Tobias and went back to the edge of the ring.

"Thank you, Logan." Tobias said, inclining his head again. "Noah, would you prefer to hold onto the rings or would you like to be cuffed? There will be three strokes, and I warn you that they will hurt."

Noah thought about that for a moment, then tested out the rings. "If it pleases you, Master, I would prefer to hold onto the rings."

Tobias nodded. "It does. Take them and breathe, we'll begin in a moment." He coiled the whip absently and waited

for Noah to settle. There wasn't a sound in the ring, the gathered men standing or kneeling silently, the air ripe with anticipation.

Noah worked the rings in his fingers deliberately, finally settling on a comfortable grip for each hand. He took a deep breath and his back and shoulders expanded, then contracted again slowly as he exhaled. He ducked his head, breathing deeply, then raised it again and stared in front of him. There wasn't a trace of tension in his body; his shoulders, his back, his ass were all smooth and loose, and his feet were firmly and squarely in place.

Three strokes he'd planned, three he'd promised; one for each shoulder, one lower on the right shoulder, covering the scar that had been left on his boy's skin. Hefting the whip, Tobias took his own steadying breath and struck, the sound too sharp and loud to be lost in the ring, too alive for the soundproofing to kill.

Noah cried out with the sting, a loud yelp that was as clear and sharp as the snap of Tobias' whip. "Master! Thank you, sir." There was a hint of whimper in his voice as he spoke. He'd gone up on his toes and his shoulders had gone tight; every muscle in them was taut and defined, but a couple of quick, shallow breaths later he got himself under control. "Burns, sir," he told Tobias. He was still panting through the sting, but his voice had taken on that low, soft quality it always did when he was deep in subspace. Very deep. "All the way down my arm. Makes my fingers tingle." Tobias knew Noah wasn't complaining, he was merely talking for Tobias' benefit, letting Tobias know what he was feeling. He was nowhere near his safe words.

With another breath, Tobias drew his arm back again and whipped Noah's other shoulder, the red welt a perfect match. Part of Tobias' mind noted that he was hard; he hadn't been when he'd walked Noah to the ring, but his arousal was climbing fast.

"Oh, God," Noah whimpered. "Oh, God, God..." There was no shout this time, but his body tensed much like before. "Thank you, Master," Noah sobbed. "Oh, Master, Master ... so good, so good to me," he babbled as he struggled with his breathing. It was coming in harsh pants, and though Noah was clearly making an effort to relax, it took him much longer to settle this time. When he finally did, he seemed to hang slightly on the rings.

"One more, pet," Tobias said calmly. "Take it. For me."

As soon as Noah stilled Tobias cracked the whip, the tip delicately raising a welt directly above the scar David had left on his boy. "Mine," he said loudly, his voice as much a crack through the air as the whip.

"Ah! Yours, Master, yours. Thank you, thank you." Noah started to sob. He leaned forward and rested his chest on the framework of the cross for support and turned his head and pressed his face into his left bicep. His knees were looking a bit weak but they stubbornly supported him. His fingers were white knuckled around the rings. "Master."

Tobias walked to him, not rushing. Every step sounded loud and he coiled his whip as he went, wrapping it like a

snake around his hand and arm. "Well done, boy," he said softly. Without touching Noah he examined the welts and nodded. "You took them well. I'm proud of you."

Turning he addressed the men gathered there. "Noah is my boy. You've seen him grow, you've seen him submit. And now I'm afraid one of you will try to sneak him away." He grinned as the others laughed. "To that end, I'm collaring him. He's earned it, and he deserves it."

Tobias walked to the table and opened the box. "Noah, come here and kneel, please."

Noah took a deep breath and pushed away from the cross. He wiped his eyes and lifted his head, and when he turned around, he was smiling, his cock still hard. He made his way over to Tobias slowly, as if he was just a little uncertain of his balance, but there was no question that he was going to make it. His joy at the promise of the collar was evident in his face and the set of his shoulders.

He knelt neatly, facing Tobias, and only winced slightly at the stretch in his back as he assumed his display position.

Tobias smiled down at him and lifted the collar out of its box. A solid silver band, it was heavy in his hand, the metal already warming to his touch. The elegant Celtic pattern engraved on the outside of it caught the eye and flashed a little in the light; the names on the inside weren't meant to be seen.

