



SINS OF OMISSION

A Creatures Of Sin Novel

INDIA HARPER

SINS OF OMISSION

...Carver couldn't take it anymore and whirled to shove David into a doorway two shops up from Venus. "What are you doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Damn it, David, stop screwing around!"

"What did you think this would be like, Carver?" David hissed with more emotion than Carver had seen from him all night. "You wanted a sub? Congratulations, you got one. If you can't handle it, that's not my problem."

"I don't act like that."

"No? You don't drop your eyes when I tell you to do something? Don't give way whenever I ask for anything?"

"It's not like—"

"It's exactly like that, Carver. It's not about having someone to boss around. It's about having someone trust you so completely that they let you make those decisions for them. It's a goddamn responsibility, Carver, and now it's yours. Whether you like it or not."

The whole time he never directly met Carver's gaze.

Carver realized how out of his depth he was. He'd thought—well, no, David was right there, he *hadn't* thought. He'd assumed he would be able to brazen his way through like everything else.

"What do I do?" They weren't even in the door and he'd fucked up. "David, tell me what to do."

David looked at him long enough to say, "No," and let the word sink in, before glancing down again.

"Goddamn it, David!"

David kept his mouth shut and eyes down.

"Fuck." Carver left the doorway, marching toward the club. That David silently followed irritated him further...

ALSO BY INDIA HARPER

Sins of Arrogance

SINS OF OMISSION

BY

INDIA HARPER

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SINS OF OMISSION
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CHAPTER 1

David Logan lay on his stomach, half-asleep, savoring the feel of soft linens and thick mattress, the pillow firm beneath his head. It was so different from his institutional bed back in the dorm, dressed with thrift store sheets almost as threadbare as the mattress beneath it. His present situation was decadent and he was determined to savor it before returning to the drab reality that waited for him.

This wasn't how he'd expected this evening to turn out.

Long, cool fingers drifted up his leg and over his bare ass before pausing with the rest of a hand on his lower back. "I've ordered room service," a low tenor voice stated.

Reluctantly, David rolled over, drawing the sheet over his lap.

His partner for the evening stood by the side of the bed,

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wearing one of the white terry cloth robes the hotel offered. David suspected he didn't wear anything else underneath, considering that the pants the two of them had removed in a frenzy several hours earlier were still draped over the armchair in the corner.

For the first time since the bar, David studied his lover. For an older man—mid-fifties, if David were to guess—he was very fit. No jowls, no sagging flab, just a softer layer of flesh over toned muscle beneath. His dark hair showed streaks of silver that he was too confident or too blasé to cover, highlighting features that were razor sharp right down to his prominent nose. He looked good for an older guy.

David had been somewhat surprised at the club when this man had turned up, offering him a drink. It wasn't the kind of place well-heeled, middle-aged men frequented. It was more the kind of place young men went to find, not companionship, because nothing that came out of there lasted long enough for that. Satisfaction. Shared interests, so to speak. In other words, David had gone there to get picked up. He'd expected a quick fuck in the restroom, if they could find an unused stall, which was rare, or at the very most the back seat of any unlocked car in the parking lot. Instead, this man had shown up, willing to buy and with a proposition for more.

David's father and brother would be having fits if they knew. Assuming they even cared anymore.

After reviewing the possibilities in the club, David had taken his chances with the older man. If it wasn't good, at least he had the comfort a man that age probably couldn't keep it up long.

He had been wrong on all counts.

The sex had been intense, driving David to the edge before pulling him back again, over and over before the man had

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penetrated him at last, fucking him fiercely until they both came, sated and exhausted. Afterward they had both dozed off. David wasn't sure how long he'd been asleep, but it had been enough time for his partner to shower and order food.

"Thanks."

The man smiled at David's modesty, making David feel a little foolish for covering up. After all, not an hour ago this same man had been sucking on what was now hidden by the sheet.

"My pleasure. Have to keep your strength up after all."

David felt the blood run to his groin at that implication.

"So tell me, handsome boy"—the man sat on the edge of the bed—"what's your name?"

"Logan."

"No, no." The man was suddenly irritated. "Not those ridiculous club names you children use to make yourselves feel special. What's your given name?"

David went on the defensive. "It is my real name. David Logan."

"Ah." Like a surprise thunderstorm, his irritation vanished. "Well, David Logan, I am Robin Faulkner. I have a proposition for you."

He seemed to be waiting for something. Since David wasn't going anywhere without his clothes, especially if there was food on the way, he said, "I'm listening."

"As you no doubt thought yourself, I'm far too old to be trolling gay bars looking for prospective partners. I suspect you have similar issues."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You don't seem like one of that desperate crowd. You wear no makeup, you're respectably dressed even if your clothes are a bit

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worn, and you have a minimum of jewelry. Yet it's difficult to find partners any other way, am I right?"

David didn't answer.

"You know I am. Perhaps we can solve that for each other."

"How?"

Robin pushed the sheet aside and began caressing David's leg, sending frissons of arousal shivering along his nerves. "A partnership. I have certain...interests. Preferences. You indulge me in those, with no questions, no arguments, and in return, I will see to your every need. I'll feed you, dress you, give you a roof over your head, any money you need. You'll want for nothing. If you're a good boy."

"You want me to be, what? Like your mistress?"

"Oh, don't misunderstand me, David." He tugged the sheet aside, leaving David exposed and feeling very vulnerable. "I'm not looking for a boy toy. I'm looking for a submissive. I expect complete and utter surrender from you. That might be difficult for a young man like you to comprehend."

David thought back to the home life he had escaped so recently, the beatings from his father and brother to try to "straighten him out," his mother's apathy, and little care or concern from anyone else around. "No, sir, I understand you perfectly."

"Sir." Robin stroked David's cheek. "How sweet. I promise you, dear David, I will make it all worth your while. In a few years, when you're ready to move on, I'll make sure you have everything you need."

It was too easy. David had scrimped, fought, and begged for every good thing he had ever had in his life. Nothing good came easy, so there had to be a catch somewhere. That didn't make it any less tempting. The sex promised to be decent, and if it got him

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out of the hazing in the dorms, maybe paid a semester or two of his tuition... “What do I have to do?”

Robin settled back against the headboard beside him. “Let’s consider this an audition.” Flipping back the edge of his robe, he exposed his own cock, already swelling to fullness against his stomach. “Give me another taste of that gorgeous mouth of yours.”

David was willing enough, already getting turned on again, and eager for the pleasures sex with this man promised. He leaned in for a swift, hungry kiss that Robin allowed, while wrapping his hand around Robin’s cock, coaxing it with slow strokes to full erection. When it was hard and ready, David gave up Robin’s mouth for his cock, settling himself on the bed in anticipation of a long, leisurely suck. Robin caressed David’s hair in approval as he worked. It felt good, both the approval and the intimacy.

The knock on the door was an unwanted intrusion.

Before David could pull away, Robin’s hold tightened, keeping him in place and preventing any escape. It was easy to read his intention, and after a moment’s uncertainty, David surrendered to it. First test, and a chance for Robin to prove what he had said as well. David returned to what he was doing, curious what would happen next.

Robin patted his head in approval. “Just bring it in,” he called.

There was a pause before the keycard rattled in the lock and the door opened.

Out of the corner of his eye, David could see the valet back into the room, pulling the cart behind him. It wasn’t until the man was in the room and the door shut that he turned to see what was going on and froze.

It was almost funny how large his eyes got.

Obviously, Robin wanted the man to witness this. It felt dirty,

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shameful, but at the same time, David was surprised to find the allure of exhibitionism intoxicating, encouraging him to improve the show, increasing his speed as he started massaging Robin's balls. He could feel the concentration it took for Robin to say, "Put it over on the desk."

"Yes, sir." The young man's baritone voice cracked.

He tried to be casual as he laid out the food, but there was no way the wet, suctioning sounds of the blowjob weren't getting to him, watching surreptitiously every time he turned from the cart. When he'd finished, he started back toward the door.

"My pants are on the chair there," Robin stated matter-of-factly. "You can take a tip from the wallet."

The young man hesitated.

"Or you could join us."

Neither David nor the valet moved.

Robin's hand on David's head became rougher, his hips rolling with a slight cant as he went on. "You'd look lovely with David's mouth wrapped around your cock. Surely you could stay for a little while."

"I..." He looked like he might agree, and David felt a surge of lust like never before at being offered to this stranger. Then the man's pager went off, and whatever he was about to say was lost. "Excuse me, sir. I have to go."

David was impressed at how quickly the valet got out of the room.

Robin chuckled, tightening his grip on David's hair to pull him off his cock and up into a smoldering kiss.

"You knew he was coming," David accused when he was finally free to speak.

"Not him, necessarily. But someone."

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“If it had been a girl?”

“Same offer.”

David started to pull away. “I don’t fuck women.”

Robin caught him, pinning him to the mattress. “You fuck who I tell you to, David. You’re mine, to do with whatever I want. I’ll offer you to who I want, and fuck you how I want, and by the time I’m done with you”—he scented along David’s neck, making him tremble—“you’ll be grateful for all of it.” He rose up on his arms to gaze down on him. “Unless you leave now.”

It was a horrible choice, leaving David with the dread of something being taken away. The answer came automatically. “No, I want to stay. I’m sorry, Robin. Please, just let me stay.”

Robin brushed the loose hair out of his eyes. “Oh, my David, such times we are going to have together.” Reaching for the nightstand, he came back with lube and a condom, putting it in place before slicking down, the remnants easing the slide of his fingers into David’s ass, preparing him. “You are going to be a wonderful boy, and I am going to teach you everything I know.” His cock followed his fingers, and David hissed in pleasure, curling his legs around Robin’s lower back to allow him deeper, fingers clutching at his shoulders. “Oh, yes.” Robin groaned in response. “I think we are going to have a wonderful time, you and I.”

If it kept feeling like this, that was more than enough for David.

CHAPTER 2

Carver Eliot lay on his stomach, tangled in the sheets and sleepily watching his lover dress. It was always the same: first the underwear, then the socks, then the shirt, then the tie, leaving the trousers for last. Carver loved watching David walk around in shirt and tie, his bare legs showing, the muscles flexing as he walked around the room. “You are such a creature of habit,” he teased.

“You could use some habit.” David didn’t rise to the bait. “Are you going to stay in bed all day?”

“Thinking about it.”

“You do have a business to run, you know.”

“And I was out until four in the morning doing it.” Carver rolled over and stretched, knowing David wouldn’t be able to resist the sight. “You have a whole squad room of guys to assign

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stakeout duties to. I've got me."

"You seemed to have plenty of energy when you got home." David stopped at the edge of the bed, slacks in hand and a smug grin on his face.

"I needed to unwind." Grabbing the slacks, Carver tugged David closer until he knelt on the bed, crouching over Carver so his tie fell against Carver's bare chest.

"I have to go to work." David's voice dipped low, promising all sorts of things if Carver was very convincing.

"Of course you do. It's early yet, though. Would it kill you to be *on* time for a change?"

"What's wrong with getting in before everyone else?"

Carver wound David's tie around his hand, tugging David down. "Coffee will be a poor substitute for what you'll get if you linger."

David caught Carver's mouth in a searing kiss. "My shirt's going to get wrinkled."

"No one will be the wiser because your jacket is your constant companion from the moment you walk out the door to when you return at night."

"Not always." He nipped along Carver's jaw line.

"Near enough." Carver's hips arched upward as David worried a particularly sensitive spot. "I promise to do the dishes."

"You're supposed to do them anyway."

Skating his hand down, Carver slipped under David's shirt and started working his boxers down. "I'll do them willingly and won't curse your name once."

David chuckled. "With a proposition like that, how could I refuse?" He helped Carver with the underwear, kicking it aside.

The feel of their cocks against each other had the same

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electrifying charge as the first time they'd come together six months ago. They'd been together long enough now to be comfortable with each other, while still having that sense of finding something new and exciting. Carver wrapped an arm around David's waist, the other cupping his head as he got lost in his lover's kiss, holding him close with an intimacy he'd only ever had with David.

David pulled back regretfully. "We don't have time for leisurely. It'll have to be quick."

"I can do quick," Carver promised, already reaching for the bottle of lube still on the bed stand from last night. "Quick has its own benefits. I can feel you this way." A squirt of lube and he wrapped his hand around both their cocks together, matching David's hiss with his own at the friction and heat and hardness that they shared as Carver started jacking them both.

"Tonight," David murmured against his ear, his voice already rough with arousal, "I'll take this tie you hate so much and wrap it around your wrists, use it to tie you to the headboard while I feed you my cock that you want so much."

"Goddamn it, David!" The image seared into Carver's brain, promising to haunt him all day.

"You love it and you know it."

What he loved was the edge of command that crept into David's voice when they fucked, not the public voice of authority he used with the men at the station, but the one reserved for Carver alone. The one that said, "You belong to me, and I can use you for my pleasure any damn way I want."

It was the truth. Which was why Carver loved it so much.

David's hand covered his, guiding the strokes and increasing the pace. It was nearly Carver's undoing.

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“Then I’m going to fuck you.” David’s voice was broken and uneven as he neared climax, but no less powerful. Carver didn’t know how David managed to get more commanding the weaker his control became, one balancing out the other. “I’m going to fuck you in that way you can’t stand. Agonizingly slow. Drawing it out until you’re begging me to let you come. Promising all manner of things.”

Carver groaned. So close. “I’m not doing your laundry again.”

David laughed. “Hell, no. My wardrobe still hasn’t recovered.”

“David.” Despite the playful banter, the friction was getting overwhelming, and Carver could feel the heat rising behind his eyes, promising such ecstasy.

Together they worked faster, their hands tangled almost romantically as they pulled at their paired cocks. The physical intimacy was amazing, but the emotional closeness was what got to Carver every time, how safe he was with this man like no one else before him. Carver kissed David again, their tongues playing, their mouths eager yet somehow relaxed, building on their arousal without overpowering it. When Carver came, it was with a sigh rather than a scream.

David followed two strokes later, collapsing on top of Carver as a comforting weight, his breath heavy yet content. Finally, he rose up, still straddling Carver’s leg. “Well, I won’t be wearing this shirt today,” he said ruefully, holding out the hem to show the wet stain along the belly. Loosening his tie, he pulled it off over his head and, with it still knotted, dropped it around Carver’s neck. “Wear that today.”

“Why?”

David leaned closer to purr into his ear. “As a reminder of tonight.”

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Carver groaned, but David chuckled and slung himself out of bed. “A tie won’t kill you, Carver.”

“It can in the right hands.”

David rolled his eyes and shrugged on another shirt, perfectly pressed and ready to go. The man was too OCD sometimes. Who ironed all of their shirts ahead of time? To be fair, Carver did benefit on occasion, as the morning had just proven.

“So, the tie and nothing else?” he asked cheekily as David retied his new tie.

“Wonderful as that image is, I’d rather not have to bail you out for indecent exposure,” David replied dryly.

“If I go out.”

“You’ll go out. You can’t stand being cooped up inside all day.”

“I can with the proper motivation.”

“I’m not sure if bound to the bed counts.”

Carver reached up to grip the headboard with both hands, arching against the bed. “All depends on whether you stick around to watch.”

David settled his pants around his hips and buttoned up. “*I*,” he emphasized the word, “am going to work. I’ll tie you down if you want, but you’ll be here by yourself.”

“Screw that.” He rolled over, stuffing one of the pillows closer under his head. “I’m going back to sleep.”

He heard David take his blazer out of the closet and shrug it on, then felt a hand caress his ass and up along his back. “I’ll see you tonight,” David said softly before kissing his temple.

Half-asleep already, Carver smiled.

CHAPTER 3

The neighborhood street was quiet, all but deserted in the early afternoon lull before school let out, parents got home from work and the daily hubbub of domestic life returned to the home front.

It made it difficult for Carver to go unnoticed.

He sat behind the wheel of his Mustang, ignoring the crack in the windshield that pointed straight at the house he was watching. He'd have to get it fixed come inspection time, as well as the smashed out headlight, both courtesy of an angry lover he had identified in a divorce investigation. Going the private investigator route had been anything but glamorous. The pay wasn't bad, if he could keep enough jobs balanced, and he didn't have much overhead, working out of his apartment, using the internet for communication and meeting clients in safe, public places.

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However, most of the jobs were messy, like the divorce case. Spying on people at their worst so someone else could get what they wanted. There were times he wished he were back on the force, with actual bad guys to track down.

Then he'd come to his senses. He was much better off as his own boss.

He caught himself fingering David's tie again. With a snort, he shook his head. David had definitely hooked him hard, making it next to impossible for Carver to claim he *was* his own boss. The man had ways to keep him in line that always astonished Carver, ways that were more like temptations than commands. Carver never would have considered himself a sub, but his relationship with David was like nothing he could have ever imagined. Here he was in jeans and a casual dress shirt, wearing a necktie of all things. Granted he had it loose, the knot hanging down to his third button, but it was there nonetheless. That it would both please and aggravate David gave Carver no end of satisfaction. He might be David's sub, but he wasn't a kitten. If David wanted to stay on top, he'd have to work for it.

His reverie was broken when the side gate at the house he was watching opened and a lanky kid in low slung, beat-up jeans and a hacked off T-shirt ambled out, checking out the street before heading up the sidewalk. Slipping his sunglasses on, Carver got out of the car.

Keeping half a block between them, he followed Billy Ford from decadent suburbia into one of the less savory areas of the city. He knew long before Billy turned down the alley that he had been spotted. Which was fine by him. Saved having to properly introduce himself.

When the kid jumped him, Carver felt like Christmas had come

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early. He'd been dying for a scuffle. Despite his small size, Billy put up one hell of a fight.

"You've made my day, kid," he said after he'd pinned the youth to the ground. It had taken longer to subdue Billy than Carver had counted on. Maybe David was right that he should look into training. *Get into shape and*— Carver cut the thought off with a derisive snort. He'd barely eked by the departmental physicals. The closest thing he'd done to exercise in years was when he'd still been on the force and David had instituted weekly boxing sessions. Those had other perks at least. Eventually. Now that he wasn't beholden to regulation, he sure as hell wasn't going to pick up better habits when he didn't have to.

Even beaten, the young man still struggled, jarring Carver out of his thoughts. "What the fuck is your problem, man?"

"Seeing as you jumped me, I'd say you're the one with the problem, Billy."

"Fuck you."

"Careful what you offer. It's a good thing you're not my type."

Billy settled for glaring.

"Good boy." Carver shifted his weight enough to make breathing difficult for Billy. "Now, are you going to tell me where Abigail Crenshaw is, or do I get to have some fun?"

"Already told the cops. Don't know where Abby's gone to."

"Her folks think differently."

"Not my problem."

"Wrong answer." He leaned heavier with his knee until he thought he heard something crack. "Now, where's Abby?"

"Christ, man!" the kid wailed. "You're fuckin' crazy! I'm calling the cops!"

"No, you aren't." Carver twisted a little for emphasis. "Abby

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disappeared three weeks ago. You vanished a week later, after the cops hauled you in. You've been going to a lot of trouble to stay out of sight, especially from the cops, so I'm thinking you're not all that interested in getting their attention now. Which means you're going to tell me why, or I'm going to tell them all about your cousin's girlfriend's brother's house and who's been staying there the last few days." He leaned in harder.

"Jesus, man, stop! I'll tell you. Just stop hurting me!"

Carver let up a little to give the kid a chance to breathe without getting away. "All right, talk."

Billy coughed, going white. "Fuck, I think you broke something."

"I'm going to break a whole lot of somethings if you don't stop wasting my time."

"Give me a second, would you?" After a few shaky breaths, Billy continued. "I swear on my ma's life, I haven't seen Abby since that night at the club."

"Club? You never mentioned a club before."

"I—I couldn't."

"Why not?" Carver leaned in enough to make Billy cry out.

"Because! I didn't want her folks knowing!"

"What kind of club is this?"

A brilliant blush suffused Billy's skin. "It was all her idea, man. I swear it. I only went so I could keep an eye on her."

"You're a regular knight in shining armor."

"Fuck you."

Shifting his weight again, he delighted in the terror that widened Billy's eyes. Carver wasn't a large man by any means, but he knew all the right angles that more than made up for what he lacked in mass. "What's the club, Billy?"

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“Venus on the River. Over on—”

“I know where it is.” *A sex club*. And not just any sex club. Venus on the River was one of the preeminent establishments around, more noteworthy than notorious. Still, it wasn’t anyplace thrill-seeking nineteen-year-olds should be anywhere near. Hell, even at his most ballsy, Carver steered well away from the place. It wasn’t his scene. At least not before David. Now, maybe... “So what, you decided you couldn’t cut it and left her there that night?”

“Shit, no! I wouldn’t have left her alone there if you paid me. We always went together and left together. That was the one thing I insisted on.”

“Meaning you brought her home that night.”

“It’s the truth. I didn’t lie to the cops, only just didn’t tell them where we’d been. Last time I saw her, she was walking up to her folks’ front door. Really!”

“So then what happened?”

“Hell if I know. I tried to call her the next day and got a message her number was out of service. She didn’t show up for class, so I called her mom. Mrs. Crenshaw said she hadn’t come home that night and was about to call me to find out where she was. Things went crazy from there. Next thing I knew, I’m in the police station getting questioned by a couple of starched shirts who are threatening to lock me away. So as soon as I got out, I ran. I’m not going to jail for something I didn’t do.”

Considering the neighborhood Billy’s apartment was in, Carver was willing to bet one of the “starched shirts” was David. *Great*. They had talked about the possibility, but here it was for real—Conflict of Interest 101. “What about the club?”

“Oh, man, don’t ask me that. They’re real strict—”

“Who did she see there? Anyone? Or you two just get your

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kicks off fucking in public?”

“No, it wasn’t that.” Billy looked uncomfortable now, but not because of Carver. “That just wasn’t my thing. Abby wanted to go, though, and she’d have gone alone if I hadn’t taken her. She was...real popular. Lots of people there liked her. Even the owner invited her ‘backstage,’ she called it.”

“She tell you what happened back there?”

Billy shook his head. “But she was different after that, you know? She couldn’t get enough of the place. I think...she went without me a few times. When we did go together, she disappeared pretty quickly. I’d just hang out at the bar until she’d turn up and I’d take her home.”

“What’s the bartender’s name?”

“What?”

“You spent all those nights at the bar, so what’s the bartender’s name?”

“Um.” Billy was thinking fast, obviously afraid Carver was going to pick up where he left off. “Toni! There were two girls, older women, working the bar. The blonde never had time for me, but the other one would slip me food and sodas while I waited. That was Toni.”

Toni had a soft spot; that could be useful.

“Is there anything else you’ve left out? Anyone Abby might have talked about?”

“No, nothing. She kept true to the Vegas policy. And I didn’t really want to know.”

Vegas policy? Oh, right. What happened there stayed there. Made sense.

Carver stood up, feeling an odd mixture of elation and disgust. Billy had given him more than he’d hoped for. Unfortunately, it

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didn't bode well for Abby turning up any time soon. Not to mention he was going to have to figure out what the hell he was going to tell David.

Shit.

CHAPTER 4

David arrived at the station in a good mood, although anyone would have been hard pressed to tell. He'd learned a long time ago how to hide his emotions, good ones as well as bad. Give away too much and get it used against you. A few people could read him despite that. Robin had always seen right through him. Carver, for all his bluntness and bluster, was starting to be able to as well.

It still startled David to find he was okay with that.

If he were a different sort of man, he would be whistling as he walked through the precinct house. Instead, he greeted everyone with a nod and the faintest smile, pausing at Detective Brigid Scott's desk. Call her Brigid and she'd lay you out flat, as David knew from experience. Although there had been other contributing factors to the anger in their sparring session. As Carver's partner at

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the time, she had taken Carver's leaving the force under the guise of sexual harassment, and David's subsequent lack of defense, as a betrayal of both her and Carver.

That Carver was relieved to be out and not willing to let David risk the career he did care about hadn't gotten through to Scotty, her preferred name, until after she'd landed several well-aimed hits.

She presently sat with her feet up on the blotter, gnawing at the end of her pen as she struggled with the morning crossword.

"Problem, Detective Scott?"

"Nothing you didn't beat already, I'm sure," she grumbled, poking at the newspaper in irritation.

"Don't mind her, Lieutenant," Scotty's latest partner pitched in from across the desk. "She had a late night last night and the coffee hasn't kicked in yet."

Miranda Doughty had come on the force a few months ago, fresh out of the academy, but already she was shaping up to be a fine officer. She looked as young as she was, with long, blonde hair and a curvy figure that seemed more suited to the runway than the police force, which worked in her favor every single time. After the first week of wolf whistles and subtle crude remarks, she had taken on three of the guys who had dared to make comments, putting them all on the mat in less than a minute. The respect started right then and there, ending any further trouble. The only downside to her was that she was almost too competent, letting Scotty become a bit more lax than when she had to be the good partner.

"I see." David hid his amusement.

Scotty glared at him.

"Carry on, detectives," he said with an innocence he knew they

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would read as teasing. “Wouldn’t want to keep you from your”—he glanced at the newspaper—“difficult duties.”

Doughty laughed, while Scotty hunched further down in her chair.

“Lieutenant Logan,” Commander Montgomery interrupted. “Can I see you in my office?”

He nodded to Montgomery, and said to Scotty, “Four across is ‘albatross.’”

“Oh, jeez, it would be that obvious. Thanks, Lieutenant.”

Not cracking a smile, David headed for Montgomery’s office. “You needed to see me, sir?”

“Close the door and have a seat, Logan.” His tone was unreadable.

Closed door didn’t bode well, but David did as he’d asked. When David was seated, Montgomery pushed a folder across the desk.

David read the tag before opening the file. “I thought we’d relegated the missing Crenshaw girl to the backburner.” Flipping through the most recent surveillance photos of the girl’s boyfriend, he froze at the last one. Carver’s unmistakable figure was clearly visible trailing the boy. *Shit*. Though David did his damndest to hide his response, Montgomery noticed. Montgomery was another one of those people who managed to read him. David never had figured out why.

