

# Casual Fridays

Bridget Midway

Loose Id

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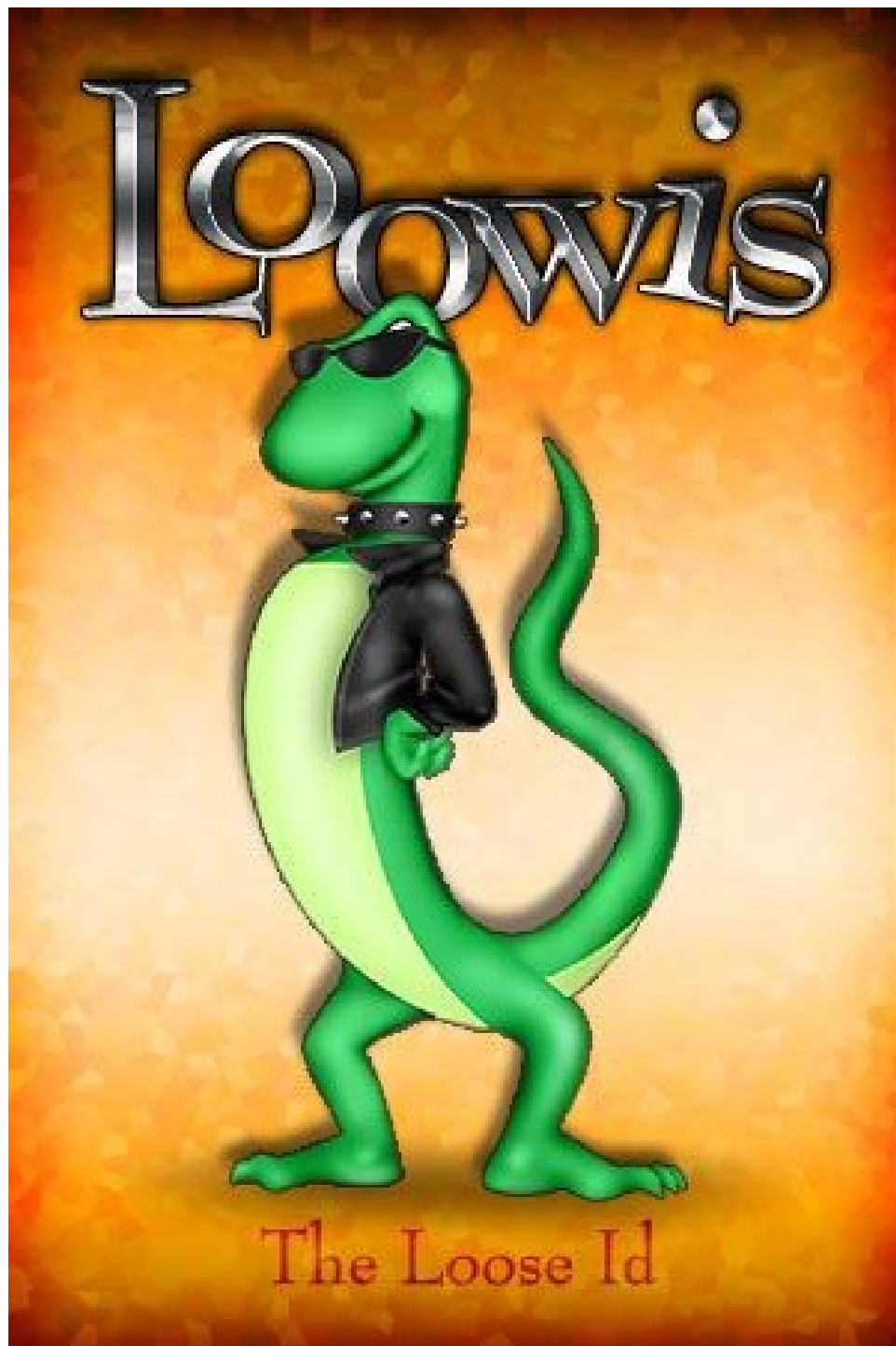
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## Chapter One

“Fuck, I love Fridays!”

Cherish Burke glared at her friend and colleague, Vonda, sitting across from her. As executives at Stratum Corporation, especially as African American executives, Cherish had to wince at Vonda's use of vulgar language. Luckily for her, no one sat around them in the company's cafeteria.

“Easy, V.” Cherish cut her salad into smaller bite-size pieces.

“What?” Vonda swept her fingers over her bangs that hung down to her eyes.

Cherish scanned the area around them before speaking. “As members of upper management, we need to act with decorum and tact.”

Her friend cocked her head in a way that signaled a profanity-laced tirade. Instead she took a deep breath. “Don't think I don't get the fact that they're watching us like hawks around here.” Vonda picked up her bottle of water. “We crashed through the glass ceiling, and they're still picking shards out of their eyes.” She shook her head and took a swig of her water.

After eating a bit of her salad, Cherish wiped her mouth before speaking. “I do love my job, even with the scrutiny.”

Vonda snickered. “I knew you would. You love organizing and keeping things straight. But at the end of the day, don't lose yourself in all of the drama around here.” She cut her gaze to the side, and a sly smile slithered across her face. “Speaking of straight, here comes your boy.”

Cherish turned to see her executive assistant, Perry Stone, strolling toward her with papers in his hands and a stoic expression on his face. Seeing him sent a ripple through her belly. And she smiled to herself with the notion that Perry could

be “her boy” as Vonda had so named him. Considering she never had a man love her enough to offer her a ring in a promise of marriage, she couldn't claim dominion over any man.

Cherish brushed her fingertips over the string of pearls around her neck. Just because she didn't have power in her romantic life didn't mean she couldn't rule with an iron stiletto at the office.

Nothing about Perry personified authority, which made it easy to rule over him. He styled his mousy brown hair in the standard corporate manner, parted to the side. Although he never slouched or looked down when he walked, his slender frame fed the idea that he had to be some sort of pushover.

With her previous assistant—a quiet yet efficient, mature woman who wore glasses with a chain connected to them—Cherish couldn't care less what the woman did for fun, or even if she was married or had children.

Perry. He proved to be an enigma, one who snagged her interest and kept her aching to unravel the silent mystery surrounding him.

Perhaps the fact that she hadn't really dated in over four years had something to do with her obsession with him. That and other activities, secret ones.

Obsession. That accurately described how she regarded her employee. Cherish had checked his personnel file when he became her assistant. She wondered if he knew that she was two years younger than him. If he did know, did it bother him?

His personnel file didn't reveal whether his towering height came from his mother's side of the family or his father's. Did he get that lean physique from swimming or did he work out? Or how many women and girls throughout his life crumbled when he stared at them with those sky blue eyes? And how did this straitlaced, clean-cut corporate rat-race runner develop calluses on the palms of his hands?

Cherish set her knife and fork onto her plate and placed her hands in her lap. With each step he took toward her, her heart pounded harder and faster, matching

rhythm with his footfalls. The thumping sounded in her ears, drowning out the idle chatter in the sun-drenched room.

“As fine as he is, rumor has it that he's playing for the other team,” Vonda said in a whisper as she leaned toward Cherish.

The statement forced Cherish to whip her head around. “What?”

“Folks around here say he's gay. Someone said that she spotted him going to that big warehouse bookstore downtown on a Friday night one time and—”

Cherish snapped her attention to Vonda. “Who saw him? Did she say when? Did she see him with anyone?”

Vonda shrugged her shoulders. “Didn't say. Man, if I didn't know any better, I would say that you were interested in him.”

At that statement, Cherish snorted out a chuckle. “Don't be ridiculous. If someone is going to make a claim like that, they had better come up with some great supporting evidence to prove it.” She kept her voice strong to show conviction in her words. After speaking, she chewed the inside of her cheek.

“Gay or straight. Doesn't bother me one bit. Hell, I have a few uncles and cousins who came screaming out of the closet.” Vonda stared at Cherish's assistant and sighed. “Just seems like a waste. You could have had him chasing you around your desk or more if you wanted. What is it that you do want, Cherish?”

Cherish rubbed the back of her neck with her hand. The mere thought of doing something so inappropriate at work inflamed her face. After her fingers brushed the clasp on her pearl necklace, she dropped her hand back down to her lap.

“For one thing, I don't want to know anything about his personal life.” Thank goodness Vonda didn't know about Cherish scouring his personnel file. “Point two, if he is gay, which I don't think he is, that's his business. And the final point”—and she had to make this quick before he reached their table—“I would never do anything improper with an employee at work.”

She cut her gaze away from Vonda. Her stomach wrenched at the tale she'd just told. Her statement couldn't be classified as a lie. She had concluded it by including the phrase "at work."

"Your loss." Vonda managed to get in the last words just as Perry stood by their table.

"Sorry to disturb you at lunch, Ms. Burke." His deep voice rolled over Cherish.

Cherish took a deep breath and held it until he spoke again.

"I have those papers you requested. You said you wanted them as soon as possible." He held them up as though he had to prove to her that he had them.

Cherish exhaled, relieving the burning in her lungs. "Please set them on my desk. With everything that I have going on right now, the last thing I need is to have my work scattered around. What about sending out the invites for my meeting in two weeks?"

"Sent this afternoon. You should have a copy in your e-mail in-box. I also took the liberty of setting up your cabin reservations for the company executive retreat."

"You're taking part in Mr. Utterman's weekend excursion?" Vonda crossed her arms over her chest as she stared at Cherish with her mouth agape.

Cherish couldn't believe how easily Vonda managed to switch between her real persona and her business one. Just minutes earlier, her friend cursed like a Tourette's sufferer.

"Something wrong with that if I do?"

Vonda cleared her throat before speaking. "I would prefer my stellar performance, the accounts I secure for this company, and the money I make for Stratum to gain me notice as opposed to a business bonding session."

Bonding session. If her best friend only knew.

Perry faced Vonda. "If I may, ma'am, participating in activities like these set up by our CEO could only further her career." Perry glanced down at Cherish for a moment before returning his gaze to Vonda.



“You might be right. I just can't imagine kayaking, hiking, and building fires as a way to get closer to the boss.” Vonda spun her now empty water bottle between her hands.

The crackling sounds from the plastic bottle sounded like what Cherish had imagined the campfire would sound with its popping and clicking. She hadn't thought about the trip at all until Perry took it upon himself to make her reservations. Could she actually spend time in the woods away from her normal routine?

She stared at her friend's hands until Vonda's voice broke her out of her daydream.

“You are way too soft and tender to do something as rough as this.”

At the mention of the word “rough,” Cherish swallowed hard and kept her gaze away from Perry, feeling like he could read her thoughts and knew the intimate fantasy filling her mind.

“If you change your mind about the excursion, I can speak with your assistant to match accommodations with Ms. Burke's.”

Vonda chuckled. “That's awfully nice of you, but my assistant is very competent. Whatever I decide to do, she'll be able to handle it.”

Perry responded with a slight nod.

“I don't know if I'm going.” Cherish lowered her gaze. She gnawed on her lower lip before raising her head to connect her stare with Perry's.

Perry's glare melted her bones into butter.

Cherish had to regain her composure, a semblance of her control. “I haven't decided yet.” She cleared her throat. “I have lots of work. Lots of projects that need my attention. Taking a weekend off seems a bit frivolous.”

“But, ma'am—”

Cherish interrupted his response. “End of discussion. My colleague is right to a certain extent. My performance should speak for itself. I shouldn't have to frolic in

the woods to prove anything. And I don't appreciate you taking it upon yourself to decide what's best for me and my career. You're my assistant, not my boss or—" She hesitated, nearly blurting the one title that would crumble her, make her burst into flames, excite her.

Perry raised his left eyebrow and released a long breath through his nostrils.

Cherish sat up straighter once she realized how much her shoulders had slumped. She pointed to the bundle in his hands. "Leave them on my desk next to the presentation folders that should have come in today." She stared at Perry, who, although he continued staring back at her, wore a forlorn expression. "The folders did arrive today, right?"

"I'll check on the order again, ma'am."

Cherish released a very unprofessional growl that characterized her irritation. "You told me that yesterday. And you assured me that the folders would be here today."

"Yes, ma'am. I apologize. I was preparing other items for your Diamond Unique project and this one aspect slipped my mind."

"It's one missed thing that could make me come off as unprepared." She shook her head. "Am I giving you too much work? Is multitasking not your thing?"

"Again, I apologize. I thought I knew what you would want."

"I just need you to do what I ask. That's it. Is that clear?"

He nodded and remained quiet.

His silence forced Cherish to wring her hands, stretching the skin until they burned. "I should be finished here shortly. Please have an answer on those supplies by the time I return to my office."

He offered a smile. "If you need me, Miss Burke, I'll be at my desk."

Just as he turned to leave, Cherish blurted, "Have you eaten your lunch yet? I mean, I hope you didn't wait for me to—"

"I'm fine, ma'am." He smiled, and all the pictures on the walls, the tables around them, and the chairs melted.

Or maybe Cherish had finally lost her mind. She blinked a couple of times before she refocused.

"Thank you for thinking of me." He turned and hurried out of the break room.

Her gaze automatically dropped down to his ass. God, what an ass.

As though picking up on Cherish's lecherous thoughts, Vonda said, "Sucks that he's gay."

"He's not gay." Cherish crossed her legs. "That I know for sure," she mumbled.

"What?"

Cherish shook her head. "Nothing."

"You were really hard on him. I guess the little nickname your former assistants gave you was right on the money."

Cherish picked up her utensils again, but her appetite had vanished. Being hard on Perry had nothing to do with perpetrating a myth. She had a standard to maintain. She couldn't be known as a pushover, not at work.

"Look at that. Your assistant comes up, and you get all straight and rigid." Vonda nudged Cherish's arm. "I mean, look at you. It's Friday and you're still in a suit with your pearls on and your hair in a bun. You can relax. It is casual Friday." To punctuate that fact, Vonda leaned back to show off her very laid-back black denim jeans and her fitted top that showed more cleavage than someone in her position should expose.

Cherish smoothed her hand over her skirt that hid her thick thighs. "I like my outfit. I want to be respected. People expect me to dress like this."

"What people?"

Cherish remained mum. She stared at the remaining salad left on her plate as she pondered over her words.

“You need to loosen up, sistafriend. There's a whole world out there. The job is great and all. But woman cannot exist on work alone. You have to let loose and have some fun, right?” Vonda nudged her friend with her elbow and winked.

“I have more than just work.”

“What? I never see you do anything.”

Cherish pushed back from the table and lifted her tray. “I don't have to do every social event with you. And I certainly don't have to tell you everything about my life.”

“No, you don't. But as your friend, I want to know that you're happy. Hey, why don't you come on out with me tonight? I'm going to be hitting this hot new club down at the oceanfront. Supposed to be the spot.”

“Hmm, braving the nightlife in Virginia Beach during the summer. I'll pass.”

Vonda opened her mouth to protest, but Cherish cut her off. “But you have fun. If I don't see you before the end of the day, have a great weekend.”

At approximately 5:01 tonight, Cherish would live the life that Vonda didn't know about, couldn't know about, ever. Every week, Cherish looked forward to Friday. That was when she truly thrived.

\* \* \*

Perry walked into the firestorm that was Cherish's office. As usual, she had someone on speakerphone, a Bluetooth connection in her ear, and was texting on a device in her hands. Machines probably envied her method to perform several tasks at one time.

Although anxious to start his weekend, as instructed, he reported to his boss's office and waited for her to acknowledge him.

The waiting. One thing he could pride himself on had to be his incredible patience. If not for that, he would have left this boardroom diva after the first day. Well, more like the first hour.

He couldn't leave, wouldn't leave. His body wouldn't allow it. Her strength drew him and kept him captive. Each day he watched her, Perry picked up little clues about this voluptuous tyrant. When she glanced his way, he licked his lips.

Cherish turned her back on him to look out her office window. No doubt in Perry's mind—she saw his gesture.

"I don't care what it takes. Get me the numbers. Get me the deal. Get the hell off my phone." She pressed a button on the side of the device in her ear, then pulled it out and tossed it on her desk. She then directed her attention to the phone on her desk. "Did you catch that, Don?"

"I need more time," a hesitant male voice replied after a beat.

"Then you need another company." She slammed her finger on the phone, more than likely to disconnect the call.

Her thumbs furiously punched keys to text a message, probably just as harsh, to the lucky one that wouldn't be subjected to a verbal spanking.

While keeping her gaze on her handheld device, Cherish said, "Folders."

Perry blinked as though a storm he'd been watching had finally passed. "Coming tomorrow morning. I verified."

She glared at him for a moment. The connection in that split second sent a ripple over his flesh. He'd never felt such a strong attraction to a woman like this. Her race had nothing to do with it. Perry liked the fact that she knew what she wanted.

"So, Saturday. Will you be here to get them?" Cherish set the electronic gadget on her desk and put a fist on her ample hip.

"Interns are working over the weekend to straighten out our files. I've designated one to keep an eye out for them and leave them on my desk."

"Have you been here long enough to tell other people what to do?"

