



Sacred Secrets

A Chronicle of Surrender

Roxy Harte

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Email:
raven@LSbooks.com

Editor
Laurie Rauch

Cover Artist
April Martinez

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Author Requests and Notes

Chapter 1

“The only tyrant I accept in this world is the still voice within.”

—Mahatma Gandhi

Celia

LEWD LARRY’S SLAVE AUCTION TONIGHT

The plastic banner, rippling in the cool night air, glares at me as we exit the taxi, taunting me with my reason for being here. For better or for worse, I am here for the auction.

The night is cooler than normal for late spring in the Bay Area, though the afternoon was warmer than average; the combination creates a thick, white fog rolling in from the Pacific. I shiver, wrapping myself in my bare arms, though the temperature is only partly to blame. I am afraid, not just a little, but terrified. The only thing keeping me from running and screaming into the night is my pride. Honking horns and squealing tires make me frantic; but then a foghorn raises above the traffic sounds, becoming an odd comfort.

Gaining ground, I see a thick ribbon of people extending around the block. A second line of people gain quicker entrance, presenting VIP passes.

I am a reporter for *Inappropriate Voices*, an underground BDSM weekly tabloid Doug Mitchell, my boss, and for tonight’s venture, my Master, jerks my chain and I follow him to a third line, the shortest of all. I understand why when he presents his pre-registered auction slip. I will be auctioned tonight even though I am still in disbelief that I took this assignment. What am I doing here?

Heart racing, palms sweating, ohmygod, I think I’m going to be sick. How could I ever agree to this assignment? Tossed to the mercy of sadists for a contractual period of thirty days—I could die here—and no one would know. I look at Doug, he is calm, cool, no where near to having a complete breakdown, but then he isn’t the one being auctioned tonight, is he?

He smiles. “Don’t be nervous, Sweetheart. Look at this as a vacation. Granted, a very exotic vacation, but you’ll have a blast. Believe me when I say, this is going to give you a whole new outlook on life.” He turns back to the crowd, humming. I want to kick him in the shin for being so relaxed.

What am I doing here?

It’s Friday night and I should be home, watching TV with Monet, my luxurious Maine Coon. She is tortoise-shell brown with long fur and a thick tail wider than my arm. I miss her green eyes and the sound of her purr already, though I know that she is safe with my friend and co-worker, Charlie. He loves cats. I know she will be fine, but I feel like crying.

Our line starts to move and a beefy security guard wearing a skintight black t-shirt that strains around his muscular frame points us toward our final destination. He winks at me and I smile before it occurs to me that he knows why I’m here. I blush insanely. Of

course he knows, everyone here knows. Looking over my shoulder, I realize he turned his attention to the next couple as soon as we passed. The back of his shirt glares SECURITY in neon yellow, as if any of us would have a doubt.

I stumble twice, suddenly unable to breathe, but manage to make it inside, my eyes slowly adjusting to the dim light. I wave a cloud of smoke out of my face—no, not a cloud—the smoke is the air. The crowd is wall to wall, not like the night of our covert visit to check the place out. That night seemed tame by comparison—mostly couples, both straight and gay. Tonight, every weirdo on the planet has shown up dressed for the occasion. Leather and latex compete for attention with sparkling sequins. There are even a few cowboy hats floating above the crowd. Worse are the suits, executives out for a thrill. However, we do not even slow to mingle.

Between slaves, the stage darkens and a spotlight flies over the crowd.

I am unprepared for the emotional jarring as the bidding begins. Flesh is being sold here...even if it is just for one month. I'm flabbergasted. I had no idea how much money would be exchanging hands. The minimum starting bid turns out to be thirty grand, but each time it quickly accelerates to fifty and even to seventy thousand dollars.

It seems there are more men than women being auctioned, and that surprises me, although I'm not sure why. I am not even sure what my expectations of this night were. Until my arrival, I would have never believed the size of the crowd. Yes, it is an annual event and all of the rich and famous are here because the event supports many charities near and dear to the hearts of many of Hollywood's biggest and brightest. Not to mention it's an extravagant opportunity for a photo op at a very naughty venue, meaning the paparazzi are also here in force, though they are confined to the red carpet area. Still, even knowing it was a mega-event, I never considered rock-concert-level pandemonium.

It is a little late to realize that I am claustrophobic.

I really should have stayed home.

The stage is brilliant, lit from all sides, a theater-size screen at the back shows every reaction larger than life, every smile, every frown, every tear magnified so that the crowd doesn't miss a thing. Some slaves walk the stage like old pros. Their personalities shine—whether haughty and over-proud, or shy and demure. Others stumble and cry, begging their owners the entire time not to sell them. I wonder if it is an act or whether they are as brokenhearted as they seem.

After the twentieth slave is auctioned, the novelty is over and the night begins to wear on as the knot in my gut tightens. Music blares, competing badly with the drone of loud voices. Dragged to the corner bar by my chain, I am forced to wait while Doug eases his nerves with a shot of tequila. I would give anything for a handful of Tylenol and a gallon of coffee.

Forty-seven.

Too close—time for Doug and me to venture stage right—this will be my last chance to opt out. It makes me think of the nerves I felt when I was younger, waiting in line for the first time on the new roller coaster at the amusement park near our home—excited and terrified at the same time.

At this moment, not even terror covers what I'm feeling. Why did the words *undercover* and *exposé* seem so tantalizing, the promise of BDSM Sex Slave for a Month alluring, when we first started this?

Officially stage right, our private corral is crowded. Two women argue in the corner.

One falls to her knees, begging, crying. Slave. Her mistress is unsympathetic. The fall of a riding crop is caught in the erratic strobe light emanating from the stage, making the crop glide in slow motion toward its victim's bare back. The enormity of my decision explodes in my mind, making it impossible to ignore the reality of what is happening onstage.

The stage is suddenly unbearably close and I self-comfort, playing with the gold baby ring that I wear on the end of my right index finger just below the first knuckle. I twist it round and round. An old habit from my college days—final exams and first dates. For a moment, I am lost in memories of long ago, people and events that have led me to this chapter in my life, some good, some bad, but all preparing me for this adventure.

I feel eyes burning into me long before I glance up to see it is the announcer, Garrett Lawrence.

His gaze grabs mine as he reads, "Seventy-three."

My number.

I start to walk forward but I am unsteady. Perhaps standing too long, most likely Jell-O legs. I'm a wreck. My brain trips over itself, shouting silently, "Ohmygod, ohmygod, what have I agreed to?"

But that smaller, quieter voice gentles and soothes, whispering, "Everything is going to be okay." And in that calm I have to admit to myself, to God, that I am so excited I can barely stand it.

Not a man to waste time, Doug drags me along behind him, pulling my collar too tight. I feel I am suffocating as he drags me to the very edge of the stage and my fingers go to my collar's edge to pull the leather bite away from my skin. We discussed that he would treat me as if I was his slave for real; I didn't realize that cruelty was part of the bargain. If my boss treats me so harshly, how is a professional sadist going to treat me once we are alone? The cliché phrase *whips and chains* explodes in my mind as something very real indeed. I search Doug's eyes, seeking comfort, but find hooded glare, his acting skills better than I'd imagined. I look again. Rage. No, surely, I am mistaken. I try vainly to seek assurance in his eyes again, but he twirls me away from him, and my skirt lifts in the breeze, exposing me, much to the amusement of the crowd.

I am the last slave to be auctioned and the excitement level has reached a chaotic frenzy. I catch myself chewing my bottom lip and force myself to stop. In a self-conscious effort, I rub my tongue over my top teeth, hoping to erase the clinging tracks of red. I rub my lips together furiously to redistribute the remaining color.

Doug turns me to face him and, for a second, I think that perhaps he will kiss me as all the previous owners have done with their slaves; but instead he grips the low bodice of my dress and rips—pulling the dress completely off me. Wide-eyed, I am both shocked and horrified but I can't move. I feel every eye on my naked flesh and I want to die. The heat of the blush begins at my toes and travels upward, until even my cheeks are flaming.

For the most part, the crowd has been relatively well behaved throughout the auction. Now, they are wild. I am suddenly very aware of the floor-to-ceiling wire mesh security fence that separates the stage from the crowd. Several people try to climb the fence during the frenzied moment. Security swarms.

"Walk the stage, bitch, or do I drag you?" Doug's spit sprays over my face with his shout. He jerks hard on the leash. Leather bites my neck.

The cheers from the crowd are deafening.

This is what they came for—red-hot drama.

Garrett Lawrence steps forward and forces the leash from Doug's hand. For a moment, Doug struggles to hang on, but is quickly overwhelmed by Security and removed from the stage. I watch the waves of fury cross his face as he is led out of the building through a side fire exit. The crowd is ignited.

Strutting across the stage, Garrett Lawrence takes full advantage of the female factor, hoots and hollers following his every move. His tight leather pants are the main attraction, leaving nothing to imagination. Not only is he well endowed, but very muscular, and the supple black leather seems to mold to the cut lines of his muscled thighs and tight ass. His full, white, silk poets' shirt is open to his navel, baring a thickly furred chest; but it is his broad smile and easygoing nature that act like a magnet, drawing the crowd to him. Male and female alike scream, "Lewd Larry, Lewd Larry, Lewd Larry!"

The security fence bulges with their weight and, out of the corner of my eye, I see multiple five-man security teams pushing them back. They make a rainbow with the word Security on their backs emblazoned in different colors, each five-man team a different color.

"Do you wish to be auctioned off of your own free will, number seventy-three?" Garrett Lawrence asks me with grand flourish over the microphone, startling me, making me aware once more of my purpose on this stage. I take a deep breath and look into his pale eyes. Blue. Mesmerizing.

The crowd's roar disappears and I can hear my own heartbeat exploding in my ears. I can't speak, so I nod. With great care, he removes the heavy collar from my neck and his fingertips rub lightly across a tender spot on my collarbone. The chafing leather marked me, his earlier warning to Doug suddenly echoing through my mind; however, I think the leather burn on my neck is nothing compared to the raised welt on my hip left by the chain, leaving grounds for disqualification, should he choose to do so.

"Can you walk the stage by yourself?" he asks softly and I realize that this part is not being broadcast. I am captivated by his deep voice. Again, I nod and he steps away from me.

The crowd blurs into faceless waves of gray as I make the semi-circle march, trying not to think about being completely naked in front of a crowd numbering in the hundreds. I really try not to think about the giant screen behind me. Straightening my back, lifting my chin, I focus on the stage, not daring to focus on anyone or anything. A flashing strobe light startles me and I am once again center stage. Reality returns in quick real time and I realize the bidding is not over.

A bid is shouted over the rest, "One hundred thousand."

I lock my knees, unable to control their shaking, but as I try to see who has made such an outlandish bid, I am blinded again by strobes of light. More bids are shouted out, each one increasing by ten thousand dollars. I am frozen center stage.

"One hundred and fifty thousand."

I am sure, at this point, the bids will cease. They don't, a hailstorm of bids follow.

"Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars," a voice booms behind me, over me, around me. The room hushes. A wave of black flashes before my eyes, followed by tiny pinpricks of blinding white. I am not sure how I remain standing. After what seems like an eternity, the auctioneer repeats back the bid. In an errant whoosh, my vision is

restored.

The audience remains still, silent.

Shaky legs hold me upright. Armpits wet, mouth dry, I quickly scan the audience, searching for what fate lies ahead. No one comes forward.

“Well, Sir, it would seem you have bought a slave,” the auctioneer announces with undisguised sarcasm.

Strong arms reach around me, wrapping a heavy black velvet cloak over my shoulders that slides around my ankles with a hiss. Turning my head to see what hand fate has dealt me, I face Garrett Lawrence’s easy smile. Gently, he lifts the cloak’s soft, engulfing hood to cover my head. My eyes must have been questioning, because as he hooks the clasp closed at my neck, he whispers gently, “I think the audience has seen enough of my slave for one night.”

“You?” I gasp, my mind screaming out for a life vest. I am drowning; this can’t be happening. Ohmygod. I came here for a story, just a little what makes ’em scream, is this auction for real story to tease the inner-voyeur in our readers; what has just been handed to me on a sliver platter is *the story*. San Francisco’s most eligible bachelor, reported as having assets in the very high double-digit millions, gay, reclusive, swathed in scandal, Garrett Lawrence is my new Master? *Shit, shit, shit!* This is the opportunity tabloid reporters dream of and I landed in it! *Yes!*

His eyes glint with unexpected mischief and his mouth curls up at the corners. “Are you glad?”

My inner voice screams, remain calm! Remain very, very calm!

“Should I be?” I try to feign bored indifference.

“I think so. Consider your options.” A playful grin and a nod toward the clamoring, over-zealous crowd currently trying to bring down the security fence illustrates his point. Lowering my eyes to hide my blush, I answer him softly, “Then I am glad.”

“Then be a good slave and kneel down before me like the others and demonstrate your obeisance. The crowd is still watching and I do have a reputation to keep.”

Shit, shit, shit. Lewd Larry’s owner, Garrett Lawrence, known across the nation and internationally as Lord Ice, Master Dominant and much sought after BDSM guru, lecturer and demonstrator of proven techniques of how to control people through bondage, pain, and pleasure. My brain manages to linger over the thought that he is a master teacher of techniques that cause pain. How could I forget this important fact until now?

“I’m sorry!” I fall to my knees, sputtering an apology, folding forward until my cheek rests on the ground at his feet, and praying it is good enough; suddenly wishing I’d paid more attention to how the slaves who performed before me showed their obeisance.

The roar of the crowd magnifies ten times.

The music returns with a total blackout of lights and then a spectacular light show begins, a distraction for the crowd as the stage is cleared and cleaned by stage workers clothed completely in black, invisible unless you are looking for them. On the dark stage, Garrett Lawrence kneels beside me and helps me to my feet. “That was prettily done. Now, follow me.”

I watch him walk away and have to hurry to catch up with him, my mind reeling with a million questions. Do I dare ask? Am I even allowed to speak at this point? I quickly review all the master/slave relationship notes I have in my head and decide to remain silent. It seems the safest option. Too late, I realize I may not be ready for what

the phrase whips and chains implies.

I am led up an interior staircase to the second level, where it is completely open in the center with the stage its main focal point. Looking up, I realize that the third level is identical, except that it is enclosed in glass, whereas this level has only an industrial-look iron and mesh safety rail. Led through the room, I stay close to Garrett, the crowd shoulder to shoulder. Garrett easily skirts his way around the masses with me his shadow.

With bars anchoring each end of the room and tables ringing the edge of the room farthest from the stage opening in the center, the dance floor hugs the safety rail. We walk the carpeted path between tables and dance floor, used mainly as an aisle for the scantily clad servers as they skirt between tables. We head into the far corner where glass and neon walls set off an adult toy store. Passing through the shop and into a back room, Garrett speaks to the man behind the counter, pleasantries, nothing more. He holds open the door for me as I pass through it, then deadbolts it closed behind him. Boxes and supplies line the walls of the small room and I am curious as to why I've been led to a storeroom. Garrett answers that question by rummaging through several boxes. He returns to me with a red satin box in hand. It is a gift box with a large gold ribbon tied around it.

"This is for you."

Nervously, I accept the box, realizing that my hand is trembling when I fumble with the ribbon. With the box free, I read the name of a much-respected jeweler embossed in gold. Gingerly, I lift the hinged lid to reveal a gold circlet with a heart-shaped charm. The charm is set with a large, brilliant, heart-shaped ruby, so beautiful, so expensive, I gasp. "It's beautiful!"

Emotion crosses his face before he shutters it away, but not quickly enough that I don't see that he was pleased that I am impressed. He pushes my hood away from my face, arranging it over my shoulders in deep folds, before lifting the circlet from the box and placing it carefully around my neck. The cool metal rests softly on my collarbone. I hadn't paid any heed to the locked hinge or the small gold key before—until I hear the mechanism click in my ear. *Slave collar*. An alarm goes off in my mind.

"I'm glad you like it. I designed it several years ago with the feline persona in mind."

The small delicate safety chain dangles on the back of my neck, tickling, teasing gooseflesh along my back, a sensory reminder that this little piece of jewelry isn't going to fall off on its own. Feline persona? His words echo in my brain.

"You're not on our client list and neither is your former master, so I should probably explain the way things work around here. The third level is for Members Only, The Oasis Dining Room, a fetish lounge, and is where you will spend most of your time when I am working." Lifting my chin, he gazes into my eyes. "Because I am the owner of this place, you are going to be under constant scrutiny, meaning that you have to behave, is that understood?"

Not really, but I nod agreeably.

He doesn't seem to notice either way.

"At The Oasis, the slaves are divided into two classes, canine and feline, and they behave accordingly. Once you see the members in action, you will have a better idea of what I am talking about. Most nights, we will be here until after closing, meaning a very long night. Tonight, we are only going to make an appearance, so that the members can see what all the fuss is about." Garrett shakes his head and chuckles to himself. "You

have really stirred things up around here.”

Me? I have no idea what he’s talking about, so I stay silent.

“These people are also my friends, so treat them respectfully at all times and, while we are here, you don’t speak. On occasion, I will give you permission to speak, but only then, understand?”

I nod my head.

“Meow,” he commands.

“What?” I exclaim.

Garrett glares at me and I know I’m in big trouble. I’m supposed to be an experienced slave but I have no real idea how to behave and reading all the books in the world would not have prepared me for tonight. Quickly, I drop to my knees and lower my head. “I mean, I don’t know how.”

“Do you have a cat?”

I nod in answer.

“Well, then, you know how. I am being lenient because you are new to me, but once you know all the rules, there will be consequences to your failures.”

I remain silent.

“Do it!” he barks.

“Merroww.” I do my best imitation of Monet. I will not cry because I miss my cat. I am sure Garrett sees the wetness straining to slip free of my lashes.

“Very nice, Kitten.”

He walks from the small storeroom, leaving me on my knees and feeling quite ridiculous. I scramble to my feet, pushing all thought of Monet away. Moments later, he returns with a long gold chain that he deftly attaches to my collar and continues speaking as if he’d never left.

“Tonight I will lead you, but in the future I will expect you to follow close, whether my hand touches this chain or not. If you are questioned by anyone other than me once we’re upstairs, you will give a positive response with two meows and a negative response with one meow. If I ask the question, you will answer by rubbing your cheek on me in the same manner. Understood?”

He looks into my eyes and I feel encouraged. Suddenly, I get the giddy feeling we’re in cahoots on some big secret and, in a way, I guess we are. Role-playing, it seems like a child’s game, but I don’t forget that it could have very real consequences. He lifts the hood back over my head and leads me from the quiet room. His hand is gentle on the leash, unlike when Doug was jerking me around; but then this man would have to be gentle because this jeweler’s chain would break easily, or so I assume. I hurry to keep up.

We take a glass elevator up to the third floor, leaving the noisy crowd and loud music behind us. Garrett leads me out of the elevator and into The Oasis. A standing ovation greets us. I quickly drop my face, looking at the floor, unsure of what is expected. It is a chance to be observant, taking notes in my head. From beneath hooded lashes, I survey the room, refusing to make eye contact with any of the curious faces turned my way. Unlike the first two levels that sported black-painted concrete floors, this level is luxurious, with plush red carpet in a Turkish pattern covering the floor and soft pink tube lighting in place of the glaring neon lights. Classical background music offers a thankful reprieve from the frenzied dance music downstairs. Cushioned chairs circle small round tables and floor pillows rest by each chair. Further observation confirms my sneaking

suspicion that the slaves are expected to recline on the floor cushions.

From behind me, Garrett lowers my hood, pulling me from my mental reverie and I become intensely aware of just how many sets of eyes rest on me. I feel the heat of Garrett's breath and his lips close to my ear and I shudder as he whispers, "Relax and don't panic and for God's sake hold your head up."

I lift my eyes, my face still somewhat sheltered by the large velvet hood. The warm safety of the heavy hooded cloak makes me forget that I am almost entirely naked beneath, until it is whisked from my shoulders. Panic. The only thing that keeps me immobile is the easy pressure of Garrett's hand on my shoulder. I am taken aback by the polite applause and accompaniment of oohs and aahs. Once again my gaze drops to the safety of the floor until, with a gentle tug on my leash, I am reminded to lift my face. Sucking in what I can muster of my remaining dignity, I lift my head and haughtily survey the crowd.

"Very nice, Kitten. Come."

I fight the urge to cry as I am led from table to table and put on display. An eternity later, Garrett chooses a table to sit at and, carefully, I sit on the cushion at his feet, tucking as much of my nakedness as I can behind a shield of arms and legs. By the tone of the conversation, it is obvious that Garrett has been joined by three of his closest friends.

The friends' slaves are driving me nuts.

The first begins by sniffing around my nether parts and, not sure how much hostility on my part is acceptable, I settle on hissing, which draws the amused attention of the *poodle's* owner. I choose poodle because his bright copper curls are caught in two cutesy, pastel pink bows, and he wears a diamond collar with a tag that reads Fluffy. The poodle barks at me in an irritating, high-pitched yap, yap, yap. A hard slap on his rump silences him. Chastised, he curls up into a ball and leaves me alone, but not without a sly smile and an ass wiggle. A screaming red handprint is his trophy.

The other two are not going to be as easily dissuaded. Working as a team, they sidle up on either side of me and take turns doing the sniffing routine. The leader, an ebony beauty with long braids, is relentless and crosses the line by nipping at my nipple. Canine, I assume. Growling, drooling, she bares her pointy little teeth at me. Okay, I don't do Dobermans—not in reality and definitely not here. Hissing and my claws flailing, I finally get Garrett's attention and he pulls me into his lap. Thankfully, I nuzzle my head into his neck, not sure what else to do, and he playfully scruffs the hair at the base of my skull.

The Doberman lunges and growls, though she is held at the end of a thick chain attached to a hook in the wall. "Heel, Luscious!" her owner commands, but she continues her verbal assault.

Not quite as lucky as I, Luscious is dragged to what can only be labeled as a very elaborate, very expensive-looking whipping post. Teak and brass. For now, she is secured in satin-lined leather cuffs. I should be glad, but I worry she will be beaten. It is my fault. Bile wells in my throat.

"Here, Kitten."

Garrett offers me a bit of cut up steak from his fingers. I quickly shake my head no and swallow hard. I receive a stern look and he non-verbally offers the meat a second time. Burying my face into his shoulder, I refuse, knowing my disobedience could cost

me; by rights, I should be at the whipping post right now. I steal a look at the Doberman. She is crying.

“Cats,” one of Garrett’s table companions spits out, like the word is a bad taste in his mouth. “Too damn finicky for me.”

“I don’t think she’s finicky, maybe a little scared. Cats don’t like new surroundings, new owners even less. They like to mark their territory and be secure in it,” a second friend, the only woman at the table, offers. She lifts her glass to me in a silent toast and smiles. Without thinking, I rub my face into Garrett’s shoulder, hiding. If I can’t see her, she can’t see me—right?

I dare a peek from Garrett’s shoulder and she winks at me conspiratorially. I duck back.

Garrett has removed his jacket and the starch of his linen shirt is scratchy against my back and shoulders; but he smells wonderful, fresh and breezy. Clean like rain, citrusy like limes. I fidget against the starch and he shoos me back onto the floor. Immediately, a waiter places a deep crystal bowl in front of me. It is filled with champagne.

The two remaining slaves are given the same treat and lap heartily—noisy canines—big slurps, drooling excess, growling territorially.

This is crazy. Dipping my tongue timidly, I feel like a complete fool. I send what I assume is a beseeching look from my seat on the cushion but he only leans over and demands, “Drink it all.”

I lap delicately and figure out the trick readily enough. Lapping and sucking at the same time decreases the effort ten-fold, and the champagne is wonderful, a lively, expressive rosé just popping with hints of strawberry, red currant, and nectarine. It would be safe to say that Garrett enjoys the good life.

I am forever attracting men who enjoy the good-life, first Lion, a boy I’d dated in university, and now Garrett. At least I cultivated an appreciation for fine wines and champagnes under Lion’s tutelage. The Moët and Chandon Brut Rosé I am inhaling, my favorite probably because Lion hated it, isn’t a grocery store champagne. There are four bottles chilling tableside at about seventy plus dollars a bottle. Of course, Garrett is the owner, he probably buys at cost, which is a definite advantage.

Tripping my chain, Garrett stands to hug his friends good night; it appears we are leaving. Thankfully, a server brings him the velvet cloak and, pulling me closer with the leash, Garrett wraps me once again in the velvet sanctuary. I am very thankful.

So this is it, a one-month contract. I can do this. *It’s only one month.*

Led down a series of hallways and a staff elevator down to ground, I fight a new fear. The fear of going home alone with a professional sadist. Suddenly, being naked in full view of a hundred seems the better of two evils.

We pause behind a heavy steel exit door. Garrett presses an intercom button. “We’re here.”

The door is opened by one of his big, burly security team members. I close my eyes and let the cool, damp air slap me in the face. I try to shutter away my fears behind the knowledge that I am on the path of becoming a recognized investigative reporter for the *Voice*. And from there...

Nowhere! Who am I kidding? This is not my big chance. This is insanity! I am putting myself, my life, into the hands of a total stranger. A professional sadist, for crying out loud! Okay, deep breath. Just breathe!

“Ready?”

His rich, deep voice jolts me back to awareness. I seek his face but find only muted shadows. For a long moment, we face each other. Me, fighting the urge to run into the darkness. And him?

I get the strange sensation that he is waiting—for me—giving me the time I need to accept this strange I’m not in Kansas anymore reality.

I’m fine; this is fine. I have a purpose. I am a reporter. Yeah, I am a reporter and this is my big chance!

I lift my chin in brutal determination to see this through and it seems it is the signal he’s been waiting for. His hand squeezes my elbow as we step together into the alley.

“The employees’ exit is the only safe route tonight,” Garrett explains with an amused voice. “Since you managed to stir the crowd into an uncontrollable frenzy, my security manager insisted we use the back alley exit. Sorry it’s not as glamorous as the front entrance. Between you and the celebrities, I’m afraid my men have had their hands full all night.”

Garrett stands just inside the door with me at his elbow until he gets a signal of all-clear, then with his men in black clustered around us as a shield, protecting us from what I assume are Garrett’s adoring fans, we are led to the safety of the awaiting limo.

Taking my elbow, Garrett helps me to get settled, sliding in behind me. Lush leather seats mold to my body, cocooning me. The interior of the limo is warm, very warm. The glowing LCD of the clock tells me what my body already knew—four a.m.—no wonder I’m crashing. The door closes and we are suddenly moving. I lean my head back against the seat, so tired I can barely keep my eyes open, the interior of the limo suffocating.

“Come here,” he commands and I am wide awake again. Every nerve aware.

I don’t move immediately, like I should. I’m trying not to freak out, I mean really freak out. I am with a total stranger, a professional sadist. What was I thinking? It seems I am seeing the man for the very first time. Gone is the good-natured showman, the flirtatious ladies’ man. This man is feral. Sensual. Close. Too close.

And with a pat of his hand on the leather cushion, he commands me closer. For the sake of the story, I don’t dare disobey, but still, I cannot will my body to move.

“Now,” he demands softly with an eerie calmness that makes my insides quake. I feel my eyes drop, feel the color rise in my cheeks, but I scoot.

His hand caresses my cheek then tilts my chin up so I can look into his eyes. Something glints beneath his own hooded lids, making me nervous, like the other shoe is going to drop at any minute, and then I understand why. He is assessing me; studying my every move and I know if I don’t behave like a well-tutored slave, if I mess up in even the slightest way, he will know and my cover will be blown. What have I gotten myself into?

“Relax.” The warm swirl of heated whisper on my temple makes me tense even more. Every nerve ending is fried with over-concentration. Leather squeaks on leather, like the pounding of thunder or maybe the scream of my own thudding heart, as he stretches one of his legs along the seat behind me. Carefully, it seems acutely careful, he pulls me into the V of his thighs and, not quite satisfied with his effort, reaches around me, and again, very carefully, very slowly, he moves me again, until I am perfectly settled into the wedge between his legs. Reaching beneath my chin, he unclasps my cloak and draws the velvet down over my back to puddle around my hips.

His hands return to my shoulders in a flash of heat and silkiness. Such incredibly soft hands. A man's wide, strong palm untouched by the calluses of any effort, deliberate in their ministrations. Soft strokes, alternating with not too gentle squeezes. Testing my skin, muscle tone, markability. Fingertips glide over the pale down covering my spine. Gooseflesh rises in response. He brushes a finger over the front of my arm, in my line of vision, just so that I will know that he noticed the prickled skin.

"I want to look at you," he says, though it is in his rights to have said nothing, to leave me guessing, as he turns my shoulders and leans me back into the crook of his elbow.

I fidget. I can't help it.

He is taking in my torso, and I use that particular word deliberately, because I have such inconsequential breasts. They're embarrassing to be seen, such small breasts.

"Easy, Kitten." His voice, like warm, smooth bourbon, holds me in place while I await his next move. The limo jolts as it bumps over something uneven, reminiscent of turbulence on a DC9, and I harriedly brush my bangs out of my face. Bad idea. My hand trembles, and if I saw it, I know he saw it too. I tuck my shaking hands between my knees, but then he is lifting me, rearranging me, pulling the warm safe velvet of the cloak away from me so that not even its soft warmth is a barrier between my naked flesh and him. Tossed carelessly, it spreads like spilled fingernail polish over the opposite seat, fluid, lustrous. I hold my breath, trying to relax, though the skin of my back fights not to lean against his chest, and I am left holding my muscles tight to keep from falling into him; not realizing my lungs ache with the effort until I finally inhale and it sounds battered, harsh.

The soft rumble of his laugh is as intoxicating as it is unexpected. "You have to remember to breathe on your own, Kitten. I'll be responsible for everything else, but breathing is up to you."

I nod absently because he is rearranging me again, forcing my bare back against the warm, crisp linen of his shirt, my bare butt against the hard bulge of his slick leather pants. Up to this point, my legs were crossed tightly at the ankles and riveted to the carpeted floor of the limo but even that won't do *for him*.

His warm hands pivot my hips so that my legs follow, stretching out along the leather seat with his. All it takes is the sight of chaotic contrast of creamy white thigh, slanted by black, lace-edged stocking, tilted over the masculine bulge of his thigh muscle to set me on pins and needles.

"Close your eyes."

The liquid velvet of his voice, whether in laughter or command, never fails to startle me. Will I ever be able to deny that voice? My eyelashes flutter closed and, an instant later, cool glass is pressed to my lips, the citrusy effervescence of champagne tickling my nose. Lips still slick with the high-gloss, high-cost, fire-engine-red lipstick part of their own accord. I greedily accept the offering, hoping that this flute of champagne will steady my nerves, where the crystal bowlful failed.

When the cool stream of liquid splatters across my chest, I know it wasn't by accident. Controlled, careful. It is a deliberate sensory jolt; icy liquid over flushed skin, the rivulets teasing between my breasts and warming in their downward course. I shiver as the teasing fluid travels the valley between my ribs and over my stomach to pool in my belly button. Another slosh added to the pool and the river is on the move again, only to

get lost in the tight nest of curls below, reappearing in a bare dribble to settle over my clitoris.

I tense, but when my hand moves to wipe it away, Garrett intercedes, somehow knowing in advance that I won't be able to help myself. I squeeze my eyes tighter, an unfamiliar heat building over the hooded pearl, but it isn't horrible, just curious.

I take another sip when I feel the crystal flute tease my bottom lip, sipping and swallowing until the glass is taken away, drained. Two glasses clink as he sets them down.

Quiet. Too quiet. Except for the regular rise and fall of his chest at my back, I could have forgotten his presence entirely. I can't be sure how long I've laid here, sprawled across him, a total stranger, but comfortable. It registers that I am quite possibly drunk, perhaps even very drunk. I consider the bowlfuls of champagne, how much that would equal in flutes, plus another flute once we settled in the car. The math is too much work, my eyelashes are no longer squeezed tightly shut but are instead brushing my cheeks with languid abandon.

"Touch yourself."

His command seeps into my thoughts. It occurs to me that I don't know whether it is day or night, don't know if we are even still moving or if we have arrived at our destination—and I no longer care until, with one sentence, he manages to remind me of my purpose. Slave. His wish my command. But am I up to this? And this being such a small thing compared to the nightmarish workings of my own imagination. My shuddered response doesn't please him. He grips my wrist and moves my hand into position. My gasp comes as no surprise to him, painful pressure points being his business, even if his target is only a narrow wrist.

With a shy first stroke, my middle finger rubs over the hooded pearl of my clitoris.

"Good girl, Kitten," he whispers, his muscles relaxing once more beneath my back. A silent command melts me against him as I try to remember just what it is I am supposed to be doing, but then I am close, so close to rippling over the edge of the precipice.

His hand reaches down to pull my thighs apart. "I want to watch you pleasure yourself."

Under his guidance, my knee angles and one heeled foot is again on the floor. I am spread, open, exposed. The natural rhythm of soft strokes shatters under the realization that I am under the looking glass. *He is watching*. My hand bolts.

Gently this time, he leads my wrist back into place. In defiance, my hand lays still and unmoving.

"I can't," I gasp.

"You will."

He covers my hand, shadowing it, finger stretched over finger. His whisper is warm and deep against my ear. "Start again. This time I want to feel you pleasure yourself." He waits, but after a moment demands, "Now!"

My fingers move, the weight of his hand alien, intrusive, but I don't waiver. It suddenly seems imperative that I pass this minor test. My fingers stroke, glide, and then suddenly the rhythm feels right again. In my mind, I am tucked into my own bed, ascending a familiar peak.

Twisting, climbing, panting...

“Don’t even think about coming, Kitten,” his voice booms; foreign, unwanted. I cling to the plateau I’ve created for myself, gauging the distance of the fall, anticipating. The first wave of intensity strikes but I cling gallantly to the edge. Walking the edge.

“...until I tell you that you’re allowed to come.”

My hand stills, but his doesn’t. As a shadow, his fingers maintain the rhythm—memorized, damning—another wave...

“Wait,” he commands in that liquid fire voice, no longer bourbon, but purgatory.

“Please,” I gasp. I am too close to the edge, slipping.

“Please?”

“Please, Master!” I am panting, straining not to fail him, but I fear I will.

“What, Kitten? I’m not a mind reader.”

Damn that liquid bourbon, velvet soft, unshakable, smirking voice. I’m dying. It is too late to save me now. Flashes of light. Damn. *Stop touching me!*

“Please, Master! Please let me come. Let me come for you!” I grit out between flashes of light. A swirling vortex has swooped me into its embrace and any second...

His lips lower to my shoulder, my nerves leap under his searing kiss just as he pulls his hand away. “Come for me, Kitten. I give you my permission. Now.”

Touch me! Touchme, touchme, touchme!

My own hand reaches when his refuses to answer my silent plea, but I realize too late, my hand is pinned, trapped between leather thigh and leather seat.

“Come for me now!”

His bark is so unlike the liquid bourbon, it spurs me to arch, to hump empty air. I ride out the swirling vortex and, with a final jerk, I come—heaving, gasping, clawing, dying—come.

His thumb brushes away a tear I wasn’t even aware I’d shed. More follow. And before I realize what is happening or can put a stop to it, I am sobbing like a child. He pulls me into his lap and strokes my head, tucking a stray curl behind my ear, and soothes me. Between hiccupped sobs, I manage to apologize, manage to sputter stupidly, “It’s never been like that before. Not for me.”

“I know,” he whispers against my forehead, and then leans forward to seal each tear-dampened eyelid closed with a kiss.

I am languid in his arms as he tucks the heavy velvet cloak around me, covering me just before the door clicks open. A cool breeze lifts the edges of the cloak, exposing my silk-covered calf to the damp night air. My stiletto mule dangles precariously and is readjusted—by him.

No more a silent tomb; torrential rain pounds the roof of the limo, the roll of lazy thunder far off in the distance.

“Good morning, Mr. Lawrence.”

“Gerard.”

A quick lift and I am in Garrett’s strong arms, he moves rapidly to get us in out of the weather. Metal clicks and a whoosh, then a blinding red glare against my eyelids announces our arrival somewhere. I brave a peek. Sparkling mirrors, gleaming chrome, and acres of greenery.

Click, click, click.

My eyes are drawn to the polished sheen of a magnificent marble floor. I close my eyes tight, morose that he would carry me through a hotel lobby, a grand hotel lobby, in

such a state. I am drunk and exhausted but not so wretched that I don't have the decency to blush furiously.

Bing.

Bing, bing.

The silence of the elevator offers my belated modesty a quick reprieve, its lift hurling me into a sweet abyss of darkness.

Chapter 2

“Be what you would seem to be—or if you’d like it put more simply—Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been...”

—Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

Garrett

Impulsive? Not me, not ever—so what happened? Even as my thought processes go berserk, I am edging from the bed...

A woman lies in my bed, a beautiful woman, which is of some consequence since I have not had a woman in my bed, well in this bed ever, but to make this easy, I have not had a sexual relationship with a woman in more than a decade. My head screams what am I doing? Just what in the hell am I doing?

Sneaking, quietly so as not to wake her...

And the truth is, I know what I’m doing. Exactly what I’m doing, I’m just not sure I can face up to what I’m doing...

The sun rose hours ago; I should be exhausted, but I feel alive, more alive than I have felt in years—not since Tony. Oh god, I can’t bear to think about that right now, not yet. Later I will think. Now, I want only to feel; and okay, I’m scared shitless but that is perfectly understandable, under the circumstances. As in, what in the hell am I doing with a woman in my bed circumstances!

I try to tell myself that I did not intend to purchase a slave.

So what happened?

It slowly registered that I was staring at a woman. I saw her and my heart stopped, or maybe it started beating again. My reaction to her was at once intense, protective. Even though I didn’t understand it at all. A woman, for crying out loud, and I was rock hard.

All I know is it started with her eyes, so big, so questioning, so caught in the light, scared doe-ish; but it had spread quickly to her mouth. I have never seen a mouth I wanted to claim as my own before. Full cupid lips and the saddest smile I’ve ever seen. I knew then I had to own that mouth and that was before she’d even crossed fully into my domain, fluttering in like a broken sparrow caught in kite string. No, I was the one caught in the snare of her beauty, and she, a beautiful hawk, willingly tethered.

Mahogany hair, short but tousled playfully, her bangs flipping traitorously over her forehead, hiding her eyes, until one took the time to look. I did and it was her eyes that lured in the unsuspecting, almond-shaped and a brilliant aquamarine, startling, unsettling, every emotion fluttering unchecked in their depths. She was unsure, vulnerable, and in a brilliant spark that lit the room, angry.

Twenty people called me in twenty different directions—all twenty, demanding attention now! And for the first time in years I delegated, my eyes returning again and again to the woman.

What drew me closer? Perhaps her smile, brief and all too sad.

Her Master jerked her through the maze of bodies by a heavy length of chain, leaving me surprised he had not yet broken her neck, if her treatment in private is worse than that in public. I watched them from the shadows, noting that he is wiry and not too smart and deciding that she puts up with him, I think, to amuse herself. They were an oddly matched set and it seemed no surprise that she was at the Club to be auctioned, a truth confirmed when he took her to the sign-in table.

I am sure she would walk willingly, if given a chance, but it seems to amuse him, dragging her on the leash, walking so fast, she couldn't possibly keep up in the four-inch stilettos.

I admit it; I enjoyed watching her reactions to the process as she was forced to turn over her leather tote and other belongings, surprise mirrored in her eyes. She likes her privacy. She balked when given a number to stick on her back. Seventy-three. If not for the sheer slip and stilettos, it would appear that she was checking in for a 5K run.

But these first crucial steps in the process are designed just so, to dehumanize the slave further. A number. A thing. Most definitely not a grown woman with thoughts and feelings. Her eyes widened when two nurses tag teamed her with questions and paperwork; one nurse drawing blood, while another demanded a urine sample. "No facility, honey, just fill it while you're standing here."

It makes reality a hard slap in the face and even slaves who think they have seen and done it all are often taken aback by the total depersonalization of our techniques.

Panic. I left the shadows when I saw that first glint. It raced through her eyes like a golden streak of lightning, but her owner was oblivious—until she bolted. Only then did he give her much thought, jerking her back to his side with a wrist snap that took her to her knees. The man further emphasized his point by slapping his end of the chain over her derriere several times but she made not a sound and shed no tears. Sad, broken sparrow.

No, icy steel glints in those eyes, she was definitely a beautiful hawk.

I couldn't not step in, I'm the owner; it was my duty to step in.

"Whoa, buddy..." I grabbed his wrist mid-strike. "Take it easy on her. One of the rules of the auction is that all slaves have to be mark free. You don't want to damage the goods now, do you?"

I was too late, a large welt was already visible beneath the sheer fabric of her dress. It was enough to disqualify them, but I made an exception, perhaps to amuse myself, or maybe, for the sake of the sparrow.

No, to free the hawk.

But did I have to buy her? No!

God, yes...

I frantically search my jacket for my cell phone. And just why is it in the wrong pocket?

Her breathing is shallow, she'll sleep a long time yet. I know what I have to do, or rather, who I have to call. I have to talk to Jackie.

Jackie always knows what to do. Best friend, confidante, Jackie. A long lost friend—found only a decade ago. It seems a lifetime. Maybe two lifetimes.

It was Christmas Eve and I was in San Francisco with my family, a final, desperate attempt to resurrect the lost tradition of the family vacation. I argued I was too old for a family vacation, Mom argued I was never too old to have fun and wanted to bring along

my fiancée; I agreed to the trip but insisted that we go sans fiancée. Besides, it was San Francisco, seeming worth the effort while I was lying in my bed at home, exhausted from finals and bored to tears; but then I lay in a hotel bed going out of my mind while my parents went sightseeing without me.

Boredom is so much worse on vacation. It eats at you from the inside out and does strange things to your mind—who really likes to play board games on a rainy afternoon—but on vacation, this is acceptable, if not lively, entertainment? No, I didn't go that far, not that there was anyone to play Scrabble with if I had wanted to. My parents were having a great time with their new friends they'd acquired poolside; cocktails, dancing, and who knows what else.

I flipped through the phone book. Doesn't everyone do that? See if their name is registered in the city that they are vacationing in? I am no different, mine wasn't. But I remembered that an old friend of mine had moved to California right after high school, begged me to go with him, but I couldn't; I was already signed up for summer quarter at University of Cincinnati. I wondered what the chances were, and sure enough...

The phone rang and rang. I wasn't about to hang up, praying it was the same Jackie Sandburg, I prayed the number was a good one, I prayed he would just pick up the goddamn phone. *Click*. No hello, no voice at all, but I knew I had the right place. Asian discotheque music blared in the background and it seemed a million voices buzzed over the foreign lyrics, then finally, Jackie's voice. It was like manna from heaven when he told me to head for the lobby and he'd be right over. He tried to tell me that things had changed, but that we'd talk more when he could tell me in person. Was I worried? No. Jackie had always been oblique. What had I expected?

Jackie was and always would be Jackie.

We had been friends a long time, since third grade when some bigger kids had dragged him behind a trash dumpster and were proceeding to beat the crap out of him just because he wasn't like them. I was bigger, meaner, tougher. The gang hadn't had a chance. I was the new kid in town and, for better or worse, I was taking a stand on the wrong side of the fight—I was a knight in shining armor. I made a new best friend.

When he strode into the hotel lobby, I realized he hadn't changed at all. He had just refined himself a bit. He had always possessed a tendency toward the abstract, the absurd. Clothing, music...makeup. And the moment he hit the lobby with full entourage, I knew the night was getting better already. I had found my long lost best friend—he just happened to be wearing a long red kimono, high heels, and a big, fluffy black wig. And I have to admit the Geisha paint was a nice touch.

A man more macho than I might have run screaming. But I saw in him a man who had finally accepted in himself what I had known for years—he had a woman's soul trapped in the wrong body. I saw a friend, a sister—a soul mate. Someone I could tell absolutely anything.

* * * *

Ring, ring.

No answer. I pace and wait. Maybe ten minutes, more likely less.

Ring, ring.

Four cups of coffee down, like I need the caffeine?

I rummage through kitchen drawers, like a lunatic, looking for Enrique's cigarettes. I

know he hides them somewhere and I need a cigarette, maybe a whole pack. Hell, after today, maybe I'll just pick up where I left off five years ago with two packs a day.

Enrique is my houseboy, he will kill me if I smoke up his stash of imported cigarettes. I will kill him if I find cigarettes in my house.

Pay dirt. Cigarettes in hand, I will kill Enrique later.

Ring, ring. This is the third try, but it won't be my last. I pray harder. Jackie, just pick up the goddamn phone!

"Jesus Christ, do you know what time it is?"

Jackie's voice is graveled so early in the day, I smirk as she fretfully relocates the appropriate higher pitch. "Goddamn, Garrett, it's eleven o'clock in the fucking morning!"

"Jackie, shut up and listen. I slept with a woman!"

I exhale the lung full of smoke I had been holding in.

"Jackie, damn it all, say something, say anything. Did you hear me?"

I inhale more nicotine; it is all there is left to do. I can almost hear Jackie remembering...

The Christmas Eve party that was just cranking up when I'd called her from the hotel was in full psychedelic swing by the time we got to her apartment. I felt distinctly underdressed. Jeans and a rumpled t-shirt just couldn't compete with all the sequins and feather boas floating around the room. Jackie parked me in a corner of her kitchen with a cold beer. Her advice: Relax. Then she was gone. Off to be the good little hostess. Abandoned again. This time, however, I couldn't escape, couldn't even move if I'd wanted to, the place was packed to the ceiling. I felt like a sardine.

My corner view offered an advantage though. I was the only one who could open and close the refrigerator door. I was in charge of the brewskies, I was everybody's new best friend.

Most of the people I met that night are still my friends today, but I can't for the life of me remember who was at that party. Everyone else faded into nothing when he asked for a cold one. For a moment life stilled, all that mattered was his chocolate brown eyes locked on mine, we shared a moment, and me not understanding that we'd shared a moment until he'd walked away, and then I couldn't understand what had happened and denied that I was feeling anything—for about an hour.

Now, looking back, I feel it was fate because I wouldn't be who I am today nor have the empire I've created, without him pushing me to succeed. Tony made me who I am today, no doubt about it.

I watched him work the crowd for a while from the safety of my corner, assuming no one would be the wiser if I just watched him. What could possibly be wrong with that, I reasoned. Watching wasn't a sin. Tight jeans, tight ass, tighter t-shirt, and I thought to myself, no one has abs that cut. It was a really tight t-shirt, making it obvious his nipples were pierced when it wasn't vogue to do so. But then he was gone, out of sight, nowhere to be seen.

"He's on the terrace."

"Who?" I asked dumbly, knowing exactly who she was talking about.

Jackie had sidled in beside me. Using the big fluffy wig perched elegantly atop her head as a pointer she spurred me on with her best John Wayne drawl. "He went thataway, pard'ner."

It all seems so much worse, after the fact, looking back.

I was so young. So unbelievably naive.

I tripped out onto the terrace, made an absolute ass of myself I'm sure, and hating heights, ended up clinging to the wrought-iron safety rail. I mean, I really hated heights. So I clung there, wondering if anyone would notice if I just jumped and put myself out of my misery.

"Hey, I'm Tony. You're new."

His voice startled me and I turned my head just enough to see that he was nonchalantly leaning against the rail, beside me, close, too close. Elbows on metal, folded hands dangling over the dangerous edge, and just seeing him so at ease frightened me even more. I stepped two feet back from the edge, finally resting my shoulder against solid wall, going for the reckless James Dean look as I lit a cigarette, thinking I could pull off looking as nonchalant as he did. I think I failed miserably.

"Old friend of Jackie's. I'm in from out of town," I explained.

He turned to face me, leaning his tight butt against the wrought-iron rail and I had to admit that seeing that iron spindle pressed along the line of his crack gave me ideas I shouldn't have been thinking. I focused on the traffic, determined to let the moment pass. I was hard, zipper-crushing hard, and praying he wouldn't notice, I was so embarrassed by the whole thing.

"Come here." His crooked finger and easy smile lured me forward, closer to the dangerous edge. Gazes locked, he drew me in. I don't know what I expected. I was like a bitch in heat, panting.

"Lose the cigarette," he whispered and smacked my cheek twice in a playful pat. It got my attention. He took the cigarette from between my lips and tossed it over his shoulder, over the edge of the terrace without losing eye contact. He traced my lips with his finger, leaning closer, and closer, so slowly, like I was a small feral animal that would startle away. Then his tongue was filling my mouth, his fingers were wrapping into my hair. His other hand grabbed my chin, holding my face in a vice while he kissed me and I tried to keep up. I'd never been kissed the way he kissed me, like he was trying to eat his way through me. He backed me up, into the brick wall, nothing gentle about it and I groped parts of his anatomy that, at the time, I would have believed I had no business groping.

Looking back, if there was an embarrassing moment in history, it was that night. I really made an ass out of myself. I didn't have a clue, I really didn't.

The next morning I called Jackie, six a.m., and she was even less pleased then than now. I had stolen out of Tony's apartment before dawn, while he still slept, with my shoes in my hand and my t-shirt gripped between my teeth. I zipped my pants and buckled my belt to the sound of the corner payphone ringing in my ear as I called Jackie. I started shouting before she even got out a decent hello.

"I slept with a man! Goddamn it. This is all your fault, Jackie! Just what in the hell am I supposed to do now?"

And now, the past repeats itself.

"Jackie? Jackie, are you there? Are you going to say anything at all?" I whisper loudly into the receiver. I stand in the long hallway outside my penthouse.

"Garrett, you're smoking. Don't even try to deny it! I can hear you exhaling."

"Damn it, Jackie, this is serious!"

"Damn," she offers with as much desolate smugness as she can muster this early in

the day. “I knew I shouldn’t have missed that auction. I could just feel it in my bones, something exciting was going to happen.” Her teasing laughter clamored through the line to rankle my already shredded nerves. “My boy got him some wild thang.”

“This is serious! She’s in my bed!” I scream then realize I’m screaming, so I growl softer. “She’s in my bed.” Like Jackie might not have heard the screamed version.

“I know, baby,” she says gently. “Just be calm, Garrett. You’re the Master, she’s the slave. You’ll figure it out, sweetie. At least this time it isn’t my fault.”

Jackie’s voice fades and I realize she is relaying my story. “Get some sleep. I sure am. We’ll talk about this later and I promise I’ll be at the Club tonight. And Garrett, it’s okay. Don’t panic about this. Obviously, you’re attracted to this girl—enjoy her—isn’t that what it’s all about?”

Chapter 3

“You go in with a certain fear and trembling. You know one thing. You know you will not be the same person when this voyage is over. But you don’t know what’s going to happen to you between getting on the boat and getting off.”

—James Baldwin

Celia

Sleepy eyelids refuse to open though I am awake, have been awake for some time; falling water lulls me and I float with the sound, thinking it is raining. Pounding rain. I jerk, startled, suddenly wide-eyed; not rain, a shower spray; and I am not at home, hearing the rain on my roof, but in his bed, hearing the shower in the adjoining room. I start to sit up and just as quickly lay back down. I am naked in Garrett Lawrence’s bed. *I slept in a stranger’s bed.*

Knowledge dawns that I slept and that thought alone terrifies me. Sleep is bad enough at home, knowing I am in my own bed and giving over to unconsciousness, but to give over to sleep here, in a stranger’s house, where any and all of my nightmares could have been enacted while I was powerless to stop it?

Oh god.

It is not enough to say that sleep frightens me, and it isn’t even the act of sleep necessarily, but the powerlessness of sleep. Forget frightens, it terrifies me. Anything can happen during those hours of complete surrender. And so, I rarely sleep. I put it off until it takes me. So what was I thinking in my drunken haze? Obviously, I wasn’t. And that frightens me even more. Anything could have happened to me in this stranger’s bed. Did he watch me sleep? I shudder to think so. I’m ready to bolt. But how far would I get? I’m naked.

I won’t sleep again.

Like that’s realistic.

I can’t panic, I am a professional.

Too late, I’m already panicked, heart racing, palms sweating, oh my god, the walls are closing in on me panic. But I can’t let myself panic. No matter what happens. I have to remember not to panic. I am in, my cover’s complete. *Inappropriate Voices*’ owner and master mind behind this exposé, Mr. Bosko, would be proud. Okay, that is stretching it, but I am certain his eyebrow will raise and he will mutter something like “damn, that girl has some spunk after all.”

Hearing the shower spray is a small comfort, knowing I have time before I have to face him.

I’m not sure what I think I will do with the time—compose myself maybe, or just nose around a bit, take in the view. Not a very inspiring view, by the way, the view from Garrett’s bed. A visual bore really; beige walls, beige floors, beige comforter. Even the wood furniture, the bureau, dresser, and headboard, are a pickled pine. Beige. It is distracting within itself to be caught in such a sea of non-color. A spinning ceiling fan

casts moving shadows of darker beige on beige. Even the curtains hiding the view are beige. And the light coming through the curtain is beige. I panic more, thinking that perhaps I am allergic to beige. The color frightens me for no explainable reason. The flesh tone of my hand fades into the comforter and then my arm and then my body until there is nothing more of me, lost in the sea of beige, trapped, forgotten.

No, I shake my head to force away the panic.

My God, if I am panicking over beige what will I do when he pulls out the heavy-duty torture? What, oh what, have I done?

I won't panic, instead, I force myself to think. Long ago, when I was preparing a thesis, I read an article on beige. It was totally unrelated to my paper, but I read it anyway. It was all about the calming properties of a monochromatic beige room. I close my eyes and coach myself to think calm. Calm room. I open my eyes. My guts clench. It didn't work. No amount of coaching will work. I decide I hate beige.

My eyes travel to the door I assume leads to the bathroom. Steam rolling through the gap between door and jam confirms my suspicions. He didn't close the door all the way and, in my beige-phobic mind, I fear it is so he will hear me wake up. The clean fresh scent of rain and citrus seeps under the door. His scent.

I like the smell, the fragrance of serenity.

The fragrance and the room are at odds.

I need a shower, but the question is will he let me take one? Better still, will he let me use his fragrance? I could stay calm all day wrapped in that fragrance. I pray the shower stall is any color except beige. The shower spray stops suddenly and I forget my plans to ask if I can use his scent. I forget everything except where I am, who he is, and what that means to me. I dive under the covers and cower. I am sure he has entered the bedroom.

He is quiet. Too quiet. I try to follow his soft movements around the room but end up disoriented. The bed creaks under his weight and I am frozen to the spot. I think my heart even stops beating for fear of discovery. But that is stupid, isn't it? He knows I'm here as surely as a child playing possum. So what now? Do I peek out and pray he's not mad?

No, I think I'll just stay here cowering a bit longer. Maybe he'll just go away.

"Kitten?"

I had forgotten the buttery soft richness of the timbre of his voice while I slept.

"I know you're not asleep, you may as well come out." The bed creaks as he stands. I try to follow his voice around the room. A door creaks open and shut, a drawer slides. His footsteps are almost silent as he crosses the carpet. "When you are asleep, you don't tremble and I don't think I've given you a reason to tremble—yet—so, I'll give you one last chance to say good morning properly."

The yet did it. I lower the cover enough for him to see my eyes. "Good morning," I offer, but I know it is not a proper good morning, it is a shaky wisp of a good morning. I swallow hard and hope it is enough. His frown tells me it wasn't quite what he expected.

"We'll work on that..." he states. "And why were you hiding from me this morning?"

I choke. I don't want to face this. Not any of it. The auction, the collar, the limo ride...

I really don't want to face what happened in the limo last night. I'm not even sure what did happen. I had expected orientation by pain, not, oh God, I have to face it,

orgasm. I have never experienced an orgasm with a man, and since I've never been with a woman...

I try to remember the saying about if you absolutely have to lie, base it in fact so that it doesn't come back to haunt you.

"I look horrible in the morning." That is the truth.

Garrett takes the liberty of sitting down on the bed beside me. This is not the response I thought my declaration would bring. I must have flinched. "Easy," he says as he pulls the sheet below my chin. He seems bigger than last night. Taller, broader, stronger and every ounce male. I fight the urge to scurry into the corner when he pulls the blanket even lower. I have never seen a man move so carefully, subtly, as if in every motion there is a supreme purpose. It is very unsettling and I wish he would just jerk the cover off. But he continues to inch it down slowly, very slowly, taking in every inch with his eyes as he goes, baring me all the way to the waist. My eyes drop to the blankets when his eyes return to my breasts. I can't bear to see his disappointment when he realizes he paid way too much money—for me. And I know he is disappointed, he couldn't possibly not be.

His hand lifts my chin so that I am forced to look into his eyes, I try to look at his forehead, his ear, anywhere but his eyes, but he seems to know every trick, even the blurred vision one, and I am forced to look. His eyes are so icy blue, so cold, it is almost more than I can stand. My lower lip quivers. I suppose it is a nervous twitch. Anticipation for what is to come, a controlled response, like Pavlov's dog; I know what will come next. I brace for it.

"Never, ever, hide from me." His voice is controlled. I don't like the sound. I wish for the smooth bourbon voice to come back. I try not to jerk as his hand comes forward to wrap around the back of my neck. His fingers are gentle as they spin through the wispy short hair at the back of my head.

"Who told you that you look horrible in the morning?"

I shrug and pull my quivering bottom lip between my teeth. His thumb is there immediately putting my lip back where it belongs, sliding over the dark red line left by my teeth. He strokes it gently, like I may have damaged myself somehow.

"You are beautiful. Morning, noon, or night. Don't hide your beauty from me, Kitten."

I am surprised when he stands and walks to the doorway. His eyes hold mine and I don't dare move. Still in shock, I guess.

What happened to Pavlov's dog?

I try to remember, it seems very important to remember. I am aware of a curious tension straining between us, but I don't understand it. He is even more gorgeous by the light of day, if that is possible.

I have to get out of here.

Screw the story.

No, I have to calm down, way down.

I wonder if he is waiting for me to follow him. I wish he would just tell me what he wants. He lingers in the doorway and my eyes cling to his. Not knowing what else to do and unwilling to break the silence, I tug the tangled blankets away from my legs and stand up. Garrett sweeps me into the bathroom, closing the door behind me. I am alone.

* * * *

Okay, not a hotel suite by any means. Post-shower, I find myself curious enough to explore and, although the doorman and palatial lobby threw me off last night, this morning I should have known better. A high-class hotel would not offer a beige bedroom to their guests, their interior decorator would know better. Garrett's interior decorator should have been fired, and it is now obvious that a professional decorator had a hand in this travesty of elegance.

Room to room, minimalism reigns supreme, resplendent with extravagant details: wood floors, exquisite crown molding, and deep-set windows. The impressive marble fireplace in the living room is crowned with monochromatic erotica, a bound male done in rust hues, and a companion piece, a bound female done in ochre hues.

The color of choice is still beige. But maybe lighter beige. Sand perhaps, but then again, it may just be a trick of the light or the fact that I feel better. Beige is no longer the enemy. It is amazing what a hot shower can do for one's spirit, even in the face of remorse, total and utter remorse. I feel I have sold myself out, or at least a part of myself, a very important part. And I don't see any absolution in sight.

Lion was right, I am no better than a whore. He told me that long ago, but the same statement could be made today. I did, after all, sell myself to stranger.

No, I'm not doing this.

I was just feeling better about this situation. Well, not really, but a good dousing in his scent was definitely helping. Shower gel, shampoo, and cologne all in the same clean fresh scent, *Ocean Breeze: A Bay Spa Luxuriant*.

After searching the bathroom for my personal items to no avail, I used all three. It was an incredible intimacy and I wonder if he will be offended. And what is the punishment for offending the Master, by the way?

I am playing a game in which the rules of play are imperative, but no clue as to what the rules are. I know I need my tote, but it is MIA. Without it, I have no clothing, no makeup, and no hairstyling products. It is bad enough parading around in a towel, but sans makeup is insufferable. And no clothes, no makeup, on an empty stomach is...

Where in the hell is the kitchen?