“My thoughts exactly.” Montgomery pulled the picture out of David’s hand and laid it on the desk with a tap of the finger. “I heard Eliot had gotten a license for private work. You know anything about this?”

“No, sir.” That much was the truth. Carver didn’t talk about his cases, and David didn’t ask, respecting the confidentiality of

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Carver's clients. It wasn't a surprise to have their work cross paths, but somehow David had expected a little warning. "He's not required to report in his case load."

That was a half-truth. He wasn't required to offer it, but David knew the commander was looking for more personal information. There were rumors still circulating about his relationship with Carver, although only Scotty knew the full truth of it. He was certain Montgomery had surmised most of it, though he'd kept his own counsel. The commander respected the personal lives of his officers, so long as it didn't interfere with their work.

Montgomery frowned. "Well, he's blundered into the middle of it now. If he scares the kid off, we'll never get a lead on the girl. See if you can't wave him off, will you?"

He stood a better chance of moving a mountain. "I'll try, sir."

Montgomery seemed to weigh the comment for a moment, then nodded. "But no guarantees? You stand a better chance than most. I think you're the only superior he even listened to."

"Eliot doesn't have any superior officer now."

The right corner of Montgomery's mouth twitched in what could be interpreted as a smirk. "You will still talk to him. Is that understood?"

"It is."

"Good."

He left the commander's office, distracted. He knew better than to expect it, but he had hoped Carver would warn him in an event such as this.

God, it was going to be a long day.

* * *

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David lingered at the precinct later than he needed to that evening. He wasn't looking forward to the confrontation with Carver. And it would be a confrontation; he held no illusions to the contrary. The day had started out so well... That more than anything should have warned him something bad was bound to happen. He'd become too complacent with Carver, too—the thought alone made him cringe—happy.

He could only delay the inevitable for so long. His own efficiency worked against him.

"You trained me too well, Robin," he muttered, shutting off the lights and heading out. The rest of the day shift had long since cleared out.

Even traffic worked against him. Not a single delay. It really wasn't fair.

He parked his Beamer behind Carver's Mustang. For all of the man's claims of appreciation for fine cars, especially fast ones, the fact that he settled for a lower level domestic make baffled David. If it had been a classic model, David could have understood.

The house was quiet when he entered. And clean. In addition to the dishes, Carver had vacuumed as well. If Carver was trying to get into his good graces, this conversation wasn't going to go well.

Carver jumped up from his seat on the edge of the couch when David came in, tense. Before David could say anything, Carver said, "I need to tell you something."

His reaction, the blunt, concerned honesty in his voice eased some of David's tension. Rather than show it, he crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm listening."

"I've been working on a case. A girl went missing; her parents suspected the boyfriend. I've been tracking him down for the last week and I found him today. Turns out he already talked to the

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cops—to you. I didn't know it was your case, or I would have told you sooner.”

“I see.”

Carver shifted uncomfortably. “There's more.”

David waited. One of Robin's most useful lessons. The less you said, the more the other person was likely to say. Silence had become David's best tool.

His silence earned a sigh from Carver. “Christ, I hate it when you do this. I can never tell if you're pissed at me or not.”

“You said there was more,” David prompted, words even, chosen with great care.

Carver nodded. “It's a potential lead. However, I want the chance to check it out, before your guys go blundering in.”

“If you have information that could help us locate a missing person, you are obligated—”

“Save it, would you? I know what my obligations are. I was a cop a lot longer than you were, in case you forgot.” The barest hint of bitterness crept into his voice. Carver had seemed relieved more than anything to be out, but even so. “Even if I was a crap one at that.”

“Carver—”

“Let me finish, all right?”

David nodded.

“I want to make certain the boyfriend wasn't lying, see if maybe I can pick up anything else. Besides”—he smirked—“I've always been good at undercover work, more so now that I don't have the cop vibe.”

“I could bring you in for withholding evidence.”

“You could, but you won't.” Now that he'd “confessed,” Carver seemed to relax. “The thing is, I'm the best shot you have

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for finding this girl.”

“In all modesty.”

“I’m serious, David.” Carver had that lean he got in his body when he was trying to convince someone of something rather than bludgeoning his way through. David didn’t see it often, but it was a sure sign of Carver’s sincerity. “They’ve been going to a fuck club over in Strip District. From the sounds of it, she got in pretty deep there.”

“She’s only nineteen.”

Carver rolled his eyes. “God forbid she *lie* about her age. You are such an innocent some days.”

David didn’t bother to correct him on that little illusion. “So we go in and talk to people.”

“No, *we* don’t.” Carver was adamant. David hated to admit it, but it was turning him on. “That place is teetering on the edge of legality as it is. They get a whiff of cops, they’ll shut down so fast you won’t even see their dust. I can go in, look around, talk to people and get a sense for things. Then I’ll tell you, you can tell Montgomery, and Pittsburgh’s finest can take it from there.”

It was a reasonable solution, and one David couldn’t find any argument with. “You took off the tie.”

That threw Carver. “What?”

“You took off the tie,” David repeated, indicating where it lay on the coffee table. “I told you to wear it today.”

“I did,” Carver insisted. “All fucking day. The kid nearly choked me with it while we were ‘talking.’ I didn’t think it was appropriate to be begging for sex during this particular conversation.”

“Put it on.”

Carver cocked his head to one side. “Are you admitting I’m

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right?”

“I’m not admitting anything. Put on the tie.”

The tone of the conversation had changed, and David could feel familiar attraction crackling around them.

“If I don’t?”

David shrugged.

Carver seemed to consider his options, then put the tie back on. “Why I put up with you, I don’t know.”

Reaching out, David grabbed hold of the tie and dragged Carver across the distance between them. “Because I’m the only one who can give you exactly what you need.”

“Mm, is that so?” Carver pressed close, but didn’t make any further moves. This was all David’s show.

David would have liked nothing more than to fuck Carver in the middle of the living room, forget everything else for the next few hours except for how to make Carver groan and beg just so. Unfortunately, his stomach gave a protesting growl, reminding him that he hadn’t had anything since the bagel on the way in to work that morning.

Carver chuckled. “See what happens when you work late?”

In retaliation, David snugged up the tie just shy of being uncomfortable. “You’re paying.” He led Carver to the door, enjoying the control the tie allotted him. Perhaps it was time to introduce Carver to something new. A brown leather collar to match his eyes, maybe a six-foot lead to start out with...

“When you smile like that, it doesn’t bode well for me.”

“Yet you always end up enjoying it.”

“Yeah, well...”

“Come on.” David pulled on the tie. “The sooner we eat, the sooner I can fuck you.”

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“You’ll get no complaints from me.”

CHAPTER 5

It startled David how quickly he'd adjusted to his new life. The past six weeks had changed him. He had a confidence he had never felt before, a self-respect he couldn't have imagined. Subbing to Robin was nothing like he'd expected. He had anticipated humiliation and cruelty, attending to Robin's pleasures while never having his own addressed.

He was learning not to have expectations where Robin was concerned.

Robin had given him a day to pack up his dorm room after they sealed their arrangement. David didn't bother to explain anything to his roommates as he packed, ignoring their cold stares. He didn't leave a forwarding address or phone number with any of them. There wasn't anyone he wanted contacting him anyway.

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Robin lived in the Friendship neighborhood of the city, in a lovingly restored old Victorian. David felt out of place the moment he stepped out of the cab with his duffel and boxes of schoolbooks, dressed in torn jeans, worn T-shirt and a hoodie. Robin didn't seem to notice. "You'll be in the room next to mine," he insisted. "Your books go in the study. You can shower once you've unpacked."

"I don't need a shower. I'm fine."

Robin studied him coolly. "My dear David, you have many things to learn, and one of them is hygiene. You will shower once you've unpacked."

When he got out of the shower, his clothes were gone. All of them.

Towel cinched around his waist, David sought out Robin. "You can't take away all of my clothes."

Eyeing him hungrily, Robin smirked. "I can and did. I said I would look out for you, did I not?"

"Yes, but—"

"Are you having second thoughts, David?" Calm and unreadable. He couldn't tell if Robin was upset, amused or indifferent.

"No. It's—"

"Delightful as the thought of you walking around naked at all hours is, ours is not a society that condones lack of attire. We will go shopping tomorrow. Until that time"—he tugged the towel away from David's waist—"you have no need for clothing."

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all," David said.

Robin's hand was soothing where it settled against his neck, thumb stroking the line of his jaw. "This is a very good idea, David. You just have to trust me."

David spent most of that first week naked. True to his word,

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Robin took him shopping for a wardrobe much more suited to a business professional than a college student.

“The outward appearance reflects the inner man,” Robin insisted, but allowed David a couple of pairs of jeans for school.

When he was home, however, Robin demanded he go naked. It was disconcerting at first, especially when Robin didn’t take undue advantage of the situation. By the third day, however, it was automatic, and David didn’t think anything of studying or doing housework with his cock hanging out. He almost took out the trash that way by the end of the week. Only Robin’s constant attention saved him.

“I’m not ready to share you with the neighbors yet, boy.” He laughed, taking the garbage bags from David. “Get your jeans on first.”

David became much more aware of his own body that week. It had always seemed like something dirty to him, something to be ashamed of, to keep hidden. The constant nudity and upgraded wardrobe began to make him see it in a different light. The fact that Robin couldn’t get enough of him helped, too.

Which was not to say it was an easy life. Robin was a stern master, demanding in every aspect of David’s life. Robin told him when to sleep and what to eat, how to dress and where to go. He allowed David to continue in his criminal justice program, although he made no secret he thought it was below David’s abilities. He insisted on perfect grades, however, and set David to studying several hours every night before allowing him any other activities. No assignment could linger, and each one was criticized and analyzed until it was near perfection. David would have complained, except the impact on his grade point was amazing. He began to think maybe Robin was right about that, too.

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The Friday following his final exams for the term, Robin didn't even greet him with a hello when he walked in the door.

"Drop your things in your room, shower, then draw yourself a bath. Yes, shower and bath," he emphasized before David could question. "Use two capfuls of the oil on the ledge." Robin turned the page of his magazine and glanced up. "Were my instructions unclear?"

David shook his head and headed for his room.

He showered quickly, then took his time in the bath, the water as hot as he could tolerate. Robin hadn't emphasized how long he could have, so David lingered. A hot bath was an indulgence David never would have considered before Robin. It was restful to relax in the hot water, the scent of patchouli and spice drifting around him and seeping into his skin. His hair was barely damp when he got out, even more so now thanks to the neat haircut Robin insisted on. He didn't bother wrapping up in a towel as he went to dress.

Clothes were neatly laid out for him: black jeans ironed to a sharp crease, dark turquoise dress shirt and a black suit coat, dress socks and high polish black ankle boots. No underwear. So wherever they were going, Robin had "plans."

David grinned and dressed in a rush.

Robin smiled appraisingly when David returned to the living room. "How do you feel?"

"Relaxed," he admitted.

"You look like a man who could get anything he wanted."

He couldn't ask for a better compliment, yet Robin's words made his confidence waver.

"The image is worthless if you don't believe it yourself. And you should believe it. You will believe it, is that understood?"

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David understood; he just didn't think it was possible. He still nodded.

"All in good time." Robin retrieved a small box from the nearby end table. "You will wear this until I tell you it is time to remove it. That may be at the end of this evening. Or possibly next week. Or next year. It could be never."

The shape of the box gave no indication of what lay inside. "What is it?"

"That you will find out when you open the box. However, opening the box gives your consent," Robin warned. "If you don't think you can agree to the terms, tell me now."

It couldn't be that bad if it was something he could wear for an indeterminate time. David opened the box.

It took a moment to register the contents. It was a strip of leather, eighteen inches long and no wider than David's thumb, tooled in ornate, almost nouveau style, intricately chased in silver. When he picked it up, he found the leather to be pliable and as soft as satin, draping over the back of his hand more like thick cloth than leather. "Is this a collar?"

"It's not *a* collar, David. It's *your* collar." Robin took it from him and carefully wrapped it around David's throat, adjusting it to just below his Adam's apple before tightening the clasp, then straightening his shirt collar to cover it. "I knew it would look perfect on you. More like jewelry than bondage wear, and the silver brings out the gray in your eyes."

"Thank you," David said sincerely. It was an odd sort of gift, but it still touched him.

"You are never to take this off, David," Robin instructed. "Not without my permission. Anyone who sees this will know you're under my protection, and they'll have to answer to me if they do

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anything to you I don't condone."

"Is that a warning?"

"No, my darling boy, it's a promise. Now come on. We don't want to be late. There are some people who are dying to meet you."

* * *

"A sex club." David tried very hard to come off as casual and not reveal how nervous he was. He'd heard stories about the Velvet Thrust from a few of the guys he'd encountered while cruising the bar scene. It was the place where almost anything went. Some of the guys who had been couldn't talk about it without their eyes going wide. David hadn't been able to tell if it was in wonder or horror. He was starting to think the latter, though. "Oh, God..."

Robin settled his hand comfortably on David's upper thigh. "Have I steered you wrong yet?"

David shook his head. "No, it's just—"

"Do you really think warning you would have helped your nerves any? In many instances, anticipation heightens an experience. Here...well, sometimes jumping in the deep end is for the best."

"I trust you," David said, forcing down the wave of nausea. He'd be fine. He had to be.

Robin caught his jaw and forced David to look him square in the face. "Who you project is who you become," he said sternly. "I didn't cage a rabbit, boy. Remember that." He hooked his finger under the leather strap around David's neck. "Remember this. I'm the one you answer to. Without my say-so, the rest of them can go

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fuck themselves.”

“Without your say-so,” David repeated.

“Make no mistake, boy, you won’t be a wallflower tonight.” Robin leaned closer, chasing his lips along David’s ear. “They know all about you, David Logan. How I found you, what we did, how I’ve been training you. They’re dying to try you out for themselves, and you are going to make me look good in there, do you understand? I would hate to have to punish you later.”

There was that rush of mortification and arousal David had become so accustomed to. Robin had already mastered playing David’s eager young body like a fine instrument. With everything Robin had given him in the last few weeks, what was a few hours doing God-knew-what with God-knew-who?

He could do this. He could make Robin proud.

“I’ll be fine,” David said, sounding and feeling surer. “As long as you’re there, I can do anything.”

To his surprise, Robin kissed him, a slow, lingering play of mouths that had the cab driver staring and David suddenly absolutely calm.

“Yours.” It was a comforting thought. “Thank you.”

“Just do me proud.” Robin pulled away and slipped out the car.

David swallowed. *Right*. He could do this.

CHAPTER 6

Venus on the River was down in the Strip District, hidden demurely amongst the shops, nightclubs and restaurants. It camouflaged itself well, nearly indistinguishable from the businesses surrounding it, except for the locked door with the old-fashioned speakeasy grille. Anyone walking by in the day would presume it was a nightclub and anyone passing at night would take it for a shop closed for the evening. Carver watched the place for a bit, saw couples and a few singles come up to the door, ring, speak to someone through the grille, then get admitted. There was one back door on the narrow alley running through the middle of the block, but that opened onto an active kitchen usually blocked by a staffer or waiter grabbing a quick smoke before getting back to work. So the place wasn't entirely under the radar if they were

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doing food service. He could fake an inspection if he needed to, or sneak in with the liquor delivery.

But he was going to try the front door first.

He settled the blazer more comfortably on his shoulders and crossed the street to ring the bell.

It startled him when an attractive young woman answered. "Good evening," she said in a smooth, casual tone. "Welcome to Venus on the River. How may I help you?"

"Hi." He tried to sound like a naughty boy sneaking out of school. "I'm new. I applied online yesterday? I was told to come by tonight to speak with Alexandra."

The girl checked her notes. "Are you Mr. Eliot?"

"Yeah, that's me."

The lock snapped and she opened the door with a smile. "Please come in. Alexandra is expecting you."

The attendant led him down a narrow hallway off the main foyer. *Smart move. Keep the potential clients away from the established until they passed muster.* Good business practice. Unfortunately, it made Carver's job a hell of a lot harder.

When they reached a door, the woman motioned him ahead. "Make yourself comfortable, Mr. Eliot. Alexandra will join you shortly."

Carver took in the room while he had the chance. It was a tasteful sitting room, done up in leather and masculine reds, nothing tawdry or overt, comfortable and sensual without giving nosey parkers too much info until they'd been checked out. Carver was going to have to do his best to sell himself if he wanted to get to the next step.

"Thank you for waiting, Mr. Eliot. I hope I haven't kept you long?" Alexandra's voice was pleasant, her appearance more so.

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Even Carver could appreciate that. Her dark hair was swept up in a simple, professional twist. Ready for a day at the office, if said office allowed mid-thigh length kimonos as part of the dress code. Though it was far from a casual look.

“No, not at all.” He forced the reply. Christ, he was already out of his element. Not to mention outclassed. While his suit wasn’t shabby by any means, it was far from top of the line. He hated feeling like he was beneath people.

“Please have a seat.” Alexandra motioned to a plush sofa, while she made herself comfortable in a high-backed armchair.

He suspected that was her job, to make people feel outclassed. What better appeal for the club than to make the clientele feel like they were rising above themselves for a few hours? He settled on the couch where she indicated and put a damper on his defensiveness.

“So what brings you to Venus, Mr. Eliot?”

“I’m a busy man.” He began to reel out the cover story he had worked all of fifteen minutes on. “And I’m not really interested in a relationship right now. I have other...obligations. But sometimes you don’t want an obligation, you know? Sometimes you just want to have a good time.”

“This isn’t a brothel, Mr. Eliot.”

“No, I know that. That’s why I’m here. Real people. Not some plastic sex toy who’s only in it for the money.”

“I can assure you no one here is in it for the money.”

Somehow, he doubted Alexandra was in it solely for the pleasure her customers obtained, if the membership fee, not to mention application fee, was anything to go on. The membership only got you in the door. All extras were extra.

Carver continued, “My interests also extend beyond sex alone.

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I've always bordered on the adventuresome, you could say."

"What makes you think Venus is the place for you?"

"The reputation, but more importantly the discretion."

"I see." She seemed to be tallying up information in her head, cold and clinical, without losing her allure. "On your application, you indicated you prefer same-sex encounters?"

"Yes. That was another point in favor of Venus. You folks are a little more open minded than some of the other clubs."

"Pleasure is pleasure." Her mouth curved in a small, knowing smile. "We understand some of the ladies enjoy watching the gentlemen play together, even if some of their partners don't. Turnabout is fair play, after all."

"I'm all for gender parity."

"How...flexible are you? I ask because you might be invited to participate in a mixed couple pair, and we want to avoid any unpleasantness from surprises."

"I'm comfortable with that, as long as my main focus would be on the male partner."

"Excellent." She rose to her feet, and Carver followed. "Let me give you the tour."

She led him out the heavy oak door behind her. "As you might suppose, due to our commitment to...discretion, there are certain limits we must impose on all our clients. You're welcome to join me here in the main room to start."

The main room was a large, open space paneled in dark wood and softly lit by sconces all around. An antique bar took up one end of the room, staffed by two women and fairly busy. At the other end was an ornate marble fireplace, probably rescued from one of the old Victorian houses in town that were destroyed in the name of gentrification. Around the circumference of the room,

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Carver saw curtained alcoves, some draped shut, others open to reveal fainting couches in true Victorian fashion, although Carver suspected Victoria would have a fit if she knew what they were being used for now. Everywhere was old leather, thick rugs, brocade curtains and brass fittings. The place had a sense of opulence that was seductive in and of itself.

And there were a lot of naked people.

Not everyone was naked, of course. Of the seventy-five or so people in the large room, maybe a third of them were unclothed. A few, mostly at the bar, were dressed for a night out, as well as the service staff, all of whom, male and female, wore black slacks, soft ballet type shoes and black T-shirts. The rest of the clients were in various states of undress, in fancy lingerie or tasteful robes, silk and satin making a major showing. Small knots of people were indulging in the pleasures of the flesh, everything along the spectrum from gentle caressing during conversation to full-out fucking.

“We have a strict fluids policy here,” Alexandra continued. “The staff can provide for all your needs for condoms and lubricant, as well as a generous selection of paraphernalia, all maintained with the strictest attention to hygiene. Also, we do not tolerate blood play of any kind.”

Shit. This was a hell of a place. Carver had imagined a squalid hole in the wall where desperate people came to do desperate things to each other. This was...tasteful. It was the kind of place you could bring the right sort of date and have a good time, even if you never got to the down and dirty.

“As you can see, it’s a mixed couples environment. We do have occasional men-only events, which I’m sure you would be interested in, as well as similar evenings for the ladies. If you’re

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ever in the mood for something in particular, you can speak with me or one of the other hosts who may be able to direct you to a partner or partners of your taste.”

All in all it was an impressive set-up. Poor Abby Crenshaw could have ended up somewhere a whole lot worse. That didn’t necessarily mean she was safe. A place like this meant money, and with enough money, anything was possible.

“Do you have any other questions, Mr. Eliot?”

“No, not right now. Just trying to take it all in.” Which wasn’t far from the truth. “The site didn’t say, but how long until I find out whether I’m approved?”

Alexandra smiled. It was more welcoming than any of her previous ones. “You wouldn’t be here if you weren’t approved.”

“Really?” It made sense, but it still surprised him. This had gone a hell of a lot smoother than he’d expected. “Well, thank you.”

“Make no mention of it. We are always on the lookout for men of your preference. Despite our reputation, men who prefer men tend to be at a premium here, which does have its advantages.”

“I’m sure it does.”

“Now, if you care to have a drink at the bar, compliments of the house, I’ll finalize your paperwork.”

“Again, thank you.”

She held out her hand and he shook it. “Welcome to Venus on the River, Mr. Eliot.”

CHAPTER 7

David was not the jealous type.

He reminded himself of that when Carver dragged himself in at two in the morning for the third time in a week, smelling of lubricant and someone else's aftershave, to collapse on the bed, too wiped out for even a quick kiss.

It was part of the job.

He didn't let his irritation show, showering and dressing silently for work while Carver slept on innocently. It was tempting to wake him up, punish him, do something to regain his attention.

Instead, David went to work.

Within an hour, he could hear the murmurs around the station.

"Look out. Ramrod's on the rampage."

People kept their heads down and stayed out of his way when

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he came out of his office, which was fine with him. It would be hard to keep his reputation as an emotionless machine if he bit someone's head off. That wasn't his style. Instead he got colder, more cutting, each look critical, each word a knife. Even the commander stayed out of his way.

Scotty was braver than most. "Hey, Lieutenant, you got a minute?" she asked from his doorway.

"No, I don't, Detective Scott." It was a lie. He'd been so desperate for work that he'd started on month-end reports a whole two weeks in advance. Things would be slow to spite him.

He heard the door click closed, glanced up and was surprised to find Scotty still there. "Detective—"

"I know for a fact you're just doing busy work. That's all any of us are doing today." She plopped in the chair across for him. "So, what's going on?"

"It's not appropriate for us to be discuss—"

"This is about that case Carver's working on, isn't it?"

David controlled his surprise. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"He and I do still go out for a beer occasionally, *Lieutenant*." Her emphasis made it seem like she was calling him something else. "He wasn't sure he could get into that club on his own. Asked me if I'd back him up."

"Why didn't he ask—" David stopped himself before he could finish the question.

Scotty slouched back in the chair with a smirk. "Same problem. Wasn't sure how open they'd be to a gay couple. Sometimes it's good to have a lady friend around."

"Turns out he didn't need your services after all." David kept scratching meaningless notes to himself, not looking at Scotty.

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“I know. That’s what worries me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I haven’t seen him since he started going to that place. I know we’re not best friends or anything, but it’s not like him not to at least call once. Going to a place like that can’t be easy.”

No, it wasn’t. Even if you had someone looking out for you, things could still get overwhelming. And not in a bad way. Or so it seemed at the time. The decadence, the liberation...it could be extremely addictive. On a number of occasions Robin had to— He stopped that train of thought cold. It didn’t matter. Robin was long gone, and David was on his own. He’d started to think that maybe with Carver...

Suddenly, he smiled.

“You know, Lieutenant, I think I prefer you impassive,” she said uneasily.

That only made him smile more.

“I’m going to get back to my crossword. Or hell, there’s a case file or two I’m sure I can review, right?” She stood up hastily and headed for the door.

“Right,” he agreed. “And, Detective?”

“Lieutenant?”

“I’m certain Carver will be calling you soon.” It was as close as he could come to thanking her.

“Okay, I’ll...um...keep my phone on.”

Carver just needed a reminder of what was important. That was all.

* * *

David arrived home that evening and heard the shower running.

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Perfect.

Shedding his clothes, David set his purchase on the bed stand and headed into the master bathroom. Between the water and Carver's off-key singing, he didn't have to be too quiet when he walked up to the shower.

He tugged the curtain aside, earning an almost manly shriek from Carver.

"Jesus fucking Christ, you trying to give me a heart attack?"

David grinned as he joined Carver, dragging the curtain closed. "With your diet, I don't need to try."

"Like you're the paragon of healthy eating." Carver pulled him close.

"At least I'm not keeping Primanti Brothers in business."

"Fries on a sandwich. It's ingenious." He slid his hand seductively down David's back. "What are you doing home already? Not that I'm complaining."

"I thought I should check in on you." He took down the bottle of his own body wash and squirted a dollop into his hand, working it up to a lather before running it over Carver's chest. "We haven't had much time together since you took on this case."

"I know. I'm sorry." Carver's eyes closed, his forehead coming to rest against David's. "That feels good," he added, "but I already washed."

"Can't be too clean." David's hands roamed everywhere, leaving no inch of skin untouched, using the soap to rub friction-free against Carver's increasingly aware body. "Did you get everywhere?" He worked slippery fingers between Carver's ass cheeks.

He groaned, his head lolling back. "Dunno. Maybe you'd better check."

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David brought one soapy hand around to languidly pump Carver's cock. "What about here?"

