



Loose Id

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BOUND AND  
DETERMINED

# *Bound and Determined*

*Jane Davitt & Alexa Snow*



## **Bound and Determined**

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## About this Title

**Genre:** LGBT BDSM Erotic Contemporary

When Sterling Baker discovers the wonderful world of BDSM, he's ready to literally throw himself at the feet of the spectacular Owen Sawyer, but Owen is unwilling to take on someone so new to the scene—or so he says. Determined to get what he wants, Sterling sets out to convince the doubting Owen that he can be the best sub in the world, the fastest learning, the most obedient, but it's not as easy as he thinks it will be.

Things get even more complicated when Sterling realizes that he's fallen in love with Owen. Will Owen be able to train Sterling to his satisfaction? And can their relationship become something more than a teacher/student one?

**Publisher's Note:** *This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable: Anal play/intercourse, BDSM theme and content (including/not limited to bondage, gag, flogging, spanking, wax play), exhibitionism.*

## Chapter One

“Are you sure this is the right place?” Sterling asked doubtfully as they stepped inside and the door closed behind them. He had to blink and let his eyes adjust, but even then it seemed like maybe they'd gotten the address wrong. He'd never actually been to a BDSM club, but whatever he'd been expecting, it certainly hadn't been *this*.

It looked like a regular nightclub, and a reasonably crowded one at that. There was a bar along the back wall with the typical collection of college students and older people jostling for the bartender's attention. Two dance floors instead of the more traditional single one, but otherwise it seemed like just about every club Sterling had ever been to in his life. Not that there had been all that many, of course, since he was still half a year from his twenty-first birthday and he couldn't legally drink, but one of the benefits to living in an area that catered to two different universities was that the clubs were prepared to handle things like checking ID and keeping the underaged from getting their hands on any alcohol.

Hypothetically, at least.

But once he looked around a little more closely, Sterling saw that this club *was* different. In subtle ways, maybe, but careful observation showed that some of the patrons were wearing collars. Choker-style necklaces went in and out of fashion, and he didn't pay all that much attention to what women wore at any time—still, he did pay attention to men, and he was pretty sure he'd never seen a guy wearing a necklace like the ones he was seeing now. There were a few different styles, and the men wearing them seemed just about glued to the people they were with—some men, some women.

There was music playing, but it wasn't the loud, pounding-beat kind that Sterling was used to at nightclubs. It sounded more like top forty.

“Hello? Earth to Sterling?” Alex said, sounding amused, and Sterling blinked and forced his attention back to his friend.

“Sorry, what?” Even now, he found his eyes being drawn back to a couple sitting at one of the tables. Well, one of the two men was sitting at the table—the other was kneeling on the floor at his feet and looking up at him with an expression that might have been called worshipful.

“You asked if it was the right place,” Alex said. “Then you looked around, and I guess you answered your own question judging by the way your jaw dropped. Play it cool, huh? We don't want to come off like tourists.”

"Hey, you've been here before," Sterling protested.

"Only a couple of times," Alex said. "Plus Ray was leading me around by the dick—mostly figuratively, by the way, in case you were thinking about asking—so I was kind of focused on him."

Sterling nodded and watched as the guy sitting in the chair said something to the one kneeling beside him. Then he reached out and cupped the kneeling guy's head with one hand, stroking his hair. "Not too many people dancing," he said to Alex, trying to sound casual even though his heart was fluttering in his chest.

"There will be later," Alex said absently, his gaze scanning the crowd. "It's not exactly what people are here for though, you know?" He touched Sterling's sleeve. "Want to get a drink first and then I'll introduce you around? I see a couple of guys I know from when I was with Ray."

"Okay." They started toward the bar; then Sterling froze as one of the men sitting at it sharpened into someone he knew. "Fuck," he said, the curse half under his breath but getting Alex's attention all the same.

"What?"

"That guy," Sterling said. "Brown hair, blue shirt, with the top two buttons undone?"

"Yeah? You know him?"

"He's a professor," Sterling said. "He taught my freshman lit class. God, what the hell is he doing here?"

"Huh." Alex studied the man thoughtfully. "He does look familiar. And I think he's probably doing what everyone else is—hoping to hook up, maybe. It looks like he's alone."

Sterling had a lump in his throat the size of a baseball; it almost hurt to swallow around it. Professor Sawyer, who'd stood at the front of the class and lectured about Shakespeare and Steinbeck and Gibson, sometimes smiling in a way that had made Sterling's cock sit up and take interest, was here. At a BDSM club.

"You look like you're about to pass out or throw up," Alex said and moved to shield him from a possible glance from Sawyer, a gesture that left Sterling feeling irritated rather than grateful because it meant that he couldn't see Sawyer anymore. Which made no sense; Owen Sawyer wasn't even close to what Sterling was looking for, after all. There was clearly a lot that he didn't know about his former teacher, but Sterling doubted that the man was a sub. No collar around *that* neck, and the relaxed way that Sawyer was sitting, with a faint smile on his face, made him look like he belonged here in a way that Sterling envied. "I seriously doubt he's going to report you to the dean; how can he?" Alex grinned impishly. "He doesn't still teach you, does he? Because I can see how that'd be awkward the next time you meet up."

"No, thank God," Sterling said. "He teaches mostly writing courses; not really my thing."

"Maybe he'll take you on as, like, an apprentice or something," Alex suggested, sounding like he didn't really mean it. But actually, it wasn't a bad idea.

Sterling watched as a woman with an impressive cleavage revealed by her low-cut blouse went over toward Sawyer. He went so far as to step to one side so Alex didn't block his view as the woman spoke with Sawyer, smiling and twirling a lock of her blonde hair around one manicured finger. Sawyer seemed bored by her, a realization that sent a little thrill through Sterling. "You think he would?"

Alex shrugged. "Can't hurt to ask. You can get assholes here, like anywhere, but most people are happy to help out new players." His expression brightened. "If he's into teaching, he might even get off on it."

Sterling didn't think that being a teacher necessarily meant that you were willing to train someone in the finer arts of being a Dom in your spare time, but he didn't point that out. There were a lot of ifs and maybes to be dealt with, but he was too much his father's son to let hesitation and uncertainty stop him from reaching out for something he wanted. The worst that could happen was that Sawyer would say no, and a no could always be changed into a yes if you knew where to apply the right pressure.

He noted that Sawyer's glass was almost empty. "I'm going to buy him a drink and say hi," he told Alex.

"Sounds like a plan. I'll get a beer, and I'll be over there if you need me," Alex said, gesturing to a corner table where three men sat chatting animatedly to each other. He patted Sterling's shoulder solemnly, a glint of a smile in his blue eyes. "Go and get an A for assertiveness."

The seat next to Sawyer's was conveniently empty—Sterling slid into it as the blonde woman walked off, looking disappointed, and said as smoothly as possible, "Hi. Come here often?"

He'd almost forgotten how cold Sawyer's gray eyes could get when he wasn't happy about something. Almost. One flickering, disinterested glance and Sterling was on his way to being hard and feeling combative, responding to being ignored the way he had in class when Sawyer had dismissed his take on a poem as juvenile or ignorant or both.

"I asked you a question," Sterling said.

Sawyer swallowed the last of his drink—whiskey by the look and smell of it, poured over ice that had melted enough to lighten the amber of the liquid to a pale straw—and set his glass down on the bar. "And I was remarkably kind and pretended that I didn't hear it or notice your presence in a bar when you're too young to drink." Sawyer stared at him directly for the first time, a hint of anger in his eyes but not a shred of embarrassment. "Go home, Mr. Baker. You don't belong here."

"You don't get to decide where I belong," Sterling retorted. "And I'm not too young to be here. To drink, sure—though not for much longer—but not to hang out. I came with a friend. How about you?"

"I don't come here to make friends," Sawyer said, his voice crisp. Listening to it felt like biting into an apple just picked off a tree; Sterling's mouth wanted to water. "You *do* know where you are, don't you?"

Sterling frowned. "Yes—I'm not stupid. Which maybe, if you weren't old enough to be getting senile, you'd remember. I know you didn't like me when I took your class, but since our grades weren't based on your personal opinion of our character, I *did* get an A." He sighed and rubbed a hand across his face—this wasn't the way he'd imagined the evening going. "Look, can we start over again? Let me buy you a drink."

"No, thank you. And I remember you from my class very well," Sawyer said flatly. "You were cocky, arrogant, and you owed your grade to the fact that when you wrote your papers for me you dropped the attitude and actually produced something worth reading." Sawyer picked up his glass and swirled the ice in it, watching it clash against the side of the glass. "You surprised me; I assumed you'd paid someone to write them initially, but a phrase here and there echoed something you'd said in class..." He put the glass down and gestured to the bartender for a refill. "So forceful in public, so keen to correct me...but when you were alone, not surrounded by your clique of admirers, you wrote in a way that showed you'd listened to me closely."

Sawyer's drink arrived, passed over with a smile that held a hint of the same adoration some of the subs in the room were showing their Doms. Sawyer took it with a nod of thanks and stood. "Enjoy your little field trip to the zoo—and, yes, some of the animals here *do* bite."

Fine, Sterling thought, watching the man's perfectly shaped ass as he walked away. Who cares? I can find someone else to show me the ropes—someone a hell of a lot nicer than that bastard.

It was all a little too forced, though, and he wasn't in the business of pretending, not even to himself; he had to admit that it bothered him that Sawyer didn't like him. Sure, he could be kind of cocky sometimes. He was sharp as a tack, and he knew it. Growing up under the watchful eye of his father, the esteemed and respected William Sterling Baker II, he'd had to learn fast and protect himself faster. He could handle someone like Professor Sawyer.

If he wanted to.

Eyes searching the room, Sterling found Alex and went over to join him and the small group of people he was talking to.

The table was big enough that there were two empty seats, and he took the one next to Alex, who turned and greeted him with a smile that quickly turned sympathetic when he saw Sterling's face. Sterling didn't want sympathy, and he really didn't want to talk about his failure. He gave the men at the table a friendly nod and got some interested, appraising looks back that were soothing, even if he wasn't drawn to anybody in particular. It didn't



matter. He wasn't here to pick someone up; he was here to find a guide through the maze. He slid his hand over Alex's thigh under the table and reminded himself that even if things hadn't gone as planned a few nights before, the sex between them was still okay as long as they kept it vanilla.

The noise level at the table rose as one of the men, a slimly built redhead with sparkling green eyes, recounted some gossip that was met with laughter and then capped by the man beside him, who was snickering too much for Sterling to follow what he was saying. Alex turned away from the table slightly and murmured, "So what did he say? I asked about him while you were at the bar, and he's definitely got a good reputation; he knows what he's doing."

"Apparently he's even more of a jerk than I'd remembered," Sterling said. "He thinks I don't belong here and I should run along home and play with my LEGOs or something." He rolled his eyes, hoping he was acting convincingly nonchalant about the whole situation when, in fact, it was bothering him enough that he had a gnawing ache in his gut.

Alex's jaw dropped slightly, but he made a quick recovery. "Maybe it's a, uh, test or something and he wants to know if you're serious?" He scratched his jaw pensively. "I wasn't staring at you or anything, but from here you looked kind of, well..."

"What?" Sterling demanded, unwilling to admit that he hadn't even gotten as far as asking Sawyer to train him.

There was a couple walking by, the sub, tall, muscular, his arms bare, faded jeans clinging to his thighs and ass, walking a few steps behind an older man in a suit expensive enough to remind Sterling of his father. The sub looked unhappy, his head ducked down, a flush on his face, but as his Dom turned and looked at him, his head came up and he smiled tentatively, the happiness returning to his eyes as the older man, his face impassive, made some minor adjustment to the fit of the collar the sub wore. It was as intimate a gesture as a kiss.

"Like the guy *not* in the suit," Alex said succinctly as the couple walked away.

"What?" It came out sounding disbelieving, which was how Sterling felt. "Seriously?"

"Well, yeah." Alex shrugged and patted his shoulder. "Sorry, man, but it's true. I'm not saying it means anything—it's just how you looked."

Sterling sat back in his chair and thought about it for a minute as conversation continued around him, the music in the background blurring into the other sounds until all of it became meaningless. Which was what Alex's theory was. Wasn't it?

His whole life Sterling had struggled to come out on top in his relationship with his dad, and although the distance that going away to college had created made things easier, it didn't eliminate the conflict. Sterling's entire existence

revolved around not letting himself play second fiddle to anyone, so it made sense that, drawn to the BDSM lifestyle the way he was, he'd be a Dom.

Of course, until a few weeks ago, BDSM had been nothing more than a term, one that brought to mind men in leather masks whipping people stretched out on a rack with blindfolds over their eyes and gags in their mouths. It had been a cartoonish concept; that was all.

Then Sterling's roommate Brian had dragged him, somewhat unwilling, to an off-campus party on a Friday night. Brian had hooked up with some little red-haired girl almost immediately, leaving Sterling surrounded by straight couples who were making out on every available surface and no way to get back to the dorm unless he wanted to walk. He'd been on the verge of deciding to do so, even though it had to be at least six miles, when he'd noticed two guys slipping downstairs. Following them in the hopes that there was a flat-screen TV and a DVD player down there, *something* to help kill a couple of hours, he'd found only a bedroom door, ajar several inches, and sounds that told him the two men were doing something a lot more kinky than getting ready to watch a movie.

He hadn't been able to make himself leave. Instead, he'd stood there, watching what he could see, his cock rock-hard in his jeans as the bigger man ordered the other—who'd turned out to be Alex—to suck him off. The words he'd used had been explicit, but it was the submissive yearning in Alex's voice as he'd answered that had made it clear this wasn't just two guys hooking up.

Afterward, still hard, Sterling had crept back upstairs and waited on the front porch for one of the two to reappear. Brian and the redhead left for her place, offering to drop him back at the dorm, but he'd shaken his head and stayed until Alex, blond hair mussed, had come outside and lit a cigarette with hands that trembled.

"Hey," Sterling said.

"Hey." Alex inhaled blissfully. "You want one?"

"Sure. Thanks." Sterling had only smoked a handful of times, but he felt instinctively that he wanted to create some kind of connection, and he'd take what he could get. "I'm Sterling Baker."

"Alex Ross." Alex lit a second cigarette and handed it over. "God, I'm wrecked. What time is it?"

"I don't know. Two, maybe?" Sterling took a drag, exhaled without coughing, and steeled himself. "Can I ask you something?"

That had been the start of their friendship, and now, with the background noise of the club sharpening again, Sterling looked at Alex with a mixture of affection and gratitude. He *needed* this, he knew it deep down, and Alex was the one who'd opened his eyes to this new world.

"It has to mean something," he said finally. "Just not what you're implying. Maybe it's because it's *him* and I'm remembering how it used to be when he was in charge of me in class. Sort of a conditioned reflex, you know?"

It was a lame piece of reasoning, but Alex seemed to buy it, if his vaguely encouraging nod was anything to go by.

Sterling might have allowed himself to be convinced if he wasn't thinking about the few times he'd tried to give Alex what he needed and fallen well short of what they'd been aiming at. Faced with Alex on his knees, an expectant look in his eyes, his features settling into a serenity that was absent at other times, Sterling had panicked. Orders that needed to be voiced with utter certainty had been stammered, his voice hoarse and wavering. He'd contradicted himself, snapped at a patient Alex, frustration at his own failure sour in his throat, and ruined the mood spectacularly. The second attempt, a few nights later, had just been boring, though there had been the sense of something tantalizingly out of reach that kept him awake for hours, staring into the darkness of his room, his body aching, hungry.

Submissive. The one thing he *wasn't* and never had been. No. He just needed some experience, that was all, needed to soak up the atmosphere here. He'd always been a quick learner, observant, imaginative; every report card he'd ever had bore that out.

"We can try again tonight, if neither of us gets lucky," Alex murmured, his eyes bright as he passed his tongue over his lips. "God, I'd forgotten how horny this place makes me feel..." He made a sound very close to a satisfied purr and then turned his attention back to the conversation still occupying the table.

A minute later, though, everyone's focus was drawn to the couple in the center of the nearer of the two dance floors, and when Sterling glanced in that direction to see what the big attraction was, it felt like the bottom of his stomach dropped out.

Owen Sawyer—sometimes professor, sometimes Dom, if the way the woman with him kept her eyes cast downward had anything to say about it—stood there, some kind of flogging implement in his hand, eyes cool and distant.

The woman had straight dark hair, long enough to fall an inch or two past her shoulders, and she turned at Sawyer's direction, crossing her wrists behind her back and letting him bind them with a silky-looking scarf. Everyone near Sterling's table had gone quiet, so he was able to hear it when Sawyer murmured something in a low voice, something approving in the same tone of voice Sterling had heard him use in the classroom. He used the woman's name too: Carol.

Panic and excitement fought for ascendancy in Sterling as he stared at Sawyer. He wanted to be him—didn't he?—so completely assured, so in charge. Wanted to feel the cool, soft leather thongs of the flogger slide against his palm and through his fingers, wanted to make a gesture, just like *that*, and have a sub kneel instantly, a smooth, graceful movement that ended with them perfectly positioned for whatever he had in mind.

Sawyer's hand slid under the flowing dark hair and closed around Carol's neck. Sterling felt the echo of that possessive, claiming grip on the back of his

neck and closed his eyes in despair and defeat, engulfed in an intense longing that made everything fade to gray.

God. He could barely keep himself together, painfully aware of how it would feel to kneel on that floor, the wooden surface hard against his knees, a sparking ache of fire traveling from bound wrists to shoulders. He could picture with perfect clarity the view from that position, the upward gaze along the line of Sawyer's body to his face.

His hands were trembling as he watched Sawyer take control of Carol. The man unbuttoned her blouse one button at a time, casually, as if he had all the time in the world and wasn't particularly interested in what he was doing. Sterling knew that part was an act, though. Carol's eyes, wide, tear-wet and dark, were mostly downcast, but occasionally moved up to look at Sawyer's face, searching for something there.

The audience was mostly quiet now, an appreciative murmur humming through the air. The music was muted so gradually that Sterling couldn't have said exactly when it ceased to be audible through the seashell roar in his ears. He heard the small, throat-caught sound Carol made as Sawyer slipped her blouse off to tangle around her bound wrists, though; he heard that clearly, and it brought an answering moan to his own lips that he hoped went unnoticed in the ripple of comment that went around the room.

Carol's small, rounded breasts were held in a wisp of white lace and silk, delicately feminine and concealing nothing, but Sawyer still took it from her, unhooking the clasp between her breasts with a deft flick. It was strapless, and it fell to the floor behind her, a pale splash against the dark wood. Carol was wearing tailored pants, and her feet were bare; the image she presented was a jarring mix that left Sterling unsettled. She didn't look like anyone else in the room; fully dressed, with her hair in a neat bun, she would have looked like an executive, a lawyer, maybe.

Half-naked on the floor, her breathing quick and ragged, slowing when the strands of leather were dragged over her shoulder, the only caress she'd been given, she looked like a fantasy come to life.

Not just any fantasy; hers, had to be—or maybe it was Sawyer's and he only went for women? Sterling stared at Carol and envied her without jealousy for what she was about to receive and for the way she'd gotten Sawyer's attention.

Even staring at her bare upper half, her flushed-pink nipples, did nothing for Sterling physically—he'd never been attracted to women—but at that moment he was so spellbound that he could almost imagine what it would have felt like if he was.

"What do you think?" Alex asked in a hushed voice, leaning closer. A shiver went through Sterling, all the hairs on his arms and the back of his neck prickling with it.

"How—" His breath caught in his throat, and he had to try again. "How far will he take it?"

"As far as she told him that she wanted to go," Alex said. "He might give her less if he thinks she's reached her limits, but he wouldn't cross them."

*I know that*, Sterling wanted to snap at him. That was basic, and the reading he'd done online, researching a kink that had made parts of his life go from confusing to clear in an instant, had spelled out all the steps of negotiation, all the rules. The words had blurred as he read them, so aroused that he couldn't continue without jerking off right there in the computer chair as if he'd been reading porn, not dry, matter-of-fact bullet point lists.

"I mean, will he—right here in front of everyone—" He swallowed dryly as the flogger swung through the air and struck the curved back waiting for its kiss, answering his question.

After the first glance at Carol's face—calm, though her eyes were squeezing shut with each stroke and she was starting to breathe heavily—he looked only at Sawyer.

Sterling had seen that intent absorption in the classroom; Sawyer gave it to anything he read and any conversation that interested him. This was different though; Sterling was pretty sure that Sawyer hadn't been hard when he'd discussed symbolism and Sylvia Plath, a flush rising in his thin, strong face.

"Jesus," he whispered under his breath. He could see Sawyer's erection, outlined clearly under the khakis that might very well be one of the same pairs from freshmen lit. It was a thought that would have made Sterling hard too, if he hadn't already been—as it was, his cock gave a heavy throb, constricted as it was in jeans half a size too small.

Sawyer brought his arm back and swung again, quicker; Carol gasped, flinched, but didn't cry out. Her pale skin was red across her upper back and along her spine. God, what would it feel like to be the one kneeling there, waiting for the leather to strike? Knowing that Sawyer was the one in charge?

Sterling could feel sweat on his palms. He wiped them on his thighs and swallowed, shaken to his core.

Finally, and Sterling didn't realize that he'd been waiting for it until it happened, Sawyer spoke, his words directed at Carol, as if she was the only person who mattered and the watching audience didn't exist. It wasn't because Sawyer or Carol would have preferred to do this alone; if they did, this would be happening in one of the private rooms that Alex had said were at the back of the club, but it added a spice of voyeurism to the scene—not that Sterling needed it to get any more intense.

"You're doing so well, Carol."

She sobbed for the first time, as if Sawyer's cool words, spoken without emotion, were harder to endure than the stinging flick of the leather.

"You earned this attention from me by failing, though, and I don't really think that we should lose sight of that fact, do you?"

If Carol answered, Sterling didn't hear her. As gradually as the music had faded, the lights in the room had dimmed, until the only illumination shone down on the woman kneeling and the man standing over her. It gave him the opportunity to stare at Sawyer openly, greedily, and he took it.

Sawyer had a strong jawline and a perfectly straight nose—the better to look down it at other people, Sterling thought—and though he was probably just over average as far as height went, just about the same height as Sterling, he gave the impression of being larger than life. His hands, though, when Sterling looked at them... His hands were solid, his fingers long. Sterling wanted to feel them on his body, that roughened palm against his cock, clutching his ass.

God.

Unthinkingly, Sterling reached out for Alex's knee and gripped it. He needed something to hold onto, and Alex seemed to understand, because he didn't ask questions or move away, just let Sterling hang onto him. It felt like it had been going on forever—each time Sawyer drew his arm back, Sterling's heart stuttered in his chest, and he could feel sweat beading on his upper lip.

Tears were streaking Carol's face now, but she held the position she'd been placed in by Sawyer's hand on her neck, the tight clench of her fingers betraying her emotions more than her expression.

"But we all fail from time to time," Sawyer said and stepped back to study the marks he'd placed on Carol's skin. "And if we learn from that..." He walked to stand in front of her and used the handle of the flogger to tilt her face up to him, tapping it once underneath her chin and then taking it away. "What have you learned, Carol?"

*"What have we learned today?"* Sawyer had often finished a class with that final question, sometimes targeting a hapless student who hadn't been paying attention and then, when they floundered, summing up an hour of discussion with a few brisk, incisive sentences.

Carol wasn't going to be one of the lucky ones who got a rare, approving smile. She blinked up at Sawyer, her eyes filled with a panicked desperation as if she knew that this was what mattered most, not how well she'd behaved during her whipping, and bit her lip.

"I'm waiting," Sawyer said and made it sound not like an accusation or a reminder, but a flat statement of a fact that disappointed him.

Sterling shivered. He'd tried to make Sawyer angry from time to time, driven by an impulse he'd never examined deeply, but he'd never wanted to disappoint him and be on the receiving end of a dismissive, contemptuous stare. Carol wasn't getting that; she was getting something worse, because Sawyer untied her wrists and turned to walk away.

"No! Wait." Carol twisted her upper body to watch him leave, wincing in pain, and then called out, "Owen! Please!" her voice cracking on his name. "I can do better, I will, I promise, I just—" She looked around at the people

watching as if she'd only just seen them, and ducked her head with a gasp, her hair falling forward to shield her face and the tears that were sliding down.

A man and a woman emerged from the shadows around the dance floor, both dressed similarly in black leather pants and vest, hanging open over the man's bare chest, buttoned up tightly on the woman. They walked over to Carol and helped her to her feet, gathering her blouse from the floor.

"Staff," Alex said into Sterling's ear. "They, uh, tidy things up. And that just got *messy*."

"I think I've seen enough," Sterling said and stood, knocking his chair back onto the floor with a clatter that went mostly unnoticed among the voices of all the patrons who were now talking, creating a buffer for Carol, an illusion of privacy. He didn't wait to see if Alex would follow, just headed for the door that was closing behind Sawyer.

He burst out onto the sidewalk. Sawyer was walking away, in the shadows now that he'd stepped out of the circle of light shed by the streetlamp above.

"Wait!" Sterling said, desperate, *needing*.

Sawyer turned at once, rounding on him in a way that made Sterling hesitate before closing the gap between them. He got to within a few feet of Sawyer and then stopped, searching the man's face for some acknowledgement of the way he felt. Sawyer *had* to know what watching that scene had done to him, had to have felt Sterling's arousal build to the point where he was fucking *hurting*.

"This," Sawyer said, his voice clipped and furious, "is not a good time to annoy me with more clumsy attempts to get my attention. I don't appreciate them, and if you're serious about becoming more than an onlooker, you're going about it the wrong way." He took a step toward Sterling, his expression closed off and forbidding. "Back off," he said distinctly. "Now."

And, for once in his life, Sterling took a deep breath and did what he'd been told. He didn't speak, he didn't push the issue. He lowered his head and looked at the sidewalk, forcing his shoulders to relax. He was aware of the picture he made with his blond-tipped hair and his erect cock plainly visible, and he could only hope that Sawyer would like what he saw.

"Better," Sawyer said indifferently, casually, his anger fading as if Sterling's show of obedience had calmed him down. Sterling took a quick, hopeful breath, waiting—and Sawyer turned and walked away, disappearing around a corner before Sterling could find the words to stop him.

## Chapter Two

Owen shouldn't really have been driving when he was this keyed up, but right then he just wanted to go home. He pushed his emotions aside to be dealt with later and concentrated on the road, navigating the familiar route between the club and his house with his hands gripping the wheel tightly to stop them from shaking.

Carol and that goddamned boy...an ending and a beginning side by side if he wanted it to be that way. Did he? He wasn't sure—and that indecision troubled him more than his failure with Carol.

He'd left a light on, and it made the empty house look welcoming as he got out of his car in the driveway and walked up the narrow, twisting path to the front door. The path was edged with low bushes of lavender, aromatic in the damp September air, and roses, some still with a few tattered petals clinging to the thorny stems. Owen had inherited the large 1900s house from his parents, who'd moved into it after he'd left for college and partially restored it. It was only now, three years after their deaths in a car accident, that it was beginning to feel like his home, not theirs, a change that brought with it some guilt as he painted over walls they'd decorated and disposed of furniture they'd chosen.

He got inside, kicked off his shoes, and headed for the master bedroom, walking slowly up the curved wooden stairs. This room was the first that he'd made his own, unable to bear the thought of sleeping in his parents' bed for even a single night, the shock of their loss making logic and reason disappear. He'd slept on the couch for a week until the redecorating was complete and his own furniture had arrived, waking stiff-necked and cramped each morning. The pale rose walls and cream carpet that his mother, Anne, had chosen and his father had endured, had been painted over and torn up respectively, and the room, with its high ceilings and long, narrow windows, was now hunter green with a hardwood floor in a rich chestnut wood. Against the deep, traditional colors, the black metal frame of his high bed could have looked uncompromising, but the way the metal was worked into an airy design, simple but visually interesting, saved it from that.

Or so the salesman had told Owen, who had been more interested by the linked double posts in each corner, rising up a few feet above the frame, and the numerous places on the frame that would take a cuff or a tether.

He showered, keeping his mind deliberately blank, and pulled on a disreputable but warm navy robe that dated back years over a short-sleeved T-shirt and shorts. It was still early, barely ten, and he went back downstairs to



get a drink. The bottle of Lagavulin looked almost empty, but tipping its contents into a glass ended up giving him a lot more than he would usually have allowed himself as a nightcap.

Shrugging, he swallowed a third of it before going to sit in the wide, low leather armchair by the fireplace. A discreetly modern and effective heating system meant that he rarely went to the trouble of kindling a real fire, but he wished that there was one burning to chase away the chill that the hot shower and whiskey couldn't touch.

With no more reason to put off the inquest, he pictured Carol's face as he'd last seen it, anguished and contrite. Did he feel even a flicker of interest in her? He had to admit that he didn't. She was beautiful, not that it mattered to him as much as other factors, and she was exquisitely responsive, but God, she was so boringly predictable. Too many small flaws marring her performance too, flaws other Doms had let her get away with because of that shining fall of hair, those wide, beseeching eyes, and full, lush mouth.

Owen had taken her on because she'd begged him to and because he'd seen her potential, but she just didn't get it, none of it. The physical pleasure she got from what he did to her—that, yes, but she was incapable of understanding why something worked for her, and trying to coax anything other than a rote, “I like anything you do to me, Sir,” from her had proven impossible.

He didn't feel too sympathetic or regretful. She'd find someone else before the marks he'd striped her back with had faded, and they hadn't formed a real connection. She'd enjoyed being seen with him because he had a reputation for being choosy, but she hadn't been interested in him beyond what they did at the club.

Owen raised his glass in an ironic, silent toast to her, took a sip of whiskey, and forgot about her.

He wished that young Mr. Baker was as easy to ignore.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was only two days later that Owen ran, almost literally, into Sterling again. The weather was gray, the sky threatening rain that Owen felt confident would hold off until the afternoon, and he was still keyed up enough after the weekend that he felt the need to burn off some of his nervous energy. He liked to run—had since he'd been a teenager—and mornings seemed the best time to do so if he wanted to lose himself in the rhythm of the exercise.

He definitely preferred the track to running in his own neighborhood; for him, the whole point was to be able to concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other, not to have to worry about whether cars or errant dogs might make him a target. Before noon, few students seemed to use the college track.

Tightening the laces of his fairly expensive running shoes, Owen stretched a little and started to run. He kept it slow at first, easing into it, and made two complete laps, a total of half a mile, before he sped up. As he did, starting the

third lap, someone else joined him, pacing him. He glanced over and saw, more surprised than he should have been, that the someone was Sterling Baker.

"Hi," Sterling said.

Owen had been using the track for months, but he didn't recall seeing Sterling do anything more athletic than tapping his pencil against his desk until Owen's fingers had itched with the need to spank the brat out of him. It was a second surprise to see just how fit Sterling looked, his long, muscular legs emerging from a pair of clinging running shorts that showcased an ass usually hidden under overly baggy shirts. Owen didn't pay much attention to the sporting side of the university, though; for all he knew, Sterling could be a star of track and field. Once the young man had left Owen's class at the end of his freshman year, their paths hadn't crossed often.

Now it seemed they were about to cross frequently unless he swatted this persistent bug with enough force to drive his message home. Telling Sterling to go away wasn't an option given their location; Sterling had every right to be here. Retreating was equally impossible; it went against Owen's natural inclinations, and he was only partway through his run.

Sterling was watching him with just a little anxiety in his eyes, very different from the cool arrogance he'd shown Owen so often in class, but there was a tilt to his chin that didn't look at all meek.

"Good morning," Owen said pleasantly, glad that he wasn't at all out of breath. "Should I e-mail you my schedule for the week so that you don't miss any opportunity to accidentally bump into me, or can we end this game right now?"

"I don't want to end it," Sterling said just as pleasantly. "We're just starting. So yeah, feel free to e-mail me your schedule. Or not—I'm stubborn. I'll figure this out either way."

Younger and apparently just as fit, Sterling kept pace with no apparent effort—not impressive yet, not when he'd just started, but if it continued... If it continued, Owen *would* be impressed, and that wasn't part of his plan as to how this would go, not at all. Owen put on a bit more speed, testing, and Sterling sped up too.

They ran side by side in silence for a while, their paces perfectly matched, their feet striking the surface of the track in an insistent rhythm. Not good, and Owen, determined to break the unwanted synchronicity, fell back with an abruptness that left Sterling forging ahead for a few paces until he realized that he was running alone.

Owen gave him a bland smile and continued to jog at an easy, undemanding pace, frustratingly slow for him and, he was sure, maddeningly so for someone as athletic as Sterling. Now Sterling had several choices; he could match Owen's speed, following his lead, demonstrate his strength and endurance by sprinting off, or continue at his present pace. Or give up. Owen didn't really care what Sterling did; any choice he made would reveal

something about him, and that was what Owen wanted. Know thy enemies... Sterling wasn't an enemy, but the theory was sound.

At first Owen thought Sterling had chosen to continue at the same speed they'd been at, but slowly, almost casually, he slowed down until he was running beside Owen again. He flashed Owen a friendly smile, somehow managing to keep any hint of pride out of it.

"I'm still an English major," Sterling said.

Owen refrained from rolling his eyes. "Am I supposed to consider that an accomplishment?"

"After the hard time you gave me in your class? I'm surprised I didn't transfer schools." Sterling's tone was light, joking.

"And miss the chance to repay the favor by giving me a hard time when I'm *not* in class?" Owen didn't give Sterling a chance to reply; he wanted to run, feel the pleasant ache of tired muscles vanish in an endorphin rush as he pushed his limits. "Two laps," he said, and allowed a hint of challenge to roughen his voice. "Show me what you've got."

It was a strange relief that Sterling was left behind in Owen's metaphorical dust, even if it was only for a few seconds. At least it reassured Owen that the boy wasn't perfect. It was stupid of him to think otherwise, of course—but God, Sterling was so young and beautiful. And quick too—he caught on and caught up in less than thirty seconds, long legs matching Owen's speed stride for stride.

It felt good, running so fast. The world passed by in a blur of color, Owen's nostrils flaring like he imagined a horse's would as he went faster and then even faster. He was aware of Sterling beside him, arms and legs pumping. Owen wasn't running at top speed—this wasn't about winning, it was about discovery, and he wanted to know what Sterling was capable of. A hell of a lot more than he was himself, if this was any indication. Owen was sixteen years older and, while fit by almost any standards, no match for a twenty-year-old with a chip on his shoulder.

He shouldn't be doing this—not the running, which was exhilarating, but what it implied. Sterling was barely more than a kid, a kid who had no idea what he was getting himself into. Or trying to get himself into. It'd be okay, though, because Owen would set him straight.

The second lap was almost over when Owen broke from a position that had given him an excellent view of Sterling's ass for the last few minutes and poured everything he had into the last few hundred yards, soon passing Sterling, who'd run a valiant race at a speed just a fraction too much to sustain over the distance.

As he'd expected, he heard a grunt of sheer determination from behind him, Sterling's breath sobbing in his dry throat, and he could almost *feel* Sterling straining every muscle to regain the lead. Did the boy think winning would give him what he wanted, whatever that was? And what would happen if

Owen allowed him to win and then walked away again, something he was more than capable of doing?

It took more of an effort to stop than continuing to run would have done, but with the finish line a few yards away, he slackened his speed dramatically and watched a blown, panting Sterling finish the race.

"You don't know your limits well enough," he said when he could speak without gasping for breath between words. His legs were trembling slightly, and the lure of a really hot shower made him disinclined to drag out a conversation that he supposed the boy had earned. They were still the only ones on the field, but it felt odd to be discussing this here in this wide-open space. "That kind of recklessness in a Dom can get a sub hurt, and in your case, you'd need a very experienced handler to impose more realistic demands upon you."

Sterling was bent forward at the waist, hands braced on his thighs as he fought to regain control of his breathing. His face was flushed, his T-shirt damp and clinging to his upper body, but his eyes were bright and hopeful when he looked up at Owen. "You're experienced," he said. "You could handle me. I want—I want you to show me. Teach me." Sterling hesitated, then went on. "Like the woman in that club. Carol? Like her."

"Oh, God, no," Owen said without thinking before he spoke for once. He shook his head forcefully and felt the cool air brush against his flushed face, reminding him of how hot he was. "I'm not going through that hell again and certainly not with you. No." He walked over to the towel he'd left draped over a bench a few yards away and used it to blot up the sweat on his face before picking up his water bottle. Sterling appeared beside him, but Owen ignored him in favor of getting the water from the bottle to his mouth, swallowing it in long, slow gulps.

Teach him? Teach the obnoxious brat who'd given him a semester's worth of hell to behave? Oh, it was appealing on one level—and Sterling's manners had improved somewhat since his freshman year—but Owen had had enough of newbies and wannabes. He'd already decided that his next session—and God, he'd earned it—would be a one-off with a sub he knew and trusted, a blessed relief after weeks of dealing with Carol's lack of imagination and, before her, the equally disappointing Andrew.

How long had it been since he'd really clicked with a sub? Bleakly, Owen wondered if he ever would again. Maybe he was too demanding, too exacting, but wasn't that what it was all about?

"Please," Sterling said. His voice was quiet, but the lack of volume didn't do anything to hide the intensity. "What if—what if it wouldn't be hell? I mean, I'm smart, and I'm a fast learner. And there must be a reason you do it—for you. Something you get out of it, right? I could give you that." From somewhere, the kid managed to find a slender thread of persuasiveness and inject it into his voice. "I could give you what you need."

"How do you know that?" Owen asked bluntly, determined to make Sterling see sense. "You don't know anything about my tastes, and believe me,

it isn't as simple as matching someone with a desire to control with someone who wants to be controlled. Far from it. I've been involved in this for a long time, and what I need and expect is almost certainly beyond you." Sterling's mouth tightened mutinously, and Owen gave an impatient sigh. "That isn't a dig, so don't give me that look. God, you wouldn't last five minutes with an attitude like that... Tell me—and don't exaggerate—just exactly how much experience you've had."

*And then I can laugh, walk away, and avoid you for the rest of the year.* Sterling smelled of sweat and musk, and the visceral memories that particular combination conjured up were making Owen edgy.

"Almost none," Sterling said, looking at him steadily and making no apologies, two things that Owen reluctantly gave him credit for. "My friend Alex and I messed around some, but it wasn't working and we didn't know why. It wasn't until he saw how I looked at you at the club that something clicked and we realized that it was because I wanted you. Because I want to let someone else be in charge, but only someone *I* choose."

Sterling sighed and looked out across the fields toward where the campus pond was. Owen looked too, reflexively, and they were both watching when a kid threw a stick and a black-and-white dog ran after it, barking, only to be swallowed up by the morning fog that hung thick in the air around the water.

"I know you think I'm too young to know what I want," Sterling went on. "But I do. And even if I'm inexperienced, I'm not ignorant. I've been reading about this for weeks. I can *learn*. I just need somebody to teach me. I'd like it to be you." That sounded like a thinly veiled threat—if Owen wouldn't take him on, he'd find someone else who would.

Owen contemplated walking into the club one night and finding Sterling kneeling, collared at someone's feet, and found the image not at all to his liking. Sterling was new, completely new to all of this, to a world that Owen had been part of for so long that he'd almost forgotten what it was like not to be surrounded by people who thought and felt as he did, people who understood. Someone had once told him that hell was standing in the cold, lonely darkness, looking through a window at a party you could never join, and right now that was how Sterling had to be feeling.

Which got him a certain amount of sympathy, but did it get him what he wanted, just for the asking? No.

Without vanity, Owen knew that he was considered good at what he did—what he *was*. Carol might be complaining about his harshness with a tear or two dewing her eyes, but that would add to the cachet of being his next sub, not put people off. If he showed up with someone as raw and untried as Sterling, eyebrows would rise and the gossip would start. There was more at stake than guiding Sterling's baby steps, not that Sterling, who possessed the natural egotism and selfishness of most people his age, would have considered that.

Overhead a squabble of birds flew, chattering noisily, swooping and diving through the cool, damp air. Owen tilted his face up to watch them, admiring their grace and precision. He could train Sterling to move like that, each shift of position smooth and flowing, his body under perfect control.

Under *his* control.

Oh, God, yes, it was appealing.

He turned his attention back to Sterling. "How old are you?"

Sterling looked startled, then answered slowly. "Twenty. Almost twenty-one." When Owen lifted an eyebrow, he admitted, "In four months. January eighteenth."

Owen shook his head. "Not a chance in hell until you're over twenty-one. And that goes for anyone you'll meet at the club *or* outside it, and trust me, I'll know if you try."

Which wasn't strictly true, but he had no compunction about lying if it kept his sub safe—and look at how easily Sterling had slipped into that space...

"Oh, so now you control everyone in the neighboring five towns?" Sterling didn't look even slightly convinced. "I already know that's not true—Alex was seeing a guy who traded him in for a younger model, younger than me. Just because you have an unreasonable code that you pretend has something to do with ethics, that doesn't mean everyone else does. If you won't do this, I can find someone who will. But I'd rather it was you."

"Fine, the legal age for gay sex in this state is eighteen, and you're well past that," Owen snapped, goaded into honesty. "What you want is more than just sex, and I'm damned if I'm going to let you rush into this, demanding that everyone dances to your fucking tune. God, pushy subs like you are the most—"

"Challenging?"

"*Not* the word I was going to use." Owen ran his hand through his damp hair, his T-shirt clinging clammily to his back. He really needed that shower, and he had a class at nine... "The answer's no."

He glanced over to the right and saw a small group of students approaching, kicking a football between them, the sound of their voices carrying. Sterling saw them too, and his mouth tightened with frustration.

"Go away and think about it," Owen said with more sympathy in his voice. "Talk to people like this friend of yours. You don't need someone like me when you're this new; you just need a boyfriend with an open mind. Find one and get him to give you a spanking. You might discover you don't even enjoy it when it's reality and not a fantasy."

"So you're saying you're out of my league?" Sterling demanded. "I'm not good enough?"

Owen looked him over; tall, good-looking in a classic fair hair and blue eyes way, undoubtedly intelligent and so very much in need of discipline and control... Oh, Sterling was good enough.

"You're perfect." Owen watched the boy's eyes light up, good-looking transformed into something so much more with the praise, vulnerability, and pleasure struggling for the upper hand in his expression. It made his parting words seem cruel, but they had to be said.

"For someone else. Not me."

He walked away without looking back, putting some much-needed distance between them.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sterling had never gotten over the surprise that there were so many people still willing to eat ice cream in the fall in New England, but it was okay with him because it meant he had a job. It wasn't crazy busy the way it was in the late spring, but business was steady and not at all hurt by the fact that Charlie, the store's manager, had branched out and added pastries and cookies to the menu along with an assortment of coffees. In a college town, there were always dozens of students willing to pay almost anything for a beverage with extra caffeine in it, and the very expensive and sometimes temperamental espresso machine saw almost constant use.

He'd just finished making a round of cappuccinos for some girls with the serious, drawn expressions of students working under a deadline and delivered them to their table—the delivery wasn't a usual part of his job, but it wasn't busy enough for it to bother him, and sometimes that kind of thing earned him good tips—when the bell over the door rang and a woman came in. She was wearing a black cap and looked, at first glance, vaguely familiar, but it wasn't until their eyes met and she said, "I know you," that he remembered who she was.

"Um, Carol, right?" Sterling asked. She was the woman from the club, the one that had been Owen's sub. "What can I get you?"

She laughed, one of those artificial titters that were meant to say just how much she *wasn't* amused. "Well, I came in for coffee and a raspberry Danish, so how about we start with that? Skim milk, large, and why don't you surprise me on the beans?"

"Sure." Sterling went for Kenyan and took the cup and the pastry over to her table, tucked away in a corner. He'd gotten good at guessing where people would sit, and he would've pegged her for a table in the middle of the room where everyone would see her, or the window, where she could look out. When she tapped the chair beside her and said, "Sit," her choice made more sense.

"I'm working," Sterling told her, but sat anyway because he was curious.

"Owen doesn't want to see me anymore," Carol said. "So I assume he's seeing you."

"No," Sterling said. "I mean, I'm trying to talk him into it, but he says I'm, I don't know, wrong for him, or something. What am I doing wrong?"

Carol laughed again and wrapped her hands around her coffee mug like she was trying to warm her hands. "You think *I* know? It's just Owen—he's the best, but he gets bored easily, so he moves on. If he isn't with you, then he must be with someone else."

Somehow Sterling didn't think that was the case, but Carol knew Owen better than he did. "Who? I mean, do you have any guesses?"

Carol shrugged, making the gesture theatrical. "I don't know. I heard about *you* because you were staring at me—you know, that night, and I hadn't seen you before, so I asked around."

He'd been staring at Owen, not her, but it didn't seem kind to point that out.

"It was the first time I'd gone there. A friend of mine, Alex, is a member, and he—"

"Oh, I know Alex," she interrupted. "He's the one who told me that you had your eye on Owen."

"Remind me to say thanks to him," Sterling said dryly.

Carol began to pick at her Danish, separating out small pieces with fingers tipped with nails painted much the same color as the filling, managing to keep an eye on Sterling as she did it. Sterling wondered if she planned to actually eat any of it; what she was doing seemed a real waste. Finally, she popped a piece laden with frosting into her mouth and pushed the plate aside.

"It's no one at the club," she said. "I'd know." She preened, her movements sensual and elegant; Sterling could see how she might have appealed to Owen, though something in him hated the thought that Carol was Owen's type. "People tell me things, always have." She pouted thoughtfully. "It might be someone from the theater... That's where I met him. There was this opening night party, and we got to talking... I played...well, it wasn't exactly the lead character, but Amelia had a *vital* role. Without her delivering the letter, Colin and Susan would never have known that Susan's father suspected them. Owen said my role was *pivotal*."

Sterling could just picture Owen when he said that, the delivery bone-dry, one corner of his mouth curled up.

Carol sighed and took a delicate sip of coffee, leaving the rim of the mug smudged with deep red lipstick. "We were so good together at the start," she said mournfully, "but I knew I could never compete with Michael."

Glancing over at the counter, which was customer-free, Sterling leaned closer to Carol. "Michael?"

"Oh, you haven't heard? He was Owen's first—and you know what they say about firsts." Carol gave him a pointed look until he nodded, then went on. "If you ever *do* get together with Owen, it'll only be temporary, because nobody can measure up. Not that Owen still wants Michael."

"He doesn't?" That sounded a little more promising.



"No, they agreed to split up. It's more that Michael is, I don't know, representative of the relationship Owen is looking for. He just hasn't figured out yet that it's not possible. He wants—hm." Carol frowned at her plate, then slid it toward Sterling. "Feel free."

Sterling shook his head. "No, thanks." Like he'd eat a Danish she'd picked apart. "What does Owen want?"

"Not me, anyway." For the first time, Sterling saw an unstudied, genuine emotion; Carol looked forlorn, her bright mouth drooping. "I knew we wouldn't have long—I see this psychic once a month, and she told me that I was still in a self-discovery phase and that in a year I might find the perfect partner, but it wasn't going to happen for a while and she'd guide me there."

Sterling repressed the urge to ask how much the guiding would cost and gave her an encouraging murmur. He wasn't sure how much of what she said he could trust; she was a self-centered flake by the sounds of it, but even so...

"He wants you to be perfect," she said abruptly. "He tells you to do something and that's the way he likes it done, and he really hates having to remind you if you screw up."

That didn't sound too unreasonable to Sterling. In fact, he got a kick out of the idea of Owen being that precise, that stern. God, yes—and he could be everything Owen wanted him to be, he knew it.

"At the same time, if you do get it right—and I tried!—you can see him switching off. He got bored with me. With *me*." Carol tossed her head. "The sex was nice, and he's *good* at the other stuff—you know. The spanking and the—"

"Yeah, I get it," Sterling said hastily. The place was mostly empty, but that also meant that it was quiet.

"He's *really* good at that," Carol said wistfully. "Just...hard to please. That scene at the club; that was over the stupidest little thing. Really, really dumb. He likes to talk; wants to know why things worked and other stuff didn't, and I can't *do* that. Well, not the way he wanted me to, anyway. And I was late a lot, and he just didn't seem to realize that I'm not a person who can be tied to a timetable. I'm a free spirit. Look!" She thrust out both hands dramatically, narrowly missing her coffee mug and exposing thin wrists jangling with silver bangles. "No watch!"

That was proof, all right. Sterling revised his opinion from "self-centered flake" to "potentially crazy flake," then hid a grin as the "free spirit's" cell phone rang.

"Sorry," she said. "Hang on." She answered the phone, her voice low, and Sterling politely turned his attention to the glass display case where they kept the pastries, noting that it was speckled with fingerprints from when customers pointed to what they wanted. "Okay. Yes. Yes. I know—you too. Okay, bye." Carol looked at Sterling again. "Sorry—that was my astrologist."

"Oh." Somehow that didn't come as the slightest surprise. What was surprising was that Owen, who had seemed pretty down-to-earth to Sterling,

had spent so much time with this woman. "So Owen didn't like it when you were late?"

Carol pouted, something that Sterling felt sure she practiced in front of a mirror to get the exact blend of sorrowful dejection and reproof. "He said it showed a lack of respect for him, what we did, and his time." Sterling noticed that her voice altered subtly and guessed that she was using Owen's exact words. They certainly sounded familiar. "He said he wouldn't start a session if he was really annoyed with a sub and with me, it was becoming impossible to feel any other emotion." She tossed her head again. "I wasn't *that* late."

It occurred to Sterling that he'd been late for a *lot* of Owen's lectures, sometimes accidentally, because his morning routine had been interrupted by something unforeseen, like his toast burning or a complete lack of clean shorts, but mostly just to get that intense stare and a few biting, scathing words thrown at him. He'd told himself that he enjoyed pissing Professor Sawyer off—the man was such an asshole about things like handing work in on time—but looking back, he wondered if he'd been looking for something more from Owen even then.

For Owen to put out his hand and say, "Enough," and *make* him behave.

If all those times when he'd been late were contributing to Owen's reluctance to take him on... God, he hoped not.

"What else doesn't he like?" Sterling asked.

"Oh, lots of things." Carol waved her hand, and her bracelets jingled faintly. "Too much talking, for one. Which is ridiculous, because, well, normal people *talk*, right? And he was so confusing about it! Sometimes he'd *want* me to talk, and other times he didn't want me to, and I couldn't keep track of which times were which."

"That does sound confusing," Sterling said diplomatically, even though he thought Carol was probably just not that bright. Right—so Owen liked it when you knew to keep quiet at certain times. That would be a challenge, sure, but he could learn.

Sterling knew he was smart. He could learn.

Carol gave him a surprisingly shrewd look. "Nothing I say will make any difference, will it? You still want him."

"Don't *you*?" Sterling pulled a face. "You don't have to answer. I know you do. Yes, I want him—more than anything. And I don't give up easily. When I want something..."

"You think that you can make Owen do something he doesn't want to? *Owen*?" Carol shook her head. "No. The only way you'll get him to take you as his sub is if you make him see you as a challenge, and right now, this new, you're more like a chore." She picked up her mug and took a long swallow. "It's been a long time since Owen trained a novice."

"Let me guess," Sterling said. "Michael."

"That's right. Everyone after Michael has known what they were doing and didn't need training in the basics." She gave him a look that might have been intended as kind but came off as patronizing. "How much training would *you* need?"

"Not as much as you'd think," Sterling said. "I've done a lot of research already. And I learn fast."

"It isn't book smarts you need for this kind of thing," Carol said. "Honey, I got straight As in school too, but believe me when I tell you, you either have a knack for it or you don't. I've seen a lot of people who thought the scene was going to be some big kink fest, that it was all about the sex. But it's not. There's a lot more to it than that."

Sterling opened his mouth to ask her what she meant, not really convinced that he trusted her take on it, but intensely curious, even so. Just talking to her had made him feel the first stirrings of an arousal that had nothing to do with her and everything about the subject of their conversation. He'd gotten the first words of his question out when the door opened and a group of teenagers walked in, backpacks slung over their shoulders, carried along on a tide of chatter and laughter.

"Damn," he muttered as he stood up. "Sorry—hang on, okay? I'll be back. Let me just get these guys."

The kids at least knew what they wanted—most of them were in the store a couple of times a week—but it took a while to make a variety of coffee drinks, especially when they asked for add-ins like syrups and whipped cream. When the last of them had paid and moved away from the counter, Sterling glanced reflexively toward the table where Carol had been sitting, but it was empty.

Looked like he was on his own again.

The next time Owen bumped into Sterling, it was even more literal. He was in the college library looking for a book he knew was on the shelf but which he just couldn't seem to find. Finally, he set his keys down on a shelf and knelt to check the lowest one, brushing his fingers along the spines of the books to make sure he didn't miss the one he wanted. *There* it was. He slipped it from between its companions, stood with a creak of joints that made him frown, and headed back toward the elevator.

Two rows later, he remembered his keys. Owen swore and retraced his steps, rounded the corner to the aisle he'd been in, and crashed full body into someone.

"God, I'm sorry," he said, finding his balance and using one hand to steady the other person. "Are you—oh. It's you."

"So I don't get an apology?" Sterling asked, grinning and not stepping back when Owen let go of him.

"You're stalking me," Owen said.

Sterling shook his head. "I prefer the word 'following'; it sounds less creepy."

"But doesn't make it any less annoying," Owen said, raising his eyebrows. "You—almost—make me wish that you were mine to deal with; I can promise you'd be regretting this behavior very soon."

That wiped the grin off Sterling's face. "God, I wouldn't regret anything if I was. Yours, I mean. I'd let you do whatever you wanted."

"*Let* me?" Owen asked pointedly. "Somehow, I think you've misunderstood the definition of *submission*."

God, they were close to flirting here, in the dense hush of the library, their voices lowered. Anyone could come around the corner like Owen had and find them here, standing too near to each other, looking too...involved.

"Maybe I need you to clear things up for me," Sterling said, inching closer still. Owen stepped back, deliberately putting more space between them, and Sterling moved forward again. "I can be good. Show me."

"You give me orders and demands when you should be begging, and follow when I'm telling you to back off; forgive me for doubting your ability to please me," Owen said, sarcasm an easy weapon to wield. "Would you be this argumentative on your knees? I'm inclined to think you would. There's a big difference between an interesting, challenging sub and one who can't and won't learn. I *know* you, and I know what you'd be like."

He let that ambiguity stand. Owen was certain which category Sterling would fall into and completely sure of his own ability to tame and control him—even if he was failing miserably at getting Sterling to leave him alone.

That failure was because of his ambivalent feelings, though, nothing more. He didn't doubt that he could train Sterling and enjoy doing it, but God, it would be *such* a bad idea. Sterling was floundering in the dark, but would he like what he saw if Owen lit a candle? Owen didn't want to see Sterling panicked, distressed, his brash arrogance scoured away. The boy had been a pest in class, granted; he was being way too demanding now, playing the part of a spoiled brat to perfection. *I want. Give it to me now*—behavior Owen would never have tolerated in a sub.

It didn't matter. He wanted Sterling tamed, not traumatized.

"You're not ready for me," he said, and tried to put a cool finality into his words.

"Maybe not," Sterling said. "But I don't want anyone else." And he sank to his knees right there in the stacks, looking up at Owen with hopeful eyes. He didn't put his hands behind his back, and he didn't lower his head, but neither of those things mattered. He was so beautiful that the thought of turning him away seemed impossible. "Please, Owen. Teach me."

"Oh my God—" Owen thrust his fingers through his hair, arousal and annoyance combining to make him louder than was wise. This was the most reckless, stupid... "Get up. Now."

"Not until you say you will." Sterling didn't pout or whine; he just looked up at Owen with a resolve that didn't waver.

Owen took a quick, sharp breath and tried to calm his racing heart.

"I just gave you an order," he said. "Disobeying it is a poor start to our relationship."

Sterling hesitated, seeming unsure of what the right thing to do was, then, finally, obeyed. On his feet again, the boy kept looking at him in that same way—steady, patient. Ready to learn, which just tempted Owen all the more.

"Better," Owen said. Somehow, around Sterling, he found himself making snap decisions without hesitation, the way it had been with Michael all those years ago. The way it was supposed to be. "You want me to mentor you until you're sure of yourself? Then we do this my way. We do all of it my way, in fact. If that isn't something you can commit to, I walk away now, and we never discuss this again. Ever."

Sterling blinked uncertainly, like he'd expected either a yes or no answer and didn't know what to do with something in between. "I don't know what that means," he said. "Do I have to wait until January? Because I can't. I feel like—I've been waiting my whole life for this, to find out this thing about myself that's as important as breathing, only I didn't know what it was. And now that I *know*, I can't just hold my breath for four more months. I can't. I *can't*." His hands were balled into fists.

Owen could understand that, but he refused to let Sterling have what he wanted so easily, just for the asking. He wanted Sterling begging, and for all the hunger in his eyes, Sterling hadn't come close to that. He would.

"There's more to discuss than we can do here," he said, "but until you agree to one condition, there's nothing to discuss—and it's not up for negotiation."

"Yes," Sterling said recklessly, not waiting to hear what it was. "As long as it doesn't mean waiting, yes. Whatever it is. Yes."

"No." Owen said vehemently enough to make Sterling flinch. "Never do that. Never agree to something blind—oh, God, can you think with something other than your dick long enough for me to get it through to you that this is only safe, sane, and fucking consensual if you use your goddamned brain to do more than stop your ears from touching?"

A distant part of his brain was telling him that he was breaking about a dozen student/teacher rules, but he ignored it. There was more at stake here than a code of conduct that he was fulfilling in spirit anyway by trying to protect Sterling from himself.

"Okay. Right, right. Sorry. I know this—I do. It won't happen again." Sterling muttered the words, flushed and seemingly miserable, but he lifted his gaze with what looked like a fair amount of effort and met Owen's eyes. "Right. Tell me what it is."

Owen exhaled, partially mollified by Sterling's reaction, which was certainly not the one a rebuke like that would have gotten had they been in class. Even the mildest criticism—and not many of Owen's qualified for that description; “scathing” was more accurate—had been greeted by a sullen pout or a riposte that bordered on insolent more than once.

“You said you didn't want to wait.” He could hear the elevator doors as they opened, and the voices of some students talking and coming toward them. Damn. “I won't make you wait to feel...” He hesitated, searching for the right words. “Owned” came to mind, and he rejected it as being too much, too soon. “That you belong,” he temporized, “but you've demonstrated impatience and bad manners—yes, you have—and they're not failings I'm lenient about. One lesson you have to learn is that actions have consequences, and another is that waiting is part of what you say you want, not something to be avoided. I want it understood that I won't have sex with you before your birthday, no matter what I decide to do with you.”

Sterling looked doubtful, but nodded. Owen thought cynically that the boy probably didn't think that he meant it. He'd learn. “Okay. If that's your condition, fine, and I'll try to be more patient. But—can we, I don't know, talk more?” He turned his head in the direction of the students coming toward them and lowered his voice. “Off campus. I know it's probably not a good idea to be seen with me. What's that, fraternizing?” Sterling's lips quirked into a good-natured smile that went all the way to his eyes, crinkling them up and transforming his already handsome face into a shockingly beautiful one.

Oh God, Owen was in so much trouble.

“I could take you out to dinner,” Sterling offered.

Owen shook his head. He couldn't think of many restaurants in town where there was zero chance of someone they knew seeing them, and it wasn't the ideal setting for the type of discussion they needed to have. Two good reasons to turn down Sterling's invitation, but the one that counted was that he didn't want to be Sterling's guest. Sterling was still, unconsciously perhaps, fighting for control of the situation as a way of dealing with it, and Owen didn't want to—couldn't—give it to him.

“We have to talk,” he said, “but I'd prefer to do it somewhere less public than that. Come to my house tonight at eight. I'm sure you can find it.” Giving orders, setting the scene...how many times had he done this? It still sent a sizzle of arousal down his spine, and he could feel Sterling respond to that without knowing what he was doing—subtle signs that Owen noted automatically, like the way Sterling was leaning in closer to catch every word. “Eat something before you arrive, but no alcohol, not even a beer.” He smiled. “And no, you don't have permission to do anything about the hard-on you'll get when you're showering, but I'm sure you knew that already.”

“I *have* been doing a lot of reading,” Sterling reminded him with just a hint of that cocky attitude Owen was familiar with. There was a tension in Sterling now, a new one that hadn't been there before—Owen felt confident it was

because Sterling thought he'd won, that he was getting what he wanted and that meant he was coming out on top. "And yes, I'll find your house. Eight o'clock. Do I get punished if I'm late?"

"That depends," Owen said mildly, more than equal to dealing with Sterling in this mood. "Would you consider being told to go away until you'd learned to tell the time a punishment, or no more than you deserved for failing to follow a simple instruction?" He moved past Sterling to retrieve his keys from the shelf. "Eight o'clock, Sterling."

"Yes, sir," Sterling said promptly. "I won't be late. Should I bring anything?"

"Just yourself," Owen said, amused despite himself by Sterling's eagerness and wondering how long it would last once he'd spelled out certain conditions.

He wasn't sure, but he suspected it was going to be an interesting evening.

## Chapter Three

Sterling took the bus to Owen Sawyer's house. Doing so felt wrong somehow, increasingly aware as he was of his own nervousness. For a while he'd been convinced that Sawyer didn't want anything to do with him, and as much as he'd wanted to change the man's mind, he hadn't thought he'd be able to. He still wasn't sure what the deciding factor had been in the sudden change of heart, which bothered him; he would have preferred to know why, mostly so that he could use the knowledge to his advantage in the future.

The bus stopped two blocks from Sawyer's house, the address of which Google had helpfully provided. Sterling walked up one street and then down another, noting that the houses were older, but well kept up. No peeling paint or unmowed lawns. Did Sawyer cut his own grass or pay someone to do it?

Sawyer's house was big and kind of old like the rest of them, with a wide porch and some tangled bushes lining the path that led up to the front door. Some of them were roses, Sterling thought, but he didn't know what the other ones were. He hoped Sawyer wouldn't expect him to know. And of course *that* thought set off a cascade of others, thoughts that made him even more anxious about how this was going to go.

Luckily Sterling knew how to pretend he was confident and self-assured, even when he was feeling anything but. It was a skill he'd perfected in years of living with his father—one of the few things he'd learned from his father that he actually ought to be grateful for, now that he thought about it.

He walked up the path slowly, aware that he was a few minutes early and assuming that knocking on the door before eight would be as frowned upon as being late. His cock, which had been at a state of half-mast all day, ached a little bit as he went up the stairs and checked his watch—7:59. Surely that wasn't *too* too early? He took a deep breath, steeling himself, and rang the bell.

Sawyer didn't keep him waiting for long, but the gap between when he rang the bell and when the door opened still seemed endless. The door was dark wood, with three stained-glass panels set high up, letting in some light without compromising privacy. Sterling had time to notice that the rose motif had carried over to the glass and time to count the panels on the door (six) before he was staring not at wood, but Sawyer, a phone to his ear and an exasperated look on his face.

He beckoned Sterling inside with a flick of his fingers and, when Sterling stepped over the threshold, gave him a nod of greeting. "I have to go, sorry," he



told the person on the other end of the phone. "Don't worry; I'll take care of it... Yes, I know where you keep your lesson plans... No, don't mention it; you'd do the same for me... Yes, I know you already did... See you soon."