“It doesn't matter how long I've been here. If something needs to get done, I make sure it happens.” He cleared his throat. “Besides, I have the countenance to lead.”

She tucked a stray hair behind her ear. “I need you—”

“Yes?” He stepped forward.

She cleared her throat. “I need you to do some research.”

Perry nodded.

He hoped she would utter some other statement, make some sort of acknowledgement on how she really felt about him. He had to keep his head in business.

“Dig up whatever you can on Diamond Unique. I want to see it all. Sales numbers, advertisements, board members, everything.”

“Anything I should be looking for in this sweep?” He cocked his head.

“Just what I said. They're my client. I need to know all about them. I need to see how the consumers view them.”

“Because to you it matters what others think, right?”

Her silence consumed the room.

Perry broke the tension and said, “I'll have whatever you need. Would you like for me to work on this over the weekend?”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Work on it Monday.”

“Thank you for allowing me my weekend.” He nodded. “It's almost five o'clock, ma'am.”

Cherish placed both hands on top of her mile-long glass-top desk and sank into her chair. The air in the room stilled as though every molecule waited for Perry's next words.

Before speaking again, he clasped his hands behind his back, which pushed out his chest. The motion of Cherish's gaze dropping to his chest for a brief moment didn't escape his notice.

He gripped his hands tighter behind his back to keep from smiling. “If you don't need anything else from me, well, here—”

Cherish swallowed hard. She parted her lips slightly. If Perry wasn't mistaken, it sounded like her breathing had increased. Knowing that she seemed to be a bit out of sorts calmed him.

“I'd like to leave now. I have something important to attend to this evening, well, this weekend.”

She cleared her throat. “I know we don't have a kind of boss-employee relationship that's—”

“That's what, ma'am?” Perry took a step toward her.

Cherish sat up straighter. “That's open.”

“You don't think so? I've picked up your dry cleaning. I've provided breakfast, lunch and, sometimes dinner for you, so I know what you like to eat. I've even purchased shoes for you. Size eight, right?”

She didn't move.

So he continued. “I think for the office, that makes us close.”

“It doesn't.”

He winced. “Fair enough.”

“However, I'd like to think that you can share a bit of your life with me. What kind of plans do you have?” She clasped her hands together and connected her gaze to his.

He stared at her to gauge her reaction. Although she didn't tuck her bottom lip into her mouth, he saw her jaw flex as though she chewed on the soft, fleshy inside of her cheek as she waited for his answer. She wrung her previously stilled hands. Through the glass top, he watched her knee bouncing up and down.

Before he answered, he took a long, deep breath. A smile hitched up at the side of his mouth. “I wish I could talk about it. But I can't really say.”

At his answer, Cherish released her breath as though she'd been holding it for years. Then she relaxed against her chair. "Fine. Keep it private. It's probably for the best anyway."

"What about you? Any special plans?"

Cherish's bottom lip quivered as though the words she wanted to say stuck in her throat. Just as a noise squeaked through her lips, her phone rang on her desk. She glanced at the display.

Without looking at him, she quickly said, "Be available if I need you this weekend." Then she waved a dismissive hand to him before answering the call.

"Aren't I always?" Perry turned and strolled to the door.

Too bad Cherish couldn't open herself up more. But then again, was he really looking for a relationship?

\* \* \*

Using every bit of concentration contained in her body, Cherish fought the urge to glance down at her wristwatch as she sat in Mr. Utterman's office five minutes before she needed to walk out the door. And to her, leaving work on time on a Friday constituted a need, a desire.

"How is everything going with the Diamond Unique project?" Utterman positioned his hands in a teepee as he sat behind his battleship-sized mahogany desk.

"Very well, sir. I'm prepared for the upcoming meeting." She crossed her legs when her clit throbbed, signaling to her that she needed to leave soon.

"I know you are." He smiled, which deepened the wrinkles around his small mouth and his wide forehead. The light over his desk illuminated his silvery hair that he had combed back and parted to the side. "That's the one thing I admire about you, Cherish. You are a take-charge kind of woman, um, executive."



Good thing Cherish had every muscle in her body trained not to overtly respond to condescending remarks. She didn't even flinch at the "woman" tag Utterman used.

"I'm the kind of team leader you need on your side, sir."

He nodded. "Yes, you are. Very hands-on. You can shape people like I've never seen before. I mean look at your assistant Perry. Sure, he came here with great credentials and he's always been a hard worker, but something about him working with you has changed him. Have you noticed that?"

At the mere thought that she had somehow been an influential force in Perry's demeanor, Cherish put her hand to her stomach to push back the fluttering butterflies. "I don't know about that, Mr. Utterman. I have a standard that I expect to be upheld. With today's job market, I'm sure Mr. Stone is doing what he can to remain employed."

The smile slipped from Utterman's face as though what she said disappointed him. "Don't cut yourself short. I'm giving you a compliment. I'm telling you that you have a gift for being an effective leader. That should mean something to you."

The more she stared at her boss, and former mentor, she caught what he wasn't saying. Utterman must be preparing for his departure and grooming her to take over. As much as she wanted to be excited by the prospect, she didn't want to come off as a vulture picking over a carcass.

"It does, especially coming from you." She took a deep breath before broaching a topic that had been eating away at her for the last few weeks. "Although I have my presentation ready, I'm not fully convinced of our direction."

Utterman furrowed his bushy brows. "Meaning what?"

"We're giving financial advice to a company that, quite frankly, may be involved in child labor and basic slave labor. Plus the fact that they're encouraging people to buy diamonds when the economy is in the toilet."

"I understand your concern; however, we have an obligation to our client to represent their interests, not be a morality monitor. Truthfully, we don't know if

those rumors about their operating practices are true. I would suggest that you don't delve into the matter.”

“I don't know if I can do that. I have to know who I'm working so hard for. If they're involved in something unsavory, that could have an adverse effect on Stratum.” Although she didn't need or even want to debate this idea with Utterman right now, Cherish had let this fear eat at her for weeks.

“That's why we have a coterie of attorneys. You let them worry about protecting our image. You concern yourself about doing the best job for our client.” During this tense exchange, her boss offered her a smile. “Besides, wouldn't you hate to be judged on what people perceive about you rather than getting to know you?”

Her boss's query had more of an underlying meaning than just being about their client. She had no desire to bring up any insecurities about her career or, especially, about her private life. As usual, she would have to come to terms with any issues on her own.

“I guess some things, if they were true, should remain in the dark.” She offered a slight smile to show compliance.

“I'm not asking you to change yourself. Sometimes you have to wear a mask in order to accomplish your goal, satisfy all parties. I know you understand that, right?”

Cherish stood. “As always, I will not let you or Stratum down. I take my position seriously.”

“It's an admirable trait.” Utterman sat back in his chair.

“I hate to run on you, sir, but I have—”

“I hear you're contemplating not going to this year's retreat.”

Perry and his big mouth. So much for an assistant's loyalty. “I'm still thinking about it. Camping is not my thing.”

“Give it some serious thought. It would be a shame not to have you there with the other executives.”

Message received, loud and clear.

“I understand.” She turned to the door.

“By the way, where should Lena and I go to dinner tonight?”

Cherish brought her attention back to Utterman. This was a normal Friday exchange for them. He would ask her for advice on where he and his wife should go to dinner, and sometimes even take suggestions for their weekend plans. She actually found their ritual to be sort of cute and expected after so much time.

“I suggest Terigi's on Center Drive. They have the best pasta dishes.”

“Sounds good.”

Cherish thought about the location of that restaurant and quickly amended her suggestion. “Or better yet, you can go down to the oceanfront and do Swim and Steer. Sounds like a funny name for a restaurant, but they do the best seafood and steak.”

“And your suggestion there?” Utterman's smile widened. He raised his hand and rested his chin on his fist. The position showed off his MedicAlert bracelet.

“For you, a tuna steak. Better for you.” She nodded to his hand to acknowledge that she remembered the man had had four heart attacks in a span of ten years. “For your wife, they have an extensive wine list. The woman can't be sober being married to you all of these years.”

“You're right about that.” Her joke released a long belly laugh from her boss. “Very good. I'll head down there then. Have a great weekend. Don't work too hard.”

At the door, she said her good-bye to her boss. In her mind, it was also a good-bye to the straitlaced, uptight woman who ruled with an iron fist. Now she would be a different person. The thought of Perry betraying her trust had to be pushed out of her mind in order for her to enjoy her weekend.

\* \* \*

In the Westin elevator car, Cherish jammed her thumb on the twenty button. She continued pressing the lit button even though it signaled it registered her destination. It had taken her several tries to coordinate swiping the room-key card she'd picked up at the front desk and getting that damn floor button to light up and stay lit. It didn't help that her hands trembled.

At her floor the elevator dinged and waited a beat before opening its doors. Cherish took a deep breath and managed to slip between the doors before they closed. She glanced at the envelope that held the key card to confirm the room number.

Outside the door, she held up the card over the reader by the knob. She could have opened the door on her own and waltzed inside. But it wouldn't have been right. She knew why she had the card. She had it to get up to the floor. At this moment, once she knocked, her life as she knew it would change as it did every week at about this time.

She raised her fist into the air and knocked on the door. It felt like decades passed before she heard the tumblers in the door handle turning. Cherish raised her gaze to eye level. Once she established eye contact she could go on with the rest of the night and weekend.

The door opened. Standing on the other side stood Perry, shirtless and staring at her. His now slicked-back hair showed off the strong jawline that defined his face. He held on to the doorknob as he stared at her.

Every Friday for months, Perry would give Cherish that look. And every Friday, she felt the same way. The jittery feeling in her belly remained until she did what she knew she had to do to start this weekend right, the proper way. His way.

In one slow, smooth motion, Cherish lowered herself to her knees in the hallway outside the door. She didn't care if there was a hallway full of people or what it looked like to anyone else. Cherish Burke no longer existed.

“Good evening, Sir.” She crawled through the doorway on her hands and knees.

“Hello, Little Lamb.”

## Chapter Two

Perry watched Cherish crawl into his hotel room, and every hair on his body stiffened. Never in his wildest dreams did he think he would be working as an assistant to the woman featured in several local newspaper articles as the most influential businessperson, male or female, in Virginia. Considering they lived in Virginia Beach and the article included executives working in Alexandria, Richmond, and Fairfax, that accomplishment impressed him.

And never did he think when he started training in BDSM over fifteen years ago that the woman he would be dominating would not only be the person slated to one day take over Stratum when Old Man Utterman decided to give up the reins or die, but also the woman who had become his boss.

Perry watched her crawling ever so slowly across the floor. She kept her stare on the maroon-colored carpeted floor. Her hips swayed back and forth, hypnotizing him the longer he watched her. He couldn't believe his luck when he encountered her off the clock.

Nearly four months ago after the end of a workday, he'd decided to hit a local bookstore on his way home to pick up a book, maybe some new tunes and a DVD to occupy his weekend. To his surprise, he'd found his boss perusing the book aisles. He'd thought about pretending like he hadn't seen her, but that wasn't his way. Above all, Perry embodied a true gentleman, and he'd never back down from any challenge.

He'd strolled over to Cherish Burke, not paying attention to where she stood. Knowing her, he had assumed she would be looking for more books on how to

organize or lead people. For all her faults, she had impressed Perry by being the most progressive and innovative thinker he had ever met.

*“Good evening, Ms. Burke.” Perry plastered a smile on his face. Rule number one in business: never let them see you sweat.*

*Apparently, Cherish forgot that rule. As soon as Perry spoke to her, she jumped and clumsily tried to hide the book that had snagged her attention.*

*“Funny seeing you here.” His attempt to start a conversation failed.*

*Cherish remained quiet and dropped her gaze to the floor in shame or maybe embarrassment.*

*“I didn't know you came to this bookstore,” she said finally.*

*“It's close to home. What about you?”*

*Cherish took a breath before speaking. “It has a good selection of books.”*

*At that statement, Perry took that moment to actually glance at the row of books that she had been perusing. To his surprise, she had been looking through what looked to be romance novels. Upon closer inspection, he noticed the books were more than just romance. Titles like Bending to Him, Bound and Gagged, and Slave made him blink.*

*“There's an interesting selection of books right here, I see.” Perry volleyed his attention between the books and her until finally he lifted his hand to her. “May I see the book you're holding?”*

*“I'd rather you didn't.” Cherish shook her head.*

*At that moment, he realized his mistake. Perry had been talking to her like they were still at work. Now that the workday had ended, and especially where they were, he could be himself, especially since Cherish had let a bit of her armor fall and exposed a delicate area.*

*“Give me the book,” he said again, but this time in his normal demeanor as master and not just Perry Stone.*

*Cherish brought her gaze up to him, licked her lips, then handed him the book. It was another copy of Slave. Perry should have figured that since the one copy on the shelf had an empty space next to it.*

*He read the back cover, occasionally reading some passages out loud in front of her, which caused her to scan the area around them to see if anyone else could hear him. He, on the other hand, didn't care.*

*"Explore your true side to submit." He stared at her, a smile curling up on the side of his mouth. "Allow the master or mistress to control your every pleasure and pain." He turned the book over to gaze at the cover. A photo of a nude woman with a collar around her neck and bound spread-eagle over a bed covered the front of the book.*

*"May I have that back, please?" She held up her hands but kept her gaze down.*

*Perry didn't answer her until she looked at him. Cherish huffed and shifted her weight from one foot to the other.*

*He longed to touch her, caress her. At that moment he wanted to watch her squirm.*

*After a prolonged twenty seconds of silence, she finally raised her gaze to meet his.*

*"You were going to buy this book?" He held it up with the cover facing her.*

*She attempted to take it from his hand, but he held it up and away from her. Being a good foot taller than her made it easy to keep it out of her reach.*

*"Just hand it over."*

*It almost looked like she stomped her foot after she made her statement. How cute.*

*"You were going to take this book with this provocative cover to the cashier and buy it with your credit card that has your name on it?" Perry asked in a provoking manner.*



*Cherish gritted her teeth, apparent from the way her jaw flexed; then within a millisecond, she relaxed and stared at him. In that moment, her eyes reminded Perry of those of the lambs on his grandfather's farm that he used to take care of when he was a boy.*

*"Please."*

*That gaze and her whispered plea awakened his need to dominate. At that moment he knew she wanted him to rule her. A second copy of the same book sat on the shelf next to them. She could have easily grabbed it instead and walked away if she truly wanted the book. At one point during the silence that lingered between them, Perry glanced at the other copy. Cherish, on the other hand, kept her stare directly on him.*

*She gave him the power he craved to rule over her in an intimate manner. By waiting for him, waiting for his decision, she exhibited the behavior of a true submissive.*

*The smile that graced his face melted. Perry handed the book back to her. Then he strolled next to her, leaned down to her ear, and whispered, "If this lifestyle is what you want, meet me in twenty minutes at the Westin next door. I'll leave your name at the front desk for the other room key. Be on time or you'll be punished."*

*"Excuse me." She grabbed his arm when he strolled by her. "You have no idea what it is that I want."*

*Perry remembered how he'd leaned in close to her and whispered, "You have no idea what I can do to you."*

*He'd never seen the Queen of Mean quiver the way she had that day. Since then, he'd drawn out a multitude of reactions and sounds from her.*

*Then and now, it still surprised Perry that Cherish had not only showed up on time, but that she showed at all. Who knew that his seemingly uptight boss wanted to be dominated?*

Actually, as a trained Dom, he of all people should have known. Business executives and corporate types longed to have their decisions made for them at the end of the day. Tonight, Perry would grant her desire.

“Get into position.” Perry pointed to the center of the room in front of the bed.

As instructed, Little Lamb stopped crawling to sit back on her haunches and placed her hands demurely on her lap, just like she did when he walked up to her during lunch.

No matter how many times he watched her sit as he had instructed her, his hair on the back of his neck always stood up on end. To watch her do a modified pose during lunch at work concerned him. Overlapping their day and weekend lives never factored into their plans.

After their first encounter, Cherish and Perry both had established some rules. Rule one: neither one talked about their special arrangements outside the hotel room with anyone. So far both had kept up that deal—at least Perry had, although he had gone through days he wanted to scream from rooftops that he was dominating this incredibly sexy woman.

Perry bent over and picked up her purse and car keys. As usual since the first day, he locked the items in the hotel safe in his room. When he told her she was his for the weekend, he meant it.

“Up.”

Little Lamb stood. Watching her at work in the same business suit, Perry felt nothing. Sure, Cherish looked great in everything she wore, but not necessarily sexy. Here in his hotel room, in the same exact outfit, he wanted her.

He dragged the tip of his finger over her pearls, the ones he bought for her right after their first meeting. “*This is your collar from me,*” he'd told her. “*Although I would love for you to wear this every day, you don't have to. You do have to wear this every Friday. Understand me?*”

“Yes, Sir,” she had obediently replied.

*“Every Friday we'll meet here. You'll be my little lamb, and I'll be your master.”*

*“Yes, Sir.”*

And she'd obeyed him ever since. Right after work, she would meet him, eager, ready, and willing. That led to rule number two: no mention of work. No matter what was going on, what problems had occurred that day, whatever issues they had remaining, neither one could mention work.