"Shit, David." Carver dug into David's shoulders, pulling him closer. "God, that feels good."

"You sure? I'd have thought with all the action you've been getting, you wouldn't need any attention from me."

There was an unmistakable tension running through Carver's body now, but his voice still came out casual, almost flippant. "It's not like that and you know it."

David tightened his grip, making Carver groan. "No, I don't."

"For Christ's sake, David, it's undercover work. You know how that goes."

"So you're telling me you haven't been enjoying it?"

Carver grimaced, stepping back under the spray. "Sounds like you've already made up your mind about it."

Grabbing Carver's arm, David hauled him out of the spray and pressed him against the wall. "That wasn't an answer. When I ask you a question, I expect an answer. I also expect that answer to be the truth."

Carver blinked at him, brown eyes searching. Finally, he shrugged. "Yes, I've been enjoying it. You happy?"

"Happy? No." He pressed into Carver, their soapy bodies sliding against each other. "Satisfied? For now."

"David." Carver brushed his cheek against David's, water running from his shaggy hair to tease at their lips. "I'm sorry. But you know I have to do this."

"I know." David allowed himself the comfort of Carver's arms before turning to whisper against his ear, "You do this because I allow you to do it. Remember that. You have my permission, Carver, but I can take it away."

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“That girl—”

He shoved Carver harder against the tiles. “I can take it away, Carver.”

Carver looked ready to fight him. When his eyes dropped, David felt redeemed.

“I know you can.”

“It’s still easy for you to forget that, isn’t it?”

“I...” Carver stopped, then studied David. “What’s this really about?” There was something vulnerable about him at that moment. “We’ve never really discussed our...well, whatever this is. It’s sort of just happened. Maybe we—”

David cut him off with a quick, hard kiss. “You talk too much for your own good, Carver.”

Carver surrendered to the kiss, twining himself around David’s body with long legs and lean arms. David almost succumbed to the enchantment of hot water and slick skin before remembering his goal for the evening. Reluctantly, he pulled away. “I think you’re clean enough for now, don’t you?”

Carver protested, trying to tug him back for more, but David body-checked him and kicked off the shower spray. “Shower’s done, Carver. Get a towel.”

With a glare, Carver did as he was told, yanking a towel off the bar in a sulk. “Not for you.” David stopped him as he unfolded it. David stepped out onto the mat and waited.

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

David kept waiting.

Sighing, Carver joined him on the mat and held out the towel. “If you think I’m drying you off, you’ve got another think coming.”

David smirked and took the towel. “If you think I’d let you,

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you've got another think coming." He made quick work of drying himself off while Carver watched. Then he barked, "Turn around."

Carver blinked, gave half a shrug and finally did.

"Good boy." David began toweling Carver off, going much slower and taking far greater care than he had with himself. Mostly.

"Easy on the hair," Carver grumbled. "It's a precious commodity for some of us."

"Your hair is fine." David finished off and tossed the towel aside, then caught a handful of Carver's dark, shaggy hair in his fist and tugged. "You could use a haircut."

"It's fine as it is."

"For you."

"I don't know. You seem to like it." Carver leaned in closer. "Gives you something to hold onto."

"Mmm." Using his grip, David dragged Carver's head back, exposing the length of his neck. "Let's test that, shall we?" Without warning, he ran the flat of his tongue along the length of Carver's jugular, making him hiss. "Into the bedroom. Now."

"You'll get no argument from me." Carver grinned and headed out.

David turned to the medicine cabinet, opened the door and rifled through until he found his cologne. He sprayed on slightly more than normal, but not too much to be overwhelming. Carver needed as many reminders as he could handle.

So did his partners.

Carver had had enough time to think and now stood by the bed looking unsure. "David, about this case—"

"Did I give you permission to speak?"

"No, but—"

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“Then why are you talking?”

“David, I’m serious.”

Brushing past him, David went to the dresser and opened the shallow top drawer. Removing the ball gag, he set it down on the bedside table. “Do I need to use that, Carver?”

Carver shook his head. “No.”

It was like throwing a switch, and even now it still amazed him. That this powerful, arrogant, aggressive man could so easily be brought to heel gave David a rush that was difficult to describe.

“Good. Because we are going to have a conversation, Carver.” Now he pulled out the long spreader bar, rigid steel wrapped in satin-soft leather, and began slapping it against his palm. “But I’m going to ask the questions.”

Carver swallowed hard, eyes riveted on the spreader, a slight flush spreading across his pale skin as he stood there. He loved the bar as much as he hated it. It was David’s favorite tool to use because it guaranteed he would have Carver’s full attention with very little effort on his part.

Crouching down, David affixed the bar to Carver’s ankles first, then instructed, “Down.”

There was only the slightest hesitation on Carver’s part before he complied, sliding his wrists into the remaining restraints. It pleased David to no end that Carver was getting good at reading his moods. Some days it was okay to resist, and on others, it was better to obey. Of course, it all depended on what kind of mood Carver was in as well.

With Carver now bound and vulnerable, David moved behind him, caressing the smooth curve of his ass.

“How many, Carver?”

“What?”

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The question came out wavering and uncertain, and David could tell Carver was thinking David was asking how much to punish him. David slapped the bare skin once to reinforce that thought, knowing the lingering dampness from the shower would make it sting.

“How many other partners?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t—”

David smacked his ass hard.

“Three! There were only three guys, David, I swear.”

Caressing the red mark soothingly, David asked, “And women?”

“Two. But I didn’t...” He swallowed. “I didn’t fuck them. Just fooled around some for their guys.”

“Did you enjoy it?”

David could almost feel Carver thinking. He smacked him again to hurry him along.

“Fuck!” Carver’s complaint held the rough notes of arousal. “I didn’t particularly hate it, all right? It’s still not something I’d seek out.”

“Have you fucked women before?”

“I...well, yeah. A couple times. I was curious.”

“And?”

“And what?” Carver did his damndest to peer up at David, but the effect was more comical than anything else due to his current position.

“Details, Carver.” *Smack.*

“What details? It was fucking ages ago. I couldn’t tell you what either of them looked like, let alone what positions we did it in.” He fell silent for a moment. “Why? Haven’t you ever?”

“I’m not the one answering questions tonight.” David planted

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his food on Carver's hip and shoved, turning him turtle. Carver struggled, hampered by the restraints, until he was able to sit up, knees splayed butterfly style with his hands in between. David swung a leg over to stand astride him, letting his cock slap at Carver's rugged face. "So, two women and three men. Why didn't the last one have a partner?"

Carver glared at him but licked his lips in anticipation. "Because he was gay, obviously."

David grabbed Carver's hair and yanked. "Watch your tone with me, Carver, or you won't get what you want."

"What do I want?" he challenged anyway.

David pulled harder until Carver's back bowed, then leaned down and whispered, "My cock up your ass."

"Maybe I want my cock up your ass for a change, David." Carver grinned wickedly. "Been a while since I've gotten to fuck you."

"No, you definitely want me to fuck you. You want to know how I know that?"

"You're a mind reader?"

"I don't need to read your mind, Carver. I know you. Better than you know yourself." He caught Carver's cock with his other hand, giving it a few meaningful strokes. "Fucking and getting fucked are two very different things for you. You aren't going to let just anyone fuck you, are you?"

"No." The reply was without bluster.

"Which means you haven't been fucked for days."

"Damn it, David." His voice began to take on the ragged edge it got when he capitulated to David's whims.

"You're only satisfied when it's me, Carver, and you know it." He straightened up again, stroking Carver's cheek with his cock. "I

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know every single one of the guys you've been with at that club were a poor substitute for what you want to do to me."

"David, please."

He kept his voice implacable. "Earn it."

It was as though he had given Carver permission. Like a racehorse freed from the gate, Carver lunged forward, mouth already open to welcome David's balls, rolling them around on his tongue the way David had taught him he liked. He was careful and deliberate, starting from the back and working forward until he was licking at the tip of David's cock, making David shiver with lust. He controlled himself and jerked at Carver's head again. "It's not a toy, Carver, and you aren't a kid. Get it right."

Carver narrowed his eyes, but didn't otherwise argue as he proceeded to swallow David's cock all the way to the root. While the technique added little physically, visually it hit all the right buttons. Withdrawing, Carver's cheeks hollowed, sucking David hard enough he practically felt it down to his toes.

"Much better." He groaned as Carver began to suck him in earnest. Tongue with the barest hint of teeth, relentless. Exactly what David wanted right now.

"You missed this, Carver." He used his grip in Carver's hair to set the pace, fucking his lover's eager mouth roughly without choking him. "You missed knowing your place. Having someone shoulder the burden of all those decisions. With me, like this, you don't have to think, don't have to worry about anything. I do all that for you." With a rough yank that caused him as much pain as it did Carver, David yanked him away from his cock. "What do you say, Carver?"

Carver swallowed the mouthful of saliva that had built up, his eyes drifting closed. "Thank you."

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Much better. “You’re welcome.” He loosened his grip and allowed Carver to take up his attentions again.

He almost let Carver pull him over the edge, but held back in time, pulling out and willing himself down while he gripped his cock hard. He wasn’t about to deny either of them the pleasure of his dick up Carver’s ass.

In control again, he asked, “Can I trust you if I take that off?”

There was a flicker of conflict in Carver’s dark eyes, but he nodded. “Yes, David.”

“Good.” David released Carver from the bar. “On the bed. Forearms and knees.”

Again, Carver nodded, climbing to unsteady feet. David wondered if the sight of Carver so pliant should please him as much as it did.

All this was build-up for David’s real intention, but it felt good nonetheless. He could tell Carver was enjoying it, too, judging by his hard-on. As a reminder and encouragement, David reached between Carver’s legs to fondle him casually. “At least you haven’t forgotten how to follow direction.”

Carver groaned and rocked in David’s grip. “Only yours.”

The admission touched him. Carver was right earlier; they never had really discussed their relationship. It had just evolved with a speed that still left David breathless. They were going to have to talk, and soon if the intensity of David’s not-jealousy were any indication.

But not tonight.

He stepped away long enough to get sleeved and lubed, then he was back, kneeling behind Carver’s gorgeous ass.

“All those people you’ve been with...not one of them has satisfied you, have they?” he asked, cock teasing at the iris of

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muscle, pressing but not yet demanding entrance.

“Please, David.” Carver’s voice was hoarse with need.

“Not until you answer my question, Carver.” David thrust forward a fraction before backing off, eliciting a ball-tightening groan from Carver. “You’re just aching for me.”

“And you say I’m the prick.” Carver chuckled, the fight still there.

“You’re not doing yourself any favors.”

Carver lifted his head enough to smirk back at David. “In all the time you’ve known me, have I ever once done myself any favors?”

David didn’t laugh, barely managing to keep his face impassive. Carver had a way of slipping through despite the best of David’s efforts to resist.

Covering, David slapped Carver’s ass in punishment.

Carver just sighed.

David’s mind was running scenarios a mile a minute. Fucking Carver now would only give him what he wanted, no matter how edgy with need David was getting. A scene like this was all about control, though, and David had to be the one to have it. Pulling away, he settled himself on the bed next to Carver, leaning against the headboard.

“What are you doing?” Carver looked a bit wild around the eyes.

“Waiting for an answer.” With more casualness than he felt, David began to slowly jerk on his cock.

“David, come on—”

“Did I give you permission to move?” he barked when Carver began to rise.

Carver was off-balance again and retreated back into his

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prostrate posture, eyes fixated on David's actions.

To reinforce the threat, David stripped off the condom and threw it in the trash, using the lingering traces of lubricant to ease his strokes. "Tell me about them, Carver."

"What?" Carver's eyes didn't move.

"Tell me about them. The men you were with, what you did to them. If you tell me very, very well, I might reward you."

An unmistakable shudder passed over Carver's body, and David could hear him swallow. "Why do I feel like I'm being set up here?"

"Maybe because you are, Carver." David smiled. "Now, the first one. Tell me."

Carver turned his face back to the bed. "He was a twink—blond, young, eager to please."

"He sucked you first, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"How was he?"

"Young and eager to please."

"Carver," he warned.

"Well, it's the truth." Carver glanced at him. "Not much for technique, but he more than made up for it with the effort."

David could picture it, Carver looming over the man, overwhelming him with his brashness until the blond was eager to do anything for him. A blowjob was probably the least of it. Closing his eyes, David pictured it. "When you fucked him, you took him from behind, didn't you?"

Carver swallowed loud enough for David to hear. "Bent him over the arm of the sofa."

That was Carver. Why bother with the sofa itself when they could stand? "That's one. Who was next?"

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“Michael.”

“Oh, this one has a name, does he?” There was that twinge again. David ignored it.

Carver nodded, his face still in the mattress. “He was there with his girlfriend. Karen. He wanted to watch her fuck another man, but she would only agree if he did the same.”

“I thought you said you hadn’t screwed any of the women.”

“I didn’t. She was more interested in one of the chiseled guys there that night. But he didn’t swing both ways, and she wasn’t doing anything until Michael got his.”

“So they found you.”

“One of the hostesses introduced us. Christ, David, please, at least let me touch myself!”

“No, Carver.” His pleading sent a rush of satisfaction through David, making him pull faster. “You haven’t earned it yet. What happened next?”

When Carver turned his head to watch, his eyes were wild and hungry. “You already know.” His voice was harsh and guttural with need.

“Tell me.”

Carver nearly whimpered. “I made him blow me. Then I fucked him while his girlfriend held him.”

“Face to face then?”

“Yes, face to face. Jesus, David, please!”

“One more, Carver. Tell me about the last one.”

“Annabelle and Louis. Threesome.” Carver gave a strangled laugh. “I don’t think the poor girl realized her man was more into me than into her.”

“Or maybe that’s why they’re at the Venus to begin with. Did you ever think of that, Carver?”

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“People don’t operate like that. Especially not people who go to sex clubs.”

“So jaded.” David traced a fingertip along the fine curve of Carver’s back. “You really have no idea why people go to those types of clubs.”

His touch seemed to ease something in Carver, who arched up with a sigh, totally David’s creature. It took every ounce of control David had not to take him right there. Instead, he reached over to the bedside table to grab the object he had left there earlier, reaching between Carver’s legs with his other hand to caress his cock roughly, so hard and ready for anything David demanded. Bending his neck, he kissed one taut cheek. “They don’t matter, Carver, do they?”

Grinding his forehead into the mattress, Carver shook his head.

“The only thing that matters is you and me.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t want you to forget that, Carver. I’m going to make sure you don’t.”

With that, David slipped the cold steel of the padlock around the root of Carver’s cock and testicles before snapping it shut.

Lost in the scene, Carver shuddered with a heady moan. David was sure there would be another response later, but for now it was enough. Enough games, at least. David’s lust wouldn’t wait any longer.

Grabbing up a fresh condom, David made himself ready again before moving back behind Carver. Neither of them was going to last long. That didn’t mean David wasn’t going to try.

Carver groaned a long, low, satisfied sound as David finally breached him. “About fucking time.” Too much relief colored the words for David to take offense. And he agreed. Completely.

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He dug his fingers into Carver's hips for leverage, quickly accelerating until the only thing more satisfying than the sound of their slapping skin was the rapid friction pulling on him with each stroke. David was torn between savoring the image of Carver fucking each of those strangers, the consummate aggressor who only found surrender in David's bed, and hating each and every one of them for touching a part of Carver David never could.

"Oh, fuck, David, that feels so good." Carver was lost in the moment, and David followed after, enjoying the feel of cold steel pressing against his balls with each stroke. "Please, David, harder...oh, God, that's good!"

He reached around to stroke Carver's dick in time to his increasingly rapid thrusts. "No one fucks you but me. Is that understood?"

Carver mumbled incoherently.

"I asked you a question." David stilled. "Do you understand that your ass is mine?"

Body trembling with tension, Carver replied, "Goddamnit, David. Yes. I understand. No one but you. Just let me come already. Please."

"Say that again." He resumed, fucking Carver harder and faster, driving them both toward climax.

"Please. You son of a bitch."

David smirked. "Again."

"Please."

"Again."

"Please."

Their words matched their frantic rhythm, blending into incoherence until Carver came with a hoarse cry, the force of his climax pulling David over as well.

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David savored the complete bliss that followed heavily on the heels of a long delayed orgasm. He felt better than he had in days. Physiology only let him linger so long, so he withdrew from Carver and disposed of the condom.

Carver stretched out on his back, joints giving satisfied pops. “You’re a bastard, Logan. But fuck, I needed that.”

“We both did.” David lay back down beside Carver. Trailing his hand down Carver’s stomach, he worked his way down to the padlock surrounding Carver’s cock and balls.

It at last seemed to catch Carver’s attention. “Somehow I doubt that’s what the manufacturers intended it for.”

David tugged on it lightly. “How does it feel?”

“Bit weird. But...” Carver shrugged. “I’m surprised it didn’t interfere with things. Who knew.”

“Good. It’s not supposed to interfere.” David removed his hand and propped both behind his head.

Carver’s narrowed eyes told David that he was finally growing suspicious. “What’s going on, David?”

“I told you, Carver, you needed a reminder. That”—he nodded to the padlock—“is a reminder you won’t be able to ignore.”

“Wait, what?” Carver sat up. “You’re not going to leave it on, are you?”

“Why not? It doesn’t interfere, so there’s no problem, is there?”

“You can’t padlock my privates!”

“Yes, I can.” He smirked.

“David, this isn’t funny.”

“It’s not meant to be a joke, Carver.” He rolled over and shoved a hand against Carver’s chest, pinning him down. “Fuck who you want, do what you want, but you will not forget that you belong to me, and I’m the only one with the key.”

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“Damn it, David, how am I supposed to do my fucking *job* like this?”

He was protesting, but David could hear the thread of fascination underlying Carver’s words. He was as curious now as he was angry, and more than a little turned on. He’d go along with it. Eventually.

Content, David lay back down and closed his eyes. “You’ll come up with something. I trust your creative skills.”

“David—”

David wrapped his arm around Carver’s neck and pulled him down to rest against his chest. “Go to sleep, Carver. It’s hard work keeping you in your place.”

Carver grumbled but relaxed. “You love it.”

Already half gone, David kissed Carver’s crown. “So do you.”

Carver didn’t answer.

“Call Scotty tomorrow,” David remembered through the creeping fog of sleep. “She’s worried about you.”

“Too busy.”

“Call her, Carver. Or you won’t like the consequences.”

“Promises, promises.”

David just smiled.

CHAPTER 8

“You all right, Carver?” Scotty looked at him curiously over her beer. “I don’t think you’ve sat still for more than two minutes put together.”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” He forced himself to sit still. As long as he didn’t think about the padlock, he was okay. But when said padlock was locked around your privates, it was damn near impossible to not think about it. David Logan was going to pay. Somehow.

“Ah, so it was a rough night then.”

He glared at her, earning a smirk in return.

“Well, whatever went on, all I know is ol’ Ramrod’s back to his usual self again. The department extends its eternal gratitude.” Leaning over the table, her voice dropped into the register that

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made the perps tremble. “In the future, you’d better do your damndest to avoid whatever it was you did to piss him off.”

“Yessir, Detective Scott, sir.” Carver saluted her with his lager before downing half. “Though, the sex is outstanding when I get on his bad side, so— Ow!” He rubbed his shin where Scotty’s well-aimed kick had landed. “Police brutality.”

“Off duty, it doesn’t count.”

“Funny, that’s what he says.”

She pulled back to punch him.

“Peace! Peace. No more innuendo, I promise.”

She snorted into her glass. “Yeah, right.” Swallowing, she set the glass down and grabbed a pretzel from the basket on the bar. “So how’s the case going?”

“It’s not at the moment. I got in the front door, but no farther.” He pushed his drink back. “I haven’t seen any sign of the girl, so if she’s still there, she’s not working the main room. I haven’t seen a sign of there being any other venues, either.”

“You think maybe they’ve got another location for the hardcore stuff?”

“It would make sense. What I’ve seen so far skates on the borders of a dozen municipal codes, but falls just on the side of legal. It’s all consensual, all safe and no money is changing hands for the sex. Members pay for the privilege of coming to a safe place to fuck in public. Although it wouldn’t take much to cross that line. A change in refreshments, shall we say.”

“They also might not want to risk the front business in case of a raid.”

Carver nodded. “Which means they take it offsite. Not far, maybe even just across the river in North Shore or Troy Hill. Close enough to be able to come and go from here discreetly.”

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“You need to start dropping hints you’re interested in more. Easiest way to find it is through the inside.”

“It’s a fine line to walk. I can’t show too much interest or ask too many questions for fear of arousing suspicion.”

Scotty arched a brow. “Arousing suspicion?”

“Completely unintentional. But you know what I mean.”

“Well, it can’t hurt to step up your game.”

“If I step up my game any more, the department’s going to have my head. Unbearable as David was now, imagine—”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence.” She flashed a smile all the more chilling for its sweetness. “You’re a capable man, Carver Eliot. I’m sure you can manage to do your job and keep your boyfriend happy.”

“We are talking about the same David Logan here, right?”

“Carver.”

He held up his hands again. “I’ll figure something out. Promise.”

* * *

Things took care of themselves, thanks in no small part to David.

Carver had to go back to Venus. He could skip a night or two, but not three.

David still refused to take the padlock off.

“Make sense, David. I can’t go into a sex club like this. They’re going to ask questions.”

“You’ll figure something out.” David was more amused than anything. “You’re pretty creative when you have to be.”

Instead, Carver went for the easy out. He left his shoes in his

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storage cupboard. Unbuttoning his shirt, he left the tails hanging out and his chest exposed, but otherwise stayed dressed. A night hanging out at the bar watching the room wouldn't be a bad thing.

Toni gave him an infectious grin and a bottle of beer. "Not playing tonight, Carver?"

He shrugged as he took a pull. "Depends on who shows."

"Well, let me know if you need anything." Toni had been as warm and outgoing as Billy had suggested, but if she knew anything about Abby, she was very good at keeping things close to the vest. Still, it was never a bad idea to curry favor with the bartenders.

Taking his time with the beer, Carver watched the comings and goings around the room. The clientele was...enthusiastic tonight. Again Carver wondered what David would be like in a place like this, if he'd keep up the Ramrod persona he always wore in public or if he'd relax into the playful, sensual man he was at home.

Carver didn't realize how lost in thought he was until a cool hand caressed his chest. "Hey, Carver."

It was the wink from the other night. *Sean? No, Seth.* "Seth."

Seth licked his lips. "I had a great time the other night."

Carver could see where this was going. "Well, good. I'm glad."

Seth trailed his hand down Carver's stomach to the button on his jeans. "I thought maybe we could—"

Carver stopped Seth from going any farther. "Not tonight. Go find another playmate, Seth."

Yanking his arm free, Seth cradled his imaginary injury. "You don't have to be a bitch about it."

Swelling up to full cop intimidation stature, Carver leaned into the guy's space. "Did you say something?"

Seth's face darkened, but he turned around and stormed off.

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“I think you crushed him.”

Alexandra’s velvet voice preceded her perfume by about half a second. When Carver turned back to his drink, she was already there, leaning against the bar with a subtle, sultry smile. “He likes you, Carver.”

“Yeah, well, I get enough of the cringing sub act at home.” He took another drink, mentally begging David for forgiveness for that little prevarication.

“Somebody getting out of line?”

“Something like that.”

Her smile grew impish. “Or maybe you just need a little warm-up.”

Before he could stop her, she reached out to cup his bulge.

He and Alexandra had developed a casual relationship of sorts in the few weeks he’d been coming to Venus. He suspected it was because he was one of the few guys there who didn’t aggressively hit on her. He was safe, so she was more comfortable with easy intimacy with him, doing things she never would have done with one of the straight clients. He never minded it because he knew she didn’t have any expectations of him, and she was good company. The fact she had a killer grip didn’t hurt matters. In the end, a hand was a hand, and while he’d never gotten off with her, it didn’t mean he didn’t like the feel of it.

Which he hadn’t mentioned to David.

Alexandra’s eyes widened, her casual grope becoming much more intentioned. “What is that?” she insisted gleefully, testing the dimensions of the padlock with her long fingers.

Fuck. Here they went with the questions.

Rather than answer, Carver put the bottle back down on the bar and opened his pants, shoving them down enough for her to see his

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new ornamentation.

“Oh, my.” She must have liked what she saw because she licked her lips. “Isn’t that...interesting. How on earth did you come by that?”

“I lost a bet.” He started to pull up his pants again, but she stopped him, fascinated by the sight. She traced the shackle over his cock, following it down to where the body rested behind his balls, the steel now warmed by his body heat. To his frustration, he found himself getting turned on by the attention.

“Very nice quality,” she commented, giving the lock a tug.

That was David. Nothing but the best. He ground his teeth.

“So what was the bet?”

Here it was, the opportunity he’d needed to “step up his game,” as Scotty had so aptly put it. He reached for inspiration and hoped it was the right one. “I bet my sub he couldn’t find ten guys in the straight club we were at to blow in one evening.”

“Quite the challenge.”

“Yeah, the little bastard put on a hell of a show.” Now he was getting turned on by the image of David blowing all those guys. “I thought he wasn’t going to make it, but he talked the bartender into it as the place was closing.”

“You didn’t have to go along with your part.”

He shrugged. “That’s no way to control someone. They have to know they can trust you, even with something as stupid as this.” Now it was his turn to grin wickedly. “I’ll punish him for it later.”

“Mm, that’s something I’d love to see.” She continued tracing the metal with her fingertips, occasionally contacting all too responsive flesh. David Logan was a dead man. Alexandra’s lips teased against his ear. “I bet you’re a good dom, aren’t you, Carver? You have a presence about you, especially when people

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cross you. Like poor Seth.”

He’d missed being the aggressor, the one in control. Venus had given him that back. At home he could play the role David expected, but here he could scratch the itch that would never quite go away. He liked having people do what he wanted.

Alexandra’s grip tightened, pulling him back. “You’re a million miles away. What’s going on?”

“Thinking about shaking things up at home some.”

“Why at home?”