Sterling didn't want to ask questions, but he didn't need to. Sawyer turned the phone off and tossed it onto a table against the wall, then gave him a rueful smile. "Sorry about that. Part of academic life is the endless swapping of favors, and that was one I owed just getting called in." The smile faded, replaced by pursed lips as Sawyer looked him over. Sterling tried not to fidget and did some staring of his own. Plain green shirt and faded jeans with a thin leather belt...casual, but like the man himself, a perfect fit. Sawyer always seemed so damn sure of himself, wherever he was. He wasn't good-looking enough to turn heads, his neatly trimmed hair an unremarkable dark brown and his eyes, now that Sterling was close enough to really notice them, a clear light gray. It didn't matter; he'd still get a second look in any crowd without even trying.

"Shoes," Sawyer said unexpectedly and gestured at a built-in closet to Sterling's left. "Take them off, and your jacket, please."

Trying to reconcile the apology for being on the phone when he'd arrived with the verging-on-curt order, Sterling obeyed. Maybe that was how you could tell if someone was a good Dom—they ordered you to do something, and you just *did* it. Sterling took off his shoes and lined them up neatly with the other pairs that were there, not seeing the running sneakers Sawyer had been wearing at the track. He wondered where they were as he slipped out of his jacket and hung it up on one of the empty hangers, then stepped back into the entry hall and closed the closet door.

"Okay, here I am," he said, spreading his arms slightly. "All yours."

"I'm sure you are," Sawyer said with more than a hint of the sarcasm that had driven Sterling *nuts* in class, "but might I suggest toning down the attitude until I've decided that I want you?"

That was a little too much like a slap in the face for Sterling's liking, and as usual, that kind of vitriol directed at him made him defensive. Okay, *more* defensive. "I don't know why you wouldn't," he said. "I'm great in bed—I know, I know, you're going to wait until my birthday to find out, but that's your decision, not mine—and I know I'm good-looking. I'm smart. I have a great sense of humor. And I follow orders: here at eight, no drinking, had dinner at the dining hall, and I haven't touched my cock all day." That last was a slight exaggeration, since it was next to impossible to take a piss without touching his dick, but he'd followed the spirit of the rule.

"In other words, you did as you were told," Sawyer said. "I *expect* that; it doesn't get you any brownie points. And as for your self-proclaimed success between the sheets..." Surprisingly, instead of an eye roll, Sterling was treated to a grin, flashing so quickly across Sawyer's face that he wasn't sure he'd seen it. "I'll allow you that illusion for a while." Sawyer led them into a large room that was a mix of formal and casual, as if two people had decorated it. Or maybe it was all Sawyer and the guy had a split personality.

"Sit there," Sawyer said and pointed at one of two armchairs beside a lit fireplace, crackling away and throwing out a moderate amount of heat and a little smoke. "You may have some water if you're thirsty."

Sterling sat. "I'm fine, thank you." It was easy to speak politely when dealing with everyday niceties—his parents had drilled that much into him. Then he waited, trying to stay relaxed because being tense wasn't going to do either of them any favors.

"You seem a lot happier about the idea of no sex than you were this morning," Sawyer said, which was jumping in at the deep end as far as Sterling was concerned. "Of course, it's not strictly true that it's out of the equation altogether; that's impossible. There's a sexual element to something as trivial as me telling you that you're allowed to have water to drink instead of asking you what you'd like." Sawyer's lips lifted at the corners in a faint smile. "Because I *do* have more than water in the house." He raised his eyebrows. "So what changed? Is it a price you're willing to pay? Or do you think that I didn't mean it and you'll get me to change my mind?" The timbre of his voice changed from conversational to something with a bite to it. "And no, turning to a friend for a quick fuck to bleed off your frustration wouldn't be allowed, and yes, I'd know."

"I agreed to today," Sterling pointed out, not letting himself be baited. "I'm a man of my word—if I say I'm going to do something, I do it. If you want me to go longer, you'll have to convince me it'll be worth it." Okay, so maybe he was getting riled up. He knew what this felt like, struggling for control, desperate to come out on top.

Wait, he thought, remembering.

"Wait." He said it fast, before Sawyer could come back at him, which, again, wasn't the point of this whole thing, but he needed a minute to work this out. The fire popped loudly. "Sorry. I—this is harder than I thought. I've spent my whole life doing the opposite of this. And being miserable because of it. I want—I want something else."

Sawyer frowned. "Explain that to me a little more," he said and yes, that was definitely an encouraging look, even an expectant one. Maybe Sterling wasn't fucking this up as much as he thought. "You seemed adamant about you being the one to choose a Dom to control you, which makes me wonder if you've been in a situation where that choice was taken away—but you said that this was all new to you, so"—he spread his hands—"talk to me."

"My father," Sterling started out. "We've always had, I don't know, a difficult relationship." He smiled ruefully. "That's the nice way to put it. He wanted me to be like him—I'm named after him, even, which is why I go by my middle name. Because I don't want even that much connection with him, you know?"

Sawyer nodded encouragingly, which made Sterling feel better. He'd done a lot of thinking, but he hadn't tried to put any of this into words yet, so he

took his time. There were a lot of pauses between sentences; it made him feel slow and stupid.

"At first, when I was younger...I tried to make him happy, you know? Proud of me. But everything I did was wrong, everything I wanted was wrong. When I figured out I was gay—I guess I was about twelve, maybe thirteen—I knew that was the end of it. There was no chance I was ever going to live up to what he wanted from me, so I decided I wasn't going to try. We fought every day. I can't think of a single conversation that didn't turn into a fight."

He wanted to get up, to pace the room. But Sawyer had told him to sit. God, this was hard. He could feel his stomach knotting up with the effort of explaining things he'd rather not think about.

"Anyway, I hate it. I'm so sick of it I want to scream. It's so much *work*. Why can't I just have what I want without it being such a *struggle*? Why isn't what I want *enough*, just because I want it?" Sterling bit his lip and looked up at Sawyer's face. "I don't know what I'm supposed to call you."

"I suppose you don't." Sawyer pursed his lips in thought for a moment and then said, "For now, please call me Owen. It's enough of a change from Professor Sawyer to remind us both that this is a new situation, and I don't think that you're ready for something more traditional." He nodded slowly, never looking away from Sterling. "So you fought his authority because it was imposed on you, wanting the control, wanting to submit, but not to him, never to him... And you tried to *be* him because you thought that you had to be to stand a chance of winning." Sawyer's—Owen's—hand slashed sharply through the air, a gesture of dismissal. "That's over. Done. And I can promise you that I'll never bully you, but it *will* be a struggle, and it *will* be hard work." Owen stood and walked over to stand in front of him, his hand cupping Sterling's chin so that their eyes met. "And it will be worth it," he said softly. "Trust me."

Sterling's sinuses prickled, a warning that emotion was threatening to get the better of him. It wouldn't; he'd mastered it years ago, determined that he'd never let his father see him cry, and the habit had become permanent as far as he could tell. Even knowing that it was stupid and pointless to think that there was anything wrong with crying didn't change things. He could hold friends while they cried in the aftermath of a relationship gone to hell or the death of a parent and not think any less of them, but it wasn't something he could or would allow himself.

Now, with Owen's gentle, slightly calloused fingers touching his face, Sterling almost wished he could.

"I do," he said, his voice hoarse. "I trust you. And I don't—I don't want you to think I'm looking for some kind of replacement father. I don't need that. What I need is someone I can...be myself with, I think. I'm just... I'm so tired of fighting, Owen." Saying the other man's name felt right. Safe.

"That's good," Owen said, his voice a quiet murmur that Sterling couldn't help contrasting with the strident tones his father had used, as if volume made what he said true. "I don't like fighting, either. It wastes time, and you don't

have much of that.” Sterling frowned, not sure what that was supposed to mean. Owen patted his face and then let his hand drop away. “You might have forgotten that you’re in your senior year; I haven’t,” he said and sat down again, crossing his legs and looking very much at ease. “I’d like a copy of your schedule as soon as possible so we can see just how much time you have free at the same time as I do.”

“I can do that. I have a part-time job too, but the schedule for that varies.” Sterling felt strange, a combination of relieved and anticipatory. Was this really happening, or was it all a dream? “So... Um. What happens now?”

“We talk. For longer than you’d probably like. Normally, I’d know you better than this, you see,” Owen said. “I’d have seen you around the club, watched you perform, possibly discussed you with your Dom. It isn’t usually this...rushed, and it’s been a long time since I took on someone as inexperienced as you.” Owen ran his hand through his hair and looked fleetingly harried. “Not to mention the ethics of getting involved with a student.” He gave Sterling a bemused look. “Tell me again why I agreed to this?”

“Because I’m incredibly hot?” Sterling suggested. He knew it was true, but he also wanted to think it wasn’t the only reason. “Actually—and I probably shouldn’t admit this, because maybe it’ll give you an excuse to change your mind, but—I don’t know why you agreed. I didn’t think you would. I was imagining weeks of ‘accidentally’ turning up where you were.”

Just looking at Owen was making Sterling hard, and he shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He wanted Owen to kiss him. Just that. He thought he could wait weeks for sex (if not the months Owen was proposing), but waiting that long for the press of Owen’s lips to his own... He didn’t think he could wait that long. He didn’t want to.

But, he tried to remind himself, this wasn’t only about what he wanted, and the idea of relinquishing control was such an incredible relief that it made him relax things inside him he hadn’t even realized were tensed.

“Am I allowed to ask questions? About you, I mean?” he said.

“You can ask, but I can’t promise I’ll always answer if it involves someone else,” Owen said, which was reassuring in a way. “I won’t discuss other subs I’ve been involved with and until I know you better, I won’t share every detail of my past, either, unless I feel it’s relevant. Questions about what we’re doing or what I ask of you—yes, as many as you like, always.” He smiled, another of those small quirk of lips that Sterling was starting to get obsessed about. “Unless you’re gagged or I’ve told you not to talk, of course.” He gazed into the fire, which allowed Sterling a small breathing space; Owen staring at him was pretty intense. “Why I agreed to take you on... Partly to save myself from being pestered, and partly because, yes, you’re very attractive, although maybe not for the reasons you think.” He gave Sterling a sidelong glance. “And maybe for the chance to deliver the spankings you did such a good job of earning freshman year. Did you consider *that* possibility when you chose me?”

"Not...consciously," Sterling admitted. The thought of it made his jeans feel even tighter, and he shifted again, trying to find a better position in the chair that had seemed perfectly comfortable when he'd first sat down in it. "I guess I'd like to know how you got into this, and if you've had a lot of, um, partners." What he really wanted to ask was if Owen had ever hurt anyone, like, *really* hurt them, because as much as the idea of being spanked was turning him on, he wasn't too crazy about the thought of having broken bones or needing stitches.

Although a few weeks ago he'd probably have laughed if someone had suggested he'd like to be spanked, so who knew how he'd feel in a few more?

"I always knew this was what worked for me," Owen said, "and when I got old enough, I went looking for it. I honestly couldn't tell you an exact number of casual partners, but people like you..." His eyes got distant for a moment. "Six. One long-term, the rest for a few months or so, none longer than a year. I'm a little hard to please, and I get bored easily." Owen's eyes sharpened, and Sterling tensed up again. "Now ask me something that you really want to know, please, because evasions fall into the category of things that both bore and annoy me."

Sterling's instincts insisted that he tell Owen off, make it clear that he didn't care whether Owen was bored or annoyed or both.

But it would have been a lie, and he didn't want to lie to Owen, so instead he forged ahead and asked his question even though he wasn't sure what kind of response he might receive. "Will you hurt me?"

"Is that a request or something you're worried about?" Owen asked, a frown appearing that was at least a familiar expression. "Nothing will happen to you that you haven't agreed to beforehand, and during a scene you can make it all stop with a single word. You should already know that." His eyes narrowed. "Do you think that I won't do this unless you agree to everything I say, no matter how extreme? Sterling, it just doesn't work like that." Owen sighed. "I'd be insulted if you weren't so damn naïve." He leaned forward, his hands loosely clasped on his knees. "Pain is incredibly useful as a shortcut and, yes, under certain circumstances it's an effective punishment. If you think that because getting spanked arouses you, I can't use it to punish you, you'll soon discover how wrong you are. If you think that I'll leave you bleeding and scarred—" Owen's face twisted in a grimace. "No. That goes well beyond my limits, and they're not likely to move much after all this time."

The air left Sterling's lungs in a rush. "Oh. Good. I mean—I wasn't trying to insult you."

He sounded more eager than he could remember hearing himself, so fucking earnest and *young*, which was exactly the thing Owen didn't like about him and therefore something he needed to stop himself from expressing.

"There's a lot of stuff online," he explained, since Owen seemed willing to listen and probably wouldn't hesitate to tell him to shut up if that changed. "It's hard to know how much of it's an expression of reality, and how much was

written by somebody trying to sound cool. Or whatever. I just want to make sure I know what I'm getting myself into." He sighed and looked down at his hands, wishing they were sitting next to each other and that Owen would touch him again. "And I can't promise I won't be uncooperative as hell sometimes. This is all new."

"I know it is," Owen said matter-of-factly. "And that's why we're talking, and why you're still fully dressed and sitting over there instead of naked and kneeling where I can touch you."

"*God.*" The word slipped out before Sterling could stop it, set free in the powerful surge of desire that swept through him. He didn't try to stop the next words. "I want that. So much. Could—please. Do you think—could we...?" He couldn't ask, too afraid that the answer was going to be no.

"You have no idea how different you look now," Owen said, and Sterling didn't think that he was imagining the connection he could feel between them, with his own desire mirrored in Owen's eyes. "Open, needy, everything right there for me to see. You're naked now, Sterling. You wanted to know what I saw in you? This. Just this."

Sterling stood on legs that trembled and took an uncertain step toward Owen. "Please." He said it very softly, part of him ashamed of the person he was letting himself be in that moment, in the person he was hoping to become.

God, this was so fucked up.

Still, he took another step closer before sinking down to the floor at Owen's feet; it wasn't kneeling as much as it was collapsing, his legs no longer able to support him. He didn't touch Owen, unsure whether that would be acceptable, but gave him such a look of anxious devotion that it might as well have been a physical caress. "Please. I need—this. You." He was shaking, his heart beating so fast it felt like the flutter of a hummingbird's wings.

"I can see that," Owen said, and his voice was rock-steady now, which was just what Sterling needed. Someone who knew what to do, someone who understood how he felt, because even if they were on opposite sides, somehow they balanced each other. "Stand up, please."

Owen saying please was so different from Sterling's stammered, pleading use of the word; it was coolly courteous and totally unnecessary, because Owen wasn't asking, he was telling. Every time he said it, Sterling felt a flicker of heat race over him. "I'm going to undress you," Owen continued when Sterling had gotten to his feet with an effort of will that took everything he had. "Then I'll allow you to kneel for me and show you exactly how I want you to do it—and you're going to remember and do it perfectly the next time you're told to take that position." Owen stood, so close that Sterling could feel the whisper of air from each word he said brush his face. "Aren't you, Sterling?"

"Yes." His vocal cords were so tight that it was hard to give his reply enough force to be heard, but Sterling was sure that Owen had heard him. He made himself repeat it, though, just to be on the safe side, and it was only as

he said it that he realized he was breathing way too fast, on the verge of hyperventilating. "Yes, Owen."

Sterling took a deep breath and let it out slowly—he didn't think he was imagining Owen's look of approval. He hoped he wasn't.

"Relax," Owen advised. "I know this is overwhelming, but the only way that you can disappoint me is by not trying, and that's not going to happen. I won't permit it. So you can relax and enjoy this." He cupped Sterling's face again and ran his thumb slowly across Sterling's lips. Sterling couldn't stop the helpless push his mouth made, chasing the drag of that thumb and trying to keep it touching him for as long as possible. "You're getting what you asked for here, and there's been a little too much of that, I think, so we need something that you have to wait for, something you'll go home wanting so much that it's all you'll be able to think about." He began to unbutton the shirt that Sterling had chosen to wear because it hadn't seemed right to show up in a T-shirt somehow, his fingers deft and unhurried as they worked the buttons through the small, tight slits in the fabric. "Any suggestions?"

His whole body was trembling, and he couldn't keep his eyes from darting back and forth between Owen's face and Owen's hands, so close. "Touch me," Sterling said. "I mean, that's what—that's what I want you to do. I want you to touch me. Run your hands over my skin."

Incredibly aroused as he was, his brain couldn't help but provide brilliant, Technicolor pictures of what it would be like. Stretched out on a bed, naked, with Owen sitting next to him. One hand would slide up along his bare thigh toward his dick... Sterling moaned, his cock giving a heavy throb inside his jeans, as Owen slipped another button free.

"Hmm, yes, I suppose that would do," Owen said with something a little rueful in the words. He stepped back. "You'd better finish undressing yourself, then, and look at me as you do it, please. I want to see your face as well as the rest of you."

God, he *hurt* with wanting, but he could do this. Owen had told him to do it, so he would. The thought that something could be that simple, that uncomplicated, was enough to get Sterling's hands fumbling at the front of his shirt, even though his fingertips were numb.

Somehow, he managed to undo the last two buttons, then remembered that he was supposed to be looking at Owen. Where had he been looking? He wasn't sure, but Owen wasn't reprimanding him and didn't look angry, so it must be okay.

Sterling slid the shirt down off his shoulders and let it fall to the floor, eyes locked on Owen's. Owen was watching him as he undressed. Owen was watching him, and he'd never been so turned on in his life.

With still-trembling hands, Sterling undid his jeans, slid down the zipper. His cock was a constant, determined ache, and he could feel the wet spot that marked the soft cotton of his boxer briefs. He licked his lips and pushed down his jeans and briefs in one—Owen hadn't specified that any of this had to be

slow, and Sterling was breathing quickly enough that he wasn't sure bending twice would be a good idea, not with the way his lips were tingling. He was definitely hyperventilating.

He got his pants below his knees, then kicked them off, and his socks, and straightened, never taking his gaze off Owen's incredible gray eyes. Weirdly, he wasn't even slightly tempted to put on attitude—just spread his hands to his sides a little bit and stood there.

*Here I am. Look at me.*

For a moment, there was something unguarded in Owen's expression, like he was tempted to forget all the carefully constructed rules and instructions he'd built around them and just reach out and take what Sterling was offering. Sterling caught his breath, but the moment—a panicked moment, he realized, because the support of those commands was about all that was keeping him standing upright—passed, and Owen just nodded at him. He did that a lot, as if he expected Sterling to add the words to go with the nod. In this case, they'd probably be flattering; Sterling knew he looked good naked, and now Owen did too.

In a silence that felt heavy, thick, muting the distant sound of passing traffic to a hum but magnifying the small sounds inside the room, Sterling waited as Owen looked him over, an unhurried appraisal lingering not on the obvious places, like his dick, straining upward, begging like the rest of him, but his mouth, his hands...

It didn't get easier to bear that scrutiny when Owen walked behind him.

Actually, what that did was send him back into fantasy. He could almost feel Owen's hands on him, smoothing down along his spine to his ass. God, Owen was going to want to fuck him, wasn't he? That was something he'd never considered—stupid, stupid, maybe he really *was* stupid, maybe that was why he insisted he was smart so often, to convince himself that it was true when it obviously wasn't. Because *of course* a man used to dominating his partners would expect to fuck his newest toy. How could Sterling not have realized it until now?

The thought made his whole body tense up in a way that Owen couldn't possibly miss.

"You might not have a safe word arranged with me yet, but until we take care of that, just stay 'stop' if you need a break," Owen said, and God, the words were spoken almost into his ear because even if Owen wasn't touching him, he was standing so close now. "Do you?"

Sterling shuddered and shook his head. "No. No." But he'd gone from turned on to almost nauseated in a split second. He couldn't do this, not if it meant having Owen fuck him, even if that was weeks, months down the line. God, he was so *stupid*. "I'm sorry," he said quickly. "Stop. I just—I can't." He turned so that Owen wasn't behind him and bent to scoop up his clothes, holding them in front of him like protection. "I'm sorry."



Owen shook his head, his face tight with exasperation that sent a chill over Sterling, making throwing up seem like a very real possibility. He hated seeing that expression on Owen's face, directed at him, but when Owen spoke, some of his misery abated as he realized just who Owen was annoyed with. "Don't be. I'm the one who fucked up here, not you, and I'm the one who's sorry. I let you rush me, and that's unforgivable, but it's so easy to forget—never mind." He gestured at the clothes Sterling held. "Get dressed and sit down. I'm going to get you a glass of water."

"No," Sterling said. "Please." He didn't know what was happening exactly, and he didn't know how to make it better, but he did know that he didn't actually want this to stop, he just wanted to know there'd be a point at which it *would* stop. He was trembling like his mother did whenever she saw a spider, phobic, terrified, and he didn't want Owen to leave him there alone.

It wasn't Owen he was afraid of.

"I don't want to stop." He'd broken out in a cold sweat. "I—please. I want to, I do."

"You *did*," Owen corrected him, "but something changed, and I need to know what it was. I don't know you well enough to work it out for myself yet, so you're going to have to talk to me." He reached out and took Sterling's hand, claspng it in his with a brief, reassuring squeeze and leaving Sterling clutching his clothes to him awkwardly, one-handed, not sure what to do with them. Owen solved that problem for him by releasing his hand and pointing at the floor. "Drop them there if you really don't want to get dressed, and tell me if you change your mind about that."

"I don't know," Sterling whispered. Did he want to get dressed? Not really, but maybe he'd feel less bare if he did. That was how he felt, laid open and showing all his secrets to the world. Only he wasn't, because Owen couldn't read his mind. But he could choose to give Owen that, to give Owen everything, all of himself.

He didn't have to, but he could.

He dropped his clothes and let his arms hang limply at his sides.

"I can't bottom," he said quietly, knowing it didn't have to be loud because Owen was listening. "I've tried, but I can't. It's too—I just can't." He couldn't look at Owen, either.

"There's a reason I said we were going to do this without sex, at least initially," Owen said calmly. "And it wasn't just out of a desire to see you suffer, though I admit I'd probably enjoy that more than a little." He tapped his finger under Sterling's chin. "Look at me, please. Yes, that's better." Sterling could feel his face heat, a blush rising as he stared at the wavering outline of Owen's face. "I think we'll continue this conversation sitting—or at least I will be."

Owen turned and walked the few feet back to his chair and sat down, leaving Sterling stranded in what felt like a lot of space. "Kneel down beside

me,” Owen said, throwing him a lifeline. “Knees together, hands behind your back, facing the fire.”

It was strange how obeying Owen's order made him feel better, and as he knelt, Sterling thought that somehow, deep down, he'd known that this was what he needed. He faced the fire like Owen had told him to, made sure his knees were together, then put his hands behind his back. He wasn't sure if he was supposed to clasp them together or what; then he remembered the way Carol had crossed her wrists, and he did that.

And waited.

“You look happier now,” Owen said and touched Sterling's hair, a light, fleeting contact. “Good.” He settled back in his chair, his elbow on the arm of it, and propped his chin on his hand, staring thoughtfully at Sterling. “I'm pleased that you trusted me enough to tell me that, and I definitely needed to know, but I'm still wondering what I did to make it so...pressing a matter. Or didn't you believe me when I said I wasn't going to have sex with you?”

Sterling let himself take his time before he answered, because there was more than one question in there and he didn't want to screw up. “I believed you. For now. But in the long run, well... When you moved behind me, it suddenly hit me that you'd want that. Eventually. And I can't. I would, if I could. For you. But I don't think I can.” The words burned coming out, burned like the flames in the fireplace, but he was left feeling better once he'd said them.

“It's something I enjoy doing,” Owen said. He smiled. “Topping, that is. It's far from the only thing though...God, no.” He leaned forward and caressed Sterling's mouth again, tracing its shape with his fingertip and giving Sterling a good idea of what one of those things was. “Yes. Exactly,” Owen said, his eyes alight with amusement as Sterling's lips parted a little. “I like giving blowjobs too...under certain circumstances, anyway.” Sterling really wanted to ask what they were, but Owen didn't give him the chance. “So tell me something that you like doing or having done to you.”

He'd been with enough guys to know what most of them liked, and most guys liked dirty talk, so he'd figured out how to get himself into the right head space to be able to do it without blushing or even feeling embarrassed. Still, this was different, so Sterling spoke carefully.

“I like blowjobs. Giving and getting. I like—uhm. Fucking. Topping.” He did blush then, but forced himself to look at Owen anyway. “Rimming. I like rimming. Someone else, I mean, not—having it done.” God, it felt like his face was bright red.

“And we're back to your ass being a no-go area,” Owen said, which did nothing to help Sterling's face to cool down though Owen didn't sound sarcastic, just curious. “Getting fucked can hurt, especially if whoever you were with didn't take care of you, but rimming doesn't... What if you're the one doing the penetrating? When you jerk off, do you use toys or your fingers in your ass to get off?” Owen sighed as Sterling struggled to answer him with anything

more than a strangled whimper. "And stop looking like you're about to melt into a puddle from embarrassment; I'm going to be asking you a lot of questions like this, so get used to it, please."

"I can't help it," Sterling muttered. He wished he could rest his forehead on Owen's knee, or that Owen would touch his hair, or...something. Anything, really. This might literally be the most difficult conversation he'd ever had in his life, including the one where he'd come out to his mother. But Owen was waiting for an answer.

"I just...don't. Touch myself there. It's not that—I mean, I don't think it's gross or anything. I like touching other people's, um. I even like putting my tongue there. And...inside." He swallowed, trying to get some moisture to his dry throat, and hunched his shoulders as much as he could without changing position, drawing in on himself. "The first guy I was with tried to. Fuck me, I mean. He couldn't."

"And when he kept trying, as I'm sure he did, it hurt, which only added to your difficulties?" Owen shrugged. "I'm not a therapist, Sterling, and I don't have all the answers—but you do. You know, if you think about it, why this is an issue to you. Maybe it's something someone said to you once as a child that planted the idea that touching yourself there was wrong, and you accepted that. Maybe every time you do it to someone else, it's part of a general rebellion, but you can't go so far as to do it to yourself and don't really think you'd enjoy it. I honestly don't know, but this is more than just not wanting to bend over for me, which is something we could work around. I need to be able to touch you anywhere without you flinching, and I need you to trust me not to do anything to you that you haven't agreed to."

Owen held up his hand, turning it slowly. "See this? If I take you on, it's going to touch you, spank you, position you. It's going to brush your hair, clean you up, hold the leather that falls across your body and makes you cry for me. It's going to be what you kiss when I've finished whipping you; it's going to be on you when you fall asleep beside me and still touching you when you wake up. You're going to want my fingers inside you, Sterling, a long time before I'm ready to give you that. And now, we're going to leave this and move on. I'm thirsty, and I would like you to go and get me a glass of water, please. The water's in a jug in the fridge, there's a glass already out by the sink because I'm a slob from time to time, and the kitchen is at the end of the hallway."

It wasn't as much of a relief to walk into the kitchen and get away from Owen's intense scrutiny as Sterling might have expected. His mind was racing as he found the jug, poured water into the glass that was right where Owen had said it would be, and put the jug back into the refrigerator. He wished he could take a few minutes just to think, to see if it was possible to make some sense of what Owen had said. Instead, he returned to Owen and handed him the glass, hesitated, then knelt down again in the same position he'd been in before.

*That felt like relief.*

"Can I—say something?" he asked tentatively.

"Yes."

Sterling's chest was tight. "I-I don't know if you—if anyone, but if it was going to be anyone, it would be you—can touch me there without me flinching. Because I think it would take a long time, for me to—be able to do that. So if that's what makes or breaks this deal, then I don't know what to do. I can't promise that I'll never flinch. I'm—I'm willing to try to do anything you ask me to, but I can't promise that." He searched Owen's face for some hint of what he was thinking.

"Don't make it into such an obstacle," Owen said lightly. "A man capable of badgering me into taking him on is perfectly capable of persuading a few tense muscles to relax." He set his glass down untasted on a small, round table beside his chair, empty of everything but a book whose title Sterling couldn't see and a coaster Owen ignored. "You probably don't look at it much, but you have a really nice ass, as it happens. It's kind of a shame; if it was covered in blemishes or flabby, I wouldn't be so interested in the idea of turning it the same color your face was a few minutes ago."

"You'd like it better if it was unattractive?" Sterling managed to take his tone from Owen's and found that doing so made him feel more relaxed. "Why do I find that hard to believe?"

"Because you're not stupid?" Owen laughed and shook his head. "No, I like it just way it is, and I'm glad to see that you're in good shape overall. Being a sub isn't all about feeding me grapes as I lounge around looking stern, you know; it can be physically demanding, and if you're in a permanent relationship with a conscientious Dom, you'll find that your diet and exercise will be monitored if you're not taking care of yourself."

Owen glanced at the glass beside him and then back at Sterling. "Even if you are being sensible, you might have a day in cuffs when every bite you eat is hand-fed to you, every sip of water taken from a glass held to your lips. It can go from being funny and messy to incredibly intense by the end of the session."

"I—" Sterling bit his lip, then continued on. "Is it okay for me to admit that I like the sound of that?" Owen nodded. "I do. And I am. In good shape, I mean. I run pretty much every day—the other morning wasn't just about seeing you. Well, okay, it mostly was. I used to play baseball, seriously. Not just for fun, I mean."

He'd been hopeful about getting a scholarship to college for a few years there, until he'd hurt his shoulder badly enough to shatter that dream.

"Used to'?" Owen asked. "What made you stop?"

It wasn't easy to talk about it, because when he did it brought back memories of the months in which he'd been deeply depressed by the realization that his plans for the future had been rendered impossible. It had been years since he'd had to discuss it at all.

"I tore my rotator cuff," he said, hoping that Owen would know what that meant so he wouldn't have to get into the details. "Pitching. And I couldn't deal with the thought of surgery, so that was the end of my great baseball career." It came out sounding more bitter than he'd intended it to.

Owen didn't gush all over him with sympathy and platitudes, but Sterling hadn't expected him to. Instead, he placed his hands on Sterling's right shoulder and explored the hollow of bone and muscle with careful fingers. "That's something you'll need to mention to people in the future," he said absently, his attention focused on what he was doing. "I can think of several common bondage positions that would put too much stress on it. Let me know if anything I ask you to do hurts. The only pain I want you to feel is the good kind."

Owen's touch, even somewhat clinical as it was, made Sterling's body react immediately; his cock twitched and started to harden. "It hasn't hurt for a long time," he said, trying not to let himself get *too* distracted. "I learned pretty quick what kind of things I have to avoid, so I just avoid them. As long as you don't ask me to pitch a baseball, spike a volleyball, or swim competitively, I'm good."

"I'll remember that." Owen sat back as if Sterling's arousal—and Owen had definitely noticed it; hell, Sterling was starting to think that Owen noticed if he blinked more than usual—had reminded him that he wasn't supposed to be touching Sterling. Or had that ended when he'd melted down so spectacularly?

"I haven't had the chance to ask you just what works for you when it comes to BDSM," Owen said. "It can vary so much for people... You've reacted positively to a few suggestions, but I get the feeling that they weren't something you'd considered before I brought them up. Have you read any porn, watched any movies? Did anything get you hard just thinking about it or anything leave you cold?" He grinned as Sterling gave him a helpless look. "Poor Sterling; am I making you feel like we're back in class?"

"Kind of," he admitted. "Well. It sort of started when I accidentally—and it *was* an accident, I swear!—Peeping Tommed—God, that's not a verb and there's no way to make it one—on a couple of guys at a party." Owen lifted an eyebrow, and Sterling clarified, "A regular party, not a BDSM party. Last weekend at the club was the first time I went to anything official. If that was official. Anyway, one of them was telling the other one to get on his knees and suck him off—the one on his knees was my friend Alex, who brought me to the club—and, well, it definitely turned me on. It's been the masturbatory fantasy of choice for weeks, actually."

He tried to think of other things he'd seen. "Um. Being tied up. Spanking. Maybe whipping too, although I don't think anything really violent would be up my alley. I don't want scars." Sterling offered Owen an apologetic smile. "Which I know you said you wouldn't do anyway, but you asked, and I want to get an A if even a tiny part of your brain is thinking about grading me. I don't know

what else. Um, wax? Like, hot wax. And I watched some porn online and kind of got off on watching someone being fucked with a dildo.” He blushed again then, a little bit shocked at himself for having revealed so much.

“You didn’t blush until just at the end there,” Owen said approvingly. “And you gave me a lot to work with. Excellent. You’ll find an A difficult to earn, but I suppose I can give you a B for that.”

“Plus,” Sterling said firmly. “Definitely a B-plus.”

“Brat.” Owen flicked his fingernail against Sterling’s left nipple, startling a gasp out of him because, while it hadn’t *hurt* exactly, it’d stung, and the two things—being mildly cheeky and the equally mild chastisement that followed—came together in his head with a click. He was fully erect now, and he couldn’t help sneaking a glance at Owen to see if he was too, under the jeans that concealed a lot more than the fresh air that Sterling was wearing.

“You’re supposed to be looking at my face,” Owen pointed out. “Yes, I’m hard. I have been since you got here, but I enjoy a certain amount of anticipation. It helps that I’m the one who decides when it ends, of course, but you don’t have that luxury. Whether or not you come is up to me, always.”

“Always?” Sterling blinked and looked at Owen’s face like he was supposed to be doing. “I can’t come at all? Do you know how often I usually jerk off?” He was whining, just about, but he couldn’t help it.

“From tonight I’ll know exactly, because you’ll only do it with my permission and usually in front of me.” Owen made a sound that qualified as a snicker, but Sterling could—just—forgive that if it meant he got to come at least now and then. “I’m sorry; did no sex for four months make you think I meant no jerking off too? I’m going to ask a lot of you, but not the impossible.”

“I didn’t think jerking off would count,” Sterling said. “I don’t—wow. This is going to be harder than I thought.” Then *he* snickered, having heard what he’d just said.

Owen rolled his eyes but didn’t comment on the pun. “You know, it keeps hitting me just how much you don’t know about all this. Not jerking off without permission is fairly standard in a Dom/sub relationship.” His expression softened, which made Sterling’s throat tighten just a little. “You’ve cannonballed into the deep end when you don’t know how to swim, haven’t you?”

Sterling looked at him solemnly and smiled. “Yes,” he said. “Don’t let me drown.”

That got him Owen’s hand on his face again, tilting it up, and Owen’s mouth on his in a brief kiss that felt like a handshake. This close, the eyes staring into his were all that he could see, their light gray flecked with darker shades. “I think I can promise that.” One final pat to his face and Owen stood. “I think we’ve done enough for one session. Get dressed now and I’ll give you my personal e-mail before you go. I’d like you to send me your schedule tonight, and we’ll arrange another meeting in a few days.”

Sterling climbed to his feet slowly, more than a little overwhelmed. As he reached for his clothes and started to untangle them, he hoped they weren't, between the two of them, making a terrible mistake, because he was definitely in over his head.

## Chapter Four

Owen walked back into the living room after Sterling had left and stood quite still for a moment as he tried to add up just how many mistakes he'd made in the last two hours or so.

Or maybe even longer than that, starting with going to the club on the one night that Sterling had chosen to walk on the wild side. Carol had wanted to see a friend, and he'd overruled her, being petty, exercising control over her in a way that karma had punished with a heavy hand.

What in God's name had possessed him to take on a new sub so soon after freeing himself from Carol, as if he couldn't go a single day without knowing that he had someone to be responsible for? Pity, sympathy, fellow feeling? Or something less altruistic...

"Next time, I should just adopt a cat," he muttered. God, this was so *stupid*. Sterling could ruin Owen's career with a few misplaced words to a friend—and get himself kicked out in his final year too. He could see the lurid headlines now, and the thought made him grimace. He'd kept his two worlds from meeting for so long, not out of any sense of shame, but pragmatism. The faculty knew that from time to time he dated men, and that wasn't a problem for most of them; times, and laws, had changed. Getting involved with a student, though...and introducing that student to what would be considered a depraved, perverted lifestyle... Oh, that wouldn't be met with the same carefully liberal tolerance.

So he should break this off before it went any further. Point Sterling in the direction of another Dom, someone with less to lose, someone who'd be more than adequate to guide a wide-eyed sub through his paces.

He tried to think of anyone he knew who'd be willing to take Sterling on given how conflicted he was and came up with a short list of one: himself.

Sterling was just too fucking tempting to walk away from. Body and face were both eye-catching. Sterling's athleticism had probably smoothed out the gangly awkwardness of youth early; he fitted his body well, all long, powerful legs and wide shoulders, smooth skin tanned by the summer sun, and that blush... Oh, Owen loved that blush. He wanted to paint Sterling's skin with it, bring the heat to the surface and rest his hand on that flushed, hot skin...

He'd been mildly attracted to the spoiled, arrogant brat he'd met in his class without really translating that into anything sexual. Sterling had been a student and young enough to be off Owen's radar. His partners were usually



about his age, and he hadn't dated anyone not into the scene for so long that it was hard to remember sex that didn't come accompanied with at least a hint of kink. The attraction to Sterling in class had been rooted in his undeniable intelligence and the challenge he'd represented to Owen's authority. It had been enjoyable to deal ruthlessly with his audacity, and yes, Owen had gotten a kick out of it at times.

Sterling in the club, the lust pouring off him as he'd watched Owen discipline Carol, had been hard to look away from, even harder to reject. Owen, who'd never had any trouble controlling the most recalcitrant sub, didn't doubt his ability to deal with this new, hesitant Sterling, or any return of the Sterling he was more familiar with, but it was going to be one hell of a lot of work. The last time he'd taken a sub from day one had been Michael, fifteen years ago. Owen hadn't been all that experienced himself, but they'd had people to turn to for help and they'd made it work—oh God, yes they had...

Too on edge to deal with anything as mundane as grading papers or watching TV, Owen paced the house, picking up scattered items and restoring them to where they belonged and making an attempt to water at least some of the houseplants his mother had put in every room. Those that had survived his haphazard care were still valiantly green, but he thought that they had a dispirited droop to them.

He needed someone to talk to about this before it got out of hand, and really, there was only one person he'd ever turned to when he had doubts. Michael might have been gone for eight years—God, no, it was more like nine—and they'd both moved on, the bright dazzle of love softening to a friendship that was even stronger, but that didn't matter.

Any more than it mattered that it'd been six months since they'd last spoken and the call had ended with Michael telling him that he was a fucking idiot and hanging up.

Just after ten, so it'd be around lunchtime in Sydney. That would work. He settled himself on the couch with a glass of whiskey and the phone and pressed the first number on his speed dial.

Michael answered just after the third ring, his voice so familiar that Owen closed his eyes for a few seconds, drinking it in and finding it more refreshing and relaxing than the whiskey. "Hello?"

"Hi," Owen said. "It's me."

That was more than enough to tell Michael what Owen needed him to know—the first word would have done it. Still, there was a pause while Michael probably considered hanging up on him again, even though they both knew he wouldn't. "Hi, you," Michael said finally. "Now, before you say anything else, just listen, okay? I forgive you for that last fight, but I *don't* forgive you for going so long without calling. You know I can talk to you as much as you want, but you have to be the one to call me—there's no way I'd risk breaking any of Daren's rules. Not even for you." It was so easy to picture the smile on Michael's face. "So what's wrong?"

"Daren would love you to break a rule now and then," Owen said, reverting to an old joke between them to give himself time to handle the sheer relief of being in contact with Michael again. Michael was right to be pissed off about him taking this long to call, even missing Michael's birthday because he'd still been smarting over the ruthless assessment of his lack of direction. "You're spoiling his fun."

"Oh, trust me, he gets plenty of fun." It sounded like Michael was running water—doing dishes, maybe? When his relationship with Daren had gone from playful to serious, he'd insisted on something full-time—the same thing he'd wanted from Owen but which Owen hadn't been able to give him. Now Michael stayed home, took care of his and Daren's house, and was ridiculously happy by his own report. "If you're not answering my question, then something's really wrong. What happened?"

"Put it this way—if this blows up in my face, Australia might be getting a new immigrant." Owen sighed. "I might have gotten involved with a student. Not in my class, and he's in his senior year and almost twenty-one, but still..."

Michael made a sound like a suppressed whoop. "Well, excuse me for being excited for you," he said before Owen could even object to his obvious delight. "Thank *God* you've gotten involved with *someone*. I was starting to think it was going to be one casual fling after another for you, and you know you deserve so much more than that. Is he cute?"

"He's pushy, arrogant, and when I taught him a few years back, he drove me out of my mind," Owen said, "but I'll admit that outside the classroom and on his knees, he's appealing. Cute, no. Do we have a bad connection? Did you miss the part where he's a student?"

"But you said he's almost twenty-one," Michael said. The sound of the water running stopped and was replaced by the clinking of dishes. "And not *your* student, which I'd think would make a huge difference. Anyway, you wouldn't get involved with him if you were really worried that he'd report you, right? What would be the point? Besides, you *love* pushy and arrogant."

"I know I do," Owen admitted with a groan. "Shit, the thought of finally getting to spank him after some of the crap he pulled...and the way he looks when I say something that pushes his buttons... He just... It's all there on his face, and he doesn't hold anything back."

Michael snorted. "He sounds perfect. No wonder you're freaking out."

"He's not perfect," Owen said. He hesitated. Discussing a sub with someone else wasn't something he did—but this was Michael, and he was half a world away. "He only just found out a few weeks ago that all this worked for him. I mean, that's not just new to the scene, that's... God, Michael, he's groping in the dark for answers and he's got this weird hang-up about being fucked and I *tried* to get him to leave me alone by telling him that sex was out of the question until he was twenty-one and it *still* didn't work."

He took a deep breath to shut himself up. He didn't mind letting Michael see him lost and unsure, but he was too old to babble.

"You really *are* freaked out," Michael observed. "Okay, first of all, are you sitting down, or are you doing that pacing thing you do?"

"Sitting."

"Good. Let's keep it to one word answers, okay? Yes or no." Michael was sliding effortlessly into his helpful mood, which at times had annoyed Owen to no end, but right now he was grateful for it. "You like the idea that he's new to the scene because it means you get to break him in."

That wasn't even a question, but Owen answered it anyway. "Yes."

"And you want to turn him on to being fucked?"

"Yes." Reluctant, but an answer.

"And you like that he wants you so much," Michael said. "It makes you crazy that he'll do anything to get you, even wait."

"Yes," Owen snapped. "How the fuck could I *not* like that? If it wasn't months away, I'd think you'd found me the perfect birthday present. Happy now?"

"Yes, thanks." Michael sounded so casual and breezy; it was infuriating. "What I want to know is, why aren't *you* happy? You should be. Why can't you let yourself enjoy this instead of brooding about it? You love a challenge. Do you want to know what I think?"

"I suppose so," Owen said grumpily, because if he didn't admit it, Michael would just point out that he'd been the one who'd initiated the conversation in the first place.

"I think," Michael said, "that your perfect man just dropped into your lap, naked and ready for a good spanking, and you're so neurotic that you're looking for things to complain about instead of thanking the universe in its infinite wisdom for giving you this incredible gift." He lowered his voice to a velvet caress that Owen needed more than he'd have guessed. "Honey, you deserve to be happy. *Everybody* does, but especially you."

"Big, bad, topsey Doms aren't allowed to tear up, or I think I might have after that," Owen told him, knowing that Michael would hear the unspoken gratitude behind his words. The house felt empty around him, quiet rooms, too many of them, sealing him in, but Michael was doing what he always did and making him feel connected to the world. It had taken them both a while to set aside the dynamics of their original relationship—and it'd led to some spectacular arguments the first time Michael lost his temper and refused to back down—but it'd been worth the effort. "If he ever lets me lay a hand on his ass, I'll dedicate his first spanking to you."

"You gave me *my* first spanking, remember?" Michael sounded a little bit wistful. "I didn't know whether to scream or come."

"You did both," Owen reminded him. And his ass had been bright red by the time Owen was finished with him. The thought of Sterling like that, laid out across his lap, bare-assed, made Owen's hand clench on his glass of whiskey.

"I know. It was amazing. *You* were amazing—you always have been. This kid's lucky to get you, but it sounds like you're lucky too."

"Not as lucky as Daren," Owen said. God, Michael brought out the sap in him. Not that it had stopped him from taking them both to the very edge of their limits on more than one occasion—and now he was hard again, memories of Michael and images of Sterling tangled together. Daren wouldn't approve of that at all, not that Owen could blame him; Michael was worth getting possessive over, and Daren held his leash very tightly indeed.

Which was just how Michael liked it, of course... Would Sterling get a kick out of having every aspect of his life controlled, from the brand of his toothpaste to the color of his socks? Owen shivered. Too soon for that level of intensity and not very practical given the way things were, but it would be interesting to see his reaction to the idea.

Michael kept quiet for a few long seconds, then said, "If I know you, you're thinking dirty thoughts right now."

"I'm thinking about the way you and Daren play it," Owen admitted, knowing that Michael wouldn't read too much into that. "You and I never took it that far, even when we were living together, but every instinct I've got is telling me that with this one, I need to start off strong and maybe ease back later, instead of the other way around. It's like he's spent his life blind, and now that he can see, he doesn't want to close his eyes even to blink. Seriously eager. If I had him here for the weekend, I'd keep him naked the whole time and watch him get more and more desperate for a touch or a kiss." He swallowed a gulp of whiskey and sighed. "I'm going to have to hang up soon, or this call will qualify as phone sex, not two old friends talking. I don't want you to have to confess anything tonight that would really piss Daren off."

"I'd have to hang up on you before it went that far, and I don't want to have to do that again," Michael said, then changed the subject. "So call me more often, okay? I want to know what's going on with you. Plus now you've got me all interested in how things with this kid will turn out. What's his name?"

"Sterling," Owen said.

"Sterling," Michael repeated. "That's unique."

"It's his middle name," Owen said. "He's named William after his father—not someone he gets along with from what little he's said, so he refuses to use it." He pursed his lips in thought. "I might if he starts to act up, though... He'd hate it, but then, that's the whole point." Owen shrugged, pushing it aside to think about later. "Enough about me; tell me what you did over your winter while I was working on my tan. Did Daren take you skiing again?"

"*And* snowboarding, and I didn't even break any bones!" Michael gushed, and Owen made himself comfortable for what was probably going to be a long conversation.

Sterling was almost vibrating with excitement when he left Owen's house, and it hadn't really abated by the time he got back to the dorm. His roommate Brian was out—maybe working; Sterling never *could* keep track of Brian's schedule—and that was just fine with him, even though they got along okay. Mostly he wished he could be living off-campus at this point, like most of the other students his age, but his father had only been willing to pay bills that came directly from the college, and he'd have had to work a hell of a lot more hours at his part-time job scooping ice cream to afford rent, even in a place with multiple roommates. This way he only had to deal with one, and he had more spending money in his pocket to boot. It seemed a small price to pay.

He considered playing some music loud and dancing, something that worked when he needed to blow off steam, but it was getting late, and he didn't want to piss off the floor's RA. He could go run a couple of miles, but the idea just didn't appeal to him considering the darkened campus.

Sighing, he threw himself down onto his bed, winced because the mattress just wasn't as padded as it should have been, and thought about his dick. It was difficult *not* to when he'd been hard off and on all day, and Owen had said he wouldn't be allowed to come any time soon. That made him want to come *more*, of course, but he'd be good. He wouldn't so much as touch himself. Well, except in the shower and if he had to take a piss, but even in those instances he'd better check with Owen first just to make sure.

He remembered he was supposed to call Alex and report how things had gone. He felt a little weird about it—not because he and Alex hadn't already talked about sex, because they had, a lot, but because he wasn't sure what Alex's reaction was going to be.

He always kept his word, though, so he dug his cell phone out of his pocket, checked to make sure it had enough juice, and dialed Alex.

"Tell me everything," Alex said immediately, which put Sterling in a *really* awkward position as he knew Owen wouldn't like him spilling every juicy detail. It wasn't as if Alex was connected to the campus at all, though, and he was deep enough into the scene to know that discretion was a given. "Did you get him to agree, or did he just blow you off again?" Alex gave a soft moan. "Okay, I need to hook up with someone soon, because the thought of him telling you to get lost, all icy eyes and stern as hell, is getting me hot. And it isn't hot. It's a tragedy. Or does this story have a happy ending?"

"Semi-happy," was what Sterling decided to go with. "He didn't tell me to get lost, but he did tell me he won't have sex with me until I'm twenty-one. Which is four months away."

"I'll throw you a huge birthday party to celebrate," Alex promised rashly. "So what *will* he do, if sex is off the table?"

"I can't come unless he gives me permission." That felt strange to admit and already too close to the unspoken line that Sterling thought Owen would draw if asked about what was allowed to be discussed. "Is that, you know...normal? For this kind of thing? I mean, I know it says it is online, but

there are so many cases where online and in-real-life are two totally different things.”

“It's not something I've ever done,” Alex said, “but Ray wasn't—well, he was just playing around. It got him hot, but I don't think he really thought through a lot of what he did. It was all about the sex for him, and he wouldn't have done anything that stopped him from getting it.”

It hadn't occurred to Sterling that he wasn't going to be the only one going without. Not that Owen had said they were exclusive or anything.

“He sounds like he's treating you like you belong to him,” Alex said. “That's kind of intense this soon. Are you down with that?”

“I think I'd pretty much say yes to anything he wanted,” Sterling said honestly. “And yeah, I know how that sounds. It's just—there's something about him. The intense thing, yeah, but there's more to it than that. I guess I'm just not interested enough in anyone else to chance screwing things up with him.”

“Definitely intense,” Alex said again. “So does that mean no more sex for us? Damn, I was just getting used to the fuck buddy thing. I liked it.”

“I did too.” Sterling wished Alex hadn't brought it up, because the topic certainly wasn't contributing anything toward getting his erection to fade. “I'm not allowed—but I could talk to him about it.” He didn't think he would, though, because he had a feeling that it wasn't a subject that Owen would be mellow about.

Maybe he was wrong about that, but he didn't think so.

“Dude, it's fine. Whatever you want to do. I mean, I like you. It's cool.” Alex snickered a little bit. “And it'll be extra cool if you're willing to share the dirt once in a while. Just be careful, okay? Don't get hurt.”

“Emotionally or physically?” Sterling asked.

“If he's as good as people say he is, you won't have to worry about the last one,” Alex said, dodging the issue in Sterling's opinion. “Okay, scratch that; he'll hurt you, but you won't be doing anything but begging for more when it's him doing it... And I want to see the marks when he dishes out your first spanking—or is looking off-limits too?”

“I really don't have a clue,” Sterling said ruefully. “I think there are a lot of questions I still need to ask. And about a million things I need to learn. I wish there was a book or something.”

“I think there are,” Alex said. “No idea if they're any good, though.”

“I guess I could ask Owen if there are ones he recommends.” Suddenly feeling overwhelmed by the things he didn't know, Sterling sighed and rubbed his forehead. Was it possible to get a headache as a result of deferred orgasms? Like the intellectual version of blue balls? Somehow he didn't think *that* was a question he'd be asking Owen anytime soon.

Alex gave a snort of laughter. "A reading list from the professor? Does that count as homework? Maybe he'll make you write essays instead of spanking you."

Owen's voice, calm, measured, telling him that he'd missed a comma and would have to start over and wouldn't get to come until the lines were written perfectly... Kneeling in front of him, waiting as Owen looked at what he'd written, tense and so fucking hard, needing Owen to read faster, tell him he could jerk off... Okay, when he'd gotten to the point where that sounded hotter than actual sex, he was in a bad way.

Aching with arousal, Sterling made some excuses and got off the phone, only to wish a minute later he hadn't because then all he had left to do was stare at the ceiling with the heel of his hand pressed to the base of his erection. He counted slowly to one hundred, keeping his mind as blank as possible, then a second time before his dick softened enough to be ignored.

Then he got up resolutely, sat at his scarred desk, and forced himself to read five chapters of his Ancient Civ text, which was the dullerest thing he could come up with.

It was going to be a long four months.

## Chapter Five

Here we go again.

Sterling wasn't any less anxious and excited than he'd been when he'd walked up to Owen's house the first time—in fact, he might have been *more* anxious and nervous. Because now he knew something was going to happen, even if he didn't know what it would be exactly.

He also knew that he needed to get some answers to his questions, but he wasn't sure if that would come before or after whatever else Owen had planned.

He'd followed Owen's instructions to the letter and knocked on the door one minute early, just like he had the last time, in case the clock on his cell phone was different from the one in Owen's house. That was one of those things he couldn't have any control over, so he'd decided not to worry about it.

When Owen opened the door, Sterling smiled nervously. “Um. Hi.”

Owen smiled back at him, his expression welcoming, which maybe shouldn't have been a surprise, because this time he was here because Owen wanted him to be, not because he'd pushed for an invitation.

Once inside, Sterling took off his shoes and jacket and felt some of the strain leave him. It was only the second time he'd hung his jacket in this closet, but when so much about the night was going to be totally new and scary, he would take his familiar and routine where he could get it.

“We'll go upstairs soon, but I want to talk to you first,” Owen said and led Sterling into the living room. Like before, the curtains were drawn, but the only light was from the fire burning steadily and a single lamp in the corner of the room. “I'd like to start all our sessions like this for a while to give you the chance to ask me about anything that's occurred to you.” Owen's faint smile didn't disappear, but his next words seemed on the ominous side, even if Sterling's conscience was—mostly—clear. “And anything that I need to know about.”

“Okay.” Sterling didn't sit down; he wasn't sure if Owen was going to want him to strip and kneel again. He had to hope he wouldn't get in trouble for not doing it without being told. “Um, I do have some questions...more about how we deal with this than how we do it. Because I figure the doing part is just me doing what you tell me to do, but when I'm not here... I need to know if I can talk about it—not with, you know, random people I meet on the street, but with people I trust. And, like, Alex wants to know if he can see marks that you put on me, and I didn't know what the answer would be—if that would be okay



with you, I mean. Oh, and how far the not-coming thing goes, and—" He realized that he was talking way too fast and stopped, cheeks burning. "I'm sorry. I have to let you answer, don't I?"

"You can always e-mail or call me, you know," Owen said gently, not commenting on the way Sterling had just shown him exactly how nervous he was. "I don't want you to feel that you have to wait to see me to ask your questions—and, yes, the occasional pause for breath might be a good idea." He sat on the couch, grimaced, and reached behind him to extract a large, overstuffed cushion, piped and dotted with buttons. "My mother had these all over the place," he told Sterling, "to the point where there was no room for anyone to actually sit down." He tossed it to the floor and pointed, not at it, which was a relief because Sterling didn't think that he could kneel on it without sliding off, but beside him on the couch. "Sit down, and I'll do my best to answer your questions—and I have a few of my own, which you are *not* to blush and stammer over when you answer them."

Sterling nodded and sat. He didn't know what to do with his hands and ended up clasping them together. It was hard not to fidget. "So this was your parents' house?" he heard himself asking, even though it wouldn't have even made an appearance on a list of questions he needed answers to.

"Yes. They died in a car accident three years ago and I... It didn't feel right to just sell it." Owen glanced around the room. "I've made some changes, though..."

"Like the cushions."

"Among other things," Owen said. "I'm not as fond of rose pink as my mother was, and yes, you can talk to Alex and I'd leave it up to your common sense to know how much to share; no, he may *not* look at your well-spanked ass when I get around to spanking it, and I'm not quite sure how there can be any confusion about you being forbidden to come unless you have explicit permission from me." He raised his eyebrows. "Next?"

"How do you *do* that?" Sterling said, awed. He'd recovered from thinking he was stupid and was, very reasonably, back to thinking he was smart, but it was clear that Owen's IQ left him in the dust. "Um, no, that wasn't an actual question. Uh, yeah. About the coming thing—I mean, I get that I'm not allowed to jerk off, but I can, like, touch myself in the shower, right? To wash. And what about—" It was very hard not to blush, but he thought he was managing it. "Sometimes, when I haven't come in a while, I'll, you know, dream. Do I get in trouble if that happens?"

He thought that he could see a gleam of amusement in Owen's eyes, but there was no trace of it in Owen's voice when he replied. "Keeping yourself clean is mandatory. And if you get hard from that—and you will—cold water is a traditional solution to that problem. We'll deal with you waking up with a smile on your face as it happens. It isn't something I'd punish you for, but if it happens too often, I won't be pleased. It's your body, Sterling, and I expect you to be able to control it and give me your best efforts to obey."

Owen slid his hand behind Sterling's neck, the warmth of his touch soaking into Sterling's skin. The hairs on Sterling's arms stood up, and he shivered, swallowing back a groan. It felt as if he hadn't been touched in weeks, and when it was Owen doing it...

"You look so worried," Owen said, his voice pitched low, a tickle in Sterling's ear. "There's no need. I'm very pleased with you so far. You're thinking about this and asking sensible questions." His thumb began to move, a slow, regular drag up and down that felt good—oh God, yes—but at the same time was close to unbearable because Sterling wanted so much more. "Do you have anything else to ask me?"

"Will you keep doing that?" Sterling asked before he could really think that it might not be the best idea. "I don't—God, I just want you to touch me. Or to be allowed to touch you. Can I? Please?" He looked at Owen beseechingly, wanting in every molecule of his body.

Owen took his hand away, which was almost enough to bring Sterling off the couch and to his knees, *begging*—God, yes, he'd beg, and if he'd had any pride, any idea that he could handle whatever Owen gave him, it was gone now, because he couldn't take this if Owen kept leaving him alone, untouched.

"We're going to go upstairs," Owen said before Sterling could move. "And you're going to get touched. It's time I got to know you." He stood and held out his hand. "Come with me."

Sterling stood up and slipped his hand into Owen's, trying not to clutch it too tightly. Every muscle in his body was taut with anticipation, and he thought it was a miracle that he managed to follow Owen up the staircase without tripping and falling on his face. *That* would have made a good impression.

They went into what was clearly Owen's bedroom. The bed was neatly made and—this shouldn't have come as a surprise—the headboard was one that would be easy to tie people to. The fact that Sterling had even thought that probably meant that he'd been watching too much BDSM porn, which seemed to favor showing people who were tied up, sometimes facedown so they could be spanked or beaten.

Sterling was hard; he didn't even know when that had happened.

"I'm not going to be getting out cuffs or a whip tonight," Owen said conversationally, as if he was commenting on the weather. He stood in front of Sterling and began to unbutton Sterling's shirt, giving the rolled-up sleeves a disapproving look but not commenting on them. "You're a long way off from being ready for anything like that, and I wouldn't enjoy it because you'd be tense and on edge. Tonight's all about getting you ready for more and trying out some things. Think of it as taking small bites—appetizers, not a three-course meal."

He undid the last button of Sterling's shirt, which hung down, untucked, over his jeans, and slid it back off Sterling's shoulders. "There's a chair over

there. Put this over the back of it and finish undressing. Fold your clothes neatly, please.”

Taking special care but also trying not to waste time, Sterling hung his shirt over the chair and took off his slacks, folding them and setting them on the chair's seat before removing his briefs and socks. It felt alien to be in a stranger's—well, almost a stranger's—bedroom, completely naked, while Owen was fully dressed.

Sterling wanted to cross his hands in front of him to hide his erection, which was dumb because even if it *was* hidden, it wasn't like Owen wouldn't know it was there. He couldn't help a glance downward at it, though—hard, flushed at the tip, and with a drop of clear fluid beaded there, his dick was fully with the program and ready to rock.

He just hoped it wasn't going to be disappointed.

Owen wasn't even looking at him, though; instead, he was getting something out of the top drawer of a tall chest of drawers in a dark wood. When he turned back to face Sterling, he was holding a wide strip of black silky material. “This isn't to tie you in any way you can't get out of with a tug,” Owen said, “but I want to see how you respond to it wrapped around your wrists.” His gaze flickered over Sterling's erection. “You can end this with a single word; that's always going to be the case, by the way, no matter what we're doing, but I'll end it for you if you come, so don't.” He drew the silk through his hands, playing with it absently. “Speaking of which, have you given any thought to your safe word? You can have two if you like; one to tell me that you need a short break, or to ask me something, one to stop the scene immediately.”

As it happened, Sterling had thought a lot about safe words, in part because he'd been doing little else but thinking. “Um—'infield' for a break. And, uh, 'Junior' to stop.” He met Owen's eyes with a hint of defiance, daring Owen to tell him either word was unacceptable. If he did, it wouldn't be the end of the world, of course, but somehow being able to choose felt important, gave him a slight sense of control. Holding out his hands, wrists crossed, he asked, “In front or behind?”

“Not yet,” Owen said, gesturing to him to put his hands back by his side. “It's important to be aware of what I want from you, and in time a good sub can predict his Dom's needs and be ready to fulfill them instantly, but there's a difference between that and rushing me or a scene.” It could have felt like a reprimand, but compared to some of the stingers Owen had sent his way in class, it was pretty mild, and Owen didn't sound annoyed.

Sterling nodded and Owen continued, “I want to ask you about the significance of those words. They don't have to have any, of course; the point is that they're unusual, words that you would never say in an emotional moment by accident, but I get the feeling that's not the case here. I can see why you'd choose a baseball reference, but 'Junior'? Is that part of your name? Another part you dislike because it ties you to your father?”

Well, he'd hoped he wouldn't have to explain, but at least Owen wasn't saying no right off the bat. Sterling winced a little bit at that word choice before answering. "My dad used to call me that—even though technically he's the Junior, and maybe that's why it got to me so much—when he was pointing out the ways I was like him. When he was, uh, trying to convince me I was my father's son and there was no point in fighting it or trying to be different. Because it was inevitable, you know? It was—I hated it. I hate *him*."

He stopped, shocked. He'd never said that last part out loud, too well-bred, probably, to consider giving that thought breath. Because he'd certainly thought it hundreds of times, and even gone so far as to scratch it into the wood of his desk at home—only to realize his mistake and have to scratch it back out again. Sometimes, in his senior year of high school, when he'd been dreaming about the day he'd get to leave, he'd run his fingertips over the imperfect spot on the desk the way a devout Catholic might finger a string of rosary beads; it had given him comfort.

"Some things are inevitable," Owen said, "but I've never considered a child as an echo of one parent; how can it be when it takes two people to create it, and after that, its life experiences are so different?" He shook his head, dismissing some thought, maybe, that he clearly wasn't about to share. "They'll both work very well. Thank you, Sterling."

Sterling felt himself relax at the simple praise—the thought that he could do, *be* what someone expected of him with so little effort, that he wasn't disappointing Owen (*yet*, a voice inside him added very unhelpfully) was a fairly incredibly one. "You're welcome," he said, because it was the proper response, and waited.

"So," Owen said, and held up the scarf just long enough for Sterling to say something, but there was nothing that he wanted to say, apart from *Hurry up, please*, and that probably wouldn't go over well.

"Keep your hands by your sides," Owen said, his voice subtly different, calm and assured. "As I said, this isn't going to restrain you in any real sense, at first, but I want to see..." He looped the end of the scarf around Sterling's right wrist, tying it with a simple slip knot, and then took the length of silk behind Sterling's back and tied the other end to Sterling's left wrist with a more secure knot. There wasn't much play if Sterling kept his hands where they were, but plenty if he brought his hands together behind his back.

