



EDGE

Roxy Harte

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Chapter One

Autumn Blessings left the courtroom, floating on clouds, thinking that nothing, absolutely nothing, could ruin her day. She believed in rights, liberty, and justice in a way she hadn't since she'd first left Yale. She believed that what she was doing *really mattered*...finally. Autumn was confident that she had made the right decision to leave her old firm, O'Malley, Bruce, and Lloyd. Not that there was any other option after her ex, Edward Brown, was made a full partner...and she wasn't. It wasn't that he didn't deserve it; it was just that she felt that she equally deserved it. She just couldn't work with Edward. Well, that part was true too; it just wasn't the whole truth.

The honest-to-God truth was that she'd left the firm because she couldn't be anywhere near her ex without wanting to fuck his brains out. He was her Achilles' heel, or rather his body was. She hated that her body still responded to his, but she couldn't deny her fluttering heart or the aching need every time she saw him enter a room, every time she heard his voice. In those moments, it didn't matter that he'd cheated on her, or that she'd caught him in the act, and that it had torn her heart to shreds. Her body didn't give a damn about her heart. Her mind went AWOL every time she looked into his blinding smile. Her mind had them locking in sensual embraces at the water cooler. Her mind had him ripping off her clothes in the elevator.

Her body had shoved him into a wall of his office; her mouth had assaulted his without any provocation...and Edward had known just what to do in that moment. She didn't need her mind to do any thinking after that moment, because Edward kissed her back. Oh God, was that the understatement of the century. Edward had poured months of raw need down her throat, kissing her with a passion that was as addictive as heroin...and had she ever needed a fix.

She'd looked up into his molten chocolate eyes and forgotten everything that had ripped them apart in the first place. His hands had been warm and powerful as he pushed up her blouse and teased his fingertips over her bared skin. She hadn't thought; not even a single synapse flickered warning that she was making a mistake.

For Jonas...not a thought.

For Michael...nothing.

Her two men were totally forgotten as she lay locked in Edward's mesmerizing gaze. But then it wasn't his fault, was it? She'd kissed him. The memory, as shameful as it was, brought a blaze of heat between her legs, raw need speeding through her veins, as she recalled his power as he'd pushed her onto the top of his desk. She'd shimmied her skirt up and pulled him down to her.

There had been no warm-up, no foreplay, and the heat of passion made the moment all the more exciting. He'd noticed her thigh-high stockings and garters, commenting, "This is new," but then he'd plunged, taking her hard and fast. It was all she could do to stay quiet. She'd wanted to scream, not because it hurt, but because it felt so damn good. She knew then that she could never spend day after day being so near him and not crave his cock inside her again.

That was the day she'd packed her office and left the firm. Even though she knew Edward would have never mentioned the incident to anyone, he would have expected more: from her body and from her heart. And she was terrified she would give him both.

Today, she'd faced him, toe-to-toe and almost eye-to-eye, because though she was six-three in her heels, he was still six-six, and she hadn't fallen into his shadow. He had seemed *less*. She'd managed to see past his blazing smile to the man he'd become. Yes, he still had an athlete's lean body and striking features, but he wasn't the man she'd met at Yale with sexy Lenny Kravitz hair and bohemian style. Now he was just another suit with his dark hair trimmed close to his scalp.

She'd hoped after leaving the firm that they could just avoid each other.

O'Malley, Bruce, Lloyd, and Brown should have never agreed to represent Isaiah Johnson, a pro football player accused of vehicular homicide. When Bradley Morris was struck down by Isaiah's car, it should have been an open-and-shut case. Isaiah had failed the on-site breathalyzer, and there had been witnesses to his reckless driving, but as the firm mowed through the prosecution's arguments, none of that had mattered.

She hadn't been in the courtroom to witness the atrocity, but she had followed the nightly news. She'd been so horrified by the outcome, and when the victim's wife had approached her about a civil suit, she'd more than happily taken the case, and today's victory was something she could be proud of.

The court awarded Vishala Morris five million dollars. And that had made her feel good. That had made her feel great!

But it didn't compare to her personal victory in that courtroom today, because she'd faced Edward and realized that she didn't want him. The blind lust was gone.

Stepping out into the bright May sunlight, she found a barrage of journalists waiting to interview her. "A.J., A.J., over here!"

They used her initials instead of calling out Ms. Blessings. It was perhaps too familiar, but it was something she'd encouraged when she was still with the larger firm. She lifted her chin and smiled, not the fake smile she used every time she was photographed—because she hated the fact that people only wanted to capture her beauty—but a real smile, a smile that would let everyone who read the papers see her strength and intelligence.

With golden skin, brown hair that was almost so light it could be considered blonde styled in loose ringlets, and wide green eyes, she stood out in a crowd. She was photographed often even before the high-profile cases she'd been taking of late. It was hard to believe that only six months ago, she'd cringed before every camera. Jonas had changed that by merely helping her see her photographs in a different light. While everyone else would see the "beautiful" female attorney, she would see what was reflected behind her eyes—*pain, loss, need*—and that somehow made smiling for the cameras easier, knowing that it never went away.

She turned to the first reporter who didn't call her A.J.

"Ms. Blessings, have you heard that Isaiah Johnson plans to appeal?"

She smiled wider. "I would hate to be the one representing him for that false hope."

"Are you saying that, if he does appeal, he doesn't stand a chance?"

"I'm saying that should he appeal, I will be there to represent Bradley Morris's wife and daughter."

"Is it true that Vishala Morris is a pro bono client?"

Autumn laughed and lifted flirty eyes to the journalist asking the question. "You know that I am not going to divulge anything that is even remotely confidential between my client and myself, so why ask, Bob?" She'd gotten quite good at knowing all the journalists by name in the last six months as she'd made a name for herself in Atlanta out from under the shadow of her former firm.

Bob Walters held her gaze. "Is it true that your father is Lord Hugh of Lairg?"

Her smile froze, and her heart stopped. For a second she couldn't think or breathe. How could this man know her father's name, when she didn't even know? *Lord Hugh of Lairg*. The name didn't mean anything to her, but in that stalled heartbeat, she knew that she'd been given the answer to the question that had long plagued her.

"Have you heard the breaking news from the BBC? That Lord Hugh may not be accepting the Queen's invitation to become the next prime minister in light of the scandal surfacing surrounding your illegitimacy?"

What?

She looked at another journalist to separate her gaze from Bob's and managed to say, "I have nothing to say that isn't in direct response to today's trial. Charlie, I believe you had the next question," but he only shrugged and gave her an apologetic look.

She felt ill, realizing that the crowd of reporters in front of the courthouse didn't give a damn about Vishala or her daughter. They'd come to ask her about a scandal involving a man halfway around the world.

Bob didn't give up. "Has Lord Hugh asked you to deny your parentage?"

"That's absurd!" Her fake smile twisted into an angry snarl, and she realized too late that twenty cameras all clicked the same shot...and it would be that face that made tomorrow's headlines, not her smile expressing today's victory.

Panicking, she escaped to her car. *Lord Hugh of Lairg?*

Lord? *Seriously?* Prime minister? Of England?

She hadn't seen her father since she was five, and had never been told his name. She couldn't be sure if she'd even recognize him if she was shown a picture.

She remembered the loud argument between her mother and father and the fact that he'd had a British accent. She remembered his rough, whispered promise close to her ear as he'd hugged her good-bye. *"I'll come back for you, lovey."*

Driving home, her anger returned fresh and ugly. Not anger directed at her father, but at her mother for running him off. For keeping him away. For refusing to reveal his identity. She closed her eyes as she parked in front of her house and leaned her head on the steering wheel. She didn't want to go in. She didn't want to remember any more of it than she was already remembering—and the small house on the poorer side of

Atlanta was filled with memories. After her divorce, she'd moved back home to the house of her youth even though she could afford better.

It had been a tough year, losing her mother to cancer and her husband to another woman. She'd wanted familiarity. She'd wanted to feel the sense of home that the small house gave her, even though the house was in a dangerous neighborhood. How could she not feel safe here? It was home. And she'd always been everyone's big sister; having changed the diapers of half the "tough guys" on the street, she held a certain amount of power. She wasn't blind to the fact that they knew she could either go to bat for them in a court of law or bury them, since she knew most of their naughty little secrets, if it ever came down to it. Besides, she'd never turned her back on her neighborhood. She was an advocate for the block when developers would have mowed it over with bulldozers.

She'd come back seeking memories but hadn't expect to *remember him*.

Her father, her nameless, faceless father, haunted her dreams. "*You are my exotic green-eyed love child. My beautiful, beautiful girl.*"

She remembered that they hadn't always lived in the small two-bedroom house. Once they had lived in a huge house...*with him*. She remembered the palm trees and the warm breeze. He'd played hide-and-seek with her in a maze of magnificent gardens.

She thought it must be because Jonas had moved in, and his Welsh brogue seemed so eerily similar, opening a closed room inside her mind.

Jonas.

He'd be waiting for her inside. They'd been together almost from the moment of their first meeting. He'd just sort of shown up for their first date and hadn't ever left. But then she'd felt that they were destined to be together, not from the first moment their eyes had locked or even when they'd shared a first kiss.

It would take seeing him behind a video recorder.

The second time they'd met, he'd been taping a couple having sex in the back of a public bus. She hadn't known what to say or do, but staring at him...he almost made

what was happening seem *normal*. She'd sat listening; he'd sat filming, and they'd connected on a level deeper than flesh and bone.

Her attraction was immediate though she didn't see him as her type at all. She decided that cute was an understatement. He had a warped sense of style that made his rumpled, just-got-out-of-bed-and-wearing-the-same-clothes-I-slept-in fashion statement perfectly him. She knew at a glance that he'd put together his outfit with determined precision, imagining him meticulously choosing each layered item. Two T-shirts, contrasting colors, and faded brown cargo shorts, a name-brand label that probably cost more than the shoes. It was the camouflage jacket that had earned him her earlier assessment; old and ragged didn't even begin to describe the amount of wear, but it looked right on him, comfortable, even though in hundred-degree heat. It took a lot of effort to look that rumpled.

She'd had no doubt he could afford better; it was all in the accessories: expensive watch, expensive shoes, and expensive camera. She'd wanted to know him better from the very first. He'd intrigued her.

She thought about him waiting for her inside the house. He'd be waiting, anxious to hear about all the details of her victory. What would she say now that her elation over winning her case was gone and she felt robbed of it? How could she explain the emptiness in her gut to Jonas? Did she even want to try?

Her cell phone rang, and she answered.

"I saw you run from the mob of reporters and wanted to make sure you're all right."

"Edward?"

"I was hoping I could exit first from the courthouse and that would divert them; perhaps give you a chance to prepare a statement."

Autumn started shaking. "They didn't want to hear about my win or your loss, Edward!"

"I know, I know. Your father. It must be very upsetting for you right now. I mean, learning his identity through these circumstances."

"You knew! And you didn't warn me?"

Edward laughed. "If anything big is about to happen in Atlanta, you know that O'Malley, Bruce, Lloyd, and Brown are informed first. Although, I would have thought that someone would have let you know that this storm was coming. Your father, maybe? But then, I guess he's so busy...covering his mistakes."

Autumn gasped. "Why are you being mean to me?"

"Hardly; I'm trying to save you from a life of regret. I know that being on opposing sides in that courtroom was as crushing for you as it was for me."

She listened, not understanding why he was saying all of this.

"I've thought of nothing but your legs splayed for me as you lay on my desk. Something's changed in you. You're different. And I want to prove to you that I've changed. I want you to come back to me. Tonight. Tomorrow, we can stage a press conference in our condo, *our home*. Your father will be hard-pressed to deny you when he sees that you are living a life he can point to with pride, or have you forgotten that you used to call one of the most exclusive addresses in the city home?"

Shaking and holding a hand over her mouth to keep from screaming, to keep from vomiting, she hung up on him. Jonas found her still buckled behind the wheel, hyperventilating. *I used to live in a mansion.*

She closed her eyes, seeing herself as a small child, running from room to room, looking for someplace to hide, her father in hot pursuit. "*Come out, come out, wherever you are.*"

She opened her eyes to find her car door open and Jonas squatting beside her.

He was wearing his frayed jeans, the ones missing the knees, and his pale skin showed in wide patches. He hadn't bothered to pull on a shirt, and his lean, lanky form

seemed especially thin. Once she'd been naive and seen his rumpled hair as boyish. She'd seen only youthful mischief in his blue eyes. She knew better now.

He was a very dangerous man. He'd been diagnosed as a sadist in his early teens and had been seeking treatment for his condition for more than two decades, until finally taking his current path.

He controlled his tendencies to want to hurt, maim...kill...by playing with the very fire that soothed his soul. BDSM games. Games took on a whole new meaning, though, because what he did couldn't be called a game. The S in BDSM, sadism, was his truth, and together they walked a very thin line between safe and deadly. They walked the edge together.

"Autumn?" He said her name softly. Greeting? Acknowledgment? Was he asking how she was? Had he seen the news? No, there hadn't been time for that.

"I'm fine," she lied, still gasping for air.

He unbuckled her, pivoted her around, and, with a hard push on her shoulders, forced her head between her knees. "Breathe! Slow and deep."

After a few moments, she was breathing normally even though she was still shaking. Jonas helped her into the house. She took a single step inside and closed the door. The wood seemed to ring inside the frame. She hadn't meant to slam the door, but she had. Her every nerve was on edge. She was an emotional mess: the high of her court victory and the low from journalists not caring at all about her client, wanting only to make what had already been a sensational story suddenly one overshadowed by scandal.

When had she become her father's disgrace?

She knew better than to face Jonas pumped on adrenaline and emotion. She knew better...and yet she'd come home. She dropped to her knees, whispering, "Hurt me."

She watched the shadow pass through his irises. It was always there, always lingering. He hid it behind his good-natured, almost-constant impish grin, but there it always was, ready to be called out, and she was calling him out to play. On her knees,

tears she couldn't explain to him streaking down her cheeks, she sobbed as a childhood song came to her mind. Patty-cake. Her father's voice singing as she patted her small hands against his large, elegantly smooth ones, *"Say, say, my playmate, come out and play with me, and bring your dollies three, climb up my apple tree."*

Jonas rushed to her side and knelt beside her, lifted her chin as she started humming the tune, the words haunting her mind. "Holler down my rain barrel, slide down my cellar door, and we'll be jolly friends forever more..."

"What's happened, Autumn? You were so certain you were winning" —he pulled back to look into her face, afraid to ask but asking anyway—"did you lose the case to Edward?"

"Don't say his name!" she growled. She closed her eyes quickly, hiding from Jonas the pain of Edward's offer. He would never know that Edward wanted her to come back, just as he didn't know about her lapse with Edward in his office.

God, the shame of that.

She knew she was calling out danger to play, but she didn't care. She wanted to hurt. She needed to hurt. The hurt on the outside must hurt more than the inside to make it go away. She'd learned that by accident, and she didn't think that Jonas even realized that he'd taught her that lesson. "Hurt me!"

"Michael isn't here. He's in Vegas, remember?"

"We don't need Michael." Autumn pushed him, her palm a sharp punch against his shoulder. She shook her head hard, trying to dislodge the song. She needed Jonas to *really* come out and play. She leaned into him, kissing his cheek, biting his cheek; then when he turned to claim her lips, she kissed him, sucking his lower lip into her mouth. Sucking his lip. Biting his lip. A metallic taste filled her mouth. She'd bitten harder than she'd meant to. He pulled back away from her, jerked away, grabbed her chin, and made her meet his gaze.

She could see a drop of his blood on his bottom lip before willing herself to meet his gaze, finding control she didn't want to see reflected back at her. "Why do you let

Michael control you? Control us? You played with me before we became a ménage. Play with me now. Just a little. Jonas. Hurt. Me. Just. A. Little.”

She could see his control slipping.

“Cut me, Jonas. You’ve wanted to. Michael always stops your plans. Michael isn’t here. It’s all right. I’m giving you permission. I trust you.”

The shadow edging through his eyes darkened.

She repeated urgently, “I. Trust. You.”

She saw the snap. She saw his eyes go. *Oh shit. What have I done?*

But it was too late for regret. Too late to stop him. She’d goaded him, and she was about to pay the price. Months of worrying about all the what-ifs, and she knew that now she would pay in spades.

Chapter Two

When she'd first met Jonas, she'd told him that she had no interest in pain. It seemed so silly now. Six months later, she'd learned that not all pain was a bad thing. She could even admit that there was a certain delicious eroticism to being spanked...flogged. Even the mere thought of the flogger coming down on her bare flesh made her ache with need. It wasn't just her nipples and clit that responded to sex since meeting Jonas...and of course, Michael, but her entire body.

But she still had her limits.

Two months earlier, Michael was setting up to do a scene with her; Jonas was filming. God, it felt like yesterday...the fear-pumping adrenaline of being tied spread-eagle. Waiting...

Waiting...

The anticipation would kill her, she'd thought at the time.

Michael had blindfolded her before he'd even tied the first rope, and that part was luscious, a sensory overloading jolt: textures that she could feel, scents that were new and exotic, and the sounds...soothing. Some frightening. One sound in particular made her skin crawl. At first it was just a *clunk*, but then she could hear a sound that she couldn't identify, but she somehow knew. *Swish, swish, swish.*

But it hadn't been a soft *swish*; it was loud. At least, louder than the sound of her own blood pulsing through her brain. She knew she'd heard that sound before, and from that time in her past, the sound should have been comforting. She remembered peeking around the wooden doorjamb that led into the bathroom. She remembered she'd always loved watching her father shave. He'd always hummed as he swirled a brush in a bowl of foam, whipping it up, and then slathered his face. He would always see her peeking and touch the end of the sudsy brush to the tip of her nose, making her shrill with delight.

But before all of that. Before the humming and whipping, and her squeals there had been a sound that had drawn her to the bathroom to watch.

Swish, swish. Swish, swish.

Her father would be striking his straight-edge razor against a sharpening strap. She'd thought to herself that surely, that was not the sound she was hearing as she'd lain tied in the bed...waiting.

"Michael?"

"Yes?" Swish, swish, swish. Swish, swish, swish.

The rhythm was different, but in her mind it seemed so similar.

"I want to see what you are doing."

"Patience, love." It wasn't Michael who answered. It was Jonas. His brogue was thick, thicker than his everyday accent, and that only happened when his buttons were being pushed too. She heard the click and whir of his Polaroid camera, which proved he was controlling his nature. Michael was bringing out the sadist in him. That was why the scene was taking so long to get started.

But then it dawned on her. This is the scene. We're in the thick of it.

"M-Michael?" She waited an unseemly long time for him to respond, the entire time having to listen to that sound: Swish, swish, swish. Swish, swish, swish.

Click. Whir.

She felt a warm hand run along the edge of her jaw before he tipped up her chin. Michael asked, "Is there something I can do for you?"

"I-I want to see." She hated it that her fear was showing so obviously in her voice, but then she realized that her entire body was shaking, her teeth chattering, and knew that trying to hide her fear was impossible. Was that what was triggering Jonas? Or was it what Michael was doing that she couldn't see?

She shook as Michael drew away the blindfold, letting her see what he was up to. The lights were dimmed; candles flickered shadows against the walls, and in the shadows she saw the shape of what he was holding in his hand. A knife. A very long knife.

"Red!"

She'd stopped the scene.

She'd never stopped a scene before, but she had, without any thought as to why she should or shouldn't. She'd just stopped it.

Seeing the disappointment in Michael's eyes was the worst. She'd hurt him badly...because she hadn't trusted him. She hadn't even given him the chance to prove that he could be trusted.

And he'd become distant ever since.

Or maybe it was just her. *My schedule is so crazy right now.* At least that was what she told herself when she started thinking about it too much.

She did think about it. Not about Michael and his distance. About. The. Knife.

She dreamed about it, waking up shaking and sobbing in the middle of the night, but not because of dreamed pain, because of dreamed desire. Desire! Which was unthinkable.

The unthinkable, which brought her to this moment: one instant she was on her knees, and the next she was being dragged down the hallway. Jonas wrapped his fist around her hair and pulled her by it. She didn't scream or struggle. She knew that there would be plenty of time for both. She relaxed into submission, allowing him this power over her, and her reward was an instant peace. Her mind went quiet; the song in her

head became quiet. Gone. If not forgotten. She closed her eyes as he stood her up in the bathroom. She'd called the monster out to play, but that didn't mean that she was brave enough to look him in the eyes.

She didn't dare acknowledge her fear or let him see it. She knew his triggers. She didn't dare let him see her fear. She didn't dare let him lose control completely, and she didn't risk even thinking that it might already be too late.

She trusted him.

He could take her to the edge; he would bring her back.

He helped her step out of her heels, and her stocking feet were jolted into awareness by the cold tile of the floor. She felt his hands smooth over her shoulders in a tender caress. She imagined the look in his eyes: awe...knowing that she had given herself to him completely. She hoped she'd see awe; she hoped she'd see a modicum of control, but fear kept her from looking as he helped her slide her arms from her suit jacket.

He unzipped her skirt next and held her elbow, steadying her, as he helped her step free of the fabric. She didn't have to look to know that he had folded the jacket and the skirt before stacking them neatly on the low, padded stool next to the tub.

Standing behind her, he kissed her neck as he unbuttoned her shirt, so slowly. Methodically. Carefully. The room seemed unseemly cool as the fabric separated to reveal her bra, her midriff. She shivered, then realized that she was shaking like a leaf, not cold, terrified. He slid the silk down her arms, pulling her shirt off to fold and stack with her other garments. His touch returned, his fingers hot on her shoulders. His lips followed his fingers, a soft kiss. She knew he was kissing the freckles sprinkled over her shoulders. He loved to kiss her freckles. He whispered, "You're trembling."

"Yes," she acknowledged, matching his soft voice.

"That excites me. I love to make you tremble. I love knowing that terror is racing through your veins...that I frighten you."

A thrill went down her spine, and she hated the perverseness of it, hated and acknowledged it. His excitement, triggered by her fear, was an intense turn-on.

A drawer opened and closed, a *clank* as metal hit the marble vanity top. She peeked, but too late to see anything; his body had already shifted, hiding what he had pulled from the drawer. She kept looking, taking in the rippled smoothness of his chest and belly. He wasn't bulked with muscle, but he was lean and so very, very pale, like his skin had never seen sunlight. Her skin next to his seemed so dark even though she was considered very light for a mixed-race girl. She'd seemed downright milky white next to her very dark-skinned mother, when her mother had been alive. She reached out to touch him and barely stroked the shadowed furrows of his rib cage when he smacked her hand away, saying, "No!"

She jumped at his sudden harshness.

"Keep your hands to your sides until I am ready to restrain you." His voice was a dark, rough version of his normal brogue.

She dared to meet his gaze and saw that some of the shadow had receded—enough to tell her that he was in control of his actions. She decided she might actually survive.

"Are you certain?" he asked.

"Yes," she whispered. "Please, cut me."

He unsnapped her bra with practiced skill, and the fabric fell forward as her heavy breasts lost their support. She reached, unthinking, to hold the cups in place as he pushed the straps off her shoulders, using something hard and cold. Steel. But was it scissors, which she knew were kept in a drawer? Or had he hidden a knife for just such an occasion?

He commanded, "Let it fall."

She did as he asked, letting her breasts spill free of the fabric as the bra fell, the straps catching at her elbows until she straightened them and then falling to her wrists. He took the bra, and she watched him fold it and add it to the rapidly growing pile of

clothing, leaving her wearing her garter belt, stockings, and a G-string. She felt the cool metal on her thigh just before she heard the snip. Scissors. She cried out as what was left of her panties cascaded to her ankles. "That was a matched set; I'll never find another thong to match that bra!"

In a flash of movement, Jonas pushed the point of the sharp scissors under her chin. She shut her mouth quickly, feeling the sting as the metal pushed into her skin. Her gaze caught his; he was so very on the edge of no control, and she kept pushing. She could feel his need as a thick electric current on the air. He wanted to control her. He wanted to make her suffer and cry out. And he would have both before they were done. She knew that. She also knew the thin line they were walking together, a tightrope of danger. One false move and she could tip the power exchange irrevocably into his direction and ultimately risk her safety. Neither of them knew how far he could take their limits, or if she might pay the price in death. That was why they'd agreed to a ménage. Having Michael present to witness would help keep Jonas in line.

She remembered their first time playing. Before she ever knew about his problems with control or about his diagnosis. He'd only taken a belt to her thighs and pussy, nothing edgy, just an introduction to the concept that all pain wasn't necessarily bad. *Some pain could be very, very good.* She hadn't understood then why he'd taken Polaroid shots of her. Only later did she understand that it helped him to slow down the pace, kept him from losing control, gave him time to think through what he was doing. She asked with a shaky voice, "Do you have your camera?"

Their gazes caught, and he slowly withdrew the scissors from under her chin. "I'll go get it."

"It's in the bedroom...by the nightstand," she said, as he turned and abruptly left the bathroom.

"I know where it is," he answered, and all trace of any growl was gone from his voice. It was just his voice. Jonas was back in complete control.

Damn it. She knew their chance of this scene happening now was getting further and further from actuality. She looked in the mirror and saw a small stream of blood going down her throat. She leaned into the mirror, looking closer at the small nick, small but deep. She didn't touch the wound or disturb the small trail of blood as it slid down her throat and onto her chest. A *click* behind her startled her, followed by the comforting *whir* of the Polaroid. Jonas had taken a picture of her examining the wound.

He tossed the unexposed film onto the counter. "Your first cut."

She turned and challenged him. "I think it's too small to denote a first anything."

His eyes narrowed. "It bleeds. It counts."

"It doesn't hurt."

"Most cuts don't. I could bleed you to death and you would never feel a thing if I did it right."

She shivered. He was right. She was goading him with reckless abandon. She was the one out of control, not him. She buried her face in her hands, breaking, crying, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be doing this to you. You're right. It counts."

His voice seemed sinisterly cold as he announced, "I didn't say we were through."

He pushed her back against the sink so that her hips were forced up and onto the sink ledge. With his hip, he pushed between her knees, spreading her legs, trapping her there in an uncomfortable sprawl. One hand grasped the faucet; the other flew back and steadied her against the mirror as she fought to find balance. The speed of his movement made her gasp, but she didn't panic until she saw the long butcher knife in his hand. "W-we could wait for Michael to return from his trip. W-we could finish this scene then."

He leaned forward, and his breath was warm against her cheek as he kissed the corner of her mouth. "I don't need Michael to babysit me."

He drew the knife up to the edge of her jaw with his right hand; with his left, he aimed the camera and clicked. Frantically, she tried to remember how many pictures

were left in the film cartridge. It started with twenty, but she knew he'd used a few the night before, maybe three, four, plus the two he'd just shot, which still left fourteen or fifteen, but he would stop play when he ran out of film. She knew he would stop. He always stopped.