He blinked at her.

She smiled. “Look around you, Carver. There are any number of ways available to you here.”

Taking the plunge, he said, “Plenty of ways, yes, but things with...my sub get a bit extreme sometimes. Toes some lines even Venus steers clear of.”

“There are no lines, Carver, if you know where to look.”

“I think if I hogtied him, gagged him and left him in the middle of the floor while I let Seth suck me off, people might get a little uncomfortable.”

She laughed, an eager, glittering sound. “They might, but I wouldn’t.” She thought for a moment. “You’ve been a good customer, Carver, open-minded and flexible. Clearly your interests go beyond what we can offer you here at Venus.”

“I tried to tell you that during my interview.”

“You did, but we needed to see if we could trust you. You understand trust. I think now we might be able to offer you something a little...more.” Tucking him away, she zipped his jeans shut again and buttoned his fly with a gentle pat. “Go home and punish your pet, Carver. Let me talk to my boss. Next time we should be able to show you something a little more to your

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preference.” She caught her bottom lip between her teeth before adding, “Be sure to bring your friend. It would be good for him to see what he can be replaced with if he doesn’t behave.”

Bingo.

David was going to kill him.

CHAPTER 9

David had never believed it possible, but there was such a thing as too much sex. He wasn't sick of it, not at all, but he was creeping toward exhausted. Blowing this friend of Robin's or fucking that one's sub or... He was young, but, Christ, five minutes wasn't too much to ask, was it?

"You're doing wonderfully," Robin commended, handing him a drink.

That was all it took, that subtle rush of energy Robin's approval always gave.

These parties were becoming a common thing, where Robin and his circle got together for swapping, staging and all manner of creative expression. Not that long ago, David would have substituted the word "perversion" for "expression." Now all of this

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seemed almost natural.

He tilted his head up for Robin's kiss, and Robin obliged, slow and wet with a swipe of the tongue that left David wondering if the flavor of semen came from his mouth or Robin's.

Robin pulled back with seeming reluctance. He gave David's shoulder a meaningful squeeze. "Come on. There's someone you need to meet."

Downing his drink, David set the empty glass aside and stood. *Back into the fray again.* He hoped this new someone didn't expect much in the near future.

It was easy enough to tell the masters from the pets in the club that night. There was always a rigid dress code at these events. The tops all wore short robes in a myriad of colors and fabrics. The bottoms wore collars and nothing more, although each collar was as individual as the robes the masters wore. Thinking of them made David aware of his own. He reached up to caress the supple leather. Hard to believe he had had it over a year now. It had been a good year, and David found himself proud of the man Robin was molding him into.

He was suddenly tempted to reach out to take Robin's hand, but he resisted the urge. It wasn't appropriate to show affection in a place like this. Maybe later, when it was the two of them.

Robin wound his way through the orgy, David close on his heels. Their goal appeared to be a tall man in the far corner with his back to the room. David presumed he was being blown by whoever was in the corner with him.

He was half-right.

There was a scrawny young man in the corner, cringing and flinching at every quiet word the man said to him. David wanted to intervene, but Robin caught his arm with a negative shake of his

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head. Instead, Robin stepped forward and tapped the man on the shoulder. "There you are, Andrew. I've been looking for you all night."

Andrew whirled, his face grim for an instant before it smoothed out into a half-formed smile. "Robin! What a surprise. It's been a while."

"Almost two years. I heard you were back in town."

"For a few weeks. I only heard about this event at the last moment." He studied David critically, and for the first time in a long time, David was uncomfortable being naked. "Who's this pretty young thing, Robin? Yours?"

Robin's hand settled at David's lower back, slightly easing his discomfort. "David's done me very proud so far. Obeys without question."

"You always did have a knack for finding the...amenable ones." Andrew's hungry gaze made David's skin crawl.

"It's a gift." Robin nudged David forward. "Words hardly do him justice."

As Robin drew away, David's eyes shifted to the man still cowering in the corner, almost trying to become one with the wall. If Andrew alone weren't setting off alarm bells, the behavior of his sub would have. David considered refusing Robin's request for the first time since their relationship began, but didn't. Robin hadn't steered him wrong yet. Even if his own warning alarms were screaming.

"I have some business to attend to," Robin said. "I'll leave you to get better acquainted."

It took everything David had to stand there, mouth shut, true to his role while Robin walked away.

"Tommy, say hello to David," Andrew said, the words benign

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enough, but the tone almost malevolent.

Tommy's eyes seemed to plead with David for something even as he stepped forward obediently. "Hello, David." His voice was barely audible.

"Tommy."

Tommy flinched before putting his hands on David's shoulders and drawing himself closer to kiss him.

David knew this dance well enough, like dogs sniffing each other's asses. Find the push and pull through a simple exchange of kisses. Tommy's mouth trembled beneath his, making David suddenly protective of this young man. He rested his hands on Tommy's bony hips to draw him even closer, opening his mouth to encourage the gentle exploration of their kiss without ever demanding more.

A heavy hand began stroking David's hair. "Oh, you are good at this, David," Andrew murmured, moving up close behind him. "Robin always was a lucky son of a bitch with his sluts. The rest of us have to work hard with ours, but you seem made for it."

He ignored Andrew and focused on Tommy, suspecting Tommy had never had this kind of affectionate attention before from the eager way he surrendered to it. Releasing his lips, David began painting a line down the side of Tommy's throat with his tongue, tiny, light strokes meant to arouse.

That's when he noticed Tommy's collar.

Some were little more than elegant necklaces, some were thick studded leather, some were torcs and some were shackles.

Tommy's was a choke chain. The kind put on disobedient dogs.

David did a quick calculation of the size of the opening on the choke collar and the size of Tommy's head and realized it had to have been permanently attached there, the chain slipped through

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one ring before the other ring was reattached and welded into place. The faintest necklace of bruises around his throat seemed to back up David's theory.

He pulled back, startled at the discovery. Desperate, Tommy grabbed for David's head to pull him back down.

"Tommy!"

Tommy jumped at Andrew's bark, eyes instantly downcast.

"Apologize."

"I'm sorry."

His apology was lost under David's protest. "There's no need—"

"On your knees," Andrew insisted.

Tommy dropped to the floor instantly and sucked David's cock into his mouth without hesitation.

David hissed. He'd been the one doing most of the blowing that night, so the feel of a hot, wet mouth around his cock was hard to resist. He felt sick with himself. Tommy was more of a victim in this than a willing participant.

"Tommy's always required a firm hand. He so easily forgets his place," Andrew murmured in David's ear, reaching around to cradle Tommy's head. "But he always makes up for it. Best little cocksucker I've ever found." Andrew's hand left Tommy's head and caressed along David's stomach. "You don't have that problem, though, do you, David? You were born to obey." That hand moved up to tweak one of his nipples before skating back to trail down his back. "Such a fine specimen."

David forced himself to relax, controlling his breathing, focusing on his own body rather than the other two with him. He wouldn't bolt; he wouldn't resist. Robin wanted him to do this, and David refused to disappoint him.

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His will almost failed him when he felt Andrew's bare cock against his ass.

"Bet you know how to take this, don't you, David?" Andrew's hips rocked against David's backside in rhythm with Tommy's increasingly frantic suction. "Knowing Robin, he taught you the right way to spread your legs and lean forward so he can slip right in."

Arousal gave way to panic. "I don't think—"

He was more startled than hurt when Andrew slapped his head. "No one asked you to think, bitch. You're only good for one thing, you and sluts like Tommy. Now shut the fuck up and spread your legs."

"I don't think he will."

Robin's voice was cold fury buried under layers of restraint. David had never been so happy to hear it in his life.

Andrew's dark good looks twisted into rage. "What the hell is this, Robin, a cock block? It's okay for you to fuck everyone else's toys, but not the other way?"

"You don't fuck a stud, Andrew. It's a waste of sperm." He caught David's arm and pulled him out from between the two, leaving Andrew red with rage and Tommy gaping like a beached fish. "Now, if you want him to screw your boy, or you for that matter, he's all yours. Otherwise, I think we're done here."

When Andrew spoke, it was to David, not Robin. "Don't be fooled, boy. You're nothing special, despite whatever pretty lies he's filled your head with." He sneered, then looked down at Tommy. "Get to your feet. We're leaving."

Tommy did as instructed, head bowed and trying to keep up with Andrew striding out.

Robin squeezed David's arm. "I think it's time we went home."

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Come on.”

They didn’t speak during the ride. As late as it was, the streets were all but deserted. They made it home without even the delay of a red light, giving them no time to talk. David stood in silence on the sidewalk, guilt and shame gnawing at him, while Robin leaned in to pay the driver.

“Inside,” he ordered gently when the car pulled away.

“I’m sorry, Robin. I—”

“No, David.” Robin’s expression was as stern as his voice. “Inside.”

Cowed, David did as he was ordered, hanging his jacket up on the coat rack in the front hall. “Upstairs,” Robin instructed, and David’s heart sank. If they were going to talk, Robin would take him into the study. If they were going upstairs instead, David knew he would be punished.

Rather than delay the inevitable, he turned and marched up the stairs.

Robin stopped him at the foot of the bed, turned him, and began to undress him like a child. Unbuttoning David’s shirt, he slid it off him to hang it up in the closet. Then he knelt to remove David’s shoes one by one, lining them up with the others. Never looking at David, he undid David’s jeans and slid them off him, taking the time to crease each leg before folding them and putting them away as well. David felt as if he were being stripped of everything Robin had ever given him, as though he were being prepared to be cast out.

It wasn’t until Robin reached for David’s collar that he protested.

“Please, Robin, no!” He covered the collar with his hands, trying to keep Robin from it. “I’m sorry, and I deserve to be

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punished, I know that. But please don't take my collar. I'm sorry. I'll do better next time, I promise!"

Robin seemed startled by the outburst. "David." He eased David's hands away. "You can have it back tomorrow. For tonight, I'm putting it away."

David wanted to argue, but the promise of tomorrow was enough to make him remove his hands. Robin unclasped the collar and rebuckled it into a circlet before returning it to its special box on the dresser with the same care and attention he showed everything. Then he guided David to the bathroom.

Robin ran the water until it was warm, then turned the shower on. Holding out a hand, he gestured to a confused David. "In."

Stepping under the warm spray, David closed his eyes, savoring the steady rhythm of the water landing on his skin. It felt better than he could have imagined. He wasn't alone long before Robin joined him. He started to turn.

"No, David. Stay." Robin's voice was low, soothing, but still underlain by the unmistakable note of command. Then Robin's hands settled on him, soapy and gentle. Every inch was scrubbed with great care, muscles rubbed until some of the tension eased out. "Turn, David." Robin tended to David's front with as much attentiveness as he had his back.

The hot water and soothing attention left David limp and exhausted, forcing him to rest his hands on Robin's shoulders and lean back against the wall for support. "This feels really good," he admitted, the steam making his voice thick, "but I don't think I'm good for any—"

Robin stopped him with a gentle kiss. "You don't have to do anything tonight, David. It's my turn to show you something."

He kept repeating David's name, as though he were reinforcing

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that identity, like David would forget who he was. He thought again of Tommy and realized that perhaps it was possible. Not with Robin.

He leaned in for another kiss, but Robin backed away. “Out of the tub now,” he insisted, switching off the water. David stepped out on the rug obediently, waited while Robin threw on his heavy Turkish robe without drying and grabbed up a towel to use on David with the same care and attention as before, missing no crease or droplet anywhere. When he was satisfied with his work, he tossed the towel aside and led David back into the bedroom.

David felt like a doll, with no incentive or motion except those directed by Robin. It was a comfort, a relief, to feel so safe in someone else’s care. When Robin pressed on him to make him sit on the edge of the bed, he sank down willingly, then lay down completely, his legs dangling over the side. Robin nudged his knees apart and knelt down making David tremble in anticipation.

The first touch of Robin’s mouth on his balls made him gasp.

He started to rise, but Robin’s voice stopped him. “I said it’s my turn, David. You don’t have to do anything but relax. Understood?”

Why something so simple should be so difficult... He lay back. Under Robin’s attentive ministrations, David found his body relaxing, eventually, although his mind wouldn’t stop. He’d like to think it wasn’t possible that, were circumstances different, he could very well be Tommy. The thought sickened him more than Andrew’s touch and Tommy’s brokenness could.

“Let it go, David.” Robin replaced his mouth with his hand, gently rolling and stroking David’s balls. “There are things in this world you can fix. And there are things you can’t. Those you can’t, you have to let go of.” Robin’s breath teased along David’s cock,

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sending a pleasant shiver over his skin. “Tommy made his choice. You can’t help him.” Robin’s mouth teased slick and hot over the head of David’s cock. “You can’t help him, David. Let it go.”

Any response was cut off as Robin swallowed him down.

Robin’s mouth was as warm and gentle as the shower had been and just as soothing for all its eroticism. He was in no hurry to bring David off, experimenting with pace and pressure, tasting his balls and rimming him as attentively, his hands busy caressing over all of David’s bare body when they weren’t busy complementing the attentions of Robin’s mouth.

David savored the unexpected rare attention. More often than not, he was the one on his knees, enjoying the taste and feel of Robin’s cock in his mouth. But this was good, too, especially after a long night of servicing others and the uncomfortable mix of signals from Tommy and Andrew. He did nothing to restrain Robin, knowing that might lead to a punishment, which was the last thing he wanted tonight. Instead, he stroked Robin’s thick, coarse hair and whispered, “Thank you,” between each gasp and groan of pleasure.

Just when it was too much to hold in, Robin raised his head. “Your choice tonight, David.”

David drew a shuddering gasp and gazed down at him. “What is?”

“Fuck or be fucked?”

“Be fucked,” he replied without hesitation.

Robin’s smile warmed him. “Are you certain?”

“Please.”

He placed a gentle kiss to the inside of David’s right thigh. “As you wish, my boy.”

Tonight the request wasn’t part of the games they played. He

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knew Robin's offer had been genuine, and the chance to fuck his dom was something that didn't come along often. But tonight David needed the reinforcement of possession, the verification of the unspoken truth Robin had laid down to Andrew earlier. No one fucked David but Robin.

Robin shed his robe and slid on a condom with practiced ease, slicking it lightly before sliding his slippery fingers into David's ass. "Still so tight. Such a perfect ass even now."

He knew it was all the arousal from the evening and no penetration that made him so tight, but Robin knew it, too. David suspected it was one of the reasons Robin took him to those events, aside from getting off on whoring him around. David got off on it, too, catching sight of Robin watching sometimes out of the corner of his eye, cock in his hand and this fierce look of possession on his face that made David work whatever partner he was with at the time harder, more interested in bringing Robin off than the stranger. Right now, though, all he wanted was Robin inside of him, taking his rightful place. Reaching down, he took Robin's cock in his hand and guided him closer.

Robin didn't resist, letting David take control enough to settle him in place and grip his hips to pull him closer. The feel of Robin's cock stretching him was the best thing David had felt all night, and he groaned aloud.

As he began the slow, subtle strokes indicating he planned to take his time, Robin settled himself on David, sheltering him with his body as he bent down to add his mouth to the wash of sensations.

"This is what this is about, David."

It startled David to realize just how much control his lover was showing.

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“It’s not about control; it’s about pleasure. It feels good when I control you, for both of us, doesn’t it? You like the way I make you feel.”

Unable to speak, David nodded.

“What if it stops feeling good?”

Again, David was surprised. “It won’t. It couldn’t possibly.”

“I’m an old man, David, and getting older with each passing second.” He emphasized the last words with hard strokes. “You might not want me anymore.”

David surrendered to the pleasure for a moment before protesting, “Stop talking like that.”

“I don’t own you, David,” Robin insisted, moving even faster. “You can walk away any time you want. The collar’s not a trap; it’s a promise.”

“A...a what?” He couldn’t focus. It felt too good.

“A promise. As long as you wear it, I’ll take care of you, David. Not like Tommy. I’ll always take care of you. Do you understand?”

He didn’t. He was too close, the ecstasy too overwhelming. Instead, he let his training take over. “I understand, Robin. Thank you.”

“Liar.” Robin growled and slammed down hard, driving David over the edge in a frenzy. Robin didn’t stop, skin slapping and mouth attacking until finally his head snapped back with a curse as he came hard enough to drive David back on the bed.

Afterward, they shifted onto the pillows, David curled up comfortably in Robin’s arms, drifting off to sleep.

“You’ll understand one day,” Robin said softly against his hair.

CHAPTER 10

Carver wasn't a coward. He just didn't know how to broach the subject of the club with David. Actually, the club was easy enough. What he needed David to do was...well... He couldn't have made a bigger mess of things if he'd tried.

Three days after the club, David finally called him on it.

"You know, the longer you wait to tell me, Carver, the more difficult it's going to be." David deftly plucked out another bite of lo mein.

Reaching for the sweet and sour pork—take-out and beer, it was supposed to be a relaxing, quiet night in—Carver took several bites before replying. "I might have made a breakthrough at the club."

"Oh?"

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He didn't look at David. "I secured an invitation 'backstage.' Thanks to you."

"What did I have to do with it?" he asked with the barest hint of amusement.

Amusement was good. Maybe. "Your little stunt with the padlock garnered me quite a bit of attention. The right kind of attention."

David made a noncommittal noise and continued eating his food.

Carver hated when David did this—forced him to do all the talking. Carver always ended up saying way too much.

"I said I'd lost a bet." Then he added in a rush, "With my sub."

That at least earned him raised eyebrows. "With *your* sub?"

"I got caught off guard. I...sort of have an image to maintain there."

David finally set his food aside and leaned forward on the table. His face and voice were impassive, the barest glimmer of humor still brightening his somber gray eyes. "So we're clear: you lost a bet with *your* sub."

"Yes." Damn, who knew food could be so fascinating. Carver tried for a choice piece of pork.

"Set the food aside, Carver."

He had halfway obeyed before he even realized it. God, he was pathetic.

David noticed. "Very good, Carver. Now, what was the bet?"

If there was a question Carver had been expecting, that wasn't it. "What?"

"I said, what was the bet this sub of yours won?"

"Oh. Um..." Carver reached for his beer instead, hands desperate for something to fiddle with. "Does it matter?"

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With the same patience, David reached out and took the beer away. "Apparently it does, if you don't want to talk about it."

"It's not—"

"Carver."

"Fine. I said he blew ten straight guys in a nightclub, okay?"

David didn't move. "Well," he said finally, as though tasting every letter of the word as it came out. "That's...inventive."

"Damn it, David, I had to tell her something!"

"No, no, I'm impressed." He turned the bottle in his hand, studying Carver. "Is that what you fantasize doing to me?" At least he was fixated on the bet and not who "her" was. His...friendship with Alexandra was going to be interesting to explain. One of these days.

"No, of course not," he replied in a rush, realizing he'd hesitated too long.

"Why not?"

"It never... I ... Fuck." He wished he had that damn beer to hide behind, buy himself a few precious seconds to think. Which was why David had taken it. *Bastard*. "That's not how it is. With us. I guess." God, could he sound any lamer? "Can I have my beer back? Please?"

"May I," David corrected.

"May I please have my fucking beer back?"

With the faintest of smirks David set the beer on the table, on his side. "Not yet." He began stroking the bottle in a manner just this side of obscene. "Of all the things you could have possibly come up with... It's really quite creative, Carver. Flattering, too."

"Um, you're welcome?"

"It's not unusual for subs to fantasize about dominating their masters," David went on, far too casually for the topic at hand.

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“Imagine ways to humiliate them, bring them down. I’d be surprised if you hadn’t, considering your more...aggressive tendencies.”

“David, I swear, that’s not what I fantasize about.”

“No? Then what is?”

“What?”

“All those times I’ve punished you or tied you up or driven you near mad with wanting to come, there’s a part of you plotting exactly what you’d do were our positions reversed. Maybe how you’d get revenge.”

Most of his fantasies these days revolved around David doing things to him. In the beginning, he’d wanted to turn everything back around on David. Chained up to the showerhead or bound to the bed, restrained with the spreader bar or doing chores naked. Then those thoughts stopped. Not completely, but Carver liked what David did to him, even when he complained.

“I think you’ve ruined me,” he muttered.

David laughed. “No, you’re just out of practice. Come on, Carver. If you could do anything to me right now, without fear of reprisal, what would you do?”

“No reprisals? Whatsoever? From anyone?”

“Sure.”

“Then I’d take you back to the station house and fuck you on your desk in front of Montgomery and Scotty and all the rest. Show them all that the stick up your ass was my cock.”

David rolled his eyes, but Carver could tell he was amused. “You’re way too pedantic in your fantasies, Carver. If nothing else, I’d have thought your time at Venus had broadened your horizons.”

“Venus is too vanilla for anything but voyeurism. The only

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thing kinky about it is that they don't discriminate against men of our persuasion."

"You think it's going to be different backstage."

"That's what my contact implied. If Abby was disappearing for periods of time and coming back hard fucked, I'm betting it's not too far away. I needed to get back there, and there was only one way to do it. I'm sorry, David."

David shoved his beer back over to him. "So who are you going to get to go with you?"

That startled Carver even more. "Oh, um, I'd thought...that is, I'd assumed..."

He couldn't finish the sentence for the look David was giving him.

"You don't have the first clue about how this works, do you?" All amusement was gone. David was as unreadable as ever.

"Where in the hell would I have picked it up? Not sure you've noticed, but I've been in uncharted territory since the moment we met. Been following your lead since the get go."

"Inasmuch as you follow anything."

Carver sighed, frustrated. "I can't deny that. But you can't fault me for not knowing the 'rules' when you've never taught them to me."

David grimaced. "You have a point."

Wait, was he actually right for a change? Carver resisted the urge to gloat. Now, at least. "What am I supposed to do then, David?"

"Find a sub."

He was going to pay for this, with his own pride if nothing else. "I don't want someone else."

"I'm not a sub, Carver. Not—" David cut himself off and got to

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his feet. “You need to find someone else.”

“David, come on. It’s playacting for a few hours. It’s not like—”

“Tops don’t bottom, Carver. Ever.” The way he snapped it out, Carver knew this was one of those rules they’d just been talking about, one he suspected David had heard often. “I’m sorry, but you’ll have to find someone else.”

“Who? Where? It’s not like I can go out and pick some queer up at a bar, damnit. This is an investigation. I need a partner who can observe and analyze, not just someone to suck my cock, David. Be real!”

David whirled on him, surprising Carver with the wild desperation in his eyes. “I can’t do it, Carver. Don’t ask me.”

Instantly, Carver backed down. “Okay, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean... I’ll see what I can do. Don’t... I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.” The words clearly came with great effort. David turned and started cleaning up. “You should go home, Carver.”

It hurt more than a sucker punch. “David, I didn’t mean—”

“For tonight. Please.”

A request, not a command. Carver was at a complete loss. He wanted to press the issue. Instead, he grabbed up his jacket and headed for the door. His common sense won out for a change. At the door, he hesitated. “Just for tonight?” He hated how fucking needy it came out.

“Yes, Carver.”

Carver didn’t feel reassured, but what other choice did he have? He should have known it was only a matter of time before he thoroughly fucked up this thing with David.

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CHAPTER 11

David didn't sleep.

He'd gotten too used to having Carver in his bed. The man hogged the covers and sprawled all over, but David couldn't sleep anymore without him there beside him.

It wasn't Carver's fault, and David knew it. It was one more of those things they'd never gotten around to talking about. After Robin died, David had walked away from that life, all of it, left it behind in favor of the celibate, structured life he'd led for the past three years, until Carver had smashed his way in and thrown everything over.

Yet this was too much.

Of course, Carver didn't know what he was asking. It wouldn't just be a bit of playacting, though, not for David. It would be a

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return to that person he was, that person he only had ever been with Robin. Except Robin wasn't there to look out for him anymore. And Carver...

If David was completely honest with himself, and he had to be in this situation, he didn't trust Carver enough to submit to him. That level of trust was hard won, earned over and over again. If it were the two of them in private, then perhaps he could make an exception, play the sub for a little while, then return to the status quo. To do it in public made it too real, too dangerous. There were too many variables for even an experienced master to manage, and Carver was all action and no thought, even now.

He rubbed his eyes and reached for his third coffee of the morning, now cold on the corner of his desk, when he saw Commander Montgomery pass through the squad room on his way to his office.

One more obligation he had, all tied up around this mess.

David straightened his tie and adjusted his jacket before tapping on the commander's door.

"Come in."

So much for the faint hope he might be too busy. David let himself in. "You wanted an update on the Crenshaw matter, sir."

"I did?" Montgomery looked over the edge of the report he was reading with blue eyes that seemed to pierce right through him. "I think I asked you to wave Eliot off the case."

"Unfortunately, we can't keep a private citizen from pursuing his line of work," he excused. "It seems as though he's had some success."

Montgomery looked doubtful. "What kind of success?"

David shut the door and took a seat. "It turns out Abigail Crenshaw had been frequenting a club in the months preceding her

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disappearance. She also obtained entrance into one of the more select areas. Eliot has managed to follow in her footsteps.”

“Has he now.” Montgomery sounded impressed. “What kind of club are we talking about, Lieutenant?”

Professionalism above all else. “A sex club, sir. A rather prestigious one at that.”

“I see.”

David waited. And waited.

“You said Eliot got as far as the Crenshaw girl did?”

“Nearly. He’s—” David stopped himself. “He’s still investigating some aspects before delving in further.”

Montgomery fell quiet again, fingers steepled beneath his chin, swiveling his chair while he thought. “How amenable do you think Eliot will be to taking on a partner?”

“Sir?”

“I want police involvement again, Logan. Seeing as Eliot has the in, we need to work with him. One of our own should be with him.”

“I’m not sure if it would be appropriate in this situation to ask one of the men to...assist in this.”

“No, you’re probably right.” Montgomery resumed his thinking pose.

David knew better than to interrupt.

Finally, Montgomery looked over his fingertips at David. “You work with him.”