Owen stepped back and studied him, a warmth in his eyes, more of the approval that Sterling craved. "Oh, yes," Owen said softly. "Very nice."

When he thought about it, Sterling found it surprising that he was as comfortable in this position as he was. He barely knew Owen, but he was standing here in Owen's bedroom, stark naked, aroused, with his wrists bound.

And somehow it felt right.

More than that, it felt like he'd been *waiting* for this.

He wanted to beg for more but reminded himself that if he was patient, Owen would give him more. Owen knew what he needed.

"I can make them tighter," Owen said. "So that the only person who can take them off you is me. Tie you so that you can pull and tug and feel held, feel safe, and I will, but I want to touch you first."

Sterling's mouth was dry with longing, but he just nodded, and Owen stepped closer and kissed him, not on the mouth, but his neck, low down where it met his shoulder. The kiss was light, but it left Sterling's skin burning as if it'd been branded. Owen ran the back of his hand over Sterling's chest, the blunt points of his knuckles tracing a random path, leaving swirls of sensation. Knuckles became fingernails, scratching hard sometimes, enough to leave pale lines, rising and then fading, and then the smooth pads of fingers. Sterling swayed in place, his eyes wanting to squeeze shut so that he could lose himself in this but staying open because he didn't want to miss a thing.

After a while, Owen put two fingers against Sterling's lips. "Suck them," he said. "Get them wet."

Sterling parted his lips so that Owen could slide his fingers inside. Owen wasn't the biggest guy, but his hands were kind of large, and Sterling was eager to taste his skin, to mouth the fingers that had been teasing him.

First he licked around each finger, exploring the knuckles with his lips. He was tempted to bite at them, just a little, not enough to hurt or anything, but he was pretty sure that wasn't what Owen had in mind. What *did* Owen have in mind? Would he paint traces of Sterling's own saliva across his bare skin?

It didn't matter; he didn't care. He was so happy to finally have Owen touching him, making him hard through something more than just his sheer presence (impressive though it was) that it wasn't important to him what Owen would do next. Instead, Sterling focused on doing the best job he could, sucking on Owen's fingers, taking them deep into the back of his throat while stubbornly suppressing his gag reflex, hoping the demonstration of his abilities might tempt Owen into putting his cock in Sterling's mouth instead of just his fingers.

Owen withdrew his fingers slowly, teasingly, and then Sterling felt cool wetness and a small, sharp jolt of pain as Owen pinched his nipple to an aching peak, his spit-slick fingers moving to Sterling's other nipple and rousing it to a matching, aching burn.

After a single glance down at what he'd done, Owen's gaze returned to Sterling's face, and Sterling hoped that he didn't look shocked. The pain had been nothing, not really, but it was weightless snowflakes gathering to make a snowball; each sting of pain, each rub of the silk against the thin, fragile skin on the inside of his wrists, each touch from Owen, with Sterling unsure if it would hurt or soothe, was making him realize one thing—Owen was in control of this, all of it.

He was breathing shallowly now, his heart pounding. He hadn't been touched below the hollow of his hip, with Owen pressing his thumb there and

drawing a circle that had tightened every muscle in Sterling's stomach. His dick was jerking with every breath, leaking, flushed darkly, showing every way it could that it was ready to come, but Owen wasn't looking at it.

Owen moved to stand behind Sterling, and as he walked past him, he let his hand trail behind him, his palm dragging across Sterling's stomach, the edge of his little finger grazing the tip of Sterling's dick.

A soft sound somewhere between a gasp and a moan escaped Sterling—he hadn't meant it to, but it did. He was so turned on that even Owen's hand touching his stomach was intense; having Owen touch his cock, no matter how lightly, was *beyond* intense, it was...maddening. He tried, really tried, not to shift his body chasing another touch, but he didn't think he actually succeeded.

"Be still," Owen said, voice quiet but stern at the same time, and Sterling froze, determined to do better.

Owen's hand slid along Sterling's skin again, fingertips circling his navel, giving him goose bumps. Owen's skin temperature was slightly lower than his, and Sterling held perfectly still as cool fingers slid down along his hip, carefully avoiding his cock, and then brushed the soft hair on his upper thigh.

He could stay still, but he couldn't keep from whimpering, the second sound to escape him in as many minutes.

"I *could* tell you to be quiet too, but I like hearing you," Owen said. "You're as eloquent as I remember you being in class, even when you're not actually saying anything."

The last four words were punctuated by gentle tugs as his earlobe as Owen, standing behind him now, set his teeth into the soft flesh and bit down. Sterling could close his eyes now, and he did, tracking the glide of a single fingertip down his side. "Do you remember what I told you to do?" Owen asked.

"Y-yes," Sterling said, his body screaming for release, for something more than darting kisses, fleeting touches. "Stay still."

"And you're doing it very well," Owen said.

It was a little scary, the rush of relief and pride that swept through Sterling when he heard that. It made his shoulders relax, dropping down half an inch or so into a more comfortable position, and it made his knees weak. He wasn't totally sure what it meant, but he liked it even though it worried him. Was this normal, or was he screwed up in ways he hadn't even realized yet?

Owen smoothed both hands up Sterling's chest, still standing behind him, and found his nipples with the edges of both thumbnails. Sterling didn't usually think of his nipples as being all that sensitive, but with Owen touching him he might have to revise that theory, because they felt so tight they almost ached with it, and each teasing touch forced more blood into his cock, which had gone beyond ache and into imminent-orgasm territory.

Not allowed to come, he reminded himself. Not allowed.

"I won't often give you a choice," Owen said. "It's not a kindness, though it might seem like it. Today, though, you get one. You can come, or you can get spanked. If you choose my hand on your ass over yours on your cock, there's a possibility that you might come anyway. If you do, I'll be very understanding, completely sympathetic—even pleased that you enjoyed it that much...and you'll still be punished for being greedy."

Owen's hands circled Sterling's wrists, gripping tighter than the silk, and then he undid the looser of the knots and let the length of material fall free, whispering across Sterling's ass and thigh before it hung from his bound wrist, the end pooling on the floor. "Choose, please, Sterling."

God, he wanted to come so badly. It felt like he'd been hard for weeks without release. But the thought of Owen's hand on his ass, hitting him repeatedly, his hips jerking with every strike, skin burning...

How the hell was he supposed to choose?

That must be what Owen meant by it not being a kindness, but when he thought about it for a few more seconds, he realized that Owen's hand touching him, spanking him, was better than coming when it would be his own fist jerking himself off.

"Spanking," he whispered, but it came out so quietly that he wasn't sure Owen had been able to hear it. He lifted his face and repeated it, flushing. "Spank me. Please."

He heard Owen exhale as if he'd been waiting, holding his breath, for Sterling's answer, and he wondered if it had been a test and not a choice. Sterling was still getting used to the idea that being submissive turned him on after years of fighting *not* to give in to anyone, so he couldn't be too surprised that Owen had doubts as well.

Owen wound the silk attached to Sterling's wrist around his hand and used it to lead Sterling over to the bed. "I could do this several ways, but there's a reason why over the knee has never gone out of fashion, and it's certainly one of my favorite positions to give a spanking." He held up his hand. "And there's a lot to be said for using this, not a hairbrush or a paddle, though for a longer session it's not practical. I'm going to spank you twenty times; enough to leave a burn, but really just a taste. Twenty is nothing. A warm-up lap. You're to count in your head, and if I stop and ask you the number we've reached, I expect you to know, or I'll add another two. Any questions?"

Sterling's heart was beating overtime, and he wondered idly how many months of his life were being burned away via sheer adrenaline. Not that he cared.

Questions? The only question he had was, why was he still standing up when he could be draped over Owen's lap.

"I don't—no. No questions." Being spanked twenty times didn't sound like enough, really, but he trusted Owen, who had sat down on the bed and was waiting. Owen shouldn't have to wait.

It was awkward, figuring out how to lie down as an adult across another man's lap. The only spanking Sterling had ever participated in was the playful kind, whacking another guy's clothed ass a couple of times. Now, with his torso lying across Owen's thighs, he felt less sure of himself again.

The first touch of Owen's hand, smoothing over his ass, made him forget everything but what was about to happen. His usual tension at being touched there didn't exist; he *wanted* to be touched when it was Owen doing it, and this wasn't being fucked, this was being spanked.

Owen put a hand palm down in the small of Sterling's back, anchoring him, and made some small adjustments to their positions, spreading his knees a little wider so that Sterling's dick was kissing air, unable to find anything to rub up against. His toes dug into the thick softness of the rug by Owen's bed, and his fingertips could touch the floor if he ever relaxed enough to spread his fingers, currently clenched into fists.

"Ready?" Owen said and waited for Sterling to croak out a yes before hitting him.

It was expected, and it still shocked him into a grunt of surprise, an openmouthed gasp. Owen hadn't made that first slap light at all; his hand had slammed down, fierce and hot, forcing pain and heat into Sterling's ass. Pain given without anger, without disappointment...pain that melted Sterling's defenses like ice in sunlight and left him open to Owen in a way that scared him even as he reveled in it.

He held 'one' in his head, the number grounding him with the promise of nineteen more just like that, and found himself arching up his hips, his legs spreading wider, begging silently for another.

The next blow was harder, as if the first one had been a test, and Sterling gave a little cry as the initial sting of it became a deeper burn. He had time to think 'two' before the third slap came, about the same as the second in force but, because his nerve endings were already flaring, more painful. He cried out again, remembered to count 'three,' then found his mind shutting down as the next few blows came, everything becoming about the pain and the moments in between. His ass was on fire, his throat roughened by the sounds that were escaping him, and his head was spinning.

"What number is that?" Owen asked gently while Sterling was still poised for the next sharp crack of pain, waiting for it.

It took him a few seconds to get his head back together enough to answer, and then he discovered he'd lost count. There'd been three, and then maybe another eight after that. "Um, eleven?" he guessed.

Owen gave a dry chuckle. "I'm glad I never had to teach you math. No. Twelve. Which means how many remaining?"

It was amazing how difficult it was to gather his thoughts together enough to do a sum a five-year-old could have managed easily. The spanking had shattered him, body and mind, splintered him into jagged pieces, not with each



smarting, biting slap, but the struggle not to give in to the insistent clamor of his dick, demanding to come. If he'd been aroused before he'd gone over Owen's knee, he was beyond that now. He didn't have a reference point for how turned on he was; he'd never, ever felt this close to climaxing for so long. Never realized just what denial would do to him.

"Ten," he said and wished, with a small, rebellious part of his brain, that he'd gotten that wrong too, so Owen would add more to the tally. He wanted more. It was torture, and he wasn't sure how long he could keep from coming, but the pain, sweet, hot, welcome, was worth it.

And, yeah, he was curious about what a punishment from Owen would be, and *that* edged his arousal up well into the danger zone just thinking about it.

"Ten," Owen repeated, his voice stern now, sending a shiver down Sterling's spine. "Don't lose count again, Sterling. Focus, please."

The next three landed on the same few square inches of skin and brought tears to his eyes because that went beyond what he could handle. He squirmed, sobbed, wetness blurring his vision, tears falling when he squeezed his eyes shut. Two more on that same spot and then Owen mercifully moved away, leaving that place throbbing.

That was five, which left five more. Sterling inhaled sharply with the next slap, and when he exhaled, he was crying, really crying. He fought it, trying to hold in the string of sobs, but he'd lost all control, and there was no way to wall off a tide that had been gathering for years. Through the struggle, he kept track of the blows with the one part of his brain that still seemed capable of counting, so that when Owen paused again to ask, "What number is that, Sterling?" he was able to say, accurately if in a broken voice, "Ni-nineteen."

He was still crying, the salt of his tears stinging his eyes, and his cock *hurt*. Not as bad as when he'd hurt his shoulder—that had been spectacularly painful, leaving his vision washed out with bright white and his tooth chipped from clenching his jaw so hard. He wanted to come, he wanted to come *now*. He'd been waiting so long, and his ass had to be bright red now.

He wasn't going to come. He wouldn't. No matter how much it hurt not to, or how good it would feel to just let go, Sterling was stubborn, and he was not going to let himself come.

The last three blows weren't any less painful for the fact that they were reaching the end; Sterling breathed heavily through his open mouth, still crying, his lips dry and his dick wet-tipped. As the sharp pain of the last strike came, his cock gave a warning throb, and he couldn't wait to see what would happen as a result—he scrambled off Owen's lap without permission and clamped his hand down around the base of his dick, squeezing so hard to prevent himself from coming that he moaned. "Sorry," he gasped. "I'm sorry, I had to—"

Owen didn't say anything, which was like a dash of cold water over Sterling, killing at least some of his arousal and reducing the *now-now-now* to

a more plaintive hope of *soon*. No praise, no blame, just Owen staring at him, a slight frown creasing his forehead, his gray eyes narrowed. The silence stretched, and then Owen crooked his finger and beckoned Sterling closer again.

“Back over my knee,” he said, and there was no mistaking the fact that Owen wasn't all that happy with him, but when Sterling, after a frantic swipe at his wet face, obeyed, his body a scream of sensation, muscles protesting the return to a position they'd held for so long, Owen put a cool hand, his left hand, on what had to be scarlet skin, taking back some of the heat, and let his right hand, the palm feeling rough and hot, caress the back of Sterling's thigh. “I know why you did that, and I appreciate your efforts to obey me and not come when you didn't have permission, but never break position like that again.” Owen smiled; Sterling could hear it shape his voice. “Apart from that lapse, and your inability to count, you were a pleasure to spank. Thank you.”

Sterling felt a smile break out across his own face even as he lifted a hand to wipe away tears again. Part of him had been worried that there were things he was doing wrong without realizing it—it was a relief to be told that he hadn't screwed up *too* badly. He was trembling, his ass a constant pain and his cock a more bearable one now that the adrenaline had died down a bit.

“Thank *you*,” he said, meaning it more than any other thanks he'd ever given. His throat hurt, felt raw from a combination of cries and sobs, and his nose was stuffed up, and God, he was tired. He wanted to slide off Owen's lap, curl up on the floor, and go to sleep right there.

After a final pat to Sterling's ass, Owen took his hands away. “Lie facedown on the bed now. You need to get yourself together and just come down from the high.”

Moving from Owen's lap to the bed was more of a scramble than a graceful shift of position, but Sterling was past caring. He sprawled out on a cotton comforter washed to softness and felt the bed rock under him as Owen stood up. “I'll be back in a moment. I'm going to get you a Coke. You need the sugar.”

Before he left, he untied the silk from Sterling's wrist and folded it into a compact square, tucking it into Sterling's hand. Sterling clutched at it as if it'd been Owen's hand and felt the delicate fabric catch at the work-roughened skin on his fingers.

He felt so *good*. He didn't even care that he was still hard and had no idea when Owen might let him come—sure, his dick ached, and it probably would for hours, but every other part of him, even his sore ass, felt good. Relaxed, like all the tension he carried around with him all the time, to the point where he mostly didn't even realize it was there, had melted away, leaving his muscles heavy and lazy, slow.

Apparently his brain was willing to melt right along with the rest of him, because he was actually dozing when Owen came back. He wasn't sure if Owen had said something or if his return had just changed the room somehow—because it made sense that Owen's presence would change a room that much.

"What? Sorry." He pushed himself up onto his elbows, wincing as the tender skin of his ass protested.

"Lie still," Owen said chidingly. He set down a tray on the night table. Sterling squinted at it without making much effort to see what was on it. "You can sit up and drink some Coke in a moment. I want to take the temperature of your backside down a few degrees."

Even with that warning, the cold, rough washcloth that Owen draped across his ass felt icy. Sterling whimpered in shock, goose bumps breaking out over him. "Cold!"

"I know." Owen blessedly didn't scrub away with the cloth, just let it leach the heat from Sterling's well-spanked skin and then repeated the process a few times before patting Sterling's ass dry with a towel that might have been as fluffy as a marshmallow but right then would have made a good substitute for sandpaper as far as Sterling was concerned.

"Some cream now," Owen said, sounding distracted. For the first time Sterling found himself wondering if Owen was as turned on as he was. He hoped so; maybe fellow feeling would let Owen give him permission to jerk off.

The cream really helped, Owen's fingers spreading it quickly and carefully. When the aftercare was over, Sterling figured that he might just be able to bear wearing pants again—assuming he didn't have to zip them up.

"Stay on your stomach while the cream soaks in," Owen said, "but prop yourself up on your elbows and have a drink. Then tell me how you're feeling and what that was like. I'm not looking for 'awesome' or 'cool'; I want to know what worked and what didn't."

Taking the bottle Owen handed him, Sterling drank half a dozen swallows almost greedily, then made himself lower it because drinking too much all at once when you were really thirsty was never a good idea. The icy liquid soothed his throat and settled in his stomach, cold.

"I feel good," he said. "Really relaxed. Like I didn't even know I was tense until I could feel what the opposite was like. Does that make sense?" Owen nodded, so he went on. "I mean, I'm still, you know, hard, so I guess I'm not *totally* relaxed. But I think what I liked was when my brain shut off and I was just focusing on my body and how it felt, waiting for the next jolt without thinking about it. It was kind of like instinct took over or something. That was when I lost track of the counting, though—I went too far away, I guess. Too much into my body."

"That's not necessarily a bad thing," Owen said thoughtfully. "Not at all. I'll always be counting, so to speak, watching to see how you're handling it. You'll learn to control losing control in time—and I know that sounds paradoxical, but you'll see what I mean."

Sterling sipped at the Coke, taking it slower now. He was still euphoric, but Owen this close to him, sitting beside him on the bed, one hand hot and reddened, was making it impossible to forget about coming. He wanted that

hand, the one that had spanked him, wrapped tight and merciless around his dick, wanted to come, shuddering, his ass tormented by the sheets as he writhed on them, spunk mixing in with the ripe musk of sweat and lust that filled the room.

"You want to come, don't you?" Owen said, a murmur, a whisper. He took the bottle from Sterling's unresisting hand and set it down on the tray and then pushed at Sterling's shoulder and rolled him to his back, with Sterling feeling weightless, as if he was floating in seawater. "Beg me for permission, Sterling. Make me feel how much you need it, want it." He leaned over and kissed Sterling's parted lips, hard and sweet, like candy, the kiss over too soon. "Beg for mercy and see if I have any where you're concerned, and let me tell you now that I don't have much. You look so damn good suffering, your cock hard and wet, waiting for me to lick it, bite it, suck it—and I'll do all that in time, with you tied up, helpless, so you can't move, can't get deeper in my mouth, can't beg because I'll gag you—can't do anything but let me play with you...but that's not going to happen for such a long time, and you need it now, don't you? Tell me, Sterling; what do you need?"

"You," Sterling whispered, because when it came right down to it that was the most basic of truths. With his ass hot and sore and his cock hard against his belly, of course he wanted to come, especially after days of waiting, but if he had to choose between Owen's touch—hand, mouth, tongue, it didn't matter—and coming, he'd choose Owen. "Want you to touch me. If I can come, that's better, but it's not what I really want." He shifted his hips pleadingly, using his body to speak for him but knowing that wouldn't be enough.

Owen wanted him to beg.

"Please. Please touch me, Owen. I've been wanting it for so long, wanting you." This was more difficult than he'd thought it would be, the words thick over his tongue, almost choking him. He didn't beg, refused to. He'd have gone to work for minimum wage with nothing more than a high school education—private school though it had been—rather than ask his father to pay for his college education. And this, being allowed to come, was a much smaller thing, something he could have gone much longer without, surely. Sterling found himself with tears in his eyes again, but now they were tears of shame at how low he'd sunk. If he begged and Owen still said no... "Please, Owen. I need to come. Need to come for you, need to show you. I want you to see."

There was nothing more intimate than having someone watch you come, but Sterling *wanted* it. Wanted Owen's eyes on him, Owen's hand stroking his dick. He was so close just thinking about it.

"I need it. Need you to let me. Need—please, Owen. Please."

"You're struggling so much with this, aren't you?" Owen said, still in that cool murmur. "You can't understand why you need all this so much, just that you do. Like air, like water." He put his right hand on Sterling's chest and drew it down slowly until it was so close to where Sterling needed it that Sterling only had to move an inch up the bed to get it, but he didn't. "And you don't let

that part of you that wants to fight me win. You won't let it." Owen's hand moved to cup Sterling's face, cradling his cheek. "Come for me, then. Use your hands. I want to see you work yourself; I want to see you come, here, lying on my bed."

Sterling made a muffled sound, desperate now that he'd been given permission, and got one hand around his cock and the other cupping his balls. It hardly took any time at all—three clumsy strokes and he was coming in long, powerful waves that robbed him of breath, aware of Owen's palm against his jaw as his release shook him like a rag doll, heedless of anything but Owen's touch grounding him, Owen's face watching him.

It was the strongest orgasm he could remember; it left him gasping, heart beating staccato in his chest and the rest of him utterly boneless, a thought which made him laugh a little, helplessly, at its appropriateness. Not completely appropriate, though, because he was still hard, and even as he lay there his cock gave another lazy pulse.

"Thank you." It was just a whisper, but he thought that the look that must have been on his face probably made up for it. He wanted to put his arms around Owen and be held, to use Owen's shoulder as a pillow and spend the night, but he had no idea if that was in the cards. He was such a novice. He didn't know how any of this worked.

Owen sighed, a long, heartfelt exhalation, and put his hand where Sterling's had been, a loose clasp that could've gotten Sterling back to full hardness again without Owen needing to do more than that. He spread his legs a little, not caring how blatant the invitation was, and Owen smiled, the cage of his hand opening. "You're welcome."

He cleaned Sterling's stomach with the damp washcloth and then wiped his hands and tossed it back onto the tray, narrowly missing the small bowl of water. "It's not that late, but you have an early class tomorrow; I want you to get plenty of sleep. If I think that this—any of it—is affecting your work, it's going to stop." He hesitated, his gaze on Sterling, whose face must have reflected some of the hurt he felt at the abrupt change from intimate to brusque. "Does that make you feel as if I'm pulling back after getting close? It isn't like that. It's just more of what we just did, expressed another way. Don't look so crushed." Owen nudged Sterling's leg with his knee. "Move over."

Sterling shifted across the bed and gave Owen enough room to lie beside him. He wasn't sure what Owen wanted him to do—and he *really* wished that Owen was naked too—but Owen reached for him and drew him closer, turning so that they lay side by side, their arms around each other.

It was...nice. Sterling was comfortable, and he wasn't hard anymore (which was a relief), and he was *tired*. He couldn't really let himself relax all the way, though, because he didn't want to fall half asleep only to be roused and sent on his way. His dorm room with its white walls and too-thin mattress seemed a world away, and he preferred this one.

"Can I—stay here? Spend the night, I mean?" he asked.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," Owen said dubiously. "You've got that nine o'clock class, and you'd need to get up early. I can't exactly give you a ride to your dorm." As he said it, his arm tightened around Sterling's shoulder, sending a different message, but a moment later, he pulled away. "It's not a good idea," he repeated.

Begging had worked before—maybe it would work now. "Please?" Sterling said. "I'll be good and get up early and walk back to campus. It's not *that* far." It was, actually, but he could do it. It'd be worth it for a chance to sleep in Owen's bed.

"Why do you want to?" Owen asked, sounding genuinely puzzled. "This isn't—we're not dating, you know. You wanted me to help you—train you—and I agreed, but we barely know each other beyond that." He pushed Sterling's hair back where it fell over his forehead, the gesture automatic, proprietary. "Or do you think you'll be able to persuade me to do more than sleep with you?"

Maybe they weren't dating, but Sterling knew, deep down, that he wanted them to be. This wasn't just training to him—it had already become something much more, and if it took a while for Owen to realize that too, well, he'd just be patient until that happened.

He was pretty sure that mentioning it now wouldn't go over very well, though.

"I'd do anything for you," he said. "If you don't want...that, that's okay, but I'd suck you off however you wanted, or you could rub yourself off on me, or...whatever. Or not. I still want to stay. I feel...I don't know, like myself here. With you." He searched Owen's eyes, hoping for the answer he wanted but resigned to quit here if he didn't get it.

"My first sub, Michael, used to sleep with me," Owen said, which came out of nowhere as far as Sterling was concerned and left him dealing with yet another sharp pang of envy for Michael. "And I suppose over the years others have from time to time, but mostly they just...go home afterward, or the session takes place somewhere like the club." He shrugged. "Stay if you want to, but don't make me have to explain the definition of no sex in the middle of the night, please."

"Okay," Sterling said. "Thank you. I won't. I'd rather sleep here with you and not have sex than go back to the dorm and not have sex alone." He grinned a little bit. "Besides, I already know my roommate snores. You might not."

"And you might," Owen said with a tug at a lock of Sterling's hair, not hard enough to hurt. "In which case, remind me to show you where the spare room is."

Sterling's grin widened; then he yawned. He was so tired—he felt like he could sleep for twenty-four hours at least. "I don't snore, and any of the guys I've slept with would tell you I don't kick in my sleep, either. Don't worry."

Owen got up and stripped down to his boxer shorts—putting his clothes in the laundry hamper, Sterling noted, because apparently he was a neat freak—and went away to the bathroom to do whatever before coming back and getting into bed again.

Carefully, Sterling hitched himself a little closer to Owen, who was warm and smelled good, and closed his eyes, sure that he was going to get the best night's sleep ever. “Good night,” he said.

“Good night,” Owen said and patted his hair.

## Chapter Six

Sterling woke in a mood that Owen couldn't help but feel was a little on the smug side. No wonder, since he'd gotten his way again. They'd both woken during the night, Owen roused from an uneasy dream when Sterling had switched on the light in the bathroom off the bedroom. He would have pointed out that the bathroom had a door that closed, but when Sterling had come back to bed, he clearly hadn't been awake enough to be capable of talking, falling asleep again within moments.

Owen had lain beside him for a while, his cock a resentful ache. Denial was one thing, but this was killing him. He could take care of himself, and he would, but it was going to be a long four months. It didn't matter; that was one stipulation he refused to break, bend, or change. Sterling needed to learn that there were limits, rules. Needed to submit to them as willingly as he submitted to Owen's hands and mouth on him.

As he lay wakeful in the dim room, he thought ahead to the morning. They'd both need to wake early to shower and eat; Sterling wasn't the only one with a class at the start of the day. Owen liked those classes; it let him see who was serious enough about the subject to put in an appearance, and once the students had woken up, the discussion was usually lively.

They'd both be in a rush, but that didn't mean that Owen couldn't indulge himself just a little...

He allowed Sterling to take the first shower and dug out a spare toothbrush for him to use. He had a battery-operated one, but his dentist always handed him a complimentary one after each checkup, and it was easier to tuck it into his pocket than refuse. He had half a dozen in assorted colors; Sterling got a cherry red one.

"I'm going to start breakfast," Owen said before he left the bathroom, resisting the urge to put his hand on Sterling's ass and watch him shiver. It was shadowed faintly with tiny bruises, barely noticeable, the redness all but gone. "I can shower after you leave. Hungry?"

"Starved," Sterling said apologetically. "Last night was intense. I think I burned a lot of calories." Of course, the boy—it was best that Owen continue to think of him as a boy, really—was probably still growing, and Owen remembered what it had been like to be hungry at that age, feeling capable of eating a whole large pizza on his own and not being full.



He allowed himself a lingering look at Sterling's bare body as Sterling stood in front of the mirror toweling his hair, since it meant he could look without Sterling realizing that he was being watched. Sterling had wide shoulders that would likely fill out some more over the next couple of years and a long torso that narrowed to a slender waist. Owen remembered what the sensitive skin over Sterling's lower belly had felt like against his fingers and palm—so soft, almost silken.

Sterling's cock was flaccid, but Owen's hands still itched to touch it, to feel it swell in his grip and stroke it to hardness.

Then Sterling moved the towel lower to dry off his chest, and Owen beat a hasty retreat to the kitchen.

The coffeemaker was on a timer, and the pot was already half full. Owen rarely had more than toast or cereal in the morning and didn't consider himself more than a passable cook, but breakfast was easy. He had frozen hash browns that only took ten minutes in the oven, and as they cooked, he set bacon and mildly spicy sausages sizzling in a frying pan. Toast, juice, and a bowl of scrambled eggs made in the microwave rounded off the breakfast, and Sterling appeared in time to be given the task of setting the table and pouring out juice and coffee.

Very domestic, very middle America...but Owen didn't, and never would, fit into that niche, and from what he'd seen, neither would Sterling.

It was only six thirty, and outside the September sunrise was chasing away the darkness, mist rising from earth that still held summer's warmth, though the leaves were beginning to turn, their bright green crisped with yellow and orange. Inside the kitchen, the air was redolent with the aroma of cooking, sharpening Owen's appetite and making Sterling look longingly at the oven.

"How many classes do you have today?" Sterling asked, looking in a second drawer until he found the teaspoons, which he'd left out while setting the table until he realized they'd need them for their coffee. Or he would, at least—Owen took his black and unsweetened.

"Hmm? Oh...two this morning, an appointment with a student after lunch, and then a meeting with the rest of my department that will probably drag on until three. Pretty quiet, really, unlike my Thursdays; some genius in admin decided it'd be fun to schedule me three consecutive classes in a row."

Sterling sipped at his juice, standing next to the table. "I'll bet your students don't complain if you're late."

"I'm sure they wouldn't," Owen said dryly, remembering more than one occasion when Sterling had slouched into his class late with an excuse only one step away from "the dog ate my homework" level of credibility. The third time it'd happened, he'd told Sterling to leave and given the class a pop quiz, telling the students that anyone whose grade fell below seventy-five would have to write a 10,000-word essay before the next class. The quiz had been so easy that only two other students besides Sterling had to write the essay—and whereas theirs had been poorly written and padded out, Sterling's had been a

pleasure to read, not that Owen had told him that. "But I'm never late. Well—very rarely."

He divided the food, arranging it on warmed plates, and carried the plates over to the table. "Sit down and cut your food into bite-size pieces, but don't start eating," he said casually.

Time to play...

Sterling looked startled, his eyes going just a little bit wider than normal, and his lips parting for a few seconds before he swallowed, nodded, and sat down. He looked so delicious when he was surprised that it made Owen wish he could surprise him all the time, slip his cock between willing lips and fuck himself deep into Sterling's mouth and throat while staring into dark, blown-wide pupils.

Owen pulled back to the here and now determinedly and took a bite of his own breakfast while he watched Sterling cut his food into a plateful of manageable pieces, occasionally glancing up at him as if trying to figure out what Owen was thinking.

He'd know soon enough.

Sterling set his knife and fork down with a clatter that Owen guessed was nerves and cleared his throat. "Okay, what now?"

"No," Owen said and took a sip of juice, tartly sweet. "It's not necessary to address me when I haven't asked you a question; I can see that you've completed the task I set you, and it's for me to set the pace, not you. Or do we have to go running again to reinforce that lesson?"

If Sterling wanted to be trained, Owen was going to cram as much as he could into the hours they had—but even if they'd met during the summer vacation, with endless, empty days to fill, he would still have gotten a kick out of shortening Sterling's leash and bringing his exuberant puppy to heel. He made a mental note to work a tightly rolled newspaper into a scene and use it to administer some well-placed smacks if Sterling failed to deliver what was required of him.

A tingle of pure anticipation raced over him. He'd spent too long going through the motions with subs whose obedience was automatic, unthinking, a means to an end. Sterling's rough edges and flashes of rebellion were the perfect antidote to the boredom he'd been feeling.

"No," Sterling said, then, as if he thought it was expected of him, added a grudging, "Sir." He sat with his wrists on the table, eyes on his plate, unmoving, waiting for instruction.

Owen ate a few more bites of food casually, enjoying the tension in Sterling's frame as a minute and then another passed. The room was very quiet except for the hum of the refrigerator and the small noises from Owen's cutlery as he picked up bites of food. Finally, thinking that enough time had passed, he gestured at the floor to his left. "On your knees, please."

The slightest pause—not long enough to complain about, really—and Sterling pushed back his chair and knelt beside Owen's instead. He didn't say anything, kept his head bowed, but he also didn't cross his wrists behind his back the way he should have, by now, remembered to.

"Where should your hands be?" Owen inquired mildly. He glanced at the clock on the wall as Sterling flushed and jerked his hands back with a complete lack of grace. "I think for you to be in class on time, you'll need to leave in fifteen minutes. Allowing you a few moments to get your shoes and coat on and say good-bye properly, that leaves, hmm, let's say ten minutes to eat. I'm going to take a minute off for your inability to remember a very basic instruction."

He turned his attention back to his food, each bite spiced with a keen awareness of just how very much Sterling was hating this—and him—even though Owen was certain that the boy was half-hard already. Hating it didn't mean that it wasn't turning Sterling on at the same time.

After a final sip of coffee, he reached over the table and drew Sterling's plate to him, studying its contents. Some sausage first, maybe. It should have cooled enough to be handled comfortably—one, if far from the only, reason he'd made Sterling wait to eat.

"Open your mouth," he said casually. God, that sulky pout was familiar. How had he gotten through a year of teaching Sterling without a single fantasy of bending him over a desk and fucking the insolence out of him, that strong body pliant and yielding, sweat-dappled back arched as Sterling begged for more?

Sterling's gaze flickered up to meet his, defiant, but when he saw that Owen wasn't angry, the look faded to one of mild confusion. He opened his mouth and let Owen feed him a bite of sausage, gripping it with his teeth so that Owen could slide the fork free and then chewing slowly. Very slowly, actually, even though he had to be hungry and he'd already been told his time was limited.

Owen always did love a sub with enough of a spark to test him; and he could see plainly, with Sterling's hands behind his back and not blocking his view, that Sterling indeed had an erection.

Hiding a smile, Owen fed the boy a bite of scrambled egg, then held a corner of toast, already grown cold, in front of his mouth. This time Sterling looked up at him with hopeful eyes, licking his lips before he took a crunching bite with his prep-school-straight teeth.

"How do you like my cooking?" Owen said, turning the toast so that a particularly buttery bite was closest to Sterling's mouth, counting on manners instilled in childhood to prevent Sterling from answering before he'd swallowed or taking another bite until he'd finished speaking.

As expected, Sterling finished chewing and swallowed before answering. "I love it," he said, his voice warm and laced with appreciation. It was clear that his earlier pique at the situation had faded.

Owen snorted and let Sterling have another bite of toast. "Diplomatic and polite, but I don't think the kitchen is where I shine." He held Sterling's coffee mug to his lips and allowed him a few swallows before continuing to feed Sterling bite by bite. "I won't be able to see you for a few days, but that doesn't mean that your training stops. There's a lot that you can do by yourself."

"There is?" Sterling sounded surprised at the idea, though not the sort of surprised that Owen had so admired earlier. Then disappointment set in. "A few days? Can't you fit in a couple of hours somewhere? I don't want to—"

Owen cleared his throat pointedly, and Sterling stopped talking. "If you want to continue being seen by me, you won't make a fuss when I'm too busy. People who ask for more than I'm willing to give end up with nothing."

This seemed to sink in, and Sterling nodded. "I'm sorry. You said there are things I can do by myself? What are they? Please."

"I know that you share a room; do you ever have it to yourself?"

Sterling nodded. "Brian's seeing this town girl with her own place; he sleeps over there three or four nights a week."

"Good. I want you to work on getting from standing to kneeling without looking like a puppet with its strings cut and to practice holding the position you're in now until it's second nature."

Sterling moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue. "Yes, Owen." The very proper response was slightly spoiled by the self-conscious expression that accompanied it, but Owen let it go. It would come more naturally very quickly.

"I'm also going to ask you to start experimenting a little and getting past your issue with being fucked."

That comment produced a worried look, but Sterling didn't say anything, just waited and then ate the bite of egg that Owen fed him.

He didn't need to say anything; Owen was an expert at reading body language and would have been able to see the tension Sterling was broadcasting even if he hadn't already anticipated the reaction. "I'm going to give you some lube, and by the next time we're together, I'll expect to be able to slide a finger into your ass without you tensing up the way you are now." He gave Sterling a pointed look, and Sterling deliberately dropped his shoulders without actually relaxing at all; it was a valiant, if in vain, attempt to fool Owen. "If you're turned on and not being a drama queen about the whole thing, it doesn't hurt at all."

Sterling bit his lower lip hard enough to turn it white around his teeth and nodded, but it was clear he had serious doubts.

"Tell me what you're thinking," Owen said.

"That I don't know if I can do it," Sterling said softly, eyes down.

Sighing, Owen set down the fork and took Sterling's chin in his hand, lifting Sterling's face until their eyes met. "You can, and you will, because I've told you to. Are we clear?"

"Yes, Owen."

That still didn't sound convincing. "Choose a time when you'll be safe from interruptions. Lock the door. Take a long shower or a bath to relax. Jerk off—yes, for this you're allowed to come—and just incorporate it into what you're doing." That sounded a little bald, but it wasn't easy to dress it up. Moved by sympathy tinged with mild impatience, Owen added, "If you're having real problems, we can discuss it Friday night. I usually order in some Chinese or pizza; you're welcome to join me for supper around seven."

He usually went to the club too, but he wasn't ready to take Sterling back there yet.

Sterling did seem to relax some then, maybe at the reassurance that their next meeting had a specific date and time rather than a nebulous 'soon' that might mean it would never happen. Owen made a mental note of this; it was always good to know what would result in emotional unbalance in a sub whether one wanted to cause it or avoid it.

"And for as long as we continue this, I expect you to maintain your grades," Owen said, remembering that he'd meant to mention it earlier. "They don't have to be perfect, but I'd like them to be as close as possible. Since you've made such a point to tell me how intelligent you are, it shouldn't be a problem."

"It won't be," Sterling said, then was quiet as Owen held the coffee cup to his lips and let him finish the beverage.

Walking Sterling to the door to send him on his way wasn't easy. Part of Owen wanted to take him back to bed and keep him there for the day, warm between rumpled sheets, waiting for Owen's touch. Self-discipline learned over the years kept him from saying the words that would have sent Sterling there. They both needed to be on campus working.

God, he really hoped that their paths didn't cross over the next few days; he was confident of his own ability to walk on by, giving nothing away, but would Sterling have that much control of his expression?

At the door, he slipped a small bottle of lube into Sterling's pocket and then kissed him, a slow, unhurried kiss that brought his erection to full hardness. If it made him late, he was going to have to take time out to jerk off in the shower. Sterling tasted of coffee and toothpaste, his lips moving against Owen's with the eagerness that caught at Owen's heart just a little.

Friday seemed like a long time to wait for another kiss.

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It had been more than two weeks since they'd started their relationship (which Sterling was pretty sure Owen wouldn't refer to as a relationship, but he sure as hell did, if only in his head), and Sterling had perfected kneeling in the position Owen favored, hands crossed behind his back, sometimes for as long as three hours.

The first thing Sterling did after Owen let him in was go to the closet, where he took off his jacket, shirt, shoes, and socks. Then he went and knelt beside Owen's favorite chair—Owen murmured his approval at his graceful, now-practiced ability to get from standing to kneeling, which made Sterling instantly hard, although that might have happened anyway just from getting into position.

He'd learned, to his surprise, to like playing with his ass. Sure, it had taken hours of careful penetration on his own, sometimes in the shower in the middle of the day when everyone else was at class so no one on his dorm floor would complain about him using up all the water. And sometimes late at night when Brian had gone off to stay at his girlfriend's place, under the covers just to be on the safe side, enough lube coating his fingers that it left huge wet spots on his sheets.

The first time he'd tried it, he'd done as Owen advised—jerked off beforehand so he'd be nice and relaxed, then given himself permission to just touch his asshole, not trying to push inside at all. Somehow, knowing that he didn't have to take it any farther had made him bold, and fifteen minutes later he had his forefinger up to the first knuckle thrust inside, and it didn't hurt. In fact, it felt fucking fantastic, and when he was fully hard again just from the sensation of his own finger in his ass, he wondered, amazed, why he'd waited so long to find this out.

It was stupid because he'd fucked plenty of guys and they'd all seemed to enjoy it a hell of a lot, and he knew they hadn't been faking it.

Of course, having Owen's fingers in there seemed like a more complicated proposition, and Sterling knew that tonight Owen intended to do it. They'd had a long conversation about it the night before, with Sterling describing in embarrassing detail what he'd managed so far on his own, and Owen had said he was ready. And sometimes being told whether he was ready or not was such a relief that Sterling would have accepted just about anything Owen wanted to do.

"You're tense," Owen said now, one hand settling on the back of Sterling's neck.

"Yes, Owen." Such a simple answer.

"I told you that you were ready for this," Owen reminded him. "If you prove me wrong, it won't be the end of the world, but I hope that you don't." He smiled, his thumb stroking shivers into Sterling, running up and down the skin behind Sterling's ear. "I want to hear the sounds you make when I touch you there for the first time. I want to see your face when you're begging me to use two fingers, not one. And you will."

Before Sterling could do more than swallow hard, filled with a mixture of dread and anticipation, Owen patted his cheek and added casually, "I'm going to take you upstairs and spank you, I think. You need to relax and remember that you trust me, and that's as good a way to remind you as any."

Sterling wasn't inclined to argue with him on that count. Being spanked left him filled with a warm euphoria, intensely aware of every part of his body. That would wear off and leave him concentrating pretty much just on his burning, throbbing ass, which wasn't always as much fun, but the discomfort was worth it.

By the time Owen had finished with him, Sterling was gasping, his eyes wet with tears from the final flurry of slaps, but he'd been begging Owen for more until he'd lost the ability to be coherent and his dick was rigid, distracting him from the heat radiating off his backside.

"You took that so well," Owen said quietly, his hand resting lightly on the skin he'd slapped scarlet. "You respond to me from the very first slap, do you know that? I've never had anyone... It's like you're primed for it because you want it so much. I could get you to this point emotionally with half a dozen slaps, I think, but don't worry, I wouldn't ever stop there. You need the pain as well, and I need to give it to you."

Thinking that Owen was right—that he *did* need the pain, and that this specific contact was just what he'd needed to remind him how much he trusted Owen—Sterling nodded but didn't otherwise move. He wanted to let Owen control all of this, to take away the worry of what he was supposed to do next or whether it would really be the right thing. Owen would tell him what to do, and he'd do it. It was so beautifully simple.

The *click* of a bottle top being popped open broke through the buzz in Sterling's ears. He'd seen Owen drop the lube casually onto the bed before sitting on it and gesturing Sterling over his lap, but he'd forgotten about it.

Almost forgotten what the point of the evening was.

"I know your safe words, and so do you," Owen said, "but this isn't a normal scene; use them by all means, but all that you have to do to get me to stop is to say just that. Which wouldn't work when I was spanking you unless I felt that you'd had enough, just so that we're clear."

The easy flow of murmured words and the ability Owen had to command Sterling's full attention when he spoke meant that the first touch of cool, slippery fingers, tracing the cleft of Sterling's ass, was a shock.

Okay, he told himself silently. He could do this. He'd *been* doing it, and he knew it felt good—amazingly good—to have a finger in his ass, pressing against his swollen prostate. He'd done this lots of times, and if it felt good when he did it, just imagine how it would feel when it was Owen. And damned if thinking Owen's name didn't make his cock give an eager jolt, and then a second when Owen's slick fingertip rubbed across the incredibly sensitive skin of his asshole.

Sterling moaned softly as Owen did it again, giving himself permission to be vocal because he knew it would tell Owen what he needed to know—that Sterling was enjoying this, wasn't too tense. Of course, Owen could always tell that anyway.

God, it felt fantastic, having Owen touch him there. It was so *intimate*.

More lube, the liquid warmer than Sterling had expected, as if Owen had been holding the bottle in his hand, lessening even that small distraction. It trickled over his hole and down, coating the skin so that when the tip of Owen's finger pushed inside him, it took the liquid with it, easing the way.

Owen wasn't hesitant or cautious—Sterling wanted to thank him for that, but he couldn't make words form right then. The slow, gentle thrust of Owen's finger felt assured, as if Owen had done this a hundred times before—which of course, he had—and Sterling sighed out a long breath of relief.

"Tell me what you're feeling," Owen said.

"Relieved," Sterling said immediately—he'd learned there was no point in fighting Owen on this; it was better just to talk when told to do so. Even when it was awkward, which this definitely was, with Owen's finger sliding slowly in and out of his ass. "Oh God, that's so—that feels good."

"It's supposed to," Owen said with just a suspicion of a chuckle in his voice. Fine, Sterling was an idiot; he got it. The waves of sensation washing through him, making him want to tighten possessively around Owen's finger and at the same time somehow get it deeper, were intense enough to distract him from thoughts of how much time he'd wasted, though.

"Are you ready for more?" Owen asked. "Two fingers aren't as comfortable as a plug, but you should be able to take them."

"Yes," he said, so quickly that it was almost embarrassing. He was worried that it would be too much, but he was also eager for the pleasure and to prove to Owen that he *could* take it, that he could and would take anything that Owen wanted to dish out. Owen didn't keep him waiting, and yes, he *could* take two fingers—oh God, yes, he could. The shape Owen's fingers made inside him was new, but he wanted to learn it by heart, and each slow, careful thrust was creating a burn that was half physical and half emotional. He was panting now, gulping for air, pushing back to meet each stroke, sweat prickling down his back. He was dangerously close to coming, and Owen hadn't said that he could—

"Stop," Sterling gasped, and Owen proved his trustworthiness by freezing instantly. "Just—wait. It's good, I just—it's too good. God." An involuntary shiver went through him, his ass clenching around Owen's knuckles, and a reason for his fears about this act formed itself inside his head, sharp and clear. This was the kind of man his father hadn't wanted him to be, bent over for another man, being *fucked* the way his father thought only a woman should be.

Sterling shuddered and moaned, his cock half limp now in response to the sick twist in his gut.

"Don't move," he whispered, knowing that Owen wouldn't. "Please. I just need a minute." Sterling wasn't counting seconds, but it seemed like a lot more than sixty passed before he could focus on the truth—that he *wanted* to be



here, that he'd *chosen* this, chosen Owen to be the man doing this to him. In that sense, he was in control. Owen was silent, unmoving, just as Sterling had told him to be.

Owen might not see it that way, but Sterling didn't plan to share that particular thought with the man, not now, anyway.

He concentrated on the incredible frisson of pleasure he was getting just from having his asshole stretched and filled this way, coaxing his erection back to life by sheer willpower. His father wasn't going to win this battle.

"Ready now?" Owen asked, his voice soft, undemanding, so perfectly in tune with Sterling that it was all the reassurance he needed to nod.

When Owen started to move his hand again, wide fingers pushing wetly into Sterling with slow, even pressure, Sterling let himself moan and enjoy it, immerse himself in it. This was who he was, and there was no shame in taking pleasure in whatever brought him pleasure. He wasn't sure he believed in God, but even if he did, he wouldn't have believed in a God that thought sex was a sin, no matter who one's partner was.

Inside, Owen crooked his fingers, and the pressure against his prostate was enough to make Sterling moan again, more deeply this time. "This is so—Owen, it's so good. Please don't stop."

"You're doing so well," Owen said, his husky voice like another touch on Sterling's body. "I want you to show me how much you like this, though. Come for me, Sterling. Let yourself go. I've got you."

As incredible as it felt, it was hard to come. Sterling *wanted* to, but letting himself surrender completely, to take that last step when he'd avoided this for so long, was more of a challenge than he'd expected. For long minutes he hovered on the edge of orgasm, eyes tightly shut, hips working with the rhythm of Owen's hand, trying to get there.

And then, like a sharp slap, it hit him—he *didn't* have to try, and, in fact, he needed to stop trying. As soon as he realized that, it happened; his balls tightened, his ass tightened, and he came so fast that a surprised cry escaped his lips. He jerked and gasped, the rush of pleasure hot and more intense than anything he'd ever felt, and Owen's fingers were *inside* him, and by the time it was over he felt like he'd run a couple of marathons and followed it up with a fourteen-inning baseball game.

"I can move," he offered finally, slurring his words more than a little.

"Whenever you're ready," Owen replied easily and slid his fingers out, leaving Sterling with a sense of loss and an empty, throbbing sensation that took a while to fade.

\* \* \* \* \*

Owen had been incredibly gentle and slow about it that first night—possibly even more gentle and slow than Sterling had been himself, but it had just made Sterling's feelings for him deepen. Owen was the one in charge; he

easily could have been rough and impatient with Sterling. But Sterling *trusted* him, and he hadn't done anything to make Sterling regret that.

Which meant that he was really, *really* frustrated that Owen wouldn't fuck him.

"I said four months," Owen had snapped the last time Sterling had brought it up. "What or who gave you the impression that part of a sub's duty is to nag and argue with his Dom?"

Sterling had ducked his head and accepted that rebuke then, but tonight he was determined to make Owen see sense. When the guy was spanking him, tying him up, finger fucking him and using a variety of plugs and dildos to get Sterling to the point of *sobbing* with the need to come, actual tears trickling wet and warm down his face, his breathing shot to hell, this insistence that they couldn't have sex seemed worn ragged around the edges.

Everything that Owen *did* was sexy; he could get Sterling's dick twitching with a word, a look—and Sterling was starting to fantasize about getting Owen's dick in his mouth. He'd shared enough showers with Owen to know what it looked like when it was full and thick, beaded with water, slicked with soap, and he wanted to taste it—God, he wanted to fall to his knees and fucking *worship* it, but Owen wouldn't let him.

He held his position and tried to keep his breathing even and quiet as Owen turned a page of the book he was reading, a glass of single malt within reach. Doing this was something that had taken him a while to get used to; it had felt too much like being ignored, and he'd been restless, willing to risk Owen's annoyance if it got him some attention.

What it had gotten him when he'd sighed loudly for the third time, rocking to a more comfortable position, was an order to get dressed and Owen's hand on the small of his back, propelling him firmly out the front door.

He'd learned to love it, though, after he'd begged, with a penitence that after four days without seeing Owen was genuine, to be allowed to try again. Slowly, as he knelt by Owen's side, he'd come to realize that he was as important a part of the picture as the book, the drink, and the flickering fire. More, he got to watch Owen, if he was careful, and when he'd slid into a state of waiting without urgency, he'd gotten a hand caressing his hair and face and a smile from Owen that was grateful as well as appreciative.

Tonight he waited for that light touch before speaking, knowing that this was Owen at his most mellow.

When it came, he breathed in slowly, determined to keep his voice as calm and reasonable as he could. "Owen, can we talk about something, please?"

Owen didn't answer right away, but Sterling was careful not to assume anything based on that. He waited, patient, until Owen finished the page he'd been reading, put a slip of paper between the pages to mark his place, and set the book aside. "What did you want to talk about?" Owen asked.

"If you'd consider making an exception to your rule about my age," Sterling said. He'd chosen the words with care, not wanting the conversation to deteriorate before it had even started because of the way he put it. "Please hear me out. I know you must have your reasons, but I'm having a hard time understanding them. I'm over the age of eighteen, which is the legal age of consent in every state in this nation, and I know what I want. You aren't coercing me—if anything, I'm the one trying to convince you. But I want—I *need* to take this further."

"You still don't understand why I'm insisting on this, do you?" Owen gestured him up with an annoyed flick of his fingers. "Get dressed and sit down over there."

When Owen was irritated, Sterling got even harder, an automatic response. He stood up smoothly and moved to put on his clothes. Being told to do so wasn't a good sign, he didn't think, but at least it meant that Owen was taking him seriously. He hoped.

Sterling pulled his T-shirt over his head and sat down in the other chair. "I want you to know I'm not asking to piss you off, and I'm not trying to rush you or anything. God knows before school started if someone had told me I'd be begging to be fucked up the ass I'd have laughed so hard I'd have hurt myself." He offered Owen a small smile, hoping for an answering one to reassure him.

He was disappointed. If anything, Owen looked as if he was on the edge of losing his temper, his lips tight and a faint flush rising in his face. After a moment, Owen opened his mouth and chipped off an icy, "Thank you for that eloquent assurance that you've overcome at least one of your shortcomings. Now maybe you can work on some of the others. Like obeying the single rule you agreed to when this started without endless complaints, nagging, whining, and attempts to cajole me into changing my mind. Because quite frankly, you're boring me."

Sterling felt like he'd just had a glass of cold water dashed into his face. His stomach was churning because he *knew* that Owen got bored with subs fast, and somehow he'd managed to convince himself that things would be different with him, that he *wouldn't* be boring. "I'm not whining," he protested. "And I don't see what part of what you just said is an explanation, or how it's supposed to help me understand the reason behind the rule. You *know* I want to follow the rules. I want to do this right. I just need to *get it*."

"Some Doms would say that all you *needed* was to do as you were told, without question, once I'd earned your trust," Owen said tightly. "Since I've always encouraged you to ask questions, you can probably tell it's not a view I share, but there's some truth in it. I choose my subs for their intelligence, not their pretty little asses and smiles, and I like to think that they've got the brains to work some things out for themselves."

They were facing each other across the room, and Sterling wanted to be back where he'd been, kneeling naked within reach of Owen's hand, so much so that it was hard to stay in his chair.

"So tell me, Sterling, can you think of any reason why I'm being so very fucking unreasonable?"

"No, but you haven't explained yourself," Sterling said. He should shut up, he knew that, apologize and beg for forgiveness and assure Owen he'd never bring it up again, but damn it, he was an adult and this was a relationship and he had a say. "I just want to understand. *Why* is it so important?" This was a mistake, a terrible mistake. He'd fucked everything up by not keeping quiet when he should have, and now he was in over his head and it was too late.

Owen got to his feet, words spilling out, forceful and bitter. "Because beyond the obvious rules to keep you safe, the worst thing a Dom can do is waver, be indecisive, second-guess himself. Because that single stipulation, that I admit I came up with more in an attempt to get you to rethink your pursuit than because I had a real objection to fucking you, is the basis of our arrangement. Because you weren't *ready* to get fucked, remember? Because you were, and are, a student at the college where I work. Because there's maybe more of the masochist in me than I realized." He took a deep breath, and his voice dropped to a conversational tone again, though his hands, before he shoved them into the pockets of his jeans, were shaking. "Did *none* of that occur to you? Really? I guess you're still as spoiled as the boy who came up to me moments after an emotional scene and demanded that I set aside my disappointment over failing to get the best from my sub to dance to his tune."

Owen walked over to him, and Sterling winced as his chin was gripped and forced upward, the first rough touch he'd ever had from that hand. It had spanked him, fastened ropes and cuffs to his wrists and ankles, held a paddle that stung and bruised his ass, but this was the first time it had hurt him. "I don't want to dance to it anymore."

"Owen..." Sterling looked up at him helplessly, wishing he could take all of this back. A couple more months of waiting and he could have everything, but he'd had to push and ask for more, had to be impatient. Damn it.

As angry at himself as he was at Owen, he stood up, shoved Owen's hand away from his face and stood toe to toe with him, eyes blazing. He didn't say anything at first, just glared at the man he'd thought would be his.

"You know what? Fine. I don't care. You think I need this? You're wrong. And for the record, I'm *not* your student anymore, and if you think there aren't hundreds and thousands of couples out there who started from some kind of place where they maybe shouldn't have been together, you're crazy. No one cares what we do!"

"If you can't respect my wishes in this—if you can't wait—" Owen compressed his lips to a thin line, visibly struggling for a calm that Sterling had thought ran bone-deep. "This isn't helping either of us, and it's damaging the little we *have* managed to achieve. I suggest that we—"

"Take a break," Sterling said. "I think we need to take a break, because I can handle you being in charge, and I can handle doing what you tell me to do, but I can't handle not understanding *why*, and no matter how many times I

ask, you won't tell me. Which tells me you don't respect me." That was the realization that pissed him off the most—he'd thought, at the very least, that Owen respected him, but he obviously didn't, and right now, knowing that, Sterling couldn't stand to look at him.

"I'm telling you, but you're not listening," Owen said wearily. "You filter everything through your own wishes and needs, and it's rare that you consider anyone else's. You're immature, and that's nothing to do with your age; it's your attitude. I thought I could train that out of you—and maybe I could have, but you want everything right the hell now, instant gratification, and this isn't about that." He was pacing the room now, quick, angry steps, looking like a cat about to spit and rake sharp claws into soft flesh. "You want a quick fuck, a good, hard climax that blows you away? That's easy. Go to any club or bar and looking the way you do, you'll get picked up and get a nice stiff cock to play with and service with someone who can't believe his luck even if he's not quite sure why you're waiting to be told what to do. It won't scratch your itch for long.

"Or go back to the club where we met and I can guarantee you'll walk out of there with someone, but it'll be easy, so fucking easy, and part of you never wants easy. That's the part of you that I—" Owen paused and turned to look directly at Sterling, gray eyes opaque, blank. "I could tell you to strip down for me, go up to my room, bend over, and give you what you want. There are nights when the only way I can get to sleep is by jerking off picturing that in my head because you've gotten me so turned on. But if I did, it would end any chance of making this work, and I won't do that. I won't."

The thought of the scene Owen had described made Sterling's anger waver, but just for a few seconds. Then it was back, full force. "Only because you got this idea in your head of how this was supposed to work and now you won't let it go!" He felt his hands curl into fists, and he wished he had something to hit—there was no way, ever, that he'd hit Owen, but right then a punching bag would have been nice. "I can't do this. You can treat me like your property, and I can even like it, but you're the one who's being selfish because you won't let either of us have what we want, and there's no reason for it. You don't think I'm smart enough to know what I want or need—you don't respect me, and I won't be with someone who doesn't respect me. I'm sorry, Owen, because I lo—"

In horror, he heard what he was saying just in time to stop himself.

He'd been in love with Owen for weeks, but telling him that would make things worse, not better. And even if this was over, there was no point in making it worse.

"I'll see you around," he said, and turned to go.

It wasn't until he'd slammed the door behind him and was halfway down the path, littered now with brown leaves crunching under his feet, that he stopped listening for Owen's voice calling to him to stop, wait, come back.

There wasn't any point; Owen wasn't going to beg him, was he? That was Sterling's thing, and he'd tried it, and it just hadn't fucking worked.

## Chapter Seven

"Yes, I can take your ten o'clock class," Owen said without thinking, giving Shari Temple a sympathetic pat on the arm. She looked like hell, her brown eyes red-rimmed and her nose unpleasantly moist and raw from being blown continuously. "I've only got a few more papers left to grade, and I'm sure the little darlings won't mind another day before the ax falls on them." He tidied the scattered papers into a neat pile. "Go home, and don't come back until you're better."

"I wouldn't have come in today," she said thickly, "but Admin said they couldn't—" She broke off to sneeze sloppily, and Owen averted his eyes from the cleanup that followed. "Sorry. They said they couldn't get a substitute in until tomorrow, and I said I'd try, but I can't *breathe* and—"

"I'll do it," Owen repeated soothingly. "Just tell me what you want me to cover, and then go home and dose yourself up with some nice, lemon-flavored drugs."

He hoped that he'd managed to avoid the worst of her germs, at least. It was a few days after Halloween, the ground threatening frost every evening but warming well into the high sixties by afternoon. Typical New England weather, Owen thought—it couldn't make up its mind.

Which reminded him of Sterling, just as most thoughts had for the past week and, if he was being honest with himself, all the weeks since they'd met. He couldn't shake his distress at the way Sterling had walked out that night and had no interest in setting aside his irritation. The boy was spoiled, had been brought up being given everything he'd wanted, and still expected the world to hand it to him on a silver plate. Sterling didn't care about anyone but himself and what *he* wanted.

It was easy to push these thoughts to the forefront of his mind, ignoring all the little things Sterling had done that proved them wrong. The pound of gourmet coffee he'd brought Owen the week before, somehow having remembered Owen waxing philosophical about its quality on a previous evening. The night he'd been late, needing to be punished—something they'd both enjoyed, of course—because he'd stopped to catch a dog that had slipped its collar and left its owner, an eleven-year-old girl, crying distraught tears at the side of the road. The care with which he'd been selecting Christmas gifts for his mother and sister even though the holiday was two months away, setting aside the little money he earned scooping ice cream and blending shakes at the

ice cream shop downtown, endlessly debating the merits of one gift over another until Owen tuned him out entirely.

Sterling was spoiled and selfish, and Owen was well rid of him.

"This is what we were supposed to discuss," Shari said, interrupting his thoughts with a book and handful of papers shoved into his hands. "Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 20,' among others. That should be fun."

"Go," Owen told her. "Go home. Rest. I'll handle everything."

It was a measure of how distracted he was that he only remembered that she was one of Sterling's teachers after she'd gone, leaving the wastepaper bin clogged with soaked Kleenex. Which was ridiculous; he had Sterling's schedule memorized, along with his own, knew his assignments and when they were due, had often postponed a session to wait for Sterling to finish writing a paper, his laptop on the dining room table, a tall soda, heavy on the ice, dangerously close to it. Sterling had said how much he'd been enjoying Shari's classes, and Owen had wished that there was a way to pass on the compliment and regretted that there wasn't.

He glanced at his watch. Time to brush up on the sonnet, but no time to find another person to take the class. Shari had given a quiz two weeks before, earning a slightly less complimentary comment from an indignant Sterling, who hadn't been expecting it. The spanking Owen had promised him if his grade was poor had replaced his pout with an expectant sparkle—not the reaction Owen had intended, which was shortsighted of him to say the least. Owen didn't feel too guilty about potentially rewarding bad work. The quiz had already been taken, and what was done was done—and he knew Sterling; his grade would probably be respectable. It had been excellent, in fact, prompting Owen to replace the spanking with a blindfold, some cuffs, and an assortment of items that left Sterling's skin awake and sensitized to the point where he'd come with a hoarse yell when Owen had dripped ice water onto the head of his cock, the first touch it'd gotten.

Afterward Sterling had curled up against him, still trembling, holding onto Owen with all his strength. "God, what you do to me, the way you make me feel..."

Owen bit his lip hard and leafed through the book Shari had left with him, relieved to find a sheet of notes tucked into it at the relevant page.

The classroom was one he hadn't been in for several years, but it was next to one of his regular classrooms so finding it wasn't a challenge. When Owen entered the room, half the desks were already occupied by students who looked mildly surprised to see him come in and walk to the desk. They were quiet, though, murmuring among themselves, and he took advantage of the few minutes before class officially started to look over Shari's notes.

He'd never taught Shakespeare, though he felt confident he could handle one or even a dozen classes. He might not be an expert the way Shari was—he was a fan of short modern stories, himself—but he prided himself on being a well-rounded scholar.



He kept half an eye on the clock, and when the minute hand hit twelve, he stood up. "Hello," he said pleasantly as all attention in the room turned to him. "Some of you know me—I'm Professor Sawyer—and all of you know that I don't belong here. Unfortunately, Professor Temple has a bad cold, and I'm taking over just for today."

Just then Sterling came slouching into the room with an apologetic look on his face, a look that changed to upset and then to a sullen one as he slid into a seat.

Owen ignored him. Sterling wasn't late enough for him to make an issue over it, and the less interaction they had, the better. The natural confidence he had—and Sterling wasn't the only one with a dash of arrogance, which Owen would be the first to admit—made him view the hour to come as a challenge instead of a threat. That attitude was helped by the fact that he trusted Sterling, even an angry Sterling, to be discreet.

"Professor Temple tells me that you've been working your way through the sonnets. The sonnets from one to one hundred and twenty-six concern an unnamed gentleman referred to as..." Owen picked out a vaguely familiar face in the crowd, a woman who'd been in the same freshman class as Sterling. "Miss Bowers?"