So far, I have located two additional bedrooms and a library on my search for food, but no kitchen. However, I am one step closer, the great room sprawls before me, literally, large enough to hold four full-size couches and a dining table for sixteen and intimidating as much in its masculinity as its incredible size. Leather is the fabric of choice for his furnishings, expensive is the fabric of choice for his walls. It seems such a waste of good wall space to hide them behind beige, even if it is designer paper, even if it has a curious weave that shifts beneath changing patterns of light. Light is the room's redeeming feature; it streams through wide expanses of sparkling glass.

I am enthralled by the view from this room. The city a masterpiece caught behind glass. Did I expect anything less from Garrett Lawrence than a penthouse view?

It dawns on me that I am alone. Here I have the run of his penthouse and my mind is complaining about his choice of decorator and my lack of makeup. I should be snooping, isn't that what good investigative reporters do? I'm too hungry to snoop, and if he has left me alone during my very first morning, it is bound to happen again. The tantalizing aroma of coffee lures me forward toward what I thought was another window to the great outdoors, but no, it is an interior window that opens the kitchen to additional light from the wall of windows in the great room.

Black granite and gleaming stainless steel greet me. I have never been in a gourmet's kitchen, but I assume that this is what one looks like. I am impressed. I have found Mecca. I would fall prostrate but I wouldn't know which alter to bow before first.

His wine selection is incredible, a collector's dream, but even more impressive than his choice of wines is the spice rack above the stove. A hundred cylindrical tins shout hello, labeled neatly and arranged by geographic origin. Okay, I'm impressed now. Commonplace lingers with the rare and exotic, the man even has *nigella*. Like an addict, I lift the lid and inhale. Tin after tin; *Aleppo pepper*, *annato*, *garam masala*. I am buzzed by the time I stumble to the glass-front cabinet that holds the coffee mugs.

I pour a cup and inhale, my mind clearing of its spice overdose.

The mug is taken from my hand with a hearty "thank you" and I stagger from the loss of promised caffeine. He pivots and walks away, leaving me shaken that I did not hear him approach.

How can one man be so quiet? I am glad I was caught with a cup of coffee and not snooping. I turn with a pout, not brave enough to glare. From his seat beside a small bistro table, tucked into a corner, he calls me forward with a wave of his hand. I am summoned. It matters not that his mouth is full of my coffee, he could have just as easily swallowed and spoke. The fact remains he didn't. I inch nearer.

Another crook of his finger tells me it is not close enough. He is hidden behind the spread of *Inappropriate Voices*.

I inch forward until my knees brush his thigh. His hand leaves the newspaper long enough to pull the towel from my body and drop it to the ground. I gasp but I don't think he hears over the rustle of the paper as he turns the page. He hands me the empty coffee cup. He knows I will refill it. I can glare now.

Fresh coffee in hand, I glare at the front page of *Voices*.

Ohmygod! I am on the front page. That is me. *Ohmygod! Ohmygod! Ohmygod!* Big as life on the front page. I bend forward to read the headline. *Quarter-million dollar slave*. He turns the page and I can't read the wavering story below the headline.

"Grrrr."

The paper drops and I am nose to nose with Garrett Lawrence.

"You growled?" he asks incredulously. He removes the cup of coffee from my trembling hand and it is only then that I realize I've spilled it on his bare toes. My gasp is not redemption enough. I lunge for the towel and pat his foot dry.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to. Are you all right? It didn't burn you did it? Geez, I am such a klutz. I really didn't mean..."

"Quiet! Sit!" he barks.

Okay, I'm standing, moving out of reach, trying to look humble, pulling out a chair—

"Not there, Kitten."

Shit, sitting on a pillow all night was bad enough, sitting on a cold tile floor butt naked is just going to make my day.

I squat and look up to see if he is happy with the effect that he is having on his unstable slave. I mean, I must be mentally unstable to be putting up with this crap. I cannot believe that people do this for fun. This is not a game. This is not fun. This is humiliating and I am too hungry and too hangover to give a—

He is not happy. He is shaking his head no. He has folded the *Voices* and laid it on

the table.

"Not there, Kitten." He pats his thigh. I close my eyes thinking that maybe the cold tile floor isn't so bad after all. "Now!"

Okay, I'm standing, I'm sitting. *God your leg is warm.*

Of course his leg is warm, it's next to my cold bare ass.

Glancing at the tabletop, I see that the copy beneath the headline is readable from my thigh perch. Wiggling my ass and scooting so that it is not so visible I'm reading, I read quickly:

"Renowned gay bachelor and owner of Lewd Larry's stunned the community at last night's auction by not only purchasing a woman, but paying the unheard of sum of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Speculation reigns supreme, calling the slave purchase a cheap advertising ploy. Those closest to the man refuse to comment..."

"Stop wiggling!" he commands, settling me further into him. "Craig, Craig, Craig." He sighs and I know he's talking about Mr. Bosko. "Columnist now? Owning the damn paper wasn't enough? God, what did I do to piss you off? Cheap advertising ploy my ass," he mumbles under his breath.

I close my eyes, allowing myself to be settled against his chest, thankful that *Voices* showed no mention of the exposé. Being purchased by Garrett Lawrence has produced a slight kink, but since the story alone is sensational; hopefully it will be story enough until I have my freedom and can publish the new, improved exposé of being owned by the most influential man in BDSM history.

The soft terry of his robe rubs my back, and my elbow glances off his darkly furred chest.

I steal a peek. His chest is wonderful to look at; at least what I can see of his chest is wonderful. The swirling eddies in my belly tell me that forgetting what happened last night is going to be next to impossible. His blue jeans seem unbearably scratchy, rough beneath my hips, but they are old, well-worn jeans, soft not rough. He tips my chin. Light blue eyes, more incredible than the wide expanse of sky behind him, hold mine. He wants an answer. I forget the question but nod absently in response.

"Are you hungry yet? Last night you refused food from my hand," he says between swigs of coffee, his voice has a liquid bourbon, when is the other shoe going to drop, timbre. "In front of my guests. *In front of my friends.*"

"I was nervous." I defend. "I can't eat when I'm nerv..."

"An excuse to soften your disobedience. And now your head pounds and your eyes are puffy because you are hung-over," he interrupts. "If you had eaten the protein I offered, you would not be in such bad shape right now."

I don't like his controlled voice much. It is stern. Condescending. I lock my jaw and count to ten to keep from saying anything.

"I bought you last night. You agreed to the terms of the contract. I own you."

"I didn't..."

Two fingers pressed to my lips silence me. I count to twenty. What he is saying is true. It just doesn't sound very pretty in the light of day.

"When you agreed to be my slave, you turned over your every want, your every need, your every desire. Do you remember signing the final papers before we left the Club?"

"Yes," I answer. It is a hushed whisper. I hate myself for sounding so meek.

Meekness is not a part of me, not anymore. But for *Inappropriate Voices*, for today, I am meek.

“Do you understand that if you sleep, it is because I allow it? If you shower, piss, or shit, it is because I allow it?” He grips my chin when I try to look away. He is telling me the truth. He is preparing me for even worse to come. God, the horrors I’ve written. I pray he has never read any of my books. Dark secrets revealed behind the safety of print. My every nightmare, dream, desire, bound and stacked on a million bookshelves just waiting for some innocent soul to stumble onto the keys of my shackles.

Do I want the freedom he offers?

I am terrified the answer might just be yes.

My eyes are huge. I can feel it. It is a reaction to his words. He will wait on every physical response, he will file away in his mind for future reference what triggers my fear, as any good Dominant would, and then, when I least expect it, I will be flogged with my own worst nightmares.

“If you breathe, it is because I allow it.”

I flinch.

“Food is a privilege in this house, not a necessity. Do you understand that if you eat the crumbs from my plate, it is because you have pleased me? You need a lesson in what happens when you don’t please me.”

“Yes, Master.” I am meek, humbled even, certain that my shaky voice and pounding heart is proof of my sincerity.

“Ah, so you do understand. You understand fear.”

He sees the slide of muscles as I swallow nothing—my mouth is too dry for even saliva to go down my throat. My palms and armpits are uncomfortably wet and my mouth is dry. God how I wish it was the other way around. His finger traces the ribbed line of my esophagus. Not a gentle caress, but an uncomfortable pressure I will remember for a very long time. I jerk back out of reflex.

“Who taught you to fear so well, Kitten?”

I shake my head. The cat truly does have my tongue. I could not speak now if I had to. My mind screams punish me already! I pull into myself. Waiting. A tear slides down my cheek and plops onto my chest. It is unbidden. I am not a crier by nature, it has been more than a decade since I’ve cried. Not even Lion made me cry...

“Kitten?”

Opening my eyes, I shake my head and blurt out, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, Kitten, you do.” His eyebrow lifts and his eyes follow the trail of a second tear. This one gets no further than my jaw line. He catches the drip on his finger and lifts the perfect drop for me to see. “Who taught you to fear so well? Because this is an old ache. Tell me, so that I can help you forget him.”

This time, my eyes drift slowly closed of their own volition. I cannot take the brilliant blue of his perfect eyes drilling into my dark soul, or his gentleness.

“Don’t worry, Kitten, I’m going to help you learn to trust again.”

I turn from him then. It is a promise he cannot keep; a promise I cannot accept.

Because of two men, my father and Lion, I am the creature I am, and not only am I well-educated enough to recognize my issues and know their root cause, I am strong enough to be okay with their results. I will never trust another man again, not with my

heart, not with my soul and that's okay.

Blue sky beckons me to the window. I am surprised that he doesn't hold me to his lap. I need fresh air. I shouldn't be here; I know now, in this instant, why taking this assignment was such a big mistake. BDSM relationships cannot exist without the trust bond. If I cannot trust a man, how am I ever going to survive this assignment?

Before Lion, I was a virgin; post-Lion, my love life, my sex life, have been disappointing at best. The men I love best are those I create in my mind. Heroes in black and white are so much easier to believe in than living, breathing men. Lion broke my trust button, it's unfixable. Do not ask me to trust you, Garrett Lawrence, because I will not. However, for this assignment I relinquish my body to your control, but never my heart, and never my soul...neither are up for barter, ever, ever again.

No, I'm not panicking. I'm too far over the edge for that. He doesn't even know what he's done. A little penlight of hope has pricked my breast and it is a total farce, a lie worse than any I have ever heard before. And if any other man, under any other circumstances...

But no, it is this man. And it is just a lie. A Master Dominant controlling his Slave.

I close my eyes and try to force away the fear. I have an assignment to do and if I'm not careful, I'm going to blow it if I can't control my own demons. God, why did Lion have to call *Voices*? Why did he ask for Celia Brentwood by name? He can't know it's me. And that's the real joke isn't it? He is controlling my head and he doesn't even know it. But at least I know he doesn't know it's me. I'm glad Tom, one of the copy editors for *Inappropriate Voices*, took a message while the regular receptionist was at lunch. I am so glad Tom took a message.

I don't want to have to leave San Francisco, but if I thought Lion found me, I would. But no, he called Celia Brentwood and demanded an interview. Quite a man to think his demands will hold any weight at *Inappropriate Voices*.

Tom thought it was hilarious that Lionell McCain, fundamentalist evangelist extraordinaire, would call little Miss Librarian for an exclusive interview for his monthly religious periodical known for its harsh stance against modern fiction, television, and cinema. In Lion's own words, "he wants to interview the evil woman who writes porn under the guise of romantic fiction, seducing good women away from Godly pursuits."

Good women, godly pursuits...so, if not pursuing God, evil women. I am an evil woman. Lion doesn't have to interview me to prove that. He already proved it to me years ago and that was long before my job at *Inappropriate Voices*, long before my career as a published author, long before this assignment. If I was evil then, what am I now?

I could have kissed Tom for sending him after another well-known author.

But then Tom said, "McCain couldn't very well interview someone who's going to be out of the country for a month now could he? And we sure don't want to send you off with a lei of bad karma."

It was hard to walk away from *Voices* that day without telling anyone my true plans. Mr. Bosko wanted the exposé kept secret from all the employees. The cover story being that I was going on a month-long vacation. I was in shock then. Still bouncing off the walls in my euphoria for having landed an undercover assignment. An assignment I am determined to do a good job of completing.

Garrett stands, and moves to the coffeepot, pulling me from my thoughts. I see through the window that the sky is turning russet. It is not morning; it is night. He let me

sleep an entire day away.

He crosses to the refrigerator. I am attuned to him completely, my muscles tense, springy. I am so on edge. So very on edge. I do not turn to look at him, remembering to breathe only when his chair creaks beneath his weight.

“Here, kitty-kitty, time to eat.”

I spin to face the mocking voice, determined. I will not to be manipulated again. This is a battle I will win. Garrett lifts a fork with a strawberry speared on the end. His weapon is fruit? No, his weapon is his smile. Absolutely deadly. My growling stomach is a traitor. I try not to smile as I walk back to his side, but I can’t help it. I am snared by the mischievous twinkle in his eyes. I am sure I should be hearing sirens, warning bells, something, but I don’t. I see a gorgeous man offering me food. I lean across the table to take the berry between my teeth. Garrett pulls it away and pats his knee.

Okay, he wins this round. After all, he gave me time to collect my thoughts. I am refocused on my task. *Inappropriate Voices* wants a story. I am going to give them a damn good story. How could it not be a good story? Already I have made the headlines, and if I know Doug, he will fan the flames for thirty days. A story that began with the highest auction price in history will not end until every intimate moment of the thirty days is revealed to an enthusiastic audience. After all, this is San Francisco; we are voyeurs all. We want it in our face, down our throat. We want the who is doing what to whom, but even more, we want to know if they screamed, if they cried, if they begged for more. And the mysterious third floor? Even the loose lips in town have not revealed its secrets and I don’t believe for a minute it is just about dogs and cats or whipping posts. There is a story there and its name is Garrett Lawrence. It’s time Lewd Larry’s dirty little secrets come out of the closet.

I look closer at the man. For a Master Dominant, he is not what I expected. His jeans are frayed and worn, his knee completely visible on the left side, the frayed hole is so wide. Did I really expect him to wear leather to breakfast? I would have preferred the leather, at least then I would have been on guard to his tricks; the jeans and bare chest, not to mention the bare toes, are disarming. The uncombed hair and morning shadow, hel-lo, just plain yummy. It’s a good look for him, sexy—very sexy. Which leads me to the mystery that is San Francisco, where are the sexy straight men?

I hadn’t considered that. Garrett is gay.

The heat coming off his thigh sears my butt, making it hard to keep my mind on the fact that he is gay; and once again, I am aware of just how naked I am. How did I ever manage to forget a detail like that?

“Open.”

My mouth opens and he offers me the fruit. The strawberry is lusciously ripe and incredibly sweet. Ripe, but still firm. Tender flesh that doesn’t moosh between my teeth, but stands its ground. Taste floods through my mouth and even my sinus cavity quickens with the thrill. I am transported to a far off place. I am certain that Garrett would be disappointed if he knew it was the food that had been responsible for such incredible rapture. Tenuous joy. I take little bites, completely savoring the moment, each strawberry a lesson in patience. His. There is a comfortable silence between us. I have given over to him completely; he feeds me, every bite. And I surrender to it, even when he teases me with the fruit pulling it back ever so slightly so that I have to rub my cheek on his. Twice. *Yes*. Two small pecks on his cheek. *Please*. I am creating language as I go. I have

acquiesced completely. Master. Slave. Juice slides over my chin and I allow him to lick it off.

“You will eat only what is offered from my hand, whether here or at the Club,” he commands, but it is in the velvet voice. Sweet, intoxicating. “Understood?”

I rub my face against his clean-shaven cheek, *twice*. It is not a bad thing being a cat. After all, a cat’s voice doesn’t shake. It is so much easier than “yes, Master, no, Master.” I think I will enjoy being a cat.

I watch Garrett through slit lids as he sips his coffee. Unexpectedly, he pulls me near and seals his lips over mine. I suck the still hot coffee greedily from his mouth. It is too sweet and creamed. I prefer dark, bitter. But the precious few mouthfuls he offers, I inhale. He leaves me wanting more.

Chapter 4

“Hence it came about that I concealed my pleasures; and that when I reached years of reflection, and began to look around me, and take stock in my progress and position in the world, I stood already committed to a profound duplicity of life.”

—R.L. Stevenson, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

Celia

I am an addict. I need caffeine! Gallons, not sips, thank you.
Desperation.

He tries to push me from his lap, but I cling to him, pressing him down. He does not expect this and relaxes into the chair. I nuzzle the hand that held the cup, twice. I rub the cup itself, twice. Two pecks on the cheek. *Please*. I am begging here! *Please! I need coffee*.

But I say nothing, because as far as I am concerned, I have already pushed the envelope and I am facing major punishment here. I don't care. I need coffee. I cannot believe I have been reduced to this. And I wonder what lengths I will resort to for a cup of coffee. But it matters not, I will not find out today. Garrett strokes my cheek gently before sitting me up, away from him. “Not now, Kitten. If you are good, I will see that you get more coffee.”

Will you?

I wonder if he understands that my blood is ninety percent caffeine and right now I am running on empty? I try to lean forward, I will beg more if that is what it takes. But I don't have the chance. Garrett pushes me from his lap and a slight tug on the jeweler's chain reminds me that this is more than a game.

“We're going to be late as it is. It's time to dress for the Club and you still have to do something with your hair and makeup.”

He pushes me into the second bedroom, also painted a variance of beige, very light, it is almost white, ivory perhaps and, like the great room, the furniture is predominantly black, slick black lacquer. The comforter and pillow shams are black silk. Three larger than life, framed black-and-white block prints hang on the wall behind the king-size bed. Nudes portrayed in bondage. I am startled when his voice breaks into my assessment. “A friend of mine sent you a present. You will meet her tonight at the Club. *And you will be on your best behavior.*”

The door snaps shut behind me and I spin toward the sound, but he is not there. I am alone again. A package leans against the wall—a present wrapped in expensive hot-orange foil paper and a large, floppy, magenta bow. The bright colors scream in the calm, ivory and ebony room.

A friend? A woman friend? Or a girlfriend. More likely. It is probably a bomb. I back steadily away from the box. An open door leads to a brightly lit bathroom. Black tub, black tile. Even black towels. My makeup case, hair products, hair dryer and hot curlers are spread across the black vanity. The hot curlers are even plugged in, hot and

waiting for me. My clothes are not here. Surely, he will not take me to the club naked tonight.

No, I won't even consider that option.

I inch forward and take in the vision of myself in the mirror. Wall-to-wall mirrors. In the other bathroom, there was only one small oval mirror in an opulent silver frame that folded out on a folding hinge and an antique shaving mirror, and I avoided it like the plague. There is no avoiding my reflection now. A stranger looks back at me. Granted, the stranger is a mess, but luckily, I have concealing stick at the ready.

She is exotic, but not me.

At least not the me who greeted my reflection yesterday morning. No, if anything, she was ho-hum boring, and that's giving her credit. God, was it only yesterday that Mr. Bosko sent me for a complete makeover at the famed Bay Spa for Hair and Body? Massage by Jamar, body wax by Ronni and, of course, hair, makeup and nails with master stylist and colorist Andre, rocking my world, deciding a bold new cut and highlights were needed to spruce me up a bit, to make me more urban. He insisted; I acquiesced. He was, after all, the expert.

It is a bolder cut than I am used to, chin length in front, even shorter in the back and angled around my face in odd wisps. And so very much darker than normal after his choice of deep mink brown to hide the dishwater blond of yesterday. Even the fiery gold highlights are not much relief against my ivory pale skin.

I also have bangs for the first time since I was in grade school. Andre promptly scrunched and freeze-sprayed these to hold. I lift a limp lock and shake my head at the utter uselessness of trying to imitate his genuine expertise.

When Andre insisted on doing my makeup before I left his chair, I was ready to run for the hills. I tried to convince him to go light, but I had to remember this is Andre. I ended up with smoky eyes and cherry bomb lips. He declared my porcelain skin perfect as is and needing no unnatural blush. The mirror reflected back an anorexic Geisha.

Spilling the contents of the Bay Spa makeup case, I try to remember how easily Andre convinced me it would be to imitate what he did...oh, what the hell, how hard can it be?

* * * *

Makeup? Check. And a damn good job if I say so myself. Hair? Remains to be seen. At least the hot rollers weren't as impossible as I first envisioned.

Clothing? Where in the hell is my tote with all the lingerie I bought at...

Wild Things.

The name of the boutique Mr. Bosko insisted I shop at should have prepared me. It didn't.

Yesterday morning. *God, was it only yesterday?*

I walked through the boutique, trying to remember what he had told me about shopping for erotic wear: a little goes a long way. Little? *I'll say!*

Thankfully, Doug had already called the owner and she rushed forward to greet me before I had a chance to bolt back out the door. A dozen incredibly sexy outfits later, I thought, *I can do this.*

It was my first conscious appraisal of the new me that I might actually pull this assignment off.

At the checkout, I was rambling, hurried, nervous. “It’s a good thing you knew I was coming and had the foresight to narrow my selection. If I had to select from the racks, we would no doubt still be at it. I can’t believe how the time flew!”

“Oh, honey, I’m sure that’s why Mr. Bosko stopped by. He probably knew that we would get so busy talking and shopping.” She laid the last item in the bag and looked up expectantly. “And he does have exquisite taste.”

“Mr. Bosko?” I asked. My mind was reeling that my reclusive boss left his sprawling beach-front manse to pick out erotic wear—with me in mind.

“Why of course, I thought you knew. He was very specific.” She offered me a smile. “And honey, make sure you wear the lace dress tonight. Like we talked about, okay?”

Remembering her comment, bile rises unbidden, realizing only now that he’d planned that onstage spectacle all along. Had he insisted on the lace dress because he knew Doug was going to tear it off me? Did he think I’d back out if he revealed his plans? Would I have? The exotic woman in the mirror is weeping. *God, what am I doing? What am I doing?*

* * * *

“I need my clothes.” I demand from his bedroom doorway. I am not sure who is startled more by my voice, him, or me.

Garrett turns slowly to face me. He is tying his black bow tie. A crisp white shirt with pearly white buttons is tucked neatly into his slacks. A tuxedo jacket is folded neatly across the bed. The man is going to wear a tux to work. He is going to look incredible. For the life of me, I can’t understand why he wants me tagging along. I will be like the annoying piece of broccoli stuck between his teeth, an embarrassment, an eyesore.

God, he’s wonderful to look at.

His face is shadowed. I do not recognize the look he is giving me. Too late, I realize my mistake. I cannot run from his room fast enough; his hand seems to reach all the way across the room to grab me around the biceps and hold me in place. Fear. It is immediate. Ice fills my veins.

Too late, I remember, Pavlov’s dog dies.

I feel the blood rushing from my head, white spots forming behind my eyelids. I fight like my life depends on it, but am subdued. My back is to his stomach, my arms crossed over each other, over my breasts. With my wrists secured in his fists at my shoulders, my breath comes in gasps, it is minutes before I can breathe normally. Even if nothing else happens but this, and I know that is unlikely. A horrible cliché—strike three, you’re out—filters through my mind.

“Easy, Kitten,” he says and I jerk when I feel his lips on the nape of my neck. “Easy.”

Each soft kiss is an electric jolt.

His grip loosens a little, but not enough for me to escape, just enough so the blood flows back into my hands. “I didn’t want it to begin this way, Kitten. But you have to learn to trust me.”

The room closes in a little.

Electric jolt.

“I am going to have to punish you. Not a good way to begin the night, is it, Kitten?”

I shake my head and the curlers rattle loose. I whisper pathetically, “Please don’t. I

will be good. I will, I promise.”

“Sh-h, you have to trust me,” he says softly. “I’m going to release you, but you aren’t going to move. Not a single inch.”

I am free. My knees aren’t sure they want me to keep standing though. I feel him behind me, even though he isn’t touching me. There is a current coming off his body—heat and energy and something more, something indefinable. I feel his hand moving, reaching for me, before he actually touches me, and it is all I can do to stand still. I must. I have to pass this test; I have to be convincing. His hands catch my neck and I startle, but don’t pull away. I don’t flinch. His thumbs are at the base of my skull and he presses into my vertebrae, hard enough to make me “eek” before I realize his intent. His thumbs slide and my tense neck muscles sigh with the massaging stroke.

“Let me take care of you, Kitten.” His lips fall on my neck again and I jolt with the awareness of how close he is and how naked I am. “You belong to me now. Do you understand?”

I nod my head, but he only laughs. “No, I don’t think you have any idea.”

His hands slide into my hair and I fight the urge to step forward. His fingers are swift as they remove the clips from the rollers. The rollers slide easily into his hands, leaving springy curls in the front, the back is shorn too short, and he ruffles his fingers playfully through that shorter hair before dropping the rollers onto the mattress without ceremony. A tug on my chain leads me to a high-back desk chair, where he sits down. Another tug on the chain has me on my knees beside him.

“I am going to punish you now, but first I want you to understand why. We are going to be late arriving to the Club. *Very late*. Last night the crowd was enormous and unruly. Tonight, the crowd is projected to be double that and I have no doubt they will be even more unruly. Do you know why?”

I look up at him, shaking my head.

“Words, Kitten. Answer me with words. As long as you are in this room.”

“No.” My voice seems alien to my own ears.

“They want to see you.” He strokes my cheek, coaxing a tear to freedom. “They want to see the slave that drew a bid of a quarter of a million dollars. They want to see what it takes to attract Lewd Larry’s eye. They expect perfection.”

My eyes drop to my hands. He is being cruel now, just like every other man I’ve ever let close to me. If he’d said they expected pretty—well, maybe on a good day—I might have believed him. But perfection? Don’t make me laugh. I drop my chin to my chest, even at this angle, my breasts barely even bump out.

Garrett lifts my chin with two fingers, forcing my gaze to his. His finger traces the line of my jaw, drawing my eyes back to his. “Last night I was uncomfortable with the security I could offer you. I just want to keep you safe, that is why I wanted to get there early tonight. To keep you from being pawed at by the crowds.”

His fingers linger on my face and it is suddenly too much, an unbearable intimacy, but I don’t dare pull away. His eyes reflect that he senses my discomfort. His face leans closer with his whisper. “You are mine. No one touches what is mine. Touching is my sole pleasure alone.”

A violent reaction takes place in my middle. I can’t bear what he is saying. Words of possession. A shiver races down my spine, leaving my body covered in gooseflesh. Garrett runs his finger over my shoulder, teasing the prickled skin.

“Come here,” he commands and pats his knees. When I don’t comply immediately, he tugs gently on the chain until I am standing. I move to sit. “No, Kitten.”

I feel myself go rigid. He can’t expect me to—

He does!

I gulp.

I can’t do this. What was I thinking? I’m insane. Better to spill my guts now. Of course there will be a huge lawsuit against *Inappropriate Voices*, I will lose my job—

“You have to do this on your own Kitten. I’m not going to force you into position. You have to surrender yourself to me completely.”

My breath is coming in tiny pants as I strangle out, “I can’t!”

“Kitten. You’ve been through far worse than a measly spanking with your old Master. Give over to me. I am your Master now.”

Why am I fighting the inevitable? Why am I struggling with this? He’s right. It’s just a spanking. No big deal.

It is a big deal.

It would be easier if he would just force me to his will and get it over with. Make me do this, I want to cry out, I can’t do this on my own. His eyes give me the strength to do the unimaginable. Very slowly, I lower myself over his knees, my fingertips tentatively reaching for the carpeted floor. A thrill fills the spot in my stomach that only a moment ago was filled with dread. *Father, forgive me the sin of this pleasure.*

“Good girl, now put your hands behind your head.”

It shouldn’t make such a big difference but it does. My breasts rub into the luxurious fabric of his trousers and my ribs press into his thighs, gravity and my own weight the enemy.

“Bring your feet closer to the chair and straighten your legs.”

This is an impossible position. My breasts still press into his thigh but my bottom is raised to an uncomfortable angle. I am open, exposed, vulnerable. I don’t like it—not this. Not being so exposed, so open. My knees quake and, low in my belly, the muscles clench with terrible anticipation.

He is watching me. No, watching is too tame of a word, he is appraising me, and it is unbearable. I want to cry out *just get it over with*, but my voice has abandoned me. There is a moment of perfect silence and I hear his breathing, slow and steady. His hands fall warm and tender on my back and I reel with a sensual pleasure as he begins to massage my back.

I think he must have been trained as an expert masseur in an earlier life. He shreds my muscles and makes them cry out with loss when his fingers move on. My shoulders are limp and sated, my lower back pleasantly tingling when he moves over my hips with the same silken skill. I am tense as a coiled spring within seconds. I know this feeling and I don’t want to be feeling it. I have to remain separate and focused, but he is making me hot, needy.

Without warning, his hand slides between my thighs. He finds me wet, ready. I would have moved into him, but his hand is gone as quickly as it was there. I wonder if I perhaps imagined the whole thing. His whispered caress tells me I didn’t imagine.

“Your body bows to me, Kitten. It pleases me to find you ready for my attention. I will not be nearly as hard on you this time as I should be—but don’t try me again, Kitten. Or next time, your punishment will be ten times as severe.”

“Count to fifteen, slowly. Start now,” he demands.

I am not sure what he wants, but I know enough to obey without question.

“One.”

His open palm falls hard across my buttocks. A searing heat quickly follows the flash of pain. Oh my god, does he think I can count out fifteen blows?

Shit! I have to pass this test. I have to convince him I am an experienced save. I stiffen my knees as I count. “Two.”

The second strike is harder than the first and the third harder than the second.

“Four.”

This strike takes me to my knees. My skin screams. I know it glows an angry red, it has to, I am on fire. I do not cry, it would be too easy to cry. I am in pain, but I refuse to cry. I think it is Lion’s fault, because he told me once that adults cry for many reasons; shame, sadness, humiliation, heartbreak, even guilt, but never pain. I was crying when he told me this. I thought it was because of the pain, but with his words, I realized it wasn’t the pain, it was anger, rage, and I was too much of a coward to act on the rage. Adults do cry for many reasons. I would cry now, if I thought it would end this game we play, but it would do no good. I call it a game, because in truth that is what it is. A serious game for serious players. Players who don’t quit in the middle; and for me, I have just rolled the first dice. The unwritten rules state that, no matter what happens, once the terms are agreed upon, both parties see it through. By counting one, I agreed to fifteen. If I cried hard enough that I couldn’t count, there is no doubt he would wait for me to calm and then finish the count. The question being, however, would he be beast enough to make me start over at one. In his shoes, I would.

I unfold and Garrett waits for me to put myself back across his lap. The shaking in my legs is hideous as I stiffen out my knees and lift my buttocks for him. I do not wait for him to ask me to begin again. “Five.”

I do not cower under the rain of remaining nine blows. I count stoically. I am somewhere deep inside myself. A robot of indifference. It has been a long time since I have been to this place.

“Fifteen.”

The strike lands passionately across my flaming buttocks. I think he is trying to get my attention with this last blow. I shrug it off with indifference and start to rise from his lap. Two hands clamp down hard on my shoulders and hold me in place, my small breasts ground into the hard muscle of his thigh.

“I haven’t given you permission to rise, Kitten. Do you wish to displease me further this night?” he growls.

“No,” I gasp.

“Good,” he states coolly. I am surprised when his hands land gently in the middle of my back. He pushes me down so that my midriff is pressed into his thighs. His fingers are magic as they dig into my tense muscles, and his voice becomes warm and deep as he talks to me. So gently, I know that every word has been well chosen.

“It did not please me to have to punish you, Kitten. I do not want to have to punish you again. It will only be worse on you each time I do. And that is not to say that even if you are perfectly well behaved, I will not help you find pleasure in pain, freedom in trust, because I will. Today you have learned that you can trust me to keep my word. I promised fifteen strikes, I delivered fifteen strikes.”

I am not certain I like where this is heading, his voice is warm and deep, but it is also very controlled. Like the man. Each stroke carefully measured out, each word weighed.

"I am not happy with the way this punishment went, Kitten. You learned nothing, except that you can rebel."

No, I definitely don't like where this is leading. I struggle to sit up. I do not want to hear anymore. I will not agree to any more blows to my ass.

"No, Kitten." He holds me down and waits for the panic to subside. "Relax."

I try, I really do. But my mind has blown a gasket of sorts.

"Please don't spank me anymore," I blurt out. It wasn't planned, the words just spewed out and I regretted them before the sentence is even finished.

"No, Kitten. No more spanking tonight," he promises. "But I do have to finish your massage. It is going to be a very long night at the Club tonight. I need you to relax and enjoy yourself. You are coiled inside of yourself like a cobra ready to strike. We can't leave things like this between us. Now relax."

I try to relax, but it is not my efforts that see the job done. His hands, his fingers, truly are magic. My spine is as flimsy as a rubber band by the time he reaches the lowest few vertebrae. I think that we are done, but I wait for him to give me the command to move. His hand hovers over my lower back then skims lightly over my ass. His hand feels cool in contrast to the heat steaming off my cheeks. I am not sure it feels good. I am not sure it feels all bad. I am sore, tender, but he is gentle with my stinging flesh. It hurts so good, a reminder of what has passed between us. I have written such ludicrous thoughts before, and had those thoughts published, but I have never experienced the nonsensical joy myself.

No, that joy was held deep inside for quiet nights alone, fantasizing about a moment just like this. I am a horrible person, sinner that I am. *Father, Father, please forgive me!*

Garrett's gentle touch brings tears to my eyes. I won't cry now. I won't cry over this.

Pain, pleasure, it is hard to tell where one ends and the other begins. My hips move involuntarily into his gripping fingers. His hand slides lower, separating my ass cheeks, his fingers find my anus, rimming it lightly, but travel beyond, tracing the slick lips hiding the entrance to my vagina. I can feel his fingers slide through the wetness. I am so wet. My eyes close and I moan. I can't help moving against his fingers, it is a primal response, as ancient as time, embedded forever into some dark corner of the human psyche. I want his fingers inside of me but he keeps them outside, teasing the folds. I am too proud to beg for this. I am excited. The man has just spanked me hard enough to leave welts, maybe even blisters, and I am obscenely excited.

What is it about this man, I wonder as I rub myself harder into his hand. How is it that he can make me feel pleasure? His finger slides forward, finding my clitoris. Lightning shoots through my head as he slides forward the fleshy hood, exposing my heat to the cool air of the room. I lift my ass higher to give him access to my flesh, but he gentles me with a soft command to relax. I bite my lip and lay still and unmoving, folded still across his legs with his fingers teasing me. I am dying little by little. It is the rhythm he learned last night.

I cry after all. I don't understand it, but even as the first wave of pleasure catches me in its grasp, I break. A soft sob escapes and an unexpected tear falls to the carpet. My sex is throbbing beneath his tender ministrations, and then his fingers are pulled away.

No, no don't be so cruel. So close. I am so damn close. But who am I kidding to

think that I could have two orgasms in as many days. I lift my hips, remembering some secret from last night. Oh God, it is too much.

“Please, Master, please let me come, please.”

“Very nice, Kitten, but you have to wait.”

His fingers slide over aching, begging flesh. Teasing, teasing. I am lifting into the vortex and it is too good to be true, but I don't question the fate that led me to this spiritual plane. I relax and coast on the headwinds of this place, but then I am falling. No, I catch myself. In the dull recesses of my brain, I realize he hasn't given me permission yet.

“Oh please, please, please, please, please.”

“Now, Kitten, come for me. Now.”

Chapter 5

“She walks in beauty, like the night. Of cloudless climes and starry skies; And all that’s best of dark and bright meet in her aspect and her eyes.”

—Lord Byron

Garrett

I glance at my watch for the fiftieth time since sending her back into the guest bedroom with instructions to open the box, wear whatever is in it, and fix her hair and makeup. What could she be doing in there?

I am determined to not go in there. It is taking every ounce of my will not to go in there and not because I want to strangle her for making us so late; but rather because I want her, desperately, but for the life of me, I cannot resolve this in my mind. If I want her as desperately as I wanted Tony, what does that say about my relationship with Tony?

After Tony died, I slept with a hundred men; nameless, faceless men. But I felt nothing, absolutely nothing. At the Club, I dominated hundreds of men and women, but the play was only that. After a while, I stopped trying to feel anything. It seemed so damned pointless. I wanted Tony back. It seemed so unfair he was stolen away from me, from the world, so soon. We didn’t have long enough together, but then I feel that a hundred years wouldn’t have been long enough.

I miss him still with an unquenchable ache. Half of me is gone. And I have to face that. I’m not sure whether because of the letters or because of Kitten, I have thought about him all day. Remembering how it all began...

The first night, while we were at Jackie’s party, he was the aggressor. Since I had never been with a man before, I had no idea what I was supposed to do. All I knew was I wanted it, all of it. Him. He was everything I wasn’t. I was a wallflower of sorts, very staid: a med student at the University of Cincinnati, following quite unwillingly in the family legacy. The fourth generation physician; great-grandfather, grandfather, father. A burned-out med student in my fifth year.

“It will get exciting now,” my father would say. “Just give it a little more time, son, once you hold that scalpel. You’ll know, boy, you’ve been born to it. It’s in your genes.”

I thought about my father’s words when Tony leaned forward and said, “It’s going to get exciting now.” I had heard my father’s words so often, it just clicked out. I had something in my jeans all right, and it was growing harder by the minute. I must have glanced down, embarrassed, making sure nothing showed, because Tony took the bait. His hand was at my fly so fast, I wasn’t sure what was happening.

Everyone loved him. So much so, that our little make-out session on the terrace kept being interrupted by people seeking out Tony. I wasn’t immune either. Tony was my opposite, outgoing, aggressive, a little hyperactive. Whether it was his smile, his swagger, or his positive outlook, I needed it. I didn’t think twice when he said, “Let’s get away from here a while.”

No, second thoughts didn’t hit until we stood face to face in his lower-end apartment

with horrible, avocado shag carpet. I was clueless. He led; I followed. At least until it was time to lose the skivvies. I balked. But by that time, he wasn't about to take no for an answer. I remember thinking, just rape me and get it over with.

But that would have been too easy. I had a choice. I chose. Tony made love to me that night. I had never been made love to. Oh, I had slept with dozens of girls, was even engaged to a pert little blonde with all the proper social connections, but I had never made love to her like Tony made love to me that night. So much passion, it was incredible, spiritual.

For two weeks, we were inseparable. Tony introduced me to feelings I never knew existed. Tony introduced me to an entire lifestyle. Not just homosexuality, but sadomasochism. It was two mind-altering weeks that I would never forget.

The funny thing was, I don't think my parents even noticed I was missing from their family vacation. I mean, I was around. The resort we were staying at had incredible amenities. I just took advantage of those amenities with Tony in tow. And he was a total chameleon, whether on the tennis courts, golf course, or dance club, he always fit in.

Then my life fell apart.

The nervous breakdown I had put off for a dozen semesters reared its ugly head on the flight home, surrounded by family, so far away from Tony, the moment I stepped onto the plane.

The nice thing about growing up in a family of physicians was the ready supply of pharmaceuticals always on hand right next to the aspirin in the family medicine cabinet. So, I played the game as long as I could. Eighteen-hour days in my residency program, lip service to the sweet-faced girlfriend between shopping sprees and manicures, and as few hours near my parents as I could afford. I lost thirty-five pounds and popped pills like they were candy. I was losing it—fast. But then a miracle happened. I turned twenty-five.

June first, my father arranged a lunch meeting at the country club, and I was prepared for the worst, expecting a serious lecture, knowing that my girlfriend had complained to her father about my lack of attentiveness, it only stood to reason that he would jerk my father's chain to get me back in line. But, the true crux of our serious talk lay in my father trying to convince me it would all work out, understanding from his own experience how much pressure I was under.

"Every physician faces burnout eventually, son," he assured me.

So, next to the wide expanse of window overlooking the eighteenth hole, I listened to his sage words of advice. An envelope beside my plate with my name scrawled in my father's bold, calligraphic style, a birthday card, like the cards he set in front of my breakfast plate each morning growing up. I'd learned long ago it was rude to rush into the opening, better to wait for the invitation to open.

"This will take away some of your fears, son," he said with a smile, tapping the card.

I smiled, opening it with polite restraint, using the edge of a knife to slice the card free, not tearing, never tearing an envelope open like a savage, never expecting it held my freedom.

A trust fund set up at my birth was paying out. In less time than it took to inhale, I had become a millionaire in my own right. I held my breath through my father's sermon; investment portfolios, a real estate opportunity in the appropriate neighborhood and plans for setting a wedding date, which would not only soothe my girlfriend's ruffled feathers

but also her father's, and last but not least, the nose to the grindstone, now it is going to get exciting spiel.

I shook his hand and thanked him for lunch, thanked him for his wisdom and guidance over the years and then, clutching the check to my chest, caught the first available flight to LAX.

That's not to say my parents raised a fool. I spent weeks in California by myself, shuffling between LA and SF. As much as I wanted to call Tony and let him know I was in town, I didn't. Jackie knew, but he would die before he would reveal a confidence. And, at the time, Jackie was still he, still in transition, still scared to go all the way. It would be years before he would become completely she.

Jackie was the only one privy to the dreams that had been forming in my head during my five-month confinement in Ohio. His Christmas Eve party had opened my eyes to a need. So many people without a place of their own to really party, to be themselves.

Insanely enough, all the plans jelled exactly one year later. All because Tony was tired of being the Top. It just wasn't in his nature. But in this our itineraries collided; he wanted me to find someone who could teach me to Top, but I saw a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Through some friends he arranged for me to attend a private party and, if I impressed them enough, they would teach me the ropes of being a Dominant. I was scared to death. Too much liquor and too many partners to count later, I was invited to The Dungeon.

Craig Michael, the party's Dungeon Master, had extended the invite. A local personality, albeit a bit on the insane side, he hailed from a prominent family and had the right kind of friends in all the right places. I played hell getting next to him because even in his own home, at his own party, he stayed hidden. I saw my chance to get close to him when he left his study long enough to fetch a glass of wine from the kitchen.

He was my height, thin, with long blond hair that hung to the middle of his back, he looked like a rock star or an aging surfer, too tan, face lined, especially around his mouth, as if once he'd smiled too much. Considering that, I don't think I have ever seen him smile; not really, not like the deep lines around his mouth promise he should. He had a wide, full mouth, a Carly Simon mouth. I decided then and there, crawling on my hands and knees after him, that I could definitely kiss that mouth to get my dreams to come true.

Yeah, I'd planned to share with him my plans even before I went to that party but had no idea that to get close to him, I'd have to seduce him.

Pleasure, pain, whips and chains, it was too much of a cliché and I was dead center and in it all the way up to my eyeballs. It was a dream, a slow motion dream.

Arms suspended over my head, body throbbing with a million welts, and Craig Michael's cock up my ass, ludicrous timing to be sure but possibly my only opportunity, I said, "I have a great idea, but I need your help."

Hours later, over coffee, I sketched out the entire plan for him. An abandoned warehouse near the Artist District was begging to be made into the area's most posh underground BDSM party place. There would be four levels: the first floor, public; the second, The Dungeon, a co-mingling level; the third, The Oasis, for fetish members only; and the fourth, The Attic, a group of very distinctive private rooms. A safe atmosphere to live out your wildest fantasies. The result took four years to complete. Lewd Larry's.

"Master?" Wide eyes peek around the edge of the bedroom door. Dark kohl makes

her eyes seem foreign, exotic. She pulls her lip between her teeth and my body's reaction is immediate, primal. She seems so damn innocent when she does that, so fucking vulnerable. Forbidden. I wait for her to join me in the hall. She doesn't. She hides behind the door and my eyes narrow suspiciously.

"Kitten?"

"Help me?" she asks in the barest of whispers.

My blood is simmering quite nicely through my veins at this point. I have never had so much trouble keeping my face under control. No expression. I push the door open and stride through it, hoping I am exuding impatience and authority.

Force of will keeps me immobile. She is still nude, her hair and make-up are incredible but she is still not ready. My teeth grind of their own volition. My mouth stays shut. She stares at me with those wide eyes, begging for something.

"I'm waiting. You're not dressed."

She rushes to the bed and shoves aside layers of tissue paper to retrieve a wisp of what appears to be lace. My eyes narrow even more as I stride over to her and yank it from her hands. Not lace, fishnet. I rummage through the tissue in the box. "Nothing else?" I demand.

"Matching belt and shoes."

Her answer sounds more like a question, my glance following her indicating hand. Italian leather shoes and belt, nice, very expensive, very Jackie, thinking that I will have a repeat of last night's performance. Not on your life, I think to myself. No, last night's stocking and stiletto show was a single engagement act. I take in the vision of this woman. Tall, slender, frail almost. My mark is still on her behind. No, no one will see her like this. She's too incredible, too enticing. It would take a saint to keep from bending her over and...

Her fingers are warm on my hand, a too brief devastating touch, as she takes the fishnets from my hand. "It stretches, but there are so many seams that have to be perfectly straight, for it to look right. Will you help me dress, Master?"

She holds it up, so that I can see it fully. It is a body suit complete with long sleeves and a turtleneck. I watch her sit down on the bed and pull the fabric over her toes and up her calves.

"I can keep it straight until I reach mid-thigh," she explains, standing and bending, inadvertently exposing herself to me as she carefully stretches the netting and adjusts the seams to run neatly up the back of her leg. She stands and pulls the netting over her hips, stopping to ask, "Is it straight? It has to be a neat line or it looks stupid."

I walk to her side and smooth the lines over her hips. "No, not straight, not completely."

My body responds with the unruliness of a seventeen-year-old and my thoughts turn back to how she would look bound and helpless. But, no, I have to go to the Club tonight. I shake away the image as I edge the fabric over her midriff and breasts, the fabric gives as she slides her arms into the sleeves, the seams want to wiggle, and I help her to adjust them. The fishnet is a rich, chocolate brown. Nice, much nicer than black would have been. She is too pale for black. I wonder how Jackie knew.

"The buttons?"

Kitten turns her back to me. Fifty glossy round buttons, fifty matching loop closures. This could take all night. She hands me a metal buttonhook.

“Great, Jackie thought of everything, didn’t she?”

She smiles at that and I am lost. I realize I have never seen her smile before.

“Your friend,” Kitten comments. “She signed the note. It was very nice, what she said, I’d like to thank her for the gift.”

“You’ll have the chance to thank her tonight, assuming we ever get there. What did she say?” I ask dumbly.

My hand trembles as it tries to subdue the surly buttons with the buttonhook. I plan to thank Jackie, too, she knew exactly what she was doing when she sent this outfit over.

Buttons. Old-fashioned buttons. Too many buttons to close over satiny soft skin. The fine down that follows the line of her spine bristles beneath my touch. Jackie is torturing me. I deserve it, no doubt, for some past sin.

“I mean, what she wrote. I guess she saw my picture in the paper. She said, ‘Beauty, the crowds have seen enough of your flesh for awhile, it’s time to tease them a little.’ Why do you think she would address me as Beauty?”

“You are beautiful, Kitten.” I answer absently. I hear her sigh and realize only then that she is not of the same opinion. I decide I would like to meet the piece of work who has not only taught her perfect fear, but also convinced her she is not beautiful.

“And if she wanted to hide my body, shouldn’t she have sent over a heavier fabric?”

I lift her gold collar and tuck it over the folded turtleneck before hooking the last five buttons.

“Done,” I say and turn her to face me. She has already tucked her feet into the awaiting heels and is reaching for the belt. My breath catches in my throat. “Jackie didn’t have any intention of hiding you, Kitten. Her intention is to display you perfectly. You are the jewel, the clothing merely the setting.”

I take the belt from her hand. It is a wide belt, with a wide clasp. As I close it around her waist, I realize its purpose. It is a lure. Like the ribbon on a package, it cries out *open me*. My fingers itch with anticipation. Seductive skin shadowed with fishnet. Each delicious curve of her rounded breasts shadowed, shimmering, begging to be touched. The shadowed dent of her belly button begging to be licked. The dark V of fine, dark hair begging, teasing.

God, it is going to be a very long night.

She lifts her foot to rest on the bed and I follow the inviting curve of her calf as she bends forward to buckle the strap that secures the four-inch pumps to her ankles. Without even realizing it, she has gained an unfair advantage. I would follow her anywhere. She lifts the other foot to the bed. *Damn*.

Displayed perfectly. Jackie, what are you trying to do to me?

* * * *

I can’t help myself, I’m ecstatic, excited. I haven’t been this ready to hit the Club since, well, a very long time. The crowd is uncontainable, the line waiting to get into the public areas snakes around the block. Even the Members Only entrance has a line.

We enter through the kitchens, not nearly as dramatic an entrance, but the service elevator will bypass the crowds and take us directly to the third floor. Our arrival is notably quiet. I inhale the intensity of the room. It is sensual and dark, hiding more secrets than could be tallied in a lifetime. The glowing brass body cages are all filled with glorious semi-nude victims. Kitten has a hard time taking her eyes off them as we circle

the room, skirting shadowed edges as we go to my regular table. When we are only a few tables away, I command her to her knees to crawl the rest of the way. No one has noticed our arrival, yet. It is after midnight and I was expected much, much earlier. My lips twitch at the note of surprise on Jackie's face. She has made herself and her pet of the moment quite at home at my table.

"Well, well, well, what a nice surprise! The man of the hour decides to put in an appearance after all." Jackie quips sarcastically. "In all my years of knowing you, Garrett, you have never been fashionably late."

"Buttons, Jackie?"

I enjoy the control she exerts over her twitching lips. "Did we enjoy ourselves?"

"Hmmm."

"Well, let me see the merchandise? Come, come, little pet. Come out of the shadows and let Aunt Jackie take a peek at you."

Chapter 6

“...where he reached for a sliver of alabaster moon. Silently he stretched his palm, opening his fingers to a sky that was all purples and mauves and ripe blue-browns—as if a moment could be lived so hard, it bruised.”

—David Leavitt, *The Page Turner*

Celia

I am not sure what I expected in Jackie, except that I know she isn't at all what I expected. She is a man. Or, at least, was a man at one time. I think.

One thing is for sure, that cleavage is real.

She stands over me and I'm pretty sure I'm cowering. She is well over six-and-a-half feet tall, probably closer to seven feet with the spikes she has on for shoes. She reaches out a well-manicured hand and, after looking to Garrett for approval, I slip my hand into hers. Her hands are huge compared to mine, but her fingers are long and graceful. She pulls me to my full height before she sits back down in the upholstered dining chair. Sitting, she greets me almost eye-to-eye.

Her natural beauty overwhelms me. She is dark skinned, a pure, deep russet. She has almond-shaped brown eyes, made even larger and more dramatic by her false eyelashes. Her full, sensual lips are artistically lined and filled with a slick, glossy lipstick. A platinum blonde wig wrapped in an elaborate French twist captures her classic elegance perfectly and makes her long, graceful neck seem even more dramatic.

“Well, aren't you the pretty one?” she asks with a smile.

I duck shyly, not even worthy of a compliment coming from her. She is something I will never be: elegant, sophisticated, beautiful.

“Thank you for the gift.” It is all I can think to say. Peeking up once more, I blurt out, “My God, you're so beautiful.”

Jackie smiles at me and she is even more radiant. Her hand cups my chin, then brushes over my shoulder. Garrett jerks the chain and I am on my knees. I assume he is not impressed by my declaration. I am not sure what punishment fits for breaking the chain, but after his small warning earlier, I know I'm not ready to find out.

My ass still burns from the feel of his hand. I peek from my pillow; he glares back. He thinks I have offended his friend, but I was only being honest. Taking the most cautious route, I curl into a ball on top of the pillow with my flaming rear end as far from his hand as I can get it. I bump Jackie's pet but he doesn't even lift his head. I realize he pretends to sleep, but more likely pouts. I wonder absently what landed him in the doghouse. Opening one eye, he winks, before closing it to pretend sleep once more.

Following his example, I close my eyes and, like any good investigative reporter, perk my ears, listening hard.

“Garrett!” Jackie exclaims. “Whatever is wrong with you? She's lovely, just lovely, and here you're scaring the poor child to death!”

“She's mine to scare,” he seethes.

“Without a doubt,” Jackie banters back.

Garrett lights a cigar and passes it to Jackie, then lights another for himself. “I’m sorry. I know I sound like I’m losing my mind. And I’ve missed dinner.”

“You sound possessive, maybe even a little jealous and I waited for you.”

“How long have we known each other?” Garrett queries. “Long enough for you to know I’m not the jealous type.”

“Well, maybe it’s time you were.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Garrett bit caustically.

“Nothing, honey. Forget it.” Jackie waves an annoyed hand toward the waiter. “Let’s order, I’m starved.”

Such disappointment in her voice makes me open my eyes. From my perch, I see them both.

Jackie grabs a breadstick from an open basket and nibbles on it. Garrett stays her hand, offering her an *I’m a dog* look just as the waiter arrives at their table and Jackie gives him an *I’ll get over it* wink as she places her order.

It is a long time before the silence is broken, even after the waiter leaves. I no longer close my eyes, realizing I am missing most of what is being said, not seeing the body language. I try to appear non-caring in my curled kitty-cat pose.

“You’re waiting for me to go first aren’t you?” Garrett asks with his famous playboy smile. It is the smile that graces the billboards along the freeway.

“Uh-huh,” Jackie counters with a pouty smirk. She peeks under the table at her sleeping pet, and, seeing that I, Garrett’s pet, am wide eyed, she winks at me before turning back to him. “You couldn’t have kept me away tonight! A quarter of a million dollars? What on earth were you thinking?”

Garrett snorts on his White Zinfandel. “I wasn’t...”

Salads interrupt anything he might have added and Jackie has the decency to keep the conversation as private as possible. “I just want to know one thing, is she worth it?”

Garrett twists his mouth, fidgets in his chair, even ruffles the tousled curls on my head before answering, “Every penny.”

I lift my brow, and this time it is he who winks—at me.

At a hailing from security, he excuses himself to speak to one of his security officers who stands waiting in the shadows.

Jackie’s elegantly arched brow lifts even higher, saying more than words ever could. “Would I love to be a fly on your wall for the next thirty days.”

* * * *

Something startles me awake and, for a moment, I am disoriented but then it all comes rushing back. I sigh and stretch, sitting half up, expecting to see Garrett, but I am left alone, obviously guarded by Jackie and her pet. I yawn again, trying to hide it behind my hand, not quite believing I slept. What is wrong with me that at home, I do not sleep, and yet, at Garrett’s I slept like the dead, and here, I slept enough to drool. I wipe my cheek. *Gross!*

“Long night last night, Beauty?” Jackie quips. She smokes a cigar and appears to be passing the time between courses with *Prometheus*, a premier SM magazine with intelligent articles and wonderful glossy photographs. I offer her a shy smile as I peek at what I’m missing—my copy being held with the rest of my mail—but remain silent.

A deep growl from the area of my stomach tells me that it has been too many hours, days, since my last real meal. I hide another yawn behind a stretch and realize I am stiff. Sleeping on a pillow is not comfortable. Sleeping on a pillow after being beaten within an inch of your life is plain torture. Though not beaten, not really; spanked and forced to submit to unbelievable pleasure that I don't even want to think about, yes, but not beaten. The muscles ache just the same—and I am dry. I can't remember ever being so thirsty.

Sitting back on my heels, I try to figure out how to communicate thirst to Garrett. The one thing he was absolutely adamant about was no speech in the Club.

Thankfully, I see Garrett returning just as the steaks arrive and I know relief is on the way.

I have been forgotten.

I am desolate, irritable.

Isn't there a rule in the Master/Slave handbook that says the Master will not forget to feed the slave? But no, he is too busy entertaining the myriad of well-wishers who stroll by the table to sneak a peek at his new slave. Any normal slave would be preening; I am forlorn. It is bad enough that I am hungry and thirsty, but I also have to pee. Add a million buttons and a man too busy to notice me means there is no relief in sight.

A savior. Garrett's friend Jackie has volunteered to see me to the Ladies' Room and back. I am thrilled, jubilant even, and I really don't want to know how she knew I was desperate. I hope I wasn't that obvious. Obviously, I was.

* * * *

I scowl and shake my head stubbornly. When Jackie said she was taking me to the Litter Box, I had no idea she really meant a litter box. A communal litter box. How sanitary is that? And I really don't care if it is an automatic scoop-away that probably cost the man a million dollars to have specially designed and built—it is still a litter box. Complete with clay sand.

Jackie stands at the ready with the buttonhook, an unhappy line forming behind us, my bladder about to explode any second. "I can't do it."

Gasps fly down the line like an echoing clap of thunder.

"Shit!" I exclaim and slap my hand over my mouth.

Jackie is already popping buttons. "Child, you can do that in the box, too."

I will never eat or drink again, if it means I have to experience that kind of humiliation. I will be embarrassed for the rest of the days of my life. I pissed in a freaking litter box, in full view of God and the twenty other women, and one man in the room with me. And yes, in that moment, when pee hit sand, I saw Jackie as a man not a woman. But I survived, and I feel so much better. I should really be even more appreciative to Jackie, because she swore she wouldn't tell Garrett about my lapse of outspokenness and she made the other women swear a vow of silence, too. The fresh, angry welts on my ass had nothing to do with their decision, I'm sure. One of the welts, in the perfect shape of Garrett's hand, would form a perfectly shaped bruise, I was assured by at least four women. They seemed envious, incredulously enough.

Oh, oh, oh. Food, glorious food. A tidbit of steak offered by Jackie's hand. I glance at Garrett. His glare tells me to not even think about it. I flop in a pout. The tidbit goes to her quickly perking Pekinese. Yes, a Pekinese, because he has way too much hair and his yipping is even more irritating than the poodle's. And he's happy, way too damn happy.

Damn.

I hiss at the bouncing, yipping, drooling, don't even think about drooling on me, Pekinese! *Get away, get away. Hiss, hiss.*

Oh, yes, saved by my Master!

Okay, I admit it, I am getting into the dog/cat thing way too much. And, aside from the litter box, it hasn't been too bad. Especially now that I am in Garrett's lap, being scratched behind the ears, and fed tidbits of steak from his hand. I admit the whole game is fun. Besides, I have my eyes on the cheesecake with Godiva chocolate icing that just hit our table.

Dumped again.

With no dessert even. And dumb me didn't even get a drink while I was in his lap.

Chapter 7

*Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering,
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal fearing, ever dared to dream before.*

—Edgar Allen Poe

Garrett

I fold the letter into eighths, though not a letter, not really; a note formed by a patchwork of letters cut from newspapers and magazines, meticulously pasted to form a mere sentence:

I AM WATCHING

It is so tattered and well-worn at this point that small paper fibers dust off and cling to my fingertips with each read. But I keep it still. Folding and unfolding, reading, and rereading. A reminder, perhaps of my loss; perhaps my future fate; or perhaps as a talisman.

It is with me—like him, the watcher—always.

George Kirkpatrick is pacing and his pacing is making me insane. He is the calmest, most rational handler I have on staff, my Number One, and he is pacing the length of my office.

His blond hair and preppy countenance make him seem better suited for the tennis courts of LA or the golf clubs of Solvang. But no, he will tell you that in his past, he gave up a very successful LA psychiatric practice to get lost in the fantasy, a time before he made fantasy real life.

Worse, I watch him and he watches me, watching him.

He knows I'm nervous, a sixth sense, a holdover from his past life. In that, we are alike. I know that the extraordinarily large crowd made him nervous, that he, too, sees their numbers as a dangerous invasion into our inner domain, our safe world laid open and exposed to all manner of scrutiny. But we will survive this, we always do. It is just the phenomena following the big auction; everyone wants a piece of the media frenzy, regardless of which side they are on. The Puritans want us shut down; but no, here we are safe. Craig Michael has seen to that even though he wanted no part in being partners. But because of his early influence in the project, his friends will keep us safe here until we are too old to even enjoy it—if only Tony were here to see our success. Sadly, it was the publicity of his horrific murder that put us on the tour map, made us international news.

George walks over to the window and looks down. Without looking, I know the crowd wraps around the block. Distracted for the moment, he taps the marble windowsill and I close my eyes against his nervousness.

