



Angela
Fiddler

Cy
Gets
A Sex
Demon

A NOVEL

CY GETS A SEX DEMON

...Sweat stuck my skin to the surface of the exercise machine each time my back touched it. The discomfort, when combined with the headache from the rush of blood to my head and the even older bruised bone feeling from my shins only encouraged the voice whispering in my head that I should stop. But four repetitions weren't enough. I wouldn't be twenty again, and that bullet or stake or set of fangs, teeth and claws that came for my throat or belly or thigh wouldn't care in the slightest how hard I had worked, or how many crunches I'd done.

I had a reason I played my iPod at volumes that would ensure the bones of my inner ear would fail first.

The sound of breaking glass came from downstairs. I ripped off the head phones. They fell to the carpet of the converted master bedroom like white, mating snakes. The house stilled except for the tinny music from the buds. I turned off the MP3 player and true silence returned. With it, something expectant waited for me downstairs.

I unhooked my ankles, and let myself fall backward to my feet. The alarm panel I had installed showed nothing wrong. The sheer amount of green LCD lights should have been comforting, but my gut still told me I had company. Then, with a sense of deliberation, the sound of breaking glass came again.

The light indicating the backdoor flickered red, just for an instant, but then went back to comforting green. Someone had my codes, or enough magic that they didn't need them. One terrified me more than the other. I didn't give my codes to anyone.

I would like to think that I had made it all the way down to the bottom of the stairs on my own, and not sucker punched so that I fell down the last three or four stairs. But that wasn't important for anything other than posterity...

CY GETS A SEX DEMON

BY

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CY GETS A SEX DEMON
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To my girl and my devo. I love you both.

CHAPTER 1

Sweat stuck my skin to the surface of the exercise machine each time my back touched it. The discomfort, when combined with the headache from the rush of blood to my head and the even older bruised bone feeling from my shins only encouraged the voice whispering in my head that I should stop. But four repetitions weren't enough. I wouldn't be twenty again, and that bullet or stake or set of fangs, teeth and claws that came for my throat or belly or thigh wouldn't care in the slightest how hard I had worked, or how many crunches I'd done.

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The light indicating the backdoor flickered red, just for an instant, but then went back to comforting green. Someone had my codes, or enough magic that they didn't need them. One terrified me more than the other. I didn't give my codes to anyone.

I would like to think that I had made it all the way down to the bottom of the stairs on my own, and not sucker punched so that I fell down the last three or four stairs. But that wasn't important for anything other than posterity. When I came to, the back of my head ached something fierce, and plastic tubing wrapped around my wrists was tight enough to cut off circulation. I knelt, and two men had solid grips on the other end of the taut tubing.

I didn't look at the goons. They all smelled the same way. Like stale sweat and suits that had not been dry-cleaned in a good long time. The boss man stood somewhere behind me at the edge of my dining room, which hadn't been used to dine in for ages. I'd converted it to an office years ago, and this was just another day in it.

"Where's my cat?" I demanded. The other questions, like "Who are you?" and "What are you doing here?" are all rookie mistakes. Taking the breath necessary to speak stirred up a wave of dizziness I didn't know I suffered from. I fought with my stomach

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to behave and won.

A laugh came from a different corner than I expected. I stopped glaring at the shadow of the huge, long-dead ivy plant that I hadn't had the heart to remove.

The real shadow, the one over by my computer, separated itself from the wall. Boss man stood tall, well over six feet, but had muscle built up on his shoulders and chest in a way that the fey never developed. A huge human, then, or human enough like me where his diluted blood counted for nothing. "Of all the questions you could be asking, that is the only one you are wasting your breath on?"

"Just answer it," I snarled.

Boss man's eyes grew wide. He opened his mouth to speak a couple times before realizing he couldn't. In fact, just thinking the words probably stung just a little bit. "Your cat is fine. He ran out the cat door at the sound of breaking glass."

Boss man put his hand over his mouth, then pulled it away. I am told lying to me, or at least trying to lie to me, produces a mild, uncomfortable stinging sensation. I always try to catch people who hire me in a lie, so they don't try it again.

The goons holding the tubing tightened their grips. If I possessed any other talent than just preventing people from lying to me, and if the tubing was natural material, I could do something. But I didn't, and it wasn't. I couldn't have stopped my shoulders from almost dislocating if I wanted to and, trust me, I did.

I couldn't even stop the grunt of pain as the tubing tightened. Boss man waved away the goons. "He is of no use to us broken."

I almost cheered. Guys like me love hearing things like that. The tension slacked off enough so that my shoulders didn't feel about to pop and I slumped forward in relief.

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The boss man came directly in front of me and touched my head. “We’ve gotten off on the wrong foot,” he said. The co-conspirator tone he used felt a bit much. Only one of us were on our knees, after all. “You’ve been sublet to us, and I need to discuss our terms.”

I didn’t say anything. They all wanted to discuss their terms. Without a whole lot of slack in the tubing, I managed a passing attempt at a shrug. “You couldn’t have just knocked?”

“That wouldn’t have been the right foot, either.”

“How many feet do you have?” I asked. Neither of the goons stood close enough to cuff me, but I felt their desire to come down the tubing like something electrical. That took talent, because the last time I checked, rubber was nonconductive.

The boss man frowned, and the tubing slacked off just a little bit more. It always hurts a lot more to have blood flow restored than cut off.

“I think you misunderstand the position you are in. I have retained all your rights. Should you die, your employer will be compensated, and we will have to try again. So you may continue to be flippant, or you may just listen to me. It might result in you not getting your fool self killed. You might just live long enough to collect your very substantial bonus.”

“Substantial?” I repeated, cautiously.

“Perhaps I should have used the term *epic*.”

Epic sounded better than substantial. For the first time, I sat back on my heels and waited. “Go on.”

“We don’t want you to kill anyone.”

Boss man spoke carefully, as though it were very important that I understood. I didn’t tell him I actually hated killing people. I avoided doing it at all costs. Gwen, my handler, knew that.

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“We don’t want anyone killed,” the boss man repeated. I waited for the *but*. There seemed to be a very large one coming. “Think of this more as an extraction.”

Boss man paused again. I waited, but clearly he wanted me to ask the question. “What is it that you want extracted?” When the deadly silence continued, I added, “And from where?”

“He’s the grandson of my employer,” the boss man said, almost begrudgingly. “And you have to find him yourself.”

I waited for the catch. Eventually he’d give in to the satisfaction and just tell me why he’d go to a fey hold in order to hire an...independent contractor like myself rather than go through the human channels, but he didn’t say anything. The conversation appeared over. He either didn’t know the extent of what he needed done or he really didn’t want to tell me. Either way, his employer put down a ridiculous amount of money to retain my services. I’d seen some of the bills I had generated.

Boss man looked down at me, and licked his lips. I should have known this part would come. “There is one more thing,” he said, and his voice suddenly became thicker. He took a step closer so that the musty smell from him overwhelmed. He smiled. “Do I have to tell you what is going to happen if you fail?”

“I don’t fail,” I told him. I didn’t.

Boss man looked down at me. I wonder if he took in the tiny crow’s-feet that had appeared out of the blue next to my eyes, or the spattering of silver in my otherwise nondescript brown hair. I couldn’t help getting older, but I was still very good. Fast enough that if the boss man and I ever got into it, even with his added height advantage, I would have beaten him. He knew that as well as I did.

He bent over so that his face loomed over mine and hovered

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inches from my ear. "I am going to ask my men to let you go. But you're not going to get off your knees, are you?"

"No." I wouldn't like it, but I wouldn't move. I had better training than that.

He ran his fingers down my cheek, letting me know without a shadow of a doubt what would happen next. The touch burned. I looked down at his hands. I didn't need a periodic table to tell me that the two rings on his index and middle finger contained iron. The touch didn't hurt as much as it would have if I had been pure, or even half fey. My human blood diffused the threat to the level of a persistent toothache.

Boss man rubbed the iron ring back and forth over my lips until they hurt as much as his trying to lie to me probably had. I put up with that for as long as I could before letting out a muffled curse and fought with the tubing. My lips felt wasp-stung.

"Let him go," boss man said. The goons hesitated, which again tightened their grip. My lips throbbed, my shoulders cracked. I swore again, exhausted, but the tension didn't slack off until the boss man repeated the order. "And then leave us," he added.

I stared up at him. The goons untied the tubing. I'd tightened their knots with my struggling, and they couldn't release them. One of them used his teeth, the other pulled out a boot knife. I preferred the kiss of steel to the touch of lips, but then that's just me. They gathered up the tubing and slipped out of the room. I rubbed at where it had cut into my flesh. When sensation returned, I rubbed at my mouth, but couldn't change how much the iron had irritated my skin.

The entrance between the dining room and the front hall didn't have a door, just a decorative arch. The detail in the crown molding had sold me on the house. Door or not, when the boss

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man's goons stepped past the archway, it might as well have been four inches of solid security steel.

If I wanted to get off my knees and break the boss man's back over my knee, I could have. But the same treacherous voice that whispered how easy I could do it also told me I could stop after the fourth or fifth repetition. I had lots of practice ignoring it.

The sound of the boss man unzipping his fly echoed in the new, charged silence. I kept my gaze level and flat. It became obvious, to me at least, that boss man wanted some sort of recognition that what was happening would be unwanted or distasteful in some way. He didn't want me to just submit. If he had hired me ten years ago, there would have been more of a reaction. But there had been far too many boss men. I had been on my knees far too many times for a blow job to mean anything more than just a small-minded attempt at establishing dominance. I made it a mechanical act, like the repetitive, slightly distasteful act of completing the necessary paperwork to put in an expense report. I sucked him off, and then stood without being released to go spit in the kitchen sink.

A line had appeared between the boss man's eyebrows, marring what had been perfectly smooth skin. I returned to the dining room. I leaned against the archway, crossing my arms over my chest. He didn't know, to me, the feeling of my now-dry sweatpants and shirt against my skin felt far worse than what I had just done.

"Until tomorrow," he said. The words sounded forced. I had felt him when he'd been in my mouth. I'd felt him lean into me and knot his fingers into the hair at the back of my head. I felt him need me more than I would ever need him. If he thought the exchange of power fell in his favor, he fooled himself. I kept my flat gaze on him. He looked away and cleared his throat. "Be

ready.”

I said nothing. The silence grew. Just as quietly as they’d come, the boss man took his goons and left.

The glass pane of the window in the mudroom in the back of my house lay in shards on the indoor/outdoor carpet. Boss man had broken it out of pure pettiness. A cold, November draft whistled through the few fangs of glass that remained in place. I didn’t have the talent necessary to fix the window but I knew people who did. Broken glass meant a blue vial, so I returned to the kitchen long enough to grab a crystal of the right color from the junk/spell drawer. It looked as though I’d run out of the purple hangover, but I had a standing order for broken glass charms delivered to the house on a weekly basis.

Throwing the vial down among the broken shards made a tinkling sound. The glass melted. The broken pieces, now like water on an oilskin, beaded up into one molten pool and then slid up the wall. It remembered and returned to its solid state.

That taken care of, I went back upstairs, had a quick shower and brushed my teeth. Sergeant Pepper lay on the bed, blinking in annoyance at being disturbed. I rubbed the back of his tabby head. His purr evoked the memory of rusty chain saws flaring to life.

The next morning, despite another sound brushing, my teeth still felt lined with scum. Coffee helped, so did a whole-wheat bagel, and by the second stick of gum, I felt normal again.

My car looked like nothing fancy, but it ran and the black paint job nondescript enough that I felt safe driving it in Calgary’s worst neighborhoods. I didn’t want to, but I drove to work for the first time in almost a month.

The curve of the building and a sign out front assured the public that the huge building contained something that had to do

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with the Hydro Company. Most of the public saw, but didn't really see it. Gwen had planned it that way. I had vetted the focus group and then found the right ingredients to cause their sudden onset amnesia. Gwen had wanted to kill them, but I had convinced her to give the warlock a chance.

Gwen's new assistant, a ginger-headed young man who appeared all wrists and elbows, glanced at me through the bulletproof glass of the counter. He looked me up and down like the boss man had the night before, but let his delight show. He leaned forward and stroked his neck.

Whether hiring doe-eyed temps or...well, me, Gwen obviously had a type in mind. I felt his fey blood, but it was muted, like a burnt out light bulb. If he had any luck at all, in a week or two, someone would meet him at the gates of the property with all his belongings that had collected despite regulations against such things. The nice H.R. lady would tell him that he just wasn't a good fit.

Of course, that nice H. R. lady would be fully capable of cutting out his heart and eating it for the mineral content alone. But, more likely than not, he would be sent away wracking his brain trying to decide what he had done to annoy Gwen.

On the other hand, if he was unlucky enough to show a slight aptitude for doing what he was told, when he was told to do it, he'd be offered a permanent position.

I looked over the long line of too plastic to be real, but nonetheless real, rubber plants. Gwen had chosen to decorate the otherwise gunmetal carpet and steel blue walls of the reception with vegetation alone. I knew couldn't find the cameras hidden somewhere in the room.

I stared at the young man the whole time I wondered about his

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fate, and during that time he had obviously gone from being flattered at the attention to being vaguely creeped out by it. He worked at his desk, trying to look busy at a job that had no real job description. He failed miserably at it.

“Tell her I’m here,” I said just to break his discomfort. Gwen obviously knew I’d arrived.

When he looked back at me, his eyes were wide, his eyebrow creased, and he glanced up at the blank wall, trying to see where the camera perched. I didn’t have an ounce of telepathy in me, but even then I could see the young man starting to put the pieces together in his head. The sooner he realized that things here weren’t normal, the better off he’d be. “I’ll tell her.”

“You do that.”

I didn’t have the time to sit down before the door to Gwen’s inner sanctum opened.

Gwen, as a half-blood, had a commanding presence. It’s a cliché, but it’s true. When she entered a room, everyone looked, and not just because of her beauty. She really wasn’t beautiful once it became possible to look past all the pastes and dyes she wore on her skin. Her curly hair had a shine to it unseen outside of hair product commercials. Her pearly white teeth were straight and she had high cheekbones. If all of that washed away nothing but hardness would remain underneath. The iris of her eyes, black as the pupils themselves, could have been painted with a matte finish.

During the day, when I felt most comfortable with what I did, I liked the money she had no problem paying me. But at night, I couldn’t imagine quitting. That would just be...unhealthy.

Still, she smiled at me. Despite myself, I loved her all over again. “Cypher. When are you going to stop terrorizing my help?”

I crossed my arms. “When are you going to keep help long

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enough for them to have learned?"

She laughed, like pleasantly breaking glass. "Inside, Cy. I am told you were very accommodating last night."

I shrugged. The help—his cheeks as red as the hair on his head—tried not to look like he hadn't hung on to every word we said. When I glanced at him, he looked away, about three shades whiter. My reputation had preceded me, it seemed.

"There are more effective ways of getting my attention," I said. I shut the office door behind us. It closed with the sound more than just a lock latching.

Gwen only laughed again. Alone or with just me, she had no reason to keep up the persona she sold to the outside world. Her laugh frosted the wall of glass across from her with a thin sheen of ice.

"And you, all but flirting with that young man. I swear I didn't know where to look between the two of you."

I hadn't been flirting at all, but suddenly it mattered. "Let this one go," I said.

Gwen's smile died. "Why? Do you want him? Because that can be arranged."

"I don't want him."

"Then no. What can I say? This one has aptitude."

I had no position to argue, I told the voice inside me before it could rear up and snarl something regretful. I didn't know if Gwen could hear my thoughts with all the other things she could do, but I wouldn't put it past her.

Gwen reached over and stroked my cheek like the boss man had the night before. It hurt, like the iron had. Maybe "hurt" didn't feel exactly the right word because her fingers on my skin skirted the sexualized line between pleasure and pain. I found myself

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aching for more.

"You have always been so pleasantly predictable, Cy." She placed her red claw-like fingernails right over my cheek. She could have carved into me as easily as she could have continued stroking my skin. At that moment, I didn't care which one she chose. She hummed something off-key, and I swayed to it.

I snapped awake, and the sensation was like being thrown from the bed. Her strange, flat eyes still managed to flash with anger. I rubbed my cheek where she had touched it. The sting throbbed stronger than the iron rings on my lips had.

"I'll take the boy," I said.

Anger replaced annoyance in Gwen's face, and lines I'd never seen before appeared. She nodded. She'd offered me a hundred temps in my time here, and I had turned them all down. She thought this one special, then. Her mouth twitched, knowing that her offer hadn't been rejected three times. It was still valid. We rocked things old-school around here.

"He's yours," she said, once again playing the part of the gracious host. "Please try to bring the boy back all in one piece. He's the only temp I've ever had who could actually file."

"I'll try." Even inconsequential promises could bite. I wondered what else filing-boy could do.

Gwen bowed her head.

I guessed the meeting was finished. I went back outside into the reception area. The redhead still tried to look busy. "You," I said. "What's your name?"

"Patrick." The young man flushed. With his pale skin, the blush spread from under his white shirt up over his neck and across his cheeks at the same time. "Mr. McKenzie."

"Patrick," I repeated. "Well, Patrick. Do you want to come

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home with me and fuck?”

Patrick smiled. “Okay.”

I took Patrick with me when I left the building. He went to clock out, but I told him not to.

CHAPTER 2

Okay, so I have a lot of exes. Ex-lovers—though I use the term loosely, believe you me—ex-employers, and ex-coworkers. Not all of them want to kill me, but enough of them do to make me a little edgier than most.

And from first impressions, nothing really looked wrong with the blue car that slowed on the main road outside the parking lot. Gwen used other independent contractors besides myself, and the odd civilian did wander in on occasion, looking for someplace to pay their hydro bill. The car didn't seem out of place. Two people argued inside the small coupe as they pulled into the lot. There were quite a few “turn the car around and go the other way, you complete moron” hand motions inside.

Gwen kept the parking lot full. Not with all the same cars, all

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the time—that would be suspicious—but still, it felt a fair hike to the door on a blustery day like today. Sometimes she got cute and filled the lot with all German-made cars one day, and all cars of different shades of blue the next. She made sure parking was at a premium. The two arguing men pulled into the only spot they could park or turn around in without even glancing at the rest of the lot.

I pulled Patrick behind me and ignored his indignant squawk. The argument between the men ended. I grabbed Patrick and threw him between a black Saab and a pink Cadillac.

A glass vial broke where we had stood and the pink fans of the Caddy we hid behind began to disintegrate. The coupe sped off, and I pushed Patrick farther between the cars back toward the building. He didn't argue and kept his head down. Globbs of pink metal hit the pavement, and the ground cracked and crumbled with its touch. I didn't feel the need to warn Patrick not to get any of it on his skin.

Guards dressed in black uniforms ran out the building. They'd been decked out as hired security, but were anything but. It was rumored that Gwen trained them herself. As many cylinders as the coupe had, it couldn't beat the security gate slamming into place. Whether the attack was personal or professional, it was officially over for them.

Eventually Patrick got to the last aisle between the cars and the door, but he hung back at the red Ford's grill rather than cross open space. The noise from the gate behind us didn't crack exactly gunfire—that would have drawn attention. And since I couldn't do magic, I couldn't see it, either.

From where I crouched between Patrick and the gate, it looked to me like Gwen's guards and the two men were just glaring at

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each other. Patrick ducked his head away, and I crept a bit closer to him. I didn't see the passenger go down, but I looked back again and he lay on the pavement. A line of blood seeped from his ear. The driver went down a minute later. Under what remained of the Caddy, black tar filled the bottom of a three-foot hole.

Guards picked up the two men and hustled them inside. Nothing more to see here, move along. I stood up, just as Gwen appeared at the glass door, but she waved me away. The questions I had could wait. Hers couldn't.

"Let's go," I told Patrick.

"But...the attack..."

"Is over. You're safe."

I could see he wanted to continue arguing. I headed it off by taking his hand and pulling him toward my car. He hadn't bothered to do up his jacket before the disintegration bomb hit, and Patrick shivered. I pre-started the car with the touch of a button, partially to warm it up and partially to make sure it wouldn't explode. You really can't be too careful.

"Things like this happen a lot?" Patrick asked, once he got to my car. He sank down into the leather seat with a heavy sigh.

"Sadly," I said. "That nondisclosure agreement you signed is ironclad. You do know that, right?"

Patrick rested his head against the seat and rubbed his eyes with his fists. His skin looked dirty, and the grit probably hurt as much as it felt good. I didn't say anything. "I know. I had my lawyer look at it."

"You have a lawyer?" I asked.

Even with his eyes closed, he shot me a don't-ask look. I didn't. But I stored the very interesting facts that Gwen's crack temp reacted well in a panicked situation and had his own lawyer. I

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would think about that later. In the meantime, I waited until the head security guard gave the all clear and we could leave the lot.

* * *

My little brick house edged onto the back of an off-leash area, much to the chagrin of my cat. Patrick looked around the small living room. The smile on his face lasted until he reached the archway leading into the dining room. He started into the small room, and looked at the spot on the carpet where I had been forced to kneel the night before. He looked back at me uncertainly. I didn't think he had the words behind the question he wanted to ask. It left him with nothing to say.

I took him by the shoulders and guided him up the carpeted stairs. "It's nothing," I told him, my voice as gentle as it got. "You don't need to worry about it."

Patrick opened his mouth but then closed it, carefully. He reached behind him and groped for my hand. I let him find it. It surprised me I did. His hand felt warm. In fact, he felt warmer than I remembered living flesh could be. His fingers twined in mine, and he gave me a small squeeze.

I almost pushed him away, or knocked him back against the wall for the nerve. I didn't want him to misunderstand what this was. But the touch felt so nice I squeezed back. The tension that gathered between the blades of his shoulders relaxed.

Patrick walked past the master bedroom and went straight for the small yellow bedroom in the back. I had installed a Murphy bed on the wall in the eight foot by nine foot room so that I would have room for my bookcases. Half-burned candles took up most of the concrete and plywood side tables I'd made.

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Patrick glanced around the room, nodding as he did, and then squeezed my hand again. "I like this room."

I had picked up dozens of men and brought them back to this room, and I almost never talked to them. Patrick, however, still held my hand. I pulled him closer to me so our chests touched. He smelled of mint, and as thick as his hair looked, the strands felt exceptionally fine. I cupped the back of his head. "Nice," I said.

"You could put your hand there while I'm sucking you off," Patrick whispered. He let go of my hand and touched my ass. He kissed my cheek. His fingers worked the long sore muscles down my spine. I didn't know exactly what he did, but it felt divine.

I forced myself to sidestep away. Even just a foot from Patrick, the room felt colder. I turned around. It always made my skin crawl to have my back to someone, but it didn't this time, strangely enough. I wanted to see if the rejection would change his seemingly calm demeanor. No, he still smiled, though ruefully.

"No intimate touching I take it," he said. "That probably means no kissing either, right?"

As it so happens, I had no problem kissing. I'd done far worse with my mouth and it had meant a lot less. But I didn't say that. I kept staring at him, wanting to call this thing off. If he didn't respect himself enough and would still fuck me after the way I treated him, I just wanted him gone.

Patrick pulled back and shrugged. "If that's what you want," he said. And then he brushed past me. Not theatrically, like he expected me to grab his arm and hold it. We stood in a very small room in a very small house.

I wanted to ask him what he expected, getting picked up the way he had, but then I shrugged, too. "I'm a bastard."

"Oh, I know," Patrick said. "I've dated a lot of bastards."

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I looked him over. "Does your mouth hurt?"

He touched his lips. "No, why?"

"I wanted to know if you were telling the truth."

He shrugged again. We were doing an awful lot of shrugging. "I can get you the names and addresses if you want confirmation."

"I'll take your word on that."

"You of all people should." Patrick remained in the doorway. His body tensed, still on edge, even as he warmed up to me again. I went to him and took his right hand. His arm felt stiff but he didn't fight me. I put it against the doorframe, and held it there for half a dozen heartbeats. When I let it go Patrick kept it in place. I did the same for his other hand, against the other side of the frame. Patrick didn't let go.

He relaxed. His crisp white shirt looked new enough that the buttons didn't want to fit through their holes, but I've had worse challenges. His pale skin had goose bumps, though the room didn't feel that cold. He had a defined abdomen and pectorals, which I knew took hard work considering his body type. I ran my fingers down to the light dusting of hair, amazed at the red gold hue.

"It's my cross to bear," Patrick said. "You should see my pubic hair."

I put my hand over the tent in his slacks. From what I felt, Patrick wasn't too bad at all. "Is that an invitation?"

"Do you need it to be?" The ghost of Patrick's smile returned, haunting the edges of his mouth.

"Only sometimes."

"You're always going to be this complicated, aren't you?" Patrick asked. That he assumed we'd do this again sounded presumptuous, but I found myself not correcting him. The muscles of his shoulders twitched, like he wanted to touch me, but he

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stayed where I put him.

I undid his slacks, and pulled everything off. He lifted one foot at a time to let me take off his shoes and socks, too. Bunched clothes made me a little sick. I've always associated it with back alleys and less than willing locations.

Patrick shivered again. His cock was as long as I thought it would be, a good hand span, and while I thought his cock would also have been thinner, like his fingers, it wasn't. I liked how heavy it felt. Patrick made a clicking sound in the back of his throat, but didn't tell me to hurry up or get on with it. I liked that. I liked the sound, too. I liked how Patrick made it again as I licked up and over the head of his cock. I found it odd how the slippery salty pre-cum now on my lips could be so nice after feeling so repulsive last night.

I felt Patrick strain against me. "Hey," he said. "You're not thinking about me. Stop that."