She cleared her throat, long silky hair falling over her face, its reddish shade matching her cheeks. "Umm, the Fair Youth?"

"That's correct." Owen glanced down at the book he held, copies of which lay unopened in front of most of the students. "If you'll all turn to page fifty-four, I've been asked to make today's lesson about the twentieth sonnet. I'll confess that I'm not familiar with it, so perhaps we can all learn something today, which is what we're here for, of course."

There was the expected ripple of ironic amusement at his mild attempt at humor. Freshmen were too nervous to smile, sophomores and juniors too cool, but by their senior year most of the students had relaxed and discovered a vague tolerance for the people who might help to determine their future.

"Maybe one of you would like to read it aloud so that we can get an idea of what the sonnet's message is, and then we can break it down and see what's hidden between the lines. This is Shakespeare; few people could pack as much meaning into a superficially simple line, and removed from him as we are by both time and geography, it's sometimes difficult for us to get a joke or an allusion that would have been crystal clear to a contemporary reader."

Owen looked around the lecture room for a victim. He didn't want the poem butchered, so no one at the back, smothering yawns, and he wasn't in the mood to have it enunciated painstakingly by someone who'd memorized in an attempt to score points, so he avoided eye contact with the bright, eager students in the front row. He'd just settled on a young man with a reasonably intelligent look on his face when Sterling spoke, his voice cutting through the background hum as people found their places and flipped open notebooks.

"A woman's face with nature's own hand painted," Sterling recited, not looking at the open book in front of him at all; Owen wondered when he'd memorized it, though not why. There was no point in interrupting him—that would only make it clear to the rest of the class that Owen wasn't in control. Better to allow it.

Sterling slouched further in his seat as he went on, his thighs relaxed and spread far apart. As he reached the third quatrain, he lifted his gaze and met Owen's, a haughty little smile playing about his lips and a challenge clear in his eyes. He finished reciting the sonnet and grinned triumphantly.

"Thank you," Owen said, giving Sterling a dismissive nod while he cursed the long dead Shakespeare and the germ that had felled Shari. An hour spent discussing a love poem from one man to another? Oh, this wasn't going to be awkward...

Sterling had read the sonnet beautifully, his voice clear, expressive, bringing the plaintive longing behind the words to life, and it hurt the teacher in Owen not to acknowledge that, but he couldn't cede even that small a victory and hope to win the war. "*An eye more bright than theirs...*" Oh, God, yes, Sterling's eyes shone today, but it was an angry glitter.

"Now, from a modern perspective, the most obvious interpretation of the theme is...?" Owen raised his eyebrows inquiringly. Shari had mentioned that this class was reasonably articulate and insightful, and he hoped that habit and a desire to impress a visitor would mean that they gave him the same energy and commitment.

The man he'd been going to choose to read the poem raised his hand and, when Owen nodded at him, said hesitantly, "Uh, because we're like, less hung up on sexuality being, you know, straight and narrow, we'd go for the idea that the poet wanted the other guy? But he couldn't just come out and say that, not back then, so he did all this thing at the end to make out that he was cool with only having the other guy's friendship when, no way, 'cause he was totally into him."

Yes, you sound considerably less hung up on sexuality, Owen thought, which wasn't fair—there was no reason to think this young man was straight, even. He just wasn't particularly eloquent.

"That's the most common interpretation, certainly," Owen agreed aloud, because there was no point in making any of this more uncomfortable than it was likely to be unless Sterling chose to keep his mouth shut, which he wasn't anticipating. "Can anyone offer an alternative?"

A young man wearing shorts—surely inadvisable given the weather—raised his hand and didn't wait for Owen to call on him. "Why does it have to mean he was queer?" he asked and, when the dark-haired woman sitting next to him shifted in her chair and muttered something, tried again. "I mean, gay? People write about stuff all the time that doesn't have anything to do with their real life. Like, Stephen King. We wouldn't try to argue that he's some kind of ghost hunter or whatever just because he writes about monsters, right?"

"But monsters aren't real," Miss Bowers argued, turning in her seat to face the young man in the shorts. "Plus we're talking about Shakespeare. There are homosexual innuendos all throughout his sonnets. Why would he do that if it didn't mean anything?"

Sterling looked bored, but he sat up in his seat and looked at Owen. "What do you think, Professor? Was Shakespeare gay?"

Meeting that hostile gaze sent a frisson of arousal through Owen. Every instinct he had was screaming at him to handle this as if Sterling was a sub challenging his Dom, and Owen knew exactly how to deal with *that*. Having an audience wasn't a problem, either; Owen loved acting out a scene at the club, with the arousal of those watching spurring him on. The problem, of course, lay in the fact that he was at work, surrounded by students, and had to rein in those instincts. Well, some of them, at least; a teacher was owed the same respect as a Dom, and the students would expect him to deal firmly with Sterling's insolence once it got to a level that was impossible to pass over. Right now, Sterling was very skillfully skirting the line.

"That's a question that's been debated, often hotly, for centuries, with no definitive answer," Owen replied. He turned to address the class as a whole. "As I'm sure you're aware, people have several candidates for Shakespeare's lover—if he had one—including the earls of Southampton and Pembroke. One can only imagine what the Elizabethan equivalent of the tabloids made of those rumors."

"But it doesn't sound, from the sonnet, as if Shakespeare liked women very much," Sterling said.

Owen shook his head. "He was a product of his time, but I doubt he could accurately be referred to as a misogynist. There's enough evidence to suggest he might have been forced to marry an older woman, which wouldn't help as far as his feelings toward the 'fairer sex' might go."

"So he had the fair youth on the side," Sterling said. "That makes him dishonest, doesn't it? Not admitting to the public who he really was and just hinting at it through poetry that most people probably didn't analyze all that carefully anyway?"

"I think you're wrong there," Owen said. Around them, the normal sounds of a full class were dying down to an expectant hush as if the students, several of whom had seen Owen and Sterling clash before, were anticipating something out of the ordinary to enliven their day. He gave the page of notes that he held a brief glance and spotted something that Shari had added an asterisk to, clearly wanting it to be stressed. "The educated people of the day were very well used to picking up on levels of meaning and would have torn each sonnet apart gleefully. No TV, no movies, no computers... This was part of how they entertained themselves."

He was warming to his theme now. "It's been suggested that Shakespeare put clues into his work as to the identity of the youth. The word 'hews' appears in the poem; the modern spelling is 'hues,' but in the original it's spelled 'hews.'

Some say that the appearance of those four letters in most lines of this sonnet refer to the initials of William and either of the earls, though that's possibly reading too much into it." He put the notes he'd been shamelessly quoting from down on the desk he was leaning against. "What is certain is that the great poets of that time were masters of the art of verse writing. They made words mean far more than the sum of their parts." He met Sterling's eyes. "And they knew that to be open about some matters was to risk everything: their social standing, their wealth—their life."

"You mean, like, gay bashing?" The young man wearing shorts seemed a little too interested in that topic for Owen's comfort.

"There are laws against it now, but in Shakespeare's day there was nothing to stop people from attacking those they felt were lacking in appropriate morals," Owen said blandly.

"But we're more civilized now," Sterling said, voice loud enough to command attention. "Especially in New England. We've legalized gay marriage, and there's legislation against hate crimes. This isn't the Dark Ages—people don't lose their social standing over something like being gay."

"A relatively recent development and certainly not the case in every state," Owen said. He pointedly turned away from Sterling, who was frowning at him, his mouth set in mutinous lines. "I think we need to bring the focus back to the sonnet, and I'd like to hear from some of the less vocal of you." He pointed at a young woman slumped in her seat, examining her nails, who only looked up when her more alert neighbor nudged her. "What would you say is the general feel of this? Happy? Sad? Romantic? What was your first impression of it and why?"

He listened to her stumbling efforts to answer with most of his attention on Sterling, visible out of the corner of his eye, but Sterling seemed to have decided that he'd pushed it as far as he wanted to—or dared. Owen was torn between annoyance and a reluctant admiration for Sterling's nerve. Which meant that things between them hadn't changed; it was that exact mix of emotions that had led to him accepting Sterling's proposal in the first place.

For the rest of the class, Sterling sat silently, appearing to listen as Owen asked questions and some of his classmates answered them. He even seemed to be taking notes occasionally, a few words here and there in the neat, somewhat blocky handwriting that Owen had become familiar with. In the end, Owen wound down the discussion with a mention of a few of the related sonnets.

"I'm sure Professor Temple will be back for your next class," he said after relaying their next assignment. "So don't disappoint her by being unprepared. Thank you—that's all."

Most of the students left immediately; a few lingered, talking to each other, before finally heading out the door and leaving only Sterling still in the room with him.

"I'm sorry," Sterling said after the last student had crossed the threshold, the door swinging closed behind her.

Owen picked up the book of sonnets and the thin sheaf of notes, fully intending to walk out, and then put them back down on the desk. He looked at Sterling, still in his seat, and sighed. "It doesn't matter. I know why you did it, and I can't say that you didn't have a right to make the points you did. It wasn't the best place to do it, though."

"It does matter," Sterling told him. "I know it's no excuse, but I was so surprised to see you here—it kind of threw me for a loop. Still. I'm sorry. I won't let it happen again." He smiled sadly and stood up. "Not that the opportunity will present itself anyway. Are you... How've you been? Okay?"

"I've missed you," Owen said, going directly to the cause of his irritability for the last week. "I didn't like the way it ended between us and I feel..." He shook his head. He'd spoken to Michael midweek, and the conversation hadn't gone all that well. Boneheaded, stubborn, and several other epithets had sizzled across the miles, leaving him to slam out of the house and go to the club, where his bad mood hadn't been improved by an encounter with Carol, all leather harness, studded collar, and adoring eyes as she stared up at her new Dom—and she *still* hadn't learned how to kneel properly, damn it. She'd looked graceless, but that had just made him reflect on how perfectly Sterling knelt, and that hadn't helped at all.

He'd ended up brushing off some offers that would normally have gotten his automatic approval and had gotten home very late, stone-cold sober and depressed.

"I've missed you," he repeated.

That earned him a wistful look as Sterling came closer, now-closed notebook in his hand the only thing he had with him despite the fact that Owen knew he had another class immediately after this one. "I missed you too, and—do you think maybe we could try again? I mean, I know I put way too much pressure on you—even though I don't think I was wrong for wanting you to explain—but I was definitely wrong for not listening when you tried. And I know I'm kind of a screw-up as far as, you know, everything is concerned. I know I wasn't living up to your expectations, and that you wanted more from me, and maybe I'm not even capable of giving it, which I shouldn't be admitting because yeah, way to sound appealing... It's just, I really, really miss you a lot, and I've been going kind of crazy, like I forgot how to release tension or something, and—"

He was close enough to touch now and that was just what Owen did, placing the tips of his fingers against still-moving lips, shaping words that Owen wasn't really listening to because this close, the need to claim Sterling as his again was overwhelming.

"You never failed me," he said. "You just asked for something that I didn't—and don't—want to give you. Two months more to wait, Sterling, that's

all. Give me those months and after that I'll fuck you raw every single night I can, but you need to wait. Can you do that?"

His unspoken *please* seemed loud enough to be heard. God, wouldn't Michael snicker to see him reduced to this state of want and need? But he was addicted to Sterling, and it had been a week or more since he'd kissed him, felt Sterling's mouth part under his, the sweet, hesitant flick of Sterling's tongue against his, the bitten-off moan Sterling made when the kiss ended, his eyes closed.

"I don't know," Sterling whispered, so close now Owen could feel warm breath against his lips. "With the way I've been dreaming about you—every night, about you fucking me, Owen, pushing your cock into my ass and fucking me—but I promise I'll try. Okay? I'll try. That's the best I can do."

And then their lips were together, Sterling whimpering desperately into his mouth, erection pressed to Owen's thigh and hands eager on his shirt. Sterling was good, so good, letting Owen control the kiss despite his need.

Owen realized that they were frantically kissing in a classroom that anyone could walk into at any time and pulled back, though he couldn't resist palming a hand across the front of Sterling's slacks, molding the cotton fabric to Sterling's cock for a brief instant, reminding both of them who he belonged to.

"Tonight," he said, his voice harsh, rebuilding the dynamic between them with clumsy swiftness, a makeshift affair that they could polish and perfect later. "Eight o'clock." Sterling nodded, his eyes wide, dazed, hopeful. "Don't expect me to be kind to you," Owen warned him, knowing just what that promise—never a threat—would do to Sterling, keeping him half-hard all day, distracted.

For once, Owen didn't care what that would do to Sterling's grades.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Owen." It was one of the few words that Sterling was allowed to speak while they were playing, and he took full advantage of the permission, saying—and even moaning—it often.

Tonight he'd arrived at Owen's house at eight as directed, been let inside, and gone immediately to the closet to follow the routine. But Owen had said firmly, "All of your clothes, please," and Sterling had stripped down, had his hands bound behind his back without complaint, and gratefully followed Owen upstairs to the bedroom.

Now he was kneeling on the floor beside Owen's bed, waiting to find out what Owen had planned for him. He knew that it was going to be an intense evening, but he *needed* it to be—it had been a long week without Owen, to the point where Sterling had started to wonder if it was even possible for him to go back to life as he'd known it previously. He'd even considered going to the BDSM club to find someone else to play with but knew that replacing Owen would be impossible, so had decided not to try.

"Did you have a question?" Owen asked, and Sterling remembered having spoken Owen's name aloud for the sheer pleasure of being able to do so.

"No—I'm sorry. I just...missed you so much." Being back in Owen's bedroom, kneeling naked on the floor, was like coming home. The relief Sterling felt was immense.

Owen's hand closed around the back of his neck, and Sterling relaxed completely into the possessive grip. It wasn't a collar—he'd asked for one once, and Owen had snorted and said that they were earned and he hadn't, not yet—but it made him feel owned. He'd tried buckling his belt around his neck once, not tightly, just to feel the rough kiss of leather and see it in the mirror, dark against his skin. He'd ended up on the floor, on his knees, panting harshly, his hands fighting a stiff zipper to get at an even stiffer dick, coming moments after his hand had closed around his erection.

He'd told Owen that he'd come without permission and taken the hour in the corner, facing a really boring piece of wall, without complaint, but he hadn't told Owen the details. Sometimes, that small omission itched at him like a half-healed mosquito bite, but God, the guilt had been worth it for that moment of *rightness* he'd felt. If Owen ever put a collar on him, he'd probably lose it completely.

"Yes, well, you're here now," Owen said, his voice free of anything but a deep satisfaction that was flattering and reassuring in a way that flowery phrases wouldn't have been. "And I want your complete attention, please."

"Yes, Owen. You have it." Sterling raised his eyes without lifting his chin, looking up at Owen but not breaking position. The man seemed enormous, eclipsing everything else in the room and, in fact, his world.

"Tonight, I'm going to tie you with very little room to move. I want you to be able to hold your position no matter what I do, and toward the end that might be difficult." Owen's hand moved to run through Sterling's hair, carding it with his fingers and leaving it tousled and clinging to Owen's fingers. "I'm going to leave you like that, blindfolded, for a while—I'll be here with you, of course—and then, when I think you're ready, well..." Owen turned Sterling's head so that he was looking at the bedside table. There were candles there, plain white ones, that Sterling hadn't noticed when he'd walked into the room, his attention focused solely on Owen. "Sterling?"

Owen rarely asked in so many words if what he had planned for a scene was okay with Sterling, but he usually gave him the chance to express any doubts or fears before it started.

"Yes," Sterling said, putting everything into that one word because it was all that mattered. He didn't care what Owen had planned; it was okay.

Owen must have heard it in his voice, or maybe just saw it in the blissful expression Sterling was pretty sure was on his face. He looked into Sterling's eyes for a long, long moment, then nodded and moved to get the blindfold.

They'd used it before, the black strip of cloth tied firmly around Sterling's eyes, cutting off his sense of sight entirely. He didn't mind it. Owen probably would have liked it better if he had, but for whatever reason, not being able to see wasn't a problem for Sterling, or at least it hadn't been so far. There was something peaceful about it; it gave him the ability to detach on some level, to feel without worrying about what was coming next.

He let Owen tie it, the flat knot positioned so that it wouldn't dig into his head when he lay back; let Owen untie his wrists and guide him, with small nudges, to the center of the bed where a wide, thick towel had been spread for him to lie on; let Owen bind his wrists and ankles to the frame of the bed with very little play.

And wished, just for a moment, that he could see the expression on Owen's face that went with the faint sigh of pleasure he heard when he'd been positioned exactly, precisely as Owen wanted him to be.

"You can make as much noise as you want to," Owen told him, fingertips tracing the lines on Sterling's palm and making his fingers twitch. "And you know what you need to do to take a break or put a stop to things."

Not that Sterling had ever used either of the safe words—he was probably too stubborn for that, couldn't imagine giving in and pushing either word past his lips no matter how freaked out or in pain he was in.

Now Owen teased him, and took his time about it too. Gentle fingers, barely touching, ran down along Sterling's throat, then moved away. Just when he started to wonder what would come next, Owen touched him again—his collarbone this time, one side and then the other, pressing thin skin over bone like Owen was leaving a mark on him. Sterling strained upward, trying for more, but Owen had tied him down tightly enough that he couldn't move very much at all.

Nothing again. Sterling waited, then focused on his breathing, on steady, even breaths and the spaces between them.

Another touch—the instep of his right foot this time, making him hiss and jerk against the restraints.

"Easy," Owen murmured. "Accept it, don't fight it. Everything I'm giving you, just take it, use it."

The next touch hurt, a pinch to a nipple that left it hot and swollen, the tight pressure of Owen's fingers maintained until Sterling was arching up, his breath ragged. The shock of the pain mellowed to heat, and each throb of punished, bruised flesh was echoed in his dick, already hard, though he knew that it would be a long time—if at all—before he was allowed to come.

"I'm going to give you a pair of clamps for these," Owen said, releasing him finally and giving Sterling's other nipple a single, teasing lick. "Call you and tell you to put them on. Jerk off thinking about you walking around with them on, hurting you, arousing you. Call you when I've come and tell you to take them



off, but you won't get to come. And I'll jerk off again later just thinking about how hard you are, how hot and sore your nipples are."

The thought of Owen jerking off made Sterling crazy—what he'd look like, hand wrapped around his cock, muscles in his upper arm flexing as he stroked it, his expression when he came.

Don't fight it, he reminded himself when Owen's next touch was a firm tug at his balls. A few deep breaths helped him relax, and even when Owen's slick fingers rubbed his perineum and around his hole, he was able to accept it, to appreciate the touch instead of tensing up. He moaned when Owen slid a finger inside him without warning—God, it felt so good. How was it possible that he'd been afraid of this for so long?

Nothing Owen did lasted. He moved from one part of Sterling's body to another, pinching here, scratching with blunt fingernails there.

"I think it's time to heat things up a bit," Owen said. Sterling smiled at the pun, but no more than that. He was sinking deeper, utterly relaxed, scattered notes of pain and pleasure scored onto his skin, waiting for him to voice them.

He heard the scratch of a match and knew that one of the candles, its base snug in a simple glass holder, was burning now, clear wax forming around the wick.

"It's not too hot," Owen told him. "I'm going to drop it from high up at first, watch it fall and splash against your skin, hear you cry out for me."

Sterling felt a shiver of anticipation shatter his calm; it would return, but he would have to rebuild it slowly, moment by moment. He didn't mind; he loved this space of waiting for something to happen. Expecting the flash of heat, he jerked with surprise when the next touch was to his lips as Owen kissed him, a hungry, avid kiss that left Sterling's lips wet and stinging from a bite. "That was to remind you that I'm here," Owen said and before Sterling could find the words to tell him that he didn't *need* reminding, the wax, like liquid fire, struck his stomach, and he gave the guttural groan Owen wanted, his chest rising and falling as he caught his breath.

It wasn't the same as touching a hot stove top because in that case the body's immediate instinct was to pull away from the source of heat. Sterling couldn't do that—he could only lie there, panting, and wait for the burn to fade. It seemed to take a long time, and even when it finally had, the spot felt sore and stiff with the hardened wax.

Sterling lay quietly, listening for Owen, for clues of when another splash of hot wax might come. He'd just started to wonder if maybe that had been the only one, unlikely as that seemed, when another hit his inner thigh and seared its way down along his skin, gravity creating a line of fire instead of just a small, round spot. He cried out and arched against his bonds, the fabric around his wrists digging into the tender skin there—he couldn't help it; instinct told him to get away from the source of pain, but there was nowhere to go. It *hurt*, and his dick, well trained as it was, throbbed with need.

He could hear Owen moving, doing something, and about half a minute later there were *two* drops of molten wax at nearly the same time, one near each nipple. The sound that ripped its way from Sterling's throat then was more like a scream, short but startled. His fingers scrabbled at the material binding him, trying to find purchase.

Owen's fingertips stroked across Sterling's mouth, capturing the shape it made as it whimpered, a touch that didn't soothe or comfort because that would come later; right now, it was about building everything higher—the sting searing his skin, the arousal heating his blood, the trust between him and Owen.

"There's going to be more," Owen warned him. "God, you should see how you look, how your skin's flushed, sweat making it shine."

A tear trickled down, escaping the blindfold, and Sterling concentrated on tracking its path down his cheek, distracting himself from the wait, until Owen's tongue licked it away and jolted him back to the sensations coursing through him. The first drops of wax had hardened fully, and his skin felt tight there, pulled and tugged. Peeling it off was going to hurt too, and he curled his fingers into fists and let himself sob out Owen's name, wanting more even though—no, *because*—he knew how much it was going to burn.

Owen laid down a circle of wax droplets around each nipple with careful precision, never letting the drops meet and merge, and then, from only a few inches above Sterling's skin, judging from the increase in heat, coated the nipples themselves. It felt as if his skin was on fire, radiating out from those two points, the bruised nipples throbbing fiercely.

"Need to come—"

"Not yet," Owen said, the two words enough to make Sterling hope that eventually he'd be given permission, even if it wasn't that much comfort given how close he was to losing it.

He should have known what was coming next, but he was so caught up in the moment that he didn't. It honestly came as a surprise when the next line of wax droplets started to fall at the base of his cock—he screamed and arched so hard against the restraints that later, in retrospect, he might have expected to learn that he'd sprained something. Thank goodness he'd had a little more play in his lower body than in his upper, because that was probably what prevented him from hurting his bad shoulder.

Sterling screamed a second time as another drop hit the center of his shaft, the sound tearing at his throat. He was aware of enough time in which to draw breath and exhale again—time Owen was deliberately giving him in which to put a halt to this, probably, but maybe he didn't know Sterling as well as he thought if that was the case, because there was no way Sterling was spitting out either safe word. The pause became excruciating—he could feel the towel underneath him sticking to his back, just soaked through with sweat—and then exploded when what felt like a quarter-sized circle of wax hit the tip of his cock.

God, it hurt like nothing else ever. He screamed so desperately that it didn't even come out very loud; there just wasn't enough air behind it to create volume. It was like his nerve endings were using up all his oxygen, and he couldn't breathe or think through the searing pain.

He couldn't do anything. He was gone.

The scary part was how fucking *good* it felt, the bright agony ripping him free of restraints that weren't made of rope or chain. He used the pain, just as Owen had told him to, shaped it, loved it, let it take him. Dimly, distantly, he felt his climax begin, lagging long moments behind his scream, an afterthought, as if his body was trying to kill the pain with pleasure, which was stupid, really, because they were both the same.

He lay languid, a washed-up piece of driftwood on an alien shore, and felt Owen's hand slide into his. Owen didn't speak. If he had, Sterling wasn't sure that he would have understood him. His brain was in free fall, splintered, smashed. That would change; already he could feel himself groping back to normal, but while it lasted, he floated, held in place by Owen's hand tight against his.

It was probably a good ten minutes later when he finally managed to push some words out. "S-sorry," he whispered. "D-didn't have per-mission."

"You did," Owen corrected him, and that was good, that was what Owen did—created boundaries, kept him in check. "I said you could. Don't you remember?"

"No." Sterling relaxed, relieved. Not that being punished would have been a bad thing. He tightened his hand slightly, squeezing Owen's against his own; he never wanted to let go.

Owen undid his blindfold, the bedroom lit dimly enough that Sterling only had to blink once or twice to adjust to the light. "I want you to see yourself," Owen said, and idly scraped at a trickle of wax on Sterling's chest with his fingernail. "Tell me when you're ready for the next part."

Oh God, Sterling thought. There's a next part? He'd already come, which in his head meant sex was over, but...this wasn't just about sex, was it? He knew that. It was still a little hard to absorb, maybe, but he did know it.

Sterling took a deep breath and nodded. "I'm ready."

## Chapter Eight

Owen gestured at the room. It was on the top floor, a corner room, with some cheap paneling on the walls that looked subtly askew. Not that much of it was visible; the room was a cluttered mess of furniture, each flat surface piled high with random objects. “There’s always one in every house, I guess. The room you never quite get around to decorating; the one where you dump all the stuff you don’t want to throw away but don’t want to keep. Except I *do* want to throw a lot of this away—or donate it to charity—because this room would be perfect as a library. I’m sick of having my books scattered around the house where I can’t find them.” He gave Sterling a sidelong look, noting the unenthusiastic expression on the boy’s face. “I meant it when I said I’d pay you for helping me to renovate it. You’re giving up an extra shift to help me today, I know, and I don’t want you to lose out.”

“You don’t have to pay me,” Sterling said, somewhat unconvincingly. Not for the first time, Owen thought that the boy probably had no experience at all doing this kind of work; it was a thought that appealed to him because each new thing he introduced Sterling to, no matter how inconsequential, belonged to him.

Just like Sterling did.

“First, we’ll have to clear everything out of here. I’ve got Goodwill coming tomorrow to pick up the things I don’t want to keep, so I’ll have to figure out what’s what—you don’t need to worry about that. Then, once there’s room to move, I’m going to have you pull down the old paneling, patch the walls, and paint.” He gave Sterling a stern look. “I don’t expect perfection, because it’s an old house and I doubt there’s a single corner that actually forms a ninety degree angle, but I do expect you to do your best.”

“I know. I will.” Sterling peeled off the sweatshirt he was wearing, revealing the short-sleeved T-shirt he had on underneath, and put his hands on his hips, surveying the chaos. “So how will I know what you want to keep?”

“Well, I’m not leaving you to do this all on your own,” Owen said, amused. “Although I do have some things to do later today. For now, I’ll help you sort through everything. The trash can go in the driveway, and the things for Goodwill on the porch. I guess the things I want to keep—there shouldn’t be many—can just go in the hallway for now.”

Sterling nodded. “Okay.”

"So for the rest of today, you belong to me, bought and paid for," Owen said with a smile. He was joking, but his body didn't care, reacting predictably to that idea. God, January couldn't come soon enough. He hadn't jerked off this much since he was a teenager, and it just wasn't enough to satisfy him. Sterling probably felt the same way, but ironically, he had less to complain about. Owen was letting him come at almost every session now, even if he made Sterling work for it.

Before Sterling could reply—and by the gleam in his eyes, he had no problem with the idea of being at Owen's beck and call and some suggestions for a better use of their time than getting filthy and exhausted hauling trash—Owen pointed at a corner. "You start there, I'll take the other side of the room, and we'll meet in the middle. Oh, and if it's pink, it goes, no exceptions."

They worked companionably for some time, Sterling occasionally asking for Owen's opinion on one item or another. There were a few dozen china statues scattered about—his mother had collected them for years, and ironically enough, Owen had purchased some of them himself for various birthdays and other holidays. Although they'd originally "decorated" the whole house, Owen had gradually moved them all into this room as he'd needed to clear up space for his own things. At the time, he hadn't been able to justify disposing of them entirely—he knew they were moderately valuable—but last night he'd finally made the decision to box them up and take them to the antique dealer in the center of town to get an estimate on their worth. Hopefully their sale would finance a weekend's vacation at a nice resort in the Caribbean next year.

Or at the very least a new television, since his was threatening to give up the ghost.

"What about this?" Sterling gestured at a small table with sides that folded down. Its surface was damaged.

"Hmm. Goodwill, I guess. I like how it looks, but it would have to be refinished, and I don't think I'm likely to get around to it anytime soon."

Sterling took the table downstairs, the wooden steps creaking under his sneakers as he went, and Owen heard the screen door to the porch open and close. A few moments later the door opened and closed again, and then Owen heard the fridge door before Sterling came back upstairs.

"Here." Sterling handed him a water bottle from the flat of several dozen he'd carted to Owen's house the week before. Sterling had tipped over a glass of water a few days before that, then complained that it hadn't been his fault and that Owen should have bottled water like everyone else. *That* little comment had resulted in a spanking that had left Owen hard for hours, palm stinging.

"Thanks," Owen said. He preferred tap water and had issues with the ecological problem of bottled water, but he'd given that lecture already, and a bottle was more practical in the dusty air. The water was refreshing—watching Sterling gulp it down thirstily, throat muscles working, even more so. He leaned against an armchair, springs poking up from its seat making it

unusable, and studied Sterling. Hidden beneath the jeans, Sterling's ass and the back of his thighs would still be showing marks from that spanking earlier in the week, tiny bruises mottling the surface. Owen was careful with him, never marking him anywhere that couldn't be covered, never leaving him too stiff and sore, though he knew there had to be some days when sitting on the wooden seats in the classrooms at the college would leave Sterling suffering.

"I suppose you're going home for Christmas?" he asked idly. Thanksgiving had come and gone with Sterling remaining on campus, something that Owen had selfishly been pleased about, but he'd resigned himself to a Christmas spent without Sterling. He'd been invited to spend the day with a couple he'd met at the local theater during a summer of volunteering there. Jake and Gary ran the theater with a smiling, utterly ruthless efficiency, determined to make it profitable and a cultural beacon in the town. Owen still pitched in now and then behind the scenes, but if his interest in the theater had waned slightly, his friendship with its owners hadn't.

"Yeah—my mom and Justine are counting on it. It'll be fun." Sterling didn't, Owen noticed, mention his father. "We'll do a tree and bake cookies—Justine says Christmas isn't the same without those cookies that come out of the gun thing." This was a mystery, but Owen didn't comment, just let Sterling continue as he gathered up a few books and set them in a pile he was making against the wall. Sterling turned and gave Owen a guilty look. "I wish I could stay here with you."

"Another time," Owen said lightly—the boy already felt bad enough about having to go home. No point in making it worse. "Maybe you could come back a day or two before the spring semester starts and spend the time here?" *That* would be something to look forward to, a few days in which neither of them would have much in the way of work.

"Yeah, sure. I was figuring I'd bring my car back if I can get a parking sticker for the lot near my dorm."

"I didn't realize you had a car," Owen said.

Sterling wriggled an elderly looking chair experimentally, then picked it up and raised an eyebrow at Owen.

"Yard, I think," Owen said, because it was both wobbly and moth-eaten.

"Present for my eighteenth birthday." Sterling was obviously talking about the car and not the chair. "Wouldn't do to see William Baker's son driving around in an old clunker, even though he probably would have gotten a kick out of it."

"It would make your life easier," Owen said, thinking of how Sterling had to race from campus to work—and often from his house back to campus. "Gas isn't cheap, of course, but you wouldn't be going far."

"I wouldn't be able to bring it here, though," Sterling said, testing. "I mean, anyone could see it sitting in your driveway."

Owen rolled his eyes. "Unless it's a bright red Porsche or something equally eye-catching, I doubt it'll even register with anyone passing by, but I could always make you park it a few blocks away, and I will if you give me any more of that attitude." He walked over to Sterling and gave his ass a tap that wouldn't have popped a soap bubble, but which still made a shiver run through Sterling. "Break's over."

"Right," Sterling said and smiled before taking the chair downstairs.

While he was gone, Owen finished collecting the figurines and put the box on the floor in his bedroom where neither of them would be likely to trip over it. Sterling made a few more trips to the porch and then paused to drink some more water before opening a small cupboard and discovering some photo albums Owen had tucked into it.

"Hey, what are these?" Sterling picked one up and opened it carefully. "I think this is you."

"Probably," Owen agreed. He moved over to join Sterling, looking past his shoulder at the old photos from his childhood. They were in color, which had faded over the years, blunting some of the bright hues that had decorated the clothing of the mideighties.

"Nice shirt." Snickering, Sterling pointed at it—the stripes *were* a bit much, but Owen had only been about ten at the time.

"I was always a trendsetter," Owen said with a haughty sniff that broke into a grin when Sterling hooted with laughter. "Give me a break," he said. "I'm sure your mother has some embarrassing photos you wouldn't want me to see." He nuzzled Sterling's neck, kissing it without passion but a good deal of affection, his arms going around Sterling's body in a hug. "How would you like to go to the club tonight? We haven't been there for a while, and I don't think that I can haul one more box down those stairs."

He'd been wary about taking Sterling to the club, but apart from a few raised eyebrows at the idea of him taking on someone so inexperienced, most people had accepted Sterling without comment. The guarded, careful attitude toward a newcomer had soon melted into a warmer acceptance; Sterling was clearly heart and soul into what he was doing, and it didn't hurt that he was Owen's sub and friends with Alex, who was fairly popular himself.

Sterling, after a few hours at the club watching the interplay between Doms and their subs, and sometimes a scene played out in public, was a handful, though, wound up, edgy, aroused, his emotions all over the place. That could be channeled into something more productive for them both, but Owen didn't always want to deal with him in that mood when his own arousal and frustration were fraying his temper.

"Okay, that sounds fun." Sterling set the album down and turned a little in Owen's embrace, slipping an arm around Owen's waist and brushing his lips against the edge of Owen's ear.

Owen's body responded hopefully to Sterling's attention, cock stirring. It wanted so badly to be bare and rubbing against Sterling's equally naked skin, to slide its way into Sterling's body; waiting until Sterling's birthday was becoming more and more difficult.

"I promise, no matter how hot I get, I won't ask you to fuck me," Sterling said solemnly, then sucked a spot just under Owen's ear.

The very fact that Sterling had brought the subject up made Owen feel wary of what the night would bring in the way of nagging from a turned-on, hyper sub whom he indulged far too much. "Good," he said as neutrally as possible. "Because the next time you do, I plan to introduce you to my favorite ball gag."

Okay, maybe that hadn't been quite as calm a reaction as he'd planned.

"Promises, promises," Sterling said archly and pressed a kiss to Owen's jaw. "What do you want me to wear?"

That brought back memories of Michael, who'd insisted on Owen choosing every item he wore, every day. Part of Owen had gotten off on exercising that much control, but there had been days when it had felt like being a parent, not a Dom. Sterling suited him better, a realization that brought only the tiniest twinges of guilt; Michael was too good a friend for Owen to truly mourn the loss of him as a lover.

"A light coat of oil and you can choose where to put the peacock feather."

Sterling laughed, a startled, full-out laugh that made him look young and carefree. It was similar to the way he looked after a particularly intense session during which he'd been allowed to come. "Maybe we should skip the peacock feather, and everyone can just see me in my naked glory." He stepped back and pivoted, arms outspread.

"Oh, no," Owen said. "That's just for me to see and appreciate. And I do." He let his gaze travel over Sterling and didn't have to fake the quick, hot rush of lust he felt. "God, you make me want to—" He broke off, biting back the words that would betray just how much he wanted exactly what Sterling was begging for. He wanted to spank Sterling's ass scarlet and then fuck him, his hands on the hot, hurting skin, wanted to push Sterling to his knees and watch that mouth part obediently for his cock. He wanted to tie Sterling down and ride him, drawing out their climaxes to the point where Sterling would be sobbing for release, desperate, needy, perfect. "Go home, shower, and change, then meet me back here. As for what to wear... You know what works at the club, and you know what works for me."

Sterling grinned and said two of Owen's favorite words in the English language. "Yes, Owen."



## Chapter Nine

It took Sterling more than an hour to get back to Owen's house—he hadn't been told to hurry, so he hadn't, and he knew Owen wanted to see him looking good when he returned, so he'd chosen his outfit carefully. His newest pair of jeans, so tight that sitting down was uncomfortable. Black leather dress shoes, the kind that slipped on and off easily. A black shirt made of a silky, satiny fabric—but was some kind of synthetic, he was sure—with the top two buttons left undone.

Owen opened the door as Sterling came up the steps and favored him with a smile. "There you are."

"I'm not late, am I?" A slight thrill of anxiety shot through Sterling even though Owen hadn't specified when he should return and there certainly hadn't been any dawdling on his part even if he hadn't rushed.

"No, but I was starting to wonder if something had delayed you." Owen came out onto the porch, still littered with furniture from their earlier task, and shut and locked the front door. One hand settled at the base of Sterling's skull and squeezed it possessively, making Sterling shiver. "Get in the car."

"Yes, Owen."

Owen gave him a speculative look. "You know, I was going to change that to 'Yes, Sir' when you'd gotten a little more experience, but I'm not sure I will. I like the way you say my name too much."

"I like it too," Sterling assured him. He was used to it now, though Alex had seemed surprised about it when Sterling had mentioned it.

It didn't take long to get to the club—maybe twenty minutes. Owen didn't seem inclined to talk, so Sterling kept quiet. He wanted to have a good time, and his best chance of that was if Owen was in a good mood, and his best chance of *that* was if things went Owen's way. And Sterling had learned to like Owen's way because it got him all kinds of delicious things: spankings, orgasms, and best of all, Owen's approval.

The parking lot behind the club was well lit but still kind of creepy; the club itself was tucked behind a row of other buildings and looked, basically, like a factory from the outside. Sterling remembered his first night and how he'd been convinced he and Alex had the wrong address.

Now, even after only a dozen or so visits, it felt like somewhere he belonged, and he got a kick out of going in there walking next to Owen, who had this reputation for being difficult to please and picky as hell. Sterling didn't

entirely agree with that, but if it got him some credit for being the sub who'd put a smile on Owen's face, he'd go along with it.

The first familiar face he saw when they walked in was Alex, who was carrying a drink to the guy who had to be his new Dom, eyes downcast. Sterling watched Alex kneel, hand the glass to a tall, burly man with a neatly trimmed moustache, and then settle into a waiting position, still on his knees.

"Sterling," Owen said, his voice edged with reproof. "Don't stare, and pay attention to me, please."

That had been a difficult lesson to learn; the need to remember every moment of the time in the club just who and what he was. Owen might be telling him not to stare, but plenty of other people were looking to see if Owen's sub slipped up, showed him up. Everything he did and said reflected on Owen, and Sterling wanted to be perfect, for Owen and for himself. He hated being second-best, or worse, failing altogether. That was one lesson learned from his father that he didn't want to push aside and ignore.

Keeping his eyes down, Sterling followed Owen to the bar, where Owen ordered himself a drink. Owen took his drink with a word of thanks to the bartender, Saul, handed his glass to Sterling, and led the way to an empty table not too far away. Sterling couldn't help looking around a little bit as he shadowed Owen, but he managed to block out everyone else as Owen sat down and he knelt beside him.

The first time he'd knelt at Owen's feet at the club, he'd been incredibly self-conscious. Would people stare at him? What would they think? But he'd learned that the floor was kept scrupulously clean, that most people either had better sense than to stare or the right to, and that the only thing anyone was thinking when they looked at him was how good he looked. Owen had assured him of this, whispering it in his ear when they'd gone back to his house. "Everyone was admiring you," he'd murmured. "Seeing how pretty you are. Wishing you belonged to them."

He remembered that now, moisture beading on the outside of Owen's glass at eye level.

It wasn't long before someone joined Owen at the table, a woman called Elise, someone Sterling knew by name only. Her cheekbones were high slashes in a thin face, her hair bleached white, a dramatic look she carried off with poise. Owen kissed her on both cheeks, and they started to chat, their voices low enough and the background music loud enough that Sterling couldn't really follow the conversation. He didn't tune out exactly; Owen might want him for something, and he had to be ready, but he found himself in an increasingly familiar Zen-like state. Kneeling, his body automatically fitting itself into the correct position, did that to him now, just as the touch of Owen's hand grounded him.

He got that touch a little later, Owen's fingers stroking the side of his face, encouraging him to raise his chin and meet Owen's gray eyes.

"He's beautiful," Elise commented, her accent foreign—French, maybe? Sterling wasn't sure. He'd never been abroad. His father had stated often and loudly that the States were good enough for him when it came to vacations. "Not at all your usual type, though."

"He is," Owen replied, pinching Sterling's cheek. "And as for my type...well, I've been told by someone whose opinion I value that he's exactly what I like."

"And who was that?" she demanded.

Sterling risked a swift glance at her and decided that she wasn't really angry, though she was pretending to frown. There was a definite twinkle in her eyes.

"Michael."

"Ah! Yes, he would know, that one." Elise nodded sagely, and Sterling felt his mouth push out in a pout.

He'd been teased with just enough information about Michael to make him jealous as hell. He knew that Michael had been Owen's most serious and only long-term sub, that they'd parted on mutual agreement, and that Michael had moved to New Zealand or Australia, maybe—somewhere insanely far away, which was about the only reassuring thing about Michael's existence as far as Sterling was concerned.

"Still, you've tended toward the easier ones," Elise said. "This one doesn't look easy at all. New, isn't he?"

"Yes," Owen said. "A virgin, actually."

It was hard not to feel affronted at Owen sharing such personal information, because Sterling wasn't technically a virgin in any sense of the word, not really. Still, he kept his eyes down and listened to the conversation with all his might—even if he couldn't participate, he could follow along.

"Will you be bringing him out onto the floor so that everyone can appreciate him?" Elise asked, and Sterling, feeling a thrill at the idea, lifted his head immediately, eyes pleading with Owen.

"No," Owen said with surety. "It's too soon."

"I can do it," Sterling said, just as certainly, even though he shouldn't speak without Owen's permission.

"You just proved that you're not ready," Owen said indifferently, though there was a spark of annoyance in his eyes. That glint told Sterling he'd just lost a few of the privileges that it felt like Owen bestowed on him just to have something to take away when he'd been disobedient.

"Or that he's earned a punishment," Elise said, leaving Sterling unsure whether he felt grateful or indignant about her evident pleasure in the idea of him being chastised in public. "I would love to see you school the boy."

"Not tonight, Elise," Owen said with a finality Sterling had come to know all too well.

He sighed a little more heavily than he should have, and Owen gave him a stern look—okay, so he probably could have expressed his irritation without being so obvious about it.

“Go away,” Owen told him.

Sterling's heart clenched in his chest. “What? Um, I mean, excuse me?”

“Go away,” Owen repeated, waving a hand toward the dance floor where Alex was now dancing, his Dom watching with pleasure. “Go talk to your friend, say hello to people. Away from me.” He gripped Sterling's shoulder before Sterling got up, though, painfully but very briefly, both a warning and a promise of the punishment that would come later. “Come back when you're ready to behave.”

Wanting to argue that he was ready *now*, Sterling knew that it was better to obey and come back than to argue not to be sent away, so he nodded and said, “Yes, Owen,” and got to his feet.

As he walked away, smarting, not at the injustice of being banished, because he knew he'd fucked up, but the way Owen clearly didn't think he'd made *any* progress, he heard Elise drawl, “Owen'? You were always so traditional, *mon petit*; what happened to you?”

Sterling wasn't sure if he'd be allowed to dance with Alex or talk to him without permission from Alex's Dom—God, what was his name? Kirk, that was it—so he just hovered around the edge of the dance floor until Alex caught his eye and mouthed a discreet hello. That was something else that was difficult to get used to; the different levels of control in the partnerships of the club members. Some Doms made his skin crawl with fascinated horror, treating their subs like dirt; others just didn't have an edge at all, total pushovers. Like Goldilocks and the baby bear, for him, Owen was just right.

When the song that was playing ended, Alex went back over to where Kirk was sitting and knelt beside him. Sterling stayed where he was, waiting, and a moment later Kirk nodded and Alex got up again, smiling, and came over to Sterling.

“Hey, how's it going?” Alex asked.

Sterling shrugged a little. “Okay.”

“That sounds convincing. You want to get some water?”

He shook his head. “Owen didn't say I could. He said I should come talk to you—I was pissing him off.” Okay, so maybe that was an exaggeration, but not by too much.

Alex looked concerned. “What were you doing?”

“I contradicted him.” Sterling didn't intend to go into more detail, but Alex waited, so he sighed and said, “I said I was ready for him to play with me in public. He didn't agree.”

“Well, he's watching you, and he doesn't look pissed off. He looks like he thinks you're the most gorgeous thing he's ever seen.”

Somehow, Sterling managed to keep from turning his head to look at Owen, even though he would have loved to see that expression on Owen's face. Right now, all that he could think of was the chill of disapproval in Owen's voice. "How are things with you?"

"Good," Alex said and nodded his head vigorously. "Kirk's really into me, you know? He says I'm the best he's ever played with."

Sterling kept any doubt out of his expression because Alex didn't need to see it. He couldn't quite figure out why he *had* doubts, but he did. Kirk hadn't done anything wrong, and Alex seemed happy, so...

"That's great. I'm glad we've both found someone." Sterling glanced around. "Remember the night you brought me here? This all seemed so freaky. I mean, I wanted it, God, so much, but I didn't feel as if I belonged."

"You do now, huh?"

"Yeah, I do. Owen's—" Sterling broke off. "Uh, Kirk's looking this way. I think he wants you—" Kirk was beckoning, and Alex broke away from Sterling with an apologetic grimace and began to walk back quickly. Kirk caught Sterling's eye and gestured to him too, a slight smile on his face.

Owen hadn't told him not to speak to anyone but Alex, and he was usually pretty specific. Anyway, he was a sub in a BDSM club—surely he couldn't get in trouble for talking to a Dom who requested it? Besides, would Kirk call him over if it went against the rules? Reminded that he still had a lot to learn, Sterling went obediently over to Kirk's table. Alex was already kneeling beside it, and it felt strange to be standing when Alex wasn't.

"Hi," he said. "I'm Sterling. I don't—I'm sorry, I don't know if I'm supposed to kneel."

"No need," Kirk said, like he was being magnanimous. "You can call me Master Kirk. Having fun?"

"Sure," Sterling said. "I mean, I'm new. I'm still learning."

Kirk gave him an appreciative look, a slow up and down once-over. Jesus, he was a big guy. He had to be almost a foot taller than Sterling and probably sixty pounds heavier at least. Sterling couldn't help but wonder, especially in the face of such avid interest, what it would be like to have sex with someone so commanding. To have the man fuck him... God. "There are things I'd like to teach you," Kirk said, licking his lips. "Not that I'm trying to tear you away from Owen—I have better etiquette than that, of course. But if you're ever interested, give me a call."

Sterling found a business card being pressed discreetly into his hand.

"And you and Alex together...wouldn't that be a pretty sight? I do like the thought of that." Kirk smiled and clenched his hand so tightly on the back of Alex's neck that the knuckles went white and Alex winced. "Keep it in mind, pretty boy. We'd have a lot of fun. Wouldn't we, Alex?"

"Yes, Master Kirk," Alex said immediately and then whimpered as Kirk's grip tightened even more. Sterling lost some of his interest in the man, not that

he'd ever had much beyond that passing attraction rooted in the man's undoubted vitality and raw sex appeal. Nice for a night, though he was sure he'd wake in a world of pain, but for the long-term? Boring. Just too...obvious.

"I don't think so, but thanks." Sterling tried to keep his voice flat and polite, but judging by the tightening of Kirk's full mouth, he hadn't done a very good job of it.

"Maybe I'd have more fun teaching you manners than fucking that tight little ass of yours wide open." Kirk took a sip from his drink, bourbon on the rocks, with the bottle right there on the table. Owen never had more than a single shot of whiskey or a small glass of wine on a night when they were playing and usually didn't drink at all at those times. "I always thought Sawyer's reputation wasn't earned; he's done a piss-poor job with you, boy." Teeth showed as Kirk smiled. "I'd do better."

Sterling was pretty sure that wasn't something he could believe, but on the other hand Alex seemed happy, and if anything this evening was reminding him how little experience he had in all of this.

"I appreciate the offer," Sterling told Kirk, the same thing as before but in slightly different words—maybe that would help it sink in. By the look on Kirk's face, it didn't. "Thank you. I'd better go back before Owen misses me. Bye, Alex."

Alex didn't answer, but he met Sterling's eyes briefly and smiled, a little twitch of his lips. It was fine; Sterling would talk to him tomorrow or the next day.

As he started to cross the room, a woman, obviously a Dom by the look of her, even if she hadn't had a tiny redheaded woman hanging off her arm—actually, come to think of it, Sterling had seen them before—stopped him. "Hey there, beautiful. Come play with us."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Sterling stammered—saying no to complete strangers was awkward. "I—I'm here with someone."

"And he doesn't share?" The woman followed Sterling's gaze across the room and lit on Owen. "Oh, I see. Oh well, no harm in asking. I'm sure you'd be fun. We're here every week, so if you ever change your mind, you'll be able to find us without much trouble." She reached out and caressed Sterling's cheek, her long, dark red fingernails scraping over his skin.

God, had he chosen a deodorant that did what the ads claimed and really did attract everyone in sight? Sterling was starting to panic even before Owen stood slowly and walked toward him with all the inevitability and threat of a natural disaster—a tornado, a tidal wave, an earthquake, unstoppable and scary as hell, even if a small part of him was glorying in the sheer thrill of having *that* look directed at him. A look that screamed "Mine!" in a voice you could hear over any of those planetary tantrums.

With a muttered "yes, ma'am" that got him an approving pout, he stepped aside, standing alone in a pool of silence, because Owen was coming over to

him, people getting out of his way if they had any sense, even if outwardly Owen was just walking, no rush, a small, tight smile on his face.

It was all in the eyes, and they were ice and fire.

If Sterling could have justified throwing himself into Owen's arms right then, he would have without a second thought. Instead, as Owen reached them, he did the next best thing and dropped to his knees on the hard floor, head bowed, the back of his neck exposed like a submissive dog showing its belly. All he could think was that Owen was right, he so wasn't ready for this, and that he hoped Owen would get him away from this woman and to somewhere safe because this was too, too much.

"I was just talking with your boy," the woman said to Owen. "He's so pretty. But I didn't realize he was *yours*—I didn't see who he came in with, and he was just wandering around on his own. I think of you as someone who takes better care of his pets."

Sterling cringed. Owen didn't deserve that, he really didn't, and it was all Sterling's fault—not the people hitting on him, but earlier. God, he wished he could take back those hasty words. He didn't dare to look up, but he couldn't block his ears, and he didn't want to hear Owen make excuses, or blame him, or yell, or do any of the things his father did when he thought that Sterling had let him down.

"Thank you," Owen said, his voice steady, even pleasant. "And, yes, he's very pretty, but he's most certainly not alone and unclaimed." His voice didn't rise in volume, but a hush was spreading, people around them picking up on the tension, and Owen's next words, spoken clearly, carried. "He belongs to me, and as I'm sure you know, Talia, I don't share."

"Oh, I know. I told him as much." Talia sounded so casual and unconcerned—Sterling wondered if it was a well-practiced act or if she just wasn't very bright. "Still, best to keep an eye on him, don't you think? Anyone else would be happy to have him, either now, if you can't be bothered, or later, when you get bored."

Ugh, one of Sterling's least favorite things, a reminder that sooner or later Owen was bound to get bored with him. He wanted to snap something at Talia, to tell her that Owen was amazing, that she couldn't in a thousand years have him as her sub because even without Owen he'd never stoop so low, but he wanted to prove to Owen that he could keep control of himself, so he didn't lift his head or say a word.

"So far he's holding my interest without too much difficulty," Owen said. "If that changes, you'll be the first to know. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to take your excellent advice and keep both my eyes on him and at least one hand." A crisp snap of his fingers brought Sterling to his feet, and for the first time since Owen had joined him, he met his cool gray eyes directly. Owen was staring at him dispassionately, much as he had the night they'd met at the club, but there had been a barrier between them then and now there wasn't.

"Playtime's over," Owen said softly, the threat not in the words or his tone, but that unwavering stare.

"Thank you," Sterling said and meant it. Even an annoyed Owen was a relief after Talia, who for some reason made his skin crawl. He wished fervently for Owen's quiet bedroom and a few hours alone, and found himself pressing closer to Owen, looking for comfort.

"I wonder if you'll say that when I've finished with you?" Owen didn't wait for an answer but turned and walked toward the door, leaving Sterling nothing to do but follow him, careful to keep a step or two behind as he'd seen other subs do. If he'd been told to, he'd have crawled out of there, head down, just to show anyone watching—and it felt like everyone *was*—how much he wanted to belong to Owen.

He didn't say anything the whole way to the car, knowing that Owen wouldn't want to hear it until he'd asked for an explanation. It wasn't easy, though—he wanted so badly to explain that none of that had been his fault, that he hadn't initiated any of it or even the conversations themselves.

Inside the car, with the doors shut, Owen put the key in the ignition and his hands on the wheel, then asked abruptly, "Do you still think you're ready for public play?"

"No," Sterling said immediately. "God, no. I'm so sorry—I had no idea people were going to—well, come on to me like that. I didn't start either of those conversations, I swear, and I thought it would be rude to ignore them, and that they wouldn't be talking to me if that was, you know, breaking any rules. But I didn't want that."

To his surprise, Owen shrugged. "I know. I could see how uncomfortable you were—and despite what Talia thought, I was watching you all the time. I always do. You'll learn how to tell them no in a way that reflects well on you and me when you've had more practice at it. And Talia was right about one thing; I should have kept you close, no matter how annoyed I was. I'm sorry for not taking better care of you tonight."

To hear Owen admit that made Sterling feel deeply miserable in a way no spanking ever had. "You *do* take care of me!" he protested. "Way better than Kirk does with Alex."

"Don't judge another relationship," Owen said. "It might be exactly the way Alex likes it. Although Kirk...he's not all that experienced, and he's been known to take things a little too far. I'm not saying he'd ignore a safe word, but he pushes the limits hard."

This was more like a conversation than Sterling had expected, especially considering their earlier visits to the club, all of which had ended with him in complete silence the whole drive back to Owen's before Owen had spanked him or once even just tied him up and left him untouched for almost two hours, much to Sterling's initial frustration but eventual pleasure.



"I kind of got that impression," Sterling admitted. "He gave me his number."

"I thought so," Owen said. "Get rid of it, please. No point in assisting temptation."

"I wouldn't be tempted." Sterling sighed. "I meant it; you do take care of me. You haven't let me talk you into stuff you think I shouldn't do, right?"

"True," Owen agreed. "Neither would Kirk, incidentally, but he might try and talk you into...stuff that you didn't want to do or weren't ready for. I won't do that. If I ever propose something that you're not sure about, I expect you to be your delightfully vocal self and speak up at once."

"*Delightfully vocal*" was said with a snap, and Sterling felt his world regain focus because Owen might be showing his softer side about some of what'd happened, but not all of it.

Owen started the engine and pulled out of the parking lot. "You're curious about what punishment you'll receive for speaking out of turn." It wasn't a question; Owen knew him well enough to know that Sterling was thinking about just that, a tight knot in his stomach, half trepidation, half excitement. Owen generally made sure that there was an element to a genuine punishment that Sterling wouldn't like, but there was no getting away from the unspoken but undeniable fact that Sterling *liked* being disciplined and Owen loved imposing it.

"Yes, Owen." Curious didn't begin to describe it.

"Well, don't worry. You'll find out soon enough."

Of course that was enough to *make* him worry for the rest of the drive, but at least it was late enough that there wasn't much traffic on the roads and they made good time back to Owen's house. The driveway and front porch were littered with the results of their day's work; Sterling thought, guiltily, that he should have done a neater job of stacking things. The house was definitely lacking what the home channel shows called curb appeal—not that Owen had any plans to sell the house.

"Inside," Owen said. "You know what to do."

He did. After stripping down, Sterling knelt beside Owen's favorite chair and waited to be told what his punishment would be.

"Is there anything else you want to tell me about what happened at the club?" Owen asked as he sat down.

"No," Sterling said uncertainly. "You know everything, and I've said I'm sorry. I don't mean that you shouldn't, uh, deal with the talking thing, because I know you have to, but I want you to know that I *am* sorry, and—"

"Stop talking," Owen said and Sterling closed his mouth on his next word. "Good. You're forbidden to speak again until we wake up tomorrow. Not a single word. Your safe word for the duration of this punishment will be replaced by a gesture; if for any reason, you want a time-out or to go home, you

can tell me by kneeling and clasping your hands behind your neck. Do that now, please, to show me that you understand.”

Sterling paused, letting that sink in, then put both hands behind his neck, locking his fingers together. He looked up at Owen, hoping that Owen could see how sorry he was, and that he trusted him and would do whatever he was told.

“Very good.” Owen ran his fingers through Sterling's hair, then turned away. “Stay there. Don't move.”

Wondering what Owen had up his sleeve—he was still thinking too much, which wasn't the point of this, but Sterling couldn't *help* it—Sterling waited until Owen came back with a black rubber ball gag. Sterling had seen it before, but Owen had never used it on him, and the thought of it made his mouth water and his dick get even harder than it already was.

“Open,” Owen said, and Sterling did.

Biting down on the rubber ball felt strange; it forced Sterling's mouth wide, his lips stretched. He swallowed several times, awkwardly, while Owen fastened the strap behind his neck. He had to drop his hands to give Owen room, so he crossed his wrists at the small of his back like usual.

“This is going to stay in place for an hour,” Owen said conversationally. “Partly to reinforce the lesson, but mostly because I like the way it looks on you. Your mouth's one part of you I've never bound much, but that's going to change because really, you have no idea how you look right now, your lips stretched open, your eyes begging me to touch you. And I will.”

He wanted to lick his dry lips, he wanted to tell Owen so many things...and he was thirsty too, but that could wait. He knew that when the hour was up, Owen would let him drink, holding the water bottle to his lips if by then his hands were tied. He didn't need words to tell Owen if he needed to take a leak, either; that was something he could always break position for without permission, though he tried not to interrupt anything Owen was doing if he could.

Owen shifted forward in his chair, his gaze on Sterling's face as if he couldn't look away. “Tomorrow I'm going to want to know how this makes you feel, but I can see for myself how much it turns you on.” Owen's bare foot dragged over Sterling's thigh, and his toes nudged the swell of his balls. It felt like something he should protest, shrink away from, but Sterling heard himself moan helplessly at the touch. “Open your knees wider. Let me see how much you like this punishment.”

There was part of him that found this embarrassing—it was one thing to be hard when you were kissing someone, making out, having sex, but something else to have Owen looking at him when it was just about what Owen was making him do. As he shifted a little bit, opened his knees so Owen could eye his erect cock, poking straight up, he had a brief flash of what his family would think if they could see him now. How horrified they'd be, how disgusted. It made him flush, thinking of his mom's expression.

He didn't care about what his father would think.

"My pretty little pet," Owen said, amusement lightening his voice and making Sterling blush hotly because that made this even more shaming somehow. "Oh, yes, I thought that might make you blush again. You've gotten so used to all this that you don't blush as much as you used to. I've missed it."

Owen pointed at a low footstool tucked away under one of the small tables that cluttered the room, dark wood upholstered with a rose velvet pad. Sterling was able to look around the house now and see exactly which rooms Owen had finished changing to suit himself and which were still furnished mostly the way his mother had chosen. This room was an odd mix of two styles, although it was the room that Owen used a lot, so it would've made more sense to fix it first. Sterling hadn't asked him about that—easy to figure out that Owen was holding back to keep some memory of his parents alive.

"Fetch that footstool here and sit on it, facing me, please. I want to be able to touch you without bending over."

Sterling brought the stool as directed and sat, glad that the seat was so comfortably padded. It did make it much easier for Owen to reach him, and Owen took full advantage of the fact, repositioning Sterling's legs so his cock was accessible.

"Much better." Slowly, Owen stroked Sterling's balls with his fingertips, smiling as they tightened further at his touch. "I do love seeing you react. You're so beautiful when you're on display like this."

On display. The words reminded Sterling of the root cause of his present state, and it must have done the same for Owen because he smiled. "You really wanted to be out there with everyone watching you, didn't you? It's going to happen, but not yet. I said you weren't ready, but I'm not ready, either. I need to know how you'll react to everything and anything that's asked of you, and that certainty isn't quite there yet. Oh, don't look so forlorn; I like this phase, where there's still so much to discover about you."

*And when you know everything, you'll start to get bored with me?* Sterling couldn't speak, but the words got said anyway, loudly in his head, and a strangled sound forced past the gag as he shook his head.

Owen frowned. "You're upset about something?" He waited, but when Sterling didn't move, Owen shrugged, still looking faintly troubled. "Tell me about it tomorrow, please. Don't forget."

He'd rather imagine what it would be like to be half undressed, or more, on the floor in the middle of the club. Owen would be standing over him like he'd stood over Carol the night they'd met, and Owen would be in charge. Sterling would let him be, let him do anything and everything, and they'd be the center of attention, like being onstage.

"There," Owen said. "Let's distract you with something a bit more pleasant, shall we?" The way he said it, relaxed and confident, let Sterling

know that there was some pain on the way, and he welcomed it. He *wanted* to be distracted.

First, a tug on his balls—that definitely got his attention—and then a series of pinches to sensitive areas. Inner thighs, nipples, the hollow of his hip, the tender spot where his neck met his shoulder. Within minutes Owen had Sterling whimpering and twitching, all thought lost.

The rug was soft against his feet, the air in the room warm, purposely so, because Owen never let him get chilled when he was naked. His ass was cushioned nicely against the velvet—and sparks of pain were burning him, fierce and sharp, making all the comforting sensations fade to nothingness.

He closed his eyes when Owen walked away with a murmured word, and opened them again when he felt cool metal against his nipple. Oh, God, he loved the clamps, but they hurt more than anything Owen had ever done to him in that first moment when they sank their teeth into his skin. The agony would ease, though, would settle into something he could handle, until the time the clamps came off and left him panting through the rush of blood forcing its way back into cramped, swollen flesh.

One nipple, then both—he controlled his breathing as best he could, staring at Owen through a sparkle of tears, letting them fall because Owen never minded him crying, from pain or joy. It got easier to let them spill over every time. There was still a glint of metal in Owen's hand, though, and Sterling blinked away the wetness to focus on it.

Owen held it up; a chain, with hooks on either end and tiny hooks hanging from it.

“The chain itself is light; you'll barely notice it's there when I attach it to the clamps, but if I add some weights to the other hooks, oh, that you'll notice.” There was a flat box open on the table beside Owen, and he reached in and took out a small piece of metal, a silver teardrop. “Just one tonight, I think.”

Sterling might have begged Owen not to if it hadn't been for the gag; instead, he swallowed saliva, jaw aching, and pleaded with his gaze. Not that it did him any good—next thing he knew, Owen was hooking the teardrop onto the chain and letting it go. It pulled the chain tight, gravity working through Owen's will, and Sterling's nipples shrieked with red-hot fire.

His muscles went to jelly, spine curling as he instinctively chased the weight toward the floor, desperate for relief from the pain. He couldn't get low enough, though, not sitting on the stool. The pain stayed at the same level, not increasing, and Sterling panted shallowly, trying to stay as still as possible because even a slight movement made it flare.