“You’re thinking about Tony,” George spasms into my mind.

“Hard not to tonight,” I answer, keeping my eyes tightly closed. “That’s why you’re here isn’t it? To eavesdrop on my emotions, chew me up and digest me and make me think that maybe I really am as crazy and ill-adjusted as the rest of the world thinks I am.”

“The rest of the world?” He chuckles. “No, Garrett, we gave up on the rest of the world a long time ago, my friend. This is about our world. I want to make sure that you are all right in *our world*.”

“Still waiting for my walls to crumble, aren’t you?”

“Not necessarily.”

“But?” I open my eyes and stand. Defensive. George has turned to lean into the sill, his back pressed against the dark glass. He takes in my posture, my arms crossed, wound tight.

“Move on, Garrett. It’s time.” He closes the distance between us.

“Isn’t that what happened last night, George? I moved on?”

He gives me that look, that psychiatrist look from his past. Then he pushes away from the window and comes toward me. *No, George, don’t do it. Damn, I’m gonna fall apart if you do this. Don’t hug me.* My mind screams in silent frustration and George hears only what he wants to. I fall into his arms, struggling not to lose the fragile hold I have on myself and then I am released, freefalling into dead air space. I look up to see George leaving.

“The others are here,” he says from the doorway.

I shake my head to clear my thoughts and reach for the Scotch beading raindrops on top of the file I’ve avoided all evening. The Scotch is smooth with little bite, waiting until it hits my belly to release its burning fury. I am warmed instantly, but still not ready to face the demons unearthed by Joel Winston, my security leader. He waits with them, my inner circle, the men and women who came together to co-create the phenomena known as Lewd Larry’s. He hopes to put the fear of God into them, singing the same song of Armageddon that he has been singing for four years in a row. But I see little hope of them developing fear at this late date; no, we’ve been through too much together to feel fear. Especially over something as trivial as the letters.

They begin arriving on the anniversary of Tony’s death. And end...when? When the killer feels I have been tortured enough? Because they do end—as abruptly as they began. The only problem tonight is that a letter arrived three months and two days too early.

I check my hand for steadiness as I lift the glass to my lips. From the shadows, Thomas grabs my hand and reprimands me soundly. “Dead brain cells don’t feel. Life is about feeling.”

I had forgotten he was in the room with us. I think he does it on purpose, blending in with the furniture, not moving, waiting until he’s forgotten, so that when he pounces it is a shock. I glare at him impatiently until he releases my wrist so that I can take a long swallow. Only after I feel the long, slow burn deep in my belly can I seethe at him with any conviction. “Today? I don’t need to feel this.”

A rap at the door draws both our attention. Joel.

“Still waiting,” he announces with bored irritation.

“We don’t have time for this tonight, Joel,” I bark from behind my desk. Safe territory. “We have a big night ahead of us, bigger than last night even—if you haven’t noticed!”

“Fine!” Joel barks, equally gruff, holding out the envelope to me for emphasis, challenging, “Just you and me. I’ll be extra fast.”

My jaw grinds sharply. I should have fired Joel four and a half years ago, and if he

weren't so fucking good at his job, I would have, based solely on the fact that I hate hypocrites. He hates us, hates the bondage, hates the homosexuality, hates anything that doesn't fit into his nice tidy world of right and wrong. Worse, he hates himself, for showing me compassion the night Tony died, for holding me longer than I needed to be held, wiping my tears and snot away when I didn't have strength to do it for myself, and for whispering promises against my cheek that would keep him morally bound to me and this place long after he retained any desire to do so.

Thomas comes to my rescue. "Deprive us of our fun, Joel? You're too harsh."

"And you're a sick man, Mr. Stephanopolis," Joel counters.

I smile, or at least I think it falls somewhere between a smirk and a grin. I can't help myself. Yes, Joel thinks we're all sick and it is because he isn't into our games that I hired him in the first place. He would do his job and wouldn't get distracted—this place thrives on distraction.

Stepping between them, I push Thomas into the conference room ahead of me, knowing Joel will follow. "Stop. You are both worse than two kids. My people need to know the letters have started again and it's my decision that we will see this latest scare attempt together. End of it."

My guts clench as we enter the conference room. It could be a boardroom in any large company in America: neat and tidy, a big money room, a rare, professional atmosphere in our workplace. Funny, Joel and I are the only ones wearing suits. The rest of my crew are dressed for work, leather prevailing, black the color of choice with a splash of red here and there; but no white, I detest white on my Dominants.

Joel starts the meeting and, after a too quick brief and a warning to be careful, his job is done. He is frustrated and his frustration swells the room. The walls move closer, containing us for a moment. A million emotions restrained. The room is tense, but it's not the tension you would expect. They, like me, are bored with the whole the killer is back routine. Four and a half years waiting and the sky hasn't fallen yet.

Out of duty, I offer, "It's okay to be freaked out by this guy and I'll understand if any of you need a break from this scene for awhile, at least until this latest assault is over..."

I leave it hanging, out there. Waiting. Leaving so much unsaid, but I know there will be no takers, as does Joel. He slams out of the room as I dismiss my handlers with a shrug. "Work the crowd, people. We have a party to start."

A sigh sweeps the room. Subdued tension sparks a new sensual mood. Following the hard work of putting together the auction, we are all more than ready for a party night of our own. It promises to be a slow, delicious, brain orgasm night.

George and Thomas remain behind. Expectant.

The tick and swing of a new age pendulum clock is the only sound.

"This one is different," I begin. Without further ado, I drop the contents of the envelope onto the table. A note, more or less, with the words and letters all carefully clipped from newspapers and magazines. Identical, almost, to the one I carry in my wallet.

YOUR SOUL IS MINE. I DON'T SHARE

A scattering of photographs fall out with the letter. Tony. Naked. Mutilated. In various stages of pre-death.

I look out the window where a gloomy mist shrouds the lights from the street with eerie halos. A heavy sigh escapes my lips before I can stop it, leaving my chest tight and

empty. I look to see if anyone noticed, but no one looks me in the eye. I look back to the window, remembering with sudden clarity the mist that surrounded us at the graveyard, a heavy white fog. Clouds fallen from the sky.

George slides the letter toward him, barely touching it with the tip of an ice pick pulled from a slide in his pants. Thomas, on the other hand, doesn't react. He just observes from his perch atop the far end of the table.

"It's a warning," George offers. "Multifaceted, it could be construed..."

I look at the ceiling for strength. From the corner of my eye, I see Thomas slide off the table. A razor blade flashes across one of the photos of Tony before either of us can react. And then another. An expensive butane lighter arcs brilliant blue in Thomas' hand. He holds the four-inch flame against the photo halves that contain the heads. Tony's face. His eyes are glazed; his mouth is grimaced until, with quick ignition, they turn to ash.

"That was evidence, Thomas. Police evidence. We have notified the police, haven't we?" George says.

I frown. When George gets nervous, he speaks in the collective of us and we. It must be a shrink thing, or maybe just a doctor thing. It seems like my father used to do the same thing. When was that? It feels like a hundred years ago.

"He wants you to see this," Thomas hisses, ignoring George and waving one of the mutilated body images before my nose. "Forget the who. Look at what he wants you to see."

Acid erupts from my stomach, searing the back of my throat. I jerk my face away, forcing myself to not vomit.

George steps between us and I wait for it to come to blows, but it doesn't. In their own unique ways, they are equals, repelling each other to their separate corners.

"Look, all I'm saying is that he wants you to see something specific." His words are mumbled, distracted. I glance toward him and see that he is sitting on the edge of the table again, eating the remaining half of the club sandwich he didn't finish before the meeting. He gulps Pepsi from a can. The pictures don't affect him in the least and I am continually amazed by his ability to divide his mind. Emotion. No emotion. I think there was a time when I could do that, but it is so far away right now, it is only a distant memory of who I might have been.

George fidgets then sits. "So, Lord Fyre, are you going to keep us in fucking suspense all night? Or are you going to reveal your thoughts?"

Okay, so it's going to get ugly now. There is no longer time for niceties and birth names. It's time to cut the crap. Thomas ignores George and stalks over to me. "See it for what it is."

I see the blue flame, feel its heat along my jawbone, but it is quick, too quick to do damage; yet he has my undivided attention. I stare at the blue flame still so near my face as he hisses, "Whatever happened to Ice? Whatever happened to that man who was one of us? Lewd is soft. Lewd couldn't control Beast. Beast wouldn't even recognize Lewd."

I flinch at the sound of Tony's slave name. It's been a long time since any of us have used it. The flame is drawn along the underside of my jaw again. This time the heat is close enough to sear hair. I wait for the burn but it doesn't come. I hope my disappointment doesn't show.

"You were the best student I ever had, Ice. You were more like me than any of the others..."

He talks and I am mesmerized, transported back into time, once more Ice, if only just for a moment. Fyre lifts his palm, stiff and ready. The other hand shoots the blue flame into his waiting flesh. His palm burns mere inches from my face, I can smell the burning flesh, but he doesn't even flinch.

"Ice, see what I see." The flame vanishes and screaming scarlet skin glares at me. I blink and turn to the pictures.

"You don't have to, Garrett," George cautions.

Garrett? No, Garrett isn't here. Garrett is too fun loving for this, he fled with the flame. Lewd stayed, waiting for the flame to stray, but he too is too weak for this.

Only Ice can see what Fyre sees. Images, not the man.

Vocal cords sliced with exacting precision to negate the need for a gag. Nipples and fingerprints destroyed by incisive flame. Traces of sperm everywhere—not the killer's, Tony's; ditto on the blood; at least according to forensics.

Chest, back, thighs shredded to strips of flesh and blood, dark stripes left by a bullwhip, each mark separate and perfect. Last, there is the photo, a still life really, of egg-shaped testes, laying on one of our cornflower blue dinner plates. They were removed with such surgical precision from Tony's scrotum that there was almost no loss of blood.

Fyre stabs the end of his knife into the final photo, a photo taken last night of me on stage, Kitten kneeling at my feet.

My mind clicks and places what I know to be true. Truth that has been there all along, even though the police ruled it a hate crime, a fag killer, a statement. It was brushed under the rug of a dozen similar killings. But the truth that I didn't want to see, maybe that all but Fyre refused to see, is that the killer is one of us. Fyre sees the truth dawn in my eyes and reflect back at him when I finally look at him once more.

"He offers us a masterpiece," I mumble abhorrently, low and beneath my breath. "He's the Master, I'm his slave. He allows me the pleasures I have for as long as it amuses him."

"Still Ice," he acknowledges, my name merely a sigh on his breath, and then he is gone, managing to toss George a twisted smile before he closes the door.

* * * *

Long after I am left alone, I sit at my desk, seeing the photos but also seeing what Thomas as Fyre made me realize tonight. I wonder how long he's known. It hardly matters, it matters only that he allowed me to see what my sixth sense has known all along.

I feel he has been waiting, waiting for the time it was safe to resurrect Ice from the dead and last night, because of the auction, I must have signaled a readiness. Fyre could always see in me what others could not—just as it was with us the very first time we met.

I was still new to San Francisco then, but had managed to get myself invited to a munch: a chance for sadomasochists to chat, snack, meet like minded individuals, and in some cases, link up to play.

We'd congregated at a Malibu beach house that seemed destined to topple with the first drop of rain. But it was a big, sprawling ranch that offered both mingling areas and private rooms. I had just arrived when he introduced himself as Thomas, a rarity at such meetings where stage names are more often used, and I responded, "Garrett." That I, too,

had used my birth name seemed to please him. He smiled. A good-natured, candid smile. I would later find out that such a smile rarely ever surfaces.

“Well, Garrett, are you here to eat—or *play*?”

There was something about his manner. He was a leader among men, not a bystander in any sense of the word. He had olive skin, shoulder-length dark hair and he sported a goatee. Tufts of thick, dark hair poked out from beneath the rounded edge of his t-shirt collar, leading me to believe he had an abundance of chest hair. His eyes held intelligence and perhaps a bit of unholiness, sparking a primal lust in me stronger even than the lust prompted by Tony; but Tony wasn’t there, not physically, though always lingering somewhere in the back of my brain.

Young, horny, daring...I was more than ready for an adventure, and if Thomas promised nothing else, he would prove to be an adventure.

Since he had taken the lead, I assumed he would Top. It never occurred to me that he might be a gay basher, or a threat of any kind, even though I had at first figured him for straight, perhaps bi. At that point it didn’t matter, because he had all the right attributes to inspire my baser instincts—bulging muscles, audacity, arrogance, and an unnamable sensuality, a charisma that one doesn’t find everyday.

I am tall, six foot, maybe a little more. He stood a head taller than I and it didn’t seem to bother him in the least that I had rocked back on my heels, sizing him up. His self-confidence in itself was erotic.

I leaned forward then and whispered, “Let’s play.”

He nodded at that and, matching my mannerisms, leaned forward before saying, “Then let’s rock. But not here. Does that make you nervous, Garrett?”

“Not really. Do you have someplace special in mind?” I answered with a nonchalant shrug that made him chuckle.

“Definitely.”

So we left the munch in separate cars and I followed his roaring black Firebird in my staid blue Honda to a deserted stretch of beach. Even if I was concerned at this point, I maintained my stance of bored indulgence. This seemed to only amuse him more. I crossed my arms and watched him pull what appeared to be a small suitcase from the trunk of his Firebird.

“Toys,” he offered before leading me into the darkness. A rolling fog engulfed us in her embrace. We resurfaced beside some battered wood pilings, the remains of a long-gone pier. He set down his case of toys and opened it. Now, I have to admit, at this point my blood must have thinned, because I know I wasn’t getting enough oxygen to my brain. And before this moment, I had never thought a mere mortal man could scare me—and maybe fear at this point was too harsh a term, even though my heart was racing and my palms were sweaty. I will say I was definitely nervous. Okay, okay, scared shitless to be exact.

“Strip for me, Garrett.”

The command was sudden, no small talk about the gray clouds or swirling tide, and I was just as instantly mesmerized by the sensual charisma of his voice.

I was christened *Ice* that night, by *Lord Fyre*. I refused to melt under the harshest conditions. Tied to the pile as the tide crashed in and, before that, used in some of the most painful and humiliating of ways.

“You’re a rare breed, Ice,” he told me after he’d cut me loose and started cleaning

me up. I was shaking, whether from cold, from shock, or from the intensity of my feelings for the man who was so tenderly wiping away the evidence of his abuse, I am not sure.

I was stunned when he said, "I want you to agree to be my student. I want to teach you to be a Master Dominant. But before you say yes or no, you need to know that if you do this, I am going to take over complete control of you. Every thought, feeling, emotion, sensation—it will all be at my discretion. The time for safe-words and scenes is over. This will be real life for you; so, I don't want you to answer right now."

He wrapped me in a heavy wool blanket and the sun was just forcing its way through the dense fog. It promised to be a hot, muggy day, the temperature already hovering mid-eighty, but I was freezing, shaking to my core.

I couldn't have made a decision then.

There was too much to consider.

"Two weeks," he added. "Think about it and meet me back here with your answer."

Two weeks wasn't possibly long enough. Was it?

Looking back, I realize I'd already made my decision; and he'd known it, too. His sixth sense had led him to me, culled me from the crowd, transformed me not into a Dominant, but a Master Dominant.

* * * *

My office is my refuge, my sanctuary—usually. Tonight, it is my cage. I wanted time alone post-meeting with the crew; post-revelations from Fyre; but time alone turned into a constant barrage of phone calls, door taps, and kitchen emergencies. In a rush I try to flee, planning on taking Kitten home and figuring out what in the hell I'm going to do with her; but Hillary, my personal assistant, flags me down, insisting I have calls waiting on lines one through seven. Calls she assures me only I can deal with. But I am in no mood for the politics of good business tonight.

Irate reporters on lines three, five, and seven, I forward to Joel. I figure he is the one responsible for the press block, he can be the one to deal with the repercussions. A VIP on line two I delegate to Bobby, my kitchen manager. One and four I let dangle as I reach for my vibrating cell phone. It tells me the night is not going to get any better. I read the illuminated number—Craig. I really have no time for this. Not now. Not tonight. Damn, he is probably standing in the VIP line, demanding entrance right now. Not a chance in that happening, considering I'm already violating more codes than they have on the books, according to the Fire Marshall.

I don't answer, pressing ignore. The phone immediately vibrates again. How long can I keep avoiding him? I answer, knowing if I keep answering, he will never take the hint.

"Garrett, thank god, I'm stuck in this blasted line. Get me in."

"Wish I could, Craig, but the Fire Marshall threatened to close us down if we let one more body in here. Seriously, they're at the exit counting as people leave, I'm facing serious fines here."

"I'll take care of it. Poof, no fines. I'd take care of you, too, if you'd just let me," he whispers into the phone, the crowd around him coming through the receiver louder than he. "Let me take care of you, Garrett."

"Craig," I sigh, not knowing what to say anymore, after five years of saying no...

“Do you remember the night I met you? It was magic, Garrett. You were magic. I’ve never felt the way I felt with you—not before—not since. I need you.”

“Craig,” I choke out his name, closing my eyes, shutting down my ears against his pleas. “I can’t, I’m sorry. I’ll get you into the club, but I’m just not able to make any commitments in my life.” I hang up on him, without saying good-bye. Rude, but necessary. I am shocked when the phone vibrates in my palm—George. I consider ignoring his call, but George rarely calls my cell unless it is a full-fledged emergency. Adrenaline speeds through my veins even before George finishes the sentence. “It’s Kitten. You better come to the dining room.”

Oh god! I’d forgotten! I close my eyes, heart pounding like mad. “Is she...” I leave the question unasked. What do I ask? Safe? Hurt? Alive?

“Just come to the dining room, Garrett. Your slave is causing problems.”

Chapter 8

“You...you will repent of this!”

—Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*

Celia

The man is a social butterfly. I have never seen anyone cover a room as he does. Everyone loves Lewd Larry. Except right now, the everyone seems to be crowding a little too close to our table. The main focal point being me. And I don't really understand it. Sure, the man was insane and spent way too much money, and I'm sure they all think they have to take a peek just so they can go home and tell their friends they saw the quarter-of-a-million-dollar slave—but hell, it's just me. *Go away, already.*

Hissing doesn't work.

I hiss anyway, and paw at the air.

I make a great show of taking a bath, thinking that they would get bored watching me, pretending to be a cat, licking myself clean. Obviously not, the crowd doubles around our table.

I see Garrett enter, double time, but then he comes to a complete halt and, like the crowd, looks at me, though more pointedly than the crowd. He gives me *that* look. But I figure, you know, Buddy, if this is what it takes to get you to notice me, so that I can at least communicate that I need a drink of water—I'll take a really long bath.

Locking his gaze with mine, I stop licking my hand but only to stroke my head and face with my damp paw; going right from there to licking down the length of my arm, slowly, lots of tongue, never taking my eyes off his.

He doesn't look away; he doesn't even blink.

Jackie titters. She'd given me a warning glance when I'd climbed on top of the table in the first place; however, I knew I wasn't in trouble, not with her anyway, when she granted me one of her amazing full-face smiles. She, at least, is enjoying the show. And I have not felt this good, this free, in years. Making a complete fool of yourself in public is very liberating, I decide to do it more often.

I pull my knee up to my face and catch the bend under my shoulder, thank you very much three years of yoga, and lick the length of my stiletto.

Uh-oh, uh-oh, I may have gone too far.

Garrett moves into action, men in black at his heels. To my surprise, they make a human shield between me and everyone else. I am relieved they do not intend to put me in the stocks, but instead are just shooing away the crowd.

Now is my chance. *Hello! Thirsty over here! How do I communicate thirsty?*

I rub against Garrett's legs, he pets my head. Without being invited, I insinuate myself on Garrett's lap and rub my cheek against his, obviously he is trying to have a serious talk with Jackie because he bats me away, but I don't care. Water is a necessary nutrient for survival. Water and caffeine, and I haven't had my fair share of either today.

“Don't worry Garrett, I was babysitting her.”

“Were you, Jackie? If something had happened, could you have protected her?”

“Garrett! How dare you insinuate I wouldn’t!”

Very carefully, I rearrange on Garrett’s lap and poke my nose at his water glass. Surely, he will notice this.

“Kitten, enough!”

His voice is too harsh, I am back on my pillow, and he is paying no attention to the fact that I am glaring menacingly at him. It’s just a good thing I’m not a cougar, or I’d have gone for the jugular by now.

Damn. He’s flitting away again.

Okay, drastic times call for drastic measures. I am a cat. I had to use a freaking litter box, for crying out loud. So, I reason, my only course of action is to behave like a cat.

Jackie catches my eye and shakes her head no.

I haven’t done anything yet! How could she possibly know I’m planning on anything?

Like a true feline, I put my haughty little nose in the air and climb into Garrett’s chair. Two seconds later, I am bent over his water glass, lapping to my hearts content. Jackie’s peels of laughter draw the attention of the entire room. I lap faster. The water is too far down for me to reach with my tongue. In a moment of pure compassion, Jackie slides her full glass toward me and I am happily lapping again.

“Kitten!” The bellow startles me from across the room. “Get the hell off my table!”

“Hmmm?” I look up in time to see an angry freight train barreling toward me.

Shit! Too late, I realize that wolfing down the cheesecake might not have been a good idea and, in a sheer fit of panic, I fly the opposite direction of Garrett.

Silverware and water glasses fly, but I don’t care. Rage. Bloodlust. I’ve seen it too often not to know what it means to my hide. Scurrying between legs on hands and knees, I dive behind the bar.

“Kitten! Don’t you dare hide from me!”

His bellow rattles my teeth, or maybe it’s just because I’m shaking. I duck further into the corner, behind the sturdy legs of a male bartender. The bartender wants nothing to do with me, picking me up and tossing me out from behind his bar. I loiter in its shadow as nonchalantly as I can.

Jackie has Garrett pinned in a corner and, from the look on his face, he is none to comfortable about the whole thing. It appears I owe Jackie, a lot. At least she stopped him from throttling me and I think it’s going to be okay. Sure, I screwed up, really big screwed up, but at least the rage has left his eyes.

And he has every right to be angry. Technically, I haven’t even been a slave for twenty-four hours. And I’m a horrible slave. I’ll have to remember not to use it on my next resume, and there is no doubt I will be filling out many resumes in my future. Of course, Garrett will make me pay in skin for tonight’s little disaster, and Mr. Bosko...

Chapter 9

*Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, Doubting, dreaming
dreams no mortal fearing, ever dared to dream before.*

—Edgar Allen Poe

Garrett

“Kitten! In front of me now!”

“Garrett, mind if I offer a suggestion?” Jackie offers quietly.

“Yes!” I shout loud enough for it to bounce off Jackie and echo through the crowd.

“Yes, I’m drawing a crowd—again, and no, I don’t care that I am!”

Laying her flat palm on my shoulder in a pat I am sure is meant to calm or quiet me, she sidles close enough behind me that I feel the heat coming off her body, her thigh molding into the back of mine. If I didn’t know her so well I would think she was trying to be the seductress, but no, I know her very well and her actions are for flourish. I jerk away, not in the mood to be calmed or quieted. She moves with me in an odd way resembling a dance move made famous by Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

“Calm down, Garrett. This isn’t going to get you anywhere. Except maybe on the front page of every newspaper and magazine represented here tonight.”

“I don’t care,” I hiss, lowering my voice, matching her calmer tone, even though I don’t want to, her body contact, now molding from breast to knee along my backside, having her desired effect even though I want to rant and rave and scream. I want to force Kitten to behave.

“Courtesy of Joel, there is a press block, remember? Like I give a shit what the press thinks anyway.”

“Well, press block or not, they’re here in full force. And yes, you do care, very much so. Your public image is very important to you and don’t you dare even try to deny it.”

Jackie rubs away the tension in my neck, continuing to talk through the side of her mouth, trying not to move her lips, since every eye is now on us. “Everything you stand for is on the line right now. How many lectures, classes, and seminars have you given on the training and controlling of the feline and canine persona? How many articles do you have floating around here and abroad? Show them your techniques work. Aren’t you the one who just told me how desperate you are to teach that girl to trust again?”

I run my hand through my hair. “Yes, yes, yes, but...”

“No buts, Garrett. This is too big, bigger than just you, bigger than just her. She’s a feline. You’re her Master. Deal with it.”

“Shit! You know I hate you, don’t you? Damn, Jackie, why are you always right?”

Turning to face the avid crowd, I shrug and put on my best showman smile. “You gotta love those cats! Anybody got any catnip?” I laugh, I joke, I pantomime, until finally, the crowd is convinced the feral cat show is over. The few who remain loitering soon give up and move on when they see Jackie and me retire to a fresh table. We order coffee and dessert.

“Damn, Jackie, I don’t even know what happened.”

“Why you exploded?”

“No, why she misbehaved. First the public bath, then the whole on top of the table fiasco. I mean, I just don’t get it.”

“You ignored her all night. What was she supposed to do? I mean she is relying on you for everything. Food, water, bathroom breaks, all of which, you blatantly forgot. But mostly, just attention. You’re a hard act to follow Garrett—you really are the man of the hour and you haven’t had to share the limelight for a long time—and I think that is the real reason you lost it. She’s cute. A rival even for past canine outbursts.”

“Stop. Don’t even go there,” I warn. “I’ll admit I blew it. And you’re right, I’m not used to having to do the whole twenty-four, seven thing any more, but don’t try to tell me this has anything to do with Tony.”

“Did I mention Tony?”

“You implied. And damn it, you’re right.” I run my fingers through my hair. “I think it’s this last batch of letters, damn it. Everything is floating on the surface again. It’s making me a little nuts. And now, this woman...”

Jackie doesn’t interrupt.

Suddenly exhausted, I rub my face, scratch my head, anything to keep from looking into those eyes that seem to know me like a book. Finally, I can’t help but look, seeing her eyes crinkled with laughter, even as I burst with it.

“This isn’t funny!” I insist.

“Not at all,” she agrees, hiding her mouth behind her hand.

“She is a showstopper, isn’t she?” I smile, wider than I’ve smiled for real, not stage, in a very long time.

“She sure is, and I think she’s deserving of a little attention. Look.” Jackie points with her eyes toward Kitten, who peeks around the edge of the bar. The bartender sweeps her with a broom completely from his territory. “Just remember, tough guy, feline persona.”

Kneeling, I hold out my hand, “Here, Kitty.” I contain my snicker when she sticks her nose in the air and feigns disinterest.

“Kitty, Kitty, Kitty, time to eat!” I call, lyrically.

Coming to all fours, she wiggles her ass and takes a step forward, still looking slightly disinterested but at least moving forward. I back up, still facing her but duck-walking backward to my seat until I am close enough to the chair to sit. She follows ever so slowly, her muscles flexing with each step. If she only knew how sexy she was...I’d be in trouble. As it is, I honestly believe she has no idea what she is doing to me.

God, I want this woman, more than I have ever wanted any being in my life, including Tony, and that is unbelievable but true. I want to close my eyes to that particular truth, but I can’t now that I’ve faced it. I loved him, I lusted after him, but what this woman has done to my insides in a matter of hours, it took Tony and I years to create. I watch her swaying ever so nonchalantly and accept that she is crawling her way into my heart.

She finally reaches me, rubs my leg with the entire length of her body before arching under the chair between my legs, offering me the perfect sight of her round ass, lifted and swaying, before disappearing under my chair. She reappears on my opposite side rubbing my other leg. Reaching down, I wrap my palms around her face, hugging her face,

bending toward her, until we are nose to nose, gaze to gaze. I pray she doesn't feel the pounding in my heart, the liquid need pulsing through my veins. If she does, I am doomed.

I have to punish her, don't I? Of course I do. I made the damn rules. Strict rules. If other Masters allowed their Slaves to misbehave, as mine did tonight, they'd be looking at expulsion from the Club. It's the order of things, it maintains control. And a Sex Club without control is dangerous.

I feed her first, feeling guilty for my neglect, hoping I can make her feel safe and secure before the handlers come. Club punishment is never fun. It is punishment, period. It is the way it has to be. And if I don't see the job done, there will be hell to pay with the other *Doms*.

Already they are creeping out from the shadows, circling like vultures. Just waiting for me to hand her over, so that they can have the privilege of taming her. That isn't happening. The job will be done and done right—at my discretion, on my timetable, by my rules.

I hope she understands.

God, I'm not sure I understand it all.

Jackie is no help whatsoever, clicking her fingernails on the tablecloth, counting off the minutes it takes me to do this. She is right, of course. If it had been Tony, he would have been shackled in the stocks by now, or at the very least tethered to the whipping post.

Tony thrived here, craving public humiliation and loving pain. Kitten is different, new to me, not yet trusting.

Soon, I will teach her to trust me.

Soon, I will teach her to enjoy the pain.

But it won't be tonight. Tonight she is going to hate me. It would be so easy to walk away. To just hide in the office until it is done, but I won't do that. I won't abandon her.

She has cleaned my plate and we have shared at least three glasses of wine, though admittedly I swallowed more than she as she tried to suck the sips from between my lips. I purposely chose the least painful punishment; actually, there will be no pain. The only pain she will ever feel will be at my hand. I hope she appreciates my efforts.

Though the punishment I have chosen is probably the most humiliating we have here. Which is worse, pain or humiliation, I keep asking myself. I wish I knew. But only she has the answer to such a question and I sure as hell can't ask her. I'm the Master, she's the Slave, so why does it suddenly seem like our positions are reversed?

"It's time, Garrett," Jackie interrupts my thoughts.

"I know."

I know all too well. Waving the handlers aside, I scoop Kitten into my arms. She knows, too. Through the meal, she was tense, waiting, and now she just stares at me with those wide, caught in the light doe eyes. Damn. I'm supposed to enjoy this.

"Trust me, Kitten?" I whisper, so that none but she hears.

My heart swells with even more tenderness when she nods. Then she realizes her mistake, such a slight mistake, and brushes her cheek against mine—twice. One of my men in black steps forward to take her from me, but I shake my head no. Any other owner wouldn't be given the same privilege and, for the first time in my life, I am using the ace up my sleeve. I own the place, damn it, it's my right. I feel her muscles tense in

my arms.

“Sh-h, it’s all right, Kitten. Trust me.”

The clear glass isolation sphere is directly in front of me. God, I hate this; I have never been good with isolation. It is one of the worst things I was forced to endure during my training. Too much time to think. Too much time to self-analyze. Too much time to worry about the what next.

I stand Kitten in the center, she is trembling. Fear in this case is good. It will help her understand the importance of obedience here, especially here, where the games can get very, very rough for the one who regularly disobeys. I try to convince myself that this is for the good of the slave, to protect her from herself, to protect her from us. The us in this case being the other Doms. A disobedient slave is what gives spice to an otherwise monotonous routine. Routine is the Doms’ hell in a place such as this.

I secure her feet with the ankle cuffs. I slide my hands up the length of her beautiful legs, I can’t help myself. She is so beautiful. I raise her arms one at a time and secure them in the wrist cuffs. My fingers swirl around the tender skin of her wrists before I lock the cuffs in place. Cuffs not made for comfort, but stainless steel for punishment. She stands spread eagle and such a beautiful sight. Naked beneath the fishnet, exposed, yet fully clothed. I flip the switch that floods light from both top and bottom and she sees herself for the first time in the mirrored glass that will surround her. She can’t see out, but everyone else can see in. She is embarrassed already by what she sees and a silent tear slides down her face. I lean forward to kiss it away, whispering against her face, “No tears Kitten, no smeared makeup, no runny nose. I’m here with you, even when you can’t see me, know that I am here with you.”

My man in black hands me the ball gag and I almost don’t take it from him.

Kitten is not impressed, I see it in her eyes. There isn’t much worse than having to see yourself trussed up and gagged, although, she is about to find out the worse. I lean forward and kiss her on the mouth. She doesn’t want me to kiss her, but I need to seal this bargain, even if she doesn’t. I realize I haven’t kissed her yet. I have teased her with coffee and water, wine and champagne, but I have never truly kissed her. I do my best to make this the best kiss I have ever given anyone, ever, in my life. I bite her lips, stroke the inside of her with my tongue, and steal her breath away. I see it in her eyes. The same eyes that well with tears as I replace my tongue with the bright-red rubber ball inside her mouth.

She sees herself when I back away, she shakes her head no. But it is too late and she knows it.

She shudders from her head to her toes and I see the question forming in her eyes, now what? Her wrists twist in the shackles, but she knows there is no escape. I guess it’s just human nature to try. I press a second button and a mechanism slides, pulling both the wrist and ankle cuffs more taut to the walls. Spread eagle and stretched mercilessly, I know it doesn’t really hurt, not much anyway, but it makes the breath catch and the heart pound faster. And then all the other little niceties start to happen, a domino effect through the nervous system. In a half-hour, her blood will be simmering quite nicely, and in an hour, her muscles will burn like she’s run a marathon. I close the door to the chamber. And she realizes, maybe for the first time, that the torment has only just begun.

I know she hates me in this moment. And she isn’t even all the way in yet.

She shakes her head and tosses me a look that says pure fury. Rebellion. But on the

inside, silently, she is falling apart. Humiliation, submission. Been there, done that, and it isn't fun. All she has left are her eyes. No longer furious, they are filled with fear, desperation, and she begs me to set her free. Even though she can't see me now, she can only see herself in the two-way mirror, she knows I am here. I hit the third switch.

A conveyor takes over. The isolation capsule is swung out into the center of the doughnut, an open pocket that looks like a four-story atrium at any other time during the day, but is reserved for just this type of moment. She is now the entertainment at Lewd Larry's. The crowd quickly clusters around the safety rails to see her. On the slow merciless ride down, she cannot see out, but she hears them. And by their words, she knows they are watching her. At ten-minute intervals, the power cells dim the internal lights just enough for her to see them. It is a surreal experience. Like a caged animal in the zoo.

Displayed, taunted.

She descends on a pulley system to the co-mingling level, where she is displayed in her clear bubble. During the twenty minutes she is paused in midair, the isolation chamber makes a complete three hundred and sixty degree turn. A slow carousel ride in the park, a roller coaster ride for the mind. Then she will ascend back up to be displayed for the members-only crowd. It is not long but for her it will seem a never-ending hell.

Special speakers inside the capsule will let her hear the gathered crowd. Special microphones inside the chamber let the crowd hear her every moan, every gagged scream. That is the entertainment. Just who will make her cry? Just who will make her scream? Who, if any, will make her come?

I watch and am amazed at how beautiful she really is. Even trussed up, she has a certain poise and dignity that other slaves never possess. A few of my trusty men and women in black are given microphones so that they can communicate directly to her, taunt her; and I can almost guess the things they will say to her. They are what make this sex club so successful. I have found the best Doms from this country and abroad to make sure this sex club experience is like none other in the world.

They draw straws in the back to see who gets the privilege; though tonight it looks like seniority won out as my top three Doms roam the shadows with their microphones.

Dr. Psycho, my favorite trainer and good friend, George, has left the Attic solely for this entertainment. There, in the Attic, he is just Psycho. He rarely leaves its sanctuary; so this is momentous. As a retired psychiatrist, he is completely ruthless in his humiliation techniques; Kitten is in for it. Verbal torture. It is a skill he has perfected over the years. And I know he will have her in tears within seconds. He's good, really good.

As the owner of Lewd Larry's I have the right to wear a special earpiece so that I can hear what is said. As her Master, I have no rights at all. Not now. When I lost control of her, I gave over those rights to the Containment Team. Out of courtesy, one of them offers me the earpiece. I decline. I would have to fire George if I heard his words. I'm too involved in this. It's only been twenty-four hours and already I'm too involved with her. I shouldn't care at all.

I care too much.

By not hearing, I can still respect him as my best handler. Even from above her, I see her shoulders shudder. George is devastating her. The crowd loves it. *God damn it, give me that earpiece.*

"...such beautiful tears. Aren't you just about as precious as they come? You should

probably know that Master Lawrence doesn't like tears very much; you have displeased him greatly by losing control so soon. But you please me and that's all that matters, isn't it? Right now, I am your Master. And I want to see more tears."

I see George glance down at his watch, damn bastard. He counts the minutes, maybe seconds, until she can see the crowd.

"You're not pleasing me. Not nearly enough tears, bitch, maybe you need something to cry about—take a good, long look at yourself, honey, and know that we're here with you."

The lights inside the capsule dim, and will remain just dim enough for her to have to focus on the crowd. A crowd that, until this moment, she has only heard in the background. Now she has to acknowledge them with her eyes. And George controls her with the ever-changing inflection of his voice.

"Open your eyes, bitch. I am the only one who can make this crowd go away, and if you want them gone, you're going to have to obey me for a while! Maybe you'd like me to join you in there. Maybe you need some real discipline to show you just who's boss. That's it, look at me—not your Master. You know, he hasn't said it out loud yet, but everyone knows his next move. The only question is, who will he give you to? I know your secret, sweetheart, and you know and I know, he paid way too much money for your filth."

Her tears are killing me. Damn it, George, you're taking this too far.

"But you know, I like filthy, dirty girls. Maybe when he gives you away, I'll be first in line. Why not give me a little preview? Tilt your hips forward so I can see your hot, wet pussy."

Way too far.

"You know you're wet for me. What do you think your Master is going to say to you when he learns how hot and ready you are for me? Make me happy, baby, and I'll make this crowd go away. Do it now!"

George looks to his watch, he's getting worried. Yes, he got her to cry in the beginning, but she's calm now, almost to the point of distraction, and he's completely out of time. The engine for the pulley system makes an almost unnoticeable sound as it warms up, preparing to continue the ride. Only those of us listening for it hear it. Within seconds the inside sphere lights flare back up and she will be in motion. She will be back on this level soon. But, in the interim, Mistress Morgana will weave words through her head that will truly mess with her mind.

I adjust the earpiece. Her voice is rich and whisper soft.

"Such a bad baby girl. You think you have it so bad? This is only the beginning. Are your muscles screaming yet, baby? How much longer can you put off moaning? I want you, baby girl, I want to show you just how bad it can get in a place like this. Yes, before this night is over, I will have a turn at you, and baby, you will scream for me! Does your Daddy know where you are, baby girl? Does your Daddy know what we do to bad little girls like you?"

Mistress Morgana strokes the length of the long dildo she has strapped around her waist and thrusts her hips forward. "Watch and learn, baby, because when I join you later, I want to make sure you know how to make me happy—very, very happy."

I pull off the earpiece, knowing what is to come. Mistress Morgana is just a brief intermission between the two main players, though I doubt she sees it that way. And, at

the moment, Kitten doesn't see it that way. She watches as Morgana forces her pet of the moment into a kneeling position. The scene she will perform for Kitten's benefit tonight has been on the books for days; however, since Kitten has stolen center stage, Morgana will use her moment of glory to use the scene for Kitten's benefit versus pulling it for another night. She will initiate another female slave into scarification for demonstration purposes, but first she will force the slave to worship the bright pink dildo bobbing in her face. "Take mental notes, Kitten, darling."

The initiate takes the dildo into her mouth, sucking it deep, Morgan forces it deeper, holding the girl by the hair, thrusting hard against her mouth. Kitten fights the cuffs and makes low, guttural noises, but she isn't breaking down. Her eyes grow wider as Morgan pulls the dildo from the slave's mouth and has her fold forward. Kneeling beside her, she kisses the spot on the girl's shoulder she will cut. Just before she lowers the razor, she lifts it for Kitten to see, then swabs the area with alcohol before carving her mark.

I am not sure who moans louder, the girl being cut, or Kitten.

Lord Fyre winks at me as he approaches. His wicked grin tells me even before I see the microphone in his hand, round two is coming up. No doubt George and Thomas have an internal bet going on this one. George made her cry in two minutes or less, Thomas will make her...

I don't even want to think about their bet.

I don't want to think about her being alone with Thomas. He is the one Dom in this place that I worry about. He is as true a sadist as there is.

"Lost control already, Boss?" he digs.

I don't dignify the question with an answer. I see he is on his way to the catwalk. He winks and calls, "Odds are at ten to one, Boss."

My inner circle of Doms; fourteen men and women who were chosen for their loyalty to The Lifestyle. Loyal to me. Leave it to them to bet on whether I have what it takes to Master this one. Will I break her?

I never broke Tony.

God, he loved this place.

I catch Jackie's eye just as she enters the elevator to leave. She can't stand to watch any more. But is it Kitten she feels sorry for? Or me? No, it has nothing to do with us. She hates Lord Fyre with a rare passion. I, for one, have to agree, he's an easy one to hate. But his talents with whip, wax, and flame are second to none. As implied by his name, the flaming candle or butane lighter are his implements of choice. The man knows the exact temperature of the wax as it hits skin, whether it falls from six inches or one.

His job with the mike is to convince her that when she leaves the isolation chamber, she will be forced to have some fun with him.

Already, I think she recognizes him from last night. Her shudder tells Fyre more than he needed to know. With him, it is best to not give him any encouragement at all. And without even knowing, she gave him the green flag to begin, no intro needed. The question is will he use last night to his advantage? He smiles his rare, brilliant smile. It is devastating, telling me that he is ready to have some fun now. Oh God, this is not good. I shove the earpiece back in my ear.

"Troublemakers come in all sizes, don't they, Little One? If you had joined Luscious at the whipping post last night, we could have avoided tonight's fiasco entirely. It was so unfair when you ran off into the night like a scaredy-cat. And, if truth be known, a few

minutes between you and me last night would have saved us a lot of trouble now.”

I am sure he wore Luscious out on the whipping post. And even though I tried to get Kitten out of the building before the evening’s play got too intense, I know she saw Fyre approach Luscious, bullwhip in hand. I know she heard the woman’s first scream. She may even blame the woman’s punishment on herself. What she doesn’t know is that Luscious and Fyre are married in the real world. And as much as Fyre loves to dish it out, Luscious enjoys sucking in every delicious drop of pain even more. They were made for each other.

Kitten’s eyes glow with fear as Fyre shows her exactly how much fun he can have with a flaming candle. One of our regular clients from The Attic joins him to model the wax. Lying flat on a tall wooden table, Fyre pulls the flimsy fabric of her bra down so that her breasts spring out. Holding a bright red candle high, he dribbles wax, splattering her breasts liberally. Lighting a white candle, he controls both, creating a pattern of wax, red smearing into white. I grind my jaw together with her first scream.

It’s a rush, pure and simple. And her screams are like music to every Dom in the room. The lower levels don’t get this kind of entertainment. We are separate and soundproof. They can only imagine what happens up here. It is for their own good. Most of the visitors to the public level are there to dance. Completely Vanilla, they are clueless. They think they know, but how could they? They are here for the thrill and just being in such an implied dangerous place is enough of a rush for them. Their imagination gives them sweet dreams.

Even those playing in the second level Dungeon aren’t up to speed on what it takes to be invited in. And it takes an invite to even be allowed in the Dungeon. Handlers on the first floor watch. Those with potential are discretely asked to apply for membership. My men in black make regular trips into the co-mingling area to cull the best. From there they are interviewed privately. Maybe they are experimenting or maybe they are hoping that they will meet the right person to introduce them to something more.

The more is a complete lifestyle for those of us on the third floor. We take our games very seriously and use our imagination without restraint. I don’t think the imagination is powerful enough to create what is usually confined to The Attic. Twelve rooms, reserved by appointment only. We offer only the best in pure adrenaline pumping terror. And, of course, fun. It is just what happens when you put two or more insane people together and tell them to have fun. Our clients get to face their own demons and live out outrageous, potentially deadly fantasies in a safe environment. Such a privilege carries a high price tag.

Thomas is my second in command in The Attic for a reason. He is too wild to be in complete control of our Attic. That’s not to say he’s not a perfectly skilled handler though. He is incredible at his craft and can pull emotions out of the human psyche that remain nameless in the English language.

And George is the perfect Number One. He is calm, cool, and collected, even when things get a little out of hand. He is my health and safety man. He has been with me since the beginning, leaving his thriving psychiatric practice to be my mind man.

So Psycho shadows Fyre, watching Kitten. If there is any sign of acute mental duress, he will step in. But tonight, Fyre is maintaining Kitten at a slow simmer. Scared but not terrified.

Fyre’s antics for Kitten are mere foreplay.

Foreplay that's too intense for Jackie, and is obviously having an emotional effect on Kitten, as well. It is different watching, hearing. And Fyre knows it, he taunts her.

"You please me. Do you know why? Oh yes, you do. You watch. You're as enthralled by me as I am by you."

Kitten struggles against the cuffs and shakes her head furiously. But she doesn't take her eyes off him. Off the wax. Or the flaming candle. It mesmerizes her.

"I like it that you are fascinated by my flames because it tells me that you need the kind of torment I can give you. We are two of a kind and, soon you will have the opportunity to be beneath my flame, you will feel my dripping wax." Kitten is not losing it with Thomas like she did with George. I wish I knew what George said that brought her to tears and what made her find her own space so that the words no longer affected her.

I think Morgana scared her.

A small thing, at four-feet, nine inches in her sock feet, Morgana sometimes scares me.

"I want my mark on you, Little One. Would you like it if I branded you and made you mine?"

Kitten shakes her head very slowly, she holds his eyes now, and I realize my mistake in allowing Fyre to have at her. He is just as spellbound by her as she is with his tactics. Damn.

This scene didn't come about under the best of circumstances, but it has been a revelation. My little slave is made of sterner stuff than I originally gave her credit for. I saw her as already broken and in need of repair. Now I wonder.

I wish I knew what is going on in her head.

Fyre is rarely wrong when he selects his subs. He insists that it is just something he senses about them. Tonight, he puts in a rare appearance to assess Kitten. I wonder if it has something to do with the exchange between her and Luscious last night that lead to Luscious being punished at the whipping post? Or whether Fyre truly culled Kitten out.

No, Fyre would never be so petty as to pick on a submissive who got on the wrong side of Luscious, though I am loathe to think he is culling her out, Kitten sure doesn't need a Master like Fyre. He would destroy her and leave her ashes behind. He hears the small click that signals the warming motor, and gives her a final thought before the floodlights fill the capsule, blinding her to him. "You will be mine."

Fyre smiles as the floodlights fill the capsule. Walking away from the scene, he goes to one of the bars. I shake my head; the man never fails to surprise me. I know that by now his blood is boiling quite nicely; his erection aches; but he orders a cola like a man at the ballpark and jokes good-humouredly with the bartender before making small talk with a straggling client.

Ah, the client, a well-known local Domme who has also made quite a name for herself in Hollywood, has snared his attention. I can see it in his eyes as he takes in all of her luscious curves, paying no heed to the pouting slave at her feet. He wants her. Tonight, he will top her. Fyre lifts the icy cola to his lips and, catching my gaze, offers me a silent toast. I can hear his salute in my mind, it is always the same, his trademark phrase. *To the victors go the spoils*. I forget who uttered those words first, Fyre has made them his own. Odd, in a way, there are no victors tonight.

Punishment at the Club is intended to mentally break the slave. It's up to the slave's Master to fix the damage done on his own time. For all intents and purposes, Kitten

didn't break. I wonder if perhaps she is the victor this day.

I watch her in her cage. The last twenty minutes will be the longest for Kitten. Isolated. No longer able to see anyone but herself. No longer able to hear anything but her own heart pounding in her ears. Her muscles are on fire from the supreme agony of being stretched, suspended. And I watch her slip into sub-space.

For the crowd, the floorshow is over. She has been reduced to a decoration now that she is no longer reacting to the words and sounds of the room. Of course, she is sure they stare still, but in truth, it is late. Or, rather, early, depending on how you see it. At five a.m., we officially lock down for the night. Ten minutes and counting.

Exhaustion consumes me, but I know that rest will be a long time coming.

It could be hours before I have a chance to leave, but it has been a long, tedious night for everyone. Security had their hands full from the very beginning and I walked right into it; but it is no excuse for my negligence. If I had kept her by my side, instead of abandoning her at the table, none of this would have been necessary.

I pull a chair over to the rail to sit and wait out the last ten minutes or so. I need a drink. A stiff drink. Seeming to read my mind, Mistress Morgana suddenly appears beside me with a Scotch on the rocks in hand. It isn't a pre-measured single or even a double, the amber liquid sloshes over the rim of the tumbler just the way I like it. I try to offer a smile of thanks but it comes out tired and not very convincing. The crowd is all but gone and my stage smile has fled with them.

Without an invitation, Morgana pulls up a stool and sits. I don't want company and I really want to be done with this place tonight.

"Harsh night," she comments, her question phrased as a statement.

"Very."

If I think my stony answer will send her away, I am mistaken. Morgana knows my moods too well to be offended by silence. She matches my heavy sigh as we sit vigil together. From somewhere deep in my mind, I remember Morgana's first visit to the chamber. She totally lost it and we had to pull her out. Claustrophobia. Her own personal demon. But I don't think that is why she lingers. No, she has something on her mind.

Five minutes and counting.

Kitten's head droops. Now that it is quiet and she is focused on herself, on her own body, she will feel the intense pangs of discomfort, muscles stretched taut and tensed for too long will cry out for relief; her mind has been pressed to a nameless place where she will face the demons living inside her head. I sigh and hope I chose the right punishment for her. She is so new to me...

No time to experiment with her needs.

No time to help her discover how to face her true demons.

"Garrett?"

I wonder if Morgana has said my name more than once. Her concerned tone and furrowed brow tells me she has. I focus on her face.

"I said, she's very beautiful. But, of course, you know that."

"Yes."

"You spoke with Joel again."

I love the way Morgana asks questions with statements, always leaving it up in the air whether she really wants the answer. I don't answer yes or no; I just spill my guts.

"He was dumb enough to think the police might actually be interested in a death

threat. But it's the same story every year, isn't it? Until the bastard actually comes out of hiding and is caught red-handed there is nothing they can do. It really pisses me off. Every fucking year."

"So this year you have created a diversion."

Was that a question? If so, I don't know, maybe I have.

Morgana stands and presses a kiss to the top of my head. "She's a good match for you Garrett," she whispers before turning to walk away, leaving me with no time to think about what she said. Time's up. The whirring click of wheels tells me it will be only seconds before the isolation chamber's door swings wide. I take a long swallow of the Scotch, but am too nervous to enjoy the warmth flaring over the back of my throat.

I join her in the chamber, knowing this is the moment that cements the relationship. Aftercare. Neglected by so many Doms, it is perhaps the most vital part of the scene.

It is a tight fit for both of us in the chamber, but I want to be able to renew the connection while she is still here in this space. As I trail my fingertips across her cheekbone, bringing her from her sub-space back to my world, my rules, she remains very still, very quiet. During the last twenty minutes, she has faced her own demons, and since she is so new to me, I don't know what those demons might be, I don't know how her mind has been affected.

Sometimes, aftercare is merely dealing with the physical and emotional reactions to the scene. Other times, because there is no visible reaction, it takes a nudge from the Master. George refers to it as poking the bear. In Kitten's case, I'm left trying to figure it out.

She lifts her head slowly, taking in all of me with her eyes. Fury and defiance flare before it is shuttered away. Hidden deeper. I suddenly realize that I want that anger to flare. I want to see her rage released, my gut telling me it is important.

I fight to control the barely perceivable tremble of my hand as I unhook the ball-gag. I think that she will at least call me a name, but she remains silent. I squat in front of her to unlatch the restraints around her ankles. With great care, I slip her ankles from the cuffs and help her to get steady on shaky legs. I stand with every intention of releasing her but I'm not ready to do so. It suddenly seems paramount that I Master her. And I feel the transition in my mind.

I no longer feel cruel. I am liberated from my guilt.

I walk away deliberately and know that she follows me with her eyes. I pick up my Scotch, ice clinking against the sides of the glass. The sound seems to fill the entire room. I look around, but we are alone. A clean-up crew should be scurrying around the room by now, my wait staff should be bustling around trying to take care of last minute details, at the very least security should be lurking about, but no, we are alone. It is too much of a temptation.

I fill my mouth with the Scotch and stride purposefully to her side, pinching her cheeks together brutally as I force her mouth open beneath mine. Briefly, there is resistance, as she tastes the first drops of Scotch. Her face rebels as I crush her to me, flooding her mouth with amber fire. Her insurgency is too short lived, barely long enough to let me know she gives a damn at all. She swallows and tries to claim my mouth with her own, but I back away. I hold her cheeks between the vice grip of my fingers and search her eyes. A bare spark and then it is gone. What will it take to release that fury? Do I really want to know?

It is buried deep. So deep.

And tonight is not the night. The moment has passed. Given more time, Psycho could have brought it out—maybe. Given her body to toy with, instead of her mind, there is no doubt that Fyre could see the task done. But I don't want it to be either of them. I want it to be me and so it will wait. Soon, very soon, we will begin the release of her demons.

I fill her mouth with Scotch from my lips once more, but this time I am gentle. This time, I linger over the sweet lushness of her mouth. In my mind I see her just like this, captured, prisoner, and I am buried to the hilt within her heat. But not tonight.

I release her lips and her head falls forward. We are forehead to forehead and I know the fight has left her. She is ragged, exhausted, turned inside out. And I know how she feels. An hour is an eternity. An hour isn't nearly long enough.

I hold her eyes locked with mine as I release each wrist. She winces and it is barely perceptible. I rub her chafed wrists tenderly and press a kiss to each one as soon as they are free. She slides into me, falling around me with a silent sob. My own knees go weak and I press my back into the cool glass of our enclosure. I pull Kitten between my thighs and hold her close. Letting her go weak after being so damn strong. I feel the sob building strength in her chest before she releases it as a cry.

"I'm sorry, Master." Her entire body shakes with the force of trying to hold back the sobs. A force greater than her propels her as she sobs over and over again. "I'm sorry, sorry, sorry."

* * * *

My cell phone is a constant aggravation. I am not sure why I even bother with the damn thing. Even now, at five thirty in the morning, it vibrates. I ignore it, not even bothering to look to see who is calling.

I tuck Kitten into the back of the limo and stand looking at the changing sky. Still hours before dawn, the sky is primed with readiness. Soft swirls of violet rise from the horizon. It is in this moment, quivering on the edge just before dawn, that is my favorite time of day and even after the worst night it seems all is right with the world.

Not all is right with my blasted cell phone.

"What?" My voice is aggravated and gruff.

"Tsk, ts, ts, why are we so testy this morning, Garrett? A lovely woman tucked safely in the back of your limo. She looks tired."

It takes a moment to realize just what is happening, just who is on the phone, and then, like a slow motion nightmare, it all becomes clear. It is him. My God, he is here. He is watching. I spin in a slow circle, searching out moving shadows beneath the windshields of other cars, but there is no one.

"I don't think she liked being in that isolation sphere tonight. I suppose she would have liked it even less if it had plummeted..."

"Stay the fuck away from her. Do you understand? Stay the fuck away from us, you bastard."

I hang up and throw myself into the backseat, tapping on the window for Blake to step on it, which he does. My mind reels with this new revelation. The bastard was in the Club. Watching. He's probably been watching all along. Damn it.

* * * *

She seems as delicate as fine bone china, lying quietly on my bed. I am shaken clean to the bone. I can't let the killer get to Celia. I am dying inside, raging, frightened.

She watches me but hasn't spoken since the Club.

I have no idea what to say; I haven't told her about the threats and I don't want to. I know I have to tell her. Soon. He is too close to us and I have no idea who he is, where he is.

I only know what he is capable of.

Kitten is still tucked away in her own mind. The sphere was hard on her—too much time to think, but not enough time to master the demons. We gave her just enough to bring them to the surface. She swims in dangerous territory and, as her Master, I need to talk to her about tonight.

But, as a man, there aren't enough words and the ones that do come to mind would totally contradict the words of her Master.

I feel so split in two. With Tony, things were so much easier. He was my lover, he was my friend, and yes, even my slave. But with Tony, we confined our slave play to the Club and a few local scenes, the rest of the time we were too busy creating an empire to adhere to strict rules. With Kitten, I am a slave to the rules.

She lies waiting, watching me.

The tension between us is so unbearable it hurts.

Leaning in as close as I can without touching her, I hold her gaze long enough to distract her from the movement of my hand so that when my hand appears beside her cheek, brushing lightly, it is a sensorial jolt. Her eyelids flutter closed. I allow myself the luxury of following the trail left by my fingertips with my lips and am lost in the scent of her. I trace each of the long, sinuous lines that define her face; each eyebrow, the ridge of her nose, her cheekbones; fingertips followed by lips. I caress the shell of her ear and follow the line along her smooth jaw. Fingertips. Lips. I pause over her long neck, so much territory to pay homage to. Collarbones jutting behind translucent skin. My fingertips trace the line of a soft blue vein. Lips and tongue try to bathe it away. My path trailing lower to trace each rib but my lips get sidetracked along the way and close over a taut nipple.

Her gasp draws my gaze to her eyes. Molten green, ringed in a deeper blue. Tears would spill over the edge of those wondrous lashes if she would just blink. I can't wonder about her tears now, or I will stop and shake from her the name of the demon making her cry, the old ache making her tremble.

Tears each time she finds pleasure.

I focus on her breasts, circling them with barely there caresses. I enjoy her breasts greatly. Firm, perky. The nipples tight pebbles of drawn, aching skin. Her gasps make it known just how much she enjoys having me suck on them. I test with a nip and her back arches in a pre-orgasmic spasm that makes the true sadist in me smile.

A pure, sweet pleasure fills me. It is foreign, intangible, almost taboo, as I swirl my tongue around the gentle swell of small perfect pillows. I kiss the solid bridge between the two; here my kisses turn to nips and her moans make her pleasure obvious. A tear slides free and trails to the edge of her jaw. I look away, not ready to bear the pain my pleasure brings her.

Fanning my hands around her narrow ribcage, I realize just how tiny she truly is. I

watch the rise and fall of creamy skin beneath my hands. My blood pounds behind my ears as I fight the urge to press the space between her ribs, guaranteeing her an instant brain orgasm of pain. Not yet, not yet. I leash myself, holding back; part fear—I'll break her if I use her too hard too soon—and part need, selfish need to prolong our first truly intimate lovemaking.

It is harder than I first believed to hold back. God, I want her so.

Slowly, I pull away from her, but only for a moment, long enough to pull the lank ends of my black tie from my shirt and start to unbutton it, long enough to kick off my shoes. It is too long for her. I have only half unbuttoned my shirt when she takes my hand and pulls me into her languid warmth, her lips calling mine to close over her mouth and I am lost. I feel her hands at the edge of my pants, unzipping them, and I help her pull the troublesome things down my legs. They land beside the pile of her clothes.

I cherish the feel of her hands sliding beneath my shirt, her touch like fire, consuming me with need. Rationally, I know that I need to move slowly with her, maintain control over my own needs if I am ever to control my slave; however, my curious fingers want to explore this new person in my bed, racing to trace the damp readiness I know I will find between her silken folds. With deliberate slowness, I explore her softness, her wetness.

Kitten has a mind of her own and, with an aggravated swipe, she pushes away my hand away, angling herself between my legs and grabbing my length with her hand, hard and demanding, forcing my solidness home. In that moment, I sense my life will never be the same again.

Chapter 10

"The past was nothing to her; offered no lesson which she was willing to heed. The future was a mystery which she never attempted to penetrate. The present alone was significant."

—Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*

Celia

He lies beside me, asleep, content. I wonder what is it about men, making it possible for them to do that. Just roll over and sleep when the women lying next to them want nothing more than to talk. But even if he were awake, what would I say? Where would I even begin?

Would I tell him the truth of who I am and my original intention? No, he would only send me away and I couldn't bear that. Not after tonight, the punishment sphere, the man.

I have never been made love to, so I am not sure if that is what happened between us. Lion is my male comparison factor. Lion did not show me love. Possession, but not love. Garrett made love to me; at least that is the only way to describe the tenderness, the emotion I felt in his arms.

I have never felt love before—ever.

I have never felt cherished.

In his arms, his length throbbing inside me, I felt both. Not because of the sexual intimacy, because of what I saw in his eyes. Now he sleeps, protecting himself from me seeing anything else within those incredible blue depths. I pray he wakes and looks at me with those same eyes.