"How can you tell?" I wiped my mouth and licked my fingers clean.

"You stiffened, and not in a good way. Now pay attention to what's at hand."

I didn't answer, but obeyed. He tasted of salt. Being on my knees here didn't bother me. Putting my hands on Patrick's hips so I could shift to a better angle didn't bother me either.

Patrick braced himself harder. The wooden doorframe gave off a crack. He opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it hard enough his teeth clacked against themselves. "Please," he said, finally.

He didn't know what to call me. I normally preferred it that way, but it made him obviously uncomfortable. I pulled my head back, and the wet cock rubbed against my cheek. "You can call me

Cy,” I told him.

“Cy,” Patrick repeated and closed his eyes. “That’s so good.”

“I’m glad.” I rubbed his cock against my other cheek, and loved the way that felt, too. I tightened my fist around the base, which still left several inches for me to blow. Normally, well, normally for me, I would’ve concentrated on bringing whoever I blew off as quickly as possible. But going slow, taking the time to coordinate my fist with my mouth so that I felt Patrick tremble under me had advantages, too.

My fingers found a dimple on Patrick’s ass. I hadn’t thought he had enough padding for a dimple to be possible, yet I found a matching one on Patrick’s other cheek. He tensed. “And now you know my secret shame. Please don’t tell me they’re cute.”

I pulled my mouth free again. “But they are.”

Patrick made a disgusted sound. “For that, I should jerk off in your face.” He had a tone in his voice.

“Do you want to?” I asked and looked up again.

Patrick went to shake his head and then paused. “Yes?” he asked and flushed. “But only if I can watch you jerk off, too.”

“But then I get to look at your dimples.”

Patrick’s mouth twitched. “Really?” I scraped my nail over the edge of the dimple, hard enough it had to hurt. Rather than flinching, Patrick leaned back into the slight pain. “Okay.”

My own bunched clothing didn’t bother me at all. My hard cock felt good in my hand. It was familiar, but with a touch of excitement that made jerking off with Patrick so much more than just jerking off alone.

Patrick parted his lips and bit down on his tongue. He hadn’t moved. “You first.”

“If that’s what you want.”

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Patrick shifted forward and nudged my knees a little farther apart. "I want."

I leaned back on my heels. I reached up and gathered some of the mixed pre-cum and saliva off his cock and used it to smooth my way. Patrick made yet another sound and met my eyes again. His face filled with want. I found it hard to look at. He broke eye contact first, and dropped his gaze to my cock. "That's good."

I grunted. I loved going at my pace, with the perfect amount of tension I knew I needed. "What about you?" I asked.

The doorframe groaned again as Patrick broke from it. He licked his palms and brought his hands down. Watching him lick his own skin looked far hotter than the sum of its parts. He matched my pace. Watching him follow felt good, but it was nothing compared to when I looked up and locked eyes again with him. My mouth went dry. The need to come intensified so much I almost couldn't stand the pressure. Looking up at Patrick, his blue eyes not even narrowed, I could keep the crest that would make me come in the distance.

I sat up off my heels. Patrick's cock brushed my cheek. This close I could see the tiny, almost microscopic freckles that dotted his hip. I kissed them. I would've kissed them all if I could. But I'd looked away to see them closer and Patrick started to come without me.

I tipped my head back. The need shook my whole body and I came so hard my thighs ached. I rode out the residual pleasure with my eyes closed, squeezing the base of my cock to prolong what I could. Patrick's semen splashed over my shoulder, rather than on my face as promised. I forgave him his lousy aim, just this once. A few seconds after the orgasm passed, when I still trembled, Patrick had somehow cradled my head to his hip. The contact felt too good

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to complain about the wrong body part being ejaculating on.

I put my hand on his thigh. I should have pushed him away but I didn't. Not until he stepped back. "That was... good," he said.

I got off my knees. The creaking sound they made alarmed me, but Patrick pretended not to hear. I rubbed out some of the numbness while Patrick cast around for his clothing. "Hey," I said.

He glanced at me, still trying to find one of his socks. It lay draped over the toe of his shoe, but I didn't tell him that. "Yes?"

"Bend over," I said.

His flush returned, creeping over his neck and jawbone. He hadn't put his shirt back on so I enjoyed watching the beginning of a whole face flush that started on his chest. "Oh. That."

I crossed my arms. He sighed again and turned around. The dimples were just off the small of his back. One still looked pink where I had scratched him. I touched it and he flinched. "Bend over," I said again.

Patrick tensed again. He stood with his back to me so I put a hand on his belly. The muscles under my palm fluttered. "No," he said.

I removed my hand. "Okay then."

"No..." Patrick hesitated. "Wait."

I waited. Slowly, a quarter inch at a time, Patrick bent over. The dimples were smaller but still there. I put my hand on his ass and felt him flinch and relax again. "Do you want me to?" I asked.

"No," Patrick said. "Yes. No... wait. Yes."

I stepped away. "When you're sure, let me know."

He turned. Spun on his heels really, and grabbed the missing sock while he did. "I am sure," he told me.

I touched his cheek, partly to see if it could be done in a non-possessive manner. It could. I leaned in to see if the kiss could be,

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too, and went two for two. He kissed back. We finished dressing without saying anything else.

The problem with midday pickups is the awkwardness that remains when an easy escape is not possible. If it had gone bad, Patrick would've been doubly screwed because I didn't have any cash on me for a taxi back. Instead, we went for pancakes in the middle of the afternoon. If there's something better that didn't involve sex, I didn't know what.

CHAPTER 3

The dive I took Patrick to had the best pancakes in North America. The waitresses were all old, worn-looking woman who still wore powder blue polyester uniforms and white aprons. But they were efficient and they loved the regulars, even if they didn't know anything more about them than their usual order. The jukebox in the corner actually had records with singles on them, and as such the song choice hadn't been updated in twenty years. I didn't see a problem with that.

Patrick stared down at the oily sheen on his coffee cup. "Are you sure?"

"You let a guy like me pick you up, and you're worried about restaurant coffee?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Patrick asked.

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I paused. Just for a second and then shrugged. I had already annoyed Gwen, what was one more capital crime? “You don’t think about the kind of people that go into the office?” I asked.

Patrick took a sip, made the universal too-hot face, and put the cup down again. “Of course. They’re all cutthroat bastards.” I opened my mouth, but he cut me off with a wave of his hand. “But I didn’t go home with any of them. I went home with you.”

“I’ve cut throats before,” I said, soft enough so that only he heard me.

“I know.”

I waited, but he didn’t say anything else. “So what was it, my beautiful brown eyes?”

“Yes,” Patrick said. “That and the fact that I’m a wizard at filing. Even your closed files generate quite a lot of paperwork, Mr. McKenzie.”

A shadow fell across the table. I looked up, my boot knife (although, in the spirit of full disclosure, it should be called a sneaker knife) already in my hands. Bill Baxter stood at the head of the table. He didn’t look at me, but studied Patrick like something unpleasant and unexpected found on a microscope slide.

I’d worked for Baxter a couple months ago. He needed to find some ingredients that were on the wrong side of legal for a summoning spell. Like the boss man had the night before, he’d taken advantage of all my services offered. I think it had given him quite the wrong impression as to what we were to each other. I mean, I like tax-deferred offshore numbered accounts as much as the next guy, but I didn’t sell my affections. It had taken me showing up beside his bed in the middle of the night with my sneaker knife to his throat for him to get that I just wasn’t that into him.

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And yet here he stood, rounder and balder than before. “Mr. Baxter,” I said carefully. “I thought we had an understanding.”

“May I sit?” Baxter asked and wiped his pink, glowing brow with his sleeve. It remained just as glowing and pink as before.

“No, you can’t. We both know there are proper channels to go through if you need to talk with me.”

Baxter wiped his brow again, just as ineffectually as the first time. “I can’t go through proper channels.” He spat out the words out like a curse. It could have been. “Your proper channels fucked me over. That’s what I need you for.”

I glanced over to Patrick, not exactly asking permission... Okay, I totally asked for permission, but as I wanted to kick him out into the cold, it only seemed fair. Patrick just shrugged. “It’s okay. I have to go make a call anyway.”

I nodded. Baxter and Patrick exchanged places. Baxter waited for the bell over the door to chime before speaking. “Look, I know you work for the company—”

“Technically, I’m an independent contractor.”

A look of annoyance flashed over his face. “What’s the difference?”

“I work outside the office, at my own pace, and with my own...tools,” I said. A waitress passed us, glanced at the knife in my hand, and continued on without a word. What can I say, I love this place.

“Fine, then. I know you’re independently contracted to them.”

“Exclusively,” I added. “I’m exclusively independently contracted to them. Which is why I don’t see how I can be of much assistance to you, Bill.”

Another stab of annoyance came over him, this one stronger. I’d treated him with absolute deference when I worked for him

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because that's what I did, but after the job finished, I had no more respect for him.

"I lost August to your boss in a poker game," Baxter said. "You can help with that."

"What's an August?"

"He's not a what. He's a who. He is my...incubus."

"You raised a sex demon?" I demanded. The ingredients I'd fetched for him had been all pretty generic, a pinch of mummy, the spleen of a hanged man, that sort of thing. Baxter didn't know how lucky he'd been that the incubus hadn't tricked him and eaten his heart. They were notoriously unreliable. Well, notorious in my circle, anyway.

"Yes. I raised a sex demon," he snapped. As was always the case, another waitress walked by the table just as the song playing on the jukebox changed. In the sudden silence, Baxter's voice traveled to the ends of the restaurant.

I shrugged at the waitress. "Admitting you have a problem is the first step," I said. The woman shook her head, no doubt having seen everything more than a couple times. When she left, I continued. "And you lost the sex demon you raised in a poker game," I summed up.

"Yes," Baxter said. "Look, that summoning took months to complete. It cost me a bloody fortune. I hadn't had August for more than a couple days, and I lost him. I want him back. I don't care how much it costs, and I'm willing to pay you quite the finder's fee to find him."

I made a snorting sound. "Oh, it's not going to be that simple. I'll take a retainer to broach the subject with Gwen, and the actual cost—finders, keepers or otherwise—will be discussed at a later date. And that's only if Gwen says returning your sex demon is

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even possible. She gets oddly possessive, let me tell you. Either way, I get paid. And handsomely.”

“Just for asking a simple question?”

I stared at him, blankly. Where Gwen became involved, nothing ever resolved simply. And since Baxter had come face-to-face with Gwen for long enough to lose August, he had to understand that. Baxter nodded, beaten. “Fine. Okay. Whatever.”

“FedEx a certified check for thirty thousand here, to the restaurant, tomorrow. We’ll go from there.”

He snorted, though it sounded closer to a choke. “You must be joking.”

The door’s bell jangled again, and Patrick walked inside, slightly bluer around the edges than he’d been when he’d left. “And that’s all the time we have, Mr. Baxter,” I said. The check hadn’t cleared yet, but I allowed him a little respect on credit. “I’ll contact you with Gwen’s answer, whatever that answer may be. If you would excuse us?”

“But...McKenzie, we haven’t—”

I made a shooing motion. Baxter shooed. The pancakes arrived a moment after he’d left. Patrick and I feasted.

CHAPTER 4

After breakfast, around four o'clock, Patrick asked to be dropped back at the office.

"You don't have to explain yourself to me," I said.

"My car's there," he explained, and then kept on explaining. "It's just that it's been broken into so many times, I don't even keep a stereo in it anymore. I mean, it's like I have a personalized license plate that says, 'Hey, break into me. There's a bag of half-eaten Cheezies under the seat, and they're still mostly fresh! It's totally worth the price of a window!'"

"What are you saying?" I asked.

Patrick sucked in his breath. "I'm saying I'd like to follow you back to your house. You'd be more than welcome in my apartment, but something tells me that's not going to fly. And yes,

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I always speak this fast when I'm nervous. It's part of the package, along with the dimples and the blushing at the drop of a hat. I think that's a medical condition. I mean, not the dimples or the talking fast, the... uh..."

I kissed him.

Patrick swallowed. "The blushing," he finished, and silenced. We drove the rest of the way to the office.

Gwen herself stepped out of building. I didn't think she did that. Despite the wind, she only wore her thin, short-sleeve blouse. Under the harsh halogen lights flooding the darkening parking lot, I didn't see any goose bumps on her perfect white skin.

I got out of the car. "Not you," she called. "I want to see him."

Patrick squeaked.

"He's mine," I told her.

She said nothing but just kept looking at me with her arms crossed.

"I want your word he'll be unharmed," I continued as though she had argued. In her way, she had.

She put her hand over her mouth. "My word," she repeated. "Over a temp? Cy, you are joking, yes?"

"Your word. To me. He's not going to be harmed."

She raised her right hand, though it felt meaningless. "Well, you're just making all sorts of new friends today, Cypher. But fine. I swear. He will not be harmed. In fact, I'll even send him along with a little map to help find your house. I'll mark the drug stores along the way in case you need anything."

The words had weight. It felt good enough for me I knocked on the roof. The passenger door opened and Patrick got out. He looked at me, eyes still wide, but I shook my head. "You'll be safe. I promise."

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“That’s what they all say,” Patrick said.

“Promises mean something here,” I told him.

He nodded and started walking. He glanced back at me once he reached the door, worried. But Gwen had granted him safe passage. I watched until they were inside, and then got back in my car. I drove straight home, but had to park on the street because a stretch limo blocked in my drive.

Your experience might be completely different, but in mine, a stretch limo in my drive is never a good thing. No exception. I got out of my car, slowly, at the same time boss man got out of the driver’s seat.

I sighed.

“Get in,” he said.

“It won’t help to say I have a headache, right?” I could lie, nothing stopped me, but suddenly I really did have a headache. I pressed my knuckles against my temple.

Boss man shot me a dirty look. “Just get in the back.”

I got in the back. I wasn’t alone. The limo smelled of expensive perfume, in a perfect, tasteful amount.

I looked up at the old woman sitting across from me. She looked to be at least in her late sixties, though rich enough that she could have been any age. The creping skin under her arm didn’t match her smooth forehead. Her pantsuit was a rich understated burgundy. She had the beauty that some woman only got in their old age. When she had been younger, she had probably been just shy of pretty. It didn’t look as though she had been hindered by that at all.

She offered me her hand, and gripped mine when I took it. “Mr. McKenzie. Cypher, is it? I believe I’ve just hired you.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

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Boss man got in the limo, and the car reversed.

She smiled. "My Bootsie didn't give you a hard time last night, did he?"

I smiled, but covered my mouth to hide it. The glass between the driver and passenger looked smoky, but I didn't know if it went one or both ways. "I'm sorry, Bootsie?"

The woman made a vague gesture to where boss man, forgive me, *Bootsie* sat.

"Bootsie," I repeated. "I'm sorry. I can't give head to a man named Bootsie. The decorum of the situation...I can't. I just can't."

She raised her eyebrow. "Bootsie has been taking the advantage." Not a question, but she still looked at me for confirmation.

"Just the once," I assured her. "It won't happen again."

She nodded. "I do apologize. You will be compensated for it."

I shrugged. I didn't think she could possibly compensate for me giving head to a man named Bootsie, but I'd welcome her to try. "He didn't tell you what I needed from you."

"No, ma'am," I said.

She handed me a portfolio. I hadn't noticed the black leather on black leather seat. When she handed it to me I noticed her knuckles were so square the rings on her fingers would have to be cut off.

I opened the portfolio. I was no expert, but the leather felt like lambskin to me.

It only had a photograph inside. The head shot looked professionally done, and the young man it in had all the affectations of pretty. He wasn't. Something in the shape of his eye or the curve of his mouth told me he'd never make it on his looks alone.

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“You see it, don’t you?” the woman asked.

I zipped the portfolio back up. “But I bet he still gets a lot of girls. Or boys. Or both.”

“Both,” she agreed. “I am not telling you that to be improper. Scott...well, Scott never really knew what he wanted other than anything that he didn’t already have. He always had someone who could provide him anything he thought he wanted.”

“Do you know where he was last seen?” I asked, keeping my voice gentle.

She shrugged, helplessly, and the first crack of real emotion showed through. She had liver spots on the back of her hand. “I don’t know. But I want you to find him. And if you can’t find him, I’ll have you killed.”

And if she didn’t, Gwen would. Business as usual. I nodded.

She rapped on the glass. “I’ll take you home now,” she said.

I thanked her, even with the death threat. Others in her position had dropped me off wherever the conversation had ended as expected. I appreciated her kindness. Bootsie stopped in front of my street. The woman put her hand on my arm until Bootsie came around to let me out. Bootsie bowed his head to the old woman, shut the door behind me, and then slammed me against the limo. He had projected what he would do so I didn’t get the breath knocked out of me.

“Aw, Bootsie. Don’t be like that,” I said.

“My name is Mr. Broots,” Bootsie said.

I cocked my head to one side. “You don’t really think I am going to call you that, do you? Bootsie?”

He raised his fist. I pre-wincing, just in case I had miscalculated the old woman, but sure enough a knock on the glass came. Bootsie’s hand shook when I opened my eyes again, and he didn’t

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fight as I uncurled his hand from my jacket. "It's been fun," I told him, and slipped free from his grip. As soon as I had skipped out of his arm-reach I added, "Bootsie." He lunged for me, but I bolted ahead. The sound he made wasn't entirely human.

I did the half-block to my house at a jog. The night had gotten colder and the streetlights in this neighborhood were few and far between. I didn't care. I hadn't left any of the outside lights on, and the little brick house look quite desolate on my approach. My heart sank just a bit. Patrick hadn't waited.

But then he came around the far dark corner of the house, caring a white pharmacy bag. I seemed intent on making him wait for me outside, in the cold. I motioned to the main road. "Work," I said.

"I figured." At least Patrick had a warm jacket on.

"There's a lot of work," I continued. "You should know I work a lot."

"I actually got that."

"And occasionally, they'll be people breaking into the house."

"So Ms. Gwen said."

"And even more occasionally, I have to kill them."

Patrick shrugged. "Okay."

"Okay? Just, okay?" I studied his face. He didn't let me learn anything.

"Yes."

I liked a man who appreciated semantics with the best of them. "What did Gwen say to you?"

"If I messed with you in any way, she'd make me wish I hadn't," he said. "Apparently, she needs you to be on your top form. I'm supposed to be good hip exercise."

"And yet, you came back."

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He held up the bag. “Well, she did draw me a very accurate map.”

We went inside.

CHAPTER 5

We were both full of pancakes, so dinner didn't seem that important. Patrick waited until I'd locked the door behind us, and then kissed me again.

"Can I tell you something?" he asked.

His words were slurred a little. I didn't smell alcohol on his breath, but I knew more than one way to get drunk. He'd pinned me, and I'd let him. Through his thin slacks I could feel his cock hard against my belly. "Sure. Go ahead."

"From the minute I saw you, I wanted to know what it would be like to fuck you," he said. He undid my slacks, showing more dexterity than I ever had in his position. "So if you want to talk and get to know each other, fine, but I'm good with just going up to your room and getting sweaty in bed with each other."

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Direct. I liked it. Of course, it was the first time I'd invited the same person back to my apartment without the later use of a forget-me spell, so it all felt new.

I set the alarm, using my body to block the code. There was trust, and then there was trust. Patrick didn't seem to mind. I led him up the stairs, then down to my bedroom. I pulled the Murphy bed down, and it took up most of the space in the middle of the room.

"I've heard of these things, I've never seen one before," Patrick said.

"I had to special order it," I said. His breathing had increased, just by looking at the smooth sheets. "Take off your clothes."

"You like saying that, don't you?" Patrick asked, but began unbuttoning his shirt.

"Yes."

Patrick pulled off his shirt. "Happy?"

"Pants, now."

"Will you add a 'please'?"

I touched his shoulder. His skin felt cold. "Please."

Patrick licked his lips. He put the bag he carried on the table with all the candles. "You're afraid of the dark," he said. I didn't answer him. He unbuttoned his slacks and hooked his thumbs under the waistband, but then hesitated. "This is more, you know. For me. I'm sorry. I can't be just a good fuck."

"I know."

He slid down his slacks, kicked off his shoes, and stepped on the toes of his socks to pull them off. Naked he turned back to me. "So this is me."

I put a hand on his hip. His soft cock felt hot under my hand, the skin velvety. He looked down to my hand, and then back up at

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my face.

"This is me," Patrick repeated.

I kissed him. "I know."

He sat down on the bed and slid himself back. Patrick spread his legs and sucked in his breath. I'd strangled people with piano wires less high-strung than the muscles of his abdomen. I went to the bag Patrick had bought. I didn't have anything not industrial in my drawer. If Patrick had gotten anything with a fake fruit flavor, it would have been over between us. But no, he'd gotten a small squeeze bottle of Probe and the condoms all had expiration dates into the next decade.

Patrick forced himself to relax. I put the lube and one of the condoms by Patrick's hip, and left for the bathroom.

I washed up and returned to the bed. Patrick looked a perfect mix of chagrin and embarrassment. "Sorry. I thought it would be different. It's been a couple years since I tried it last."

I shrugged. "If it's not your cup it's not your cup. Do you have any aversion to being the one fucking?"

"No. Is that an option?"

"Hell yes, it's an option. Why wouldn't it be?"

Patrick touched my face. "You are pretty spectacular."

"You haven't fucked me yet."

Patrick's mouth twitched, but the smile he fought won in the trenches in the corner of his mouth. "But I can tell. I want...all of it. With you. I just don't want to be fucked."

"Okay."

"Okay?" Patrick asked, obviously not quite believing it.

I shrugged. My erection had flagged somewhat, emotional talk will do that, but to see the hangdog look gone from Patrick's face felt worth it. He smiled, the shyness gone, and motioned to the

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candles. "You like them for sex, don't you?"

"Yes. And occasionally to read by."

He eyed them, and raked his bottom lip. "So, how do you..."

"Like to get fucked?" I asked.

"Yeah. That."

"Hard," I said. "Can you do that?"

Patrick flushed again, and a shade I hadn't seen yet. "Yes."

"Good."

"So...um, maybe you should get on the bed. Please."

"Come on, Patrick. You can do better than that." I crossed my arms over my chest. "Say it like you mean it."

Patrick cleared his throat. "On the bed," he said, and his voice dropped an octave. I waited, just to see what would happen. "Now."

That was better. I got on the bed, on my knees, and he moved up behind me. I heard another condom wrapper tear.

"So either way you like it rough," Patrick said. At least, it didn't sound like a question. He slid a finger inside me, and it went in easy.

"Either way I like it definite," I said.

Patrick moved up behind me. I felt his cock against my ass, and on just bare skin the condom felt tacky.

"I see," Patrick whispered. The lube bottle squirted, and his knuckles rubbed my ass a little harder than necessary. It felt good. I leaned back into it.

He slapped me. I hadn't expected that, and I jerked forward. He grabbed my hips and pulled me back. "I thought you liked it definite."

"There's 'Ow, stop it' and 'Ow, do it again.'"

"I know the difference," Patrick said. "Ask me nicely for

another.”

I wanted to tell him to stuff it, literally if need be, but didn’t. “Okay. Please.”

Another slap. I fell forward, and this time Patrick let me fall. I scrambled back. “And what did that prove?” I demanded.

“Nothing, yet. Let me do it again.”

I shook my head, but got back on my hands and knees. “Happy?” I demanded.

“Soon,” Patrick said. He brought both hands down again. I flinched as just the fingernails caught me. The blows stung, rather than hurt. I hissed.

“Thank you,” Patrick said. His cock touched me again, brushing where my ass still stung, but this time the lube slid effortlessly on my skin. “May I fuck you now?”

“Please do,” I said.

I may give head at the drop of a death threat, but to most of my blowees, the act is one of submission, not sex. And I have been fucked on the job, usually by men so full of self-loathing and repressed lust that they sometimes come before getting inside me.

Compartmentalization is what Gwen called it. It’s why I can do this job. I just didn’t care.

But now I cared. Patrick fumbled, letting out a curse that had real power to it. Three of the biggest candles burst into flames.

I didn’t tell him to relax. Instead I pulled back, just for a second and turned around so I faced him. “It’s going to be all right,” I said.

He didn’t answer me.

I took his cock in my hand. The condom felt like a second skin. I wanted to smile, but he’d just take it as me laughing at him. “It would take a lot more to fuck this up,” I said. I didn’t like to have

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sex face-to-face. I didn't like seeing the rutting expression of whoever thrust into me, but for some bizarre reason, I trusted Patrick. Getting into position and still keeping my hand on Patrick's cock took effort, but I am flexible. It's a job requirement.

"Better?" I asked.

He nodded. He took hold of my hips, carefully, and I let go of his cock. I couldn't reach my pillows, but I used my arm to prop up my head. The angle felt a bit awkward and I had my own moments of panic when I realized just how exposed I was. Patrick could cut me from stem to stern before I could get up.

Patrick seemed to know it, too. He kept just his fingertips on me with one hand, while his other guided his cock ever so slowly inside me. "Good?" he asked.

I nodded. His cock felt just big enough that the full feeling teetered on discomfort, but the cramping subsided. He needed to start fucking me and we'd both be golden. Still he hesitated.

"Hey," I said. "What's wrong?"

He didn't answer, obviously not wanting to lie. He grabbed my hips, all hesitant care gone, and slammed his weight into me. I grunted, trying to push him off me just a little. A wave of heat so unexpected came from beside the bed and I almost pushed Patrick the rest of the way off me. Every candle that hadn't caught when he swore now burned. Even the smallest wick sputtered at least six inches over the wax.