“Sir, it’s really not—”

“Appropriate? Maybe not. But you know the man, and as I said before, you’re the only one who could keep him under any kind of control.” Montgomery studied him critically. “You aren’t concerned about your reputation, are you, Logan?”

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"No, sir, of course not," David answered. "We all have to take on roles we find...distasteful sometimes."

"Oh, give me a break, Lieutenant. The door's shut, and you and I both know better."

"Sir?"

Montgomery rose to his looming six-foot-five and came around the desk, leaning against it with his arms crossed. "I know you two are involved. I knew from the beginning. Hell, I was grateful for it. You needed someone like Eliot to shake you up a little, and God knows, Eliot needed the control. If you'd both been a little more discreet, we wouldn't be having this conversation, as you'd probably be working together on this anyway."

"Sir, I—"

"Relax, Logan, none of this leaves this room. You're too good an officer for me to be squeamish about your sex life. You're also the best person for this job, as you and Eliot already have a rapport. Plus, if this is happening where I think it is, Eliot has managed to get in where we haven't ever been able to slip a plainclothes in. This may have become a lot bigger than one missing person. It's got to be handled right, though."

Montgomery had him there. They did need to handle this right. They both knew he was the man for the job. David just wished Carver hadn't already set the stage. *Shit.*

"Is there a problem, Lieutenant?"

Several. "No, sir. When shall I start?"

Sitting on the edge of his desk, Montgomery frowned. "By the sound of things, yesterday would be preferable. However, as soon as possible will work."

"Yes, Commander." David got to his feet. "Will that be all?"

"The Crenshaw case is your only priority from here on out.

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Detectives Scott and Doughty will take over your outstanding caseload, understood?"

David nodded.

"David." Hearing the commander use his given name was enough to startle him back to attention. "This isn't a death sentence. Go. Have fun with your boyfriend. Get paid for it. Catch the bad guys. But above all, be careful."

"Yes, sir."

Montgomery shook his head. "Dismissed, Lieutenant."

David slunk back to his office. It was the only word for it. In addition to having to admit to Carver that he was wrong, he was now under orders to submit to him in the line of duty. If their situations were reversed, Carver would probably find it a huge turn-on. David just felt guilty.

First things first. He picked up the phone and called Carver.

He answered on the second ring, but didn't say anything. Neither did David at first. One of them had to talk, though, or it wouldn't be much of a phone call.

"Did you hear back from the club?" David asked.

"Last night."

"Look, I'm sorry..."

"Don't. It's fine. Montgomery wants me to come with you." He could have kicked himself. He'd made it sound like it hadn't been his choice. Which it hadn't. *Fuck, what a mess.*

"Don't put yourself out," Carver snapped, obviously hurt. "I'll manage."

"Please." It was past time for pride. "I want to come with you, Carver."

Carver hesitated. "I think it's more that you have to, isn't it?"

"It's complicated, Carver."

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“So I gather.” Carver was shutting him out again.

“Will you at least give me a chance?” Or try to. Christ, that part of David’s life was supposed to have been over. It died with Robin. “Carver?”

“Yeah, all right. I’ll come by later.” He hung up without another word.

It was going to be an uphill battle the entire goddamn way. David knew he only had himself to blame.

CHAPTER 12

Carver could hear David moving around upstairs when he let himself in.

It had been tempting to come over earlier, hell, to be waiting there when David got home from work. He still had enough pride left—barely—where David was concerned that he held out. His own apartment was spotless from the lengths he'd gone to not to crack early, but he'd done it.

Alexandra's phone message had been brief. She expected him at eleven-thirty that night if he was still interested in new opportunities. It was only quarter past ten now, so they had time for a quick briefing without any painful, awkward silences.

David was getting dressed when Carver found him.

"Getting" was perhaps an overstatement. David was wearing a

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towel, pacing back and forth between the dresser, bed and closet, picking things out and laying them on the bed, taking something else away and returning it where it belonged.

Carver had never seen him this uncertain about dressing before.

“What’s the dress code?” David didn’t look at him.

“Um.” He glanced down at his own jeans and polo. “Business casual, I guess.”

David glared at him before dropping his eyes again. “That’s not very helpful.”

“To be honest, no one keeps their clothes on long enough for me to tell. I can tell you what the staff wears, but beyond that...”

“Right, fine.” Whipping off the towel, he grabbed up a pair of dark jeans and stepped into them.

“No underwear?”

David froze for a moment, then tugged them the rest of the way on. “They get in the way.” His voice sounded oddly strained. He shrugged on a short sleeved, form-fitted button up. Finally, he faced Carver without looking at him. “Will this work?”

“I... Yeah, sure.” This was not the David Logan he knew. “What the hell is wrong with you, David?”

“Nothing’s wrong.” He started to step into a pair of loafers, then changed his mind for some low boots. “There’s a box in the top drawer of my dresser. Would you get it out?”

David wasn’t going to talk to him. Fine. Carver jerked open the drawer.

There was a finely polished cherry wood box sitting in amongst the neatly rolled belts and ties sorted by color in the drawer. Carver had never been in this drawer before. They had better tools than belts and ties for their bondage games, and Carver had never needed to borrow one of either, so he’d never even thought to look.

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This wasn't just a storage box. It was handcrafted, an elegant but simple pattern stained onto the surface under a thick lacquer of varnish. Picking it up with more care than he showed most things, Carver turned to offer it to David. "It's beautiful."

"Would you..." David was tense, the words coming difficultly. "Open it," he said with a little more force.

Carver found a strip of black leather etched with silver inside. It looked both well worn and well cared for. "Is this a collar?" It seemed such a crass word for the elegant object. He'd noticed a few at the club, but none looked like this.

"Would you please put it on me?" David spoke every word with seemingly great effort.

Why couldn't he do it himself? Keyed in with David's behavior, it was one more thing telling Carver this was a bad idea. "David, I don't think—"

"You never think, Carver," David snapped.

Now he looked at Carver, and Carver wished he wouldn't. His eyes were steely with anger and...pain. The odd combination left Carver feeling extremely uncomfortable.

"Put the collar on me now."

The command had Carver in motion and the collar almost fastened around David's neck before it fully registered. How did David do that?

When he finished settling the leather around David's neck, David visibly relaxed. His "Thank you" was almost too quiet to hear.

"David, maybe we should—"

David's eyes were back to looking somewhere just over Carver's shoulder. "We don't want to be late."

Carver was tempted to argue, but he was starting to think it

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wouldn't do any good.

They were silent on the drive over. David sat in the passenger seat and kept his own thoughts while Carver drove, wondering what in the hell was going on with his partner. David was uncharacteristically docile, but there was something underneath it, something Carver hated himself for not being able to read. The stable foundation he'd been living on for the last few months suddenly seemed to be shifting sands, and he wasn't sure how to respond.

Carver parked on the street up from the club and got out. David followed, quite literally. He never came fully even with Carver as they crossed the street and headed toward Venus, always staying a step or two behind, no matter how Carver changed his pace. Carver couldn't take it anymore and whirled to shove David into a doorway two shops up from Venus. "What are you doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Damn it, David, stop screwing around!"

"What did you think this would be like, Carver?" David hissed with more emotion than Carver had seen from him all night. "You wanted a sub? Congratulations, you got one. If you can't handle it, that's not my problem."

"I don't act like that."

"No? You don't drop your eyes when I tell you to do something? Don't give way whenever I ask for anything?"

"It's not like—"

"It's exactly like that, Carver. It's not about having someone to boss around. It's about having someone trust you so completely that they let you make those decisions for them. It's a goddamn responsibility, Carver, and now it's yours. Whether you like it or not."

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The whole time he never directly met Carver's gaze.

Carver realized how out of his depth he was. He'd thought—well, no, David was right there, he *hadn't* thought. He'd assumed he would be able to brazen his way through like everything else.

"What do I do?" They weren't even in the door and he'd fucked up. "David, tell me what to do."

David looked at him long enough to say, "No," and let the word sink in, before glancing down again.

"Goddamn it, David!"

David kept his mouth shut and eyes down.

"Fuck." Carver left the doorway, marching toward the club. That David silently followed irritated him further.

He knocked on the door with more force than necessary.

Lisle, the regular door girl, smiled when she opened the door for him. "Bit eager to get in tonight, Mr. Eliot?"

"Something like that."

She shook her head. "Alexandra's waiting for you in the office." Peering past him, her smile deepened when she saw David. "Oh, my."

"I'm beginning to think he's more trouble than he's worth," he grumbled.

"I'd be glad to take him off your hands for you."

"I'm tempted to give him to you." David winced, and instantly Carver felt ashamed.

Damn it, that's what this was about, wasn't it? His problem with a disobedient sub. *Suck it up, Carver. You can pay for it later. If David lets you.*

Lisle laughed lightly and closed the door. "I may take you up on that later. Thanks for the offer. Go on through."

Alexandra was at the desk, the light from the monitor giving

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her dark hair a ruddy glow in the softly lit office. She smiled when they came in. "I was hoping you'd come. Thea's looking forward to meeting you. And I'm dying to see what you think."

"Of what?"

"Oh, you'll see. This must be your...friend." She studied David critically, bottom lip caught between her teeth. "Well, I can see why you'd make dangerous bets with him. I bet that padlock was worth it. How do you do?" She offered David her hand. "I'm Alexandra, the chief hostess here."

David took it and, to Carver's surprise as much as Alexandra's, bent to kiss her knuckles suavely. "It's a pleasure, Miss Alexandra."

"Oh, you've done well, Carver. You sure I can't get you to swing a little farther the other way?"

With a grin, he brushed his lips over hers playfully. "Sorry, sweetheart, you just aren't man enough."

She chuckled. "All the good ones. Come on. Let me take you down the rabbit hole."

Leading them out into the hall, Alexandra headed right, away from the main room of the club and toward an inconspicuous door. Inside were assorted janitorial supplies, then a stairwell leading down into a normal looking basement-cum-wine cellar.

"I can't say there's much to impress me yet," Carver commented.

Alexandra laughed. "So impatient." She brought them to a door behind which was another set of stairs. "Mars Underground is close, but not too close, if you know what I mean."

"There's backstage and then there's over the river and through the woods."

"I assure you, Carver, Mars is nothing like your grandmother's

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house. Though, if it was, I think I'd love to meet her."

"Nah, she's like everyone's grandma. Big eyes, big teeth..." He grinned at her, then instantly felt guilty again. Here he was, flirting with Alexandra while ignoring David. When he glanced back, David seemed...placid somehow. Resigned, maybe.

Damn it.

The long hallway was claustrophobic, narrow, rock-hewn walls painted a creamy white to add an illusion of space, faux Persian carpet on the floor and elegant wall sconces lighting the way. It was much in the same mode as Venus itself was. They followed single file behind Alexandra, who kept glancing back over her shoulder with a secret smile. Finally, the tension got to be too much for him. "What?"

"I'm looking forward to seeing your reaction."

"If we ever get there."

She stopped and pressed a button on one of the wall sconces, revealing a door he hadn't noticed cut into the wall. "We're there."

"There" consisted of another long stairway that left Carver breathless by the time they got to the top. Even from there, he could hear sounds of activity coming from the rooms beyond, sounds that had little in common with the susurrations of pleasure making up the soundtrack at Venus. This was hard and driven and—

"Was that a whip?"

Alexandra laughed. "Sweetie, prepare to have your eyes opened."

She pushed the door wide, revealing a dark, dimly lit room that could only be called a den of sin. There were contraptions and devices, implements and tools, many of which Carver had never dreamed existed.

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“Je-sus.”

A quiet snort came from behind him.

He whirled on David. “Something funny?”

David shook his head, eyes downcast, and his face mostly impassive, save for the slightest curling of his lips. The bastard was laughing at him.

“Alexandra, what are the rules here?” he called back.

Wrapping her long arms around him, she leaned her chin on his shoulder and whispered, “No rules here, Carver. Anything and everything goes.”

“What about—”

“Anything and *everything*.”

Fuck.

The place was pretty intense. Venus had been open-minded about same-sex pairs, but it seemed more prevalent here, where the men outnumbered the women three to two. The décor itself seemed to foster a more hardcore atmosphere. Everything was in black and chrome, the floor a faux marble that would be hard on the knees but would wash easily. “Utilitarian” would have been a good description for it if only it didn’t all look so damn expensive. He’d never seen so much black leather before, both on the furniture and on the clients, those who bothered to wear anything. There was no privacy here like in Venus. Everything acted out was on the main floor, out for public consumption. Watching seemed to be the secondary entertainment, with a fair amount of heckling as well.

There was a small stage at one end of the room, occupied by two guys teaching a woman the benefit of multiple orifices. Several swings hung here and there around the room, all of them occupied, giving Carver some lovely images of hanging David up in one for a few hours. Bondage apparatuses took up the corners of

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the room, with couches similar to weight benches taking up the space in the middle. It was smaller than Venus, with a smaller attendance, maybe twenty-five or thirty couples in various permutations.

“So,” Alexandra asked expectantly, “what do you think?”

“It’s...comprehensive.”

She shook her head and laughed. “You are so jaded, Carver. It’s what I like about you. Here.” She slipped a blue rubber bracelet around his wrist, the kind once used to promote various causes until they became overused and fell out of fashion.

“What’s this for?” he asked as she put one on David as well.

“It lets the others know your preferences. Blue for same-sex only, black for hetero only, white for anything goes.” She looked at David and then to Carver. “He does swing the same as you, I assume?”

He remembered the conversation they’d had the other night during his “training” session. “Yeah, that’s fine.”

“Too bad.” She winked at David.

To Carver’s surprise, David winked back.

“Thea will be with you in a minute. In the meantime, can I get you something to drink? We’ve got a lovely absinthe.”

“Boy, you weren’t kidding about having everything. Where did you get absinthe?”

She put her finger to her carefully painted mouth. “Ancient Chinese secret. I told you we could get you anything you wanted here.”

He was beginning to see the truth of that. “Just a beer for me.”

“What about your friend?”

“Oh.” He kept forgetting, even if she didn’t. All David’s decisions had to come from Carver. It was hard enough making up

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his own mind, let alone reading David's. "For both of us. Beer is fine."

"Be right back."

He blew out a breath as soon as she was out of earshot. "Okay, so in over my head here."

"You're doing fine," David said, voice equally low, still not quite looking at him. "Stop feeling guilty about it. If you don't start owning it, the others are going to know."

"What others?"

"Look around you, Carver. This isn't a place for dilettantes. You aren't the only dom here, and the others can read weakness. It's a constant struggle for who's the alpha dom. If you falter even a little, they're going to see it and then we're both going to be in trouble."

"In trouble how?"

David's eyes were flinty. "Let's just say I don't want to be on the bottom of the fuck pile to see who gets me for themselves after they drive you out."

"They wouldn't do that."

"How did you spend so much time as a cop and still know so little?"

"How do you know so much?" he shot back.

"I had a good teacher."

Before he could come back, Alexandra returned with their drinks. With her was a tall redhead built like a brick outhouse and dressed like a Fredrick's of Hollywood fantasy. Nothing indecent showed, but the skin-tight, low cut satin emphasized every curve and demonstrated emphatically that she didn't have a damn thing on underneath.

"Carver Eliot," Alexandra made the introductions, "please meet

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my boss, Thea.”

Thea offered her hand, and Carver shook it politely. She ignored David. “Welcome to Mars, Mr. Eliot. Or should I call you Detective Eliot?”

Carver’s heart stopped.

“Or better yet, ex-detective?” She smiled. “Our background checks are extremely thorough, Carver. I have to know I can trust my clientele. And my clientele should know that they can trust me.”

Meaning she knew every dirty secret to play her patrons to her advantage, if the need arose. “You’re a brilliant and frightening woman, Thea.”

“I can ask for no higher compliment.” Moving around him, she drew up next to David. “Who is this remarkable specimen?”

“This is David.” He didn’t dare give his last name, or this Thea would know she had an active cop on her hands, and a clean one at that.

“Very nice. I admire your taste.” She circled David, sizing him up. “He’ll make a fine addition to our stable here.”

“I don’t think—”

David cut him off, dropping his head with a crisp, polite, “Thank you, mistress.”

She laughed in startled pleasure. “So very well trained! Nicely done, Mr. Eliot.” To Carver’s mortification, she began unbuttoning David’s shirt. “I understand from Alexandra that you’ve had some discipline problems with him lately.”

Cursing himself again for not thinking things through before getting David into this mess, he tried to mitigate the damage. “Some. Nothing too out of line.”

“Just enough to be a distraction, hmm?” She shoved David’s

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shirt off his shoulders and stood back to admire his chest. “Well, I think we can help with that. From Alexandra’s description, I had expected him to be more recalcitrant. Those ones need a firmer hand. This one I think only needs a reminder. Alexandra?”

Alexandra nodded. “David, follow me.”

“Now, hold on,” Carver protest. “What do you think—”

“Relax, Carver.” Thea looped an arm around his shoulders. “Alexandra has very capable hands, as you well know. She won’t damage the goods. Promise.”

While he didn’t distrust Alexandra, he didn’t fully trust her either, despite their camaraderie. He certainly didn’t like David taken out of his sight. Before tonight, he would have had no worries about David taking care of himself, but here his lover had become someone else entirely. Carver couldn’t say how far David would need to be pushed before he broke character.

“I’m sure she wouldn’t.” He forced a confidence he didn’t feel. “However, I prefer to always keep my eye on David. No telling what goes on behind your back.”

Thea caressed his back. “I understand your paranoia completely. David could very well be a hot commodity here at Mars. Yes, perhaps it is best, in the beginning that you don’t stray too far from each other.” She gave him a gentle push. “Alexandra will show you to Room Eleven. It’ll allow you two to acclimate before joining the main floor.”

David was already naked by the time he caught up with them in the private room.

It was little more than a closet, shelves on one wall, the ubiquitous black leather bench in one corner. Alexandra was folding David’s pants neatly when Carver found them, David’s boots already lined up beneath the bench. David glanced up when

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Carver came in, the look on his face so vulnerable, so trusting, it made Carver's blood run cold.

"His collar is beautiful," she commented, putting the pants on a shelf. "Where did you get it?"

"Oh, it's... I..." He struggled for inspiration. "Provincetown. I picked it up in a craft shop there on vacation." There. That should be difficult enough to trace.

"It's lovely." She trailed her hand down David's chest. "It's like it was made for him."

David winced, but whether from the words or the touch, Carver wasn't sure.

Alexandra drew away with obvious reluctance. "I'll leave you boys to get settled in. Robes are behind the door, should you feel the need. There's a brown one that would suit you perfectly." Then she was gone, closing the door behind her.

Alone, finally. He turned around to ask David what he was supposed to do, but David cut him off with a quick shake of his head and drew near.

"May I undress you?"

"Uh...yeah. Yes, uh, you can."

David moved behind him, hands settling on Carver's waist and working his shirt up. Lips teased against Carver's ear and David's voice was barely audible. "Eyes and ears everywhere. You always have to be on."

Well, fuck.

"Oh, I almost forgot." As though to reinforce David's warning, Alexandra popped back in and offered Carver two sets of straps. One was a ball gag, too familiar to Carver from their bondage play at home. The other was four leather straps around a central steel ring, each strap ending in a padded leather manacle. This one was

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not in David's arsenal, but it was easy enough to figure out its use. "I remember how you said you planned to punish him for the other day. Thought you could use these."

It was David who took them. "Thank you, Miss Alexandra."

"You're welcome, David," she responded with the same level of politeness. "I'm sure they'll look exquisite on you."

"I hope you enjoy."

"Please, Carver? Can't I have him just once?"

"Depends on how he behaves. If he can't learn his lesson..."

"Oh, I'm punishment. I like that." She shook her head with a laugh. "Don't linger too long, gentlemen, or I'll have to come and find you."

As soon as she was gone again, Carver tried once more. "I don't think this is such a good—"

Taking his hand, David led him back out into the main room.

Carver felt more overdressed here in just his slacks than he ever had in Venus, and the sensory overload was overwhelming. Music throbbed at a primal bass beat, cries of pleasure and pain making up the harmonies. The air was thick with the smell of sweat and sex and nauseatingly sweet smoke. It was impossible to pick out individuals and couples in the writhing mass, making all the random encounters look like one massively orchestrated orgy.

David studied the crowd critically, never releasing the sex toys Alexandra had given him. Before Carver could ask what he was doing, he stepped away to intercept a young man with a white bracelet coming back from the bar. They spoke quietly for a few moments, and then, to Carver's surprise and sudden jealousy, David leaned forward and kissed the man, taking his time and obviously getting into it. When they broke apart, David caught his hand and led him over to Carver.

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“This is Martin.” He introduced him as though this Martin was one of his oldest friends.

“How do you do, Martin?”

“Very well, sir, thank you for asking.” His answer was crisp and polite, and he had that same way of not quite looking at Carver that David had affected. Was this how subs acted? Was this what he did with David without ever noticing?

“Martin is going to help punish me.”

The words stopped Carver’s thoughts cold. “What in the hell—
..

David handed him back the straps Alexandra had given him. “I know I was wrong to be so forward about our bet. I’m sorry, and I accept my punishment.”

“David, I—”

“Please.” His tone was part warning and part desperation. “Here where everyone can see. I want them to know how much I regret my behavior.”

Shit. This shouldn’t be turning him on so much. “It’s not punishment if you’re looking forward to it, David,” he said, as sternly as he could manage.

David instantly dropped his eyes, sending a rush of adrenaline straight to Carver’s cock. “No, sir. I’m sorry, sir.”

Carver closed in on David, enjoying the sensation of power over his lover, however false and fleeting it might be. “Not yet. But you will be.”

The manacles didn’t work quite the way handcuffs did, but he still managed to get David’s wrists locked behind him in no time, using the straps to lever David’s arms up and force him farther out onto the floor, more into the general mix of bodies. Each one brushing against Carver’s bare arms and chest sent another shudder

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of arousal through him until the animal part of his brain wanted to throw himself into the crowd and fuck all of them until he was sated. But he had more important things to focus on. Finding a clear bench, he shoved David down to his knees and bent him backward, weaving the remaining straps of the hogtie through the legs of the bench before wrapping the manacles around his ankles, trapping him there.

“Now maybe I’ll just leave you there for the rest of the night,” he threatened against David’s ear, loud enough to be heard by Martin and anyone else nearby paying enough attention to listen. “But I think that mouth of yours is just too damn tempting, don’t you, Martin?”

Martin looked startled to be addressed, but agreed. “Very tempting.”

“You’d fuck that mouth, wouldn’t you?”

Martin licked his lips. “Anything you want me to do, sir.”

“Maybe if you do what you’re told very well, I’ll let you. You’d like that, wouldn’t you, David? After all, that’s what got you in this mess in the first place, isn’t it? Sucking on any cock that came by.”

David dropped his head, but Carver could read the flush of his skin. “I’m sorry, sir. I shouldn’t have demanded the bet.”

“No, you shouldn’t have.” Stepping closer, Carver ran his thumb along Martin’s lips. “How about you, Martin? Are you a good little cocksucker?”

Martin leaned close enough to brush his lips across Carver’s. “It would make me very happy to show you.”

“Mmm.” Carver gave in to the scene and kissed Martin, tongue and lips and teeth reminding them both who was in charge. By the time they finished, Martin was already sinking to his knees. “Hold

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up. We can't have David's dirty mouth distracting him from his discipline." Almost lovingly, he forced David's jaw down and shoved the ball gag in place, buckling it snugly behind his head. "There. Now we won't be disturbed, will we?"

Eyes wide, David shook his head.

Undoing his fly, Carver gripped the back of Martin's head, shoving his pants out of the way. "Go ahead, Martin. Show me what you can do."

Martin obeyed at once, mouth wrapping around the head of Carver's cock before taking him all the way in without a hint of gag reflex. It was something that always looked more impressive than it felt. Fuck, did it look good. Retreating some, Martin started to prove that he had skill as well as show to bring to the table. Too much teeth for Carver's preference, but the wicked, knowing tongue and right amount of pressure that made his toes curl more than made up for it. Carver let Martin bring him to the edge. Right. There. Then he dragged Martin off and held himself back.

Glancing over at David almost tipped him over. Bound nearly immobile, gagged, with his cock straining upward...he was a pretty picture.

"You see, David, anyone can suck cock well if they put their mind to it. Easy enough to trade one mouth for another." He caressed Martin's head like a well-trained dog. "So tell me, David, why is it I don't throw you over for a good boy like our Martin?"

David's nostrils flared as his breathing picked up even more.

Carver reached behind David's head, toying with the strap. "Before I let you speak, bear this in mind—the answer better be damned good, otherwise it's Martin going home with me. Understood?"

David nodded once.

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Carver released the catch. “Well?”

David swallowed the saliva that had built up in his mouth from the gag, licking his lips to moisten them before saying hoarsely, “Because it’s not my mouth you love to fuck.”

And he was damn lucky when he got a chance at it. Mars might have its upside after all. Carver smiled at David, the smile he knew showed too many teeth. “Maybe if you’re very obedient, we’ll both get what I want.” How satisfying to throw that back at David. He turned to Martin. “On the bench. David’s going to show us both how good he can be.”

Martin straddled the bench eagerly, edging closer to David’s end, eyes wide in anticipation. Reaching down, Carver undid the manacles around David’s wrists, allowing him to face Martin. Before he could move in, Carver caught David’s hair and pulled his head back. “Make it good, David. I’ll be very disappointed if you don’t.”

David nodded against Carver’s grip. When Carver released him, David rose up on his knees, massaging Martin’s spread thighs in long, generous strokes that incorporated his balls and cock, the strokes getting shorter and shorter until at last he was just jerking Martin’s cock. Carver settled on the bench behind Martin, enjoying the friction of Martin’s spine against his hard-on and the lovely view down Martin’s chest into David’s mouth.

David took his time, hands and mouth working in tandem to increase Martin’s arousal. Martin was very vocal in his pleasure, scrubbing his fingers through David’s hair with each caress, hips already anticipating fucking David’s gorgeous mouth. When his tongue finally spiraled Martin’s cock into his mouth, Martin swore.