He ran the cold, hard steel down her throat, not cutting, caressing, and she hated that her lower belly clenched with need, wanting his touch to turn sexual, needing him to be rough as they played. Could they safely play, mixing cutting and sex? God, she wanted both. She wanted to come on the edge of his blade.

The blade slid fast through the valley separating her breasts, and she gasped, recognizing the sting. He'd cut her. She looked down and saw her skin separate and pool red—a three-inch track. He asked, "Does that one count?"

He'd cut her. He'd really done it.

Red blood spilled from the wound and trickled over her stomach as he aimed the camera and took the next shot. Seeing her blood made her realize what a dangerous game she'd instigated. She'd known, but she hadn't let herself really acknowledge the danger; the epiphany made her light-headed and nauseated. He took another picture, and she glanced up in time to see his smile. She didn't recognize the look in his eyes, but it frightened her, made her blood pound in her ears. He took another shot. "You're white as a ghost, baby."

She tried to push against him, but he put his hand against her chest. Her blood smeared beneath his fingers. He still held the blade, and it angled in against her throat. "Do. Not. Move."

She panted, trying to not hyperventilate, trying desperately to not pass out. The sight of blood had never affected her this way before. *What is wrong with me?*

She could feel herself shaking, and the nausea racing through her veins made her want to run. Jonas leaned in and kissed her cheek. He angled his forehead against hers, capturing her gaze, but their faces were so close, his blurred before her eyes. "Do you feel that? The adrenaline speeding through your veins? Pure, sweet cortisol and

epinephrine, hormones meant to save your ass with a fight-or-flight response. But you aren't fighting. *Or fighting*, are you? Why is that, sweet, sweet Autumn?"

He trailed his fingertips over the cut, dragging her blood between her breasts in a rust-colored smear. "You haven't hit your limit yet; that's why you aren't running. That's why you aren't fighting me."

He jerked her toward him and angled the knife over her hip. "Do you want this?"

"Yes-s," she hissed.

He made a small cut and then another, deeper than the one over her sternum. The sting was quick, and she embraced the pain. Had it only been six months ago that she'd said she wanted nothing to do with pain? These bled. They bled a lot. He pushed his hand through the blood, covering the top of her thigh, dragging the blood between her legs.

He pushed her thighs farther apart, revealing her sex. He slid a blood-covered thumb over her clit, and she jolted with the need that rushed through her body. "Oh God, Jonas, yes! Fuck me."

She watched as he pulled the cool metal over the top of her thigh, not cutting. He moved close to her clit with the blade. She gasped, but he didn't cut her. He lifted his fingertips to his mouth and tasted of her. She wanted to cry, not regretting, not fear, but with longing like she'd never felt before. She loved sharing this moment with him. Her heart pounded through her rib cage, so fast, so hard...because she needed this so badly.

She felt that this man entering her life had saved her. Because of him, she finally felt alive. She watched him lick her blood from his fingertips. If he killed her now, she could honestly say she'd lived fully, completely.

He leaned close enough to kiss her. He'd left a drop of her blood on his lips. "You want to taste, don't you?"

Her head nodded, and she realized only after that she'd nodded, only after he leaned closer, close enough to tease but not touch. If she wanted to taste, she would have to go that extra space...such a very small space to cross. She licked her lips,

wanting so badly to kiss him, to taste herself on his mouth, but she couldn't make herself move. Autumn pushed her fingers into the mirror, holding on, sliding as her fingers slicked with nervous sweat. "I can't."

"You can; you just have to let yourself."

He pulled back, licked her blood off his bottom lip, and smiled. "I'm proud of you...for this" —he smeared his fingers over her bloodied chest—"for trusting me."

He turned to walk away from her, leaving her precarious balance on the vanity unstable. She sat up, wondering what had just happened. She gripped the edge of the vanity, holding on with a white-knuckled grip even though there was no longer danger of her falling, at least not physically. Her heart was still pounding in her chest, in her ears, and it made her angry that he was walking away. "We're done?"

He turned toward her slowly and showed her that he was folding the knife, a small butterfly knife like the ones she'd seen the boys in the neighborhood hide in their jeans. Had the butcher knife been her imagination? She closed her eyes and opened them again. *There was no butcher knife.*

She stood up and lifted his camera off the counter. She asked softly, "Take a picture of me."

He stared at her as she ran her hand over the drying blood on her midriff where he had smeared it.

"I want you to take a picture of me covered in blood."

He shook his head. "I won't cut you again."

She opened the drawer and pulled out the scissors. "You won't have to. I'll make myself bleed."

He moved quickly, grabbing her hand, grabbing the scissors. "No!" he said authoritatively. "The scene is over, Autumn."

She shook her head. "I don't want the scene to be over. I want to feel more. I want to feel what this made me feel...again."

She took his hand and placed it over her chest. "Make my heart pound and flutter. Make me scream and cry. Take me to my limit."

"No."

"Why not?"

"I think your limit would kill you...and doing that, hurting you gravely, would kill me."

Still holding the camera, she watched him walk out of the bathroom before she started shaking. Intellectually she knew it was her body crashing from the adrenaline rush, the postreaction to the danger, too much adrenaline pumped through her body in too short a time frame. She slid to the floor and lay on the cold tile, shaking so hard her teeth rattled. She listened to Jonas in the other room. He called Michael. It was a one-sided conversation, but she got the full gist of it.

"She's fine, but" — she heard his voice waver, even though heard through a closed bathroom door — "I think you should come home."

She knew that Michael must have heard the emotion too — the self-loathing, the fear. His voice had changed to angry when he said heatedly, "Well, you weren't here, were you?"

A softly spoken exchange followed, still heated, but whispered so that she couldn't tell what was being said until the end when he said, "Yes, I'll stay here. I won't leave her." That made her sigh with relief; she didn't want to be alone. She thought he would come into the bathroom, but, listening for his steps, realized he was still on the phone with Michael. She couldn't make out a single word. Then suddenly he said angrily, "Yes, I'm in control. Damn you for asking, man."

Great. He's in control.

I'm not. I'm losing it.

She rubbed her hand between her legs, her thigh still sticky with blood. She smeared her hand through it. She brought her fingers to her lips and tasted the metallic

sweetness. Raising the camera over herself, she took a picture. She rubbed her hand through the blood and dragged her fingers over her face. She took a picture.

She wanted Jonas to come back and fuck her, fuck her senseless, but she didn't think for a minute that he'd come back into the bathroom.

She thought about her mother, remembering her serious talk with a very young girl. She was putting photographs of her father in a box along with everything else from their old life with him. *"We're going to put these pictures up, and when you are old enough to understand how deeply a man's love can cut you, then we'll take them out and I'll tell you the whole story."* Where had her mother hidden that box?

Chapter Three

The flight from Las Vegas takes four hours and thirty-six minutes, give or take a minute or two. Autumn knew this because she'd looked it up on more than one occasion, thinking that she might go to Vegas and confront Michael, but that would be ridiculous, wouldn't it? They were in a polyamorous relationship by choice of all parties. So it wouldn't make sense for her to ride in on a jealous rampage and confront him with another woman, even though she'd considered it. So when she woke up a little after midnight and found that Michael was sitting on the edge of the bed next to her, it was a surprise. He'd turned on a bedside lamp and sat on the edge of the bed.

Doing quick math in her head told her that it was almost impossible for him to have made it so quickly. Almost. Obviously, by his very presence, not completely. He would have had to drive to the airport at an outrageous speed, lucked into an already boarding flight, and driven from ATL to her driveway without hitting a single traffic snag.

She looked up into his worried face as he flipped through the Polaroids: both the ones taken by Jonas and the ones she'd taken. He'd shaved off his goatee, and she wasn't sure if she thought it was a better look or not; yes, he was still devastatingly handsome, still looked like a rock star, Rick Springfield to be precise, but she'd liked the

beard. Now probably wasn't the time to mention it. But what could she say? "It looks so much worse than it was."

He nodded, still looking at the photos. "You are either the luckiest woman on the planet" — his gaze lifted to hers — "or Jonas really has conquered his inner demon."

She didn't know what to say to that. Jonas had shared aspects of his darker self with Michael that she knew he would never reveal to her, because he didn't want her to be disgusted by the monster he'd once been, and because of that, she didn't see him as a monster at all. She didn't fear Jonas, but she couldn't explain her feelings knowing that sometime in his past he had done something truly horrific, something that led to his being sent to a mental hospital and diagnosed as a sexual sadist.

Michael said something, and she didn't catch it. "Excuse me?"

"I would have never forgiven myself if you'd been seriously injured." He threw the photos on the bed, and she knew he was angry even before he demanded, "Why would you do this?"

"It was nothing. Really! If you'd have been here, you'd have seen that it was a controlled scene."

He gave her a look that said he thought that she had lost her mind. Clearly exasperated, he said, "But I wasn't here."

"I'm sorry."

"Why?" he asked, and she shook her head quickly, clearing the cobwebs of her own confusion as to what he was asking.

She repeated his question. "Why?"

"Yes. Why? Why him and not me? Why?"

She knew exactly what he was asking, and why he was asking it. She'd said, "*Red*," then refused to talk about it...at least with Michael. Later, weeks later, she had talked to Jonas. She'd had to. She'd had to talk to someone about it, and this...this dark desire was something she absolutely would not talk to her gal pals about.

But she'd been daydreaming. At work. Instead of working. And when she realized how serious her problem was becoming, because she hadn't just been remembering the scene with Michael and Jonas and regretting her refusal, she'd actually sat for hours, running a fantasy through her head.

She could see it, almost feel it, as clearly as if it were really happening. Jonas cutting off her clothes with scissors.

He'd started with each sleeve of her blouse, cleanly going up each arm. She'd felt the coolness of the metal tease along her skin. *Snip. Snip. Snip.* The act or the danger made her so hot, wanting him, that she'd kept leaning in to kiss him, and he'd kept pushing her back, telling her to have patience. *Snip. Snip. Snip.* He cut through the collar, and the fabric fell to her waist. He pulled on the cup of her bra, pinching the fabric away from her skin. *Snip.* She'd gasped when the metal of the shears had barely touched her breast, the metal ice-cold. When he released the fabric, it reformed around her breast, but her nipple poked perfectly through the hole he'd made with the scissors. He'd taken a picture before repeating the act again on her other breast. *Click. Whir.* The sound of his Polaroid recording her shame made her insane with need, desire pulling with a hard ache inside her groin.

Please, she'd begged. Cut me.

That was when she decided she had a problem, and she'd gone to Jonas to talk to him about what was happening. He'd said that they could try the scene again...with Michael, but she'd made him promise that he wouldn't mention it to Michael. Ever.

Facing Michael, she decided that maybe she should have talked to him. He was the psychiatrist in the relationship; wouldn't that have made more sense? Instead of facing why she had or hadn't gone to Michael instead of Jonas, she challenged, "It wasn't like you were around."

"Did you do this to get my attention?"

She laughed at him, but the laugh held no humor. "No."

"Because you're jealous?" Michael's face reflected the horror of his question. He grabbed her shoulders. "What would I have done if you would have died?"

"Aren't you being a little melodramatic? Dead? Really? If it eases your mind any, I didn't do this to get your attention. I am not jealous. You. Are. Not. That. Worthy."

Autumn threw off the covers and hauled herself from the bed, intent on making it to the bathroom without throwing up. She was glad she'd worn a long silk nightgown to bed as she stalked toward the closed bedroom door; at least the damage to her leg was hidden. Michael followed her, turning her abruptly and kissing her roughly. "Damn it! I don't want to worry about you every minute I'm away. I don't want to worry that he might kill you!"

She laughed. "Jonas isn't the one you need to worry about! I begged him for more, even after he walked away. I goaded him. I begged and pleaded, but he wouldn't cut me again."

"Thank God."

"He wouldn't touch me either."

"It doesn't look like you were in any condition for sex."

"I was fine! It's just a couple nicks, and that isn't the point. When you go away, he doesn't touch me. We don't play, and we don't fuck. So while you are off romancing whoever it is you are romancing, we're here waiting for you to come back so that we can get on with our relationship."

Michael looked at her like he didn't believe her; then he looked away. "I'm sorry. I had no idea, but we all agreed to a poly relationship. You knew that there would be others."

"I also thought I'd have Jonas when you were away, but it hasn't worked out that way."

"Why?" Michael asked, seeking her gaze once more.

She shook her head. "I don't know."

"You were in a sexual relationship before I joined in."

She nodded. "Yes, but it's different now."

He pulled her into his arms and whispered against her face, "I'm sorry if that's my fault."

"I don't know," she said, but she thought she did know. She thought it had something to do with their not playing. Intellectually she understood that he needed a certain level of play to be sexually enticed. Emotionally it felt wrong, like he should want her sexually with or without playing, and she didn't want to think about that part at all. She pulled away. "I really have to pee."

"Go. Go," he said, allowing her to leave the bedroom to use the restroom, but he was waiting for her when she came back into the hall. He leaned against the wall like he had all the time in the world to wait for her. She'd hoped to be rescued from any more conversation, but that didn't appear to be likely.

She walked back into the bedroom and crawled back under the covers. "God, I'm exhausted."

"Edge scenes are hard work: mentally, physically, emotionally. It may take a day or two for you to feel any semblance of normal."

He sat on the bed beside her.

"Jonas isn't coming back, is he?" she asked.

"Not tonight. He's playing at the Blue Parrot with Lydia."

Lydia, his sister, the one person who loved him and believed in him, despite his diagnosis, forsaking her old life in Wales for a life in the United States because she knew Jonas would follow her here. She'd done it because she couldn't stand how he'd been looked at following the diagnosis. It was a small town. He'd been lucky he hadn't experienced a serious "accident," or so Lydia had confided once she decided Autumn had been worthy of her brother. He'd been ostracized. No girl would go against a father to date him, not that they would want to; most feared him. He didn't deserve that.

"You asked him to stay away the entire night?" She knew the Blue Parrot closed at three a.m., and that he could be at her house by three thirty when he wanted to do so.

"I thought it might be best if he stayed at his apartment tonight."

"I don't think it's best."

Michael pulled the sheet up to her chin. "Maybe I wanted some time alone with you...purely for selfish, romantic reasons."

She lifted her eyebrow in doubt, causing him to admit, "I wanted to talk to you without him here."

"We're fine. We played, but Jonas was in complete control."

She felt the slap of Polaroids against her thigh and held back her curse, though she winced. Of all the skin on her entire body, he hit the few spare inches that Jonas had stitched together last night. It had hurt like hell then; it hurt doubly bad now that the endorphins had worn completely off. Michael jerked back the cover and pushed up her gown, exposing her thigh. He cursed loudly enough for the neighbors to hear. "Goddamn, Autumn." He pushed the gown higher, pulling it out from under her hips and roughly jerking it off her body. His gaze went from her thigh, which had required stitches, to her sternum, which hadn't, and then to her chin, which Jonas had put two stitches in even though she'd begged him not to. "What were you thinking?"

"That I wanted him to do a cutting scene." She rolled into a sitting position to look at the damage under the light of the lamp. She knew it wasn't that bad. It looked angry and red, though the stitches were perfect. She swallowed back stomach acid, insisting, "Jonas was in control."

"And you were willing to bet your life on that?"

"I was willing to trust him, yes."

"What if he'd lost it?"

"I guess I would have died, and Jonas would have gone to prison. Isn't that what everyone has been waiting for him to do? Ever since he was diagnosed at age thirteen,

wasn't it? When would he transgress from merely ripping off the wings of flies to actually crippling a person? When would he completely lose it and kill someone?"

"He wasn't diagnosed because he maimed insects; all boys do that. He was diagnosed because his very first sexual encounter got ugly."

Autumn covered her ears. She didn't know the details, and she didn't want to. She especially didn't want to learn the details from Michael; if Jonas wanted to tell her...if Jonas felt it was important for her to know, he would be the one to tell her. Seething with righteous indignation, she asked, "Could you live up to the kind of scrutiny and expectation that he has endured? Could you? Or would you just kill someone and get it over with?"

"That's enough!"

"Is it?" she asked, daring him to argue with her. "Do you know why he is here?"

"His sister —"

"Yes, he's told you the same story: his sister left home and his mother charged him with a promise he wouldn't come back until he was able to bring her back, right?"

"Something like that."

"It's true, but his sister won't go back. She'll never go back, because she couldn't stand the way everyone watched him. There, everyone knows, everyone was waiting. Here, no one knows, except you...and me. It broke Lydia's heart to see him reacting every day to the pressure of living under a microscope. Sooner or later he would have cracked solely because of the expectation that he would. She couldn't bear for that to happen."

"But I asked you not to play while I was away." Michael chastised her. "I would never forgive myself if anything happened to you."

She shook her head and bit her tongue to keep from challenging his declaration. Now was not the time to sound like the jealous girlfriend. "We're talking now. He won't be home for hours. That's plenty of time to say everything that needs to be said."

"Is it?" He pushed her hair away from her forehead. "I'm worried about *you*. And it's going to take me more than a few hours to determine if you are all right."

"Are you assuring yourself as my boyfriend...or as a psychiatrist?"

"Last time I checked at the office, you aren't my patient, so it's strictly as your...*boyfriend*." He smirked. "I was hoping you'd let me sleep over tonight."

She relaxed against her pillow with a heavy sigh, not turning her face away when he leaned close to kiss her. "I want you to tell me what led to you wanting to do a cutting scene with Jonas. He said it wasn't planned, that it just happened."

She closed her eyes, not wanting to think about that. Not wanting her brain to start asking the questions that would keep her from sleeping. "I'm tired now; can we talk later?"

She felt him stretch out next to her and knew he would lie there waiting until she was willing to answer his questions, whether it was hours, days, or weeks. She kept her eyes closed. "You aren't going to let this go, are you?"

"Not a chance."

"I suppose I deserve this. I did ruin your weekend, after all."

He sighed. "You interrupted my time with Carla, but you haven't ruined my weekend."

Carla. She hadn't had a name before. Now the woman he'd been meeting in Las Vegas had a name. Over the six months that she had been with both Jonas and Michael, Michael had been with many other women, but he'd never divulged a name. She swallowed hard. *This can't be good*. She wasn't sure she was ready to share him on a full-time basis.

Jonas had never asked her to share him with anyone...and yet he'd shared her with Michael. It didn't seem fair, but honestly, she didn't know if she could deal with knowing that they were both seeing other women.

"I won my case."

"Congratulations."

"The firm is going to appeal."

"Expected, I guess."

She nodded, still not opening her eyes to look at him. "It seems I may be in the center of a scandal."

"The other side is playing dirty? Bringing your personal life into play?"

"Something like that."

"They can't tell you who you can or can't date."

"No, not my sex life, although it would definitely tarnish my reputation if it was exposed that I play kinky games behind closed doors," she admitted before announcing, "the media is having a field day with my paternity." She rushed to add the rest. "I may have a lead on who my father is...but I think it might be too late for us. Maybe I don't want anything to do with him anymore. Maybe I don't give a damn who he is or why he never came back into my life."

"And that's why you asked Jonas to hurt you?"

"Maybe. I don't know. I just knew that I hurt so badly inside that something had to make it stop."

"And Jonas cutting you made you forget for a moment why you were hurting on the inside." Michael said it as a statement, not a question, and even though she tried to not think of him as a psychiatrist, she failed miserably. She closed her eyes, trying to make sense of it all herself. It wasn't like she'd driven home from the courthouse, planning on asking him to hurt her.

"It just happened."

She looked at her hands, folded in her lap, to keep from being held prisoner by his gaze. "I needed a diversion. I was remembering my childhood..."

"We all have pain in our past, but please don't make up an excuse you think I'll want to hear." Michael lifted her chin, making her look into his eyes. She wanted to

scream at him that she wasn't making anything up. "I'll admit that I'm hurt because you didn't trust me to even do a small knife-play scene with you, but you let him cut you. And from the looks of these pictures, everything went very out of control."

She remained silent, her eyes filling with tears. *Jonas was in control.*

"Can you honestly tell me that you do not see the danger in pushing him so hard?"

"I see the danger." She struggled to find the right words. "I just know that I'm safe with Jonas."

"But you don't feel safe with me?"

"No! That isn't it at all!"

"Then explain this to me." He waved one of the Polaroids in her face. It was one she'd taken of herself. Streaks of blood ran down her face where she'd pulled her blood-covered fingers from forehead to chin. Streams of blood had dried, running from the nick in her chin down her neck. Blood from the sliced cut between her breasts was smeared over breasts and belly. And she looked...satisfied. There wasn't any other word for the look on her face. The cat that swallowed the canary maybe. And damn pleased about it.

"I can't," she admitted. "I don't understand it myself."

She rubbed her face, hiding behind her hands because she didn't need to see the photos to know what she looked like in them. The images would be imprinted on her mind for the rest of her life. She thought she was beautiful: her face twisted by the agony of Jonas walking away, the perfection of her features blurred behind the smears of her own blood.

She lifted her gaze to his and told him, "Right now, I'm exhausted and going to go to sleep." She reached out and took the photos from him, turning to lay them in a stack on the nightstand before reaching for his hand. "You are welcome to stay the night. I'd really like you to stay, but I'm not talking about this anymore. At least not until tomorrow."

Chapter Four

She woke to darkness and disorientation. Her hip was throbbing, but that wasn't what woke her. She'd been having the strangest dream. She'd been snuggled between Michael and Jonas, but they weren't in their bed; they were in England and they'd been on a madcap search for her father. The dream must have been tarnished by the location though; it was very Monty Python, and she'd had a hard time keeping up.

"I know that you're awake."

"You shouldn't have interrupted your trip," she replied, refusing to open her eyes. She didn't want to see his face, and she certainly didn't want to see the evidence of her and Jonas's mischief.

Then she realized what had awakened her and lifted her hips, feeling the bliss of a velvety, warm tongue stroke over her clit. "M-mm, I'm having the most marvelous dream."

Michael shifted his face. "Are you dreaming?"

"I must be, because you aren't mad at me anymore."

"I was never mad. I was scared out of my mind by Jonas's phone call; but even if I was mad, I doubt that would keep me from doing this." He licked a teasing stroke in illustration and need jolted through her clit and up her spine like a bolt of lightning.

"Oh God."

"Like that?"

"Love that," she assured him.

"You don't want me to let you go back to sleep?"

"Uh-uh, no sleep, not now, just my clit on your tongue." She chuckled at herself, and even though it was dark, she hid her eyes beneath the bend of her elbow. She'd grown so bold in the last few months, unbelievably bold with her two men. She suddenly wanted Jonas there with them to photograph this moment and had the sudden worry that Jonas wasn't coming back at all tonight. It would be just like him to stay at his apartment instead of facing a confrontation with Michael, and she didn't blame him. Still, she wished he were there to photograph this. She didn't have any pictures that involved just her, her clit, and one of her men's tongues. There was always paraphernalia: ropes, chains, and clamps. This moment was so pure, so honest and real, just skin on skin.

"I've missed this," she admitted as he wrapped his arms around her thighs, settling his hands on her pelvis. He would hold her down with leverage as she rode close to orgasm. Cunnilingus was one of his best skills.

"Mm-hmm," he mumbled against her clit, and she giggled because the vibration tickled. Then his tongue slid under her clit, and his lips sucked around her. The pressure started building as he rocked his face against her, licking, sucking, pulling her flesh, until her hips were moving, rocking, keeping pace.

"Oh, baby. Michael, please. Motherfucking God, don't stop." She didn't stop to think why she called him Michael, not Master, because he'd always been Master or Master M ever since they'd met. She didn't stop rocking against him, worried that he would be offended by her dirty mouth. She would think about both, later, in the dark, as he snored softly against her, but for the moment she could only rock and croon as the orgasm he built inside her lifted her into a spiral of stars.

She wanted to drift into sleep, but he rose above her, and she opened her mouth, more than willing to offer him the same pleasure he'd just graced her with. But instead of thrusting between her lips, he straddled her face, lowering his mouth back to her still-throbbing pussy. He inhaled loudly, and she knew her scent must be strong after such a hard orgasm.

"I hope you don't mind," he said. "I can't get enough of you tonight."

His velvety-soft, searing-hot lips and tongue closed over her clit, and she jumped with the jolt of awareness. He angled his erection closer to her mouth, and she gripped his length in both hands, pulling him nearer, sliding her tongue around the head in a teasing lick that made him moan.

She liked licking him and sucking him.

It helped her to separate away from the need building between her own thighs as he mimicked the rhythm she was setting with her tongue. He matched her lick for lick, stroke for stroke, sucking, biting, pulling. She didn't know which of them was in control of this game. She only knew that her body was spiraling out of control. Her orgasm peaked, and she pulled his length from her mouth to scream and bite his inner thigh. It seemed too much, the sensation of a second orgasm so closely following the first.

"Oh God!" she cried out again and again, as wave after piercing wave racked her body. "Ohgodohgodohgod! Stopstopstopstopstop!"

He didn't stop licking or sucking or teasing, and another wave mounted her body and rolled through her. "Oh God, Master! Please, let me bring you pleasure now. Pleasepleasepleasepleaseplease."

He released her clit and dismounted her face. In a smooth move, he angled over her, his face near enough in the dark shadows to make out his every feature. "So. We're back to Master again, are we?"

Autumn turned her face. Confused. Unsure of the answer herself.

His hand slid over her pelvis, pressing between her bones to find the sensitive spot over her G-spot. She bucked against his hand, moaning. She hated that she sounded so needy.

"More?" he asked.

She didn't have long to think; he rolled her onto her stomach and lifted her hips. One hand slid under her, pressing against that damning bundle of nerves that would have her writhing and moaning sooner than she would have liked. His dominant hand plunged between her legs, sliding in only a finger, then two. She moaned as hunger and need collided, his fingers awakening need buried deep in the sinewy muscle of her body. A third finger joined the rest, and she felt stretched.

He pushed hard into her pelvis, trapping her G-spot between his fist and his fingers. Her back arched, and she screamed like a cat in heat. He pushed in a fourth finger before rotating his palm so that his thumb could stroke her clit as well.

"Please!" she cried out, her orgasm so close.

"Tell me what you need."

"Fuck me," she growled. "I want your dick inside of me. I want you to ride me hard. Ride me hard enough to break me."

He responded by pumping his fingers inside her, stretching her, taking her higher than she'd ever climbed before letting her fall into an orgasm that stole through her like an earthquake. She gasped and shouted, riding through the turbulent tremors controlling her body even after he withdrew his hand. He wrapped his erection in a condom and thrust, hard, harder. She screamed and bucked as he rode her. He held down her shoulders, and her screams got swallowed by the pillow. "You want ridden?" he asked.

"Oh God, yes!"

"You want me to break you?"

"I need it like this. I need to be used roughly."

He brought his hand down hard on her ass. "How rough do you want it, baby?"

She pushed her ass higher, taking his thrusts. "Fuck me like you mean it, goddamn it!"

Growling, he fucked her, riding her hard enough to break her. But she didn't break; she molded to him like a silken glove, milking him as he thrust, making him come before he was ready to stop.