Owen reached out for him at once, his hand hovering an inch or so away from Sterling's face, not touching him, giving Sterling the choice of leaning into the known comfort of that cupped palm, skin on skin connection with Owen, or staying still, fighting to balance pain and arousal, both equally unbearable sensations right then.

He wanted to do this, wanted to be strong for Owen, to take everything Owen gave him, but God, this *hurt*. The irony was that Owen wasn't even all that angry with him. This wasn't a true punishment, not really, and neither was the gag; the worst that Owen could ever do was to send him away, and they both knew it. This was just pain that Owen thought that he could handle, pain on the lowest setting; the box on the table held more of these weights, after all.

Struggling to take the intensity down a notch, Sterling leaned forward, giving himself something other than the pain to focus his attention on—the feel of Owen's hand against his cheek. Owen slid his thumb across Sterling's lower lip where it was stretched wide by the ball gag, and Sterling whimpered in gratitude. There were so many things he would have said if he'd been able to, but instead he had to hope Owen could guess what he was thinking and feeling by the expression on his face, the look in his eyes.

“Good,” Owen crooned. “That's right—you're doing so well.”

Sterling made a muffled sound, knowing that he *was* doing well, that this wasn't so bad. He could take more. Unthinkingly, he looked toward the box of weights again, then at Owen.

“No,” Owen said. “You don't need more just yet.” He wrapped his hand around the teardrop and took its weight, the relief immediate, but not entirely welcome. Sterling protested, the words caught in his throat, half dreading what would happen if Owen let the weight fall and jerk. Instead, Owen beckoned him up, helping him with a hand supporting his elbow, so that the chain didn't tug at the clamps at all.

“Walk to the couch,” Owen instructed him. “I want you over my knee.”

The thought of what the weight and the chain would feel like in that position made Sterling see why Owen hadn't bothered to hook any additional teardrops to the chain. Over Owen's knee, with Owen's hands on his back and ass, exploring his body with a calm possessiveness before starting to spank him, making him squirm and writhe—and God, he couldn't move, not without making the drag and tug at his tortured flesh agonizing.

If his mouth had been free, he would have been talking right now, but he wasn't sure what he would have been saying: “please” or “no”?

It wasn't as hard a spanking as Owen had sometimes delivered, but it seemed to go on forever. Sterling sank down into the pain. It was like the opposite of an out-of-body experience—instead of rising above himself, feeling nothing, Sterling was more inside his body than he'd ever been in his life, and nothing else mattered but the pain.

His nipples burned, the tug of the weight on the chain with each strike of Owen's palm on Sterling's bare ass like the most vicious pinch of clever, torturous fingers. Sterling sobbed into the gag, the swelling in his nasal passages as he cried making breathing a challenge—he had to monitor his intake and outtake carefully, creating a rhythm that fit itself, interlaced with the blows like clasped hands. He couldn't keep from crying, though, and he

didn't try to stop it. His dick was swollen, clear fluid trailing from the tip, but when he opened his eyes, he couldn't see a thing. The world had gone white, condensed, and there was only Sterling's body and Owen's where they touched, and he could feel a climax building, so strong and powerful that it scared him, would wash over him like a tidal wave and leave him to drown.

Then he was rolled to his back, cradled against Owen's body, a strong arm supporting him. The jolt of pain from the shifting chain was irrelevant, a drop of water in a storm, but it was too much for him to take, even so. He arched, thrusting up, vaguely aware that a hand was now clasped around the tight-stretched length of his dick, giving substance and meaning to his action. He wasn't fucking air but the hand that had just spanked his ass red and hot, and with that realization, his climax was inevitable. Fluid spurted from his dick, splattering his stomach and chest. He still couldn't see clearly, but he could feel the pattern of wetness on his skin and hear the hammering of blood in his ears.

Owen reached for the straps holding his gag in place, and then he hesitated. Sterling's thoughts were too muzzy to permit questions, but he had his answer a moment later when Owen quickly, decisively, removed the clamps instead, gathering the tangle of metal in his hand and tossing it to the floor.

Sterling's teeth bit into the rubber ball, a secondary spasm racking his body, pure pain, just as his climax had been pure pleasure—the two had separated themselves again. Owen's free hand was working the bruised, crushed flesh, his fingers massaging each nipple in turn with infinite gentleness, his mouth shaping encouraging words of praise.

When Sterling could relax his jaw, could lie quiet in Owen's arms, the gag was removed, eased out of his mouth with more murmured reassurances and dropped to the floor.

He was a mess; tears, snot, spit were smeared over his face, and his head felt fever light and heavy as lead at the same time. Owen leaned in and kissed him anyway, a brush of his mouth over Sterling's forehead and then his lips.

"Don't say anything," Owen warned him, a reminder that was as much an act of kindness as the kisses had been.

Sterling nodded and gestured at a box of tissues on the nearest end table, raising one eyebrow.

"Of course," Owen said, but when Sterling started to sit up, added, "No, don't move. Stay here." Easing himself away, Owen stretched to reach the box, then offered it to Sterling, who took three tissues in a row and wiped his eyes before blowing his nose.

Gross.

Being able to breathe in enough oxygen felt amazing, though, and having Owen's arms around him was the best thing of all. Sterling was filled with a rush of love and admiration so powerful that he wanted to slide off the couch onto the floor and babble nonsense to Owen, kiss Owen's feet, something,

anything. If he'd had more strength, he might have. Instead, he turned in Owen's embrace and kissed him full on the lips, pouring all of his affection into Owen's mouth.

The response he got was an echo of everything that he was giving to Owen—no, not an echo, because they were weaker than the source, and Owen's kiss matched his in fervor and passion. Sterling moaned his appreciation and pressed up against Owen, not caring that Owen's cotton shirt felt like sandpaper against his nipples. It was worth it to feel so surrounded by approval and so needed.

He became aware that if he'd come—and Owen's shirt was covered in the proof that he had—Owen was still rock-hard. If he'd been permitted to speak, he'd have begged to be allowed to go to his knees and let Owen use his mouth to come in, hell, let Owen jerk off on him, whatever the man wanted. Sterling just wanted to be a part of Owen's climax for once, even if he only got to watch it.

Getting that over in mime wasn't going to work well, though, and he didn't want to push Owen's buttons on the touchy subject of them having sex, not after what had just happened. Because even if all Owen had done was touch him, what they'd just done had come really close to Owen jerking him off.

"I'm going to get you a drink," Owen said with a final kiss. "And then you can shower, and I'll get changed." He plucked at his smeared shirt, sticking to him in places, and gave Sterling a rueful look. "Save me some hot water."

As little as Sterling wanted to let Owen go, he knew that he had to. He stayed there on the couch, more lying down than actually sitting in his exhaustion, until Owen came back with a glass of water—no bottles permitted tonight, not that he felt the slightest inclination to argue. He drank it gratefully, too fast and too sloppily, but he was thirstier than he'd realized. Sweat had dried on his bare skin, leaving the stiff crackle of salt behind.

"We could—we could shower together?" he suggested. "I mean, I'd keep my hands to myself, I promise. But it would... I'd like to be with you."

His suggestion got him the first disappointed look he'd had since they left the club, and still wiped out from what they'd done, it took Owen's fingertips pressing firmly against his lips for a second or two to remind him of what he'd done. Shit. To make matters worse, an apology rose instinctively to his lips, and the first syllable of "sorry" popped out.

Owen sighed. "I know that this is hard, harder than you thought it'd be when I told you what your punishment was, but you *like* it when it's difficult and a challenge, Sterling." He nodded at the clamps and gag on the floor. "We both just saw that." He stood. "Shower. Don't get dressed again. You have seven minutes exactly to be back here, kneeling in front of me. When I permit you to speak again tomorrow, you can deliver that no doubt fervent apology you were about to share with me, but tonight, I don't want to hear it." He glanced at his watch, his eyes cool. "Go."

Sterling scrambled to his feet, legs shaky underneath him, and went quickly to the bathroom, where he took one of the fastest showers of his life, scrubbing frantically to clean his dick and belly. He was counting seconds in his head, trying to be as accurate as possible, but that meant he had less than a minute to dry himself off and get back to Owen. Not wanting to take any chances, he gave himself a cursory swipe with the towel, hung it back on its hook, closed the shower door, and hightailed it to Owen, water still running from his hair along his neck as he fell to his knees with a little more force than they were used to.

He winced but looked up at Owen hopefully.

"Bring me a dry towel," Owen said. "A white one, please."

The precision of the order did what it always did and calmed Sterling to the point where he could stand with more grace than he'd shown going to his knees and walk away, moving quickly without rushing. That had been another lesson that Owen had taught him: unhurried efficiency. Owen didn't like it if he got flustered and panicked.

The narrow cupboard outside the bathroom yielded a towel that was both dry and white, and Sterling took it from the stack with a hand that had stopped shaking with reaction. He returned to Owen, the folded towel in his hand, resisting the urge to blot away some of the trickles of water coursing down his back. Owen wanted the towel dry.

"Thank you," Owen said, accepting the towel from him unsmilingly. "Kneel facing away from me. That's it."

Sterling felt the softness of the towel against his bare skin as Owen began to dry his back, the thick material soaking up the water. Owen didn't take long over it, but when he moved to dry Sterling's hair, that changed. Thick strands of hair were lifted, wrapped, squeezed, and rubbed, with Owen seemingly in no hurry to finish grooming Sterling back to the way he preferred to see him.

The sensations made Sterling shiver; then his skin prickled with goose bumps. It reminded him of a phase Justine had gone through for a while, pretending to break an imaginary egg over his head, little fingers moving over his hair. Even though he'd known it was a trick, it had made his skin crawl every time.

Owen wasn't playing any tricks, though. Owen was slowly, carefully drying his hair, styling it into shape, which wasn't too hard considering it was fairly short, though when it was wet it had a tendency to curl. Justine had gotten the straight-hair genes. All the straight genes, actually, Sterling thought, but didn't let himself snicker.

He inhaled through his nose as Owen dried the hair at the nape of his neck, a fresh wave of shivers moving through him. His cock, which had been flaccid, stirred, one pulse of blood sliding into it, and at the same time his sore nipples throbbed too. Sterling moaned against closed lips.



That earned him a reproving tug at a lock of hair, which did nothing to quell the gradual renewal of his arousal, but which did remind him of how important it was not to slip up again. Owen was right; Sterling had thought that the imposed silence was a gesture, no more, with the clamps and spanking being the true penalty for speaking out of turn, but he'd been wrong about that, just like he'd been wrong about being ready to be shown off at the club. Owen had taken things a little further with the weight and the chain, but really, it was an extension of something that they'd done before, and the spanking had been brief.

Keeping silent when there was *so much* that he wanted to say had to be the worst punishment ever, and Owen had known that.

"You're going to stop fighting this," Owen said. "If I was spanking you and you struggled, I wouldn't be happy, and I'm not happy with the way you're dealing with this. Sink into it. Accept it. You fucked up, and you're being punished for it, just like I'm going to deal with you talking before your shower."

The towel dropped into Sterling's lap.

"But that can wait until *I* shower," Owen said. "Get up. You're going to go to my room and bring my robe, a plain white T-shirt, and some navy shorts to the bathroom. While I'm showering, you'll kneel on the bathroom floor, and you can dry me when I get out and then dress me. Show me what a respectful, penitent little pet I've got."

Listening to the sound of the water falling in the shower just made Sterling harder, imagining Owen stripped to the skin. He went to Owen's bedroom and found the things as ordered, then took them to the bathroom and set them in a neat pile on the edge of the sink before kneeling. Owen had said "*on the floor*," he remembered, so he did kneel on the hard tile instead of the soft bathroom rug that would have been so much more comfortable under his knees.

As he knelt there, Sterling managed to find a level of calm, a place where all he had to do was exist and not worry about what was happening or what would happen. It was a good place to be, especially when Owen, on the other side of the glass door and visible, if blurry, started to jerk off.

It was impossible not to *want*, with visible and audible proof of Owen's arousal and the desperate, almost-painful need to participate in relieving it, but Sterling kept it together. Still, each moan, every movement, no matter how slight, was lovingly remembered for future use. The curve of Owen's shoulder, the taut line of his ass when he finally came, head thrown back in pleasure, was imprinted on Sterling's brain.

He stayed quiet, waited for Owen to finish and get out.

The shower door opened. Owen's skin was flushed from the hot water, and droplets clung to his body, a body that Sterling had seen and touched, but not as much as he would have liked. The dusting of brown hair across Owen's chest was water-darkened, flat against his skin, and his cock, still half-hard, drew Sterling's gaze. He wanted to crawl across the space separating them and

lick the tip of it, take it into his mouth and coax it hard again. He wanted a trace, no matter how faint, of Owen's taste on his tongue, even if that was all he could have until this endless time of waiting was over.

A pointed clearing of Owen's throat recalled him to his duties, and he reached out for a towel and tugged it down off the rail. He wasn't sure where to start when it came to drying Owen, but he was on his knees already, so he decided to stay there. With the towel in one hand, trailing behind him, he crawled, head down, and began to dry Owen's feet. He was getting a kick out of serving Owen this way, attending to his needs. This close, he could see the individual hairs on Owen's legs and the odd freckle, smell clean, damp skin and, sometimes, when the towel slipped, touch it.

He wanted to kiss it, but was that allowed? He didn't know, and he couldn't ask. Frustration built in him and with a choked whimper, he pressed a single kiss to the inside of Owen's knee, then rubbed his cheek against the warm skin imploringly.

Owen reached to caress his hair; Sterling, being contrary, chose to view this as affection rather than actual approval, and applied himself properly to the job at hand. He dried Owen's knees, thighs, and hips, avoiding his cock except for a cursory pat, and then stood so that he could concentrate on Owen's torso and arms.

He wished he could do this every time Owen took a shower. It was like being able to give something back to Owen, one small thing in exchange for everything Owen had done for him.

Lingering at Owen's hair, which was short and barely needed to be dried, Sterling inhaled the scent of shampoo. Being able to touch Owen like this was such a privilege that Sterling felt awed, aware that his eyes were wide and his lips slightly parted.

"You make me wish for the days when every gentleman had a valet," Owen said, sounding much less stern than he had been before the shower. Sterling wondered if that was because Owen had gotten to come or his own efforts to please him and decided to believe it was the latter.

He put the wet towel into the wicker hamper in the corner of the room and then turned, ready to kneel again.

"It's not that late, but it feels as if it's been a long day," Owen said, smothering a yawn with his hand. "One last task to take care of and then I think we'll call it a night."

One last task had to be dealing with his slipup earlier, and Sterling bit his lip, worrying at it as he waited to be told what Owen had in mind.

"Stop that," Owen said, making Sterling feel guilty for very little reason. It was his lip, after all, but even if he'd been allowed to speak, he didn't think that he would've pointed that fact out to Owen. "You spoke when you shouldn't have because you wanted to be with me. That's flattering and the desire is mutual, but it doesn't excuse you." Owen studied him for a moment in silence.

"You may sleep in the spare room in a bed or in my room on the floor. This isn't a test or a way to prove anything to me. If you choose the spare room—" Sterling shook his head firmly, his choice made before Owen had finished speaking. He'd always choose being close to Owen over comfort, and there was something that got to him about sleeping curled up by Owen's bed like the pet he'd been called so many times that night.

"All right." Owen gestured at the sink. "Brush your teeth and do whatever else you need to, then come to bed."

The floor in Owen's bedroom couldn't have been any harder than any other floor, but as Sterling lay on it staring at the wall, it felt less comfortable than anything he could remember. He couldn't lie on his stomach, not that he would have anyway, because his abused nipples were so sore, and he couldn't lie on his back because his ass was. On his side, a pressure point on his hip was gradually becoming numb, but it was his best option, and he was determined not to complain, even in his own head.

From the darkness came a sigh. "You're very restless, you know that?" The bed creaked, and then the door of the built-in closet. Something soft and heavy landed on Sterling a moment later—a summer-weight comforter, by the feel of it. "Now go to sleep," Owen said quietly, the exasperation in his voice mild enough that Sterling allowed himself a grin before rolling himself up in the comforter.

## Chapter Ten

Owen woke up with a vague sense that something wasn't right and an insistent pain tightening around his head. A moment later the toilet flushed, water ran in the sink, and Sterling came into the room, then looked surprised to see him and gave what might have been an apologetic shrug of his shoulders.

"You don't need permission to use the bathroom," Owen reminded him peevishly.

Sterling frowned and, looking worried, pointed at Owen and raised an eyebrow.

"And you can stop with the charades and get into bed with me," Owen told him. "I'm not ready to get up, and I don't want to be alone." This was a stress headache, no doubt, considering the date, and what he wanted to do right then was close his eyes and go back to sleep curled around Sterling's warmth and hope that when he woke up again he'd feel better, or maybe that he'd find the whole day had passed.

He didn't realistically think either of those things would happen, but it was worth a shot.

Sterling slipped into bed and close to him. "Are you okay?" he whispered.

There was a warning shimmer in his field of vision, shifting prismatic light, small, but it would gradually increase until he was virtually blind out of one eye. "Migraine," Owen admitted reluctantly. He hated the way that something as trivial as this could render him helpless, even for just the space of a few hours. "I get them from time to time. Once, maybe twice a year. It'll pass."

Thoughtfully, Sterling lowered his already quiet voice another notch. "Do you have pills or something?"

He did, and if he'd been alone he wouldn't have taken one, finding it easier to lie in bed than get up and find them. "Bathroom," he said, limiting words. "Imitrex."

"I'll find it." Sterling pressed a light kiss to Owen's shoulder and left the room, the padding of his bare feet on the floor unusually loud to Owen's sensitive ears. He was back an eternity later and helped Owen to sit up, putting a pill in his mouth and holding a glass to his lips.

Owen swallowed some water and lay back down to a freshly turned pillow, the case cool against his cheek. He closed his eyes and imagined the pill in his

stomach slowly dissolving, the medicine spreading itself through his bloodstream, easing pain everywhere it went. Sometime during that visualization, he fell asleep again.

When he woke the second time, his head was on Sterling's shoulder and he suspected he'd been drooling.

Sterling didn't speak, but he shifted position a little, turning into Owen, his hand passing slowly over Owen's back in a wordless greeting.

The dazzle in front of his eyes had gone, and he felt clearheaded if still a little fragile. Not a day for anything strenuous, but he would at least be able to do something with whatever was left of Sunday, even if his plans would have to be adjusted.

"You're still here," he murmured and found that his voice sounded quiet, the words no longer reverberating inside his skull. "You didn't have to stay."

"You're kidding," Sterling said gently. He slid his hand higher, to the back of Owen's neck, and then slipped his fingers up into Owen's hair, rubbing with a light touch. It felt so good that Owen found his eyes closing again. "You think I'd leave you when you're sick? I mean, not sick, but hurting. I wouldn't do that."

"Listening to me snore isn't that entertaining," Owen pointed out drowsily. He brought his hand up to rest on Sterling's shoulder, feeling the muscles flex as Sterling continued to massage his neck. "I can't promise I'll be any better company now that I'm awake, either."

"You're good company even if you're asleep." Sterling was probably just trying to be loyal, but it sounded genuine enough. "Do you want something to eat? I could go make something. Toast?"

Owen propped himself up on an elbow, losing the comfort of Sterling's hand but giving him an excellent view of Sterling's face. "You don't have to wait on me," he said bluntly. "I'm just not feeling up to any of what we had planned for today, clearing out the room *or* dreaming up a scene for you, so can we just..." He couldn't think of a way to phrase what he wanted to say without sounding brusque. It wasn't as if being a Dom was something he could switch on and off; he was a teacher even during vacations and a Dom even when he wasn't feeling horny, but he'd never been able to sustain the lifestyle 24/7 with a partner, which was one reason it hadn't worked out with Michael. Today, the thought of the effort involved in being nothing but a Dom to Sterling, which was the sum total of their relationship, after all, overwhelmed him. "Time-out. Sorry."

Sterling looked even more worried and reached out to touch Owen's chin like he wanted to but didn't know how Owen would react. He did make tentative contact, though. "Don't be sorry, and don't think *I* think I have to wait on you. Can't we just—could we spend the day together even if we're having a time-out? *I* still want to. I *like* you, Owen—you, not just what you can teach me. Could we just pretend we're friends for today? You can take it easy, and I won't expect anything."

"We don't have to pretend we're friends," Owen objected, swapping sides in the argument just to be contrary—and because he was curious and a little touched by Sterling's evident concern. "We are. At least..." He trailed off, gathering his thoughts before speaking. "No. We're not, are we? Our relationship's too uneven for that; we know each other very well on some levels, not at all on others." It was too early for soul-searching. He poked Sterling's shoulder, the relief of movement without consequences washing over him. "Which would be your fault for bullying me shamelessly into this and rushing me."

"Hey, I didn't—"

"Did it ever occur to you," Owen continued remorselessly, unable to hold back a grin, "that if you'd hung around the club for a few weeks being your usual engaging self, *I* might have decided to pick *you* up after getting to know you better?" He dropped a kiss on Sterling's nose. "What with you being so pretty and apparently irresistible."

The smile Sterling gave him was so delighted Owen was almost overwhelmed by it. Of course, it could have been the migraine meds.

"You're—are you actually teasing me?" Sterling asked. "In a nonsexual way, I mean?" He was blushing just a little bit, but he snuggled up closer to Owen and kissed him, long and slow. "Okay, I don't think friends kiss each other like that. Boyfriends, maybe, but..."

That word made Owen freeze, something that as close as they were, in every sense, Sterling picked up on immediately. Before the moment could shatter, he forced himself to relax and keep his breathing steady. Boyfriend. "That's not how I think of you," he began, "but it's not you—I haven't thought of anyone that way since—"

"Michael."

"Yes." Owen eyed Sterling uncertainly and decided not to attempt to patch things up with a kiss. "If you were my, uh, boyfriend, we'd eat out, catch a movie, invite friends over, plan vacations, maybe live together..." It was appealing in a way. He focused on the main stumbling block. "We'd have a future that wasn't certain to end when you graduate next summer and go off to do exciting things with your shiny degree, which is just what you *should* do with it. We don't have any of that, and the way things are right now, we can't. If it helps, I'm not happy about it. I'll miss you more than I thought I would." He rolled to his back and stared at the ceiling, which wasn't looking at him with a stricken expression. "You didn't want to hear any of that, did you?"

"I—" Sterling didn't seem to know what to say, and who could blame him? There was a long silence, then that same tentative touch, but on Owen's chest this time. A careful, tender stroking of fingertips over his skin. "First of all, if you think when I graduate here that means I'm done with school, you haven't been listening. I'm going to get a Master's degree after this—maybe two—and then probably a doctorate. Might as well use up as much of my father's money as possible. Plus that gives me more time to decide what I want to do."

"You're still not sure?" Owen asked.

Sterling shrugged. "I have time. Anyway, I figure I'll stay here for my Master's, so that gives me at least another two years here. Maybe four. And—for the record, if we're sharing stuff we think the other person doesn't want to hear... I want all of that with you. Movies, friends, vacations. The whole future. I know you think I'm too young, but I think you're wrong."

"I don't think you're too young to fall in love," Owen said. "You're almost twenty-one, after all. I just think that falling in love with *me* is...problematic. I've given you something that makes a lot of your life suddenly make sense; you went from having no outlet for this—this mass of emotion and need building up, to having me giving you everything you didn't know you wanted but you did." He turned to his side, facing Sterling, and gave him a rueful look. "I'm your fairy fucking godmother, I get that. I'm also a lot older than you, and I *know* this lifestyle is one I won't walk away from. I couldn't. You haven't reached that point of certainty yet, not after a couple of months."

"So I'll wait," Sterling said. In that moment, he sounded so confident and able to be patient that almost anyone would have believed him. "I'll wait as long as it takes. When will you think I know? In a year? Two years?"

Owen sighed. "I know when you're thirty seconds away from needing to use your safe word, and I know when you're about to come. I also know when you're trying to fool me that, yes, you've done enough research on an essay when we both know you've skimmed it to spend time with me. I *don't* know how long it's going to take for the novelty of getting your ass spanked to wear off. Maybe it never will; on the face of it, you're a natural sub—on the pushy side for some, but not for me. But I've seen people drift away from the scene; they've fallen in love with someone who'd freak out if they were asked to give or take a spanking, and the love's more important than the kink. Or a baby comes along and the parents decide paddles and cuffs don't mix with diapers and teddy bears." He pushed the pillow up behind him and sat up. "If you want to mix in some downtime with the sessions, and come over just to, well, hang out, you can do that, but it will change things a little, just to warn you."

"That'd be good," Sterling said eagerly. "I'd like that. I mean, not the changing things part, necessarily, but I want to know you. And it's not like I'm going to have any babies—though maybe you want to, some day? I know you've been with women too..." He seemed disturbed by the idea.

Owen snorted. "Trust me, I'm not the paternal type. I did a stint at an elementary school as part of my teacher training, and wiping snotty noses for six months and dealing with whiners, bullies, and winsome little misses is what made me decide I was happiest teaching older students. Kids are hard work, and I'm too selfish to give up my life in favor of someone else's—a someone else I don't even know, who could be a complete brat." He raised his eyebrows. "You don't want children ever? It's something that isn't completely impossible these days; there's adoption, or surrogacy..."

"I've just never wanted any," Sterling said. "I like kids, just, you know, other people's. I think my mom is still waiting for me to change my mind about that and about being gay. Just wait until she finds out about the BDSM thing—I'll be lucky if she doesn't explode." He seemed more accepting of it than Owen would have expected, like it was an inevitability.

"I never told my parents," he said. "Oh, they knew I was bi and they were..." He frowned. "I don't know how they were about that," he admitted. "I brought home my first boyfriend after a string of girls, and they asked if I was gay and I said no, I just thought that this one guy was hot. After him it was another girl, and they just stopped asking me. They treated all my partners the same, and if they wished I'd make up my mind, they never said." He shrugged and slid his hand into Sterling's on an impulse, pleased when Sterling's hand returned the light clasp warmly. "After I got a place of my own, I stopped introducing them to my dates. It got too complicated and too risky. They knew Michael, but they didn't know what we did together. I kept them apart as much as possible. He would have taken off his collar if I'd ordered him to, but you'd have to have been blind to miss the way he was around me. I can fake it; Michael, not so much. I envy him that confidence, but I couldn't go there." He ran his thumb over the back of Sterling's knuckles. "You must be close to your mother to consider telling her about this?"

It occurred to him that an incensed parent could descend on the university demanding that the teacher who'd corrupted her son be fired, but the idea of asking Sterling not to mention his name didn't appeal. Owen was discreet about his sex life, but he wasn't ashamed of what he did, and this was one area where he felt that he had no right to dictate to Sterling.

Even if tenure could be revoked.

"I guess," Sterling said. "Yeah, pretty close. She was the first one I told about being gay, and the one who had the sense to tell me I shouldn't tell my father. I didn't come right out and tell him, at least—but I never went on dates or to the prom, and I never talked about girlfriends to throw him off the trail. I talked about my guy friends all the time, and I could have told by the way my father looked at me that he didn't like it even if he'd never said." His mouth twisted. "But of course, being who he is, he told me constantly."

"What kind of things did he say?" Owen asked.

Sighing, Sterling brought his mouth down to their clasped hands and kissed the wide knuckle of Owen's thumb. "You know, all the clichés. How if I kept hanging out with the guys from the baseball team and didn't date girls, people would start to suspect I was a queer. He was thrilled when I fucked up my shoulder and couldn't play anymore, until I decided to hang out with the artsy kids instead." Changing his voice, making it deeper, he imitated what Owen was sure was meant to be his father. "You do *know* the reputation that boys who participate in theater have, don't you, Will? I'm sure you wouldn't want to risk shaming your family that way."



Owen laughed, a snicker of pure amusement. "Jake and Gary, the couple I'm spending Christmas Day with, would confirm every fear he had about theater people, but Jesus, how narrow-minded is he?"

"The funny thing was, I started playing baseball because he didn't want me wasting my time with sports. He maybe got over that a little bit when it turned out I was winning us games and people in town got into the idea of having a star player, but he thought when I was done with baseball that meant I'd concentrate on my grades. It never got through to him that I did just fine grade-wise whether I was paying attention to extracurricular stuff or not." Sliding down, Sterling pressed his lips to Owen's chest without really kissing it, then exhaled. "Now I mostly worry about what he's telling my sister about me, you know?"

Sterling had mentioned her from time to time, a deep affection clear when he spoke of her, but Owen, an only child, couldn't really relate to the idea of a sibling. He stroked Sterling's hair, enjoying the way it always wrapped around his fingers, fine and silky. "Is she likely to listen to him? Or is she a rebel like her older brother?"

"Definitely not a rebel," Sterling said. "But I don't know if she'd listen to him, either. And I'm pretty sure my mom wouldn't try to counteract whatever he said, even if he wasn't around. But I guess if he was going to convince Justine I'm some kind of pervert or whatever, he would have managed it by now. It's just—I care what she thinks of me."

What he hadn't said was just as clear—that he didn't care what his father thought of him—although Owen was sure that wasn't true. "That's normal, Sterling."

"I know. Sometimes I just wish I didn't care so much what other people think. My life would have been a lot easier." Sterling offered Owen a strained smile. "Hey, what about you? How are you feeling?"

"A lot better." Impulsively he pulled Sterling up, craned his neck, and kissed him, Sterling's lips parting for him with a sweetness that startled him. "Thanks for taking care of me. I usually skip the medicine, sleep it off, and wake up feeling like hell."

"Well, we can't have that," Sterling said, his smile warmer now, though there was a faint shadow in his eyes. Stirred-up memories took a while to settle and clear. "Want that toast now?"

On cue, Owen's stomach growled, reminding him that it was in need of filling. "How about we change breakfast to brunch? There's a place on Forrest that does all you can eat buffet on Sunday, and their waffles are sinfully good." He sketched out a shape. "I take five and layer them, fresh fruit, whipped cream, maple syrup...lots of syrup..."

"I don't know, Mr. Sawyer," Sterling said, with an emphasis on the "mister." "Don't you think that sounds suspiciously like a date?" Then he dashed from the bed before Owen could give him a single but well-deserved slap to his bare ass. "Sure—brunch sounds good."

The restaurant was crowded, which it always was on Sundays. Parents visiting their children at college seemed to favor brunch as their family meal out, maybe because it meant they got to see their kids shoveling in a day's worth of food in one sitting. It was a nice place, though not so nice that it required dressing up—which Owen did anyway. He was aware that he might see one, if not more, of his own students, current or former, but decided it was best not to worry about how a meal with Sterling might be perceived.

They were seated, ordered coffee, and hit the buffet. Owen laughed when he returned to the table to find Sterling's plate so loaded that the food made a small mountain. "Can you even eat all that?"

Sterling couldn't answer immediately because he'd just stuffed an enormous bite of pancake and bacon into his mouth. He chewed, swallowed, and finally said, "Um, yes? And probably more. Trust me, the quality of my metabolism isn't in doubt."

"I've seen you running, so I guess I know how you stay in shape." Owen, with great self-restraint, speared a strawberry first. It was dripping with syrup, so it didn't give him many brownie points for eating healthy, but it made the next bite, golden brown waffle, crisp on the outside and soft inside, taste that much better. "This is on me," he added, wanting to get that out of the way. "Consider it a tip for all the work you did yesterday."

"You don't have to," Sterling said. He was studying his plate a little too carefully, though, as if trying to keep himself from saying something he shouldn't.

"No, I don't," Owen said. "I paid you for the hours you did like we agreed, and I don't have to do more than that—but I want to." He stabbed at a stray segment of grapefruit on Sterling's plate, stealing it before Sterling could do more than yelp indignantly, and popped it into his mouth. After chewing and swallowing, he said, "If it makes you feel any better, we can make our second date a trip to the movies, and you can buy the popcorn. It'll probably cost more than brunch if you treat me to a soda too."

Sterling smiled. "So this *is* a date."

"I never said it wasn't," Owen pointed out.

"But you didn't really say it was, either." Sterling sipped some coffee, eyes shining over the rim of the cup. "And I'm definitely paying for the movies. Assuming we can agree on what to see."

"That could be a problem," Owen agreed. "We could always go to different movies and meet up in the lobby afterwards."

"I can't hold your hand if you're in a different theater."

"Oh, well, if it's *that* kind of date, it doesn't matter what we go to see," Owen countered, "because we won't be watching it much."

Sterling's eyes darted to Owen's left hand, which was resting on the table beside his plate, but then he sat back deliberately. "I wish I could hold your hand now. When I'm not a student anymore, could we?"

"I don't imagine the skies would fall if we did," Owen said. "We might get a few pointed glares and muttered comments, but I can live with that." He could have gone on to point out that as a rule he just didn't do romantic gestures, but it would have been as pointlessly cruel as telling a child that Santa Claus didn't exist. Sterling, for all his outward self-assurance and bravado, had areas of vulnerability.

Deliberately, without looking around to see if there was anyone watching, Owen put his hand out, and when Sterling took it, he let him keep it for long enough to take a few more bites of food before sliding it free with an apologetic grimace. "I can't cut a stack of waffles one-handed."

"True enough." Sterling took another ridiculously large bite of sausage and omelet and chewed, leaning back in his chair. God, he was a handsome young man, Owen thought, and he had the look of one who'd age really nicely too. "Do you think—in a few years, or whenever—you'd want to meet them? My mom and sister, I mean."

Owen took a sip of coffee, buying time before he had to reply. A few years? Sterling took big bites of more than his food... "I'd like to meet them sometime," he said eventually. "I assume they'll all be in town when you graduate?"

"God, I hadn't thought about that," Sterling said with a groan. "I don't know. Maybe I'll get lucky and my father will have some last minute business meeting or whatever. If you meet him, you won't want anything to do with me anymore."

"I already know he's an asshole," Owen said. "It hasn't changed how I feel about you, so I can't imagine why seeing him would." He shrugged. "I don't really want to, though. Being polite to him would be an effort, and being rude... Well, the dean would frown on that, I'm afraid." He kicked Sterling's ankle gently under the table. "Change the subject before we get indigestion. I'm feeling well enough to tackle clearing some more junk, but there's something else I want to do, and it's not really worth starting a job like that and only spending an hour on it. Do you want a ride back to your room after this?"

Sterling shook his head and pouted slightly. "No, I want to stay with you. Whatever it is, I can help. Or just hang out."

"It's not..." Owen hesitated, unused to sharing something that was both personal and a source of sadness. "It's not something that I need help with, and I usually go alone, but it won't take long and I guess..." He broke off a sentence that was becoming impossibly tangled and tried again, forcing the words out and wondering, not for the first time, how Sterling managed to break down his resistance with no more than a pout and a look. "It's the anniversary of my parents' death. I'm not religious, and I'm not sure that I even think that they're somewhere, though part of me would like to believe that they are, but I take some flowers to their graves and just...remember them." Pink roses for his mother and anything that caught his eye for his father, something bright and sunny. "I'll understand if you don't want to come; it's not the most cheerful place to go."

He liked it there, though, and usually wandered around for a while. The older graves dated back centuries, the inscriptions on the stones time-blurred, the names quaintly old-fashioned, the span of lives sometimes cruelly short.

When he looked up, Sterling had set down his fork and was ignoring the rest of the food on his plate, not that there was all that much left. "I'd like to go with you. I'd go anywhere, if you asked me to, but that's not why. I'm—I don't know, honored, I guess, that you'd let me come."

A light, jokingly dismissive response would have been easy to make, and Owen almost went there from force of habit—but pretending that he wasn't touched by Sterling's words would have been disingenuous at best. He'd never lied to a sub or a friend, and Sterling was both of those and deserved more than glibness.

"If they know I'm there, remembering them, if that's at all possible, I think they'd be glad to see me there with you." He met Sterling's eyes. "They'd like seeing me happy."

Sterling stared back at him, realization of what Owen had just said slowly dawning in his eyes. "You...you deserve to be happy," Sterling said finally. "I want you to be happy. I want—I want..." He inhaled and looked away. "I want more bacon. Excuse me." Pushing back his chair, Sterling stood up and walked toward the buffet tables, leaving Owen to wonder what it was he'd considered saying.

After that, Sterling stuck stubbornly to more casual topics of conversation, and since that was easier, Owen let him. They left the restaurant and drove to a local nursery where Owen had bought flowers for his parents the year before—it was on the way to the graveyard.

"What about these?" Sterling suggested, and Owen turned to see him holding some purple flowers that were probably some kind of iris.

They weren't what he would have chosen; he usually went for yellow or red, something vivid in the colors of fall, but given that he didn't actually think his father knew what flowers would be laid on the grass above his grave, he nodded. Including Sterling in this felt more important than following a tradition that hadn't been in existence long enough to really qualify as one. "They're beautiful." He took the sheaf of irises from Sterling and added it to the bunch of pink, deeply scented roses in his arms. "We're done."

The drive to the graveyard didn't take long, and the small parking lot wasn't too crowded, though the straight paths linking the graves in the modern section were dotted with people. Owen always felt sorriest for the single mourners, some stooping stiffly to arrange flowers or deal with an errant weed, some standing in silence, their heads bowed.

He'd been one of them on previous visits—he didn't make a point of going to the graves on any particular day apart from this one, but when he missed his parents, or something reminded him of them, he generally stopped by, just for a few minutes—but not today. Today, like the young woman clinging to her brother's arm, their resemblance marking them clearly as siblings, or the

couple with a baby, he had someone to share his sorrow with, muted though it was after several years.

Sterling looked appropriately solemn, although he seemed to be directing the majority of his attention toward Owen. He even, as they started walking up the path toward the center of the graveyard, reached out and took Owen's hand, and Owen let him.

There were dried leaves under their feet, crunching and crackling in the cold. Although there was no snow on the ground, the earth was hard, half-frozen.

"We should have brought gloves," Owen said as they stopped at his parents' shared gravestone. "It feels colder here, don't you think?"

He didn't expect Sterling to agree—it was a passing fancy, the idea that this place of death could be more cold and still than the rest of the world—but Sterling nodded and squeezed his fingers more tightly, then drew their clasped hands into the pocket of the wool jacket he was wearing. "Is that better?" Sterling asked.

"Yes," Owen said, feeling the nudge of a coin against his knuckles and the scrape of the inevitable grit lining most pockets. He drew his hand out after a minute or two and put his arm around Sterling's shoulders, bringing them close together, no space between them as Sterling's arm went around his waist. At their feet, the flowers glowed brightly, their scent and color borrowed from spring and summer. The frost would blacken and crisp the velvet-soft petals, and the wind and rain would shred them.

Owen's mind was blank. He stood, staring at the names inscribed on the stones, and felt no sense that the people he'd known and loved were there, but a sense of peace gradually eroded the blankness. He bent down and picked up one of the irises that had separated itself from the bunch, its green stem cool against his palm.

He'd take it home, keep it alive a little longer.

## Chapter Eleven

Sterling's mother would have come to pick him up at school, but Christmas Eve was the night of his father's work-related holiday party (though never to be referred to as such, Sterling had learned when he was nine, which meant he continued to do it just to get under his father's skin), and there was just so much to do in the days leading up to it. They could have afforded to have it catered, but there were certain things Audrey Baker insisted on, and cooking the food for parties that happened under her roof was one of them.

She did come to get him at the bus station on the twenty-third, though, getting out of a silver BMW that Sterling was pretty sure she hadn't been driving when he left for school in the fall. "Will!" she cried, waving a hand, and he raised his in return and picked up his suitcase.

His mother hugged him tightly when he reached the car, which was awkward—he was still holding his suitcase. "There you are! It's been so long. Let me look at you." She pushed him away to arms' length and studied him. "You look good. You're growing your hair out?"

Owen preferred it longer, liked to run his fingers through it, and if Owen liked it, Sterling did it. For the most part. "Just a little. I've been busy."

"Are you still working at the ice cream shop? They must like you there."

He put his suitcase into the trunk and got into the passenger seat. "I got another raise, so I guess so. I like the guys there."

His mother, from behind the wheel, gave him a look. He knew exactly what it meant. It meant, *That's nice, honey, but just make sure you don't mention that to your father.* "Good. Justine's so excited to see you—I could barely get her out the door this morning. I had to promise I'd get her released from school early. We're going to swing by there on the way home and pick her up, if that's okay?"

"Sure, of course. I'm excited to see her too."

Justine went to a local school that was expensive, exclusive, and, as far as Sterling could see, was designed to turn out perfect wives for men like his father, starting at an early age. At twelve, Justine could probably have named the ideal wine for each course of any given meal, and she knew all the current vacation hot spots. To be fair to the Monmouth School, she was also receiving an excellent education and the chance to be trained by the best in any sport or creative endeavor she shone at. Justine's passion was tennis; Sterling could still beat her, but it was getting to be more of a struggle every year.

When they drove up to the school, glittering under a light sprinkle of snow, Justine was waiting on the steps hopping from foot to foot, an expensive satchel slung over her shoulder that was probably filled with homework for the vacation, the navy of her uniform blazer turning her hair to a bright gold. The uniformed school employee who had been waiting with her raised a hand in greeting to Audrey, who waved back as the woman went inside.

Sterling got out of the car and held his arms open, grinning as she launched herself at him in a series of exuberant leaps, her long legs carrying her over the ground. "Hey, Giraffe," he said, hugging her tight. "How's my favorite little sister?"

She made a halfhearted attempt to punch him in the kidney, off target because of her satchel and the extra inches she'd added since the summer. "I'm your only sister, booger brain."

Through the open passenger door, their mother gasped in mock horror. "You two are awful. You know what your father would say."

"Go read the dictionary," Sterling and Justine chorused, trudging back for the car. Sterling dragged his feet in the thin layer of snow, leaving trails behind him, and Justine, taking advantage of his distraction, shot forward and into the front seat. "Hey!"

"You were the one playing slo-mo," Justine said, shutting the door and leaving Sterling to get into the backseat.

"My legs are longer," he said, digging his knees into the back of her seat just to hear her yelp. "I need the extra room. I call shotgun for the rest of the vacation."

"You've got your own car," she reminded him and then turned, her face bright. "You'll be able to take me places! Daddy's always too busy, but you'll take me to Cindy's and Laura's, won't you?"

Sterling had vivid memories of those two girls. They had a tendency to look at him, blush, and giggle behind their hands, communicating with each other by sidelong glances and nudges. They freaked him out, and he couldn't tell them apart, though they weren't actually related. "I don't mind giving you rides, but the terrible twins don't come near my car, okay?"

"Mom! Tell him not to call them that! And tell him he has to be nice to me too."

Audrey sighed and pulled out onto the main road. "The next time I think I miss the two of you both in the car with me, I'll remember this moment."

"Oh, you love it," Sterling told her. He knew it was true; this was the best part, the three of them together. There'd been times when he was younger, thirteen or fourteen, when he used to wish that his father would get in a car accident, or even just drive off and never come back, and that it could just be the three of them forever. Not that he'd ever believed it would really happen, and now he'd come to realize that it never would, because weirdly, inexplicably, his mother loved his father.

Why, he'd never understand.

He leaned forward and tugged on Justine's hair, not hard enough to hurt. "I'm going to be so nice to you this vacation, you'll think I'm a totally different brother."

"Okay, that would be kind of freaky. Buy me ice cream, and I'll consider us even." Justine tossed something over her shoulder and it almost hit Sterling in the face. "Here, have some gum."

"Jeez, warn a guy next time. I could have lost an eye."

Their mother turned her head to look at them. "It's all fun and games until someone loses an eye, so let's make sure that doesn't happen, shall we?"

"Besides, Dad would have a cow if an unanticipated trip to the emergency room interrupted plans for the holiday party," Justine said, and Sterling accused her of being a closet *Simpsons* fan, which she denied just a little too vociferously.

By the time they reached the house, Sterling could feel himself tensing in anticipation of seeing his father and yet obscurely soothed by the familiarity of it all. This was home; he'd climbed that tree there, practiced pitching on the lawn, frosted over now with snow, a rolling expanse of turf he'd cut often. William Baker employed a gardener, but he'd expected his son to do chores to build character. Sterling hadn't minded; the size of the lawn meant that a ride-on was the only practical way to tend it, and it'd been kind of neat to zoom up and down creating wild swoops instead of neat lines.

To his relief, his father's car was in the driveway—the fact that he hadn't put it away in the garage meant that he was just making a pit stop, a temporary appearance before he took off again to some meeting or business dinner or whatever it was that would enhance his reputation and bolster his bank account. Sterling wasn't sure which one was more important—not that it mattered when the family came in a distant third.

"Dad's not staying in?" he asked.

Audrey shook her head as she put the car in park. "Business dinner." At least she'd given up on trying to convince Sterling that of course his father *wanted* to spend time with him but was just too busy.

Managing to keep from saying *great*, Sterling rolled his suitcase up the walkway and lifted it over the threshold.

Home, except that it wasn't.

The wide, curving stairway was lavishly, tastefully decorated with fresh pine and tiny gold bows; the air was redolent of spice and gingerbread. In the reception room leading off the lobby, a tall tree stood, shimmering with lights and decorations, none of which had been made by Sterling and Justine, kept and treasured. The decorations changed each year; this time, his mom seemed to be on a Victorian kick, very traditional; one year it'd been all glittering white, silver, and blue. Sterling, suffering from a hangover he couldn't admit to, had



been forced to sit with his back to it as he opened gifts he didn't need and, if they were in any way his father's choice, didn't want.

He took his suitcase to his room, showered for a long time, changed, and then, hoping that he'd dawdled long enough for his father to have left already, walked back downstairs.

His luck wasn't with him. William stood at the foot of the stairs, checking his watch impatiently, already dressed to go out. Tall, powerfully built, handsome, his fair hair lightly streaked with gray at the temples, his blue eyes sharp and cold like the man himself.

"So there you are," his father said by way of greeting.

Sterling's stomach tightened unpleasantly; you'd think it would have learned by now that there was no point in expecting his father to change. "Here I am," he said. "How's business?"

Sometimes that worked as a way of distracting his father, but apparently tonight wouldn't be one of those times. "Excellent, as always," William said. "Your grades?"

Of course it wasn't "How are you?" or "Are you happy?" "Straight As," Sterling told him, glad that it was true. "Wouldn't want to sully the brilliant Baker name."

"No, you seem capable of doing that in myriad other ways." William sighed and checked his watch again. "I'm late because I waited for you. I have to go. I'll be back around eleven—we can talk then."

Not if I have any choice in the matter, Sterling thought, but he nodded as his mother appeared and kissed his father good-bye.

"Make sure you eat vegetables," she admonished William, and for a moment his expression softened.

"I'll eat what's on my plate, I promise. If it happens to include something green, so be it." William patted his wife's cheek gently, the gesture bringing a pang of longing to a watching Sterling. Owen did that to him, cupped his face, cradling it in the curve of his palm... God, he missed him already, the barrenness of this life in sharp contrast to the one he'd made for himself at college. Here, he was nothing that was real, faking for his father, lying to his friends, never sharing what he was.

He didn't want to broadcast the details of what he and Owen did, not out of shame, but because there was something appealing about the idea of having this additional layer to their relationship, unsuspected, intimate. Private. From what he'd gathered talking to Owen and Alex, not many of the club members did talk about it outside their circle.

Sterling would never be a Freemason like his father, but he understood the value of loyalty to a group of like-minded people.

Posing as straight to all the visitors who'd throng this house over the vacation, though—that galled him. Being gay just wasn't a big deal these days, but try explaining that to his father.

He reached the foot of the stairs, intending to go in search of something to eat in the kitchen. William turned away without looking at him, but Audrey touched her husband's arm, her eyes full of appeal, and he hesitated and glanced back over his shoulder at Sterling.

"Good to have you back, son."

The words sounded stiff, scripted, but Audrey's face lit up with relief and pleasure, and it was for her sake that Sterling took the few steps needed to bring him close enough to his father for a handshake, brief and impersonal.

He didn't brace himself for a hug; William Baker didn't hug men, even when they were his only son.

The door closed behind William, and Audrey turned to embrace her son warmly, both hands moving on his back. "Thank you," she whispered. Pulling back, she smoothed Sterling's hair and smiled. "I know your father can be difficult sometimes, but he does love you."

It would only hurt her to insist otherwise; Sterling knew because he'd tried a dozen times or more before finally giving up. Let her have the lie—it was small enough, and in the long run it didn't matter if she chose to believe it, except to her.

Justine was sitting at the granite island in the large kitchen on one of the two leather-topped wooden stools, eating fruit salad with her fingers.

"We do have utensils," Audrey told her as she and Sterling entered the room.

"I know, but I can't tell which grapes are good and which ones are gross with a fork." Justine raised her hand and made a pinching motion with thumb and forefinger to illustrate the superiority of her digits.

Audrey moved to the wall oven and opened it, looking in at a casserole dish. "I'd hope none of them were gross."

"You never know. Sometimes there's a bad grape." Justine picked up one and squeezed it experimentally, then set it beside her bowl. "Like that one."

Sterling pulled out the stool beside her and sat down. "You can tell it's bad just by touching it?"

"It's squishy," Justine said.

Sterling picked it up and rolled it around in his palm. "Seems okay to me."

"It's not." Justine frowned. "It's bad."

"I think I'll eat it and find out."

"No!" Justine made a face as Sterling popped the grape into his mouth. "Gross!"

"It's fine," Sterling said, chewing. "A little soft, but it tastes normal."

"So. Gross," Justine pronounced and flounced to the sink with her bowl. "Is that lasagna?" she asked her mother.

"If you can't tell and you have to ask..." Audrey shook her head sadly. "Maybe it's gross too. Maybe it's best if I just throw it out—"

"No!" Justine wrapped her arms around her mother, tall enough now that her head came up to Audrey's shoulder. "I love your lasagna. Do we get garlic bread too?"

"Homemade, with lots of butter," Audrey promised, smoothing back Justine's hair. "Now set the table for me, please?"

"Can we just eat here in the kitchen, as a treat?" Justine begged. "It's Will's first night back."

Audrey bit her lip, and Sterling heard the echo of his father's voice insisting that the formal dining room be used for the evening meal, each setting perfect, a heavy linen napkin beside each plate. The additional work for Audrey as she laundered the napkins to pristine smoothness and polished the mahogany table to a mirror gloss didn't matter; the fact that it was just the four of them, with no guests, was irrelevant. Standards had to be met, appearances were important.

"Just this once," Audrey said finally. The unspoken *don't tell your father* was understood.

Without being asked, Sterling went to the refrigerator to see if there was a salad waiting for them—he knew that lasagna meant garlic bread and salad as well as Justine did. He took out the large glass bowl and set it on the island, then asked his mother, "Want me to make some homemade croutons?"

Audrey gaped at him. It might have been the most surprised look he'd ever seen on her face, which was pretty funny when you considered he'd asked about croutons. "Since when do you know how to cook?"

"I have a friend," Sterling said, because it was better to keep it simple. "He's shown me a few things." Owen played down his talents in the kitchen, but he could produce food that was edible and looked good, a combination Sterling admired.

"Well, far be it from me to stand in the way of progress," Audrey said and gestured at the stovetop.

"I want to help! Can you show me?" Justine asked.

It didn't take long to cube the bread, season it, and toast it in a pan that was nicer than the ones Owen had inherited from his parents by about four times. When they'd finished, Audrey had taken the lasagna from the oven and was slicing the garlic bread.

A bottle of red wine would have gone well with the meal, but Sterling didn't suggest opening one. He was permitted to drink a single glass of wine at dinner and had been for several years; William believed in men who could hold their drink and appreciate good wines, but Justine would wrinkle her nose, and Audrey would only sip at hers. He got water for all of them instead and grinned at the holly-sprinkled paper napkins by each plate.

Maybe this visit would go well for once, with no arguments. He'd changed, after all, the sessions with Owen teaching him patience and restraint. He'd learned how much he could take without breaking at the hands of someone who cared about him. He wanted more than caring and affection from Owen, but he could let himself hope that Owen would give it to him soon, along with so much more.

Okay, thinking about Owen relaxing that stupid rule and what would happen when he did wasn't the best idea. He sat at the table, dropped his napkin into his lap, and took a gulp of ice water.

"Why are you blushing?" Justine asked.

"It's hot in here."

"No, it's not." She snagged a huge chunk of garlic bread and bit into it. "Are you thinking about your girlfriend? Do you have one? Is she pretty?"

"Justine, talking with your mouth full isn't allowed, whatever room we're eating in," Audrey said, her eyes begging Sterling not to respond.

Little sisters were a pain in the ass; how come he always forgot that essential truth?

"No, I don't have a girlfriend," he said finally, then added something guaranteed to get the conversation to veer off its track. "I was thinking about the puppy we found that time, at the park, remember?"

Justine's eyes lit up. "Yes! It was so cute, but Dad wouldn't let us keep it."

"Dogs are a lot of work," their mother said diplomatically, giving Sterling a grateful look. "And they make a lot of mess."

"It was still cute," Justine said. "When I grow up, I'm going to get a puppy. *Two* puppies. Maybe one like President Obama's dog—what kind is it again?"

"A Portuguese water dog," Audrey said.

Justine nodded as Sterling took a bite of lasagna that was every bit as good as he remembered. "Maybe *three* dogs," she said.

"A whole pack," Sterling agreed, and then the conversation veered again to a book Justine had read about a pack of wild dogs living on the streets, and Sterling forgot about the stress of coming out to his sister, which he definitely had to do sometime soon.

\* \* \* \* \*

The open house slash holiday party the next night went smoothly, mostly because Sterling did what his father wanted him to do and put in an appearance. He was doing his best to keep things civil, for his mom and Justine's sakes, so he wore a somber dark blue tie instead of the rainbow-striped one he'd bought a few months back and considered wearing up until the last minute.

He went back up to his room when things started to die down, figuring that no one would miss him. There were only half a dozen people left at that point, and Justine had already gone to bed.

An hour later, Sterling heard his father coming upstairs. He thought William would just walk on by on his way to his parents' bedroom, but to his surprise there was a sharp, loud knock at his own bedroom door before William shoved it open to slam against the wall with startling force.

Sterling, who'd been sitting on his bed with a book, jumped at the sound. "What—"

"How *dare* you behave that way?" William said. "Are you *trying* to destroy me?" His voice was low and filled with anger.

"What way?" Sterling was genuinely perplexed.

William took a step into the room, glaring. "You deliberately ignored people when they tried to speak with you, and then you disappeared without saying good night! I had to make half a dozen apologies for you. I've never been so embarrassed!"

"Oh, I think you probably have," Sterling said. "It's not like this was the first time I ever embarrassed you. Remember when I got the lead in the senior play?"

"You will not drag this family down into the gutter with you—everything I've worked for, everything I've sacrificed—"

Sterling tossed his book aside and stood, facing up to his father because that was what he did and always had. William had taught him never to back down, how to find an enemy's weak spots, how to manipulate a person or situation to his advantage. He hadn't intended for his son to use those skills against him, of course, which really, when you thought about it, was pretty fucking stupid of him. "The only thing you've sacrificed is your family. I grew up despising you, and Justine, well, she doesn't even *know* you. Nice job, Dad. Stellar."

The angry flush on William's face darkened ominously. Jesus, he looked as if he was going to have a stroke or something. Sterling thought back to the party, unable to pinpoint what exactly had triggered this outburst. His father was maybe a little drunk, but even smashed out of his skull, Sterling couldn't see William Baker losing control. Time to calm the troubled waters and all that shit.

"Look, whatever I did or didn't do, it wasn't on purpose, okay? The only people left when I came up here were your poker buddies, and I'm not even on their radar." Since his dad played cards with people like the mayor and the chief of police, Sterling liked it that way. "And ignoring people...who, for God's sake? I talked to half the goddamned town tonight."

"Don't defy me and don't answer back." William strode over to the bed, quivering with a rage that seemed out of proportion to whatever it was he thought that his son had done. "Every man there with a son knows he's got a

future, someone to pass his business on to, someone he can trust. What do I have? A filthy degenerate—oh, I saw you flirting with that young barman we hired. Shaming me. You cost him his job, do you know that? I'll call the golf club—get him fired—”

Sterling rolled his eyes. Carl was midtwenties, good-looking, and worked at the golf club bar, busy even when the green was closed for the winter. He sometimes got side jobs bartending private parties, mixing drinks with a friendly smile for the men and a flirtatious wink for the women. Sterling had chatted to him as he waited for Carl to uncork a Pinot Noir, their brief conversation forgotten moments after he'd walked away.

“Newsflash, Donald Trump; Carl's not gay. He's banged half the women at the golf club. And even if he was, I've *got* a boyfriend and I don't cheat—”

A sharp gasp from the doorway startled him into turning his head, so his father's fist caught him high on his cheekbone, the blow strong enough to leave him dazed, the salt taste of blood in his mouth. He explored the place where flesh had been driven against his teeth and spat blood onto the pale gray carpet. “Asshole.”

“*Faggot*,” his father hissed. “You're too much of a sissy to hit back, aren't you?”

Actually, Sterling was too much of a pacifist, which was funny when he thought about what he did in his free time—but that was different. Letting Owen spank him was one thing; punching somebody because he was irritated, or even seriously pissed off, was something else entirely. “No, I'm too *smart*,” he retorted. “You'd probably call the police on me.”

He didn't think his father would, though, because it was the kind of thing that would get around, the kind of thing his father didn't want “ruining the family reputation.”

“You've never been the kind of son I could be proud of,” his father growled. “You disgust me.” And he left the room, pushing his way past his wife and daughter, who were in the hallway right outside.

“Will...” Justine moved into the doorway, her face white, long hair loose. Her Hello Kitty nightgown, too short but her favorite, made her look younger than she was. Beside her, elegant in a black cocktail dress, Audrey looked equally shocked and upset.

Sterling turned, heaved his mostly still-packed suitcase up onto the bed, and carefully took the wrapped presents for his mother and sister out, laying them on the pillow. Then he shoved his other things back into the case and zipped it up before turning to Justine, who was crying, with Audrey's arms around her. She turned to look at him and pulled free of her mother. Sterling led her over to sit on the edge of the bed with him. He hugged her and rested his cheek against her hair; Audrey watched them, a stricken, helpless look on her face.

“I'm sorry,” he murmured. “Shh, it's okay. It'll be okay.”

"No, it won't!" Justine pulled back, her eyes red. "Is that why Dad hates you? Because you have boyfriends?"

Here it was, the conversation he'd been thinking about for a couple of years, afraid of how it might go. "I think Dad hates me for a lot of reasons," he said. "But yeah, that's probably one of the bigger ones. I'm gay, and I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I wanted to."

"Did you think I'd be mad?" Justine looked worried more than anything else.

Sterling studied her eyes. "I thought maybe you'd hate me too."

Tears welled again, and Justine buried her face against his chest and hugged him tightly. "I love you, Will. I'd never hate you. And especially not for something stupid like that. I don't care if you have girlfriends or boyfriends. There are girls at school who are gay."

Audrey, who'd been standing nearby letting them talk, said, "There are?" her voice startled.

Justine nodded and wiped her eyes. "Yeah, a couple. I don't care. I don't get why anyone would care about something like that."

"Dad does," Sterling said grimly. "Look, I love you guys, and I don't want you to have a crappy Christmas because of me. I'm going to get out of here, give Dad a chance to blow off some steam without having to look at me."

His mother didn't protest, which told Sterling where she stood on the matter—on his father's side, just where she always had. Oh, she loved her children, but William came first.

Sterling's father was waiting for him downstairs near the front door, another drink in his hand. "Figured you'd run. You never did have a spine."

"Just like you never knew what you wanted from me," Sterling said, tightening his grip on the handle of his suitcase. "First you want me to have a spine, then you want me to do what you say. What *do* you want?"

"A different son."

Sterling nodded, appreciating the honesty of the reply in a strange way, if not the spite behind it. "Yeah. I get that, I really do. But you and I have never gotten along, ever, so somehow I don't think me being straight would've made a whole lot of difference. It's just a handy hook for you to attach all your bullshit to."

"It makes a difference. And I always knew there was something wrong about you—"

Sterling gave him a cold stare, something of the chill in his eyes creeping into his heart. Shit, he was about to walk out on Christmas Eve, spend it away from his family for the first time ever. The worst part was that it was kind of a relief to do it too.

"There is *nothing* wrong with me. Considering my parents, it's a shock, I know, but I'm just fucking fine."

"Get out of my house," William said. "And don't come back until you've decided to live your life the way it should be lived, with morals."

Setting his jaw, Sterling said, "Oh, I have those. But if you think I'm ever going to live the way you want me to, you're crazy." And before he could say anything else, he pushed open the front door and walked over to the garage, hoping beyond hope that his car would start up when he turned the key.

It did, much to his relief, though it didn't stop his heart from pounding in his chest as he maneuvered the car carefully down the driveway. His hands didn't shake as he drove, at least, and he realized he wasn't feeling much of anything. He was kind of numb.

Numb was okay. Better than freaking out on the highway.

He got most of the way back to college before he remembered that the dorms were closed for the break—he couldn't stay there. He could call work and see if there were some shifts he could pick up over the next week—having something to do would be good, something to keep him busy. For tonight, though, he knew where he wanted to be.

Somehow, Sterling couldn't bring himself to actually call Owen until he'd pulled the car into Owen's driveway. Maybe it was because he was afraid Owen wouldn't be there—when he saw Owen's familiar car was when his hands *did* start shaking, but that was okay—or maybe he was worried that Owen wouldn't let him in. Not because anything was wrong between them, but because Sterling was pretty sure Owen wasn't big on surprises, especially when they were accompanied by years of family angst.

There weren't any lights on in the house. It was really late, way past midnight, and Owen was probably sleeping. Sterling could drive to a local hotel and check in for the night and worry about tomorrow when the sun came up, but he didn't want to.

Maybe it was selfish, but he wanted Owen's arms around him.

Taking out his cell phone, Sterling dialed Owen's number. It rang three times, then on the fourth ring Owen picked it up, saying, "Hello?" in a half-asleep voice.

"Hi," Sterling said, and now his voice was shaking too. "Hi, Owen, it's me, Sterling. I'm, um...I'm sitting outside in your driveway. I know it's late, and I'm sorry, but—I really need a place to spend the night. Can I come in?"



## Chapter Twelve

Owen had wondered if Sterling would call him over the Christmas break and decided, more than a little regretfully, that he probably wouldn't. Not because out of sight was out of mind—he was sure that Sterling would be thinking about him from time to time—but because Owen just didn't fit into the world Sterling was returning to.

Neither did Sterling, of course.

Hearing Sterling's voice so unexpectedly, the phone call coming just long enough after he'd turned out the light that he'd been mostly asleep, had woken him up with the decisive kick of an espresso shot. It still took a moment for Sterling's words to register.

"Outside? You're here?" He rubbed at his eyes and then closed them, fumbling for the bedside light and switching it on. The blaze of light brought him a step closer to coherent thought, and he opened his eyes, blinking away the dazzle. "God, yes, of course you can. I'm coming down to open the door."

"Thanks," Sterling said.

The boy was waiting on the steps when Owen opened the door, still holding his cell phone in his hand. Even under the porch light, Owen could see the bruise coming up on Sterling's cheekbone, the skin there swollen and reddened.

"Sorry," Sterling said, giving a little shrug. "I didn't know where else to go." His face crumpled, and he brought his free hand up to hide it, shoulders shaking.