Then he caught the right rhythm. He synced with me, with what I needed, the right pace, even the right flare of his hips at the end that got me at the exact perfect spot. Patrick's face darkened, but only because the flames had died down to where they should have been in the first place. I reached up with my free hand and touched Patrick's cheek.

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"It's good," I told him. Patrick looked down at me, still not all with me. But he nodded. The pace slacked. Suddenly, selfishly, I wanted him to be all right so I could lay back and just enjoy the thrusting. Then I tried to remember the last time I could just relax during sex, and couldn't think of any.

Patrick's grip on my hip tightened. "It's good," he repeated.

I'm not going to lie. It took effort to come. The thrusts were so hard it hurt to breathe if I timed my exhaling wrong. The look of concentration on Patrick's face didn't help either. I could have been the bar exam for how much tension he showed taking me.

Something had to be done. I reached down and took his hands off my hips. I managed to get him to relax enough so that I could entwine my fingers into his. It didn't feel like a particularly good grip, as my wrist was at the wrong angle, but it worked.

With a minimal amount of encouragement, I pulled him up against me, almost belly to belly. He panted, his skin covered in a thin sheen of sweat, but I didn't care. His cock still moved inside me. I wrapped my ankles around his hips. He couldn't manage anything more than short thrusts, but that worked, too.

At least with his face now inches away from mine, I had more connection with him. He even managed a quick smile.

I needed that. I lay back again and found that the heel of my foot cradled nicely to the small of Patrick's back.

And he took instructions. I could guide him into the perfect angle again, slowing him down or make him pound my ass to ride the perfect wave.

The candles beside us sputtered, and another wave of heat rolled like a ball from them. Half the smaller candles extinguished as I felt the first urgent need to come. And then as I felt my own rolling ball deep inside me pushing for release, the rest of the

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shorter candles flared and died. Patrick cried out. His body jerked like being tasered.

Normally, I just pushed the other person away. From me, from my bed, my house. Instead, I let him collapse on me, shaking. I might have even cradled his head to my chest. I didn't know who cradled whom. If it hadn't been for Sergeant Pepper, bursting through the mostly closed door and demanding to be fed, we probably would have stayed in bed.

Instead, we had to deal with the awkward shifting and cleanup that can never be unobtrusive. Patrick stared at the table of mostly burned out candles, but said nothing.

The silence continued until I offered Patrick the first shower. He nodded and took me up on it.

CHAPTER 6

Sergeant Pepper had a wide variety of food to choose from, but my fridge lacked anything that the adjective “fresh” could describe. The freezer had slightly more promise. I picked out a couple frozen curries, started a pot of rice, and picked a red that could withstand the heat. By the time Patrick came out of the bath upstairs, the heat and steam from the room chased the last little bit of abandoned building feeling from the corners of the house. If you need more of a time line, let’s just say the rice cooker had finished and sat on the warm cycle.

When Patrick emerged, he did so with a slightly goofy smile and a towel around his waist. And yes, if you were curious, nothing else. “Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” I took the hard plastic curry bowls out of the oven.

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Patrick leaned over me. The oven had been on for an hour, but the heat still radiated from his skin. “How does the plastic not melt?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “How do you light a hundred candles from three feet away?”

Patrick swallowed. “I don’t know. No one has ever had so many candles by their bed before.”

I tried to say something about the night being full of firsts, but kept my tongue. “Has it been happening for a while?”

A shrug. I wanted to ask him if he’d seen anything flash between the guards and the two men that afternoon in the parking lot, but I didn’t. The warm, occupied feeling in the house diminished, somewhat. So instead I gave Patrick the empty bowls. “Dish out the rice,” I said. “There’s chutney in the fridge.” Condiments, I could do.

Patrick relaxed. “Mango?”

“And coriander. But check the expiration date.”

He nodded.

Patrick didn’t think it strange that we avoided the dining room. Instead we ate by the sink, wineglasses on the counter. Patrick had jumped up and sat next to the fridge, the white towel riding up almost to dishtowel length on his thighs. Nor did he seem particularly worried. He smelled clean, and of my conditioner, which I liked. I would never tell anyone that, even under torture.

The downy hair on his inner thighs looked golden. I’d just made him laugh so hard that he’d come close to snorting his rice. This thin-edged normalcy felt unreal, but I could get accustomed to it alarmingly easily.

Patrick put his bowl in the sink. He had to turn on his hip to do it, and the towel gave up trying to protect his modesty. The edges

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of the towel rolled down his hips, and he froze, completely naked.

I picked up the edges. The towel felt damp, and when I pulled Patrick to the edge of the counter, it squeaked. Patrick started to say something, but then obviously changed his mind. He shook his head. "Is this where you blow me?"

I looked up at him. He took a sip of wine, and his lips were stained a rich, blood red. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"Work tomorrow."

"Skip it. I'll write you a note: 'Dear Ms. Gwen, please excuse Patrick's absence. I rendered him nonverbal and we lost track of the time. Also, you owe me one.'"

"That will go over well," Patrick said. He put down his wineglass. "As much as losing the ability to speak sounds fun..." He slid off the counter, leaving the damp towel where it lay. I still had the ends in my fist, so he only had a hairsbreadth of free space. His breath touched my cheek and his cock my belly. "I really have to go."

I could have ordered him not to go. Hell, I could have begged him to stay. And he would have. But he looked at me in that sideways kind of way and I knew I couldn't push the issue. I stepped back, draping the towel over my shoulder. "Go."

He went. Back upstairs at least, and I heard him walk down to my yellow bedroom. Typical of any man about to do the walk of shame, he dressed on his way back down hall, thumping and cursing as he went. Sergeant Pepper bolted down before him and darted out through the cat-door. The still swinging door caught Patrick's eye as he came down stairs.

"Who takes care of your cat when you're not here?" Patrick asked. He hadn't completely dressed; his bare ankles were weirdly charming sticking out of his loafers. I could have told him that it

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was none of his business, but that would be taking his rejection personally. I didn't take rejections personally. "Pepper gets by," I said. "He's convinced everyone in the neighborhood that he's a poor starving waif."

"That doesn't bother you? Anything could happen to him."

I shrugged. "I let him go, he comes back."

"That works for you?"

He didn't look away from me. I wondered who had stopped talking about the cat first, him or me. "So far."

He nodded. "Will I see you tomorrow?"

I could have told him I didn't care, but that would have hurt, and suddenly I couldn't bear that thought. "You're the one with the detailed map."

He touched my cheek. "I'll take care of dinner."

"Don't," I said. "I might be late. Or dead. Or some sort of flesh-eating zombie."

"Do you really worry about being turned into a zombie?" Patrick asked.

"Yes. Wait. You don't?"

"I wish I knew you were joking," he said, but smiled when he said it. He leaned into my space, but didn't kiss me. Instead, he sighed, our foreheads touching. It felt...nicer. "I'll see you tomorrow. Unless you're a zombie."

"Brains," I whispered, barely under my breath.

"Idiot," Patrick said, but grinned. That made it better.

Sergeant Pepper waited for Patrick to leave before coming cautiously back through the flap. I scooped up the cat. He weighed close to twenty pounds, but he only squirmed to get more comfortable on my shoulder. He grumbled in my ear as I went from room to room, turning off lights and setting wards. Once

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upstairs, he staked out the center of the bed and curled up contently as I fetched the pillows.

“You’re a very poor substitute,” I told him. He pretended like he didn’t understand.

* * *

The thing is, I’m very good at my job. I hadn’t charged Baxter thirty large just to ask a question to punish him or stroke my ego. I know how to ask questions. Case in point, the next morning I’d asked two questions, the first to a coke dealer I’d gotten out of a sticky situation, and the second to a photographer who’d been wrongly accused of a pretty nasty thing, and I had both Scott’s last name, Underhill, and his agent’s contact information. The agent, Wilford Butler, kept the drug dealer in first rate bling, but didn’t use himself. I wondered if he was Scott’s Dr. Feel Good.

I called, but no one answered the agency’s line or Mr. Butler’s private cell. Eleven o’clock could have been too early for the agency’s business hours and Butler could have just left his cell phone on the table on the way out the door that morning, but the knot in my stomach told me that Mr. Butler hadn’t been so lucky.

I wish I could say I used my crack ninja skills to break into his self-named agency office on the second floor of a historic, if somewhat rundown, sandstone building, but (a) I don’t have any crack ninja skills and (b) the door was wide open. As was Mr. Butler’s skull, by the way. Front to back, in one clean heft.

I swore. The two-door filing cabinet had no folders in it, and the desk Butler sat behind looked clean but for brain matter. A void in the blood splatter on the desk gapped in a perfect laptop shape. “Damn it,” I said.

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Plan B involved hacking into the government's system and finding the last job Scott worked at. I could do that. I called 911, complaining of hoodlums cavorting about in Mr. Butler's agency and hung up before the woman on the phone asked me my name. If she tried tracing this number it would lead only to a fax machine in the back of a warehouse of Elgin Avenue. I had just reached my car when my cell phone rang.

Gwen.

I answered it. She wouldn't accept my own death as a good enough reason to let it go to voice mail.

"Get back here," she told me, never one for pleasantries. Or...sentence subjects. All declarative, all the time, our Gwen was. For dramatic effect the phone should have cut to dial tone, but cell phones didn't do that anymore. The dramatic moment had to settle for dead air.

I went back, found the same parking spot from yesterday, and pulled in. The hole in the asphalt had disappeared, and all the cars were different shades of mauve. I grabbed my own portfolio and went outside. The faux leather on the outside of it felt even cheaper than it had yesterday.

A new temp, far more shell-shocked than Patrick had ever been, stood in Patrick's place. It doesn't take the astute ones very long to understand the wrongness with the building. This one looked as though he would stay oblivious for a good long time.

"Cypher," Gwen said from her office, the moment I stepped inside. She'd waited for me.

"Where's Patrick?" I demanded.

"Patrick," Gwen repeated, somewhat mockingly. "You don't even know his last name."

"Gunnar," I said. I'd gone through his car's registration when

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he had been in the shower. It had seemed the least obtrusive way to get the information I needed. "Do you want his address or what his driving license restrictions are?"

She shook her head. "I told you. He has aptitude. We hire from within. You know that."

"Really," I said. Being terminated at this job usually involved never finding the body.

Gwen leaned over her desk and pushed her intercom button. I knew she had done it for show. Her gun-metal skirt slid up her thighs as much as Patrick's towel had the night before. I looked away. "Mr. McKenzie requires proof of life."

I crossed my arms, no longer caring how defensive it made me look. You never knew with Gwen when proof of life meant the ear, the head, or the whole damn body.

We waited in silence for a long time. She didn't ask me how my new job was coming along. She didn't trouble herself over the minutia of the day-to-day. Gwen was all about the big picture.

The door finally opened, and Patrick, whole and breathing, stumbled into the room, thrust by unseen hands. He took a couple running steps to keep on his feet, and by the time he had regained his footing, the door behind him had closed.

"Satisfied, Cy? He's never been better. I've even made him head of his department. Will you lose the idea that I am trying to kill everything you hold dear?"

"No," I said. She knew I knew eventually, one way or another, she did exactly that.

"It's fine, Cy. Really. I'm just working somewhere else now," Patrick said. He certainly didn't look more distressed than yesterday. He'd showered. I wondered if he still smelled like us.

I nodded. "Please wait for us outside," I said to Patrick, but

didn't look away from Gwen as I said it.

She nodded, giving all the permission Patrick needed. The door opened without him touching it, and Patrick left the room in double-time.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"Well, I'm about to break into the government's database to look up the last job Scott would have had."

"What are you doing with Patrick?" Gwen asked gritting her teeth.

"I'm not fucking his ass," I said. "If that makes you feel any better."

She made a cutting gesture across her throat, a mixture of *cut it out* and *you're next*. I suspected more of the latter. "I have vested interest in that boy, and you fucking him paints a bull's-eye on his back that not even I can scrub off."

I paused. "Why do you need him?"

She didn't answer me. I suppose I didn't really expect her to. I answered for her. "Those men yesterday. They weren't after me."

"As hard as it must be for your ego to accept, yes. They were not after you."

"Are they dead?"

"All but." Gwen crossed her legs and leaned forward. "You are going to tell your boy that you are terribly sorry, but you forgot you are an asshole who is horribly allergic to second dates."

"Third," I said, without thinking. I normally didn't do that around Gwen. "Technically, it's our third date, what with the whole me meeting the new client and all."

Gwen pressed her lips together tightly in her version of a smile. Even that was rare. "The third date," she corrected herself. Another rarity. "Break it off." She stood up and went around her desk; the

conversation finished.

Only it wasn't. "No."

She stopped so suddenly you would have thought one of her beloved rubber plants had spoken and told her to lead her people into the desert. I repeated it, just to be sure. "No. I'm not. Sorry, Gwen."

"Sorry, Gwen?" Gwen asked, incredulously. "You disobey a direct order and you think you are sorry now? I assure you, right now, you're nothing more than mistaken."

I said nothing. But my fingers dug in through the heavy sleeve of my jacket I hadn't taken off. A trickle of sweat ran down between my shoulders. It had nothing to do with the heat vent I stood next to. I gripped my portfolio tighter.

"And now you have nothing to say," Gwen spat.

"I'm apparently willing to die and you're apparently willing to kill me. I'm waiting for the first one to flinch."

She laughed. Funeral processions had more mirth and joy. "You're willing to bet your life I'm going to change my mind? Perhaps you entertain me more than most of your equals, Cy, but I assure you. You're every bit as expendable."

"Then what are you waiting for?" I could smell my fear. It wafted off my skin, but I refused to look away. "I've never asked you for a single thing."

"Except this. If I say yes and that boy gets you killed—"

"I'll be just as dead."

She laughed again. I was on a roll. "You think this is about you? I kill you in here, it's damage control. Just more mulch for my hybrid apple trees. You get killed out there and I look weak."

"And we can't have that," I snapped.

"No, we can't," Gwen said. She pushed the intercom button

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again. “Jonas. Darling, be a dear and bring me Cypher McKenzie’s termination papers? Yes, dear, they are right on your desk. The blue file. Yes...no, no. Darling, the blue file. Fantastic. Good job. Yes. I would like those brought to me. Yes, to my office. Yes, now would be lovely.” She straightened a heartbeat later. Jonas, the nervous looking temp, came through the door. And yes, part of me did expect him to be carrying a red folder, or perhaps a goldfish bowl.

“Is that everything, Ms. Gwen?” Jonas asked. He swallowed, and his pronounced Adam’s apple bounced as nervously as the rest of him. His eyes swam behind his thick glasses.

“Of course it is,” Gwen said, smiling so prettily it probably hurt her face. “Thank you so much. You’ve been working so hard, why don’t you just go ahead and take off early for a nice long lunch?”

Another game of bobbing for Adam’s apples started. “Why thank you, Ms. Gwen,” he said. He walked away, no doubt thinking that his new boss seemed about the nicest person he’d ever met. Then I found myself wondering if the smell of cordite would clear from the office by the time Jonas returned. I knew for a fact the floor would scrub clean.

The moment the door closed, the smile on Gwen’s face died. She took out the paperwork and adjusted the date. I didn’t feel really concerned. Not yet. The new date topped seven other older dates, all scratched out with the same efficient royal blue inked line. When I looked, though, there were two dates in the list she hadn’t demanded I watch. That alarmed me.

She wrote in today’s date and then initialed and dated the change.

I said nothing.

The termination reason line hadn’t been crossed out. In Gwen’s

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neat penmanship, *Insubordinate* looked downright pretty.

Gwen paused, glancing up at me. She sighed and added, *“And also, for being a ridiculous ass who let his dick do the thinking this morning, his last on earth.”* You wouldn’t have thought that would have all fit in the small line, but it did. Every word. Gwen had many talents.

“You can sign this, or not. It’s entirely up to you. We will just smear it in your high velocity blood splatter and allow it to air dry. It will be just as binding.”

I snorted, but didn’t answer her.

“No? Your loss.”

She scratched out that section, and the section for last meal requests. She’d never taken the termination ruse quite so far before. Then I realized I’d always caved before.

She dated the bottom with today’s date, and glanced at me. “Very last chance, Cypher. Do not push me.”

I shrugged. I had warned Patrick not to cook tonight because I might be dead. I only wish it had been after lunch. And that Gwen wasn’t the one who did the actual killing. I still really liked Gwen.

She went to sign her name, an easy thing to do because she only had the one, and cursed. All her beloved rubber plants in her office turned to ice, shriveled, and died.

She stood up and forced me back so that I touched the solid, load-bearing wall. I dearly hoped she remembered that. She brought her hand back, her red nails as sharp as any talon, and I knew she’d go for my eyes if I looked away for a second.

So I didn’t. It didn’t seem possible to piss her off even more, but I could. We stayed like that for I don’t know how long. It couldn’t have been too long; I remember not blinking and my eyes didn’t completely dry out. She cursed again and broke away.

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"You think you've won," she snarled. I felt her words in my chest like a sonic boom.

"I'd settle for not being reduced to bone chips later this afternoon. You can call that what you want," I said, surprised my voice still worked. I swallowed without needing to just because I could.

"But you still want Patrick."

Another shrug. I certainly hadn't gone through hell for Jonas the nervous temp's ass.

"What if I said you can't have him?"

"I'd say you'd need another termination sheet. And since you've sent your temp out for a long lunch, you're pretty much out of luck."

"Oh. I keep duplicates in my desk. You never know when you have to order everyone killed."

She was kidding; I was almost sure of it. "I want Patrick."

"He'll get you killed."

Only Gwen would kill me to protect me. "I'll try hard not to make it look bad on you."

"Jonas, I am told, has a spectacular ass and almost no gag reflex to speak of," Gwen cajoled.

"I'll stick with Patrick."

"I'll throw in a new car. It will have to be mauve, though."

"Patrick, Gwen."

"Oh, all right. Patrick it is."

"Why do you want him so much?" I asked.

She wasn't going to answer me. Her face went cold, and my insides liquefied a little. I'd gotten her angry again. "You don't think your little charms and spells magically appear out of nowhere, do you, Cypher? Everything takes power, and your boy

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is quite the battery pack.”

I made a sound in my throat.

She sniffed, ignoring me. “Go have a shower. You smell terrified.”

“Sorry about that.” I had just gotten to the door when she spoke again.

“And Cypher? I wasn’t bluffing.”

Not even Gwen could lie to me. “Neither was I.”

“Next time you won’t have so much leniency.”

That wasn’t a lie, either. I shivered.

CHAPTER 7

Patrick waited outside, and looked about as nervous as he should have been. “Are you all right?”

A man sat next to Patrick. We’d never been formally introduced to, but I knew his job title almost as well as he knew mine. It’s been my experience that men who just killed as their job either embraced the all black suit and mirrored sunglasses regardless of the time, or they wore Hawaiian shirts and Bermuda shorts regardless of the season. This one didn’t wear sunglasses. Still, both the types had something wrong with them, and I didn’t want Patrick sitting anywhere near him. Assassin cooties never came off.

“I’m good. Let’s go.”

“Where?” Patrick asked. I used my key card to let us into the

building proper.

“The fifth floor.”

“Fifth? But that’s just storage.”

“Yeah, that’s what they tell all the temps. Have you ever gotten anything from up there?”

“No. We use the storage room on third.” Patrick paused. “Oh.”

The pool cast calming shadows onto the ceiling even from the elevator though it had to go through several sets of glass walls. The unisex change rooms led to the unisex showers. From Gwen’s preferred, though highly unorthodox hiring preferences, there seemed no point in separate showers. A quiet attendant, dressed in a butler’s uniform exchanged our clothes and my portfolio for a towel and toiletries.

“Madam has ordered you up a change of clothes, sir,” he said, but didn’t make eye contact. His white gloves remained spotless even after touching my clothes. They were so damp with sweat I hadn’t realized they had felt gummy until I took them off.

“Thank her for me,” I said.

“She also has indicated that you are to have a meal allowance. May I just have Madam’s chef send up whatever Madam is having, or do you have a special request.”

It may have had all the words necessary to have been a question, but it wasn’t a question. “What she is having is fine,” I said.

“Very well, sir.”

The butler turned away from us, the conversation apparently over. Patrick and I went to the shower room. It felt like stepping into a slightly higher-than-body-temperature rain shower. And we were naked. With soap. And condoms with individual packages of lubrication provided in a discreet baskets off to the side. Patrick

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took the shower gel from me, backed me into the corner that had the most water pressure, and scrubbed me off. The loofah he'd chosen felt a bit rougher than what I liked, and I swore the first time he brought it over my shoulders.

"So tell me," he said in a smug tone I hadn't thought possible. "Was that an 'ow, that hurt' or 'ow, do it again'?"

"Try 'ow, get a new fucking loofah'."

"I don't think so. Turn around."

"Patrick—" I began, but he looked me.

"Please?"

I turned around. "Just be more careful."

"Will do," Patrick agreed cheerfully, then tried his damndest to turn my subdermal layer of skin tissue into my epidermis. After a while, it even started to feel good.

During my turn, I tried killing him with kindness. Which isn't actually possible unless you put a pillow over the face, by the way. I used the softest cloth on every inch of his skin when Patrick was already turned on. I enjoyed the pathetic sounds he made. Telling him that it was his fault for being so receptive didn't seem to help him take it any better. I rinsed off the last of the soap from his neck and kissed it while reaching around to lather his cock. He thrust desperately in my hand.

"Ready to fuck me?" I asked. The room filled with steam enough that both the change room and the pool were out of sight.

He nodded. I thrust his ass with my hips, my cock sliding easily between his cheeks. He didn't flinch.

Instead, he reached into the alcove where we'd stashed the packets of protection. I stumbled away, feeling for one of the stone benches I knew stood in the center of the room, and found one with my outstretched hand rather than with my shin. I counted that as a

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win. The bench felt slightly cooler than everything in the room, but none of the sprayers reached it. I couldn't stop rubbing my eyes.

The misting had lifted. I hoped a motion-sensitive device controlled the flow rather than some person, but the fog felt so heavy now anything outside my immediate area looked blurry.

Patrick emerged from the banks of fog, his hair slicked back so much it looked dark. He was in his element.

Sure, you hear that a lot as a saying. It gets passed down through so many untalented hands that it's come to mean nothing. Not Patrick. Patrick was in his water element. Part of him, a grandfather, I thought, was water fey. Not like me, the blood so diluted that it hardly counted. He had a direct line, like Gwen.

"You with me?" Patrick asked.

I shook my head. My back on the bench seemed colder than the rest of me. More heat had leeches from it than I thought. And my skin still stung from harsh rub Patrick had given it.

I got off the bench, and Patrick's mouth twitched. He wouldn't tell me how much he wanted to fuck, but I wanted to hear it.

I kissed him. "You don't understand," Patrick said. "I'm not kidding when I said I dated a lot of bastards."

It didn't surprise me that Patrick could read my mind in here. "You don't have to explain."

"I want to."

I kissed him again. My back felt still chilled, and the bench didn't hit at the right height anyway. I knelt on the bench instead. That seemed better. Patrick came up behind me and wrapped his arm around my belly. His forearm grazed my cock, half hard already, but he ignored it. I tried to strain my hips so that he'd have to touch me again, but as soon as I tried, he just raised his arm a little until I couldn't reach him at all.

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“That’s just mean,” I told him.

“I don’t want you to come.”

“I thought that was the whole point to this exercise.”

He laughed. Surrounded by water, the heavy feeling I’d gotten the last time we’d done this dissipated through the mist, fog and the pool. He couldn’t overcome me, here. “I’m installing a hot tub,” I told him.

Patrick hesitated. “What?”

“I’ll tell you later. Are you fucking me or what?”

He didn’t answer. But I felt a finger sliding inside me. It gave me an almost electrical stimulation it hadn’t the first time. Patrick had brought extra packets of lube, and I glanced over to it. Water based. Of course. I planned on buying a case.

Patrick jerked his finger away, like he’d been electrocuted instead of just pleasantly stimulated. “That’s new,” he said.

He couldn’t see me, so I didn’t try to hide my smile. “No, it isn’t,” I said. It was very, very old. “You only fuck with condoms, don’t you?”

He tensed again.

“Relax, I’m not asking you to go steady. Even for oral. You use a lot of condoms.” We had, for everything but the first time, but there hadn’t been any contact.

“I’m always safe,” he said, voice more guarded than I’d ever heard before. “Is that going to be a problem?”

“No, not at all,” I said. I arched my back. “I’ll just be requiring you to finger fuck me more than you’re probably used to.”

He slid his finger back inside me. He had probably added more lubrication, because it slid in even easier. The same sizzle returned, going from slightly annoying to just right after the first second. “Oh.”

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"Yes, oh," I said, and then put my mouth over my forearm so I could groan properly. Patrick slid a second finger, and that worked twice as well. My whole body felt twitchy, and as good as it felt, I didn't feel quite hard enough to really ride out the sensation into a full-blown orgasm. Not yet, at least. "That's very good."

His cock brushed past my ass. "I'd really like to fuck you now." After a second, he added. "Please."

I sighed, feeling more put on than I should have. I fucked myself back on his fingers. "Can't you see I'm in the middle of something here?" I just wanted one little orgasm, not too much to ask. And the sparks inside me were getting bigger and hotter. I wanted to pant. He didn't stop moving his fingers in and out, but he started to do it faster, just exactly right. I closed my eyes, letting the sensations build inside me. If it was just me jerking off, I'd let myself come right about now, but I liked letting someone else build up the pressure just that little bit past the comfort zone.

"Afterward?" he asked. His thrusting redoubled. He obviously used both hands now, to push his fingers harder inside me. And that felt oh-so-nice, too.