He pulled his spent condom off and dropped it into a small bedside trash bin before collapsing onto the pillow next to her. Lying next to her, he could barely move. He cracked one eye to look at her, noting that the room was growing lighter. "Are you all right?"

She laughed. "God, that was amazing."

"We may have torn loose your stitches."

"I don't care. I really needed *that*."

He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close. He kissed her forehead. "That's the problem. You make me lose control. It's no wonder Jonas doesn't trust himself around you. I should have never smacked your ass, so close to the stitches. I—"

She stopped his words with a soft press of fingertips. "You did exactly what I needed you to do. Please don't apologize." She replaced her fingers with her lips, kissing him. She kissed his mouth and jaw; she kissed his neck; and as the sun broke the horizon, filling the bedroom with light, she kissed a trail down his chest, over his navel, to where his pubic hair thickened around his cock. She lifted his penis, soft and flaccid.

"I may need a minute." He lifted his head to look at her, chuckling, then dropped limply back into the pillow.

"It's your lucky morning. I think I can spare a minute or two," she promised before lowering her lips to pull his limp cock into her mouth. She sucked on him, patiently, swelling with the pride of accomplishment as she felt the first tentative flicker

of interest in his length. She continued to suck him and stroke him, coaxing him harder and harder. She lifted her face to find him gazing at her.

"I love it when that happens, when you go from soft to hard in my mouth."

He smiled. "Me too."

From across the room, her cell phone rang. She ignored it.

"You aren't going to answer that?"

"I'm not moving" – she stroked the length of his hard dick with her fingertips – "except to spread my legs."

"It might be Jonas. He's probably worried."

"It's one of the girls," she guessed. "I'm missing the Saturday morning confessional. It's after six."

She didn't have to explain to Michael the who, what, or why. He already knew the story of how she and her college dormmates, Kim, Delilah, Juliet, and Eleanor, had christened themselves the Fabulous Fucking Five. During an LSAT-insanity cram session, they'd taken a break from studying to find and fuck, then report back for a Saturday morning tell-all that over time and distance would become a regular conference call. She had always listened, rarely sharing; she'd never had anything of interest to share until she'd met Michael...and Jonas.

In the past, she'd set her alarm so as not to miss a single solitary second of the divulged naughtiness, knowing full well that she was the only one needing to set an alarm. The others would just be rolling in from their night's debauchery. After the scene with Jonas, she had showered, gone to bed, and never even considered an alarm. What would she say?

"Won't they be worried if you don't answer?"

Autumn shook her head. "I think they're getting used to my not showing up on the call. It's getting harder. I mean, how do I confess this?" She looked pointedly at his very impressive erection and waggled her eyebrows. "I really don't want to share you

with the four of them." Then she pointed at her hip, which was indeed bleeding a little around two torn stitches. "Or this."

Michael climbed out of the bed and walked over to pick up her purse from where she'd tossed it. He rummaged a bit and retrieved the still ringing phone. He answered in a darkly mysterious voice, "Hello? This is Michael, and you are?" Watching him, her lips twitched. His dark, sensual, erotically charged wet-dream voice could reduce an entire room of women to aching wantonness. She shook her head, smiling.

She could just imagine Juliet, Kim, Delilah, and Eleanor's (better known as Kit Kat, because of her love for the chocolate bar, and because Robby Edwards had nicknamed her that after a college date when she proved to him just how much fun eating pussy could be when said chocolate was hidden inside) reaction. Michael chuckled and blushed. She couldn't ever remember Michael blushing. Kim would have been responsible for *that*. His answer was quick, assuring them, "Oh, she'll have a good excuse. Give us a few more hours, though." With *that*, he hung up.

He dropped the phone back into her purse before rejoining her on the bed. Reaching into the nightstand, he withdrew a wrapped condom, and she watched as he tore open the package and unrolled the slick, prelubed rubber down his rigid length. As he rolled over her, she said, "You didn't have to answer my phone, but since you did, I could have taken the call."

"No, you couldn't have." He pushed her thighs wide, exposing her clit and her wetness, which he trailed a gentle finger through, before plunging into her hard and fast. Deep. She moaned, loving the force of him. Also loving his sheer length and girth. He always hit just the right places. He kissed her neck, admitting, "I don't want you to share me."

Her eyes flew open, confused. She didn't hide her sarcasm. "I already do...with Carla." She really didn't like the way the woman's name sounded coming out of her mouth, and vowed silently to never say it again.

"I meant, what we do together isn't to be shared. If I wanted the world to know what we do together, we'd play publicly."

"They are my friends. I only share enough to feel included."

His fingertips lightly traced beside the cut running along the valley of her cleavage. "Will you share this?"

"No!"

"Carla is an old friend," he said, pulling his length out slowly, but not all the way free. He plunged back in, deeper, harder, making her gasp. "Would you care if I told her the details of this?"

"Yes!"

He thrust roughly.

"Oh God, Michael."

He started to pull back out, but Autumn grabbed his hips, wanting him to thrust in her fast and hard, wanting him to ride her to madness.

"You don't have to worry; Carla isn't privy to the private details of my life."

"Please," she begged. "I do not want to talk about *her*."

He pulled out just as slowly a second time, same as the first, not all the way out, but almost. She braced for his thrust, but he paused. "We've played together a lot over the years. We'll never be more than that. Play friends."

He was killing her; she really didn't want to talk about his other women...play...or otherwise. He asked, "Do you understand?"

"Like a fuck buddy, but with whips and chains," she answered smartly.

He laughed, saying, "Exactly," before lifting her ankles to his shoulders so that she couldn't stall his movements. He thrust into her hard, giving her what she'd wanted. Thrusting again and again until she was screaming from the sheer force of his body connecting to hers. Her hips were raised completely off the bed, and he controlled every movement. She was pinned and at the mercy of the pleasure he was inflicting on her

body; he wouldn't let her come, though. He'd learned enough about her body to keep her riding the edge and prevent her from falling into orgasm.

She swore at him, "Goddamn you!"

"I want you to understand the difference."

"What?" she asked. Her pleasure-addled mind could make little sense of his words or her own thoughts.

"You. Are. Not. A. Play. Friend," he growled.

"Oh!" she squeaked, suddenly understanding as orgasm surged over her body.

Chapter Five

She slept only to be awakened again and again by Michael. Fingers. Tongue. Penis. He'd used her until she was as limp as a washrag: tender in places she'd never been tender and too exhausted to argue that she'd had enough orgasms for one day.

"I'm tired," she whined, pulling the blankets over her body, over her head. "Let me sleep."

"Not yet." He slipped the blanket down, exposing her face. He kissed her eyelids, her nose, and her lips. He asked, "Do you remember the first time you kissed me?"

With her eyes still closed she smiled, remembering the first time she'd seen him. She'd actually gone to Dante's, a BDSM nightclub, with the girls, having been invited by Jonas to come out and hear his band play. She and Jonas hadn't been dating yet, really didn't even know each other. No, that wasn't true, because from the first moment she'd looked into his eyes, she'd felt her soul had found its missing half. But even so, when she'd entered that elevator and found herself so near to the man she'd only heard referred to as Master M...she'd been immediately intrigued.

He'd had a woman on her knees, giving him a blowjob in a public elevator, but he'd seemed bored to tears. Seeing that, how could she stand there doing nothing? She'd kissed him. She'd actually kissed him so thoroughly he'd shot his load.

"Kissing you was the bravest thing I'd ever done."

"Was it?" he whispered, kissing her again.

She laughed, covering her face with her hands. "I don't know what got into me."

Michael pulled her hands away from her face. "I'm glad you kissed me." He caught her bottom lip between his teeth and tugged until she opened her eyes. "You know I went to a lot of effort to find you?"

She whispered, "Yes," and found herself caught in his gaze. For no other reason than she was looking into his eyes and he into hers, her heart started beating a mad tattoo. She understood then that there really was something more between them. Chemistry? Magic? Destiny? That was why it was always so important for Jonas to be there: to keep this...whatever this feeling was...from overwhelming her.

"Do you feel that?" he asked.

He feels it too?

Her lips parted, whether to admit or deny, she wasn't certain, she was so undecided; she felt that whatever *it* was, if allowed to grow it would consume her, leaving no room for Jonas, and she couldn't let that happen. His mouth closed over hers, hungrily, and though she tried to keep her mind focused on staying in control, it was a lost cause.

Her body responded with an equal passion. It seemed then that her mind separated into two halves—part enjoying the fire spreading through her veins and the other half floating above her body, watching with intellectual control, crying out a warning, *This is going to end badly.*

She pushed against him, but not to push him away. The half of her that had surrendered control wanted her arms around him, wanted to straddle him. They ended with him sitting, her straddling. He thrust into her, making her scream for more as every nerve ending in her pussy responded. She rode him hard, raking his skin with her fingernails. She bit his shoulder, making him moan.

When her orgasm finally took her, it rocked through her. She couldn't support her own weight, so she fell into him, shaking and sobbing, the orgasm leaving her convulsing for long minutes. Every time he would move, stroke her, or kiss her, she would jerk as new spasms tore through her. That's when he believed her and pulled her into the crook of his arm.

He waited until her breathing regulated and her body stopped quivering before saying, "I want to break up the ménage."

She turned her head to look at him, sure that he was joking. "What was today then? Fucking my brains out your twisted way of saying good-bye?"

She tried to pull away, but he held her tight, kissing the top of her head. "My way of saying I love you. My way of saying that I cannot let anything happen to you."

"Meaning you want to get rid of Jonas?" She focused on her anger to keep from acknowledging the other part.

"Yes."

She sat up straighter even though he wouldn't release his hold on her. "Now who sounds jealous?"

"This isn't about jealousy. I do not know what I would do if anything happened to you while I was away and unable to protect you."

"Jonas would never hurt me."

"Jonas would never mean to hurt you."

Autumn covered her ears. "I'm not listening. The cutting scene happened because of me. If it wasn't for that, we wouldn't even be having this conversation."

Michael pulled her hands away from her ears. "Then tell me how you went from being unable to participate in a little knife play, to letting Jonas carve you up? And do not even deny that."

She shook her head but knew that she had to try to explain, if only to understand it herself. "Ever since I said 'red,' I've been thinking about sharp objects. I don't know

why, I never have before, so I don't understand it myself, but I have been. Knives. Scissors. Chain saws." Seeing his look of horror, she clarified, "Not being hacked up by a chain saw, but the sound, the danger.

"The worry of being cut, maimed, killed...it's very" — she paused to consider how to explain — "compelling. I feel like I'm being romanced by some dark need that I don't understand...and don't want to understand. I'm embarrassed by it. I admitted my fantasies to Jonas because he was here."

Seeing Michael's frown, she amended, "It wasn't just because you were away." She didn't say out of town with Carla, even though she thought it in an angry, jealousy-filled voice. "Because even if you'd been here, I might have only confessed to Jonas."

"Why?"

"Because I didn't want you to think I was crazy."

Michael patted her leg. "Not crazy, love, but very susceptible to the power of suggestion."

"You're saying that because of the scene I did with you, my brain turned it into a desire."

"It happens."

"Did you know that it would happen?" she asked suspiciously.

"No. I didn't realize you'd react so strongly, and when you did, I thought that it would be a boundary we would have to take our time with."

"We? You and me? Or you and Jonas?"

"We. As in all of us. At least that's what I was thinking at the time."

"Why wouldn't you just put it on my hard limits list? No is no."

Michael shook his head. "Not always. No is always maybe until it is proven to be no."

"But I said no when you tried to do the scene."

He smirked, then winked. "But that was only the first time we tried it. I would have tried again. We would have had a conversation about it first. You would have thought about it—"

"You think I would have caved."

"Perhaps. Eventually."

Autumn sighed, frowning hard. "I don't think I like that. I have boundaries that I don't ever want to cross."

"And I won't push you on those."

"How will you know the difference?"

"Trust me. I'll know."

She rolled her eyes, admitting with an uneasy chuckle, "I do hate it when you say that: 'trust me,' like I don't, because I do." Her face turned completely serious when she said, "Know this: Jonas is a hard limit; no power of suggestion will change my stance on him."

Chapter Six

Autumn roamed around the apartment, feeling alone...tired to the point that she felt shredded and dazed—despite the hours of sleep, despite Michael's presence in the next room. She tried to get some work done in her home office, instead of going into her small office downtown, even though usually she did spend half a day in the office on Saturdays. Truth was, she was exhausted—mentally, physically, emotionally—and hated to admit that the scene with Jonas had added to that exhaustion. Then there was Michael, arriving like the white knight to protect her from the villain.

Jonas might be a sadist, but he was not a villain.

She just wasn't sure that she could ever convince Michael of that, especially after she looked at herself in the mirror. The cuts on her thigh were an angry red, spreading a soft pink puffiness around the edges. Her entire thigh felt hot to the touch, signs screaming that infection was rearing its ugly head. She didn't even want to consider getting a doctor's opinion; that would be entirely too embarrassing. As much as she hated to do it, she was going to have to call in a friend favor, the friend being Kim, who, as a practicing physician, could prescribe anything she needed. She just hoped she wouldn't ask too many questions. Asking for a prescription for anything was something

she'd never done, and although she knew she should just ask Michael to write one, she couldn't bring herself to ask him.

She peeked around the corner to make sure that Michael wasn't in hearing distance. He lay on the couch watching a soccer match, which added to her stress because he was showing no signs of leaving. All she really wanted to do was drive to Jonas's and make sure that he was okay, make sure that their relationship was okay. She didn't think that Michael would say anything to Jonas about breaking up the ménage...but what if he already had?

He wanted to break up the ménage.

"I love you."

Why had Michael said that...now?

Her throbbing thigh distracted her long enough that she knew she had to take action. She made the call to Kim, dialing before losing her nerve.

"You better have a good excuse for missing the conference call," Kim said instead of offering the more traditional "hello."

Autumn closed her eyes and let out the long breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "I cut myself a couple days ago. I think it's infected."

"How bad?" Kim immediately sounded more like her mother instead of her friend.

"Bad enough for stitches."

"Good. You went to the ER. What antibiotic did they prescribe?"

Autumn didn't say anything.

"You didn't go to the doctor, did you? Tell me you stitched yourself so that I can come over and smack you."

Why did I call Kim?

"Jonas stitched it for me," she whispered into the phone.

"Autumn!"

"He did a good job."

"I don't want to hear it. Do you have a fever?"

"I don't know; I don't think so. I'm just tired and achy, and the wound is kind of hot to touch it."

"Go to the emergency room. Now."

"I was hoping you would just call in a prescription," she admitted.

Silence answered. She'd been afraid that Kim might be nosy, demand a lot of answers to questions that she wasn't really comfortable answering, but Kim getting mad at her for asking had never been a thought. Now she worried that she'd just crossed a line of friendship.

"I'm coming over," Kim finally said, breaking the silence.

"No! I mean that's ridiculous. I don't want to interrupt your Saturday afternoon, and I'm really busy. I'm only calling because everything is so crazy right now and —"

"Okay, okay, I understand. I saw the news."

What? Autumn questioned silently, momentarily confused; then she remembered the nightmare of reporters she'd left behind at the courthouse.

"I still want to see it."

"I really don't want you to."

After another long silence, Kim asked, "What did you do?"

Autumn swallowed the hard, dry lump clogging her throat before lying to her friend, "I cut myself. On the outside of my thigh. It isn't a big deal. It was just deep enough that it needed a few stitches. I didn't want to go the emergency room; that's all."

"Should I be worried about you, Autumn?"

Autumn chuckled softly, knowing *that* tone. She resisted calling her "Mom" when she answered, "I'm fine. Overworked, stressed-out, stupidly careless...but fine."

"If the heat and redness doesn't start to lessen immediately, promise that you will call me?"

"I will," Autumn promised, and Kim told her which pharmacy she would call.

She heard Michael come into the office behind her, and she turned to face him. He looked grim; had he been listening to her conversation? "Hang up the phone."

"Excuse me?"

He took the phone from her hand and spoke into the receiver. "She'll call you back."

She stood and faced him. "What the fuck? Who gives you the right to listen to my private conversa —"

Michael's hand clamped down over her mouth, and he pushed her into the living room none too gently, demanding, "Sit!" when he had her in front of the television. She looked from his face to the wide glowing screen, at first not understanding what she was seeing, a small house in the suburbs surrounded by police tape. The on-screen newscaster was saying, "The bodies were found just after noon by Maha Gupta, Vishala Morris's mother, when Vishala failed to arrive for a special dinner and failed to answer the phone. Her granddaughter would have been celebrating her third birthday."

The screen flashed to an older woman, wearing a bright orange and red sari. Tears rolled down her cheeks. "I know he did this to my baby. He killed her, and he killed my precious granddaughter. Well, judgment will come for you, Isaiah Johnson! Judgment will come!"

A slide show of recent photos of Vishala and her young daughter flashed across the screen. Autumn clasped her hand over her mouth. "They're dead?"

Another photo flashed onto the screen: Isaiah Johnson. "The police have stated that Isaiah Johnson is being considered as a person of interest. Even though no charges have been filed, Johnson, accompanied by his attorney, did arrive at the police station a little over an hour ago to answer questions."

Autumn shook her head, not believing what she was seeing. Then matters got worse, because it was her face being flashed onto the screen, and the announcer claimed, "Local attorney A.J. Blessings, who just won a very substantial settlement for her client Vishala Morris in the civil case against Isaiah Johnson, could not be reached before this newscast to offer comment."

The screen widened to show a second news announcer seated by the first. "Jim, as our international correspondent, we rarely share the same desk, but today you're here to offer us an international angle on why Ms. Blessings has failed to make any statement regarding the current situation."

"Actually, Tom, it has not been confirmed or denied, but latest reports from the UK suggest that Ms. Blessings may not even be in this country at the moment. It has been suggested that Lord Hugh has arranged a meeting with her on...shall we say...neutral ground. He left on a flight for the Bahamas earlier this morning, and it is being speculated that he has arranged to meet both Ms. Blessings and her mother, his former housekeeper, at his familial estate."

"What in the hell? I haven't talked to my father in almost two decades! And my mother's dead."

Michael patted her hand. "It's sensationalism, nothing more. They're trying to make a story where there isn't a story."

"Everyone keeps saying this man is my father."

"Maybe he is. Would that be so terrible? Call him. Meet him."

Autumn snarled. "I saw *that* movie. Amanda Bynes was very convincing as the little girl who went to London to find her daddy. Problem is, that story was fictional, and in real life, happy endings aren't so simple. And honestly, I'm too old and too jaded to be anyone's little girl."

Michael took her face between his hands, hugging her face; he kissed her nose. "You aren't too old for closure."

She tried to smile, tried to make him believe her when she countered bitterly, "Maybe I don't want closure. Maybe I like holding on to the cold, empty spot in my heart he left when he walked out of my life."

He nodded. "That's what I'm afraid of."

"This is insane, whether or not this man is my father... I don't give a damn... He hasn't been a part of my life for decades. Vishala was my client. I held her hand yesterday." Autumn's voice cracked, and raw emotion flooded through her. "She'd dead. I can't believe she's dead." She was glad that Michael just held her and let her cry. It felt good to cry, but she knew in the back of her mind it was too good to last, and as soon as she'd blown her nose and established that she was okay, Michael was standing there holding out her laptop.

"What's this for?" she asked.

"Google him. Look at a picture of him. See if this Lord Hugh is even the man you remember."

She took the laptop and set it on her knees, wondering if it would matter. If she saw with her own eyes that Lord Hugh was her father, what would she do differently? Would she fly to London and confront him? No, that was definitely not her style. Not that she was sure what her style was in this instance, but confrontation wasn't it.

"At least you'll know for certain," Michael encouraged.

She Googled and selected the first hit. A photo of her father stared back at her.

Oh God. Ohgodohgodohgod! Now what?

She slammed down the lid of her computer, not wanting to face the "what next" question.

"So?" Michael asked.

"It's him," she answered, daring to look into his eyes. She hoped that he could read in hers that she really didn't want to talk about it, didn't want to delve into her

feelings, and definitely did not want to commit to anything that would involve facing the man...at least not yet. She had to get her thoughts together.

An hour later, she was in her car, escaping to the drugstore to pick up her prescription. She'd thought Michael would object to her going alone, but he hadn't. She was very certain that he was as tired of her melancholy as she was.

She had to see Jonas. She *had* to.

* * * * *

Driving to the Blue Parrot, she thought about the first time Jonas had taken her there. She'd ridden on the back of his motorcycle; she'd seen him play the sax and met Lydia. It was the night that had changed her life, taking her from merely being a watcher to actually doing something. There was something about Jonas that made her brave, made her willing to take chances...made her want to find all the excitement life could offer, and experience it, not merely watch others.

She watched him from the shadows near the hostess stand. Of course, she didn't have to try very hard to be hidden; most of the place was dark, very dark, lending a certain mystique to what could have just been another club downtown. The Blue Parrot was small, intimate, even by jazz club standards. The waitresses all carried small flashlights to help them see their order pads, as did the hostess to light the floor as they put one foot in front of the other. A crowd of regulars packed the house almost every night, but especially Saturday nights. She knew she wouldn't be able to get a seat, not even at the bar, not that she necessarily wanted one.

She only wanted to see Jonas, and finding him onstage, playing his heart out in a sax solo, she knew he was okay. He would be okay without her. He was the one who was living fully before they'd ever met. There would be no reason to think his life would be any less...even if the ménage was dismantled.

But could she honestly leave Jonas for Michael as Michael wanted?

No.

She didn't need to see Jonas to know the answer to that. She needed Jonas. Even if he didn't *need* her. He was teaching her to trust again. Somewhere along the line she had realized, she didn't trust...hadn't trusted anyone...for a very long time. She could blame her father for abandoning her, or she could blame Eddie for cheating on her, but would either experience be the reason behind her lack of trust? She didn't think so.

Fear had always controlled her.

How could anyone trust with fear as their master? Fear of abandonment, betrayal, failure—fears that didn't hold a candle to death. By chasing death with Jonas, she was learning how safe life really was, and Jonas understood that. Yes, Michael probably knew that as well, but she'd learned early in the relationship that he took fewer risks. He could push her adrenaline, but he didn't scare her.

She liked it that she could fear Jonas.

Jonas could do anything to her, because she trusted him, against all reason, because he made her feel so alive. She wondered if he *knew* that.

His gaze met hers as soon as the solo finished, like he'd known she was standing there all along. It was a long moment before he turned his head, whispered something to Lydia, and left the stage. As he crossed the room, Lydia moved over to the piano and started playing a soft Gaelic number, one with words Autumn didn't understand, but her heart felt. She'd heard it before, and the song always made her sad.

"Why are you here?" he asked, looping his arm around her to pull her with him outside onto the sidewalk in front of the building. The spring evening was chilly, his question blowing as a white puff from his mouth. "Damn, it's cold out here; you need a jacket."

His brogue was thick, like it was when he was drunk or angry. She didn't think he was either. Autumn rubbed her arms, covered only by the fabric of the thin cotton jersey she'd left the house wearing. "I'm fine," she said, cold but not caring. "I needed to see you, and you weren't planning on coming around for a while, were you?"

"I can't see you," he whispered very softly, "not for a while. I asked Michael to explain—"

She immediately bristled, angry at Michael for keeping Jonas away. "Look, I don't know what Michael said to you, but—"

"Stop," Jonas interrupted her. He scratched the back of his head, then let his hand fall to the back of his neck, where he left it, making him look even more uncomfortable, if that was possible, as he explained, "It was my decision to stay away for a while, but only partly because of what happened. Look, your house is surrounded by news crews. How you even got here without your paparazzi following is beyond me, but you're here, and you need to know that I have no intention of adding to your life drama."

Her irritation showed in her face as she jumped to conclusions without thinking it through. She tried to not let the emotion she was feeling overwhelm her, tried to keep it pushed back but failed. "Because you don't want to be caught under the American microscope. Because your nice, safe, quiet life here, where no one knows your secrets, will blow up."

She regretted it as soon as she'd said it, because she knew that wasn't it at all. He was, if anything, protecting *her*. She stepped closer to him. "Oh damn, I didn't mean that."

He took a step back, keeping them from touching. "Some part of you might have."

"No," she said. "You're trying to protect me and my life. You don't want me associated with a clinically diagnosed sexual sadist, because whatever dark secret you have in your background might come forward to tarnish my name, my career. Well, I don't care. Whatever drama is going on in the UK can bloody hell stay over there. It isn't going to affect my life. Lord Hugh means nothing to me. I don't even know if the man really is my father. I want you to come home with me."

"I know that you can't see it, but that would be a very bad idea."

"Then I'll stay here and wait for you to finish your set. I'll go with you back to your apartment." She heard the desperation in her voice and didn't care that she

sounded pathetic. Jonas grabbed her elbow and pulled her to the side as a large group exited the club. He pushed her closer to the building and tried to block the cold breeze with his body. "Michael's waiting for you; he already phoned."

"He knew I'd come here to find you?"

"He guessed."

Autumn nodded. "What else did he guess?"

Jonas leaned against the wall and crossed his arms. He looked past her, making sure that no one within hearing distance was overhearing their conversation. A car drove by and honked its horn, making her jump, but the driver was only waving at one of the people in the small clustered crowd waiting for a taxi. Jonas leaned closer, whispering, "He thinks you might ask me to hurt you again."

Autumn turned her head angrily, eyes flashing, denial on her lips, but she couldn't deny the truth. If Michael weren't in town, and she were alone with Jonas, she would talk him into a scene. She couldn't deny that she wanted the escape from her own reality or that she felt she was barely treading water emotionally.

Jonas asked, "What did you ever do before me? Before I brought pain into your life?"

Autumn shrugged. "Nothing." She met his gaze, admitting, "I complained to my friends a lot about clients, sobbed on their shoulders over the personal stuff, and ate gallons of cookie dough ice cream."

"Maybe you should stop by Juliet's."

"I don't want to eat ice cream. I want you. I want you to help me escape for a while."

He rolled off the wall and covered her, pushing her hard into the brick with his body, wedging his knee between her thighs, a quick thrust that shocked her clit, making her cry out. He covered her mouth with his lips, silencing her. To a passing stranger, it would look like two lovers making out, and that wouldn't be a lie...but she suddenly

didn't like the force he was using on her. It embarrassed her that they were on a public street. They might be seen. She'd never considered how that might make her feel, being seen in public, but with the recent scrutiny, it worried her. She had her professional reputation to consider. She tried to push him away, but his knee lifted, taking her off the ground. His hands moved to her throat, holding her head in a tight hold as he kissed her harder. His hands traveled over her jaw, over her throat, pressing in against her arteries.

"Stop," she cried into his mouth, but it came out as only a muffled moan as he kissed her deep, plunging his tongue into her mouth.

His hands released her neck, going back to hold her face, controlling her as he forced his tongue in and out of her mouth, like he was fucking her mouth.

He was hurting her...hurting her mouth with the intensity of the kiss, hurting her back against the rough brick, and with his knee, aimed so perfectly between her legs to make her ache with need and scream in pain in the same moment. She struggled to get away, and he released her mouth long enough to growl, "I cannot see you tonight. I cannot see you until I regain some control. Do you know how badly this could go?"