Staring into her eyes, Perry undid her jacket and slipped it down her arms. He threw the garment on the bed, then worked on her shirt, undoing each button in a slow and methodical manner. With each release of a button, he felt her trembling.

God, if she knew how much it turned him on to see her react. His stomach flipped every time he heard her breath catch.

When he got her blouse undone, he spread it open. Underneath he found her luscious, full breasts encased in a flesh-colored lace bra that allowed her dark areolas to peek through.

“Good girl. You're wearing the bra I bought for you.” And what a fun event that was. The two of them flipping through a Victoria's Secret catalog. Perry pointing out the items he wanted to see her in, and his Little Lamb blushing at each request.

Perry grabbed her skirt and pulled her forward. “You have on the matching thong, right?”

Lamb nodded.

“Excuse me?”

“Yes, Sir. I do.”

“Better.” He turned her around and undid her skirt.

When the item fell to the floor, he asked her to step out of it. He placed it with the jacket on the bed.

True to her word, she had on the matching undergarment. Her rounded ass cheeks begged for him to touch them, so he did.

*Smack!*

He slammed his hand against her firm flesh, making her yelp and jump.

A smile peeked through, but he quickly reined it in. With her back to him, he released her hair from its bun prison, allowing her long black hair to cascade down. He then unfastened her bra and slipped the straps down her arms. He pressed himself against her backside as he pulled her panties down.

Her honey brown skin glowed as though she had microscopic flecks of gold embedded in her pores. And her voluptuous body had him longing to run his hand over her curves, exploring each hill and valley her body offered.

Now that she stood before him completely nude with the exception of her stockings and black pumps, Perry's cock throbbed. No good Dom should react that way to a submissive in training and learning about the Lifestyle.

With each meeting, his feelings for her deepened. How could he not find this attractive woman who was smart, successful, and, more importantly, was into the same kink as him, desirable?

He gave her other ass cheek a smack before giving her a directive. "Hang up your clothes; then come undress me."

"Yes, Sir." As instructed, Lamb hung up each piece, including her lingerie.

"Take off your stockings and shoes." Although he loved seeing her legs in the sheer black hosiery, he needed her ready for playtime.

Cherish returned to Perry and began undressing him. Unlike his hands, hers trembled.

"You're doing great." The words, meant to reassure and calm her, brought out a smile.

Lamb got down on her knees to take off his shoes and socks before removing his pants. When she got to her feet again and reached for his boxers, he stopped her. It was bad enough he was getting hard; she didn't have to see it too.

"Leave them." Perry held on to her wrist as he kept his stare on her.

"Yes, Sir." She bowed her head.

He took her hand and led her to the bathroom. Little Lamb squeezed his hand.

“You enjoy bath time, don't you, Little Lamb?”

“I love when you bathe me, Sir.” She clasped her other hand around his. “I love it when you prepare my body for your pleasure.”

He had to stop her from talking. Every word she uttered pumped more blood into his cock. After helping her into the bathtub already filled with warm water and white, frothy bubbles, Perry ducked into the bedroom to retrieve Little Lamb's red ball gag he had in his bag of tricks.

As soon as she saw him with the toy, a smile spread from one ear to the other. On cue, she turned her back to him. Perry imagined that she already had her mouth open, awaiting her red ball.

He positioned it in her mouth and fastened the straps behind her head. Once he secured the gag in her mouth, he placed his lips on the back of her neck. The connection sparked a moan from her. Little Lamb's body trembled and stiffened. The reaction sent a wave of goose bumps over his body and accelerated his heartbeat.

With all their rules, one rule remained unspoken yet understood: no penetrative sex. Had he gotten Little Lamb to reach an orgasm? Absolutely. Several times over from spankings or breast play or anal play.

Her sensitivity level amazed him. Sometimes just staring at her got her to squirm around. As much as he wanted to sink his cock into her shaved pussy, he couldn't cross that line.

For one, as her Dom, he wouldn't create that level of intimacy with a part-time submissive. Had she been his 24-7 slave, he would have had her in his bed and been making love to her every day and night.

Plus, although he never talked work with her during their weekend sessions, the idea that this woman was his boss never escaped his thoughts. That didn't mean he didn't truly want to fuck his full-figured, sexy, and delectable boss whenever he saw her.

Perry suspected that perhaps she felt the same way, that she wanted to take their arrangement to another level. When she asked him whether he had eaten lunch earlier that day, it cemented the idea in his head that she'd started to care about him.

She'd also started relinquishing her power during the day. Little by little she relied on him more, which troubled him. The thing he liked about her, although it was a trait that had to grow on him, was the fact that she oozed confidence.

Perry kissed her from one shoulder to the other as he stroked his fingertips down her arms. Tonight's play would be rough; he wanted her to experience something tender first. This time had to be about pushing her limits even further.

He brushed his lips over her velvety flesh, occasionally letting his tongue peek through his lips to taste her sweet skin.

In one swift motion, he fisted her hair. He heard Little Lamb's breath catch.

"Don't come until I tell you. Am I understood?" He growled his order into her ear, brushing his lips against the shell.

She gripped the sides of the tub before she nodded her head. She strained to turn her head to stare into his eyes.

Perry loosened his grip to allow her the motion. Her direct stare said more than she could. With her brown eyes wide, she expressed her complete trust. She took a deep breath, then nuzzled her face against his.

God, he could love her. The realization chilled him to his marrow.

Just like relationships, love had eluded him. The notion used to bother him at first. Then once he accepted the fact that he would be a terminal bachelor and a Dom without a full-time submissive, he reconciled himself to the idea that love wouldn't be in his cards...until Cherish.

Their arrangement had been started just for fun and play. Except for the play, it wouldn't be serious. With each weekend, with each meeting, their deal started to change.

Perry didn't like it. He had to get them back to where they were before. Back to normal, their normal, otherwise this would be over.

Before he could fall more into her love spell, Perry released his physical hold on her long enough to reach around her to retrieve the soap from the dish. After commanding her to sit lengthwise in the tub, he lathered his hands with the lavender-scented soap that he brought just for her; then he started with her arms.

In long swipes, he dragged his soapy hands from her long, beautiful neck, then down her arms. As a personal treat to himself, he would save touching her breasts for later. Besides, he enjoyed watching her fidget. Thank goodness he'd put the ball gag into her mouth early. Perry would buckle if he heard her begging to be touched, pleased.

Cupping warm water into his hands, Perry rinsed off her body. He repeated the same process for her succulent legs, from her full thighs down to her cute toes with red-painted nails...just like he liked, just as he had instructed. When his fingers brushed her sole, Little Lamb jerked her foot back.

Damn, Perry had almost forgotten about her being ticklish. He gripped her ankle, which made her widen her eyes. She grabbed the sides of the bathtub as much as she could and shook her head.

Too late. Without mercy, he flicked his fingertips over Little Lamb's sole as she thrashed about, struggling to get out of his hold. Through her gag, she sputtered and released muffled screams, but none of that stopped his assault. When her free foot kicked against his arm, he stopped the tickling torture long enough to secure the flailing leg under his arm.

"Too bad you have the gag in your mouth." He continued tickling her. "You can't call out your safe word, can you?" Watching her trying to get away from him, he had to press his lips together to keep from smiling.

"Gredth!" Little Lamb managed to warble.

"What was that? Was that green, meaning you want more?" He wiggled his fingers faster over her delicate skin.

She shook her head, laughed, coughed, and attempted to scream the incoherent word again. "Reedsthgr!"

"I'm still not understanding you. Do you want me to keep going or stop?"

She shook her head at first, then nodded, then rocked her head back and forth like someone possessed.

That was how Perry wanted Little Lamb. He wanted to possess her, own her, keep her, be everything she needed, wanted. Now he wondered if having her for weekends only sufficed.

As the thoughts entered his mind, he must have slowed down the tickling. He snapped out of his concentration to find Little Lamb resting against the back of the tub and trying to catch her breath.

What the hell was he doing? Perry needed to concentrate on Little Lamb, on her needs. After one last tickle, he set her foot down into the water. He lathered his hands again. Time to push her limits.

Keeping his gaze directly on hers, Perry dipped one hand into the water, seeking the treasure between her thighs. The other hand covered her full breast. Her hard nipple slipped between his digits.

As soon as his hand connected to her skin, Little Lamb's body melted, relaxing to the point where her body slipped down in the white bathtub so that the water came up to her shoulders and her legs parted even more.

With that invitation, Perry smoothed his fingers over her hairless pussy. The touch along with pinching her pert nipple forced Little Lamb to jerk up, splashing the warm bathwater onto Perry and the floor.

Around the red ball gag, she panted. When he slid his fingers over her protruding clit, then dipped his middle finger inside her, he didn't expect her to nearly leap out of the tub. Little Lamb arched her back, pushing her chest out even more.



What a sight. Little Lamb's body, slick with water, soap, and bubbles, looking more like a decadent mound of chocolate ice cream with drops of whipped cream dotting various delectable parts, swayed in the water. Perry's heart pounded faster, which prompted him to squeeze her nipple harder. Her slick vaginal walls constricted around his finger.

He couldn't tell if the steam from the bath elicited the beads of sweat that ran down the sides of his face, or if this sexy woman prompted them. Either way, he wanted to sweat even more and make this woman scream his name.

To both tease and torture her, Perry eased his finger back and forth inside her while he went to her unattended tit with his other hand to roll her nipple around his fingers. The pressure had Little Lamb growling. And the faster he went, the more she grunted.

"Don't come." Perry squeezed her dark-chocolate nipple, enjoying feeling the thickness and the soft flesh. "Nod to let me know you understand."

After a deep inhalation through her nose, she nodded. She answered pretty easily. Good girl. Time to ratchet up the play.

Perry pressed his thumb against her hard clit, then slipped a second finger inside her hot pussy. At this point his cock brushed against the side of the tub. When his breathing increased to a rapid pant, he realized just how much he wanted her, not just for playing.

Little Lamb's legs trembled. She balled her hands into fists and pounded them on the sides of the tub.

He'd been with her and played with her long enough to know her orgasm wouldn't be far off. But he also knew that she would rather claw off her own skin than disappoint him.

In the time they had been playing together, she had become fiercely obedient, a trait that surprised and scared him. What did she want from him? What did he want from her?

With all her writhing, he needed to hear her. It tortured him to prevent her from speaking. After one hard thrust of his fingers inside her, Perry eased them out and rinsed them in the water.

As he reached behind her head, he said, "I'm going to remove your gag." He undid the clasp and pulled it from her full mouth.

Little Lamb's tiny pink tongue slid over her lips. Perry couldn't wait to have that mouth, that tongue, sweeping over his cock, his balls, his body.

"The only thing I want to hear you say is—"

"Fuck me!" As though she had released a deadly virus in the air, Lamb covered her mouth with both hands and shrank back.

Damn. Who was torturing whom here?

## Chapter Three

*Fuck me.* Sure, Cherish had thought about having Perry's long, hard cock inside her, pounding away, bringing her to a sweet orgasm time and time again. But to say her request out loud probably shocked her more than it jarred Perry.

How could she have done that? What was she thinking? They had never had or discussed sex for good reason. Although intimacy rooted their after-work relationship, oddly enough, sex couldn't dominate it. Sex ruined relationships.

With Perry, Cherish finally felt like her real and true self. So what if they didn't have sex? She'd had terrible relationships that had been filled with sex and left her feeling unsatisfied. Perry had given her so much more.

"I'm so sorry, Sir." She shook her head. "I shouldn't have said that. Please forgive me."

Perry remained quiet, which unnerved her. A reaction of some sort would at least permit her to respond. To say nothing just allowed her to come up with scenarios in her head. Was he seriously contemplating her request? Was he repulsed by it? Was he mad that he hadn't thought of it first? Did he want to stop this arrangement right here, right now? God, she hoped not.

Ever since that day he had demanded to see the book that interested her, she'd wanted him, ached for him to control every aspect of her pleasure...and pain. Until he stopped fingering her and pinching her nipples tonight, Perry had been doing a great job of giving her both.

Relinquishing control, not just to Perry, but in general, relieved Cherish. The weight of the world crushed her as soon as she stepped through the doors at Stratum. Without her job, she wouldn't be able to afford keeping her grandmother

in that high-end assisted-living facility. Without the money Cherish earned, she wouldn't be able to bail out her wild-child sister, who was hell-bent on getting in trouble or getting her name in the tabloids...or both. And a small part of her wondered if her wealth, not her kink, ultimately attracted Perry to her.

Whatever the reasons, she craved weekends, looked forward to the peace they offered her. Strange to think a strictly BDSM relationship could be called peaceful. For someone like herself who controlled everything, every decision executed in her department, every step each member of her team made, she couldn't wait to give that power to someone else for a change.

Her hardest decision on their weekends together involved when to use her safe word. Other than that, she bowed to him, catered to him, bathed him, licked him, stroked him, masturbated for him...and did it all happily.

Her color, her age, her education level—none of that mattered when they were together. All that concerned her was that he was her master and she was his little lamb. And it had all made sense to them.

Even though not having intercourse had always been an unspoken rule, Cherish wanted to change the rules. But would Perry want to go to that level in their relationship?

Perry stood next to the tub. Cherish's gaze traveled up his body. She wasn't sure why he insisted on keeping his boxers on. Through the thin fabric, his erection couldn't be hidden. From where she sat in the tub, it would have been so easy to capture his cock in her mouth and taste his succulent juices.

He pulled a towel from a shelf. "Up."

Damn. He hadn't answered her request or even acknowledged her apology. He really must be pissed.

Cherish rose to her feet, her gaze down to the floor.

"Out of the tub."

With Perry holding her hand to assist her, she took a careful step onto the white rug in front of the tub.

“Look at me,” he demanded.

As he commanded, she brought her gaze up to meet his. The knotting in her stomach from her impending orgasm didn't go away.

While he patted her dry, he said, “You think you should be punished for breaking the scene?”

The seriousness of his tone forced her to nibble on her bottom lip for comfort. Cherish shook her head, then thought better of the way she would answer. “No, Sir.” She shifted in her spot.

When he finished drying her, he whispered into her ear, “Don't worry. I won't leave you hanging.” With that statement, he gave her a hard pop on her ass.

“Oh, God!” Cherish buckled, which triggered Perry to scoop her into his arms. The warmth of his body inflamed her, eliminating the slight chill she experienced once she got out of the balmy bath. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her forehead against his chin.

The intimate connection didn't last long.

Perry sat her on the bed. “Good news and bad news.” He turned and dug through the infamous red gym bag that always accompanied him during their special weekends. “Which do you want first?”

“Bad, Sir.” Cherish assumed her position on the bed, sitting back on her haunches with her hands on her lap.

“The hotel is booked solid because of a convention.” Perry pulled out a tightly bound bundle of white nylon rope. “So no spanking sessions or even hard flogging. Last time we tried that in here, hotel security came up to check on us.” He knocked his knuckle against the wall. “Thin walls, and you, my dear, are a bit of a screamer.”

At the sight of the rope, she licked her lips. Through her panting breath, she managed to squeak out, "And the good news?"

"I have some new toys for you. And I still expect to hear you when you come; well, that's if I let you come." He stared at her as he unraveled the rope.

Familiar with what would happen next, Cherish positioned herself on her back, her arms and legs spread apart with her feet pointing to the corners of the mattress.

"Looks like I'm being predictable." Perry shook his head. "Turn over onto your stomach."

Cherish blinked at the request. Did he want to do anal play tonight? Not that she didn't like it. He did it so infrequently that she had assumed anal play wasn't his big thing.

At her hesitation to perform the task, he stopped moving and stared at her.

"Do I need to repeat myself?"

"No, no, Sir." She flipped onto her stomach, turned her head, and allowed it to sink into the sea of fluffy pillows. It was then she noticed the delicate aroma of vanilla, something she knew the hotel didn't add.

Perry kept his eye on every detail, at work and when they were together, except for today. Cherish hadn't wanted to scold him during lunch. He had no right to make decisions for her...at work. Besides, didn't he know she couldn't spend a weekend without him?

In a swift motion, he grabbed her arm and started the slow process of tying her. "Have I told you what beautiful skin you have, Little Lamb?"

"Not today, Sir." Cherish smiled.

"Good. I don't want you getting used to too many compliments."

At his comical response, she flipped her head over to look at him.

“Just relax. Trust me. You'll be working soon enough.” Perry bound each wrist to each ankle, then spread her legs apart. “I'm going to be pushing your limits tonight, Lamb. Are you ready?”

As she nodded, Cherish replied, “Yes, Sir.”

“Good. Face forward.”

Cherish brought her gaze back to the headboard. The tight bindings securing her caressed her wrists and ankles. When she pulled her arm forward, her leg came up. How Perry tied her up so quickly, Cherish would never know. She knew they didn't teach this type of rope tying in the Boy Scouts. Or did they?