"Afterward, sure. Fine, great," I managed between thrusts. I didn't know there would be an afterward. My brain came very close to exploding along with the rest of me. I just needed a little bit more.

Patrick put his whole weight into it. I needed that. My eyes were closed, but I swear I saw sheet lightning flash from the receding banks of fog. The orgasm ripped through more, bigger and more rounded, but still perfect in every agonizing detail. Patrick had reached around me at some time, because I began to realize his hand still gripped my cock, letting me ride out the last of the orgasm, and then the snapping of electricity all at once

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became too much, and Patrick pulled away.

“Wow,” I said.

Patrick rubbed my shoulders. “Now?” he asked.

I nodded.

He pushed inside me. I didn’t think I could get off again, and the condom protected me from the snap-crackle-pop. That felt good, too. He thrust fast, almost too fast if I hadn’t already come selfishly first, but I had to remind myself that he would age well, like wine.

The pool felt slightly cooler than the shower room had been but not cold enough to be brisk. We didn’t stay in the water too long because the butler served lunch. I got out first and went to where the robes waited. The soft terry cloth felt blissful against me. The chicken on the bone tasted moist and the vegetables crisp. The simple meal tasted better than anything I could do.

Patrick kept poking the chicken. “This doesn’t even taste like any chicken I know.”

“It used to always taste like this,” I said.

We couldn’t hide away on the fifth floor forever. Others had tried. I had a new pair of slacks and a clean shirt ready for me, and Patrick’s clothes had been pressed. I took the shirt off the cardboard backing when Patrick picked up my portfolio and took out Scott’s picture.

He stared at it for a very long time. Far longer than anyone who didn’t know the person. “Do you know him?” I asked.

“No,” Patrick said. “Yes. Maybe. I don’t know. I might know his older, better looking brother.” Patrick gave me back the picture and the portfolio. “He was a model. The brother, I mean. He worked on a commercial shoot for my father’s company a couple weeks ago. I saw him when I had my dad’s lawyer look over the

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contract for here.”

“That’s him,” I said. “I hope. He doesn’t photograph well. I think I need to talk to your father. Scott has gone missing and I need to find him.”

Patrick didn’t look convinced. “My father divorced my mom when I was like three. He hasn’t been around all that much, but I think I’d still be upset if you killed him.”

“I just need him to answer some questions. I promise there won’t be any bloodshed.”

Patrick still looked like he had a burr under his saddle. If he, you know, had a saddle on.

“Also, we had sex. Scott and I, if that’s his name.”

“Just sex?”

“Oh, yeah, and just the once. We didn’t...work together. Not even slightly. He didn’t think I had just let the right person fuck me and he gave lousy head. Fish lips. Honestly it felt awful. He had a horrible fat man fawn on him during the shoot, which took a million takes, and my father’s going with a voiceover instead.”

“Can you introduce me to your father? I promise to be on my very best behavior.”

Patrick studied me. “Okay. First thing tomorrow. But remember. No killing.”

I put my hand over my heart.

Patrick’s smile turned a little shy, or perhaps just a little sly. “We could go from your place.”

We could indeed.

Gwen came to her door as we got off the elevator. She glared at me, but I wouldn’t give Patrick up now. He came with a vibrate mode.

I had just gotten out of my car back at the house when Baxter

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came running up to me. Despite the cold air, his face still shone. How, I didn't know.

"Did you talk to Gwen?" he demanded.

And how, I thought, but shook my head. "Go back to the diner and get your check back, Mr. Baxter. I can't take your money anymore. Your best bet would be to contact Gwen yourself and collect another set of ingredients for another summoning spell."

"But I don't want another demon! I want August! I want him back. You need to get him for me!"

Baxter went to put his hands on my chest. I saw it in his eyes he wanted to hurt me. But just as I reached for my knife so that I could force-feed Baxter his own fingers, he pulled away. He slammed his fist down on the hood of my car. Which, I supposed I would allow. This time.

He stepped back. "Please. I loved him. I want him back."

"Like I said, I'm sorry. But I'm not in Gwen's favor right now, and anything I ask from her will be denied."

Baxter's lip quivered. But he turned around and left without saying another word. Just as Patrick reached the front door, and Baxter drove off in his car, the big limo rounded the corner. I exhaled, and tossed Patrick the keys.

"Go on ahead," I said. "Unfortunately, this might be a while."

"Are those the people who are going to turn you into a zombie?" Patrick asked.

"Worse. They made me give head to a man named Bootsie."

Patrick unlocked the door, shuddering.

Bootsie got out of the driver's side door. "In," he ordered. "Don't speak. Just get inside."

I mock saluted him.

The old woman waited for me. Today she wore a soft blue

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pantsuit, with a white fur stole over her shoulders. Her gloves were white suede and she had a string of pearls around her throat. She looked as though she'd just come from the opera rather than getting dressed up only to threaten me.

"You were on the way," she said, and took off her gloves. "What have you found out?"

"Scott's agent is dead."

She didn't look too surprised to hear about Butler's death. She should have at least wanted to know if I'd learned anything. She gave me nothing. "You have three more days," she said, instead.

"No one said anything about a deadline," I snapped.

"That doesn't mean the deadline hasn't been there. Three days, McKenzie. Don't waste them."

The door opened again. "Get out," Bootsie said. I only stood beside him for a second, but it long enough for Bootsie to lean into my space. "She'll kill you," he whispered. "But I'll get you first."

I stepped away, but not fast enough. His words slid down my skin like filthy mud. No pressure or anything.

Have I ever mentioned how much I hate deadlines? It's not like they're called seriously inconvenienced lines or "oh, well I'll try harder next time" lines. Especially in this business. I ran the short distance to the house and threw open the door. Luckily, Patrick hadn't locked it on his way in or the dramatic moment would have been totally ruined.

"Are you naked?" I called.

Patrick came around so that he could see me from the kitchen. He was fully clothed, but answered the question anyway. "No."

"Then we've got to go." That sounded too much like an order. I tried again. "I've got to go. But I want you to come. I need you to come." That felt better. "Please."

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Patrick looked at his watch. "My father starts work ridiculously early. He'd be home by now."

I waited. Patrick hesitated for a second more. He wanted to ask if this could wait, but he had to know that it couldn't. He sighed, but seemed distracted. "Let me get my coat."

"You're already wearing your coat," I pointed out.

He touched the leather with his fingertips. "Oh. Yeah."

CHAPTER 8

Patrick gave directions to Mount Royal, the wealthy part of the city on the other side of downtown. The houses here were huge and on enormous lots unlike any other place inside the city. The obstacle course, otherwise known as the traffic calming measures, let you know right off the bat that my kind wasn't welcome here. I could imagine Patrick, in his crappy little car, causing quite the commotion.

He had one of those clicker things on the end of his key chain that opened up a gate on one of the quiet, labyrinth-like one-way streets. The neighbor's house, complete with a turret, stood as the only house on the block visible from the road. Once inside, we drove another minute before reaching the circular driveway in front of the house. My high school had been fewer square feet than

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the huge forest green monstrosity before us.

“Holy shit.”

“Old money,” Patrick said. And if his elemental power came from his father’s side of the family I knew the money carbon-dated.

Before we got out of the car, my ancient Honda barely acceptable as a running around town car, the front doors had opened. A redheaded woman, young enough to be Patrick’s older sister stood in the doorway. Her black pencil skirt and cashmere sweater did what black pencil skirts and cashmere did best. If she wasn’t the trophy wife, she was the personal assistant soon to become the trophy wife.

When she offered her hand, I didn’t see a ring. The latter then. “Welcome Patrick and Patrick’s...friend. I don’t believe your father expected you.”

“I didn’t call, Melody,” Patrick said, mimicking her tone. They could have easily been siblings. But not the happy, get you exactly what you want for Christmas type of siblings. The were squabbling over the will, over the deathbed kind.

He hadn’t apologized. I liked Patrick even more.

Eventually Melody caved in. “So, right this way then,” she said, her smile painted on.

She took us up the stairs, down the corridor, up another flight of stairs through a door, and into a sunken room obviously a study. The rich wooden walls had built-in bookcases to the ceiling. It even had one of those wheelie ladder things you only see in movies. Fireplace, check. Two as green as the house-high back chairs, check. A dog-shaped thing, with long ears and jowls in front of the roaring fireplace, snoring softly to itself, check. Okay, the dog looked like a nice touch.

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Patrick went straight to the dog. “Winston,” he said, and crouched down next to it...er...him. “How is it that you are still alive?”

“Good blood,” the man sitting in one of the chairs said. I came around in front of the fireplace, and couldn’t believe the man, Gunnar, obviously, wore a smoking jacket. And smoked in it. The pipe in his hand barely smoldered, and the tobacco mixed with the smoke from the actual wood fire burning in the fireplace. I looked at the pipe in his hand, and saw the man’s face for the first time. The sense of dread inside me tripled Earth’s gravitational pull in that room.

Because Patrick’s father wasn’t whole. I’m not saying parts of him were missing on the outside, he had huge gaping holes inside. He’d been emptied, wrung out like a dishcloth and left to molder in the back of a dank, dark cupboard.

Outwardly, he looked no different. Though I’m sure if we asked Melody, the trophy personal assistant, she’d say he’d been acting his age lately. When he stood up, he did so like an old man who forgot his body hurt until he moved.

Gunnar glanced over his son still petting the ancient dog in front of the fire. I got the impression the man glanced over his son quite a lot. The house, other than Melody, had no sense of feminine power, so Patrick’s dad hadn’t left his family for another woman. Or even another man, I would bet. Fae have fluid sexuality. He’d just left.

Gunnar’s gaze locked on me. I didn’t like the sudden anger inside me. I cleared my throat and began again. “I need to talk to you.”

“And who are you?” Patrick’s dad demanded.

“What does that matter?” No names. Names had power, and

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they especially did in this old house with this old man who was dying, for the first time in his life.

“Patrick, wait for your friend outside,” Gunnar said. Again, he didn’t look at Patrick. And part of me wanted to shout at him to look at his son and actually see him, and part of me found that idea terrifying.

Patrick didn’t argue. He patted the old dog. I knew it would outlive its master. And Gunnar, looking at me, knew I knew.

It felt like a wet blanket smothered the sounds of the room. “You’ve killed several of the kind folk,” Gunnar said. “You still smell of their blood.”

“Self-defense,” I said. I’ve never killed a single fey who wasn’t trying to kill me first. Though in full disclosure, it doesn’t take a lot to provoke the kind folk. Just looking them in the eye will do it most of the time. I could smell the semen on him, too. We all had our talents. “But now I’m just looking for one.”

His lip curled back. I wonder if he’d noticed his yellow teeth or his receding gum lines first. “Why should I help you?”

“Because the same man who took him wants your son.”

I said the wrong thing. I saw it, but I couldn’t pull back the words. He opened his mouth to take a deep breath but I cut him off. The agility of youth overcoming yet again. “You do care. You don’t want him to suffer through what happened to you.”

He opened his mouth again, to lie to me, and swore, covering his mouth. “You’re not human.”

“Not entirely,” I agreed. “You know you can’t lie to me. I know you care. Now tell me, did you fuck Scott Underhill?”

He took another cautious breath. But he held it. Mulishly, he nodded. “How did you know?”

I sniffed. He understood, and flushed, hot pink on ashen white

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skin. We were getting somewhere. “Did he take you somewhere or did he do it here?”

He opened his mouth to protest. He didn’t finish his thought. But he couldn’t have if he wanted to. “I don’t care about the sex,” I said, letting impatience creep into my voice. “Did Scott take your power? Or did you go somewhere?”

He didn’t answer me. Two weeks ago, he would have thrown me out of his house for my tone, and he would have been right to do so. But two weeks ago he’d literally been a different man.

The old man sank down into his chair. The old dog heaved to its stubby little feet with a Herculean effort. His flesh hung off him, but I thought it a breed characteristic and not a sign of the zombie apocalypse. He waddled over to his master and thrust his gray muzzle against his thigh. The old man couldn’t have been that bad.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I even meant it a little. “But Patrick is running out of time.”

The old man sighed. “He took me somewhere,” he said, the words heavy. “We went under some sort of Asian restaurant. Korean, I think. Next to the railroad tracks. It had seemed harmless, and the people they had on offer...you don’t get anywhere like that through any service, let me tell you. They were so beautiful, and so willing.” He closed his eyes, his hand sliding up his thigh in an empty, futile gesture. He made a disgusted sound that startled the dog.

“Until they sucked you empty in every way,” I said, hoping to snap him out of his...remembrance.

He looked up at me, his blue eyes weak and powerless. “I went willingly,” he said, and touched his thigh again. “I’d do it again.”

His hand stopped. His eyes closed, and soon he made the same

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snuffling sounds his dog had made. I left the two of them sleeping.

Patrick waited for me outside of the room. He looked at me, at the door, and then back to me. "He's asleep," I said.

Patrick exhaled and his shoulders slumped. "I won't bother him, then," he said, too quickly.

I nodded.

Once we were back in the car, Patrick whipped up his cell phone and Googled Korean restaurants. Calgary had only three, and the railroad tracks only ran by one of them. We drove past the strip mall that contained the restaurant, but the whole block looked deserted. Perfect cover for a sex-demon brothel.

"You're not going to go in?" Patrick asked.

"No," I said. "All brothels pay protection to someone, and if this one is protected by important people, stumbling in unannounced would be suicidal even without the time crunch. I have to talk to Gwen, first."

"A phone warrant isn't good enough?" Patrick asked.

Poor, young Patrick. "Um...no," I said. "When you deal with things that can hold grudges for more than a century, it's best to get everything in writing."

"Good point," Patrick said, quietly. "Can we go back to your place and fuck, or do you need written permission for that, too?"

I assured him I could act on my own behalf on some issues, fucking being one of them. We grabbed dinner at Chicken-on-the-Way. Any Calgarian traveling through Kensington late at night had to stop. I'm not saying they use any magic in their food, but their fries and corn fritters taste good even cold. You be the judge.

After dinner, and the small bones disposed of well enough that even Sergeant Pepper couldn't find them, we retired to the bedroom.

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Patrick looked good tied to the Murphy bed. Naked, with only candles lighting the room. It's the contrast of the warm yellow light and black pooling shadows I think, that does it. The light turned everything into a pornographic sepia photograph.

Patrick strained against the soft ropes at his wrists I'd tied over his head. "Are you going to do something, or just watch me all night?" he demanded.

"I have a choice?" I asked.

"No. You don't," Patrick said. "Your choice is pretty much do something."

I stepped into the room. Patrick tensed, testing the ropes for real this time, but I could have told him he had to stay put. I found keeping people where I needed them a key part of my job. "And what would you like me to do?" I asked.

I meant the question rhetorically, but Patrick still glanced to the table full of candles. I had replaced those that had burned out. He swallowed, and I heard his throat click.

"Just breathe," I told him, knowing how little the advice did for him. I waved my hand over the bank of candles. It felt too hot to keep my palm over it for more than a second or two.

Still, Patrick's chest rose and fell. The breath rattled out of his throat. If we did this again, I would need a glass of water with a bendy straw. I looked down to Patrick again and silently amended the thought to a *when*. When we did this again.

I picked up the smallest of the tea lights, burning merrily in its container. It felt hot, even through the plastic holder. Patrick bit his lip, turning his head away. I brought the candle over the smooth expanse of his back. His whole body pulled away from the tiny flame. It flickered and almost went out despite how brightly it had burned a second ago. Patrick's fear doused it.

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“I’m the one burning his fingers right now. Do you want it or not?” I asked.

Patrick tensed again. I just about put the candle down when he finally spoke. “I want it. Please.”

The magic word worked on me. Although the tea light had been burning long enough that the wax had all melted clear, I only tilted the candle itself a fraction. The first drops fell from such a distance over his back I watched the ball of wax almost solidify before hitting Patrick’s skin. Three perfect starfish-shapes of wax appeared on his shoulders, in amongst the freckles. Patrick reacted as though I’d held a cattle prod to his skin. I waited for the last of his twisting to end and gave a silent moment of thanks I didn’t have any neighbors to speak of. I hadn’t thought Patrick could be so vocal.

Finally, he took a deep gulp of air and relaxed his muscles one by one so that most of him lay on the bed rather than hovering over it.

“Another?” I asked.

Well, that set off another round of fighting the ropes. I watched, enjoying the view as Patrick’s muscles bunched and clenched. I even put down the candle. I mean, I have a pretty high tolerance for pain, too, but I’m not made of asbestos. “That didn’t answer the question, Patrick.”

Patrick didn’t look away from the wall. “Yes, please.”

I picked up the candle. This time it did blow out, the flame guttered to a thin blue line, then wicked to nothing but a glowing red eye. The heat had done its job. I let the hot wax tip over again, this time over his ass. He twitched, and kept twitching until the long line of wax had solidified and dulled. The overreaction didn’t happen a third time.

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“Again,” Patrick ordered, voice muffled. He hadn’t moved where he pressed his mouth against his upper arm.

I poured the wax on the small of his back this time. The skin seemed more sensitive with far more nerve endings, and the pooled wax took forever to harden. His shoulders stopped shaking last, and a thin film of sweat had slicked his skin. It made him glow in the candlelight.

Patrick nodded. “Again.”

I dripped the wax from candle after candle on to his skin. After the first six, he stopped blowing them out the moment the flame crossed his skin, which I suppose took talent, not to use his talent. I loved the wax on him. Whether it dripped down the sensitive skin of his upper thigh or over the rough skin of the palm of his hand, he reacted the same way.

He preferred the wax falling from a great height. He hated a live flame coming within a couple inches of his skin. I loved the way he’d turn his head to the wall, asking himself if this felt like the most pain he wanted to feel, or if he could take just a little bit more.

And of course, he always could. His body trapped his hard cock between him and the mattress and during the longer waits for the wax to dry he’d grind himself against my bedspread. I liked putting my hand on the small of his back and feel him ride out the conflicting waves of pleasure and pain. Eventually I took pity and nudged him up onto his knees so I could jerk him off. His red-gold pubic hair felt damp, but still soft as body hair. I stroked it with my fingertips, ignoring his whole body straining towards me. His cock hung down from his body, heavy and hard, and his toes curled into the now-damp blankets. He smelled of pre-cum and sweat, paraffin and burned wax. I brought him to the point of his whole body

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shaking with the need to come and then spilled wax over the line of his spine. He swore, but it took away his ability to come.

Even in the dim light, his skin looked red. The more he moved, the more the wax twisted off him. It exposed new skin that felt even more sensitive to the hot wax. I caught much sensitive skin with my last tilt of one of the big, colored candles. Patrick cried out, twisting a final time to get away, and the rest of the candles instantly snuffed out. That ended the game. I blew out the single surviving candle and undid the ropes. He fell forward, still trying to get away from that last little bit of pain, and his breathing took forever to calm. He looked up at me, his eyes red, and shifted against the blankets. He shuddered and it took him a long, long time to open them up again.

“May I fuck you?” Patrick asked when he could.

“You don’t have to sound so hesitant.”

Patrick smiled. I untied him and got naked.

The bottle of lube had been replaced by some of the small packets we had smuggled off the fifth floor. He got off the bed to grab a handful of condom packages or something, and his first step just about toppled him. I grinned, he shot me the finger, and regained his sea legs by the third of fourth step. I turned over and lay down. The blanket smelled of Patrick’s arousal. I thought the floor show couldn’t have made me harder. I was mistaken. “On your knees?” he asked.

I turned around to look at him.

“If you don’t mind,” he said, again, too quickly.

I nodded, and turned back. I rested my weight on my elbows, pressing my head against the black blanket. I smelled the burning wax. We’d need something better on top of the bed when we played with the candles again, or maybe we could do it in the

middle of the floor. My mouth twitched at the image.

The thought struck me again, how different this felt to any other...my mind balked at the word "relationship" but it had no other word for it to use to describe the other pickups I'd had. I opened my mouth, but Patrick's fingers saved me from saying something ridiculously sappy as they pushed inside me.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Yet again, with the stupid questions," I said. "Should I break out my engraved invitation set?"

"What's an engraved invitation?" Patrick asked.

I put my head down. "I'm going to pretend you didn't ask that until after you fucked me. Which is a yes, I'm ready. Please."

"You could have just said that," Patrick said, and the lube on his fingers felt cold for a second. I leaned back on the bed. Patrick got up behind me, and that went well, too. He moved between my legs, and as much as I wanted to get finger fucked to another mind-blowing orgasm, that also worked. The bed creaked. I didn't really think of how the Murphy bed could manage as a place of sport, but it hadn't loosened from the wall yet.

Patrick pulled his fingers out of me. I didn't like how that made me feel. I wanted him, and I didn't want to want him. Over time, I'd accept it. I could learn. I reached behind me and held onto Patrick's hip. He slid inside me. The burn left from his fingers tingled inside me, and the condom pushed past the discomfort.

"Harder."

Patrick hesitated, just for a second, but gripped my hips tighter. He even put one foot up on the bed, which worked a much better angle for me. I dug my nails into his skin without meaning to. Patrick didn't make a sound. He'd already been primed once. I hadn't been fucked hard in such a long time I forgot how much I

liked it.

He began to grunt from the effort. I didn't know if my skin or his palms made the contact slick. I didn't care. I grabbed a fist full of blanket, feeling the tension in every place the good kind of tension could build. I became aware of the sounds I made. Patrick changed his grip on me, pulling me back hard. He pushed inside me, and I felt him strain.

Just when I thought I needed more and that he would come without me, he slid his hand over my belly and down. He fisted my cock. I reared up, or tried to. For a scrawny guy, Patrick kept me pretty much pinned to the bed. It became too much, then for a split second not enough, and then exactly, perfectly right.

I put my mouth over my forearm, and that masked the most embarrassing sounds that slipped out. Patrick pressed against me, froze, and then slid away. It took him forever to pull all the way out. I turned my head away, groaning to cover the already escaped whimper.

My knees creaked as I collapsed. My back hurt from being bowed for so long. I went to pull Patrick to me, but when I reached for him, he'd disappeared. I froze, but then I heard the water running in the bathroom down the hall. I didn't know how Patrick could recover and get down the hall so quickly. I closed my eyes.

But when I opened them again, he'd returned. The rough washcloth felt good. I grabbed his wrist before he pulled himself away. "Stay," I said.

"I—" Patrick began, but didn't finish.

I pushed myself up onto my elbow, so I could look at him. The room had fallen in shadow. Patrick held the washcloth out. "I have to go put the damp cloth back, or it'll stain your wood floors."

"And then?" I asked.

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“Then I get the left side of the bed. Deal?”

I thought about it. It didn't seem to have any loopholes. I trained myself to find them. “There and back. Deal.”

CHAPTER 9

The next morning I dropped Patrick off at his apartment/condo/townhouse/whatever and headed straight to the office. Well, straight via a coffee shop. The second cup of coffee bolstered the first, and I felt ready to face whatever Gwen had to throw at me, metaphoric or literal.

The glass vase smashed a quarter inch from my nose. I'd seen it coming, or else it would have been my nose, and then ducked as a second volley came flying from her desk. I didn't see its exact shape as it flew into the reception area, but it had blades.

"Ow," I said, and dabbed my cheek. The blood on it looked like pin-pricks; glass shrapnel took out eyes. "I haven't asked you for anything yet."

Gwen sat down at the desk and crossed her feet at the ankles. "I

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could just lie and tell you I like seeing you on your toes, Cy,” she said. “But then I’d have to reapply my lipstick. So do you want to tell me where you were yesterday, or shall we play another round of dodge the sharp objects?”

Truthfully, dodging would have been the safer and easier option. I entered the room, stepping gingerly over the broken glass shards and sat down, uninvited, in one of the leather chairs opposite her huge desk. I rested my elbows lightly on the arms, ready to bolt, but she stretched and linked her arms behind her back. Her black sweater shifted, showing off her flat stomach and the perfect line of her breasts. I had immunity, though, and she knew it.

“So, where were you last night, Cypher?” she asked.

“You know where I went. And you knew I’d go there. You refused me Patrick to stop me. You knew he’d recognize Scott’s picture.”

“You’re very good at your job. Of course I knew.”

“You would have stopped me, knowing that Ms. Underhill will gladly skin me if I don’t find her grandson.”

“I hoped you’d find a work-around.”

“In three days?” I demanded. “You can’t be serious.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “I only hire the best. If that involves culling my herd to keep them the best, so be it.”

If? I looked at her. A lifetime of having people hedging their lies around me made me very sensitive to words that avoided a technical lie. “Did this involve culling your herd?”

Her eyes flashed. Literally. Bright spots appeared in the matte finish, but just for a second. “No,” she allowed. “This didn’t.”

“Which means you had other reasons for wanting me to fail,” I said. I stood up. It made me a larger target, but I had to think and I

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always thought better standing up. I chewed my lip. "You knew I'd find the brothel."

"What brothel?" Gwen didn't even try to sound innocent, but it made her words seem an accusation. I turned to her.

"The brothel you're either involved in, or supporting the ones who run it."

"Oh," Gwen said. "That brothel. It doesn't matter, Cypher. I'm telling you right now. I can't authorize you going in without permission from the owner."

I looked at her, hard. She looked back at me, harder. I looked away first. I have to believe in something very strongly in order to stand up to her, like me continuing to live, and this didn't need to go that far. "Why did you set me up?" I asked, instead.

"I didn't," she said. The words came from her painlessly, so she hadn't. "I thought old woman just wanted her grandson. I had no idea it would lead back to where it did. I'm sorry, Cy, really."

"I need to get in there." I suppose I could have asked her to cancel the contract, but that would have been a waste of breath. She wouldn't do that. I didn't think she could. The retainer meant nothing. She'd given her word the job would be done and this was old, old, old school.