“How long do you think you can hold out, Martin?” Carver asked against his ear.

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Martin shook his head. "Too good. Not long now."

Carver grabbed a condom and some lube off the tray of a passing server. "Long enough. Hold on, Martin. David's lesson isn't done yet."

He got up off the bench, ripping open the condom and rolling it on as he moved behind David. This wasn't the place for a slow, considerate preparation, so he made do with an overabundance of lubricant before settling behind David.

They both groaned at the first penetration, David's muffled by Martin's cock in his mouth.

God, he was always so fucking tight, yet he always took Carver with great ease. The perfect combination and hot as hell.

He leaned close to David's ear and warned, "If you don't bring him off before I come, there'll be hell to pay. And you aren't to come at all."

Not waiting for a response, Carver began pounding into David, hard and relentless and determined to drive David as close to the edge as he could manage. To his credit, David's attention to Martin didn't falter in the slightest, the man becoming more vocal as David used every dirty trick he'd ever used on Carver.

"Oh, God... Oh, fuck..." Martin's lithe body tensed and shuddered under David's onslaught.

Carver gave himself over to the sensations and sounds of sex everywhere.

Martin's alto shriek preceded his orgasm. Two more thrusts and Carver came as well, collapsing against David's back.

"You are fucking amazing," he said low enough he was certain only David could hear.

Reluctantly, Carver withdrew, depositing the spent condom in the bin readily provided by a club attendant. He caressed the pale

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curve of David's ass, then landed a resounding smack against the right cheek.

David sighed.

Standing up, Carver helped Martin to his feet as well. "Thanks for your help. I think I can manage from here."

"Any time." With a content smile, Martin kissed him, languid and invasive, and Carver allowed it, cupping Martin's head for a moment before pulling away. Bending down, Martin kissed the top of David's head as well before wandering out into the crowd.

The benches were adjustable, allowing Carver to raise one end and recline against it, drawing David up to lie back against Carver's chest. It was comfortable, and Carver allowed himself the dangerous affection of a soft kiss against David's ear, even as he trailed his hand down to David's still rigid cock.

"Thank you for this," he said, low enough to be lost in the ambient noise of the place, as he almost negligently began stroking David's cock.

"Don't," David insisted.

Carver knew he meant the apology and not the jerk-off.

"No, David. You have to listen to me now, the same way you have to do whatever I want." He took his time, milking David, massaging his balls with a steady grip, holding him tenderly, ignoring the people around them, either lost in their own thing or watching others who were. "I know this was difficult for you. I know what it cost you to do this. It means a lot to me that you did it anyway."

"Carver," David said.

"Hmm?"

"Over there. Getting out of the swing. Isn't that your girl?"

Carver's eyes shot to where David indicated, but all he saw was

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a flash of blonde hair before the girl, whoever she was, disappeared beneath the limbs and bodies of the men surrounding her.

At least one of them was still doing their job. *Shit.*

Continuing the easy strokes on David, he tried to see through the mass of flesh writhing in front of him. “How did she look?”

David snorted.

“Not like that. Did she look under duress or...”

“Thoroughly and happily fucked.”

“The mouth on you. It’s possible she’s being drugged.”

“Too in control. And I can’t be certain it was her.”

“Contrary to popular belief, all blonde women do not look the same.”

“To me they do.”

“I still don’t believe you haven’t tried the other side at least once.”

Any reply he might have made was lost as Alexandra wandered over. “You boys put on quite the show.” She straddled the bench in front of them, eyes riveted on David. “I can see why Carver keeps you around.”

“Thank you, Miss Alexandra.”

“So polite.” Stroking his thigh, she glanced slyly at Carver. “It’s no wonder he steps out of line if you treat him like this after punishment.”

“Positive reinforcement, sweetheart.” He reached over and removed her wandering hand from David’s thigh. “None of that. I won’t have you corrupting him with your wily ways.”

She gave a coy pout, but did as instructed. “So what’s next for you boys?”

Carver didn’t stop stroking David off, enjoying feeling him get

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a little bit harder with Alexandra's presence. He kept it casual, like this was the most natural thing in the world, even if it was making him hard enough to pound nails again already. "I was thinking maybe the swing," he suggested just as casually, directing her interest to the spot David thought he had seen Abby. "Think they're done over there?"

Alexandra grinned. "Yeah, I think Abby's moved on to the floor show. Come on." She took David's hand and dragged him to his feet. "I'll help you get set up."

There was the confirmation they had been looking for. Now it was a matter of tracking Abby down and finding out if she were there of her own free will or under coercion.

Except they'd established an airtight, pussy-free cover story. It was going to look obvious if they started asking around about a girl. In the meantime, he had his tiger by the tail again. How long David would let him keep up the illusion was anyone's guess.

One way or another, this was going to end up biting him in the ass. He wasn't looking forward to it.

CHAPTER 13

David had slipped into the sub role like an old, well-worn suit. A suit that felt far too comfortable, though he hadn't worn it in more than three years. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed it. When Robin died, that piece of his life was supposed to be as good as dead, too. If he intended to rise through the ranks of Pittsburgh's finest, it was a world he shouldn't be a part of.

"You going to sit there all night, or you coming inside?" Carver peered back down into the car.

"Yeah, I'm coming." Crawling out, David led the way to his house. Doms didn't sub. Rule one in the book of Robin Faulkner. No, rule one was *always* use protection. Doms not subbing was a near equivalent number two. He'd broken it, more than gladly before the night was half over. He'd slipped so easily back into

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that familiar rhythm.

First thing he did when he reached the bedroom was grab the varnished box, turning to Carver. He waited.

Carver paused with his shirt half off. “What?” He looked at the box. “Oh, come on. You’ve got two good hands; you can take it off yourself.”

David shook his head. “No, Carver, I need you to do it.”

“David—”

“I *need* you to remove it, Carver,” he said tightly. “That’s how this works.”

Carver opened his mouth to protest, then stopped. “Fine, whatever.” He removed the collar with more care than his attitude would dictate. “I suppose you want me to put it away, too, huh?”

“Yes.” David didn’t wait once Carver took it, heading into the bathroom.

He locked the door behind him.

It wasn’t to keep Carver out. Not really. It was to keep himself in. He’d pushed too hard tonight and lost his center, that sense of himself that was always so present, and he needed to get it back, which he couldn’t do with Carver all over him.

Turning the bath taps on as hot as he could stand, he got undressed, folding up his clothes before putting them in the hamper, despite the urge to let them lie on the floor. In the shower, he took his time, using a rough face cloth and half his bottle of body wash to remove any lingering trace of sweat, come, and cologne off of and out of his body, savoring the coarse scratch of terry cloth over every inch of his skin. He washed his hair twice and shaved in the shower while the faint stubble of the day was still soft. The water was starting to get cool by the time he got out. He combed his hair before brushing his teeth with care, followed

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by two rounds of mouthwash. He applied deodorant and cologne before he put on his robe and went back out to the bedroom.

Carver stopped pacing. "David, look—"

"Go and shower, Carver."

"David, can we—"

"I said," he repeated, a hint of threat in his voice, "go and shower."

Carver frowned, looking like he was ready to argue, then stalked into the bathroom and slammed the door.

The box was still sitting on top of the dresser.

"Damn it, Carver, I tell you to do one simple thing..." he grumbled. He started to put the box away, but stopped himself. That was the issue, wasn't it? Carver had been the one telling him what to do all evening. They had both forgotten their real roles.

David was still standing at the dresser when Carver emerged from the shower, towel wrapped idly around him.

"You didn't put it away," David said.

"Your collar, your box, your dresser. Put it away yourself." Carver dropped on the bed with a contented groan. "God, that was fucking exhausting."

David waited.

"What?"

"I asked you," he said in a quiet, dangerous voice, "to put it away."

With a growl of irritation, Carver rolled off the bed and stormed over to the dresser, shoved the box in the drawer and slammed the door shut. "There. Are you happy? Can we please go to bed now?"

David took the box back out of the drawer, set it on top and turned to Carver. "Put it away properly."

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Carver's eyes narrowed. "Fuck you."

David slapped him.

"Put it away properly," he said again.

Carver seemed to weigh his options, then with deliberate care opened the drawer, set the case in, and shut it. "There. Happy?" It was very clearly another "Fuck you." "Don't you dare slap me like that again. I'm not your bitch."

"Yes, you are."

"Right, whatever. I'm going to bed. You can stand here and be an asshole."

David grabbed Carver's wrist as he started away, quickly twisting it up behind his back and pulling him into the chokehold. "You've forgotten your place, Carver," David whispered.

"And you've lost your fucking mind." Carver tried to twist free. "Christ, I hate you sometimes."

"Then why are you still here?"

He didn't answer.

It was tempting to force him to answer or leave, but that was risky. Right now David had the advantage, but if he let go of Carver, even for a moment, he would lose that. "You need me, Carver," he said instead, reaching into the drawer behind him. "You felt it tonight at the club. You're lost without me there to tell you what to do, to give you focus and direction."

Pulling out a narrow belt, he slipped the leather through the catch one-handed and lashed it around Carver's wrists. "You could leave. You've been free to leave anytime." Satisfied now that Carver couldn't escape him, he released him with a slight shove that sent him stumbling. "So why haven't you?"

"Because I haven't wanted to," Carver answered, arms flexing with effort as he tried to free his hands. Finally, he gave up. "Even

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when you act like a complete bastard.”

“You’d know.”

“Yeah, well... Are you at least going to tell me what the hell is wrong with you tonight?”

“No.”

“Last night?”

“No.”

Carver turned his back to David and raised his wrists. “Then undo this. I’m too tired to play any of your fucking games, David. I’m going home.”

David drew close to Carver, running his hand from Carver’s bound wrists to his shoulder. Gripping tightly, he forced Carver to his knees. “No.”

“You try to feed me your cock and I swear to God, I’ll rip it off.”

“First things first.” He pulled another belt out of the drawer with a whip-like hiss and used it to cinch Carver’s ankles together. Carver tried to resist, but hampered as he was, he couldn’t do much more than delay the inevitable. Then, using a third belt, David linked the two, bowing Carver backward until his hands and ankles met.

“Goddamn it, David, this hurts!”

David petted his hair. “Stop struggling and it won’t.”

Of course he didn’t. “Fuck you, David. I swear to God—”

He stopped cold when David took out the ball gag.

This time David didn’t give Carver the option. Despite Carver’s desperate attempts to escape, David jammed the ball between his teeth and buckled the straps in place, rendering him effectively silent.

Then he left him there.

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Carver's muffled protests followed him to the closet where he retrieved his suit and shirt for the next day. The protests grew louder while David took his time picking out the perfect tie to wear. Turning back to Carver, he asked with deliberate casualness, "The red or the blue?"

"Mmph mrr!"

"Good point. Gray it is." Laying the new tie over the hanger, he closed the doors and hung his suit on the front. Then it was back to the bathroom to switch off the light Carver had left on. He returned to where he had bound Carver and crouched down in front of him. "Are you ready to listen yet?"

If looks could kill. Carver nodded.

David settled into the armchair across from the bed, positioning himself above Carver. In his struggles, Carver had lost his towel, leaving him naked and even more vulnerable. Just what the situation called for. "You pointed out that we've never really talked about our relationship."

Carver glared at him.

"I think it's time we did. I don't want you to get the wrong idea from tonight, Carver. I was doing you a favor, nothing more."

Carver hated not being able to talk back; David could see it in the way Carver's jaw worked around the gag.

"Our relationship has gotten out of control. Out of my control. Had I trained you properly, tonight never would have happened."

One of Carver's eyebrows rose.

"Right, knowing you, it still would have happened. You have a knack for making messes for yourself. However, you would have known with absolute certainty what behavior was expected from you this evening."

"Mmph."

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David held up his hand. "I'm not done. Now, the only way I can see to resolve our problem is to start from the beginning."

Carver shook his head.

"You don't think so? I've given you far too much freedom, Carver. I have also neglected taking you to task when you step out of line. We need to start from scratch."

Carver began struggling again.

David held his breath. "Or you can leave."

Carver froze.

"I know what you're thinking—what the fuck kind of choice is that? It's the only choice there ever is, stay or go. It's the one choice I never gave you. We fell in together. At least now you have an idea of what you're getting into."

He still didn't move.

"I am going to ask you this only one time, Carver, so think very hard. Keep in mind that things are going to change." David paused, letting the words sink in. "Do you want out, Carver?"

Carver wanted to argue with him. To not be able to, not be able to bludgeon his way through this with words and actions was killing him. Which was the point. There should be no argument. David was in charge, and Carver, if he accepted this lifestyle, should accept it willingly. But he was so busy trying to have it both ways that he'd never made the choice. Here, now, bound and silent, he couldn't escape it. For once in his life, Carver actually had to think about something.

Ignoring his own fluttering fear of rejection, David stood up and undid the strap linking Carver's wrists and ankles together, only to loop it around one foot on the bed and back around his wrists. Carver didn't struggle, didn't resist, just stared at him with a look that was part frustration and part betrayal. David stroked his

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cheek around the strap and kissed his forehead. “Don’t rush. This will change your whole life. Sleep on it tonight.”

“Mmrf.”

Turning off the lights, David shed his robe and climbed into the bed, burying himself under the covers. He listened until he heard Carver settle down on the rug for sleep or a long night of thinking.

He continued listening long after Carver started softly snoring.

CHAPTER 14

He'd slept on the rug like a fucking dog. Carver couldn't decide if he was more disgusted with himself for playing along or for falling asleep. Between his wrists being bound and sleeping on the goddamned rug by David's bed, his back was killing him. Everything combined to put him in a very bad mood that morning. He couldn't even complain because the ball gag was still firmly in place.

Sure, he could avoid this humiliation and everything David was going to throw at him, but that meant walking away. From David. That seemed a hell of a lot worse in comparison.

It took him ten minutes to realize that David had already left for work.

Glancing behind, Carver found himself still firmly affixed to

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the bed leg. It had been a running joke between them, leaving Carver bound while David went to work. Except those cases involved Carver being bound on the bed, not bound to the bed on the fucking floor!

You're a dead man, Logan. He growled against the gag, again tugging ineffectually at the bindings.

To make matters worse, he had to take a leak. Of course, thinking about it only made matters worse. There was no way in hell he was going to piddle on the rug like a naughty puppy.

David wasn't just going to be dead, he was going to be really dead. After Carver got free.

First things first, he needed to get free from the bed. At least it was close enough to the floor that, with enough leverage, he could lift the corner he was bound to. Maybe if he could get his legs far enough under, he could manage it.

Dead, he repeated as he flopped onto his side and began to scooch his legs under the bed. If he got rug burn on top of this, David would be lucky to be dead.

He got the bed up on the first try. Unfortunately, he very nearly took his little finger off when he lost his hold. The second and third attempts were equally as fruitless, but less damaging. By the fourth, he freed himself, well as free as he could be with wrists and ankles still bound, said wrists still tied behind him.

Right, piss first, then he'd worry about the rest.

It proved more difficult to get to his feet than it was to lift the bed. He succeeded eventually, almost falling a half dozen times as he bunny-hopped to the bathroom. His aim proved surprisingly good, much to his irritation. Would have served David right if he'd pissed all over the toilet. Though Carver knew he'd be the one cleaning up.

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Once he averted that crisis and could relax a bit more, he considered his predicament. He needed his hands free if he was going to get out of this at all. Without being able to see what he was doing, he couldn't get his fingers around high enough to unlatch the buckle. So first priority had to be getting his hands in front of him.

Backing up to the tub, he trapped his hands against the edge and started forcing his backside through the circle of his arms. It was slow going, but, for once, he was grateful to have such a skinny ass. Any more pelvis and he'd be stuck. Finally, his hips worked past his elbows and he stumbled backward into the tub, his wrists now down around his knees. He scrambled to pull his legs free and sit up, his hands now right where he needed.

Except he still couldn't reach the buckle.

Fingers were out, which left teeth. It wasn't until he brought his wrist to his mouth that he realized he still wore the ball gag. Now he'd have a sore jaw on top of everything else. *Lovely*. Several futile tries later, he got the damned gag undone, working his jaw in relief.

"Dead," he said hoarsely as he began working at the belt buckle, soon growing sick of the taste of leather.

By late morning he was unbound, every muscle in his body aching like a son of a bitch. Carver was still mad as hell at David, but quite proud of himself. At least he could add escape artist to his list of useful skills.

Outside a long, hot shower, brushing his teeth, and finding himself some food, he didn't have a clue what he was going to do next. David had given him an ultimatum. He should probably think about that, but he didn't want to give David the satisfaction. He wasn't about to leave, nor did he much care to spend another night

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on the floor. Not leaving, not committing. There, he'd thought about it.

He could sit around and plot revenge, but even that was going to get boring. Which left work. He needed to find out more about Mars, if he could. Time to look up some of his old contacts.

After he showered and ate.

* * *

There wasn't much for David to do but catch up on paperwork and think about Carver.

He had been torn that morning getting ready for work. Obviously last night's activities at Mars and the emotional assault afterward had overwhelmed Carver, who didn't so much as flinch the entire time David dressed. It was tempting to unlock him, or at the very least throw a blanket over him, but that would send the wrong message, which would have made the whole thing pointless. He'd reminded himself of that three times during breakfast and again on his way out the door. Carver would be fine.

He kept to his office, not wanting to have to explain what he was working on to any of his colleagues. "Oh, I'm subbing at a sex club these days," didn't have the right sound to it, no matter if he was technically undercover.

Scotty stopped by on her way back from lunch and dropped off a salad. "You look like someone killed your cat."

He took the salad gratefully. "I don't have a cat."

"You know what I mean. Everything okay?"

"Everything's fine, Detective."

She held up her hands innocently. "Okay, okay. Just making sure."

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He relented. "Thank you for the salad," he said, gesturing with the box.

"You're welcome." There was a hint of understanding that made it seem like she was saying more. "We're going out for drinks tonight, me and Doughty and some of the guys. You want to come? Maybe give Carver a call?"

He thought again of Carver tied to the bed. "Not tonight. But thank you."

She gave him a small smile before heading back to her desk.

At first, he was hungry, but by the third bite of the no doubt excellent salad, David had lost the taste for it. Finally, he closed the box and shoved it aside. Maybe he'd be more in the mood for it later.

By the time three o'clock came and went with no sign of his appetite returning, he surrendered and got up to toss the box away in the staff room and make his apologies to Scotty. He was halfway out the door when he froze.

Carver was leaning on the edge of Scotty's desk, talking animatedly with her and Doughty.

He'd gotten free. Of course, he'd gotten free. Carver was a determined bastard when he wanted to be. Unfortunately, David couldn't decide if he was upset because Carver had gotten free and was currently standing in the station, mocking him, or if he was upset because he was impressed by the fact Carver had managed to get free and had the balls to show up here.

David continued to the staff room as he'd intended, not giving the slightest indication he'd seen Carver. On the return journey, he said to Scotty and Doughty, "This isn't social hour, Detectives."

"Not even a hello for a former colleague." Carver tsked. "Good to see your manners haven't improved any, Lieutenant."

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"If you aren't here on business," he said stonily, "I suggest you save your conversation for off shift."

Carver turned to lean more fully against the desks, crossing his arms over his chest. "As a matter of fact, I *am* here on business."

"Why, did you find something?"

"No, but Commander Montgomery asked me to stop by."

David's briefly reclaimed control was slipping out of his grasp all too fast. "He didn't tell me."

"I didn't realize I had to run my decisions past you, Lieutenant."

Montgomery stood right behind him, an amused smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"No, sir, of course not."

"Eliot," the commander greeted Carver, offering his hand, "good to see you again."

Carver shook it. "You're just saying that."

"As long as I'm not responsible for you, I'm more than happy to see you."

"So what've you got?"

"Let's take this to my office. I'm certain you remember the way."

"Burned into my brain, Commander."

"So, are you in or out, Carver?" Scotty called after him.

"I'm in. Especially since you're buying the first round."

She just laughed.

Doughty chimed in. "Maybe you can convince Lieutenant Logan to join us."

Carver glanced at David and snorted. "I have a feeling you have a better chance than I would." He disappeared into Montgomery's office, only to poke his head out a moment later.

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“The commander says he doesn’t have all day, Lieutenant. Might want to get a move on before he takes it into his head to demote you.”

David glared at Scotty and Doughty, who only watched him innocently, before marching into Montgomery’s office.

“I appreciate you taking the time to come in today, Eliot,” Montgomery was saying, settling into his chair. “Have a seat. You, too, Lieutenant.”

Carver was already slouched comfortably in one chair, leaving David no choice but to settle in the other.

“I wanted to touch base with you about your current case and express the department’s gratitude at your willingness to allow one of our officers to shadow you,” the commander went on. “I know it’s not your preferred working style.”

Carver didn’t hesitate. “I couldn’t have done it without Lieutenant Logan, sir. He helped provide the perfect cover.”

David winced.

“So you’re in?”

“Yes, sir,” David took over before Carver could get warmed up with the innuendo. It would be just his style, not knowing Montgomery already knew about their relationship. “We made our first visit last night.”

“And?”

“That’s about all there is to report at this juncture.”

“So you don’t count spying our missing girl as worthy to report,” Carver chimed in.

“We don’t know that for certain.”

“You seemed pretty certain.”

David frowned.

“My contact at the club also confirmed the identity.”

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"You didn't think this worthy of mentioning, Lieutenant?" Montgomery addressed him.

"There was nothing concrete, sir."

Carver leaned back casually. "Still, it's the biggest lead you've had on this girl since the get-go."

David couldn't say for certain, but Montgomery seemed the slightest bit amused by everything. It was also possible that he was being paranoid. But not likely.

"When do you go back?" Montgomery addressed Carver. It made sense since Carver was the one talking. Perfectly logical and David didn't feel slighted.

"Not for a couple days," Carver replied easily. "Shows we're interested but not too interested. Unfortunately, our cover is such that getting close to Abby isn't going to be easy."

"God forbid you should ever try the easy way," David grumbled, realizing too late that he'd done it out loud. Carver wasn't supposed to get to him like this. At all. Especially here. *Damn it.*

"I'd like you in for a briefing the afternoon following your next visit," Montgomery concluded, effectively dismissing them.

Carver nodded and rose. It was the most deference he'd likely ever shown the commander, which only further aggravated David.

He started to leave, but Montgomery called him back. "A word, if you wouldn't mind, Lieutenant."

"Sir." He sat back down.

"You've handed off the remainder of your caseload as I requested."

"Yes, sir."

"Then why are you in the office today?"

Because I was too big of a coward to stay home. "I had

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paperwork to wrap up.”

“Well, see that it’s wrapped up. Today. The Crenshaw case deserves your full attention.”

Montgomery thought he was doing David a favor. Bastard. “Yes, sir.” He got up again and headed for the door.

“Don’t think I don’t notice you tend to only call me ‘sir’ when you’re pissed at me.”

David wanted very much to slam his head against the doorjamb. “Will that be all...Commander?”

“Yes, Logan. And by today I do mean five p.m.”

Carver was at Scotty’s desk again, bent down for a quiet word. He glanced back at David with a surprisingly benign look, then left.

“So?”

David hadn’t realized he was staring after Carver until Scotty caught his attention.

“So what?” He tried to recover his composure.

“So are you coming with us tonight?”

“Are we going somewhere?”

Scotty rolled her eyes. “Me. Doughty. Carver. You. Beer. Pool. Angelo’s. Are you in?”

He wanted to go home and confront Carver on his challenge to David’s authority. He did not want to be out in public with him where he couldn’t make a scene or try to enforce any sense of order on the situation. But he knew where Carver was going to be, so unless he wanted to sit home alone like a martyred wife...

“Thank you. I’ll be there.”

CHAPTER 15

Fortunately, Carver was well practiced in the art of enjoying himself regardless of what else might be going on in his life. Which meant David's presence at the bar didn't bother him. Much.

Doughty sat with David, the two of them just sitting quietly. Carver had mixed feelings about Doughty. She was a nice enough person and a decent cop, but she had this way of mimicking the person she was with, matching their body language and behavior almost unconsciously. So when talking with Scotty and Carver, she was vivacious and energetic, while with David, she was still and silent. It was like she was two different people or something. Finally, she nudged David's elbow and slid off her stool to head to the dartboard. To Carver's surprise, David followed.

"So what's going on with you two?" Scotty intruded on his

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observation.

“Nothing. Why?”

“Because he’s way over there and you’re way over here. Normally you two are practically in each other’s pants all night.”

“We are not.”

“All right, metaphorically. But there’s almost always a tension between the two of you that makes me throw Rick on the bed as soon as I get home at night. Tonight there’s just...tension.”

Carver shrugged and reached for his drink. “Life cycle of the modern male romance.”

“So what’s the backroom of the club like?”

“Intense,” he replied, eyes riveted on David and Doughty. Wait, was he smiling? Doughty had cracked David’s ever-stoic façade. The hell?

“Easy there, killer.” Scotty gently eased the glass from Carver’s hand. “Doughty’s not out to get your man.”

“Just because David hasn’t slept with a woman before doesn’t mean he won’t.”

“Right, let’s try this again.” Catching his chin, Scotty forced him to look away from the dartboard. “Doughty’s not out to get your man. Or any other man, for that matter.”

He raised an eyebrow at that. “What, are you the designated alternative lifestyle partner?”

“At least this one will hit on me.” She gave him a wicked grin.

“Wait, are you two—”

“No, we are not. My long time boyfriend aside, I’m not comfortable sleeping with my co-workers, unlike some people.” This time her expression was stern.

“Yeah, yeah, well, he’s not my co-worker anymore.”

“Since you displayed such a classic case of insecure jealousy,

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I'm assuming the life cycle of the modern male romance has entered the 'where is this relationship going' phase?"

"Mind your own business."

"This is so much more fun."

He retrieved his beer from Scotty, polished it off, and waved the bartender over. "Two more if you'll be so kind, Marty."