She struggled against him uselessly.

"I want to feel your terror coursing through your veins. I want to hear you scream. You have no idea the thoughts that go through my head when I lose control like this." He hissed, repeating, "No idea."

"Then tell me. I want to understand," she implored. Sounding desperate, she begged, "Please! We could talk about the scene in advance; we could set limits."

He released her, and she fell jarringly to her feet when he withdrew his knee. She almost fell when he turned from her and started walking away.

"Then I'll ask Michael. Is that what you want?" She goaded him, hoping he would cave, but he didn't even though she saw the flash of pain that went through his eyes when he glanced over his shoulder at her. He kept walking.

She hurried to catch him, but by the time she got into the club he was climbing back onto the stage. He picked up his saxophone and threw his soul into the music as he joined in midsong, escaping the pain she'd caused him.

She told herself she wouldn't cry, but it was a lie. She cried. Watching from the back of the club, not caring who saw her, she cried until she couldn't cry anymore. It was late when Jonas left the stage, exiting through a back door, and though she could have followed him, she didn't. She needed him to return to her. She wouldn't hunt him down. She couldn't let herself fall that far.

Chapter Seven

By the time she reached the house, she was done. She didn't have any tears left, didn't have any emotion left. If Jonas didn't want to be with her, fine, he could go fuck himself for all she cared. Michael could fuck off too. And as far as Lord Hugh was concerned, well, he could just bugger himself too.

Walking up the sidewalk, she saw that Michael already stood waiting on the porch. She pushed past him, not saying a word. He followed her inside, but she turned on him and screamed, "Get out!"

His mouth parted to speak, but he stopped himself.

Autumn put her hands on her hips and squared her shoulders for a fight. "You told Jonas to stay away."

"That was Jonas's choice. He's still upset that he cut you too deeply. You should have never required stitches from any play. He lost control. It's going to be a while before he trusts himself to play again."

"What am I supposed to do in the meantime while he's getting over himself?"

The look that crossed Michael's face was painful to watch, making her regret her words as soon as she said them. Unless she really blew it, she did still have the man in front of her. "You think I'm psycho."

He took her hand and led her to the sofa, where they both sat. She didn't pull her hand away even when he explained, "No. I think you have a lot of inner pain that you've denied for years, and without realizing what we were doing, Jonas and I opened Pandora's box."

"Yeah, well, maybe Pandora's box needed to be opened."

Michael looked distracted as he answered, "Maybe," giving her the feeling she was on the psychiatrist's couch, and she didn't like feeling that at all. He would either be there as her other lover or he had no business being there at all. If she wanted to figure out the garbage in her head, she'd pay someone.

"You want to open my box?" she challenged seductively, lifting her eyebrow, knowing that with her puffy eyes it was far from sexy.

Grabbing her wrist, he pulled her into him hard and fast, making her gasp. He wrapped his arms around hers and held her so tightly that she couldn't fidget away. A primal urge made her struggle even though it was useless to do so. "Stop it."

"You don't want me to stop."

She swallowed hard, knowing it was true. She didn't want him to let her go. She wanted to force his hand, force him to lose control even though she didn't understand why she was trying so hard to do so.

"What do you want me to do, Autumn? Cut you? Take away your air? Threaten your life?"

She shivered, and he held her gaze until she admitted, "I just don't want to think."

"Maybe you need to think. Maybe you need time, bound and alone, to do just that."

She imagined herself restrained and left alone in the dark. Fear filled her gut, alarm greater than anything she'd faced with either Jonas or Michael before, as she imagined him doing just that. She argued, "That isn't what I need. I've spent my entire life alone and thinking too much. I just want to escape it all for a while. I need—" She

didn't finish the sentence. She didn't know how to finish the sentence. What was there to say? *Pain?*

That seemed so ridiculous when she was filled with a constant ache.

I miss my daddy.

That seemed so lame.

I'm a failure.

Why? Because Vishala and her daughter were murdered? No one could have seen that coming.

It was so much easier with Jonas. She didn't have to explain. He understood her needs, even before she knew them herself. It was like Jonas was teaching her about herself...and now Michael wanted her to stop seeing him. She resolved in her heart that she would never give up Jonas.

She struggled again, trying to wrench free of his hold, glaring at him in anger, and she knew the look was pure meanness...and it wasn't his fault. None of this was his fault. She liked Michael. A lot. Too much. She liked him so much that she felt like she was doing something wrong. Something against Jonas. Cheating maybe. But not cheating, because they'd always shared each other from the very beginning...so not cheating. A tear streaked down her cheek, and she couldn't even wipe it away.

"Tell me what you're feeling."

She shook her head.

"Tell me what you're thinking."

She bit her lip to keep from saying something stupid like, Why did you have to tell me her name? Why did you have to tell me that she doesn't matter? That she's just a plaything? "*I love you.*" Did he tell her that?

"Am I just a plaything?"

"What?" he asked, shock filling his voice. "Why would you ask that?"

"I don't want you to be able to leave me and not have a second thought about me."

"Where is this coming from?" He sounded exasperated, and she could understand his frustration. He'd left for a weekend with his playmate, thinking he was leaving his happy, stable ménage at home, and came back to find the ménage in meltdown...and her life was quickly becoming apocalyptic.

"I don't know!"

"I'm not your father. I'm not Edward."

"I know." She buried her head against his shoulder, hiding her eyes. "I can't do this with you. Not now. Everything is wrong. Everything is falling apart, and now Jonas..." She couldn't finish the sentence, couldn't put voice to her fears that she would never see him again.

"What's falling apart? Nothing has changed except that Jonas needs a breather."

"Vishala —"

"Your client was murdered; you have no responsibility in that."

"Edward helped the man who killed her avoid prison; if he hadn't, she would still be alive."

"Not your fault."

"If I hadn't won such a large settlement for her —"

Michael silenced her by cupping his hand over her mouth. He held her face tight between his fingers, making her look at him. "No," he said forcefully. "You are not going to blame yourself for this in any way, shape, or form. I know that you've had a couple of insane days, but I will not let you beat yourself up over something you had no control over."

She nodded, and he released her mouth.

"I had control over Jonas," she admitted. "I pushed him. So don't blame him. This was my fault. I wanted him to lose control."

Michael agreed with her. "I'll let you take the blame for that one."

She rolled her eyes at him and pouted out her lip, before saying, "Gee, thanks," which made him chuckle. He elbowed her, making her smile. It seemed so wrong to smile when everything was so messed up.

Michael bent over her, nudging back her hair with his face to kiss her cheek. "Let me help you escape."

She wanted to deny that she wanted escape, but couldn't and that shamed her, though not as much as the truth of all that she was feeling. Her voice broke with a sob, but she was able to admit, "I don't want you to hurt me; if you won't let Jonas hurt me, neither can you."

"This doesn't have anything to do with Jonas," he said, his voice suddenly filled with anger.

She hadn't expected anger from Michael. But what had she expected? "It has everything to do with Jonas!"

He turned from her, running a hand through his hair, taking a moment in what she guessed was an attempt at self-composure. She didn't press his emotional buttons like she would have Jonas's. When he finally turned back to her, he was calm. He wrapped his hands around her upper arms before he said, "No, baby. That's an excuse. You don't want me to break your heart, and you're using Jonas as a wall between us."

She fought his hold, using everything she had in the struggle. He didn't release her. She screamed at him, "Stop blaming Jonas for everything! You have Carla; I have Jonas; that's just the way it is. There is no *us*!"

She wasn't expecting his lips to close over hers, or hers to react as they did with heated passion and need that took her breath away. Michael broke the kiss, promising, "Oh, there's an *us*. There's been an *us* ever since you kissed me in that elevator. You felt it, I felt it, and I won't let you start denying it."

Lifting her face, she offered him her lips. She was done with words. She needed more than words now, because this was an argument that couldn't be won. He kissed

her quickly, a quick peck before pulling away. He took the paper prescription bag she was crumpling in her hand away from her. She'd forgotten she held it. Michael opened the bag and palmed the bottle of pills. "For your leg?"

She nodded.

"You haven't taken one yet?"

She shook her head, caught in the intensity of his gaze.

"Take off your pants."

She didn't even consider not doing it. She pulled down her pants and stepped out of them. She kicked them to the side and looked down at her thigh, expecting it to look better because she hadn't thought about it for hours. She didn't even remember the moment it had stopped throbbing.

The minute she looked, seeing the bright red, puffy skin pulling the stitches, the pain came back tenfold, buckling her knees and making her nauseated. "Oh God."

"Idiot."

"What?" Autumn gasped.

"Not you. Me. I should have been checking this all day." He poured two tablets into his palm and handed them to her. She argued, "The label says one."

"One under normal conditions; I need you to take two. Now. Or in the next hour you get to take a trip to the ER."

She opened her mouth and put in the pills, mumbling, "Water?"

"Chew. Now. I'll get you some water for after you swallow."

She screwed up her face. "Chew? The gel's melting already. It tastes horrible. Will you please get me a drink?"

He left her to get her a glass of water and brought it back. "Did you chew?"

She nodded, fighting to keep from vomiting, and held out her hand for the glass. He handed it to her and she gulped greedily, washing the taste from her mouth.

"Thank you for trusting me," he told her.

She nodded and didn't complain as he helped her into the bedroom and tucked her beneath the covers. Shame flooded her cheeks with a red flush. "I'm sorry."

"For?"

She pointed at her thigh and fought back the emotion making her eyes flood with tears. "I was stupid. We were stupid. I should have taken precautions against infection."

Scenes from the moments following the cutting filled her mind. She'd smeared her fingers through the blood with her unwashed, bare hands. Plus, she didn't know whether Jonas had sanitized any of the blades or the needle he'd used to sew shut the wound. Yes, he'd washed the cut and sprayed it with antibacterial foam, but obviously that hadn't been enough.

"If you'd been here, maybe we'd have been more careful."

Michael kissed her on the cheek. "Don't. I'm here now, and I'm going to make sure that we do things right from this moment on."

She didn't know what to say to that. She didn't want to ask if doing things right included doing things without Jonas. Michael didn't acknowledge her silence; maybe because he thought her silence signaled agreement. She couldn't even consider life without Jonas in it, but she wasn't about to argue tonight. "Can I take something for the pain?"

"I'll get you some ibuprofen, and then I want you to sleep."

Closing her eyes, she relaxed back into her pillows and listened to his footsteps as he walked into the bathroom. She heard him open the medicine cabinet, the rattle of pills, and his soft footsteps back. He handed her the pain medicine and her cell phone. "There's a new text."

She took the pills, swallowing them with more water before looking at her phone. She didn't open it to see whom the text was from. "Who's it from?"

"I didn't look. I only heard the beep."

She opened the phone and read the message from Jonas: *I just need some time. My feelings haven't changed.*

She texted back quickly: *Not too long, k?*

She watched as Michael stripped, not paying any attention to her. She felt compelled to tell him the text was from Jonas and equally compelled to lie. She'd never lied to either of them. *I've just never revealed the complete truth, have I?* She pushed the thought away, because it would only bring back the images of Edward in his office. She wanted it to not matter, and maybe it wouldn't if she did reveal the truth. But it might also mess everything up, and everything was already so messed up, she dared not take the chance. She volunteered, "It was Jonas."

"I assumed." Michael looked over his shoulder at her, but she couldn't read his expression. He pulled back the sheets to join her in her bed. She realized he'd rarely ever spent two nights in a row with her. He would come over and participate in scenes, but he rarely stayed. She didn't comment. She just rolled onto her side, putting her back to him, not to be mean, but because her thigh was throbbing unbearably.

"Leg hurting pretty badly?" he asked.

"Yes."

He scooted against her back, spooning in tight, and wrapped his arms around her waist. He was nude, but she'd left on her bra, long-sleeved jersey, and panties. His warmth and his touch were welcome, even though she was scared to death he was going to make her choose between him and Jonas. She didn't keep the thought to herself. "I can't choose between the two of you when he comes back."

"I know," he whispered. "I don't want you to have to choose. I actually hope that I overreacted last night."

She turned her head to look at him. He pushed up on one elbow to lean over her to make it easier for them to make eye contact. "Promise?"

He nodded. "I just want you safe."

"I know."

"I love you, Autumn."

She lifted her head to kiss him, and he breathed into her mouth a whispered promise, "I don't say that to anyone else. You're special. I want you to know that."

"I do." She kissed him again, but she didn't tell him that she loved him. She couldn't commit to that as long as she felt the ménage was threatened. She was glad when he settled back against his pillow, snuggling into her back. She was glad he wasn't going to push her for more.

* * * * *

Her bed became the center of her universe for the next three days. She took pills and ate everything that Michael carried in to her. She was a good patient, even when her leg stopped throbbing and she started to feel normal again. She didn't realize how not okay she'd felt until she'd started to feel better, and the constant nausea and headache left as well. She didn't even argue with him when he refused to bring her laptop to her. Though she could have acknowledged that he'd been right when she woke up after sleeping an additional twelve hours. She was being a little stubborn, she knew that; she'd already acknowledged that she and Jonas had screwed up...that was enough...she wasn't going to keep apologizing.

Besides, every day that she woke up to find that Jonas hadn't returned, she was grumpier...and that was before she learned that a news van had been parked across the road since sometime Monday morning.

On Thursday, Michael looked at her leg and smiled.

She smiled back, readjusting her clothing. "I can go into the office today?"

"No, but I can play with you today...if you would like to play a little?"

She agreed that playing would be a good distraction; it would keep her from going across the street and taking a bat to the news van.

He carried her into the spare bedroom, which had been converted into a playroom. She'd never been in the room with just one of them before. It was always Jonas and Michael, not just one or the other. She'd actually involved herself with both of them, separately, but on the same night. She tried to not wish that Jonas would magically appear, and hid her face against Michael's shoulder to keep from letting him see her thoughts. He asked her quietly, "Tell me what you're thinking."

"The night at Dante's..." she said, lifting her face to catch his gaze.

"When you kissed me?"

Autumn nodded. "I was trying to remember if I'd put it together yet...that you were Master M, because before, when Juliet spoke about you, she'd said, 'Master M is going to make me fly,' and that seemed so terrifying. You in the abstract seemed so terrifying."

Michael smiled and kissed her nose. "I can't be terrifying now that you know me, is that what you're saying?"

Autumn shook her head. "I think you could terrify me. You did before...when I wasn't expecting the knife play."

"I should have told you the details of the scene before we began." His eyes filled with regret. "I'm sorry."

Autumn pressed her fingertips to his lips, quieting him. "I've thought about it so much. Every moment of that scene. I've rerun it through my mind a hundred times, and I don't think it was the straightedge. I think it was because it was you holding the straightedge. That you intended to cut me, and please don't take this the wrong way as I say it. Listen to me, hear what I'm saying, because I've thought it through, and I'm only beginning to understand it."

He nodded.

"If Jonas had been the one with the straightedge, I would have been terrified, but I wouldn't have stopped him. It was because it was you, and I don't want to associate terror with you...and that has something to do with my father." She looked at him to

see if he was going to say anything, but he didn't. "Every man I have ever loved has hurt me, broken me, in one way or another...except you. Even that first time we played, in the river, when you held me under the water. You could have drowned me, but I trusted you not to, so I wasn't afraid."

"That was actually the second time," he corrected.

She waved her hand at him and rolled her eyes. "That isn't the point."

"The point is?"

"I feel safe with you, loved...and I screwed that up when I stopped that scene, because all I did was drive you to find another playmate."

"You do not have to be jealous of Carla!" He defended, sitting down hard on the bed, taking her with him in a sudden jolt as they both sat.

"I'm not jealous," she insisted, then amended, "okay, maybe I'm a little jealous, but it's because you are giving something to her that you aren't sharing with me anymore. I can feel you separating *from me*."

"If I wanted to be separate from you, I would walk away. I wouldn't ask you to dissolve the ménage. I wouldn't have told you that I love you."

Autumn nodded. "I know."

"Go back, to the part about it having something to do with your father."

"Oh yes, Mr. Psychiatrist, we're back to that part. Is that all that you heard, and now you want to psychoanalyze me?"

He bumped his head against hers. "Hardly. You're actually making me very horny."

Autumn snickered. "Which part is making you horny? The part where I don't want you to try to terrify me, or the part that has something to do with my father?"

"All of it, quite honestly. That we are sitting here, talking about your fears, your wants and needs."

"We haven't done any of that yet." She frowned at him.

"Oh yes, we're doing exactly that."

Autumn rolled her eyes. "Maybe. And that excites you?"

Michael nodded. "The mental stuff that makes people tick is very exciting, because it's you; your mind in particular...is what makes it very erotic."

"You're kind of sick for a shrink." She laughed.

Michael pulled her down as he fell back so that they lay on the mattress, leaving their legs still dangling over the edge. "I would think it would be the other way, since Jonas is the one with the British accent. Your father —"

She gave him an evil look that silenced him. "My father, what I remember of him, had a thicker accent. It was thick, not cultured. Not Welsh."

"Scottish, perhaps? Like Lord Hugh?"

"I don't know," she snapped, irritated that the conversation had veered off course. "I don't want to talk about him."

"Okay. Let's not talk for a while." He surprised her by kissing her. Taking her hand, he pulled it down to cup his balls. She could feel that he was hard and ready. She wouldn't argue if they just had sex, no scene.

He rolled up and over her, straddling her. He pressed his finger to her lips. "Don't say a word. I want to tie you up."

Her eyes widened, but she only nodded. *A scene then, okay. A scene would be a nice distraction.* She relaxed a little, feeling muscles that had been held tight loosen at the mere mention of a scene. She let out a deep sigh. *Michael can help me escape.*

"Don't try to terrify me, though," she said suddenly.

"No words," he insisted as he pushed himself off her and crossed the room to a large armoire, which held the amassed collection of toys. Floggers. Ropes. Canes. Masks. Hoods. Blindfolds. Nipple clamps. Mousetraps. Clothespins. Needles. Dildos. She couldn't imagine a more diverse collection anywhere. He returned to her side with a blindfold and four padded cuffs. Restraints. *Oh God.* Rope was fine. She was good

with rope. She wasn't sure she liked the idea of being restrained with the cuffs: that reminded her so much of patients in a psych ward. She kept her mouth shut, but it was hard to not object. Their last scene of significance had been stopped because she'd safeworded out. She couldn't do it again. She had to trust him.

Why was it so hard?

She did trust him. She did. But something had changed.

He lifted her head and placed the blindfold over her eyes. He helped her scoot to the middle of the bed where he commanded her to take off her clothes.

She started unbuttoning her blouse. It seemed so odd with the blindfold on, feeling her way from button to button. She pulled her blouse off and then paused, undecided whether to take off her jeans or her bra. It seemed so difficult, just making the decision. She decided on the jeans, unbuttoning, unzipping, shimmying them off while staying seated in the middle of the bed. He hadn't said that she couldn't stand up, which would have made it an easier task, but he hadn't said that she could either.

She sighed and tossed the fabric of both shirt and pants over the edge of the bed. She assumed they landed in a pile on the floor.

She unhooked her bra and slid it off, trying to not think about it. That she was blindfolded, almost nude, and he was somewhere in the room fully clothed. After six months of him seeing her in various stages of dress and undress, she didn't feel like she should feel so self-conscious, but that was exactly what she was feeling. Could she really blame it all on the blindfold? She'd been blindfolded before and not felt this way.

"Lie back," he commanded, and she obeyed, stretching out.

"Spread-eagle," he said, and she held her breath for a second, getting her bearings. She lifted her arms over her head first, stretching her wrists toward the corners of the mattress. She spread her legs, though not nearly as wide as her arms. He didn't mention it. He didn't say anything.

She felt his hands on her left wrist, wrapping the padded restraint, pulling it toward the corner post. He attached it swiftly and securely. She didn't bother tugging.

She listened to his movements and knew even before he touched her leg that her left ankle would be next. He wrapped the restraint, buckled it, and then pulled, forcing her leg wider than it had been. She ground her teeth together when he touched her right ankle, forcing her legs very wide. She wouldn't safe-word, not when he hadn't done anything yet.

She thought her teeth might shatter because she was biting down so hard. Then she felt his hands take her right wrist, gently. She felt the press of his lips over her pulse and then the slide of fabric as the padded restraint went around her arm. He pulled it snug, buckled, and secured it to the post before he kissed her. She wasn't expecting that. A kiss. A long, lingering, seductive kiss. Then he backed away from her. "I want you to think; I want you to feel."

She listened hard, her heart suddenly pounding. She hadn't heard the door, but then he hadn't closed it before. Perhaps he'd walked through it and left it open, left her alone. She whispered, "Don't leave me," and was relieved when he answered her, "I won't leave."

She didn't know how long she lay there restrained. She tried to count the seconds, determine minutes. Had it been hours? It felt like hours in her burning shoulders, her stretched arms. "Michael?"

He didn't answer.

"Michael!" she screamed, but she needn't have, because she felt him, his body warmth stepping close enough for her to feel him near. She whispered, "Michael?"

"You aren't thinking yet. And I said not a word."

"I'm thinking," she argued.

"Not about what you should be thinking about."

"What? Tell me what you want me to think about."

He whispered against her face, "I can't do that," and then his warmth disappeared. She listened hard. Listened. Knew when he crossed the room, knew when he sat down on a soft chair, even though he did it almost soundlessly.

I'm not thinking? What in the hell am I supposed to be thinking about? The scene was supposed to help me escape, wasn't it? Help me to not think for a little while. I do not want to think!

The floodgates of her mind opened.

Vishala and her daughter. Dead. Had Isaiah killed them? And why? To get out of paying them anything? That didn't make sense when she knew that O'Malley, Bruce, Lloyd, and Brown could have kept the appeal tied up for years.

She squeezed back tears. Edward. Had he really asked her to move back in with him? Could she be expected to forget the past? Could she be expected to forgive him for his every transgression in the future? Because he would fuck up. He wouldn't change. It would be woman after woman after woman...

Cheater!

I cheated on Jonas and Michael.

It was only once!

It will never happen again.

It was a mistake. A big mistake.

I couldn't help myself...

What would Jonas and Michael think if they knew he'd asked me to come back to him? What if they found out about what happened in Edward's office? They would think I'd been having an affair all along. Stop it! I am not going back to Edward.

Her mind was quiet, but only for a second.

Her mind was suddenly barraged with decades of photoflashes. A million strangers could beg for her picture, because she was that beautiful...and she would not be beautiful enough to keep his affection.

Daddy?

She would still be the illegitimate black baby who didn't matter.

Daddy?

"I'll come back for you, lovey."

He wanted me!

He wasn't ashamed of me!

In her mind she saw her mother on a small ladder, putting the box of memories in the attic. How had she forgotten that? She didn't need the box. She remembered each item, each picture, perfectly, as if it were yesterday. In her mind, she opened the box, revealing her yellow cotton dress with the beautiful embroidered smocking that made her feel like a princess. She could see herself, sitting on the manicured lawn, all of her stuffed animals in a circle for high tea. Sometimes her father would join her, but never her mother. There would be pictures in the box of them all together, when they were happy together. There would be a picture of the house, and with her grown-up knowledge she knew it wasn't a mansion, but a plantation somewhere in the Caribbean.

She remembered the day the woman arrived and ruined everything. She was a beautiful woman, a white woman. Her father's wife? She must have been, because they'd fought about her and her mother.

She saw it all then. She knew why her mother always spent her days in the house and never played with her and Daddy. Her mother had been his lover, but she also only saw herself as just a maid. Period.

When she broke down, Michael was there to wrap his arms around her, to quiet her sobs. He kissed her gently, then hungrily, filling her with need, and she was more than willing to forget the pain. He released the restraints at her wrists and ankles and pulled her into his lap, the blindfold still over her eyes. "I'm going to hurt you now."

"Why?" she asked, trying to pull away. "Wasn't that the scene? You wanted to make me think. You wanted to make me cry."

"Because I want you to understand that I can. It doesn't always have to be pleasant between us. When you need me to be hard, I can be hard. You need to know that."

"I don't want pain. Not now, Michael. I want you to hold me."

"I'll hold you after. Are you ready?"

"Ready?" *Ready for pain? No!*

"Ask me to hurt you."

"I can't."

"You ask Jonas. It's easy for you to ask him. Ask me."

Oh God. "Oh God!" She shook in his lap, holding tight to the collar of his shirt. Her voice shook as she asked, "How? How are you going to hurt me?"

He didn't answer, and she shook even harder.

Jonas would have whispered to her in that moment. He would have told her how much her trembling excited him. Michael didn't say anything, and still she said the words he demanded of her.

"Hurt me."

"Tell me that you need me to do this."

No, Michael. No. Not this! She shook her head, clenching his shirt.

"Autumn." He said her name with authority, making her shake. He grabbed her chin, and turned her face to his as if he was forcing her meet his gaze. His fingers dug in, hurting...if just a little. His other hand slid behind her head, wrapped into her hair, and pulled, making her gasp. Need swept down her spine and allowed her to forget about Jonas long enough for her to whisper, "I need you to hurt me."

"How?"

"What?" She stilled, her breath catching. *What did he ask? How? What do you mean, how? You're the Dominant here. You tell me!*

"You heard me. Tell me how you want me to hurt you."

Oh fuck, oh fuck...

"Spank me."

Spank me? Where in the hell did that come from? Oh fuck. Nonononono! I did not just say that!

Michael pushed her up so that she was standing on the floor. She heard him scoot on the bed before he took her hand. "I want you to take off the blindfold and lay over my lap for your spanking."

He kept holding her hand, so she used the other to pull off her blindfold. She wiped her nose with the back of her hand, regretting it when she made a smeared mess. "I need to blow."

"No. You need to obey. Bend over."

She looked at him, and her mind flashed back to the elevator, to the cocky man dressed in jeans and leather vest. He'd been a flirt, a tease, devastatingly handsome, but she hadn't seen what had earned him the reputation of being scary. Of being the highest regarded, most desired Dominant at Dante's. She saw it now.

She thought she should feel silly as she did as she was told, folding herself at her waist to lie across his lap. She didn't feel silly. It felt like the most natural thing in the world to do.

"Push up on your toes to lift your ass higher."

She obeyed.

"Arch your back more."

What? She hadn't realized that getting into position for a spanking would be so difficult. She arched her back and was shocked when a sharp thread of need spiraled through her core. No, she wasn't expecting that at all.

His hand fell over her ass cheek in a sharp-sounding slap. Pain flared through her. Sharp. Hot. She moved her hands to cover her ass, but he pushed them away. "Put your hands over your head."

It took every ounce of will she possessed to obey, but she did. Her arms were so long that her fingers curled and still touched the floor. "Stay that way."

She held her breath, waiting.

"Arch."

She arched.

"Breathe."

She took a breath, and his hand slapped down.