It seems like years since I have spoken, since I have had a real conversation. It has only been two days. What will I be like in a month? Will I even remember how to talk?

I realize that sanity isn't even an issue. I left the sane world behind Friday night. Now, I am a cat. I could almost laugh at that but for the fact that it just isn't funny. It is degrading and perverted. And I love it. I think I have never felt as alive as in those few precious moments I was sending glasses and silverware flying off the table and running for my life. I have never felt so aware of another living soul as I was of Garrett when I was hiding from him behind the bar. I have never been so aware that my actions affected another until I crawled on my hands and knees to him. It was almost worth what came later.

Almost.

No, completely. The isolation sphere was completely worth it.

Did I mention that I've never felt so alive? That chamber of mirrors and light made me know that I was alive. Fear of dying from embarrassment has that effect and it had to have been embarrassment that made my heart pound, made me want to claw myself free—made me want to hide. Because it wasn't fear. Fear I understand. What I felt in that chamber wasn't fear. And to think that they thought their little mind games would work on me. I have met the Master of mind games and his name is Lion.

I think, though, that I would like to introduce the man with the flaming candle to Lion. God, that would be enjoyable. What would be even more enjoyable would be to get inside that man's head for the basis of a character in one of my next books. There was something in his eyes—it is so real for him. Not a game.

Not role-playing.

Is it strange that I identify with that?

My entire life has been role-playing. And *this*—this is as real as it gets.

I am exhausted and couldn't move even if I wanted to, but my mind won't shut down. Thoughts fly through my head with lightning speed and I can only grasp a partial idea here or there, and then it is gone. I need to contact Doug. No, not yet. He will want details and I have none. What would I say? The third floor is great; I get to sit on the floor, eat out of a crystal bowl, and use a kitty litter box. There has to be a story here. I just have to find it. And there is no way I am telling Doug about the isolation chamber. I don't understand it all myself, but what I experienced in that chamber is private. Not even Master will be privy to what I felt there. It is mine. Just mine.

Enough mindless thought, I have work to do.

I struggle from the bed. I am so tired. Being a cat should not be so physically challenging. I feel like I ran miles but have done nothing more strenuous than give myself a tongue bath. I guess that is not entirely true; after all, I was stretched tremendously and forced to be the act in center ring. But still, should I feel like I've been run over by a bus?

First on the agenda is locating a phone. A computer would be excellent, but I would be happy with a phone.

There is no phone.

In the entire condo, ten rooms, no phone. It comes as no further surprise that there is no computer, no fax. I am mentally going to melt into nothingness. The man exists in the communication dark ages. *Oh my God, that smell.*

Coffee.

Spellbound, I follow the aroma to the almighty kitchen. I could spend hours, no days, in just this room. It is my favorite room. Even with its beige walls and tile floor, even with its black granite counter tops, I am in love with this room. Totally masculine, the kitchen. Just one more paradox in Garrett's life.

As I pour coffee, the clock on the automatic drip tells me it's ten a.m. But, in two short days, time has somehow lost all meaning. The only things with meaning now are the rules. Rules, it seems, I am inclined to learn by trial and error, as yesterday.

Rule number one: don't climb on the table.

No, I think that would have to be rule number two, since we have already established rule number one as *You will only eat what comes from my hand*. I look guiltily at the mug of steaming coffee. In defiance, I swallow great burning gulps.

I really don't know what has gotten into me. I have never been bad, always obeying the rules and doing what I was told. Behaving has always brought me pride, pleasure. Such a simple thing to just be good...

For coffee, I will be bad.

And I could justify it if I had to! I mean, inadvertently, the coffee has come from his hand. Oh, who am I kidding? It is his coffee. I am stealing his coffee!

Further, if I remember right, I have to prove I am worthy of the crumbs from his plate.

Grrrr. That makes me angry. But not really, because the crumbs from his plate were quite wonderful last night. Pieces of steak from his fingers, wine from his lips. Yes, definitely quite enjoyable.

Damn. I need more coffee, but if I pour another mugfull, he will realize some is missing. I will face that later. I pour more coffee, greedily inhaling the aroma drifting with the steam, just for spite.

“Ahhhhhhh!”

Crash.

Crash.

Shit. My eyes fly to the intruder who has just dropped two bags of groceries in the middle of the floor. He is jumping around and pointing like he sees a mouse, screaming like he sees a rat. I guess that makes me the rat.

Stepping around shards of the broken coffee mug, I reach for a towel and make shushing motions with my finger against my lips. Garrett will not sleep through this. *Shit.* I squat and start picking up bits of broken earthenware out of the puddle of coffee. The towel absorbs the coffee. It is an easy mess to clean up. It isn't the mess that I will be punished for and I know it. I suppose it serves me right for sneaking around. Being caught, that is.

My efforts for silencing the man are futile. He shrieks and points, eyes closed, hopping up and down.

“My God, Enrique!” Garrett shouts from the living room. “What in the hell has gotten into you?”

By the time Garrett reaches the kitchen, Enrique is finally silent but still pointing. I wring out the coffee from the rag I have been using to sop up the spilled coffee, no need to stop. With no place to hide and guilt written all over my face, it is too late to turn the truth into a lie or a lie into the truth. I bend back down to finish cleaning up the mess. It's the least I can do.

“Kitten? Why are you out of bed?”

His voice has that controlled *just wait until the other shoe drops* timbre that I really hate. Did I expect less? I'd hoped for something more after last night. He squats beside me and takes a broken shard of the mug from my hand. His eyes linger on my hand and I realize what he sees. I have nicked myself and a drop of blood has bubbled up on my index finger. He lifts the finger to his mouth. Too late, I realize what he plans to do.

“No! I...”

His mouth inhales my entire finger just to clean the tiny nick and then I catch the flicker of emotion that lingers in his eyes and I am melting in the intensity within their depths. His eyes tell me all that I need to know. He cherishes me still.

I turn to look at the intruder responsible for my being caught red-handed.

Enrique hides his eyes behind his hand. Garrett follows my eyes and snorts.

“Enrique, what are you doing?”

“A woman naked, there is—in your kitchen, Boss.”

I shake my head. His English is slightly better than terrible and his accent so heavy, my mind has to fill in the gaps. Garrett sighs and turns back to me.

“Yes, there is, isn't there? I see you've met my houseboy, Enrique. Enrique, this is Kitten, she will be staying here for awhile.”

I watch Enrique separate two fingers to peek. Again, I am assessed. From head to

toe. His fingers fly back together and he blushes sweetly behind his hand.

“The question is, Kitten, what were you doing in my kitchen naked?”

Standing, Garrett tosses the spent rag into the sink then rakes his fingers through his hair. “And do you realize we’ve only been asleep two hours?”

You have, I think sarcastically, but know well enough to keep my mouth shut.

“Coffee.” I answer, feeling it is all the explanation that is needed at this point.

“Coffee?”

“I was going to bring you coffee in bed,” I lie or not a lie if I had had the opportunity. I might have gotten around to taking him a cup.

“Really?” His voice tells me he doesn’t believe me.

“Yes, Master.” I’m confident that I would have gotten around to taking him a mug, if only to hide the evidence that I’d already inhaled a fair portion myself.

Rule number three, four, and five. Act innocent, pout baldly, and look pathetic. I figure it’s worth a shot, after all, it worked when I was four.

“Go! Get in bed. Now!”

I don’t think it is going to work this time. I scoot around Enrique and fly from the kitchen. I can hear the deep, pleasant rumble of Garrett’s voice even after I am under the covers. I eavesdrop, enjoying every shameful second.

“A lot happened while you were in Las Vegas last week, Enrique.”

“I see, Boss, I see.”

Chapter 11

“Love passed, the muse appeared, the weather of mind got clarity newfound: now free I once more weave together emotion, thought, and magic sound.”

—Eugene Onegin, 1823, Aleksander Sergeyevich Pushkin

Garrett

A storm rolls in off the coast, the slow, rolling thunder a ways away. I like the slow build up, like a good orgasm, the longer it takes the storm to build to a crashing crescendo, the better it is. Already there is promise that this will be a big storm. The bedroom is as dark as night when I return to bed. She tries to pretend that she sleeps already, but I will not make such a mistake again as to fall asleep before her.

I think I will add bells to her collar, so that I will be able to hear where she is, even if I cannot see her. For her, the rub of the collar is obviously not enough to make her feel owned. The tinkle of small bells should be tangible enough to ignite a constant consciousness of fact.

I climb under the sheets, her presence making the normally chill sheets warm and inviting. Wrapping around her with arms and legs, she is warm and soft.

The cotton sheets have caught the scent of her exotic, musky female scent. But not just any female. No, this is distinctly her scent. I pull her back into my chest and spoon around her. It is nice when I feel her relax against me.

“Kitten?”

“Hmmm?”

She sounds drowsy. It excites me.

“I will have to punish you because of the coffee.”

She is instantly tense in my arms.

“But not today, today is Sunday. I will punish you on Monday. Lewd Larry’s is closed on Monday, it will give us all day.”

If she could tense any more, her muscles would shatter. She remains silent and unmoving. In this condition, it will be a long time before she relaxes enough to sleep.

The storm chooses that moment to arrive full throttle; rain batters the windows and flashes of lightning score the sky. Insane, chaotic thunder reverberates a staccato through the room. Kitten quakes and this, I know, is fear.

This high up, the wind and lightning can seem intense. I am used to it. I enjoy a good storm. Especially when it is on hyper-drive, as tonight. Fast and powerful. Kitten is so on edge anyway, she reacts to every sound, scooting out of my reach, huddling against the headboard. A lightning bolt strikes the roof and a blinding flash fills the room. The instantaneous thunderclap scares a strangled scream from Kitten’s throat, and she wraps herself even more tightly in her own arms. I stroke her arms and legs to comfort her, but it is no use, she is terrified.

“Come here,” I whisper into her neck, but I don’t wait for her to move closer. Instead, I pull her back down into the bed with me, wrapping myself so tightly around her

that she cannot wiggle free.

“I need you, Kitten, close, just like this.”

But I quickly realize I need more than her closeness; I need to feel her as crazed and reckless as last night. I need her to drop her guard and feel the passion that runs so thick in her veins, passion she allowed herself to experience last night. I am bruised from her bite and I cherish that mark. I want to feel her claws and her teeth; I want to hear the primal growl caught in the back of her throat when her orgasm overtakes her.

Last night, I believed that two could truly melt into one.

She feels my erection brushing against the back of her thighs and starts to pull away, then just as quickly rears into my embrace when lightning fills the room and the walls shake. The crashing cacophony of thunder peals through the room, making her jump and squirm. It is too much for her to deal with—the storm, my promise of punishment to come, me touching her because I cannot stop touching her. “Sh-h, Kitten. I’m here. Relax and talk to me.”

She tries to roll onto her back, but I keep her steady on her side, selfishly enjoying the feel of her bent into me and knowing that it may be easier for her to talk if she isn’t facing me. Curved around her as I am, my erection presses between the swell of her hips.

“I...” She stalls when she feels my hand behind her, opening her hips to me.

“Talk to me, Kitten.” I guide my swollen penis into her. I enjoy her soft gasp of surprise. She is wet, hot, and ready. In this position, I cannot move very deeply into her, so it is only a soft caress between her vaginal lips. My hips rock her back and forth gently.

“I’m waiting,” I encourage, still rocking her gently. “This is our room, you can tell me anything as long as we’re in this room.”

“I-I don’t want you to spank me again,” she tells me in a rush of breath.

That was very brave. Not what I expected, but I’m not surprised, and I’m glad she does not see my lips twitch with amusement. I silently applaud her bravery. Of course, now I have to help her see that spanking is good, and can really be a lot of fun with the right ambience established. But not tonight.

I slide my hand around her middle and press between her pelvic bones to push her deeper onto me while I surge upward. A small, strangled moan escapes her lips. “It doesn’t matter what you want, Kitten. It only matters what I want for you.”

The pleasure I am giving her takes some of the bite out of the words, but I know she will remember them. Maybe even more so because of the pleasure I offer with the reprimand.

“Please, don’t spank me tomorrow.”

Her soft pleas excite me even more. I push into her harder, deeper still, but still not deep enough. I want to bury myself to the hilt inside of her and the position we are in just won’t allow for it.

“To be honest, Kitten, I had not planned on spanking you for your punishment. But if you insist on begging so pathetically, I will have to spank you on principle alone. And that will not be pleasant for either of us. You don’t want that to happen do you?”

“It was only coffee,” she cries out, a little indignantly.

I still. My teeth grate together. A Master can never abide insolence and if I wasn’t in full Master mode before, her tone wakes up the beast.

“It is the principle of disobeying,” I hiss back.

She is a bright spark. Damn if her boldness doesn't push me over the edge. My blood boils with need for her. I want her to stand up to me, I want her to push my buttons so I can figure out hers. I want to feel her rage. So that we can put it behind us.

"I know," she whispers. "I'm sorry, Master."

And the anger is gone as quickly as that. Not a spark—a dying ember. I will kill the man who did this to her.

"You are forgiven," I offer her with as much gentleness as I can muster. Then a little stronger, I add, "But I will still punish you on Monday, just to make sure you remember the rules. You will never again eat or drink anything that doesn't come directly from my hand. Ever. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Master."

"And when I am done punishing you on Monday, you will thank me for the punishment."

"Yes, Master."

She does not need to know yet that on Monday I will begin the lessons to help her enjoy the pain, not fear it.

In one fluid motion, I roll her onto her stomach and tuck her knees beneath her. She is completely open to me now. I can move deep into her, I can plow her roughly. It is an insane urge to want to use her harshly. So thin, so frail; but still I want to ride her hard.

I want to taste her.

I shift behind her, rocking back onto my knees. I hear her whimper and I know she thinks I will punish her now—but punishment is the farthest thing from my mind as flashing light shimmers through the curtains and lands on her raised round ass. I rub my palms across her rounded hips, arranging her, opening her. The light show is incredible tonight, even though the thunder is only a low rumble. The strobe-light-effect breaks the motion of my hand crossing her pale flesh.

I bend low to open her. With nervous quivers, her lovely pink folds tease me forward but only close enough to inhale her scent. She is musky after our last bout of sex. I inhale deeper and she shudders, the sound making her fidget.

"Still, Kitten, unless you want hog-tied," I command and she freezes beneath me. My tongue flicks out to taste her.

She trembles and I do not think it is from excitement.

I will teach her to trust me.

She is extraordinary, lovely. Her body was made for this, for me.

My tongue dives deeper, plunging again and again into her vagina. Sucking gently, I pull her clit into my mouth and suckle, willing her to relax.

In the next flash of light, I see her hands curled into tight fists, her arms held tightly to her sides. This won't do. Carefully, I go about the business of rearranging her. I bring her arms over her head and tuck her hands around the thick spindles of the headboard. She is raised just enough to cause friction against her breasts when I do move over her. She will have to hold tight, with her arms stiff to keep from falling while I use her as roughly as I plan to.

"Hold here and don't let go until I give you permission. Can you do this for me?"

"Yes, Master."

I hear her quiet whisper but I want to make sure we both understand fully. "Because, if you can't leave your hands there, I will restrain you with rope, is that understood?"

“Yes, Master,” she answers me in a loud, clear voice. Better. I readjust once more and, in doing so, click on a bedside lamp. Now, I can go back to enjoying the view—of her. The light unsettles her.

I separate her hips and look farther than the dark shadows.

She knows I look and I feel her tension rise even more. I smooth my hands over her round cheeks and gentle her. “Easy, Kitten.”

She tries to fidget so that I will stop what I am doing, but a gentle tug on the delicate chain attached to her collar stills her instantly.

“Be good. I want to look at you.”

And so I look, taking in the full luscious sight of her; all the wonderful rounded curves, the nervous tremble of her legs, the even rise and fall of her back. I press her knees, separately, pushing her more open to me. This excites her, if her quickening breath is any indication, even if she is unwilling to admit it to herself. I slide my hands between her thighs to open her to me. Her vulva is lovely in the golden light of the bedside lamps.

I am so hot for her now, I don’t know how long I can delay with this little game. I have to taste her. I push my face into her, inhaling and reaching out to her with my tongue. One long, gentle lick from her clitoris all the way back to her anus. Her moan is deep, primal. It makes me insane. She lifts herself a little higher, encouraging me. I press her back into the correct position. “Stay still. It is hard lesson to learn, but it is one you must, Kitten. It isn’t about what you want. It is always about me. What I want, what I need. And right now, what I need is to taste you.”

I lick her like crazy, back and forth. I am rough, thorough. I take what I want from her. When I slide over her, she is throbbing with need. So close to begging. But her jaw is tense, her teeth clenched. She knows I purposely kept from touching, stroking where she needed me to most. A slow lesson to drive the point home.

I want her to move, I want her to disobey just a little, any excuse to pull out the ropes, but no, she is obeying and the goal is to teach her trust. Today, I restrain myself, settling for straight sex, not play. Aside from the dominance play, we could be in any bedroom in America. Is there something wrong with this picture?

Trying to not think myself out of the moment, I reach into the bedside stand and retrieve a condom, making quick work of tearing open the package and rolling it into place. Soon I will teach her to do this for me, maybe with her mouth.

I touch the tip of my sex to her, not quite ready to fill her yet, and rearrange her to suit me a little better. I slide my hand under her, laying my palm flat on the slight swell of her belly. Then I slide into her, filling her hard and deep with one thrust, pulling her into me with the flat palm of my hand on her stomach to take me even deeper. Her quick intake of breath and deep-throated moan tell me I went too deep, too fast, filling her in one stroke to the point of pain. I push harder, letting her know that I did hold back, just a little, that there was more that I could have forced. She tries to pull from the ache, I force her to stay. She is such a tight fit. Without mercy, I push deeper, lifting her pelvis, slamming hard into her inner wall, pulling a scream from her throat.

“Stretch for me, baby. I want you to take all of me.”

I withdraw, then slam into her insides fast and hard, pushing even deeper, pulling her back onto me at the same time. A little grunt is forced from her lips, but I don’t ease up. We are only just beginning.

“Stretch,” I command softly, pushing a little deeper, forcing myself into her. I am not

yet completely buried, I want to be completely buried. She is so damn tight. So small. I withdraw, not completely, but almost so, taking aim.

“Stretch for me. I am your Master now,” I whisper sharply against her ear, reveling in the tremor that courses through her in response as I slide my length into her, slowly, pushing relentlessly to that spot high inside her. I use that response. “You will fit your body around mine. You will mold yourself to me.”

I pull her into me with my hands, rocking hard against her, stretching her in all directions now, not just depth. She shudders in my tight embrace and I realize just how badly she needs it like this. Demanding, but gentle. I don’t thrust, I rock her against me, rocking ever so gently.

“I am going to make you come now, Kitten, because I will it. But not an explosion, I want to milk your orgasm from you one delicious drop at a time. Do you feel it building inside of you, baby?”

She nods and moans, so very close to coming. Her vagina tightens around my hard cock like a vice. “That’s it baby, come for me, nice and slow, drip, drip, drip.”

I can feel her tears without seeing them.

Her frantic pants send me over the edge because I know she is coming just as sweetly and just as softly as I planned it.

Without really fucking her, I am exploding inside her. *Rock, rock, rock.*

“You are mine,” I whisper against her neck, pushing deeper, feeling the slow throb of her orgasm. She buries her face into the pillow to hide her sob but I pull away the pillow, forcing her sob to be heard, loud and broken. “Mine,” I whisper again, easing my fingers over her clitoris and, with just that soft stroke, she comes all over me again. And again. As many times as I will it, she comes for me and her broken sob grows louder with each orgasm, until finally, I have her screaming and coming. Screaming and coming.

* * * *

The doorbell is ringing. And ringing. My eyes are covered with my forearm and it is a struggle to budge it from its rest. My body is lead. I am used to the nightlife, not no sleep at all.

Kitten, too, finally sleeps. I hate to wake her. She is so peaceful, so lovely asleep. The doorbell rings again. This time, there is no let up as someone holds down the buzzer. Kitten shifts in her sleep. I will kill Enrique if he doesn’t open the damn door soon. I will kill whoever is behind the door making such an infernal racket. I shift to see the numbers on the glowing clock. Two o’clock. It can’t be! Damn!

The room is still cast in darkness. A gloomy Sunday.

I ignore the irate doorbell, lean over, and kiss Kitten’s brow. “Time to wake up, sleepyhead.” A quick calculation tells me we’ve slept all of two hours.

“Hmmp-mm,” she mutters. I translate that as a no.

I rub the sleep out of my eyes, roll out of bed, and hit the hallway with a bellow. “Enrique!” There is no answer. “Enrique, answer the goddamn door!”

But I am already there, swinging the door wide to stand in the entry stark naked.

“You’re looking a little pale, my friend. You need a day at the beach,” Jackie teases. “And here I thought you’d at least have your little slave girl trained to the menial task of opening a door by now. At least tell me you’ve got her tied up somewhere to ease this gnawing worry spreading through my guts.”

Jackie traces a deep violet bruise on my chest with the tip of her manicured nail. She shakes her head in disapproval.

"She's asleep." I answer.

"Oh god, at least promise me she's curled up on the floor at the foot of your bed."

"She's in my bed."

"My god, my god, can it get any worse? Do you hear this Bernard?" Jackie pokes her silent friend in the shoulder, but he just shrugs and offers me a look of sympathy. She towers over him by at least a foot and he has no doubt been lashed by her tongue all morning. "And where's your little houseboy? What's his name?"

"You know his name, it's Enrique."

"The day he gives me the time of day is the day I'll try to remember his name. Now where is that little tight-assed boy?"

Jackie strides on in, her entourage straggling behind, loaded down with goodies.

"Now don't close the door, more are on the way. We couldn't all fit in the elevator."

"I know, I know, gang's all here."

"You know it." Jackie suddenly turns to me with a pout. "You didn't forget did you?"

"No, I didn't forget." I promise. "How could I forget, it's Sunday, isn't it?"

"Uh-huh," she says. Her eyes narrow dramatically as she tosses her handbag onto a dining room chair. I lift my hands and back toward the bedroom.

"Honest, we're all set." I promise. "Who's bringing the movies?"

She's still staring me down as Bernard answers, "Tom."

"Great!" I enthuse, trying to place who Tom is. "There you go, Jackie. See? All set, movies on the way, you brought enough food for an army, and see here..." I motion toward an entering Enrique. "The man you've been waiting for." I throw him a pointed glance that I hope translates into *you're in big shit this time*. "Enrique, start the margaritas, I'll be right back out!"

A moment's reprieve. I lean against the closed door and sigh. Kitten is sitting up in my bed looking very sleepy and incredibly sexy. She has that tousled just had sex look about her. I walk over to her, claiming her lips quickly before she can react.

I am hard instantly when her arms loop around my neck in the first show of genuine affection she's offered.

The door behind me bursts open. "You'll be right out, huh."

I turn around to face Jackie in surrender, my eyes pleading.

"I promise. We'll be right out."

"Uh-huh."

The door closes behind me as I fall face first into the mattress. Kitten squeals as I roll to face her. She offers a startled smile. It takes away some of the worry about today. She is too somber by half. It is good to see her rare smile.

"So, what's that all about?" she asks.

"It's Sunday."

Her left eyebrow arches in question and I have to kiss it; then I pull back to look at her, seeing evidence in her eyes that she was well taken care of last night, I take the time to kiss a path between her breasts to her belly button. Her giggle when I swirl my tongue around the indentation makes me smile. "My friends come over every other Sunday for Margaritas, Movies, and Mayhem."

"I see," she answers. But then she draws her lip between her teeth and I know she doesn't get it at all. I pull her face down to mine and claim her lips again.

"I really don't want it to be Sunday," I whine, falling back into the mattress, pulling her over me to straddle me. "I don't want to have to share you."

At this, she struggles away with a look of sheer panic on her face. I race to cross the mattress and pull her back into my arms. "No, no, no, baby. I don't mean share. No one will ever touch you, but me. I meant it when I said *you're mine*. I just meant, I'd like to be alone with you today—to get to know you. So you could get to know me."

Her sigh of relief is laughable.

I want her so badly. I just can't get enough. I stand up and walk to my dresser to pull out some clothes for both of us. I press down on my steadily climbing erection to make it behave before I pull on a pair of plaid flannel boxers. *He* doesn't want to behave; *he* wants to be buried inside of her, not later, now. Sighing regretfully over the impossibility of now, I toss her a pair of smiley-face boxers and a ribbed cotton tank.

"Put these on. And be forewarned, my friends can be a little risqué."

She wrinkles her brow, torn between a frown and a smile. "You want me to wear these?"

"Unless you'd rather watch old movies in the buff," I laugh.

She moves very fast when she wants to, pulling on both tank and shorts before I manage to grab a long-sleeved t-shirt out of the drawer and pull it over my head. She sits quietly, watching me from the edge of the rumpled bed. I want to rumple her.

"Stand up and let me see."

She obeys without question and even models by turning in a slow circle with her arms over head. She seems almost playful after her nap. Odd, but I'm glad. Then I realize that it is probably just a reflection of my own lighter mood. I love my friends and I love Sundays. It's our Sunday Movies and Mayhem that has kept me going over the years since Tony's death. Call it my security blanket, but I've come to rely on this tradition. I cross the room in three strides and pull her into my arms to claim her lips. She has the most kissable lips of anyone I've ever known. I lift my head to tell her she's beautiful and she ducks with embarrassment.

"You are beautiful." This time I tilt her chin up and hold her gaze.

I wipe away a stray curl that clings to her cheek and, for the first time, notice the smudges of mascara beneath her eyes. Sleep or tears, I wonder. Tugging her chain, I pull her with me into the bathroom and heat a washcloth with warm water. Carefully, I remove all traces of last night's makeup from her face. She offers me a shy smile from beneath hooded lashes as I drop a kiss on the end of her damp nose. Taking her hands in mine, I lift her fingers to my mouth. There are red and purple scuffs on her wrists from struggling against the metal cuffs. Holding her gaze, I kiss each mark tenderly before kissing her full and deep on the mouth again. She struggles against me and I lift my head lazily, since there is no chance of her escaping my embrace until I'm ready to set her free. "I like seeing my marks on you."

She traces the bruise on my chest with her nail, just as Jackie did moments ago, and looks up at me shyly from beneath lowered lashes. I think I spy a small smile. Growling playfully, and swatting her ass with my flat, open palm, I admit, "I like seeing your marks on me, too."

The admission is worth the cost to my sadist pride when I see her smile. God, she is

glorious when she smiles. I must think of new ways to make her do so often.

"Come on, we have guests waiting, and if I don't get you out of here right now, I'm not going to be responsible."

She raises her knee, rubbing into the soft flannel boxers, feeling my erection.

"My makeup case is in the other bathroom," she says fretfully and worries her bottom lip, rubbing her knee back and forth. I wrap my arms around her waist, pulling her into my chest.

"Not today." I kiss her nose, daydreaming that every day could be just this wonderful. "No makeup on Sunday. House rules. Everyone is just comfortable with everyone else on Sundays. We just take each other as is."

Her eyes narrow as she challenges, "Jackie is wearing makeup."

"And honey-child, ain't nobody ever gonna see me without it, either." Jackie pokes her head in to find Kitten trapped between my thighs, catching me lowering my lips once more to hers.

"We're never gonna get into those margaritas are we?" she plagues me, winking at Kitten, "At least, not at the rate you two are moving."

Kitten ducks as she blushes a rosy pink, but first she winks back. And I know by the surprise in Jackie's eyes that she has been won over. With a knowing nod, she turns to leave. She turns back and holds her open palm in the air. "On second thought, child, I better keep you with me. That way, at least I'll know he'll follow."

Kitten glances up, lip between her teeth. I tug the lip out with my thumb and release her from my thighs. It is a struggle to push her and watch her put her much smaller hand in Jackie's. She stops and turns toward me.

"Do I look all right?" She is unsure, nervous.

I take in her long, tan legs peeking out from beneath my bright white and yellow boxers that hang low on her waist and curve deliciously around her hips, teasing my thoughts with a glimpse of belly button between their elastic edge and the hem of the ribbed tank. The tank itself molds around her narrow ribs and small breasts. Her nipples are pebbled hard behind the thin fabric. She wears my mark on her neck, just above the slave collar, a purple hickey just beneath her right ear. I don't remember biting her. I move forward and rest my lips over the spot, kissing away imagined pain.

She smells of sex and me. It is a good smell. I tousle her hair more just for spite.

Jackie tugs her quickly from my reach. "Damn girl, if you looked any better, we'd never see either of you again."

I follow their chatty trail into the living room where the mayhem has already begun. Three sofas. Twenty people.

And that isn't including Kitten or me in the count. I quickly add in all the dining room chairs and calculate the nameless faces behind the ringing doorbell. Not that my friends aren't completely resourceful. Case in point, the four friends sprawled across the floor between the sofas, wrapped in their own blankets, elbows buried into their pillows, chins propped on their palms, watching television.

I catch Kitten's gasp of surprise.

Her expression of shocked wide-eyed innocence amuses me, though I am not sure which surprises her more; the growing crowd, the fact that they are all in varying degrees of pajamas, or the fact that the crowd is made up entirely of the blatantly gay male persuasion. She turns and realizes what Jackie is wearing—long, flowing, satin lounging

pajamas and slides with a fluffy feather trim, both in innocent white—before accosting me with a questioning gape.

“Did I neglect to mention it’s a slumber party?” I ask innocently. Jackie titters, hiding it with expert theatrics behind long, elegantly manicured hands, before wrapping a supportive arm around Kitten.

Enrique makes the rounds with a bamboo tray laden with frosty margaritas rimmed with crystals of salt. He tries to skirt around us. I grab two and hand one each to Jackie and Kitten before grabbing another for myself. I can tell that Enrique still has his nose out of joint over Kitten. And Jackie has her nose out of joint because Enrique refuses to give her the time of day. It is going to be a long afternoon.

Kitten nods absently as she takes in the rest of the guests. A few, sporting plain white briefs, float through the room, but for the most part, either boxers or satin pajama bottoms rule. Couples lounge together, though today their intimacy seems contained, reined in, and I am sure it is Kitten’s presence that makes the sole difference. Not out of politeness, but because she’s a woman. It makes everything just a little surreal. Like going home for the holidays and trying to face what is normal life for the rest of the world.

The doorbell rings again. This time Enrique is right on it. Tom Turner bounds in with way too much enthusiasm. The little I know about Tom is that he is always bounding and always a little too giddy. Pooh’s Tigger on speed, pardon the horrid analogy. Hoots fill the room. I notice Tom isn’t in the required slumber party attire and wonder when exactly he became part of our crowd. He tosses the movies over the couch to a pair of ready hands.

“Nice of you to join us, Tom,” Jackie quips.

“And it’s always a pleasure to see you too, Jackie.” Tom lifts her hand to his lips with chevalier grandeur. “And where, oh where is this new slave I’m hearing so much about, Lewd?”

I really hate it when he calls me Lewd. Number one he’s a kid, interning at *Inappropriate Voices*, and I have jeans older than him. Show some respect already. And two? Ah hell, I just don’t like him. He’s a little too Goth around the edges maybe; I’m always waiting for him to ask me if I want to donate blood. All I know is he’s always trying to wrangle invites and that makes me nervous. He’s a little too eager, not quite real enough. Maybe when he’s older and he has a handle on who he really is, he’ll turn out all right.

I frown and glance around. I see Jackie wheel her head to look behind me. Pointing out that Kitten is trying her best to hide. Shy? Or hiding from Tom? And if hiding from Tom, why? I mean I can understand it. Now that I have an annoying face to go with the name, I want to hide too. But what is her reason?

“Hello, Pussy,” Tom leers and reaches around me to stroke her face. Her chin is tilted away from him and when he touches her, she jerks. I look to see if his too glossy black nail polish rubbed off on her face, like he could leave her smudged. I’d like to smudge his face, except I’m against child abuse.

“Always the clever one, aren’t you, Tom,” Jackie wraps a protective arm around Kitten and shields her from his leering eyes. In true Diva fashion, Jackie either loves you or hates you at first sight. It is one of her more amusing characteristics. I watch her pull Kitten into the kitchen and brush a tear off Kitten’s cheek. What is going on here? I start to follow them, but Tom holds me back.

“You know, I’m sorry about this, Lewd, but I can’t stay. I have a cute little honey bunny tied down to my bed right now and, well, you know how it goes, duty calls. I’d watch that stray you’ve dragged in. You just never know about cats. Curious, ya know? Just watch her, okay?”

“Yeah, sure, Tom,” I answer absently as I walk him to the door. “You watch those bunnies, too. Never know when you might get a rabid one.” I always send my guests off with a chuckle. Showman instinct. It keeps them coming back for more. As soon as the door closes, I head for the kitchen. God, I am like a bitch in heat following her.

When I enter, they are forehead to forehead, whispering as they make popcorn the old-fashioned way, over the stove, in a huge pot. Enough for thirty-odd guests. There are no clues to Kitten’s tears and now she seems perfectly content. Maybe I imagined the whole thing. A soft titter from Kitten, a bolder outright laugh from Jackie. They are too close like that, elbow to elbow, and I am suddenly jealous that Kitten laughs for Jackie, when I have yet to even make her truly smile more than once. Always the sad smile for me.

I clamor in with all the good nature I can muster and lift myself to sit on the countertop. They are quiet. I have intruded on a private conversation and I don’t like it. No, not one bit.

“Leave the room, Kitten.”

Her head pops up, fear in her eyes. Jackie swivels her head toward me with an uplifted brow as Kitten scurries from the room.

“And don’t you dare look at me that way!” I tell her.

“Garrett Oliver Lawrence, I haven’t seen you this green with jealousy since we were in junior high school and you got in a scuffle over that cute little cheerleader. What was her name?”

“That’s what I get for keeping the same friends too many years. It was high school and her name was Carley. Surely, you remember. The one I almost left standing at the altar.”

“Um-hm.” Jackie nods her head in an irritating fashion while she jiggles the pan over the heat. “You’ve got it bad for this one, haven’t you? I never dreamed you’d fall for the first dripping pussy that straddled your face.”

“Get out!”

Her head jerks up so fast I think her wig slipped a little.

“What did you say?” she demands.

“I said, get out!”

The slamming door pulls me back from my stupor. Damn. I’m an idiot. A total freaking idiot. I sigh and count to ten. She’s not coming back. *Damn. Damn. Damn. I’m an idiot.*

It takes me all of about ten seconds more to chase after her. Thank God it’s a slow, old elevator and I run the stairs twice a day just for fun. I hit the parking garage the same time her key slides into the lock.

“Jackie, stop. Please.” I am shouting as I sprint across the cold cement. A cold drizzle falls outside and fills the garage with a damp, bone-chilling draft. I put myself between the car door and the jam. I know she hides her face to hide her tears. She is my oldest, dearest friend. And she is in love with me. I think she has always loved me. With the kind of love I can never return. She loved me enough to tolerate Tony. And if I hadn’t

been such an idiot, she might have learned to tolerate Kitten.

"I'm a total, fucking idiot. Please come back."

"I don't want to come back inside, Garrett. And it's not because of what you said."

I close my eyes. It's too hard. I can't do this. I can't run off my only true friend.

"Damn it Jackie, I love you. Please don't go."

"Don't you see Garrett, that's why I have to go." She turns her tear-stained face up to meet mine. I lean my forehead against hers. We know each other well enough to know an impasse when we see one.

"I need you, Jackie. I'm not going to survive this without you. Please. It hurts too much already. It's like I'm losing him again and I don't understand it."

"Oh, Garrett." Her arms close around me, comforting, like a mother or a sister. It is okay again. "You have to let go, baby. It's time to say goodbye. What you're feeling is Tony letting you go. You have to let go of him, too."

"Will Kitten be okay for a few minutes alone?" she asks suddenly and I wonder what she's up to.

"I hardly think she's alone. There are thirty-odd people up there and more arriving every minute."

"And you trust them, but you didn't trust me?" she accuses in her standard straightforward way.

"I trust you," I promise her. "You are the only one I would really ever trust Kitten with, no questions asked. I just went a little nuts. I'm sorry. Blame it on lack of sleep so I don't feel like a total loser okay?" I press a kiss to her cheek.

"Go for a drive with me and I'll think about it."

* * * *

My fingers dig into the doorframe. I will not get out of the car. I shake my head and dig in my heels. Forget it, no way. *You can't make me.*

But my silent tirade gets me nowhere quick. I can't speak. My nose is full of snot and my vocal chords are frozen silent. I tell myself it's just shock. I can't believe Jackie brought me here. I haven't been here since the day we put him in the ground.

I never looked back. I never looked forward, either.

"Get out of the blasted car, Garrett!" Jackie digs in her heels and pulls me out by my shoulders. I don't have a chance against her. She is four inches taller and fifty pounds heavier. She tosses me onto my butt in the cold damp grass without even a grimace of effort. Then she has the audacity to slam the door shut behind her as she locks herself in the car. She has heat. I am freezing. God, I hate spring, unpredictable, one never knows what to wear. I look at my flannel boxers, I am not dressed for this.

Tall iron gates tower over me, waiting for me to decide. Jackie wags her hand at me and mouths "hurry up" through the closed windows. With a racing heart and damp palms, I push myself up out of the damp grass and plod over the soft earth to Tony's grave. My bare toes sink a little bit because the ground is so wet. Overhead, the sky is as dark and somber as my soul. I don't cry. I've cried out every tear I had stored while I was still in the car. While I was still begging Jackie not to make me do this. But here I am. I bury my mouth in my hand and rub my scratchy cheeks. I should have at least shaved. Tony hated a rough face. I look at my bare legs and feet, quickly turning bright pink in the brisk breeze.

The marker looks the same as it did five years ago.

I swallow hard and sit down with my back to the cold granite. Damp grass soaks through my flannel boxers. It doesn't seem to matter.

"Tony," I say in greeting, as if he is here beside me. And who knows, maybe he is. I have often felt like he is watching me. I felt his closeness the night of the auction. I felt his nudge when the bids started flying fast and furious over Kitten. "It's been a long time."

A breeze shoots through the high branches of the white pine that shelters us with a long, slow whistle. It is comforting.

"God, I've missed you."

I start out slow, struggling, not sure what to say, but then I know he is listening and I feel his pain as if it was mine. A sadness that life stalled for me five years ago. I never got on with my life. I've just gone through the motions. At least, until two days ago.

"You should see her, Tony. She is sunlight trapped beneath glass. She is a brilliant shining star who, in two days, has led me out of the pit of darkness. She is every clichéd song ever written. But damned if I know what I'm doing.

"I don't want to offend you and all we stood for together, fought for together—by falling in love with a girl. But, it's already too late for that. She stole my heart the minute she stepped through the side doors."

I laugh. "Bob, you remember Bob? The big, beefy security guard who goes through all the doorways sideways? Anyway, she walked in and he said something that made her smile and it was the saddest smile I've ever seen in my life."

I sit there on his grave, deadheading zinnias as I try to explain the pull she has over me. "I tried not to look at her. But it seemed like she was everywhere I turned. When her owner hit her with a chain, I knew I'd never let anyone ever hurt her again. I know, I shouldn't be telling you any of this. But I have to—just because I did love you so much."

I pull a blade of grass through my fingers and twirl it. Thinking, remembering...

"Just think, if it hadn't been for you, there wouldn't have been a slave auction."

And it was true, the very first auction had been at his whim. He begged for weeks before I agreed, and the only way I would agree to it was if all the proceeds went to charity. Then, just days after that first auction, Tony died. Was murdered.

I almost didn't do an auction the years following. But I made myself, in memory of Tony, because it was the last thing we ever planned together. And now, the auction is big, bigger than big—huge. And Lewd Larry's is bigger and better than ever.

"And it's all because of you. Every time I said no way, that's too far out there, you proved to me that it wasn't far enough. The people always want more."

I watch the clouds rolling end over end in shades of granite, wondering what more there is to say.

"It's good just to talk to you again. I shouldn't have stayed away so long. I'm sorry for that."

A steady drizzle falls, has been falling for I don't know how long. And I know it's time. I've come to do what had to be done. Although, I'm still not sure what it is I'm seeking. Forgiveness? A blessing? But I know I'm calm now. Calmer than I've been in five long years and I know it's time. "Goodbye, Tony."

Chapter 12

"You go to dark places so that you can get there, steal the trophy, and get out. That is more important than to be psychologically safe."

—Frederick Busch

Celia

I have always wanted to be Barbara Walters. I admire her.

As a woman who forged forward for women across the globe by pursuing a traditionally male-dominated arena, she ruled. I try to imagine Barbara in my shoes.

Okay, so for this assignment I need a new role model.

I can't waste time dwelling on what happened—why Garrett got mad, why Jackie got mad and left, or even why Garrett chased after Jackie. And I have no idea how long they will be gone. But in a house with no phones and at least five cell phones in plain sight, this may be my only chance to get word to Doug. If I can just get my hands on one of those phones...

I have never been very good at sneaking around. It seems I always manage to get caught. Like the time when I was sixteen and I tried to sneak out through the bedroom window with plans to meet up with some friends. My father was stationed beside the corner of the house to catch me in the act. How did he know I was going to sneak out? I mean, I didn't even know I was going to do it myself until I did it and I had never attempted anything so rebellious before to give him reason to think I would. But he did think it, I did it, and there was hell to pay for it.

Then there was the time I considered calling the police to help me get away from Lion. By pressing the redial button on the phone, he found out not only who I called, but what I planned to do. The police thought I was a lunatic and Lion came out with his halo shining all the brighter.

God, I have to stop this! Do I want to fail? That was then, this is now. I will succeed at this assignment! Garrett is gone, his guests are blitzed on margaritas and Richard Gere. Or, as Enrique put it earlier, "ay, yi, yi, nice ass he has Richard Gere." Of course, a major debate followed over which part of Gere's anatomy won out over all; and surprising enough it was a tie between the seductive smile and his tight ass. Ah, target in sight.

The closest phone is lying next to two of the brief boys. And believe me when I say they are so wrapped up in each other that they won't notice. Eureka.

Okay, okay, it's okay. My heart is not going to explode! I don't know when I've ever been this scared. I'll just slip into the pantry. I dredge Doug's cell number from the recesses of my brain and dial.

Ring, ring.

Hurry up.

A buzzer sounds. Doorbell? No, not Garrett. Garrett wouldn't ring the doorbell.

Ring, ring.

Voice mail message. Hurry up. Hurry up. Please!

“It’s Ce, I’m...”

A ghost hand flies into the pantry and jerks the phone from my hand so fast my head spins. Then the hand pulls me from my hole and shoves me into a wall. Can’t breathe. Oh, shit. Lord Fyre, though in my mind, Satan, Lucifer himself. “I don’t think we’ve been introduced. Kitten, isn’t it?”

His sneer is all it takes. Tears are falling. What is it about every man I meet in this nightmare that I have to slobber all over them?

“You can call me Lord Fyre. And I think you’re being a very naughty little Kitten.”

“I-I was...”

“Silence!”

I notice his roar has drawn a crowd. Surely, he won’t kill me in plain view of an audience. I try to move off the wall, but his forearm forces the remaining air from my lungs. I suck in scorching pain.

“Who does this belong to?” Lord Fyre demands, holding the damning evidence above his head.

A very pale-looking brief boy lifts his hand. Fyre tosses him the phone. “Get rid of it, Gulliver.”

The crowd is further dismissed with a glare. They run, it is a testimony to their feelings about this man and I feel forewarned not to mess with him. The unholy one swivels his head back to face me and devours my mouth. It is not a kiss. It is more like a total and complete rape of my mouth. My tongue is raked to shreds and my lips numb under the sheer force of the attack. I can’t breathe, I can’t think.

God, why do I always have to get caught?

The assault begins and ends with my mouth. He pulls away from me with the same force that he originally assailed me. My mouth is still gaping, I fear I am mortally wounded by his kiss. It takes a great effort to close my mouth and even more effort not to vomit when he traces his fingers along my exposed collarbone, lifting the heart-shaped ruby then dropping it to smack against my chest. His condemnation travels through my brain, even though he doesn’t speak a word. *You don’t respect your collar, you don’t respect your Master; he deserves better than you.*

His eyes burn through my soul with accusation and I can feel myself breaking down, running the story through my head, trying to make it sound not as bad as it is. When he does speak, it is a whisper and I jump from the force behind it. “You didn’t like that, did you?”

I manage to shake my head, though I’m not sure how.

“You screwed up, didn’t you?”

I nod.

“So where is your Master, Kitten? That you would be left to your own devices?”

I gulp and shrug.

His smile, brilliant and inviting, puts me even more off balance than his line of questioning. Terror isn’t even a strong enough word to describe the emotion that holds me silent. His fingers wrap into my hair and jerk my head back. His lips fall closer to my face but he does not kiss me. No, it is much worse than that. He demands answers.

“Who did you call Kitten?”

I squeak with pain. I am sure I will be bald when he is through with me. My mind flies wild trying to think of what to say. Lies close to truth, truth that is lies.

"My-my Master."

"Garrett is your Master."

"My o-other Master."

"You have no other Master. Only Garrett."

"M-my old M-master."

Fyre stretches my neck with a jerk of my hair. "Why?" he seethes.

"I promised him I would call him in two days."

Sparks flicker from the man's eyes just before they narrow into fierce slits. I wait for his head to start spinning, but it doesn't. I feel a light slacking on my hair. His breath, cinnamon and heat, fans my face. I would have expected fetid breath from one so unholy. And his voice, though terse, is not acid. "Why would you promise him such a thing?" His voice is filled with disbelief.

"He said he would worry if I didn't tell him I was all right."

"And did you tell him you were all right?"

"I was trying to when you..." I gulp, he isn't buying any of this and so far every word has been truth. Or at least cover story truth, which is the same thing. "Please, don't tell Master, Lord Fyre."

"Why shouldn't I?"

"I don't want him to get rid of me. I want to stay here with him. Honest. Please, I'm begging." As I say the words, I realize they are truth, real truth not story truth. "I just didn't want..."

Lord Fyre is impatient and snaps my head with a jerk of my hair.

"I don't want him to come here and ruin everything," I say in a gush. It is the truth, one hundred percent truth.

He releases me so quickly that I drop to the floor. I stay there in a limp puddle on my knees until Lord Fyre returns to the kitchen with what I assume is Gulliver's cell phone. I watch him press redial. He listens to the rings, he listens to the message. A smirk wraps his face in sinister amusement. Doug's message is stupid, it hardly qualifies as amusing. "I am Master, you are slave, say what you have to say. Now, Bitch!" *Beep*.

Lord Fyre hands me the phone.

"It's me. I'm fine," I quickly tell Doug and hand the phone back to Lord Fyre, but he doesn't take it. He just shakes his head and mouths "more, say more."

I put the phone back to my lips. "I won't be calling you again. I am happy here with my new Master." I press end and look up at Lord Fyre. "There isn't anything else to say."

"Good," he answers and takes the phone from my hand. He moves into the living room, I assume to give the phone to Gulliver. When he returns to the kitchen, I am still sitting on cold tile. He doesn't seem to notice me but I know that he is taking in my every move as he moves to the refrigerator. I sit quietly, still, trying to breathe normally. He takes a glass bottle of juice from the fridge and pours some into a stoneware mug. I watch him inhale the liquid in two gulps, and then refill the mug.

He carries the mug of juice with him as he walks to my side. With his free hand, he offers me a hand up. Not sure what else to do I accept his hand. He pulls me up and into him. Cool lips and tongue linger on the skin just under my ear. The same place Garrett dropped a kiss earlier. It makes me feel every bit the whore and I'm not sure why. I didn't invite this attention but neither have I shoved him away. My eyes close as the cool tongue traces the whirl of my ear. In my mind, I see wax dripping...

“Very soon, Kitten, Garrett will tire of you and when he does, I will be here to collect my bounty for keeping this our little secret. You will be mine.”

He pulls away suddenly to lean nonchalantly against the counter top. Bereft of his scorching body heat, I feel cold. Very, very cold. I back as far into the corner as I can and shake uncontrollably. I think he finds amusement in that.

The ringing doorbell breaks the spell that held my eyes locked to his. Muffled voices grow louder and it sounds like there is a skirmish taking place in the living room. I recognize one of the voices. Doug.

Shit, shit, shit. Can this day get any worse?

Lord Fyre sees the recognition register on my face. His eyes hold me still while my body falls apart. I am not sure what caused the reaction, but the uncontrollable shaking worsens, wrapping me in its embrace. The unholy allegiance that I didn’t agree to, or deny, with Fyre? Or the fact that Doug has shown up and I know it will be only moments until my cover is blown?

“I demand to see her!” his voice echoes off the high ceilings.

I am not ready for a confrontation with Doug. I don’t know how to play this. I can’t let him blow this story. He flies like a madman into the kitchen.

What do I do? What do I do?

I panic and hide behind Lord Fyre. It is my only recourse. Garrett thinks I am afraid of Doug and it is good enough. Let someone else throw him out. Then maybe what he has to say will be discounted as wild rants.

It was a good decision choosing Lord Fyre as my shield. He is tall, maybe taller than Garrett. Definitely broader than Garrett. And by squeaking between Lord Fyre and the counter, I feel safe. I wish Garrett were here. But I am also glad he is not here. This is a complete nightmare.

“I want to talk to my Slave,” Doug barks at Lord Fyre.

“You have no property here. You should leave now,” Lord Fyre responds in a too calm voice,

“Not until I talk to her.”

“She has nothing to say to you.”

“I feel she does. And who in the hell are you anyway? Where is Garrett Lawrence?”

I didn’t think it was possible for anyone to stand toe to toe and argue with the behemoth that shields me. Obviously, Doug is made of sterner stuff than I gave him credit for. Even if he is a little squirrely.

“Garrett isn’t here and, while he is away, I am the protector of his property. And I say you will leave.”

“And if I don’t care to leave right now?”

“You will leave. Now.”

From behind Lord Fyre, I peek around to see Doug. We lock eyes and for a second I feel his concern. He is being a good friend, looking out for my safety, but I can’t let him blow this story. Not now.

“Go,” I mouth.

“Are you really okay?” he asks.

The concern in his voice is enough to bring me to tears. It’s been a long time since anyone has shown any concern for me. I nod and finally find my voice.

“I’m fine. Really. I want to stay here. I want to see this through. Go home.” I hope I

said enough to let him know we can do the story, I hope I didn't say too much to blow my cover.

Chapter 13

"We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory..."

—Abraham Lincoln, First inaugural address

Garrett

I am weary and tired and chilled completely through to the bone. After the cemetery, we drove for hours, Jackie waiting for me to talk.

Stubborn and silent, I stared out the window, unable to share emotions, feelings, needs that I had no idea I had until she pushed and pushed, nagging at me to put them into words, until the walls I'd built around myself crumbled. The feelings I'd left hidden so deep welled to the back of my throat, pounding with my heartbeat, a needy dead weight over my heart that suffocates me and makes it hard to take that next breath; but I don't release it. I refuse to say a word, jumping from the car at a stoplight and running faster than I have ever run, barefoot. Pouring rain slaps my face, blinding me, but I run and run. Five miles isn't far enough; I could have run all night but suddenly my complex is there, towering over me. And Gerard is meeting me at the sidewalk with an umbrella.

My hair drips in my face; wet clothes hug my body and I want nothing more than to shed them immediately, to feel warm and dry again, but no, I must wait. Today has been too emotional by half and now I have to deal with Thomas, too. That he is even here amazes me. He knew he was needed, was the only explanation he gave.

That in itself amazes me, that he knows instinctively when life or circumstances will go awry. It is an uncanny ability, somehow frightening. The aftershock of his revelation ripples through my mind. Kitten was busy today.

"You will never tame her, Garrett," Thomas hisses and the sound ricochets through the bright hallway.

"Maybe I don't want to tame her."

"Maybe she needs someone who is willing to tame her!"

One of my neighbors, Mrs. Hildebrandt, officious and ancient, slides out of the elevator and makes the slow trip to her room. I smile and wave, Thomas actually takes her packages and waits patiently while she unlocks the door with a jittery hand and an even more jittery key.

"You are such a dear fellow, Mr...?"

"Call me Thomas."

Thomas offers his most charming smile and Mrs. Hildebrandt's nervous titter evidences that even at, well, ancient, her soul is still one hundred percent female. "You better watch out for that friend of yours—he just isn't himself these days," she whispers, quite theatrically for an old bird.

"You don't say?" Thomas indulges her.

"He has a woman in there with him." Again with the stage whisper.

I shake my head and sigh, I catch Thomas's wink as he asks, "A woman, you say?"

“Why yes, and she is such a sweet girl.”

I choke. How does Mrs. Hildebrandt know Kitten is sweet?

Even Thomas shuffles uneasily. “You’ve met her then?”

“Oh, we haven’t actually spoken, but she always waves.” It is Mrs. Hildebrandt’s turn to offer a charming smile. I think, in her day, she definitely turned heads. There is a wickedly mischievous gleam that comes through with her smile. “You probably didn’t know, but our balconies face each other. Some mornings I see her watching me water my flowers out on my balcony and I think she needs some flowers to take care of, too. Once we caught each other in the bathroom windows that face each other. Of course, she was naked, getting out of the shower, and I was naked, trying my best to maneuver into the shower!” Her laugh catches me off guard. “You should have seen the rosy pink that girl blushed, but then she just waved and we shared a laugh, well you know, as well as you can with two panes of glass between you.”

I have never seen Thomas at a loss of words. He is.

“Thank you for seeing me in, Thomas, and do keep an eye on your friend. He has the saddest smile I have ever seen in my life. And that, my boy, is a lot of years.”

Thomas completely tucks her into her apartment before returning to my side. “Tame her, Garrett, or find someone who will,” he hisses.

“And you think that someone is you?” I challenge.

“No, I think that someone is Ice, but if Ice is unwilling to tame her, Fyre isn’t!”

Thomas growls, and I know he means it. His attraction to her was immediate and most obvious.

He culled her from the crowd, seeing her needs, knowing her desperate secrets, instinctively feeling her darkness whereas I feel only the light shimmering beneath the surface. I wonder what it is about Kitten that keeps me blind to her needs?

“I won’t lie to you, Garrett, the wench fuels something inside of me that I considered long dead, something that has been too long missing in my life.”

“Do tell, Thomas?” I bite sarcastically. “Would that be lust? Because I know you wear your lust on your sleeve.” I wait for him to jump right into the fray, but he doesn’t. “There is no doubt as to who does and who doesn’t inspire your baser side. I know it’s more than just your sadist side that inspires you to find someone new to crush beneath your boots on a daily basis. What is lacking in your perfect world, Thomas? Beautiful wife, children, open marriage, perfect job. Has your wife grown too dark herself to suit your needs? You feel Kitten is still light and good? Perhaps it is the sunlight that radiates from her soul? Or perhaps you romance the idea that she might save you from your own darkness!”

“My relationship with Latisha is none of your concern,” he growls.

I am not prepared for the body slam that pins me to the wall or the heat of his mouth covering mine. A heat meant to roust Ice from his slumber, a heat demanding fierce passion in return. I shove him away and wipe his spit from my lips. I glare at him and he resumes his pacing. It is rare for Thomas to lose control of himself, yet a trademark for Fyre. But Thomas is not Fyre now, and I wonder at the blatant show of emotion that brings color to his normally shadowed cheeks. “Kitten deserves more.”

Kitten deserves better than me. Left unsaid, it is the jab that leaves him standing alone in the hallway. I slam the door between us and lean my forehead against the cool surface. He culled her out, he culled her out. Fyre saw a like flame and culled her out, my

mind screams. *Damn it all. Damn, damn, damn.*
She deserves Fyre.
But will she settle for Ice?

Chapter 14

"It is a revenge the devil sometimes takes upon the virtuous, that he entraps them by the force of the very passion they have suppressed and think themselves superior to."

—George Santayana, *The Letters of George Santayana*

Celia

The room is shadowed when my eyes drift open. Someone turned off the lights. I am far from alone, but Lord Fyre is no longer sitting across from me, guarding me. Make that watching me.

I hate to be watched. Even worse, I hate having my every movement, response, reaction assessed. He didn't try to kiss me again. Actually, there was no intimacy at all, as if the kiss itself never even took place. I feel the rape of my mouth still—the force of it, the force of the man behind it.

For now, I am safe, nestled on the couch against a man I know only as Sugar. I think he is the man who came with Jackie, but I am not sure; we haven't spoken, with the exception of exchanging names.

"Sugar."

"Kitten."

It all seems so very odd without Master here.

Sugar is a small man, barely five-feet tall and he is heavier than many of the men in the room. He is a good pillow. Someone covered us up during the movie, *Pretty Woman*. Of course, every able body in the room was drooling over Richard Gere. I missed the ending. Almost everyone is asleep, the few remaining awake are serious Gere fans, *Rhapsody in August* having just started.

What time is it? Daytime? Nighttime? Does it really matter anymore? I sleep when I am told to sleep, I wake when I am told to wake, and I eat when I am fed from Master's hand. I am not ruled by clocks, schedules, or even rumbling stomach.

An unbelievable fury of rain pounded the windows earlier, but now it is quiet. I am disoriented after sleeping during the wrong time of the day, but then I'm not sure what the right time of the day is anymore. It still blows me away that I sleep here at Master's. I feel I am in need of serious professional counseling. Too afraid in my own safe bed, but put me in a total stranger's house, a known sadist at that, and I sleep like a baby. I can't even begin to dwell on the ramifications of that since not only do I sleep, but I dream. Brilliant watercolor dreams of Lord Fyre with a flaming candle. Forget counseling. Psychoanalysis is more suitable, and maybe drugs. Serious drugs.

Two things dawn on me now that I am wide-awake. Someone lit a fire in the fireplace while I slept and it is now deep twilight. A lavender sky is decorated with the sparkling gems of city lights. San Francisco is beautiful from up here at night.

It bothers me that Master has not yet returned with Jackie. It has been hours. Five, at least. Is it odd that I am so worried about two people I hardly even know?

I wonder what woke me up. I wipe a drop of cool water off my forehead. A tear. Or a

drop of rain that fell off someone who was soaking wet when he kissed the top of my head. My heart leaps with hope. No, I reprimand myself. I have to keep this separate. It's only for one month. No strings attached. And what would Garrett Lawrence ever do with the real me, anyway? The Librarian? It is a depressing joke.

Made even more depressing by Lion's truth...

Who would ever want me?

I sit up and listen to the sounds in the house. Water is running, a shower or a bath, in Master's bedroom. Without thinking twice, I rush to join him, but stand frozen just outside the bathroom door. What if it isn't him? What if he isn't pleased with the intrusion? What if Lord Fyre has already given him a full report on everything that happened?

Steam laced with Ocean Mist drifts under the door. Okay, I decide, if it is locked, I'll wait on the bed. If it is unlocked...

Steam rolls off the man. He hasn't realized that I have intruded yet, so I watch him lather his hair and rinse it under the pulsing spray. I want to touch him to make sure he isn't just a mirage. I pray Lord Fyre has kept our secret.

I am just turning to walk back out when our eyes meet.

He lifts his hand out to me and I move forward. I start to speak, but he lifts his fingers to my lips.

"You seemed to have livened up the party while I was away, Kitten."

"I..."

Master interrupts anything I planned to say with a kiss. Water from his wet hair drips into my eyes but I don't close them. I can't bear to look away, fearing he may disappear again.

He is a very good kisser, his face rough from not shaving all day, but the kiss gentle. He pulls me under the steamy shower spray with him, my cotton tank and boxers quickly soaking through and clinging to me. It is an unexplainably erotic sensation.

My body no longer seems my own because I have never felt sensations such as I feel with this man. I wrap my arms around his neck and twine my legs around his legs, but still we are not close enough together. A longing fills me to know where he's been, but I will not ask. An undercurrent of emotion fills the small space with a sharp tension that I am loath to interrupt.