Within a minute, she heard a click, then smelled a slight burning odor. Her stomach tightened.

His fingers dragged over her pussy lips. She arched her back and sucked air through her clenched teeth.

“I see someone's already wet.” He continued rubbing her smooth nether lips, making her moan.

Cherish took in a deep breath, capturing the implanted scent from the pillows and the waxy smell from the burning candle. Before she had time to absorb the erotic scene, she felt a slow, blunt pinch on one of her pussy lips.

Again, she held her breath and raised her hips into the air.

“I know how much you love the clothespins on your sweet cunt. Right, Little Lamb?” Perry patted her backside.

“Yes, Sir.”

In between the pinched area, her flesh throbbed, pulsating to try and get acclimated to the pain.

Cherish kept her breathing steady, wanting to pant but knowing that her out-of-control breathing would only hurt her, put her in panic mode. Right now, a calm feeling swept over her.

The fact that he wanted to continue playing after her outburst and subsequent apology relieved her.

“When you're all nice and smooth like this, it makes it easier for me to attach more. You know that, right?” With his statement, he clipped on another clothespin to her other nether lip.

Cherish arched her back even more. Sweet torture. “Yes, Sir. It's one of the reasons I keep it smooth for you.”

“It is?” He clipped on two more. “What's the other reason or reasons?”

She paused before answering in an attempt to catch her breath. Once composed, she said, “That's the way you like it.”

“Do you always do what I like?” He rested his large hand on her ass cheek.

The heat from his hand seared her skin. She pushed her hips up higher under his palm. “I hope I do what pleases you.”

Perry's hand slipped off her backside, and she felt the bed moving like he had gotten off it. She turned her head to the sound of his padding feet; however, she wasn't fast enough to catch him. He fisted her hair again.

“Oh, yes!” The intense pain resonated through her body, from the throbbing in her scalp down her curved back to her pussy, which felt like it had about six clothespins attached to it.

She gripped her hands into fists and pulled them forward on instinct, which brought her ankles forward and raised her knees off the bed.

It was rare that Perry put her in a position like this. When he did, the bindings gave her the feeling of being captured. She was his prisoner until he wanted to free her. The idea of that, of his utter control and her willingness to relinquish her power, comforted her.

“So what do you think will happen if you disappoint me?” Perry tugged her hair to the side to force her to look in his direction.

“I'll get punished.” She managed a response between gasping breaths.



“That's right.” He let her hair go and strolled to the dresser where his bag of tricks sat.

From it he pulled out more candles. Cherish tried keeping track of Perry as he set candles all over the room, on the desk, on the dresser, on the small table by the window and even on the nightstand. One by one, he lit them.

It didn't take long for the room to smell like a garden. Heavenly floral scents wafted through the air. Cherish took in a deep breath. Any kind of sensual memory she could take away from this moment, she wanted to keep.

To her surprise, Perry turned off the lights in the room so that the candles offered the only illumination. The intimate lighting also cloaked Perry's movements.

She heard him at his bag again, so she directed her attention to him. As he headed back to her, she tried focusing on what he carried. Although she could see an outline, she suspected he had a bottle in his hand.

Perry sat next to her, evident from the way the side of the bed sank under his weight. She heard him flip open a top. The first dollop of cold oil that hit her bare back made her body jerk.

“I never get tired of that response.”

Was Perry laughing at her? Thank God for the darkness. Cherish smiled at the idea that he had as much fun at this play as she did.

He added more oil to her back while his other skilled hand rubbed it over her body. The touch sent shivers down her spine. When he got to her legs, he slowed down his hands, savoring the extended touch. Like a sculptor, he smoothed his hands over her calves and to her feet.

As he touched her sensually this time, now she didn't feel as ticklish. Cherish wanted him to continue caressing her.

Perry slid his hands down her calves, over the backs of her thighs, and to her ass, which he palmed and squeezed. Cherish couldn't help but release a long, low

moan. She even raised her hips in the air to encourage him more...not that he needed it. With the motion, the clothespins he had clipped to her clicked together.

Amazing how other sensations, sights, smells, touches, distracted her from the one sensation that should have captured her attention.

As though reading her thoughts, Perry pushed her legs apart as far as they would go. "Such a good girl." Then, one by one, he removed each pin.

As he relieved each clothespin of its duty, blood rushed back into that body part, offering Cherish another new feeling. First the stinging pain hit her. A million pinpricks stabbed at each previously pinched spot.

She tried drawing her legs together to rub her poor, sweetly tortured pussy lips, but Perry stopped her, wedging his body in between her thighs.

"Tell me what you feel, Little Lamb." He rested his hand on the small of her back.

Damn, in his position it would have been so easy for him to slip his cock inside her, ease it back and forth in a soothing rocking motion. Hell, if he wanted to pound her pussy, she would love that, too. Knowing Perry—and after all these months, she had a pretty good handle on him—she knew that was out of the question.

"It hurts, but it's a good kind of pain, Sir. It's like you've spanked my pussy with a wire brush, wire side out. I just want to rub it to make it feel better." Although Perry blocked her from closing her legs together, she did have access to grind her clit on the comforter underneath her body.

She pushed herself onto the mattress and rubbed her hardened nub, giving herself a sinful titillation that blanketed her skin with goose bumps. As she continued grinding her clit into the bed, she thought about the fact that Perry hadn't made a move on her despite their intense chemistry. Because they got on so well, seemed so in tune with each other's bodies, and were both driven at work, she thought that they would make a great couple.

Couple. Cherish was doing it again, rushing them into a situation at least one of them wasn't ready to undertake. She was ready. At least she thought she was.

One thing she loved about their warped relationship was this private side. So much of her life, whether she wanted it to or not, played out in the public eye. She knew that, with the company she worked for, all her major decisions would have been announced in the news and local media. That she understood. She just didn't get the need for people to know about her beyond the boardroom.

That was what made Perry so unique. He had her exposed. If he wanted to, he could run to the media and share everything about their clandestine relationship, but he kept their secret. Probably the fact that he protected her both at work and in the hotel room during their weekends together was what changed her perception of him. As long as he continued protecting her, she would keep trusting him.

But then again, he had told Utterman that she contemplated not going to the retreat. Did he do that because he knew what was best for her? Or was it a ploy to undermine her?

Cherish relaxed her body onto the bed, which proved to be a mistake. Whenever she got too comfortable at anything, that was when a surprise reared its ugly head. As soon as the thought hit her head, a drop of hot wax fell onto the center of her upper back.

"Oh, God!" Cherish arched off the bed.

Although the intense pain caused her to jerk, it lasted only for a moment. She settled her body and accepted the second hit of hot wax a little better than the first. By the time he got to the fourth and fifth drops, Cherish had settled back onto the bed.

She closed her eyes and enjoyed the extended attention. The drops started at the center of her back and curved around her side and ended at the bottom of her back in the center. Then he did the same motion on the opposite side of her back.

A heart. Would he put their initials inside? Or maybe create an arrow? Cherish knew Perry had a romantic side, despite his hard, domineering nature.

To her surprise, a knock sounded on the door. Cherish turned her head to the direction of the door and saw the shadow of someone standing on the other side.

Perry leaped from the bed. Knowing him, he would correspond through the door and wouldn't open it to anyone. He wouldn't let anyone or anything disturb their sanctuary. So why was he putting on a robe?

“Sir, what are you doing?” Cherish rocked back and forth, now fully aware of her nude body and its current position.

“Answering the door.” And he smacked her ass for good measure.

So much for keeping their arrangement quiet.

## Chapter Four

Perry had hoped room service would have come much earlier than this, certainly before Little Lamb had gotten out of her bath. But then again, he had to cut that event short due to her honest but surprising outburst.

Once she'd made the request, he couldn't find the words to respond. Should he have told her how much he'd wanted to take her ever since he saw her black lace bra peek from under her conservative business jacket during his first week on the job? Should he have reassured her that although the idea of having sex with her sounded great, doing it would change the whole dynamic of their relationship? Or should he have just told her he wouldn't be strong enough to release her if after they had sex they decided to go their separate ways?

Above all else, he had to remain true to himself. Whether she liked it or not, he couldn't change his behaviors. This small test would show him just how far she would go with him.

As he walked to the door, he thought about how he would greet the person on the other side. Should he just accept the items at the door, keeping his Lamb's state hidden? Or should he do what he had wanted to do for weeks now: expose her and their relationship to someone outside?

Perry found no shame in being in the BDSM community. He also didn't mind being linked to Cherish. He knew she found a great sense of comfort in keeping their arrangement a secret. Perhaps exposing her would show him whether or not he could have a future with her. If he let the hotel employee into the room, what would she do? How would she react?

If she hated it, he would know he could never have a future with her outside of their casual Fridays. But what if she didn't complain? What if, besides being into the BDSM lifestyle, she was also an exhibitionist? The thought of that caused his cock to throb with each step he took toward the door.

“Sir?”

Perry didn't turn around. He wrapped his hand around the doorknob and opened the door fully. The light from the hallway poured into their darkened room. The waiter smiled as he stood behind a cart with trays of food on it.

“Sorry for the delay. Would you like for me to bring this inside?” The waiter grabbed the cart and directed it to the room.

After a slight pause, Perry answered, “Yes, come inside.”

He heard Lamb moving about a bit; then she became still. Perhaps she thought being motionless rendered her invisible. He had to smile at that thought.

Standing in front of the cart, which blocked part of the waiter's view of Lamb, Perry pointed to a small table near the door. “Put the items there, please.”

The man nodded. At one point, it looked as though he peeked around Perry to see what he hid in the candlelit room. He must have seen something. The waiter glanced up at Perry after placing the last dish on the table. He uncovered each one to confirm Perry's order. After Perry signed for the items, the waiter pulled the cart out of the room.

Perry closed and double-locked the door behind him. After stripping out of his robe, he returned to the bed. He clicked on a light next to the bed. Lamb's face lit up under the artificial illumination.

He had half-expected her to turn away from him, to be angry that he would allow a stranger to view her. Instead she carried a blank but almost serene look on her face.

“Did he see me?” she asked in a whisper.

Perry scanned Lamb and the area around her. Next to her naked body sat the six clothespins he'd had attached to her sweet cunt. Her body now glistened from the baby oil he had applied. And hard red wax drippings covered her back. He wanted to smile when he spied his attempt to make a heart in the dark.

"I think he did." Perry put his fists to his hips. "How does that make you feel?"

"You sure you don't want to save that question for our 'sexy six,' Sir?" Lamb smiled, and it reassured him that he had pushed her in the right way.

Damn, now he really wanted her, and for much more than just his part-time submissive.

"It is about that time, isn't it?" Perry climbed into bed in between Lamb's legs.

With great reluctance, he untied her wrists and ankles. Although he loved seeing her trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey, he had to feed her.

Once untied, Lamb spread her arms out over the bed in great relief. She kept her legs spread apart as well. Perry leaned over her back and started peeling off the wax stuck to her body. With each gentle tug, she writhed underneath him. In its wake, the wax left red blotches over her skin. The image of the burned-on heart remained.

"Get into position on the bed." Perry jumped off the bed and dumped the wax pieces into a nearby trashcan. Then he brought over a tray of fruit, cheese, and crackers along with a bottle of white wine and two glasses.

When he returned to the bed, Lamb sat in the center on her haunches facing the headboard. She looked so peaceful, nothing like the tough-as-nails exec from Stratum or that nervous woman in the bookstore.

Perry set the tray on the bed in front of her, then sat on the bed with his legs stretched out in front of him and his back against the padded headboard.

"Who, what, when, where, why, and how, right?" He screwed the corkscrew into the top of the bottle, then wiggled out the cork.

"Yes, Sir." Lamb kept her gaze directly on him.

As Perry poured out a glass, he thought about what he wanted to ask her. He took a sip of the wine. The sweet taste would complement the fruits and cheeses well. Good choice.

He held the glass to her mouth as he asked his first sexy-six question. “Besides me, who got you interested in this lifestyle?”

Lamb took a small sip of the wine, moaned in approval, then swallowed. “No one really. I’ve always been curious about BDSM.”

“Then your answer should be that you got you into this lifestyle.” Perry picked up a large strawberry from the tray and put it up to her lips. “You need to stop discounting yourself from the equation, even as a submissive. Your opinions matter. Why do you think you have a safe word?”

She nibbled the end of the strawberry, which did not please Perry. He wanted to see the entire bulbous fruit in her mouth. Call it a Freudian thing. He liked that she was a woman with a healthy appetite.

After a couple of chews, Lamb opened her mouth wider to accept the rest of the berry save the stem.

Perry picked up another strawberry for himself and popped it in his mouth.

“My turn?” She placed her hands on her lap.

Instead of verbally responding, he nodded to her.

“If not me, who would you do this to on a regular basis?”

Did his little lamb have a jealous streak? He never thought that she would even care about his other activities apart from their weekend and their work.

“There are a couple of clubs in the area. I would play with submissives there.” Not content with having a purely vanilla meal, Perry picked up one of the clothespins.

He watched her expression go from calm to excited in a matter of seconds. Grabbing a hold of her tit, he pulled her close to him first. He swiped his tongue



over her nipple. Just to touch it and hear her guttural moan pumped massive amounts of blood to his cock.

In the brief moment he had his mouth latched onto her magnificent orb, he closed his eyes and imagined them in another place and time where she would feel comfortable being his little lamb full-time.

Perry pulled back from her nipple; then, with the precision of a surgeon, he eased the clothespin around the pebbled flesh. The squeak of the coil echoed in the expansive room. When he let the securing device go, she sucked air through her clenched teeth. She balled her hands into fists and jammed them into her thighs as she squeezed her eyelids shut.

“Breathe through it.” Perry brushed the backs of his fingers over the side of her breast.

The touch must have relieved her. She exhaled, relaxed her hands, and leaned her head back.

“Thank you, Sir.” A tear rolled down the side of her face.

Perry knew it stemmed from confronting her fears head-on. He stroked his fingers down the side of her face. So much for being rough with her this weekend.

“Next question. What did you think when I let the waiter into the room?” He picked up a piece of cheese that looked like jalapeño pepper jack. After taking a bite, he knew he had it pegged.

Lamb didn't answer. She kept her gaze on the bed. And her heart pounded so hard in her chest that it made the dangling clothespin affixed to her flesh jump in a consistent rhythm.

“Little Lamb, I asked you a question.” He waited until she answered before feeding her a piece of the spicy cheese.

“I, um, I was scared.” She stole quick glances at Perry. “What made you decide to let him in here to see me?”

"I'm assuming that's your 'what' question, right?" He brought the small cube of cheese to her lips. "It's spicy."

She may have appeared tough at work, but Perry had ordered many of her meals, and he knew she didn't care for a lot of spicy foods.

"As I'm sure you know from your extensive research, BDSM is about pushing limits. I like seeing you react when I challenge you." Perry watched her chew on the cheese.

It didn't take long for her eyes to water. He retrieved their shared glass of wine and brought it to her lips. Lamb wrapped her delicate hands around his hand as she downed a lot more wine than in her first sip.

"No more spicy cheeses for you." He chuckled as he set the glass back on the nightstand and poured them another glass. His jovial expression slipped away as he contemplated his next query. "When do you see our arrangement ending?" At that moment, he removed the clothespin from her nipple.

Lamb grabbed his hand as he pulled away. The desperation in her eyes tore at his heart.

"I don't want this to end." She wrapped her other hand around his to show him her seriousness.

He didn't need to see her clinging expression to know what these weekends meant to her. But Perry wanted more. He needed more.

"You didn't answer the question," he said.

After taking a deep breath, she replied, "I see our arrangement ending when you end it, Sir."

Perry slipped his hand from her grasp. "Don't give me all the power. You certainly have some say in what happens." What he couldn't tell her was just how thin his patience was running.

"When do you want our arrangement to end?"

Perry should have figured that would have been her next logical question. “When it stops being fun and interesting to us both.”

“I hope I can keep you interested, Sir.”

He offered her a smile to push away her fears. “So far so good. I’ll let you know when I’m concerned.” He stroked her cheek with the back of his finger. “Where on your body are you the most sensitive?”

Perry had to break the tension somehow. That questioned seemed to have done it. Lamb smiled and even managed to cough out a giggle.

“With you, Sir, I seem to be sensitive all over. When you pull my hair, my scalp feels like electricity is pulsing through it. When you touch my skin anywhere, I melt. And when you touch my feet—”

“Those precious feet.”

“I can’t control myself.”

“I guess I’ll just have to find more areas on your body that will keep melting you.” And Perry meant that.

The one great thing about Little Lamb was her thirst for knowledge. She wanted to learn from him. Her willingness to do just about anything enamored him as well. How could he walk away from that?

“Where on my body did you want to test me, Sir?” She stared at him with those full brown eyes that always rocked Perry to his core.

“I’ll guess you’ll see over the weekend, won’t you?” Showing Lamb his hand would allow her to somehow prepare herself. Perry wanted her raw. “Why do you make that breathing noise when we play?”

She furrowed her eyebrows. “What noise?”