Fiery heat spread over both ass cheeks, but worse was the pounding in her chest, her heart racing, and need, filling as a tight balloon in her chest, telling her to flee, telling her to make him stop. She struggled to push away from him, but he seemed to expect that reaction and planted both hands on her back, holding her firmly in place.

"No," she screamed. "No more!"

She knew that "no" wasn't her safe word, but she wouldn't use that. Refused to use that. He wasn't killing her after all; he was only spanking her, like a naughty child. She whispered, "No," gasping as the need in her chest blossomed into something more, something she didn't understand at all. *Longing*.

She relaxed over his lap, ceasing her struggle.

"That's better," he said, and then the real spanking began.

Chapter Eight

Friday, Michael went to his office, and Autumn found herself relieved when he left, then felt guilty for wanting some time alone. Time to think. Though, it seemed to her that she had been doing nothing but thinking since he'd restrained her and left her to be bludgeoned by her thoughts. She couldn't take another minute of contemplation. She needed a distraction.

She knew Michael believed that she would stay home behind the safety of closed doors because she didn't want to face the news van out front. She actually faced nearly a dozen news vans, following the AP news feed that had released her identity as Lord Hugh's daughter. Obviously, he'd forgotten that she had recently learned to embrace the media, using it as much as it used her. There was nothing better than free advertising after hanging her own shingle.

It crossed her mind that Michael would be furious when he came back and found her gone, even though she had no intention of seeking out Jonas again. She imagined his hand coming down on her ass...

She hadn't looked at her ass last night to check out the bruises left by his hand, but dressing she noticed, and then she looked, really looked, in the mirror to inspect them. She caressed the edges of a wide bruise, tracing the red flare that led from a central,

darker purple mark. She thought she could make out the faint imprint of fingers in places.

I was naughty.

The spanking was punishment.

The thought didn't seem right, making it all still feel like a game.

His words came back to her, "*When you need me to be hard, I can be hard. You need to know that.*"

He'd spanked her because he could; it had nothing to do with punishment, even though in her mind she might have deserved it.

Looking at the bruises in the mirror a final time before dressing to go to the office, she hoped that Michael had what it took, just in case Jonas didn't come back. She couldn't go back to the emptiness that was before the ménage or the barren landscape of her life that was before meeting Jonas.

When she opened the door to go to her car, she was ready.

"A.J.?" the reporters called out to her, each a little louder, each sounding a little more desperate. "A.J.? A.J.?"

She paused by her car door, smiled, posed, and waited for the cameras to stop flashing. Before meeting Jonas, she could have never been so brave. When the flashes stopped and she still hadn't gotten into her car, one of the men she didn't recognize stuck a microphone in her face and asked, "Have you prepared a statement?"

"My client Vishala Morris and her daughter were murdered. I am certain the Atlanta police department is doing everything in their power to bring their assailant to justice."

"What is your reaction to your father's early-morning press release?"

She glanced at the man asking, recognizing Bob. "Are we speaking about my alleged father? Lord Hugh?"

Bob lowered the microphone. "Is this a game, or have you really not been watching the news?" He handed her a press release. She quick-scanned it until her gaze fell on a single sentence. *Autumn Blessings, currently residing in the United States, is my only living child and heir.*

"Holy crap."

"Can we write that as a direct quote?" He snickered.

"No!"

"It's breaking news. I want to go live with your reaction."

"Not on your life." She jumped into her car and peeled out, hoping that reaction didn't make the noon news. She thought about calling Michael...or Jonas, but what would be the point? She would only interrupt Michael's work, and she couldn't really bear another refusal from Jonas. She decided the best thing she could do for herself was forget about it. Knowing who her father was didn't make a damn difference in her life, so it shouldn't disrupt her day. Right?

Once she arrived at her office, she regretted her absence. A week's worth of phone messages were her greeting, mostly clients and reporters and a disturbing call from Eddie, asking her to lunch. Why hadn't he called her cell? And why did he want to meet for lunch?

She was even more surprised when she glanced up to see him making his way through the reporters who had followed her from the house to her small downtown office.

She'd chosen the ground-floor rental in one of the few original structures the downtown still offered. Tall, brick, with its original wood shutters, it was slightly off the beaten track but held a quiet character and historic ambiance that the new skyscrapers didn't hold a candle to. Two aged trees stood sentry on either side of the entrance, which she'd figured was good from a feng shui standpoint, not that she'd been a huge follower of the ancient practice, but anything that could help wouldn't

hurt. And it had history; the building had always been a law office from what she had discovered. Her old-money clients respected her even more for keeping with tradition.

The only disadvantage had been that the narrow street her office called home had limited parking. It suddenly seemed like a perk when the news vans couldn't find spots, leaving the journalists to hike in from a parking garage several blocks away.

Edward was handing each of the journalists his business card as he made his way to her door. *Bastard. He's staging free publicity!*

She snorted when she saw the bouquet of white roses.

He opened the door, and a small brass bell hanging above jangled cheerily. She spoke before he did. "If that's your idea of a white flag—"

He smiled his trademark brilliant white smile but didn't acknowledge her comment. She saw that a news reporter held open the door, and a cameraman was filming. Angrier than she'd been since learning that Vishala and her daughter were dead, she pushed from her chair, marched over to the door, and slammed it closed after a none-too-gentle shove moved the journalist out of the way. She quickly bolted the door and turned to confront him. He laughed. "Still a tigress. I remember the last time you locked the office door with that much passion."

She was shaking with rage. "This is not passion! Your client killed my client." She would not admit that having Eddie in such close proximity had any other effect on her body than anger. That was why her pulse was out of control. That was why her vision had bled red. *It was not lust.*

"The police haven't—"

"Save it. Get out of my office, and take your damn roses with you."

Edward stepped closer, close enough to whisper, "These walls aren't one hundred percent soundproof, so I suggest you hear me out."

She shivered, having him so close, catching his scent... A million memories flooded her mind, and each held him naked.

"We have an audience, and unless you want all of Atlanta to know how badly you want me, I'd suggest discretion. Especially now that word is out that you are the woman causing such controversy on the other side of the Atlantic. All you need to do is add some spice to the scandal."

Her eyes widened, her gaze flying to the number of reporters out on her stoop, as she realized that somehow her hand had gone to his chest. His heat burned her fingertips with guilt. She pulled her hand away, denying her part in anything. "Englishmen have had bastards with peasant women since the beginning of time. This is not newsworthy."

"The fuss is because he is rumored to have refused the Queen of England, and no one refuses the Queen. Maybe your illegitimacy wouldn't have mattered at all, but with the tabloids there fueling speculation, and the tabloids here releasing photos of you..."

"It will die down soon enough."

"If you were ugly as sin, maybe it wouldn't have lasted two minutes; but you? Exotic, entrancing Autumn? Not likely that they will walk away without a story. You still won't acknowledge what an incredibly stunning woman you are, will you?"

She sighed heavily; it wasn't a matter of acknowledging. It was a matter of hating the fact. "Fifteen minutes of unwanted fame. So what?"

"Fifteen minutes?" He laughed at her, then leaned nearer; his breath caressed her cheek, making her heart pound wildly, compelling her to pull away, but she found herself mesmerized by his soft whisper. "Once you kept me from making the biggest mistake of my life. You saw the diamond of who I was when you found me in the rough. You taught me how to dress, how to act, how to fight my way up the ladder of success. I owe you, and right now you need to pay attention, because you are at a crossroads."

"*You are at a crossroads.*" She'd said the same thing to him more than a decade ago.

"The firm has made contact with Lord Hugh on your behalf."

"What?" she shrieked, meeting his gaze.

"Shh! Take the flowers." He hushed her and managed to wear a big, dazzling smile as he did so. She wondered how he managed to stay smiling as he hissed, "Smile."

She took the flowers and smiled, whispering heatedly, "What are you talking about?"

"I explained everything to O'Malley, and obviously since Lord Hugh has not contacted you, we agreed that you needed to make contact with him. It's in your best interest. You do realize that this man is destined to be the next prime minister?"

"I'm not standing in his way! I really don't give a damn what he does or doesn't do with his life." She turned her back to him and angrily tossed the bouquet on her desk.

He moved closer, so close that she could feel his heat radiating through her, making her very aware that leaving the firm was the smartest thing she had ever done in her life. The lust she'd believed conquered raged back with an intensity that made her knees weak. What was it about this man? It didn't matter how mad she was at him...she wanted him to fuck her brains out. Realizing that fact so shortly after her personal victory at the courthouse was devastating.

He's just another suit.

She closed her eyes and focused on the image in her brain of him in the courtroom. She'd hated him with every breath she took as he tried to keep her client from receiving any compensation for her loss.

"It's not his life I give a rat's ass about, A.J.! Do you realize the magnitude of what it means to be publicly acknowledged as his heir? How many doors will open to you?"

Her eyes narrowed, though she didn't look at him. "You mean *we*, don't you? That you could benefit in some way? The firm as well? No, thank you." She moved away from him, putting the desk between them, and jumped when someone pounded on the door hard enough to jangle the overhead bell. She jerked her head to see who it was, expecting to see one of the other partners entering as backup, and was so thrilled to see

that instead, it was her friend Kim. She ran the length of the room to unlock the door and welcome her in with a tight hug. "Thank God you're here."

Kim made quick assessment of the situation, seeing Edward in her office. As she stepped through the threshold, she asked loudly, "Ready for lunch?"

"I'll grab my coat. Mr. Brown was just leaving." She lifted her eyebrow, challenging him to differ, but he merely left without a word. She hurried to lock the door after him, and turned the small sign around in the window to say CLOSED.

"Not so quick," Kim said, "Juliet and Delilah are right behind me. They're just hunting down a close parking spot. That was quite an erotic tableau I stumbled upon; you and Edward Brown aren't reconciling, are you?"

"No!" Autumn assured her, realizing her hands were shaking. "Not on your life."

Kim inhaled deeply. "M-mm, I smell chemistry. If you hadn't had an audience" — she laughed — "I seem to remember a confession involving the length of that man's dick when you first started dating him. Several conversations about it, before you decided that you were in love and talking about his penis would be somehow disloyal. We were all so jealous of you."

Autumn could have died of embarrassment. She hid her face, pretending to watch for the other women. Hating it that her body remembered all too well every part of Edward Brown's anatomy.

Kim teased her gently. "I completely understand; the man is a walking temptation."

Autumn glanced over her shoulder and saw that Kim had lifted the bouquet of flowers to smell. She determinedly tried to change the course of the conversation. "Kit Kat isn't with you?"

Kim took the flowers to a back room, and Autumn immediately heard running water. A moment later Kim returned with the flowers in a vase. "She went back to Japan." She set the arrangement down on her desk. "The man has wonderful taste in flowers. Expensive taste."

"Really?" She stumbled over the words, embarrassed that Kim might think she actually cared about the roses. "I mean, Eleanor back to Japan. I didn't know."

Kim tilted her head and said in chastisement, "You should have." She caught Autumn's gaze, making her feel even worse. Autumn watched her friend adjust a stem of baby's breath.

She turned away from Kim, especially away from the flowers. "I know, I know." She'd meant to meet Eleanor for lunch right after her return from her first trip to Tokyo, but that had been months ago...and now she'd gone back? She watched out the door for the other women, her hand on the dead bolt, ready to unlock. "I've earned worst friend of the year award. So, what's in Japan?"

"Her new husband."

Autumn's jaw dropped. "What? I had no idea."

"I'm sure you've been quite busy." Kim implied even more with her tone than her words. "So which man is keeping you away from us and your tongue tied? Edward? Jonas? Michael? And if you tell me that you are having sex with all three, I may kill myself." She laughed, like she had made a joke, but Autumn turned guiltily.

Just once. It was just once, a single lapse in judgment, and she wasn't admitting to it...not to anyone.

Kim gasped. "Oh. My. God. All three of them."

Seeing Juliet and Delilah hurry up the block steps, Autumn opened the door quickly and hurried them in, then closed it just as fast. The door rattled in its frame, and the glass inside the door made a crisp vibration, topped off by the jangling of the bell.

"God, I feel like I step back in time a hundred years when I walk into this dump," Juliet announced, wearing a joking smile.

"Ha-ha," Autumn said, hugging her. "I hate to ask why the three of you are here."

"You didn't tell her?" Juliet asked Kim while Autumn hugged Delilah.

"Tell me what?"

"This is an intervention," Delilah stated as she released her from the hug. "We are taking you to lunch to determine how badly you've been damaged."

"Damaged?" she squeaked, thinking about the bruises that covered her ass and the just-starting-to-heal cuts on her thigh.

"Those two men of yours have stolen our friend, and we want her back."

Autumn laughed nervously. "You guys really don't exist as part of the real world, do you? You always think that distance equates to men problems."

"Men problems...or the illusion of love," Kim clarified. "Same thing."

Autumn smiled and lifted her hands in defense. "Work. That's all. I've been under siege lately. First the civil case victory, then my client's murder, and now this thing with the guy overseas —"

"Your father?" Juliet asked innocently.

"Okay, so you do watch the news."

"If things were normal with you, we'd have each gotten a phone call by now. Seriously, Autumn, what in the hell is going on?" Delilah demanded. "The only thing different in your life is Michael and Jonas, and as pleased as we are that you've obviously found happiness with them, they aren't entitled to keep you all to themselves. They have to share. They can't keep you from being our friend."

Autumn insisted, "It isn't like that."

Juliet pulled her hand to lead her to the front door. "Then explain how it is over lunch."

Autumn pulled her hand back, promising, "Soon...but not today," because it suddenly dawned on her that Edward was right; not about all of it, but about the part where she needed to meet this man Lord Hugh, if only to make him disappear again. She needed to contact him. Immediately. She didn't need Edward or the firm to do that for her. If they could get in touch with him, so could she. Determined, she turned to her

friends and said, "I have to work now. I'd love to do lunch but not today. If you'll excuse me?"

Her friends all looked at each other, concern etched deeply in their faces.

She softened her tone. "I have a dead client, and the news media swarming my front steps; do you seriously think that I am going to have lunch today? It looks like the only way I'm going to lose the circus is to have a press conference of my own."

"Oh! You could do something with him! A formal lunch or attend his inauguration. Something that screams photo op," Juliet suggested. "Do you need help with plane reservations?"

"I am not flying to London," Autumn stated forcefully. "Besides, they don't have inaugurations in Britain."

"You're not?" Juliet asked, confusion evident. "They don't?"

"Go to London! Confront him," Kim encouraged from the sidelines. "Besides, he's gorgeous."

"How do you know that?" Autumn demanded.

"Google," Kim answered sarcastically.

Autumn rolled her eyes. "Oh my God. You googled Lord Hugh?"

"Duh. I am disappointed that you didn't share any of this with us. The man in a kilt is to-die-for sexy."

Autumn covered her ears. "I do not want to hear that the man who might be my father is sexy."

Delilah stepped up behind Autumn, wrapped her arms around her middle, and rested her chin on her shoulder. It made her uncomfortable, especially knowing that Delilah and Kim had been intimate in the past...if not still...but Autumn didn't pull away because she realized Delilah was trying to whisper something in her ear. "Now that he's declared you his heir, the media isn't going to go away. You are going to have to become proactive and deal with this instead of hiding behind your desk."

The others watched, so she knew that they were in on whatever was going on. She thought of the reporters outside trying desperately to get a story and glanced toward the windows nervously. Kim and Juliet moved to block any view of Autumn and Delilah when Delilah held out a small slip of paper. Autumn was only slightly surprised when Delilah unfolded it to show her an international phone number written on it. She swallowed, knowing it was his direct line, probably his cell phone. She didn't want to know by what legal or illegal means his number was procured; she knew Delilah's resourcefulness ran the gamut between the two and that the less she knew the better.

Turning Autumn around to face her, Delilah lifted her eyebrow, challenging her when she didn't immediately take it from her hand. Autumn bit her lip, thinking too hard before actually holding out her hand to take it. Delilah snickered, asking, "Do I need to dial the number too?"

"No," she whispered, letting out the breath she'd been holding. "I'll do it when I'm ready, on my timetable." She lifted her gaze, seeking in turn the gaze of each woman. "Alone. I want to do this alone. Later. Away from *here*." She emphasized the last by looking pointedly at the journalists on her stoop.

"Fine, fine," Kim agreed. "Just tell me we're still doing lunch; I'm starved."

Autumn agreed to lunch, anything to get away from the office.

It was a good decision, she thought as she listened to Juliet's latest dating tale of woe. She was relaxed, laughing until Juliet said, "All men are hiding something; you just have to figure out what it is—"

"Holy fuck," Autumn gasped, realization dawning. "That's it."

"What, honey?" Kim asked, confused.

"Edward and his sudden need to get back together, to bring me back into the comfortable fold of the firm. I thought the attention was because someone at the firm had decided that they could use my relationship with my father to somehow garner a boon to their private agendas."

“Edward wants to use your father...through you?” Juliet gasped. “The pig!”

“Yes, yes...but no. That’s just a smoke screen. That’s too predictable. I think something else is going on here. They want me back on their team for a reason. Eddie’s hiding something, and I’m going to find out what.”

Chapter Nine

The funny thing about snooping around where you probably shouldn't is it immediately becomes obvious that you're on the right track. Two phone calls and a visit to Vishala's mother's house produced the answers Autumn was looking for. She'd learned that Bradley Morris and Isaiah Johnson were both having an affair with the same woman. Had one challenged the other to give her up? Had Isaiah threatened to tell Bradley's wife? No, that didn't make sense, but something was definitely fishy, and that led her to the belief that Bradley Morris's accident hadn't been accidental at all. She wasted no time going directly to the police station, only to be assured by the lead detective on the case that they were already investigating that same information.

She was driving away from the police station, hopeful that Isaiah Johnson would actually get his due, when her cell phone rang. She answered despite the caller ID displayed reading UNAVAILABLE.

She assumed it was from an office within the county court and answered it. An obviously disguised voice asked, "Do you know what happens to naughty girls?"

She smiled, remembering her spanking. Blushing and biting her lip, she tried not to giggle. Michael was going to extreme lengths now to terrify her, was that it? The thought made her warm and tingly inside and oh so horny. She pressed her thighs

together, enjoying the sensation of need making her lower lips twitch. She played along, asking, "They get spankings?"

The voice laughed, and it wasn't a pleased laugh; it was a laugh that frightened her. She knew then that it wasn't Michael...or Jonas. Her pleasure was replaced instantly with fear and anger as she demanded furiously, "Who is this?"

"Someone who is going to take great pleasure in making sure that you will never want to show that beautiful face of yours in public again. When I'm done with you, no one will be able to call you beautiful."

Her voice shook as she shrieked, "Who is this?"

"I'm going to sit you in front of a wide mirror. I'm going to cut off your eyelids first, because I want you to be able to watch the entire transformation. It wouldn't be any fun if you couldn't watch—"

She hung up on the caller and flung the phone away from her. Glancing in her rearview mirror, she told herself she had to stay calm, but her body was shaking too hard to convince herself she could. She pulled off to the side of the road, opened the door, and threw up, her fear only part of her reaction. She'd thought it was Michael. She'd felt the thrill of want and need low in her pelvis.

What kind of sicko would call her and say those things?

Uneasily, she looked up and down the road, but that did little to make her feel any better. Still shaking, she called Michael. His secretary answered. He was at his office, in the middle of a session, but hearing the hysteria in her voice, the woman got Michael on the phone. She felt horrible but didn't know what else to do. After explaining the received phone call, she couldn't stop saying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have called you at work. I'm sorry."

"Autumn, go back to the police station. I want you to file a report."

"No," she said but couldn't give a reason why.

"Come to my office. Now." He demanded it with a voice she knew she wouldn't disobey.

He met her in the bright atrium lobby that was all white marble and lush green plants. A water fountain splashed serenely in the center of the wide room, though she was anything but calm. Michael immediately took her up to his office, where she refused to sit. She paced.

"Do you think this has anything to do with Isaiah Johnson?"

She shook her head, then said, "It has to be. I don't know of anyone else who would want to hurt me. It just doesn't fit."

"He's already killed a man, a woman, and a child... Why doesn't this fit?"

"He didn't torture any of them," she answered testily. "What if it is just someone playing a sick joke? Bad timing, but really a joke."

"Who?"

"I don't know...one of your friends? Or Jonas's?"

The look he gave her should have been a clue as to how ridiculous that idea seemed to him. "You have to take this threat seriously."

"I know," she said sharply, and then she buried her face in her hands and started sobbing. "As sick as it sounds, I'd rather think it's a joke."

Michael pulled her into his arms. "I'm sorry; I know you must be terrified. I shouldn't make it worse."

"I hate this. I know the threat was real. I felt it in my core that whoever was on the other side of that phone call meant every word. I just can't convince myself that it was Isaiah," she said, perhaps trying to reassure them both as she pulled back away from his chest and wrapped her arms around herself. When she looked back into his eyes, she didn't try to hide her fear.

"Why?"

"He doesn't seem...sadistic... He just seems like a murderer."

Michael frowned at her and visibly sagged as if under a tremendous weight. "What would he have to do to *seem* like a sadist?"

She knew there was more being asked in his question than what he was asking.

"If not Isaiah, who else?"

She closed her eyes against him because she couldn't stand to see the worry lining his face. Without wanting it to happen, her mind filled with images of Jonas. *Jonas. Jonas. Jonas.* He didn't seem like a sadist either. *Jonas wouldn't hurt me.* Taking a deep breath, she reopened her eyes and answered, "No one else. It must be Isaiah. What am I going to do? What if he goes further than a phone call next time? What if he catches me out alone?"

"That isn't going to happen. You are not leaving my side until this creep is behind bars."

She shook her head, tears falling over her cheeks. "Maybe I don't deserve protecting. When did I become such a freak? I'm sick. There is something absolutely wrong with me that just a few days ago I was begging Jonas to cut me...and enjoyed it."

"No. There is nothing wrong with you. It's okay to be in touch with the darker aspects of your sexuality. One has nothing to do with the other!"

"So, I don't need to fear Jonas?"

Michael kissed her forehead. "You're killing me, Autumn. This has nothing to do with my concerns about your relationship with Jonas."

"I know, but this does put everything in perspective, doesn't it?"

Michael wrapped her in his arms and hugged her close, promising, "Yes, yes it does. And the two of us can protect you better than just me alone."

Her heart leaped into her throat. "You'll call him?"

He pulled his cell phone from his pants pocket and speed-dialed the number.

"What if he doesn't answer? What if he won't come?"

His eyebrow went up in response to her questions; then he said into the receiver, "We have a problem; Autumn has received a threat."

Autumn walked over to a wide window, trying to not listen. It sounded so much worse hearing the facts laid out by Michael. The window looked out on a walled garden, and she tried to find peace there. She was surprised by the lushness of the plantings and wondered how she could have missed that spring had indeed arrived. At her house, she'd noticed a few daffodils in bloom but had given them little thought. Michael's garden couldn't be ignored. A magnolia was covered in lush pink bloom, and the ground covered with a low mat of blooming magenta winecups. Against the walls were taller plants and planters, all cascading with blooms she couldn't name, because a gardener she wasn't; she was surprised to realize that Michael was.

He came up behind her and kissed the back of her head. "He's on his way."

Thank God.

"Now we just have to figure out where to take you to keep you safe. Your house is out."

She closed her eyes as she remembered another garden...her father's. She turned from the window. "I don't want to feel like I have to run and hide. That absolutely pisses me off, but three people are already dead, so I have to be smart about this. If I must leave, I might as well kill two birds with one stone. Stay safe and deal with a little unfinished business."

"What are you thinking?" Michael asked.

She took a deep breath and turned her back on the window. "I need to make a phone call. I think that there is a place that I would be safer than anywhere else—my childhood home—and I need to find out if Lord Hugh really is my father so that I can either put a stop to the sensationalism or figure out a way to deal with it. *I'm going home.*"

Reaching into her jacket pocket, she pulled out the slip of paper Delilah had handed her. With a shaking hand, she dialed the number and waited to hear his voice,

feeling fairly certain that she would recognize it if she heard it again. She wasn't disappointed; it really was him. He'd said hello twice before she could actually make her own voice work. "This is Autumn. I thought we should talk."

He didn't seem particularly surprised to hear her voice. "I thought you might get around to calling."

She bit her lip. "I'd have called years sooner if I'd have known *who* to call. Is it true then? You are my father?"

"I thought your mother would have told you."

"Did you really?" She didn't hide her sarcasm. She didn't understand the dynamics of her mother and father's relationship, but she knew he must have known how jaded and bitter her mother had become.

She heard his heavy sigh before he admitted, "No, I guess not."

"I've never asked for any favors, but I would like to ask something of you."

"Anything, Autumn. I mean that."

"The plantation house, is it still yours?"

"Of course. It's not maintained as it once was. I haven't been there..." She thought his voice sounded as if it had cracked with emotion; then she realized that's what she wanted to hear, so she couldn't trust that she really had. "Not since you and your mother left."

"I'd like to spend some time there, maybe a few days, maybe a few weeks."

"Oh...well...right then. Ah, lovey, I'd deny you nothing, but I'm afraid of what condition it might be in."

"That doesn't matter. I just need a roof over my head."

"Are you in trouble?" he asked, concern thickening his brogue. "I never meant for any of this drama to affect you. The public has gone insane with its need to know every detail, and the media is more than willing to try to oblige them. Come here, to London. Or Edinburgh, if you'd prefer."

"No!" she said too quickly, too harshly. She tried to soften the refusal. "I'm trying to stay out of the public eye for a while."

"I understand," he said, sounding dejected. She felt bad for letting him assume he was to blame for her flight from the US, but didn't know what else to say.

"There will be a plane waiting for you."

She didn't remember saying thank you or good-bye. She knew she hadn't said I love you, and that bothered her. She did love him, didn't she? He was her father, who she hadn't seen in twenty-seven years. She should have said it. She thought maybe he should have said it. She shook her head, irritated at herself. What had she expected? It wasn't like he would pick her up at the airport himself. He wouldn't be there. Was that what she wanted? Because that was just childish silliness. She was lying to herself if she thought she might find closure, but maybe she could at least say good-bye to the fantasy.

Chapter Ten

Autumn was nervous and not quite sure what to expect. Her nervousness translated into quietness. From the time a car arrived to pick them up, she just didn't say anything. A jet was waiting for them at ATL. They transferred to a helicopter after landing in Nassau for the final leg of the journey. Michael stretched out his hand from across the aisle and asked for what seemed like the hundredth time, "Are you okay?" He'd shouted it over the rotors, and she felt like screaming in frustration, but she didn't. She wondered if it really mattered. Was she okay? Wasn't she? She had no idea.

She closed her eyes against the look her two men shared. Did they think she didn't see the nonverbal arguing, their eyes flashing? They didn't have to say the words. *Leave her alone. Shut up. I'm worried. I'm worried too.*

She wanted normal back but had no idea what normal was anymore.

Too soon the helicopter was circling and she knew, without even opening her eyes to look, the island was below them. Jonas rubbed her knee. "Baby, look."