Owen's feet were bare, and the icy air struck at him through the robe he'd pulled on over bare skin as he hurried down the stairs, but he stepped out onto the small porch, folding Sterling in his arms. Practicality made the hug a brief one, but he kept an arm around Sterling as he drew them inside, and once the door was closed, he held him again.

The tremors running through Sterling were getting worse. Owen could hear Sterling's teeth chattering, although the boy felt warm enough and was wearing a thick, down-filled winter jacket. Shock, not the temperature, was causing this reaction. Sterling was sobbing now, silent, heaving sobs that seemed to leave him no chance to breathe, certainly no opportunity to talk. Owen stroked Sterling's hair and cradled him as tightly as he could, but when Sterling showed no signs of calming, he broke free of the hug. Taking Sterling's

hand, he led him into the front room and pushed him into the armchair by a fire that had burned down to embers but was still throwing out heat.

"Sit there, Sterling," he said, consciously using a tone of voice that demanded obedience. "I'm going to get us both a drink, and when I come back, you'll be calm enough to talk to me, is that understood?"

It didn't take long to pour two drinks and bring them back, but by the time he had, Sterling had shrugged out of his heavy jacket and was wiping his cheeks. He glanced up at Owen, then away again, and he didn't say anything.

"Drink this," Owen told him, pressing a glass into his hand. It was Scotch, which he normally wouldn't have given to someone who was underage for a variety of reasons, but in this case he was making an exception because it was clear that Sterling needed the mild sedative effects that the liquor would deliver.

Sterling sipped at it and leaned his head back against the chair. "Sorry—I kind of lost it there. I'm okay."

"I very much doubt that, and I'm sure you had good reason. Tell me what happened."

"I was born into the wrong family, pretty much," Sterling said, directing his gaze toward the fire. "My father is an asshole, and my mother takes his side every time. I finally came out to my father and my sister—he flipped out, which was stupid because he *knew*, it was just something I never *said*."

"And hearing it said made him do this?" Owen asked, brushing his fingers over the bruise rising on Sterling's cheek. He had to work to keep his anger from showing when he got a small nod in reply. He'd put plenty of bruises onto Sterling's body, inflicted pain that to an outsider would make a single punch a trivial thing—hell, he'd made Sterling cry with that pain.

Not the same.

Not the fucking *same*.

Moving slowly, reading every shift in Sterling's body, he fitted his palm to Sterling's jaw and turned his face so that the soft glow from the lamp illuminated it. Sterling stared at him without expression, his eyes dull. The loss of the sparkle in those eyes made Owen angrier than the bruise on a body that belonged to him, inflicted by a hand that should never have been raised. Sterling might be an adult, but he was still Baker's son, and to hit your child—

He took a deep breath and then kissed the reddened cheek lightly, claiming the mark and wishing that he really could kiss it better. "Some arnica will take the bruising down, and it's not close enough to your eye to give you a really spectacular shiner. You're still pretty, don't worry."

"I'm just—really tired." Sterling looked exhausted, actually, and Owen was grateful that he'd made the drive without incident. The thought of how it would have felt to discover that Sterling had driven off the road... "I don't want any arnica, or anything. Can we just go to bed, please?"

"Of course. Let me take that." Owen took the glass from Sterling's hand and set it down beside his own, then tugged Sterling to his feet and led him upstairs. It didn't take long to get him tucked into bed, his eyes half closing even as Owen pulled the covers up over them both.

Sterling was asleep almost immediately. It took Owen a good deal longer to drift off.

He woke again a few hours later—the clock read three a.m. At first he wasn't sure why he'd woken up, but he gradually became aware of Sterling's breathing, too uneven and quick to indicate sleep. "Are you all right?" he whispered, and Sterling's breath caught.

"Yes. I just can't sleep."

"Then don't try." Owen stretched, working the stiffness out of muscles held too long in one position. "Come here," he said and let Sterling huddle up close, his arms around a body that felt weighed down, leaden. He kissed Sterling's temple, feeling the smooth skin warm against his lips. "Want to talk? Or just stay like this?"

"It's Christmas," Sterling said, which wasn't really an answer.

"Yes." Thinking it might be reassuring, Owen added, "You can come with me today. Jake and Gary won't mind—they're always saying the more the merrier." It didn't sound like much in the way of consolation, spoken out loud, but it was better than nothing.

"Okay." Sterling's voice was hollow, empty, and Owen wasn't sure he could bear to listen to it. Sterling—*his* Sterling, his beautiful, bright, stubborn boy—had been broken.

It was up to him to put the pieces together again.

Owen turned a bit more, bringing his mouth down on Sterling's lips in a coaxing kiss. At first Sterling didn't really respond, but within a few seconds he did, as if the heat of Owen's lips was waking him from a deep sleep. "Don't stop," Sterling begged when Owen drew back for a moment.

"I don't want to stop," Owen murmured. "I never do with you." He nipped at Sterling's earlobe, a love bite, no more, worrying the velvet-soft skin with his teeth and then pressing a kiss against the sensitive skin behind it just to make Sterling shiver. "I missed you. Two days and I missed you." He went back to Sterling's mouth and made the kiss more urgent this time, pouring the truth of his words into it. Sterling needed to know that he was wanted, and Owen had no problem at all in showing him that he was.

Sterling returned the kiss, but he was moving restlessly now, his frustration plain, his hands clutching at Owen's shoulders.

Owen was about to ask him what was the matter, but the words played out in his head, jarring, wrong. Sterling didn't need questions to answer, decisions to make. He needed comfort, and Owen wasn't giving it to him.

With a detached part of his brain, he reflected that it would have been better for Sterling if he hadn't slowly fallen in love with the boy; a month ago,

he would have taken charge and treated him the way he would have treated any sub in distress—guiding him down a clearly marked path with a firm hand. Tonight, instead of doing that, he'd been kind, fussed over him, cuddled him—and now Sterling's teeth were gritted, his muscles tense, and his body shaking again.

“Shh,” Owen said. “It's okay—I know what you need.” And he needed it too, almost as much, and at that moment there didn't seem to be any point in denying it to either of them.

He sat Sterling up and peeled off the long-sleeved T-shirt, pressing kisses to Sterling's neck and shoulder as he eased him back onto the pillows again and then claimed his mouth, fingers moving expertly to one of Sterling's nipples to pinch it gently; Sterling sobbed and arched into the touch, shuddering with desperation. Sterling shifted onto his side and slid a hand down Owen's back to his ass, hips rocking forward so that their erections rubbed against each other through the fabric of the pants Owen wished they weren't wearing.

“Please,” Sterling muttered into his mouth, not pulling away enough to speak clearly but obviously determined to continue repeating the word. “Please, please, Owen. Please.”

That word coupled with his name in Sterling's mouth aroused him unbearably, always had. God help him when Sterling figured that out, if he hadn't already, but tonight the plea was heartfelt, unstudied.

“I want you naked,” Owen said clearly, his fingers against Sterling's mouth, stilling the desperate chant. “Focus, Sterling. On me, on what I'm telling you to do. Nothing else.”

Sterling moaned, but the frustration had lessened, and he let Owen move away enough for them both to skin out of what little they wore. Owen reached out for the bedside lamp and hesitated. The darkness was better for this; he wanted to end it with Sterling relaxed enough to sleep, but he needed to see what he was doing. He compromised, turning the lamp on but moving it to the floor, where it cast a fainter light that, once their eyes adjusted, would be perfect. Sterling's hand touched his hip, the light caress as much a plea as anything he'd said, but Owen made him wait just a few seconds longer as he fumbled open the drawer in the bedside table and got out the supplies he'd promised himself he wouldn't use for another few weeks.

It didn't feel like Sterling had won, though, any more than Owen felt like he'd given in.

Then he let himself do what he'd wanted to do for so long—he rolled on top of Sterling with nothing between them, all of Sterling's bare skin underneath him, stretched out and glorious. Owen's erection slid over the soft hair on Sterling's thigh, and he choked back a groan because even though he was doing this for both of them, he wanted to stay in control.

He straightened his arms, pushing himself up so he could see Sterling's face. Sterling's eyes were wide and a little bit shocked, like he couldn't believe

this was happening, and Owen couldn't blame him. It was a fantasy come true. Owen rocked his hips once, the head of his cock rubbing against the tender skin over Sterling's balls, and Sterling gasped.

"I'm focused," Sterling said to reassure him. "God, I want you so much, Owen. So much."

He'd never doubted it.

He'd had plans for the first time he fucked Sterling; hell, what Dom didn't get off almost as much on the planning of a scene as its execution? None of them had included a traumatized, unhappy Sterling, and all of them had included elements that he couldn't use tonight. He had a fair idea of Sterling's limits, but they hadn't been together long enough for Owen to be sure of his reaction to being tied up when he was this emotional; it might calm him, it might freak him out. On a more mundane level, he *really* didn't want to leave the haven of the bed to look for something to use, but it didn't mean that he couldn't work in a taste of what they both loved.

He knelt between Sterling's spread legs and ran his hands down Sterling's arms, capturing his wrists. The headboard of his bed was all metal, smooth curves and bars, and he brought Sterling's hands up to it. "Hold on and don't let go until I tell you that you can," he said. Sterling's fingers curled around the metal at once, his eyes wide, some life in them now, and Owen rewarded him, squeezing the thin, strong wrists hard. "Feel that?" he murmured. "My hands on you, holding you? When I take them away, you'll still be able to feel me holding you, and you'll keep your hands where I've told you to, just like they're tied there." He leaned over and kissed Sterling, a leisurely, possessive kiss, his tongue licking inside Sterling's mouth, tasting him. "I can chain you, cuff you, rope you so tightly that every breath is an effort, and that's just for show. All that I need to keep you where I want you is to tell you to stay there." He loosened his grip and rubbed his thumbs over the leap and throb of the pulse in each wrist. The skin felt hot, chafed, and tomorrow there might be tiny bruises here and there. Sterling's wrists would be hurting him now, but it was a clean, warm pain, welcomed, expected, not the shock and betrayal of a blow.

Owen ran his hands down Sterling's arms and then his chest, touching every bit of Sterling he could, reclaiming him. "You're mine, Sterling. You belong to me. Say it."

Shuddering when Owen's fingers traced the head of his cock, Sterling groaned out, "I'm yours, Owen. I belong to you. Just you. You're the only one I want."

"Good." Owen bent over Sterling and licked at one nipple. He scraped his teeth across it, bit at it, sucked it into his mouth and worked it with his tongue until it was swollen and reddened and Sterling was whimpering. So responsive... Moving to the other nipple, he gave it the same attention—by the time he was done with it, Sterling's cock was slick at the head and his hands clenched on the headboard so tightly that he was white-knuckled.

"Please," Sterling whispered, and Owen wondered if he knew how powerful a word it was, even used instinctively since it was clear he wasn't capable of anything calculated when he was so needy.

For the first time since they'd been together, Owen bent over Sterling's cock and touched it with his mouth. Sterling cried out, just once, but didn't let go of the headboard as Owen tasted him, the flesh unbearably tender against his lips and tongue. He took his time learning Sterling, cataloguing each moan and shift, licking away the bead of fluid at the tip, salty and bitter, making Owen's mouth water. When he finally took Sterling's cock in, lips sliding down the shaft, Sterling held his breath, every muscle tight beneath Owen.

Sterling knew better than to come without permission, but Owen couldn't deny, to himself at least, his curiosity in seeing how far he could take things.

This was something he loved doing. He knew Doms who never sucked off their subs, claiming that it upset the power dynamic too much, tangled the lines drawn. To his mind, that was nonsense. He was in complete control here, just like he would be when it was Sterling's mouth on his cock, fervent, worshipful, obedient. Hell, if he ever wanted to, he could order Sterling to spank *him* and still be clearly, unmistakably, the one calling the shots.

With the head of Sterling's cock nudging the back of his throat, he eased off just a little, enjoying the helpless whimpers Sterling was making and swirling his tongue around the slippery shaft in lazy flicks and licks. Sterling was trying to thrust up, instinct taking over training, but even at his most indulgent, Owen wasn't prepared to allow that. He took his mouth off Sterling's cock and held Sterling down, his hands firm on the boy's hips. "I told you to lie still. If you try to fuck my mouth again, I'll cancel the spanking I had planned as one of your presents."

Sterling trembled; his eyes glittered, moist with tears that probably had half a dozen causes. "I'm sorry. I'll be good, I promise. I won't move again."

There was no point in making Sterling sweat it out, Owen thought. He'd been under enough stress as it was. "I *am* going to let you come tonight," Owen told him. "But not now—not like this. I know you can wait, and I expect you to; I know you won't disappoint me."

"I won't," Sterling whispered and closed his eyes. "God, this is so good. I can't believe you're actually—I've had dreams about this. Fantasies, about you touching me like this. I'll do anything. Anything."

"Right now, all I want you to do is stay still and not come," Owen said and took Sterling's cock into his mouth again, relaxing his throat and letting Sterling go balls-deep.

The cry that ripped out of Sterling was close enough to the sound he'd make when he came that Owen almost expected to feel a gush of fluid fill his mouth, bitter-salt, but Sterling held back. Owen wasn't sure how much more of this either of them could take, but he spun it out for a while longer, wanting to take Sterling way past the point where he'd tense up as the reality of being fucked clashed with his arousal.

He moved his hands, one going to cup and roll the tight mass of Sterling's balls and one to Sterling's cock, holding it in place as he teased the tip of it, running the slick head over his closed mouth and then his teeth. Sterling was making sharp gasps now with every quick, panting breath, but the deciding factor was that Owen was too close to climaxing himself, just from this, to be able to wait much longer. Too many months of just jerking off, too many months of waiting to do this with Sterling.

Owen knelt up, one hand still wrapped around Sterling's cock until the last moment. With quick, automatic movements, the action as familiar as brushing his teeth, he rolled a condom over his erection and let a small pool of lube drizzle from the bottle into his palm.

He slicked the outside of the condom with the lube, then used those same wet fingers to open Sterling up, fingertips sliding wetly over the tight hole he'd fucked so many times with his fingers and with dildos but never with his own cock. Sterling moaned and relaxed—he'd been taught well—and even spread his thighs wider as Owen pushed two fingers into him. There was little resistance, though Sterling's ass clenched around him briefly, hungrily, begging for more, and Owen had to breathe in slowly through his nose to keep from just shoving himself into Sterling and fucking him fast and hard, to keep from getting lost in Sterling.

The most important thing was that this was good for Sterling, that it left him wanting more and more.

Owen curled his fingers slightly, rubbing against Sterling's prostate in the way that made Sterling gasp and shiver like it always did.

"Open your eyes," Owen told him as he slid his fingers free and shifted position, the head of his cock poised for entrance, and Sterling did. He looked dazed, desperate, but his eyes focused and met Owen's. "I won't do this until you ask me. If it's not what you want, this is your chance to—"

"Please," Sterling said breathlessly, not waiting for Owen to finish, impatient, naughty boy that he was. "Owen, I want you to fuck me. Please, please, please." Sterling's hips lifted slightly; his breath was uneven, and his pupils blown wide. "Please fuck me. I need you to, I need..."

"I know what you need," Owen said and pushed inside him—an inch, no more, Sterling's body so willing, so receptive. "See?" He rocked his hips back and forth, gaining ground slowly, sweat breaking out on his back because God, the tight heat enfolding him felt incredible and he wanted to drive deeper into it, long, hard thrusts, claiming every part of Sterling as his.

"More," Sterling said, and oh, that was close to a demand, and part of Owen felt a brief, savage flash of satisfaction that Sterling was back even as he punished impatience by pulling out almost all the way and giving Sterling a stern look.

"I said I knew what you needed; I didn't say you'd get it for the asking, no matter how prettily you beg." He ran his hand over Sterling's chest, using the brief pause as a way to calm himself and damp down desire intense enough to

leave him shaken. The way he felt right now, this could be over in about thirty seconds, and he'd never live that down. "Count to twenty for me, Sterling. Slowly. Show me you can wait."

The sound Sterling made was guttural, a grunted exhalation of impatience and want, but it was followed by a more careful drawing of breath and the slightest nod. "One. Two." Sterling's voice was hoarse; his nostrils flared between each spoken number, and Owen could feel him trembling.

"Seven. Eight."

A shudder ran through Sterling, and he clenched down around Owen's cock, making them both moan. Owen knew it hadn't been deliberate, so he said nothing, but licked his lips and waited for Sterling to continue.

"Eleven. Twelve."

Owen could feel a bead of sweat running down along the back of his shoulder—it tickled and made him grit his teeth. Sterling's face was open, trusting, as he finished counting.

"Nineteen," Sterling said and swallowed. He kept the same pause between the numbers as all the previous pauses, even though Owen could feel his heart rate increasing in anticipation. "Oh God, Owen—twenty."

"You never let me down," Owen told him, already starting to move, and wondered if it was what he'd said or what he'd done that put that startled, grateful look in Sterling's eyes.

Sterling's hands were still gripping the headboard, and with each of Owen's slow, careful thrusts, the muscles in his arms flexed and tightened. "God. Owen, please don't stop. Please."

"Tell me how it feels," Owen told him, because they both needed the distraction that words would provide. He drew back and pushed forward again, Sterling's body hot around him.

"It's—good. It feels good. I can't—" Sterling shivered and bit his lip; Owen lifted him, both hands at his hips, and slid inside at a slightly different angle, making Sterling moan.

"You know how long I've been wanting to do this? Wanting to fuck you?" Owen looked between them at Sterling's cock, half-hard where it lay on his belly, and it gave a throb as if it could feel his eyes on it—at the same time, Sterling's body clenched around him. "Wanting to know what it would be like to have you around me, crying out for me, begging me for more?"

Sterling did cry out with Owen's next thrust. "Faster. Oh God, it's—I don't think I can wait."

Owen was getting to the point where he couldn't either, the need to *move* an itch he just had to scratch. He thumbed the head of Sterling's cock as his hand worked it, teasing him to fully hard in just a short space of time, never slowing the smooth, deep strokes. Sterling's head was rolling restlessly on the pillow, the muscles in his arms corded, standing out sharply. Holding onto the headboard for this long had to be a strain, but he didn't seem to care, and



Owen didn't even consider telling him to release the bar. He would have liked Sterling's hands on him, but not if it meant giving up this view of taut, straining muscles.

"Move for me," he said, the words harsh, raw, his vision shredding, graying. God, he didn't want this to end, but he had to come, had to find that release... He let go of Sterling's cock and gave Sterling's flank a single, stinging slap, needing to hear the crisp, perfect sound of his hand on Sterling's ass. "Come for me."

Sterling managed a few awkward rolls of his hips before he let out a sound that was very nearly a scream and came, body arching under Owen's as fluid striped his chest and belly. It seemed the most intense release Owen had ever witnessed, although to be fair it was only a moment later that his own orgasm crashed over him—he jerked his cock into Sterling half a dozen times as the pleasure rushed through him. It left him shaking, collapsed down on top of Sterling with his breath panting hot against Sterling's chest.

He hadn't told Sterling he could let go of the headboard, but he felt a hand on his hair, stroking it. Sterling didn't say anything, but his touch was so new and familiar at the same time that Owen found himself closing his eyes.

It was a moment that he wished could have lasted longer, but the need to ease out of Sterling led to an equally pressing need to clean them both up. Lube was useful, but it got everywhere. Owen gave Sterling a kiss that was hard to break, so difficult in fact that it turned into a series of kisses, and then reached for the box of tissues on the bedside table.

"The romantic part," he said wryly, tossing a handful of tissues at Sterling, who was sprawled on his back, every muscle lax, his cock soft and damp against his thigh. Owen looked his fill, locking the memory away. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Sterling pushed himself up onto his elbows and winced, then mopped at his chest and stomach. "A little sore, but good." He smiled, a relaxed, happy smile; seeing it made Owen's heart do something funny in his chest. "What time is it?"

"Too early," Owen said. The sun wasn't even thinking about rising yet, and even when it did, the day was forecast to be cold and windy. Christmas Day, he remembered. "I don't think I've been up this early on Christmas morning since I was about ten." Belatedly it occurred to him that Sterling probably didn't want to think about past Christmases right now, estranged from his family as he was, but Sterling didn't seem to react at all, just rolled over to toss his handful of tissues into the small trash barrel next to the bed.

"Well, we'll just have to go back to sleep for a few hours," Sterling said. He tugged at Owen's arm until Owen lay down beside him again, then burrowed in close. "Merry Christmas," he said, and Owen kissed Sterling's hair and whispered, "Merry Christmas," back to him.

## Chapter Thirteen

“Oh, shit, we’re late!” from Owen woke Sterling from a heavy drowse. He’d been half-awake for hours, dropping in and out of sleep, so comfortable with Owen’s arm around him that the thought of waking fully hadn’t been even slightly appealing.

Now, though, Owen was jumping out of bed and pulling back the covers, leaving Sterling’s bare body uncovered and reacting to the sudden chill with many protests.

“Come on, you—get up. I was supposed to be at Jake and Gary’s house an hour ago. I have to call them and let them know I’m running late and that I’m bringing a surprise guest along with me.” Owen gave Sterling a fond look, then slapped his ass. “Up! Get into the shower and I’ll join you in a minute.”

Without complaining out loud, Sterling dragged himself into the shower and let the hot water run over his shoulders and back and (sore) ass, then shampooed his hair. He was loitering, waiting for Owen to come in so he could run hands over him and hopefully persuade him to be another hour late—not that he’d be able to tolerate penetration again so soon; he was pretty sore, but he’d gladly settle for a couple of blowjobs.

But when Owen came into the bathroom, all Sterling got was another gentle slap on the ass and an, “Out with you! Go get dressed, then go down and take the cheesecake out of the fridge, please.”

Getting dressed wasn’t as difficult as it would have been, since Sterling had started to keep some spare clothes at Owen’s house just in case—his suitcase was still out in his car, and the thought of going out into the cold with wet hair was seriously unappealing. The dark blue cotton slacks and gray sweater would do, he thought, looking at himself in the mirror over Owen’s chest of drawers, then heading quickly for the stairs when he heard the shower being turned off in the bathroom.

The chocolate cheesecake looked delicious when Sterling eased the lid of its container up and took a peek. It was topped with raspberries nestled in a thick layer of chocolate shavings—dark, milk, and white—and there was definitely an alcoholic ingredient in there somewhere.

Not really what he wanted for breakfast, though. Owen, bless him, had started off a pot of coffee, so Sterling snagged a cup and let it put him back together, his thoughts a tangle that he didn’t really want to unravel.

He wasn't thinking about what he'd normally be doing at this time of the day; he knew. They'd be on their way back from visiting three sets of relatives in town, Justine beyond hyper and on her fourth candy cane, the small stocking stuffed with gifts that she'd been given at breakfast already a fading memory. The big presents got handed out later, beside the tree, with his parents sipping drinks and even his father looking halfway human.

He missed Justine and his mom. He loved Owen, but it felt weird to be here with him instead of at home on a day like this.

"There are some muffins in the cabinet there," Owen said, coming into the room and interrupting Sterling's thoughts. "Grab a couple and we can eat them in the car. The cheesecake's for dessert tonight—it's a tradition. Not cheesecake specifically, but me bringing dessert. And wine, but that's in the car. It's white, so I didn't think leaving it out overnight would hurt it at all—I would have chilled it anyway."

It was a relief to know that Owen didn't expect him to eat cheesecake for breakfast. Sterling finished his coffee hastily and found the muffins, taking the whole box with them just in case.

The car's tires crunched over the small amount of snow on the driveway—the street was clear, the late morning sun having been working on it for several hours at that point. Jake and Gary lived about eight blocks away, but Sterling was so busy watching Owen as he drove that he never would have been able to find his way back.

"What?" Owen said, glancing at him.

"I don't know," Sterling said honestly. "I was just thinking...you look different today."

Owen spared a moment to glance down at himself. He was wearing black pants and a forest green shirt in a fabric mimicking suede that made Sterling want to pet him because it felt so touchable. His long overcoat was black too, hanging open, and a heavy silk scarf patterned in green and silver was around his neck. "You don't like what I'm wearing?" he asked, sounding surprised but not particularly offended. "Too much? Jake and Gary are theater people; they tease the hell out of me if I show up looking like a teacher. One whiff of a tweed jacket with leather elbow patches and they swear they'll tear my name out of their little black book."

"It's not that," Sterling said. "Wait, there are people who actually have little black books? I thought those went out of fashion, like, a hundred years ago."

Looking like he was stifling a grin, Owen rolled his eyes. "Yes, thanks—that's exactly what this relationship needs, yet another reminder of the age discrepancy."

Sterling laughed. "Uh-huh, and you definitely don't sound like an English professor. Just see if you can keep from quoting Shakespeare."

"Well, if I start looking like I might, distract me," Owen said as he pulled the car into the driveway beside a small but immaculately kept house with modern lines and shut it off.

"How should I do that?" This was fun, Sterling thought. Really different from how most of their time together had gone, but definitely not in a bad way.

Owen gave him a sidelong glance coupled with a wicked curl of his lips. "Getting naked is a classic. And don't think I haven't noticed that 'different' still lacks a definition. If I was in full on teacher mode, I might be about to bring out my cane, so get ready to placate me, and no, an apple won't come close."

"What about cheesecake?" Sterling reached into the backseat and tried to snag the box, but it was too heavy and the paper box too flimsy for it to survive being picked up that way. He got out of the car and opened the rear door, leaning in and sliding a hand underneath the box to support it like that. "Are you *sure* it's okay with them that I'm coming?"

"For the tenth time, yes," Owen said, shutting his own door, two bottles of wine tucked under his arm. "If it hadn't been, I'd have stayed at the house with you, but this will be more fun."

As if on cue, the front door opened. A tall man with white blond hair stood in the open doorway. "Well, look who finally decided to turn up!"

Sterling followed a smiling Owen up to the doorway, a polite smile fixed on his face, but feeling horribly awkward. Any other day and it wouldn't have mattered so much, but this was Christmas and a formal dinner, and he knew from watching his mother prepare that an extra guest at the last minute was about as welcome as an infestation of roaches.

"Gary, if you want me to grovel, I will, but we both know that I've only missed the first round of cocktails, because I'd have to be six feet under to be late for one of your meals."

Owen managed to give Gary a warm hug without dropping the wine he held, and before Sterling could begin to apologize for being there, he'd been swept inside the house, divested of cheesecake and coat, and Gary was giving him a welcoming smile coupled with a swift look up and down.

"Tell me you act. I could use you—"

"For all manner of things, I'm sure, but you promised to behave." Jake swept into the hallway and struck a pose theatrical enough to make Sterling blink and then, when Jake winked at him, grin. Jake, like Gary, was maybe in his midforties, short and dapper, his dark hair silvered at the temples, his bright blue eyes sparkling. "Owen, my sweet, I know you told us this young man's name, but introduce us properly so that he knows we're civilized and don't bite. Well, not our guests, anyway."

"That's more Owen's thing anyway, I think," Gary said, grinning and batting his eyelashes.

"This is Sterling." Owen put a hand on Sterling's shoulder. "And this blond devil is Gary, who I assure you isn't anywhere near as clean-cut as he pretends to be. And this is Jake, who runs the show."

"In every sense of the word," Gary said. "And speaking of the show..."

"I actually have done some acting," Sterling told him, since he could tell the conversation was headed back in that direction anyway. "Mostly small parts, because I got into it late." There was this whole hierarchy thing that had gone on in high school drama. Of course, college theater could be a totally different animal—he hadn't had much free time in which to find out, or maybe that was just an excuse.

"Well, let me tell you about our little group." Gary put an arm around his shoulders and started to guide him toward the kitchen, which smelled fantastic. "Owen, you don't mind if I borrow him for just a bit, do you?"

Sterling glanced back over his shoulder, not worried that the answer would be yes, since this wasn't the club and Owen wasn't giving off a single possessive vibe, but needing the reassurance of a last look because who knew how long it would be before he got to be alone with Owen again.

"I'll bear up under the loss if Jake gives me something else to nibble on." Owen patted his stomach and gave Jake a plaintive look. "We pretty much skipped breakfast."

Gary brought Sterling to a halt. "Seriously? No breakfast?"

"Coffee and a muffin," Sterling offered. "We, uh, we were up late, and we sort of overslept."

Gary chuckled and started walking again, taking Sterling with him. "Mmm-hmm. Occupational hazard with Owen, I bet."

That made no sense, and Sterling was left wondering just how many cocktails Gary had had, though his eyes, a startling green that might have been natural but was probably contacts, were clear enough.

The kitchen was spotless and chaotic all at once, every counter strewn with pots and spoons and chopping boards, every burner on the stove in use. The kitchen's color scheme was deep blue, butter yellow, and black, the long, curved granite counters like slices of sky. It managed to be both striking and homey, and the familiar smell of cooking did as much as his hosts' instant acceptance to make Sterling relax even before a lethal-looking drink was put into his hand.

"Um, no," Owen said, appearing at Sterling's elbow and taking the glass back out of his hand.

"It's Christmas!" Sterling protested. "And you gave me a drink last night."

"That doesn't change anything; those were entirely different circumstances, and I said no." Owen gave him the stern look that meant there was no point in arguing, and Sterling let it go. It wasn't like he needed a drink—he was going to relax, have a nice day, and try not to think about where he should have been today, and it would be fine.

Jake was watching Owen with a knowing expression. "Just how old is this boy, Owen?"

Sterling's first instinct was to answer, but Owen was the one who'd been asked and probably wouldn't appreciate Sterling butting in even if the conversation *was* about him.

"Almost twenty-one," Owen said. "And I know what you're thinking—yes, I'm considerably too old for him. But he's very stubborn and refuses to accept it."

"Darn right I do," Sterling said and slipped an arm around Owen's waist. Owen put an arm around him too and kissed his temple, and Sterling wasn't sure that anything else really mattered.

"Owen calling someone else stubborn?" Gary shook his head and gave Sterling an impish grin. "You must be the original immovable object."

"I'm not really... Well, maybe a little bit." Sterling shrugged. "I just have a hard time when people say no if it's something I want."

Jake had an intrigued look on his face as he walked over to the fridge. "So doesn't that make things difficult?" He opened the fridge and took out two cans of soda, Coke and ginger ale, holding them up with an inquiring lift of his eyebrows.

"Coke, please," Sterling said, accepting it from him. Owen's arm tightened in a hug, and then he walked away to scoop up a handful of nuts from a bowl on the counter, popping them into his mouth one by one, the drink he'd taken from Sterling discreetly abandoned behind a tall pepper grinder. Sterling opened the Coke and took a grateful sip, needing the caffeine. "If you mean, do we argue about stuff, no, not much."

Owen rolled his eyes but didn't comment. Jake screwed up his face. "Are you *allowed* to argue with him?"

Sterling felt a blush crawl up over his face. With someone like Alex, he didn't mind discussing what he did with Owen. Alex was part of that world; he understood, but this was different. He took an unwisely large gulp of his drink, swallowed the wrong way, and choked on the mouthful of fizz.

"Did I put my foot in it?" Jake asked with an anxious look at Owen. "Isn't he one of your, uh, sandwiches?"

"You don't need to use code words around him," Owen said with more calm than Sterling would have expected. "And that one's totally ridiculous, by the way."

"I told him that," Gary put in, "but he has delusions of being funny. Or 007."

"Bond," Jake said, deadpan. "Jake Bond."

"Delusion being the key word," Gary said, grinning.

It had taken Sterling that long to translate “sandwich” into “sub.” “Yes,” he said finally. “I’m his, um, sandwich. But I’m still allowed to argue. Sometimes.” He looked at Owen for confirmation.

“It depends on the circumstances,” Owen agreed. “Today, he’s just my boyfriend.”

“Except for the part where you get to decide if he drinks or not.” Gary pointed this out hesitantly, like he wasn’t sure how deep into this he wanted to get. Sterling couldn’t blame him.

“The law says he can’t drink. Last night was an exception for medicinal purposes.” Owen rubbed his hands together. “Now, what can we help with?”

This was clearly an attempt to change the subject, but it turned out to be an attempt that Jake and Gary both ignored. “So if you’re the boyfriend, this is serious,” Jake said.

“Um,” Sterling said and looked at Owen.

“Come on, sweetheart—you can answer for yourself,” Gary told him. “If you can’t say what you’re thinking on Christmas Day, when *can* you?”

“Thanks,” Sterling said, realizing he hadn’t told them that yet. “For letting me tag along. I really appreciate it.”

Gary waved a dismissive hand. “You’d have been invited anyway if we’d known you existed, and besides”—the look Sterling got was a kind one, making him wonder just how much Owen had told them—“you’re not the only one here with parents inclined to take certain news badly. We’re happy to meet you—and an extra pair of hands to help clean up later is *always* welcome.”

Looking at the clutter of dishes, Sterling could see why. The rest of the house, from the little he’d seen, was immaculate, but the kitchen was a mess. The tantalizing smells wafting around it made up for the tidying up to come, though.

“Now, are you going to answer the question?” Jake said archly.

“You mean is it serious?” Sterling asked. “Um. I think that depends on who you ask. It is on my end.” He was a little afraid to look at Owen, not sure he’d like the expression he’d see.

“But he did refer to you as ‘the boyfriend,’ even if it’s an on-again off-again sort of thing.” Gary was taking some vegetables that were probably for salad out of the refrigerator. “He wouldn’t use that word unless there was something serious going on.”

“You could let me answer for myself,” Owen said mildly. “Here, let me take those. Do you want them cut up?”

“Cut’ is for Philistines,” Jake said. “We want them julienned.”

Grinning at Owen, Sterling said, “I can do that,” and Gary passed him a cutting board made of stripes of pale and dark wood.

“So what is your answer, Owen?” Gary raised an eyebrow and slid a knife across the countertop toward Sterling.

"You know, I think you forgot the olives," Owen said. "You promised me olives two weeks ago."

Gary sighed and went to the refrigerator again. "I didn't forget."

"Wonderful," Owen said blandly, accepting a small plastic container from Gary. "And to lay this subject to rest once and for all, since I'm sure there are much more exciting topics to discuss, Sterling and I are together, as you can see, and I'm very happy about it. Please tell me you have radicchio?"

Sterling gripped the knife he held tightly, processing the careful, noncommittal words. Owen was a private kind of man; maybe he didn't want to share his feelings with his friends, no matter how close they were, but would it have killed him to just laugh and say something reassuring?

He kind of lost track of the conversation then, focusing instead on slicing carrots and bell peppers into perfect matchsticks because it was better than thinking about what Owen did or didn't feel. As he was finishing, he discovered that everyone had stopped talking and gone quiet, which was disconcerting. "Sorry—did I miss something?"

"We asked if you were okay," Gary said. "Owen, maybe you should let him have a drink. Just a little one?"

"No, I'm fine," Sterling said. "I was just, you know, thinking." Which was exactly what he *hadn't* been doing, but it wasn't like anyone was going to catch him in the lie.

"It can be hard," Jake said quietly. "Family stuff. Do you want to talk about it?"

Sterling shook his head, then shrugged. "I don't know. It's—like, what is there to say? My father's an asshole, and I'm happy to be here and not there. I just wish my mom and sister could get away from him too. But he's okay to them."

Gary came closer, took Sterling's chin gently in his hand, and turned his face toward the light. "He's not okay to you, though. You can press charges, you know. We have a friend who's a lawyer—do you want me to give her a call tomorrow, get a little advice?" His voice was warm with sympathy.

It was too intimate—Sterling couldn't do anything but shake his head again, just slightly.

"If you change your mind—"

Owen hadn't moved from the counter where he was preparing the salad, but his voice cut through the quiet air, laced with the authority that never failed to make Sterling's heart beat just a little faster. "Gary." Gary moved his hand away from Sterling's face and turned to Owen, who smiled at him. "What Sterling needs is some food. The poor boy's starving."

"Well, of course, he is," Jake said a shade too heartily. "We're not eating for a while yet, but I've got some divine smoked salmon to nibble on and a loaf of that rye bread from Frank's Bakery..."



Jake started to whisk plates out of a cupboard and assemble a snack that Sterling wasn't sure he was going to be able to eat. His stomach was empty, yes, but it was also churning—too much emotion, too much—

Owen walked over to him, and Sterling's world began to settle when Owen's hand slid around the back of his neck, a familiar weight. The kiss that followed, Owen shielding him from view—not that Jake and Gary were looking—helped even more.

"You're going to be okay," Owen said softly. "I'm right here." He patted Sterling's cheek. "Now come and eat something."

\* \* \* \* \*

"That was so great," Sterling said dreamily eight hours later on the front porch of Owen's house, waiting as Owen unlocked the door.

The day had passed in a haze of amazing food and detailed conversation that had at times been so shockingly honest that it had left Sterling dry mouthed. He'd shared things he'd never said out loud before, with Owen's hand on the back of his neck lending him strength. Now he felt blissful; when Owen said, "Get undressed and kneel by my chair, please," a ball of warmth started in his stomach—anticipation—and he was quick to obey.

"This isn't what I thought I'd have waiting for me when I got home tonight," Owen said, his hand playing with Sterling's hair, smoothing it, tugging it. He'd brushed it once after a walk, when the wind had left it tangled, with Sterling kneeling between his legs, his eyes closed, suffused with the same sense of well-being he got after a spanking. "If I had a Christmas wish list, a beautiful sub for me to spank before bed would have been right at the top of it." He tipped Sterling's face up, two fingers under his chin. "No—not just any sub. You. My boy. My Sterling."

A sound of gratitude escaped Sterling, pushing its way past his lips and coming out as a moan. He stared into Owen's eyes and lovingly traced every millimeter of Owen's face—the strong nose, the slight indent above his upper lip, the lush curve of the lower. There were so many things he wanted to say: *thank you, please spank me*. And the most important one, the one he knew Owen wasn't ready to hear, a fact that didn't make it any less true.

He thought that if he loved Owen, and if he told Owen that, it would be the final nail in the coffin, the last thing about him that hadn't been boring. And once he was boring, Owen wouldn't want him anymore.

So instead, Sterling closed his eyes and licked his lips and waited for Owen to tell him what to do next.

"We didn't get each other gifts," Owen said. Sterling had wanted to, nothing fancy, just *something*, but Owen had told him not to and made it a direct order when Sterling had tried to argue. "You can consider this spanking a gift to me, if you want to. I'm going to enjoy it very much." He traced the shape of Sterling's mouth with his finger, the slow drag sending an ache of longing through Sterling. "And so are you," Owen added with a faint smile. "I'm

going to do this upstairs. You have five minutes to brush your teeth, and then I want to find you kneeling by my bed.”

Five minutes was plenty of time, but Sterling hurried anyway—he was still swallowing traces of mint when his knees touched down on the plush rug at Owen's bedside. The air felt chilly against his bare skin, but his cock didn't seem to care at all, standing at attention as he yearned for the sting of Owen's palm on his ass. Well, he assumed it was going to be Owen's hand that hit him and not something else. Owen had used a hairbrush on him once, on a day when he'd been unusually uncooperative, and it had been a good thing the following day was Sunday because there'd been no way he'd have been able to sit in one of the unforgiving classroom chairs. Traces of purpled bruises had lingered on his ass for more than a week.

Owen was taking his time downstairs, probably locking up and turning out the lights. Sterling's suitcase, which he'd finally brought in from the car, was over against the wall, unopened. It was a reminder Sterling didn't particularly want, a reminder that he was a temporary fixture here, not a permanent resident.

He reminded himself that Owen had called him 'his.' That helped, a little.

The sound of Owen walking up the stairs made him swallow convulsively. God, he loved this moment—still waiting, but knowing that it was soon going to be over and he was going to get what he needed. He closed his eyes, striving for the calmness that usually only Owen's hand on him could bring. It wouldn't come; he couldn't do this alone.

He needed Owen.

Owen went into the bathroom, and Sterling kept his eyes closed, unbearably wound up now, as he listened to the muffled sounds of water running at intervals. When Owen finally came into the bedroom and closed the door, he opened his eyes and bit down hard on his lip to stifle a sound that would have come too close to a sob. He heard a drawer slide open and Owen rummage around inside it, searching for something that Sterling knew would be used on him—for him.

“You're so ready for this,” Owen said, approving, admiring—he was, wasn't he? Sterling needed that from Owen as much as the pain and the control. “Even from here I can see that, but you're too tense. I need you relaxed.”

Owen walked over to stand behind Sterling. “I'm going to use both of these on you, and my hand, and I'm going to decide in what order and how many times.” A hairbrush made of black, glossy wood, and a small, leather-backed paddle, about twice the size of the brush, were placed on the bed in front of Sterling. He stared at them until they swam in front of his eyes. They would hurt, but he wanted to know how the paddle would feel with a curiosity that burned as much as his ass would. There were other things that Owen could use on him; he'd shown Sterling some of them: the flogger, soft, thick strands of leather; the crop, promising a wicked sizzle of pain that had gotten Sterling so hard looking at it that his cock had been wet-tipped, leaking, bare seconds

later. Shown him and then put them away with a “later” that had left Sterling with nothing to do but wait, anticipate.

“But it's Christmas,” Owen said, his hand coming to rest on Sterling's shoulder, “and I'm very pleased with you. So you can choose something else for me to use at the end, when you're crying, begging, writhing over my lap, your ass so red, so hot. I'll decide how much more you can take, but you can choose what delivers those final strokes, and you can come when I've given them to you.” The crop and the flogger joined the brush and the paddle on the bed.

Knowing that he'd be allowed to come at the end of this was the frosting on the Christmas cake as far as Sterling was concerned, not that he wouldn't have loved it even if Owen had left him high and dry. He nodded and said the words he knew Owen liked to hear. “Yes, Owen.”

“I think the chair will be more comfortable for this,” Owen said thoughtfully. “Bring it here, please.”

Sterling stood up and went to get the old-fashioned wooden chair, its seat padded with a floral design, from where it sat against the wall near the closet. Sometimes Owen sat in it when he was putting on his shoes in the morning, and sometimes he liked to sit in it when Sterling was draped across his lap, ass ready and willing.

“Yes, right there.” Owen sat down and gestured at his thighs, and Sterling bent immediately into position, finding the most comfortable spot he could. None of them were *really* comfortable, but he'd learned the experience would be better if it didn't include the aching wrists and ankles that came along with supporting too much of his weight.

It was agony to be perched there, waiting for the first blow to fall. The chair was next to the bed, so Owen could reach the toys he'd brought out; there was no way for Sterling to know which of them would be used first unless Owen told him in advance.

It was Owen's hand first, the equivalent, Sterling supposed, of stretching before running laps, not that Owen couldn't get him just where he wanted to go using nothing more than that. As Owen had once pointed out dryly, though, it could get painful for his hand, which wasn't the object of the exercise.

The slaps came down, raindrops on thirsty earth, his skin welcoming each one. If he lived with Owen he'd get spanked every day, maybe—and *that* would've been at the top of his wish list, even if he knew there was no way it could happen. Not that students didn't rent rooms in people's houses, and Owen definitely had enough space; the basement was finished, with a small bathroom roughed in, waiting for the fittings. Owen had told him that his parents had planned to divide the space into a living room and bedroom for their frequent visitors, some of whom stayed for weeks at a time.

Middle of his ass, top of his thighs; harder now, his skin sensitized so that each blow hurt more, and he was making noise, guttural sounds, letting the pain wash through him and carry away all the negative shit that the last few days had given him.

There was a pause then, Owen rubbing his palm gently over Sterling's sore ass and his lower back. "Good," Owen said. "That's my good boy. Now I'm going to move on, and I'd like you to count fifteen blows, please."

He was always so polite, Sterling thought as he waited for the next tool. Would it be the hairbrush, hard-edged and unyielding? Or the paddle? Did he have a preference, or would it be the same in the end?

It was clear the first blow was going to be a lot harder than the ones delivered by Owen's hand—Sterling could tell by the way Owen drew back his arm. The slap against his already-sore behind hit with a *whoosh*, knocking pain in and the air right out of him in a rush. The paddle, he thought dimly, reeling. There were black spots dancing in front of his eyes, and he realized that he'd been holding his breath until the paddle had hit him; he inhaled sharply, oxygen filling his lungs, and his vision settled back to normal.

Owen had been waiting for him to recover, sensing that something was wrong. Now, he went on, delivering another four blows in steady succession. It was weird—the paddle didn't actually hurt as much as Owen's hand did, but it knocked him for a loop every time. It was so intense, the area it covered when it made contact so much *more* than a palm and five fingers.

It made more noise too, and that was part of it. So much so that Sterling wondered what it would be like to do this if he couldn't hear; he'd been spanked blindfolded, and he usually ended up closing his eyes to shut out everything but the impact of Owen's hand anyway, but if he couldn't hear, would that make it more intense, or less?

Something to talk to Owen about... Owen loved it when he wanted to discuss what they did; Sterling could see him taking it all in, and if he said that he wanted to try something, it usually showed up in a session eventually. He never lost sight of how much of what they did was tailored around his needs; it made his debt to Owen that much greater.

Blindfolded, earplugs—God, would Owen gag him too, rob him of that outlet as he'd done before, leaving Sterling with his sense of touch and not much else?

The next blow of the paddle tore a yelp out of him because it *really* bit deep. "Focus," Owen said, just a hint of sternness in the word. Losing himself in the spanking was allowed; letting his thoughts get busy wasn't, and Owen always knew the difference—God knew how, but he did.

Sterling couldn't form an apology; he was well past words, but he choked out a contrite moan and arched up his ass to meet the next hard, punishing slap, which made Owen chuckle and murmur "so eager" like that was news when it wasn't.

Two more, and then Owen stopped to ask, "How many is that?"

Sterling had perfected the art of keeping track with only part of his mind. "Fourteen." The fifteenth was the hardest yet, hard enough to make him cry out, and he was relieved to know that this part of it was over. Still two phases

to go, with the hairbrush next, and he could imagine how that was going to feel.

His dick could imagine it too, and it liked the idea just fine.

He craved the sharp sting of the hairbrush so much that he wriggled, just a little bit, in Owen's lap in anticipation of the pain. The movement gave his cock some relief in the form of shifted pressure, and he groaned deep in his chest.

"I said you could come when this was over," Owen reminded him. He rubbed the smooth coolness of the back of the hairbrush over Sterling's ass and then flipped the brush over. The bristles scored the tender skin as it was dragged across it ruthlessly, and Sterling squirmed wildly and voiced a protesting moan. "Not before," Owen finished. "Lie still for me, please."

That was difficult; Sterling wanted to move, fighting the pain even as he welcomed it, but he tried. The first smack from the brush defeated his good intentions. Tears of pain slipped out of his eyes, and his hands curled into tight fists.

"It's such a concentrated pain, isn't it," Owen mused as his hand rose and fell. "Inflexible too; no give in it like there is in my hand or a nice, springy paddle. Not as concentrated as a cane, of course, but I don't think you're quite ready for that."

Owen didn't usually talk this much, but Sterling found that listening to him helped, even if Owen's voice was getting lost in the roar of blood in his ears. He wanted to reach that place where it stopped hurting and each blow was like a small, perfect climax, pleasure shaking him, rocking his world. So close.

"Fifteen," Owen said, matching the silent count in Sterling's head. His hand passed over Sterling's ass, a whisper of coolness. "I think...yes, I think that you can take another six. What would you like me to use, Sterling?" His hand kept touching Sterling's ass as he waited for Sterling to catch his breath enough to reply, petting it, playing with it—delicate pinches, pats that were almost hard enough to count as a slap, sometimes the slow drag of a finger down the crease of Sterling's ass, close to flesh that still ached, a sweet, deep ache reminding Sterling of how good it'd felt to be filled, fucked, taken.

Sterling wanted something that would leave a mark, a mark that he could press his fingers to over the next few days, one that would remind him that he belonged to Owen. "The crop," he said hoarsely. "Please."

Owen's hand went very still. "Ah. Maybe that's not a good idea—"

"Please." Sterling turned his head and tried to see Owen's face, but he couldn't, not without moving from where Owen had put him, and he wasn't allowed to do that. "Please, Owen. I want it. Let me get on my knees. Let me tell you how much I want it from you."

"It'll hurt," Owen said, and there was something in his voice that told Sterling how much it would hurt and how much Owen wanted to do it. It was

hard to wrap his head around at the beginning of their relationship; the way that for all Owen made him feel safe and protected, Owen got off on hurting him, leaving him bruised, marked, crying. With anyone else, that would have freaked Sterling out, but he didn't just love Owen, he trusted him. Totally. No limits.

It was what allowed him to ask for more than he could take, made reckless by arousal, knowing that Owen was more aware of his limits than he was. Spanking him scarlet and hot turned Owen on, but controlling Sterling, reining him in, curbing his impulses, did even more for him, and Sterling knew that.

This, though, this he wanted. The crop. Six strokes. Could he take six cuts on an ass that was already singing, screaming with pain? Maybe not. But he could beg for them, knowing that Owen would only administer enough to bring him to a blissful, messy, ecstatic climax.

"Please," he said, putting everything he was feeling into the word. "Owen, I can take it. I *want* it. I need it." He shuddered, a full body shudder that went from his head all the way down to his toes and made his cock quiver.

For a moment, Owen was silent, and Sterling was sure a refusal was coming. But then Owen said, "Six strokes. Remember your safe words, and use them if it's too much. Promise me."

"I promise," Sterling gasped. Right then, he wanted the intensity, the newness of it, more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life—he'd have promised anything, no matter how rashly, so he didn't even need to think about it. It wasn't like he intended to use either safe word, *ever*.

He could feel Owen reaching to the bed, and his whole body tensed up with the knowledge of what was coming.

Except for the part where he had no fucking idea.

"One," Owen said—it was the first time he'd counted aloud, which Sterling took as a warning—and brought the crop down across Sterling's ass.

To say that he screamed wouldn't have been an exaggeration. It hurt more than he'd imagined, the thin fiberglass cutting deep and setting the world aflame. His scream died out when he ran out of air, and he inhaled so fast his lungs and stomach ached with it.

He heard Owen breathe in sharply and felt him react to the stroke of the crop, his muscles locking tight, as if it'd been Owen's ass set alight, Owen's body split apart, sliced open. There wouldn't be any blood. He'd told Owen that, hadn't he, once, a long time ago? No blood. He didn't want to bleed—oh, God, was he bleeding, could he hurt this much and not be bleeding?

The pain possessed him, took him over. Too much of it for him to handle, for the very first time. He needed it to get to where he wanted to go, but this was pushing him past that point to somewhere new and he wasn't sure—

"Two," Owen said without a trace of indecision in his voice.

The crop sliced through the air and came down hard, and Sterling screamed again. He didn't try to hold back, because that would take too much effort and he knew it wouldn't be successful no matter how hard he tried. As the pain flew through him, he let it take him, let it shove him down into his body, walling out everything else until he was the only thing that existed, him in his body and nothing else.

He was safe there.

Three and four didn't make him scream because he was past screaming, although his face was hot and wet with tears and his hips were working, pushing his cock against nothing but the air that just might be enough to make him come. So close, he was so close...

For just a second, the sound of Owen's voice saying, "Five," thrust him out of it, took him back into the real world that he'd been trying so hard to hide from, and when the blow struck it wasn't transcending or beautiful and it didn't make him come, it just *hurt* like fuck, and Sterling cried out.

"No," he choked. "No, Owen—inf-field."

Owen stopped, and one hand stroked Sterling's hair, lifting it away from his sweaty face. "Good boy. I'm proud of you."

Proud? Why would Owen be—

"Knowing your limits is very important," Owen went on. "There's no shame in needing a break, and none in my decision that this is enough for one night."

Startled even at the same time he was incredibly relieved, Sterling lifted his head, trying to see Owen's expression. "No, it's—"

"It's not your call," Owen said. "It's mine. Onto your knees, please."

His ass burning, Sterling obeyed, sliding down off Owen's lap and onto the floor, where Owen joined him a few seconds later.

It felt weird to have Owen on the floor with him. He put an arm around Sterling's shoulders and reached back to snag something from the bed. Sterling tensed, even though he knew that Owen wouldn't be reaching for anything like the paddle.

A pillow. Soft and white, the cover cool against Sterling's ass as Owen tucked it between his ass and his heels.

"If you really want that final stroke," Owen said, his arm supporting Sterling, "you can take it this way, from my hand."

Before Sterling could form a thought, let alone words, Owen's hand closed around his erection, wilted by what he'd endured, half-hard, no more, and began to move, gently, firmly coaxing him back to the place where everything—kneeling, hurting, Owen—fit perfectly, snugly together.

He said Owen's name, loving the way it shaped his mouth, the sound of it in the air. Said it again and got Owen's lips on his, a kiss that felt as good as Owen's hand.

“Keep your hands where they are,” Owen murmured, and for some reason that casual command sent Sterling over. Sterling cried out, Owen's arm cradling him as his hand tightened, sped up, and then there was nothing but a spark-filled darkness, and his body, for a space of time, belonged not to him but his climax, and to Owen, always Owen.



## Chapter Fourteen

The day after Christmas, Owen woke to the muffled half sound of heavy snow falling. Several inches were already piled up on the outside of the windowsill, which meant there was far more on the ground. At least he didn't have much planned for the day, he thought as he turned over and put an arm around Sterling.

"Mmm. What?" Sterling muttered.

"Nothing," Owen said quietly. "Go back to sleep. The blizzard will still be there later."

"Blizzard?" Sterling yawned and blinked. "Seriously?"

"I don't know, maybe. A lot of snow, anyway."

Sterling sat up, then winced and rolled onto his side instead. "We should bake cookies. And make a snowman."

"Allow me to introduce you to one of the joys of home ownership in the town," Owen said dryly. "Namely, snow shoveling."

"Doesn't the city do that?" Sterling asked with another yawn as punctuation.

Owen rolled his eyes. "They do the roads. The driveway and sidewalk will need to be cleared by us. I usually take care of the digging for Sarah, the lady next door, too. She's in her late seventies, and it's just too much for her." He relented and gave Sterling a kiss on his sleep-softened mouth. "And I have cookies. Lots of them. Sarah's not too old to bake, and she brought me a basket of fancy ones on Christmas Eve. She's part of a cookie exchange with some of her book club friends, and six dozen assorted cookies is too much for one old lady, or at least that's what she tells me. If you're very good, I might let you have one or two of them, but touch the chocolate ginger ones and prepare to face my wrath."

"Oh, I'm scared." Sterling smirked and winced again. "Ow. Okay, maybe I really *am* scared." He was smiling, though.

"Go take a long, hot shower," Owen said. "You'll feel better. Then we'll have breakfast before we brave the wide outdoors."

"We could buy a snowblower instead," Sterling suggested as he got up.

"One, they're most likely sold out; two, shoveling is good exercise; and three, we'd still have to shovel to get the car out to go and buy the blower, and once we'd done that, we wouldn't need it."

"I suppose you think you're smart," Sterling said and stuck his tongue out, which made him look much, much younger.

"Think? No. Know? Yes." Owen got out of bed, pulled on his robe, then beckoned to Sterling. "Come here."

Sterling walked back to him, moving cautiously. The day after always hurt the most, or so Michael had told Owen more than once. Owen turned him and examined Sterling's ass. The marks that the crop had left, thin, starkly purple lines of bruising, were surrounded by fainter bruising on skin that felt rough and warm against Owen's palm. "I'll put some arnica on after your shower, and you're to let me know if you're in pain."

Sterling shrugged without replying, and Owen tapped him on the hip, a chiding slap. "I mean it; if you push yourself too far, I won't be happy. You showed me last night that you can speak up, but I could tell that you didn't like doing it. It's not a failure, ever, to ask me to stop; you get that, right?"

The look Sterling gave him was an uncertain one, but the boy was smart enough to give the right answer even if he wasn't wise enough to believe it. "Yes."

Owen sighed. "No, you don't. Sit down."

Cautiously, Sterling sat.

"Now listen to me. Knowing your limits is one of the most important things, and the fact that you recognized yours and let me know you needed to stop shows me that you might actually be mature enough to handle this relationship." Owen put a hand on Sterling's thigh just above his knee. "That's a good thing, Sterling."

"I know." Sterling nodded. "I do! I believe you."

"But?"

Sterling slipped his own hand underneath Owen's, turning it so their fingers could interlace. "But that doesn't make it any easier. It *feels* like failing, and that's not a feeling I like."

"Nobody does," Owen said bluntly, "but I've never—ever—had a long-term sub who didn't use a yellow-light word at least once, and to be honest, if you hadn't used yours soon, I'd have pushed you until you did. You *need* those words; they're not just window dressing. I can see what you're going through, and read the signs, but when all's said and done, it's quite literally your ass on the line."

Sterling shifted position on the bed as if the reminder of what his ass felt like had made it hurt more, and Owen squeezed his hand in an automatic gesture of reassurance.

"There's more to it than the physical aspect too; something that you can handle easily one day can become overwhelming another time because of the mood you're in. I'm not even talking about pain here; if you were depressed and feeling isolated, and I gave you an hour in the corner for mouthing off to me, that might push you to the point where you couldn't handle being ignored a

second longer.” Owen wished he could believe that any of what he was saying was sinking in. “Using them to get out of something boring isn't allowed—and yes, I'd know if you were, and you would *not* enjoy what happened next—but using them in need is in no way a failure. Ask around; talk to your friend Alex. You'll find that I'm right. To keep what we're doing safe, we both have to be responsible, not just me. This is for pleasure, yes, a game, if you like—but it has rules and safeguards, and they're there for a reason.”

He sighed and ran his free hand through his tousled hair. “Okay, you know what, it's just too damned early for a lecture. I need coffee. Go grab your shower and I'll start a pot.”

While Sterling was in the shower, Owen made his coffee and sat at the small kitchen table drinking a cup. He could hear the water running upstairs, so he'd know when Sterling was done and he could take a turn himself.

His plan for the day was to keep Sterling busy and relaxed. After an intense scene like the one the night before, what Sterling needed most was some time for reflection, not to mention time to come down off the high that those levels of endorphins produced.

They'd need a decent breakfast, not just cookies (tempting though that thought was). He'd gone shopping a couple of days before and stocked up in preparation for his time off, so there was plenty of food in the house—they could have soup and grilled cheese sandwiches for lunch and maybe order pizza for dinner if the storm had settled down by then. A glance out of the window showed Owen that the snow was really accumulating, the world veiled with its icy white curtain as it fell.

The shower shut off, and from upstairs Sterling called, “I'm done!”

Owen drained his cup and went upstairs, contemplating the thought of Sterling damp and flushed from a shower because it was considerably more appealing than thinking about the coming hours of shoveling. He'd take a shower now to freshen up, but he promised himself a long soak in the tub later. He'd need it.

Spreading arnica over Sterling's ass made an interesting coda to the spanking. Stoic during the spanking, Sterling lay on the bed and squirmed, whined, and whimpered throughout the application of the cream, yelping “ow!” and complaining about being ticklish until Owen's grin became outright laughter.

“You're a baby,” Owen informed him. “Cute as a button, but a complete wimp. It really helps the bruising.”

“That stuff's cold and slimy.” Sterling rolled to his side and pouted, his lower lip thrust out dramatically. Oh, yes. Cute as hell. “And I *like* the bruises.”

“You spent at least five minutes admiring them in the bathroom mirror, didn't you?” Owen said resignedly. It wasn't a guess.

“At least,” Sterling agreed, wholly unrepentant. “I wonder if they'll last until the new semester starts?”

"I doubt it. You seem to heal fairly quickly." Owen screwed the top back onto the arnica cream and stood up. "Now get dressed and we'll have some breakfast."

They ate a leisurely meal of fried eggs and toast, with some cantaloupe on the side that Sterling complained about.

"It's important to eat a balanced diet," Owen told him.

"I just don't like melon," Sterling said, though he ate it. "Not even watermelon. I don't know why—it has a weird texture, I guess."

Owen ate the last of his toast, then said, "It's always one complaint or another with you."

That made Sterling stop and think. "Really?"

"No, not really." It had just been something to say.

"No, I mean, do I complain too much? I know that was one of the reasons I pissed you off when I was in your class. I'll try to stop, if you're serious." Sterling was looking at him earnestly.

"Sterling..." It wasn't often that Owen felt at a loss, but he did then. "I'm not going to say that you didn't annoy me in class, because we both know that you did, and quite deliberately too, but no, I don't think that you complain too much. It was a stupid thing to say; I was just joking, that's all. Ignore me. Seriously. I like you just the way you are." He gestured at what was left of the melon. "Eat it; leave it. Your choice. There're some raspberries left over from the cheesecake in the fridge if you'd prefer them."

"This is fine," Sterling said. "Mine was a stupid thing to say too. It's just melon—it's not like you were asking me to eat lima beans or okra or something really gross." He grinned a little bit, seeming to have recovered his good humor. "For the record, I hate okra."

"Good to know," Owen said. "I'm not a big fan of it myself. And I won't touch cauliflower."

Sterling left the last slice of cantaloupe untouched on his plate and sat back in his chair. "What *do* you like? I mean, what are your favorite foods?"

"Chocolate," Owen said promptly. "And I like spicy foods, if they're not too hot; I like the taste, not the heat. Duck, the way they do it in France, all juicy and rare...anything really fresh from the garden, just picked... God, lots of things." He smiled. "But mostly chocolate."

"I'll remember that," Sterling said, and Owen wondered if something chocolate might make an appearance as a future gift. Sterling stood and picked up his dishes, taking them to the sink to be rinsed and gazing out the window while he was there. "Wow, that snow is really coming down."

Owen followed him to the sink, carrying his own collection of plate, cup, and cutlery. Once his hands were free, he stood behind Sterling, his arms around him in a loose hug, and stared at the whirlwind of flakes. It looked wild out there, the familiar shapes of bushes and paths all but obliterated. "Still want to make a snowman?"

"Maybe, if it stops." It didn't look like there was any chance of that happening anytime soon. Sterling sighed contentedly. "This is nice."

"Watching a blizzard from indoors? Because you won't think so once we're out in it."

"I just meant being here with you," Sterling said.

For the second time that morning, Owen felt blindsided. Sterling was so open about his feelings, his emotions expressed without reserve or embarrassment. It wasn't that Owen didn't share his opinion on the simple comfort of being with someone he liked with nothing to do but enjoy his company while outside the snow blanketed the earth, but he didn't think that he would have said it so freely.

"You're very romantic, aren't you?" he said lightly. "Should I expect a dozen roses on Valentine's Day?"

Sterling turned in his loose embrace, which rubbed his sore behind against the countertop and made him wince briefly. "A dozen dozen, if I could afford it and I didn't think you'd be, I don't know, offended." He searched Owen's eyes. "You know—some guys are anti-flowers. For themselves, I mean. Are you?"

"I don't think I've ever had anyone give me flowers," Owen said. An unaccustomed tenderness made him smile into Sterling's anxious eyes and answer him seriously. "I think I'd like it if you gave me some, but not that many. Two roses. One white, one red." He gave Sterling's ass the lightest of touches, cupping the curve of it without applying any pressure. "I'll leave it up to you to work out the symbolism of the colors."

"Valentine's Day is still a couple of months away, but I think I can remember that long," Sterling said. Deliberately he shifted backward, a small sound of pain escaping him as the pressure on his bruises increased. "And if you think I might forget, you can give me reminders."