"I need you now, Kitten," he whispers against my cheek in a breathy plea that leaves me breathless and aching to heal the hurt so evident in his voice.

I don't resist when he pushes the flimsy top above my breasts, his hands palming their softness with rough need. I don't understand the mood he is in, but his blatant need for sexual fulfillment is evident. His mouth finds my breast even as his fingers wrap into the waistband of my flannel boxers. With deft ease, he pushes the soaking fabric over my hips to my knees, supporting me while I step free. His kisses turn rough, his teeth nipping at each breast before traveling up the column of my neck; I am moaning with pleasure-pain by the time he ends his savage assault of my senses. I match his intensity, my fingernails raking over his back, my teeth sinking into his shoulder, eliciting an intake of breath.

Inside, I smile. With my teeth, I apply more pressure to the fold of skin and muscle; not biting hard enough to break skin, but hard enough to make him moan.

In a smooth lift that I don't expect, he pins me against the shower stall wall, his

length filling me completely with one savage thrust. My legs grip his waist, my fingers dig into his hair as I try to hold on, try to force his lips to find mine. But he is the one in control. "I don't want to hurt you," his growl echoes off the tile walls.

What? My mind warps a little. My sadist Master is afraid of hurting me? I pull back a little, holding on tightly, gazing into his eyes, seeing more need than I have ever seen. A fine vibration runs just beneath his skin and I realize just how hard he is trying to hold back his power, his urgency.

"I'm fine, Master." I insist, pushing back into his need with a savage grind. He pulls back to look into my face and I am not sure about the expression that crosses his, until he slams my hips against the cold tile wall with his hips. "Hold on with your legs, Kitten," he commands.

I do as I'm told, as he takes my wrists and lifts them above my head, securing them in metal shackles that I hadn't noticed were there until they clicked around my wrists. "Grab the chains with your hands, and hold tight."

Without warning, my hips are slammed into the cold tile wall, his hip thrust intensifying until I am pounded front and back, the wall not giving an inch, and neither does the man.

With total acceptance of who he is and who I am supposed to be, I throw myself into his fierce passion with an equal ardor that both thrills and terrifies me, stroke for stroke, bite for bite, screaming, grunting moan for moan. For a moment, he is me and I am him and all seems right with the world.

* * * *

Monday. My day of reckoning.

I know that Master has not forgotten about his promise to punish me on Monday. It is not in his nature to forget such things. It seems like forever ago that I broke the coffee cup. That it was only twenty-four hours ago seems impossible. I am trapped in a warped time continuum that perpetuates a non-reality.

I know, it doesn't make sense to me either.

None of this makes sense.

Especially the fact that I sleep here.

I sleep knowing today is D-Day. I sleep not knowing what Lord Fyre or any of the others reported to Master. I sleep knowing full well that everything I've ever wanted is in jeopardy. It makes no sense. I wonder if, when I return home, I will be able to sleep. A nagging suspicion tells me I will return to my normal insomniac self.

Master has been awake a while, and is showered, shaved, dressed, and ready. Ready for what is the worry of the moment. I, on the other hand, am still bleary-eyed and naked; I just want to get the promised punishment over and done with. Punishment for sneaking coffee. Not a spanking. Now that the alternatives flare rampant through my mind, I wonder why I was so quick to get out of a spanking? And the even bigger worry is just what is the proposed punishment for making an unauthorized phone call; for making a deal with the devil; and for having my boss/ex-owner show up unannounced? I shudder to think.

He is whistling and the whistle draws nearer.

I want to duck under the covers, but I bravely sit up. Might as well get this over with. He enters the room with a smile, but it quickly turns to a frown. "You're looking cross

this morning.”

I have the sheet pulled up to my armpits, covering my breasts. I wish, in this moment, that it was pulled over my head. What is the punishment for looking cross in the morning, Master?

“It’s Monday,” I reply candidly.

“Ah, you’re worried. Worry is good. It is part of the pleasure of anticipation.”

I can’t help lift an eyebrow. “You’re joking.”

He laughs. It is a soft, sensual laugh. I will never grow tired of hearing his warm bourbon voice or his velvet laugh.

“I have something special planned for you today.”

I wait for the shoe to drop. It doesn’t. I didn’t realize how grumpy I was until this moment. I want to know what he knows about last night. Damn. I hate games.

“My old owner showed up while you were gone yesterday,” I volunteer at random.

He sits down next to me on the bed. He looks good in his clothes; black turtleneck and gun-metal gray cargo pants in a coarse, nubby tweed. Urban weekend-wear. What I wouldn’t give for a turtleneck and jeans. In a swift swoop, his hands pull down the sheet so that I am bared to him.

“I was told something like that,” he offers but spares the details.

I gulp, edging on frantic, thoughts of being discovered and forced to leave running rampant. “I didn’t want him to come here.”

“No one said you did.”

“Lord Fyre thought I did.”

“He was mistaken.”

I nod, it seems the most appropriate thing to do, especially in light of the fact that I want to spill my guts, I want to blow my own cover, I want to belong to this man for real. I’m losing it, really losing it, but I win my inner battle and remain silent.

Master caresses my cheek before he stands and walks to the window. A brilliant blue sky is revealed when he pulls open the heavy drapes. He seems to take in the view before he turns back to me and I can’t help but wonder what he is thinking.

“You are hungry, no doubt. Unless you ate while I was gone?”

“N-no, nothing.”

He nods his head, accepting it as truth. Of course, he could verify everything I say with any one of the people milling around yesterday. It all seems like such a stupid game. This game of waltzing around the issues.

“Would you like something to eat?”

“To be honest, I could use some coffee.”

“Yes, of course.”

It seems suddenly odd that he has yet to use his pet name for me in a sentence. I miss the familiar Kitten. And he is being overly formal when contrasted to yesterday’s carefree ramble. I find I want to go back to Sunday morning. I would like to do the whole day over again without Master rushing out to follow Jackie and the ensuing catastrophes that followed.

“Forget the coffee. I just want to get this over with so that things can get back to normal between us.” I can’t believe I just said that.

Master steps closer. “And you like the way things are between us?”

I nod. It is the most I can do with so much unbidden emotion welling in my throat. I

refuse to cry all over him first thing in the morning. In answer, he takes my face between his palms and just holds me like that. A hug for my face. It is at once comforting and overwhelming. I can't help it, the tears spill over, and he brushes them away with his thumbs.

"Perhaps we should begin then," he says quietly. With a quick pull, he has me standing beside him and leads me to the library. Shutters cover the usually bright windows and a hundred candles light the room. The flickering flames cast ghoulish shadows against the rows and rows of books. The room is large, about twice the size as one of the bedrooms.

I hadn't noticed the fireplace before. Now it burns brightly, making the room seem smaller, warmer, cozier. I am not feeling warm or cozy. Master closes the door behind him and the echo is absorbed. For the first time, with Garrett, *Master*, I am afraid, and I wonder if he is intentionally trying to make it just so.

"We're alone, here. Completely alone." He is beside me again. His hand closes around the nape of my neck in a solid hold, not painful, but unyielding. "This room is completely soundproof. An adult playroom, if you will. In here, you don't speak, you don't moan, you don't cry out, unless I tell you that you can. And if there are any infractions, it will only be worse for you."

The silence is deafening and I freeze at the look in his eye, calculating and accessing.

"Understood?"

I nod, shaking in his hold.

With his free hand, he pulls a wooden straight-back chair out from beneath one of the two tables in the room. Guiding me with the hand he has wrapped around my nape, he pushes me down into the chair. He doesn't tell me to stay; I don't dare move when he steps away. From the corner of my eye, I watch him go to a tall, narrow cabinet of sorts with more than a dozen drawers. He returns to my side with several lengths of cord.

"Part your legs so that your ankles are on the outside of the chair legs." His voice is cold.

I acquiesce, after all he expects me to behave like an experienced slave. But I dread what I know in my heart are his plans. He is going to tie me to this chair and there is absolutely nothing I can do about it. Worse, I am open to him, thighs apart. Exposed. Vulnerable.

Why does it always manage to escape my notice that I am parading around naked or semi-naked until the most inopportune moments? I feel myself flushing with embarrassment.

Master ties first one ankle and then the other to the legs of the chair. My heart lets me know it is still beating at this point as it threatens to punch through my chest. And, like it or not, I got myself into this. I agreed to the terms. *Shit. Why did I ever agree to do this?*

He moves to stand behind me. "Put your hands around the back of the chair."

I fight the urge not to beg and I do as I'm told. He ties my hands, tight enough for me to not escape, tight enough that it will not be long before I cannot feel my fingers. He plants a kiss on top of my head. "You are doing very well."

Damn him for not ending the sentence with Kitten. I feel lost without this mental anchor. And I know now that he is mentally manipulating me. Damn him even more. I will not compare him to Lion. I will not.

“Sh-h, easy.”

My eyes close at his soft shushing. He takes his time walking to the cabinet and I only reopen them at the sound of his returning. He carries a small box with a lid. I do not think I am going to like whatever is in that box. I coax myself to calm down. Dominance and submission is ninety percent mental. This man may make a living at mental games, but I am up to whatever curve he can throw at me.

Master takes the lid off the box and removes five small, glass bottles. They are lined neatly on the table. In the flickering candlelight, I cannot see what is in the bottles, but regardless, I refuse to be freaked out. I feel my face wrinkle in puzzlement as he stacks five packages of cellophane saltines on the table and I fight to regain control before he turns to look at me. Nice blank face.

He picks up the first bottle and pulls a cork out of the top. He turns to face me.

“We are going to play a little game. In these jars are five different kinds of peppers. You are going to take a bite from each one and tell me their heat factor on a range from one to five, one being the mildest and five the hottest,” he pauses purposely, letting me absorb the information, watching my face for changes in expression. “On your application for the auction, you listed no known allergies. I want you to answer me, yes or no, are you allergic to peppers?”

I lose control over my face, eyes widening through all of this, but I manage a very calm “No, Master.”

I am thankful now that I enjoy spicy food on occasion. But, I have to admit, it is a very imaginative punishment, or would be to one who detested hot foods.

Master offers me a bite of the first pepper. It is warm, very warm. I swallow. I want water but I refuse to ask. Besides, the logical part of my brain tells me to wait on the cracker, water would just disperse the pepper oils through my mouth and make the burn much more intense. I realize Master is taking his time opening the cellophane around the saltines. Very imaginative. He plans to clear my palate between bites with a neutral starch but he wants me to think about the taste in my mouth long enough to make an impression. I try to keep my facial expressions as neutral as his through the entire process.

It turns out that peppers two and three are less intense than the first.

Pepper number four brings immediate tears to my eyes and it seems like an eternity before he tears through the cellophane to get the crackers out. I am on fire and desperate by the time he puts the cracker in my mouth. And I know even before he puts pepper number five in my mouth that it is going to be even hotter than number four. I lock my jaw and refuse to give in. When he is ready, I open my mouth. Bite. Chew. I am dying and he knows it. He is merciful with the crackers already in his hand. He does not make me wait.

While I chew the cracker, he pours two glasses of Chardonnay. He sips one at his leisure then brings one toward me. The cool lip of the wine glass teases my lip. I am not sure wine is consolation enough, but I gulp greedily.

The crisp, cool liquid that glides down my throat is a surprise. Not a Chardonnay after all. A Riesling. A whiff of damp earth mingled with the delicate fruit backbone leads me to believe it is a Von Kesselstatt Spatlese from Germany or maybe a Trimbach Cuvee Frederick-Emile from Alsace. The sweetness absorbs the heat from my tongue and I gladly swallow another large mouthful. Not the proper way to enjoy such a delightful white wine but, in this instance, acceptable.

“Tell me, in order, mildest to hottest.” His voice is neutral. He is baiting me for something but I am not sure what. I do not think I like this game very much any more.

“Three, two, one, four, five,” I answer slowly.

Master walks to the table and picks up bottle number five. “I am going to punish you now. And, after today, you will remember not to eat or drink anything that doesn’t come from my hand.”

I gulp and fidget in my chair. The binds are tight and I know it was futile to even test them. I do not want to eat any more peppers, especially the peppers in bottle number five.

“To make sure you remember this lesson, you are going to have an hour to think about it. After I punish you, you are going to remember to thank me for the punishment. So that things between us can get back to being *normal*.”

That’s it, throw my own words back in my face. I am sure my face is very cross-looking now. I grind my teeth together and lock my jaw as I watch him move closer with bottle number five.

“Would you agree that you never want to experience the peppers in this bottle again?”

I nod.

“Words.”

“Yes, Master, we can agree on that.”

“Good.” He sets the bottle on a small side table and opens his hand to reveal a larger pepper that I recognize as the type from bottle four. It is a small relief, but a relief still. “I will be more lenient than I should be, especially since every day you’ve been in my safekeeping, you have disobeyed, and I have had to punish you.”

He kneels in front of me and suddenly his intent is clear in my mind. He wouldn’t. God no, surely he wouldn’t. He sets the bottle on the chair between my thighs. I stare it down as if it is a cobra ready to strike. My knees are shaking, but there isn’t a thing I can do to stop them, it is embarrassing that he sees this weakness.

Desperation. Do I beg? Will it be worse if I beg?

“I am going to make you very uncomfortable now. I am going to cause you intense pain so that we never have to experience this particular punishment again. Though, be warned, if it ever does come to this punishment again, I will not be lenient. Understood?”

“Yes, Master.”

Peppers? Peppers. Something niggles at the back of my brain.

“You might find this amusing...” Master interrupts my thought process and turns my chin to make sure our eyes are locked. “Several years ago a friend of mine was reading a book, purely for entertainment, and he read out loud to me a passage about a special use for spice. The book is somewhere on one of these shelves, maybe I will find it and we can read it together. It’s something, something, adult bedtime stories.”

No, it can’t be! *Spanked and Sent to Bed Without Any Supper Adult Bedtime Stories, an exotica erotica anthology*. My very first publication was one of the three short stories in the anthology. I try to remember what happened in one of the two stories not written by me, but I draw a blank, aside from the title, *Sugar and Spice*.

“I have two choices; I can gag you or you can be left gag free. It really doesn’t matter since the room is soundproof.” Master places the pepper on the exposed chair surface between my forced-apart thighs, rubbing the inside of my thighs with his thumbs, a deep massage while he speaks. “And rest assured, you will be making noise before we

are through.”

I will not panic.

“I guess the novelty of the gag is that it acts like a security blanket, having the same effect as burying your face into a pillow when you are flogged. It’s your choice. Do you want the gag?”

I am dumbfounded. He gave me a choice? No way. It is just a trick. I shake my head but remain silent.

The massage stops and Master drops a kiss on the inside of each thigh. Even knowing his intent, a thrill runs down my spine at the luscious brush of his lips and a heavy weight fills my groin and belly.

I am wet, I know it as well as he knows it.

Anticipation? God no. Fear then? No, not fear...

“Good, I detest gags personally, so I will release you from the bind of silence for this hour. And it might comfort you to know that I am not going to be quite as cruel as the Master in that book. I don’t intend to leave the pepper inside of you the whole hour...”

He retrieves the pepper, parting its flesh open to expose the seed and liquid-filled interior.

I gasp. The story flies through my brain in 3D color. The Master in that story actually fucked his partner with a hot pepper. My stomach clenches in a knot. I can’t believe this is happening.

“But I will make sure that I rub enough of this juice on your inner and outer lips to ensure your discomfort for the entire hour.”

“No, please. Master, please! Don’t!” I am too pathetic for words and my pleas get me nowhere, Master is already sliding two fingers into the glass jar. I try to brace myself for what is to come. I will not cry out. *I will not blubber like a baby. I will not.*

“You may scream now.”

Master slides his two fingers inside of me and the first shock wave of heat floors me. I can’t help it. I scream.

Chapter 15

“Difficult as it is really to listen to someone in affliction, it is just as difficult for him to know that compassion is listening to him.”

—Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*

Garrett

I watch Kitten on a monitor screen. She is alone in her pain, living agonizing moments of abandonment. Sobbing. At first it was truly from pain, but now she feeds off anger. I can see the rage simmering in her eyes and I wonder if we will be able to use this lesson to free her from her demons.

I did not take as much pleasure in her first screams as I should have. I have grown soft since losing Tony. While she screams and curses me, I make lunch. She will be fine, I am losing it. Emotion. God, it's been so long since I felt anything at all, and now I am a wellspring of empathy. She is mine. Mine to control, mine to pleasure, mine to discipline; it is a powerful feeling, knowing that I can do absolutely anything I want to this beautiful, passionate creature, and yet I feel her every tear to the bottom of my soul. I wonder how I will ever survive this month if I can't even bear a few moments of her tears?

She is affecting me in ways I never imagined. I can't seem to get enough of her. There is nothing on earth to compare to the satiny smoothness of a woman's skin. Or her scent. Not from the scent of soap or shampoo or perfume, but her scent, the earthy female scent that calls to me now, even in my daydreams.

I have not completely resolved the guilt issues in having betrayed the lifestyle that Tony and I shared, the lifestyle that we fought for, but I am closer. Jackie's ever-present guidance has helped. Her entire philosophy in life revolves around love. Love has no gender, she says, just heart and soul. And so I will follow Jackie's advice and just enjoy Kitten while she is mine.

It is a rare indulgence.

My eyes can't stay off the monitor. God, she is so incredibly fine.

The table is set for two; fine linen, crystal, china, even flowers—for her. I give the salad a final toss and prepare cinnamon butter while the rye rolls are baking. Poached sea bass on a bed of spring vegetables will fill out the menu. I have both dreaded and looked forward to this day all week. Monday, the day I would have her all to myself, ironically turned into punishment day. I hope to salvage what is left of it.

My vibrating cell phone interrupts all cognitive thought. This better be damn important. Joel's name appears. Fuck.

“What?” I bark.

“It's another letter,” Joel says tentatively. He waits for me to respond. I don't, I can't. God I hate this. Why won't this jerk just leave me alone?

“I have to call the police this time, Garrett.”

“No! It'll stop, soon.” I try to make him see reason. “It always stops, Joel. Come on. I just can't take this anymore. It's just fucking paperwork. They never do anything

anyway.”

“I have to,” he reiterates in his firmest voice. “And you know it. Damn it, Garrett. There’s more at stake now.”

“What are you talking about?”

“This letter threatens the woman.”

His voice tells me more than the words. God, this can’t be happening. Not again. Not to me. Not her. “Shit,” I swear under my breath. But it nowhere near expresses what I’m feeling. “The letters have always been just threats, harassment. What makes you think he will do anything this time, Joel? Every year he threatens, every year we wait, every year—nothing.”

“He killed Tony.”

“There was no warning letter before Tony,” I argue.

“Will you risk Kitten’s life on a maybe?”

“You know I won’t!”

“Good to hear, Garrett, I was worried for a moment. So, I’ll involve the police.”

For a moment, I do not realize that he has hung up on me. Looking at the phone dumbly, I finally hang up the receiver, crumbling under a torrent of forgotten emotion. I rage at the man who stole away Tony’s life; rage at Tony’s unfaithfulness; but even that would have been forgiven, if only he had lived. I rage at the God who allows evil men to walk the earth and curse myself for buying Kitten and subjecting her to danger, but then in the same breath am so thankful she walked into my life when she did.

I woke up this morning whistling, something I have not done in years and it dawned on me; I feel alive again because of her. It will kill me to set her free at the end of our thirty days together, and already I am making plans in my mind just how I will ask her to stay. I know I am playing a reckless game. I risk falling in love with her. And now Joel would have me believe that I risk her life. I do not believe that though, I think the letters will stop. They always do.

* * * *

Watching her struggles have been harder since talking to Joel. I argue with myself over how to keep her safe, deciding finally to arrange for her to have a full-time bodyguard. He will stay here while we are here, he will travel with us to the club, and without her knowing, he will shadow us when I surprise her with an outing today. Post-punishment, she will need to know just how much I cherish her. I hope an outing will prove that, but my ulterior motive is to show her what our life could be like together outside of our contractual agreement. I just can’t let her know that I’m thinking about that yet.

My watch tells me it is time to release her and I will not delay because I know I must build trust in this relationship on my end if I ever expect to be able to trust her. Opening the door and walking back in is twice as hard as it was to leave. She is beautiful in her binds, glowing slick and golden in the candlelight. I grow hard just looking at her. It is primal what I feel.

I take my time going to her side. I need the time to relax inside. To give my raging testosterone time to slow to a low simmer.

She knows I return to release her, she knows the moment of freedom is at hand and yet this is the most agonizing moment. She is frantic with the need to be free. She

struggles hard against the ropes and I see that she is scraped and bruising. My fault for using rope, but it was a conscious decision on my part. Leather cuff restraints would have left no marks and the memory of today would have ended with the pain. My Kitten seems to need constant reminders. A visual reminder that goes past the memory of the sear of the original heat of the pepper juice. It will have faded by now, replaced by a still unpleasant heat and, within another half hour, even that will begin to fade. It is the heat I hope to use to give her pleasure.

I purposely left the door to the library ajar. Not only will she hear the mood music I have playing in the living room, but it also lets her know that the punishment is over and we can now go back to enjoying each other.

I approach her slowly, like you would a startled doe. From behind, I grab the nape of her neck hard and give it a small shake, just before I kneel to untie her hands. Carefully, I bring them back around to the front of her body and lay them in her lap, rubbing them each in turn to get the blood circulating. She is tense and angry, but she is silent. I feel her anger rolling off her in great waves and it makes me want to pull her into my arms and offer her comfort; but that would defeat the entire lesson and so I remain distant.

I am the Master Dominant.

I am losing my mind.

Her scent fills the room and I want to pull her near. I want to hug her, and kiss her, and tell her I will protect her and keep her safe from the raving lunatic that tries to dominate me from the shadows. But I won't say a word. I won't show her any kindness—not yet. Some unwritten rule holds me back. I let this trained side of me work on autopilot for a while. Glad, for once, that I am so well trained.

Her hands are red and no doubt tingling. She glares at me as I rub her hands and wrists to increase the circulation. I lean into her and kiss away her tears. I wipe her running nose with my handkerchief. And command her to blow. She is embarrassed and does not wish to blow her sloppy nose while I hold the handkerchief.

“Now,” I command.

Reluctantly, she blows her nose and I wipe away the mess as if she were a small child. I fold the cloth and replace it in my pants pocket. She sighs and a small shudder shakes her narrow shoulders.

Kneeling before her, I release her ankles but don't allow her to clamp her thighs together as she'd like. She is still, quiet. And her exterior calm just increases my raw need. God, I cannot ever remember wanting anyone so much as I want this woman.

I rest my chin on the edge of the chair long enough to let her know that I am looking at her bared pussy, long enough for her to become unbearably uncomfortable. Her knees start to quake uncontrollably against the seat of the hard wood chair. I think that for Kitten, this must be worse than the punishment itself.

I roll my face to the side to look up at her. Her eyes are clenched closed, her hands are balled into fists in her lap.

Sitting back, I take her fists into my hands, rubbing and massaging her hands until they are relaxed and soft in my hands. I lift her hands to the tops of my shoulders, then press the tops in a silent signal to leave them there. “Open your eyes, Kitten.”

I am almost surprised when she obeys. I hold her gaze once she looks.

My hands slide along her quaking thighs, calming her with a gentle massage until her quaking reduces to tremors. With supreme tenderness, I caress her, my fingers sliding

nearer to her warmth. Holding her gaze, I separate her coral lips, still bright from the heat of the spice and slide my finger inside her. Her gaze never wavers from mine. She is as brass as they come. In this moment, I can't read her eyes and I feel the loss.

"You are wet for me, Kitten. It pleases me that you accepted your punishment with grace."

She struggles to stand even with my finger deep inside her. But I hold her down, gentling her. "Sh-h. We're not through yet, Kitten."

I can feel her damp flesh contracting around my finger. Holding me tighter, not pushing me out. It would be a simple matter to bring her pleasure, now that the worst of the pepper oil is spent. I rotate my finger slowly as I coax her to relax. "Easy, Kitten." But I have made a detrimental mistake—I stopped reading her body signals, paying attention more to my own lust-driven need.

"No more, please," she gasps and throws her arms around my neck, falling into me, clutching me as one drowning. Together, we roll onto the floor. "I'm sorry about the coffee, I'm sorry about everything, please, please, no more."

Removing my finger from her body, I hold her tight, pulling her into me even as I seek her eyes, finding desperation there. Fear taught at the hand of another. It pisses me off.

My jaw tightens in anger at the man I see as my sole competition, the man from her past who she thinks about every time we are together. Kitten flinches back from my obvious glare but slowly, bravely, takes my hand and lifts it to her lips, kissing my hand.

She takes my breath away. In part, because of this strange ability she possesses to stride through her fear in spite of its obvious hold on her mind. Pressing her face into my chest, I hold her, allowing her to hear the tempo of my heart. Patting her back, I tell her how proud I am of her.

She doesn't want to hear my words of praise and twists in my embrace. She wants to hate me; her body wants me to love her. I hold her firm, wrapping my legs and arms tighter around her to make her lie still upon the ground with me. I do not know how long it takes her to relax and lie calmly with me, only that I know the moment of her surrender, the moment the emotion wells from deep within her chest and explodes in a growled sob.

It is the growled sob I will remember long after the day is through, because I know, in this moment, she gives herself to me wholly. I kiss her just for the pure pleasure of it, scattering kisses against her lips, her cheeks, her nose, her eyelashes.

"I hate you," she whispers, lying completely relaxed in my arms.

I smile and hold her tighter, kissing the dampness from her eyelashes.

"You weren't supposed to enjoy it, Kitten. It was punishment," I whisper back, ruffling her hair with my hand. Taking her face in my hands, I kiss her long and well. She blushes beautifully when I kiss her that way. "After lunch, I will teach you the difference between the pain of punishment and the pain of pleasure."

I kiss her mouth again, a quick peck, all thoughts of pleasuring her now gone. I pull her to her feet. "Come on, Kitten, I'm starved."

In a rush, she whispers, "Forgive me, Master, and thank you for the punishment."

"And did you enjoy the punishment, Kitten?" I ask, amused at the look that crosses her face. She is unsure which answer would make me happy, and her sole concern is to make me happy and get out of this room.

Her head shakes. "No."

Without my asking, she retrieves the two wine glasses and Riesling before darting from the room. Perhaps, there is hope for this day yet.

* * * *

I enjoy watching her sit at my table, curled into a chair, hiding as much of her nakedness as she can behind arms and legs. I think she will not admit it, but the wine pleases her, the meal pleases her, and I think that it is not lost on her that I went to some effort to make the table setting beautiful, romantic. But still she is angry at me and doesn't know what to do with the anger. It is this, her emotional turmoil, that makes my job all the more enjoyable. It is what the dominating is all about. Keeping the slave off balance, never knowing what will happen next. It makes her tremble so prettily and, for me, it is a pure rush of pleasure to see her thus. Unsure, every sense on guard.

I lean forward, threading my hand between her wall of arms and knees to caress her breast while she chews. The trembling goes up a notch and her breath catches. My own body tenses in response to hers. We are like two lithe jaguars circling each other in an ancient mating ritual. Sniffing, testing, pushing. The female waiting for the male to pounce. I pinch the tip of her nipple hard before withdrawing my hand and arm, leaving her wall intact.

"I enjoy having you at my table, Kitten. It has been a long time since I have enjoyed a meal as much as this one." With my fingers, I feed her another bite of sea bass, allowing her to lick my fingers clean before I feed her another bite. "Are you enjoying your lunch?"

"You are a wonderful cook, Master."

Her answer is polite, but strained. Leaning forward, I push apart her arms, press down on her knees, rearranging her body in the chair the way I want her posed, exposed and completely open, feet still on the seat but knees spread wide, hands and arms wrapped around her knees to hold herself wider.

I take a long look at her and her shy embarrassment is a beautiful thing. Filling my mouth with wine, I lean into her, absently setting the wine glass on the table as I take her pebbled nipple into my mouth. I swirl the cool wine still in my mouth over her warm flesh. Her flesh is like fire on my cool tongue as I let some of the liquid spill from my lips to dribble over the flat line of her stomach. I suckle her until I hear her telltale soft moan, almost hidden in her throat, before licking the spilled wine from her flesh. I nip her nipple again playfully. "I enjoy you overmuch, I think."

Her eyes meet mine, but she doesn't speak. I return to my meal, it is enough that she has been discomfited by the moment, and I tuck away a mental note that compliments distress her. It seems too rarely she has received compliments. I watch her as she stares through the open window at the brilliant blue sky. Together, we watch two pelicans glide effortlessly just outside our window.

I slide a complete table setting closer to her and place a serving of sea bass and vegetables onto the plate. "Eat, Kitten. If I am going to take you out to an elegant restaurant, I at least need to know you can solve the mystery of the forks."

Kitten glances away from the window, running her gaze over the three forks, two knives, two spoons. A mixture of emotions crosses her face and I wish I could read her thoughts, but for now, she has hidden them from me. A moment ago so easy to read, now

sheltered completely away. I wonder just who taught her this?

“Forks are simple,” she answers. “It’s the idle conversation that makes me insane.”

I can’t even begin to stifle the chuckle that spills out. “I can’t imagine holding an idle conversation with you, Kitten.”

“Ah,” She picks up the correct fork and spears a long green bean on its end, pointing at me with the speared vegetable, “It’s still a new relationship Master, soon we’ll be talking about the weather.”

“But it is a lovely day,” I say. “A good day to be outside.”

She looks at me for a second like there is something that needs to be said, but she only nods in agreement, then sighs heavily and lets her attention drift back to the window once more.

I have been dismissed and it momentarily sets me off balance that I didn’t see it coming.

I lost control of my Slave.

Unbelievable.

Chapter 16

“Personality is born out of pain. It is the fire shut up in the flint.”

—J.B. Yeats, *Letters to His Son*

Celia

Impossible. It is totally impossible and irresponsible that I want him so, need him. So clichéd, but honestly, I do need him as much as the sun needs the moon. Is it chemistry? The perfect male pheromones finding the perfect female pheromones, and yippee, we're in lust? Or is it fate? And if it is fate, has the universe been conspiring all along, through college and Lion and *Voices*, to bring me to this place in time? This place in need?

He called me Kitten and something inside of me physically gave way. I don't understand it myself yet and so I can't even begin to explain it, why the return of being called Kitten should affect me so profoundly. Kitten. Each time he says it my stomach flutters wildly. It bothers me that I want him so desperately. I want him to kiss me, lick me, and do unimaginably wicked things to me.

Of course, I think my version of wicked would differ greatly from his version of wicked.

I pretend to look out the window but see only him in the shiny contours of reflecting glass pane. I watch him spread cinnamon butter across a dark rye roll, the simple act of which is so incredibly erotic that I wish I were the roll. Perhaps it is only that we are sharing a normal lunch and it really has nothing to do with the man. But how can this be when absolutely nothing else is normal?

His long, elegant fingers hold me entranced. The same fingers that, only an hour ago, slid liquid fire inside me, over me—in the gentlest caress imaginable—as punishment. I still burn from the spice, but it isn't horrible. Just enough of a reminder for me to remember that I should still be angry, cursing maybe, or at least making it known that I'm not happy about this whole situation. But then that wouldn't be the entire truth. Not exactly. During my confinement, in a maelstrom of every emotion ever known, I realized that I want this man. Lust, maybe. Or something on a deeper level. Something within me whispers that he could fulfill the needs I have only before confessed on paper. I want something—something more, something indefinable—and it is this more that terrifies me. And he calmly spreads butter.

I need to talk to someone about this, but it can't be him, no not him. But who then? And what would I say? That in this man's presence everything changes? Time, touch, emotion, the normal tilting slightly off center to become something so new, so different, that even the simple act of spreading butter is erotic and my own skin is alien to me?

I feel the rope still, cutting into my flesh, but it wasn't unpleasant; if anything, I wanted to be bound tighter. I wanted to feel the rope tied as tightly...around my waist, around my breasts and thighs and calves...until I was totally enclosed in his rope. I want to be bound so tightly that it hurts to breathe. I imagined it, for a moment, to take my mind off the fire in my pussy. I imagined not being able to breathe before realizing that I

could barely breathe for real and that it was emotion, this need for more, that has been suffocating me my entire life.

I know—I'm totally messed up.

I was in such exquisite agony and I wanted, no, needed more! When he cupped my face between his palms, hugging my cheeks, my head, my soul, I thought I would die from the sheer pleasure of it. Even now, the cool leather of the dining chair teases my heated vulva. It is an incredibly intoxicating sensation. A secret delight.

I think of the report I have to give, the story exposing inside secrets and know I cannot share such secrets. Not about him. About us. Not with anyone.

I am greedy with this newfound sense, a sixth sense to gauge all things sensual that are out of the realm of sight or sound, touch or smell. A primal sensory panel buried deep within my mind—a by-blow of ancient man, as indefinable as the ticking biological clock, that guides us through this journey of self-discovery.

I think Master tries to make up for his harshness with this incredible meal, but it will take more than this to make me forget the last hour. It is an hour I will cherish even though it was horrible. Which takes me right back to the indefinable more that terrifies me so.

My brain is messed up, short-circuited.

I hated the pain and I was angry for it. Obviously not angry enough, because if I was truly angry, would I be sitting here now? No, I would call it quits. This goes beyond the realm of any front page exposé. And now lunch. An even harsher surprise because of the tenderness. It is too sweet, too soon. Let me be angry. Let me stomp and rant and rave—or at least screw my brains out.

But this? An intimate lunch for two?

And me, naked.

It seems somehow obscene to be sitting at the dining table—in broad-spectrum daylight and using the good china to boot—naked. Whereas yesterday, it seemed natural to be naked with him, in his lap.

Yes, sitting across from him, when he's fully clothed, puts an entirely different spin on the realm of this new reality I exist in. I can't explain it.

"Kitten?"

I realize, at the sound of my name, that I was toying with my vegetables. Did I really just do that? Did I really separate my vegetables by color? Orange carrots, red bell pepper slivers, green, pea pods, all tucked into tidy, very separate piles of color. I quickly spear a baby carrot and stuff it in my mouth as I glance his way.

"You weren't listening?"

"I'm sorry," I gasp. "I was thinking."

"That much was obvious."

At his note of sarcasm, I grin, I can't help myself. I also blush because of the actual thoughts I was thinking. Even now, I want nothing more than to pull his turtleneck over his head and follow the trail of dark hair that trails from his chest to where it hides beneath his waistband with my tongue. But why stop there, when a simple snap would unbuckle his belt and a slow slide would lower the zipper and then my tongue could wreak havoc.

"I was thinking about you," I admit hastily.

"Oh, really?"

Again with the sarcasm, but this time he smiles. I suck in a deep breath; it is hard to breathe when faced with such sensual maleness.

“And just what were you thinking that made you blush like an innocent maiden?”

“You are the one staring at my breasts!” I accuse.

“I love your breasts, Kitten.”

I glance away as the fresh-cut flowers blur before me, the sting of tears too quick to stop. I can’t let him know how deeply his jab hurt me.

“Kitten?”

Master is there in my face, making me look at him and I can’t take it. He is too physically perfect to be stuck with someone like me. It is too cruel a jest. “Don’t. Please.”

“No! Not until you tell me what just happened.”

I close my eyes and wish myself anywhere but here. It suddenly seems prudent that I move the little gold ring from finger to finger, a nervous tick perhaps, but at least a distraction. It finally lands back where it started.

“Kitten, tell me. I’ve hurt you and I don’t even know what I did. Is this about the punishment? You know I had to punish you, don’t you?”

I suck in a ragged breath, “It isn’t that.”

“Then what?”

I square my jaw and look him in the eye. “I will put up with anything you feel you have to do to me, but I would ask you to please not make fun or joke about my breasts.”

He sits back in his chair. I have shocked him with my candor. At least, I think that is surprise that crosses his face. I am not sure. Nope. I’ve made him mad again. It’s obvious in that little muscle that twitches in his jaw and the narrowing of his eyes. When will I ever learn to remain silent?

He takes a long swallow of his wine, contemplating his next move, no doubt, and I wish, again, that I’d kept my mouth shut.

“Come here, Kitten.” He pats his knee to emphasize the here.

I spoke out of turn. Bad, bad, bad. I will be punished for speaking my mind about my breasts and it serves me right. He can hate my breasts and it doesn’t matter. I am nothing, a slave, here for his pleasure and nothing else. Still, I don’t rush to do his bidding. Instead, I dawdle, drawing out the inevitable, wondering if I will be punished for speaking my mind. I settle on refilling both our glasses with wine before complying.

When I finally settle on his lap, he pulls me back into the warmth of his chest and I startle at the fabric, so soft and warm. His body heat suddenly welcome against my cool skin.

“I want you to know something about me.” he breaks into my thoughts. “I don’t demean others by teasing about their faults or weaknesses and I would never tease you about something I knew was going to hurt your feelings. I’m sorry I did. Because I was being very honest with you; I love your breasts.”

The moment I look away, Master pulls my face back around to his.

“You have the most perfect breasts I’ve ever seen on a woman. They are round and firm, they don’t sag at all. And your nipples are little rosebuds of perfection that just beg to be sucked on.”

His head dips down to demonstrate, pulling an already taut nipple into his mouth. The thrill spreads fast and deep into my belly. “I really, really love your breasts,” he promises in such a heated declaration that I wouldn’t dare not believe him. “Do you

believe me?"

I can't answer him because it is a ridiculous declaration. I would really like to believe him, but it makes my heart ache. His laugh takes me by surprise.

"You should see your face! Did you know you think with your entire face? Believe me, Kitten, because it's the truth."

I am not sure when I sucked my bottom lip between my teeth, and only become aware of the fact that I did at all when he pulls it back out with a tug from his finger. "If you don't stop biting your lip, I am going to really give you something to chew on."

His growled threat makes me giggle. He is teasing me.

I feel suddenly lighter than air as I glance at him beneath hooded lids. His black turtleneck is marred by a stray ball of lint. I pluck it away, my fingers trembling as they fall back from his chest. A wave of desire spreads through me with just that small intimacy. And it does seem so oddly intimate to be picking off lint.

"Who taught you to hate your breasts?" he asks suddenly, very serious again. He doesn't wait for an answer. "He should be horsewhipped."

I chuckle, thinking to myself that there would be too many people in line for that for even Master to conquer. "That's very sweet of you to say, but..."

"But you don't believe me?"

"Let's just say I'll need to hear you say it a hundred more times for it to sink in."

"He needs to be horsewhipped!" Master growls.

"Not that." I laugh and bury my face into his neck.

His scent assails me and I inhale deeper. Needing to memorize the scent of him, lest I forget. And then I brazenly, loudly, inhale him again, soaking him in as a sheer pleasure for my newfound sixth sense.

I want to cry into his neck that I want his naked body next to mine. And I want to beg him to show me just how much he likes my breasts by sucking on them, but I only whisper, "The other part."

"I can do that, Kitten, because I really do love your breasts." Master plants several kisses on my face before he shoves me from his lap. "If you're finished eating, there's a present for you on the bed."

"A present?"

"Mm-hmm."

"From Jackie?" My eyes narrow on him, remembering her last gift and the problems it caused getting in and out of it. But it had led to getting Master naked. So, okay, presents from Jackie are a good thing.

"Oh, oh." Master clutches his heart dramatically. "Now, I'm crushed. I wine you, I dine you, I buy you presents..."

"You bought me a present?" I ask again, quite stunned.

"Yes. I bought you a present, Kitten."

* * * *

I am too excited for words. It seems ridiculous, but then perhaps not. It's been six years since I've received a gift from a man. And then it was only because of the traditional requirements of one holiday or another; a box of candy for Valentines Day or perfume for Christmas. Today is not a holiday.

I kick away the wrapping paper and slide the georgette slip dress over my head. It is

a stunning watercolor floral in bleeding swaths of yellow, orange, and red. It is boldly sensual and hugs my body with every movement. The beaded hem tickles the sensitive skin just above my knee.

Master catches me twirling in front of the mirror in the bathroom and I am horrifically embarrassed for being so childish, but he only pulls me into his arms and tells me he is delighted I like it.

There are matching sandals in a playful orange. I am thrilled.

He bends to kiss my neck. “Just lip gloss today, okay?” he whispers. “You are so beautiful and the dress brings out the deep rose in your cheeks. It would be a shame to hide that behind makeup.”

I refuse to cry over a present. How can I help myself?

I can only nod and snuggle deeper into his chest. He presses tender kisses to the top of my head. This morning’s punishment seems far removed from now, leaving me wondering about a warp in the time continuum once again.

How is it that mere hours seem like months, even years, between the two of us? And how is it that this dress means the world to me, just because it is from him?

“It is still a little chilly,” his voice rumbles deep in his chest against my ear. “But it is supposed to reach a high of sixty-five. If it’s too cold, we’ll stop downtown and get you a sweater...”

“We’re going out?” I gasp. My mind starts whirling. I need to get a message to *Inappropriate Voices*. I need to talk to Doug. My brain jerks mid-stride. No, no, no, no, no. This is what caused this morning’s punishment. The *Voice* is just going to have to wait until I get back for the full report.

“Sure. I live for Sundays and usually do bookwork on Mondays, but today I delegated. My secretary and personal assistants can start earning their paychecks for a change. I’ve decided my days off are too important to put off. Life’s just too short.”

* * * *

Steinhart Aquarium

Children ring the living coral reef in their colorful spring jackets like a bracelet of living, vibrating jewels. Their excited whispers about yellow tangs, pink bubble coral, and striped lionfish carry across the walk to us.

“Look that one looks like a zebra.”

“Oh my gosh, that one’s poisonous. Tell Jane the teacher said...”

My head swivels, trying to see Jane. It dawns on me that I have been Celia for so long I have forgotten I’m Jane.

Master pulls me along, out of earshot. He has me wrapped in the leash of his arm. In the car, he held my hand. Even as he shifted the gears of his amazing red Viper, he didn’t let go, he just pulled my hand along for the experience. Now, he keeps his arm slung about my shoulders or low on my waist, directing my turns with a small pressure from his own elbow. It seems oddly natural to be here like this and, even more, peculiar. I wish he would just tell me to walk four spaces behind and one to the left, like a good little slave. But this, dragging me around like a girlfriend or wife, makes me want to cry and I don’t understand it. I have decided to seek serious professional help when I return to the real world.

As he pulls me in the direction of the Fish Roundabout, I hear the high-pitched

squeal of a young girl. I listen for Jane's name to be called as I look over my shoulder trying to catch sight of her. The children are chattering rapidly about dominos and clowns in the tank. I hope they are talking about different kinds of fish and not the plastic debris of someone's mutilated game.

"There is a hundred thousand gallons of water surrounding us," Master announces and I momentarily forget the children as his mouth closes over mine. He pulls me tight against his chest, taking what he wants from my mouth.

"I want you, Kitten," he whispers when he comes up for air. He leads my hand to the hard length of his erection. His pants pull tighter beneath the soft stroke of my hand. I am glad the room is dark, even though, for the moment, we are alone. I smile against his chest as he pushes into my hand. "I want you so incredibly bad."

A wicked thought flashes through my mind that he means now, instantly, and I pull back from him, adequately masking my anxiety, I hope.

"Now?" I chirp playfully, hoping my eyes are mischievous and not petrified as I seek verification.

"Not yet, not here," he whispers. "But soon."

Outwardly, I pout, inwardly I give a sigh of great relief, although the soon gives me a moment's anxiety.

"So I bought an exhibitionist? Is that what you're telling me, Kitten?" he demands in a light voice and pulls me in closer.

He claims my mouth before I can answer. His tongue strokes mine with a teasing slowness that steals my breath and makes me delirious. I have somehow been pushed against the glowing wall of the tank. It is cool against my back, he is steaming heat crushed into me and around me. And to think, he thought I might need a sweater.

Barracuda and giant Pacific Mackerel glide around us, oblivious that his hand has slid under my dress and pushed aside the small wisp of lace. Delicate panties after days of being totally bare. My freshly depilated lips brush and tease with every step I take. In my naiveté, I thought that he wished to preserve my modesty since we were going out, but the dress is immodestly sheer in the brightness of day.

"You are so hot." His voice, seeming unnaturally loud, draws the round, nosey eyes of a hundred fish.

Laughing, I reach up to shush him with my hand and realize my mistake only after his brow goes up. I pull my hand back quickly. "I'm sorry, Master."

His eyes crinkle with merriment as what seems like a million children fill the echoing cave of a room and his finger glides into me slowly.

His lips fall to my ear. "And so fucking wet. You shouldn't tease your Master so, Kitten. And you definitely don't tell your Master to be quiet. But the punishment I have planned for you for this small infraction will bring you pleasure as well as me."

His finger slides out and then lifts to my mouth, glossing my lips with my own moisture before he kisses me again. This time the kiss is noticed, if the loud, giddy amusement of a third-grade class and the frowning displeasure of their teacher are any indication. We escape into the bright wash of day.

* * * *

The Mission District

Rose ice cream floats over my tongue. It is as delicate and luscious as the name

implies.

Our sightseeing adventure has seen us all over town, landing us at the Bombay Ice Creamery for a short break. Master moans delightfully over a kulfi, sharing a taste of the conically shaped Indian version of ice cream. Super-creamy and delightfully sweet, it is garnished with rice noodles and rosewater syrup. “Oh my,” I gush, grabbing his hand. He allows me to push his finger through the rosewater syrup and pull it into my mouth for another taste. “Mm-mm.”

He laughs. “Want to trade?”

“No, Master. I’m enjoying mine just as much, I just like licking the syrup from your finger.”

“I’ll take a gallon of the syrup to go, please,” he calls out to anyone and no one.

His black sport coat wraps around my shoulders in an effort to ward off the fickle temperature changes of an early spring. We stroll, hand in hand, for a while, until our confections are gone. He is a definite people watcher and he has a million insights. “Morning sex,” he says, gesturing to a forty-something homemaker who lopes by with two small children.

I choke on the cream melting on my tongue and cast him a curious glance. “What?”

“The woman with the babies, she had sex this morning.”

“And the all-seeing omniscient Master knows this how?” I demand, wrapping myself deeper into his jacket, enjoying the sound of his voice.

“It’s written on her face, and in her walk. I think her panties are damp, perhaps a little uncomfortable,” he pauses mid-stride. “How are your panties by the way? Damp? Dripping?”

I ignore the question and pull him along. It amazes me that he can talk so nonchalantly with absolute strangers strolling in such close proximity.

* * * *

Bunny Meadow.

Bunny Meadow? Actually, it is just a pet name for the scooped out little grove behind the Conservatory of Flowers. It fits. It is idyllic and peaceful here. A place perfect to recite fairy tales or Shakespeare, but no bunnies in sight. Although, butterflies dance with random abandon amid some early daisies and tall grass.

The grass is warm enough to sit on, having caught the grace of a fitful sun. I sit, legs drawn up and my cheek pressed against my knees; Master reclines, his body curled around my hips, totally relaxed and all male. I keep waiting for a tribe of gnomes to sneak from beneath the screen of trees that blocks the chilly breeze off the ocean. The air is cool still and smells of salt and seaweed. His free arm is slung over his eyes. His other hand holds mine, as it has all day. I close my eyes in despair, realizing that the unthinkable has happened. I am happy.

It dawned on me as we watched the boats from Fisherman’s Wharf. I don’t know when it happened. Or even how, for that matter. I just know that one moment I was blissfully ignorant and the next, I realize I am humming.

Rolling to his side, his hand rubs down my thigh, pushing the fabric of my dress with the slide of his palm until it pools just past the tops of my thighs. My panties are exposed, just the edge, but exposed. His fingers play with that edge of lace, pushing it aside so that his fingers can run through my pubic hair. I hear voices, but no one comes into view. I

am nervous, tense, emitting a soft “eek” in that way girls do when they are taken off guard, and when his fingers dip further, sliding into wetness, I make that sound.

“Easy, Kitten.” He rolls my clit between his thumb and fingers. “I’ve waited all afternoon to touch you like this.” Withdrawing his fingers, he lifts them to his nose and inhales my scent. Touching the dampness from my pussy to my lips, rubbing my own taste, my own scent over my mouth before he kisses me.

“You taste good, Kitten.” He presses me down into the grass, so that I am the one lying and he is sitting, holding a press of his finger against my lip as a warning to be quiet. “You smell good too,” he says as the voices he heard before I did become clear enough to hear. Frantic, I try to sit up, but he pinches my clit cruelly between his thumb and his finger. I suck in air, but I don’t scream, I don’t make the girl sound. He holds me that way, tightly pinched until my eyes begin to water.

The voices grow closer, two women by the sound of their voices, and I want to sit up, I want to pull the dress back over my thighs, but he controls me with pain. I don’t move. Lying in the grass, my dress around my waist, his cruel fingers holding me prone, I know I will die of embarrassment as the voices draw nearer and nearer until only a thick privet line separates us. They seem to stop directly beside us. Master lifts his fingertip to his mouth telling me to remain quiet. Still pinching my clit, he applies more pressure until I am squirming, silent, but squirming. I do not know how long he torments me, but it seems like an eternity. Knowing the women are so close, that if they wanted to, they could see, and for a moment, hearing giggles, I convince myself they have seen the whole show; but slowly the voices move away and Master releases me. “Tonight, I will help you learn to find the pleasure in the pain.”

Covering my body with his, he lifts his damp fingers to my nose. “God, you smell good.”

I am distracted by my own scent just long enough for him to enter me without my realizing what he’d planned. “Oh god, Master, not here, not in broad daylight, not in a public place!”

“Anytime, anyplace of my choosing, Kitten!”

Chapter 17

*“Through me you pass into the city of woe: through me you pass into eternal pain...
To rear me was the task of power divine, supremest wisdom, and primeval love...
Eternal, and eternal I shall endure. All hope abandon, ye who enter here.”*

—Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*

Garrett

Why do I regret the end of this day? It has been a perfect day, a day like any other. For a very long time I believed I would never again enjoy the simple pleasure of spending the day out with someone I care about. Of course, we have to return. At dinner, I will jerk her chain a little just to ease the transition back in easier. If I were a smart man, and I used to be a very smart man at one time in my life, I would have kept her chained and naked the entire month. It is, after all, what she'd expected. But I am not a smart man any more.

She sits here beside me in the soft candlelight looking like a princess in the gold-gilded velvet chair. I sip Scotch, she asked for iced tea. I wonder what she thinks about as she absorbs every nuance of the quiet room, so silent, so relaxed.

I need to know everything about her. I am finding that I want to know the woman beyond Kitten and that is a dangerous thing indeed. I really need to step back for a while, but I don't want to. I am being tossed by a wicked swell and pulled by a sucking undercurrent, and I couldn't care less. I just want to enjoy the day. I want to enjoy her.

She brushes a lock of hair off her forehead as she reads the menu...in French. She is intelligent, that much is obvious. Her voice carries characteristics that insist she was schooled in the East, but was probably raised somewhere in the middle states. She tries so hard to be a chameleon.

When she places her order, her French is perfect. I am impressed.

She waits for the waiter to leave and then leans in. “May I find the ladies' room?”

“Of course,” I answer and point in the direction she should head. She stands to go, but I grasp her hand before she escapes. “And Kitten.” I pull her forward so I can whisper into her ear. “Do something for me while you are in the ladies' room?”

“Master?”

I smile at her ready response. I want to hear her call me Garrett, but that is impossible and I know it. Perhaps after the month is over. God slap me, the month has only just begun and already I am thinking of asking her to stay. I have to get a hold of myself. She looks at me expectantly, but my eyes linger on the soft swell of breast that peaks at me from this angle. It is an effort, but I drag my eyes to hers.

“While you are in the ladies' room, I want you to touch yourself. Come for me, Kitten, and I will know if you did or didn't, so make it a really good one for me. I want your panties good and wet when you bring them back to me.”

Whatever has possessed me to resort to such a novice trick?

“Bring them to you?”

I smile at the doubt I see in her eyes.

“Yes, bring them to me.”

A small smile teases the corners of her lips. It is sudden, unexpected, and it erases any doubt there seconds before.

“Of course, Master.”

She returns much sooner than I expect, not being gone more than five minutes at the most. I frown and wait for an excuse of some sort or another, but she slips the damp panties into my hand. I hold them in my closed fist and discretely lift them to my nose and inhale. Her scent.

I am rock hard, again, instantly. It is obscene that I have so little control over my body with this woman. She stands beside me, waiting for further instructions. I pull her down, kissing her thoroughly, tongue to tongue, lips bruised, before motioning her to sit back in her seat. Several of the other diners turned to stare and, knowing the sheerness of her dress, I am not surprised by at least one shocked gasp. I only wish I were in his seat and could have seen what he saw, just the pale curve of her hip, the darker shadow of her crack? I keep her bent forward, holding her lips to mine, sliding my hand up the back of her thigh just enough to show the one who gasped the slight curve of her ass. “Do you like having your ass bare beneath your dress, Kitten?”

“Yes, Master,” she sighs against my mouth.

“Thank you, Kitten. You may sit now.” I enjoy the pink flush that creeps over her shoulders and neck. She embarrasses easily. “Are you always so quick in obeying your Masters?”

“Only you, Master,” she answers, ducking shyly.

God, I am so well pleased with her.

“Remember what I told you in Bunny Meadow?”

She stills and I know she remembers. Nice, very nice.

“Don’t worry, Kitten, You are going to enjoy learning to find pleasure in pain.”

* * * *

Culture shock at its finest. She cowers in the library doorway. I wonder if I will have to shove her through to get her to bend to my will. This time the fear is of me, not another. I am pleased, her whimpers exciting me. She wants to beg, but I warned her in the car, during the drive home, that if she spoke so much as one word, I will gag her. She holds the promised implement in her hand, stroking the red ball absently.

I noticed her fear of the gag at the Club, and it was confirmed this morning when I made offer of it and she visibly paled. That I had one waiting in the glove box for the return drive home was only barely calculating. She tries to pull me toward the bedroom where she knows she will be permitted to speak, but it isn’t going to happen.

“Kitten, now.”

I think she will cry, but she doesn’t. She steps one foot into the doorway. A gentle tug on the leash gets her moving again, even if it is only two steps. It is enough for me to close the door. She pivots in a panic when she hears the lock click. I hand her a lighter and tell her to light ten of the candles. She obeys this without question, though her hand visibly trembles with each one. When the task is complete, she is quick to return to my side without me having to tell her to.

“I told you that tonight I would teach you the pleasure there is to be found in pain.

Consider this to be lesson number one.”

She is resistant, but she follows the moment my hand touches the delicate chain that normally trails down her back. I lead her over to a tall, antique cabinet, its aged mahogany wood glowing in the candlelight.

“Kneel in obeisance, Kitten.”

Her palm flies up to my chest. It is a warm weight over my heart. I am not sure if she steadies herself or begs me with her eyes to change my mind. I shake my head in gentle silence.

She kneels, still clutching the ball gag in her hand, bowing her head forward to touch her forehead to the floor.

It is more than I could have hoped for.

I open the top drawer and remove a pair of leather handcuffs. “Stand up, Kitten.” My command is harsh and she obeys instantly. Fear enters her perfect aquamarine eyes as I take the ball gag from her hand. I lay it in plain sight on top of the cabinet before slipping the cuffs over her wrists and tightening down the buckles. For a moment, I think her eyes glow, like a wolf at night, but it is just the reflection of the candles’ flame.

The room is not as brightly lit as this morning, but I would need no light at all for the task I have planned. When I lift a suede Cat o’ nine tails from the drawer, her eyes widen, but she doesn’t back away from me. The Cat o’ nine tails is my favorite fear inducer. A wicked, colonial reproduction with nine separate woven tails with a knot and three strands at the end of each one. It is beautiful to look at, terrifying when instructed on its history, and stings mercilessly with the very first stroke. Even a very soft stroke leaves a raised welt, an extreme beating removes flesh.

I lead her to a hook disguised as a plant hanger. After lifting off the hearty vine, I lift her hands to loop the chain over it. Her dress flutters and rests a bit higher on her thighs. Softly, I draw the thongs of the Cat up her leg, running the length of her thigh. Her shiver of anticipation excites me; however, I am a patient man, and soon I will discover her level of patience as well. Walking away, I do not turn my back on her, but rather step backward to an upholstered wing chair that doubles as a reading chair when the room is used as a library.

She trembles beneath my watchful gaze. She is stretched uncomfortably, her muscles tense, ready. I sit down in the wing chair for a moment, just to watch her. I am certain she hates being watched, but it makes the forbidden even more enjoyable for me, if that is possible. Dangling the thongs of the Cat over my leg, I lightly slap my calf, establishing a rhythm, matching the beat of her heart. She watches, unable to look away. Her tongue darts out to moisten her lips and my mind reels at the sensuality of that small, innocent act. On any other woman, it might have seemed contrived to lure, to tease, but not on Kitten. Unconsciously, she licks her lips because her mouth has grown dry, nothing more.

“I want you to become well acquainted with my Cat, Kitten. It is my favorite toy. There is nothing loving or kind about it. It is an unforgiving torturer of flesh and will be ideal for demonstrating to you how quickly pain can become pleasure. This Cat is a replica from the time when America was young and military justice was harsh, the time when men could be punished with a hundred strokes or a thousand. Men regretted a hundred. It left scars that were a lifelong reminder to themselves and to any who saw the scars.” Kitten squirms in the wrist cuffs, not meaning to fight the bonds, but my words making her test them. I know, and she now knows, she isn’t going anywhere. I also know

that her fear will release adrenaline, preparing her body for the rush of pain-relieving endorphins that will follow the first few strokes of the Cat. “A thousand strokes would usually kill a man, and if not the strokes themselves, the infection that followed having his flesh shredded.”

She stares me down, suddenly still, trying, I think, to determine if she should truly be afraid. After today, she is deliciously confused. I leave her hanging there, waiting, wondering.

I mark time with slaps of the thong against my pant-leg.

The shadowy contours of her body are visible to me through her dress. The dress conforms around her hard nipples and subtle swell of breast. But even more alluring is the dark shadow beneath the fabric that hints at her belly button and the dark triangle of soft, dark curls between her legs. I am not sure who decided for her to keep the triangle after removing all of the rest of the hair but it draws me in even more than if she was completely bare. I like it and I have a feeling that no one influenced her decision, it was a personal choice.

I toy with the idea of shaving it off, but decide not to. It will be a good punishment sometime. I will wait and shave her when it will make a clear impact, and then, after she has been bare for a week or two, I will allow her to grow it back.

Kitten fidgets under my scrutiny and I decide it is time. Slowly, I pull the turtleneck over my head, folding it and laying it over the arm of the chair. Kicking off my shoes and pulling off my socks, I place both together and slide them out of the way, under my chair. She watches me with an intensity that leaves me feeling devoured.

Her fear level has dropped considerably, the soft slaps of leather against my leg lulling her into a sense of security.

Languidly, deliberately, I stand and unbuckle my belt. Kitten jerks but eases back down as she sees my intent is not to remove my belt but only to remove my pants. I step closer, close enough that her breasts brush against my chest, close enough that she feels my erection barely brush her thigh. Her breath is warm and sweet on my neck as I tease us both by my closeness, touching but not touching. Slowly, I turn her so that she faces the wall of books. She shimmers expectantly, waiting, dreading, needing, and I know the need is there. I can feel the want of it seeping from her pores. There is a vibrant energy surrounding her. And because I have been in her shoes, I know what she feels, fear, but something more than fear, an excitement, a need.

Waiting is the worst, she wants me to hurry up and get on with it, get it over with; she wants me to hurry up because she is so excited she is going out of her mind. A soft moan escapes her lips as I trail a line of kisses across the nape of her neck. She struggles valiantly against the cuffs but she knows we aren't going anywhere.

“You like this, don't you Kitten?” I don't expect an answer as I press my lips over the thudding pulse in her neck. “Even though you know I am going to hurt you—you like this. You want this. You *need* me to do *this*.”