"It's your round, right, Carver?" Scotty said, stalling Marty.

"Yes, sweetheart. This round's on me. You know I don't order unless I'm paying."

"What about that time—"

Carver clamped a hand over her mouth. "Marty, the rest of Ms. Scott's drinks this evening will be on me."

She pulled his hand down. "In that case, screw the beer and bring us a bottle of Herradura. Time we moved on to shots."

Carver nodded to Marty, then turned his full attention back to Scotty. "You're off duty tomorrow, aren't you?"

"You bet I am."

"Drinking me under the table won't get you answers."

"I know it won't. I just have to keep on at you until you cave. The tequila is to take full advantage of your generosity."

"You're a hard woman, Brigid Scott."

"Takes one to know one." She tipped out the tequila into their glasses.

"Are you calling me a woman?"

She shrugged. "You're the one over here talking about your relationship while you're boyfriend's off playing darts. You tell me."

He swallowed a mouthful of the tequila.

"You're supposed to sip that, you know."

He swallowed the rest of it. "Not tonight, I'm not."

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* * *

David's aim was off tonight.

Doughty didn't comment. In fact, she barely spoke at all. After Carver's constant commentary, it was odd to find companionship with someone so quiet.

"Hey, Doughty—"

"Miranda," she interrupted with a smile. "I prefer my first name off duty."

Off duty...wasn't that a familiar turn of phrase. Grimacing, David tossed his last dart, hitting the far right edge of the board where it bounced off. "I really did win the interdepartmental championship, I swear."

"I've seen the trophy. We all have our off days." Doughty went over to retrieve the darts before taking her spot to throw. She didn't say anything more, instead focusing on her game.

He wasn't used to that. "You're not going to ask why it's an off day?"

She shrugged between throws. "None of my business, is it? You'll talk if you want to and won't if you don't."

"Thanks...Miranda." He didn't know what else to say.

"You over here also riles Carver up. Scotty was right. He really is easy to play."

David tried not to be too obvious when he glanced back. Carver looked jealous. "He knows women don't interest me."

"Doesn't matter." Her third dart hit the bull's eye. "Scotty will set the record straight, if she hasn't already. Still won't matter. Jealousy doesn't obey reason."

"Why on earth would he be jealous?"

"Dunno." She pulled the darts out of the board and offered him

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his. “Why would he be?”

David took the darts and studied them, thought about the night before, hell, the week before. “Things have been a little...unpredictable lately.”

She threw a dart. “That’s life for you. Unpredictable.”

“Not for me.” *Not anymore.*

“Frankly, Lieutenant—”

“Off duty, it’s David. Especially when you’re going to insult me.” His throw landed far left of center, but it was more on the board than he’d hit all night.

“Well, then, frankly, David, even you’re not that uptight. Life’s always going to throw you a curve ball”—another bull’s eye—“when you least expect it. Not sure if you’ve noticed, but when you think things are going hunky dory, that’s about when they go to shit.”

“Yeah.” He missed the board completely. “I’ve noticed.”

Miranda tossed her last dart and turned to him. “You’ve got two choices in a case like this, either stick it out or get the hell out.”

“I liked it better when you weren’t talking.”

“Most people do. Though if I’m not talking, I tend to be kicking their asses.” She waved to the board. “Case in point.”

He studied the board. His darts were all over the place, out of control. Perfect metaphor for his life at the moment. He went and pulled them out one by one, carefully lining them up in his hand. “I get what you’re saying.” He handed her the darts. “I guess I’m getting out.”

Her pale brows furrowed.

“At least for tonight. Thanks for the game, Miranda.”

“My pleasure.”

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More uncertain than he'd felt in a long time, David went over to Carver at the bar. "Can I buy you a drink?"

Carver had already had quite a few, judging by the half-glazed look in his eyes. "I already have one, thanks."

"Sorry, Charlie." Scotty confiscated the tequila bottle sitting on the bar in front of him. "Bar's closed."

"Hey, I paid for that!"

"Miranda and I appreciate that. Now go drink somewhere else."

Carver gaped at her blearily.

"Go on. Go."

"Come on." David slid under Carver's arm and helped him to his feet. "I'll take you home."

They were almost to the door before Carver protested. "No."

"Carver—"

"Not home. Not your home. If I go back, I have to choose."

"Be reasonable—"

"You said"—Carver poked him in the chest drunkenly—"that I had to choose. I haven't chosen yet, so I'm not going back there."

"All right." God, he had made such a mess of things. "I'll take you back to your place then. You have to sleep somewhere."

"In a bed." Carver poked him again. "I'm not some damn dog."

"In your own bed. I promise. Come on. My car is over here."

"So long as we're clear." Carver stopped struggling and leaned his full weight on David, which, granted, wasn't much, but still.

"I'm not going to carry you." David dragged him along.

"You should. Owe me for the fucking acrobats I had to do this morning."

David smirked in spite of everything. "I do hope you meant acrobatics."

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“Why, what’d I say?”

“Acrobats.”

Carver snorted. “There’s an image. Would serve you right.” He lifted his head from David’s shoulder. “Should be proud of me.”

“For drinking yourself under the table again?”

He shook his head. “No, Scotty did that. Meant about getting free. I’m fucking Houdini.”

“Is that a challenge?”

“No... Maybe...” Carver slumped back on David’s shoulder. “Only if it’s not on the goddamned floor. My back’s killing me.”

“You’re feeling no pain at the moment, Carver. Plenty in the morning, but not now.” David propped Carver up against the car while he opened the door, then maneuvered a surprisingly quiescent Carver into the front seat, strapping him in.

Carver didn’t speak again until they were well on the way to his place. “Why?”

“Why what, Carver?”

“Why’d you leave me, David?”

Because he’d been a coward, that was why. Because he was still a coward. He should have been up front with Carver from the beginning. A lot of what had happened with Carver had been instinct, much like how the man operated. It wasn’t how David operated. Shouldn’t be how he operated. He’d lived with rules and structure too long to throw them over like this.

“You’re thinking.” Carver slurred his words. “I can feel it. And you didn’t answer my question.”

“Because I don’t know, all right?” David snapped.

“No, you know. You’re too much of a chicken shit to tell me.” Waving dismissively, Carver leaned against the window. “Not like I’m going to remember any of this in the morning.”

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Fortunately, they arrived at Carver's apartment, giving David a brief reprieve as he hauled Carver out of the car and inside.

Carver was half-asleep before he even hit the bed. With a sigh, David pulled off his lover's boots and shoved him more fully onto the mattress. "You're supposed to sip Herradura, you dumbass," he said against Carver's hair as he kissed him good night.

Carver only snored.

CHAPTER 16

Carver woke up with a pounding headache and a tiny little sweater on each of his teeth.

Groaning, he buried his head under the pillow.

It took a few minutes to sink in that he was in his own, lumpy bed. Alone.

Pulling his head out and squinting, he looked around. He could swear he remembered going home with David last night, but there was no sign of him. Of course there wasn't. David was like an old Indian, never leaving tracks. Shoving back the covers, Carver got to his feet, fighting down the rising nausea of his hangover. Jesus God, what had that woman poisoned him with? He struggled out of his shirt and jeans, pulled on a ratty old pair of sweats he'd left hanging on the closet door and shuffled out into the living room.

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David was dead to the world where he lay sprawled out on the couch. Inasmuch as a man of David's height could sprawl out on what was little more than an oversized love seat. What a noble bastard.

Contrary to his first impulse, Carver let David sleep on and headed to the kitchen to put on the coffee, though his stomach lurched at the thought. There was no functioning without coffee. Maybe some ramen as a base, the ultimate cheap, bland yet salty hangover cure. Despite David getting him in the habit of cooking real food, Carver had managed to retain some of his old standbys. Add in a couple ibuprofen and he'd be well on his way to being human again. At a very slow crawl. He was also never, ever drinking shot for shot with Scotty again. The woman had an unnatural tolerance for alcohol.

The coffee finally started to percolate, the smell motivating him enough to move onto his next task.

"We talked about this, Carver."

He jumped, dropping the fortunately unopened package of noodles on the floor. David beat him to it, quickly snatching it out of his reach.

"I cannot in good conscience let you eat this garbage."

Carver grabbed for the noodles, but David easily evaded him. His head resumed its incessant throbbing in protest. "You really don't want to fuck with me right now. I can't be held responsible for my actions."

"You are not putting this crap in your body after the night you had last night. Now go take a shower. I'll make you a decent breakfast."

"Greasy french fries?" he asked hopefully.

"You're disgusting. Go shower."

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It was so automatic to follow David's commands that Carver didn't even remember he shouldn't until he was closing the bathroom door behind him. It was too late now, and besides, a shower would probably help make him feel more human again.

Carver knew he was good at justifying things to himself.

He ran the shower this side of scalding. It was almost enough to counteract the demon pelting of every single drop that landed against his skin. No more tequila. Until the next time. He never could give up the things that were bad for him.

But David wasn't bad for him, was he?

Things had been going pretty well until the Crenshaw case happened. Sure, they fought. Carver thrived on conflict, after all. He couldn't not push people. He couldn't not push David. He liked trying to crack that iron-clad control.

Carver switched off the water with a sigh, climbing out and quickly toweling off. He slipped back into his sweatpants and headed to the kitchen to find an omelet and a side of bacon waiting. Where in the hell had David found bacon?

David caught him staring. "Found it in your freezer behind the massive bag of Tater Tots. You've fallen behind on your shopping again."

Tater Tots. He'd forgotten about those. Fried, bland and filling, just what he needed. He was halfway to the fridge when David's voice stopped him cold.

"Don't even think about it." He pointed at Carver's plate. "Sit down and eat. All of it."

Carver had the first forkful to his mouth when he realized he'd done it again. "Fucking Christ!" He slammed the fork down. "Would you stop doing that?"

"Doing what?" David asked benignly.

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“That thing you do. You know, with your voice. The thing that has me doing what you want without a second thought.”

“Eat, Carver.”

“No.”

“You’re only hurting yourself.” David turned back the stove, scooped out the omelet, and switched off the burner. Taking the seat across from Carver, he started eating without another word.

The omelet did look pretty good. It probably tasted even better, knowing David. “Fuck it,” he grumbled and started eating. He could better hold his own on a full stomach.

He wolfed down three mouthfuls before asking, “So why are you even here? Shouldn’t you be at work?”

David didn’t look up from his own plate. “Montgomery’s relieved me of my workload until we can get this settled.”

For a moment, Carver was surprised the commander was interfering in their personal relationship before realizing “this” was the Crenshaw case. Swallowing, he reached for his coffee. “Well, that shouldn’t take long. The hardest part is going to be getting enough evidence to convince her parents.”

“Hard to take pictures in Mars.”

“Yeah. No place to put the camera.” He looked up at David, hoping for at least a little smile.

David broke off another piece of omelet. “Are we going back there tonight?”

Disappointed, Carver took another bite. “Makes the most sense. Don’t want Thea to think we’ve lost interest.”

“We’ll have to stop back by my place on the way.”

“Oh?”

“I’ll need the collar again.”

Or not. After everything that happened the other night, Carver

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wasn't so keen on it. "Can't you get by without it?"

"No." End of discussion.

Which never stopped Carver. "Why not?"

He could tell David was debating on whether to reply or not, which was more than he usually got. "You've got to give me something, David."

"No, I don't. Unless you want to make a bigger mess of things than you almost did the last time, I need my collar."

"If you need it so badly, tell me what's so fucking important about it. Christ, it's like you're someone else since you put it on."

David's lips pressed into a thin line. Yet one more sign Carver needed to back off. But Carver was sick of rolling over like a good little doggie every time David told him to.

"You keep telling me to trust you, but you won't trust me." Great, now he sounded like a girl, which only served to piss him off more. "We're not going to Mars until you give me something, David. Otherwise, Montgomery's orders or no, I'm going back to working this case on my own."

"It's a symbol, Carver, all right?" David shoved his plate away, meeting Carver's eye for the first time all morning. "A sign to everyone that someone gives a damn about me. That I'm not free for the taking." He spoke with an intensity Carver had never heard from him before. "There are rules and protocols, something you never gave a damn about. The collar is a symbol of that."

"I didn't give it to you."

"I know you didn't. No one else needs to know."

"David—"

"You know what? Never mind. I'll just go home now. Come and get me if you want, or don't if you don't. I'm sure Martin or someone will be happy to see you show up on your own."

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He should let David walk out the door and let them both cool down. “Sit your ass down and finish your breakfast. And for Christ’s sake, stop acting like a fucking queen.” Damn, that felt good.

David stared at him.

Carver rose and went to the sink to wash his plate and fork. After setting them on the rack to dry, he turned back to David. “Now I’m going to go die for a few hours. If you’re not here when I wake up, I’ll hunt you down and I will kick your ass.”

David didn’t look impressed. “Not with that hangover, you won’t.”

Carver groaned. “God, no kidding.” He scrubbed his hands over his face before dropping them around David’s neck. “I don’t know what the fuck is going on in that complicated head of yours,” he said, much more quietly than their previous conversation, “and honestly, I’m in no shape right now to try to work it out. But if we’re going to break up over it, at least give me a chance to sober up and make a fair fight of it, okay?”

David’s eyes softened, and to Carver’s surprise and pleasure, he reached up to toy with the hair at the base of Carver’s neck. “I think I can do that.”

“Okay, good.” He dropped a quick kiss on David’s startled mouth and headed back to bed. “I’m going to kill that bitch for this the next time I see her. It’s the only way to stop her evil ways.”

“I’m going to tell her you said that.”

“Whatever. Just be quiet about it. Christ.”

CHAPTER 17

The week after David made sergeant, Robin called him aside as he was heading out to the precinct.

“You won’t be working late tonight, will you?”

“Today should be a paperwork day, though I’m sure I jinxed myself now. Why?”

“I have something in mind and would like to plan accordingly.”

“I’ll call if things change.”

Robin nodded and turned back to his paper.

The question wasn’t unusual, but it was rare enough to pique David’s interest. It had been a while since they last went to a party. Since joining the force, their attendance had gone down correspondingly, Robin having become even more selective about the groups of people he exposed David to.

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“Discretion is the backbone of this world of ours, but the greater one’s profile, the greater that discretion should be,” Robin had informed him. “It is possible to continue doing whatever you wish behind closed doors, so long as you know it will stay there.”

David was fine with that. It meant more time for him and Robin, without any demands on their time. David regretted not being able to take Robin along on office events, but Robin was right. There were some things you didn’t share at work. His co-workers might maybe accept his homosexuality, but they would never be open to his much older lover.

He was still adjusting to his new role as sergeant. It was unusual having officers under his command after so long being the one taking orders. His young age was another obstacle to overcome. He knew there was resentment, especially among the other sergeants, but he ignored it. There was nothing he could do about it besides prove he had earned it. He took a page out of Robin’s book, remaining always cool and unemotional, treating everyone with respect whether they had earned it or not. The grumbling had quieted soon enough, especially among the officers. It was amazing how far a little respect could go.

His day was even less eventful than he’d planned on, leaving David with little else to do but take off before five or sit behind his desk doing the crossword for the next hour. Not a good example.

“You’re early,” Robin said in surprise, but seemed pleased when David walked through the door.

David smiled. “Turns out it was a very quiet day.”

“All the better, you can take your time. Shower, then bath.”

Meaning they were going out. He was equally pleased and disappointed by the revelation. He’d thought... Hell, he hadn’t known what to think.

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Without another word, he headed to the bathroom, stopping by his room long enough to disrobe and hang up his suit. Normally he'd set aside his clothes for the next day, but since it was his day off, he didn't bother.

He ran the shower hot enough to soothe out the minor tensions of the day, lingering well after he'd rinsed off. Finished, he set about filling up the tub. Since Robin hadn't set anything out, David opted for the patchouli. It was his preferred scent, and not solely because it was Robin's favorite.

Sinking down under the water, David drifted, his mind going blank. He wasn't shocked when the door opened. Robin often stopped in, sometimes to give David a head's up if there was anything particular that evening, but other times just to discuss the day.

What *did* surprise him was the young man with him.

David quickly schooled himself into some semblance of composure.

Robin smiled. "David, I would like you to meet Alec. Alec will be your sub for the evening."

So much for composure. A sub? What the hell was he supposed to do with a sub? He was the sub.

Robin watched him expectantly while Alec stood there, eyes downcast, every inch the submissive.

Well...fuck.

No. He had to pull this together. What would Robin do? Whatever it was, he would be confident and decisive. His word was law. Apparently, tonight David's word was law.

"Alec," he said, steady if not confident, "go to the master bedroom and remain there until I join you. You are not to undress yet. Is that understood?"

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Alec nodded quickly in acknowledgement and left. David hoped Robin had given the man a quick tour.

"It's been a while since you've thrown me in the deep end, Robin." David started the tub draining and crawled out, grabbing up a towel.

"You always fare well." Robin took the towel and began drying David off.

He knew he was supposed to play along, roll with the punch, but hell... "I don't know the first thing about being a dom."

"Yes, you do," was the placid reply. "You know how to treat the young man in there because I've taught you."

"That's different. It's —"

"It's not you." Robin shook his head. "You're a leader of men now. Do you really think you can direct others out there and not in here?"

"Are you trying to get rid of me?" The thought hurt.

Robin sighed. "You've never been this stubborn before, boy." Finished, he curled the towel around David's neck and pulled him closer. "If it makes you feel better, pretend you're doing it for me, that I get off on watching you dominate another man and then submitting to me."

It did make him feel better. The other was too much. Felt too much like rebellion.

He leaned forward and brushed his lips over Robin's before delving in for a deeper kiss, showing his acquiescence. Robin accepted it for a moment before pulling away with a wry smile. "Save that for your protégé in there."

"Who is he, anyway? I haven't seen him before."

"His name is Alec, he's a medical student at Duquesne, and he comes highly recommended. That's all you need to know."

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Why was this so difficult?

Robin slipped the towel from David's neck, leaving him no excuse to linger. He knew better than to try Robin's patience.

"You are going to be there? Watching?" That didn't sound too hopeful and needy, did it?

"I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"Okay." He took a deep breath, turned, and headed for the master bedroom.

Alec stood in the middle of the room, waiting, patient, head down. Now that Robin had pointed it out, David could see the differences between himself and this man—a true, surrendered submissive. David didn't lower his head, didn't slouch his shoulders, didn't make himself smaller in Robin's presence. To the contrary, Robin made him feel large, in control, even when he completely gave himself up to someone else's authority. David showed respect without surrendering his own. He was different, and Robin wanted him to learn about those differences.

He circled Alec slowly, studying him from all sides. Robin settled into the armchair, crossing his legs and steepling his fingers to rest them against his lips.

"He's in nice shape," David commented, letting his fingers trail along Alec's shoulders.

"Have I ever given you less than the best?"

"No." Catching Alec's chin in his fingers, David tipped his head up. "Why are you here, Alec?"

"Because Master Robin asked me."

"You know Master Robin won't be touching you this evening?"

"Yes, sir."

David felt a shiver at his acknowledgement. "You know I

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won't touch you unless you are very, very good."

"Yes, sir."

"Good." David leaned in to tease the line of Alec's mouth with his teeth, fully aware of Robin watching them. "Then let's get started."

It felt good to say those words.

CHAPTER 18

It was almost a relief to be back at the club.

Here things made sense. Everything was black and white, followed strict rules and stricter behaviors, however out of control those behaviors were. With his collar back on, David knew his place in the scheme of things and it was...comfortable.

He sat on the barstool bare-ass naked, Carver next to him, hand around him possessively while he ignored David, deep in conversation with Alexandra. In another setting, David might be jealous of her. Carver had admitted to trying hetero sex, and he and Alexandra were physically very intimate with each other, hands stroking and caressing in ways that would be harassment in any other setting, even as they carried on casual conversation. However, in this setting, under these rules, David waited patiently

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for his master's orders.

"So he's been behaving then?" Alexandra asked.

"For the most part." Carver stroked along the border of David's collar. "I only have myself to blame. When you're together long enough, you get complacent."

"Mm, makes sense," she said.

A flash of long, blonde hair drew David's attention to his right. The woman beside him had pale, smooth limbs and slight curves enhanced by the fitted black leather bodice she wore. He caught her smile and glanced up into the laughing blue eyes of Abigail Crenshaw.

"I wanted to say I've been watching you," she whispered with a touch of awe, "and you're amazing at this."

He felt Carver tense beside him. David touched his hip, out of sight of either woman, signaling him to hold on. "Thanks. I've had a lot of practice."

"I can tell." She slid up on the stool next to him, revealing that the bodice didn't come with panties. "It's hard sometimes, you know? Letting them boss you around all the time. Sometimes, I just want to tell them to shove it."

"Ah, but then you get punished."

She grinned. "Yeah. That's probably why I do it."

David slid his beer over to her. "Are you here for business or pleasure?"

"Both." She took a long swallow, presumably to clean out whatever lingered in her throat from her last encounter. "I started out just coming to play, but Thea could see something in me. She invited me back to Mars a couple of times, and I was so good at it, she offered me a job."

He noted the triple strand of pearls around her throat. "So you

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belong to Thea, then?"

Her fingers went to the necklace automatically. "Yeah, I guess so. It's kind of weird, you know? Thea's really good to me, and God, I love the sex, but to belong to someone like that, like a pet or something... Well, it's kind of weird."

David shrugged. "Some people treat their pets better than people."

"Yeah. Can you believe I'm still getting paid for this? Thea says I have to earn my way, and since this is what I do best, she let me keep my job."

"Generous."

She missed his cynicism. "I know! Isn't it great? I wish it were more natural. You make it look so easy."

"It's never easy. Every day you think about revolting, taking your life back, shoving the bastard to the ground and giving back as good as you got."

"Why don't you?"

He leaned closer to whisper in her ear. "Because of what my life would be like if I did."

Her eyes widened and she looked at Carver with a hint of awe. Carver tried not to notice, but David felt him flinch.

"Every so often I like to test my boundaries," he added. "The punishment can be worth it."

She gave an excited squeal. "Oh, that padlock stunt you pulled was ingenious! I can't believe you got off as easy as you did for that."

"Not all punishment is fit for public."

"Here it is."

"But he knows I enjoy it public."

"Then it wasn't much of a punishment, was it?"

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He put a finger to his lips.

“Oh, you’re good.”

“Abby.” Thea’s stern voice interrupted them, Abby’s eyes instantly going wide like a child caught on the kitchen counter. Down went her head, followed by, “Sorry, Mistress Thea.”

“What have I told you about chatting up blues?”

“That it’s a waste of everyone’s time. But I wasn’t...chatting him up, I mean. I wanted... Well, I wanted to see if he might offer me some pointers.”

“Is that so?” Thea caught David’s chin, lifting his head. He very determinedly kept his eyes downcast, as was expected. “You could do well to learn from this one’s example, despite the trouble Mr. Eliot occasionally has with him.” She left David alone and turned back to Abby. “Break is over. You’ve been specially requested for Room Three.”

“Room Three, really?” Abby sounded delighted.

“Yes. Now go do me proud.”

“Yes, mistress!” She bounded off.

Thea took the open stool beside David. “She’s young and untempered, but she has great potential.”

“She’s too enthusiastic.” David cursed himself for being so forward. He hadn’t realized how out of practice he was.

“I beg your pardon?”

“My apologies, mistress, I—”

“No, no.” She waved his protest away. “What did you mean by that? I’m curious?”

“She’s like a wild horse,” he took the chance of explaining, “and you allow her to run wild without knowing who her true master is. Or mistress. It takes time to focus someone enough to stud them out without losing them completely.”

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“You sound as though you speak from experience.”

This time he dared to look up at her. “I was young once, too.”

“You had a very good teacher, as I recall.” The voice was aggressive and edgy, interrupting the intimacy that had developed between David and Thea.

When David looked to see who the speaker was, he almost fell off his stool.

It would have been difficult to identify the man as the young man he had seen so badly abused all those years ago. Thin, young cheeks had filled out and were now hidden beneath a coarse beard, the wispy body had bulked out to border on heavy. But David had looked into Tommy’s haunted eyes, and those hadn’t changed at all.

Tommy’s laugh set David’s teeth on edge. “Good Lord, it really is you. I would have figured you’d have moved on by now. I guess some of us are born to just one role.”

“You know each other?” David couldn’t tell if Carver directed the question at him or Tommy.

Tommy answered, “We were acquainted. In another life.”

“David?”

He couldn’t take his eyes off the man. It was like seeing a ghost. Hell, that was what he’d expected Tommy to be at this point, likely dead of an overdose. “How?” he asked.

“Robin.”

David’s gut twisted into a tight knot. “Robin saved you.”

Tommy nodded. “Didn’t want it at first. It wasn’t easy leaving Mas—Andrew after three years. Robin got me through the worst of it, though, set me up with a life, and here I am.”

“Here you are.” Robin had never said a word. After the one encounter, neither Tommy nor Andrew had registered on David’s

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radar again. No, that wasn't true. Andrew had sent flowers to the funeral, which David had promptly sent back.

"Don't beat yourself up about it, David. It wasn't something you needed to know about."

"David, what's going on?" Carver asked more insistently.

Head spinning, David dropped his eyes automatically when he turned to Carver. "I'm sorry. This is someone I met once a few years ago. Tommy—"

"Thomas now. It's hard to believe it was just once. I've thought about you so many nights, David. How confident you were, how coddled and protected. Everything I wasn't back then." He curled his hand around David's head, caressing down to hook his neck and force him closer. "You're like I remembered you," he said against David's lips, "but I'm not."

That was when David noticed that Tommy's neck was bare. He had noticed, but the absence of a collar hadn't fully registered with the shock of Tommy standing there alive and in the flesh.

"I spent so many nights, David, imagining myself in your place." His voice was low and husky as he led David away from the safety of Carver's presence step-by-step. "You on your knees, my cock in your mouth, all that praise for me instead of you." Tommy nipped at David's lip harder than pleasure called for. "I hated you those nights. For Andrew, for Robin, for being all those things I wasn't. But now, now I'm in control, and you're going to surrender to me at last, aren't you?"