"Take a good look at it, boy. Once it's on, it won't come off again unless we part ways. I made sure that it was discreet enough for you to wear to work, and it closes with screws. You won't be able to remove it." Noah's eyes were wide as he reached forward and ran a finger along the intricate Celtic knot design. As the narrow circle of silver reflected the light, the engraving must have caught his eye because he leaned in a bit, tilting Tobias' hand gently so that he could read it. Noah's grin grew wider and more sentimental and he laughed softly, pleased. He ran his fingers affectionately over Tobias' wrist and then returned his hands to behind his back.

"I'm proud of you," Tobias said. "This collar is an acknowledgment and symbol of your submission to me. You have earned it, and I know you will work to keep it. This collar says that you are mine. I will continue to work to remain worthy of that."

Tobias settled the delicate collar around Noah's neck, his cock throbbing at the sight. It lay gracefully on his collarbones, lower than the norm for play, but required for daily wear out in the world. He turned the two screws, watching Noah's cock harden even more.

"Stand," he said thickly.

When Noah had made it to his feet, Tobias turned him to face the others. He stood behind him and said, "My submissive. My collared submissive. If anyone has an issue with Noah, or about him, they will deal with me."

The silence rang for a moment and Tobias wrapped a hand around Noah's prick, careful not to let him lean back and rub his welts. "In about half an hour," he whispered, "I am going to fuck you so hard you won't want to ride a horse until Valentine's Day." Noah groaned loudly and shamelessly, the grin still clinging to his lips. Bradford and Logan laughed at the response and began to applaud.

"Three cheers for Tobias and Noah!" Bradford shouted, sending up the first cheer himself. The ring filled with heartfelt applause and cheers from Doms and subs alike.

Tobias grinned and let go of Noah's cock. "All right, pet. Go show off to your friends, I'll find you soon."

He waited until Noah had finished pouting before kissing him. "I love you. Go play."

Noah finally moved off, Phantom and Brian almost running to him, and Tobias moved to Bradford, hand out. "Thank you, my friend. You're help was invaluable."

"Congratulations! I believe he was surprised, don't you? I might have to feature your boy and your whip at my Valentine's party; that was expertly done, and he held up beautifully," Bradford said with a wide grin. "I wonder where his safe word would have come had you not told him there would be only three."

Off to their right, Noah was surrounded by subs whose Masters had let them congratulate him freely. Tobias smiled slightly. "One more like that, two if I'd gone lighter," he said with absolute surety. "The collar turned out perfectly, don't you think?"

"It's beautiful. I confess I peeked at it in the box, I didn't want to get it back here and find out it wasn't what you'd asked for. I wonder how well it will go over in the locker room at work?" Bradford grinned. "Not that it matters; Noah looks so proud he could pop. He'd probably tell his cop buddies if they asked him outright."

Logan stepped in and offered his hand. "Congratulations, old man, I'm very envious of that arm. You barely broke a sweat."

Tobias shook Logan's hand and grinned. "Spend some time with Bradford and your arm will be just as good. I'd fear for his back, though." Tobias looked over at Noah again and felt his smile grow. "He better not pop, that's mine."

Logan laughed.

"The catering is all set to go in one of the supply stalls; where do you want to put it? We can have the boys set it up. I think everyone's anxious to get to playing." Bradford winked, also looking at Noah as he spoke. "He looks happy, Tobias; you are a very lucky man."

"I know. I really am," Tobias said softly. Clearing his throat he pointed to the library table. "Right there, for the food, I think. Although anyone caught sitting in my chair will have to face my arm."

The men laughed and Logan moved off to gather a few of the subs to bring in the food. Still smiling, Tobias turned to face Brett. "Thank you for coming. I know it means a great deal to Noah, and I want you to know I appreciate it."

"I was honored to be invited. I was surprised, since I've effectively left the scene, but it's really the most important day of the rest of Noah's life, and I'm glad to be able to support him. And Andrew was a sport. It's not really his thing, but he and Noah seem to be getting along well." Brett pointed over to where the two were having an animated conversation. Brett looked back at Tobias. "Apart from the fact that you're just ... amazing at what you do," he said with a smile, "you should know, Noah speaks very highly of you, Tobias. He's very proud of you, he tells me he feels very safe, and anyone can see he's very much in love. I'm really happy for you both."