"I can't allow you to force yourself in where you don't belong," Gwen said. She stood up, but her gaze didn't falter. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

I did. "I need an invitation."

Gwen sat back down. "You're not as dumb as you look," she said, which felt like high praise, coming from her. She put her reading glasses back on, just so that she could look at me over them, I swear. "I don't think you're high stakes enough, Cypher."

"But Patrick is," I said.

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She shrugged. "Quite."

"You want me to use Patrick as bait," I said, just so we were both clear on the subject. Okay, so that I became clear on the subject. She'd guided me to this moment from the beginning, holding up huge flash cards so that the clarity would come.

"Quite." Her eyes were cold again, flat and entirely inhuman.

"What if I said no? What if I said there wasn't a chance in..." I didn't finish. Religion, old, new or otherwise didn't work in this building. "There isn't much chance of that at all," I said, instead.

"Then my herd gets culled," Gwen said. "And that would sadden me."

Both were true statements. I felt it inside my chest. "The work-around needs a work-around," I told her.

"You're more than welcome to come up with one," Gwen said, but then made a show of checking her watch. "Would you like the time you have to left in days, hours, or minutes?"

"Point made," I said.

"It had better be," Gwen said. "For your sake, Cypher. I believe your Mr. Gunnar has just arrived. Let him clear the backlog of work he has on his desk before you drag him off again."

"I didn't think he had actual job duties," I said.

She shrugged. "You know what they say about overachievers. Always looking for something to do. Try not to get that one killed, either, Cy. I would miss you both."

"But you'd replace us in a heartbeat," I said, intending the words to cut. Gwen didn't bleed.

She didn't even blink. "I already have."

I made it to the door, stepping carefully over the broken glass, and turned back. "Is Baxter's sex demon in the brothel?"

"He had been. As far as I know, he's still there. People don't go

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to sex demon brothels to bring the sex demons cupcakes.”

I had worked for Gwen for the past ten years. She hadn’t changed. Not even her hairstyle, which still remained in fashion. But the beautiful woman exterior acted as a façade for what lurked under her skin. She had so much old power and secret knowledge it sometimes hurt to look at her. “I wanted to be you,” I said. “That’s what made me take this job.”

“You can’t be me. Cypher, you can’t ever be like me. You are far too human.”

And suddenly, I didn’t feel that as bad thing at all. “If I don’t die by the end of the week, we need to renegotiate my contract.”

She had already gone back to the paperwork on her desk. “And if you do die, all the confidentiality clauses that you have signed remain in effect. FYI.”

I closed the door behind me. We didn’t have an open door policy.

Patrick worked on the third floor. Gwen stashed all the human crew who were replaceable, and yet still necessary, there. She embraced the paperless office and waited for the day a people-less office worked, too.

The people here seem to know it. They all had cubes—or cubicles, whatever the hamster cages were called now—but none of them had a single personalized object among any of them. People here just up and quit.

Patrick’s desk, on the other hand, had a plant on it. One of the hardy types with the spikes and scarlet flowers blooming on the edges. He actually had a photograph—Mom, a guy not his father, and another dog. The old man looked much younger than the man I met last night, and the dog seemed far more alert, and happier than the basset Winston. I began to suspect I fucked a dog person.

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Oh, shit.

Patrick saw me and smiled, but that died when he took in my expression. "What's wrong?"

"I'm trying to get past near irreconcilable differences."

Patrick frowned. "Our near irreconcilable differences?" he asked cautiously.

"Yes. Dogs. Not going to work for me."

Patrick looked crestfallen. "No dogs? Are you sure? Maybe you just haven't met the right dog."

"And maybe you just haven't met the right cock to go up your ass."

Patrick stood up. "You can't compare dogs to anal sex."

"And yet, I just did."

"That's just..." Patrick closed his mouth. "Not fair."

I wondered what he almost said instead. I changed the subject instead. "We can't just break in, guns blazing."

He exhaled, sharply. "Good. I don't own a gun. How else are you going to get in?"

"With you."

"And how am I going to get in?" Patrick asked.

I just smiled.

Patrick didn't buy it. "No, really. How am I going to get in?"

"What, you want me to tell you here, right now?"

Patrick nodded.

I shook my head. The boy had no sense of drama. "You're going to get us in. You're far stronger than I am, when it comes to..." I made a hand gesture that tried to encompass his father's blood. Not as easy as it sounds, let me tell you.

"Me?" Patrick demanded, "Oh, no. If the guy in charge before at the commercial shoot is still the one in charge, believe me, I

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may have what he wants, but you're the one he's looking for."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked, suddenly cautious.

CHAPTER 10

Patrick, despite being awfully skinny, would still look damn fine in a pair of tight jeans. I looked like an idiot in them. He wasn't the one having trouble breathing.

"So tell me," Patrick said. "How is no dogs a deal breaker but trying to use your sex partner as bait perfectly acceptable?"

"The amount of slobber, mostly," I said. Patrick would still attract the sharks, my ass in jeans or not.

Patrick had done his part, now it was my turn. He'd called his father, asking that the voice-over recording for his commercial be moved up to today. I had expected more fight from the old man. But instead of recrimination, he had made all the arrangements. Of course, he would need a new talent agency, as the last one had left his brain matter on his blotter. I had a feeling that whoever had dug

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their claws into the old man wouldn't let him go.

I hadn't been mistaken. It had cost a bloody fortune, I had no doubt, and the man holding the clipboard and orchestrating the whole thing didn't feel like an ordinary "go to" man, even though he set up a sound booth and projector in the middle of the soundstage, barked out orders to nine different interns and lackeys, and rushed through sound check bytes. I couldn't tell the interns from the lackeys or vice versa. Despite all the movement, when Patrick stepped onto the stage, clipboard man stopped, turned, and stared. We had his attention now.

The interns, or lackeys, or both, scattered, but only because the string of orders had stopped and they were free. From the look on the man's face, and the bad feeling I got from him, the smart ones would keep going. I didn't like this man, with his rimless glasses and his high widow peaks. He dressed trendily enough with thin black jeans ten years too young for him and his black turtleneck. The clothes only accentuated how much chin he had and the start of a beer belly he lost ground to. Aging gracefully didn't look his thing.

But when he wanted to, this man moved mountains. Or shot a commercial with three hours notice using only union people. If that didn't take power, I didn't know what did. "Patrick," he said. "Your father said you might be stopping by."

Patrick smiled, though it looked forced. I doubted this man had seen any other kind of smile for years. "And look, here I am. Have you seen the old man?"

"I thought he had gone off to have a nap."

Patrick smile turned to a grimace. I didn't know his father. I hadn't met the man he'd been. But if he resembled Gwen in any way, I could not imagine him taking a nap as the man he was. "I'll

wait.” Patrick wandered off, deliberately, and left the two of us alone.

We hadn’t planned going any farther. Gwen knew I didn’t have enough blood in me to cue the fawning mode that Patrick triggered, but I had enough power that the man had interest.

“So, darling, have the two of you been together long?” the man asked.

He had some fae blood in him, I could tell, but I also felt him mask the real amount of power he had. He got his fluid sexuality all over me. No one has called me darling in years. I looked at him, trying to set my face like I couldn’t imagine peeling the skin off of his. It’s why they paid me the big bucks.

“Do you have a name?” I asked, concentrating on looking innocent. I didn’t want to give him any reason to lie to me.

Unfortunately, lying is inherent in some people’s characters. As is phrasing everything as though trying to hedge a bet. “They call me Pan,” the man said with a smile. “And you are?”

“Cy,” I said. A small amount of power transferred, but not as much as if I had given my real name.

The one they called Pan—though that wasn’t his real name or who he really was—ran his hand down my arm. I didn’t break it. His hand, not my arm. Thinking about breaking his hand kept me from hearing all of the appreciative sounds he had made, which made not breaking it even harder.

“Tell me, does Patrick share?”

From his tone, he could have been talking to a dog. It’s yet another reason why I don’t like dog people.

I looked him up and down, and curled my lip back. “Not without something to sweeten the pot,” I said.

His hand touched on my arm. I tensed, and believe me when I

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tell you Pan misread the situation. “Oh, lovely,” he said. He reached into his back pocket, pulled out what looked like a business card, and passed it over. When I touched it I felt like a credit card. “There’s an address on the back. A...coffee shop. I’ll send someone for you.”

I studied the plastic. It didn’t take long. Other than the small, cursive font that read an address across town from the Korean restaurant, it contained nothing. I looked up at him. “What is this top secret shit?” I demanded.

“Precautions. Mine, darling, not yours. You don’t worry about anything. If all goes right, I’ll see you tonight.”

If he tried to touch my face, I would break his neck. Trying to keep my face blank while having that thought on repeat took every ounce of willpower. But he didn’t, so I didn’t. One of the interns came back with a white, logo-less coffee cup, and that set him off on another rampage.

I retreated as well, and waited in the car until Patrick returned.

Patrick didn’t look good when he joined me. “Something is seriously wrong with my dad,” he said.

“Yes,” I said. “Something is.”

“This thing you’re doing...we’re doing, I guess. Will it...will it make him better?”

He didn’t look at me. It made it easier not to lie. “I don’t know. I don’t...think so. The most we could hope for is stopping them from taking any more of him.”

“Any more?” Patrick said, and I let him pretend he didn’t understand. “Any more,” he repeated himself. “He’s dying.”

“Yes.”

Patrick took a deep breath, but let it out without saying anything. I put my hand on his shoulder. “Did you get what you

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were looking for?" he asked, but his voice stayed dull.

"I hope so." I showed him the card. "We're running out of time."

Patrick took it, turning it over and over in his hand. "You're running out of time," he corrected me.

"Yes."

Patrick shook his head. "And they're going to kill you if you fail."

"Probably," I said. *Hopefully*. I didn't want to think of the alternative if I failed.

"And if not this time, then the next job. Or the one after that. They'll always be threatening you with death if you fail."

"Yes."

Patrick swallowed. "Let me out here."

"Patrick—" I began.

Patrick turned on me, suddenly furious. "Let me out here!"

"We're not moving," I said. "You can just open the door and walk away."

Patrick hesitated. Then did just that.

CHAPTER 11

Most people have a “things to do before they die” list. I have a “things to do before I die today” list. Well, actually, it’s on my computer and I print off a new one when I need to. I hadn’t updated in a while, and that meant a trip to my lawyer. There was a reason I paid her a ridiculous amount of money as a retainer.

Still, I had to wait a couple hours before Amanda’s secretary saw me into the twenty-ninth floor office. Amanda has always been pretty, girlish even. She still is, even in her mid-forties. Her button nose and wide eyes still hid how cunning her brain worked.

I’d never been fooled. I just want that on the record. But if you’d been tied up as much as I had with Amanda’s pink skipping rope so that she could talk on the phone with her boyfriend unbothered, you wouldn’t be fooled, either.

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“Well, hello, little brother. In trouble again?” Amanda asked.

“Just making sure my affairs are in order.”

She nodded. Amanda, as my lawyer, never asked me what I did. But as my sister, she knew that she’d gone away to Ryerson in Toronto on a very tight scholarship, but it hadn’t been enough to go to class, buy books and eat. She’d come home over Christmas break ready to quit, and by New Year’s she had money in her account for her to go back for the second semester.

She nodded, and reached into her desk for my file. “How are things, otherwise?”

I shrugged. “Is the saying ‘it’s better to have loved and lost,’ or ‘loved and tracked them down and make them pay’?”

“Loved?” Amanda asked.

It had been a figure of expression. But the word hung out there and I couldn’t...didn’t want to take it back. “It doesn’t matter now.”

“Are you changing your beneficiary?” she asked, reaching for her fountain pen.

“No. God, no. But you get the house, you take the cat.”

“Of course,” Amanda said. “Anything else?”

I took out another slip of paper. Numbered offshore accounts, registered to dummy corporations. All of them chosen to be easily transferable to cash. “Add these.”

She did, cautiously. “Maybe you need an accountant.”

“No. The money is clean.”

She nodded. “Anything else?”

“That’s it. You and...Chris? Still together?”

She nodded. “But we’re both working a hundred and ten hours a week. That’s not really together together. If there is anything else I can do for you, Sidney, I’ll be...I owe you.”

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My name, my real birth name cracked in the air between us. "There's nothing you can do," I said. I'd made my bed.

"But you don't have to lie in it alone," Amanda said. Did I forget to mention that sometimes, when she concentrated really hard, Amanda could read minds? She concentrated really hard. I, naturally, got the hell out of there.

I didn't have Patrick's number, any of them. I didn't even have his email. I could have waited outside his condo/apartment/townhouse whatever, but that seemed a bit stalkerish. I went home, got all Sergeant Pepper's things together, and then worked out until just before seven. I showered, got into my car, and drove to the address on the card.

The coffee shop, despite Pan's misuse of an ellipse, actually sold coffee in a shop full of donkeys dressed in Hawaiian gear. Yeah, I didn't get it either. The tall tables and chairs were half full, mostly of pretentious people hiding behind laptops.

All except one. The one sitting by himself, sipping plain black coffee on one of the few lower tables the shop had. His olive skin looked flawless, his features ageless, and his black hair had those shaved patterns in it that only looked good on far less than one percent of the population.

He also crackled with sexual power, but I heard sex demons did that. I could tell. The energy resonated on a different frequency than I felt accustomed to. Right now he used it to ensure everyone in the shop left him alone.

"Oh, hell no," the sex demon said, and stood.

"You can say that?" I asked.

"Why not? It's not as though it's my hell. Where's your friend?"

"Not here."

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“Well, when he is here, I’ll be here, too.”

I wasn’t dumb enough to try to stop him as he brushed past me. I didn’t know how much of my arm would remain if I tried. “Wait, please,” I called.

He turned on me, and the hair on the back of my arm rose as though suddenly charged with static electricity. “What, mortal?”

I stumbled back, hit the wall, and stayed there. Around me, the talking and laughter of the other patrons vanished, but not because they’d stopped. My ears eventually equalized the pressure, but it took a ridiculous amount of swallowing to do so. “Nothing. Um, carry on.”

The demon waved his hand, and a ten-digit number appeared down my arm. It, surprisingly, didn’t hurt, considering I could see flames lapping my skin inside the number. “You get your little battery pack, you call me. Otherwise, stop wasting my time.”

“Sure thing,” I said. The demon stormed out. I wrote down the number in case hellfire washed off. Four-zero-three, a local number. For some reason, I thought it would have been a bit more long distance.

I meant to drive home. I had every intention of it. When I stopped the car, I looked up and saw Patrick’s townhouse. I opened the door. The engine pinged, telling me I’d left the keys in the ignition, but I didn’t get either in or out of the car. The noise became comforting.

Patrick opened the door. He hugged a woolen blanket to him. “Either get in or go away,” he called, irritably.

I grabbed the keys, got out, and locked the car behind me. Patrick hadn’t moved from where he blocked the light in the doorway. “Parking’s by permit only,” he said.

“I’ll get a ticket. Trust me, it’ll be the least of my worries.”

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Patrick didn't look at the table beside him. He thrust a visitor's parking pass at me. "They'll tow your car."

I sighed, but went back and put the visitor's pass on the car's rearview mirror. "Happy?" I called.

Patrick didn't answer. He'd moved from the door, but left it opened behind him.

I went back inside.

Patrick kept his house warm. Hardwood floors shone rich umber. A runner down the hall and up the stairs matched the hunter green walls and pristine crown moldings. I wondered if he realized the similarity between color of his walls and his father's house.

There were smells, too. I took a minute to catalogue them all. Someone had just done laundry. The kitchen, also visible past the living room on the main floor, smelled of actual food prepared in it.

Two pairs of shoes by the door, both size nines, took up space in the entrance way. I toed mine off and closed and locked the door behind me. I went up to find Patrick.

Upstairs, I only had three doors to choose from. One felt cold to me, a spare bedroom or an office Patrick obviously never used. The second had to be a bathroom, so I chose door number three.

Patrick sat on the edge of his bed, the white blanket still over his shoulders. Door one probably didn't contain an office, he had both a desktop set up in the corner and a laptop down on its side by the queen-size bed. The door to the en suite was open. Other than his toothbrush on the edge of the sink, it looked as tidy as the rest of his house.

"You're not going to look at me, are you?" I asked.

"What are you going to do next week?" Patrick asked, his gaze

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firmly down on the area rug under the bed. "How about next month? Do you have any plans for Christmas this year?"

"I have a standing invitation to join my sister and her husband," I said, not answering the first two questions. I didn't have to.

"You have a sister," Patrick repeated, as though he wanted to be sure.

"A lot of people do," I said. "I have a mother, too. She even joins us, when she's in town."

Patrick's mouth twitched. "I suppose that's something."

"Would it help to say I really look forward to it?"

Patrick shook his head. "Better quit while you're ahead." He paused. "How did the thing go?"

I shrugged. Patrick, correctly, surmised that meant it hadn't gone well at all. His eyes widened. "You need me."

"No, I don't." I looked around. Patrick had such a tidy apartment. He had a tidy life. I wasn't tidy.

I stood up. "Have a good one."

Patrick stood as well. The blanket slid off his shoulders. He felt warmer than the room. I put my hands on his hips. His back had a knot in it. I touched his spine and I felt him flinch. I kissed the top of his head.

He didn't show me out. I didn't want him to. The fob to his father's gate took an extra second to ease off his key chain.

* * *

A police cruiser followed me up Royal Avenue, the interior light bright in the car. I kept to the posted speed limits, but the unmarked didn't got off my ass until the gates of the big green house swung open.

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The cop waved as he drove past. I waved back, wanting to be neighborly.

The old man slept on his side. His chest barely stirred the ridiculously high thread count sheets. The huge house around me felt still. Melody the trophy assistant didn't sleep here, yet. I stepped over Winston the dog and he didn't move.

The old man opened his eyes and stared up at me. He didn't speak. I cleared my throat. "I need your help."

He sat up. I felt the drag from him. Someone had opened a buffet on the old man's soul. "Why should I help you?" he asked his voice breaking.

"Because if you don't, whoever is draining you will finish the job. You must know they aren't completely done with you."

I saw him think about triggering his panic alarm. The remote was under the blankets; his finger had probably never left it. He stared at me. Even as I calculated what a third floor drop onto pavement would damage, he brought both hands over the blankets.

"Wait for me downstairs."

I didn't argue.

He came down twenty minutes later, dressed in tweed slacks, button-up shirt with honest-to-god cuff links, and a London fog trench coat. "I'll drive."

We took a silver Jag downtown. Really, besides the V12 power, leather seats that seemed molded to my ass, and a purring engine it felt like just another car.

God, I wanted one.

The pay parking lot next to the restaurant had an access off 14th Street. We were still a good mile from the downtown core, but the per day price to park cost more than a parking lot on Center Street.

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Not a single car took up space in the poorly-marked parking lot. No surprise there. But as the Jag entered the abandoned lot, the back of the store beside the Korean restaurant slid open. Track lighting lit the way down. The man drove down into the darkness. The cars parked on both levels were all high end and showroom shiny.

“This way,” Gunnar said. He led the way down to an elevator that only had one button. The car moved downward seamlessly.

For a secret, high priced demon brothel, I’d seen better. The single room the elevator led to had a bar down one end and a wall of other discreet elevators down the other. The doors and the bar all had the same brushed steel effect. The only illumination came from the rows of lights behind the top shelf alcohol. A young man, blond and lithe, came up to Gunnar. The blond didn’t speak, but licked his lips with a forked tongue.

Patrick’s father grabbed my wrist. “Do not leave this place without me,” he said.

“I won’t.”

His fingers gripped me even harder. “Promise me.”

“I promise,” I told him. He nodded, relaxed he followed the blond to one of the elevators. When the door closed behind them, I stood alone in the long, dark room.

“It’s not you,” a voice said behind me. I turned. The demon from the coffee shop now lounged behind the bar. “Secrecy is big here. There’s a more public entrance from inside the restaurant. This is just for the high rollers.” He came around the bar. “Can I get you anything?”

“Tonic water,” I said. “If possible.”

“Oh, anything is possible here,” he said, and smiled, popping an ice cube into his mouth.

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“May I call you something?” I asked. I didn’t ask for his name, and he bowed his head a quarter inch in thanks.

“You can call me August,” he said, and put down a tall glass in front of me. “Cy.”

So this was August. It didn’t surprise me. If I’d asked for Baxter’s left nut he would have cut it off himself. August smiled as though reading my mind. He leaned forward and kissed me. His mouth felt ice cold. I jerked back, and August spat the cube he sucked on to the floor. “Anything you see out here is absolutely free. Anything yonder a ways,” he motioned the elevators with his chin, “will cost you just about everything.”

“I’m not interested in going with you,” I said. “I need to find Scott Underhill.”

August threw up his arms in disgust, but I saw the flash of relief in his eyes. “Well. You can’t have him.”

“But he’s here.”

“I never said that. His being here is immaterial. He is not for you. As for me, Pan wants you to know I’m a freebie just for coming in.” August’s eyes turned dark again.

“Do you want to be a freebie?” I asked.

He rolled his shoulders, and the muscles visible through the thin shirt he wore rippled in the most interesting ways. He licked his lips, touched his throat, and leaned even closer to me. I didn’t want him, but my cock ached in my jeans. When he opened his mouth to speak, he shut it again, quickly. “I felt a little blood in you, but it seemed so weak I thought it latent. I should have known.”

I shrugged. “Sorry.”

August cleared his throat. “So, no,” he said. “I don’t. I didn’t ask to be summoned by a sweating, fat man. I certainly didn’t ask

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to be lost in a game of chance to a brothel, and as cute as you are, Cy, I'd rather not be forced to fuck you."

I put up on my hands, trying to show it was the last thing I wanted, too. My dick wanted to discuss the issue further. "Baxter put you up as collateral?"

"Yes."

"Yes?" It wasn't a lie to not continue.

August stood up. "Ask the fat sweating man." He put his hip on the bar and swung his legs over it so he stood next to me. "So, do you want to? I hear the battery pack you found doesn't like it up the ass. Pity."

"Patrick is not just an energy source. And I thought you didn't want to fuck me."

"I didn't want to be forced. Now that you're not forcing me, why shouldn't we?"

I didn't answer him.

"God. You foolish humans. It would have been great."

"I need the old man," I said.

August made another disgusted sound. "Even with that ticking time clock in your head, you've picked this week to find yourself the tiniest bit of nobility. It will be the death of you. Wait upstairs. I'll be sure to have the old man brought up when Diesel is finished with him. He never takes that long."

The first elevator door opened. The bar had been so dark the bright cheery light from inside the car hurt my eyes. When I looked back, August had disappeared. Time wasted, but I couldn't tell Patrick that I'd left his father in the brothel.

The elevator door remained open. After a while, it occurred to me that it waited for me. I went to it, half expecting a death trap to spring once I stepped past its threshold. Instead, it took me up a

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single floor. This bar, on first glance, could have been any bar on any Friday night in any strip mall in town. The mix of genders looked about fifty-fifty. The couples gyrating on the dance floor contained all the different combinations and permutations possible. The music sounded dulled, however, and the conversations the barflies had could be heard whispered.

Real power thrummed over the music and conversation. It felt muted, too. The people here felt more like me than Gwen, or even Patrick. All except one.

Scott Underhill was far better looking than his photograph, even now. A group of almost as pretty—never prettier, I noticed—young men and women gathered around his table, in standing room only. In a bar where everyone else needed to be quiet, the entire table boomed.

Someone had their claws in Scott, just as they had Gunnar, but the drain felt noticeable.

“Do you like what you see?”

I turned. Pan stood behind me, holding a cocktail glass. The alcohol in it looked ruby red, but far too translucent to be blood. Not that I thought it would be, but my mind goes literal sometimes. Pan had changed into some kind of shirt that shimmered when he moved. He didn’t have a clipboard or any lackeys that I could see, but I knew they both could be summoned with a snap of the finger.

“I thought they were patrons,” I said.

Pan laughed. It should have been a high-pitched trill, but instead it sounded low and guttural. “Everything is for sale here, darling.” I opened my mouth to protest, but he put his hand on my chest. “No, not you. You are already bought and paid for.”

I closed my mouth. He had a point.

“So I could arrange a meet, between you and your boy. Play

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your cards right with the right sort of stakes and you could win him right out from under me.”

“Stakes?” I asked.

Pan waved his drink in a don’t-be-foolish gesture. In slow motion, the liquid came up over the edge in a perfect, ruby wave but then it rolled back into the glass without spilling a drop. I recognized a mesmer attempt when I saw one. I still had to pull my gaze from the liquid to Pan’s face. He grunted, obviously disappointed in it failing. It had taken a huge amount of energy. Scott Underhill stopped talking mid-sentence. His entourage stopped breathing. When Scott came back to himself, his groupies laughed like he’d just cracked a good one.

Pan cleared his throat, pulling my attention back to him. “Stakes. You have access to Karl Gunnar’s son. That’s all the stakes you need.”

The name gave me power over Gunnar. I didn’t let it show. “You want me to gamble Patrick for Scott? I’m telling you right now that’s not going to happen.”

Pan snapped his fingers. Rather than summoning a clipboard or a lackey, Bootsie stepped out from the shadows. Some masters insist that their slaves wear some form of outward ownership. Bootsie wore nothing but his uniform, but the devotion in his eyes looked both new and unmistakable. He stood besides Pan, and his entire body leaned forward in anticipation.

“I ensure everyone brings me something of value. Broots here brought me Scott. He lost. But you might have better luck.” Pan held up his index finger. Obediently, Bootsie began sucking on it. “Then he lost a lot more than that. Or you could look at how much he’s gained.”