“No, no. You can’t answer a question with a question.”

“Okay, I wasn’t aware I made a noise, Sir.” She chewed on her lower lip as she stared at him.

“You do. When you see me coming with a toy or a device, you do this little high-pitched hum like you're about to laugh or scream or both. When I first started playing with you, the sound distracted me. That's the reason I kept you blindfolded or hooded. Now I kind of look forward to hearing it. It's kind of cute because it's become your thing.”

She smiled. “I didn't know I had a thing.”

“You have a lot of little things about you. That's just one.”

Lamb nodded. When she brought her attention back to him, her expression had become serious.

“You're not going to ask the question you always ask, are you?” Perry stared at her.

“Why me?”

He shook his head. “Because we found each other at the right time in our lives. We needed each other.” He reached for her other nipple and pinched it in between his fingers. “So are you going to ask that question again next weekend?”

Lamb laughed. “I cannot tell a lie, Sir. I probably will.”

“Last question. How am I going to convince you that you belong in this lifestyle?”

Her laughter tapered off. “I believe that I belong, Sir.”

But he didn't believe her. She lacked the pride that he expected her to have. He had to keep reminding himself that she was new to the Lifestyle. How long would he have to wait until that notion sank in?

Lamb cleared her throat before she posed her last question. “How do you manage to—uh, never mind.”

“No, what were you going to ask me?”

“How do you like the cheeses, Sir?” She smiled to cover the question that must have frightened her.

“That's not your original question. Ask me what you were just about to ask me, or else this weekend can stop right now.”

She grabbed his hand and inched closer to him. “No, please. Don't do that.”

“I don't want you hiding anything from me. I want you to be one hundred percent honest. Understand?”

She nodded. “How, um, how do you manage to hide our relationship at work?”

So she wondered the same thing he had. Still holding her hand, Perry curved the back of her hand against his mouth and planted a soft kiss on it.

“It's the most difficult thing I've ever had to do. But for someone like you”—he rubbed her hand against his face—“it's worth it.”

She smiled, and it seemed like a thousand more candles lit up in their room. “Do you find it hard not to talk about the other women you play with at those clubs?”

Perry shook his head. “No.”

“Why me, then?”

She didn't know? She couldn't figure it out?

“Did you just ask another question outside of our assigned six?” He had to get off the topic; otherwise, their weekend might get cut short.

Lamb breathed out a long sigh. “Who came up with this sexy-six game anyway?” She opened her mouth as Perry fed her grapes.

“I believe, my dear, that it was your idea. You said we could learn more about each other by asking six simple questions.”

“I don't know about you, but it's working for me. Every time we meet, I feel like I'm learning more and more about you.”

“Then this weekend will be an eye-opening experience.”

No more games. After playing with her for so long, Perry craved a change, something more permanent and lasting. He didn't know if Lamb would be down for it.

“Let's finish our dinner.”

“Do I get dessert?” Lamb hitched a smile at the corner of her mouth.

Perry knew exactly what she wanted. Hell, he wanted the same thing. He liked hearing her say it, though. “What would you like?”

“What do you want, Sir?”

By reflex, he grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled her forward. “Say it.”

Her irises widened, making her brown eyes look black. “I want your cock in my mouth.”

“Good girl.”

He had the whole weekend to contemplate their relationship. For now, he would just play.

## Chapter Five

Morning came too quickly in Cherish's opinion. Falling asleep in Perry's arms and waking up in the same position gave her a sweet sense of security—more than getting her current job, more than buying her home. With Perry, she couldn't go wrong.

He needed her. Not her money. Not her influence. Not her connections. Thank goodness she didn't need him. Not really.

Self-flogging didn't suit her. And she certainly couldn't spank herself. Like a bad habit, she could walk away from this arrangement. Hell, thanks to the many, many mishaps at Stratum, she'd learned how to lie so that if Perry did open his mouth, she would know how to cover her tracks, spin her tale. But Perry wouldn't say anything. That she knew.

Unlike the people in her life who were supposed to love her unconditionally, Perry had asked for nothing except for her time and willingness to trust him. Trusting him had been easy, especially after their first time together.

She had expected some gossip to occur after their first weekend together. It would have served her right if he did talk, considering she barely knew the man when she agreed to meet him at a hotel.

And after what they did their first time together, the debauchery, the absolute carnal acts, she thought he would have sold her out either by revealing her true nature to anyone in the media who might be interested, or use it to move up at work.

That scenario seemed more up Perry's alley. He came across as a very ambitious young man. She'd heard how hard he fought to be her assistant. And

when she rode him hard the first few months he'd worked for her and he stayed, she knew she had a winner.

Just when she didn't think he could get any more perfect, she discovered this tawdry side of him. Or rather, he uncovered her secretive side.

She could never dare step into one of those clubs that Perry talked about and frequented. Even if her standing didn't prevent her from participating publicly in a lifestyle so controversial, she still couldn't imagine being brave enough to walk into a club like that and ask to be disciplined.

Deep down, she had always imagined that a man, a Dom, would find her browsing through those books and would do exactly what Perry had done that night. Could their work relationship and weekend arrangement work for a true relationship?

Cherish turned in his arms so that she faced him. Perry's even breathing soothed her. With a gentle nudge, she eased him onto his back. He rolled without resistance with his arms spread wide open.

She moved her gaze down his form and noticed before she could reach his feet that morning lust had set in. Midway down his body, the comforter covering him tented above him.

Just as Perry demanded of her, he also slept in the nude. Cherish eased her hand under the covers. Heat from his shaft drew her hand. She coiled her fingers around him. His body jerked from the touch, but he didn't wake.

Moving a breath at a time, she climbed over his body and straddled him. With a firm hold on his cock, she trembled as she rubbed his mushroom tip between her pussy lips. As much as she wanted to impale herself onto his hardened dick, she respected their unspoken rule about sex. That didn't mean she couldn't enjoy the feel of him, the sensation of his manhood against her sex.

When she couldn't get enough air through her nose, Cherish parted her lips and tried taking in as much oxygen as possible. She braced her free hand against



the planes of his chest as she continued to move him back and forth, letting the head of his penis linger longer than it should have at her pussy opening.

Her heart pounded so hard her body shook. Cherish snaked her tongue over her lips. She leaned her head back and clawed his chest. His cock pulsed in her grasp. Maybe if he were awake, he would want to plunge himself inside her, tell her how much he wanted her, fuck her so hard that it would bring her to tears.

Her body ached to have him. Cherish swallowed hard as she contemplated her next move. The mouth of her cunt covered the berry head of his shaft. With one downward plunge, she could have him. And then what? Where would their relationship go?

She didn't want to think about that now. She needed Perry. She wanted to feel needed for a whole different reason.

Just as Cherish started to move her body down, sheathe him with her pussy, a hand gripped her wrist. Her body froze in position. She stared at Perry. His expression chilled her to her bones.

The look brought her back to reality. At that moment, she reverted back to Little Lamb.

"What are you doing?" Perry released her and sat up, bringing his face dangerously close to Cherish's.

She felt his warm breath over her lips. "Um, I wanted to wake you up."

"Fucking would have definitely done that." He started to move his body up toward the headboard.

The motion inadvertently allowed the tip of his penis to brush over her vagina and nearly enter her.

Cherish let out a moan and squeezed her eyes shut. Perry managed to slither back from her and rest his back against the headboard.

"Start the shower. I'll be in there in a minute."

Cherish cast her gaze down. “Yes, Sir.” She climbed off him and started to leap from the bed.

Perry held on to her hand. When she brought her attention back to him, he said, “Good morning,” and offered her a smile.

At least he didn't seem upset by her brazen act.

“Good morning, Sir.” She brought his hand up to her mouth and kissed the back of it. “I apologize for what I almost did this morning. I shouldn't have—”

“Shower.” Perry pointed toward the bathroom.

She bowed her head again. “Yes, Sir.”

Cherish padded to the bathroom on shaky legs. At every turn, she embarrassed herself. Last night she blurted that she wanted Perry to fuck her. Then this morning she nearly rode her Dom. And, again, he didn't want to discuss it.

The fact that he avoided discussing this serious topic concerned her. Why didn't he want to talk about it? Maybe he didn't really want her. Or maybe he didn't want to change the dynamic of their relationship.

At this point she wondered if they both needed a bit of change, a shake-up. They already tested the waters with their weekend setup. Would having sex really change them that much?

\* \* \*

What a temptation Perry encountered as he woke up from an amazing dream or what he thought had been a dream. He imagined that he and Cherish were making love. In his dream, Cherish rode him. Her full breasts swayed in concert with her gyrations.

When he woke up, he didn't have to imagine how tight her sweet cunt would be. Cherish had slipped back into her take-charge manner that served her well as Cherish Burke of Stratum. By the time he opened his eyes and found Cherish doing

exactly what he had dreamed, he knew he had to take the reins before either of them went too far.

As much as he wanted to fuck her, he couldn't. Their unspoken rule had protected them so far. Besides, if anything were to happen between him and Cherish, he would be the one to initiate it.

Having her rule him during the day tested him enough. He only had power over her on the weekends, and he wanted more.

Perry slipped out of bed. Needing to release some tension, he stretched his arms over his head, pulling the muscles in his back and legs. His cock wouldn't be making a descent for a while, especially since he would be joining his little lamb in the shower.

As soon as the thought entered his mind, he heard the rush of streaming water from the shower. He strolled into the bathroom and found her bending over with her hand underneath the rounded head.

He admired her ample backside, how smooth and firm. Perry asserted his power over her. He reared his hand back and gave Lamb a firm pop on her ass.

Little Lamb yelped and braced her hand against the stall wall. She brought her attention to him. Her passionate stare stoked the flames of desire.

Perry backed up, lowered the commode lid, and took a seat. He patted his lap. "Over my knees. Now."

Little Lamb took a couple of tentative steps toward him. "Are you concerned about the sounds?" She tilted her head to the side. "The other guests—"

Perry patted his lap again and waited for her. As he started to give her a warning on not obeying him, she glided to him. It took her no time to position herself across his lap and prop up her naked ass, taunting him to do more than just spank her.

He rested one hand on her back. The other hand caressed her soft ass cheeks. “Little Lamb, you have to learn your limits.” Perry warmed up her skin by giving her a hard, swift pop on each cheek.

Her body jerked, then settled back into position. “Yes, Sir.”

He felt her breathing pattern accelerate. His skin tingled. He observed the currents of her back, how it rippled, swelled, and contracted with each of her breaths. His hand surfed down her flesh into position at the crest line of her succulent ass.

“I think you like pushing my limits because you—” He choked on the words.

Perry nearly blurted what had been lingering in the back of his mind since the very first day of their unusual arrangement—though submissive, she actually controlled this relationship. The exchange didn't feel shared as he wanted. His actual power came from his physical force, what he did to her.

Cherish braced her hands on his thigh and turned to him. Even in her submissive position she carried a commanding stare, which raised the hairs over his body.

“Because I what, Sir?” She shifted on his lap.

In the motion, her body brushed against his steadily deflating cock, which stirred it again and brought it back to life.

“Facedown.”

Before she could completely turn away, he administered two more hard pops to her ass. He felt her stomach stiffen as if she held her breath. Perry knew a great way to release it. He showered her with swats all over her cheeks.

As he spanked her, Cherish flailed her legs, thrashing them about until she hit the back of her foot on the counter.

“Ow!” She covered her mouth with her hand. “Sorry, Sir.”

At her declaration, Perry stopped the punishment. He helped her turn over so that she sat on his lap, facing him. From her seated position, he felt how hot her backside had become. She took the punishment like a trouper.

“Let me see.” He held on to her ankle and brushed his thumb over her Achilles tendon. “Is this where it hurts?”

Cherish shook her head. “Other leg.” And she crossed her leg to present it to him.

As he rubbed her soft skin, he gazed into her eyes. “Feels warm.”

She nodded.

“Does it hurt?”

She shook her head. “Not anymore.”

The longer Perry stared into Cherish's eyes, the more he wanted her. As though on its own volition, his face drew closer to hers. His lips parted, and hers did the same. His pounding heart drowned out all noises around him.

Cherish's small pink tongue snaked over her plump lips. Just as he got to her lips, he deftly moved to the side of her face. His cheek brushed against hers.

In her ear, he whispered, “Let's shower.”

He recognized the moment she released her breath. Her body relaxed before she swept her legs around and climbed off his lap.

The absence of her body chilled him. Perry wanted to continue holding her. And he especially wanted to kiss her full lips. At least one of them had to show some restraint. Halting this action should also show Cherish who had control...he hoped.

Perry stood and followed his little lamb into the shower stall. He positioned her under the streaming water, dousing her delectable body. He watched as the water sluiced over her curves, and at that moment, he envied the element.

Not to be outdone, he lathered his hands in the body wash and placed his hands on her shoulders. Cherish's body melted as though she wanted him to mold her.

Perry eased his hands down her arms to her hands, where he interlaced his fingers with hers. He rested his chin on her shoulder, then wrapped her arms around her waist. In this position, he saw their future. He imagined a life in which he excelled at work, she continued to rock the business world, and at night and on the weekends she would be his little lamb.

He closed his eyes and let his imagination run wild. He thought about the games they could play, both in private and in public.

For so long he'd dreamed of taking her to a play party or to one of his favorite clubs.

Cherish was not the type of woman who he could trot around on a leash.

Perry closed his eyes and rocked their bodies back and forth. Listening to the hiss of the shower and inhaling the fragrant steam wafting up to his nostrils, he was transported to a place in his mind where the life he wanted could be achieved.

If he wanted Cherish Burke to be his 24-7 submissive, he could have that. If he wanted her to wear vibrating panties as she spoke to the President of the United States, he could do that too. And if he wanted to make love to her, fuck her, he would have her.

As they stood in the shower, he thought about how it would be to have sex with her there. He would caress her body, taking pleasure in exploring every inch, every hard and soft spot, every area that would make her cry out for him.

He would take things slow with her, kissing her with such passion that his knees would buckle. He would slide his tongue into her mouth, allowing her to touch and tease it with her tongue, suck it like she would his cock. Then he would play with her breasts, kneading them, squeezing them until she came or close to it.

When he could no longer stand the waiting, he would gently press her against the wall, put her legs around his waist, and enter her so slowly that it would feel like an eternity. He wanted a moment like that to last, to feel her tight, slick pussy walls surround his dick and hold him until he wanted to submit to her.

As he thrust inside her, he would continue to kiss her. During their real weekend relationship, they shared quick pecks, a kiss on the cheek or on the hand, but nothing deep, passionate, loving.

God, had he actually thought about love? Cherish hadn't thought about love with him. Perry knew that. She demanded to know even the minutest details of all her business dealings while at work. So if she truly loved him, wouldn't she have said so? She never bit her tongue in the past.

Instead of being so gentle, as he had imagined before, he would take her, hard. Still in the shower in his imagination, this time he would place her hands on the wall, bring her ass back and take her from behind, pounding in her so hard that her knees would buckle instead of his.

He would fist her thick hair. Her breasts would jiggle with each motion. And she would do the one thing that would make him come so hard and deep inside her—call out his name, his real name. Not Sir or Master.

Perry's imagination prompted his next actions. One hand drifted down between her thighs. Cherish took a step to the side to allow him access. As his thumb brushed over her soft mound, his middle finger swept over her clit.

Cherish sucked air in between her teeth and pushed her ass back against him. When her backside connected to his now engorged cock, she moaned.

The reaction spurred him on to do more, take more. Perry slid his middle finger inside her. Her wet channel gripped his digit.

Cherish clamped down on his arms. Her shoulder hoisted his head up higher, which meant she probably stood on her tiptoes. If he wanted, he could slide himself inside her right now.

Perry pulled his finger out of her long enough to push her against the stall wall. As wide as Cherish's eyes got, he surmised that he'd either surprised or excited her. Either way, she didn't appear disappointed.

Without saying a word, with just the motion of his hand, he got her to put her foot on the side of the tub, giving him full access to her pussy. Perry stepped closer in between her legs.

Presented with this perfect moment, the perfect woman, and a need so potent it consumed him, Perry wanted so much to enter her, to finally make her his. He held both of her wrists in his hand and held them against the wall over her head. With his other hand, he held his cock.

Perry had her. He had the control. He mastered this situation. And right now, he wanted to possess her body.

He positioned the tip of his penis toward her vagina just as she said, "Do it. Take me. Just fuck me. Please."

The demand should have prompted him to do what she requested. Instead Perry saw it as another way Cherish showed her control over him. If he fucked her, she would think he did it because she wanted it.

Perry took a step to the side. He released his cock in order to slide his index finger inside her. In response, Cherish ground down on his cock substitute and growled so loudly that he knew the whole floor must have heard her.

As he plunged his finger inside her, she undulated her hips, riding him so hard that Perry didn't have to imagine what it would be like to finally bed this tigress. He brought his lips dangerously close to hers. He ached to taste her.

*Fuck!* When did the lines blur between him wanting to be her Dom and wishing to be her lover?