She leans her head against mine, moaning. For the first time, I touch her, sliding my palms over the slick fabric covering her ribs, then sliding to cup her pelvic bones. Still holding the Cat of nine tails, the long thongs hiss around the tops of her thighs with the movements of my hands. She shudders beneath my touch, brimming with need. I continue to tease her with my hands, slowly gliding down the fronts of her thighs, then ever so gently trailing back up over the round of her hips. This time, the dress bunches

under my hands and I bare her beautiful ass. The thongs tickle along the backs of her legs.

Her feet dance around a little and I am forced to remind her to stand still as I hold the dress at the base of her spine, the weight of the Cat's handle pressing into her while I slide my other hand over her hips. I separate her ass cheeks and slide my finger along the crack, a throaty protest escapes, not words, just a grating whine. I ignore her and push a single finger inside. She cries out then, but catches herself admirably. I still my finger from going any deeper when violent shaking wracks her shoulders.

"Easy Kitten, I'm not going to hurt you. Not like this. The leather will hurt you in a little while, but by then you will be ready and it will be as much pleasure as pain."

I continue my tender ministrations to her anus, sliding the finger deeper until I feel the first ring of resistance. "You have to relax, Kitten. Let me touch you, let me pleasure you."

But she doesn't relax and I push deeper anyway. The tight muscles give and she lets out a pained squeal. It hurts like hell because she refuses to relax and I know it will only be worse next time if I stop now, so I don't. Small presses, and an easy back and forth motion. She is squirming desperately to escape the source of pain.

"Be still, Slave," I use the harshest voice I've ever used on her before and she stills. I hear the hiccup of a sob. "And don't cry, or I swear I'll gag you and spank you."

She is still and silent.

"Have you ever been touched here before?"

She nods.

"Then why are you acting this way? I'm not hurting you."

She nods again, frantically.

"Sh-h, no I'm not, Kitten." I slide my finger out and push it back in, this time it goes deep without the painful resistance. "See? No pain."

I move my finger in and out of her to prove my point before moving my hand around to touch her sex. She swells against the press of my palm, giving in to the search of my fingers with a little moan. I slide two fingers into her ass. Her pelvis moves a little as I touch her, my palm rubbing her clit while my fingers work her anus. She is hot, wet, and throbbing for me now, and it takes so very little to send her over the edge. Her involuntary scream of pleasure fills the room as her orgasm wracks her body. Withdrawing my fingers, her greedy vagina tries to hold onto them, sucking my fingers. I leave my hand there, covering her sex, holding her until she is herself once more. Her breath comes in little pants.

My body is a solid force around her and she sags in her bonds a little. I lift her face, cupping her chin. "Open your eyes, Kitten."

She obeys instantly and I reward her obedience with a soft kiss on her lips, "I didn't give you permission to do that, Kitten."

"Forgive me, Master."

I frown at her, my gaze going from her to the ball gag still sitting in plain sight on top of the cabinet, knowing her eyes follow mine. My hand slides along the sheer neckline of the back of her dress, it really is a sheer bit of nothingness when contrasted against the power of a man's hands.

She knows what is coming. "Please don't tear the dress. Please."

"Please?"

“Slide it off me, but please don’t ruin it.”

“Is the dress worth being gagged for your disobedience?”

“Yes,” she whispers.

I consider her request. I am not sure why. I am even less sure when I give in. I want nothing more than to rip the fabric from her lithe frame, but instead I release her hands long enough to pull the dress over her head. She says nothing as I toss the dress into the chair and go about re-clasping the buckles.

“What? No thank you?”

“Thank you, Master.” Her head drops and a tear falls with a huge splat onto the wood floor.

“There would have been other dresses, Kitten,” I whisper against her cheek.

She shakes her head. “But not that dress, Master,” she insists. I shake my head and turn her back to facing the wall.

I flip the Cat o’ nine tails against the seat cushion of the wing chair. She jumps with each strike. It is a nasty, mean sound. When she grows accustomed to the resonance, I stop, turning to tease the thongs of the Cat up the back of her thigh; then trace the swell of her hip, before teasing a line up her spine with the blunt end of the handle. Switching back to the thongs, I brush the center of her back lightly, letting her imagination build on what it’s going to feel like.

But really, she doesn’t have a clue.

If she did, she would be more afraid.

She would be screaming.

I swat her as lightly as possible, three gentle swats that cause the blood to rush to the skin, leaving ugly red lines, even though it was soft. The markability of her pale skin is amazing. I run my palm over the reddened flesh and she hisses in, expecting pain, relaxing when there is none.

Without warning, I lift the Cat and bring it down very quickly, so fast that it whistles as it moves through the air, but far away from her back so she just feels the breeze, experiences the terror of the sound. I do not give her the opportunity to relax, I want her tight, muscles tensed for the first real strike. I do not make the Cat whistle this time, I want her to feel pain, but I also want to leave her flesh intact. When the Cat lands, I know I have met my target accurately, her back arches, she thrusts her hips back. If her hands were not stretched so tightly above her head, she would double into herself. Her scream is precious and I am suddenly glad that I did not gag her. The line of distinct red welts appear immediately, and her body quivers uncontrollably. Pain. I do not wait for the stinging to pass. I do not want her relaxed as I bring the Cat down again. Three quick strikes, same intensity as the first. Her entire body jerks with pain and her scream does not start and stop, but is a long, solid wail. A hiccupped sob breaks the sound when she realizes the blows have stopped. It is a brain delay. There is still pain, it still stings unbearably, sucking her muscles tight to the bone and clenching her anus, teeth, fists.

She is left gasping for air as one who has almost drowned, and she is drowning in foreign sensation. I wait for her to calm, almost surprised that she is not begging to be released. I run my hand along the fine mesh of welts and she sucks in air, hurting. I wait, stroking lightly, causing the pain to simmer like a bad sunburn, and I know the exact moment her endorphins kick in, her pants of pain turning to sighs. I spin her around and she is dreamy eyed, lost in the Land of Endorphin High, aware but not functioning aware.

I let her float while I walk over to the antique cabinet, trading the Cat for a plain, heavy-duty suede flogger

When I return to her, she is still dreamy eyed but she is once again aware of me, the room, and that she is held by her wrists.

“Do you remember when I had you count the number of strikes for the spanking?”

She nods.

“Good. This time will be the same, but instead of using numbers, I want you to meow once before each strike.” I stroke the side of her face with the handle of the flogger. “I’m going to wear you out, Kitten. I can’t do what I want to do to you with the Cat, but I can with this flogger. Count, now!”

“Meow.” Her voice comes out shadowy and too soft.

The flogger strikes her on the back of the thigh. We are eye to eye and I swing again, meaning to get her attention, the endorphins making the flogger seem overly tame. I make sure she feels it in the sweet curve where ass meets thigh. “Louder, Kitten.”

“Meow.” This time is perfect. I do not strike her this time. “When you are ready, begin. You will meow ninety-nine times.”

Her gasp tells me more than words. I move behind her. Ready. Waiting for her to begin.

Her first few tries at meowing are timid, unsure, but a few good blows across the backs of her shoulders are quick incitement to do a better job of it. After that, I go about warming her flesh with slow, easy strokes.

There is something so rewarding, both mentally and physically, that comes with wielding the flogger just so. It takes practice to do it right. To evenly disperse the thongs. I lay in several loud pops, those that have more bark than sting, then add some really stinging strikes. Her skin starts to glow a fine red over the more intense lines left by the Cat, a crossing of welts. A slick sheen breaks over my back from the effort and on her back from the assault itself.

She is resilient and stubborn through the first half, but then she begins to break down. No tears, just low moans in between the meows. Soon she will be moaning outright, it is inevitable. My tempo increases and I deliver two blows for each meow. This confuses her and when I fit three strokes in between each meow, she compensates by counting more rapidly.

“No, Kitten,” I reprimand. “You will meow at the same pace you have kept throughout. And I will strike you as many times as I feel like it between the meows. Understood?”

She nods.

“I’m waiting,” I say impatiently.

“Meow.”

Slap, slap, slap.

“Meow.”

“Much better, Kitten.”

She is on the second half of meows and I really go to work on her now. She moans loud with the first strike of each set. It is almost more than she can take, but she takes it. I want to know just how much it will take, though I know we won’t find out this time. Next time I will really push her, this is just a get to know you session.

“Meow.”

Slap, slap. Slap, slap. Slap, slap.

When she reaches the hundredth meow, I do not know that she will stop meowing, but when she visibly sags it is because she knows that she has upheld her part and that she trusts me to uphold mine. Her hair and body are wet with sweat. Her skin is rosy red from my attentions. My mark is on her shoulders, her back, her buttocks. The lines that crisscross and welt will most likely bruise. God, she is beautiful. A wave of intense possessiveness and something more—protectiveness—fills me.

Marked. Mine.

I let her stand there a moment. Then I can't help myself, I am down on my knees sucking at her flesh like a madman. A startled scream flies from her mouth. It is intense for her, letting me pull on the flesh of her clitoris from between tightly pressed thighs. Her orgasm is quick. I stop long enough to lift one of her legs to rest on my shoulder and open her wider to me. The second orgasm will take longer and I am glad. I enjoy torturing her with the special shards of pleasure-pain that leave her squealing and panting. She fights the cuffs, I fight for mastery. I dig my fingers into one of the largest welts I left on her behind. Her scream wells up something primal inside of me and I pinch even harder. But the caressing of my tongue is purposely soft, so soft that she now arches into me, silently begging for the shards of pleasure-pain to come back. That she can fight against. This she can't control and there is no escape from the soft lips teasing out the slow, rolling orgasm or the mean fingers forcing the pleasure back into hiding for a little while longer. By the time I am done with her, she is cursing and begging, the precept of silence lost in the red mist of pleasure-pain.

"Please, Master, no more."

"We have only just begun the lesson, Kitten. We have only just begun."

* * * *

She passed out in my cuffs, from exhaustion, mental and physical, but also from pleasure overload. I was well pleased with her by the time I carried her limp body to my bed and I enjoy watching her wake up, going from sleepy grogginess to panic, realizing she is still cuffed. Only now she is cuffed to my bed. Her ivory skin as pale as the ivory cream sheets. I sit across from her in a comfy chair meant for late night reading.

While she slept, I carefully prepared the room, turning on the soft rose-colored lighting that is set into the tray ceiling above the bed. It casts a faint, even glow around us. Soft music, a new-age instrumental that has its roots in the aboriginal tribes of Australia, the backbeat throb sounding so much like a heartbeat, plays in the background.

Walking to her slowly, I let her see that I am at least partially clothed in a long black velvet robe. Sitting, I touch her face, letting the perfumed velvet stroke her cheek. She rubs her face into the softness. "Are you ready to continue?"

"Yes, Master."

"Did you enjoy the whipping with the Cat, Kitten?"

She is silent as she mulls over her answer. "I did, Master. What you did was incredible."

"And we're talking about the whipping, not what followed?" I bend, running my tongue over her lower lip, giving her just a taste of the peppermint I sucked on while she slept. Pulling back, her face lifts from the pillow, trying to maintain contact. I let her try, staying a hairsbreadth away from contact, breathing fresh mint over her face.

“What followed was incredible, also, Master.” Her lips catch mine and I draw back just enough to let her know that I am in charge. She ducks her head shyly, tilting slightly to the left, a small smile playing across her lips.

Her brass overwhelms me.

I was sorting through the small box I keep inside the nightstand with an assortment of toys—nipple clamps, spreaders, dildos, vibrators—when she woke up, so I set the box aside.

“I have moved you in here so that we will have the freedom to discuss things as we go. I think we need to make things a little more clear between us. I am going to ask you questions and I want honest answers. If you have a need to ask me something, you can, but if I give you a command of silence, you will obey it immediately. Understood?”

“Yes, Master.”

“I have been trying to decide what I can do to help you trust me, no matter what I decide to do to you, and no matter where I decide to touch you.”

She blushes furiously and I know we are in accord. I move back across the bed so that I am lying along side her, resting on my left elbow, my face in my palm. I stroke her between her breasts as if I were petting a cat, just petting, not teasing, not trying to arouse, offering her body contact, comfort after the stress of being bound and flogged.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes,” she whispers, ducking away, her shyness overwhelming.

“Did you like it when I fingered your ass, Kitten?”

She tries in vain to hide her face in the pillow.

“It’s nothing to be embarrassed about, Kitten. I am going to help you to learn to enjoy all of the pleasures anal stimulation can give you. I am going to open you and stretch you until I can take you that way fully.”

She shakes her head no with fear in her eyes.

“I will not bend on this, Kitten. I will possess you in every way. Tonight will begin your lesson in trust, so that you will know that if I say that I am not going to hurt you, I will not.” I move around her, so that she cannot avoid looking into my eyes.

I lift a small, metal butt plug from my toy chest. “Do you know what this is?”

She nods.

“But you’ve never been trained to one?”

She shakes her head no. I smile at her, stroking the cold metal over her cheek. “We’ll work on that.” I press the metal against her lips. “Open.” I slide the long, thin metal plug into her mouth, her lips closing around it without my having to tell her. I let her explore the slightly curved shape inside her mouth with her tongue before I withdraw it.

I lift up four different types of nipple clamps. “Which is your favorite?”

She looks closely, then points at a Japanese design. “That one’s pretty, but I don’t have a favorite.”

“Then we’ll have to experiment with them all until you do have a favorite.” I replace all the small toys in the box and set it aside, before sliding close enough to her to stroke her thigh while we talk. “Have you heard the term fisting before, Kitten?” I know she has even before she answers by her body language. “And has anyone ever fisted you before, Kitten?”

Her eyes grow wider and she shakes her head no.

“Use the words, Kitten, it’s why we’re here.”

“No one, Master,” she answers me with a shaky voice.

“I’m going to change that, Kitten.” I keep my voice soft, comforting. I don’t want her to panic right away. “And it’s because I know that if I can give you this special experience, it is going to help you know that you can trust me in all things.”

Her eyes are wide orbs as I lift my hand for her to look at. I spread the fingers wide then close them into a tight fist. “Do you think my hand is large?”

She nods and catches herself. “It won’t fit, Master!” Her voice is panicked, knowing that I will not back down, knowing it will happen regardless of what she says.

“Sh-h.” I place a finger to her lips. “It will not only fit but it is going to give you the most incredible pleasure you will ever feel. But, I will be honest, your pelvis is narrow and I am going to stimulate parts of your body you may have never even realized existed—so tomorrow you will be tender. And you will feel well used for another day after that. But it isn’t going to be pain. Just a low pocket of pressure here.” I lay my hand over her pelvis to emphasize. “Don’t be embarrassed to tell me what you need, ever, when it feels good, say so, if it hurts, say so. It doesn’t mean I will completely stop what I am doing, but I will rework what I’m doing so it won’t hurt as badly. Okay?”

Her silence is total impertinence. A gleam in her eyes spells trouble down the road. With the wide span of my hand, I reach beneath her jaw and press my thumb and middle finger deep into the natural grooves just beneath her ears, finding painful pressure points that send shooting pain streaking through her neck, jaws, and ears.

“Okay, okay. Forgive me, Master!”

“Would you like to begin this lesson, Kitten?”

“Please, Master.”

With a quick flip, flip, I release the safety buckles that bind the cuffs to her wrists and I command her to empty her bladder so that we can begin.

Chapter 18

“Life itself has given me the answer, in my knowledge of what is good and bad. And that knowledge I did not acquire in any way; it was given to me as to everybody, given because I could not take it from anywhere.”

—Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*

Celia

His fingers push into my pulsating vagina; one, two, and finally three. As deep as he can, then pounding me—in, out, in, out. My head arches back, my neck straining, my throat crying out guttural noises, ancient and feral.

I realize that this is the way I like it—rough, demanding, no quarter granted. Master knows just how far to push me, before breaking me, damaging me. My scream comes out fierce and loud as waves of orgasm shake me from head to toe.

I gasp unintelligible words, until finally I’m crying, begging him to stop.

“Let me come down a little, Master, please, just a little.”

His fingers pound harder, deeper, more demanding in response.

He is loosening me up, preparing me for what’s to come next. My guts convulse. My knees are out of control. Hell, my whole body spasms wildly, but still he works me, and my orgasm never stops, wave after wave of pleasure-pain breaking over my body.

Four fingers in; *thud, thud, thud*; my juices make sloshy noises. Then, finally, a moment’s reprieve.

Moans of protest escape unbidden even as I gasp for air. For a split second, our eyes meet and I am unsure of what I see in the depths of his, molten heat, but I can’t read the emotion. Another moment later, his fingers and thumb dip duckbill style into my gaping vagina, filling me completely. Even as well prepared as he’d made me, I am tight, stretched uncomfortably. I feel a deep pressure high in my womb as his fingers work deeper, then the magic, hold your breath moment when his fingers curl; almost unbearable pressure as his fist forms; and like magic, his hand is inside of me, wrist deep. Breath stalls in my chest, leaving me stunned, unsure whether to inhale or exhale.

He tugs slightly, smiling, pretending his hand is stuck, making me half-laugh and turn my head away. I relax; I can breathe again.

Lying still, I breathe, just breathe. His fist is like a heavy weight deep inside me, comforting. I bravely look into his eyes and find peace.

His lips come down to my face; kisses on my eyes, forehead, nose, lips. “You wanted to come down a little, Baby?” His whisper tickles my neck.

I smile shyly, strangely embarrassed, hiding my face beneath my bent elbow, but watching his face intently. He catches my sneaky game, peeks below my elbow and holds my gaze. Eyes locked, I stretch, arching, pushing up just a little, testing the feel of his hand inside of me. His eyes are relaxed narrow slits, like a cat’s. He is enjoying himself, enjoying the pleasure he is giving.

His free hand slides from my belly to slyly stroke my clit with his thumb as he

rotates his hand within me. Orgasm crashes through me unexpectedly and every muscle in my body tightens. I am going to explode. Wave after wave crashes through my womb, a never-ending boiling sea of pleasure.

I am going to die from the intensity of it.

I'm hyperventilating. "Let me come down just a little, Master, just a little."

Master laughs, deep and happy; and I know the workout has only just begun.

Moving his free hand back over my low belly, he feels every push and pull as the fisting begins in earnest. Slow and easy, building as I can take more, until he is pumping me harshly, my hips raising off the bed with each thrust. The pressure build up intensifies; one hand pumping, the other pushing down; my body building up a store of fluid just beneath my G-spot.

Panting, I can't get enough air, can't breathe deep enough, but I don't give a damn.

"Harder, Master, harder." I beg, needing his knuckles to knead hard into the soft spongy flesh covering my G-spot.

"No, Kitten, I won't hurt you. This is as hard as it gets."

"I need MORE!" I grit out between pants, between sobs.

"More what, Kitten? Tell me exactly what it's going to take."

My head twists from side to side. I am too far gone to communicate, and frustrated as hell because I can't fall into the orgasmic hyper drive vortex my body craves. My fingers claw the sheets, primal noise taking the place of words.

Master slows his pace, no longer pumping, just easy pushes. In response, I keel in frustration, tears sliding over my cheeks. His free hand leaves the swell of my belly to wipe my face.

"Easy," he whispers. "Easy. I'll take care of you, Kitten. Just relax."

"Can't...fucking...Relax!" I manage, shaking my head, rubbing my eyes hard with closed fists.

Master reaches up and, capturing my hands, holds my fists prisoner above my head. The other hand leaves fist form and slides easily from my body.

"No-o!" I wail against him, biting his forearm as he leans over my face. "Need more!"

"Not until you relax."

His gaze catches mine, long enough for a glaring match of wills. I turn my face away from the kisses he offers. I am too deep into primal need, caring only about release.

"Relax," he whispers again, trailing gentle kisses over my jaw and down my neck. My fists pull against the hand restraining me, my hips buck. He responds by wrapping his leg around my knees, pinning me completely.

"Sh-h," he gentles and, with his patience and softness, my body slowly relaxes, my mind becoming my own again, making me feel remorse. Emotion wells thick and hot in my throat.

"I'm sorry," I manage.

"No apologies, Kitten, we're not done yet."

I close my eyes as I feel two fingers ease inside of me.

I feel tenderness in parts of me I'd never felt before and know that muscles I hadn't known existed would be screaming in the morning. I bury my head against his lightly haired chest, inhaling deep, enjoying the sensory overload his scent and coarse hair provide in that moment. Deeply relaxed and in my own head space, it barely registers that

he crooks his fingers inside of me, pulling deep presses in slow rhythm directly over my spongy hot spot. A sudden urge to pee panics me.

“Don’t! I have to pee!” I cry out.

“Sh-h, you don’t have to pee, Kitten, just relax and let whatever is going to happen, happen.”

I relax back into the pillows; his fingers resume their insistent pressing. Seconds later, I have my release; hot liquid spews out of me. Master withdraws his fingers, letting my come squirt freely.

I am awestruck, realizing that he just milked a major ejaculation out of me and, until that very second, I would have argued with anyone that it just wasn’t possible for a woman to ejaculate like that.

Master isn’t finished though, his fingers hook again, his thumb still teasing my clit.

My god, my god.

Hot liquid keeps pouring from me, soaking the sheets beneath my bottom. His thumb rubbing gently over my clit forces my orgasmic spiral higher and higher until light explodes behind my eyelids.

A while later, as I lay still, recovering, my insides stretched and moderately sore, Master kisses a path down my belly to the tender folds between my legs: soft licks, playful nips. Within seconds, I come again, and again, and again.

* * * *

Okay, I am in post-sex hell. When Master said he thought I might actually be aware I had a vagina for a few days, I had no idea he meant I would know I have a vagina for a few days. And no it doesn’t hurt, not pain anyway, but it is down there, definitely.

I hope it doesn’t fall out.

Was it worth it? God, yes.

Would I do it again? Definitely.

Will I use this in the *UnderCovers* article? Not a chance in hell.

It is early, I don’t know how early, but early. There was some kind of commotion in Enrique’s room, and then Garrett left with Enrique to do something at the Club. We aren’t going there tonight, even though it is a work night for Garrett, he wants me to stay tucked in bed all day. He left, saying he would take care of everything that needed to be done at the office and be right back. He also warned me to stay in bed. Like I am going anywhere. No, me and my happy, still throbbing vagina are staying right here under the covers.

Chapter 19

“Now cracks a noble heart. Good night sweet prince: and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!”

—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Celia

I spend three days at home with my happy, pulsing vagina. A doctor summoned in the middle of the night revealed I'd contracted a urinary tract infection, prescribed an antibiotic, and suggested, perhaps, there be less physical play for a few days. Master explained later, after I sobbed with embarrassment, that the doctor was community friendly, and wasn't being judgmental.

Today, we arrive at the Club earlier than we ever have and it is odd being at the Club with no clients here. He is tense. I long to ask him what is wrong, but I don't.

It's a funny thing how happy can turn to miserable in a heartbeat. I mean, I'm still floaty, even days following my endorphin overdose, but floaty turns desolate once I figure out what I am seeing.

How many references have I heard mentioning the obscure, deceased partner who had a major part in designing what would be the third and fourth floors? It's obvious now, by the memorial photo display, he was also Master's lover.

It should bother me that Master's lost love was a man, but oddly it doesn't. Maybe because I only know him as who he is with me and I don't see Master as a gay man. I see him as a passionate lover. I'm not so certain that even a week ago my reaction would have been so complacent, so nonchalant, even after five years in San Francisco; but now, having felt so much passion, having watched him interact with clients, I see him only as he is—strong, passionate, dominant.

Of course, being here in this world is partially responsible for my change in attitude. It is hard not to quickly discover that here it is not so much about labels, but about passion. Passion for this lifestyle make the people here special, no longer man or woman, but Master/slave; dominant and submissive, top and bottom. No, gender doesn't even play into it. But does my apathy make me any less jealous? Not a chance.

He is an Adonis.

Was, was.

I fight jealousy, knowing the man has been gone five years now. Thirty-two years old. So young. Pictures cover a section of wall. Honestly, he should have been in the movies.

Yes, he was that good looking. He had a strong face, dark hair, and even darker eyes. A brilliant smile that could warm even the coldest day calls to the heart. A mischievous glint in his eyes calls to the soul. It is easy to see why Master was attracted to him. Anyone would be.

In the largest portrait, he is wearing a black t-shirt, a gold necklace, well-worn jeans with the knees frayed out, and that big toothy smile I know without a doubt is trademark,

nothing forced about it. The smile, like the man, was genuine, real. He is barefoot in the portrait. Very casual. His arms are crossed and he leans against a Range Rover. The picture is a powerful statement about the man. He was comfortable with who he was.

Muscular, masculine, power-driven, and evidently gay, but it doesn't really stand out that he was—not like on some, who wear their sexual identity like a badge. The wall is a memorial to the man. I'm not sure how I missed it before, I mean it's a noticeable display in the elevator foyer. A small plaque is mounted beneath the portrait, reading "Beloved Tony" and followed by a section of a poem titled *Away*.

"I cannot say and will not say that he is dead—he is just away! With cheery smile and a wave of the hand, he has wandered into an unknown land and left us dreaming how very fair its needs must be he lingers there."

I recognize it immediately as a James Whitcomb Riley poem. He was a favorite of mine in college. Another poem of his, *When the Frost Is on the Punkin*, never fails to make me smile because of its uncommon Hoosier dialect. I wonder how Master ever came across the poem.

Voices draw my attention and I quickly wipe away the tears that streak down my face before anyone notices. I understand completely now the empty pillow in the corner, near Master's regular table, stationed beneath a large O-bolt that has a thick chain and a thick leather and studded dog's collar hanging from it. The collar actually rests in the center of the cushion.

I take in the rest of the photographs that make up a unique grouping. His life. A smiling, toothless boy with an amazing head of curls; an adolescent who never had a moment of acne; the man—in a tux his arm looped over Master's shoulders, in boxing gear with a gold medal strung over his neck, in full hiking regalia with majestic mountains in the background. There are two black-and-white photos of him with Master; in the first they are lying wrapped together on a sofa; in the second, a close-up, they share a passionate kiss. They really loved each other. Sometimes the obvious just has to slap you in the face. I wipe away my tears, not worrying if my makeup survives. More tears fall until there is a torrent I cannot seem to stop. God, he was so young, so beautiful. They were so in love. Tears for Tony, tears for Master, tears for me.

Jackie finds me, odd that she is here so early. I have never seen her arrive before midnight and yet, today, the doors haven't even opened for business. I hear her coming down the hall leading from the kitchens before I actually see her. There is no mistaking her voice. I am hiding, huddled in the corner, and it takes a second for her to find me, though it is obvious when she does that she is relieved she has. "Garrett is a very bad Master, Kitten, to leave you alone and so lonely. Is it any wonder you keep getting into mischief when he leaves you to your own devices?"

I bury my face into my hands. She squats beside me, balancing on her five-inch heels to take my face in her hands and, holding me, she hugs my face.

"No tears, child. Tony was wonderful, but he had a wonderful life. He lived every minute of it, we should all be so lucky to live the way he lived. He would be happy Garrett has finally found someone to put the sparkle back in his eye."

She helps me stand, brushes me off, and wipes my face dry with a linen napkin.

"I am happy he found you, so let's not have him find you lacking. Let's go fix that makeup." I nod, the thought to argue the offer not even considered, and follow. I am well-trained. It is so easy here, following, no thought necessary. It could be so easy to get

lost in this for real. I keep reminding myself why I am here, in case I forget, but even remembering, I do not know how I am ever going to be able to complete an article on what really happens here behind closed doors. One, it feels like a horrible betrayal; and two, I don't want to share the details of what transpires between Master and I, our sacred secrets. They're so not what I expected our relationship to be like.

Post-makeup emergency rescue, I am once again fit to be seen and Jackie leads me to her regular table. I take the cushion at her feet, thankful for her intervention. What would I have said to Master if he had found me instead? He has been so tender all week and tomorrow, Sunday, we will be alone together again. I can hardly wait, even if I have to share him with the others for a movie spree and slumber party. I want nothing more than to curl up beside him on the couch. I want to give him a massage the way he massaged me, spreading oil over my tender back, tea tree oil that he said would heal any tears in my flesh from the Cat.

The Cat o' nine tails has rightly earned my respect. I would not want it used as punishment for real and, though unexpected, I am glad he switched to the flogger.

I close my eyes as others start filling the room. Tonight, I am glad I did not have to crawl in behind him, aching in places I didn't realize I could ache. It is nice. I don't think anyone realizes that I am here, not seeing Master, and probably not expecting him for hours.

I duck farther beneath the table, seeking my own inner solitude. I need time to think, about how to speak to Master and what to say, especially now that I have come face to face with my competition, a man so well loved, I wonder if Master could ever possibly face the emotion again. Time to face the possibility that I may be facing that emotion myself.

* * * *

I hear his voice before I actually see him, his voice is raised and echoes slightly through the hall leading from the kitchens, though the words are indistinguishable. He sounds angry; but when he pushes through the swinging doors, he is smiling, laughing. Another man is with him, the blond Dom that I have decided I do not particularly like, not because of anything he's done, just because he makes me uncomfortable. They call him Dr. Psycho.

He also looks like he just stepped off the cover of GQ, and no man should look that perfect all the time. I imagine he does.

Master carries a covered tray. Food. Just the thought of food makes me happy, knowing Master will pull me into his lap and feed me from his fingertips. Ever since the night of the Observation Sphere, he has not forgotten to feed me and seems to enjoy it when I lick his fingers clean. I smile my happy to see him smile and, seeing it, he smiles in return, setting the tray on the table. He bends to kiss my forehead. "I'm sorry I took so long, Kitten."

He leans over to kiss Jackie on both cheeks; she chastises him for taking so long, and he kisses her again.

Then he looks at Dr. Psycho and smiles, both sitting, both smiling. He doesn't pull me into his lap like I want him too, but he offers me a bite from his fingertips. Suddenly, I am not very hungry, wondering the worst. Are they lovers, Dr. Psycho and my Master? They share intimate glances and it makes me insane on the inside.

Lord Fyre joins the table as he usually does by midnight each night, tonight he, too, is early. He winks at me, I pull back, ducking beneath the tablecloth. He laughs, it is our every night game.

Tonight he shares a glance with Master and I realize they are sharing some kind of secret among themselves, conversation too soft for my ears. It pisses me off, so much so that I refuse to eat or make eye contact with Master. In part it is my jealousy, which I know is ridiculous; but another part is that I feel like he is keeping something from me and my guilty conscience screams that I am keeping a big something from him.

How will I ever tell him the truth, tell him I am a reporter, tell him about the exposé?

God, the exposé. For a moment I have forgotten all about it. I've loved being so lost in his world that I didn't even think about work. Now, I think about work. I don't want to do the article. I don't want anything to do with an exposé about Garrett, about Lewd Larry's, and especially what has transpired between my Master and me.

I should tell him, but how? How do I tell him what my true purpose was, knowing the revelation will destroy the relationship we are beginning to share? That is my fear.

My hope is that he will love me enough that the revelation, when it does come, doesn't ruin this.

I want him to love me—the way he loved Tony. Anything less wouldn't be enough.

I feign sleep, praying for him to love me like that.

* * * *

We are home and it is barely past midnight. I should be worried, very worried, because he didn't say anything on the ride home. He didn't touch me either. It doesn't matter, I don't care, having decided that he will never love me the way he loved Tony and it's more than just not having the right equipment. There was something extraordinary about their relationship.

Master pushes me into the bedroom. "What is going on with you, tonight?"

I can't face him. I can't tell him the truth about what's wrong, because I wouldn't know which truth to start with, the *I know you loved a man and yeah, it's bugging the hell out of me* truth, or the *oh, by the way, I'm a reporter, but please don't worry about that because I've fallen in love with you and decided I couldn't possibly write an exposé* truth.

Shit, shit, shit! I am so screwed right now.

I look stubbornly through the darkened window and relax only when he walks away. He doesn't pursue it. Across the room, he sorts through papers on his desk, oblivious to me, and I am glad. At least for the moment.

How do I tell him "Uh, by the way, I met your dead boyfriend today. Get rid of him."

I hate myself.

I am a horrible person.

* * * *

I walk out of the bathroom and into Master. He jerks the beige towel off my body with a viscous snap. A second snap pulls the towel from my head and leaves my wet hair dripping in my eyes.

"Did you ask permission to shower, Kitten?"

I shake my head and roll my eyes.

Guilty as charged.

"Come. Now." His tone tells me all I need to know. He passed pissed off hours ago. I stay glued to my spot. "I said now!"

Stronger tone, this is going to get ugly. Why am I doing this? I swallow hard and look him square in the eye. "Not tonight, I can't. I just don't want to play tonight."

Oh god, I hate it when he crooks his eyebrow that way and, I am quickly learning, he always gets his way.

"If you wanted a shower, all you had to do was ask," he promises softly in his very controlled Master voice. I am really up shit's creek this time. I should apologize, I should make excuses. Shit, did I mention he's strong? With one swift move, he tumbles me over his shoulder and carries me back into the bathroom. He drops all pretense of niceties when he dumps me in the shower stall. I land sprawled in a very unladylike position and don't even manage to struggle into a sitting position before he turns on the water. Ice cold water. A jet spray of it blasts my belly. I lift my hands to protect my face. I slip and slide across wet tile trying to stand.

"You wanted a shower?" he growls and I have never heard this voice before. It frightens me and makes me want him more desperately than I thought I could ever want him. Just because of a change of inflection in voice. If I were going to do an exposé, and I'm not, I would mention the importance of voice in controlling one's slave

I finally manage to stand and I struggle against Master.

"Not like this," I plead.

For a moment, we are a tangle of arms and legs and jet spray, but it is only for a moment. He is bigger, stronger, and faster. With a pivot, he slams me into the shower wall, his elbow in my chest, and all the air from my lungs is expelled in a gush. I should have learned from Lord Fyre to watch the elbows. Icy water blasts my breasts as I struggle to gasp in air. I would scream if only I could suck in enough air. My lungs scream instead as I sink to my knees.

The icy blast of water follows me down.

Finally, enough air seeps in to my aching lungs. "Please, stop, please."

My teeth begin to chatter and I sink down onto my ass, clutching my arms as his knee forces my knees wide and he shoots the water between my legs. This is not erotic, this is not fun, this is a fight to the end. I twist and turn to escape but he holds me firm, seeming to have twice as many arms and legs to do the job, as I have to fight. The water probes me with cold, vicious fingers and I start to cry great, wretched sobs.

Closing my eyes, I am too cold to fight, not even lifting my arms to defend against the water spray in my face. An even more horrible shower scene fills my mind and it is Lion forcing water down my throat. "Repent, Bitch, I will flush the sins of your kind from your evil belly."

"Stop, please stop. Oh god, Lion, stop!"

The water stops and I am left lying on the cold tile. I open my eyes to see Master stalking away, he returns to the room, combing his fingers through his hair, pacing the small bathroom space like a caged tiger. Fist flying out, he punches a hole through the wall. I should be afraid, I should run, but I can't move except to chatter my teeth. I watch him face himself in the mirror, shivering, breathing hard. Reaching for a towel hanging on the wall, he wipes his face before turning to me. "I'm sorry."

He lifts me from the stall floor, wrapping me in the body towel even as he lifts me into his arms. I wasn't crying when I lay on the floor, feeling his safe warmth; but in his arms, I start to sob, sobbing all the way into the living room, where he carries me. He lays me on the leather couch and I keep sobbing. I can't stop. Neither can I move. I just don't have the energy or the fight left in me for anything else tonight. My teeth make a horrible racket in my ears.

Two clicks and there is fire in the gas fireplace, leaping flames dancing wildly behind the glass enclosure. He walks back to my side and kneels before me to rub my arms briskly. There is worry etched into his face, but I am powerless to erase those lines. I cannot even control my crying. Through my tears, I see that he is soaked through. His hair, shirt, and pants all drip, leaving a massive puddle on the floor.

"You're wet," I manage to get out through chatters.

"I am that," he answers. "Will you be okay while I make you some hot tea?"

"I'll be fine," I chatter. "Get out of your wet clothes first."

"No, I'll get your tea and get you warm before I do anything else."

He passes through the room in semi-darkness, shunning the lights. Through the large window that divides the kitchen from the living room, I can see him, behind the counter. Watching him work, I am filled with calm. While the tea pot heats, he pulls his wet shirt over his head without the benefit of unbuttoning it first. His damp skin gleams in the dim light cast by a series of small lights recessed into the cabinets.

I close my eyes, suddenly exhausted, aware enough to register every sound: the unclenching of metal teeth as he slides his pants zipper and the splat as the pants land in the sink on top of the shirt. Rollers slide as drawers are opened and closed, a stoneware cup clinks as it settles on the bar, a paper rattles and water pours...

My eyes open to the sound of my name in a concerned voice.

Master gives me a weak smile and helps me to sit up. He is wrapped in a colorful madras plaid, a tablecloth. He offers me the hot tea, but my hands are so unsteady, he has to help me hold the cup as I sip. He brushes my cheek. "Tell me what's going on, Kitten."

My sob is ugly and guttural and there is no control left to be had. "You loved him."

Chapter 20

"If honour and wisdom and happiness are not for me, let them be for others. Let heaven exist, though my place be in hell. Let me be outraged and annihilated, but for one instant, in one being..."

—Jorge Luis Borges, *The Library of Babel*

Garrett

I am not sure why I never mentioned Tony. Now she knows about Tony, and I am at a loss as to what to say to make her feel better. I wish I knew what to say, but I don't even know where to begin. With the truth I guess.

"I loved him," I whisper. "But he is gone now."

She finally calms enough to sit and sip her tea on her own. I carry a heavy comforter out to the couch and wrap us both in it before I begin. She looks at me with round questioning eyes that melt my heart and elate me at the same time because it means she cares, perhaps even loves me back. Up until now, I've been afraid to even think the word about her, but it's true. I'm in love with her.

And that is why I must be very careful about what I say to her now.

"Tony was my life for a very long time."

It is not a very strong beginning but I don't know how else to begin. I had planned on a bold statement, but it comes out a cracked whisper. I wish she'd ask a million questions, but realize at the same time she isn't about to interrupt, forcing me to struggle onward. "I loved him."

I can't do this. It's too hard. I've never talked about Tony, not since that night, not even during the funeral or wake that followed. I just closed up and kept it all private.

"Does it bother you that I had a male lover, Kitten?"

"No," she answers quietly. "It doesn't bother me that he was a man. But if we're both honest, he was more than just a lover. He was..."

"My soul mate," I finish the sentence for her.

"Yes."

I awake on the couch hours later, Kitten still in my arms, soft and warm. I can't believe how angry I was. Not angry at her though. It's the stress of the letters and the reliving of it all, over and over again. And now he dares to threaten her. God, I can't let anything happen to her.

She stirs in my arms and I realize she is awake and watching me. I have questions of my own that I need the answers to. Though, I wonder if now is the right time. I ask anyway. "Kitten, who's Lion?"

She stiffens immediately.

"Sh-h, baby, it's all right, we don't have to talk about him now, but I do want you to trust me enough to talk about him." I stroke her hair away from her forehead, hoping she will relax in my arms again. She doesn't. She sits up, pulling her knees into her chest.

"How do you know about Lion?"

She doesn't remember, or perhaps she doesn't realize. "You called me Lion in the shower."

Kitten closes her eyes and sighs. Little tears sneak out from beneath her lashes. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize."

"It's okay. Don't cry."

I feel a little better when she climbs into my lap and wraps her arms around my neck and lays her head on my shoulder.

"I met him back home. He was an evangelist who came to preach at my Daddy's church. He seemed so perfect, so sophisticated, so beautiful. He was everything I wasn't. I think Daddy secretly hoped Lion would be the man I'd marry. But I was young, only seventeen, and I'd already been accepted to a half-dozen colleges. Marriage wasn't what I wanted; I wanted a career. And Lion was too busy paving his way as the next Billy Graham to be interested in me, but I admit, I was star struck. So, when his evangelical tour came to my college a few years later, I stopped in to say hi and we ended up going out for coffee."

Kitten pauses to collect her thoughts and my mind reels at her first revelation. Her father is a preacher. I sip what is left of my cup of tea, gone cold hours ago.

"I'm not sure how I ended up in his hotel room or, for that matter, in his bed, but I did. I was so ashamed the next day. He convinced me that it was my fault we'd fallen into sin. He always did that, he made me feel so dirty."

I brush the fresh tears off her face and wait for her to go on. I can hardly believe my ears.

"After that, he would stop in to see me every time he was in town, every couple of months, and every time I vowed I wouldn't have sex with him, but we always managed to end up doing it. I was Satan's tool. It was insane and the insanity went on for years. Once, I told him I couldn't see him because I had other plans. He guessed it was another man and was furious. He told me I belonged to him and no one else could ever have me. I later found out he had followed us and, after Jason brought me back to my dorm room, Lion showed up..."

Kitten fights back the tears and I pull her closer, dreading what I know is coming. "It's okay Kitten, let it go."

"He raped me. I can't call it anything else. He raped every part of me. He tore me pretty bad when he sodomized me."

Kitten buries her face in my shoulder and I let her cry her heart out, her sobs breaking mine.

"Sh-h, Kitten. You don't have to..."

"I have to," she hiccups. "Please, I've never told anyone."

I hug her hard against me, wondering how much more she could possibly have to tell. "Then tell me. I'll listen, Kitten, and I'll hold you tight while you get it out."

I feel a calm steel over her as she rocks back in my lap to look into my eyes. "I'm a horrible person. He was so clean before he met me, and I tempted him, a holy man."

"At first, I was just so mesmerized by him; he was so beautiful, so charismatic, that I would linger over his every word, and I admit to a fascination with him, with wanting to have sex with him. I was young, and so naïve, I thought maybe I would be good enough to get into the kingdom of heaven if I could become his wife. But I ruined that by having sex with him, by being so evil that I drew him to my bed that very first date. He never

believed me when I told him I was a virgin before him. I was. But he didn't believe me."

"M-marry?" I stutter, quite appalled. "Why would you ever want to marry a jerk like that? He raped you!"

"No, you don't understand. In the beginning, I tempted him. I was dressed too sexy for a date with a preacher, tight jeans, tight t-shirt. Yes, he raped me and I've never forgiven him for that night. I've never forgiven him for leaving me pregnant."

My mind spins out of control with the implications of what little she has told me. My god, she was the innocent. How dare he! I want to kill him.

"I didn't know what to do; I had no idea what part of the country he was in or anything—so I went home because I knew Daddy would know where to find him."

Kitten sighs and looks far away. I don't disturb the memories. As much as it kills me to hear what I'm hearing, I know she needs to say all of it. A low-flying plane rumbles overhead, startling her out of her reverie. A shiver races through her.

"Lion came to see us, at the request of my father, but he lied. He said the child wasn't his. He called me a slut and all manner of filth. He said he never wanted my father to know the kind of trash his only child had turned out to be, but now that I'd brought the garbage home, he couldn't keep his mouth shut any longer. He told him that there was a line of men in and out of my bed. That I'd gone to college to get an education, but what I'd learned was how to whore."

"My god, Kitten." My jaw grinds. "Your father?"

"He believed Lion," she whispers, falling into my arms with a sob. "The next morning Daddy and Lion drove me to the abortion clinic. I was four months pregnant. I imagined that I'd felt her move the day before. I wanted her. I did. But I had no one, except Daddy, and..." Kitten really breaks down, sobbing. "I thought that giving up my daughter was the only way to keep my father. Oh god, I couldn't lose him too, not so soon after Mom. I wouldn't have had anyone... I named her Sarah."

* * * *

Kitten sleeps on the sofa. She cried herself to sleep.

I sit and wait for Thomas at the corner deli, he is bringing me Kitten's folder. I have to read it. I don't doubt her story, but there is more she isn't telling me. I am going crazy inside because I am rarely awake at this hour to notice such things as what life is really like during the daytime. The deli is crowded and noisy in its midday rush. But the noise and crowd blur as Thomas enters. He left a rugby game to join me, stopping by the office for the file.

I forget how easy it is for him to travel in and out from under the veil. He straddles the fence between normalcy and depravity, dangling one leg in each world on a daily basis. He looks good like this, hair pulled back, cheeks wind-blown and ruddy, with well-muscled, dark-haired, tanned thighs peeking out beneath slinky shorts and knee-high socks. The long-sleeved jersey that stretches tight over his muscled chest and arms makes him all the more sinful.

He sits opposite me, laying the file between us. One look into his eyes tells me just how unimpressed he is with me right now, not because I forced him to leave his rugby game, but because of the betrayal I am committing. Thomas has a very clear view of right and wrong.

He sees this as definitely wrong.

I sit, staring at the unopened file, knowing I am going to read what is inside. I will betray a sacred trust for answers. And I wonder what kind of man I've become. Identities of the players are sacred, and the trust I have forged with Kitten is fragile.

Condensation drizzles off the side of my barely touched glass of ice tea. The waitress is not impressed that I have not ordered anything more. She is even less impressed when Thomas requests a glass of ice water. She stalks our table, waiting for us to stand so she can seat someone else. Someone she hopes will buy food and leave a tip.

"Did you decide on that pie?"

The waitress in question interrupts me as my fingers toy with the edge of the folder. Still debating whether or not to open it. With an aggravated sigh, I pull a twenty out of my wallet and place it under the glass of tea.

"It's yours when I leave, if you leave me the fuck alone! Got it?"

She backs away, eyes wide, and nods her head. Thomas snickers. I shake my head, regretting that I scared her, glad that she is no longer my shadow. It is hard enough spying on Kitten without the prying eyes of another watching the crime. Once I open the folder, there is no going back.

At my request, George has gone to the penthouse to keep Kitten company while I rifle through her file like a common thief. I am an idiot for thinking I would find anything here. Jane Alexander, 29, non-smoker. Unemployed. Highest education level completed, grade 12.

I believe she is a non-smoker. The rest is a lie. But why? Doubt digs at the back of my brain, a comment Tom Turner made while he was over last Sunday. "I'd watch that stray you've dragged in. Just watch her, okay?"

It bothered me when he said it, not the words, but the way he said it, like it was a warning.

"Do you know Tom Turner?" I ask abruptly.

Thomas lifts an eyebrow but shrugs.

"He's some geek intern who works at *Inappropriate Voices*," I continue. "I think he might know something. He showed up at the Margaritas, Movies, and Mayhem party a while back, and Kitten wouldn't make eye contact with him."

"So call him."

After three tries through information, I know I have the right Tom Turner the minute he answers his phone.

"Who is she, Tom?" I demand over my cell phone.

"I figured you'd get around to calling me sooner or later, old buddy."

I frown. We've never been friends. The way I see it, I barely know him and that's fine with me. I can't believe I even called him. Newspaper reporters always make me queasy. Soft music plays in the background and there is a soft giggle that's definitely not Tom's as I wait for him to answer my question. The noise in the deli, once a low drone, now roars. I plug my bare ear and strain to hear the lightest sound on his end. "Easy baby," Tom's whisper is sharp and I know it's definitely not directed at me.

"So, are you going to tell me or not?" I rasp out impatiently.

Tom laughs. This is definitely directed at me and I don't like it. Not the sound of his laugh over the phone or the feeling that he is toying with me, has been toying with me ever since the party. It makes me see him as a child. A young, dangerous adversary. I close my eyes against the deli patrons who are still standing in line, waiting like vultures

for one of the few tables to open up.

“Look, Lewd.” I really hate it when he calls me that. “I know we’re not the best of friends, but in a sense, we’re brothers. Times are changing and we’ve seen a lot in the past few years. We live in a world apart from the vanilla one, and trust me when I say, I like being able to not have to hide my lifestyle. It’s one of the reasons I choose to work at *Inappropriate Voices*. It’s why I’m willing to sacrifice my loyalty to my job for the loyalty I have to our lifestyle. I’m not willing to let anything we’ve fought for be destroyed for the sake of a story. You’d agree that it’s been a hard battle, am I right?”

“Sure,” I mumble and I wait, thinking *who in the hell is this kid trying to fool. What has he done in the past few years, graduated from high school?* A mid-range moan drifts through the receiver. I tap my fingers on the Formica tabletop.

“Tell ya what, you should probably check out Celia’s Book Corner, Lewd, you never know what you might find amidst all that tantalizing erotica,” Tom answers cryptically. “Oh baby, that’s it, I like it just like that.” His whisper is clear as a bell over the receiver.

Before I can demand more, he hangs up on me. I am pissed. More than pissed and, as I head down to the corner for a copy of today’s edition, I decide it better be worth the effort or Tom’s current blowjob might just be his last.

I stare at Celia Brentwood’s photo. It is a rough black and white, and the woman in it is wearing glasses, but take those away and cut off four inches of hair, and she could be my Kitten. Unbelievable. Thomas concurs.

It’s all been lies. The bitch just wanted a story.

Thomas follows me home after a quick summary of Tom Turner’s revelations. Aside from a slight tightening in his jaw muscle, he doesn’t react to the news. Sometimes I wish he would be less stable. Like now, I want him hot and angry, like me. In Thomas mode, he is useless to me; I need him here as Fyre, lethal and feral. My guts ache, my head aches, and my mouth is dry. If I ever needed to be Ice, it’s now.

“Just take her home and make sure she understands I never want to see her again.”

“No problem,” Thomas promises me.

I am going to be sick.

“Hit me.”

Thomas arches his brow and a smile teases the corners of his lips, the transformation happens there, in his eyes, one minute Thomas, the next his fist tears through my middle, delivered unsympathetically by Fyre.

Oh god, I needed that. I cough, sure that there will be blood with the spit. There isn’t. I manage to straighten after several agonizing minutes. “Scare her, but keep your damn hands off, Fyre,” I grind out.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. Still not the Ice of old. Whatever am I going to do with you, my friend?”

“Hands off, I mean it.”

“No problem, Boss.”

* * * *

Celia sits at the dining room table looking none too impressed when I storm in. I am sure I look none too impressed either. She is wrapped in my bathrobe.

It is obvious that she has been crying. Leave it to George—an hour with him has that effect on most everyone. There’s something about a sadistic psychiatrist, he just can’t

keep his whips out of your mind.

I unlock a drawer in the back of my pantry and grab Kitten's black tote. Every muscle in my body is tense as I pull out her jeans and sweatshirt and toss them at her. Only her quick reflexes keep them from smacking her in the face.

My heart thunders against my chest as I wait for it to explode.

"Get dressed, Jane."

"Can I ask what's going on, first?"

"You can ask."

She stands and walks toward me, I step back two paces and Fyre intercedes for me, stepping between us. "Just get dressed, it's for the best, for now," he demands.

She grinds her jaw and stares me down. "For your information, I stopped being Jane Alexander the day Lion raped me!"

The barb hits home, dead center in my heart, I assume it's what she wanted, and I feel even more manipulated. I cross my arms. I have been topped from the bottom and wasn't even aware of the game. Teary eyes jerk my chain and I wasn't even aware I'd been leashed. I feel stupid and dirty, used.

"Jane was a dirty, filthy curse on his lips every time he pounded into me. I couldn't bear the sound of it anymore after that, so I took my mother's name as my own. Celia. Celia is a beautiful name." She looks down, but only for a moment as she struggles to gain her composure. "Celia Brentwood. But I'm assuming you know that already."

"Yes, I suppose I do." I sigh. I don't want to have this discussion. I am not inclined to even listen. I can't bear another lie, not from my Kitten. But another part of me demands answers, wants to know the truth, wants to believe that she is as cold-hearted as I am led to believe in this moment. I am harsh and impatient as I step forward. No more going back. "So, Madame Reporter, was the plan to destroy Lewd Larry's?" She jerks at the venom in my voice.

I ignore George's shocked gasp and try to see what lies flutter within her brilliant blue-green eyes.

"No!" She shakes her head. "It wasn't going to be like that! I swear." Her shoulders shake long after her head stops moving. Her eyes beg me to believe her.

"Easy to say now, Celia, but I'm afraid it doesn't hold much weight with us." George steps in, this matter almost as personal for him as it is for me. He doesn't talk about the time before Lewd Larry's, but I know he was very successful, and I know it took almost every dime he had at the time, which amounted to a small fortune, to survive the lies of a woman bent on destroying him because of the way he spent his off hours. "We're hardcore, we've survived your kind before. We'll survive you."

She tries to get closer to me, shoulders quaking, eyes begging. Fyre holds her back and ends up throwing her over his shoulder, carrying her and the pile of clothes into the bedroom. A loud commotion ensues behind the closed bedroom door, but it ends just as abruptly as it began.

As much as I very much want to rescue her, I can't face her again. Right now, I need rescuing more than she does.

"Get me out of here, George."

"Anything you say, Ice."

Chapter 21

“Give all to love: obey thy heart.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Celia

I face my worst nightmare and his name is Lord Fyre. I am cornered in Garrett’s bedroom, wondering what happened between the bleary hours of this morning and now. There were a few hours of mindless sleep and then I awoke to find myself guarded by Dr. Psycho, who insisted I call him George. He is actually a psychiatrist. Unbelievable.

He made us tea and made me talk about all the things I didn’t want to talk about; and he didn’t even have to twist my arm to make me spill my guts, not about *Inappropriate Voices*, though I wanted to, but about my mother, my father, Lion, and Sarah. I think he was actually concerned about my mental health. And at this point, my mental sanity is definitely at risk. God, I can’t lose Master over this. I was wrong to keep the story a secret so long. What was I thinking?

My mind is the least of my concerns as I once again face down Lucifer himself. He tosses my jeans and sweatshirt at me. What is it with men throwing my clothes in my face this morning?

“I need to talk to Master.”

“That’s impossible. Right now, you are going to get dressed.”

“Bullshit! I’m talking to Garrett!”

I head for the door but he derails me, grabbing my arm and forcing me down. I grab a handful of his hair on my way down and am pretty sure my elbow finds his face, but it is a short-lived moment of glory. He lands on top of me and pins me in less than a second. We are a pile of arms and legs at the foot of the bed. At least he didn’t knock the air out of my lungs this time, which I am sure would have been the case if we had hit the floor. Although, I am not pleased with where we landed. I scramble against the comforter, sinking deeper into the mattress as I push against the immovable force of the man above me.

“Damn you!”

“I think that’s a pretty sure thing already,” he grits out as I struggle for freedom. “Now lay still before you get hurt.”

I am not going to lay still. I buck, I roll, I grab a handful of flesh and chest hair through his cotton jersey and pull for all I’m worth. My efforts earn me a slap in the face, after which it is easy for him to pin my hands. For a moment, I am not even sure what planet I’m on.

“Now, we can do this the easy way or the hard way. You are going to get dressed.”

“Not until I talk to Master!”

Too late I realize my mistake. Both of my hands are pinned above my head. I manage a small squeak, realizing that I am trapped under Lucifer himself and am now completely bare down the middle where Garrett’s bathrobe has come undone in my

struggles. Lord Fyre cocks an eyebrow, waiting for me to agree to get dressed.

My heart has lodged in my throat and words seem impossible. His lips twist in an almost smile just before he lowers them to kiss the flat bridge of pale skin between my breasts, his tongue sneaking out to lick the smooth trail to my navel.

"I'll get dressed," I promise rapidly. He frees me just as quickly. Stepping back from the bed, he pushes a brisk hand through his hair, pulling his long tresses out of his eyes then, keeping his eye on me, crosses the room in two paces. It seems Lord Fyre wants as much distance from me as I do him. A shudder wracks my body as I sit up; I stare at him, weighing the situation still. He stands wearing a determined frown, his arms crossed over his chest, barring the door, blocking any attempts at escape. My teeth grind together, every second I am stuck here is too long away from Master. *I need to plead my case, he needs to understand.*

I didn't realize I'd spoken out loud until Fyre answers. "Now is not the time, Celia. I know the man, better than most. You are going to have to give him time, because no matter what you say to him right now, he won't hear it. So, please, get dressed and let me take you home."

I lift my chin stubbornly, determinedly. "And if I don't get dressed, if I refuse to leave this room?"

He tilts his head, a small smile forming. His lips twitch with amusement as he asks, "Do you really want to find out if that works for ya?"

"Don't watch."

"I've seen you naked before," he quips. "But I promise I won't enjoy myself, *this time.*"

I throw off the robe. He doesn't even blink as I pull on the sweatshirt and jeans, no panties, no bra, not that I need a bra, but panties would have been nice. As soon as I am done, he opens the door and lets me leave the room, but I am too late; Garrett is gone. I pivot on my heel to glare at his accomplice.

"I'm supposed to take you home now."

"I'm not going!"

"Yes, Celia, you are."

I shake my head in short, angry bursts, my jaw clenched so tight it hurts, but it keeps me from crying, almost. "Shit, shit, shit." I bury my face in my hands and start to cry. I am not prepared for the gentle arms that absorb me and hold me tight. I don't even manage a convincing struggle.

"I think Garrett said something along those same lines, Sweetheart," Lord Fyre speaks quietly, his tone a stark difference to his normal raging bark or cynical humor. "Just give him time to sort things out. I know you were just doing your job; you know you were just doing your job..."

"This isn't about the job!" I scream, trying to push out from his embrace. He doesn't let me, he pulls me into his chest with a solid thud. "Don't interrupt."

"I'm sorry."

"Garrett is a smart man, given time, he may even begin to realize that you weren't playing him; no matter how this thing got started, the bottom line is the two of you share a special connection. I never thought I'd live to see Garrett's eyes glow with life again, but whatever you did, he felt it; and Celia?" Saying my name, he lifts my chin in his hand to make me look into his eyes. "If I didn't honestly believe that there wasn't something

incredibly special happening between you two, I'd have already carried you off to my cave and claimed you as booty."

His growl isn't convincing and, despite myself, I laugh.

* * * *

My beautiful Victorian, painted in the warm hues of a sunset, is as welcoming as a morgue. Twilight casts us in shades of lavender as we sit together in Lord Fyre's car. It is a chilly evening and he runs the heater, intensifying the scent of cinnamon that fills the space, though there are no unsightly air fresheners anywhere in sight.

Neither of us has spoken since leaving Master's penthouse and I find it almost impossible to break the silence. But it is even harder not to ask. "Will you tell him to call me?"

"No," he answers gently.

"Please?"

"Don't beg," he rebukes and tucks my hair behind my ear. "It isn't pleasant, not for you and not for me, and it won't change my mind."

I pout, but that doesn't change his mind either. "You love him," he says after a long silence.

It wasn't a question, a statement, perhaps.

"Yes," I answer.

"Enough that you should have told him the truth about how you came to be at the auction."

"Yes."

"Regret is the worst it gets, Celia. From this moment on, live without regret in all that you do."

I close my eyes, his words bouncing around my brain. I'm stalling, I don't want to leave the temporary sanctuary of Lord Fyre's car. He clears his throat and I think that he is growing impatient, but when I turn to face him, he is watching me intently.

"I didn't accept the assignment just for the story," I try to explain, qualifying for myself more than him the truth of the matter. But my voice wavers and cracks. "I'm a writer, I write erotica with a bondage tilt..."

This isn't going very well. I wish to god George hadn't messed with my mind. Why had he said that the truth would set me free, followed quickly by, are you willing to admit the truth, if only for your own peace?

Lord Fyre gestures with his head for me to continue. I don't even know what I'm trying to say. No, that is a lie. I have been lying since the beginning.

"Do you remember the first time?" I ask quietly. I have his full attention now.

"The first time?" he repeats awkwardly.

"When you knew without a doubt that you needed more?"

I ask the question, but don't wait for a response. The floodgates to my darkest secrets have been opened and I have to get it all out before they close again. "I was eight. Eight was a year of discovery for me. I was watching an episode of Tom and Jerry. Tom had tied Jerry into the inner workings of a piano—I don't know what those inside gadgets are called that go up and down every time a key is struck, but he was tied to one—and whenever Tom struck a key, Jerry would go up and down, or sometimes be squished between two..."

Lord Fyre chuckles and I look over, irritated that I have been interrupted.

He grins. "I saw that one on the Cartoon Network last week. At the time, I only considered the mind behind the cartoon, but now, hearing you, I see all kinds of human potential. But the engineering involved..."