Well, that certainly explained how little he’d told me about

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Scott. With Bootsie still sucking on his finger, Pan pulled me toward him by the small of my back. His hard cock touched my thigh. It felt like he'd backed me into a wall. Pan took a sip from his glass, which made me realize he hadn't used a hand to hold me. I fought, trying to pull away, but his cock, massive by the feel of it, ground on me. I felt sick and used in the worst way.

Bootsie kept sucking on Pan's finger, and Pan's cock rubbed against me. The hold on me pushed me forward, and tried to compel me to reciprocate. If I used his body to grind against, it promised to be a spectacular orgasm.

Pan looked me in the eye. "Get me Gunnar's son at the table."

The fabric of Pan's tight slacks felt wet, and the cold pre-cum leaked through my jeans and touched my skin. If he had used a cattle prod on my hip it would have shocked less. I stopped trying to push back against the wall that held me, and Pan had come so close to getting off that he didn't notice. I pushed forward, with the strength of the wall trying to pin me to Pan. All three of us, Pan, Bootsie and I sprawled forward. I jumped to my feet first.

Scott Underhill and his entourage had gone. The ones that remained stared at us. Pan growled, pinning Bootsie down with an animalistic hold over his neck. He rubbed himself off on Bootsie's belly. Bootsie, in all honesty, didn't seem to mind the attention. They were both fully clothed, and would no doubt be very sticky in just a few seconds. Neither seemed to care.

Pan came first, slamming his hips against Bootsie. He howled with that same guttural sound as his laugh. Bootsie writhed against the floor, using his hand to get himself off. The entire floor showed looked hard and dirty, and I wanted to look away from the desperate movement Bootsie made. Pan remained over him, holding Bootsie's hips down but he stared me, and I knew, in the

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same way I knew Pan had drugged the alcohol, that if I had been part of the dog pile I'd be lost in the same way Bootsie was.

I sat down. Luckily, a barstool was right behind me or I would have fallen on my ass. Pan stood up, with more dignity than most men could have after fucking a fully clothed lackey on the floor of a bar, and straightened the front of his pants. "Come with me if you want an invitation to tomorrow night's game."

"No," I said. My still-hard cock ached for attention. It took all my strength not to spread my legs and finish what Pan had started. I was better than that.

"This is your last chance. I could give you everything."

I had to wait for Gunnar. I'd given my word. I physically couldn't back out of the promise. "You are not my type. I'd say bugger off but you probably can't yet."

Pan snapped his fingers again. Bootsie jumped to his feet. I hadn't been paying attention and I didn't know if he had come or not. I hoped, for his sake, that he had. They went off together, through a door that radiated *employees only*, though it was unmarked. Pan's hooks pulled from me slowly.

August appeared on the stool beside me, perched as gracefully as any cat. Which took talent. The stools were far trendier than they were comfortable.

"You handled that quite well. I'm impressed." His drink had a long-stem cherry in it. He picked it up with delicate fingers and began doing...things to it. He smiled, and glanced down to my crotch. "May I handle this for you?"

I shifted uncomfortably. Or more uncomfortably than usual, I should say. "I told you. I'm waiting for..." Karl Gunnar. Saying Patrick's father's name, even just in my head made him real for the first time. Of course I had to help him. Reversing what had

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happened may not be possible, but at least I could stop anymore from being taken.

August tossed the stem of the cherry. It had been tied into a four-leaf clover using just his tongue. I stared at it. August caught me looking.

“Yes,” he said. “I’m that good. And you, under all your obligations and negative self-image, are quite the hero type. You can’t save Karl and you can’t save Patrick. You probably can’t even save yourself.”

“And you?” I asked, because I had to.

August only laughed.

But he stayed with me, scornfully, until Devin brought Karl back. The old man looked exhausted. It took both August and me to get Karl into the passenger seat of his car. A thin line of salmon pink cloud traversed the entire eastern sky as I pulled onto the main road. I officially had two days left.

Melody the trophy assistant met me at the door. “Thank you for bringing him home,” she said, but didn’t look at me.

Karl had come back a little more in the car, and he didn’t have to be carried into the house. She didn’t seem to have any problem handling Karl up the stairs so I let them go.

I didn’t feel ready to go home yet, despite how tired I was. I unrolled the window before starting my car. The engine complained bitterly as it cranked over.

The chilly air streamed through the window and helped keep me awake. Despite the now brilliant orange sunrise, commuter traffic doubled my ETA to Baxter’s house.

I’d only been to his house once, and the snarl of street names in this part of the suburbs were all the same but for the crescent, street, or boulevard end bit. Whoever thought of that deserved a

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worse fate than most.

The house still looked dark as I pulled up into the drive. A neighbor, wearing a bathrobe, froze just as he bent over to pick up his newspaper. I smiled and waved. He waved back, but it was the nervous jerky motion of a man trying to suss out if someone else seemed like a serial killer.

His suspicious gaze burned the skin on the back of my neck. I didn't have a chance to break in, even as fast as I could do it. So instead, I rang the doorbell. I even rapped on the glass. The neighbor still stared at me so I turned and waved at him again.

"Heavy sleeper," I called.

He nodded, obviously not convinced, but went back to his door. I turned, about ready to pop the lock, when a light came on from inside the house. The thick, opaque glass obscured everything but a dark shadow moving down the front hall. I kept my face blank as Baxter no doubt studied me through the peephole. The first of several chains, deadbolts, and locks released. There would have been no way I could have popped all of them quickly.

Baxter let me in. "What do you want?"

"Do you have an invitation to the game tonight?" I asked.

Baxter hesitated. I exhaled. "I don't have time to dance with you, Mr. Baxter. I need that invitation. Tell me what you want from me and I'll do it."

"Just like that?" Baxter asked.

I nodded. "Just like that." My fists bunched at my sides and I forced them to relax. I couldn't look at Baxter anymore, the knot in my stomach cinched too tight.

"Is it the redhead?" Baxter asked. "You could offer him up as stakes, but you don't want to do that. You want to keep him."

I tried to snarl something, but I felt too tired. I shrugged instead

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and even that strained. "Yes. But that won't matter until I get an invitation. So please."

"Say that again."

"What, please?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Please." It didn't hurt. It actually loosened the knot a little inside me to say it. I almost said it again.

Baxter rubbed his face. "You won't need stakes," he said, looking me up and down. "For the first hand at least. They'll let a guy like you be your own bet, I'm sure. That's what happened with that driver guy. He tried to win back his first bet. They wouldn't let me play, but he had more to offer than I did. When he lost, it felt like...a light went out inside him. You would do that for the redhead?"

"Yes," I said. Either I won Scott back or Mrs. Underhill would kill me. How I spent the remaining day hardly seemed to matter.

Baxter nodded. "Okay."

"Okay?" I repeated.

"I'll get you the invitation."

I tensely waited for the *but* or *if* part of the sentence. I wanted to go to bed, so what did one more act of degradation matter? Baxter turned away. He opened a hall closet, rummaged through unseen pockets until he pulled out a plastic card, then gave it to me. It felt just like the business card Pan had given me, only it had a magnetic stripe instead of an address.

"That's it?"

"You said please."

I swallowed. I hadn't realized how tense I was until I felt my muscles relax. I fell back into the open doorframe. The catch caught me just below the hip, but the pain seemed dull. "Thank

you.”

Baxter nodded. “It’s the last elevator in the bank. It only goes to the one floor.”

I wanted to ask if I could stay here, up against the doorjamb for a minute or so, just until I got my sea legs back. Baxter turned around, giving me the mock privacy I needed. I turned around and left, but waved to the neighbor for the third time. The man ducked behind his living room curtains like I’d just brandished a weapon.

I drove home in a daze.

Patrick waited for me on the landing inside my house. At first it just felt right that he could get into my house, then the creeping paranoia struck. He’d broken into my house. “How...”

“You stole my key fob. I called a locksmith.”

“He just let you in?”

“Sergeant Pepper vouched for me.”

“Really?”

“I embarrassed myself with the hissy boyfriend routine. Plus, I knew your combination for the alarm.”

I’d shaded the keypad. He must have read my mind. “I’m glad you’re here.”

He stood up. “So here I am.”

No more words. They made me sick. I kissed him, right there on the step. He leaned against me, arms around my shoulders.

He pulled me upstairs, tugging at my jacket and shirt until they came off despite my efforts. I’d been half or all the way hard most of the time at the brothel. It didn’t take much more than feeling Patrick wrap his fingers around the base of my cock to get me hard again.

“I wish everything was this easy,” Patrick whispered. He had me up against the wall, the Murphy bed hadn’t been pulled down

yet, and Patrick didn't feel as though he wanted to wait. He dropped to his knees, gripped my hips, and went down on me.

Patrick opened his mouth. His lips were so soft, his mouth warm, and he engulfed me. He didn't use his fist to mitigate how much of me he had to swallow, and the feeling of being taken in, completely and totally, felt a thousand times better than anything Pan could have done.

Patrick didn't bob his head up and down, and I certainly did nothing to force him to take my cock any deeper than Patrick could. I didn't have to. The feeling of Patrick slowly taking me in and out of his mouth, using his lips and tongue to tease when he could, all the while rubbing his knuckles against my ass, stimulated nerve endings already on high alert.

"Please," I said again, knowing how well the word had worked for me before. "I just...please."

Patrick pulled away, breathing hard. "You just what?" he asked, wiping his mouth.

"Need to come," I said.

Patrick smiled. He licked his lips one last time and then took me back down his throat. This time, when he had to breathe, he used his fist to keep up the tension. Every part of me strained for just another ounce of pressure or a quarter inch farther down Patrick's throat. He fought himself now, and controlled his gag reflex through sheer will alone.

The way he looked, on his knees with his eyes closed and his cheeks flushed and the pure concentration on me and my cock, made me come. Patrick pulled away, just for a split second, coughed, and then let me shoot into his open mouth, this time with his eyes wide open and staring up at me.

"Um, thank you," I said, when I could. The still random

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synaptic fire across my neural pathways overrode speech for the longest time.

I'd been stripped completely, but Patrick still had his jeans on somehow. "You can thank me later," he said. "Maybe when your hand-eye coordination returns."

"There is nothing wrong with my hand-eye coordination," I said, stumbling away from the wall. I reached for the cord that pulled the Murphy bed down and missed it by about a mile and a half.

"No, you're golden," Patrick said, and pulled down the bed. "Melody called this morning around five and said you'd been out with my father all night. She said he said you promised to take care of him."

"By bringing him straight back to the lion den," I muttered. Patrick grabbed the pillows as I fell into the bed. My whole body wanted to surrender to the pull of sleep. But I fought against it. "That's hardly what you would call noble."

"No one in my father's history has ever made him do anything he didn't want to do," Patrick said, voice only slightly bitter.

I caught his wrist. "He didn't do it for himself. He did it for you."

Patrick tensed, but didn't respond. He got into bed with me, but he didn't seem tired. "What's our next move?"

"You don't have one. I've got a ticket to the game. I'll get Scott back."

"You have nothing to gamble with!" Patrick protested.

I touched his cheek. "Don't need it. Trust me," I said, crossing the line between mostly awake and mostly asleep. If Patrick answered me, I didn't hear, but I felt him stiffen.

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* * *

I don't dream. Or if I do, they are of the inconsequential sort that don't need to be repeated. When I woke, the sun cast long shadows across the room. The walls echoed the ticking of the radiator and the low hum of the fridge from the first floor.

I sat up so fast the bed creaked. I grabbed for the jeans I'd worn the night before. My fingers brushed the hard plastic of the elevator key on my third try. I wished that settled the impending doom I felt. It only made the feeling worse. "Patrick, what are you doing?" I asked, but the empty old house didn't answer for him.

Or maybe it did. The answer sounded an awful lot like breaking glass.

I got out of bed and dressed on the fly. I bolted down the stairs, and skidded to a stop just before running into Bootsie. "Dear God, man. Couldn't you have knocked this time?" I snapped.

Bootsie just glared. I guess there are some things watching a man hump the floor don't change. "Don't push your luck, McKenzie." He motioned the dining room with his chin. Scott Underhill sat at the table. I opened my mouth, but closed it again. Scott sat too still. He looked like a robot whose battery leads had been corroded.

"What's wrong with him?" I asked.

"He's been traded at the game," Bootsie said, then paused. "I traded him in a game. It was a lark for him, and I got caught up in the emotion of the moment. I tried to win him back. Obviously that didn't work, either. Pan lets his toys go during the day. I can fulfill my obligations with the Underhills so everything remains under the radar. But Scott has been told to shut down completely when he is not with Pan. So even if you drag him kicking and screaming

out from under Pan, you're not going to get him back. Do you understand?"

"At least Scott isn't being hurt."

"Yet," Bootsie snarled. "I'm like you. I don't have much blood in me either. We're nothing but snack bars for Pan. Scott? Karl Gunnar? Your boy Patrick? They have so much excess energy. Scott will fuel hundreds of your little wards and charms and glass breaking spells. It's so easy to skim the excess off. Scott probably doesn't feel a thing. Once Pan gets past that excess layer the pain is going to start."

I glanced to Scott, who hadn't looked up. "So why did you do it, Broots? Why did you sell the grandson out?"

Another exhale. "I got caught up. One for one. Release Scott, get a pretty little thing all to my own, the card deck had been so forgiving. High card takes the pot. What's easier?"

Because of this man I might possibly die the next day. Because of him, a bright, beautiful if slightly unphotogenic young man would spend the rest of his life being used. I had to play the same game of chance and hope that I wouldn't be swallowed the same way he had.

Scott blinked, the first time I saw him move. I looked to Broots. He needed to show me, so I understood what I gambled with. "Thank you." I didn't mean to say it. It just came out.

Broots relaxed. "So you're not going to play their game."

"Oh, I am."

"The game is rigged! You can't win it."

"That's what they think," I said.

Broots made a disgusted sound in the back his throat. "That's what they all think. And you only get one shot without Gunnar's boy."

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“One shot it is. Now, if you will excuse me. I need to get ready.”

Broots left. I got ready for the evening. I didn’t want to think about what losing meant, but I had to prepare for it regardless. I had to find Sergeant Pepper’s pink ball. With that located (in the laundry basket), I put it with the rest of his stuff. I showered, actually used product in my hair, and got dressed. It took awhile to decide what to wear to a “using yourself as bait” card game, but tailored slacks and a white shirt worked. I thought I would have more time to kill, but by the time I went downstairs to grab a granola bar, the sun had set.

I got in my car and drove to the abandoned parking lot.

The invitation to the card game let me in to the super-secret parkade, and from there I went directly to the super-secret elevator. And yes, I hummed the tune to *Mission: Impossible* while I walked. You would have, too.

As it turned out, I’d arrived early for the ball. The room the elevator opened into could have been any boardroom. Gun metal gray walls and carpet didn’t look like it stretched the interior design budget of the brothel. Even the long table, though real wood, looked from the as-is section of Ikea. The chairs looked older, the wood more worn and I didn’t see a pillow or cushion in the room.

A single trolley, stainless steel and out of place, held a selection of some fancy bottled alcohol available in the bar. It smelled off to me. The highball glasses stood upside down on the metal shelf. When it moved, the grating sound of glass on metal would be torturous.

Pan, dressed in a blue shimmery shirt and too-tight jeans, sat down at the head of the table. Outside of the club, the shirt made

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him look like an old man playing dress-up. He still had all the affectations of youth, but under the harsh fluorescent lights he couldn't hide just how old and evil he was. Scott stood behind him, in the same trendy gray suit he had worn the night before. It looked rumpled, slept in, and ruined. The same vacuous look took up most of on his face. I could tell Scott had lost even more of the energy he'd had that afternoon. Pain etched lines around Scott's eyes.

Pan looked me up and down, but didn't smile. "I suppose you're here as your own collateral."

"Baxter told me I could," I said.

Pan's mouth twitched. Like Gwen, on anyone else, it would have been a smile. On him, it looked ghastly. Pan had more power than I had at first thought. I'd grossly underestimated Mr. Pan.

"Oh, it is," Pan said. "Very permissible. But I have to tell you, the...collateral on offer has to be acceptable to the house. To be fair, I'm sure you understand."

I shrugged. "Whatever."

"You feel so very interesting to me." Pan stood up and walked around the table. "I felt you, the first time we met. You wanted to hurt me just for touching you. It made me want to touch you more, just to see if I could provoke you. You're not even a puppy in this game. Do you think even at your finest you come close to what Scott can offer me?"

"No," I said. "I don't."

"Good," Pan stood up. I fought the urge to take a step back and won, but he saw me struggle with the need. "Because despite how truly insignificant you are, the thought of you spreading your ass for me gets me hard, Sidney."

My real name made me stagger. I had no idea how he got it, but it had power over me. I covered how badly it affected me by sitting

on the table. I could still leave. Pan caught me glancing at the door and laughed.

“Let’s get on with it,” I said, roughly. Pan wasn’t going to touch me. I’d see to it.

“Bravado, I like it. Even if I let you win tonight, I could still have you. Your daily rate is what, ten grand? Do you suppose your handler has an hourly rate on the books?”

The thought twisted my gut. I suppose the saying is like a stab to the gut, but I’ve been stabbed in the stomach and this felt nothing like that. Not better, not worse, just different. A part of me believed Gwen would not do that to me, but she just might. No more. It felt so right I had to say it out loud. “No. I’m done. This is my last job. I’m out.”

Pan laughed. “Do you think she would just let you go?”

“That is the question,” Gwen said behind me. I turned, having to stand to do so. Gwen stepped into the room, dressed in a red dress that plunged every single place a dress could plunge. She looked like an ice princess. Patrick stood behind her. He had changed into a gray sweater and jeans and looked terrified.

“No. Not Patrick. Send him out.” My voice shook. I’d be the first to admit I don’t have a hell of a lot of power, especially with the two power stations in the room. Even Scott, as empty as he felt, had far more power than I would ever have.

Human emotions have strength, too. I stuck out my chin. “Patrick isn’t yours to gamble with.”

Gwen shrugged. Her red dress rippled. “Perhaps you should have read the amendments to the contract I have all new employees sign. But relax, Cypher, your Patrick is here on his own volition. I am not forcing him to do anything.”

“At what cost?” I asked.

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“The same deal I have with you. Not such a bad thing. He’s young. Twenty years of service will go by really quickly if you are there to guide him.”

“No,” I said.

“Yes,” she said. And we were at an impasse.

“There’s still the matter of whether Cypher here is able to stand as his own collateral,” Pan said. “He is, as I understand it, your property.”

Gwen looked at me, and shook her head. “Sadly, Cypher is an independent contractor. His job ends tomorrow. I do not, nor have I ever, owned him.”

Pan smiled. “So there is just a small matter of his worth.” He reached over and touched my cheek. His fingers were cold and his skin sluggish. The twisted thing I called a smile grew on Pan’s face. His fingers touched my jawbone, down my throat and over my chest. I stared at him blankly, not allowing myself to give into the emotions that wanted to roll out of me. His hand continued downward over my belly to the front of my slacks.

“Enough,” Gwen said. “Cypher has offered himself up as collateral, not as your meat. If you want to continue to paw him, I suggest you accept him as adequate and allow him to play.”

Pan’s hand lingered just below my navel for another second and then he pulled back. Gwen was a cold-hearted bitch, but I was hers. “You do have a point, my lady,” he said. “I believe my poor excuse for a worthless thrall is also acceptable?” He motioned Scott with a flourish.

“Yes,” Gwen said. “But only for his additional worth to my organization. If you ever attempt to bring in an already used thrall, things will be very different.”

No one asked me.

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Pan motioned Patrick with the same flourish. “And young Master Gunnar will be acceptable.”

Again, no one asked me. I open my mouth to protest, but Gwen cut me off with a look, and the words fell silent.

The door opened. August walked in. He carried his deck of cards that were freakishly large, like a magician would use so that the people at the back of the auditorium could see values. I caught nothing from them. They felt dead like a rock or a phone booth. That didn’t mean anything, I supposed. I hadn’t felt much at all from Pan the first time we met. Gwen glanced at them and nodded. If she was satisfied I was, too.

August didn’t leave, but hung back by the trolley. He felt battered to me. He didn’t have a mark on him and he hadn’t moved as though something hurt. But still, he didn’t look right. He caught me looking at him, but rather than look away he met my gaze with a challenge until I broke eye contact.

I focused my hatred on Pan himself.

The back of the cards could have come from any Hoyle package. Pan shuffled, awkwardly due to the cards’ size, then pushed the deck over. He hadn’t pushed very hard, but the whole deck traversed the length of the table in a solid ribbon of cards. There seemed to be a hell of a lot more than just fifty-two of them. Spread out, they numbered in the thousands.

“Standard rules, agreed?” Pan asked. “One draw, one card. Highest card wins. As we are the ones, my lady, who have collateral rather than are collateral, you and I shall go first. Disagreements or questions?”

I felt way out of my depth. Yes, I know, I should have realized that earlier, like say when I heard the glass breaking the first time. I’m thick, in more ways than one. Well, just the two ways that I

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can think of right now. I no longer knew if I could even tell that I had the high card if we weren't playing with a deck I understood. I wondered if I could ask for a rousing game of Crazy Eights, or perhaps Old Maid. I really liked Uno.

But Gwen had already nodded, and the game started. As usual, no one asked me.

They both drew cards randomly, Gwen from the head of the deck, Pan from somewhere in the middle. They turned the card over at the same time, and just like that, Gwen bowed her head, ever so slightly in defeat. She stood back and motioned Patrick to go stand by Pan.

I had no words. Where my words were, where my thoughts should have been inside my head, felt empty, cold betrayal. I stared at Gwen. I couldn't process the idea that she had failed me, and failed me so horribly. It left me with nothing.

She looked at me, her blank black eyes showing no emotion. She didn't shrug. She came to stand behind me, instead.

Pan gloated, the victory turning his skin into something plastic and vile. "Are you sure you want to play, meat? I'm giving you this chance to turn around and run out the door. Take it, don't be foolish."

I squared my shoulders. If he hadn't said anything, I might have wanted to bolt. No chance of that now.

Pan pulled his card from the deck, but didn't turn it over. I looked him square in the eye. "Did you cheat?" I asked.

Pan stared at me. "What?" he demanded.

That let me get even more specific. "Just now, when you pulled that card. Did you cheat?"

Behind me, Gwen smiled. I couldn't see it, but I felt it on the back of my neck. "Answer the question," she said.

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Pan tried to bluster. He opened his mouth, and covered it with his hand, wincing. “You bastard,” he snarled.

“Perhaps then, you should pick a new card,” Gwen said, her voice, as always, mild.

Without saying anything, probably to protect his mouth, Pan picked a new card. I, on the other hand picked his original card. Pan cursed me, but I had already turned the card over. He had to, too. These things had rules, you know.

I didn’t recognize the card. It had symbols that looked like bowling pins after a particularly violent split, but Gwen sighed and clapped her hands, just the once. “Choose which one you want,” she murmured to me. “You’ve won.”

“Patrick,” I said not even having to think about it. “I want Patrick. I want him now.”

Pan shrugged. Patrick stumbled free as though something unseen released him. Something probably had. All during the draw, he’d had the same slack look as Scott, but control returned to him slowly. He came around the table. I put my arms around him. I held him for a second, and pushed him back behind Gwen.

“Again,” I said.

Pan smiled. “You offer your lover as collateral this time?”

“Not on your miserable life, you piece of shit,” I said. He bristled at that, but I needed his dander up. “Same stakes as before. Me for Scott.”

“Done,” Pan said.

He picked a card, quickly this time. More importantly, randomly this time. I felt it. I put my hand over the deck, and that familiar, way over my head feeling washed over me. August, at the trolley, shifted and the glass scraped against the steel. It sounded horrible for the humans. It must have been even worse for the non-

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humans in the room. In that same split-second when everyone looked at the trolley, the card my hand passed over spiked with heat.

By the time everyone had looked back to the deck, I had picked the card. Pan and I turned the cards over at the same time, and though the squiggles meant nothing to me, but I heard Gwen's self-satisfied laugh. "Well. That's that then." She announced. Scott came back to himself slowly, flinched, and stood.

"I have to get home," he announced to the room, as though he had the most important discussion on the table. I suppose, to him, it was. Gwen crossed the room, silk and just the slightest hint of perfume in her wake. She took his arm. "I'll be sure to have a cab called for you," she said in the same tone of voice she used for Jonas, the oblivious temp.

Pan, on the other hand glared at me. "This isn't over," he said. Rather clichéd, I must say, but succinct.

I looked over to where August still stood by the trolley. "Not by a long shot," I finished, for Pan's benefit. And August's, I suppose.

Gwen didn't speak until we were back in the underground parking. She hadn't parked on this level. I wonder if Patrick had seen my Honda, and what he must have thought. I glanced over to him, at first shyly, but then realized he looked shell-shocked. I put my arm over his shoulder and pulled him to me, and he clung like a drowning man.

"My office, Cypher," Gwen said.

I don't know why I expected something more. I tried following her back to the false hydro building. If you've ever driven in Calgary, you wouldn't believe me. With all the swerving in and out of traffic from everyone around us, we were lucky to keep her

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red lights in view for the first five minutes or so. After that, we were alone.

Patrick stirred in his seat. We stopped at a light, so I took my hand off the gearshift and touched his knee. I think I expected him to flinch, or at the very least push my hand away, but instead he put his hand over mine. That felt pretty good.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Why, Patrick?” I asked.

“It was better than you dying.”