Perry slipped a second finger inside her. This time he did catch her standing on tiptoe on the one foot she used to stabilize herself. He wasn't sure if the moisture running down his back came from the showerhead or his sweat from watching this beautiful woman move.

Not wanting to torture her anymore, he pressed his face next to hers and growled, "Come."



With no more provocation than that, Cherish screamed. She pressed her pussy down onto his fingers and held herself there as she rode her wave of pleasure.

When her breathing evened, Perry eased his fingers out of her. He pressed them against her lips. Watching her lick her own juices prickled his skin.

Cherish stared at him. A smile crept its way up at the corner of her mouth. "Now what?"

Perry had been thinking the same thing. Now what would he do?

He connected gazes with her and said, "Talk."

## Chapter Six

Talk. Cherish had wanted Perry to open up to her more...just not right after he gave her an amazing orgasm.

After Perry helped her out of the shower, he dried her off, patting her body down with a thick white bath sheet that tickled her skin with each contact. She stood still during the treatment, a feat considering her insides still quivered from her recent climax.

Before walking out of the bathroom, Perry ran his fingers over her pearl necklace, then strolled to the hotel-room door. He made sure to leave the DO NOT DISTURB/NO MAID SERVICE sign hanging on the doorknob before returning his attention to her.

Cherish kept herself planted in the bathroom doorway, observing him as he set the scene.

He pointed to the bed. "Have a seat."

As instructed, she padded to the king-size bed and crawled to the middle, hoping Perry would join her. Perhaps what he wanted to talk about had to do with taking their relationship to a whole new level. She chewed on her lower lip in anticipation.

Instead of sitting down with her, Perry planted himself in front of the bed. Since he remained in the nude, Cherish found it difficult to direct her attention anywhere but at his penis.

"In all the times we've been together, and all the sexy-six games we've played, I don't think I ever asked you why you're so drawn to this lifestyle." He crossed his arms over his chest.

She thought about the answer for a while before attempting to answer.

As she parted her lips to respond, Perry said, "And please don't tell me some romance novels or movies. I need to know the truth."

"So are you saying that reading about this lifestyle isn't enough for me to want to be a part of it?" She directed her attention to him until she caught a slight beeping sound from behind her.

Not sure she actually heard anything, Cherish kept her attention directly on Perry.

"No. Something in you drove you to want to read those books. For example, kids don't read comics because they're curious to see if a man can fly. They want a real hero in their lives."

"You are my hero." She crawled toward him. "You recognized a need in me that I didn't know existed."

He shook his head. "Don't sell me on the idea."

She blinked at his brusque response. Though not overt, the statement referred to her job, her duties. As she thought about it, Perry had never mixed business with their pleurably painful weekend.

"Just tell me. What is it about submitting that appealed to you?"

Again, she didn't know what to say. Cherish felt her jaw drop open and her lips move, but nothing came out, a first for her. What could she say when in her mind she hadn't fully reconciled the idea to herself?

"Maybe it'll help if I shared why I became a Dom." He let his arms dangle at his sides. "My father died when I was about fifteen."

Although Perry kept his face emotionless, Cherish's heart sank. For as much as she had complained about her own family, at least she had them. If she needed to, she could call her parents or her siblings at any time.

Even though his father's death happened nearly fifteen years ago, Cherish still wanted to hold Perry in her arms to comfort him. His puffed-out chest and set jaw clued her that he didn't need comforting or saving.

He continued. "My mother didn't work. And I had five sisters. Suddenly, I became the man of the house. I helped my mother with all the paperwork with my dad's life insurance policy, and with the attorney. I think that's when I got the inkling that I could do well in business because I went toe-to-toe with some tough attorneys and didn't bat an eye. Kind of cocky for someone with barely any facial hair."

Cherish smiled.

"At that moment I became a man in every sense of the word, and I wanted to keep that control."

"Over women?"

"Over my life."

Cherish heard another beeping noise. Without turning her head, she cut her gaze to the side, toward the wall safe. Hoping Perry didn't catch her lack of attention, she brought her stare back to him.

Perry took a beat before continuing to talk. "I knew exactly what it was that I wanted to be. I knew the name of the Lifestyle. I knew what I wanted to be called. I knew how I wanted a woman to react to me and how I wanted to treat her."

"Like property."

"Yes."

Cherish blinked at the fact that he didn't correct her seemingly less than flattering statement.

He placed his hands on the bed in front of her and leaned forward. "I wanted a woman I could take care of, play with, train to show her how to please me."

The beep sounded again. This time Cherish strained to keep her focus on Perry. She swallowed, then wrung her hands together.

“You thought I would refute the fact that I see my submissive as property.” He shook his head. “I won’t.” He held Cherish’s chin and brought his face closer to hers. “You’re mine. You belong to me. What you get from me over the weekends is just a taste. I need someone who is just as dedicated and focused.”

“On you?”

“On the relationship, on the Lifestyle. Not just for fun.”

The beep sounded again, this time with Perry’s face mere inches from Cherish’s.

Perry released an exasperated sigh through his nose. “And not a diversion until the next goddamn meeting.” He pushed himself off the bed. “Scene over.”

“What?” Cherish rubbed her eyes as though she had been in a trance until he uttered those two crucial words. “Why did you stop?”

“You want your phone?”

Cherish remained quiet. So Perry had heard that same beeping that meant that she had missed a call or a text or a message or two, and that she’d perhaps missed something crucial while she and her assistant played.

As Perry opened the safe, he said, “I saw you looking over here. I know it’s killing you inside not to be able to see what you’ve missed.”

“It’s not killing me.” This time Cherish crossed her arms over her chest in indignation.

“I’m your assistant, remember? I know how often you check this thing.” He pulled the device from the safe and stormed over to her. “I know if this could be hardwired to your brain, you would be happy. So here.” He presented the phone to her.

Although it took every bit of strength and will not to look down to see what she had missed, Cherish kept her stare directly on his. “No.”

“Take it. I know you want to.” He pushed the phone toward her again.

“Then maybe you don’t know everything about me.”

"I don't?" Perry brought the phone up to his face and clicked a button.

When Cherish heard the tinkling sound of her phone being powered off, a part of her wanted to scream. Turning off her one lifeline to her business side equated to death.

On the other hand, she wanted to jump up and kiss him for allowing her what she hadn't allowed herself in years—a chance to be selfish and do something fun, sexy, dangerous.

"Last chance. Are you sure you don't want me to turn this back on so that you can—"

"Please, let's go back to the scene." She turned away from him, hoping it would prompt him to return the dead phone to its cave and bring his attention back to her.

"No." He did stroll back to the safe to return the phone. When he returned to her, he said, "Something had been bothering me for a few weeks, and I can't discuss this within a scene."

"Um, okay." Cherish grabbed a pillow and hugged it in front of her body. "Shoot."

"Why are you covering your body now?" Perry sat on the side of the bed and faced her.

"What are you talking about? I'm just holding on to a pillow to get comfortable." Damn. In scene or out, he knew how to read her.

Cherish couldn't explain why she felt more naked and vulnerable out of scene than in scene as Little Lamb. The determination and absolute fire in Perry's eyes never changed from his gaze as her assistant, her Dom, or now, as just Perry. His consistency frightened her.

Had he always been this rigid, or did this happen after his father passed away? Or maybe the fact that he didn't change meant that in certain aspects of his life, he wouldn't waver, wouldn't bend, wouldn't, or maybe couldn't, compromise.

"Sex."

Perry blurted the word, and it hung in the air between them, separating them even more.

“The first time I saw you in person, I wanted to have sex with you.”

The declaration should have brought Cherish closer to Perry. Instead she scooted back from him.

He cleared his throat. “Neither of us has made it a secret that sex is on our minds. I dream about it.” Perry put his hand on Cherish's leg. “Whenever I play with you now, I think of how great it would be to end the scene with us making love.”

She released a long breath. Cherish wanted to admit the same thing, although from the way he talked, Perry already suspected that she felt the same way.

“You say this like it's a bad thing.” She put her hand on top of his.

The intimacy must have been too much for him to take. He slipped his hand from under hers, leaving her flesh cold.

Perry waved his hand in between them. “We haven't truly defined what we have.”

“At this point, do we need to? We make each other feel good. Can't that be enough? Certainly people have had affairs on much less than that.” She smiled as a way to get him comfortable with the idea.

He started to say something. His mouth opened, and he stared at her with such intensity that she knew he wanted to say something earth-shattering. Instead he hopped from the bed and strolled to the closet.

“What were you going to say?” Cherish didn't mean for the boss side of her to come out. But being Cherish Burke meant never having to say “excuse me.”

Perry riffled through his clothes.

“You were going to say something just now. I'd like to hear it.”

Without a word, he strolled back to her. On the nightstand next to the bed, he placed a box of condoms next to the empty wineglass they'd used last night.

He pointed to the box. "This will change everything. You know that, right?"

"Does it have to?" She shrugged her shoulders.

"Are you saying that you wouldn't feel a bit strange to have me as a lover now?"

Although his words made it sound like he didn't want to pursue this new angle to their arrangement, his cock showed otherwise. It started to rise the more he stared at her.

"Strange? I've crawled across the floor naked for you. I've jerked you off. I've had your penis in my mouth. You've spanked me. And you actually think having sex would seem strange?" Cherish chuckled. "I think we've talked enough."

She reached forward to hold his erection, but he grabbed her wrist first and held her back from him. As he crawled onto the bed, he drew her arm back and pressed it against the mattresses.

His body hovered over hers as he kissed down the side of her face. With her free hand, she smoothed it down over the back of his head to his neck and down his back.

Feeling him as a lover didn't compare to touching him as her Dom and, especially, didn't match up to handling him as her assistant. He felt different, like a stranger, like she'd never touched him before.

The spark she expected to feel didn't transfer from his body to her hand like she thought. Although her body responded to him as always, the mood didn't exist.

Perry kissed down her neck. She panted and waited for the goose bumps to cover her body. They never showed.

He trailed his lips down to her breasts. As his mouth covered one nipple, his free hand massaged her other. Cherish arched her back. A moan floated through her parted lips. His skilled tongue twirled around her hardened nipple.



Perry let go of her hand to caress the sides of her body, moving himself down between her legs. With her heart racing, she spread her legs apart and fisted the pillow under her head to ground herself.

Cherish felt Perry parting her nether lips. Then a hit of warm air blew over her clit. Her hardened nub throbbed from the sensation. Again, she moaned. The idea that he could offer to do something so intimate to her both excited and scared her.

What if after this one act he had enough ammunition to confess to the highest bidder about their relationship? What would it mean to her to now have him as a lover? What would this do to their working relationship and their secret one?

As though Perry picked up on her concerns, he stopped before any oral action. Cherish lifted her head to peer at him. Deep down, she hoped he had stopped only to tease her like he had done as her Dom during play. When she saw him slide up onto his knees between her legs and reach for the condoms, she knew better.

"You're very wet," he said, as though trying to rationalize why he cut his actions so short.

Perry ripped off a condom from the strip, then opened the corner of the package with his teeth.

"Let me do that." Cherish sat up to help sheathe him.

Instead Perry put one hand to her shoulder to ease her back onto the bed while he managed to roll the condom down his length with his other hand.

She wanted to look down and see him slide inside her for the first time. Again, just like earlier, he held both of her hands and pressed them against the bed, limiting her movements and preventing her from stealing a peek.

She wanted to look him in his eyes during the act. Just before he plunged inside her, Perry turned his head to the side.

Cherish wanted to say his name. As he thrust inside her, her vocal chords became paralyzed. Her body tensed, and her legs coiled around his.

Part of her dream was realized in that precise moment. His cock fit her as though God made him just for her. His body felt right, there on top of hers. Not crushing her, but also not hovering so high off her body that she felt disconnected. And the way he moved... She couldn't have imagined such precision.

Perry kept his body moving in a smooth yet hard motion. He did everything right. Her pussy constricted around his shaft. She listened to his heavy breathing that warmed her ear and the side of her neck.

On instinct, when she tried moving her hands to touch him, he squeezed her wrists tighter to continue holding her down. She felt his body shaking.

The hell she would finally have sex with this man and not see his face during the damn thing. Cherish tried rolling onto her side to turn them over so that she could ride him like she had almost done that morning.

Perry stopped that rollover effort. Although he let her hands go, he propped himself up on his knees and pounded inside her. As he did so, he either kept his head back or had his eyelids shut.

A cold feeling swept over Cherish's body as she watched this sexy man give her the pleasure that she could have gotten from a vibrator. He didn't look at her. He didn't want her touching him. He barely spoke. Was this the real Perry, and the Dom she met every weekend was actually an act? What happened to the man who had stared her down at the bookstore?

As she pondered over this imposter, Perry rubbed his thumb over her clitoris, then gave her a slight pinch, just enough to send her body spiraling out of control. Cherish clamped her legs around him even tighter. Although she didn't want to, she held her breath.

"Oh, God. Oh, God." She chewed on her lower lip and tried to hold out from coming.

Perry continued playing with her clit, and he reached down and pinched her nipple.

Damn him. If nothing else, the man knew how to extract an orgasm out of her. Cherish's muscles locked as she screamed. Perry pounded into her hard and fast until he too grunted and growled.

She raised her hips off the bed and kept her body in a rigid position until the orgasmic wave dissipated. Her body melted back onto the bed. She relaxed her hands. Her legs released Perry from their capture. When Perry slid out of her, she opened her eyes.

Still on his knees, he wiped his hand over his face and eyes. The brief eye contact he gave her propelled him to ease back from her and sit on the edge of the bed.

Cherish turned over onto her side. She reached for the man who had given her a sweet, if not distant, orgasm, and he sprang from the bed.

When he turned to her, he said, "Return to scene."

Cherish blinked. What? He wanted to go back to being Dom and Little Lamb instead of languishing in the moment?

"Run a bath for us, Lamb. I'll order us breakfast." He disappeared into the living area of their room.

Somehow Cherish saw this moment turning out so differently in her dreams. And now she had to decide if she needed to continue with their weekend arrangement or just walk away.

## Chapter Seven

Cherish had had bad sex in her life. Unsatisfying, unfulfilling, dull, meaningless, and empty sex. With Perry, sex had been an odd combination of emotions. He had satisfied her, but he'd kept himself emotionally distant. He'd excited her, but he'd made the act almost routine. Had he made more of a connection with her, making love to him would have been even more amazing.

Although the act should have been intimate, it almost came across as businesslike, professional. Perry the assistant had fucked her while Perry the Dom held her down. She needed a combination of Perry's two personalities...or she needed to move on.

Every weekend moved through faster and faster lately. When Cherish started this arrangement with Perry, the time she spent with him during their weekends crawled. Perry managed to fill every minute awakening a new muscle, touching an untapped nerve, finding an unheard-of type of orgasm deep within her.

She thought making love to him would reveal Perry's true self that he kept hidden from her. Instead he hid himself even more. Afterward, he stayed in his dominant role, refusing to talk about it or allow her to break from her little lamb position.

Before she knew it, Saturday had come and gone with them both playing a role. Besides spending the day completely nude as usual, Perry had spent the day pushing her limits, both mentally and physically. He'd tied her up spread-eagle in front of an uncovered window. Then he'd bound her hands over her head in the shower stall while housekeeping cleaned their room. When a housekeeper nearly stepped into the bathroom, Perry stopped her.

Cherish's heart still raced thinking about that moment. Now that Sunday rolled around, she didn't want their time to end. But it had to stop just like it did every weekend. She needed to talk to him. She needed to resolve some issues. Maybe she needed to do what she'd always done—protect herself and move on.

She glanced down at her watch again. The time had only moved one minute from the last time she looked at it.

“We have an hour.” Perry unlocked the safe to retrieve her items.

“Actually, only fifty-eight minutes, Sir.” She sank into the sofa and clasped her hands together. She rested her hands on her bare, jittery knees.

Even though their time wound down, she found it difficult to get dressed again. The nudity gave her freedom, strength, power. Once clothed, she would be a drone in the corporate army and struggling to make a difference. And when she reverted back to Cherish Burke instead of Little Lamb, she would have to confront Perry about so many things like the sex and possibly betraying her confidence.

Perry placed her purse and car keys on the coffee table in front of her. Clad in a pair of jeans and a black T-shirt, he still looked good enough to eat. The thought of it brought back memories of falling asleep while holding his impressive cock in her mouth. The saltiness of his precum had hit the back of her throat. She swallowed now to see if she could conjure the flavor of his juices, but it was too late.

Perry had gone back to the closet and pulled out her suit, the same one she wore on Friday night. This time a clear plastic dry-cleaning bag covered it. No matter what, he always sent her home clean.

As he walked toward her, she kept her stare directly at his crotch. Her nipples hardened the closer he got to her. To keep her hands occupied and away from her throbbing clitoris, she held on to her knees. However, her stare remained on Perry's core, his center.

“Up.”

Cherish heard the directive. Her body refused to move, not when the proximity of his body teased her.

“Little Lamb,” he said with a bit more forcefulness in his voice.