She opened her eyes and looked through the helicopter's bank of wide windows. She gasped, not expecting the sheer beauty of the green island against the azure setting of the ocean surrounding it. They were near enough that she could see the leaves of the tall palms waving in the breeze. Then her stomach flip-flopped as she realized that they

were landing. It would be only moments now before she would be at her childhood home.

A bright sun greeted them, and it was hotter than she'd expected it to be. She could appreciate the breeze that whipped her hair. Michael caressed her shoulder, turning her toward a waiting car; she had stopped being surprised that people were at her beck and call because of one phone call from Lord Hugh of Lairg. Together they crossed the small tarmac to a very dark-skinned black man standing beside the older sedan. He wore sunglasses, a ball cap, and a tank top, the muscles in his biceps standing out starkly. She didn't think he looked much like a chauffeur. Michael must have felt some concern as well, because he asked, "You'll take us to the manor?"

The dark man nodded but didn't say anything.

Jonas joined them, and her attention was pulled to him as he and the pilot placed their bags in the trunk of the car. Looking up, he winked at her, and she smiled a small smile; she hadn't smiled since leaving Michael's office. His eyes sparked at her, and his eyebrow arched suddenly. Silent language between them that said he couldn't wait to be alone with her, but maybe that was what she wanted to read on his face because she desperately wanted to be alone with him.

Jonas opened the rear car door and held it open for her while she climbed into the backseat and slid to the center. Both Jonas and Michael joined her, one man on either side of her. The man in the front seat waited for them to get settled. He glanced over his shoulder at them but didn't smile when he said, "Welcome to the island."

Turning back in his seat, he started to drive, and it was only a moment before they seemed completely swallowed by the lush vegetation covering the island. The small road, which could barely be called that in its current state, was a single lane, and on either side of the car, branches and leaves scraped, making sounds like a small trapped animal using its claws to get free.

Autumn shuddered, realizing that she was the small animal. Her heart was pounding in her chest as if a cage door had been closed and a lock latched, trapping her inside.

Michael traced the two red lines on her upper thigh that had started healing nicely since she'd been taking the antibiotics. She'd carefully chosen shorts that were long enough to hide the marks before they'd left, forgetting that the fabric would ride up when she sat. She realized that Michael wasn't looking at her leg to see the improvement, he was staring down Jonas; and Jonas was staring back, neither man willing to drop his gaze.

She asked the driver, "What's the population here?"

She looked into the rearview mirror, expecting to catch his gaze, but he was watching the interplay between Michael and Jonas. He answered, "Three."

She shivered and looked through the dust-covered window, not that there was anything to see. The man added, "I guess six, now that you're here," making her glance back at the mirror. This time he was watching her, and the look he gave her made her uncomfortable. She could only imagine the questions going through the man's mind as he probably wondered which of the two men in her company she was actually sleeping with. She reached out and grabbed each man's hand, holding on to both of them, searching for the strength to tear her gaze from the driver's. She managed to look again through the window at the vegetation, catching glimpses of sparkling ocean through breaks in the low shrubs and taller palms.

She told herself she wasn't going to try to remember, but found herself leaning over Michael's lap to press her face to the window, taking in every building, every palm tree, wanting so much for the moment to stop feeling like a dream. *Wake up, wake up, wake up.*

Her cell phone provided a wake-up call, jangling noisily. "Sorry," she said to Jonas and Michael as she pulled it out of her purse. "I forgot to reset to vibrate after the flight." She looked at the caller ID, seeing UNAVAILABLE. She hesitated, remembering

the threatening phone call, but reason won out. She rationalized, "It could be a client," before saying, "Hello?"

"You left town?"

Her breath caught in her throat as she recognized the metal sound of the disguised voice. She didn't say anything but switched the phone to speaker. "Did you think I wouldn't find you? How do you think you'll look without eyelids? Without lips?"

"Look, you motherfucking bastard!" Jonas erupted.

Michael took the phone and closed it without comment. He removed the SIM card and battery.

Autumn demanded, "What are you doing? I need that!"

"Trying to make certain that this sick bastard can't track you *here*," he replied before handing her his own cell. "Call the police, make the report."

She looked at Jonas, hoping he would agree with her. He shook his head. With a shaking hand, she took Michael's phone. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she looked at it, not making the call. "Love, why is this so hard for you? Make the call," Jonas urged.

The driver's gaze darted to Jonas, and she realized that he'd caught the endearment. Had he also seen Michael kiss her temple before they'd climbed into the backseat? What would he think? It didn't matter what he thought, she realized, jerking her gaze from the mirror. She shared two men, and anyone watching could just get over that fact.

"I hate this." She looked between the two men and knew from the looks on their faces she wouldn't find an ally, so she placed the call while they drove. The detective seemed sincere when he assured her that they were doing everything they could to find Isaiah Johnson. He thanked her for making the report, though she wasn't sure that one more complaint against the man would make much difference. He was already facing murder. But if she could help it, he wasn't going to be facing murder charges for her death.

She handed Michael his phone back; he returned hers, but minus the battery and SIM card. She felt naked...powerless. When had her cell phone come to mean so much? She remembered the days cell phones didn't even exist and immediately wondered how people ever survived an average day.

She knew they were near the house when she recognized the pillars at the foot of the long drive. "We're close now," she said to no one in particular, and then they arrived.

The manor house was just as lovely and stately as she remembered, even though it hadn't stood the test of time well. The tropical heat, tropical storms, and years of neglect were taking a toll on the two-story structure. Someone had painted it a ghastly shade of pink during the years she'd been away, but not recently, decades ago maybe. The shutters were a pastel shade of Wedgwood blue, and when she closed her eyes, she could see that they had not changed. In her memories, the house was a soft, buttery yellow.

"I'll just take the bags inside," Michael said, touching her elbow lightly. "Are you coming?"

She opened her eyes and looked again at the house, finding herself glad that it wasn't the yellow she remembered. "Not yet. I want to see if I can find the gardens."

He didn't argue with her, but she could tell he wanted to. She turned away, putting her back to him, crossing her arms. The thought drifted through her mind that coming back here was a mistake. It was easier to blame the trip and the toll it was taking on her emotionally than to accept that she was purposely distancing herself from Michael.

She was so aware of him that she knew the exact moment he turned to walk away. She also knew the exact moment Jonas drew nearer. It seemed the three of them were dancing an odd tango that drew the men back and forth between her, each repelling the other, the three of them not really together on this trip. Not really a ménage anymore. She hated that. And it was all her fault. She'd lost control, not Jonas. Why couldn't they

both see that and stop blaming each other? When Jonas slid his arm around her waist, she forced a smile before looking up into his face, but she didn't relax and kept her arms tightly folded.

"Why are you doing this to him?" Jonas asked, not looking at her. She knew his gaze followed Michael from the yard into the house, and she couldn't bear looking.

"I'm not doing anything," she denied.

"Right," Jonas said, pulling his arm from around her waist.

Meeting his gaze, she promised, "I'll do whatever I can to help things go back to the way it was between us, but you both have to try too."

"Now isn't the time to talk about any of this."

"You're right. But there's one thing you need to think about before we do talk. I *need* you, Jonas. I only *want* him. And if you walk away from *us*, I'll walk away from *him*."

He didn't like what she'd said, his tight, angry lips told her that much, making her wonder how close he'd been to never coming back when Michael had called him to tell him that she was in danger. A muscle in his jaw twitched as he turned away from her. "I'm going to walk the perimeter, try to figure out some way of making sure that we can actually keep you safe in this wreck."

She sighed, looking again at the house. He was right of course; it was pretty derelict. She hoped the inside had fared better than the exterior. She thought to take a walk to look for the lush gardens but realized just as suddenly that she was standing in the middle of what once had been. Native weeds had replaced most of the cultivated perennials, and only a bare whisper of the former beauty was distinguishable.

"Autumn," Michael called from the porch, "there's someone here that's been waiting a long time to see you again."

Hope leaped into her heart, which made it doubly tragic when she turned expecting to see her father and instead saw an old black couple she didn't recognize

standing on the porch. She tried to hide her disappointment behind a smile as she walked forward.

"You don't remember us, do you, child?"

Child.

There was something in the way the woman said that word that brought a haunting of familiar chastisements to mind.

"Out of my kitchen, child. How am I ever to get supper on the table with you underfoot?"

"Child, you are gonna be the death of your momma; pray tell, how did you tear your dress this time?"

Autumn broke into a smile. "Birdie?"

The woman beamed with the recognition, though by physical appearance, Autumn would have never guessed in a million years was her. The woman standing before her was twenty-seven years older and more than fifty pounds heavier than the last time she'd seen her. Autumn rushed up the steps to give her a hug, feeling five again as she was wrapped in the woman's thick arms. Birdie had to stretch her neck to kiss Autumn's cheek. "Lord, you've grown."

Pulling back from the hug, Autumn smiled, saying, "I did at that," before turning to the old man at Birdie's side. "Alphonse?"

He smiled and wordlessly held out his arms for a hug. He looked as if he was going to cry; Autumn knew the feeling, being quite choked up herself.

It was hours later, after they'd laughed and cried together over shared memories, after Birdie had divulged that her father hadn't been back to the manor house, and Autumn sat emotionally exhausted on the sofa, that Michael joined her on the couch. "Nice surprise?"

Autumn managed a sad smile. "A surprise that they've stayed all of these years, especially after everyone else left."

"Would they have had anywhere else to have gone?" Michael asked.

"This is their home," she answered solemnly, realizing it hadn't been her home in a very long time. She had the memories that told her it hadn't been a dream, but that didn't keep her from feeling she didn't belong here. Birdie and Alphonse did, though they'd never lived in the manor house. They lived on the property as they always had, kept the manor house up as well as they could, and waited for the day the phone would ring to announce that someone would be visiting the forgotten property.

"Michael!" Jonas called, coming through the rear entrance. Autumn knew he'd used the kitchen door because the screen door screeched the same as it always had. Michael left the couch quickly, making her realize how on edge he was that she was in danger. She heard them whispering excitedly, but the conversation ended when Michael told him, "Show me tomorrow."

Curious now, Autumn went down a short hall to the kitchen and was dazed by the fact that it looked exactly the same. She closed her eyes as the ghosts of memory danced before her eyes, making her dizzy. Her mother helping Birdie in the kitchen, her father scratching against the screen to call her mother outside, and the wide smile that graced her mother's face upon seeing him.

She'd loved him so much.

He'd left.

As one memory crashed into another, she forced it all away, demanding, "What?"

"Slave quarters," Jonas announced. "It's like stepping back in time when you walk around this property."

Yes, she had stepped back through time all right...and she didn't like it. She insisted, "There are not slave quarters on this property."

"Well, you're right that there probably haven't been in a very long time, but there's some crazy shit out there that argues that once upon a time there was."

"I want to see it."

"Autumn, it's been a long day," Michael cajoled her. "Tomorrow is soon enough. Night is falling now, and I don't want you outside after dark. We stay together, and we keep you safe."

She wanted to argue, but she knew he was right. Still, she sat with a flop and a pout back onto a wooden stool. Michael turned to Jonas, asking, "What did the perimeter look like?"

"If he comes here, we'll have no way of keeping him away from the house. We won't see his approach: there are a couple hundred decent hiding places out there that would keep us from even realizing he was near until it is too late. I hate to say it, but unless we keep her in a locked room in plain sight at all times, we aren't going to be able to keep her safe here at all."

Autumn rolled her eyes. "He isn't coming here. No one knows about this house."

"Anyone with a computer can find out that this property belongs to your father. The media has already speculated that you were going to come here for a secret rendezvous."

"So, coming here was a bad idea?"

"On the contrary, coming here was a very good idea, because you are going to finally gain some closure on this chapter of your life," Michael said. "But the reality is, you aren't any safer here than you were in Atlanta, and possibly even less safe. We might want to think about going somewhere else, at least until we're certain Isaiah Johnson is locked up."

Autumn closed her eyes; no one would convince her that she wasn't safe here. The island was deserted except for Birdie, Alphonse, and the man who had driven them from the airport, who she had since come to assume was the couple's son. "We'll be safe here tonight?"

"Yes," both men said at once. Jonas elaborated. "Pick a bedroom, because we're all holing up in one room. I'll stay awake the first four, Michael can take watch the second

half. Once it is daylight, I propose we pick someplace where no one would have any reason to look for you.”

As much as she hated considering that she wasn't safe, she had to, even though it went against what she was feeling. *It was good to be home.*

* * * * *

The next morning, she refused to leave. It didn't make any sense. She should be scared to death, she should be doing whatever it took to find someplace safe, but she couldn't bring herself to go. She hadn't slept in her old bedroom, though she'd found the old nursery easily enough. She remembered the room just across the hall was the one her father had shared with her mother. That was the room she'd gravitated to. She'd climbed into the wide, dark wood four-poster bed with a thick, elaborately embroidered bedspread and sheets softer than anything she'd ever experienced since. The mattress was a thick goose-down pillow-top that made her feel like she'd sunk into a cloud. She'd made both men climb into bed with her, one on her left and one on her right because that was where they belonged. She hadn't cared that they'd each taken a turn staying awake, listening for any sound; she needed to touch them both.

Laughter had come from the room, happiness.

So why had everything fallen apart? It was a mystery she was intent on discovering the answers to. Birdie might know something more than she'd let on to knowing, or Alphonse for that matter.

Michael tapped his foot impatiently, having already loaded her bags into the trunk of the car.

“I'm not leaving,” she told him stubbornly. “I haven't seen everything there is to see; I haven't remembered everything there is to remember. I haven't gotten closure yet.”

She almost felt guilty throwing his own words back at him.

Michael argued, “We'll come back, as soon as —”

"I know, I know, as soon as Isaiah Johnson is behind bars. But did you ever think that the man threatening me might not be Isaiah Johnson? What if it's someone else?"

"Some random stranger?" he demanded. "That would be quite the coincidence."

She looked at Jonas for help with her argument, but he only shrugged, lingering in the background as he had since returning to them.

"I want to see the rest of the property, and I'm not leaving until I see everything," she declared forcefully. Turning, she started walking in the direction she believed would take her toward the beach. Behind her, Michael slammed the trunk and asked Alphonse to wait, because they wouldn't be long.

She shook her head at Alphonse and was pleased when Alphonse climbed out of the car. "You know where to find me when you need me." Smiling, she kept walking away from the house. She didn't have any idea where she was heading, but she followed her feet. She could hear Michael running to catch up with her and Jonas behind him, not running, just walking, allowing Michael to join her first. He did, grabbing her and then spinning her into a tight hug, his lips descending on her forcefully, stealing her breath. When his lips released hers, he demanded, "Have you always been this obstinate?"

She laughed, seeing that the challenge flickering in his eyes wasn't anger, just frustration. "I'm not *that* stubborn."

"Heaven help us if you were any more willful than you already are," he teased, but added with a serious note, "I want us to be off this island tonight. I want you safe."

She pressed her fingertips to his lips, whispering, "I know."

Michael wrapped his hand around hers, holding her fingertips to his lips the second longer it took to kiss them. His gaze held hers, demanding that she give him more.

Ever since their first meeting, she'd been overwhelmed by how good-looking he really was. She'd thought then that he looked as if he'd walked out of the pages of a glossy magazine—a model or someone famous or someone who should be famous. Her

opinion hadn't changed, and for a moment she allowed herself to get caught by his gaze, his mysterious hazel irises. His eyes demanded more than play. She thought he wanted her to love him.

Sure, he'd said it. He'd even asked her to dissolve the ménage, but he hadn't looked at her the way he was looking at her now. He loved her.

And that scared her.

In her peripheral vision, she caught Jonas walking on, knowing he was watching even though he was trying hard to make it seem that he wasn't. He stopped walking at the edge of the cleared yard, or at least what was once cleared yard and was now overgrown garden, and waited at the beginning of the path for them to catch up. Her lips parted to tell Michael that they should catch Jonas, but he stepped closer to her, pressed against her, lowered his head to kiss her and stopped just before his lips touched hers. It felt like an electric current ebbed and flowed between them.

He was waiting for her.

She heard the *click* of Jonas's camera and laughed on the inside. Their spectacle must be quite the Kodak moment if Jonas had pulled out his camera. Just the tension between her and Michael was calling to Jonas's sadistic nature.

She reached out to touch him, grazing the fingers of both hands over his clean-shaven jaw, but she didn't stop there; her fingers traveled around to the base of his head. She wrapped her fingers into his hair, holding him back when his lips would have moved forward to complete the kiss. His eyes widened, telling her that he hadn't expected a dominant move from her. She felt his chest rising and falling beneath the press of her breasts as she moved even closer, pressing her pelvis into his. Her reward was feeling the long, thick length of a hardening erection beneath the thin fabric of his shorts.

"I don't want to fight," she whispered against his lips. Touching him...barely, barely touching him with her lips.

"I didn't know we were fighting," he whispered back.

She licked her lips, touching his lips gently as well with her tongue, keeping the tension in his hair pulled tight because he couldn't resist trying to move forward, and she just couldn't let him...not yet.

His breath kicked up a notch.

"We will."

His eyes widened. "What do you want from me?"

She smiled a little smile, hoping to ease the sting. "Nothing more than you've done all along. Just keep sharing me with Jonas."

She grabbed his erection through his shorts and squeezed, still holding his hair in a tight grip with her other hand. She wouldn't let him kiss her...not until he agreed. He seemed to realize that this would be their defining moment. His breath left him in a hiss, "yes," and she allowed her mouth to succumb to the sweet temptation of victory. Her lips sealed over his, resulting in a long, deep kiss. Her tongue dived deep, then deeper, wanting to seal the bargain wordlessly.

The *click* and *whir* of the camera seemed far-off, but then Jonas cleared his throat and she realized the kiss had spiraled out of control. Michael's hand was under her shirt, pinching her nipples with a painfully numbing intensity; her hand had slid beneath the waistband of his pants, and she was sliding her hand up and down his cock.

They separated like caught teenagers. If Jonas hadn't cleared his throat when he had...they may have ended up rolling in the grass. She just couldn't control herself around Michael, not when it came to sex.

Jonas was standing near, very near—close enough to rest his hand in the small of her back. "We should probably tour the island before the heat of the day." His brogue was thicker than she'd ever heard it.

Michael leaned in to whisper in her ear, "My yes can always be vetoed by his no."

* * * * *

The sun blazed on their backs, though it was still early morning. Autumn was uncomfortably warm by the time Jonas led them to a row of small houses. A trickle of sweat teased down her spine where it pooled on her lower back. She rubbed at the irritation, pushing her shirt against the slick skin. She was ready to go back to the main house, where she could at least catch a breeze. She didn't need to go inside the houses to know that the people who had lived here had struggled every day of their lives. Desolation seemed to hang in the humid, tropical air.

Michael and Jonas ducked into one of the buildings, exploring. She could hear their excited exchange. *Boys will be boys, right?* And this must seem as exciting as a treasure hunt. She turned away from it. Her memories were all hidden in the manor, and she wanted to get back to discovering all she could there.

Suddenly, a strong sense of déjà vu came over her, but then she realized that it wasn't just déjà vu but a very strong memory. In her mind she could see a blazing fire beneath a starry night sky, women dancing together to the static-filled music coming over a transistor radio, men smoking cigarettes and drinking beer.

Michael touched her elbow. "Are you all right? I called for you from inside, didn't you hear me?"

"No," she answered, wondering if she had been standing there transfixed for mere seconds or long minutes. "My mother used to bring me here sometimes."

Michael smiled at her. "Good memories?"

"I think so," she answered, but something gnawed at her gut, something that she couldn't quite remember.

"Good. Come explore with us." He took her hand and pulled her to where Jonas was waiting. Jonas led them to a building that looked older than the rest, its entire roof having collapsed under the weight of time and neglect. He walked through a doorless threshold and showed Michael the treasures he'd found earlier, ancient implements of bondage and torture.

"Oh God," Autumn gasped. She lifted a rusted shackle. "These are slave chains?"

"Yes, I believe they are," Jonas agreed. "But neither you nor your mother were slaves. These are older than that, much older."

"I know," she whispered softly, feeling the rough, rusted iron's weight and imagined it around her wrists or ankles. "But slaves were kept here."

"Your father didn't keep slaves," Michael assured her.

"Yes, but at some point his family, my family, kept slaves on this property. How can I ever be all right with that?" she asked, dropping the iron.

"It was a different era. Men did what they had to do," Jonas said softly, picking up the shackle from the dirt floor.

She gasped. "You can't possibly think it was ever right?"

"No, I don't. It was abominable, but it did happen. It is a regrettable history, but we all have pain in our ancestral pasts. We just have to remember and move forward," Jonas answered her, but he wasn't looking at her, he was watching Michael go back outside.

"How?" she demanded.

Jonas finally looked at her. "Make peace with it."

"I will never make peace with this."

Jonas held the shackle out to her, and she felt the ripple of challenge coursing through him even before he asked, "Is this really about slavery? Or is knowing that someone was really forced to wear the chains the issue?"

She rolled her eyes. "It's the same thing."

"No, it isn't," he said. "I am asking you to wear the chains. I am giving you the choice, and I think that is the problem. You *want* to wear the chains. They call to you like heroin to an addict."

A pulse of energy seemed to jump from him to her when his knuckles lightly brushed her fingertips. She chanced looking into his eyes and saw the need hidden in the depths of his beautiful blues. He could turn this shanty, this real-life torture shack,

into a place of sexual pleasure and pain. And she did want that, as perverted as it made her feel...he was right.

She jumped as the metal touched her hand, and saw in his eyes that he intended to restrain her. Sharp need hissed down her spine and twisted through her guts, leaving her panting softly with raw need. Her heart responded, pounding fiercely in her chest. Adrenaline too, racing through her veins. Her body was telling her to run. "*Fight or flight*," he'd said in the bathroom the day of the cutting scene; that was the rush, denying her natural instincts.

But this was different; it could have been her black ancestors who had been chained here. There was little doubt that her white ancestors had abused them.

And still, even knowing that, she was filled with lust. She wanted Jonas to chain her; she wanted him to take a crop or cane to her flesh and make her scream.

Wanted it more than her next breath. She disgusted herself, the knowledge of her own depravity making her ill.

"No," she said, backing away from the iron manacles. She shook her head, hard, so that she might also make herself believe that she wanted nothing to do with them.

"Yes," he said, his gaze locking on hers, but then his gaze shifted to a spot behind her. She didn't need to look to know that Michael was watching, but she did look over her shoulder at him. He was standing in the shade of a palm, watching them.

She was sure he didn't mean for her to see the shadow of worry cover his features. He hadn't said anything more about it, but she was certain that he was trying to figure out how to break up the ménage. In response, she felt a shield of self-preservation go up around her. Her smile tightened, as did her resolve to salvage the ménage.

She didn't say anything to Jonas before she left the shanty, walking directly over to Michael.

"Boys and their buried treasure," she joked, but Michael didn't return her smile. He was still staring toward the small building. She followed his gaze and found Jonas leaning in the doorway of the shanty. He was dangling the iron manacles and chain in

his right hand. She stifled the shiver that stole over her. She would not let Michael see her fear and allow him to mistake it for fear of Jonas. Yes, he was a sadist, but he was her sadist.

Looking at him, he was the all-American guy, a walking Abercrombie & Fitch ad, but she'd seen the face without the happy-go-lucky mask; she knew the devil inside of him intimately. She beckoned him, and he winked at her before dropping the chains on a low table she remembered was just inside the door. His smile said it all as he sauntered toward her. He wanted to play again.

Oh God! Yes! She hadn't realized, because she'd been so disgusted at herself, but seeing the dark flicker of need play over his facial features, she knew the truth of it. He would play with her. That was the best news she'd had in days.

She smiled as she turned to Michael. In her mind, she hoped that, alone together for a few days, Michael could relax and see that the ménage could work. She wouldn't think about the real reason why they were on the island when it was a tropical paradise—almost deserted for crying out loud—that begged for romance to ensue. How could it not? And she would do whatever she needed to entice them both.

Chapter Eleven

The sun was high in the sky as they walked back toward the manor. Autumn led the way along the path, knowing they'd passed a side shoot off the main path, one she hoped would lead them to the beach.

Finding the cutaway, she called, "Hey, guys?" But they had stopped in the middle of the path and were talking. She sighed, thinking that it was time the men remembered the truth of their relationship. She skipped off down the path and was rewarded quickly as the narrow path emptied onto a wide white sand beach. She giggled and pulled her shirt over her head. She dropped it into the sand and started running toward the surf.

"Autumn?"

She heard Michael's voice, calling out to her. She smiled and dropped her shorts quickly, leaving them in the sand. She stepped out of her flip-flops and stripped, leaving her panties and bra with them in a pile.

"I'm here," she called and walked backward into the water so that she could see their approach, wanting to enjoy their expressions.

Jonas hit the beach first, and his expression was everything she'd hoped as his frowned anxiety turned to raw hunger. Her smile widened. "Come on in, the water's

fine!" He returned the smile and ran toward her, pulling his shirt off as he ran. He was naked by the time he hit the water's edge. He grabbed her by the waist and threw her into the surf. She came out of the water, sputtering, laughing, and splashing water toward him. He grabbed her wrists and pulled her into his chest. Looking into his face, she saw his smile. It was still a naughty, "I want to do really painful things to you" smile, but it was undercut by his current mood of playfulness.

"Where's Michael?" she asked. Jonas nodded behind him, saying, "He's right behind me," but he realized from her frown that Michael hadn't followed; he'd skidded to a stop and stood in the shade of the trees.

"Oh shit," she said.

"This going to be a problem?" Jonas asked.

"No," she insisted. "It isn't."

"I lost control, love. Michael can't forgive that."

"No! You stayed in control. I was the one who kept pushing for more, but you refused. You have to tell him that." Autumn grabbed his shoulders and made him look at her. "Please, Jonas! I can't lose you now that I've found you."

Jonas shook his head. "I have to see the way he looks at you...every time we're together. He. Loves. You."

Her gaze searched his face as she grabbed his hands and started walking backward into deeper water. "What about you, Jonas? How do you feel about me?"

Emotion he couldn't hide from her crossed his face. "I love you enough to let you go to the better man."

"No," she whispered, backing up so that the water was waist high. "He isn't the better man; you aren't the better man. I need both of you to complete me; can't you see that? But more, you need him...and he needs you."

"Given this some thought, have you?"

She looked over Jonas's shoulder, watching Michael. She called to him, "Join us!" She begged Jonas softly, "Please call him in."

Jonas turned toward Michael and raised his hand, calling, "Michael?"

She held her breath as they waited, but it soon became obvious that Michael was coming forward. He walked slowly through the sand all the way to the water's edge.

"Dunk me, Jonas."

"Do you want to run him off completely?" Jonas whispered.

"Dunk me, Jonas. Play with me. Michael loves to watch you play with me."

"Yeah? Well, I like to watch Michael play with you. You call him in; let him dunk you. I'll take pictures."

Autumn laughed. "He'll have his turn! You first."