“You would have hated it. Being with Gwen or with Pan. You would have absolutely hated it. I couldn’t let that happen.”

“Gwen said that Pan would cheat. With her, it was fifty-fifty draw, but Pan wouldn’t let a mortal beat him. I didn’t have a choice.”

“You always have a choice. Promise me you won’t do anything like that again.”

Patrick took in his breath, to argue, but then sank back against the seat. The light turned green, people started honking, but I didn’t care. “I’d never been so afraid in my entire life,” he said.

“That’s not a promise,” I said.

“No.”

“What?” I demanded. The honking turned to shouts behind me, but I didn’t care.

“If you’re in trouble, I want to help. I’m not going to do nothing the next time you need help. I hope I won’t be so stupid the next time. I love you, and if there is anything I can do to keep you alive and well, I’ll do it. You did the same for me.”

He had a point. The light turned yellow. I gunned it through the intersection to keep the tender moment from being cut short by a mob of angry villagers. Their furious honks followed. We hit a

good streak of green lights after that, and pulled into the hydro parking lot soon after.

“At least promise me you’re going to talk to me before you run out and do something so...” I didn’t say stupid again. Patrick wasn’t stupid. A fifty-fifty chance seemed better than the certainty I’d faced. It didn’t help how helpless I felt.

“If you promise me the same thing.”

I’d parked, but we were both staring straight ahead. “I do a lot of stupid things,” I warned him.

“Well, maybe I can talk you out of at least half of them.” He put his hand over mine, still on the gearshift, and squeezed. “.300 batting average is still a pretty good batting average.”

I nodded, not having the heart to tell him I didn’t understand what that meant.

Gwen waited for us in her office. She stopped pretending to work at paperwork in front of her. She pulled off her glasses. “Ah, Cypher. Thank you for joining me.”

If she wanted to pretend I had a choice, I’d go with it. “You’re welcome.”

She looked over to Patrick. “Would you wait for us outside, please?” Gwen asked, not looking at him again.

“No,” I said. “Patrick stays with me.”

She sighed. “It begins. Cypher, I thought you had enough sense to be immune to all this. You were doing so well.”

“Patrick stays.”

She shrugged. “Patrick stays. This once. Then you are not going to push me again. Do we understand?”

I nodded.

“So, you say you want to renegotiate your contract. What if I don’t want to renegotiate with you?”

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“Then I quit.” I had no idea what all Gwen could do. She’d never showed me anything close to how powerful she really was. She stood.

“Do not push me on this, Cypher.”

She refused a third time. Now we could get down to business. “I still want to work for you. But I don’t want any more jobs where if I don’t succeed I die.”

“Death is an extremely effective motivator,” Gwen said mildly.

“So is your disappointment.”

“You would not like the tedious, menial jobs that do not require, shall we say, a firm finish.”

I shrugged. “Then I quit.”

Gwen shot me a filthy look. “Do not be dramatic. It doesn’t suit you.”

I’d taken the job for my sister, though my shifty uncle had collected quite the finder’s fee. I’d checked, years later, and sure enough, what he’d gotten had been enough to put Amanda through law school. The vast amount of cash had been necessary then, but it had been years since I’d had to worry about money more than just the inconvenience of finding an ATM in a seedy neighborhood.

Gwen read my mind. She laughed, emotionlessly. “Don’t insult me. You don’t work for me for the money. We both understand that. You love what you do. You’re my very best employee, Cypher. And you know it.”

“Independent contractor,” I corrected her automatically.

“Whatever you want to call it. What would you do if you didn’t work for me?”

“I’d figure out.”

We both glared at each other. She knew she would win in the

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eventual sense, her being immortal and all, but human stubbornness had its advantage, too. "For you and you alone, I am willing to try this...new thing."

From the way she said it, it sounded as though I suggested a sexually degrading act that needed a Surgeon General warning. "Thank you."

"If it doesn't work, we're done."

I agreed. The idea of not working under Gwen hurt me inside. Not metaphorically, it actually hurt below my rib cage.

She tossed me my file. "Make the appropriate changes."

I had to use both hands to catch it. The folder was three inches thick. I glanced at Gwen, awed that she'd given it over. She looked noble and distant, as usual, but I had affected her.

Something niggled in the back of my brain. I tried to follow it, but didn't catch the thought. So I opened my mouth, not thinking but the words came. "He called you 'my lady.'"

"Oh," said Gwen. "Did he?"

Gwen could no more feign innocence than she could guilt or "gosh, Mom, thanks for the puppy." She just didn't have it in her. I pushed her again. "Who is he?"

"Who is who, Cypher?"

"Who is Pan?" That gave her too much of an out. I tried again. "Who is Pan to you?"

She hesitated. "I am not obligated to tell you," she said, her voice neutral.

"I know," I said.

She went to her desk, paused, and then sat down on it rather than going behind it to her seat. "He's my half brother. But the common, ne'er do well half, if you must know."

"And what he's doing is okay with your people?"

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She shrugged. "Cypher, don't get caught up in your morality lesson. You know how we treat right and wrong."

I nodded. She got paid or she didn't. She had power or she didn't. I suppose Pan did quite well for himself.

"I'm still going to have to kill to him," I said.

Pan still had control over Gunnar and August. August had saved my life. I wasn't going to leave him there.

"I never said you couldn't. I will not assist you, for reasons you do not have to understand. When you are finished with the file, please leave it on my desk and see yourselves out. I am retiring."

The perfume she wore had faded, but it still lingered after she had gone. I went to her desk, not daring to sit behind. I pulled up one of the leather seats so I could sit and read.

My file wasn't top secret. Gwen did not operate that way. Negative performance reviews didn't happen in a job with a high cost of failure. I leafed through the new bits, not realizing I had been that busy over the past year. And Gwen was as ruthlessly efficient as she was ruthless. We weren't much into November and yet she or Jonas the wonder temp had prepared the tax forms for next year using December's projections.

I stopped and stared. They hadn't gotten Al Capone on his bootlegging or his brothels. They had gotten him for failing to pay his taxes.

I wondered if Pan had been just as naughty with his high-priced sex demon bawdyhouse. I knew a way to check.

I don't have mad computer skills. But Gwen keeps those in her employ who do. Not at three o'clock in the morning, however.

Patrick had obviously stopped trying to hide how tired he felt.

"I can't finish this tonight. We'll have to come back in the morning," I said.

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He yawned. "You know, there is something we can do between now and then. Actually, I can think of a couple things, but in a very definite order."

It took me a moment to figure out what the first one would have been. "Oh, right," I said.

Patrick took my arm. I hadn't gotten to the twenty-nine page termination subsection at the end, so I took an extra moment to find the terminal termination clause and cross it off. I also initialed the change and dated it, just in case. Then we were back in the car and driving home.

Patrick yawned a second time, this time so loudly his jawbone cracked. "So, let me be clear. Even when you're not facing death, you'll be pretty much as stubborn and bullheaded as if you did."

"Yes," I said.

Patrick fell silent for another minute before I saw him nod. "And you keep crazy hours."

"Yes again."

"And, there is still the fact that you are quite obviously a cat person."

"If Sergeant Pepper goes, I go."

"And your bed is exceptionally uncomfortable to sleep in."

He had me there.

Patrick leaned over and touched my cheek. "But you are amazing in bed and though stupidly loyal, loyal nonetheless."

I nodded.

Patrick shrugged. "So, I'll keep you."

Good. We pulled into the drive. Sergeant Pepper wound around my legs in the entrance hall, unusually affectionate, and I fed him before we went upstairs to bed.

We'd left the bed down and it took up most of the room.

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Patrick looked asleep on his feet. Changing his orientation horizontally rather than vertically changed little. I lay down next to him. He used my arm as a pillow for a while before abandoning it for the real thing. I still felt wide awake, having slept for most of the day. A day ago I would've collapsed beside Patrick and been glad for the chance to catch up on the sleep debt, but without a sword dangling over my head like always, my body didn't need rest.

CHAPTER 12

I stayed with Patrick until I felt the sunrise and then got up. We'd closed the bedroom door. When I opened it, Sergeant Pepper made a beeline for the bed. He jumped up, stalked his way to the sleeping body in the middle of it and lay down, lengthwise along Patrick's back. I let them both sleep.

I made coffee, taking the old coffeemaker down from the cupboard. Space had a premium in an old house.

The coffee beans I had were old, and a liquid that the machine produced looked brown and caffeinated, if not potable. I drank a cup black and then put the machine away in case Patrick came down and tried to drink the sludge.

My computer gathered dust in the dining room. Despite the fact it had all the bells and videoconferencing programs necessary for

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me to uplink to the office, it didn't have the computer gurus I needed to find the taxation status of one super-secret demon sex brothel.

I got in my car and drove in, instead.

Only one tech was up at that hour, and I pretended I didn't see her quickly switch from a first person shooter type game to a DOS screen. She was blonde, cute, wore a spiked black leather choker and her boots came up to her knees.

"What can I do for?" she asked.

I told her. She didn't bat an eye. Pan had to have a real name, or he wouldn't have been working on Karl Gunnar's commercial shoot. Gwen kept her permanent staff well-trained. It only took cute Goth tech girl a few minutes to come up with a name and an office on the trendy Stephen Avenue Mall, not far at all from the talent agency. I wondered if Pan had gone in and shot Butler in the head and then grabbed a coffee before going in to work that day.

Pan's a.k.a., Cedric Panther, didn't feel like his real name either. Goth tech girl couldn't find any records of Mr. Panther going past seven years in the city or the country. He declared a modest income, most of his cash flow going out as expenditures with no real income to speak of. On paper, the poor boy looked practically destitute.

And yet, Mr. Cedric Panther owned two Lexuses, a luxury penthouse condominium, and two race horses at Northlands. Pan had made no effort to launder any of his money. It didn't seem the kind of mistake Gwen would've made, but then Pan wasn't Gwen. I took a printout of all the assets that could be directly linked to Pan and thanked the girl for her trouble.

I drove past the condominium on the way home. It had to be a condominium. I'd need more to break into his home than just a

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glasscutter and floor plans in hand.

I would still get him.

I grabbed coffee and bagels on the way home. As I turned down the street, the huge limo had again parked again in my driveway. I parked curbside, just as the driver got out, and it wasn't Bootsie. The man in the chauffeur uniform had chiseled cheeks, and, if possible, even less personality than Bootsie'd had the first time we met.

I held up the bag of bagels and the tray of coffee. "I'm just going to put these inside," I said. I didn't ask permission, really, the job had finished. I owed them nothing, but still I waited for the almost unperceivable nod before continuing. I opened the door, put the bag and the tray on the second step.

The door into the backseat waited open for me when I came back out. I got in and shut the door behind me. Mrs. Underhill, just as she had before, outdid herself. Her black slacks were impeccable and her jacket...or coat—I'm not sure what they're called when they clearly cost over a grand—looked as though coffee wouldn't dare spill itself upon it.

At least this time she had color on her cheeks and she held out her gloved hands for me to take. I didn't want to take them, but I did.

"I came here to thank you in person, Mr. McKenzie. I didn't think you were going to succeed, but Scott came home last night."

I nodded. The last time I had gotten somebody out of somewhere, the family had still screamed for my blood. The girl had survived her trip under the hill, but she hadn't come back the same as the happy eighteen year old they had lost almost a decade before. When Gwen had refused—I had held up my end of the bargain—the family had set some pretty nasty people and things

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that used to be people after me.

There is no social etiquette in place that helps you thank the person who had wanted to kill you if you failed in the task they'd set for you.

"Scott is doing just fine," Mrs. Underhill continued, as though I had just asked. "A bit shocked, I must say. My doctor insists he'll be just fine. Maybe he'll be a little more cautious next time."

I would not be involved the next time, but I smiled and nodded again.

"Your woman said that I had no obligation, but I thought it appropriate to come here and give you this myself," Mrs. Underhill said. She wanted to tip me and forget about me as though I were nothing more than a faithful doorman or dog walker.

As I told her I didn't need anything, she reached into a clutch purse that didn't seem big enough to hold much at all. The envelope—paper thin, so it contained a check and not a bundle of cash—had been folded in thirds. I took it so I'd never have to see her again.

"Is there anything else?" she asked, as though my getting paid indicated I should get out of the car any time now.

"What happened to Bootsie?" I asked.

She stared at me, surprised, and then shrugged. "Certain things came to light about his involvement with my Scott's disappearance. I cannot, and will not, harbor disloyalty."

"Thank you," I said. I hoped, for Bootsie's sake, he needed a new job and not an eternal resting place. Mrs. Underhill's eyes had a coldness that made me doubt I'd have to worry about Bootsie breaking into my house again.

I got out of the limousine and watched it back out of the driveway. Bootsie's death made me sad. I knew how much courage

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it had taken for him to have offered himself up as collateral in a game he didn't really understand, and yet he had done it. That took guts.

I went back inside my house. Patrick still slept, not surprising considering it was just past eight, so I put the coffee away and worked out. I'd showered and grabbed the newspaper before he emerged, blinking from upstairs, wearing my tattered bathrobe.

Without a word he found his coffee, and battled the paper wrapping around the bagel for so long that I just wanted to take it from him and unwrap it for him, but eventually he figured it out. He drank half the now-cold coffee before he looked up at me. "Good morning."

It felt like a very good morning. With Scott home, I was free and no longer faced certain death tonight.

Patrick cleared his throat. "I'm sorry. I thought I'd said 'good morning' out loud."

"Sorry. Mrs. Underhill paid me a visit." I'd thrown the envelope onto the counter beside the coffee tray, and stood up to grab it. She hadn't sealed it.

The cost of one errant grandson delivered was fifty thousand dollars. I suppose that meant that I'd have to get to a bank machine today. But the check would be good, I didn't doubt that. I slipped it in my back pocket.

Patrick finished his coffee and threw out the empty cup. He wrapped the second half of his bagel back into the wax paper it came in with more dexterity than he'd shown unwrapping it, and put it in the fridge. I watched him, realizing how odd perfectly normal actions were here, in this kitchen, when Patrick turned to me.

"I'd like you naked, please."

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“Pardon me?”

He motioned at the table, which he’d just cleared off. “I’d like you naked and over the table, if you don’t mind.”

“The condoms and lube are upstairs.”

He reached into the pocket of the bathrobe and pulled out a handful of condoms and the tube of lube.

“You come prepared,” I said.

“Not yet. But I have great plans.” Patrick pulled off the terry cloth robe, and it slithered down his shoulders. “Now you.”

I had a lot more fiddly bits, what with the boots and socks and all, but it didn’t take that much more time. Patrick stood back, looking me up and down, and then smiled. “Yes.”

“Yes?” I asked.

“Yes,” Patrick repeated. “I’m glad I love you.”

“You had to think about that?”

“Think about that for a second and tell me if you blame me.”

I did, and I didn’t. “Good point.”

Patrick waited. “Well?” he demanded.

“Well what?”

“Don’t you have something to say to me?”

“What, that I love you?”

“It would be nice. Reciprocal, even.”

“Did you think I’d offer myself up to a brothel for you if I didn’t love you?”

“Call me old-fashioned.”

“You’re old-fashioned. And I love you.”

“Great,” Patrick announced. “Now, we fuck.”

“Really?”

“But I thought I might tie your hands behind your back with this bathrobe belt, first.”

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My cock liked the sound of that. Hell, all of me liked the sound of that. Patrick glanced down with a sly smile, and backed me into the fridge. He was half my build, but when he wanted to, he could still menace. He gripped my cock with his fist, and the dry skin on my extremely sensitive skin would have been too much if he had jerked it. He held still.

He grabbed my shoulder with his other hand. For a heartbeat, the old fight-or-flight reflex kicked in, but moving him would move his fist on my cock. And that would be bad.

I couldn't reach the lube without moving. I glanced to it. Patrick's grip on my shoulder didn't tighten. I stretched for it. I had to strain, and I pushed it farther away at my first grab. I got the bottle on the second attempt.

The lid popped up. Patrick's fist on my cock moved a fraction of an inch, and I flinched, which moved it even more.

"Careful now," Patrick warned.

I swallowed. The bottle shook. The lube felt cold, but so good.

"Enough," Patrick said. I capped the bottle and let it fall from my fingers. The lube melted on my skin, running down my cock and pooled around Patrick's fist.

His grip tightened. I went up on my toes. I tried to slide my cock through his fingers, but he just rode out my thrust with ease.

"What do I have to do?" I asked. My skin prickled uncomfortably, especially down my spine.

Patrick kissed my cheek. "Promise me something."

I shifted. The fridge against the small of my back hummed. I jerked, but Patrick kept his hand in the exact same spot no matter how much I bucked. "What?"

"You'll never throw yourself away like that again."

It was a promise. One of the big ones, one of the old school

ones. I shifted again, but Patrick sensed that one, too. The lube ran down his fingers now. His grip remained hot and dry, prickling my skin all over again. “I promise,” I said.

Before I finished the sentence— poor planning on Patrick’s part—he slid his fist all the way down my cock. The keening sound I made tasted metallic. Patrick’s mouth sealed over mine so I couldn’t let it out.

After all the tension, Patrick behaved quite miserly with how he jerked me off. I leaned against the fridge, letting my shoulders take most of my weight. Patrick broke from the kiss, gasping for air.

“Do you want to come like this or over the table while I’m fucking you?”

Decisions, decisions. “Table.”

Patrick nodded. His grip on my shoulder flipped me around, and the second his fist left my cock I wanted it back. Patrick had me turned facing into the fridge with my hands pulled back.

The rope felt soft. Patrick didn’t tie it tight, but there must have been about nine loops. “Where did you learn your knots?” I demanded.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Patrick said, then guided me back to the table.

“Boy Scouts,” I guessed. The table chilled my skin. I grunted. Patrick patted my thighs so I would spread them wider for him.

“Don’t ask, don’t tell,” Patrick said. I heard the sound of a condom wrapper ripping. Cold pressure of Patrick’s fingers sliding inside me. I closed my eyes and let the now familiar crackle of power rush over me. He slapped my ass. “And don’t come, Cypher.”

I jerked away from the pain. Patrick withdrew his fingers,

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damn him, but slid his cock into me their place. He held me down by the hips. The condom provided enough of a barrier to the overwhelming sensations so I could pull myself back from the brink.

“Better,” Patrick said. He began thrusting in me, pulling me back so that we were at a better angle. I balled my fists, twisting them in the rope bond.

“Not for me,” I said. I needed the same level of contact, and just his hands on my hips weren’t enough.

“Aw,” Patrick said, but I didn’t detect any real sympathy in his voice. “Poor thing.”

I thrust myself back harder on his cock. His right hand slid down my length. He watched me writhe against the table. “Is that better?”

I groaned, burying my head in my arms.

He moved up his other hand so that it pressed against the small of my back. That added pressure, along with his long fingers around me and his breath on my shoulder. I needed that. I closed my eyes, feeling my muscles tighten, and then nothing remained but the bittersweet tension that pent up just for a second before triggering the release I wanted. Patrick had pulled out of me. He’d stripped off the condom and I loved the feeling of his semen already cooling on my back. I couldn’t stop myself from coming.

There are less comfortable places to come back from a blissful moment than bent over a kitchen table, but I’m hard-pressed to come up with any. Patrick had already staggered away. I straightened up and collapsed onto the chair. Patrick joined me a second later, and for the longest time we just sat there. I don’t know when he slipped his hand into mine, but it felt right that it be there. Eventually, I got up to wash off, and Patrick gathered up the

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clothes scattered about and took them upstairs with him to shower.

It was good, joining him. I got out first, wrapped a towel around my waist, and went to get dressed, only to find him scowling at me a second later.

“What?” I asked.

“That closet,” he said.

I turned to look at it. “What about it?” The room had a standard closet, especially for a house this age. It fit maybe a dozen hangers, most of them holding either dark slacks or shirts. I wasn’t exactly a clotheshorse.

“You don’t expect me to share that closet with you, do you?”

The thought hadn’t occurred to me, until just then. I picked up half the hangers and threw them to the floor with the shoes.

“Better,” Patrick announced. “But we’ll still have to stop at my house before you go threaten Pan.”

“You’re not coming with me,” I told him.

“No, see, that’s where you’re mistaken. I certainly am coming with you.”

“But—” I began, and then closed my mouth. I didn’t like feeling overruled. It felt an awful lot like pink skipping rope.

CHAPTER 13

Anyone could be caught anywhere. That's what Gwen had taught me at least. I caught Pan just outside the abandoned parking lot. Patrick gunned the Honda so that it blocked him in the driveway, and I slid into the passenger seat easily.

Pan didn't look all that surprised to see me. "What do you want, Cypher?"

"I want you to leave Karl Gunnar alone," I said.

"That's not going to happen," Pan said. "Take your winnings and go. Don't engage me again so soon."

"I thought you said we weren't over yet."

"Oh, we aren't," Pan acknowledged. "But I have time."

I gave him the print out. He glanced at it. "What's this?"

"All your undeclared income."

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Pan laughed. "This is it? This is your big move against me?"

"It's a start," I said, but the bluster didn't feel real. Numbers weren't going to catch him. The serious dread on how much I'd misjudged the situation slammed me to the back of the seat. I needed to get out of the car.

Pan saw it, too. He ripped the pages up. "This means nothing. Because I like you, and I can't wait to fuck you when all of this is over, I'll give you a two second head start."

I glanced out the side mirror. A heavy man got out of the car behind us. He had suspicious lumps under his suit jacket, and I didn't want to get caught in the passenger door. But just as I grabbed for the door, Pan lashed out and grabbed the front of my shirt. "Expect retaliation."

I pulled away and bolted out of the car. The heavy man began to trot along the edge of the car, but I ducked my head, darted into my Honda, and Patrick floored it, merging into the traffic probably better than I could have, under the circumstances.

"I take it that didn't go well," Patrick said, studying the rearview mirror, but we weren't followed.

"You could say that," I said. I straightened my shirt where Pan had tugged at it, but that didn't settle the angry rage inside me. Patrick pulled over, into the parking lot of one of those "twenty-four hour because everything is microwaved anyway" type diners, and set the parking brake.

"Cy?" he asked.

"It's nothing," I said. But even the words burned.

"Bullshit," Patrick announced. "Get out. I'm feeding you lunch, and then we're going to regroup."

I nodded, but whatever my evening plans were, they didn't involve Patrick. It was too dangerous now. I wanted to go back to

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Gwen and ask her for the big guns, but she wouldn't help me against Pan. Patrick would fight me. He'd think he could handle it. He'd be wrong. But I exhaled, looked up to the bright yellow sign we were parked under, and shuddered.

"Yes," I said. "But not here."

We drove on. No cars filled the diner's parking lot, but they were open. I'd take the slightly tattered, duct taped faded blue booths over anything bright and shiny any day. Our waitress smiled in welcome, putting down coffee and two large glasses of water before making herself scarce again.

I let Patrick talk about plans. None of them would work. Patrick felt better talking, so I let him. I ate mechanically. Patrick noticed, and took my hand.

"Don't turn off like this," he said.

"It's not you." I pushed away my half-full plate. "I think we should get back to the house."

Patrick hadn't eaten most of his food either, but he put his fork down. I paid, we got up and drove home, both exhausted and in a somewhat maple syrup induced coma.

We both heard the fire trucks from three blocks away.

My house had collapsed to rubble by the time we got there. They just didn't make charms big enough to restore an entire house. I got out of the car before Patrick had found a place to park. Even the bricks had burned. We hadn't been gone long. I pushed my way through the throng of onlookers to the fire marshal.

The hoses were out, but not on. I had to show identification before any of the men would talk to me. When they did, they spoke with slightly slurred voices and dilated eyes. The house, brick and all, had gone up like tinder, and I couldn't find any of them that thought that odd. Pan's fire magic stained the ashes, suppressing

the men's thoughts as much as their actions.

"My cat," I asked. "Did anyone see him get out?"

"Sorry, sir," the marshal asked. His face looked surprisingly smoke-free. All his men's faces were clean. They hadn't even attempted to save the building. "It had mostly been consumed by the time we got here."

"The bricks burned," I asked.

The marshal nodded, herky-jerky. "Yes, sir."

I exhaled. The men started looping up the hoses. They hadn't even been filled with water. If Pan had wanted to, he could have attacked at night, when the two of us slept in the upstairs. He'd just shot across our bow, so to speak.

Patrick pushed through the crowd, slower due to the irate, large tabby in his arms. I went to them, scooping up Sergeant Pepper. He glared at Patrick over my shoulder, putting the blame of all of this on Patrick's head alone.

"If that's everything, then I suppose you should just go," I told the marshal.

He just nodded, blinked, and went back to filling out the form someone had just handed him on a clipboard. I only hoped that Pan's magic didn't fuck over any insurance issues as well. I didn't want to be the adjuster who tried to figure out what accelerant would burn bricks.

"Let's go," I told Patrick. Patrick glanced to the burnt out rubble that used to be my house, down to the cat in my arms, and nodded. After a moment of shifting tabby, I held out my now free hand. "I'm driving."

"With the cat?"

"Of course."

Sergeant Pepper sat on my lap as I drove straight to Amanda's.

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Thanks to Amanda being my sister and her husband being a crown prosecutor, she had about the best security that the two of us combined could muster.

“He burned down your house,” Patrick said, on the drive to the house. The country estate was outside the city limits, but not by as much as it had been when they’d first bought the land.

“Yes.”

Driving the Deerfoot Freeway on any given weekday afternoon felt only slightly less dangerous as offering oneself up to an alien card game.

But through the road noise and the honking, I still heard Patrick swallow. “This is for real.”

“Yes.” I tapped the brakes to let a black SUV cut across four lanes of traffic rather than the front part of my car stopping him at three and a half.