"Excuse me." Carver's voice was cold water on the spell Tommy was weaving over David. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I'm borrowing him for a little while." Tommy didn't look away from David's face. "Don't worry. I'll bring him back more or

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less in one piece.”

Carver caught his arm. “I don’t think so. Go find your own. This one’s mine.”

“Oh, really?” Tommy wasn’t impressed. “Then why is he wearing another man’s collar?”

“He’s not,” Carver denied.

Tommy’s finger traced along the leather circling David’s neck. “Mm, I don’t know what he’s told you, but I’d know this collar anywhere. Property of one Robin Faulkner, deceased. Which means David here is mine for the taking.” He started dragging David off again.

“No, he’s not.” Carver’s voice was cold and even as he slid his belt off. “Take the collar off, David.”

“Carver, I—”

“Take the fucking collar off now, David. Or I’m cutting it off.”

He couldn’t take it off. That wasn’t how this worked. It had to be Carver that removed it, the right way.

“Alexandra,” Carver barked. “Scissors.”

“Carver, I don’t think—”

“Get me some goddamn scissors,” he cut her off.

Carver Eliot was one scary bastard when he wanted to be.

David reached for his collar and stopped. He couldn’t do it. The very thought of taking it off himself made him ill. “I can’t.”

“Fine. Alexandra!”

“Here.” She slapped a pair of shears into Carver’s palm. “Just for the collar.”

“Turn around, David.”

Steeling himself, David did.

Carver pushed his head down, leaving the back of his neck exposed. The metal slid coolly over David’s overheated skin. “One

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last chance.”

“Do it.”

Between one blink and the next, the shears snicked and the collar fell away to settle innocuously on the floor. David barely registered the thick leather of Carver’s belt wrapping around his neck.

“There.” Carver cinched it just short of constricting. “It’s crude, but it’ll do.”

Tommy growled, “If you think—”

“I don’t think, I know,” Carver stated. “This marks him as mine. If you so much as breathe on my property again, you’ll regret it.”

David stared at the severed pieces of his life, lying on the black tile with the discarded napkins and condoms, one more piece of trash.

“Gentlemen, please,” Thea tried to smooth things over. “I’m sure this has just been an unfortunate misunderstanding.”

Carver stopped her before she could get any further. “Alexandra,” he said with a coldness that barely registered with David, “get David a robe please. Now.”

“Carver, please,” Thea tried again. “That’s hardly necessary.”

“I decide what’s necessary for David,” he snarled. “If you insist on allowing people in here who can’t follow the simplest rules of etiquette in this kind of situation, well, I don’t think I’ll be coming back.”

Alexandra crouched down and wrapped a silk robe around David’s shoulders, helping him slip unresponsive arms into the sleeves. The room had gone dead quiet around them, everyone pausing to watch the spectacle they were making. David didn’t care.

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“Front door,” Carver insisted. “I’m not wasting time with all the cloak and dagger, Thea. Just tell me where the damn door is.”

“Fine.” Her mouth, normally full and inviting, was now a tight line. “It’s through my office. Alexandra will show you the way.”

He tugged on the end of the belt. “Come on, David.”

David reached for the scraps of silver and black.

“Leave it.” This time the yank nearly choked him, stumbling him backward and up to his feet. “Close your robe. I won’t have you getting us arrested on top of everything else.”

Tying the robe shut, David followed Carver and Alexandra obediently. Obedience was automatic it had been ingrained in him so long. It was all he was capable of at the moment.

From Thea’s office, they entered a short corridor, exiting onto the waterfront, about half a mile downstream from Venus.

“While I don’t condone Thomas’ behavior, you should have known better,” Alexandra stated.

“Maybe I should have.” Carver just sounded tired now. “But you know as well as I do that this sort of relationship works best when there’s trust involved. On both sides. How can I expect David to trust me, if I don’t extend the same courtesy.” He sighed. “It’s usually too late when we realize that trust has been misplaced.”

David hadn’t thought he could feel worse. He’d done everything wrong from the beginning.

“I’d best be getting back,” she said.

“Do that. Hope we didn’t kill the mood completely.”

“No worries there. Mars recovers quickly.”

Carver caught Alexandra’s hand and brushed his lips over the top. “Maybe I’ll be back, maybe I won’t. For what it’s worth, Alexandra, it’s been good knowing you.”

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“You’ll still be welcome at Venus.” David was too numb to feel jealous when Alexandra leaned forward and kissed Carver on the lips. “Don’t be too hard on him. I’m sure David had his reasons.”

“Don’t we all,” Carver said wryly.

Then it was the two of them, alone with the river. Carver started walking. Even without the belt, David would have followed. It was all he could do.

CHAPTER 19

Carver was blind with rage.

He'd always thought that was a figure of speech before now, but he was so furious, he could barely see three steps in front of him. If he got behind the wheel of a car, he'd be a menace. At least he had enough sanity to realize it. When they got to his car, he threw the keys at David's head. "You drive."

He caught them and unlocked the car, sliding behind the wheel and silently buckling up before starting the engine. Carver didn't bother with the belt.

David didn't look at him. "Where?"

"Home." David's mouth opened, probably to ask which one, but Carver shook his head and said again, "Home." David could take that to mean whatever the fuck he wanted because Carver had

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more important things to focus on. Such as getting himself less than homicidal before they were out of the car and in the privacy of whoever's home they ended up at.

Carver hadn't calmed much by the time they pulled into David's driveway. Without the engine running, there was no sound to break the silence surrounding them, save the cracking pops of the car cooling down. Neither of them spoke nor made a move. Carver didn't trust himself. As for David...fuck David.

"Inside. Now."

David slipped out of the car without question, which only served to infuriate Carver even more. How dare he be so well trained? How dare he know so much and Carver so little? How fucking dare he keep secrets from him? At least if David stood up for himself, they could fight this out. As it was, there was nothing to castigate him for, which only pissed off Carver more.

David had Carver's keys, so it was a good thing he made it to the door first, or Carver would have kicked it in. Head bowed, he let Carver pass first.

Carver couldn't stand any more.

His fist closed around David's throat as he slammed him up against the mudroom wall. David clutched at Carver's fingers, fighting for breath but not for freedom.

"Who the fuck is Robin Faulkner?" Carver ground out, hating the name even as he spoke it.

"No one," David choked out.

"Fuck no one." Carver squeezed a bit more, pleased to get a slightly greater response from David this time.

David finally loosened Carver's fingers from his neck and went still again, eyes downcast. "It doesn't matter."

"Doesn't matter?" Grabbing David's shoulders, Carver

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slammed him against the wall, only earning a grunt in response. “Doesn’t matter...shit. You don’t walk around wearing the collar that some other man gave you, proclaiming you’re his property, and expect me to believe it doesn’t matter.” He slammed David again for good measure. “Who the fuck was he?”

“He’s someone from my past. Leave him there, Carver.” There was that familiar hint of steel, the voice of the David Logan Carver knew. It was the tone that usually had Carver rolling over and doing as David said.

Not tonight. Maybe not ever again.

“Obviously you can’t, so why should I?”

“Because I’m telling you to.”

“No. No way. You don’t get to do that. Not after— No.” With one final shove, he backed up, suddenly wanting to be away from David as much as he’d wanted to strangle him a few moments earlier. “You forfeited it the minute you slipped that goddamned collar on.”

David’s face was hard, but still he kept his eyes averted. “I told you not to ask me to do this, Carver.”

“Don’t you dare put this on me. This isn’t about Mars or Abby or any of it. This is about you fucking lying to me all this time.”

“When? When did I ever lie to you?”

“You—”

“I never did, Carver. Just because I didn’t tell you things doesn’t mean I lied to you.”

“You son of a bitch. That’s bullshit and you know it.”

“How is it bullshit, Carver?”

“A lie by omission is still a lie.”

David laughed, a harsh, broken sound. “Christ, that’s rich, coming from you.”

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"I know I'm not a paragon of virtue like some people, Lieutenant Logan, but— Fuck it. What does it matter? It's over, isn't it?" Caver threw up his hands. "Keep your goddamned secrets, David. I don't give a shit." He headed for the door. He was back to wanting to murder the bastard. It was best he get out before he actually did it.

David followed him. "This is your choice then?"

Carver turned on him. "You never gave me a fucking choice! You set all the rules, controlled every damn thing and never let me know what game we were playing. That's not a choice, David."

"And now?"

"What now? There is no now. You won't tell me shit, and I will not be a replacement for some other guy in your dom fantasies."

"You're not a replacement, Carver."

"I suppose because there is no replacement. You can shut up anytime." He had the door open and right foot on the stoop when David grabbed him by his shirt collar, hauling him back in, and closing the door again as he shoved Carver up against it.

"I thought you wanted me to talk," David said dangerously.

"Now that I'm ready to walk out?" Carver struggled to throw David off him. "It doesn't work like that. You had your chance."

"What do you want me to say, Carver? That I love you? That there was never anyone else before you? Even you wouldn't be stupid enough to believe that. So just what exactly am I supposed to say?"

"You know what? You're right. Don't say anything"

Carver guaranteed David's silence with a punishing kiss, in the most literal meaning of the word. His mouth was brutal on David's, grinding and biting until he tasted blood. David's

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whimper wasn't from pain, and it went straight to Carver's cock. "God damn you, David Logan," he ground out. "Get upstairs right now."

"Carver—"

"Do what I say!" he roared, all patience gone.

Down went the eyes and David took a step back, then another, finally turning and heading up the stairs at a steady pace.

Carver leaned against the door, steadying himself while he waited for David to disappear. He had no idea what he was going to do. Funny how that had become an all-too-familiar feeling in recent days. Pushing himself into motion, Carver followed David's path with one certainty in mind—they weren't playing by David's rules anymore.

David stood at the foot of the bed, waiting. The silk highlighted every muscle, showing off his broad shoulders and tight ass.

"Robe off," Carver said. "Drop it to the floor and leave it there."

David shrugged and the material slithered to the floor. His hand went to the belt still tight around his neck.

"Leave it."

He did.

Carver walked over to the dresser and pulled out the spreader bar. He moved behind David again. "Legs apart, bend over."

Without hesitation, David dropped, for which Carver was grateful. He didn't want David to see how much pain his obedience caused him. This wasn't David, not his David anyway. The David at Mars was all just a game, playacting for the crowd. His David, the real David, was confident, aggressive, in command no matter what the situation.

He dropped the bar at David's feet with a clatter. "Put it on."

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There was no eroticism in this. It was strictly punishment and control. Carver didn't bother even to take his shoes off as David strapped one ankle down and then the other, slipping one wrist through the strap and cinching it tight. Unable to manipulate the strap on the other wrist, he slid it in place anyway, leaving it to Carver to tighten.

He didn't look up the entire time.

Carver reached down and jerked the strap tight, not touching David otherwise. "Who is Robin, David?" he asked, picking up the book David had been reading at night from the bedside table.

"He's no one, Carver. I swear—"

Carver slapped the book against David's exposed ass with enough force to send him stumbling.

"Who is Robin Faulkner?" he repeated.

"It doesn't matter—"

Carver smacked him again. "If it doesn't matter, then tell me."

"No."

"How about I ring up Thomas?" *Smack*. "I'm sure he'd be more than happy to fill me in." *Smack*.

Silence.

"David!"

"Who we were with before doesn't matter."

Smack. The shock reverberated up Carver's arm. "The hell it doesn't. Especially if you go around wearing the collar he gave you."

"He gave me this house. Should I give that up, too?"

"The house doesn't mark you as his possession, David. You made me look like a fucking idiot out there. Did you care? Or were you even thinking about me?"

"I care."

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"You've got a damn strange way of showing it. Now tell me, David, who is Robin Faulkner?"

"Carver, please, let it go."

"Why? What's so special about him that you can't even talk about him? What makes him so much more important than me?"

"He's not."

"Then tell me who he is!"

Something in David seemed to break and the tension left his body. "Robin was the man who made me who I am. You're the first person I've been with since he died three years ago. I moved on and never looked back. Until you made me." There was no accusation behind the words, just simple fact.

"Why didn't you say no?"

"I did, emphatically, if you recall."

"Then you changed your mind. Don't give me the bullshit about Montgomery making you. We both know there are ways to get out of assignments if need be, especially for someone of your standing."

David was silent.

"David."

"Because it was safe," he answered at last, so softly Carver almost didn't hear him.

"You call that safe?"

"Yes." His head hung even lower. "Because I could submit again without taking responsibility for it. Because I could submit to you. It was safe again."

Safe. Yeah, Carver got that, crazy as it seemed. Hell, pissed as he'd been at David for tying him up to the fucking bed like a dog, there'd been that reassuring sense that however bad things got, David was still looking out for him. Well, until he left Carver there

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when he went to work. Weren't there rules about that sort of thing? Maybe, but they'd never played by any, never discussed their relationship, just did it all on the fly, Carver following David's lead. When David stopped leading...

"I didn't think it would be this difficult," Carver confessed.

David started to lift his head, then stopped. "I didn't either."

Carver thought about it, their whole messy, messed up relationship. David had never volunteered anything, but Carver had never asked, both of them stumbling through like drunks trying to make something not quite like a life together. If it weren't for this case, they might never have faced any of this and continued on blindly until they came apart.

Carver didn't want that.

Crouching down, he gently undid all the straps on the spreader bar and tossed it aside, taking David's hand to straighten him. David's eyes glazed for a moment as the blood rushed from his head. He started to look away.

"No." Carver caught his chin with a small shake. "Not tonight. Not after all this." He uncinched the belt from around David's neck and threw it after the spreader bar. "Look at me, David. Who do you see?"

"I see you—Carver." He reached up to caress Carver's cheek.

Carver caught his wrist. "No one else in the room tonight, David. Just you and me."

"It's not that easy—"

"Just you and me, David," Carver insisted. "The others will still be there afterward, but for right here, right now, it's the two of us. Can you do that?"

David hesitated, unsure. "I...I can try."

This time when Carver kissed him, it was with the slow caution

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of a tentative new lover, testing out David's willingness, unsure of his response.

David opened his mouth with a soft sigh, and Carver was lost.

He gave himself over to the kiss, savoring the solid, sensual warmth of David's response. Tonight there would be no fight for dominance. Carver just wanted to *be* with David. Even if it was only tonight.

David seemed to understand that, too, not pushing, but not retreating, meeting Carver on equal terms for perhaps the first time ever in their relationship. His hands coasted up Carver's chest to begin worrying at the buttons there. Carver let him do what he wanted, more interested in the shape of David's mouth and the firm line of his jaw. The feel of David's bare chest on his shocked him as David curled his arms around Carver's neck, pulling him closer into the embrace as he recaptured Carver's mouth.

Carver's shirt hit the floor, followed soon after by his pants. Kicking them aside, he wrapped around David, enjoying the feel of body heat and taut muscle. Until David, skin-to-skin contact had been a rare treat. To feel that much of a person...no quick fumble, however skilled, could compare.

They slowly worked their way back to the bed, David reaching it first and pulling Carver down with him. David rolled Carver beneath him, their legs intertwining to allow their cocks to caress while they made out. Carver let his hands map David's back, all the taut muscles and shallow indentations that made up the architecture of his body. All the while David did the same, broad hands caressing Carver's shoulders and hips and thighs like a new lover. This was all new. No taking turns, no servicing the other, just equal and open and honest.

Carver turned over, taking David with him. He didn't break

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their kiss until he had David comfortably beneath him, then lifted his head to look down at him. Most days, he forgot how damn young David was. Twenty-eight wasn't a child, but he always seemed so much older than his years, older than Carver sometimes. Now, so open and vulnerable, he looked so innocent.

"Did you love him?" he couldn't resist asking.

David brushed a strand of hair off Carver's cheek. "I thought we weren't doing this tonight."

"I know."

David's fingers trailed along Carver's jaw and down his neck. "He took care of me. He was the only one who ever did."

Tempting fate, Carver took a breath. "Do you love me?"

The question surprised David, his eyes snapping to Carver's in unmistakable confusion.

Furious at himself for pushing too hard, Carver bent down to prevent any answer with another kiss.

David broke the kiss, levering Carver up so Carver had to look at him. "I could."

It was a hell of a lot more than he'd expected. He swallowed. "'Could' works for me." When had he become such a girl? The less emotional involvement the better had always been his philosophy. Physical was fine, but all the rest only led to pain in the end.

David's fingers wrapped around the back of Carver's neck, thumb brushing lightly over his pulse. "What about you, Carver?"

"I'm usually well past headed for the hills by this point. I don't do this. But with you?" He sighed, burying his face in David's neck. *What a fucking girl.* "I can't give it up, even though I know it has to end."

David kissed his temple, stroking his hair tenderly. "Maybe it

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won't."

"Maybe." He teased his lips against David's. "Maybe it doesn't matter."

His hand on the back of Carver's head became stronger. "Tonight it doesn't matter. Just you and me, just now." Using his grip, he pulled Carver down into another kiss.

Just now, just them. The rest of the world didn't matter as Carver lost himself in his lover's caress. Their mouths became more insistent, hands that had teased and stroked now clutched as their desire built to a fever pitch. Carver reached for the bedside table, but David beat him to it, flipping them yet again so he sat astride Carver's hips, balls grinding against Carver's cock as he reached for the lube.

"Condom," Carver whimpered as David slicked him up.

David dropped the bottle and moved over Carver, positioning his cock with practiced ease. "Not tonight," he answered.

His actions spoke volumes.

"David—" The rest of what Carver had to say was lost in a groan as David sank down on him. By the time David had taken Carver all the way in, Carver neither remembered nor cared what he'd wanted to say. There was nothing between them but the thin coating of lubricant. "Jesus, fuck."

It felt glorious. So hot, so smooth, so perfect. "You incredible bastard," he said, resting his hands on David's hips and feeling the subtle contractions of David's muscles as he held himself still. He shifted his hands, sliding them up around David's back, and pulled him down against his chest, holding him close as their bodies rocked together.

"David," he murmured, the name standing in for all the words he wanted to say and didn't dare. Not yet. But soon.

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David turned his head and they were kissing again, tongues mimicking Carver's cock sliding in and out of David, making them both groan, building to a slow, crushing climax that left them both shaking.

Afterward, they lay entangled, David's head resting on Carver's chest for a change as they absently stroked each other's soft cocks, exchanging slow, casual kisses like lovers did. Things had changed—they had changed—and Carver couldn't help but think that was a good thing.

"Tell me about Robin," he said softly in the dark, not demanding, just asking.

This time David answered. "Robin found me when I was nineteen. He was so much older than me, but he was good to me." He went on, describing the relationship, the clubs and the parties, the restrictions and demands, all with sad affection that surprisingly didn't leave Carver feeling jealous.

"What happened to him?" he asked when David seemed to run out of stories.

"I was at work. He had a massive coronary and died instantly. I found him when I came home that night."

"Scotty said you lost someone close to you and your life ground to a halt."

"Yeah." He settled back against Carver's chest again. "He left me everything—his car, his house, his money. Like he'd promised me. None of it mattered."

Carver couldn't begin to imagine. He'd never had anyone like that in his life, hadn't let himself. Partly because he didn't want to feel like that.

"Thank you," he said finally. "For telling me."

He felt David shrug. "It was time I did. Besides, you're like a

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dog with a bone; you wouldn't let up until I told you." The affection was unmistakable and Carver couldn't help but smile.

"I might have. Eventually."

David pressed his lips against Carver's chest. "Go to sleep, Carver."

His eyelids were getting heavy. *What a fucking day.* He shifted David to a slightly more comfortable position, maintaining as much contact as possible. "If I weren't so tired, I'd tell you to stop bossing me around."

"You missed it."

"Yeah, I did." He sighed.

After a moment, David said, "So did I. Thank you."

"Any time."

David nestled in closer. Half-asleep already, Carver just smiled.

CHAPTER 20

Everything felt different that morning.

David sat in Robin's kitchen, in Robin's house, drinking coffee from Robin's china, and for the first time in a very, very long time, he didn't miss Robin. There was anticipation in his life again, as though the best part of his life was no longer behind him, but might just possibly be waiting around the corner for him instead.

Carver grinned at him.

"What do we do know?" David asked as he reached for the toast.

"Well, first thing is I have to talk to the girl's parents. They aren't going to like my answers very much, but they need some warning."

"Warning for?"

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“The second thing we’ll have to do. Which is talk to Montgomery.”

“Good Lord, Carver, are you actually going through channels?”

“Oh, ha-ha. I’ll go through your channel in a minute if you don’t watch it.”

It was David’s turn to grin.

“There’s enough illegal activity going on there to get them shut down if we can hit them fast in the middle of a session. Pandering, drugs, corrupting minors. Not all the ‘staff’ there were adults.”

“I saw.”

“I say we give Montgomery the details, but let him set up the raid. Since we can tell them where the front door is to Mars, they should be able to get in and get the evidence they need before Thea and her crew have time to hide it.”

“You know they’re going to pick up Abby Crenshaw in that, too.”

Carver sighed. “I know. Which means I’m probably not going to get paid for this. But you heard her last night. She’s having the time of her life in there. There’s no way her parents are going to get her out willingly.”

“I can give Montgomery the rundown this morning. That should give them enough time to set up the raid. Do you want in on the meeting?”

“I don’t know,” Carver said with surprising honesty. “What do you think?”

“It’s up to you.” David shrugged. “It’s your case.”

“But it goes on your record. Another brilliant investigation by the darling of the department.”

“You know I don’t care about that anymore.”

“No?”

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“No. I’m happy where I am, Carver, doing what I’m doing.”

Carver began turning his coffee cup nervously on the table, not looking up from it. “I’ve been thinking about last night.”

David’s stomach knotted. “Oh?”

“Yeah. And if you... I wondered if...” He stopped, then took a deep breath and looked up into David’s eyes. “I would be honored if you would let me wear your collar.”

“Carver, I—”

“Save it, yeah?” He shrugged. “It’s a silly idea, especially considering all the shit I gave you last night. Forget I said anything.” Finishing off his coffee, he rose and made a beeline to the maker for more.

In all honesty, David was flattered as hell by the request and caught completely off guard.

Carver sat across from him again with a self-deprecating grimace. “Eliot’s stuck his foot in it again. Once again not thinking and—”

“Carver, shut up.” David did his very best not to smile. “You can’t just propose something like that and expect an immediate response.”

“Yeah, well—”

“I said shut up, Carver. This is where I talk and you listen.”

Carver pressed his lips together, eyes narrowed slightly.

“The nice thing about you, Carver, is that I always know what you’re thinking because it comes right out of your mouth. When you actually stop and think about something, I know you’re serious about it. You get it now. You understand the implications of the collar, all the responsibility and obligations that go along with it. So, yes, I will allow you to wear my collar. On one condition.”

Carver braced himself. “Which is?”

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“I want yours as well.”

Carver didn't say anything.

“Robin knew, right from the beginning, that I would move on, but I never could. I couldn't let go of that life, so I...stopped. You crashed right through all my walls, Carver, and for a long time I tried to build them up again on the rules I knew. But you, you make your own rules as you go and damn the consequences. I need that in my life. I need *you* in my life. I trust you, Carver. Please.”

The corner of Carver's mouth quirked in that wry way he had. “How are we going to know who's in charge, then?”

“Same way we always do. Fight for it.”

Carver laughed.

Shaking his head, David got up and went to the sink. He poured out the remainder of the coffee and rinsed the cup, then set it on the rack to dry. “You sure you don't want in on the meeting with Montgomery?”

“Nah. You're better at the bureaucracy. I'll go put my brilliant people skills to use and brief the parents.”

Chuckling, David walked over to Carver, ruffled his hair, and placed a kiss on his forehead. “Keep near the door. Even I wouldn't take Abby's father in a fight.”

“Ye of little faith.” Carver caught David's neck and drew him down for a proper, open-mouthed kiss, tasting of coffee and Carver. David knew he could get used to this.

“Just be careful.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Carver pushed him away.

David was halfway up the stairs when Carver called to him. “What was that?” he asked, looking back.

Carver was leaning against the banister. “I said, if possible, would you give me a heads up on when the raid's going down?”

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“Why, do you want to be front and center?”

“Not really, no. I...I want to give a friend fair warning is all.”

Friend meaning Alexandra. David tamped down the flare of jealousy. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks.” Carver disappeared back toward the kitchen.

David went upstairs to get ready for work. He hesitated with his hand on the dress shirt before putting it back in the closet and pulling out a polo.

It wasn’t much, but it was a start.

INDIA HARPER

India Harper is the combined persona of Philippa Grey-Gerou and Emery Sanborne. Emery and Grey have been writing solo for five years and together for even longer, resulting in a dozen works in the hetero and ménage genres. As they already share a brain, they figured it was high time to share a name as well. Their stories under the name India Harper have a slightly harder edge as they explore predominately male/male relationships in the rich environments of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. Emery lives in Philadelphia with her cat, while Grey lives in the Philadelphia suburbs with a less well-behaved zoo.

* * *

**Don't miss *Sins Of Arrogance*
by India Harper,
available at AmberAllure.com!**

Carver Eliot, who has always played fast and loose with the rules, finds himself demoted and reassigned to the backwaters of Pittsburgh's police force after being caught in flagrante delicto with the key witness for a case he was working. Still cocky, Carver arrives at Zone Six, willing to play the game until the dust settles.

The lieutenant overseeing the department, however, has other ideas.

Lieutenant David Logan has followed the rules and worked hard to earn his high rank by the young age of twenty-eight. Carver's arrival threatens to disrupt the efficiency of the quiet department. At the urging of his commanding officer, David takes on Carver to curb his brash, hotheaded tendencies. What he didn't count on, however, is the chaos that his attraction to Carver brings to his well-ordered life.

David's unorthodox training methods capture Carver's attention, and the two men of opposing temperaments find themselves growing closer as the weeks pass. When Carver becomes a suspect in a carjacking ring, they find their relationship tested before it's even begun...

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