Tenderness gave way to lust, pure and simple, an arousal so immediate that Owen couldn't keep it from showing in his expression. Sterling's eyes darkened, his lips parting. One gesture from him, Owen knew, and Sterling would be dropping to his knees, waiting to be told what to do, how he could please Owen, his mouth opening readily to be filled by Owen's fingers, then his cock. Sterling's capacity to give and submit seemed limitless, and the rush that knowledge gave Owen was as heady as the reality would be.

But as much as Owen wanted Sterling's mouth on him, wanted Sterling tied, sobbing, smiling as he was taken slowly, slow enough that Owen would be lightheaded from holding back, dizzy with the need to fuck Sterling hard and deep...this wasn't the time. For the sake of discipline, it wouldn't do to have Sterling get what he wanted just for the asking, no matter how much Owen wanted it too. He'd make Sterling wait.

Just a little bit longer.

He needed *something* now, though, and so did Sterling. Owen leaned his weight on Sterling, his hands on either side of him, and kissed him, his tongue deep in Sterling's mouth, welcomed, accepted, even as Sterling whimpered and wriggled, not to escape the pressure on his ass, but to increase it.

"You're such a slut," Owen whispered into Sterling's ear, using standard phrases he'd said to other men and women, but never with so much conviction, so much yearning. "Such a good boy." He shoved his hand up inside Sterling's T-shirt, casually, without asking, and thumbed a nipple to hardness. "I could clamp these. Make you shovel snow with them swollen, burning, aching so much, but I think I'll save that for later, when I can watch your face, see in your eyes just how much you're loving it."

Sterling moaned softly and turned his head, begging for another kiss, his lips so eager that Owen couldn't possibly have denied him, not when he wanted it too. He stroked Sterling's tongue with his own, one hand at the back of Sterling's neck to steady him.

"I could kneel for you," Sterling murmured, gasping as Owen pinched his nipple again. "Let me, please?"

When Owen didn't answer right away, Sterling apparently took silence as consent, moving half a step sideways to give himself room to kneel on the floor at Owen's feet. Sterling rubbed his cheek against Owen's thigh, then against his hardening cock, breathed hot air through the fabric of Owen's slacks.

"God, I love it when you're like this," Owen said and was shocked by how uneven his voice was, "but you've got to stop—Sterling, we only just had breakfast, dammit."

Sterling glanced up, startled, grinning. "We're not supposed to do this after breakfast? Is that a rule I should remember? Maybe write down somewhere?"

Owen took hold of a handful of Sterling's silky hair and tugged at it playfully. "Don't you dare. We can do this 24/7—but not when we have snow to dig." He nodded at the window. "Look, it's slowing down. Let's get dressed—I've got spare boots if you need them—and make a start."

Maybe the snow would cool his ardor down to the point where he could look at Sterling without wanting him to the point of compromising his principles, but he wasn't holding out much hope of that. Snow was only frozen water, after all, and it couldn't work miracles.

It could, however, exhaust him in his efforts to move it. Forty minutes in, the back of his shirt was clinging to his back with sweat, and he'd abandoned his hat, preferring to let snowflakes fall onto his hair and neck than chance overheating. Sterling, who was working on the heavy barricade of snow and ice that the plow had left at the end of the driveway, had taken off his jacket and draped it over the trunk of his snow-coated car. His cheeks and nose were red with the cold, but he labored on, though Owen noted that he shoveled left-handed exclusively instead of switching the shovel from side to side the way he did himself.

"Whew!" Sterling called to him a minute or so later. "This is almost done—do you want me to move over to the neighbor's? Which one is it?"

"The little white one," Owen said, pointing, and watched as Sterling found the sidewalk and started shoveling in the direction of Sarah's house. Thirsty, Owen retreated back to the house for some water for them both. The warm air inside, which had seemed pleasantly comfortable, now felt like soup, thick and muggy. Owen kicked off his boots and went to turn the thermostat down, leaving a trail of melting snow behind him. He drank at the tap, long, greedy swallows, and then put two bottles of water into his coat before heading back outside.

Sterling had stopped work, not for what Owen imagined was a much-needed rest, but to talk to Sarah. She had braved the slippery paths and was smiling up at Sterling, her white hair hidden under a jaunty knitted cap in purple and green. Owen grinned when he saw that Sterling's shovel had been propped against a snow bank to free his hands for a large cup of something steaming gently in the frigid air.

"Owen!" Sarah called when she saw him. "This kind young man is digging up all my snow and tells me that you told him to do it, so I'm afraid I've given him the cocoa I intended for you. If you give me a moment, I'll be out in a jiffy with some for you."

Owen smothered a smile. Sarah had grown up in England and still peppered her conversation with phrases that he'd learned to translate. "No need," he said, walking up to them. "I just had a long drink of water, and I'm sloshing." He bent to kiss her cheek. "Merry Christmas."

"Happy Christmas to you too. I suppose you're grateful we didn't get all this snow yesterday, or your holiday plans at your friends' house would have been a bit more challenging to get to." Sarah was wearing one mitten that matched her hat and holding the other in her bare hand.

"I would have had this one with me to help," Owen said, gesturing at Sterling.

Sarah smiled, looking puzzled. "That was a surprise."

"It was," Owen agreed. "Sterling's plans changed suddenly, so I was lucky enough to have the pleasure of his company."

With a strained smile and a hasty last swallow of cocoa, Sterling handed the cup back to Sarah and said, "Thank you very much, it was delicious. I should get back to work." He turned, picked up his shovel, and went back to the end of the driveway.

Sarah frowned and leaned in closer. "Did I say something to upset your young friend?"

"He's just keen to finish the job," Owen said diplomatically. "Full of energy."

"Ah, I remember those days," Sarah said. She shook her head. "Now, it's all I can do to keep up with my little hobbies."

As her various clubs occupied her five days out of the seven, Owen wasn't surprised. Sarah had energy to burn, even if she was now too frail for strenuous physical activities. He stayed chatting with her for a few minutes longer until, shivering, she retreated back to her house, crowded with photographs, books, and plants, and ruled over by a despotic cat called, most appropriately, Satan.

Owen watched her until she'd gone inside and then walked over to Sterling, who gave him a sidelong glance and continued to shovel.

"Take a break," Owen said.

"I'm almost done."

"Consider it an order, if it makes you happier," Owen said mildly. "Stop what you're doing and look at me."

Sterling speared his shovel into the deep pile of snow beside the driveway and, hands on his hips, glared at Owen defiantly. There was snow caked on the cuffs of his sweater and sprinkled over his hair, and his ears were red with the cold. "What?" he snapped.

"You took the words out of my mouth—except I might have phrased it a little more politely. What's the matter?"

"Nothing." Sterling brought one hand up to his head and ruffled it through his hair, doubling the snow falling around him for a short moment. When Owen continued to look at him, he sighed and let both hands dangle at his sides. "I just figured she'd ask about what happened, and then there'd have to be this whole explanation about how my father can't stand to look at me, and I just didn't want to have to be there for it, okay? People are curious, I get it, but that doesn't mean I want to participate."

"There's absolutely no need to go into that much detail with a stranger," Owen said. "Not that Sarah would have pried, but if anyone does, just brush them off. You don't owe anyone an explanation when it involves something that personal." Sterling looked so dejected and defiant that Owen wished they were inside, just the two of them, where he could have hugged him, kissed the smile back onto lips drooping at the corners. "Yesterday—I didn't tell Gary and Jake any details, you know. They just filled in the gaps from their own experiences of parents who don't deserve to be."

"Yeah, I figured. It was fine. I actually felt pretty comfortable with them." Sterling sounded like it had come as a surprise.

"They liked you," Owen told him, trying to feel out what might coax a smile out of the boy. "And believe me when I say they don't like everyone, so that means something."

"I liked them too. It was kind of cool, hanging out with people who are so...you know, *out*. I haven't really done that before."

Owen laughed, the sound not carrying far; the snow was coming down more heavily again, already covering ground their shovels had scraped clear. "Oh, they're most definitely out. They're good people. Totally focused on the



theater, just to warn you; when they start work on their next production, don't be surprised if they try to rope you in. When you told them you'd done some acting, I saw their eyes light up."

"That's cool. I'd probably enjoy it more than some of the parties my roommate has dragged me to, even if one of them *did* sort of lead me to you." Sterling *finally* smiled, just a little bit; it was scary how Owen's heart lifted at the sight of it. "I should finish this," he added, gesturing at the snow at their feet.

"I'll help you clear to the edge of Sarah's fence," Owen said, "but I think we're fighting a losing battle here."

"Hey!" Owen turned and saw a man waving at him from the opposite side of the street, a tall, bulky figure he recognized as a neighbor, though he didn't know the man's name. He was standing by a snowblower that looked like it'd seen a lot of winters. "I'm going to fire this baby up, and I can finish off Sarah's sidewalk. You two look like you could use a break."

"Say yes," Sterling muttered under his breath. "Please say yes."

"Thanks," Owen called back, only too happy to accept the offer. The snowblower would leave a neat, wide path in a matter of minutes, and he wasn't *that* keen on digging. "Appreciate it."

The man raised his hand in acknowledgement, and a moment later the noisy clatter of the snowblower made any further conversation impossible.

Owen pointed toward the house and tilted his head in that direction, and Sterling nodded. Together, they started trudging back toward his house through snow that had fallen since Sterling had shoveled the same space—maybe they should have waited until later in the day to start, Owen thought, though looking up at the sky, he'd swear it was lighter than it had been.

Sterling picked up his jacket and gloves from the back of his car—all of them coated with snow—on their way past, then shook them off as they were going up the stairs. "I wonder how long this is supposed to go on," Sterling said. "I guess it snowed like this when I was a kid, but then I was happy about it because it meant school got cancelled. Plus I didn't have to shovel." He grinned and held the screen door for Owen.

"Well, neither of us has to be anywhere," Owen said. "I don't think it'll keep us housebound for long, though; the Weather Channel seemed to think that we were getting the edge of the storm."

They hung their wet clothes in the small utility room where they could drip onto tiles, not wood, and Owen started a fresh pot of coffee. "What would you like to do with the rest of the day?" he asked. "If it clears up, we could go for a walk around Jasper's Pond and maybe eat a late lunch at a pub in town. The Fiddle and Firkin has a good menu." He was at a loss; having someone staying with him was a rare occurrence, and even Sterling wouldn't want to spend the whole time naked... Well, if he did, Owen wouldn't let him.

"Whatever." Sterling shrugged. "If you have work you have to do, that's fine—I can read a book or something. Don't feel like you have to entertain me. Just do whatever you'd do if I weren't here, and I'll keep myself busy."

"Well..." Owen bit his lip. "I always have work, but I'm damned if I'm creating syllabi the day after Christmas—and I don't want to entertain you like if you're a visitor or something, but I *do* want to spend time with you." He spread his hands helplessly. "I just don't know what you like to do."

"I think I owe you a movie, but this doesn't seem like the best time to be out on the roads," Sterling said just as another plow went by, lights spinning yellow circles through the gray-white outdoors. "I don't know. Do you have any board games? Or we could see if there's anything on TV. Or, um..."

It would have been so easy to step forward and kiss Sterling, taking them back to the emotionally charged state they'd been in before they went out to shovel snow, but Owen didn't like easy, and if he and Sterling were going to turn this into something lasting, they needed more than sex to hold them together.

Michael and he had been friends first, which was probably why they were still close; they'd shared a love for the same music, they read the same books...with Sterling, the age gap did bring problems. Insurmountable? Owen hoped not.

"Let's watch a movie," he decided.

He let Sterling go through his shelves of DVDs and choose one, which took longer than Owen would have thought. Then they curled up on the couch, Sarah's basket of cookies on the table in front of them, and watched *Life of Brian*, a movie Owen could quote chunks of but which Sterling had never seen. Halfway through, Owen, feeling chilled, reached to pull down the blanket that was draped over the back of the couch, spreading it over his lap and Sterling's.

"Thanks," Sterling said and turned his head to smile at him.

Owen realized that their mouths were very close together. "You're welcome," he said and kissed Sterling slowly.

Sterling's mouth tasted like the peppermint candy cane-striped cookies he'd been eating, and his hand settled on Owen's knee as he made a soft, happy sound against Owen's lips.

After the indulgences of the day before and the physical exertions of earlier, Owen was in the mood to be lazy and languid. As the movie played on, he kept kissing Sterling, sometimes his neck and throat, sometimes his hair, returning over and over to Sterling's mouth. If he had to choose a word for Sterling right then, it would've been "edible," and he couldn't get enough of the way Sterling tasted. Too drowsy to want the sharp, invigorating edge of arousal, he put an arm around Sterling and settled them in the corner of the couch, Sterling sprawled over him, the two of them kissing like teenagers, eyes closed, hands drifting over each other without urgency.

"You make me happy," he said, whispering the words like a secret, a confession, into Sterling's hair, his lips finding the curve of Sterling's ear through the strands. It had been a while since he'd spoken, his mouth occupied with contented murmurs and kisses, and it felt strange to shape his mouth to form words. Kisses made simpler shapes. "Is that...is it something you want to hear from me?"

Sterling's answer was soft and warm, like his hand on Owen's waist where his shirt was rucked up. "God, yes. Of course it is. Why wouldn't I want to hear that?" The tip of his tongue found the corner of Owen's mouth and licked it. "I want to make you happy," he breathed.

"I want you to *be* happy," Owen said. The distinction seemed important, but he couldn't think clearly when he had Sterling in his arms, utterly relaxed and so very fucking sweet. God, so sweet...under all the insolence and sneers, all the sass and spark that had gotten Owen so on edge and tempted, Sterling was just so—

The repetitive loop of his inconsequential thoughts was abruptly snipped in two by an unfamiliar ring tone. Owen jerked, startled and not at all pleased to be disturbed. "Is that your phone?"

Stupid question, really, and he sounded way too snappish—it wasn't Sterling's fault that his phone had rung—but the invasive, insanely chirpy jingle was as welcome as being doused by ice water would have been.

"Crap—that's my mom," Sterling said, struggling to a sitting position and contorting himself so he could get his phone out of his pocket; he came close to elbowing Owen in the stomach and muttered, "Sorry," as he flipped open his phone. "Mom? Is everything okay? Yeah."

He was quiet, listening to his mother on the other end of the line. He'd straightened up, which had pulled the blanket half off Owen's lap, but Owen stayed still.

"Well, that doesn't mean you have to—okay, but... Mom, can you at least try to—but—" Sterling stood up, flipping the blanket back over Owen's thighs before walking away and finding a place to pace between the living room and the hallway. "Okay, fine, but can you tell Justine I'm—"

Sterling stopped, shoulders slumped. Then after a few seconds he turned around, an unamused, blank smile pasted on his face. "She hung up on me."

"Your *mom*—" Owen stopped himself before he could complete his sentence and schooled the incredulity from his expression. From what little Sterling had said, he was close to his mother, so that rejection would have been as unexpected as it was hurtful. "So why did she call? What's happened?" He pushed the blanket away but stayed where he was, unsure if Sterling wanted to be held and comforted. Sometimes it was irritating to be hugged when you wanted to rage and stalk around, and Owen couldn't read Sterling very well right then.

"She just wanted to let me know that my father made a new rule that she's not allowed to call me, so that's why I haven't heard from her. She wanted to make sure I was okay." Sterling didn't seem to be having a hard time believing this, which was odd, but maybe it hadn't sunk in yet. "It's fine. He's always been like this. I should have been expecting it. Let's just watch the rest of the movie, okay?"

He came back over and sat down, letting Owen tuck the blanket back over his lap, then curled into the same position he'd been in before and put his arm around Owen's waist.

Sterling couldn't see the movie with his head resting on Owen's shoulder, but Owen didn't think it mattered. He held onto Sterling—*his* boy, *his* Sterling—and tried not to let his anger at two people he'd never met communicate itself to the man in his arms.

So William Baker liked to make rules and to dictate to his family. Owen supposed that to an objective onlooker that made them similar, but he didn't feel any kinship with the man. William struck him as a bully, petty and vicious. Owen had never quite worked out what it was about control and the precise deliverance of a certain amount of pain that appealed to him so powerfully, but it didn't feel like cruelty to him, and it didn't feel destructive. What William had done was both.

He stroked Sterling's hair and back, measured, slow caresses, and wondered if Sterling would let go of the rigid control he was showing enough to cry. Not that it mattered if Sterling found that too difficult to do; if Sterling wanted that release, Owen would give it to him.

With pleasure.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the next day, Sterling reminded Owen of a bee buzzing angrily against a window, unable to understand why he couldn't get through what looked like clear air but refusing to quit trying.

Sterling had slept poorly, alternating between clinging to Owen and tossing restlessly, taking up most of the bed. After only picking at his breakfast, he'd started to eat cookies, dipping into the box Sarah had brought over until all that was left were crumbs and, Owen noted with a wry twist of his mouth, the chocolate ginger cookies he himself had claimed.

Owen was close to imposing some discipline on the sulky teenager Sterling had regressed to, but he wanted to see just how far Sterling would go. If this bad mood blew over by itself, he'd prefer it; Sterling was being tiresome, but it was understandable. If it was a cry for attention, well, fine, he'd give Sterling all the attention his ass could take, but part of him disliked the idea of associating anything he did with Sterling with the absent father who'd caused the cloud over Sterling's head.

"Would you like to go for a walk into town for lunch?" he asked around eleven, putting down the book he'd been trying to read. "Or call Alex and see if he wants to meet us for a coffee?"

"Not really," Sterling said. He'd been alternating standing at the window looking out at the bright blue sky and huge mounds of white snow with walking around the first floor of the house, occasionally picking up some random object and looking at it before going back to his aimless pacing. Now he picked up a wooden bookend that was supporting a few books on top of a side table. With their support gone, the books tumbled to their sides, a few of them sliding to the floor. "Oops."

Enough was enough. Letting Sterling's behavior go unchecked wasn't doing anything for the dynamic of their relationship, and Sterling in brat mode wasn't particularly attractive.

"Oops indeed. Pick them up, please." For a moment he thought that Sterling would disobey him, but with a faint, defiant smile, Sterling meticulously tidied the books, fussing with them until they were perfectly straight, with an attention to detail that bordered on insolence given that persistent smile.

Owen leaned back in his chair. "So you want to play," he said pleasantly. "You could have just gone to your knees and waited for me to notice you; I'd have gotten the message, trust me."

Sterling's impertinent smile faltered, and he stood where he was for a long moment before he came over to Owen's chair and went heavily to his knees. He leaned in until his temple touched Owen's knee, the back of his neck seeming pale and vulnerable in the sudden quiet of the room.

Reaching out, Owen laid his hand on Sterling's neck, resting it there. "You've had a very hard few days, but that doesn't excuse your rude behavior. You need to figure out another way to express your feelings." He smiled. "Or I'll do it for you. That's what you want me to do, isn't it?"

He could hear Sterling swallow. "Yes."

"Yes," Owen agreed and let the silence build between them until Sterling shifted position enough to convey impatience, not stiff muscles, a sigh escaping him. "And now you've misbehaved when you're on your knees, and that's something that I'll never overlook, never let pass." Sterling glanced up at him, and there was profound relief in his eyes now. He needed consistent, understood limits—but what sub didn't?

"You've pushed me all morning," Owen said, his voice empty of anger because that emotion was never part of this, ever. "Been restless, noisy, clumsy...none of that pleases me. We'll begin with an apology, I think. Make me believe you, or you'll spend some time in the corner waiting for me to give you a second chance."

Sterling pressed his mouth to Owen's knee and shivered, then looked up at him again, meeting his eyes steadily. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I didn't

mean to—I couldn't help it. I wanted to stop, but I didn't know how, and I didn't know that I could ask...for this. I'm sorry, Owen. Please forgive me.”

Sometimes he forgot how new to this Sterling still was. “You can always ask,” he said, cupping Sterling's face, a gesture that was familiar between them now, a silent message. “I won't always give you exactly what you want, but I'll give you something. I'll never leave you hungry, I promise.” He patted Sterling's face. “You're forgiven—which doesn't mean you're not going to have consequences to deal with, but you knew it wasn't that easy, didn't you?”

“Yes. I know I deserve whatever you choose as punishment—I've been driving me crazy too, not just you. I *am* sorry.” Sterling closed his eyes and leaned against Owen's thigh again. “I kind of feel like I'm losing my mind. I'm so fucked up, Owen. Sometimes I don't know if I can be fixed. Or, if I can, it's going to take so much...”

“I don't want you fixed,” Owen snapped. “There is absolutely *nothing* wrong with you. Open your eyes. Look at me.” He waited for Sterling to obey him and then continued, his voice tight with annoyance, directed at a man he'd never met, not the one kneeling beside him. “Do you remember the first time I took you to the club?” Sterling nodded, a frown creasing his forehead. “I went back a few nights later alone and spent the whole night fielding questions about you. If I had to sum up all the conversations, I'd need two words: lucky man. They weren't talking about you; Doms, subs...didn't matter. They meant me. *I* was the lucky one because they could see how special you were and how happy you were making me even back then. Hell, Michael's never even met you, and when I'd finished telling him about you, the first thing he said was that I didn't know how lucky I was.” Owen took a deep breath. “You're gay and your father's unhappy. That happens so often it's almost a given. You've found out you get off on being submissive; more unusual, but you've been to the club, and you know you're not unique. You've been virtually disowned, and you're upset; well, who *wouldn't* be? I'm not seeing any way in which you're fucked up.”

He put both hands on Sterling's face and held it in place so that Sterling couldn't look away. “You are mine, Sterling. Mine. Nothing I do to you or with you or for you is too much trouble or a burden.”

It was easy to see that Sterling both wanted to believe him and couldn't see his way clear to. “I just—could you take me out of this? *This*, I mean, this—reality. I need you to hurt me. I need to feel that, instead of this. God, I'm not even making any sense...”

Owen sighed and slid his hands down to Sterling's shoulders. “Of course you are,” he said patiently. “You're asking for what every sub wants and what every Dom wants to give. Hurting you, though... I don't need to do that to get you to that place. Sub space. You've heard that term? Yes. Of course you have.”

“Please...” Sterling clung to Owen's leg, shifting so he could rub his cheek against Owen's inner thigh now, close to his cock. “Please, Owen? I'll do

anything you want me to, I promise. Just tell me what you want me to do. Should I strip? I know you like it when I'm naked."

"Sterling. Focus," Owen said sharply, and Sterling pulled back and looked up at him with wide eyes.

"Yes, Owen."

"I'm not doing this—any of this—to punish you for what you are, what you want," Owen said as clearly as possible. Sterling seemed to be lost, adrift. Which he was, of course; Owen and what he offered was new, but Sterling's family had been there all his life, and now they'd cut him loose. Owen couldn't imagine how lonely that would feel. He hesitated and then said quietly, "I'm not your father."

The look Sterling had been giving him, open and pleading, hardened, and Sterling pulled away and stood up. "I can't believe you'd say that to me."

"I need to be sure you know," Owen said. "I need to know you understand what this is and what it isn't."

"I've *never* thought of you as any kind of father figure," Sterling said, his voice cold. "I never wanted you to be. If that's what you think—" With a rough shake of his head, Sterling took a step backward, away from him. "You don't know me at all, do you?"

Owen stood up, wondering how this had gone so wrong. "Of course I do. Sometimes I think I know you better than you know yourself."

"Well, you're wrong." Sterling stepped back again; he sounded more angry than Owen could ever remember. "God, I can't believe I thought this could actually go somewhere. I think I need some time off. And no, I'm not waiting for your permission." He paused, then said, slowly and deliberately, "Junior."

The shock of hearing Sterling's safe word used to signal far more than the end of a scene held Owen silent for too long, and Sterling turned away and went upstairs.

Owen could hear him packing his things, then coming back downstairs and putting on his sneakers. He wanted to go after Sterling, to wrap him in a hug and murmur reassurances, but that wasn't what Sterling wanted right then, and what Sterling wanted, Owen couldn't give him. Not now, not like this. He'd give Sterling some time to cool off; then they could talk.

Staying where he was, Owen listened as Sterling left.

It was one of the hardest things he'd ever done.

## Chapter Fifteen

Sterling didn't remember until he was driving down Owen's street that the dorms were still closed and he had nowhere to go. What was with him and running away? Were all the things his father had said about him true? Was he a coward, someone with no morals? Owen obviously didn't think much of him. He was better off on his own until he could figure out what to do.

He checked into the first hotel he found along Route Ten and decided the best way to spend the day would be alternately watching bad TV and sleeping. He wasn't even slightly hungry, which was good because getting food other than the candy bars and potato chips that were available in the vending machines in the hallway would require leaving the hotel and Sterling was seriously considering never doing that again. Who needed a degree? He could just live in this hotel room until the clothes rotted off his body, cheering on Jerry Springer's guests and growing the world's longest beard.

Maybe he'd get in the Guinness Book of World Records.

Sterling slept through the afternoon, watched straight porn that was both terrible and boring throughout the evening, and fell asleep again for the night just after two a.m. He woke in the morning to the sound of someone knocking on his door—it took him what felt like a really long time to identify the sound, and then to stumble out of bed and say to the door, “Who is it?”

“It's your father,” the familiar and dreaded voice said. “Open the door.”

“No,” Sterling told him.

“Open the door or you'll regret it,” William said. “You know I don't make idle threats.”

Sterling knew his father could just cut him off financially—if he hadn't already decided to do so—and he'd be screwed. Unable to continue his education, without enough work experience to get a full-time job that would come close to supporting him...

He opened the door, hating himself for it.

“What do you want?” he asked sullenly. Owen would have spanked him but good for displaying that kind of attitude, and the thought made him ache.

William didn't push past him; he simply walked forward and expected Sterling to back down and make room, which he did. His father seemed to fill the room, tower above him, though there wasn't that much difference in their heights. William was carrying a bulging plastic bag embossed with the name of



an expensive delicatessen. Sterling frowned at it and then looked back at his father.

"It didn't take long for your friends to kick you out, did it?" William gave the room a curled-lip stare. "You could have found somewhere better than this considering I'm the one picking up the tab, but your standards never were very high."

For one frantic, heart-stopping moment, Sterling thought that William knew about Owen, all about him. He wanted to throw up, the panic filling him like poison, needing to be expelled from his body before it ate away at him. Maybe his dad had hired someone to follow him, an investigator, someone to poke and pry and take photographs—

"I expected a charge to show up right away," William continued, and Sterling wanted to sob with relief. The credit card. The fucking credit card. His father had pulled strings, leaned on someone—hell, the card was in his name, so maybe he hadn't needed to do more than make a phone call to find out where his errant son was holed up. "But I suppose you know people who tolerate your disgusting behavior because they're no better than you." He toed a worn spot in the carpet, his face a mask of revulsion like he was standing in a pool of vomit. "You can stay here until the semester begins. It might teach you a lesson."

"I thought you weren't talking to me," Sterling said, then felt his heart freeze in his chest again as he realized he'd just given away his mother. Quickly, he added, "I mean, since you didn't—"

William sneered and said, "Don't be stupid. You think I didn't know your mother would call you? She's always had a ridiculous soft spot for you, even after I started to suspect that you were a deviant. But now that we know for certain, I'm sure she'll come around to my way of thinking."

Sterling knew better than to point out that his mother had known, for certain, for a long time.

"Take this." William thrust the bag he was holding at Sterling, and Sterling took it because he didn't know what was in it and he didn't want to drop it only to find out it was something he actually wanted. "You aren't to contact your mother or sister again until you've decided to leave this revolting lifestyle behind you. When you're ready to live like a decent, respectable man, call me and we'll talk. Until then, we don't want to hear from you."

Sterling was looking down into the bag. In it were the Christmas presents he'd so carefully selected and wrapped, the ones he'd left behind on his bed for his mom and Justine. "You don't want to hear from me," he corrected, feeling blank instead of mad.

"I'm the head of the family," William said, as if that said it all. "That still means something to me. It's my responsibility to keep our name clean. I don't want gossip and people talking; you'll still get my financial support until you graduate. No one can say that I haven't done my duty by you."

"I don't want your money—"

"But you'll take it, won't you?" William said. "Take it and keep away from us. If you care about your mother and sister, you'll be...discreet, but I suppose that's asking too much of you. Your type like to flaunt what you do, what you are. You don't care about who you hurt. Selfish, depraved—" William was so close to him that with each word Sterling felt a gust of breath on his face, making him want to gag. His father's cologne was tainting every breath he took, the heavy, expensive smell conjuring up memories of home. "You've always disappointed me."

"I know," Sterling said quietly. Why bother to fight it now? "I've known it for years. You never tried to hide it, did you? But Mom and Justine—they loved me anyway. Why not let them have their gifts?"

William gave him a look of such disgust that it made Sterling cold inside. "Because they deserve better."

For what felt like an hour, Sterling just stood there looking at his father. He wasn't looking at him as a whole person, just at different, tiny parts of him—the silver hairs above his ears, the top button of his shirt. Finally, as if from far away, he heard himself say, "Whatever." Like it was that easy to dismiss what he'd just been told, to push it aside because it was unimportant, meaningless.

He wished that were true.

His father turned and walked away without another word, out in the hallway, gone. Sterling kept standing there. He was waiting for something, he thought, although he didn't know what.

Eventually he shut the door and sat down on the bed, picking up his cell phone. His first instinct was to call Owen, but that wouldn't work. Owen didn't really want him—Owen just wanted a toy, an uncomplicated, interesting toy that would eventually get boring and be discarded. Not a fucked up, broken toy that didn't work right. Which was what Sterling was.

He called Alex instead, knowing that his friend was at work but not really caring.

"Sterling! Good to hear from you. How's it going with your folks?" There were people talking in the background, their voices loud, and Alex laughed. "Sorry, it's a madhouse here. People are still in a party mood—or maybe they haven't sobered up yet. Will you be back in time for the New Year's party at the club? It's supposed to be really something."

"I'm actually sort of back now," Sterling said. "I had a fight with my dad—long story, and believe me when I say I don't want to get into it. And then I had a fight with Owen, and no, I don't want to talk about that either. How are you?"

"Better than you are, it sounds like." Alex sounded concerned, and after a minute everything in the background went muffled, like he'd gone somewhere more quiet. "Are you okay? Do you want to hang out when I get off work? I'm free tonight—Kirk gives me two nights off a week."

"Yeah, I'm fine." It wasn't true, but it was starting to dawn on Sterling that there were people other than Owen who could give him what would help. "Hey—I know this might sound—weird, or something, but...you remember at the club, when Kirk gave me his number?" Not that he had it anymore, but if Alex agreed to what he was hoping for, he could get it again. "Do you think—would it be okay with you if I..."

The silence that followed had him swallowing hard. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. He knew how he would've felt about sharing Owen with another sub, even someone as good a friend as Alex—hot as a fantasy, but in reality, God, he didn't want to think about Owen's attention on someone else, his hands touching them, his smiles and approving words for them, not him. Okay, add jealous and possessive to the list of his failings...

"You want to play with us?" Alex asked dubiously, filling in the blanks without much difficulty. "God, Sterling, I know I'd love it—I miss your skinny ass, you know that—and Kirk seemed *really* into you, but I'm not sure it's a good idea. Insanely hot, yes, and I would *love* to watch Kirk really push you—okay, I'm getting hard just thinking about that, and I'm not in any position to deal with it. God, I'm in the freaking copier room with a hard-on; I'm going to need therapy after this. I hate you."

"Please," Sterling said and hoped that it worked on Alex the way it did on Owen. "Please, Alex."

He heard Alex suck in a breath. "Owen's going to freak if he finds out." Alex sounded tempted, but nervous. "You just don't do that to your Dom, Sterling, no matter how pissed off you are at each other. Go and find Owen, do what you do best, flutter your eyes, pout, lick his boots, whatever, and get him to take care of you. It could be fun. Makeup spankings are the best."

"It's not like that," Sterling said, wishing it was. "He doesn't want me. I was—Alex, I was kneeling at his feet begging him to spank me, hurt me, and he wouldn't. He thinks I'm looking for a replacement father or something, and I'm just—I'm losing it here." His throat felt thick, like he was choking; he couldn't breathe. "Can I just sort of borrow Kirk? Just for tonight, if he'll... It doesn't have to be about sex. I just have to get out of my head, just for an hour. If you can't, that's okay, but—maybe Kirk can hook me up with someone else? Anyone who knows what they're doing." He let out a shaky breath. "I don't know what else to do."

"Let me make some calls," Alex said, and he sounded warmly sympathetic now. "Don't go looking yourself, okay? I know just how you're feeling, and it's really fucking shitty of Owen to just leave you high and dry, but you can't just put yourself out there for any asshole. I'll call Kirk for you, but no matter what he says, you *don't* go off on your own, you hear me?"

"Okay," Sterling agreed. "Call me back soon?"

"As soon as I can," Alex promised.

He was as good as his word, and within half an hour Sterling had a firm plan for the evening that included Alex, Kirk, and the playroom at Kirk's house, which Alex assured him was well stocked.

"It'll be great," Alex said. "Kirk says don't be late, and he means it—he'll take it out on me if you are. Eat something first, but not too much. And he's going to want to fuck you."

The thought of Kirk tearing into him, making him scream, turned Sterling on more than he would have thought possible, especially considering how freaked out he'd been about penetration just a few months ago. It wasn't about the fucking, he knew now, but more about yielding to something whether he wanted to or not, about letting himself be pushed into the head space that would give him some peace. The realization of how totally broken and useless he was made him feel sick, the awareness so painful he'd have done anything, gone to anyone, who had a chance of making him forget, even for a little while.

The afternoon seemed to last forever, but finally it was time, or close enough. Sterling drove across town to the address Alex had given him and got there almost twenty minutes early. Alex's car was already in the driveway, so at least he knew it was the right place.

He turned off the engine and stared at the house. Smaller than Owen's, more modern, and less inviting somehow. The driveway had been cleared of every snowflake and lump of ice, bare and neat, an attention to detail that made Sterling's mouth go dry.

He'd been thinking about this for hours, his dick so hard that he'd been tempted into jerking off, but his training held. If Kirk asked, he wanted to be able to say that he'd waited. A playroom... Lurid images from porn movies filled his head, doing nothing to calm him down. Chains and frames, whips and leather, Alex watching him beg and scream and—Sterling whimpered, his breath coming in short, harsh gasps. Kirk had appealed to him on one level when they'd met at the club. The guy was big, muscular, oozing confidence, and that really worked for Sterling.

Owen didn't like Kirk, though; that had come across loud and clear. Owen thought Kirk was no good at what he did. But maybe Owen was wrong. And it wasn't like Kirk had to be an expert—he just had to be good enough.

Fifteen minutes to go. Should he knock at the door? Was early going to get him into as much trouble as late?

His phone rang, and he fumbled it out of his pocket. If it was Owen, what would he do, what would he say? Fuck, maybe he should just drive away—

"I can see you're prompt," Kirk said, his deep voice intimate, knowing. "Good boy. But there's no need to sit out there freezing your butt off. Come in and let me warm it up for you."

"Yes, sir," Sterling said weakly and shoved his door open, the phone still pressed to his ear. "Thank you. For letting me come."

"Don't make assumptions," Kirk said. He sounded amused, like he thought he was pretty funny. "And I like it if you keep your mouth shut unless I ask you a direct question. I don't like a lot of chatter."

Obeying, Sterling walked to the front door, which opened before he even got there. Kirk was even bigger than he'd remembered, hair and mustache carefully groomed like his appearance was important to him. He was wearing a white shirt with a black leather vest over it, leather pants, and heavy boots.

"Get in here," Kirk said, then shut the door and took Sterling's chin in his hand, studying his face. "On your knees."

God, this guy didn't waste any time, did he? Sterling dropped to his knees, head down, and told himself that Kirk—Master Kirk, that was what he liked to be called—was in charge, and all he had to do was obey. That was easy. He could do that.

"So you and Owen had a falling out," Kirk mused. "Yeah, I didn't give you two long. He's got a reputation for being fussy as hell, all rules and regs, and he babies virgins. I don't." Sterling's hair was used to pull his head backward, and his eyes watered slightly as he stared up into Kirk's cold brown ones. "I show the new boys who their master is right from day one, and if they're as hot for it as you are, they love it and beg for more. Is that what you're going to do, you pretty little boy? Gonna beg me right now?"

The words were crude—hell, cheesy, even, but there was no doubting the intent behind them. Kirk was hard; kneeling like this, his erection was impossible to miss, thick and long, a bulky shape outlined by leather, and that was all that mattered. If he'd gotten Kirk turned on already, then he was doing something right. He wasn't being a disappointment.

"Yes, sir," he said. "Please, Master Kirk. Please do whatever you want to me—hit me, spank me, whip me. F-fuck me. Please—I promise I'll be good for you."

"You will," Kirk said. "I'm not going to give you a choice. Gonna hurt you good—tie you up, make you scream and cry, spank that sweet ass of yours red-hot. And then, just when you think you can't take any more, I'm going to fuck you. Just shove my dick up inside you." He smiled almost cruelly, and for a second Sterling's gut twisted as if this was real and he was in danger. Kirk's eyes brightened as he took in Sterling's expression, and he grinned wider, looking younger and more natural for a moment. It should have been reassuring, but it just rubbed in the fact that being a Dom was an assumed role for Kirk. For Owen, it was part of him, unforced, genuine. God, Sterling missed Owen so much...

"Yeah. This is going to be fun," Kirk said, satisfaction thick in his voice. "Now follow me."

It took Sterling a few seconds to realize that he was supposed to walk on his knees. The gold shag carpet against his jeans made static electricity spark and pop as he followed Kirk down the hallway to a set of stairs that led to what looked like the basement.

"You can walk now," Kirk said as he started down. "Don't want you to hurt yourself before I have my fun."

At the bottom of the stairs was a door that was locked from the outside with a slide bolt. Kirk unlocked the door and pushed it open to reveal the playroom, making a gesture for Sterling to step inside and join Alex, who was kneeling with a gag in his mouth and a cock ring tight around his cock and balls.

Sterling went to his knees automatically, his eyes wide with shock. Alex had been locked in. Okay, he wasn't tied, but he'd been trapped and left alone. Owen had never gone more than a few feet away when Sterling had been bound, and when he'd been blindfolded, he'd always been able to hear Owen's voice, or the small, deliberate rustle of his clothing, the soft, measured sound of his breath.

He should stand up and get the hell out of here. Now. His brain told him to run and his dick—oh shit, he was hard, achingly hard.

"See that disobedient little boy in the corner?" Kirk said, closing the door with a shove. "He's not going to get to come at all tonight, but he's going to get to watch everything I do to you, aren't you, pet?"

Alex nodded, his eyes bright with tears and frustration.

"W-what did he do?" Sterling asked without thinking. There were whip marks all over Alex's chest and thighs, a faint tracery of scarlet decorating his skin, the nipples swollen, surrounded by stripes, as if they'd been used as a target, something to aim at. No blood, and the marks would fade, but that had to have hurt. From where Sterling knelt, he couldn't tell if Alex's back had been whipped too, but he guessed it had.

"Did you forget what I said about talking?" Kirk inquired, his voice silky. Sterling tensed and ducked his head, hoping to placate Kirk, who'd sounded almost pleased, like he was glad Sterling had fucked up. "Guess I can see why Owen ditched you if you can't remember a simple order from one minute to the next and don't know how to address your Dom. Take off your clothes—I'm going to give you a reminder."

Sterling started to undress, first pulling his shirt off and letting it drop to the floor where there was a pile of Alex's clothes already, then undoing his jeans. As he took off his clothes, he reminded himself that his first night at Owen's, he'd been nervous and out of his element too. Just because he felt uncomfortable didn't mean something was wrong. Alex had been with Kirk for months, trusted him. That should reassure him.

Naked, he put his hands behind his back, crossing his wrists, and bowed his head without saying anything. Master Kirk had told him not to talk, so he wouldn't. If he was good and followed the rules, he'd get taken to the place he needed to be all the sooner.

"On your *knees*," Kirk barked and slapped the back of Sterling's head hard enough that it surprised a gasp out of him. Owen had never hit him like

that, just out of the blue without warning, and while it hadn't hurt exactly, it had come as one hell of a shock, a shock that made him slow when it came to dropping down to his knees again and earned him another slap. "For such a pretty boy, you're stupid *and* slow."

Sterling couldn't help it—when he looked up at Kirk, his irritation definitely showed on his face. Damn, he was fucking this up—all he had to do was get into the right head space, and he couldn't even do that.

Too late he realized how his expression might be misread—and going by the anger in Kirk's eyes, it had been.

"You know, I'm starting to wonder if you deserve this," Kirk said, his voice tight with annoyance. "Deserve my attention, deserve my cock up your ass. You're not impressing me, and Alex is gonna pay for telling me what a sweet little fuck you were and how desperate, because right now, you're just wasting my time."

For all Kirk's posturing, there was genuine displeasure showing, and Sterling supposed that it was justified. He was tumbling from one mistake to another, nerves and need making him clumsy when he wanted to be perfect.

He closed his eyes, steadying himself. Fix this. Get Alex off the hook and make Kirk want to play with him. He could do it, he could.

It wasn't easy to abase himself without really feeling any respect for Kirk, but he made a small, apologetic whine like a whipped puppy and shuffled forward on his knees, then leaned over and pressed his lips to the top of Kirk's leather boots. It was the most humiliating position he'd ever been in, and it flooded him with shamed arousal. He didn't think about backing down and leaving; he'd gone too far. This felt like the day he'd pushed Owen into agreeing to be his Dom; he felt the same impatience, a need so great that he *had* to have it met and the hell with the consequences for him or anyone else.

It was selfish. It could have gotten Owen into trouble; tonight it'd gotten Alex a whipping by the look of it, and if Owen found out he'd be hurt, disappointed. Sterling knew all that but was determined not to let it stop him.

Other people's feelings didn't count. His father had taught him that by example, ruthless in pursuit of his objectives, always successful. William's ways worked, and Sterling had made them work for him too.

He needed the pain, the loss of control, and if Owen wouldn't give it to him, he'd take it from someone else.

He rubbed his cheek against Kirk's boot and whimpered, needy, yearning.

*See me beg, Master? See how sorry I am? Don't you want to punish me? Hurt me, fuck me, own me, now, dammit, now—*

"Get on the bench," Kirk said sharply, and Sterling scrambled to do as he'd been told. He'd seen padded benches like this at the club; it had supports for his arms and legs and wasn't all that complicated, but he was grateful that he'd watched someone getting spanked on one because it meant he was able to get onto it, in position, without screwing up. "Nice." Kirk's hand caressed

Sterling's bare ass, then slapped it, but not hard. "I think I'd like to see what you look like when you're strapped down."

That made Sterling a little nervous again, but when it came down to it, he was desperate enough that he'd have agreed to anything right then, so he didn't protest but lay still, cooperative, as Kirk used thick straps to restrain him. He was so vulnerable like this, his ass easily accessible and his cock and balls hanging down, and once the straps were fastened, he literally couldn't move.

Kirk didn't give him time to worry, though—he could feel a paddle being rubbed against his ass. "Gonna get this ass nice and red," Kirk said. "Warm you up for me."

And it started. The first whack sounded loud to Sterling's ears and was immediately followed by the warm tingle of a blow that hadn't been all that hard. Sterling wasn't sure if he should feel relieved that this wasn't going to get out of hand or upset that it wouldn't be enough to take him out of his head, but within half a dozen more strokes the blows were getting progressively harder, and pretty soon he found himself grunting with each one. Kirk didn't seem to have a problem with him making noise when he was being paddled, at least.

It felt good. Different; he couldn't feel any connection running between him and Kirk the way he had with Owen, no sense that this was something they were sharing, but still, it was close enough to what he needed that he soaked it up, thirsty for it.

"Owen did a number on your ass," Kirk said conversationally, jarring Sterling out of the warm fog he was in because he stopped the paddling. "What did he use?"

Questions and a conversation about Owen were the last things he wanted, but he forced himself to answer politely, his body tense, craving. "A crop, Master Kirk."

"When?"

"Christmas Day," Sterling said, his teeth gritted against the desire to tell Kirk to just get on with it.

Kirk chuckled. "Nice present, but he didn't hit you enough times. I'd have *really* made you squirm."

Sterling remembered how five strokes had felt and shuddered. God, he'd have done more than squirm...

"Oh, you like that idea, don't you?" Kirk said. The paddling resumed, but in a desultory, uneven way, as if Kirk was bored. "You know why Alex is being punished?"

"No, Master Kirk." Those words were getting more and more difficult to say in a way that sounded sincere. He needed more, and he needed a slow, steady build, not this uneven, choppy, stop-start shit.



"He told me to go easy on you." Kirk laughed. "Said you were 'going through stuff' and you were new... But he's not the one in charge here, is he? I'm the one calling the shots."

There wasn't a question in among all that, so Sterling didn't reply. There was no way he was going to get off—emotionally or physically—from the spanking he was getting, and he started to hope that Kirk would move on to something else soon.

Kirk tossed the paddle across the room; it hit the floor where it was nothing but bare concrete and made a clattering noise that startled Sterling so that he strained against the straps holding him down.

Laughing, Kirk said, "You really are new. Hmm. I think I know what I want to do with you next."

Sterling found himself being unstrapped. His ass was sore, but not in a good way; it was just a distraction as he stood up, muscles complaining slightly, and then knelt with his wrists behind his back.

"Here, turn so you can see this." Going over to Alex, Kirk casually removed his gag. "Get up." Sterling could see Alex working his jaw as he got to his feet like Kirk had told him to. Then Kirk took Alex's bound cock in his hand and stroked it.

Under other circumstances, the expression on Alex's face might have been amusing, but he bit his lip hard as Kirk worked his cock, which was dark red and swollen, blood trapped in it because of the cock ring. Alex whimpered and Kirk let go, then slapped Alex's cock a few times, back and forth, until he whimpered again.

"Back on your knees," Kirk said, and Alex obeyed.

Kirk strolled over to Sterling again and lifted his face, examining his lips and then sliding two fingers between them roughly.

"You do have a pretty mouth; I think I'd like to fuck it. Take out my cock."

Sterling's mouth watered at the thought, and he fumbled the front of Kirk's jeans open with eager fingers and pulled out Kirk's dick, which was impressive in both length and girth, just like the man himself.

"Tell me you want it," Kirk told him.

Quickly, Sterling said, "Please, Master Kirk, let me suck your cock. I want it so bad. Please."

That must have been enough, because Kirk didn't wait any longer, just slid his thumb into the corner of Sterling's mouth to hold it open and pushed his cock inside. The taste was bitter, like it had been a little too long since Kirk's last shower, and Sterling had to fight not to gag as the head slid back over his tongue and almost into his throat.

"Do a good job," Kirk warned him.

It had been a *long* time since he'd done this, but it was something he loved, and Sterling tried to make it good for Kirk, only to find that Kirk didn't

want him to get inventive. Kirk wanted a wet, open mouth to fuck and that was all. After some painful tugs on his hair and some sharply worded comments, he concentrated on relaxing his throat muscles and trying not to drool too much. What the hell did Alex see in this jerk?

Kirk's thrusts sped up, uncoordinated and invasive, chafing Sterling's numb lips. His jaw ached, and he was praying that Kirk would come soon. Instead, Kirk stopped and pulled out. Taking his cock in his hand, he wiped it on Sterling's cheek, leaving it wet and sticky. "You've got a lot to learn about sucking cock. Alex can take me all in, can't you, boy?"

Sterling didn't glance over at Alex to see him nod. He didn't want to remember that his friend was in the room watching this, part of this; it was just too embarrassing to think about.

"I'm going to finish in your ass." Kirk announced. "Alex, you're still not going to come tonight, no matter how much you beg and crawl, but I'll let you to lube him up since you're so concerned about him. Use plenty; I'm going to take my time."

"Yes, Master." Alex walked on his knees over to Sterling and took the bottle of lube from Kirk, kissing Kirk's hand with obvious affection and closing his eyes blissfully when Kirk caressed his hair more gently than Sterling would have expected. Maybe Kirk wasn't a *complete* asshole. Maybe there were some things he was good at—maybe fucking Sterling into a state of Zen would be one of them.

"Don't touch his dick," Kirk ordered, then went over to fiddle with the straps on what looked like some kind of giant crucifix.

Alex looked into Sterling's eyes as he popped the bottle's lid up and squeezed some lube onto his fingers, and Sterling did his best to communicate that it was okay, that he was okay. Sighing with relief, Alex moved to one side and slid his slick fingers down along Sterling's crack. It was hard not to tense up, but he trusted Alex not to hurt him; he even let Alex urge him, with a hand on his shoulder, down onto his hands and knees.

He did wish Alex could talk to him, but he hung his head down and closed his eyes, concentrating on the feeling of Alex's fingers tracing his hole wetly. He was almost whimpering when they disappeared, only to return a few seconds later, even slicker. One pushed its way into him and he gasped, then shifted his hips back, trying to get it deeper. So close to his prostate—God, he wanted it. His cock was so hard. The finger slid out, then another one slid back in, pushing more lube into him and making him cry out before he could stop the sound from escaping.

"That's enough," Kirk said. Sterling turned his head and saw Kirk staring at them, his tongue passing over his lips. Kirk had taken off his boots and jeans, exposing long, powerful legs, taut and muscular. He was definitely good to look at, Sterling thought hazily, eyeing the thick cock with a shiver of arousal. "Over here."

With more enthusiasm, Sterling joined Kirk at the framework, wondering just how this was going to work. He'd never fucked anyone standing up, or been fucked that way, and once he was tied to the cross he wouldn't have much flexibility.

"Stand up," Kirk said, all business now, as if this, the sex, was what mattered the most. Sterling had given up trying to analyze what Kirk got out of this; he didn't seem to care about building a scene or even carrying through on most of what he said. The playroom was full of toys, and Kirk looked the part of a Dom, but that was as far as it went.

He let Kirk position him against the padded leather cross, his erection pressed against the cool surface, and felt a familiar surge of excitement as one wrist was bound, held in place. Yes. This was better. This was going to work...

Kirk grabbed his other wrist and pulled it up, the movement too abrupt. Pain flared in Sterling's shoulder, a warning sign he'd learned to listen to since he'd injured it. God, not now...

He shifted, trying to lessen the pressure on his shoulder, and Kirk slapped his flank. "Keep still."

"No, I just—"

"Shut up or I'll have to gag you," Kirk said. "I can't have you distracting me. You think this is easy?" He tightened the strap at Sterling's right wrist, then kicked at Sterling's ankle. "Spread your legs wider." *That* was what proved to be too much; the pressure and unnatural position, arms stretched tight, made his shoulder joint scream.

Sterling took half a step back, colliding with Kirk's groin—he hadn't realized the other man was so close, but that had definitely been Kirk's dick against his ass cheek—in his attempt to lessen the strain.

"Eager for it, aren't you?" Kirk sounded smug.

"This isn't going to work for me," Sterling said firmly. "It's not that I don't want to—I have an old—" Before he could finish what he'd been about to say, to explain that they'd need to find another position, the promised gag was being forced between his teeth. That was when he remembered they'd never even *talked* about a safe word, not that he'd have been able to speak it with a gag in his mouth.

Kirk grabbed onto Sterling's ass with both hands and squeezed it, spreading his cheeks and letting his thumbs brush over Sterling's wet, slick hole. "You just keep your mouth shut and listen. I'm going to give you the best fucking of your life—you're going to *love* it. Didn't I tell you to spread your legs wider?" He kicked Sterling's ankle again, and Sterling's foot slid eight inches to the right. Panicked as the shriek of agony in his shoulder flared white-hot, Sterling tugged hard with his left arm, trying to find his balance.

It didn't work, and he felt a sickening pop as his right shoulder, never really recovered from the long-ago injury, was wrenched from its socket. Sterling screamed, choking on the gag. He couldn't move because he was

hanging from his wrist, and his fucking *arm* was fucking *dislocated*, and most of his conscious thought fled in the face of the pain.

He was dimly aware of Kirk's annoyed voice and Alex's alarmed one, and then someone was lifting him, holding onto him with both arms around his chest, taking his weight. That just made the pain shriek in new but equally agonizing ways, and he screamed again, his throat and lungs torn by it.

"Get the gag out," Alex said, and Sterling *would* have, but his hands were tied. How was he supposed to—

The gag was removed. Sterling knew he had to relay what was going on. Talking around the pain seemed impossible, but he managed a tight, "Dislocated," from between clenched teeth, and Alex swore and told Kirk to undo the restraints.

"I didn't do anything!" Kirk said, fumbling at the straps, his movements seeming unbearably clumsy and slow. Sterling fought to breathe through the agony, but screaming helped more than oxygen, and he just couldn't stop doing it, sucking in enough air to fuel the next one. "Look, make him stop that," Kirk snapped. "Someone might hear him." He glanced at Sterling. "God, *be quiet*."

"Kirk!" Alex sounded upset, worried, but he wasn't panicking, and there was an edge to his voice. "Shut the fuck up, okay? Just get him untied." Alex, one arm around Sterling, reached up to undo the restraint on his side, freeing Sterling's injured arm at last. His wrist slipped, and Alex caught it, lowering it slowly. It didn't help much with the pain. Sterling's arm jutted out awkwardly, stiffly, his forearm twisted, freakish.

"Got it," Kirk said with an air of triumph as he finally managed to undo the other strap. "There."

Sterling, supported by Alex, stumbled back a step or two. The room was spinning around him, but he clung to consciousness. No way was he going to pass out in this room, though throwing up all over Kirk had its appeal. He cradled his arm as best he could, panting heavily. Had it hurt this much before?

Kirk folded his arms and pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Okay, this is what we need to do. First, we get our stories straight—"

"First, we get Sterling to the emergency room," Alex said as he led Sterling to a chair by the wall. It had straps hanging off it, but Sterling didn't care. He sat down, his skin clammy, waves of heat and cold chasing over him. "Jesus, Kirk, how much of an asshole are you? He's hurting here and all you can think about is yourself." As he spoke, Alex gathered up Sterling's clothes and his own and took them over to Sterling.

"Just...the pants," Sterling grated out. He was trying to support his bad arm as best he could, but he couldn't find a position for it that hurt less than the others. Okay, they'd go to the hospital. The doctors would give him something for the pain, so it wouldn't hurt so much. While he repeated this to

himself, Alex got dressed and then helped him into his jeans—no underwear, that was fine, right then Sterling didn't care—and then his sneakers, no socks.

Alex looked conflicted, like he wanted to help Sterling stand up but didn't know where to touch him to do it. Sterling appreciated not being touched; he got to his feet on his own, shaky and gritting his teeth, and Alex tugged his jeans up over his hips and fastened them.

"You can't mention my name," Kirk was saying, like anyone was listening. He was fully dressed again now, but his boots were off, and the sight of his feet in bright red socks sticking out from under leather pants looked absurd. "I'll lose my job, I'll—"

"I won't," Sterling said. God, it was December, and he was going to go outside without a shirt, and that was actually preferable to the alternative because it meant he wouldn't have to put one on. "As far as I'm concerned, you don't even exist." It felt good to say it—was the only thing that felt good just then.

Going up the stairs felt like a week's journey, and then getting into the car, lowering himself onto the seat and swinging his legs in, hurt so much that he almost passed out. The only reason he didn't let himself was because he knew he'd come to again in this same pain, and he was pretty sure that would suck even more.

"It's gonna be okay," Alex said. "Jesus. Do you want me to roll down the window?"

*In case you have to puke* was the rest of that sentence, left unspoken, and Sterling said, "Yes," because it was his car, since it had been blocking Alex's in, and he didn't want to puke in his own car.

The wind was icy as they drove to the hospital, freezing the sickly sweat that Sterling seemed to be covered with. He closed his eyes and tried his best to let the pain take him deeper, the way it had when things were good, but it didn't seem to work and he wasn't sure why.

"I am so fucking sorry," Alex said after a while.

Talking was an effort he didn't want to make, but Sterling gave a grunt that he hoped translated to "not your fault" even though a small part of him *did* want to blame Alex for hooking up with a jerk. Which wasn't fair at all.

"He's not usually like that," Alex went on, hunched over the wheel as if that would make the car go faster. "Well, I mean, yeah, he is, but it's okay, you know? I get off on it and so does he, and it all just sort of works for us, but you... I think you made him nervous."

That was so ridiculous that it distracted Sterling from the pain for a brief moment. "What?"

Alex gave him an apologetic look and then swore as a light turned red, forcing him to brake. "God, we're never going to get there... Kirk's been around awhile, but not *that* long, and he's sort of on the fringes, you know? Not that well-known. He hates that. And you're Owen's and he is well-known, and he

knows everyone and everyone looks up to him. Getting to play with you was like a fucking dream come true, like borrowing someone's fucking Ferrari, but he was panicking in case he didn't measure up."

"He didn't," Sterling said.

"I know." Alex was quiet for the rest of the drive until a muttered, "Thank God," as they drove into the parking lot outside the ER. "Hang out; I'll get someone with a wheelchair."

The thought of that was too unsettling. Sterling said, "No. I can walk."

"Yeah, but should you?" Alex asked but came around and opened the passenger door, then stood there as Sterling, with much whimpering, eased himself out. "You must be freezing."

He wasn't, actually, but he could feel himself breaking out in a fresh round of cold sweat. He clutched his forearm more tightly; it was impossible to walk without jarring his shoulder, and his head was spinning. "Gonna pass out," he managed; the edges of his vision were going black with sparkles.

It was kind of pretty, he thought as hands bent him at the waist and he sat down onto something that felt, to his ass, like a swing. He was moving. Was he at the park? Was it a nice enough day to be at the park? And why the fuck did his arm hurt so much?

Bright lights drove away the darkness, and Sterling dropped his head to his chest, shutting his eyes tightly. "Okay, get him on the gurney," someone said, and he screamed as his shoulder became the only part of his body he could feel. "Okay, okay. Try to relax."

That was the stupidest thing Sterling had ever heard in his life. Relax? Hell, he was still screaming, and someone was touching him. He swatted at them—that *hurt*, he didn't want anyone touching him, he just wanted Owen. Someone tried to hold him down by his good shoulder to keep him from moving, and he shouted again and jerked away, flaring the pain into red fire. "Don't touch me," he gasped. "Don't." Letting someone other than Owen touch him was what had gotten him into this mess. Another hand at his wrist and he shouted it a second time. "Don't touch me! Only Owen. Where's Owen?"

Sterling let his head drop back, feeling hot tears streaking down his temples into his hair. Where was Owen?

## Chapter Sixteen

Owen sighed and almost viciously scratched out three entire paragraphs from the article he'd been working on. Even if he hadn't been in a filthy mood, he'd have been just as hard on himself as an author—it often took him dozens of drafts to complete anything to his satisfaction.

He tossed the pages aside and leaned back in his chair, his back aching from sitting for too long. Time to stop before he gave in to the overwhelming impulse to crumple the entire article up and throw it into the trash.

He stood, and for want of anything better to do, picked up a cup half full of cold coffee and carried it to the kitchen. Taking his time, he washed it, dried it and put it away, concentrating hard on the task. It still only used up a minute or two of an evening that was dragging by.

Sterling hadn't called. Owen had no intention of letting the silence between them continue for much longer, but he'd expected Sterling, impatient, annoying, exasperating boy that he was, to have made the first move the way he always did. He'd been braced for another midnight call, a stormy-eyed Sterling pushing his way in, demanding, persuasive, infinitely appealing. He'd dozed on the couch until finally, around two, he'd gone to bed, leaving the porch light on, a tacit welcome.

Nine thirty. Oh, the hell with it. He was going to call Sterling. Another night apart wouldn't do either of them any good.

The phone rang as he was walking toward it, a synchronicity that made him smile, certain that it was Sterling. The idea of them both reaching breaking point at the same time was curiously comforting.

He picked up the phone, still smiling. "Hello?"

"Owen? It's Alex. Sterling's friend Alex? Look, I know there's probably a better way to do this, but I don't know what it is, so I'll just—Sterling's at the emergency room with a dislocated shoulder, and he's freaked out and screaming and he won't let the doctors touch him, and he's asking for you. I know you guys had a fight or whatever—"

"Alex, take a breath," Owen said, going immediately to get his boots and coat, the phone tucked under his ear. "What happened?"

"He was losing it, and he asked if he could have a night with Kirk. But Kirk didn't hurt him, I swear. All he did was strap him up and then Sterling's arm just—I don't know why it happened."

"I do," Owen said grimly. "And when I get my hands on Kirk—" No, he'd worry about that later. "I'm leaving now. I'll be there in a few minutes. Tell him I'm on my way." Owen dropped the phone on a table and checked his pocket for his keys as he went out the front door.

Reacting quickly in an emergency was something he'd always been able to do; there just wasn't space or time to panic usually, and he never did because it wasn't remotely helpful. The thought of Sterling screaming for him didn't change that; if anything, it put him in a state of mind where everything seemed incredibly simple and easy. He was in his car, he was driving, and at the end of the journey was Sterling, who needed him. So he had to drive quickly, but not recklessly, because an accident would slow him down and so would a ticket, and he had to *not* think about Sterling much, because it made the orderly thoughts marching through his brain, telling him where to turn, when to change lanes, when to overtake a stupid, fucking car just crawling along, dissolve into a chaotic mess of anguish and anger.

Simple.

It was a little disconcerting to slam the car door behind him in the parking lot of the hospital and discover that he had only the vaguest recollections of the drive over.

Alex was waiting just inside the ER doors, his face screwed up with a mixture of relief and apprehension. "Owen! Thank God you got here."

"Where is he?" Owen said, brushing aside Alex's attempts to explain what had happened in a hushed, frantic tumble of words. "Never mind all that. Where is Sterling?"

"This way," Alex said and led him down the hallway to a room that had walls but no door, only a curtain. Owen pushed it out of his way impatiently, and *there* was Sterling, finally, wearing nothing but a pair of jeans and his sneakers unlaced on his otherwise bare feet. The fact that he wasn't wearing a shirt made his dislocation easy to see—his shoulder was misshapen, his arm where he cradled it to his chest awkwardly out of alignment.

Sterling's face was pale and tear-streaked, but he wasn't screaming anymore at least. As Owen moved toward him, he was aware that the doctor and nurse standing near the wall most definitely *not* helping Sterling were saying something to him, but he couldn't listen to them.

And then Sterling's eyes met his, and Owen could see the rush of relief in the way Sterling's face relaxed, just a little bit. "You're here," Sterling said in a voice that was almost gone.

Owen nodded, not trusting himself to speak right then. He went to Sterling and cupped his cheek, the skin damp and cool. Sterling's gaze was fixed on his face, blue eyes clouded with pain, imploring. "Let them take care of you," Owen said, phrasing it as an order, not a request. "I'll be right here, and when they've finished, we'll go home."



He turned his head and found the doctor, a gray-haired man with the bushiest eyebrows Owen had ever seen, staring at him, frowning. If it was supposed to be intimidating, it didn't work. "Has he been x-rayed? Examined? Given something for the pain?" Owen asked, raising his eyebrows inquiringly, his voice, to his own ears, clipped and cold.

"We just managed to give him something for the pain a few minutes ago, but that's all we've been able to do so far. He didn't want us to touch him, and we didn't want to restrain him until he'd relaxed a little bit—there's too much risk of nerve damage." The doctor seemed apologetic, but when he put it like that, Owen could understand why they'd waited. "If you think you can get him to lie still long enough, we'll give him a muscle relaxant. Then when he's more comfortable, we'll take some X-rays to make sure we know what we're dealing with, though based on how the injury happened, I think things should be fairly straightforward for now."