“Oh. Sorry, Sir.” Cherish sprang to her feet.

As usual, Perry dressed her. Cherish steadied herself by putting her hands on Perry's broad shoulders as she stepped into her skirt. He directed her to turn around, then zipped up her skirt in the back.

He slipped on her bra. He cradled each breast in his large hands as he adjusted them in their cups. His touch rendered her boneless. She leaned her head back against his shoulder as he worked his magic. Her mind wandered back to the high points of their lovemaking—the smells, the feel, the power, the control.

Cherish closed her eyes and imagined that Perry had her clothes off. Instead of merely spanking her, he would be making love to her. This time he would be caressing her body and kissing her, something else she wished he had done.

She'd never been in a relationship like this where she never kissed her man. But that was another level of intimacy that they didn't want to cross. At least Perry didn't want to cross that line.

Cherish felt Perry move his head down next to hers. If he kissed her shoulder or even her neck, she would crumble in his arms.

Instead he whispered in her ear, “Let me put on your shirt.”

The statement sobered her to their reality. She stood away from him and helped him slip on her blouse.

“Turn around.”

She faced him as he buttoned up her silk top. His stare never broke from hers. Strange that he would stare at her now, when during sex he wouldn't even look at her.

Needing to break the tension in the air, she said, “Thank you for a great time this weekend.”

When he buttoned the last button, Cherish took his hand and kissed the back of it. Usually Perry would say something after she thanked him. He would thank

her for being so obedient and so willing. This time he remained quiet. It was the same reaction he gave her immediately after they had sex.

“Put your jacket on.” He handed her the garment.

Next to the discarded bag on the couch, wadded into a ball, were her panties. As usual, he took them as a souvenir. He stuffed them into his pants pocket, a gesture that always tickled her. She liked knowing he would be taking a piece of her home with him. Maybe he smelled them on his way home. Maybe he wrapped the lacey garment around his penis and masturbated to thoughts of her. Maybe he carried a pair of them to work with him and during the day he took quick sniffs, his version of crack. Or maybe he put them on and pranced around his house. The last option wasn't likely, but it was funny to imagine.

“Scene over.”

Cherish's breath caught when Perry said those two words. “What? Usually you don't say that until right at checkout time when I leave. We still have time.”

Perry planted himself in front of her. His face remained stoic for a while, which kicked up those butterflies in her belly again.

“This will be our last weekend together.”

Although he never broke his gaze, never even blinked, something inside Cherish cracked. Her heart maybe. Her soul. Something. If she hadn't locked her knees back, she would have fallen to the floor in a blubbering heap.

Ending this arrangement made sense. She'd started to harbor doubts about Perry's integrity. And after their less-than-stellar coupling, Cherish would have ended their relationship as soon as he pulled out of her.

Sex didn't root their relationship. A deeper connection linked them. He'd shared more about his past this weekend than any other time. For that reason, she couldn't walk away from him.

“No.” It was the only word she could muster the strength to utter.

Perry turned away from her. “You asked Friday when I saw our little arrangement ending. I told you I didn't want to continue doing this when it stopped being fun for me. It's no longer fun for me.”

The harsh words pierced through her like a sword. He couldn't mean them, not the same man who had just lovingly dressed her or the man who bathed her two nights ago. What had happened between that night and now? Sex. Damn, she knew it would change everything.

“So you didn't enjoy the wax play or the clothespins or the exhibitionism? I loved it all. You pushed me, and I didn't back down.” She tried to gain eye contact with him again.

This time Perry kept his back to her. “Playing with you is wonderful. It's just—”

“Then what? Tell me. Do I limit you somehow when we play?”

“Yes, you do.” He packed a few things into his overnight bag. His red gym bag full of toys was already packed and sitting zipped closed on top of a dresser.

“How? What am I not doing?” She marched to Perry and got in his face this time.

While keeping his gaze down, he said, “When I play with random submissives and slaves at local clubs, it doesn't bother me because I'm not attached to those women.” He glanced up long enough for his gaze to connect to hers. “If I'm going to play with a submissive on a regular basis, I don't want to feel limited, and with you, I do.”

“Limited how? I haven't used my safe word all week—”

Perry turned to her. “We don't leave this hotel room all weekend long. Everything we do, everything we are, exists in these four walls for about forty-eight hours, and that's it. Sundays you go home and I go home and we don't talk about it when we get to work, ever. Are you telling me that this arrangement doesn't bother you in the slightest? You're okay with living your life in a lie?”



"I'm not living a lie. When I'm at work, I'm all business. When I'm with you, I'm all yours." She reached out to touch his hand, but he pulled away, a motion that squeezed her heart. "You act as though I should be walking around with a banner over my head that says, 'Hey, world, on the weekends I let my freak flag fly.' I can't do that, and I shouldn't be expected to do that, not by you or anyone else."

"Great speech."

His sarcastic statement cut her to her core. Was he trying to push her away?

He turned back to his bags. "My problem is that I'm actually involved in a local Lifestyle community, and I can't even take you to meet and mingle with them. *I* don't feel authentic."

"And the answer to your problem is to dismiss me?"

He didn't answer. Instead Perry sat down and slipped on his socks.

"Was it because of the sex?" Cherish paced in front of him. Now that the scene was over, her bossy Cherish side slowly emerged. "I admit. I've had better." She stared at him to see his reaction.

Perry kept his head down.

She continued. "At one point, even I thought it might be better for us to stop this arrangement. But I'm not willing to walk away. Not yet. Not until I get some answers."

Perry grabbed Cherish's wrists and glared at her. He looked as though he longed to say something to her. He took a deep breath. "Go home."

Cherish stood. Her throat started to close on her. Damn. She hadn't cried since her grandfather died when she was in high school.

"No."

Perry snorted as he slipped on his sneakers. "Fine. I've got things to do." After he tied his shoes, he stood.

"Perry, stop it. Just talk to me." Cherish stood in front of the door to block his path. "I refuse to believe that a man who said that we both needed each other can

suddenly say that he no longer wants me, no longer wants what we've been doing for several months. And fuck me like he was checking off items on a to-do list. I demand some answers. And since you say that I have just as much say in our arrangement as you do, then I'm saying that we are not over." She crossed her arms over her chest. To punctuate her point, Cherish repeated, "We are not over."

Perry threw his bags onto the floor, then squared off against her. "Yes."

"Yes, what? Yes, we are over?"

He shook his head. "Yes, the sex was bad. I know that."

Cherish blinked. "Why?"

Perry stared at her for a moment, then brought his hand to her face like he wanted to stroke her cheek. The little marching band in her head blasted a congratulatory tune. But since Perry hadn't touched her and he still looked angry, she had to silence them until he finished speaking. He put his hand back down and cleared his throat.

"The reason we can't go any further is because I can't have the type of relationship with you that I could with a submissive or slave." He put his hand on the door over her shoulder and crowded her space. "Haven't you noticed that lately there seems to be a wall between us, like there's something left unsaid?"

"That's why we do the sexy-six questions." At least that's what she had reasoned to herself.

Perry shook his head, so he must have felt otherwise. "We learn basic stuff about each other. Favorite foods, what we like in bed, previous sexual histories. But we don't talk about our lives. There are things I want to do to you that I can't because we're restricting each other."

Had Cherish recognized that a barrier existed between them despite their intimate relationship? Yes, she had. She'd chalked it up to the idea that it added to the mystery surrounding him. What she didn't want to admit was that learning more about him would force her to expose her personal thoughts, her fears, her dreams. The last time she'd done that, her heart had gotten broken. No, a

relationship with boundaries suited her. Why wouldn't a man be happy with an arrangement like that?

"That's the second time you've said that. What can't you do to me that you haven't already done?" Curiosity got the better of her. She wanted the titillating details for her own gratification rather than a need to improve her performance.

"If I want to play with two submissives at once, with you being one of them, I can't. I don't even know if you would be down for satisfying another woman or having her pleasure you."

"You want to see me with another woman?"

"If that's what I feel like doing the day I'm playing, then yes, I would want to see you with another woman or women."

That revelation came out of left field. Like Perry said, there were lots of things about each other that they hadn't revealed, so why should that bit of news be a surprise to her?

Without waiting for her reaction, he continued. "I want to show you off to my friends."

Cherish crossed her arms over her chest. "Oh, you mean like showing your friends that you have *the* Cherish Burke on a leash?" She didn't think Perry was the type to brag about getting her, but perhaps he was. Maybe she didn't know him after all.

"Yes, but not in the way you think. You are beautiful and sexy and damn near the best submissive I've ever trained. If I covered your face with a mask to hide your identity, I would still feel the same way. I don't care about who you are. I care about who we are together."

She blinked again but for a different reason. Did he just admit that he was falling for her? The idea nearly caused the corners of her lips to curl into a smile, but she kept her lips pressed together.

Perry took a step back from her. "I don't want to hold you back from the type of relationship you want. I've taught you the basics of the Lifestyle. I can give you a list of clubs and associations in the area if you want to find a permanent Dom. But I can't keep doing this."

"Why? You're afraid of something. What is it?"

The way he took a couple of steps back from her, the question seemed to catch him off guard.

"You don't know what you're talking about." He shook his head.

"I'm not stupid."

"And I'm not some weakling looking to spill his heart out."

"Why wouldn't you look at me when we made love?" Cherish moved in closer to him.

Perry chuckled. "When we fucked?"

"Whatever you want to call it. Why wouldn't you look at me?" She licked her lips. "Why wouldn't you connect with me?"

He stalked forward, forcing her to stumble back against the door. "Maybe you don't really know me."

"Why are you trying to scare me away?" She crossed her arms over her chest.

"So my lifestyle scares you?"

She didn't answer. If she had, she would have told him that *he* scared her more than any whips or chains or hot wax. Whether he knew it or not, Perry had more power over her than she had over him. Sure, she could fire him at work. But he knew her secrets. He knew what scared her and what excited her. He had seen her naked. If he wanted to, he could ruin her reputation and career. Knowing all that, she still didn't want to stop their arrangement.

"Go home." He grabbed the doorknob behind her.

“Make love to me.” She took a step closer to him to solidify the invitation.

That one step proved to be all Perry needed to take her up on the offer. Before Cherish could blink, he had his hands on her shoulders, ripping down her jacket and pooling it around her feet on the floor.

Perry grabbed her shirt collar. Before moving he said, “Last chance to back out.”

She shook her head. “You know we can't turn back now.”

In one swift motion, he moved his arms apart, ripping the buttons off her blouse. Then like a caged tiger clawing for meat beyond its reach, Perry pulled down her bra cups. Cherish heard a ripping sound, but she didn't care. What concerned her had to do with getting his dick deep inside her.

To help him along, she started working on his jeans as he pulled up her skirt. Perry finished pushing his jeans and underwear down to his ankles after he got her skirt around her waist, exposing her naked pussy.

With the strength she didn't know he possessed, he hooked his arm under her leg. He positioned the head of his dick at her pussy opening, teasing her by rubbing it up and down between her soaked nether lips.

Her heart pounded so hard, she knew it had to be banging on the door behind her. Just as she gripped his shoulders, a knock did sound on their door.

“Housekeeping,” a female voice called from the other side.

Perry kept his gaze directly on Cherish's as he answered. “Just a minute.” He released her legs and backed away from her. In a whispered tone to her, he said, “Come to my house. Follow me.”

Cherish wanted to scream, to protest. Never had she been so wet, so needy for a hard cock to penetrate her, delve deep inside. She needed to connect to him on a physical and emotional level. Never had she thought about going to his home.

“Don't question it.” Perry must have read her thoughts. “If you don't come to my house, consider this relationship over.”

Damn. She needed him, but could she really take their relationship to the next level?

## Chapter Eight

For once, Perry thanked the constantly intrusive hotel staff for giving him a way to get Cherish to his house. Although he wanted to fuck her against the door of their shared hotel room, it took every bit of his strength to corral his hard dick into his jeans and zip them up without getting to experience her succulent flesh. Judging by the way her cheek flexed, he knew she had to be just as frustrated.

Then waiting for Cherish to meet him at a central spot to follow him to his house tested more of his resolve. His heart thrummed as soon as he saw her silver Jaguar rounding the corner to meet him in that restaurant parking lot. Her appearance proved she wanted to take their relationship to another level, which made him nervous. Though he'd pushed her to show more, do more, be more for him, was he really ready for that next step?

As he drove back to his home with Cherish in tow, he thought about his decision to release her.

It hadn't been easy. He had to think about every aspect of their current relationship. Would she want to express her feelings for him when they worked together? Would she want to go to clubs with him as his submissive? And would she want him in a romantic way, especially since he didn't earn as much as she did? He was pretty sure that his annual salary equaled what she earned in a week.

As he held her lavish and tailored garments when he dressed her, a niggling feeling of inadequacy crept into his psyche. At that moment, he thought of someone who hadn't entered his thoughts in a long time: Ann.

Although she wasn't the first submissive he had ever played with, she was the first he'd officially owned. Unlike his relationship with Cherish, the one he'd shared

with Ann had started off sexual. A chance meeting at a vanilla club quickly turned to a gropefest in the parking lot and an after-hours visit to a BDSM club called Red.

Their union started off perfect in Perry's mind. She'd served him and seemed happy. Daily questions about her performance started off cute and endearing. Soon it became clear to him that Ann had lost herself. No longer was she a submissive who knew what she wanted and how to please him. She became a needy, self-conscious shell of her former self. It reminded him of his mother, how she'd needed him.

Perry's constant reassurances to Ann didn't help matters. Pretty soon she even questioned his motives. Why was he with her? What was he getting out of the relationship? Did he truly love her?

At that point, he had to let her go, and Ann agreed. A submissive who questioned every aspect of the Dominant-submissive relationship couldn't have a sturdy foundation and wouldn't be healthy for either the submissive or the Dom or Domme. And Perry, as a Dom, had some of that self-doubt creeping into his brain now.

Looking at Cherish's expensive clothes, he wondered if he measured up to her standards for more than just a man who disciplined her. Did she truly respect him? Without respect he had nothing. All the spankings in the world couldn't bring him that.

And how could he keep a woman, submissive or not, who didn't need him? Perry either had women who relied on him entirely, didn't trust him, or didn't need him. Cherish, oddly enough, existed in all three categories.

He couldn't figure her out. And he couldn't look her in the eyes when they made love. If he connected with her, he would fall for her completely. And he couldn't have his heart broken.

His only option as he saw it had to be to let Cherish go. Doms in higher tax brackets existed. Perry only hoped that a different Dom would look at her in the same awestruck way that he stared at Cherish.



She took his breath away. And as she stepped into his house now, looking a bit breathless herself, he decided for that moment, their moment, nothing else needed to be said.

Maybe he needed to stop being so afraid to feel. He had to look her in her eyes. If nothing else, Cherish deserved that. She deserved that full and complete connection. He wanted to be the man to give it to her. For this one instance, he could open himself up to her.

Perry approached her. She managed to hide her ripped blouse underneath her intact jacket. With one arm around her waist and the other held out above her shoulder, he pushed her backward and managed to slam his front door behind her and press her back against it.

Although he wanted to be as frantic as they had started in the hotel room, he decided that if this would be their last time together, he wanted to savor every moment.

“Perry, maybe we should—”

He silenced her with a tender kiss, pressing his lips against her soft ones. When he closed his eyes, he was transported to a place where he didn't doubt her motive or question his worth, and status didn't matter.

Her soft lips had him questioning why in the world he held off kissing her for so long. He actually felt complete, whole, with this one connection.

Perry framed her face with his hands, occasionally stroking her velvety cheeks with his thumbs. He snaked his tongue into her mouth, hoping for acceptance but preparing for resistance. When Cherish didn't push back, he closed in on her space even more, pressing her harder against the door.

A light moan reverberated in her throat. Testing how far Cherish wanted to go, he stepped back from her, pulling away from the kiss that had so far buckled his knees but hardened other areas of his anatomy.

Like a piper, he stepped backward toward his bedroom while keeping his gaze directly on her. If she wanted him, if she wanted to go further, she would follow.

Seeing her make that first step toward him accelerated his heartbeat. A thought quickly hit him that she may have made the step in order to create enough space to open his door and leave.

His heart pumped faster as he awaited her next move. When she didn't take another step, he stopped in his tracks. After a crucial beat, she released a breath and took another step toward him.

Hedging his bets, Perry sped up the process and continued moving back to his bedroom. At his bedroom door, he stood and waited to see if Cherish still followed. When she appeared at the end of the hall carrying a concerned yet excited expression on her face, he took that to mean that he had her.

He ducked into his bedroom and stood by his bed. As much as he wanted to rip off all his clothes and already be naked by the time she got to his room, he waited. Creaking floorboards signaled that Cherish continued toward him.

Once she appeared in the doorway, Perry could breathe again. He didn't move. He wanted her to come to him, and she did. As she stood in front of him, looking frightened like he had never seen her look before, he undressed her...again.

Just as he'd done a couple of nights ago, he slipped her jacket down her arms. This time he didn't care that it hit the floor, and from the way she remained still, she must not have been concerned about the location either.