My look of annoyance finally registers in his mind and he stumbles over a quick apology.

"Eight years old, but it triggered something. That night, after everyone was asleep—and I really don't care if you believe me or not—I was going nuts with this cartoon going through my head. So, I dug around in my dresser, found my pair of plastic police handcuffs, and locked them in place, then reenacted the episode with all the enthusiasm and ingenuity an eight-year-old could muster. I wrapped my arms and legs around a pillow. In that moment, in the still darkness of my bedroom, I was Jerry. I hunched against that pillow for all I was worth, my orgasm was...a bi-product...not even knowing what I'd done was an orgasm, or that it had to do with sex. Sex was the farthest thing from my mind, I didn't even have the vocabulary at the time to think through what happened. I just knew, this feels good, and I need to be tied up. Period. It would be years before I understood that what I was doing was sexual, that it was a form of masturbation. That it was sin."

Lord Fyre's chuckle doesn't interrupt, it is just part of the conversation, and when I look at him, we both smile. "God, I daydreamed about that episode for years. Am I totally freaking you out?" A small shake of his head gives me enough courage to admit, "I know what's going on in my head, last night I revealed my darkest secrets. I told Master things I've never told anyone...ever. My darkest secrets. Secrets that I vowed no other living soul would ever know; secrets I now regret sharing with Mas—with him."

Darkness enfolds us, the sky through the window deepening shades of violet.

With a forceful hand, Lord Fyre turns my face and holds my gaze. "Never regret what has been shared in a moment of intimacy with your Master. Do you understand?"

I close my eyes, blocking his search of my soul, nodding. "I now reveal the perversion of my childhood to you. God, what is wrong with me? I've never told anyone that."

"Open your eyes, Celia."

I'm not sure why, but I obey his gentle command. His face is mere inches from mine; I pray he won't kiss me. When did we come to sit so close?

But there is no kiss, instead he offers a shoulder for my head to rest on. A tear leaks out of my eye the minute he starts talking.

"You're not one of them any more, Celia, the mundane people who see everything in shades of black and white, right and wrong, and I haven't been one of them in a very long time. There's no judgment in this car, just me and my friendship, believe me or not. You can say anything to me, anything. And I will not judge you. Ever."

Believing him, I shudder against his shoulder, a large weight lifting from my shoulders. After a long silence, Lord Fyre gives me a knowing smile. "I had a pair of those plastic handcuffs, too. They were a source of great joy, at least for me; I'm not sure the neighborhood boys I imprisoned would agree."

His own admittance breaks up the tense knot in my gut and I laugh. "I used to sit in my handcuffs for hours, watching TV and pretending to be someone's prisoner."

"Did you create elaborate storylines?"

“I’m a writer, what do you think?”

It puts us both over the edge. We laugh so hard, we snort. Then it is quiet again. This time the quiet is so much more horrible than before. I still don’t understand what happened at Garrett’s. I need to know, if only for my own peace of mind.

“You know, don’t you?” I ask.

“Know what, sweetheart?”

“Who told Master.”

“Does it matter?”

I sigh and trace shapes in the condensation forming on the windows. I turn to face him and, for the first time, really hold his gaze. “If you were in my shoes, wouldn’t you want to know?”

“Yes.”

I sit stubbornly, waiting, holding his gaze, not begging. I know the moment before he breaks and I understand then what Garrett meant when he said my emotions were written all over my face.

“One of your co-workers at the *Voice*. Tom Turner.”

* * * *

Twenty-four hours is long enough for any man to cool down, isn’t it? It has been twenty-three hours and fifty-nine minutes too long for me to wait. I am sick, miserable, broken. I curse myself for not telling Garrett the truth sooner. I curse myself for revealing my soul to a man who obviously cares too little. God, why did I tell him about Lion and not about the story?

Picking up the phone, I dial with purpose.

“If you know the extension of the party you are trying to reach, enter it now...”

I don’t wait for the rest of the message; I know it by heart. My fingers tap out staccato tones that a hidden computer translates into Garrett’s mailbox number.

Beep, beep, beep.

“Garrett Lawrence is unavailable...”

Damn electronic voices. Just beep already so I can leave a message! Hurry up, hurry up.

Beep.

“Master, you have to listen, you have to understand. I admit that it all started out as an assignment...okay, an exposé...but then I met you, and everything changed. You are still my Master. I’m losing my mind, please, please call me, so we can talk about this. Please.”

The darkness of another night descends. I do not even attempt sleep. I stare at my monitor, the blank page of doom. I have an exposé to write. If nothing else comes of my adventure, I should at least merit the promised promotion. But professional success at this point means nothing. I would walk away from my keyboard forever, this very minute, if it meant Master back in my life.

I no longer think of him as Garrett Lawrence, only Master, and I don’t understand the difference in my head, except that there is a new, all-consuming need to be back in his shadow.

An eternity passes, but there is no return phone call. I am not patient enough to wait another second.

“If you know the extension of the party you are trying to reach, enter...”

Beep, beep, beep.

“Garrett Lawrence is unavailable...”

Beep.

“Master. I am lost without you. Please understand. I would never do anything to hurt you or your business. Believe that, if nothing else. The assignment wasn’t about Lewd Larry’s, it wasn’t about you, it was just about the Auction. An insider’s perspective. A sightseeing tour of what goes on behind closed doors after the Slave goes home. But don’t worry, I’m not revealing anything that happened between us. It means too much to me. And I hope to you. I know it’s hard to understand why I didn’t come clean sooner, but I knew it would end like this and I couldn’t bear the thought of losing...”

Beep.

Damn.

I slam down the receiver and throw the phone across the room. It is not a good move for the phone, the wall it hits doesn’t fare very well either. I don’t give a damn about the damage. I have an insatiable need to destroy things right now.

* * * *

I never realized what loneliness was before, not really. I don’t believe I’ve slept. Not since Lord Fyre left me here three days ago, I am not even sure it was three days; maybe two, maybe four. I do not think, have not thought for days. It hurts to think. Hour after hour, I move through the motions and wander the lonely hallways of a house too huge for one. Empty hallways, empty rooms, steeped in history, draped in garish flowers and lace—so very feminine. So different from Master’s penthouse—so utterly lonely.

My collection of antique clocks—mantle clocks, pendulum clocks, grandfather clocks, cuckoo clocks—choose this very moment of desperation to erupt in agonizing merriment. Noise. Clanging, deafening noise. No longer a comfort, now a soulful reminder, another hour has passed without Master.

Two weeks, barely, that is how long I was with him. If I miss him so much now, what would I have been like after the entire contractual month? Would I even be able to breathe on my own if I can barely function now?

I was so scared when I first went to Mr. Bosko’s office, not knowing he was going to offer me an assignment; but rather assuming he was going to give me walking papers. Except for my phone interview, I’d never spoken to the man, never seen him at the office. My first day, it was explained that Doug Mitchell would be my acting boss. Five years I’d been at the paper and Mr. Bosko never made an appearance that I knew of—that he made a special trip that day was significant. I just knew it was to fire me.

I was an embarrassment to the paper—not my writing, but physically. I was told more than once that I was painful to gaze upon. So, I sat in his office, terrified, wrapped in my big, woolly cardigan, collar pulled up to my ears, chin pressed into my chest, waiting.

He, too, seemed to be waiting, watching me. No small talk, just silence, a long silence, until finally Doug Mitchell walked in and took the seat next to me, explaining that he was sorry he’d been delayed. Mr. Bosko smiled, relaxing a little in his chair after Doug’s arrival.

“Now that you’re both here, we can finally get started. There’s an assignment I want

you both to work on together.”

I heard very little of the details after that first sentence. The thought kept racing through my head that it was finally happening, my big opportunity. I sat on the edge of my seat and leaned forward with excitement. I nodded my head, agreeing to go undercover to do a *Real Life UnderCovers* article, having no idea what I was getting myself into. Slowly the big picture started to unfold before my eyes. Mr. Bosko wanted me to pose as a slave at Lewd Larry's Underground Club on Friday night. I tried to concentrate as my boss explained that he had already called and gotten most of the details.

“It seems harmless enough. The slave agrees to go home with the new owner and live as a slave for one month, after, of course, passing the medical exam, which includes a standard physical, including screenings for Hepatitis, STDs and HIV, and a psychological evaluation.”

I remember freaking out, not externally, but on the inside, thinking about what he was implying, the concern about sexually transmitted diseases. Until that moment, I had honestly not thought about the sex part.

“You know, the whole enchilada, and don't worry, you won't be turned over to just anybody. These people pay big bucks for quality entertainment; so that in itself weeds out most of the unsavory types. Besides, it's all for the sake of a good time and a great charity. That's why we're doing this little exposé—to see how real or how big of a scam it is. Isn't this the greatest town in the world? Where else is there this kind of entertainment?”

This is his idea of entertainment? My mind froze on the words owner, slave, month; my screwed-up psyche reading handcuffs, whips, pain, and not minding that thought so much.

“To be honest, Ms. Brentwood, you weren't my first choice.”

He had my attention with that. Of course I wasn't his first choice, was I like back-up then, just in case his first choice got a sore throat?

“However, Mr. Mitchell seems to think you've got the right stuff and, as he pointed out, you are the best looker we've got in this place. If you lose that god-awful sweater and the glasses, and change your hair color—maybe.” I didn't appreciate the look that passed between him and Doug, or that Doug assured him he'd arrange a suitable look.

“And Celia, to be honest, we just wanted someone not recognizable in the community, and most of the people in this office are serious players. You won't be recognized.” The file he was flipping through slammed shut. I jumped. He was done. He had said all he planned on saying and he was done. His hands folded over the file, making it even more obvious. His eyes glanced from Doug to me and back again. I was supposed to stand up and leave. Obviously. But, I couldn't move.

I'm not that same girl now, post Garrett Lawrence and his Fantasyland. I am the girl who can give myself a public tongue bath and enjoy performing the show. Without even trying, Master has made me more powerful than I ever dreamed of being. Is that a hoot or what?

Looking at my blank piece of paper, I pick up my red felt-tip pen. I always rough draft in red ink, it helps me think, and I always write in longhand before typing. It takes longer, but it is more intimate, more real, when I see the words written in my handwriting.

Inappropriate Voices: Article #1

Five years ago, I moved to San Francisco. Fresh out of Emerson, with an MA in Urban Journalism, and ready for the big time, or so I thought. I knew that D.C. or New York would offer a better venue for where I wanted to end up in life, but that was too close to him. Anywhere on the East Coast was too close, too near my ex. We were never married, but he owned me, or thought he did. So I ran. Taking my mother's maiden name as my own, I sought shelter in the one town I figured he'd never look. Too big, too crazy, too immoral. But it offered anonymity. It was perfect.

It all started as a fluke.

I answered an Internet posting for a journalist position and ended up here, *Inappropriate Voices*. They hired me, sight unseen, based on my writing credits. When I arrived, the betting pool started immediately. They never expected me to last. They may have regretted hiring me, the too wholesome, too nerdy girl-next-door, but it was also too late—the five-year contract was signed.

My nickname is The Librarian, and I suppose it fit, being that I was no raving beauty. Mousy brown hair, unnoticeable blue eyes, which I hid at every opportunity behind big plastic reading glasses, and a long, lanky body, which I hide under layers and layers of clothes. The name fits. It used to irritate me, but not anymore. The staff at *Inappropriate Voices* finally accepted me, maybe even came to respect me.

But this journal isn't about my struggles for acceptance at *Inappropriate Voices*, because three weeks ago I received my first assignment as a real reporter, going undercover at the infamous Lewd Larry's. More to the point, I was to be auctioned as a slave, live as a slave, and finally, when the thirty days was up, deliver an insider's peek into the auction. A voyeur's view into the fabled Members' Only third floor. I would provide the raw emotion and psychodrama of being a twenty-four-seven sex slave, detailing every moan, every scream, every unintelligible syllable.

But, dear reader, you aren't going to get that; at least not today.

It began with a personal makeover that reached much further than hair and makeup, designer acrylic nails, and lingerie to die for, and changed me from the staid, mouse-brown, bespectacled wallflower that you, dear readers, have grown to love.

The assignment only survived sixteen days.

Last week, you were privy to the pictures published and saw my transformation, though you may not have realized it was me. What you have not been privy to is the soul of the beast raging in my breast. For I am not a Kitten, but a raging Beast. A Jaguar. Spitting, clawing, furious, and deadly. Injured and dangerous, because the one who owns my soul has misplaced me. I am not angry at him, how can I be angry at the one who has loved me as no other?

My owner, Lewd Larry, has lost his Kitten.

And doesn't know where to find me.

For you see, he mistakenly believes me to be a lunatic reporter, better known as Celia Brentwood, bent on the destruction of his world. But if he had only looked into my eyes, he would have known. There is no such being as Celia Brentwood, she is only an apparition. As fleeting, as unfeeling as a shadow. Soulless. Lifeless. Loveless. And that is not me. For the day I was bought at auction, I became the beloved, prized possession of my Master. I was given a collar and a soul. My Master taught me to feel, to trust, to live.

My assignment was to discover if the auction was for real or whether it was only an

exaggerated farce. Is human flesh truly sold? Purchased? Used? Abused? Enslaved? In answer, Celia Brentwood knows not the answers to those questions. However, as Kitten, I can honestly say that I was not sold but offered myself freely. I was not purchased but accepted as the gift I intended myself to be. Not used but cherished. Not abused, not ever. Not enslaved, set free. For those of you not in the BDSM lifestyle, my words will no doubt confuse or annoy you, but for those of you who, like me, have that great, dark, aching need lurking in your soul, you will understand and maybe appreciate my brief if maudlin article. And if Garrett Lawrence by chance honors me by reading this article, know that I wait for you, Master.

* * * *

Coworkers mill around me in silence. So far, no one has even offered a polite hello. My sorry excuse for an exposé lays waiting on Mr. Bosko's desk. I may not have a job after today—my five-year contract expired while I was undercover.

I didn't consider that until after I'd sat behind my desk deleting two weeks' worth of e-mails at random. Charlie McCain plops down beside me, as if I haven't been gone for three weeks. He is the closest I have to a dear friend.

"My God, it's true isn't it?" he gasps. "When I saw the pictures, I thought it was you, but I couldn't believe it. My God, look at you! You're beautiful!" His hand caresses my shorn and much darker hair. "My God."

"You said that already." I manage a small smile.

"You're beautiful!"

"Charlie! Damn it, stop repeating yourself!"

"Sorry."

Charlie pulls my hand away from the keyboard and holds it. My jaw tightens, I will not cry, not now, not after finally deciding that I can face life as Celia again. But, I can't. I know it. Charlie, though unaware of the details, knows it too.

"Spill your guts, Moppet, I'm listening."

"Oh god, Charlie, what am I going to do? I have never fit in. Never been good at relationships. But with Garrett, it was right. And now he hates me. He won't answer my calls and..." I take a minute to blow my nose and wipe the rest of my makeup off with my tears. It is the first breath I've taken in over twenty minutes of spilling my guts. Charlie silently reads over my article for *UnderCovers*. I know it isn't going to fly—not with Mr. Bosko. Damn. I never dreamed in my widest dreams that writing erotica would become impossible. But it has. I can't share what happened between us. I just can't. "I have to get him back."

"Jeez, Ce, you deceived the man; and from what you've said, he felt something for you, too. You know, there's a very fine line between the words I love you and I hate you. They're both very intense emotions and it's easy to lose track of what you're feeling. Are you sure—I mean really sure—you want to go back to being his slave?"

"I want this more than I've wanted anything in my life, Charlie," I toss the Kleenex I have managed to shred into a million pieces into the wastebasket and reach for a new one. Charlie stops my hand mid-flight and makes me look him in the eyes. My guts wrench, only Charlie can twist me around like this so that my insides warp and fall out in pieces. At least that was true three weeks ago. Garrett had the same effect on me.

"I don't have a life without him." I don't recognize my voice behind the sob.

Charlie waits patiently while I collect myself. He is calm and rational, at least when it doesn't involve him or his life, and I know I am in trouble when I see the glint of mischief flicker through his eyes.

"Then I'll help you. I'm not the best ad man in the city for nothing and I may have a plan."

Oh god, he has a plan.

Charlie's plans always spell trouble, especially when it involves anything to do with matters of the heart. My Charlie thinks he's Cupid.

I can't deal with Cupid today.

I inch out of my seat and head for the coffee pot. Charlie is quick on my heels, tapping his teeth with a pencil. Thinking. Oh, god, thinking like an ad man.

I pour coffee and hand Charlie a cup. He takes it but he is distracted. "And it's all right here in this article you wrote. First, we do a classified ad. Then, tomorrow, we do a follow-up story on the response..." Charlie interrupts himself. "Ce? What are you doing?"

"What?" I answer distractedly.

Charlie angles his pencil at my coffee cup. I realize I have already added three packets of sugar and have just ripped into my fourth. "I'm, uh, making a cup of coffee."

"You drink your coffee strong and black, Ce."

The lifted eyebrow does it. I spin away with my coffee in hand and try once more to hide in my cubicle.

Charlie plops back in front of me and carries on the conversation without skipping a beat. At least he doesn't dwell over the coffee. Remembering the first morning, Master giving me sips of coffee from his mouth. I am going to lose it, really lose it, and I can't lose it here. I will myself not to cry, not over coffee, not now. Charlie has a plan, at least it offers more hope than I've had in days.

I sit the coffee mug on the edge of the desk, not drinking it, the taste being both heaven and hell in my mouth.

"I don't think you were listening before. We'll call it Kitten Sightings. But I need you to hit the streets—in something feline—and I'll send a camera crew with you just to make sure people pay attention."

Charlie's pen flies as he sketches some quick notes and preliminary drawings. I chew off one of my glorious fire-engine-red nails and say a little prayer that he knows what he's doing. He slides me the notebook. "Maybe Mr. Bosko will even approve a token monetary reward for sighting information."

I pick it up and read.

Missing Kitten. Female, 5'7", 125 lbs. Call The Voice directly with your Kitten Sighting stories or notify the owner, Garrett Lawrence, immediately at 555-LEWD. Do not try to capture. This feline is wild and reckless.

I glance up from his quickly scribbled, barely legible ad outline. I am doubtful. Intrigued.

"I need to think about this a while, Charlie. Right now I need to get out of here, take a walk around the block maybe." I smooth a hand through my slicked-back hair, having avoided the whole curlers and frou-frou thing since leaving Garrett's. I catch my reflection in the window. Sleek, aged, no longer Kitten. Definitely no longer Celia Brentwood.

“Meet me for lunch, Charlie?”

“Sure, Ce, just make up your mind quick. Something like this has to have the right timing or it just doesn’t work and I’m assuming you haven’t seen Mr. Lawrence in a couple days, right?”

“Six.” It seems like forever.

* * * *

My walk only gets me as far as the front lobby.

“Mer-rr-oww.”

I’m plucked from my thoughts by an insidious voice and further irritated by the loathsome giggles that follow. I spin toward the voice. Tom Turner. Worse, he has his entourage in tow, three girls all plucked directly from the pages of TeenGoth. *Wonderful.*

“Hello, Pussy.” He winks with a sneer and it is more than I can take. My fist finds his nose before I even realize I’ve crossed the floor. Ohmygod, I think I broke his nose. Blood spills on his bright white shirt and then splatters on the floor. The look of total shock on his face makes me laugh. I am insane and hysterical as I race up the stairs to find Charlie. Laughter truly is the best medicine. I feel better than I’ve felt in days.

I stop myself and hang over the rail to shout down to Tom. “From now on, you may call me Kat!”

I like the sound of my newly chosen name as it echoes through the cavernous marble lobby, further punctuated by my hysterical laughter. I race around the maze of cubicles, landing at mine.

“Thank God you are so predictable,” I pant as I corner the edge of my cubicle. Charlie hasn’t budged from his seat by my desk. Drawings and new ad layouts, all with Kitten in bold print, litter my desk. I brush my hand reverently over his work. Charlie can be brilliant when he wants to be. I sigh. “Do you really think this will work, Charlie?”

“Only if you believe it will, Ce.”

* * * *

Yesterday, Charlie’s dream scheme; today, my reality. I hit the streets with a camera operator, Taylay, an African-American albino currently with tufts of orange and red hair and over two dozen visible piercings, and a reporter, Mango, a beautiful Vietnamese girl, with no visible piercings, no dyed hair, and way too much in the way of cheerful personality. She only comes up to my armpits and has the most disarming smile in the world.

It is barely past dawn, I haven’t been to sleep yet. My internal clock may never be the same again. Now that my day is just beginning, I want sleep. I don’t want to be traipsing around town in the velvet bodysuit that Charlie was imaginative enough to sew a long plush tail onto. I draw the line at eyeliner whiskers. I feel ridiculous, I can only imagine how ridiculous I look.

My only comfort in all of this is my collar and the four-inch spikes that took me down the original runway walk into Master’s life. Since my homecoming, they are my footwear of choice.

My cohorts are tame by comparison, wearing what can only be described as reporter wear; baggy khakis, t-shirts, Taylay wearing tie-dye and Mango wearing solid, if faded,

red, and tennis shoes. Taylay also wears a khaki camera operator's vest with a zillion pockets, all stuffed with film, lenses, and gadgets.

As Mango powders my nose for a close-up posed on top of my messy desk, I am morosely determined to make this work. My mind says this will never work.

Mr. Bosko makes a rare appearance in the bunker otherwise known as our office space to wish me luck. This is insanity at its finest. Applause heralds our exit into the sunny blue-sky day that makes me cry. Blue-sky eyes haunt my every waking moment, which is almost every moment, because I have not slept in five or maybe six days. Time has no meaning at this point; it is measured only by hours between phone calls to Master. I left him yet another phone message before we headed out. I was rude. Nice has gotten me nowhere, tears have gotten me nowhere.

"Damn it Garrett Lawrence, you owe me twelve days! We have a signed contract!"

It may have been rude, but it worked at the time—even if just for me.

I regret it already.

I look over Taylay's shoulder as he directs Mango around one traffic jam after another. Street names and locations for the proposed Kitten Sightings, written in Mr. Bosko's elegant hand, blur. Market Street, Columbus Avenue, Van Ness. It has been a long day.

I've been photographed on top of a trolley taking a tongue bath, much to the pantomimed discontent of the trolley driver, and licking ice cream drips from a child's cone in the Mission District. I accomplished this one on my hands and knees with tears streaming down my face, brought on by the memory of my last ice-cream experience in the Mission District. I even crawled on top of a garbage can in Golden Gate Park and begged scraps. I am tired, exhausted, and post-traumatic, if truth were told, and so far past humiliation, I am beginning to wonder if it is even worth the effort. It is. But I will kill whoever made the decision to head for Fisherman's Wharf at dinnertime.

Tourists.

Hungry, grumpy, tired tourists.

And I am sideshow numero uno. A million flashbulbs leave their imprint on my retinas. I am sick and tired and my head is pounding. And sunburned. My cheeks are blazing atoms of pain.

"My God, Bernard, you're right! It is Kitten!"

Ohmygod. That voice can only belong to one person. Can I just crawl in a hole and die now?

I turn to face my soon to be accuser, but one look into her face tells me that I am still her friend. I rush into her open arms and manage to slobber out my entire pathetic story in twenty seconds.

"Sh-h, Baby. You're gonna tell Aunt Jackie all about it, but first we're going to put some food in that belly of yours. When's the last time you ate?"

I shrug. Bernard nods, turning and disappearing into the crowd. I wonder if it is sympathy or accusing in the look he tosses over his shoulder as he leaves.

"Bernard?" I ask.

"The reservation is for two and, looking at you, you need a meal more than my little butterball Bernard. God, you look awful. You haven't slept either?"

I shrug again.

A terse tsk-tsk accompanies her shaking head as she drags me into A. Sabella's

Restaurant, wrapping her magenta swing coat around my public indecency leotard as she pushes, leaving Taylay and Mango to find their own dinner as we escape the maddening crowd of Hawaiian shirts, sunglasses, and flashing cameras.

Soothing music and peaceful quietness are our gateway into the third-floor dining room. Candlelight reflects off the windows as we are given a glorious view of the Wharf and the Bay beyond. The tranquility of the moment could almost make me forget my reason for being here, with Jackie, no Master in sight. Tears spill before I even realize they have risen to the occasion. Jackie mops them up with a tissue.

"No crying, Kitten, at least not until after dessert." Jackie insists. "I'm starved, mind if we skip the appetizers and jump right into the main course?"

"I'm fine with whatever you want, Jackie." I sniffle, wanting to crawl into her wide lap, wanting to bawl like a baby. I sit, curled in upon myself, waiting for her to make the first move.

I watch Jackie eat, delicately, very mannered, but without ceasing. She has the fresh domestic lamb chops served with polenta, asparagus, and a Balsamic sun-dried tomato glaze. I ordered less robustly, a Spring salad with frisée, shaved fennel, ruby grapefruit, and blood orange, topped with candied pecans and goat cheese. I mostly play with the pecans and manage to eat a few bites of the blood orange and grapefruit. Even though it is an excellent salad, eating these days makes me ill.

"Love stole your appetite?"

"What?" I ask, startled.

"You're in love with him," she accuses between bites of lamb.

"I'm not in love, I barely know him."

She shrugs and continues eating. I notice a busboy taking an excessively long time clearing the table to our left. Then I notice the camera phone in his hand, lens aimed at me. Another Kitten Sighting bound to make media play within hours, if not minutes. I hide behind my napkin, suddenly feeling like a circus sideshow freak. *What am I doing?* If Garrett was afraid of bad publicity, is the Kitten Sightings helping him or hurting him?

Jackie runs off the busboy, complains to a manager, and returns to her meal without missing a beat. "It'll be easier once you admit you love him."

"I want him back." Tears fall into my salad.

"Oh, Kitten." She sighs softly. "Dear sweet girl, I wish I knew what to tell you to do. I'd like to throttle the prick!"

I snort, but it is a sad snort, shaking my head in the negative, "Jackie, Garrett is your oldest and dearest friend, he told me as much. You sure don't have to side with me because we're sharing a meal. And, he's not a prick. He's just confused. He thought I intended to destroy his business with my exposé article. But I swear to you; and if he would only listen, I could explain the truth to him. The story was random, we had no idea the owner of Lewd Larry's would purchase me that night! The story was an insider's look. That's all!"

"Every day he's not reconciled with you, in my book, he's a prick. I can read, I've been following the Kitten Sightings articles, and if you're acting, you deserve an award. Has he talked to you at all?"

"We haven't spoken, I've left message after message but he isn't returning my calls. Do you think I should give up?" I lay down the soggy napkin, retrieve my fork, and resume pushing around pecans.

“Trust me, Kitten, if you honestly love him, you won’t be able to give up; and you can trust me on that, I’m speaking from experience.”

I stare at her, my fork stalled mid-air, balancing a pecan precariously on its tines. I never expected her to admit anything along those lines, even if true.

“Oh yes, precious, you aren’t the only one to fall for Garrett. He’s owned my heart for the better part of twenty years. But, no, in answer to the question I see lurking in your eyes, we have never been intimate. I won’t lie to you though, I’d die for that man. I do love him and if you don’t start taking better care of yourself, you aren’t going to be any better than dead.” Jackie waves her well-manicured hand, “I won’t lecture you on that. It’s hard to eat when your heart is breaking. I know that from experience, too.”

“Help me get him back!” I plead, dropping my fork into the salad and grabbing her hand, holding tight onto her strength, as if she were the life-preserver and I the one drowning.

I am drowning.

Jackie sighs, “If I promise I’ll talk to him, will you eat all of that salad?”

I nod vigorously and start eating, tears streaming over my cheeks as I chew.

“And will you please stop crying until after dessert? My god, Kitten, your mascara is going to be down to your knees at this rate and you’re really starting to ruin my appetite.”

* * * *

I am weary, used up: emotionally and physically, my bubble bath is much deserved. It seems I was everywhere I could possibly be sighted today, but Taylay assured me it was only the tip of the iceberg. With major sightings at Fisherman’s Wharf and the Mission District, not to mention A. Sabellas—so many the operator couldn’t keep up with the calls—Mr. Bosko assured me we’d be out in force again tomorrow. Kitten is proving to be a very hot, very marketable commodity!

On top of the calls, *The Voice*’s web page had five-thousand hits today. Incredible.

Even more incredible? Mr. Bosko ran the *UnderCover*’s report as is and even signed it with a little paw print!

I shake from head to toe with both hope and dread. I cannot bear failure.

I am at the height of my professional career. Because of this fiasco, Mr. Bosko renewed my contract, with a substantial bonus each week I keep the Kitten Sightings going strong. I refused the contract and the bonus, until he said he wouldn’t run the Kitten Sighting articles without me being under contract. Either way, I may be screwed. I have to prove to Master that I would never do anything to harm him or his business.

It’s after midnight and I haven’t been home more than half an hour. An upscale photo shoot to be used for a nation-wide publicity campaign lasted hours after I returned to the office. I wore the button-up bodysuit that Jackie gave me to welcome me into the family, or one identical to it, at any rate. She had it sent over by courier as soon as she got back to her boutique. I pray she will talk to Master as promised. I feel better just knowing that she is on my side.

Tomorrow, the trolley side rail ads and the billboard ads along the interstate are all going to be replaced with the classified listing and the pictures we took tonight.

Even if it is just for the moment, I am filled with hope. I have a plan, which is more than I had this morning, but even more, I have friends. Charlie has a million ideas to keep the Kitten Sightings campaign going strong for as long as need be and, over *Chateau*

Montelena Chardonnay, Jackie promised me she would do anything she could do to help. She was all too glad to become my co-conspirator once I'd poured out my heart. She believes me. And I somehow think it was more than just plain dumb luck that I bumped into her on the street.

As always, she was mysterious and cryptic, saying only she was sure Garrett couldn't help but notice and appreciate my efforts. I hope she is right. Though I now dread seeing him the first time—post-insanity, post-humility, post-revelations of my past. I wonder, if not for my revelations, would he have at least talked to me about the lie? Or was the lie an excuse to escape from me?

Oh, how I wish to god I had revealed the assignment before I revealed my soul.

Chapter 22

"I shall be telling this with a sigh, somewhere ages and ages hence: Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."

—Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*

Garrett

I exit the limo on schedule, long before the club is open for business, but I don't go in. Instead, I bum a pack of cigarettes from my driver, Blake, and a lighter. The cigarettes are menthol. I'm not much into menthol, but I don't turn them down. We share a smoke, there on the curb, propped against the warm metal of the hood. Blake offers an opinion on the whole mess I find myself in.

"That old lady at your complex is off her rocker."

"You don't say?"

Blake readjusts his balls in his stiff uniform and exhales a cloud of smoke. "Kitten was a great looker, don't get me wrong, but in the grand scheme of things..." Blake exhales a lungful of smoke. "She was just a novelty." He inhales. "We all knew you'd come back around."

Come around?

"We?" I ask dumbly, my eyes still trained to his crotch, for no other reason than it is now apparent he has a raging hard on. Blake is young, too young for me, at any rate. Besides, I attribute his hard-on more to the fact that, at twenty-one, he is probably always hard and less to any interest he might have in me.

"The guys on the street. Anyway, the whole undercover thing, getting found out and all, it just sped up the inevitable. I mean, it wasn't like your relationship was forever. And now, all this publicity crap from *The Voice*. I say, and a lot of the guys agree, we should just boycott, you know, as a group."

"Ah, Blake, it wouldn't change a thing." I seek his eyes, but his gaze is trained on a bicycle courier with outstanding thigh muscles. The courier straddles his neon-yellow bike, one foot propped on a pedal as if to take off, but also leaning against my building like he has all the time in the world. I point out the blond to Blake with a nod. "Is he waiting on you?"

"Nah, never seen him before."

I walk away without further comment, and head toward the entrance of the club. But I don't make it inside, stalling mid-stride in the center of the sidewalk. From the corner of my eye, I see Blake pass his half-burned cigarette to the cyclist. As good a pickup as any, I guess. I turn from the entrance and walk around the block, thinking *oh, to be young and cocky again*. Thinking. I think way too much these days.

I think about my passed youth. I think about Tony, although not with sadness now, just fond memory. And I think about how I felt with Celia. She gave me that *I can conquer the world* feeling back. She touched a part of my soul that I thought was long gone. And if truth be told, yes, I miss her.

The fact of the matter is I truly believe Celia Brentwood was just as used as I was. Sure, she agreed to the exposé. But, I think, at some point it became more than a story. I cannot bear the thought that she felt nothing; and, if I am to believe the emotion abandoned to the safekeeping of my voicemail, she felt.

But my what-if voice lingers in the back of my brain, leaving doubt, and as long as there is doubt, I cannot possibly let her back into my life, my heart. I wouldn't survive losing her a second time. It's the longing to return her calls that leads me around the block again, and again. I'm keeping a safe distance from a phone, any phone, until I convince myself that I won't call her.

I stall as long as I can, walking and thinking, knowing I need to get inside before the crowd arrives. If tonight's crowd is anything compared to last night's, it will threaten to burst the club at its seams. Lewd Larry's has never been as popular as this week. I am not sure whether I want to thank Kitten for all the publicity over our separation, or pull her hair out.

Everyone has an opinion on the scandal I find myself trapped in. Everyone, including my doorman, Mrs. Hildebrandt, street people, even my chauffeur, who has rarely said more than two words in one sentence to me, and, unfortunately, the clients visiting Lewd's. A hundred knowing nods followed my every move last night, and twice as many smirks, as word of my misdeeds traveled through the crowd like wildfire. Silent opinions divided the crowd down the middle; at-a-boy-Lewd on my left, insensitive bastard on my right. No middle ground.

Kitten's imminent strangulation seems to be an option at this point. My nerves are shot. I wish for superhuman powers, invisibility at least, as I flounder, making my way to my only sanctuary, my office. I have never faced such judgmental eyes, even in the early street marches. At least then the heckled screams evoked a self-protective response; my own pride, my own anger were armament enough.

Where is my pride tonight?

For that matter, where is my anger?

My brain is spinning out of control and I know my only answer is to escape this insanity for a while. I need time to think, time to remember who I am. What I'm doing with my life. I have to escape!

Chapter 23

“One half of the world cannot understand the pleasures of the other.”

—Jane Austen, *Emma*

Garrett

What am I doing? I don't know. And if I don't know, who will? I find myself tripping over a tricycle in Thomas's front lawn. How did I come to be in the land of manicured lawns?

I yank my wrist close to my face and focus on the wavering watch. Two. Morning? No, brilliant sunshine blinds me further; the middle of the day, then. What day?

My watch confirms it is Saturday. Thomas will be asleep still, and I turn away from the glowing teakwood door without knocking. I retrace my steps and notice for the first time the fresh blue and purple blooms of Douglas Iris surrounding the porch, their spear-shaped leaves seeming sharp enough to gouge out my heart. Spring in Suburbia. What is worse, the fickle spray of cottony pollen drifting on the breeze teasing my sinuses or the fickle song of the finch hiding in the leafy overhead canopy that tugs my thin lips into a semi-smile and simultaneously makes me want to weep?

I pause in the middle of their manicured lawn, spellbound, as the loose petals of a brilliant pink magnolia are plucked free by an errant breeze and flutter into the exposed interior of my convertible.

“Uncle Gar, Uncle Gar! Uncle Gar, Uncle Gar!” The shrill cry flies at me from behind. I am tackled, free-falling into the soft bed of recently mowed grass. As I sit up, I brush away the fresh clippings clinging to my hair, my silk shirt, my leather pants. I am overdressed for suburbia; I am too tightly packaged for a tumble with four-year-old Hektor, Thomas's oldest son. He clings to my back with his arms wrapped snugly around my throat. I hear finely snapping threads. My shirt? My pants?

A second tackle hits me from the side. Olympia. A cuddly, wiggly, frenzy of black ringlets emits shrill little girl giggles into my chest.

“Jesus Christ, Gar? What a treat!”

Ah, the Master of the house is awake after all. My bleary mind only responds to the elbow lift, following the tug away of small, disappointed children.

“Garrett?” Thomas looks deeper, unceremoniously removing my sunglasses with a jerk. “You've been drinking?” Obvious disapproval clouds his face.

“Really, Thomas, not that much,” I claim, though not very convincingly.

“Any is too much if you haven't eaten.” I translate that to mean *in front of my children*.

I stagger, more from exhaustion than drink, up the two steps leading into Thomas's sprawling Missionary-style ranch, allowing Thomas to scold me without another word of defense.

“When was your last meal, Gar?”

Here, in suburbia, I am Gar; Uncle Gar to Thomas's three children. The familiarity

makes me smile.

“Meal?” My numb mind clicks backward. “Days.”

“Lattie!” Thomas shouts as we enter the dark foyer. My eyes reluctantly, painfully adjust.

“Add another steak to the grill, Gar’s here!”

“Gar?” Latisha peeks around the corner, obviously not believing her ears.

I am startled into awareness by feminine curves and dark, glowing skin. A simple tank and very short shorts do little to hide the fact that she is expecting—again. Not more than a few months, but still—again. A lustrous sheen on her forehead suggests the kitchen is too warm and, in a desperate effort at cool comfort, her dark signature braids are tucked into a sloppy bun at the nape of her neck and held in place with a wicked plastic clip.

She seems so peaceful in her sunny yellow kitchen. It is hard to believe she is the frightening Doberman known as Luscious at the Club. There, in that setting, it is even harder to believe she is any more or less than what she projects: anger, rebellion, and holding an intense need to be punished. I shake away the image forming in my brain.

Lattie of suburbia is far removed from Luscious.

Nikkos, the drooling, pudgy, six-month-old youngest son clings to her hip, a phone is propped between her ear and her shoulder. “Gotta go. Call you back,” she says quietly into the receiver before she winks at me. “It’s been too long since your last visit, Gar. Shame on you for staying away so long.”

The gently swelling round of her stomach confirms why her last visit to The Club was the last. I remember the snap of the whip and her scream. I know she didn’t know then about this latest pregnancy; Thomas most definitely didn’t suspect. I send a silent prayer of thanks to the angel who watched over the faintest clump of cells that night.

“Another baby?” I whisper to Thomas. I am awestruck, envious. Tony and I had dreamed of adopting, but that was so long ago. “Congratulations, Thomas. Lattie will really have her hands full now, you too of course.” I can’t stop myself from repeating, “Another baby.”

He nods and scratches his beard thoughtfully. Wheels are turning behind those eyes. I don’t even want to know his thoughts now. Without formality, I flop, sprawling really, onto their sofa. My eyes close beneath the soft caress of the swirling ceiling fan. Thomas whispers meaningfully to Lattie, who draws away giggling children. Me, he grabs by the collar, tearing me away from his couch, and pulling me outside onto the patio. Smoke rises from the grill, filling the air with the tantalizing aroma of searing flesh.

With Thomas chasing a wild toddler and tending the grill while Lattie prepares the rest in the kitchen, I take a walk around the very well-manicured lawn. Flowerbeds surround the perimeter on the yard on this side of a glossy redwood privacy fence. Birdbaths and birdfeeders zigzag a colorful path through the flowerbeds. I think that if I had stayed in Cincinnati, I would have had a lawn as nice as this, a house in the suburbs and steaks on the grill. I thought the picket fence dream was long dead, but am man enough to admit that right now, in this moment, I am envious.

Picket fences didn’t fit the lifestyle Tony and I had shared, a very committed gay relationship with a window of openness to it that allowed for me to have regular clients for play, not sex, and Tony, well, he played and had sex, though he only slept with me. Bedtime was our time, even if it was the middle of the day. Definitely not a suburban

lifestyle.

I close my eyes to the beauty of the lawn, wishing I could forget the nightmares that brought visions of Kitten as Lattie is now, barefoot and pregnant. Someone should put a gun to my head for merely dreaming the thought. I am still convinced she is the enemy, but I want to sleep with the enemy and, until I can get a grip, I should have stayed away. What in the fuck was I thinking coming back to San Francisco?

The glaring sun has calmed to a dull roar on the backside of the house. Thomas, at some point, tossed me into a shaded lawn chair and handed me a plate of food and a Pepsi over ice. Lattie is amazing with food, combining all of her ancestry, Sudanese and French, into well-seasoned, tastebud-orgasming delights. I dive into the food with gusto; Thomas sits beside me similarly engrossed. We watch as she swings Nikkos in a baby swing while Olympia and Hektor play in the sandbox at her feet. I am a wreck, a pathetic, half-sobered wreck. Thomas will never forgive me for showing up at his home this way. I will never forgive myself.

"Is everything okay at the Club?"

Thomas snorts, answering between bites of corn on the cob. "Larry's has survived without you. Your staff is very loyal."

"Thank you." I say, knowing that it was he, George, and Morgana who kept the place running smoothly. Knowing my staff as well as I do, George left his beloved Attic to manage the offices and Thomas stepped up to the plate and took charge upstairs. Lovely Morgana was rumor control and PR gal; whatever it took to turn the Kitten Sightings and *Voices*' fallout to our advantage.

It was probably best that I was gone for a few days. "I know it took you away from your family extra hours and I regret that."

Thomas shrugs. "Profits for the quarter are triple last year's gross"

"Just dumb luck," I respond, not wanting to confirm that Kitten is the best thing that's happened to Lewd Larry's since Tony's death.

A shadow falls over my plate. "Dumb luck?"

My Pepsi, in mid-lift to my lips, sloshes over the rim to splatter onto my silk shirt at the sound of George's voice. The slight spill spreads rapidly through the absorbent fibers, leaving an ugly swath of crimson across the burnt orange of my shirt. Blood. It could very well be a slick of blood. Tony's blood looms in my mind. But my mind doesn't stop there. The vision of Tony lying in death is replaced by Kitten's body, also covered in blood.

I shudder, shaking away the vision. I fight to steady the traitorous hand and swallow several quick gulps before facing George. Only now do I understand the hushed conversation between Lattie and Thomas as I drifted into semi-conscious oblivion on their sofa. Lattie called George.

He takes my drink and holds my wrist between two fingers and a thumb. He is here as a physician. Great, just great.

"My pulse is fine, I am fine," I fume. But my voice shakes. I don't sound at all like myself, even to my own ears. My wrist stays in his grip until he is ready to release me.

"Let's just say you've had better days, but I'll put off admitting you until after we talk," George threatens, pulling a squeaky lawn chair across from me and sits, the nylon and aluminum contraption groaning. "You look like shit."

I watch Lattie lift Nikkos from the swing. She deftly herds the children out of the

sandbox and into the house. I'm in for it. I focus on my steak.

The next thing I know, I'm in the backseat of George's Saab. I am not sure how I came to be here, but I am; and if I thought I was in for it before, I wasn't even close. Thomas and George, although at this point I believe Psycho and Fyre are more in order, ride in the front. George is navigating I-80 at a furious pace. I don't even want to know where we are going. I am cornered, furious, and I'm not even sure when or why or how, but my best friends have switched teams mid-game.

"She's a fucking reporter!"

My scream of frustration coincides with George veering off onto an exit ramp, accelerating, and I think maybe I should have remained silent. I long to scream and shout and rant and rave, but at whom and why? My defense is as good as any. She's the enemy. I cross my arms in frustration and slouch further down in the seat. It's taken me days to gather enough anger to keep myself from returning her calls, and I'll be damned if I let them weaken my conviction.

George and Thomas share a look. What? They act as if I am the one out of control; but it is George who is doing ninety in a fifty-five zone. I wait for miraculous intervention in the form of flashing blue lights. Where, after all, is a cop when you need one?

Screeching brakes announce our arrival as George parks on the shoulder of the street. Deep shadows of dusk embrace us. George turns off his headlights. The terraced hillside below leads my eye to a row of stately Victorians, a famous San Francisco photo-op if ever there was one. So? I long to ask. Why are we stopped? But I remain silent.

A spray of streetlamps lining the feminine block sparks and flutters on the verge of lighting.

Thomas points. "Fourth house. The orange and burgundy one is Celia's."

I moan. I sure as hell didn't need this. All those restless nights when I was dying to know. Now, I don't want to know. How will I ever forget?

Her Victorian is stunning, painted the colors of a late fall sunset and surrounded by a solid wrought-iron fence broken only by entry gates and covered by ornate iron arches loaded down by heavy vines. Three stories, it is a mammoth house for a single woman. Well-tended flowerbeds and bright enameled pots complete the perfect picture, but in my mind it is not perfect. If it were perfect I would be going through the gate, I would push an abandoned tricycle off the walk leading to the door, and I would be tackled from behind by a giggling girl the image of her mother.

"She existed!" George yells. "You felt something for her! And that something is destroying both of you!"

"Take me home," I groan, holding my pounding head in one hand and my aching guts in the other. Steak and George's joyride so soon after a week-long tequila diet was a bad idea. Worse, the feeling I've been hiding from all week is back and worse than before I left. I want Kitten. I want to be happy again, like I was with her. Damn it! I was used to being sad. I was used to being alone. I was okay.

Then she messed everything up by making me feel something other than empty.

Heaven help me, I don't even care that she was a reporter bent on destroying my business, not if it means feeling alive again. No, that isn't true. Too many others depend on me. My business supports families. I can't let Larry's fall over one woman.

"Take me home!" I beg, as close as I've been to sobbing in a very long time.

“Go in and talk to her, she needs to be able to find some kind of closure,” George urges. “You need some form of closure.”

“She looks like she’s doing okay to me,” I say. “You’ve seen the ads all over town. Does she look like a woman on the verge of destruction?”

“Yes!” Thomas and George scream simultaneously. They pivot in their seats to glare at me.

Thomas hands me what I assume is today’s edition of *Inappropriate Voices*. I don’t want to take it. I don’t want to read a thing that paper has to say. A boxed article, made to look like a letter and signed with a small paw print, doesn’t escape my notice.

“I saw her maudlin article already,” I hiss. “It didn’t impress me then, it isn’t going to impress me now.”

“This isn’t the same article, Garrett,” George insists. “You’ve been out of touch for days. You have no idea what’s going on downtown.”

“He doesn’t care,” Thomas intones.

“The Club?” I gasp, trying desperately to ignore the article still looming beneath my nose.

“The club is fine, I told you that. Have you forgotten that there is a killer on the loose?” Thomas seethes.

“Another letter?” I ask, and my voice sounds defeated even to my own ears.

“We filed a missing person’s report!” George seems angry to have to relay this bit of information. “We thought you were missing. Or dead. Do you even realize you’ve been missing for six days? Jesus Christ, Garrett, we had everyone looking for you. Do you even know where you were?”

Images of empty Agave Tequila bottles and a dirty hotel room immediately spring to mind. “Unfortunately, that part I remember.”

“And?” Thomas demands. “Care to enlighten us?”

“Not necessarily. It wasn’t pretty,” I sigh. “Escapism, maybe. Haven’t you ever wanted to just get away from something really awful?”

“Sure, Garrett, lots of times.” George is still in his psychiatrist voice mode. “We all have. But disappearing wasn’t cool. It really wasn’t cool.”

“So, where were you? Just so when you disappear again, I’ll know what hole to drag you out of,” Thomas snarks.

“I was out of the country and it isn’t going to happen again.”

To what do I blame my promiscuity? Was I trying to prove something? Proving to myself, that I remember what it’s like to be gay? Really gay? Cruising and being cruised?

All I proved was that my body would respond. To both. I like men. I like women. And what does that say about all those years that I really believed you had to be one or the other, gay or straight, never bi? How can I admit aloud that Kitten broke my heart? Or that I’m scared shitless she will die, like Tony, and it will be my fault all over again?

“Mexico? Are you insane?” Thomas snorts, lowering his sunglasses to glare at me. “All you had to do was say the word and I would have helped you find escape and it wouldn’t have involved you fucking every tight ass you could get your hands on!”

“Garrett, you didn’t!” George hisses.

I don’t deny the accusation. “I apologize for scaring you, I’m sorry that you were so freaked that you had to file a missing persons report. It won’t happen again,” I promise, but they aren’t listening.

George growls at Thomas and Thomas growls back. Their words volley back and forth in an angry match, but they are blurred into incomprehension in my brain as I catch movement in the lit windows of the house I now know belongs to Kitten.

"I'm not going in there to talk to her, so you may as well take me home."

"You really don't give a fuck about Celia?" George demands.

"No."

"I don't believe that," Thomas hisses and I catch his eye. He's definitely on the verge of Fyre. "You of all people should understand. She's spiraling out of control. She's in freefall—with no net, no Master to catch her when she bottoms out!"

"She exposed her soul to you," George interrupts and I really don't like his condemning tone. "And you walked away. You ripped her guts out and left her to bleed to death."

"Enough!" I scream. "She's the enemy! A fucking reporter bent on destroying all of us!"

"No, Garrett. You are destroying all of us," George accuses. "Just you. Is it guilt because of Tony?"

I shake my head no.

"Is all of this because of him? Maybe you've been looking for an excuse all along to make walking away from Lewd Larry's easier."

I shake my head harder, trying to block out the words, not willing to accept that George, as always, is closer to the truth than I'd like. And then I see her. Just a dark silhouette against the brightness of the illuminated window in one of the upper rooms, but it is her, I know it. Something inside me gives way when her shadow disappears once more.

I jerk the paper from Thomas's hand.

Dearest Master,

I dream and my dreams are dark. I am frightened, alone, once again a small girl, weeping because I am lost. Again. Because you found me before, rescued me really, and for that I am eternally thankful. When your collar snapped around my neck, you literally set me free. In my eyes you saw my fear, my distrust, but what you didn't know was who I feared. It is time you know the truth. I feared myself. I feared my dark desires and the consequences of my sin. But with you, I knew no fear.

Master? Are you there? Do you hear my silent sobs? I am lost and alone once more. Afraid again. And this new fear is so much more unbearable, because I don't have you to lift me up, hold me close, keep me safe.

I dream of moaning, desperate cries in a candlelit room, and relive the bite of your whip on my naked flesh. I dream of shared screams in a candlelit room and remember our passion. I dream and I awake, eyes damp with tears. Alone.

I was wrong. I admit that. I should have told you the truth the very first night, when the assignment went awry and you bought me. I didn't consider the consequences until it was too late. Until after I'd fallen in love with you. And then I couldn't tell you the truth because I couldn't bear the thought of losing you.

And that was my biggest mistake. Not trusting you with my whole heart, because if I'd trusted you with the truth, I know we could have worked it out.

Punish me. Please, please, punish me! Nothing you can do to me will be too harsh. I will gladly submit to whatever punishment you design. But please, honor your promise.

Promise? I hear you ask.

When you snapped your collar around my throat, you made a solemn vow to protect me and keep me. "Mine. You belong to me now," you said.

And so, I am yours.

For you alone I wait.

Kitten

My vision mists as I seek her shadow in the window, but she is gone, the window dark.

"Take me home. No, please, take me to the club." I am not above begging.

* * * *

I have been defiled, or at least every corner of my life has been. Is it not bad enough that I had to drive by not one, but two billboards plastered with the glorious, centerfold-worthy spread of Kitten on my way to the Club?

Now, my inter-sanctum has been defiled to boot?

I can only glare at my computer monitor and wonder who. KITTEN rolls over and over the screen in psychedelic colors.

"Who in the hell would do this to me?" I mumble absently. But my altered screensaver is just the latest in a series of internal pranks. No doubt one of my men in black, since only they have access to this room. I hit a key, any key, to end the scroll. A shrill, computerized "Merr-ow-ww" erupts from the speaker. I hit another key.

"Merr-ow-ww."

The screensaver disappears.

"Thank god!"

I automatically go to Outlook Express, planning to check my e-mail, when my computer freezes and starts purring. It is loud, obnoxious, and I am cursing openly when Jackie's shadow crosses my threshold.

"Boy, you got it bad."

Her voice startles me. Aggravated at myself more than her, I growl and hit an anonymous key on the keyboard to make the noise disappear. It doesn't; a new, alluring purr alternates with sensual growls.

Kitten. Her purr. Her growl, the sound she made the night I fisted her, primal, needy, demanding.

The memory of our last lovemaking invades my brain. I close my eyes, reliving throbbing flesh, sweating bodies, the purring growl that erupted from her throat when she reached orgasm.

"The only thing I have bad is security." I hit the reboot switch—a series of beeps and clicks follows. A new screensaver appears in lieu of Microsoft Windows—Kitten in glorious fishnet raiment.

"Damn."

Jackie steps behind me and chuckles.

"I am not amused." Aroused, but not amused. My arousal, obvious enough for Jackie to smirk at, pisses me off all the more.

"Maybe this will help," she says, dropping today's edition of *Inappropriate Voices* on my desk. "Or maybe you've seen it already."

I scan the article, another letter from Kitten, complete with tiny paw print signature.

"I'm not interested in her or the game she's playing. And I don't like all this...this...prankish, infantile crap!"

"Really?" Jackie coos, grabbing my crotch and jerking my rock hard erection. "Your body disagrees."

My flaming rebuttal dies a silent death when Joel pokes his head in the door. "Where in the hell have you been?"

"I was...walking."

"Walking?" Joel asks incredulously and rubs his face in his hands. "Aren't you the same man who hired me five years ago to ensure your safety?"

I roll my eyes, and give him a *just get on with it* look that earns me a smack on the back of my head from Jackie. Me, the insolent child, her, the mother. And Joel...god no, I don't need a surrogate father that badly.

I sit when Joel explodes, his voice like cannon fire. Another envelope...I shouldn't be here...concerned about my safety...blah, blah, blah. He is too loud. Always. It makes my head swim, his loudness. I focus on the envelope, trying to find my lost anger for the lunatic behind its threat. Joel speaks over me, seeming to ignore me. I try desperately to ignore him.

"Let's get away for awhile, Garrett. Me and you," Jackie suggests. "A vacation south of the border. Beautiful Latin bodies, dancing beneath the stars, fucking..."

"I just got back from south of the border." I interrupt her, gritting out between clenched teeth as I take the envelope from Joel. "It didn't help."

Is this the end? Will I meet Tony's killer? Finally?

This message is even more cryptic than all the others put together.

LOST YOUR KITTEN?

Hardly a death threat. Maybe now he has gotten what he wanted. Me, alone. Me, miserable. I can hope that this ends the series of letters for another year. Or perhaps it signals it is time.

"When did this arrive?" I demand at the same time Jackie says, "This is insane, Garrett."

"It arrived while you were away." Joel answers derisively.

Jackie leans close and whispers in my ear. I don't doubt that Joel hears every word. "The police aren't doing anything and this guy is a walking time bomb. Maybe you should go away for a while. The business takes care of itself. I'll go with you. How about a year abroad? Paris? London? Amsterdam? I hear Paris has a divine party place, *Whips*, I think."

I fold the letter and replace it in the envelope, laying it flat on my desk. I scratch the back of my neck, thinking over her suggestion. That I am actually considering running away is a signal that I am in deep shit.

"You don't get it do you?" Joel demands.

I look up to see him throw up his hands and turn toward the door. His parting shot drives me to forget a next available flight to Paris.

"I just can't believe that you don't give a flying fuck that he's out there right now trying to find your missing property."

"It makes perfect sense..." Jackie taps her manicured nails on my desk. "No, never mind."

"What?" I demand, suddenly curious. Jackie has never, in five years, ever offered

any kind of opinion on the killings.

"It was a stupid thought. Forget it."

"So, say what you thought. I want to know." Why does my voice sound so defensive even to my own ears?

"Fine. I'll say it. You were this creep's archrival. Right? You had Tony's heart. Tony wouldn't give you up for him. That sick mother fuck would rather have Tony dead than share him with you. And now..." Jackie shrugs like the answers should be clear. "Well, you're still arch rivals. Neither one of you won. You both lost Tony, and if I'm not mistaken, he blames you, not himself, for Tony's death. I think he wants you to feel his pain. I think he's been waiting for you to fall in love again. He wants to win."

A long pause, but she isn't done. I can see it in her eyes as her gaze locks on mine.

"Go on," Joel urges, suddenly curious from the doorway.

"So, what if he decides to make Celia choose?"

"What? You've lost me," Joel interrupts. "What does Celia have to do with this?"

"What if he finds Celia? What if he makes her love him? What if he gives her a choice?" I whisper. "Me? Or him?"

* * * *

Enrique meets me at the door. I am weary, haggard. Enrique takes my suit coat gladly, too gladly. Something is wrong. God, what else can possibly go wrong?

"I just wan' you to know, Boss, it was'n my fault."

"What in the hell are you talking about?"

"The cat, she was sitting outside, meowing, and the red bow says Master Garrett on it, so I bring her inside..."

"Kitten? Kitten's here?" I gasp. Excited. No, angry. Furious. Jesus, who am I trying to lie to?

"Where is she now?"

"I locked her in the bathroom. I mean, it seemed to be the best thing to do, under the circumstances. I think you should know, I didn't know what else to do. I don't know if you'll be more mad if I bring her in, or jus' leave her out."

I stop myself at the closed door, my hand poised, trembling, over the knob. The sounds emitting from behind the closed door are pitiful and I remember George and Thomas's warnings—freefall, self-destruction. I jerk open the door.

"Enrique!" I slam the door back shut. "Not Kitten! A cat!"

"Si, a cat, that's what I said. She came with a kitty box, and litter, and food and the bowls and..."

"Shut up! Just shut up!" I point to the door. "You only put one cat in there?"

"Si, one cat, Boss."

I open the door enough to peek through the crack. Enrique stands on tiptoes to see over my head.

"Ay, yi, yi!" he says. "I didn't know that, Boss."

"Shit." I run a hand through my hair before I am brave enough to face the prospect of going into that bathroom. "You said there was a note?"

"Si, on the cat."

I fling open the door and barricade myself in the room with the cat, a luxurious Maine Coon. Her gold nametag reads Monet. She barely even looks up. She is exhausted.

Six newborn kittens all mewling and rooting, still too new to latch on by themselves. A shudder tears through me. Seven cats. And this a no-pet building. Kneeling, I lift a crying kitten up to a swollen nipple, before reaching for the note.

Master,

There is no lonelier moment than morning and four empty walls—alone.

I hope this helps.

Kitten.

I lift another kitten to a bare nipple and then another. The mother cat's eyes glow. I wonder if she appreciates my efforts to help or is irritated. I am not sure whether to laugh or cry as I sit on the cool porcelain tile and do both, remembering Celia's lone shadow against the brightened window. Alone. Lonely. It almost makes my own pain bearable.

Chapter 24

“Even the fear of death is nothing compared to the fear of not having lived authentically and fully.”

—Frances Moore Lappe

Celia

It is late when I arrive home, dusk came and went as I drove from *Inappropriate Voices*, taking the long way, past Lewd Larry’s. Just past dusk and the line for entrance was already forming. Master’s business is doing very well, considering they will wait in line at least two hours before doors open. Some will wait all night and still not gain entrance. They will wait anyway, waiting and hoping for a chance to see him. I cannot find fault with the masses, not when I drive thirty minutes out of my way each night for the same obsessive glance. I want him with an obsession I have never felt before.

I want him with such desperation it scares me.

I want him so badly I would barter my soul to be back in his life and that scares me enough to seek god, not the Pentecostal god of my youth, but a more practical god for my life as an adult.

I went to a Catholic church, I touched holy water to my forehead, I lit a candle and I prayed to Mary. I prayed and wept and prayed some more. If anyone knows about brokenness and survival it is she, and to her I prayed. Holy Mother of God seeming to fit the bill for my needs better than Dear Father. I can’t imagine what my earthly father would say if he knew. What could he say after the sin he committed in the name of his god?

In the name of routine, I go to early mass each morning, even though I am not Catholic. Charlie explained the important parts, how to walk the walk and hopefully not get busted. He says I will be fine, knowing I fooled Master for so long, and truly, until Tom Turner’s interference, I pulled it off. Pretending to be Catholic is a cakewalk compared to pretending to being a slave. Funny thing, now that I am no longer pretending I am enslaved, I am so enslaved, I can no longer work. I cannot read bondage stories and write reviews, I cannot write the exposé, I cannot keep going in every day to do nothing. I took a leave of absence. I actually left the request on Doug Mitchell’s desk, waiting until after he left. Although Master changed me in many ways, in some, I am still a coward.