Owen looked at Alex, who seemed a little less apprehensive now that Owen was here. Or maybe it was just that Sterling had stopped screaming.

Seeming to understand what Owen wasn't asking, Alex said, "I told them the truth. I wouldn't risk his health, not even to protect myself." That let Owen know that Alex had told them the injury was his fault, probably leaving Kirk out of the equation entirely. It didn't matter. Owen would deal with Kirk later.

"Sterling?" Owen watched Sterling's face for a sign that he'd been listening, and Sterling nodded very slightly. "They're going to give you another shot now to help relax you. I want you to lie still and let them do what they need to do."

Sterling nodded again, just a tiny bob of his head. His lips were reddened and dry, probably from biting them, Owen thought as he put a hand around the back of Sterling's neck to reassure him. Sterling whimpered when Owen had to stand up and shift toward the head of the gurney while the doctor gave him an injection.

"This should kick in fairly quickly," a nurse said. "Try to keep him calm and once he's less tense, we'll try to reduce the dislocation."

"Owen?" God, Sterling sounded terrible as Owen pulled a chair over to sit beside him. He took Sterling's good hand in both of his own, cradling it carefully.

"Sterling, I need you to focus," Owen said. It was something he was having trouble doing himself; his thoughts were jumping from pointless speculation about what else Kirk had done to Sterling to inconsequential details, like the small shaving cut under Sterling's chin, the tiny slash of red stark against pale skin. Anything beyond the present moment just didn't seem to matter, though he knew that he would have some damage control to do later. Alex wasn't going to bear the brunt of this. It helped that the ER staff were virtually unshockable and used to dealing with the most bizarre accidents; a dislocated shoulder following a bondage scene was relatively mundane in their world. "Focus on

me, not the pain. It's not important. It's going away. Let yourself relax and let these people do their job."

"Hurts," Sterling said.

"That's entirely to be expected with a dislocated shoulder." Owen allowed some asperity to show even as he gave Sterling's hand a gentle squeeze. "I'd be astonished if it *didn't* hurt, but I'd like it to hurt just a little less, which it will do as soon as you relax. Are you relaxed?"

Sterling took a deep, shuddering breath and then nodded, his eyes closing, the rigidity of pain-locked muscles loosening. "Yes, Owen."

The nurse and doctor were murmuring in soft voices as they left the room, giving them some privacy, which Owen greatly appreciated. Alex chose that moment to come closer, saying, "God, Sterling, I'm so sorry. If I'd had any idea things were going to go down like that, I never would have—"

"No," Sterling said weakly, then started to cry while keeping as still as possible, which looked both difficult and painful. "It's not—not your fault..."

"Shh," Owen told him, then turned to Alex. "I know you want to help, but there's nothing you can do right now." It seemed cruel to tell Alex he was making things worse, even though it was true. "Go home. I'll call you later and let you know how he is. And if you talk to Kirk, let him know I'll be in touch."

Alex nodded. "I'm so sorry. So, so—"

"We know. Go on now." Owen was relieved when Alex left, glad that there was one less distraction from Sterling, who needed all of his attention just then. "Shh. It's all right. I'm here. Just listen to me and relax." He stroked Sterling's hair gently. "Everything's going to be fine."

Breath hitching, Sterling shuddered and closed his eyes. "I—I'm so glad you're here."

"That's good to know," Owen said, keeping his voice conversational. Tears were wet on Sterling's face, trickling down, and he wiped them away with his fingers. "Because I don't plan on leaving, just to make that perfectly clear."

"I'm sorry too," Sterling murmured. "I shouldn't—Kirk—God, I was so *stupid*—"

"The only stupid person in this room is me for letting you walk out in that state," Owen said ruefully. "But we can save the apologies for later. I'll call them back in, and you're going to let them deal with your shoulder. It will hurt, but this time I'll be here. You'll be safe."

"Okay," Sterling whispered, looking at him trustingly, willing to accept the pain because Owen had told him to.

Once Sterling was relaxed, his breathing deep and steady, his gaze on Owen's face, it was fairly quick work to take some X-rays, which confirmed that it was safe to put his shoulder back into its socket. He didn't fight the doctors and nurse, stayed calm and still while they rotated his arm and let the shoulder slip back into place, although he let out a horrible choked scream

when it did. The relief was immediate if the way Sterling went limp afterward meant anything.

"Oh God," Sterling said, breathing heavily. "Thank God. That's so much better."

"Here, we're just going to move it around a little bit and make sure everything's where it belongs," the doctor said. He lifted Sterling's arm and moved it around, then nodded in satisfaction and gestured at the nurse standing nearby, who handed him a sling. "Sit up here—good, good—and I'll strap you up." He worked quickly, his movements smooth, earning Owen's gratitude as it saved Sterling enduring any more pain than was inevitable. "There we go."

"Thanks. Sorry—about before." Sterling was still pale, but he looked better.

"Don't worry about it. That was nothing compared to some people." The doctor patted Sterling's good shoulder and turned to Owen. "He won't be able to drive tonight, obviously, and he'll have to take it easy with that arm for a week or more. He should see his own doctor by Friday at the latest for follow-up. Over-the-counter pain medication should suffice, but he'll need to ice the joint to minimize swelling. You're going to take him home?"

"Yes, he'll be staying with me," Owen said, committing the brief instructions to memory. He didn't think that Sterling was taking much of the conversation in, too dazed by meds and the ordeal. "I'll take care of him."

"The young man who brought him in told us what happened—" The doctor hesitated and then said, "If there's any counseling required, or if your friend wants to report this incident—"

"No," Sterling said, his voice stronger now as he sat up and turned so his feet were dangling toward the floor. "I just want to go home with Owen. I'll be fine."

"Your call," the doctor said with a shrug. A baby's wail, high and piercing, cut through the background noise, and he turned his head. "I think I'm being paged," he said dryly. "There's some paperwork to fill out at the desk, and a pharmacy in the lobby if you need it." With a nod to them both, he left the cubicle.

"You don't have a shirt," Owen observed out loud for the first time.

"I didn't want to try to get it on. I think it's in my car. Oh no! Alex has the keys." Sterling giggled, and Owen guided his feet back up onto the gurney. "I'm so stoned."

"Clearly." Owen was a mix of confusing emotions, relieved that Sterling was all right, worried about what had gotten him hurt in the first place, angry at Kirk for messing around with something he knew too little about and with himself for not having put a firmer stop to Kirk's fumbling attempts to seduce Sterling weeks ago. "Stay here. I'm going to see what we need to do to spring you. All right?"

Sterling nodded and curled onto his good side, closing his eyes. It wouldn't have surprised Owen to find him asleep when he came back a few minutes later, paperwork in hand, but Sterling's eyes were open.

"Oh, good. I was wondering if I'd have to carry you. Which I should anyway because your car, while still in the parking lot, is locked. You were right about Alex taking the keys. Sterling?"

The boy turned a dopey smile in his direction. "Hmm?"

"Never mind. Here, pretend to sign these." Owen signed them himself, returned them to the desk without comment, and went to bring his car around so Sterling wouldn't have as far to go. One of the nurses put Sterling in a wheelchair and rolled him out to the sidewalk, then helped Owen get him into the car. Sterling was a little *too* relaxed now, floppy but in good spirits as Owen pulled away from the curb.

"Hey," Sterling said, frowning. "Where are we going?"

"To the moon and back," Owen muttered under his breath. "Home," he said aloud. "Remember? I don't know where you've been staying, but we can get your things tomorrow. And your car. Don't worry about it now."

Tomorrow was beginning to fill up with tasks, but all of them could wait until he'd spoken with Sterling and found out what had been going on. He gave Sterling a sidelong glance. The boy was slumped in his seat, humming tunelessly as he stared up at the roof of the car.

"You should have a convertible," Sterling said. "No top. It'd be cool." He giggled. "Really cool on a night like this."

"I'll think about it," Owen said. He didn't want to grill Sterling, but asking him questions while he was like this, his inhibitions down, might be easier on him. God, he wanted to tear Kirk apart. Little pieces. Tiny. Sterling was *his* and Kirk had *dared*—

Owen slammed his fist against the unforgiving leather of the wheel and took a deep breath, pain radiating through his hand. Retribution could wait until he had the full picture, and really, there was only one person to blame and that was him. Kirk had hurt Sterling, but Owen had made it possible for him to do it; it was his fault, all of it.

"Ouch," Sterling said sympathetically. His face brightened. "Want me to kiss it better? I'll kiss all of you, anytime, you know that, right? Love kissing you. Love—"

"Sterling, are you hurt anywhere else or is it just your shoulder?" Owen interrupted. He hadn't seen any marks on Sterling's back or chest, but there was something about the way he was sitting that told its own story. Owen was only too familiar with the careful way a sub sat after being spanked or paddled, and even doped up, Sterling was showing signs of having a tender ass.

Infinitesimally small pieces...

The question seemed to require an awful lot of consideration. Sterling frowned, thinking, then turned his head as a car passed them in the opposite direction, staring after it. "Wait, what?"

"Are you hurt anywhere else but your shoulder?" Owen repeated, trying to be patient.

"Oh. Um...not really."

Owen sighed; he was obviously going to have to be more specific. "Tell me what Kirk did."

"You mean *Master* Kirk." Sterling snorted, although he couldn't have found the title as ridiculous as Owen did. He sounded marginally less spaced-out now. "He strapped me to a bench—it was padded—and spanked me. With a paddle. For a long time, but like he didn't really get anything out of it. I don't know why he bothered. I think he just liked seeing me in that position. Or maybe he just liked the idea of hitting me. I don't know." His voice, still rough, grew wistful. "I just wanted to get out of my head, but it didn't work."

Owen tightened his hands on the wheel until his knuckles ached. He should have been the one to take Sterling there, to lessen his emotional distress. "Then what did he do?"

"Fucked my mouth." It sounded like Sterling was relating a dream, not something that had actually happened. "But I don't think he liked that, either. He really wanted to *fuck* me fuck me, you know? He had Alex slick me up, then he started to strap me up to this cross kind of thing, and that was when..." His voice trailed off, head turned toward the window, his face in shadow. Owen couldn't see whether his eyes were opened or closed.

It could have been worse. It could have been so much fucking worse. Telling himself that didn't help, but Owen let the words repeat in his head until he almost believed them. Okay. Now he knew what he had to deal with, and it didn't, thank God, sound as if Sterling was particularly traumatized by anything leading up to the injury, more frustrated because he hadn't gotten off.

Which, as far as Owen was concerned, was something that Sterling wouldn't be getting to do for quite a while. He was willing to assume a lot of the blame for what had happened, but that didn't absolve Sterling entirely. One argument shouldn't have been all that was needed to send him out actively looking for a replacement Dom, and Owen was going to point that out to him at length.

"One last question," he said as he turned into the driveway. "Did Kirk stop as soon as you used your safe word?"

Kirk was culpable for not discussing physical and emotional limits in enough detail with a new sub, but if Sterling had been so eager to get his ass hot and well-fucked that he'd rushed Kirk into the scene, then Owen could easily picture an equally eager Kirk going along with it. It fitted what he knew of both men, and he knew how very tempting Sterling could be. If Kirk had

ignored a safe word, though, Owen was going to put the word out that he was a risk to any sub, someone to be avoided. The club would close its doors to him.

It didn't seem enough, but it would be a start.

The car stopped, and Owen put it into park, but didn't shut it off—it was cold enough outside that the interior would lose heat very quickly, and he wasn't sure how long they'd be sitting there. He turned toward Sterling and waited.

Sterling sighed before rolling his head to the left, looking at Owen. There was enough light from the one on the porch that they could see each other. “There wasn't one. He didn't ask, and I forgot. When he strapped my wrist and it started to hurt, I tried to tell him it wasn't going to work, and he told me he wanted me quiet and gagged me before I could explain.” Sterling looked worried, like he wasn't sure how Owen was going to react to this news.

Like he was afraid of Owen's reaction.

Gagged. Helpless. Hurting. His boy. Sick rage, bleak and bitter, filled him like dirty water, swirling around until all he could taste and smell was tainted. He wanted to hit something again, punch holes to let this out before he drowned in it, choking, silenced, just as Sterling had been.

Sterling made a small, soft sound, distressed by what he must have seen in Owen's face. “Sorry—God, I'm sorry. I let you down, I dis—I disappointed you, and I—Owen, please—”

“Don't,” Owen said and put his hand up to Sterling's mouth to stop the words because he couldn't bear to hear them join the screams he hadn't heard but which were still echoing in his head. “Oh God, Sterling, don't. I'm not disappointed in you. It's my fault. I was supposed to keep you safe and I didn't, I fucking didn't—” He wanted to hold Sterling to him, hug him, and he couldn't even do that without hurting him more.

“Please,” Sterling said. He grabbed onto Owen's hand with his left, awkward but better than nothing. “Please, it wasn't your fault. I was the one who took off instead of staying and working things out—that's what I do, and I want to change but I don't know how. And I'm the one who went to Kirk. It's not your job to keep me safe from my own stupidity. I should have known better. I'm lucky that Alex was there to step in, but where I'm really lucky is that you were willing to come to the hospital when I needed you, because you didn't have to.”

“I wanted to,” Owen said. “I wanted to call you two minutes after you walked out of the house, but I thought you needed time.”

“I needed you,” Sterling whispered.

“I should have known that.”

Sterling was shivering; they were only small tremors, but Owen was close enough to see them plainly. He leaned in, intending no more than a brief, reassuring kiss before he took Sterling inside, but Sterling jerked back at the first touch of Owen's lips.

"Don't. He—I can still fucking *taste* him."

Owen narrowed his eyes. "Remind me to wash your mouth out with soap tomorrow, but right now I want to kiss you, and when I have, the only thing you'll taste is *me*." He cradled the back of Sterling's head, his fingers spread wide, the cool silk of Sterling's hair against his palm. He searched Sterling's eyes for any hint that he was pushing him too far and, finding none, kissed him. Sterling's lips parted for him, and he slid his tongue inside, deliberately closing his mind to the inevitable images of Kirk. His boy to kiss and hold and comfort. His.

He didn't want to stop, but it was time to get Sterling inside and comfortable. The boy was wearing nothing but Owen's jacket and the sling binding his arm to his chest on the top half of his body, and was still probably in shock from everything he'd been through.

"All right—let's get you into the house and in bed. Do you think you could eat something?" Owen got out and went around to the other side of the car, where Sterling had fumbled the passenger door open on his own. "Stop that. I'm here to help. Easy, now. Should I get you a blanket before you walk inside?"

"No." Sterling's teeth chattered. "Just want to go. It's not that cold."

It was, but they were close enough to the house that it didn't matter much. Owen kept an arm around Sterling as they went up the steps, only discovering that he'd failed to lock the front door when the key in the lock didn't slide the bolt. "Straight upstairs with you," he said firmly, not wanting to chance Sterling falling asleep anywhere but where he'd be most comfortable.

"Your room? I can sleep with you?"

"Oh, you're sleeping with me," Owen said grimly. "I'm not letting you out of my sight." That threat didn't seem to bother Sterling too much, going by the wavering smile. "I need to get an ice pack. Go on up and get into bed; I won't be long."

"Yes, Owen," Sterling said. He shook his head. "God, that feels so much better to say than—"

"Don't," Owen said. If he heard "Master Kirk" from Sterling's lips one more time, he was going to throw up. "I'll be with you in a minute. I need to call Alex."

He watched Sterling climb the stairs and then got an ice pack, a glass of water, and the painkillers, placing them by the bed. Sterling was in the bathroom, but the toilet flushed, followed by the sound of running water, so Owen decided not to bother asking if he could manage since it was clear he could.

He went back downstairs to call Alex, not intending to do more than bring him up to speed. Alex had earned his gratitude, but he wasn't entirely off the hook as far as Owen was concerned.

"Hello?" Alex said eagerly at the first ring.

"Alex, it's Owen. Sterling's fine. They put his shoulder back in—he'll have to see a doctor later this week—and I've got him here at my house."

"Oh, thank God. Thank *you*," Alex said. "I've been so worried, you have no idea. And Kirk—"

"Don't tell me he's been worried," Owen said sharply. "I don't want to hear it. If he was really worried, he could have taken Sterling to the emergency room himself. Which is what a Dom with any decency would have done."

"He was freaked out," Alex whined. "He was afraid—"

"He should be afraid of *me*," Owen said. "I thought Sterling was your friend."

"He is!"

"Then let's worry about him and not the man responsible for putting him in the hospital. Sterling is fine, Alex. I'll have him call you tomorrow." Owen paused, then hung up without reminding Alex that he'd be calling Kirk at some point. Let the man worry about when that might be—he deserved to.

Going back upstairs, Owen went into the bedroom, where Sterling had kicked off his sneakers and jeans and was standing, naked, beside the bed. The covers were pulled back, but Sterling looked apprehensive. When he saw Owen, he said, "I don't know how to lie down so it won't hurt. I guess I was thinking if I stood here long enough, the bed would turn into a cloud or something. Or maybe I'd fall asleep standing up and it wouldn't matter."

"What we can do is prop some pillows around you on that side for support," Owen said, glad to be presented with a problem that was relatively easy to deal with. "If you lie on your back, we'll see how it feels. If it doesn't work, we'll try something else. I imagine you just need to avoid rolling over onto it when you're asleep, and the pillows will stop you."

Sterling nodded, looking completely exhausted, as if even the smallest decision was too much to make. Owen helped him into bed, wincing inwardly at the grunts of pain Sterling made as his shoulder was jarred even a little, and arranged the pillows from his side of the bed around Sterling.

"How's that?"

"It's okay." Sterling's lips were pinched, the skin around them bleached white, but his eyes were sliding closed as Owen watched.

He waited, but Sterling's breathing had evened out and he seemed to be asleep, so Owen placed the ice pack on his shoulder and went downstairs to lock up. Once everything was locked and the lights turned out, he went upstairs again, undressing as he stood in the doorway, and dropped his clothes to the floor, something he almost never did.

Sliding in between the sheets with the extra pillow he'd taken from the guest room, Owen did his best not to make the mattress shift, but he didn't completely succeed and Sterling murmured softly, reaching out for him.



"Shh, I'm right here," Owen told him. The ice pack slid off Sterling's shoulder, but it'd been on for a while, so Owen decided not to replace it. "Go back to sleep."

"Can't," Sterling said peevishly, even though Owen was sure he had been sleeping. "Hurts, and I missed you."

"Do you want a painkiller?"

Sterling tried to hitch himself closer and whimpered. "No. You."

"Okay—just stop moving. Let me come to you." Carefully Owen slid closer, resting a hand on Sterling's hip so he wouldn't risk jarring Sterling's arm. "Is that better?"

"Mm." Sterling opened his eyes, which looked half unfocused. "I love you."

That wasn't something that Owen wanted to hear when he felt that he'd failed Sterling and let him down. It wasn't a pleasant feeling, and it wasn't a familiar one. He was good at his job, he was good at being a Dom; his life had felt solid, built on a firm foundation. Sterling had brought that house of cards tumbling down, and Owen was as lost as Sterling had been when he'd gone looking for comfort in all the wrong places.

Pointing any of that out to Sterling right then was impossible. Hell, by the morning this conversation would have been sponged from Sterling's memory, wiped away by pain and drugs, forgotten.

So Owen kissed him, the lightest brush of his mouth against Sterling's, and said, "I love you too. Now go to sleep."

It wasn't a lie; it hadn't been for a long time, but Owen still felt guilty about saying it, even if Sterling's mouth did curve in a contented smile as sleep took him again.

## Chapter Seventeen

Sterling woke up to an incredibly stiff shoulder and an equally stiff cock. Probably the result of being in Owen's bed, he told himself as he sat up, wincing, and leaned against the headboard. That wasn't comfortable, either—Owen's headboard was awesome for being tied to, but not so much when it came to leaning. Still, once he was there he didn't want to move again, so he just stayed.

He could hear sounds of movement downstairs and wondered what Owen was doing. Having coffee? Trying to figure out where to send Sterling for the rest of the semester break? Owen was too responsible to kick him out when he was hurt, not to mention probably feeling guilty about him getting hurt in the first place. Not that it was Owen's fault, because it wasn't, but Sterling couldn't remember if he'd told Owen that the night before—everything was a definite blur, and he actually wasn't sure how he'd gotten to Owen's house at all.

His ass was sore too, he realized, but nowhere near like his shoulder was. Having it pop out of its socket like that had been sickening and even more painful than the original injury.

Sterling looked down at his erection and glared at it. So not appropriate under the circumstances. Hearing Owen's footsteps on the stairs, Sterling quickly yanked up the sheet and blanket to his waist to cover up his dick.

"I thought I heard you moving around." Owen was holding a cup of coffee, which was the perfect accessory as far as Sterling was concerned. "Here, take this for now and if you like, I'll bring you up some breakfast. Or do you want to get up?"

Owen glanced down as he handed over the cup. It was only two-thirds full, which was a detail Sterling appreciated; spilling hot liquid over his crotch might take care of the problem of his erection refusing to subside, but there were less drastic ways to do that. "Hmm."

It was a noncommittal sound, but the amused glint in Owen's eye made it pretty clear that sheets and a blanket could only do so much.

"Oh, great, make fun of the guy with the useless arm," Sterling said, sighing. "Look, I know you must not want me here, so you don't have to pretend, okay? If you'd feed me something and help me figure out how to get to my car, that'd be more than I deserve, and I'd be grateful."

Owen looked at him with a serious expression. "Sterling. I *do* want you here, so stop being ridiculous and drink your coffee. And your car's in the

driveway—Alex dropped it off last night and put the keys through the mail slot.”

That was enough of a surprise that Sterling stopped sipping his coffee. “You told him to, didn't you?”

“I told you I'd take care of everything last night, but you probably don't remember much.” Owen sat on the edge of the bed very carefully, so that only the slightest of jolts went through Sterling's arm. That put Owen really close, which did nothing to help his dick get the message that now wasn't the time to be insisting on saying hello. “Let me refresh your memory before we move on to other matters at hand.”

Sterling took another gulp of his coffee to give himself something to do. None of that sounded good, but he wasn't going to argue with Owen about anything today. He owed him too much. “Uh, sure. Whatever you want to say, just say it.”

Owen patted his leg reassuringly and left his hand there, high on Sterling's thigh, his strong fingers kneading it absently. He raised his eyebrows inquiringly. “Why are you so tense? Do you think that you're in complete disgrace and I'm furious with you? That any moment now I'm going to launch into a lecture, yell at you, kick you out? I hope not, because it's not the way I'm feeling at all.”

“It—it's not?” Sterling's fingers tightened on his mug, studying Owen's face. It was such a good face—strong, handsome, understanding. Without a doubt, Sterling knew that it was the best face he'd ever see in his life. No one else would ever measure up to Owen.

“I was—still am—angry with Kirk. He didn't take care of you. He shouldn't have even agreed to—never mind.” Owen gave him a wry grin. “You're persuasive enough to get me to take you on, entirely against my better judgment; Kirk never stood a chance.” His smile faded. “I'm very sorry you were hurt. Even sorrier that you felt that desperate and didn't come back to me, didn't know that you *could*, that you always can. I'm not done with you, Sterling. We haven't even started—but we need to be sure it's what we both want.”

All the time that Owen was speaking, his hand was warm against Sterling's leg through the sheets. It was hard to concentrate when Sterling wanted that hand higher, over the throb of his cock, but he made an effort. If Owen spotted that he was distracted, he'd probably say *Focus* in that stern, kind voice, and Sterling wasn't sure, but that might be all it would take to make him come.

“I want you as my sub,” Owen said and that got all of Sterling's attention. “This time, *I'm asking you*, without being pressured or coerced or manipulated or seduced—and, yes, you did all of that and you know it. I want it understood that you're *mine*. I can keep you on a much tighter leash if it's what you want, or we can take it slowly for a while; we'll need to work out the details, but that's what I would like. You, belonging to me. My boy.”

Sterling's heart was hammering in his chest, and he parted his lips to say something—he wasn't sure what—but nothing came out at first. He knew he was staring at Owen with wide-eyed, open longing. What Owen had said was still sinking in, still hovering at the edge of being real. If it was real, and he hadn't imagined it—

“Yes,” Sterling blurted out. “Is that—was I supposed to answer? Because that's what I want too. Pretty much the only thing I want. I—” He had a vague sense that he'd said it last night, so he might as well jump in at the deep end—Owen wouldn't let him drown. “I love you. I want to be yours, just yours. Please.”

“I told you I loved you last night,” Owen said, which had to be a lie because there was just no way that Sterling would have forgotten that. Not that Owen had ever lied to him before, but he'd been high, not dead, and he would have remembered something like that. “You weren't really listening then, but I don't mind saying it again. I love you. You're just impossible *not* to love, exasperating though you are at times. I pretty much stopped trying a while back.”

Sterling found himself smiling; it felt like a wide, goofy smile. “So does this mean you're not kicking me out?”

“I am most definitely not kicking you out,” Owen said. “I'd like to do the opposite, actually, if we can figure out how to arrange it.”

Not sure what that even meant, Sterling dismissed it because he cared more about making sure Owen knew how happy this made him. “This is—it's what I wanted, for a long time. Are you sure?”

That got him a narrow-eyed look that sent a sizzle of heat through him. “Very sure.” Owen tilted his head thoughtfully. “So where were we? Oh, yes. Matters at hand.”

Sterling was torn. He didn't want Owen to go anywhere; staying this close to him for the rest of the day would be ideal, and he knew that they had a lot to sort out. Shit, he had to get his suitcase and other things from the hotel, and make time to talk to Alex who was probably freaking, and make appointments with a doctor and all kinds of stuff. No, he didn't want Owen to go, but the longer Owen stayed this close, his hand caressing Sterling's leg, the more impossible it got to ignore the fact that Sterling was so turned on he was close to begging for something he knew he wouldn't get. He told himself to focus—big mistake as that sent a jolt of pure lust through him—and tried to look attentive.

Owen's hand finally moved, flipping back the covers in a smooth, sudden movement, and exposing Sterling's dick, hard, darkly flushed, slick-wet at the tip, his balls drawn up snugly. His lips twitched in a smile. “Urgent matters, by the look of it.”

The breath Sterling drew in was shaky. “Is—are you—you're going to tell me I can't come for the next year or something, aren't you?”

"That wasn't what I had in mind," Owen said and closed his hand around Sterling's cock just below the head.

Sterling moaned. "Oh God. Owen, please."

"Be careful with that cup of coffee," Owen told him. "You wouldn't want to spill it. And don't move—if you chance hurting your shoulder, I'll stop. And I don't think you want me to stop, do you?" Owen's perfect, beautiful hand stroked Sterling's dick, tugging the skin over the ridge and then back down again. Sterling's toes curled.

"No. No, don't stop." God, it was so hard not to move.

"I won't unless you spill the coffee or move," Owen said, his hand moving smoothly, his fingers flexing, teasingly light, then a tight tunnel Sterling wanted to thrust up into. "You see, for this once, it's completely in your hands. If you obey me, the way I know that you can, the way I expect you to be for me always, perfectly, beautifully obedient, my good boy, then you'll get to come, Sterling. I won't stop until you come or unless you move. I'm going to keep on doing this until you—"

"Oh, *God*," Sterling choked out. Sweat prickled his forehead and the back of his neck. Owen's hand, his fucking *hand*, working him with so much assurance, his thumb flicking over the slippery head now and then, a quick, firm circle that made him whimper every time, helplessly, fruitlessly pleading for permission to fuck up into that circle of palm and fingers.

Only Owen could make getting jerked off such torturous, unbearable pleasure. Maybe this was punishment for what he'd done, since Owen couldn't spank him. Maybe this was going to happen over and over until his shoulder was better, kept in this bed, Owen's bed, hard and aching, with Owen coming to him and doing this hour after hour, making him sob out Owen's name, begging for mercy without ever wanting that wish granted.

The thought of it made him even harder, brought another jolt of clear fluid to the tip of his dick, fluid that Owen spread around with another firm slide of his thumb. Sterling felt so sensitized that he couldn't bear it, like all the nerve endings in his body had migrated to his cock and the rest of his body was left with nothing.

His chest rose and fell in quick, short breaths, his left hand holding onto the coffee cup in desperation. If he spilled the coffee—well, it wasn't hot enough to burn him, not really, though it wouldn't feel good. He was more worried about not getting to come. He wanted to come, wanted it so much, wanted to see his dick pulsing in Owen's grip, wanted to see Owen's face as it happened. Owen, who loved him and didn't think he was a huge fuckup. Who didn't think he was a disappointment, and how that was even possible, Sterling couldn't begin to guess.

"Please," he gasped, holding rock-steady, not moving at all. "Please, Owen, let me come. Can I? Tell me..."

Owen held his gaze and then nodded. "Show me," he said as he lifted the hand that had been lying empty, palm up on his lap to his mouth. He licked his middle finger, a swift curl of his tongue, and then rubbed it, wet, spit-slick, through the fluid beading the tip of Sterling's cock, and brought it back up to his mouth, tasting it with a slow lap of his tongue.

"Oh fuck," Sterling whispered and came all over himself and Owen, eyes locked on Owen's mouth. He was totally frozen except for his dick, which shot what he was pretty sure was a record nine times as his toes curled and his lungs locked up. He couldn't even make a sound until it was over, and then it was a moan that escaped him as he shuddered and his shoulder made its protest to the movement known.

"Let me take that," Owen said, tugging on the coffee cup, and Sterling let go gratefully, not caring at all that his back was probably imprinted with the pattern of Owen's headboard.

"Would—would you tell me again?" Sterling asked. He was still breathing heavily, but he needed to hear it.

Owen gave him an amused look. "Well, you already came, so I assume you're talking about the other thing. And yes, I will." Leaning in close, he brushed his lips over Sterling's, then said, "I love you."

It was such a relief that Sterling sighed and closed his eyes. "I don't know why you would, but—I'm so fucking glad. You have no idea." The past couple of days had been so hard.

"I think I do," Owen said, his voice dry enough to make Sterling open his eyes again. "I suppose it didn't occur to you that I feel the same way?" He picked up one of the pillows that had gotten pushed to the bottom of the bed during the night and tucked it behind Sterling's back. "Better?" Sterling nodded gratefully. "I don't know what you see in me, beyond the fact that I know which buttons you like having pressed, but we can bill and coo over each other when we're less...damp." Owen took a handful of tissues from the box beside the bed and gave Sterling's stomach a brisk rub. "I'm going to get you into the shower; they said that you could take your sling off, so don't worry about that."

"A shower sounds good," Sterling said with total sincerity. He wanted to symbolically scrub every trace of Kirk off him. "A really long one."

"I'll share it with you," Owen said. "You can do some more standing still while I take care of you."

Like always, Owen meant what he said—he didn't let Sterling lift a finger in the shower, just told him to stand there. Owen washed him down, starting with shampooing his hair and working his way all the way down to Sterling's ankles, with particular interest in the sounds Sterling made when underarms and balls were concentrated on. Not that Sterling's cock seemed capable of stirring right then, which he had to admit was kind of a relief; he wasn't sure if Owen was going to let him come again anytime soon.

"Can I go get my stuff after breakfast?" Sterling asked as Owen turned him under the spray. "It won't take long. I just don't want to leave it there."

"*You* can't," Owen said. "But we can go together. I wasn't kidding when I said I didn't intend to let you out of my sight, for a couple of days at least. I take it you weren't staying with Alex, or he would have brought your things with your car."

"No, just a hotel." There were a lot of things that went along with that that Sterling didn't say, like that it had been lonely and boring and then eventually further tainted by his father's visit.

"I see," was all that Owen said. "Well, luckily Alex did have the sense to put your coat and shirt in the car; I brought them in earlier."

Owen was running his hands over Sterling's chest as he spoke, checking for soap residue, Sterling supposed. It was distracting like it always was when Owen was touching him, but there was a new element to the way Owen handled him; more possessive, definitely more loving, as if saying the words had allowed Owen to demonstrate just how he felt. Each outwardly mundane action as Owen bathed him felt like a disguised caress.

The water was shut off, leaving them standing in a steamy, ringing silence. Owen was so close that their bodies touched; arms, chests, their knees bumping. The kiss was inevitable, and Sterling closed his eyes, welcoming the slick thrust of Owen's tongue against his.

"You might wish I didn't love you," Owen murmured. "I'm going to be so much stricter with you now, so much more demanding." His hand slipped between their bodies, and Sterling moaned as Owen cupped and rolled his balls. "I hope you enjoyed this morning, because that's not going to happen again for a few days. I like you desperate, begging me to come. For me, though... Months of denying myself the feel of your mouth on me... I don't see any reason why that state of affairs should continue, do you?"

Once Sterling figured out what that meant—okay, maybe he *was* a little slow, but he'd blame it on the meds from the night before—he found himself genuinely shocked. "You mean—we don't have to wait until my birthday?"

"There doesn't seem much point now, does there? Between us, we've broken that rule a couple of times already. I think I can trust you not to inform the college of my breach of ethics."

"You can," Sterling said eagerly. "I wouldn't—I'd never do anything to hurt you. *Never*."

Owen patted his hip and nodded. "I know. I do trust you. And it's been a very long time since I've been able to say that to someone I was involved with, so I hope you appreciate that it actually means something. Now come on—let's get you dressed and fed, and we'll go over to the hotel and get your things."

\* \* \* \* \*

Walking into the hotel room was more difficult than it should have been, even with Owen right there beside him. His father seemed to still be there, the echo of his words, the sneer on his face.

The gifts he'd brought back.

Owen had pointed at the bed and told Sterling to sit on it and not move, an order Sterling knew he was going to protest eventually, when his shoulder had healed, but not today, and started to pack up Sterling's scattered belongings with swift efficiency. When he got to the bag with the presents, he paused. One present had fallen out, lying on the floor. Owen picked it up and read the tag, then turned to look at Sterling. "You brought them back with you? Would you like to mail them to your mother and sister?"

Sterling shook his head slightly, not knowing how to explain.

Owen put the present back in the bag, then looked at Sterling. He'd missed the shake of Sterling's head, but now saw the expression on his face. "What is it?"

"My father. He brought them."

Frowning, Owen straightened up. "You left them at your house and he brought them here?"

"It's not my house." Sterling grimaced. "I'm not allowed to talk to them or go home unless I get his permission first, and I can only ask for that if I'm willing to give up my 'deviant lifestyle.'" He smiled at Owen, or tried to. "He doesn't know the half of it, does he?"

"He doesn't know you at all," Owen said, walking over to him. "He looks at you and misses everything that any father would be proud of and focuses on the one thing you can't change—don't *need* to change. Do I have to tell you how stupid of him that is? How it reflects badly on him, not you?" Owen exhaled sharply, his expression reflecting his distress. "God, I'm so fucking sorry, Sterling." He put his hand lightly on Sterling's injured shoulder, no weight to the touch. "So this is his fault."

The temptation to blame his own stupidity on his father was strong, but Sterling thought it was better not to. "No, it's mine. I knew better. I knew Kirk wasn't what I wanted, but at the time it seemed like something was better than nothing, you know?" He was looking into Owen's eyes earnestly. "I'll never make that mistake again, I promise." With Owen right there, owning him, it was the easiest promise in the world to make.



## Chapter Eighteen

“Yes, he's fine. He had a second MRI last week, and the doctor thinks that surgery will be necessary, but we'll cross that bridge when we come to it; Sterling doesn't want to schedule it until the semester is over.” It was late spring, and Owen was on the phone with Michael, who he'd also called the day after Sterling's injury. He'd known Michael would calm him down after his rage-inducing conversation with Kirk—who had, to be fair, been extremely apologetic and offered to pay Sterling's medical bills. Which wasn't the issue; Owen would have been more than happy to pay them himself, but Sterling was still a student and covered under his father's insurance.

Like he'd expected, Michael had done a perfect job of soothing him, and he'd been able to hang up after twenty minutes and go back to the drowsy Sterling without clenching his fists and grinding his teeth.

Now, with Sterling upstairs getting ready for their first trip to the club since he'd been hurt, Owen was comfortably seated on the couch and had Michael on the other end of the line checking up on them.

“Well, I'm glad he's feeling better,” Michael said, just a suspicion of a knowing smile in the words, “but what I really want to know is, does he pay rent, and if so, how?”

Owen rolled his eyes tolerantly. Thousands of miles away, and he still knew exactly what Michael looked like right now, mischievous and impertinent. Years ago, he'd have dealt with it by spanking him until all that sass turned into sizzle, but that wasn't his responsibility anymore. Sterling and Michael...very different men, but they both knew exactly how to get what they wanted from him.

“Yes, he does, as it happens.” A nominal one, anyway. “The basement's self-contained, with a door that locks, and as far as the university is concerned, he's a tenant, no more. There's been some gossip, but nothing I can't deal with, and Sterling's very good at brushing off questions he doesn't want to answer.”

“But he doesn't actually live down there, right?” Michael asked, his curiosity evident.

“He uses it,” Owen replied. “I wanted him to have a place of his own, somewhere to entertain his friends. He sleeps with me, of course.”

The basement bedroom had become somewhere they used now and then for role-playing, with Sterling showing a playful inventiveness that spurred an

initially reluctant Owen on. Sterling loved assuming another identity for an hour or two, throwing himself into each role with enthusiasm.

"Well, of course," Michael said. "And how are things with his family?"

"Complicated." Owen sighed.

"Aren't they always?"

"Yes, but that doesn't make it any easier. I feel for him, I really do." Owen hesitated before divulging more detailed personal information. "He is in touch with his sister through the Internet. She's too young to stand up to their father on her own, I think, but it's something. It makes him feel better not to be cut off entirely."

"And that's it? His mother is perfectly happy to leave things the way they are? I don't know," Michael said. "I guess I expect a certain amount of anger and disgust from fathers when they find out their sons are gay, but mothers... It seems like they should be more accepting."

"I did hear mention of an argument between Sterling's mother and father," Owen said. "I suspect she'll come around in time. From what Sterling's sister has said, it's starting to sink in that his mother is going to miss seeing him graduate, never have him home for Thanksgiving or Christmas. I'm not sure she's willing to agree to a permanent separation, even if Sterling's father seems more than happy with that scenario."

The sound of Sterling's footsteps on the stairs had Owen looking at his watch. "Okay, I'm going to say good night now—"

"Good morning," Michael corrected him.

"Behave," Owen said with a chuckle. "I'll speak to you soon. Give my regards to Daren."

"And you take care of yourself," Michael said. He lowered his voice and added, "I'm glad you're happy," before hanging up as Sterling came into the room.

Sterling was wearing a new shirt he'd bought just for the occasion, a dark red that brought out the blond highlights he'd had added to his hair. He'd been talking about a piercing too, but more as if he were feeling out what Owen thought than anything else. Mention of a tattoo would come next, Owen was sure. "I'm ready, I think," Sterling said. "Unless I'm forgetting something." He still needed fairly frequent reassurance to bolster his self-esteem, something he hid extremely well from everyone but Owen. Owen was the one who got to see the real Sterling, the Sterling behind the carefully erected walls.

"You look good," Owen said. He stood and walked around Sterling, a slow, thorough assessment that brought a flush to Sterling's face. After making a few adjustments to the way the shirt lay across Sterling's shoulders—unnecessary in themselves, but the attention made Sterling's eyes darken, his tongue passing over his lips—he undid one more button on the shirt and nodded. "Very good, in fact. I'm going to enjoy watching people stare at you, and I know they will." He ran his fingers across Sterling's throat and felt the ripple as

Sterling swallowed hard. "Maybe we need to make sure that staring is all they do."

"No one's going to touch me." Sterling sounded confident of it. "They all must have heard by now about you putting Kirk in his place."

"If they haven't, they've been living under a rock," Owen agreed. The way he was eying Sterling's throat was going to give away his surprise, he thought, and made himself look away.

"Oh, shit, I knew I was forgetting something. You asked me to get the mail, and I brought it in, but you were making dinner and I lost track of it." It was a small disobedience, one that Owen would just as easily let go without comment, but the fact that Sterling had brought it up meant he was hoping for the punishment that would follow.

Sterling went to the kitchen and returned with the mail.

"I'm sorry I forgot."

"We'll deal with it later," Owen promised, leafing through the pile that was mostly junk mail anyway. Near the bottom, though, was a greeting card addressed to Sterling. "This is for you."

"I never get mail. Actual mail, I mean." Sterling sounded surprised but opened the envelope and pulled out the card. "It's from my mom." Now he sounded *really* surprised. "She says—she says she stood up to my dad and told him he doesn't get to define her relationship with me, and she and Justine are going to PFLAG. No *way*."

Owen was as surprised as Sterling. From what he'd heard about Justine, he'd expected that she would get in touch with her adored older brother sooner or later, and he'd been glad for Sterling's sake that it had been only a few weeks after Christmas when her first e-mail had arrived, but Audrey Baker had seemed willing to follow her husband's lead, no matter what the cost to her family.

"That's wonderful news," he said sincerely. "Maybe with graduation coming up, your mother realized that it was time to take a stand? She'd want to be there and watch you; it's one of those once-in-a-lifetime moments for a parent."

"I kind of thought maybe she'd sneak away and come without saying anything to my father," Sterling said. "But my whole life that's all she's ever done—go behind his back once in a while. You remember I told you that Justine said they were fighting? I thought she was exaggerating or something, but... He must be shitting bricks. Seriously, I can't believe it. I mean, I do, because this is her handwriting..." He grinned at Owen. "But it's just—such a surprise. I wish I could have been there to see her standing up to him."

"I would have been applauding in the corner," Owen said. "After years of agreeing with him blindly, that must have been a huge first step for her to take." He patted Sterling's face. "One you took without hesitation, and thank God you did."

His touch seemed to signal to Sterling that it was okay to feel emotional about this—until then, he'd just seemed shocked. Now Sterling put his arms around Owen and leaned in close. "I'm really happy," he said. "Also stunned. But happy."

"I know." Owen stroked Sterling's hair tenderly. "And at the risk of sounding overly smitten, I'm happy that you're happy."

"So let's go! Can we go? Please?" Freed from his reaction, Sterling was like a puppy, full of energy, eyes bright.

Sterling like this was also in need of a firm hand. Loving, always, but firm. Owen was delighted to see the sparkle back in his boy's eyes, but tonight was important to them both, and he wanted Sterling in exactly the right head space when they walked into the club.

He stepped back, deliberately putting some space between them. "Since when is that how you ask me for something?"

Impossible to put real sternness into his voice, but the reproof wasn't faked. Owen had spent a lot of time training Sterling until certain responses were automatic, ingrained, but curbing Sterling's impatience, no matter how much Owen shared it in this particular instance, was definitely a work in progress.

Swallowing, Sterling dropped his gaze and crossed his wrists at his waist—the more traditional position of hands behind his back had been altered to accommodate his injured shoulder. "I'm sorry, Owen. I'm ready to leave whenever it pleases you."

Owen let the silence drag out and was more than pleased when Sterling didn't start to fidget but instead went deeper into a calm acceptance of the moment, his breathing slowing, no tension in his body as he waited for Owen.

"That's much better," he said finally. "I think it's time we left, don't you?"

Sterling kept his eyes lowered, but Owen could see the smile curving his lips. "Yes, Owen."

It never ceased to amaze him how Sterling could make it plain that Owen's name meant something entirely different used at times like this. Owen had thought about using a more traditional form of address but realized that he'd miss Sterling's respectful, adoring "Owen" far too much.

By the time they walked in the front door of the club, Sterling was fairly vibrating with excitement. It was definitely the positive version of the emotion—Sterling was looking forward to what might happen, not dreading it. The club was crowded, most of the participants for the evening having arrived within the last half hour or so, the air electric with anticipation. There were no tables completely empty, but Owen spotted one near the dance floor with a free chair and headed toward it.

Getting closer, he saw that one of the table's occupants was Elise, who had a young woman kneeling next to her.

"Elise," Owen said, nodding. "How are you?"

"Fine. Happy to be here," Elise said. "I heard things were working out with your boy—I'm glad to see they weren't just rumors. Sit with me?"

Owen nodded. "Thank you. No, not rumors at all. Sterling?"

Sterling was already halfway to his knees, not needing to be told, but he said, "Yes, Owen?"

"A drink for me. Club soda with a twist of lime, no ice." He didn't ask if Elise wanted something; if she did, the woman beside her would be fetching it.

Sterling straightened immediately and bowed his head before turning and walking toward the bar, his back straight but, Owen was sure, his eyes respectfully lowered. Sterling wouldn't be trying to catch anyone's attention tonight.

"He's beautiful," Elise said. "So much more at peace with himself than when I last saw him."

"I like to think so."

Elise pursed her lips. "I heard about the business with that other one. Not nice. Not nice at all, but you dealt with it well." She leaned over the table and tapped the back of his hand, hard enough to sting. "Better watch your boy tonight. He's just too tempting wandering around looking like nobody owns him."

"The reminder really isn't necessary," Owen said mildly. "As I'm sure you know, because you know everything, my darling Elise, I'm about to make sure that everybody knows exactly who Sterling belong to."

"And who would that be?" she asked, her eyes gleaming with amusement.

"He's mine," Owen said, smiling at her. "And you knew *that* the first time you saw him."

There was no comment to make to that, of course, and Elise didn't try. Owen looked around, evaluating the scene that was starting on the floor closest to them. Two older men, the Dom with white hair and a stern expression, the sub shirtless. The sub had tattoos all over him, the majority of his back and one entire arm covered with ink, and Owen wondered idly how many of them had been chosen by the Dom. If any; many of the people who came to the club were partnered on some level, but plenty of them were just casual friends.

He turned to look for Sterling, who was just leaving the bar holding his drink. Sterling's eyes weren't on the floor—reasonable considering he was carrying a full glass—so Owen was able to see his expression change as his steps faltered, gaze on someone near the door.

Kirk.

"Oh, you have to be kidding me," Elise said, not at all softly.

Owen stood and went toward Sterling. "Put my drink on the table and kneel beside it," he said. "I'll handle this."

With a grateful look, Sterling said, "Yes, Owen."

Kirk hadn't moved from just inside the door. He had to be aware that his reception would be chilly, his presence unwelcome, and indeed he seemed supremely uncomfortable. Good, Owen thought as he walked over. He should have had better sense than to show up here.

By the time he reached Kirk, the man was standing alone; people had pointedly turned and walked away from him, either to watch the scene on the floor or because they'd noticed Owen's approach. This was his situation to deal with, and no one would interfere, though Owen knew that if he needed it, plenty of people would support him in word or action. Not that it would come to that; the club wasn't free of drama, but a fistfight—no. Not here.

"Good evening, Kirk," Owen said, keeping his voice conversational. He looked around. "No Alex?"

Alex had, somewhat surprisingly, stayed with Kirk. Sterling had talked to him about it, worried that his friend was at risk, a concern Owen shared, but Alex had seemed confident that Kirk had learned his lesson. Owen wasn't sure the dynamic between Kirk and Alex could survive; a sub had to respect and trust his Dom, and he couldn't see how either emotion was possible when it came to Kirk, but loyalty was another element to the relationship, and he gave Alex points for that.

"He's waiting in the car," Kirk said. He bit his lip, his gaze flickering around the room like he was committing it to memory. "I didn't want him to see me get asked to leave, but I will if you don't want me here. I just wanted to talk to you, and Alex told me that you'd be here tonight."

Something told Owen to check on Sterling, so he turned his head toward the table. Sterling was kneeling as he'd been told to do, but he was tense and he was watching Owen and Kirk. Owen smiled at him, hoping to relieve his anxiety, and then said to Kirk, "You know that almost everyone here is aware of what you did to Sterling?"

Kirk flushed. "Yes."

"And you know any Dom who abuses a sub isn't welcome in this community."

"It was an accident," Kirk said. "I didn't know about his shoulder being a problem. Which doesn't excuse what happened—I take full responsibility for that. I got in over my head."

"You've always been over your head here," Owen told him.

Kirk nodded, meeting his gaze. "I know. You're right. But I'm hoping—I'm hoping you'll give me your permission to stay. I just want to watch and learn. I'm willing to be here as an observer only, until you say otherwise."

Studying his face, Owen thought about it. It wasn't an unreasonable request, but it was missing something. "You can stay," he said slowly, "if it's okay with Sterling. He's the one you owe the biggest apology to."

"I *want* to apologize to him," Kirk said. "You—you wouldn't let me talk to him—I get that, I do—but I want to tell him face-to-face that I'm sorry I didn't

do it right, any of it.” He was taller than Owen, all wide shoulders and muscles, but he seemed visibly diminished tonight. Attitude, Owen thought. It was all in the attitude. “He wanted something from me and I didn’t—”

Something in Owen’s eyes must have told Kirk that he was heading for dangerous ground because he stopped talking then, his eyes anxious, pleading. It had taken Owen a while to get over the thought of Sterling kneeling at Kirk’s feet begging for something only Owen should have given him, and being reminded of it now was rekindling a resentment that he knew he had to let go of.

“You can talk to him,” he told Kirk, “but this is one decision he’ll make for himself. Having said that, if you upset him, you’ll answer to me.”

Owen turned and beckoned Sterling over, not missing the slight hesitation before Sterling rose gracefully.

He thought that when Sterling joined them the boy stood a little closer to him than he normally would have, which meant he wanted to be protected, or at least to know that Owen would protect him if it became necessary.

“Kirk wants to talk to you,” Owen said, placing a hand on the back of Sterling’s neck. “But it’s up to you. You don’t have to if you don’t want to. Either answer is fine. Are you willing to hear what he has to say? I’ll be here the whole time.”

Sterling’s eyes were on Owen, but they flickered briefly to Kirk before he answered. “Yes, Owen.” Then he looked obediently but warily at Kirk, waiting.

“I’m really sorry about what happened,” Kirk said. “I screwed up in plenty of ways, and all of it was my fault, not yours.”

“I know that,” Sterling said sharply. “The only part that was my fault was in going to you thinking you knew what you were doing.”

That seemed to unsettle Kirk, who had already been unsettled enough that it surprised Owen he’d shown up at all. “I’m really sorry. And I’m willing to make it up to you in whatever ways you want me to. Is there anything I can do?”

Sterling shook his head. “No. Well...don’t do it again, to anyone. And don’t hurt Alex. If you do—”

“I wouldn’t,” Kirk said fervently. “I never have. Ever. I mean, I’m not making excuses, but what I did to you wouldn’t have hurt you if your shoulder had been okay, right? What I did wrong was not asking if you had anything going on I should know about, but God, I wouldn’t have hurt you deliberately. You’ve got to believe that.”

Not looking convinced, Sterling said, “I don’t. If I’m being totally honest, I think you’re probably going to end up hurting Alex too, and probably physically and not just emotionally. Which is why I’ve been doing everything I can to convince him to stop seeing you.” The more Sterling said, the angrier he sounded, his voice rising, and Owen was aware that they were attracting more attention than was desired or appropriate.

"Sterling, that's something for Alex to decide for himself," he said. He ran his hand over Sterling's back and felt the rigidity of stiff, tense muscles. Annoyance rose within him; he'd wanted this night to be perfect, and Kirk was spoiling it for Sterling, unintentionally, but Owen wasn't that interested in being fair, not when it came to Sterling. "Alex has decided to give Kirk a second chance, and from what I know of him, that's a decision he took after thinking it through, so we should respect that." Even if we both think he's making a mistake, he added silently.

Kirk, looking woebegone and contrite, nodded. "He has, and I'm really, really grateful about that, but he misses coming here—so do I—and I just..." He glanced around the club again, naked longing on his face. "There isn't anywhere else we can go and feel like we belong. At work I'm not even out, for God's sake, and if they knew I was into this—Not being part of it—it hurts. Maybe I deserve that, but..."

"So what do you want from me? Forgiveness? Sorry, but it's not that easy." Sterling was looking at Kirk coldly.

"I'd do whatever you wanted to earn it," Kirk said. "I was hoping—I just want to be able to be here with Alex. Not to play, just to watch and learn. I want to learn how to do things right."

"Fine," Sterling said. "Fine, whatever."

Owen decided that enough was enough. Sterling was getting upset, and any true reconciliation with Kirk was obviously a long way off, but that concession was something, at least. He caught Kirk's eye. "Why don't you go and bring Alex in?"

"Yeah, I'll do that. I—thanks." Kirk moistened his lips. "Thank you," he said again, his shoulders straightening as if some measure of dignity had been restored.

Knowing that they were being watched and not wanting Kirk's exit to be misread, Owen put out his hand, and when Kirk extended his, shook it firmly. Kirk hurried away, and Owen put his hand on the back of Sterling's neck again, the smooth skin warm against his palm.

"Good boy," he said, keeping his voice low. "Don't worry; he won't come near you or talk to you without my permission, and he won't get it."

Sterling turned toward him, in close so that, with his bent head, his face couldn't be seen by anyone, hidden by the curve between Owen's neck and shoulder. He wasn't trembling; Owen would have been able to feel that. "Yes, Owen," he said, no doubt using the familiarity of the words to calm himself. "Thank you. I just—I think about what he's like, and what he could do to Alex, and I start to lose it. I don't want to lose it here." He pulled back a little bit so that Owen could see his face and read the plea on it.

"You won't lose it here," Owen said, making it a command the way he knew Sterling wanted it to be. "I have everything under control. Take a few deep breaths and let all this go; then we'll go back to the table."



Sterling did as he was told, and half a minute later they were walking back to their spot. Elise nodded at Owen approvingly, then gave verbal approval of Sterling so that Sterling could hear it. "Your boy is very well-behaved."

"Yes, he is," Owen said, and Sterling, kneeling beside him, wasn't able to hide his smile.

He took a sip of his drink and sat for a while watching the people around him and letting Sterling regain his composure. At times like this, when Sterling was emotionally wound up, he could feel the connection between them strengthen and grow, and he knew when Sterling was ready for the touch that brought his head up, their gazes meeting.

"The sub out there is doing well, isn't he?"

Given tacit permission to look, Sterling turned his head. The dance floor was set lower than the area with the tables, and even kneeling, Sterling could see some of the scene. The sub's back was marked with more than ink now; red lines crossed it, and even from here, the sound of his moans carried clearly. Owen stared, seeing through a Dom's eyes, and wondering how Sterling perceived it. Owen watched the Dom's arm rise and fall, heard the flat slap of leather on skin, and admired the accuracy of each stroke and the measured rhythm the man had found.

Sterling was probably looking at the sub, kneeling up, his face visible now and then as he moved his head from side to side, his wrists bound together in front of him, his chest heaving as he fought for breath. The sub's eyes were closed, his face transfigured by sensation, emotion, his lips shaping words that Owen knew would be pleas for more, spilling out with every whimper, every cry of pain.

It took Sterling a little while to answer, and when he did, it was a bare whisper. "Yes, Owen."

"You'll do better," Owen said and curved his hand around the back of Sterling's neck, his thumb stroking the sensitive skin below Sterling's ear, his grip firm, possessive. "Won't you, boy?"

"Yes, Owen." Sterling looked up at him, face open and trusting, happy.

The scene on the floor ended, Dom and sub both breathing heavily. The sub lifted his head, and Owen didn't need to see his face to know that the way he was looking at the Dom was similar to the look Sterling had been giving him. The Dom helped the sub to his feet and stroked the side of his face, murmuring what were no doubt praises, and led him off the floor to the mild applause that were actually significant praise in the community.

Owen let the crowd disperse and finished his drink. There was no rush, and he was enjoying watching Sterling try so very hard to stay still, be patient, when his breath was coming in quick, rushed gasps and his erection was plain to see.

"Calm down," Owen said finally when Elise's attention was on her own sub. "Focus, remember? When you're ready, I'm going to take you out there and show you off. I'm going to peel the shirt off your back and clamp your nipples, pinch them tight. You'll like that, and everyone's going to love watching your face because you show it all when you're hurting, everything you're feeling is right there, and you're beautiful. So very hot. I should spank you in front of a mirror, make you watch yourself. Yes, I think I will..."

Sterling whimpered and then went very still, his breathing slowing down. He wanted it enough to concentrate on being calm, Owen thought, pleased. It was so easy to read Sterling—he was the most transparent sub Owen had ever come across, and Owen couldn't imagine ever growing tired of it. It had been very enjoyable over the past weeks, refusing to let Sterling come for more than a month, although Sterling had admitted, shamefaced one morning, that he'd had a wet dream during the night.

Owen had punished him for that, but not *too* harshly.

Thinking about Sterling out on the floor, everyone watching them, was enough to make Owen impatient too. He knew how delicious Sterling looked with his nipples clamped, sweat glowing on his skin, pupils dilated and lips as swollen from being bitten as his nipples would be when Owen finally took off the clamps...

He let the background noise of the club, the music, the voices flow back and then began to speak again, loving the way Sterling turned his head just a fraction at the first word. His Master's voice. Yes. "And when you're getting used to the way they bite you, when you think you can handle the pain, my brave boy, I'm going to make you kneel, back straight, head up, nowhere to hide that delightful blush, because this is you on display, Sterling, this is me showing the club what I own, how lucky I am to have such an obedient submissive, so eager to please. And I'm going to whip you, that flogger I used the first night you came in here, but you won't be watching tonight. You'll be feeling it across your shoulders and neck, your back and your chest. I'll whip you scarlet and stinging until the tears are rolling down your face and you're about to come, right there, in front of everyone, and I might allow that if you've pleased me, and I know you will." He sighed and ran his fingers through Sterling's hair. "You always do. My Sterling."

He let his voice get rough, commanding, needing to hear Sterling's voice, so aroused by the picture he'd painted that he knew he'd have to do this soon. He couldn't wait. "Whose boy are you, Sterling?"

"Yours, Owen." Sterling's eyes were bright, his expression transcendent, like he'd been waiting all his life for this moment. It made Owen feel indescribably good that he'd been able to give it to Sterling, his beautiful boy who so deserved to get what he wanted. "I'm yours. God, please. I'll do anything for you, you know that. Anything."

"I know." Owen bent and kissed Sterling's mouth, his tongue flicking against Sterling's lip, a signal that Sterling could kiss him back, which he did

with a passion that made Owen decide they'd be leaving the club early. There was so much that he wanted to do with Sterling, and the club had limits, rules, about what could happen in public. "It's time."

Sterling quivered like an eager puppy but didn't stand up until Owen had. He shadowed Owen out onto the floor and sank beautifully to his knees as soon as Owen stopped and turned, wrists crossed in front of him, head bowed. Owen knew almost everyone in the club was aware of Sterling's shoulder injury, but even if they hadn't been, different Doms had different preferences and this might just as easily have been one of Owen's. Sterling couldn't have looked any hotter or more submissive even if his hands *had* been behind his back, and Owen was aware of the buzz of voices quieting around them as the attention of Doms and subs alike was drawn to the picture they made.

Sterling hadn't asked questions when Owen had left the house that morning, busy with a paper that had to be handed in the following week. Owen's preparations hadn't taken long; he'd known exactly what he wanted.

Without a word, Saul, the man in charge of the bar at the club, and two male subs, both redheads—which was one more than Owen would have taken on, but Saul seemed to thrive on the challenge—came over to his side, his subs trailing behind him, one carrying a small table, the other a silver tray. With a smile for Owen, he snapped his fingers and the table was set down beside Owen, and the tray placed carefully on top of it.

"Thank you," Owen told Saul. Saul's subs exchanged glances and smiled at Sterling, who wasn't looking at them but at what lay on the tray.

Clamps, a flogger—and a collar, plain black leather, dark against the rich gleam of the polished tray.

Sterling's lips parted like he was about to speak, then closed again without him making a sound. His eyes were wide as he stared at the tray, and the tip of his tongue wet his lips before disappearing back into his mouth. Finally he turned his gaze to Owen, disbelief coloring his cheeks in the flush of pink that Owen so loved.

"Your neck looked a little bare," Owen said, "and I don't want anyone to have any doubt about the fact that you're mine." He looked away from Sterling with some reluctance and found that he was surrounded by smiling faces, their approval plain. His gaze was caught by one sub, a woman in her thirties, her neck as unadorned as Sterling's, tears bright in her eyes as she looked up at the man beside her. Her Dom, a younger man, no more than Sterling's age, glanced down, his lips shaping a single word: "Soon."

Attention back on Sterling, Owen gestured at him to stand up, which Sterling did. The movement seemed to bring back some of his earlier calm, and he kept his eyes down respectfully as Owen reached to uncross his wrists, bringing his arms to rest at his sides so he could unbutton Sterling's shirt.

He usually had Sterling undress himself, but tonight he wanted to do it as part of his laying claim to his boy. One by one he slipped the buttons free of their buttonholes, tempted by the bare skin he was revealing and anticipating

later in the night when they were home and he could explore every inch of it with his mouth and hands. When the shirt was fully unbuttoned, Owen slowly pushed it back over Sterling's shoulders. "Don't move," he said, not wanting Sterling to drop his arms into a position that might cause strain, and Sterling went utterly still.

The shirt off, folded neatly and placed on the small table, red on silver, a splash of color, Owen picked up the collar and turned back to Sterling. He held the collar up where Sterling could see it.

"This goes on first. Everything that's about to happen to you is because you're mine and I want you to have it: the pain, the submission, all of it from me to you. Because you are mine." He separated the last words out, emphasizing them. "The collar doesn't make that true. It *is* true." He tapped Sterling's shoulder. "Kneel and I'll put it around your neck."

Sterling went to his knees so quickly that under any other circumstances Owen might have thought he'd been shot; he felt the floorboards vibrate under his shoes. They weren't the only things vibrating—as he stepped behind Sterling and lowered the collar to fasten it around the boy's neck, he could feel the fine shiver that was running through Sterling.

Sterling wasn't the only one affected by the moment, of course; the watching people were silent, completely so, a silence more emphatic than cheers or applause, and Owen found that his hands, for a moment, until he controlled them, were shaking.

Once the collar was fastened, he adjusted the fit and placed his hands on Sterling's shoulders, letting him feel touched by more than just leather and metal. Skin on skin...a connection running between them, as it always had from the day they'd met.

Sterling had been restless then, unhappy. Searching, like Owen, for someone to complete him.

Owen leaned down, his mouth close to Sterling's ear. "Ready, Sterling?"  
He knew what the answer would be.

THE END

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## About the Authors

### Jane Davitt

Jane Davitt is English, and has been living in Canada with her husband, two children, and two cats, since 1997. Writing and reading are her main occupations but if she ever had any spare time she might spend it gardening, walking, or doing cross stitch.

Jane has been writing since 2005 and wishes she'd started earlier. She is a huge fan of SF, fantasy, erotica, and mystery novels and has a tendency to get addicted to TV shows that get cancelled all too soon.

She owns over 4,000 books, rarely gives any away (but is happy to loan them), and is of the firm opinion that there is no such thing as 'too many books'.

### Alexa Snow

Alexa Snow is an emotional person who appreciates practicality in others. She's prone to crying at inconvenient times, drinking too much coffee, and staying up too late playing with words (either reading or writing.) A background of schooling she wasn't all that interested in resulted in a Bachelor's degree in Sociology and a vague sense of wasted time. Alexa lives in a tiny, ancient house in New England with her husband, young son, and two little-old-lady cats.