"Thank you." Tobias was beginning to wonder if he'd stop smiling at all. "Andrew seems taken with the collar," he noted. "And he certainly doesn't have issues about talkingto a naked man." He laughed and winked at Brett. "He might not be into this particular lifestyle, but I'm betting he has some fun kinks."

Brett laughed and winked in return. "Oh, he's far from vanilla, we'll put it that way."

Bradford gave Phan some affectionate stroking as the sub returned to his side. "Hello, pet, how are you doing?"

"Fine, sir. Thank you," Phantom said. To Tobias' ear he sounded fine as well, displaying none of the agony he'd been in only a few short days before. "Logan has asked me to help with the food." He smiled up at Tobias, careful to keep his eyes lowered. "Noah's collar is lovely, sir. Congratulations."

"Thank you, Phantom," Tobias said softly. "That means ... the world to me, you know." He looked at Bradford for a moment. "May I have a few moments with him before he goes to help Logan?"

"Oh, yes, of course, take your time, Logan has plenty of help." Bradford took Brett by the arm. "You must introduce me to your beau, Brett," he asked, smoothly leaving Phan and Tobias alone. Tobias slid a hand down Phan's arm. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm okay. Really." He got a genuine smile. "Bradford gave me my own room and he doesn't mind if I have nightmares. Well, not yet, anyway. Dr. Brewer says that some of them are from the medication and things will even out."

Tobias nodded. "What does she have you on?"

Phan snorted. "God, I can't pronounce it. There's something for anxiety and a mood stabilizer. She says the mood thing is short-term, that therapy will help. Right now I'm seeing her every day."

"Do you like her?"

Nodding, Phan smiled again. "She's totally subby. It's nice not to have to teach her about the lifestyle—the doctors my parents sent me to all tried to fix my kinks."

"I know." He did. He raged about it, and it was a primary reason he'd pushed for Dr. Brewer. "Do you need anything?"

Phan smiled again. "No, sir. A request though?" "Sure, ask."

"Can I say thank you to Noah before we go? He's really done a great job with you, almost got you right back into prime."

Tobias threw back his head and laughed. "Brat!"

"No, seriously!" Phan protested, laughing as well.

"Actually," his voice dropped and he stopped laughing. "I was out and about a couple of weeks ago. Before New Years. Your reputation on the south side is gold for another few years."

Tobias stilled. "Oh?"

Phan nodded. "Some guy named Adam filled me in. I assume Noah doesn't know?"

"No."

"Okay. Just thought you'd like to know that you're a fucking hero down there."

Tobias nodded to himself. "I'll think about this later. Now you shoo. Help Logan." The very last thing Tobias wanted to think about was David and what had happened when he'd gone after the man. Not then, not when he was supposed to be celebrating Noah and their life together.

Phan shooed obligingly, likely understanding exactly what Tobias was thinking.

"Eat, my friends," Tobias said loudly. "And when you are of a mind, enjoy the stables. Supplies are in each stall, medical and water are at the end. If you need anything, you only have to ask." He smiled as a cheer went up. "Noah. To me, please."

The group crowded around the table parted, and from it emerged Noah, who went right to Tobias and knelt at his feet.

"Sir, Master, I'm ... I don't know what to say." Noah chewed over his words. "I wasn't expecting this at all. I'm so ... honored. I just don't have the right words to thank you."

"You earned it, pet," Tobias said softly. "It's yours for that reason alone. You honor me by wearing it."

"I feel very proud to wear it, sir," Noah told him. "And it's beautiful."

"This has great potential to turn into us complimenting one another, you know. Frankly, I'd rather use you." Deviations: Domination by Chris Owen, Jodi Payne

"I am looking forward to your promise, sir," Noah said playfully. "Have you a stall in mind? Or were you planning on bending me over the hors d'oeuvres?"

Tobias grinned and urged Noah to stand. "Why, pet. Would I do that?" he asked as he steered his boy back toward the table, both of them smiling happily.

~end

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