It has been three weeks since I last saw Master. Three days longer than the time we spent together. Tonight I drove by, hoping to see him, even if just a shadow, to say goodbye for real. I shake still, shaking so badly, I cannot get the key into the front door’s lock.

“Need some help?”

His voice startles me, George Kirkpatrick. I turn to see the man who sided with Master even after all I’d revealed to him. I slide the key home, anger steadying my hand just enough. “No. I don’t need any help.”

“Are you sure? We could talk.”

“Do you think I’d be dumb enough to reveal my secrets to you a second time?” I demand, pushing open the door but then stalling in the threshold, pivoting to glare at him. He lifts his hands defensively. “I’m on your side, Kitten.”

“Don’t call me that!” I point at him, daring him to argue. “You haven’t earned the right to call me by that name,” I spit out.

He speaks softly, calmly. “What would you have me call you then? Celia?”

“No.” I snort, “You don’t call me anything. If you have something you need to say, just speak the words, because as of tonight, I am nameless.”

“Why tonight? What happened tonight? Kit—?” He starts to say Kitten, but stops himself. I tilt my head to the side, looking at him. I know he is a dominant at Lewd Larry’s, but he has never been a particularly attractive dominant to me. Too soft and fuzzy around the edges maybe, too surfer boy beautiful, too blond and tan. And maybe it is because once a shrink, always a shrink. Every time I have seen him, he has wanted to pick at my psyche like it is a scabbed-over wound, just lifting the edges to see if it has healed, raising blood then backing off. I close my eyes against his penetrating gaze. How does he know my secrets? How did he know I was so wounded; finding me first at the pajama party, then in the observation sphere, finally making me talk at Garrett’s kitchen table three weeks ago.

He thought I’d shared all my secrets, but no, Garrett’s revelations revealed the one secret I was too afraid to share. I was a reporter. At the time, it was a confession worse than the others. How did I get so seriously screwed up?

“You need help.” His voice reverberates through me and I come to the realization that his arms are wrapped around me, supporting me while I sob against his shirt, both of us standing in my threshold. Without his strength holding me, I would be on my knees. Gently he takes me by the shoulders and pulls me back out onto the wraparound porch. Taking me by the hand, he leads me to the porch swing and helps me get seated before sitting beside me. The swing sways and rocks gently with his additional weight, but neither of us make any move to set it in motion. Both sitting so very still, I wonder which of us is more afraid of the other. In the lengthening dusk, the heavy musk of distant honeysuckle fills the air with sweetness.

“I wanted to tell him,” I cry, pulling a small floral pillow from behind my back to hug to my chest. The hard wood of the swing hits against my shoulder blades, the discomfort welcome. “I really did!”

“When?”

“I don’t know when, I just did.” I promise, squeezing the pillow. Once, I thought the large floral pattern, deep burgundy, peach, soft yellows and greens, complemented the exterior paint colors; since living at Master’s ultra-modern, minimalist penthouse, the mass of florals and laces filling and surrounding my home seem too girly, too old-lady, too old-fashioned...just too much.

“Tell me the first time the thought went through your head. The first time you felt guilty about not telling him.”

“The first time he made love to me.” I shrug. “It was the night I was placed in the punishment sphere.” I feel the tears filling my eyes but am too exhausted to brush them away. “When I was inside the sphere, I was so mad, not at Garrett, not at the being there, but at myself. Mad because I’d wasted so much time, hiding from myself, hiding from my needs, my sexuality. After it was quiet, toward the end, I could have stayed in that

sphere forever, but Garrett pulled me out. He took me home and he made love to me—not sex, sex isn't emotional, and what we shared held too much emotion to be just fucking—and I thought, ohmygod, what am I doing? This is a person, this is a life, this is so much more than a story. I knew then I needed to tell him. I knew then I was never going to be able to go through with the exposé."

I look up at George, blinking, a fat tear splashing onto my cheek.

"It could have been anyone that awakened you to the need. It just happened to be Garrett."

"I love him."

"Do you? Or is it the lifestyle you need?"

"I love Master."

"Believe what you will, but this is destroying you. You need help, you need someone to guide you through this process of release and rebirth, because you have only just begun to see the truth inside yourself and you can't go on like this." He lifts my wrist, taking my pulse. "You've lost at least twenty pounds in the last three weeks, I should have you hospitalized."

"So when you say I need help, you're saying I need a shrink, not another dominant? Oh god, this is too much," I laugh, holding myself in my own arms, the pillow crushed against my chest. "I was afraid you were offering your services as a professional Dominant! But no, you want to be my psychiatrist!"

"I plan to be neither, Kitten. You don't like me well enough for me to be of any service in either area." He strokes my cheek, wiping away the evidence of the big tear that slid down my cheek. Reaching into his shirt pocket, he withdraws a business card, his business card, by the Dr. Psycho emblazoned across the front in raised script. Turing it over, he reveals a number scrawled on the back.

"Call him."

"Master?" Placing the pillow on the empty seat beside me, I pinch the card between my thumb and first finger, prepared to take it; however, George doesn't release it.

"No. Not Garrett. He isn't able to give you what you need right now." At my crestfallen expression he adds, "Maybe someday, but not now. The phone number is Lord Fyre's private cell."

I pull away from the card and look down at my fingers, rubbing them together. Did I think I would be burned merely touching the ink of his phone number?

"I can't. I won't call Lord Fyre."

"As a professional, it is my advice that you call him." He tucks the card into a slit pocket on the side of my purse. I'd forgotten it hung off my shoulder until he drew my attention to it between us. He shrugs at the look I give him. "In case you ever change your mind."

Standing, he brushes the back of his slacks even though it is dark, even though the swing was clean, before taking the four short steps down to the concrete walk. He lifts his hand in a small wave, then turns completely and strides to his car.

"I'm not going to call him!" I call after him.

He lifts his hands, shrugging, and ducks into his car. I do not think I will see him again and it bothers me, because under different circumstances I may have liked him. As it stands now, he is right, I don't like him at all.

* * * *

A *thwack* on the front porch announces the arrival of the newspaper, a peek at the clock confirms six-thirty a.m. Today begins my leave of absence from *Inappropriate Voices*, so no rush to dress. I click off the monitor and stand, stretching, peeking through the curtain to see that the sun has been up a while. An entire night passed, and not one word was stuck to the page. I typed, I erased, I typed more, but nothing sounded good enough to keep. So much for being a freelance writer.

If I cannot have Garrett as Master, I want normal at least and working at *Voices* was a far cry from normal. For a moment, I try to remember normal. Really normal. I can't fathom it, at least not going back to normal the way it was growing up. I question how normal that was.

Walking into the kitchen, I rub my eyes exhaustedly. The singing birds piss me off and that is definitely abnormal, usually morning is my favorite time of day, and I love birdsong. I shun the coffee pot for a glass of orange juice, the sustenance that has kept me alive for the last three weeks. With juice in hand, I head for the front door to collect the newspaper waiting on the other side, trying to collect my thoughts along the way. Thoughts confused even more since George's visit. Opening the door, I find roses, a dozen long stemmed roses on my front porch. I am excited. Master. Reaching for the card, I read the last name I expect to see. Lion.

Ohmygodohmygodohmygod.

How did he find me?

"Jane?" I turn toward the voice and don't scream and run as I think I probably should. I stand, looking at him, feeling an unbelievable sadness and an overwhelming emotion that makes me want to cry but has no name. He stays on the sidewalk, on the far side of the black wrought-iron fence. It is a surreal moment. The sun shining on him so golden, a frame of spring roses surrounding him.

"Jane?" he repeats, sounding unsure.

"Go away, Lionell McCain, you are not welcome here." Finding my feet can still move, I turn then, running inside, slamming the door, and staying hidden behind its closed solidness until I am sure he is gone. My pounding heart tells me he is not as dead to me as I thought he was. After all he did to me, I can still think of him and still want him?

No, because it isn't true, I don't want him. I want Master.

However, the truth is, I'm not dead. Oh god. Could my life get any worse? I almost ran to Lionell McCain! The truth is too much; but it is truth. I almost rushed into his arms because once I loved him, and with Master refusing to see me, I just wanted held. I wanted strong arms to hold me while I cried. It is the realization that I would go to Lion for comfort that makes me reach into the little side pocket of my purse and carefully retrieve the card Dr. Psycho slid there earlier. Looking at Lord Fyre's private cell number, I lay the card on top of my desk to keep from touching it, staring at the handwritten numbers until they blur, branded permanently into my brain.

I pick up the phone and tap it against the card, as if the call could place itself with the tapping.

Sighing heavily, I lay the phone down gently, next to the small card. The call doesn't place itself no matter how hard I stare at the phone next to the card.

Chicken, the voice in my head screams. I wait for the voice in my head to start rolling hysterically, but it doesn't. The voice in my head is too despondent to laugh, too

angry to do anything but scream at me.

"I am not chicken!"

I pick up the phone and dial, from memory, not from reading the card.

Ring, ring.

"Yeah?" Lord Fyre answers, but it is groggy and half-asleep.

Oh, shit! Back on normal person time, I forgot that he was on Club time! Looking at the clock, I figure he may have been asleep two hours. "I'm sorry I woke you."

"Celia, it's fine. Are you okay?" he asks, sounding concerned.

I stop the sob that formed in my throat with the question. I am so not okay. "I'm not, I don't know why I'm calling, I-I..."

"Stop! Babbling isn't pretty, Celia, and you do know what you need. Be strong enough to admit it. Be strong enough to ask me what you need to ask me."

"I don't understand." I lie, knowing exactly what he's telling me.

"Ask me to master you, Celia."

I close my eyes and see his face in my mind. I know his taste, I know the feel of him, I know the feeling that raced through me the one time he kissed me. I was repulsed and needy at the same time. It's not a feeling I'm ready to repeat.

"Celia," he says my name as a whispered sigh that sends a chill down my spine.

"You know this isn't about sex, this isn't about cheating on Garrett, this is about you and meeting your needs. Discovering what you want and what you need is a good thing. Don't be afraid."

"What if what I want scares the hell out of me?"

"Then I'll teach you to embrace fear."

"I can't."

"Maybe not yet, but you will, Celia. This phone call was the first step. When you're ready, asking me to master you won't be as hard as making this first phone call," he promises. "Psycho said you look like shit."

I know he can't see the face I make, scrunching my brow and pouting. "I don't look that bad."

"Sorry, Kiddo, but I'll take Psycho's word on this one. You're not eating or sleeping?"

"I-I can't. I'm not hungry, and I can't fall asleep alone," I explain.

"Are you on a mobile phone?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Trust me, Celia. Can you do that?"

"Yes," I whisper.

"Walk upstairs and take off your clothes."

"What?" I squeak.

"Trust me. Obey me, Celia."

"I'm not yours to command," I argue.

"I'm not arguing semantics. Are you upstairs yet?"

I sigh heavily, but start walking up the staircase. Barefoot, my feet pad against the cool rise of the hardwood stairs. I try to ignore the dust bunnies in the corners of the risers that formed while I was away and haven't felt like sweeping away since my return. "I'm upstairs, in my bedroom." I announce, pulling my t-shirt over my head and sliding my cotton shorts and panties off my hips, "And, I'm naked."

“Good girl, Celia. Now, crawl between your sheets and keep the phone next to your ear.”

I don’t argue, I’m suddenly languid and melty. I slide between the sheets, my naked body chilling between the cool sheets. I haven’t slept naked in a bed since leaving Master’s. Tears streak over my cheeks. I miss him. I miss being in his bed, admitting it aloud without meaning to.

“It’s okay, Celia. You’re safe because I’m here with you, and I’m going to be here when you wake up. Right now, I want you to close your eyes and sleep. Sleep for me, Celia. Go to sleep with me,” he whispers and I feel myself relaxing into the calm, solid warmth of his voice. “I’ll keep you safe.”

* * * *

I run into Jackie downtown. It is strange that she is just standing outside the Bay Spa, and it before noon. Jackie never rises before noon, so I knew she was waiting for me, but that was okay because I’ve missed her. We went to lunch together and it seemed only slightly weird that she knew I had an appointment at the Bay Spa today. Turns out, she wanted the scoop on what I was planning to do next. I think she was disappointed that I’ve given up the Kitten Sightings. “Do you think Master will ever want me back?” I ask desperately.

“Honey child, who’s to know a man’s mind?”

I snort, thinking how true those words are, still not understanding Lion’s arrival on my stoop. “What?” she asks.

“Oh nothing, a man I haven’t seen in eons left roses on my porch, then waited for me to come out and find them,” I answer. Of course Jackie being Jackie demanded answers. I told her only enough to hate Lion, not enough to hate me.

“Jackie, I told Master things, things I’ve never told anyone about my relationship with Lion. Things I was too ashamed to admit to anyone, ever.”

“Love does that to us, baby, we trust them with our secrets and if they are worthy they stand up to the challenge of keeping our secrets safe for us. They offer us absolution because they love us despite the horror of our confessions. Some men just don’t deserve that level of trust and it’s too late before we realize it.”

“Are you saying Garrett wasn’t worthy?”

“I’m saying Garrett was too weak to stand up to the challenge.” She pats my hand. “I won’t make excuses for him, and even if I did, even if I told you that he’s been under an unbelievable amount of stress since Tony’s murder, it wouldn’t matter, because you needed him to be the keeper of your secrets and he failed you. I just wish he hadn’t cut you so deep, baby-girl.”

“It’s not the cut, Jackie; it’s that he didn’t stick around long enough to put on a Band-Aid.”

Jackie laughs, I didn’t mean to make her laugh, but then, I’m sure her intention wasn’t to make me cry. I suppose I wanted to make her cry. No, I want to make Garrett cry. I want him to want me so badly that he weeps over the loss of me.

“Baby, you need closure with this man Lion. You need to shut the door on that part of your past and never look back and I’m going to help you do it!”

Sitting there with her holding my hand, her plan seems like a good idea and I don’t try to stop her when she makes a series of phone calls to track him down. I do stomp on

the top of her foot when I realize she has him on the phone.

“Mr. McCain? Yes, this is Celia Brentwood’s personal assistant. She would like to meet you for dinner tonight. Is eight fine with you?”

She clicks off her cell phone and I pray he said no, but then I see the absolutely wicked gleam in her eye and it reminds me of the wicked gleam Charlie gets in his when he has a plan. *Oh no, Jackie has a plan!*

“Honey child, you’re in luck. The bastard is still in town and you are going to do exactly as I say, ain’t no arguing to it...”

* * * *

Walking toward the restaurant, my nerves threaten to consume me; however, post-Kitten Sighting extravaganza, this floor show is nothing more than me taking control of the situation I lost control of years ago. I wear the flaming watercolor slip dress Garrett gave me, four-inch hot pink stilettos and matching purse completing the look. My nipples show through the sheer fabric; Lion is most certain to be offended. It is perfect. The only real question is panties or no panties. Do I want to be obscene? Do I not want to be obscene? I must admit I’m feeling a little wild.

Tonight, I show Lion what he can never have again.

Thanks to Jackie, tonight Garrett will see what he’s lost. If he doesn’t want me after tonight, he never wanted me in the first place.

With her guarantee that she will have Garrett there to witness my seduction of Lion, I am brave enough to face him, I am brave enough to say the things left unsaid.

When I see him across the crowded restaurant, he is already seated and reading the menu. I pause only for a moment to stare. When he appeared on my doorstep, I didn’t see him as he is now, I saw him as he was the last time I saw him, young, cold, arrogant.

If I didn’t know his past so well, I would say he has the look of innocence.

The years have been good to Lionell McCain. He’s as gorgeous as he’s ever been, maybe even more flamboyantly so, now that he has achieved his heart’s desire—success. He is a household name, an American icon. America’s morality all wrapped up in a neat little package. The boy next door with golden good looks, innocent eyes and a dazzling dimpled smile, currently clad in a creamy linen suit, crisp white shirt, fashionable dark brown silk tie and Italian leather loafers. By the look of him, he pays a stylist. America’s Preacher. He had the title trademarked.

I think for a moment that he seems perfect in the tropical setting of the restaurant, lounging in the high-backed wicker chair surrounded by palm fronds and exotic flowers; but to me he is and always will be Lion—untamed, sensual, feral. Even having seen the stage performance, the laying on of hands, the healings, the mass hysteria that heralds his arrival to big stadiums meant more for ballgames and rock stars, I don’t see him as holy.

He drums his fingertips lightly on the top of the black leather Bible he carried into the restaurant with him. America’s Preacher can’t be without the prop even for a dinner meeting—but then he couldn’t possibly dine with San Francisco’s latest scandal without it. How else could he explain such a meeting, except to save my soul over salad?

I am late, purposely so, on Jackie’s advice.

“Let him see you walking toward him, swaying those cute little hips of yours, and knowing he can never, ever have you again.”

I walk, as she taught me to walk, approaching the table as casually as I can, hips

swaying, thinking nefarious thoughts to give off the sex vibe, though my heart is pounding, my palms sweating and my knees shaking. Lifting a tall iced tea to his lips, he looks my way. His expression is startled, seeing me for the first time in five years, and then he shuttles the shock away, filling his eyes with something less definable as his gaze takes in every fluid inch of me. Lean tan legs, pert breasts extremely perky beneath the clingy chiffon of my breezy slip dress after being shocked into their current state by a half-hour compress of frozen vegetables. Jackie guarantees my nipples will stay pointy for hours. I won't need hours. He lingers for a moment over my shorter, sexier hair, my breasts getting an extra long look the second time around, and finally my *mile-long tan legs*. Yes, I am back to my legs, because I know he has gone back to my legs. As I approach him, he can't take his eyes off my legs. His Adam's apple bobs appreciatively beneath his tight collar and tie, his cheeks flush. This look I know. Yeah, he wants me.

God, I'm glad I wore the four-inch spikes, not because I want him back, not ever; but this, having him look at me like it's a hundred and ten day and I'm a popsicle on a stick, is a total boost to the ego.

He stands, pulling a chair out for me, as always the gentleman in public. The creaking wicker sounds thunderous in the tranquil dining room as I take my seat, feeling as though every eye is on me. I wait until he sits across from me before speaking. "Why did you come to my house?"

His smile is suddenly cautious. "Hello to you too, Jane."

As I sit, I offer him the smile I practiced in the mirror with Jackie for hours—slow, seductive—before I correct him. "I go by Kat now."

His eyes meet mine, clearing his throat before he can say it.

"Kat?" He clears his throat again, he lifts the menu, pretending to study it. I think he's hiding behind it. "Yes, I suppose so, I mean the billboard campaign for *Inappropriate Voices*. I saw that—one of the billboards—and using a stage name, smart at least for propriety's sake, less embarrassment than if you used your real name, I suppose." He flushes, looking at the menu, not me.

"I didn't choose the name for propriety's sake."

He blinks at me, looking stunned.

"I don't care what the people who knew me before I moved to San Francisco thought—that's my past life—their judgments don't concern me."

"Everyone goes home sooner or later, Jane. That's why I came here, I wish I could have found you sooner, before this disgrace, but you made it so difficult for the private investigator to find you and now...well, we'll cover up this shame as best we can. Pay the right people to make this scandal go away, so that you can come home."

I pause, lifting my glass of iced water to my lips to hide my dismay, knowing he cannot force me home this time. I sit my glass down harder than I should, thudding the wide base against the table with a sharp ugly sound and sloshing water over its rim. "You think I'm going home?" I laugh and it's an ugly sound.

He glances around the room, I assume to see how much attention we're attracting—no, I'm attracting. He leans forward and whispers, "You're still angry, I get it, just let it go Jane. What happened was evil, but all sin can be forgiven and, once we get home, and you've made right with the lord, and apologized to your fa..."

"Don't!" I raise my hand to silence him, "Don't you even go there. I will never apologize to my father and as far as making things right with God—," I shake my head,

unable to finish what I might have said, growling through the lump in my throat. “How dare you!”

He takes my hand in his, and I am so surprised, I don’t jerk away fast enough, giving him a chance to get a solid grip, and then it is too late. Looking up, I am more shocked to see a tear riding down his cheek as he leads my fingers to his lips, kissing them. “I am so sorry.”

My eyes narrow, not sure which part he’s apologizing for—too many past infractions—but neither can I ask, my brain unable to formulate the words necessary. I have never known Lionell McCain to apologize for anything in his life, let alone cry in the doing.

I wait expectantly. Surely, he won’t just leave it as is, but no, he is going to make me ask.

I wait. He turns my hand over, opening my palm to kiss the sensitive flesh there, and I am repulsed. Good. Definitely no attraction. He feels no need for further explanation, and I am exasperated to the point of saying under my breath, “There are no righteous, no not one.”

It is Lion’s favorite passage of scripture and I wonder now if it is because he condemns so many or because the verse virtually lets him off the hook. Our eyes meet over the table, his lips still pressed to my palm.

“Especially me, I am not righteous,” he says. “Look at me, I am here, like an addict, drawn to your lasciviousness. Though, at one time, before you, I thought I was the exception, and now, with the taste of you, the touch of you running through my veins, I need you still! Oh god, Jane, forgive me,”

I wonder if he truly prays for divine guidance, and if so, to which of us did he direct the prayer, but then the biblical quote flows off his tongue. “The works of the flesh are manifest, which are these...”

Pulling my hand from his grasp, I interrupt, finishing the quote. “Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness. Dare not quote the Galatians to me, Lionell McCain. Do you forget yourself? Scripture was sung to me as a babe, not lullabies. I played in the baptistery not playgrounds growing up. While other girls my age were going to parties and dances, I was condemned to my knees, praying to cure their wickedness. So, I ask, Lion, whose soul do you pray for to cure this sin? Mine? Yours? My father’s?”

“You couldn’t help yourself, Jane, the curse of Eve...”

Answer enough then. Standing, I push the table against him as hard as I can, lifting my water glass by its delicate stem, taking a sip to wash the horrible taste forming in my mouth, then toss the remaining ice and water into his face. “I grant you no absolution by accepting this sin as mine alone, Lion. Some day perhaps we can compare notes in hell.”

Chapter 25

His love of danger, his intense appreciation of the drama of an adventure—all the more intense for being held tightly in—his consistent view that every peril in life is a form of sport, a fierce game betwixt you and Fate, with Death as a forfeit, made him a wonderful companion at such hours.

—Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Lost World*

Garrett

“Garrett, I’m worried about you. You don’t talk to me any more.”

I meet Jackie’s eyes, but she isn’t looking at me, she is looking over my shoulder at something across the road. I pivot to see what she is looking at, but see nothing of import. I feel exposed, traffic whizzing by. Turning back toward Jackie, I catch a glimpse of what has drawn her attention. Kitten. I swallow hard, turning to face her fully, noting she wears the red silk dress I gave her and sits quite comfortably at a table inside an elegant, air-conditioned restaurant across the road.

Jackie chose this bistro, this outdoor table, with no umbrella and scorching sun on this overly warm spring day, and I melt in the black, long-sleeved Armani shirt and tailored slacks meant for cooler weather. But it is not the heat of the sun raising my temperature, making me sweat, it is seeing her, facing an unknown him.

I sit forward in my chair, surprised by my quick gut reaction; surprised even more when I stand in response to him taking her hand in his and lifting it to his lips. I’m pissed as hell when he rolls her wrist over and opens her fingers to kiss her palm. Just who in the hell does he think he is?

“Easy Garrett.” Jackie clutches my arm, pulling me back into my seat. If not for Jackie’s death grip on my arm, I would have been halfway across the road by now. “Oh no, you don’t care about her at all, do you?”

I lean back into the heavy cast-iron chair, feeling very used, letting the hardness of the metal dig into my back. “Did you set this little scene up, Jackie? Because this little drama has Jackie written all over it!”

“Quiet down, Garrett! You’re drawing attention.”

“Good!” I shout. “I hope they throw us out. You can’t manipulate people’s feelings this way Jackie! It’s not right!”

“Oh, you mean, like the way you aren’t manipulating Kitten’s feelings? Gotcha,” she hisses and I wonder how on earth I hadn’t noticed before that my best friend in the world chose sides in this drama and I’m on the wrong team. “Shit, Jackie, that was low even for you.”

“Face it, Garrett, the woman wears your collar, she has done everything she possibly can to let you know how sorry she is, to let you know that she wants to come home to you, but it takes you seeing her with Lion to get any reaction from you at all. So tell me, just who is being low here?”

“Lion?” I ask, dumbfounded, turning to see the dark arch-nemesis that haunted her

dreams while she laid with me. I find her through the glass pane just in time to witness Kitten throwing an icy drink into his face and storm away. Inside I cheer, watching the restaurant's front entrance for her exit. When she appears, my eyes fly to the table where she was sitting—he doesn't pursue her, he just sits there, wiping his expensive linen suit with a napkin.

He just sits.

Kitten climbs into her car, revving the engine, pausing only to wipe her face before peeling into traffic. I sit, not pursuing, even though she left crying, visibly shaken.

I just sit.

"So, this little sideshow, was it solely for my benefit, Jackie?" I whisper, my deadly, all Ice whisper. I can't ever remember being so pissed. "You two are in cahoots? Or maybe that isn't Lionell McCain at all, just some paid bimbo, here for the performance. Well, she should get an Emmy for that little performance!"

"Fuck you, Garrett. When will you ever figure it out it isn't always about you! You arrogant, self-absorbed bastard!" Jackie screeches. "That is Lion and after five years of searching for her, he finally found her, after five years, he still wants her!"

My head swivels, straining for a better look. Leaving the table, I decide I need to see this prick up close and personal.

* * * *

"You look chipper this evening, Mr. Lawrence."

"I feel pretty chipper, Hillary. I just broke Lionell McCain's nose. News at eleven"

"Mr. Lawrence? Did you say Lionell McCain? America's Preacher, Lionell McCain?" Hillary's voice wavers between concern and panic. "Mr. Winston is in your office. I asked him to wait outside but he wouldn't listen to me."

Joel. Smiling to myself, I consider how good it might feel to break two noses in one day. I mean, if I'm going to be up on assault charges, I might as well go for the gold. For the first time in weeks, I enter my office without trepidation, vaguely registering Hillary's voice over the intercom, summoning George from the Attic.

"Mr. Kirkpatrick? You said to call you first if Mr. Lawrence returns." Fear fills her voice and I feel pleasantly wicked; it has been a long time since I strolled these halls and caused such a reaction. "You better come quick. I think Mr. Lawrence is in trouble. He seems—different."

Throwing open my office door, I am angry. Perhaps for the first time in five years, I actually feel and it is incredible. Forget anger, this is rage—blood boiling rage—and it feels good. Good enough to break Joel's nose, for grins if for no other reason. However, closing my office door, I sense I won't be breaking his nose, he appears grim enough without any help from me. Without a single word, he holds out the envelope and my blood goes cold. I have to sit down for this one.

"It came by courier twenty minutes ago, Garrett."

My hand shakes, my power surge stolen in a heart beat.

"Open it," Joel urges. "I've already called the police, they're on their way. I doubled the security load tonight and sent a man to keep an eye on your place. We're as prepared as we can be. The cops are going to get him this time and I'm going to protect you until they do."

I hate my weakness. Willing my hand not to tremble, I rip into the letter, gasping

when I read the words.

I FOUND YOUR KITTEN
IS THERE A REWARD?

“No!”

Joel scoops the dropped letter off the ground, as I dive for my jacket and pull out my cell phone. My fingers can't move fast enough.

Ring, ring.

Joel shouts to Hillary to get another call in to the police at the same time George hits my doorway, Thomas in tow.

“What in the hell’s going on?” George asks.

Ring, ring.

“Answer it already, baby, please, answer the phone.”

Click.

“Thank God, Kitten, you have to...”

“...have reached Celia, I’m not able...”

“Shit!” I scream at no one in particular. Not Celia, just her voicemail. Then I hear the fumbling of someone picking up and a faint “Hold on.” Not voicemail, an answering machine.

“Kitten! Don’t worry about the damn machine, just listen!” I shout over the rest of her message. “...Leave a message...” I scream again. “Just listen! I think you are in danger.”

“...after the tone. *Beep.*”

“Garrett?” she asks with a puzzled voice. She catches herself and I hear a startled intake of breath, brimming with hope. My heart lurches; I kick myself for not calling her sooner. “Master?”

“Kitten, lock all of your doors. Hang up and dial 9-1-1. I’m on my way.”

“I don’t understand. What are you...” *Click.*

“Shit!” I look up at George. “We got cut off.”

George and Thomas, staring down at the note, look as bewildered and horrified as I feel.

“Come on!” Thomas demands, racing from the office. He doesn’t have to ask twice.

George and I are hot on his heels, racing toward the stairwell.

“Where are we going?” George pants as we run the stairs, taking two and three at a time. “Shouldn’t we wait for the police? We have no idea what we’ll be walking into.”

“Shut up, George, just let me think!” Thomas barks at the same time as I say, “I’m going to her house, now! I’m not waiting for the police.”

Thomas and I pile into his Porsche; there is no room for George. “Stay here,” I say. “Tell the police we’ve headed for Celia’s.”

Thomas barely gives me time to get the words out before he is burning rubber, squealing out, transmission screaming. My cell phone rings as Thomas bottoms out on the parking lot curb, entering traffic. I answer the call quickly, still bouncing in my seat, hoping to her voice.

“Kitten?”

“Yes, I have found your stray.”

My guts clench, as I try in vain not to think the worst. “Leave Kitten the fuck alone! You can have me.”

His laugh is manic and crazed, it leaves me chilled. "I could have had you whenever I wanted. That's not the point. I've been waiting, biding my time until you fell in love again and now you have. The performance this evening was magnificent, by the way, but now I want my reward."

Click.

"Fuck."

"He wants his reward," Thomas says, swerving across three lanes of traffic to hit the high-speed lane of I-80 right off the entrance ramp.

"That's what he said, he has her." Frustrated, I hit the padded car door with my fist. "This isn't the way to Celia's."

"We're not going to Celia's."

"What? God, Thomas, we don't have time for mistakes. She answered her phone."

"Call her again."

Mindlessly, frantically, I obey, if for no other reason than I don't know what else to do.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

"Busy."

"Or lines cut? Either way he's already taken her. He likes big, public, messy. He won't do this at her house, Garrett. Not public enough." Thomas swerves between two semis and into the slow lane, a small opening between cars. I curse, closing my eyes, but I can't keep them closed. I have to watch, not watching is worse. He kicks down the accelerator, hits the shoulder lane, and speeds toward an opening still six car lengths away. He swerves in and paces for only a second before shooting into the high-speed lane again. Shit. Too close, too close.

"She can't die, this can't end like Tony."

"Celia isn't going to die," Thomas promises. I close my eyes to chase away the mental image of Celia hanging as Tony hanged from the St. Andrew's Cross. Bloodied. Used. Tortured. The wave of nausea is slow to pass; I put my head between my knees.

"You okay?"

"Forget me. Where are we going?"

"Inappropriate Voices. I think he'll go there for his reward."

"What?" I sit up in time to catch Thomas whizzing from the high-speed lane through two small openings between other cars before hitting the exit ramp doing ninety.

"Christ." I duck involuntarily, although ducking wouldn't save me if we did crash.

Thomas snickers.

"I'm talking about the classified ads. I'm talking about the Kitten Sightings. I'm talking about a lunatic. Where would this crazy go to collect a reward?"

"I don't know. My condo? The Club?"

"Maybe, but my gut says the newspaper."

Palm trees whip by at an alarming rate of speed. Thomas zigzags with reckless abandon through heavy traffic. My cell phone vibrates at the same time Thomas' cell rings.

"What?" I answer mine, his keeps vibrating between us on the seat.

A frantic George informs us that Celia's house has been broken into. "The police aren't saying it, but she's not here."

Squealing tires, burning rubber, honking horns, Thomas pulls a U-turn in the middle

of the street, running the stoplight not once but twice, taking a one-way street the wrong direction to save time. I don't have to ask now. I'm tuned in as Ice, thinking a little more like Fyre.

"Can't you make this thing go any fucking faster," I demand. His laugh is startling, mine even more so.

The *Inappropriate Voices* building is locked up tighter than a drum. Thomas doesn't say anything and neither do I as I watch him pull a billfold out of his back pocket. Pulling a wicked metal tool out of a sleeve that holds six others, he intends to pick the lock, and though I've never seen him do anything even remotely similar, I'm not surprised and I don't doubt he can.

"Hurry up!"

"Patience, Ice."

I look through the window, seeing where Thomas' gaze focuses; a dark stain spreads across the floor from beneath the information booth in the center of the lobby. My guts lurch. Blood. There is no doubt about it, even at fifty paces. Thomas pushes the door open quietly, pulling a gun from inside his vest, crossing the room with a stealth I've only seen demonstrated in high-action movies. Somehow I know he's done this before. Right behind him, I mimic as closely as I can.

I've never been brave enough to ask about his past. I've always known he carries weapons, going so far as to try to convince myself that they are only stage props, but knowing in my gut that his past keeps him fully armed at all times, discretely, but armed nonetheless. Those less observant never see the gun. Or the knives.

He motions me to follow him into the staircase.

I make the mistake of looking at the dead security guard and it slows me down. Fyre lets me know in no uncertain terms what he is going to do to me if Celia dies while I am rubbernecking.

I follow him up the stairs two at a time, knowing he is feeling by instinct. We exit the stairwell and enter the third-floor office area quietly, his gun leading. He has a two-hand hold on the gun, he has definitely done this before. I hear her before I see her, both of us reacting at the same time to her soft moan.

She lives.

I force myself to stay calm with deep, quiet breaths. *She's alive, she's alive.* My internal mantra keeps me sane. Fyre points what he wants me to do, handing me the gun. I stand behind the door, ready to kick it in as he leverages his body through the dropped ceiling panel, the plan being to drop in on the killer.

The moment is unreal, I have a gun in my hand and I am prepared to kill him if given the chance. I close my eyes, thinking that thought through one more time. *I will kill him.*

Calm washes over me, making everything louder. I hear his words through the door that reads Mr. Bosko on the nameplate, her whimpers assuring me she is still alive.

"You are so lovely, Celia. You cry me such beautiful tears. Did you cry such lovely tears for Garrett Lawrence?"

My cell phone vibrates, the slight sound consuming the narrow hallway. I silence it as fast as I am able, hoping he didn't hear, holding my breath to hear his reaction if any.

"Hmmm, your lover doesn't answer. He must not care as much for you as I thought he did. Pity. I was so hoping for that reward."

I hear a whip crackle just before her scream. Her scream doesn't make me panic. It

makes me nuts, but I don't panic. It is a terror scream more than a pain scream, though I know she hurts from the small injured-animal sounds coming from her throat. Pain not caused by the whip, but from something that happened earlier, before I arrived. Knowing she is injured severely enough to be making that sound makes it almost impossible to wait for Thomas' signal.

Another whip snap emanates from the room, this time echoing through the corridors. This time her scream is warranted. I can feel her flesh giving under the force of the bullwhip. I know her pain as my own, my teeth gritting down on the inside of my jaw in response; the flood of pain and blood inside my mouth helping me to focus.

Snap.

Waiting for Thomas' signal teaches me a new level of agony as her screams filter through the door. My fingers tighten on the knob, my knuckles going white with the effort not to open the door. My mantra begins anew of its own volition: she screams, she lives. She screams. She lives.

"How dare you scream!" The scream that comes through the door is manic, insane. It chills me to the bone. "I told you not to make a sound!"

I don't like the sound of that voice, it makes my skin crawl.

"What did I tell you? If you scream, I silence you."

The memory of Tony's sliced throat races to the surface of my brain. Vocal chords sliced. Silence. No!

"No!" I burst through the door even before I realize I've done it. "Get away from her!"

The man turns in slow motion to face me. I have enough time to register the look of pleasure sliding over his features, and sense the throw of the knife before it flashes from his fingertips. I bob to the left, but I'm not fast enough, the blade he was going to slice Celia's throat with embeds in my shoulder. I stagger, as much with the knowledge of who as with pain.

"No!" Celia screams. She is beautiful. Chained. Excruciatingly lovely. There is no St. Andrew's Cross for Celia, she is stretched with her arms chained overhead to a support beam, her skin glistening with the sweat of fear, her eyes wide with terror. She pleads—for me, for my life. I cannot believe it is so. Nothing would have prepared my heart for the agony I feel in her voice. The terror of five long years charges toward me with another knife raised and Celia's scream rings through the room. I aim with a two-handed hold, just how Fyre did it. The gun firing doesn't seem as loud as I thought it would and, for a moment, I think that I have missed because he is still charging. I am an animal unleashed as I rip the knife from my own shoulder and lunge. We collide, but I am catching his dead weight. The bullet pierced something vital.

Hearing the gunfire, Fyre dives through the ceiling above me. Sirens blaze outside the window, but the cavalry is too late. Fyre, too, a little late. Craig Michael Bosko lies dead against me. I dumbly stand there holding him up, until Fyre helps me lay him back onto the ground. His eyes are open and glazed. It all becomes suddenly clear, wrenching my heart. Days before Tony's death, we'd fought, exchanging bitter ugly words, accusations without warrant. I wanted him to give up not all of his other men, but the one other man who had become too important, drawing him from me, more and more often. I was jealous and, fair to him or not, I'd sent him from the club with the words, "end it or stay with him." He came home that night shaken, but promising he'd ended it. I'd never

asked who the other man was.

Even knowing, I still can't believe Craig was capable of what was done to Tony.

I am sickened that, for the last five years, he has been trying desperately to get into my bed. Fyre takes the gun and the knife from me. I'd forgotten I held both weapons, one for each hand. I blink, slightly dazed.

"Ice?"

I look at Fyre and nod. "I'm okay. Help me get Kitten out of here."

Chapter 26

And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.

—Anais Nin

Celia

I awake in a hospital bed, IVs dripping into my arms, machines making irritating beeps, and a blinding light in my eyes. It takes a second to realize I am in a hospital, and another second to remember why.

I bat my eyes against the bright light, finally giving in to shutting them tight, my head hurting with the effort it takes to remember what happened. Easier to just focus on the blinding red flame that is the inside of my eyelids. Will someone turn that damn light off?

A soft creak to my left startles me, but not enough to move, not enough to open my eyes. The danger is gone. Mr. Bosko is dead. Nothing in my hospital room is as scary as what happened earlier today. Made more scary because I understood Mr. Bosko's obsession; not the rage, but the desperation; not the blood-lust, but the obsession. I have been obsessed with Garrett Lawrence.

The only clear thought I had, bound and gagged, was that I would die for Master, willingly, if it meant he would live. I imagine, five years ago, Tony felt the same when given the choice.

I focus on the bright red, not a swirling red, but a mottled red, with patterns and shapes. I imagine I can see the faint pattern of veins. Is it truth or imagination that I can see the veins inside my eyes?

It doesn't matter, it is something to focus on, taking my mind from dwelling on the pounding in my head. Taking my mind from dwelling on my rescuer, Master. Taking my mind from the one who carried me from the room of terror, Lord Fyre. I focus on the searing red to forget the look in both men's eyes, one of regret, one of possession; and I am responsible for both looks.

My focus on the blinding red light is not strong enough to keep me from overhearing the two in question. They are here, both of them, together. Oh god, what made me so special that two, not one, waits for me to awaken? Possession and regret. God curses me with intelligence when I wish I could be less smart in matters such as this. Now, after so long, both want what they almost lost.

"You will release her."

"I won't!"

The argument repeats; different words, same meaning. Shouldn't someone ask me what I want? I turn my head to the left, toward the closest voice. I open my eyes just a crack, just enough to focus on the shape of him, of Master, sitting in a very uncomfortable-looking chair, an ugly chair, the nauseating blue-green that someone long ago decided was hospital chic. Noticing I am awake, both men stop quarreling and

Master turns toward me.

I smile, he returns the smile.

Next to him, Lord Fyre leans against the window ledge, arms crossed defensively, not looking a bit comfortable, but he manages a small smile for me and lifts his right brow sardonically. On the ledge between Lord Fyre and Master rest two vases filled with bouquets of roses. The first, red roses with a smiley-face balloon on a stick pushed between the flowers; the other, red roses mixed with white calla lilies. One whimsical, one totally seductive. Which man is trying to seduce?

"I'm alive," I whisper.

"Yes. You are," Master confirms.

"I knew I must be, I don't think dead hurts this much."

"You have two broken ribs, some skin tears, a really nice black eye." He starts to run down the list. I interrupt, sounding sadder than I'd meant to. "Broken heart."

He very carefully slides from the leather chair, the chair making a crinkly sound—not leather, vinyl perhaps—and moves onto the edge of the bed, taking my hand in his as he sits. Fyre shifts position, lowering his arms as he walks over to the side of the bed Master isn't sitting on.

"I should have told you that I was a reporter."

"That doesn't matter now."

I nod at him, acknowledging what neither of us says. I was too close to almost being killed by a lunatic to have something as little as deceit and perceived betrayal ruin our reunion, but I can't hold his gaze. I close my eyes against the fear that he is going to walk out of my life again. I close my eyes against the pull of energy coming from the other side of the bed. The side of the bed I don't dare turn toward. I am alive, Master sitting beside me, and me fighting an insane attraction to the other man. I finally turn, having to look. Lord Fyre is completely seductive when he smiles at me. I close my eyes, but the smile is still there. Not the sweet *I'm so glad you're here, I'm so glad you're alive* smile that Master gave me when he realized I was awake, but the totally sinful smile that he also gave me when he approached me, chained to a beam in the ceiling, and stretched impossibly. Stepping over Mr. Bosko's dead body seemed merely an unimportant obstacle as he came toward me, never taking his eyes from me. His smile on approach, so naughty it made me blush, making me forget that I was a madman's victim a moment before, mindless with terror. His smile making me feel very much alive. His smile of promise as he released my bonds, only to whisk me into his arms; a smile that seemed to say *Until we meet again and I can chain you the way I want to*. But then, I was hysterical and my imagination probably drew wrong conclusions. Opening my eyes, his smile is still in place, still hinting that there are so many naughty secrets he'd like to share.

He winks and I close my eyes against him.

I hear Master's voice, so filled with regret and I don't have any words to make his regret go away, so I keep my eyes tightly closed, once again focusing on the blinding red searing through my eyelids, trying to forget Fyre's smile.

"You're angry at me for letting the Kitten Sightings go on as long as I did without calling you," Master says.

A field of black appears, filled with white dots, and it is a moment before my mind registers that the light over my bed is switched off. I open my eyes to a dimly lit room, the only light coming from the wide crack separating the main room from the in-room

bathroom.

I turn toward Lord Fyre then, because instinctively I know that he was the one to turn it off.

“Party-pooper,” I mouth, making him chuckle silently. Master is still talking, still professing apologies.

Lord Fyre leans forward, brushing my forehead with soft lips. “You’re tired, you should sleep now.” When he pulls away, it is with a look of promise, the look that lures in the ones such as me, the ones such as him. I get it now, why I find the smile, the man, so alluring. Because his smile speaks with unspoken words, saying *I know what you need to make you complete*. And maybe it isn’t what he’s thinking, but it is what the smile filled with such lovely darkness promises.

Yesterday, I wanted nothing more than a phone call, a token offering of hope that someday I could return to Master, knowing with just one word, I would wait forever; but now I realize, as much as my heart wants Master, my soul wants what only Lord Fyre can deliver. Darkness. I want to dwell in that place for a while. I want to find myself there.

“I wanted to call you,” Garrett whispers in his most charming voice, and he is suddenly so close, his face as close as Lord Fyre’s was a moment ago. I think he will kiss me, but I turn my face, sitting up, brushing beyond Master to peek around the partially closed privacy drape to see Lord Fyre opening the main door to go out into the hall. He is leaving.

“Lord Fyre!” I call.

His hand lingers on the handle but he doesn’t pull the door open any wider. “Please don’t leave yet, there is something that I need to say.”

“Tomorrow, Celia. Tell me tomorrow, after you rest.”

His head is bowed and he speaks so softly I have to strain to hear. He looks as exhausted as I feel.

“Lord Fyre,” I urgently request. “Please stay, tomorrow will be too late, tomorrow I will not be as brave as today.” I leave so much out, I hope he can read the words left unsaid, because my soul cries silently to be heard, and my heart only wants to be picked up, held, protected, and loved. All the things that Master professes.

Seeing Lord Fyre turn to stay, I face Master. “Please just tell me one thing that is complete truth, Master.” Frustration fills my voice, making my demand come out as growl.

“I want you,” he says softly, with the same eerily calm voice that first got my attention our first night together, the liquid bourbon voice that makes my insides quake. No charm, just naked honesty. I drop my eyes to my hands, clasped so tightly together that my flesh is mottled. Heat flushes over my face and I know color rises in my cheeks.

His hand caresses my cheek then tilts my chin up to look into his eyes. Something glints beneath his own hooded lids, lurking like a promise, almost darkness. Almost. Darkness.

I want to scream at him, just shut up and kiss me, take me to the edge of sanity before you bring me back again, but I don’t. I pull in, withdrawing into myself, letting him talk. God, I’ve waited so long for him to talk to me and now—

“I needed time to work things out in my head, but it seems ridiculous now. I want you, Kitten, Celia, Jane. I want to know all of you because I want you more than I have ever wanted anyone in my life, and that terrifies me. The things I want with you, the

things I want to experience with you scares the shit out of me, because it means changing the life I've had for so long and making it different."

"Different how?" I ask, weary.

"First, what name am I supposed to call you?"

"What?" I ask, confused, finding it hard to follow the question.

"You've never been given a choice and now I'm not sure if I should be calling you Jane or Celia."

I actually have to think about what he said for a moment; Kitten wasn't one of the choices. The realization shoots a ball of pain through my abdomen. "Are saying that you no longer want me to be Kitten?" My voice wavers.

"Do you truly wish to be Kitten again?" His voice holds hope and that makes me smile, realizing that I do want to be Kitten, and thinking for a moment that to be Kitten again might be enough to satisfy the dark need of my soul. Leaning close, intimately, he whispers, "I will call you Kitten when you are in persona, because I do miss you as Kitten so very much; but I also want to be able to call you by the name of your choosing, because I want to get to know all of you, and if I continue to only call you by Kitten, every second, it is going to change you into something else, something of my making, not the true you."

I swallow hard, wanting more than anything to be lost in him, in his world, to never again be Jane, to never again be Celia. I sigh, close to begging. "I want to be of your making, I want to be just Kitten."

"And I want you to be the greater of all of your parts, and you cannot evolve into who you are truly meant to be if I put that much limitation on you," he answers using the voice I know best, the unyielding Master voice. Twenty-four hours ago, I thought never to hear it again.

Hearing it, I smile. "You want me?" I tease, my own darkness making the question sultry.

"I want you."

Fyre steps forward, to the very edge of the bed. "That was all very sweet, congratulations on making up, but you asked me to stay." Coming around the bed, completely to my side, he leans over me suddenly, pressing a slow kiss to my lips, so slowly, so seductively, that I could have stopped him—if I wanted to.

In front of Master, he kisses me, not a chaste peck on the forehead and not the total rape of my mouth that I experienced at Master's that very first weekend, but definitely a kiss I will not soon forget. He holds my chin and the nape of my neck between his hands, controlling the kiss completely, not giving me an inch, taking what he wants from my mouth, my tongue, my teeth. Calling from me the dark desires I'd almost had completely tucked away. Almost. Desires for darkness and flames.

Releasing me, stepping back away from me, his look says it all. He felt my mind give during the kiss and his look is one of pure unholy evil, one of triumph.

Challenging.

But I can't do it, shaking my head in denial, my heart making the decision. I want Master. I have him back and I will not lose him now. A tear slips over my cheek as I say goodbye to all hope of ever feeling the lovely darkness his eyes promise.

Thomas snickers. "You will renege then?"

"I made no promise!" I cry.

Master sits back, closing himself, crossing his arms defensively. “What promise?”

I ignore the question, begging Lord Fyre with my gaze to let it go.

“Thank you both—you saved my life.” I change the subject as genially as I can, compelled to formally apologize now that the tenuous intimacy Master and I just shared is broken by the intimacy forged by Lord Fyre. Saying the words, I realize their truth, and it becomes suddenly too much of a weight—wanting Master, desiring Lord Fyre, almost dying. I try to smile, but it comes out scrunched and tears fill my eyes. Both men fold around me, holding me while I break down, sobbing repeatedly, “He would have killed me if you hadn’t come.”

Neither man makes hushing noises, both hold me in silence. In their silence, I hear more than any words could say. They thought I was going to die too.

Holding me, Garrett makes small, comforting swirls on my back with his fingertips, his lips pressing kisses to my temple. Thomas just holds me, no petting, patting, or swirling, just solid strength wrapped around my back and I am surprised when I feel his lips on the back of my neck in a soft kiss. Between the two, a very real tingle races down my spine and I could not say which of the two wake my body, making me feel very, very alive. Even with tubes and wires, aching ribs and swollen face, I am horny, wanting, needy.

“Celia?” Lord Fyre hisses, reminding me he waits for an answer.

Will I renege?

I made no promise, but I am guilty just the same. The lesson from a long ago Sunday school lesson flares through my mind. Thought is Deed. The moral of the lesson summing up Jesus’ disclosure of how God felt about immorality, using the book of Matthew to establish its position. If I think it, I am morally as guilty as if I did it.

For the moment, I wish away Dr. Psycho’s visit, the card with Fyre’s private number written on the back, and the admonition to call him because he was waiting for my call. I really, really wish back the call itself. Yes, I am guilty. Does it matter not that now I want to take it back?

Liar!

Okay, I don’t really want to take it all the way back, but I don’t want it to destroy what I have with Master either. In times like these, I really want the dark voice in my head to go away!

I sigh heavily, going very still in between the two very warm men. With supreme force of will, I force myself to stop crying. Both men react to my tightening, pulling a little away from me.

“Master, I don’t want to be accused of lying or hiding anything from you ever again. You need to know I wanted Lord Fyre to master me.”

Both men react to my admission in the same way, both pulling away so that they still sit on the bed, but neither touching me. Master speaks first. “You’re talking about the phone call made after George’s visit?”

“You knew.” I cross my arms over my chest defensively, feeling used and naïve. Again.

“You are mine, Kitten. There is very little I don’t know about that which occurred in your life the last few weeks. I also know you met with Lion, but it’s okay, I know you were confused. You couldn’t have me, so...”

“No! Stop talking!” I interrupt, looking at him as if he grew a second and third head.

“You think that because I couldn’t have you—any man would do? I needed to be abused and any sadist would work, even a sick, perverted sadist from my past life? Do I look so stupid that you would think that about me?”

Lord Fyre reaches for me, solidly, pulling me back into his chest, holding me there with a firm hand. I shake in his arms, my anger and frustration a very live thing. His hands smooth down the length of my arms, calming me, so that my blood is no longer trying to shoot through my skin. Calm enough to speak, if not calm enough to relax in Lord Fyre’s arms completely.

“Did you ever think, even for a moment, that I am drawn to Lord Fyre because I want insight into my true inner self? That I need an outlet for my darkness? That just maybe I am intelligent enough to recognize a like being when I see one? Or, that I only met with Lion because after five years I wanted closure? I just wanted to tell him what a royal prick he was?”

“It has been a long day, Celia, and perhaps this is a conversation for another day,” Thomas says in a soft, very solid voice, his stroking hands digging deeper into the tense muscles of my arms, a massage intended to force a relaxed state. “Relax for me, Celia. The monitors are going crazy and I want you released from this place. Your healing cannot take place here. Relax.”

Hearing the increased beeps of the machines by my bed, I know he doesn’t lie, and though the pounding in my head has increased ten-fold, I try not to relax. I want to feel my muscles fighting with bone, my anger and need buried in that tension. I embrace the pain in my chest, knowing my broken ribs argue with my lungs with each breath I take. I like the pain. It reminds me I am alive. I survived this night.

“Relax.” Lord Fyre’s supremacy wins the battle, his fingers magic, and I go liquid in his arms, my eyes closing, lulled by the total neutrality of his voice, power mixed with calm. It’s heady stuff, Lord Fyre’s master voice. Reawakening the so very new, unknown dark need, begging release; his voice is not at all like Garrett’s liquid bourbon, charismatic voice that acts as kindling for need that was already there. A slow blush rises through my body. My god, I’m comparing them, comparing the feel of their voices, just as I’ve compared their kisses, their hugs. What is wrong with me? *I want Master.*

Nevertheless, a very vital part of me needs what Lord Fyre can give me and that very vital part of me isn’t so certain that Master is up to the task.

“I’m going now, Celia, sleep. Tomorrow is another day.”

“No.” I say softly, not wanting to lose my nerve. Looking at Master, I make a promise. “I want you to be my Master, for ever and always.”

“Do not make a decision you will live to regret!” Lord Fyre hisses, but I hold my hand up, silencing him, my eyes turning to him with a promise held in their depths. I hope he sees that promise before I turn back to Master.

I lift my hand to Master’s face. “I want to be yours; but first, I have to find myself so that I am a strong enough woman for you to love. A person can’t be ready to accept another’s love until she can love herself, and I’m just not there yet. I still hate my darkness, still see it as sin. I don’t think you can change that.” I turn his own words against him, “You said that you want to love all of me, that you don’t wish to call me Kitten all the time because you will make me into a being of your making, and maybe that is true. But there lies inside of me a part aching to be birthed, a darkness that longs to feel, and that darkness has found a like mentor, one who will help me embrace it and not

be repulsed by it. I didn't mean for this to happen, but if you want me as much as I want you, you will allow this."

"What are you saying?" Master asks, but I see in the depths of his eyes that he knows what I'm saying, he just isn't sure he wants to acknowledge it.

"I don't know any other way to say it." Dropping my chin to my chest, I squint my eyes closed against hot tears, wanting so desperately not to hurt Master, not like this.

"Celia." Lord Fyre whispers my name against the back of my hair, his exhale warm on my neck, prayerful. Louder, he says to Garrett, "As her master, you have the power to command her into my keeping."

"I can't do that," Master seethes to Fyre before turning that angry energy onto me. "Are you saying I'm not Master enough?"

Lord Fyre answers for me. "She deserves to feel the darkness burning through her soul! It isn't a matter of you not being Master enough; it's a matter of you refusing to be Lord Ice with her! You have two choices: deny her this now, with her opening herself to you so honestly, risking all; or honor her honesty, knowing that she asks to be yours—and mine."

Reaching for him, I sob. "I cannot bear to lose you again, Master."

"No," he says, standing, putting distance between us. I sob harder, feeling I've lost him this time completely, not because of deceit, but because of truth.

Lord Fyre's arm wraps around my waist, pulling me into him completely, bowing around me, holding my struggling body with his arms and body as I try to go to Master. My hospital gown pulls apart, my bare skin touching him along the exposed strip of flesh between the ties of the hospital gown. I feel naked against him, though I'm not, not really. Still, I feel dirty and sinful.

Holding me so tight, my ribs scream, he whispers against my face in a strong hiss. "Let it go, Celia, let the guilt go. There's no judgment here!"

"There's always judgment!" I scream, kicking my legs to get free, but he holds me immobilized. "Anything I say comes back to haunt me! I keep my reason for being at the auction secret because I didn't want to hurt the man I'm falling in love with and it bites me in the ass. Then, to keep from cheating on the man I'm in love with in the future, I speak the truth of this need I can't abate—and that's biting me in the ass too! Even though he insisted on honesty as the basis for our relationship! He's not judging me, he's already condemned me!"

"No, Celia," Lord Fyre's words are said simultaneously with Master's "Not true."

"Yes, true, Master. You are punishing me for being completely honest! You are punishing me for expressing my needs." I go very still, my voice calmed by legitimacy. "Because I do want Lord Fyre to master me, I can't deny that. Are you so willing to walk away from me? Do you think that you own the monopoly on being hurt, angry, and sad? Rejected? Goddamn, Master! Want for me what you've already experienced! You've felt the release of your darkness. You've felt total surrender. You've known the joy of a great love! Do I deserve less?"

Lord Fyre barely breathes against my back; however, he doesn't release his hold on me.

Master runs his hand through his hair, anger, hurt and a million other emotions crossing his face before he turns his back to me and stands looking at the dark window.

I look at the window, too, the darkness of a very black night on the other side. Yeah,

I know this trick. I look at his reflection, catching his eyes and holding his gaze in that reflection when he seeks to find me in the darkness.

“Would you deny me?” I ask softly. His gaze doesn’t waver, seeing what I see, me pulled tight against Lord Fyre’s chest. Lord Fyre seeing both Master and I struggle to keep each other, though in very different ways.

“Set you free, so you can come back to me, is that what you’re saying?” Master demands.

I screw my face, trying not to laugh at the absurdity of a poem penned long ago, trying not to cry with the fear of all I’m risking. I settle for nodding. “Yeah, something like that.”

I don’t expect the long, dead, silence, where the three of us sit looking at each other’s reflections.

“Would you offer her any less than the opportunity Tony offered you when he sent you to your first munch solo, Garrett? Do you regret meeting me? Did meeting me, surrendering your will to me, change how you felt about Tony, or how he felt about you?” Lord Fyre breaks the awful silence that follows with a whisper that shakes the room. “Surrender to this now, Garrett, and while she’s finding herself, you can work on reawakening Lord Ice, because only as Lord Ice do you have any chance of owning her.”

My reflection watches as the gazes of the two men collide in their reflections.

“I’m not removing her collar.”

“I’m not taking her as Kitten, Lewd Larry’s property.”

I blink, not believing that they argue about me as a piece of property in third person while I sit between their warring reflections.

“Surrender, Garrett, have you forgotten all I taught you as you transformed into Lord Ice?”

The reflection of Garrett closes his eyes and turns to face the room. I refocus on the man. Facing me, he shoves his hand into his pants pocket and retrieves the small key to my collar. I take one last look at my reflection, not knowing how long it will be before I see Kitten again. The shiny, very expensive gold collar with the ruby charm looks out of place against the ugly blue-and-white-patterned hospital gown. I turn quickly from the reflection, looking expectantly at Master, thinking this is what I want and don’t want at the same. *Shit, shit, shit!*

“Wait! I don’t want this!”

“Yes you do, and when you’re ready, I’ll be waiting for you to come back to me.” Master promises, unlocking the collar. He presses a soft kiss against my lips. “I will be waiting for you.”

“Promise?” I gasp, trying not to cry and not succeeding. Garrett wipes the tears off my cheeks with his thumbs, failing to keep up with the torrent.

“Yes, Kitten, because it’s an easy promise to make. I love you,” he promises. “I just hope you are ready for the lesson Lord Fyre is willing to teach you.”

I look from one man to the other, suddenly very apprehensive. “What lesson is that?”

Garrett looks to Lord Fyre for the answer. Lord Fyre strokes the length of my arms, warming me from a sudden chill. “Only in surrender do we find peace.”

The End

About the Author:

Roxy Harte lives in a small town in southwestern Ohio; however, that is just the beginning of the story...

I wanted a house in the historical district and I found a wonderful Craftsman style that was perfect...well, it became perfect, actually quite wonderful, after I made nice with the resident ghost. Her name is Lucy and she's a young, mischievous girl who likes to play hide and seek. This is excellent, because Lucy has become known as the finder of lost things...keys, pens, earrings, cell phones.

I started writing incredibly hot BDSM erotica a decade ago, as a respite from caring for my invalid parents. After tucking them in, I would write the day's stress away until the wee hours of the morning, sometimes until it was time to start my day over again.

Now, I write for myself, for my joy...and hopefully to bring a moment's escape to my dear readers when they are in need of respite themselves.

Roxy lives with two of her three awesome daughters. Her oldest lives away from home and is busy raising Roxy's two incredible granddaughters. Also part of the family are two big, boisterous dogs and two reclusive cats.

Roxy writes for Liquid Silver Books and is an active member of Romance Writers of America and the Passionate Ink erotic romance chapter.

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