She ran her hands through the warm, clear water and splashed Jonas. His eyes widened, and he warned, "Autumn."

Laughing, she splashed again and again as fast as she could, a deluge of water in his face. She shouted at Michael, "I don't know about you, Michael, but my vacation starts now!" In that instant, Jonas lunged, taking her under. Her eyes open, she swam underwater, trying to get away, but Jonas held her ankle tight. His other hand pushed down on her back, holding her under.

Autumn twisted in the water and pulled her head out of the water just long enough to gulp in air. Jonas pushed her under again, and she held her breath. She was surprised when he released her and her lungs weren't even burning yet.

She sputtered out of the water and opened her eyes to find Jonas and Michael wrestling in the surf. She screamed at them, "Stop it! Stop it! What in the fuck are you doing? Michael! Jonas! Stop!"

Shaking with anger, she pushed between them. Jonas was nude, but Michael was still completely clothed. "What is wrong with you two?"

They both looked at her like she was the one who had lost her mind. She lifted her hands and backed away from them. "Fine, you two do what you have to do. I'm going home." She started wading toward the shore.

Michael answered her first. "I freaked; I'm sorry."

She kept walking. "Too late."

Michael hurried to catch up with her, his clothes clinging to his body as a heavy weight. "I wasn't there with you during that damn cutting scene; I should have been."

She turned on him, the water only ankle deep. Small, quiet waves lapped over her feet. "So you don't want us to play at all now? Because that was just play, like two kids. What are you going to do when the sharp objects come out?"

"I know, Autumn. I'm being irrational."

"Yeah, you are, because the last time I *played* in the water, it was *you* holding me under. Remember the river?"

"I know!"

"Others call you Master, for God's sake!"

"I know," Michael told her, scrubbing his face.

"Why in the hell *did you* shave off your goatee?" she demanded, caressing his cheek. "I liked your furry face. I thought it was sexy."

He burst out laughing. "We're arguing, and you want to talk about my beard?"

She winked at him. "The argument's over; we aren't fighting about this. I've been attracted to you since the first time I laid eyes on you, and I don't want you to walk away from this...because *this* is special." She pointed among the three of them, then walked out of the water and onto the beach. She threw herself onto the warm sand, sitting with her legs stretched out in front of her, her face lifted to soak in the sun.

Michael and Jonas joined her on the sand moments later, one sitting on each side of her. She shielded her eyes with her hand to look out at the glistening water; the two

men looked at each other. She refused to look at either of them. Jonas asked Michael, "Why did you shave off your goatee?"

Autumn smirked as she peripherally caught Michael pointing a finger at Jonas, warning, "Don't you even say it."

Jonas smiled sardonically. "What? You don't want me to tell you, you're so much sexier with a goatee?"

She broke out laughing, and Michael shoved her shoulder, asking, "You think that's funny?" She fell over, her shoulder hitting the sand, and when she sat back up, damp sand covered her back. Feeling the gritty layer of sand clinging to her, she moved to brush it off, admitting, "The visual was funny."

"Eh?" both men asked at the same time. Michael helped her brush sand off her back, scooting behind her to make the job easier.

"You two, stubbled cheek to stubbled cheek, doing the nasty." She laughed hysterically, her giggles feeding into each other, making the image in her head funnier and funnier.

Michael pulled her back into his chest, wrapping his arms over each of hers and tightening behind her back, holding her completely immobile. "Think you're a funny girl, do you?"

She laughed so hard, tears leaked over her cheeks. That's when she heard the soft *click* and *whir* of Jonas's camera. She stilled, realizing her predicament. She looked up at Michael, and for the first time since his return from Vegas saw mischief in his eyes. "God, I wish you had a length of rope right now. Do you know how much I love being tied in your rope?"

"As much as I enjoy seeing you tied in my rope?" he asked.

She shook her head, feeling his damp shirt bunch against the back of her neck. "More."

He kissed her forehead when she dropped her head back to look up at him. "I don't think that's possible." Their gazes caught, and she knew he was up to something even before he said to Jonas, "Tie her feet." He smiled, his gaze never leaving hers. "We do share something special, and I think it's time we thank you for reminding us both of that."

Oh shit, she thought as she felt her discarded tank top wrap around her ankles. Jonas cinched the knot he was tying tighter than she thought was necessary. She looked up in time to see Jonas's discarded shirt get tied just above her knees. The smart-ass in her had to ask, "Okay, I'm helpless, now what?"

"Now," Michael whispered.

"We get to thank you," Jonas finished. Watching him, her eyes widened as he leaned forward. Using his fingers, he separated the soft lips hiding her clit to expose the sensitive bud. Using his tongue, he started thanking her. She was quickly bucking in her bonds, and Jonas pushed against her thighs to hold her where he wanted her. Michael's arms tightened against hers. He demanded, "Look at me."

She did.

Michael leaned over her and kissed her, breathing into her mouth, "You were right; I do like to watch, but I like to torture you too. Let me know when it's too much."

It was already too much; her clit was too sensitive for the tonguing it was taking. Jonas wasn't alternating soft strokes with harder strokes like he normally would when he wanted her to come. Every stroke was hard, calculated to cause too much sensation.

"Please, it's too much!"

Michael shushed her, clucking, "Sh, sh, sh," close to her ear. "Not yet, baby, he hasn't even gotten started yet."

Her eyes rolled back in her head as her body started to spasm, not in orgasm, in sensory overload. She started to scream, a high-pitched staccato sound, interrupted only by her panted pleas. "It hurts!"

"Relax," Michael commanded. He bit her cheek, not hard enough to draw blood, but hard enough to take her mind off her clit, if just for a moment. When he released her, the attention Jonas was laving on her clit returned tenfold, but somehow the pain had switched to pleasure, and her body rolled into a bone-jarring orgasm that left her gasping for breath.

While she struggled to pull herself together, Michael released her arms and moved to trade places with Jonas. "No no no!" she begged. "No more, not yet."

She tried to push up on her shaking arms, but Jonas stood up, straddling her. She looked up at him. Although he was as naked as the day he was born and wearing a camera around his neck, which should have seemed comical, he was as formidable as a mighty warrior. He pushed his bare foot against her chest, forcing her to lie back down. He grabbed her wrists and pushed her arms over her head. "Don't move."

She didn't, except for her gaze following his every move. Jonas walked over to where he'd stripped out of his clothes, and bent over his canvas messenger bag. He dug around inside, finally finding what he was looking for. He walked back toward her, dangling a pair of nipple clamps attached to a chain. Kneeling over her, he attached them; pain shot through each nipple in turn, but she knew it would lessen as she adjusted to having them on. Grabbing her wrists, he helped her to her feet. Her ankles and knees were still hobbled by the tied shirts, so her balance was precarious, and she leaned against him to keep from falling.

"Ready?" he asked, and she knew from the direction of his gaze that he was talking to Michael, not her. She looked away from Jonas to see what Michael was doing and saw that he'd pulled his own shirt off and held it in his hand; it was dripping wet where he'd just dunked it into the ocean. He walked toward them, looking lethal. He answered, "Ready."

"Hold your hands over your head. Don't let them drop," Jonas commanded. He stepped away from her, and she teetered on her bound legs. He laughed, adding, "And try to not fall over," as he took up position several feet away, his camera ready.

She wasn't sure what was going to happen next, but she guessed and guessed correctly. She heard the whistle of the wet shirt before it hit her; water spray droplets filled the air as he hit her again and again, making her yelp with each slap, the wet cloth a slicing sting. On the fifth smack, she lost her battle to keep her balance and dropped to her knees. She managed to keep her hands lifted over her head as her knees sank into the sand.

Thwack, thwack, thwack. The shirt landed again and again, until she lost track of how many strikes. She was sobbing by the time he stopped, her back a mass of stingy welts that she couldn't see but felt the throb of each one. She'd lost track of Jonas and, only after she could see through the red haze of pain, realized he'd been circling them as he snapped pictures, getting off shots at every angle. She knew they weren't done, because he was still circling, still snapping off shots. Michael came up behind her and ran his fingertips down a particularly tender welt, making her hiss. At the same time, his other hand reached around her, pulling the chain connected to the nipple clamps, reminding her that they were still there. He tugged hard, popping them off, and her vision shot white with the pain.

"Motherfucking Jesus!" she swore. Michael pinched the welt, making her pull away from him. Losing her balance, she fell into the sand. She didn't catch herself; her arms were too heavy to move from holding them in the air. Michael followed her down, covering her with his body. He lifted her head and turned it to the side before lowering it back against the sand. His breath was hot against her face as he demanded, "Tell me that you liked it."

"I liked it," she said on the exhale.

"Tell me you want this ménage."

"I want this ménage," she repeated, a sob punctuating the needy truth in her voice.

He whispered against her face, "I want this ménage too; I've never not wanted it, but someone has to be lead Dom. One of us has to set the rules, make sure we all play safe and sane, and that person cannot be you. Do. You. Understand?"

"Yes," she promised. "I understand."

"Tonight I'm claiming bedroom rights; Jonas can sleep in another room. I want to make love to you, tenderly, adoringly. I want you to feel how much I love you. Do. You. Understand?"

Emotion caught in her throat, making her chest heave. She loved him too. She had from the first, and she realized that she'd been holding it in until he accepted the ménage completely, because she couldn't have survived baring her soul to him, giving her love to him while there was still a chance he'd walk away. "I understand."

"Helicopter," Jonas announced suddenly. She looked at him and saw that he'd pulled on his shorts. He tossed hers toward her as Michael lifted his weight off her and quickly untied the shirts holding her knees and ankles. She rolled onto her back and let Michael help her lift her shirt over her head.

"My bra," she said.

"Right now they're just circling the island, probably a sightseeing tour," Jonas said. "Let's just get you covered; your bra and panties can wait."

Michael slid her shorts over her ankles.

"You don't think they'll land, do you?"

Michael answered as the helicopter flew directly overhead; she didn't hear his answer and shouted, "What?"

"I think they're landing; let's head for the house." He helped her stand, and as he did, she caught the pointed look he gave Jonas. He hefted the canvas bag onto his shoulder and nodded.

Michael pulled her to her feet. "We're going to run. Are you ready?"

"Why are we running from tourists?" she asked confusedly. "And what's in the bag?"

"I don't think that it's tourists, and there's a gun in the bag. Jonas is going to watch our backs while I get you into the house safely." He led her by the hand and started running. She ran to keep from falling.

"Who do you think it is?"

"I don't care who it is. Once you are safe in the house, we'll figure out if they are friend or foe."

She was panting hard by the time they reached the manor. Michael jerked her to a hard stop before they exited the tree cover, and she saw that the helicopter had indeed landed. Directly in front of the house, a man stood on the porch. As a matter of fact, several men stood on the porch. Jonas jogged up behind them. "Please tell me that isn't who I think it is."

"I don't know about the rest of them, but the man on the far right...that's my father," Autumn answered, adding sarcastically, "Let's just get you covered; your bra and panties can wait; who said that? Because I am not going to be seen by my father for the first time in decades with my nipples puckering the front of my shirt!"

Jonas dangled her bra over her shoulder. "I suggest you put it on quick, because his security detail just realized we're here." He stepped around her, shielding her. Michael did the same so that the two men's shoulders touched. With shaking hands, Autumn slipped on her bra, sliding each arm out of the armhole of her shirt to slide into the bra straps and back through the shirt without ever pulling the top off. Looking down at the wrinkled, sand-covered garment she doubted that she looked any more presentable, but at least her nipples weren't sticking out.

An armed man stepped forward and shouted toward them, "You, in the trees, show yourself."

Jonas and Michael both stepped from the cover while Autumn wiped at her shirt. She was miserable and self-conscious, knowing that her hair was a wet, tangled mess,

her makeup was either smeared or nonexistent at this point, and her clothes had definitely seen better days. Of all the times in her life she'd fantasized about seeing him again...this wasn't how she'd ever envisioned it going down. On top of the horror of her appearance, her nipples hurt, the welts throbbed, and as much as she hated to admit it, her pussy was still soaking wet. She imagined that if the helicopter hadn't circled when it had, Michael's cock would have been buried deep inside her within minutes. She wondered if she could be any more humiliated as she followed the men onto the overgrown lawn.

Her father's eyes widened, his jaw gaped; she imagined his expression was one of horror, but then he was racing down the steps toward her. Two guards stepped between her and Michael and Jonas, creating a barricade of flesh and armed weapons. Her father was within a few feet of reaching her when he demanded, "My God, what happened?"

She lifted her hands, waving them to stave off his worry, promising, "Nothing, we were just hiking and ended up at the beach. I'm sure it looks worse than it is, but I promise we were just having too much fun on a hot day. A hot shower, and I'll be much more presentable."

She tried to head for the house, but he stopped her. "There isn't time. I only have a few minutes. No one knows I'm here, you see."

Her forehead furrowed. "What? A few minutes?"

Her father exchanged a look with the armed men; words were exchanged between the ranks, and two others raced into the trees, she assumed to derail any would-be Kodak moments of her and her father's reunion. This had honestly been handled so much better in her fantasies.

He took her by the hand and walked with her to the front porch. "You deserve more than this, Autumn; you deserve more than a clandestine meeting."

She laughed sharply. "You paid for Yale, and I guess that was enough."

He nodded, and she was surprised at how old he looked and how sad. "I loved your mother. I wanted you to both come with me to Lairg, but she was a stubborn woman."

"She didn't want to be your mistress?"

"She refused to be my wife. She worried that she would ruin my political future, and I was already deeply embroiled in the politics of our country by the time we met," he explained. "But I would have given it all up for her, for you. I wanted you to know that."

Autumn nodded. "I'm not going to see you again, am I?"

"No, you won't."

"Are you going to publicly denounce me?" She held her face in a tight mask, not willing to let him see how much she was hurting.

He took her hand, and she felt his trembling against her palm. "I never wanted it to come to that. There will be a stipend —"

She interrupted him with a harsh laugh. "You think I want your money? You think you can pay me off to keep me quiet? I didn't even know that you were my father. American reporters told me! So I think you are a little too late to try to cover up my illegitimacy now."

She pulled her hand away from his, disgusted by the sight of him, and she was surprised when he chuckled. "You are as fiery as your mother and just as stubborn. I can see that."

One of his men approached and tapped the top of his watch. It was time for him to go.

"Please listen, Autumn. I'm out of time. I am not going to be the next prime minister, but my decision has nothing to do with you. The announcement is going to be made public in less than an hour, even though it has obviously been rumored for days. I

want you to understand my decision, because you are going to bear the burden of dealing with the public alone."

She shook her head. "Why me?"

"Because I won't be able to," he answered, his voice sounding defeated. "I'm a very sick man; I keep it hidden well, but the fact is I'm dying. Now listen very carefully; there has been a stipend set aside to manage my properties in England and also this house. All that is left after the property management is calculated will become yours because you are my only heir."

"I don't understand; what are the doctors saying?"

"Please don't concern yourself with my ill health."

A tear streaked down her cheek. "Don't you understand? I don't want anything you have; your houses and money mean nothing to me. I want you. I want to get to know you!"

"You already know the best that ever was of me. Remember me here with you and your mother, because it all went bloody downhill after that. Remember that there wasn't a day that passed that I didn't think about you both. I loved you."

He left her then; two men helped him back to the car. His bodyguards filed in after him. And then he was gone. He didn't see her fall into the arms of her two men, sobbing. Couldn't hear her bitterly screamed pleas. "Don't leave me!"

Chapter Twelve

She'd been inconsolable for two days; Michael's promised lovemaking took a backseat to her despair. Both Jonas and Michael begged her to make the trip back to Atlanta, but she wouldn't go. She hadn't made peace with her past yet, and she was beginning to think that, with her father's final abandonment, she might never find the peace she desired. Then she sat with Birdie on the front porch. She was wrapped in a quilt, though it was another hot, humid, tropical paradise beautiful day. Birdie told her about her mother...and her father, about how this manor house had been their love nest during a time in the world when biracial couples had to live in fear of being caught. "Your father loved your mother so. He begged her to marry him, begged her to come live with him in England, but she wouldn't even consider it."

Birdie's words made her even sadder because they brought back the memory of something else, something long forgotten. "I remember a woman, she was so beautiful, a blonde. Wasn't he already married to her?"

"Yes, I remember her," Birdie exclaimed. "She came for him, but she wasn't his wife. She was his sister. His father had died, and she came here to make him return with her and assume his responsibilities as the new lord of the manor. He left for several weeks, but by the time he returned to the islands, your mother..." Birdie didn't

finish the sentence, looking suddenly uncomfortable. She stood suddenly, announcing with a nod of her head toward the sky, "I better be getting my old bones home. Storm's coming."

Autumn looked up to see dark clouds rolling in.

"You should probably go inside to your men; they're worried about you."

"Soon," Autumn promised, but it wasn't a promise she'd keep right away. As soon as she saw that Birdie was out of sight, she left the porch and started walking toward the trail that would lead her to the row of shanties. She didn't think to tell Jonas or Michael that she was leaving. She just walked, and when it started to rain, she kept walking, because there was a memory in her mind that she couldn't work out.

* * * * *

It was dark and cool when she realized that Jonas was calling her name. She was barely aware of it. Rain was dripping off the shredded roof. *Plop, plop, plop.*

And there was another sound accompanying it.

Thwap, thwap, thwap.

Thunder crashed overhead, lighting the inside of the bleak shack she'd taken shelter in. She must have fallen asleep, because she'd had the most peculiar dream. She'd been in a field, working as hard as any woman could work, but it wasn't hard enough for the man wielding his belt against her back. He'd hit her and hit her again. She'd screamed, but when she looked up into the man's face to ask him why, she wasn't looking into a man's face, she was looking into her own. She was the one in the field letting the leather belt fly. She was screaming, "Why? Why would you do this to our family?"

* * * * *

Jonas found her sitting in a dark corner on the dirt floor of the building with no door and hardly any remaining roof. She was rocking herself. As lightning flashed,

illuminating the room, he discovered that the slapping noise that had drawn him to her was the sound of a crop slapping into her calf. He also saw that she had slid her wrists into the rough iron shackles.

"Autumn?" he said, kneeling beside her.

The soft slaps didn't stop; over and over they fell. *Thwap, thwap, thwap.*

"Autumn, honey?" He put his hand over hers to still the riding crop's next fall. "We've been worried. I wish you wouldn't have left without telling us you were going."

She didn't look up at him but continued to stare vacantly, though she did assure him, "I'm okay. I'm just thinking, just feeling...all of it. You know?"

"I know."

He texted Michael to let him know that he had found her, that she was safe, and where they were. He doubted she even registered the level of concern she'd caused both of them, not knowing if her phone stalker had come to the island and carried her off to her doom. She wasn't aware of the danger.

"How is it that you do that? Understanding me without trying to analyze me. I don't have to explain it..." Her voice trailed off.

Jonas winked at her and tapped his head. "Wired different, remember?"

"Me too?"

He reached out and touched her shoulder, realizing by feel in the darkness that her clothing was soaked through. "Ready to come back to the house?"

"I'm fine here. I'm not too fond of the memories that come with the darkness. Isn't that strange? When it's bright and sunny and the air is filled with sweetness, I only remember the happiness. But when the darkness settles, I only remember the sadness, the misery."

"That isn't so unusual."

"You're right. I shouldn't be such a drama queen."

He stroked her cheek. "Tell me what you are remembering."

"A man...a black man...my mother used to come here to be with him when my father was away."

Jonas's eyebrows went up in the darkness, understanding immediately what she was saying. He didn't interrupt her when she continued. "When I was younger, I don't think it mattered as much when we would come here... I wouldn't have understood. But then one night, it was strange in my mind that she was here, that she wasn't with Father. They ate and drank and danced. The music was so static filled, coming through the little transistor radio, but that didn't seem to matter. In my memories...the way he looked at her...the way she looked at him...I don't think they even heard the music."

Autumn bit her lip remembering. The riding crop continued to fall against her leg, keeping time. *Thwap, thwap, thwap.*

"I was supposed to be in one of the shanties, sleeping with the other children while the grown-ups stayed awake late into the night, but a storm woke me up, a storm so like tonight's, and I wanted my mother. I went looking for her."

"You found her?" Jonas asked.

"Yes," she whispered. "When I came into the dark cabin to find her, I couldn't see anything, but then lightning illuminated the room and I could see the man was on top of her. My mother was screaming; I thought he was hurting her... I was so stupid."

"You were a child."

Autumn stayed silent. *Thwap. Thwap.* Jonas stilled her hand, making her look up at him, but she still wasn't there with him. He kissed her, kissed her hard and hungrily, forcing the kiss onto her until her lips responded and kissed him back.

"Did your father ever find out?"

"I don't think so. My mother was so upset with me; she kept shouting that I must never say a word to him. She just kept shouting that into my face, even as she packed our clothing, and I sobbed that I didn't want to go anywhere." Autumn buried her face

in her hands. "There's so much I don't remember. I've spent my whole life angry with my mother, and I didn't understand why. I just knew it was her fault for not letting me see my father. I didn't realize that she was afraid I would betray her infidelity."

"Your mother must have loved him very much," Jonas theorized.

"Or she was afraid he would take me away from her," Autumn suggested. "She's dead, so I'll never know the answer to that question now." A long silence fell between them before she admitted, "I was sitting here thinking that maybe that was why Edward's betrayal hurt so much, that somehow, subconsciously, I remembered enough to finally understand and be ashamed for my mother."

Jonas lifted her chin, making her make eye contact with him. "Or maybe Edward was just a bastard for cheating on you. Unfaithfulness hurts."

A sob broke from her chest. "I'm no better than she was!"

"You cheated on Edward?"

"No," she whispered, admitting, "after we returned from Victor's party, I went into the office, and I don't really know what came over me, but I—we... I'm so sorry."

She covered her face with her hands, sobbing; Jonas pulled her into his arms and held her, rocked her until she calmed. He kissed her forehead. He asked, "Was that the only time?"

She nodded. "That was the day I left the firm."

He took her chin between his fingers and forced her to look into his face. "Thank you for telling me."

Her lower lip trembled as she said, "I don't want us to be over because of this."

He arched his eyebrow; thunder rumbled low and long in the distance. He finally answered her, "I'm not that guy, Autumn. I admit that I'd be disappointed if it happened again and I found out in some way other than your upfront honesty, but I'm not going anywhere."

"Do you think Michael would be as understanding?"

"I think he would have before he fell in love with you, but now it's a wild card you'll have to play to discover the answer."

She started to say that she wasn't willing to risk it, promise that it would never happen again, and beg Jonas not to tell; but just as quickly realized she couldn't ask that of him. This was her mistake, and she was going to have to clean up the mess. She sighed heavily, the weight of the day pushing down hard on her shoulders.

Jonas pulled on the rusted chain attached to the shackles on her wrists. The cuffs were so loose she could slide her wrists out without any difficulty at all if she wanted to. She looked down at her hands like she'd forgotten the manacles were around her wrists.

"You know you're very sexy in chains," he teased, waggling his eyebrows. "I'd really like to chain you to that wall and hurt you just a little."

Autumn swallowed hard, hating the idea of being locked in slave chains, but since she'd been the one to put them on her wrists, arguing about it seemed moot. She tried to sound brave as she said, "I could use a good escape about now."

Jonas shook his head. "I don't want you to escape. I want you to embrace who you are, where you've come from, and where the future may take you. You said you came to this shack to feel... I want you to feel all of it: remember your ancestors and their roles, black and white; remember your mother's betrayal; say your good-byes to your father; and deal with your feelings for Edward and Michael once and for all. Do whatever you have to do so that when we leave this place you are free of your past."

"I don't know if I can do that, Jonas." She took his hand and pulled it to her chest so that he could feel her frantic heartbeat. "I'm more afraid in this moment than I ever was when you were cutting me. It feels like..." She looked for the rest of the sentence but couldn't put into words her fears.

"It feels like you could die here?" Jonas guessed.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Part of you will die here. Part of you will stop being the moment you let all of this go."

She shook her head.

"Because you like holding on to it," he charged. "The guilt, the shame, the pain...you like to carry it around with you."

"No."

Jonas laughed at her. "You are terrified to let go."

She wanted to argue with him, but she couldn't. Her heart was racing; her palms were sweating. She felt like she should run. This was her limit.

"Fight or flight," she whispered.

"Yes, exactly that. There are so many avenues of edge play. You've experienced physical, but we've only begun to skim the surface of mental or emotional edge play."

She tried to stand, but Jonas put a firm hand on her shoulder. "I'm fairly certain that if I start playing in the dark, shadowy places of your psyche, you are going to want to run. You will want to hide—"

"Do you just want to see me cry? Is that what does it for you? Because I hurt so badly right now. If I think about any of it, I'll start sobbing all over you again."

Jonas bore through her with his beautiful blue eyes, his gaze demanding that she find the truth of his words in his eyes. "This isn't about the pleasure I'll gain pushing your buttons. I want to free you of the pain locked inside of you that is keeping you from falling in love with Michael. I want to free you of all of your abandonment issues and all of your guilty hang-ups, so that maybe, someday, you can fall in love with me too."

She raised her hands to her face, hiding her eyes, not wanting to face what needed to be faced to gain the freedom he dangled. She whispered from behind her hand, "I do love you, Jonas. I don't have to face anything to know that."

"Words, Autumn, pretty words. I want you to feel the gut-wrenching ache of loving someone like me. And you aren't there yet."

She dropped her hands. "I want to be. I want you to know that I am. Help me?"

Jonas stood and held out his hand to her, and by taking his—she was giving him her trust.

Standing beside him, she watched as he threw a long, rusted chain over a low beam. She spent a long, nervous moment trying to remember when she'd gotten her last tetanus shot.

"Take off your clothes."

She shivered in response to the request, still not certain that she could do what he was asking, not here, not with so many memories locked in this place. She felt like her mother would see and know. She begged, "Jonas?" wanting to say no, wanting to say, "I can't," but only shaking her head in a soft refusal that really wasn't anything more than a delay of the inevitable. She knew it and guessed he knew it as well.

Resigned, she let out a heavy sigh and slid her hands out of the manacles. She laid the heavy ironwork on the ground. She stepped out of her flip-flops, pulled down her shorts and panties in a single tug, and tossed them on top of her shoes, then pulled her knit top over her head, unhooked her bra, and laid both in the heap at her feet. Without asking, she picked the manacles back up and slid them over her wrists. It had only been a minute that they hadn't been around her wrists, but in that moment her wrists had seemed bare...naked...bereft.

He took the chains at her wrist and hooked her hands to the ceiling. She knew she could slip her hands free of the manacles if she wanted.

"Grip the chains in your hands," he said. She complied, and he pulled the length of chain in his hand to lift her, stretch her out. She knew all she had to do was let go of the chains, pull her wrists free.

"So which of the dark, shadowy places in my psyche do you want to play with?"

He pulled the chain again, and she had to go up on tiptoe. She shivered; a cool breeze had blown through the open door. He ran his hands over her skin, teasing her ribs with soft strokes. "Tell me what it felt like the first time Michael touched you. The first time he kissed you."