Patrick looked down. “I don’t want to stay at your sister’s.”

“I know. But please. For me.”

Patrick swallowed again. A divide came up, and most of the insane drivers took it to loop around the city. Patrick hadn’t asked me to turn around. I stayed south.

Sergeant Pepper noticed the change of tension. He sat up from my lap enough to see that we weren’t immediately crashing, and then settled his weight back down between me and the door.

“You’re going to stop him, right?” Patrick asked.

“Of course.” We had no other option. If Gwen knew, she probably would have tried to stop me. I’d cleverly not told her my plans. I could learn.

Patrick settled back down. “Good.”

Amanda would take care of the boyfriend and the cat while I was gone. “I won’t be long,” I told Patrick.

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“Cy, please. Don’t leave me here.”

Patrick didn’t look at me. I slowed down and waited for the guard at the first gate to wave me through. He was new, and it took him an extra second to look me up. Patrick didn’t say anything else, but I saw his mouth tremble. The first set of gates opened, and I had punched Amanda’s code into the second gate to be allowed up to the private drive before he spoke again. “And don’t die.”

“I’ll try,” I said.

Patrick grabbed my arm. “Promise me you won’t.”

“I promise,” I said. Nothing’s ever stopped me from lying to myself.

I pulled up in the circular drive in front of Amanda’s massive house. Over four thousand feet it took up a lot the size of my city block. The dark wood exterior had enough floor-to-ceiling windows to make it look festive despite the security.

“Tell the maid that the cat is going to need his usual. And when Amanda gets home—” I quickly checked my watch, just one o’clock. She still had several hours before she’d even think about returning. “Tell her I owe her one.”

“And you will be back.”

“Yes.”

“You promised me, Cy.”

I didn’t say anything. He looked away first. I kissed him. Mansions such as my sister’s do not have boot rooms, as such, but they do have a back room that had abandoned boots and briefcases. I found a small over-the-shoulder leather messenger that still looked new and seemed large enough to hold a head. Good. I took it down and made sure I locked the door behind me. If I could have barred it from the inside, I would have done that, too.

The drive back to the city felt Zen to me. I paid the ridiculous

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parking and went into my bank. I love how mixed a city Calgary is. It was the only place in the world where the millionaires wore jeans and cowboy boots and the guy in the three-thousand dollar suit beside him had leveraged his entire life.

They all knew me at the branch. So instead of waiting in line, a clerk whisked me away into a private office with a cappuccino served by someone who had a “senior” in their title.

I cashed the Underhill check and had them fill the empty bag I’d brought full of cash. It took a while to count the money, but they did so efficiently.

During all of this, I felt cold. Not just from the nippy wind that seemed concentrated in the wind tunnels in Calgary’s downtown, but cold in the most calculating way.

I liked the clarity. If I had to give it all up, I would miss it. Gwen wasn’t wrong about that. This time it felt personal. Pan had come up against me rather than just the people I worked for. I saw every step of what I had to do in clear steps ahead.

The huge building Pan lived in hadn’t been completely sold out, even if the large sign down the building still going up beside it promised imminent exclusivity despite the recession and glut of expensive condominiums now flooding the downtown market. I didn’t want the sales team; I wanted the building manager who should be on hand to meet any potential buyer.

I asked the nice young concierge at the desk to speak with the manager. The young man showed me into a room with plastic plants. The décor couldn’t hide how flimsy the office was. The carpet hadn’t been vacuumed lately, and the office furniture looked like pressboard where the furniture makers didn’t think people checked. I checked.

Patrick would have rolled his eyes over it. That I thought of

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Patrick here, right in the middle of a job, didn't bode well. I cleared my throat, hoping it would clear my head, and stood as the building's manager stepped in.

The man, with his receding hairline and shadows under his eyes, looked tired, and he smiled at me artificially. We shook hands, and at least his grip felt firm.

"Is there somewhere quiet we can speak?" I asked.

His fake smile widened, and he motioned to the room we were in with a wide expanse of his arms, but I looked at him. If he needed me to look up to the corner of the room where we both knew a camera recorded, I would. He didn't need me to.

I will say this. People in real estate sure know how to take a bribe. Whether to rent out a showroom by the hour or let someone into an apartment and then just disappear, they did it in a style that didn't demean the briber or the bribed. And I respect that.

I pulled on my gloves, took a deep breath, and pushed open the door. No alarms followed, tangible or otherwise. I stepped across the threshold.

The dark condominium stretched on forever in a wasteland of open concept space. The window treatments on the entire wall of windows blocked the light. At least I didn't have to worry about stumbling into any furniture.

In the standard issue granite countertops/stainless steel appliance kitchen, the rack of knives over the six burner stove looked unused. I tested the largest chef's knife, half-afraid the knife was just another staged prop. The ceramic blade felt different in my hand, free of all traces of iron. I liked it.

Maybe when I first started I would have been compelled to see if it could shave the hair off the back of my arm, but in today's age of forensic science, I wasn't going to leave my DNA around. I

turned back to the bedroom.

I knew Gwen required very little sleep, but she still needed it. And as Pan had been out during the morning and needed to be at the brothel all night, the afternoon would be the only time he had to sleep. If he wasn't tucked into the bed, fast asleep, I'd wait for him.

But Pan slept, as still as death, in the middle of his huge, California king-size bed. A sleep mask covered half his face, his chest barely moved the down comforter he slumbered under, and a bit of neon orange foam poked out of his ear. The downtown roared and honked its way directly below his bedroom, so I didn't really blame him.

It sure made my life easier.

Pan didn't move until he felt the blade over his throat. And even then, he didn't jerk. He probably would have slit his own throat if he had. I had no idea if he opened his eyes under the mask, but his hands moved up a fraction of an inch under the blankets before he kept still again.

"Good choice," I said.

"Cypher?" he asked, raising his voice.

I pulled out one of his ear foams out of compassion. I'd hate to die blind, forget deaf, too.

"Do you really have to ask who has a knife to your throat?" I asked.

"Would you?" He raised his voice, and when he pulled his lips back, I saw how yellow his teeth really were.

"I suppose," I granted him. "But I am sorry you had to wake up for this. I didn't intend that to happen."

He laughed, and the barking sound kept his throat very, very, very still. "Do you think that this bluster is going to be any more

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effective than your last?" he demanded. "Karl is mine. I'm not giving him up."

"This isn't a bluster. I'm going to cut your throat, and then I'm going to saw off your head and bury it at a crossroad. They're doing construction on Fifth and Fifth, I think it will be a lovely memorial."

That made him mad. I put my hand down on his forehead to keep him still. Bodies did have a habit of jerking violently, and I didn't want any more blood on me than possible.

"It won't work," he called, as though I were across the room and not at his throat. "Killing me. It won't release Karl. He'll still belong to whoever takes up my mantle. Are you going to kill them, too?"

"Maybe," I said. "Or maybe they'll be easier to negotiate with, knowing how you met your end. You shouldn't have burned down my house. My cat could have been inside."

"You'd kill me over a cat?" Pan demanded, and for the first time, real panic entered his voice.

"Well, yes," I said, honestly. "But I'd kill you over a lot less. Like the way you've been looking at Patrick. Now hush, I want to make sure the first cut hurts as little as possible."

He didn't believe me until I pushed his forehead, pressing his head back against the mattress, which exposed his throat nicely. The sleeping mask felt silky against my palm. The air conditioner kicked in, masking the sound of traffic for just a second, and I readied myself to bear down on the blade. It wouldn't take much to cut all the way through the trachea, but then it got tricky.

For a split second, Pan's entire body froze, and his forehead, the part not covered by the mask, grew sweaty. "Wait," he called.

"No," I said.

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“Please. Take Karl. Take him! I give up all claims to him. Please. Just...just don’t kill me.”

I felt the power in his words. It rippled past me, hot against the cold blast from the air conditioning. I hesitated, just for a second. “And August.”

“What?” Pan demanded.

“Free August, too.”

“The demon?” Pan asked, and it didn’t seem his place to act incredulous over any of my demands. I slapped his bare throat with the flat part of the blade, and he screamed, so high-pitched that the glass in the windows shook. “The demon. Fine, yes, whatever, I release his services, too.”

“And you give up any right you have for vengeance, either by your or someone else’s hands?” I asked.

“Gods, yes, yes, yes. Please. Anything. Anything!”

“This knife?” I asked.

His entire body shook, but I hadn’t put the blade back on his throat. I wondered if he’d even noticed. “Yes, sure. Whatever.”

I poked him with the edge, glancing. Blood welled up and ran down his neck in a fairly constant stream. “Swear,” I told him. “On your blood.”

“I swear on my blood,” he said. “Satisfied?”

He must have thought me a rookie, to walk out the door with just the promise of a knife. “All of it. Swear on your blood or I swear I’ll end you right now.”

“I swear. I swear Karl’s life is yours, your demon’s services are no longer mine, and I swear that I or anyone else by my hand will not harm you. Or yours,” he added, without me having to prompt him. “And the blasted knife. Take it. Take it all.”

“Thanks,” I told him. “I will.”

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I stripped off the mask. The room was still dark, but Pan still covered his eyes as though the hint of daylight through the heavy curtain blinded him. His hand touched the blood I'd spilled. He cursed, but not at me, and pulled out the other ear plug.

"You bluffed," he said, and looked at me for the first time.

"No. I didn't. I came here to kill you."

"You have no idea what repercussions that would have caused," he said, but kept his voice subdued.

"Well, isn't it a good thing you chose to saw reason instead." I wiped the blade's tip off on the comforter, and as much as Pan wanted to, he didn't say a word about it. Part of me wished I'd dropped his head in my satchel rather than just the knife. I did get what I came for, if not what I wanted. And tracking down who had inherited Pan's power would have been a huge hassle.

Pan rubbed his throat, which only smeared his blood more. "You would have done it," he said. He looked at me. "You really would have."

"Yes."

Pan shook his head. "Get out of my house. And never come back."

The worst he could have done, if I did return, would be to file a restraining order, but I didn't tell him that. I left, swinging the satchel over my shoulder, and actually felt good on the walk through the growing darkness back to my car. Once the sun cleared the buildings downtown, Calgary got cold.

CHAPTER 14

It occurred to me, yet again, that I still didn't know Patrick's cell phone number. I called Amanda's house instead, but it rang and went straight to voice mail. I told her and Patrick that I'd survived and that everything went well. Just after I hung up, the phone rang again.

I thought for a second it was Amanda, or Patrick, calling me right back, but it was Gwen. Pan must have called her as soon as I'd left the room.

"If you had told me what you were doing, I would have told you to forget it," she snapped.

I waited, not apologizing, and wondered if she noticed.

"For your stunt, I should keep your bonus," she continued. "But I'm not going to. It will be waiting for you when you come in

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to see me tomorrow morning bright and early. Until then.”

“Thank you,” I said, but she’d already hung up.

I got back to the car and threw the satchel into the backseat. Traffic moved just as heavy as it had been when I’d driven out of town the first time. I drove straight back to Amanda’s, and I had a much more Zen-like calm about me. I did miss my house, but dully. The real acute pain came when I thought that Patrick could have been alone in it. I couldn’t have protected him all the time. I didn’t want to think of how exposed he was.

Any house, even Amanda’s, could be breached, but driving through all the extra security did relax the knot that had formed. The house, as it came into view, glowed with light. I parked the Honda and got out. Even before I approached the house the front door flew open. Patrick ran out.

He threw himself on me. He obviously didn’t know his own strength. We fell back and my breath was knocked from me. When I got it back, the cold stones under my ass left me near speechless.

Rather than get up, though, Patrick pinned my arms over my head and kissed me. “You didn’t die,” he told me, as if I hadn’t already figured that out.

“I might still,” I managed. Patrick kissed me again, sliding down against my body, and probably would have done more if Amanda hadn’t delicately cleared her throat behind us.

Patrick got off, albeit reluctantly. It took me a moment later.

Amanda kissed my other cheek.

“I didn’t think you’d be home,” I said. “It’s not past midnight yet.”

“I heard about your house on the news. You should have called me.”

I should have. She waved off any apology I would have given,

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and led the way back to the house.

“Is it over?” Patrick asked.

“Yes. Your father should be getting stronger. I don’t know if I’ve reversed anything, but he’s not going to get any worse.”

Patrick nodded, silent for a good moment before taking my hand again and squeezing it. “Good.”

“And I freed August.”

“Who?”

“The demon.”

“Oh,” Patrick said. “Good for you.”

“And I got a nifty knife.”

He looked at my strangely, but then kissed me again.

Supper waited in the oven, just a little something her housekeeper had whipped up before going off duty for the night. The roast and all the fixings took three trips to the table to bring it all out. I hadn’t realized how hungry I felt until I smelled the beef. Amanda opened a bottle of an amazing French red, and we finished it off in front of the roaring fire in the den.

I don’t really remember what we talked about, so it couldn’t have been that important. But that didn’t matter. Patrick didn’t move from my side, Amanda sat curled up in the big chair with her legs under her like she had when she was a girl. Sergeant Pepper had thrown himself in front of the hearth and absorbed a good portion of the heat before it even had a chance to reach us.

A good night, all and all.

Eventually, the fire died down. Amanda’s husband Chris returned, and she got up to sit with him while he ate the plate she’d saved for him.

Patrick stood, stretching like I’d seen Sergeant Pepper stretch, then he reached down and took my hand. “Let’s go to bed.”

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I didn't argue.

Amanda's guest suite was as large as the upstairs of my house. What had *been* the upstairs of my house, I corrected myself. Patrick kissed me in the doorway and I stopped caring about the suite's relative dimensions. I cared about the four poster bed, and about the en suite bathtub being big enough for the both of us. I took off my shirt as Patrick stretched into the cavernous tub to put the plug in, and we kept kissing while removing an article at a time until we were both naked. Patrick felt hot, I was a little too cold, but with him against me, everything balanced out. He put his hand down, over my cock, and smiled.

Just then we realized that neither one of us had a condom. They'd all burned in the fire, and I hadn't thought to stop to pick any up on my way to or from going to kill Pan. I realized that about the same time Patrick did, and after a quick, fruitless search of the bathroom, I banged my head against the mirror.

Patrick shrugged. "We'll make do. Get in the tub."

We took stock of what we did have, a full bottle of conditioner and a trial-sized container of shower gel. I got in the tub. The back had a gentle slope to it. Patrick took the gel we'd found, opened the lid, and poured out an exceedingly generous portion of it over me and into the water. It had a warm, musky smell. The mirrors over the vanity began to steam as Patrick stepped into the tub with me. He settled his weight carefully, making sure that our groins were aligned, and while the heat of the water had put a damper on the erection I'd had up against the mirror, feeling his soapy hand revived it. He had to brace himself against the end of the tub in order to stretch enough to kiss me, but he managed it. Compared to the water, his mouth seemed cold, and the minute rhythm he started, just rocking his cock against mine, started waves that

lapped against our skin.

Wet, his body against mine, nothing stopped that extra bit of energy crackling between us. But rather than being concentrated entirely on my prostate, which I had to admit I really liked, it touched me all over my body. I gathered up some of the still liquid soap from my skin. It took some maneuvering, but I managed to get my hand out from between us and over Patrick's back. Patrick tensed, feeling my fingers brush his ass, but then relaxed. I switched to the bottle of conditioner. With it, my finger slid easily inside him, and while that caused him to tense up again, he forced himself to accept it. I pulled away, letting the water wash us clean. Patrick kissed my cheek.

I threw my head back. He kissed down my neck, either ignoring the soapy aftertaste or not even noticing it. He kissed my shoulders, warm, then cold, then warm again as the waves slapped them, and then he grinned.

"I need you to shift up about five inches," he said.

I didn't ask. I just did. Patrick grinned at me, slid his way down between my thighs so that my legs were up on the tub's edge, and ducked his head under the water's surface.

Having a lover that had water elemental power seemed useful in a lot of ways, the least of which meant he could hold his breath under water for a long, long time.

We showered off the last bit of soap, then wrapped ourselves in the guestroom towels that could have doubled as sheets on a twin-size bed. Patrick pulled down the comforter and climbed into bed.

I licked my way slowly down his chest. Patrick shivered, trying to push my head down farther, but it was my turn to be in charge and I had every intention of reveling in it. He protested, symbolically, then lay back and just let me do what I wanted.

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His cock lay still hard and tight against his belly. "Do you trust me?" I asked.

The muscles of his stomach clenched despite himself. "You know I do."

I had no intentions of fucking him. Instead I shifted down even farther, spread his legs wider, and kissed first the base of his cock, then the tender spot just behind his testicles, then the tight skin of his perineum.

He felt still tense; if we had a condom wrapper I could have bounced it off the muscles of his stomach, but he took a deep breath. I didn't push my tongue inside him, but I wouldn't ignore the nerve endings on the outside.

"Oh," said Patrick.

I stopped, but wet my finger and kept teasing the too-sensitive skin. "Yes, oh," I said.

"Okay. I could learn to like that," Patrick added, and groaned again as I started using my tongue. He squirmed under me, never trying to push himself onto me, I noticed, but accepted the light teasing touch easily enough. It made his cock harder, at the very least, so that when I did take his cock into my mouth, his body did this complicated jerking motion that I swore must have hurt.

He exhaled, sharply, and grabbed the back of my head. I let him. I couldn't take him as deep down my throat as he could take me, but he didn't seem to mind. He pushed me back, lifting his hips up to fuck me rather than holding me down, and I liked the desperate sounds he made. He moved so energetically that I worried the bed would start to creak, but its solid build didn't let us down.

His fists tightened in my hair, and he pushed himself all the way up off the bed. I swallowed him as he came.

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He collapsed back into the bed, breathing hard. He pulled away, too sensitive for any touch, and turned over. He shivered, and I let him recover before pulling the comforter up and over his shoulders.

“Thanks for that,” Patrick said.

“No problem.”

Patrick shook his head. “No. Huge problem, most times. Most guys think that I’m broken, and that they can fix me if they try hard enough.”

I didn’t apologize for them. He slid closer behind me, his ass rising up to my cock, and turned off the bedside light.

I fell asleep before I felt him settle again.

I woke up just before six. When I moved, Patrick woke. “I’ve got to go to work,” I told him. “Do you want to come or sleep?”

Patrick blinked. “Come,” he decided, but moved stiffly to get dressed. Neither of us had clean clothes, but at least he had his own things waiting for him. Yesterday’s clothing felt stiff against my skin. An assortment of baked goods waited for us downstairs on the marble-topped island of the huge kitchen, and I poured myself a cup of coffee in a waiting travel mug to go back into town.

I dropped Patrick off at his townhouse, and then went to the office.

Jonas the wonder temp showed me into Gwen’s office, but she wasn’t there. The florists had obviously been back—she had an all-new set of rubber plants where the old ones had been, and they made the room seem warmer. I sat down in one of the leather chairs and took the time to call for a personal shopper. If Gwen could do it, so could I. I spent the fifteen minutes it took Gwen to arrive giving my preferences to a very eager sounding young man, and quickly said good-bye just as the door opened.

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"I am sorry about your house," she said.

"Enemies who have the power to burn bricks down to nothing happen," I said.

"Sadly, you're absolutely right. You handled yourself with an efficiency. I didn't know you had in you, though. That impressed me. It shows that I can use you for tasks that require a bit more delicate touch."

I shrugged, but didn't know if I wanted to be ready for what Gwen thought of as delicate. "I didn't go to Pan in order to scare him. I went there to kill him. He managed to talk me out of it."

She raised her eyebrow. "Is that so?"

"Yes."

"Part of me would like to say it would be easier if you had killed him. But that would have caused me problems in the long run."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"You can ask," she said.

"How could he be your half brother and yet he still has to call you 'my lady'?"

Gwen sighed. "It's complicated."

She didn't refuse to answer. I waited. "But I suppose if I need your job description to change, you'll hear about it eventually. We are siblings, he and I, through our mother. My father, higher ranked in the courts, took me away with him when I was a little girl. One of his underlings, an odious toad, found my mother years later. She bedded him and Pan was born."

"And now he's causing trouble?"

"His father ensures his continued health. Nothing more. Pan isn't just going to forget you, regardless of how carefully you worded the promise."

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"If he does come back after me, I will kill him. I got to him once. I can get to him again."

She waved my words away. "You're not telling me this. And you won't tell me about it when it happens either. Are we very clear about that?"

I nodded.

She sat back down. "Now, to business. Again, I am sorry about your house. We will move you to temporary housing while the house itself is being rebuilt. Unless you would prefer something newer?"

"I can take care of that myself."

She waved her hand again. "Do not be foolish. Housing is part of your contract."

"I may have other arrangements," I said.

She looked down her nose at me. "With the boy? You can't be serious."

"Gwen, they have this thing now. It's called 'house insurance.' I had it. I'll deal with the insurance company myself."

She sighed. "What am I going to do with you, Cy?"

"What you always do. Nothing's changed."

"Everything has changed. And if you don't believe that, I have no use for you. Take some time off. Enjoy your bonus. Once you've got everything in order, come back. I'll put you to work."

"Enjoy my bonus?" I asked. "What's that supposed to mean?"

She shrugged. "It's waiting for you at your car. Away you go now, Cypher."

I left. Jonas the wonder temp had started to look nervous and I wondered what he'd seen in the past week. "It's not going to get any easier," I told him.

He looked up at me, eyes wide, but didn't say anything. I left

him in the lobby.

The bonus could have been anything. Gwen had the power to put just about anything in my car, with just a few seconds notice, but when I got back to where I'd parked, August lounged on the front fender. He didn't have a jacket and shivered in the parking lot.

He saw me and exhaled. "Well, great. Are you my next master?"

"Maybe."

He stood. I unlocked the car, but he didn't move from the driver side of the door. "Where I'm from that pretty much means yes."

"And where I'm from, it doesn't. I owe you. So go, you're free, or whatever the magic words are. Shoo."

August frowned, looking around himself, but he didn't vanish in a puff of smoke like I'd expected him to. "It doesn't work like that."

"Why not?" I asked.

August's mouth twitched. "Pan didn't own my contract. He just had use of my services. Perhaps you're familiar with the concept."

Perhaps I was. Baxter hadn't lost August to Pan in a game. He'd lost him to Gwen.

And if Gwen still owned him, he didn't really belong to me. "We'll sort this out. Get in before you freeze to death."

"That's what they all say," August said, darkly. But he went around the car and got into the passenger side. I started the car with the clicker and called Gwen right back.

"No," she said, instead of a greeting. "You can't free him."

I stopped my sharp retort as soon as I remembered who I talked to. "May I ask why not?" I asked, instead.

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“Because it does not please me to have him freed. I may require his services at a later date, and with you is about the safest place I can stash him.”

“I can’t take a sex demon home,” I said. “Patrick—”

“I’m asking this out of idle curiosity only, Cypher, please don’t misunderstand me. Do you think I care?”

Since she put it that way. And she really couldn’t have been very curious as to the answer, because she hung up again before I had a chance to answer. I sighed, closed the phone, and got into the now warm car.

“Everything sorted?” August asked.

“It looks like you’ll be hanging around me for a while,” I said.

August looked me up and down, shrugged, and started to reach for my zipper. I caught his hand. As my fingers came around his wrist, I felt how much power he had all over again. Like I had the first time we met, I started to worry August might just rip my hand off. A lot had changed since then.

August didn’t fight, and when I let go of him, he took his hand back and laced his fingers almost demurely on his lap. “I don’t understand.”

“You and I, we’re not going to be having sex,” I said.

“I don’t...understand,” August repeated, obviously even more confused. “You’re my master.”

“And my boyfriend will kill me,” I said. The word didn’t sound as strange as I thought it would. “Understood?”

“No,” August said. “Not even slightly.”

I put the car in reverse and pulled out. August remained silent until we were mostly back to Patrick’s. He cleared his throat. “Do you really mean no sex?”

“Yes.”

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“Not even blow jobs?”

“No sex.”

“Am I allowed blow jobs?” A faint hint of panic entered his voice. “Hell, am I allowed sex?”

“You can do what you want,” I told him. “Just not with me.”

“Am I allowed blow jobs with your boyfriend?” He sounded hopeful.

“No!”

He clearly struggled with the concept. “So...sex is out with him, too.”

“In a nutshell...yes.”

“So I’m just supposed to hang around with you? For all eternity?”

“For the next hundred years or so, yes,” I said. I didn’t have the heart to tell him barring getting my throat cut or suffering from high velocity lead poisoning, I would outlive the average human.

August threw himself back into the seat. “Shoot me now.”

“Gwen might release you sooner,” I said. “And there’s always the possibility I might die.”

August covered his face with his hands. “One can only hope.” He paused. “Master.”

* * *

Patrick waited for me in the townhouse. “What’s this?” he asked, looking right past me at August.

“This is August,” I said, realizing the two hadn’t been formally introduced. “He’ll be staying with us for a while.”

“How much is a while?” Patrick asked.

“There is a strong chance he might die soon,” August said,

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trying to be helpful and failing miserably at it.

Patrick took a step back, up onto the first step. “Well, is it house-trained?”

“Is it house-trained?” August demanded to me. “Did he just ask you that?”

“Apparently.” I turned to Patrick. “Can you wait for me upstairs?”

Patrick nodded, turned on his heel, and went back upstairs. I waited to hear the bedroom door open and close before turning on August. “And you. Behave. Don’t bait him.”

“Yes, master. Whatever you say, master.”

“I mean it.” I put my hand on the banister to go up as well.

“Hey, where are you going?” August asked.

“You’re a sex demon,” I said. “You should be able to figure it out.”

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