She shivered, remembering the searing heat. She'd felt like a moth lulled by the flame. She'd wanted to get closer.

"It was like molten lava pouring through me, searing my soul." She closed her eyes, not daring to let him look into them.

He leaned into her, rubbing his rough cheek against her smoother one. He whispered against her face, "Tell me what it is about Edward that's keeping you from allowing yourself to accept Michael's love?"

Her eyes flew open and "nothing," flew from her lips so fast they both knew she hadn't really considered the question. Jonas's knuckles bit into her rib cage so hard and so fast, the pain seared through her with enough strength to arch her spine. She screamed and tried to squirm away, but she didn't release the chains.

He made a sound like a game show buzzer. "Wrong. Try again."

She started shaking, knowing the answer, but not wanting to tell Jonas the answer, because she did not want to hurt him. He held her around her rib cage, soaked in her fragile trembling. "Edward does that to you too, doesn't he? It's hard to be in the same room with him and not want to have sex with him. Isn't that right, Autumn?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"You can pull his scent into your mind with just a thought. You remember exactly what it feels like to be thrust into by him. Even now, thinking about him makes you wet."

She whimpered, knowing he was talking about Edward, not Michael. Jonas dug his knuckles between her ribs. She yelped and screamed, "Yes yes yes."

"You think that if you love Michael like you allowed yourself to love Edward that it will kill you."

"Yes."

"What about me?"

She didn't answer, couldn't answer. How could she explain that loving Jonas was different from loving Michael? Any way she thought about it seemed wrong. "I need you to hurt me."

"I'm hurting you now." He demonstrated by pushing into her ribs.

"It isn't the same," she replied, cursing the pain that was arching her spine.

"What isn't?"

"I trust what is between us. I don't trust his love," she admitted, and they both knew she was talking about Michael. "It's so easy for him to catch a plane to Vegas to see Carla, pick up a phone to call anyone, anywhere, anytime, and have them be ready, willing... He's Master M. He doesn't *need* me, anyone will do."

"And you think that I *need* you?" His hand wrapped around her throat, cutting in, cutting off her air. "Is that it?"

He released her, and she gasped, "No!" She coughed and sputtered. "The opposite. Just the opposite. I need you. There is no one who can replace what you are to me...and I want that...with you. I want you to feel that way too, and maybe...someday...you'll feel the same about me. Michael never will. It hurts too much knowing *that* to let myself love him with my whole heart and soul."

"Master M is a player, like your Edward was, but Edward pretended he wasn't and Michael's been nothing but honest with you. You've seen him at his worst."

"His worst?" she asked, not understanding.

"You've seen him so played out that he can't even respond."

She thought of Michael and the woman's attempt to blow him, which left him looking bored. She repeated Jonas's words, "Played out," before agreeing, "Yes."

"And you responded to his need. You didn't ask him to be Master M, you let him be Michael."

Her mouth formed an O as understanding dawned.

"Now he needs you to accept his love; he needs you to believe in him, because you can give him something the others can't. With you he gets to reveal his true self, his weaknesses, and his desires."

She broke down, tears sliding over her cheeks. Jonas licked away the salty tracks. "That was just the warm-up. I'm going to hurt you now, and I won't leave a single mark, but you are going to remember this night. You are going to bring in the morning as a new woman...one willing to love Michael and put Edward into the past where he belongs."

She shuddered, not wanting to know how he planned to do it. A bright flash of light filled the small, dusty room, exposing the dirt, the shadows; thunder crashed on impact. She jumped and held her breath, waiting for something terrible to happen. "We should go to the house. He'll be worried. I don't want him to worry any more about me than he already has. It's not fair."

"Are you crazy?" Jonas laughed. "We're not going anywhere in this storm."

She watched as he pulled his cell phone from his jeans pocket and typed a text to Michael; she didn't ask what he texted. She was too worried about which corner of her brain he wanted to play in next. His phone vibrated a second later with a returned text. He read it, folded the phone closed, and put it in his pants pocket before focusing all of his attention back on her. "Michael isn't very happy with either one of us right now."

"We should go back."

"You should have never left the house without us."

Her chin dropped to her chest; she knew he was right. She kept her hands in the manacles and held on to the chains with everything that was in her as a downpour started outside. It rained so hard. It was a loud rain, seeming to dent the ground as it hit and the metal roof over her head hummed.

She jumped when Jonas kissed the back of her neck, and he chuckled softly under his breath. "Storm scaring you?"

"Me scaring me, maybe."

He chuckled again, his breath warm on the back of her neck, the fabric of his jeans brushing her thighs. He ran a single finger over her bare shoulder, drawing gooseflesh and making her tremble. She knew it was just the storm but felt like they were being watched. "Was Michael going to come here?"

"No. He'll stay at the house and wait for us." His finger slid down her back, caressing curves, teasing her skin into a heightened sense of awareness. By the time he slid his palm over her ass, she was shaking uncontrollably. "Tell me why you are suddenly so afraid?"

Another brilliant flash of lightning brightened the room, another crash of thunder. She jumped and screamed, seeing through the threshold a silhouetted man, leaning against a palm tree.

Her teeth chattered. "A man. Outside. Watching."

Jonas kissed her shoulder but had his gaze lifted to see through the threshold. The next flash of lightning revealed just a palm tree. He walked around in front of her. "There's no one there, Autumn. It's a tree."

She nodded and licked her lips nervously. "I know; I saw there was nothing there. My imagination...just my mind playing tricks on me. Ghosts from my past maybe. My father spying on my mother? My mother's lover spying on her and my father? I don't want to do this."

"Do what, love?"

"Head games. I don't like feeling this kind of fear."

"No more head games," he promised. "But maybe I can play with you a little? We are alone here for the rest of the night."

He unbuttoned the top button of his shirt, arching a brow in challenge. "But we could continue to talk the rest of the night if you want."

Autumn smiled shyly. "You'll take off your clothes too?"

He unbuttoned another button in a slow tease. "Is that what you want?"

"Yes," she hissed, arousal slamming hard through her body. "I need you."

He pulled his shirt over his head instead of unbuttoning any more buttons and dropped it to the ground. He quickly followed with his jeans and shoes, leaving him standing as naked as she.

"I need you too," he said confidently. He held her face in his hands, kissing each eyelid before trailing his hands down over her jaw, her neck. His hands closed around her throat, holding, not tightening, not releasing.

She panted, her need evident with every breath.

"Hurt me," she whispered, but he shook his head.

Jonas's head ducked down, and he claimed her lips, kissing her, stealing her breath with his gentleness. Pulling away from her, he caught her with his gaze, a staccato flash of light that seemed to go on for eternity illuminating the truth of his words as he said, "You don't have to wait for someday, love. No one can ever be or has ever been what you are to me."

She gasped, tears filling her eyes as his mouth claimed hers again softly, so softly it was painful in its intensity. Her heart felt like it would explode with the amount of emotion swelling it. His mouth moved from her lips to her cheek, and he whispered roughly, "I'm in love with you."

"Oh, God," she sobbed, pushing her face against his, holding on to the chains with a white-knuckled grip, unable to let go. "I love you."

Chapter Thirteen

Michael didn't ask any questions when they returned to the manor just after dawn; he just pulled her to him and held her. She closed her eyes, feeling his heart beating in his chest like a small, trapped thing. Jonas went up the staircase silently, leaving them alone in the front of the house. She desperately wanted to follow him up the stairs, because she knew he would fall into bed. She knew he had to be as exhausted as she felt, though in her mind, exhaustion didn't begin to cover what she was feeling. Turned inside out, maybe.

She didn't know what to say to Michael and was too exhausted to explain why they didn't return immediately to the house last night. Besides, she was fairly certain Jonas had used the storm as their excuse for staying away. She knew honesty wouldn't erase the worry in Michael's gaze.

She'd hated seeing the relief on his face that said he'd been worried about her safety. He needn't have worried. Jonas had been true to his word and hadn't left a mark on her...at least not visible ones. She wondered if the mind-lashing she'd taken would be obvious on a CAT scan. She knew it wouldn't but also believed it should be. There should be some mark, some scarification, in the place of what had been.

He'd taken her places she'd never have been able to go to on her own, and whether it was a dream or a summoning, she'd believed her mother had been in that shanty with her when she railed against her twenty-seven years of anger and frustration. Twenty-seven years of questions demanding answers and answers she didn't want to hear. Yes, it is possible to love two men...with all your heart and all your soul...and how lucky she was to live in the time and place that both men were evolved enough to understand that love and not want to kill each other.

The dream-mother-summoned-mother had said, *He would have left me. He would have hated me. I couldn't have borne that. It was better that I leave, knowing he loved me. That love was all that kept me going in the years that came and went. That love kept me from killing myself every time you turned your angry, hate-filled eyes on me. You wanted him so badly, and I was too selfish to let you go. I couldn't have either of my men...but I could have you.*

Autumn barely held in the sob that tore through her chest. She hugged Michael tighter to hide her pain. Her dream-mother-summoned-mother had been right: she could love two men and they would accept each other, but it was her third love that could very well destroy them all. Edward. She'd had to banish Edward from her heart, from her mind, from her lust-filled blood, but to do that she'd had to feel him...again.

Was it a dream lover?

She'd been awake. Chained. Tortured with caresses. It hadn't been Edward. She knew intellectually that Edward had not been in that shanty, but like her mother...he had been there...whether dreamed or summoned. He had made love to her, but it hadn't been lovemaking; it had been lust fulfillment. He had taken and taken; she had taken and taken, but she'd realized that it was without substance. Any two bodies could create that kind of lust. Any two bodies...

Edward didn't matter.

She didn't need Edward.

She might always think that he was beautiful, she might always remember his taste and scent, but she knew that she would never feel an insatiable lust for him again. She'd used it up, burned it out...banished it.

She wished she'd been able to banish her father as easily.

The sob tearing at her chest broke free, and Michael felt it, pulling away to look at her tear-filled eyes. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she choked out, sagging against him. "Just hold me."

He pulled her close, folding his arms around her, holding her as tight as he could hold her. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No," she told him. "My father will die, and I will never have known him. All I have is the memories of a child."

"Sometimes those are the best memories that we'll ever have of our parents."

"But I want more than that. I know it's selfish, but I want more."

He pushed her back and looked into her face. With gentle fingers, he brushed away her tears. "Then maybe we should go find him. Do all that you can possibly do to assure your mind that you did do all that you could, so that when he does die, you will at least be at peace, knowing that you tried. You never know, it might end well. You might get the relationship you always dreamed of as a child."

Holding his gaze, she nodded. "Maybe. I was considering it."

He smiled softly at her. "I'll go with you...hold your hand. Be there if you need me to dry your tears."

"I'd like that, but you might not feel that way at the end of today." She didn't look away even when she felt him stiffen next to her.

"Why is that?" he asked in his very practiced, professional voice.

She wasn't ready to face this, wasn't ready to ruin everything, but better now than later...better now than after admitting to him she loved him. She led him to the sofa and sat down. He sat too, though she got the distinct feeling that he didn't want to.

"I need to tell you something."

"Yes?"

They could easily be patient and doctor, sitting in his office. She didn't like feeling that way, but she understood why he was suddenly so different. He was sensing her fear and was scared in turn. She wouldn't torture him any longer with suspense. She blurted out, "I had sex with Edward...after I started seeing you and Jonas...but it was only once...and I am so sorry." Her voice cracked and fresh tears fell. "It will never happen again. Please don't leave us!"

Michael's eyes widened, and then he started laughing. He didn't stop laughing.

"What?" she demanded, suddenly angry that he would laugh at her misery.

"You! You thought that I would leave because you had sex on Edward's desk with him?"

Autumn gasped. "I never said that it was on a desk."

His eyebrow went up. "No, you didn't; Edward did."

"What?" she shrieked.

"Edward came to the house looking for you the day after you quit the firm. You and Jonas had gone to scope out properties to rent. Do you remember?"

"The day?" she asked. "Of course I remember the day." She also remembered having sex in each location they'd viewed, sometimes while the realtor or lessor was in the next room. She blushed, demanding, "Edward came by?"

"Yes. I told you that."

She tried to remember and did, but it was vague, just a small notation of conversation filed away in her brain. She'd asked, "*Did he say what he wanted?*" and Michael had answered, "*You back.*" She had laughed because that wasn't going to happen in a million years.

"You didn't mention that at the time," she accused.

"It wasn't necessary to mention. He could have been telling the truth, or he could have been lying to your new boyfriend in an attempt to run me off; either way it didn't matter."

Because you didn't care. I wasn't important enough. Her face fell under the sad realization.

"I wasn't going anywhere, Autumn. By then I already knew that I wanted to be in your life as long as you wanted me there." He tipped her chin to force their gazes to meet. "I was already falling in love with you. I wasn't going to let your ex run me off."

"Oh." She smiled, feeling silly and very relieved.

"I was hoping that when you fell in love with me, he would be completely forgotten."

She chuckled, blushing as the images of what went on in her mind when Jonas was purging her of him. "He is completely forgotten."

Michael smiled. "Good."

"Hey!" Jonas called from the top of the stairs. "Exhausted. Lonely. Are you two coming to bed or not?"

Michael stood and held out his hand to her. "Coming to bed?"

Autumn put her hand in his, standing. "Definitely."

Michael called to Jonas, "We're coming."

Jonas laughed, shouting down the stairs, "Not yet, but we will be!"

"I thought we were all exhausted?" Autumn said softly as Michael led her toward the stairs. He chuckled. "I don't think any of us are *that* exhausted. Besides, I was supposed to make love to you days ago."

She looked at him sharply, narrowing her eyes. "You are not throwing Jonas out of the bedroom today."

Michael shook his head as they climbed the stairs. "Nope. He's going to help me make love to you."

"Mmm," Autumn said contentedly, looking from the man beside her to the man who waited for her. "Sounds wonderful."

Michael barked with laughter as they joined Jonas at the top of the stairs. "You have met my friend, Jonas, *the sadist?*"

Jonas gave Michael a questioning look, to which Michael responded, "I was just promising that you and I are going to make love to Autumn like she's never been made love to before."

Jonas chuckled and waggled his eyebrows, taking her other hand. "Oh, aye, I think between the two of us, we can do that."

Michael led the way into the bedroom, followed by her, then Jonas. Still holding hands, it seemed like some sort of convoluted dance party. Neither let go of her hands when they reached the middle of the room. Michael wrapped into her front, pulling her close; Jonas matched him stepping into her from behind. Their heads dipped at the same time, kissing her on either side of her neck, but not a soft trail of kisses from either of them. Demanding kisses, each biting, sucking, drawing her flesh into their mouths, both of them directly over her arteries so that a sensation like orgasm arced through her, making her knees weak. She gasped, "Oh God!" but neither stopped, and she knew that her neck would be left marked, bruised.

Jonas released her neck first, and she sagged against him. He released her hand and slid his hands beneath her shirt, teasing the skin over her midriff. They were all nestled so close, she knew that Michael must feel Jonas's hands and wondered what he was thinking; then Jonas unbuttoned and unzipped her shorts, and she stopped thinking about everything except sensation as Jonas pulled the fabric down her legs. He steadied her while she stepped out of the leg openings. He pulled her flip-flops off as he tugged the fabric away. Then his hands were caressing her feet, his fingers magic as they massaged higher, his fingers pushing into her calves and then her thighs.

Michael's mouth in the meantime had slid lower.

She wasn't sure when he had lifted her top or the edge of her bra, but both were pushed up over her breasts, the tautness of the bra making them bulge out. Michael was drawing her nipples, both of them at the same time, into his mouth. Sucking hard, harder, then biting, nipping, stretching the flesh out as he held tight with his teeth and pulled. "Ohhhh!"

Jonas slid his fingers higher, kneading into the sensitive juncture of her thighs and making her hips thrust even though she didn't mean for it to happen. "Oh, please!" she begged.

"Please?" Jonas asked coyly. "Please what?"

"I want...I want—oh my God."

He'd slid his fingers between her slick folds and was holding her open, exposing her clit by pulling back the hood. Michael had dropped to his knees in front of her and sucked the sensitive bud into his mouth, Jonas's fingers still there, his body a firm wall behind her. A good thing as her knees started to shake.

Michael licked and sucked her clit.

Jonas had returned to sucking her neck. She screamed as her orgasm lifted her, arching her back, buckling her knees, but her men supported her weight, and neither stopped sucking.

She wasn't sure which of them lifted her and carried her to the bed, only that she was lifted and her body was still convulsing. Someone still had his hand on her pussy, a finger inserted, maybe two, definitely sliding in and out. As soon as her weight was solid on the mattress, both men were there.

She opened her eyes.

Jonas was pulling his shirt over his head. Michael had his fingers inside her, pumping her, making her squirm. His mouth lowered to her clit, and she screamed as the sensation overwhelmed her. Jonas's mouth was there to cover hers, catching the scream. She gasped, "Too much, too much," but neither man listened. Jonas silenced her with his tongue, making her kiss him back while Michael plunged his fingers in and

out and sucked her clit. Her body spasmed in a great wave, another orgasm building, seeming both so close and so far away. She bucked against his hand until the vortex finally lifted her and consumed her need.

She'd closed her eyes again, so tightly she didn't think they would ever open. She didn't think she wanted them to open. Floating in bliss was too nice.

Motion rocked the mattress. She identified the sound of a shirt being pulled off, shorts unzipped, then felt two warm, nude bodies slide in beside her, one on either side of her. She wasn't 100 percent certain who was on her left, who was on her right. Both men were rubbing their hands generously over her body, thigh to breast and back again. Eventually her breathing resumed a normal pace.

A warm hand passed low over her belly, gently caressing before descending lower, teasing the soft juncture of her inner thighs. Someone spread her open and pushed her thighs apart. She lifted her lids enough to register that it was Michael, his erection straining hard and ready, already encased in a condom. She let her eyes fall closed again as he entered her, pushing in slowly, teasingly slow. She lifted her hips to speed the filling, but Jonas whispered close to her face, "Don't move."

She stilled, feeling his warm breath on her face. He was so close to her, watching her every expression. There hadn't been a single *click* or *whir* from a camera, and she realized this was the first time he hadn't used the camera when the three of them were together.

Michael continued to tease her entrance, soft, easy pushes, filling her so slowly, her hips begged to move. A muscle spasmed in response to the need.

"Stay still," Jonas said, gently but firmly.

She rolled her head toward him and opened her eyes. He smiled and she saw he held nipple clamps in his hand. He lifted his brow, questioningly, and she knew he was asking her if she wanted the pain to go with the pleasure. She nodded but was still shocked by the swift kick of pain as he attached the first. She only had time to inhale before he attached the second.

It seemed both men were waiting for her to relax into the pain, and the minute she did, Michael thrust hard and deep and fast. He established a demanding rhythm that made her forget about her nipples. Jonas teased her lips with kisses until her body exploded in another orgasm.

She was still kissing Jonas, tongues dancing, when the last wave ebbed.

He pulled the nipple clamps off one at a time, making her scream. She kicked her feet, and every muscle tensed in response to the pain. "Oh. God."

* * * * *

Both men were caught between sleep and wakefulness when she eased from the bed. Michael reached his hand toward her, and she briefly touched his fingertips, saying, "Gotta pee."

As she went through the bedroom door, she asked, "I'm going to get a drink while I'm up, do either of you want anything? Water? Juice?"

Negative responses from both men were more moan than syllable, which made her smile.

She stopped at a window at the top of the stair landing, which overlooked the wildness between the house and beach. From here she could see the sun setting over the ocean, the sky a palette of mauves and corals and golds. *How beautiful.*

She heard the back screen door and thought, Birdie, then blushed, glad that their bedroom escapades had ended before she arrived to make the evening meal. She hurried to use the bathroom, jumped into the shower, and dried before going back into the bedroom for clothing. She dressed quickly, frowning at the two dark bruises on either side of her neck. She grabbed a patterned scarf and looped it around her neck to hide the damage, then added hoop earrings and an ancient, faded jean jacket to the ensemble, hoping to look trendy, not like she was hiding something. If Birdie was anything like her mother, she'd see clear through the disguise, but at least she'd tried to save them both some embarrassment.

She kissed each of the men on the forehead. "Birdie's here. I'm going to go down and spend some time with her in the kitchen."

Nodded half syllables were mumbled.

"Make sure you're awake for dinner," she told them, and then she left them alone.

She didn't hear Birdie's usual humming and started to worry that perhaps Birdie had heard her screaming; yes, it had been screaming in a good way not a bad way but still...how embarrassing. She almost decided to not go into the kitchen, but that would just be cowardly. She bustled herself quickly into the kitchen, full of false cheer, and stopped dead in her tracks when she found herself facing Isaiah Johnson. He was leaned against the countertop like he belonged there; a steaming-hot cup of coffee was in his hand. He calmly set it down on the counter and looked back at her.

Her heart stopped beating for a second from the sheer fright, then panic kicked in and she fled, but he grabbed her by the upper arm and hit her in the jaw so hard she saw stars. She dropped to her knees and tried to scream, but no sound came out. Isaiah had wrapped his hand into her hair and held her face up to him so that he could hit her again.

* * * * *

When her vision cleared and her thoughts again made sense, she realized two things very quickly, and neither was good news: she was tied to a beam in one of the dilapidated shanties, the rope so tight her hands were already numb, and it was fully dark outside. There was no roof over her head, so she could see both the full moon and the stars blanketing the sky.

She struggled against the ropes, regardless of how useless it seemed. The only good note was that she was still clothed.

Isaiah stepped into her field of vision. "'Bout time."

What was she supposed to say to that? *Sorry I was unconscious too long for your liking after you knocked me out?* She stayed silent, wondering why she wasn't dead yet.

She was thankful she wasn't dead, but was really curious about what had stopped him. His other victims never saw what was coming.

She also wondered where Jonas and Michael were and hoped to God they hadn't fallen asleep. By the time they woke up, it might be too late for her, but she didn't want to think about that.

Isaiah stroked her cheek. It was the side he'd hit...twice. She sucked in her breath from the pain of his soft touch. He asked, "So, why aren't you dead yet?"

She decided by the tone of his voice that she really didn't want to know.

"You know I watched you playing with your friend the other night."

The silhouette by the tree hadn't been her imagination.

"So, is he like a freak, or what?" He pinched her cheek hard, making her gasp. "Or is it you who are the freak? Maybe you get off on the pain."

She really hoped he wasn't planning on trying to find out and decided she'd be really relieved to hear Jonas and Michael calling her name in search.

She feared why they weren't; all manner of horrible images zipped through her head.

He snickered. "You know this couldn't have been more perfect. You, here, with not one man but two, you're obviously whoring for both of them, and from what I saw last night mixing pleasure with pain is not a problem for you. So when your body is discovered, it's just a matter of the police blaming one or the other."

"The police know about your phone calls to me. They'll come looking for you."

"No," he said assuredly, "they won't."

The conviction in his voice increased the doubts already there. She was covered with bruises and a few welts. Jonas was... He had a dark past already. *God, don't let them try to blame this on Jonas.* "Why are you doing this?"

"Isn't it obvious? You ruined my life. When you won that joke of a civil trial, I lost my endorsements. Do you know how much money I make from sponsors?"

Actually, she didn't have a clue and didn't give a damn. She didn't want to die right that second, though, so she answered, "No."

He drew back his fist and punched her in the ribs; sight-stealing pain tore through her. She thought she heard a breaking sound, hoped it wasn't a rib, and tried to breathe.

"Count!" he demanded. "That was one. For the first million dollars in endorsements you cost me." Spit flew over her face when he screamed, "Say it! Say 'one'!"

She wheezed. "One."

He hit her again. Same spot. No crunching sound. Pain like she'd never felt in her life ripped through her middle. He screamed at her. "Count, damn it! Are you so stupid you can't count?"

She heard a growl of rage and squinted her eyes closed, knowing that if he hit her again, the rib he'd broken on the first punch could very easily tear into her lung. She could die.

He didn't hit her.

She heard a loud "ummph!" and then a solid impact of something heavy hitting the ground. She opened her eyes to find Jonas on top of Isaiah, Michael holding the gun on the pair of them. Michael didn't seem in a hurry to pull Jonas off Isaiah, who looked like he intended to leave Isaiah ten times more black-and-blue than she was going to be. She didn't say anything to interfere. She thought she should have but just couldn't bring herself to vocalize the words.

Once Michael was certain Isaiah wasn't going to be standing on his own anytime soon, he lowered his gun and crossed the room to release the ropes from Autumn's wrists. He said to Jonas, "Enough," and she was surprised when Jonas stopped hitting Isaiah; she wasn't sure she would have.

Jonas came over to them and helped Michael ease her to the ground and continued holding her while Michael dialed 919, the Royal Bahamas Police emergency line.

* * * * *

It was late afternoon by the time all the police's questions were answered, Isaiah was taken away in handcuffs, and Autumn had been seen by a doctor who, after X-rays, said she was lucky her ribs hadn't broken. They were, however, severely bruised, which would make breathing difficult and activities would have to be limited for several weeks.

Both men assured him that she would be taking some time off from work and that she wouldn't be lifting a finger around the house. Returning to the plantation, Autumn sagged between them. "Can we go back to our nice, uneventful lives now?"

"Maybe," Michael answered. "If that is what you really want. But I was thinking you might want to take a small side trip to the UK to spend some time with your dad. Get to know him again...before...as long as you are taking some time off work anyway."

"He doesn't want that."

"I don't believe that...and neither do you."

She let out a shaky sigh. "I don't know. I'll have to think about it. For now, I just want to get on a flight for Atlanta, soak in a bubble bath, and maybe let the two of you make love to me again...very gently."

"Maybe?" Jonas teased. "You're not sure about the last part?"

"That does require willingness on your and Michael's part."

"I'm in!" both men said simultaneously.

Autumn smiled at them both. "Well, I'm definitely in. Let's go home."

THE END

Roxy Harte

Roxy recently moved to an even smaller town in Southwestern Ohio with her husband and sixteen year old daughter, a very loud, boisterous dog, and two independent cats, where they are serenaded at night by coyotes and wakened each morning by geese flying over.

"Life is good. Sometimes I worry that it is too good, that writers need angst and personal drama to draw from. When I first started writing, a decade ago, it was a respite from caring for my invalid parents. After tucking them in, I would write the day's stress away until the wee hours of the morning, sometimes until it was time to start my day over again. Now, I write for myself, for my joy...and to hopefully bring a moment's escape to my dear reader's when they are in need of respite themselves."

I am often asked, "So, what do you write?"

And the answer, Contemporary Erotic Romance just doesn't answer the question justly. Yes, it's contemporary romance. Yes, it's erotica.

But first and foremost, it is fiction which serves the purpose it was originally intended to and that is to encourage my readers think, to push their boundaries, and to give my readers emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually complex characters to fall in love with.

Keep up on the release dates of all of Roxy Harte's erotica at www.roxyharte.com