As he slid her ripped blouse down her arms, he slipped out of his shoes. Mimicking his actions, Cherish stepped out of her shoes as well. With each piece of clothing she removed, he began to see her differently. Cherish wasn't the most powerful businesswoman at Stratum or in Virginia. And she wasn't a submissive he enjoyed teasing and testing. She would be his lover in a few moments. That label scared him more than anything else.

With Cherish completely unclothed, it took him no time to remove his garments as well. Now that they stood in front of each other naked, bare, it felt as though their relationship was starting over, as though the slate had been cleaned. But had it?

Cherish had never felt so vulnerable and free at the same time. Although she'd never been to Perry's home, she didn't have a desire to take in her surroundings. It didn't matter what hung on his walls, or the color scheme of his bedroom. Perry consumed her attention.

Staring at him, at his lean, nude body, she didn't experience any regret or fear. He stared at her with such lust and admiration in his eyes. And to see his cock rise as he looked at her stirred the juices at the apex of her thighs.

In their previous arrangement, she'd viewed him as powerful, strong, controlling. Now he appeared romantic, tender, loving.

Oh, God, did he love her? For that matter, did she love him? At this point, did it really matter? Maybe if she thought about it, perhaps it did matter.

"I can tell you're thinking, probably overthinking this situation." Perry approached her and took her hand.

The warmth of his hand calmed her, slowed her rapid breathing.

"Don't think. Don't talk. Just move." He pulled her to his bed.

And Cherish just moved. She sashayed to his bed. When he sat down, she climbed on top of him. While she had him on his back, she kissed him again, hungrily this time, nipping his bottom lip and sliding her tongue into his mouth.

Perry held on to her waist, then let his large, commanding hands roam her body. As one hand slid up her back, the other feathered down her hip to her thigh. She kissed down his neck to his chest. At his nipple, Cherish licked. Her toes curled when she felt how hard she'd made it under her manipulation.

With her hand on his chest, she felt his heart pounding out of control. He nestled his warm cock between her pussy lips. Making one slight undulation, she ground her sex into his, making him draw in a quick breath.

As she headed down his body, planting kisses along the way, a realization must have hit Perry on her intentions.

Without a word, he grabbed her shoulders and flipped her onto her back. Staring into her eyes, he offered her a smile to reassure her that he would protect her, care for her, love her. Just as she had done, Perry kissed her neck and moved down her chest.

Cherish assumed that, because of all the times she had served Perry, perhaps this time he wanted to be the one who catered to her. He licked in between her breasts, leaving a cool spot.

As he got comfortable in between her legs, he palmed her breast, massaging it oh so slowly and gently. His mouth busied itself by latching onto her nipple, licking and sucking until Cherish could no longer focus or see straight. He twirled his tongue around her hardened nipple. With each pass, her body twitched.

When he moved his mouth over to her other breast, his hand traveled down her body, over her stomach to her hip. Just as he'd done on the first tit, he licked and sucked the second one, taking his time, savoring her mounds as though it would be the last time he would touch her. She hoped it wouldn't be.

Perry kissed down the center of her belly, dragging his tongue to her navel and dipping it inside. As much as she didn't want to in this intimate moment, the sensation caused her to giggle.

She peered down and found Perry smiling. He continued slithering down her body until her pussy sat in front of his face. On instinct, she spread her legs wider for him. Cherish fisted the comforter around her head in anticipation of his first touch.

She felt his warm breath blowing over her throbbing clitoris. She writhed over his bed. Even with her eyes squeezed shut, she recognized the feeling of his fingers parting her slick nether lips.

Cherish chewed on her lower lip, waiting for the initial touch. Again, he tortured her sweetly by blowing his hot breath over her pussy. As a boss, she wanted to scream to him to put her out of her misery. Her heart squeezed so hard she thought it would collapse within itself.

The first swipe of his tongue over her clitoris made her body contract. She held her breath until she felt her heart beating again. Then Cherish relaxed her body onto the bed. Just like with the rest of her body, Perry knew exactly how to play her. He licked her from her anus up to her clit and down again. When he covered her sensitive nub with his mouth and hummed, she jackknifed off the bed and held the back of his head with her hands.

Perry certainly didn't need any encouragement. She needed to hold something to keep her grounded. He held her thighs apart as he made love to her cunt with his mouth, diving his skilled tongue inside her.

Feeling boneless, Cherish collapsed on the bed. His nose pressed against her clit, offering another sweet sensation through her body. Her stomach knotted, and her legs trembled. The longer he worked on her, the more her climax built inside her. With this new arrangement, did she need permission from Perry to come?

She'd thought about that question, how would they now be defined, as soon as she stepped out of the hotel room. Several times she tried convincing herself to keep driving to her own house and not to meet Perry. She blamed her weakness on her curiosity about his home life. Did he have whips and chains hanging from his walls? Did he have all-black leather furniture decorating the place? Did he already have a submissive there waiting for him?

All these questions rolled around in her head, yet as soon as she walked through the threshold of his home they all went out the window. She needed the answer to one question: did he want her? As he explored her pussy with his mouth,

he more than answered that question. Now another annoying question buzzed in her head: why? Why did he want her?

Perry flicked the tip of his tongue over her clit, and Cherish completely broke apart. She released a moan that shook her body.

He must have taken that as a sign of how close he'd gotten her to come. In a swift move, Perry jumped off the bed and dove into his nightstand drawer. He pulled out a string of condoms and ripped off one.

Cherish wanted to be the one to slip it on him, but he didn't wait. Honestly, she couldn't wait either. Perry tested her eagerness by positioning himself on his back.

If he expected her to be shy and retiring, then he had the wrong woman. Cherish held the base of his cock as she climbed on top of him, straddling his body. She teased herself, rubbing the tip of his cock back and forth between her pussy lips, enjoying the feeling.

Just as Perry took in a deep breath, Cherish impaled herself. A blinding white light left her sightless and disoriented, but in a very good way. She braced her hands on his chest and leaned her head back until she could regain some composure.

Perry raised his hips, which prompted Cherish to gyrate hers, riding his shaft and giving herself permission to let go and enjoy herself for once.

For the first time, she didn't think about work or upcoming interviews or even that damn company retreat. She took in this moment and relished it, enjoying what Perry offered her body.

With her focus returned, Cherish leaned down and brushed her lips over Perry's. She tasted her juices on his mouth, and the briny but sweet taste tempted her to taste more. As she undulated her hips, riding his cock, she nibbled his lip.

Perry rested his hands on her ass cheeks, occasionally squeezing them. In a moment that should have been more titillating than shocking, he gave her ass cheek a smack.

He had certainly spanked her before, and much harder than that. For a reason Cherish couldn't rationalize to herself, she grabbed his hands and pulled them away from her, particularly from her backside. But that didn't stop her from grinding on him faster and faster.

Sweat poured from her body. She felt a drop of it roll down her back between her shoulder blades.

As she held Perry's hands, she noticed how sweaty he'd become. She felt his body trembling under hers. Her too-cool-for-words assistant now gnawed on his upper lip and looked like he would explode at any moment. Defying his own order to remain silent, he spoke.

"Say my name," Perry said between strained breaths. "Please. I'm going to come."

And Cherish felt the build up inside her as well. As easy as it should have been to just utter the word "Perry," she couldn't. Even to this moment when he had given her the best sex of her life, to say his name after all they had been through and done together seemed strange, almost wrong.

"Cherish! Oh, God! I'm coming!" He gripped her thighs and thrust his hips up. "Say it!"

"Yes!" She leaned back, resting her hands on his legs.

Her body shook and every muscle tightened. Her vaginal walls tightened around Perry's hard shaft until it seemed like his body fused with hers.

Perry sat up and wrapped his arms around Cherish's body. "Oh, Cherish."

She coiled her arms around his shoulders. Between panting breaths, she managed to say, "Oh, um, Sir."

## Chapter Nine

Perry held Cherish close to his body. She had her back against his chest and her ass pressed against his satisfied penis. Too bad he couldn't say that the entire experience had been satisfactory.

As he thought about her hesitant response to him when she came, he stroked her soft hair. Outside her standard bun, her hair coiled into loose curls.

Even after the best sex he'd ever had, he didn't know what to say to the woman who had been instrumental in that experience. He leaned forward to kiss her bare shoulder but stopped. Only millimeters away from her flesh, he could almost taste her. His warm breath bounced off her body and wafted by his chin.

Perry pulled back, physically and emotionally. Although he had hoped the sex this time would tear down walls that existed between them, it hadn't. If anything, Cherish laid another thick layer on top.

"Stay." He shifted his body so that he sat up.

Cherish remained motionless, almost as though she wanted to pretend to be asleep. Then she cleared her throat, took a deep breath, and flipped over onto her back to gain eye contact.

"Here?"

Perry didn't say anything. He didn't move a muscle. He hoped his intense stare answered her query.

"I can't." She sat up. With her back to him, she said, "I need to go."

"So that's it?"



She peered briefly over her shoulder at him before she stood. She stumbled a bit before she opened a door across from the bed and peeked inside. When she discovered a bathroom behind the door, she ducked inside.

Out of view, she said, "What more do you want? The sex was amazing. I think I came as soon as I stepped onto your porch." She laughed.

Too bad Perry found nothing funny right now. He sprang to his feet and stormed to the bathroom door. "What the hell are you doing?"

Cherish took a step back from him. "What do you want from me?"

He held on to her shoulders and stared into her eyes. "I want to be able to have you subservient to me after work and at home while having you still boss me around at work. I want to be able to take you to BDSM clubs and let people know that you're mine. I want to meet your family. I want you to meet my family. And I want to keep making love to you. Does that sound like too much?"

"I don't know. Does it?" She crossed her arms over her chest. "Is that what you really want, or are you saying this because you think that's what I want to hear? You think this is what I really want from you?"

No wonder the woman could cut executives in half with her words. She saw through the fluff and flowers to get to the thorns.

She took a step forward and crowded his space. "Now why don't *you* tell *me* what's going on here."

At work and during their weekend play, her brutal honesty had become a trait that he respected. Now he didn't know if he could take Cherish's brand of tough love. But he knew he had to be the one to break down that wall.

This time Perry crossed his arms over his chest too. "Why wouldn't you say my name?"

She opened her mouth to respond and managed to utter a squeak. Rendering her speechless didn't feel good, especially since he wanted answers. What held her

back? For that matter, why couldn't he admit his fears? Maybe if he got her to confess her problems, he would be able to open up.

"And don't think I didn't notice that you pulled my hands away from your ass when I spanked you. Now all of the sudden you don't like that?"

Again, she cleared her throat. "Forget the shower." She barreled past him. "I'll just go home like I should have in the first place."

As he watched her throwing her clothes back on, Perry gritted his teeth. "Damn it, Cherish. We have to stop doing this to each other." He slammed his fist against the doorframe.

After she buttoned her skirt, she twirled around to face him. "Doing what?"

"Shutting each other out. How the hell can we both have and love our kinky and vanilla sides outside work, but neither of us are willing to talk about it?"

This time she approached him, stomping up to him and looking like a bull snorting before charging its opponent. "You want to talk about it? Fine. I don't know what the hell we are. At work, I'm your boss. At the hotel, I'm your submissive. Here, I'm your lover. I don't know if the three lives can or even should mix together. It was hard enough keeping the two personas up. I don't know if I can handle a third." She shook her head.

With each word, he felt pressure mounting on her shoulders. "Then let's not keep our relationship a secret." Perry approached her.

Cherish stepped back. "Plus at work, I feel like I'm disappearing."

"Disappearing? You're all people talk about—"

"I'm representing this client who I don't think is—" She stopped before saying more.

As usual, Cherish kept herself closed off, not wanting or needing support. Couldn't she see that if she wanted it, he would be there for her?

"I don't see where it has to be an issue."

She snorted. "You're a liar. If you're so okay with it, why did you release me?"

That question silenced him. Her brutal honesty stung him. And he didn't know how to respond because she had nailed the exact reason he had released her.

"That's what I thought." She snatched her purse and jacket from the floor. "See you at work. Don't be late."

Perry watched the woman of his dreams walk away from him, and he did absolutely nothing. He couldn't get her to trust him. And judging from the way she left without further discussion, he wouldn't be able to sway her. That meant he had one alternative left.

\* \* \*

*Hold it together, girl. Just another block.*

As soon as her home came into view, Cherish slammed her hand against her automatic garage door opener on the monitor on her center console. She barely let the door open enough for her to get her car through. Safely inside her garage, she closed the door behind her.

She didn't wait for it to close before she broke down, sobbing hard enough that her throat became sore and her eyes hurt.

Never had Cherish cried this hard before, and certainly not over a man. Even with her diva storm-out, she could no longer deny the fact that Perry owned her heart. She loved him. Making love to him solidified that feeling.

A small part of hers wanted the second experience to be horrible, for him to be just as mechanical as their first time. Unfortunately—and fortunately—that hadn't been the case. Perry changed. He handled her body in the same way he always did when they played.

He could see beyond their roles to make love to her as a woman, not his boss and not his submissive.

So why couldn't she break the barrier that kept her from fully giving herself to him? Damn it, why couldn't she just say his name? Lord knew she had been

fantasizing about doing that as well as everything else she'd done with him today since the day he stepped into Stratum.

Cherish sat back in her seat. She peered at her face in her rearview mirror. Her puffy, red eyes topped her red, runny nose. Perfect. Business sharks didn't look like this.

She wiped her finger under her nose, then stepped out of her car. Carrying her shoes in one hand and her purse in the other, she padded into her big, empty house. As she made her way to her bedroom to sleep the rest of her day, she stopped.

Never before had Cherish noticed just how large a house she had purchased. When she bought it, the house suited her station. A powerful woman like her needed to show off her successes.

At that moment, she put her hand to her neck to feel for her pearl necklace, her collar, another symbol of her place. Would she have to give this back?

Another wave of tears washed over her. She ran to her bedroom on the top floor. Without care, she threw her shoes on the floor and plopped herself face-first onto her bed. Times like these, she needed a friend.

Cherish snatched her cordless phone from her nightstand and automatically dialed Vonda's number. Not until Vonda answered did it hit Cherish that she wouldn't know what to say to her.

"Hey, C. What's up?"

"Vonda, I...uh, I..."

What could she say? Since she'd hid her relationship with Perry, she couldn't come clean now. And even if she did, how much should she tell her friend? Should she go into the fact that, although she could squash businessmen like bugs under her red-soled high heels, on the weekends she longed for a man—no, not any man, her assistant, Perry—to take over every aspect of her life? Should she tell her that she just had sex with that same assistant and he blew her mind? Or should she confess that walking away from him broke her heart into a billion pieces?

Cherish sniffed.

“Girl, are you sick? Are you going to be able to present your Diamond Unique dog and pony show tomorrow?”

Yes, work. Cherish had to get herself together. “I’m fine. I was calling to see how your weekend was.”

Silence lingered over the phone, and the hairs on the back of Cherish's neck stood on end. She knew exactly what crossed her friend's mind. Although they had been friends for years, Cherish never called her out of the blue to ask about Vonda's activities.

Cherish had always been the strong one, the one everyone else leaned on for support. Now that Cherish needed that shoulder, she didn't know how to ask for help. It hit her then that she treated all relationships, not just with Perry, with a standoffish attitude.

“If you want to know the truth, it's still going on.”

In the background Cherish heard a deep moan and some mumbling. Apparently the phone call woke up the boy toy Vonda trapped and dragged back to her lair. Cherish released a long breath.

“Sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt. We can talk tomorrow.”

“Wait. Did you need me? You've never called me bef—”

Cherish cut her off. “I’m fine. Go back. Have fun. I’ll catch up with you tomorrow.” She disconnected the call before Vonda delved into the real reason for the call.

Sitting on her bed and surveying her space, her home, it hit her how truly alone she had made herself. Loneliness didn't suit her, but it fit her situation. She had deals to make and an image to protect. Hitching up to just any man wouldn't do.

Perhaps she needed to forget that side of herself. She'd seen firsthand executives on her level in loveless marriages, having affairs or drifting to the seamier side of sex like public sex with prostitutes or frequenting strip clubs.

With her weekend activities with Perry, Cherish became one of those people. She should thank Perry. He released her in time for her to recognize the destructive path before her. So why did she still miss him? Why did it still feel like a part of herself had died, disappeared?

Cherish curled into a ball on her bed. She brought the sleeve of her blouse up to her nose and took in a deep inhalation.

Perry. His scent still lingered on her. Stinging tears erupted from her eyes. What the hell would she do now?

## Chapter Ten

Cherish sat in her office, facing the window that overlooked the bustling city streets below. Although she had to give her presentation in half an hour, she hadn't thought about it at all. The completed folders with the necessary information sat on her desk.

Perry. Efficient as always.

She came into the office early to avoid the awkward stroll by his desk.

Avoiding conflict had never been a part of her DNA. But even after a night of crying and pondering, she still couldn't handle the first conversation with Perry. Today wouldn't have been the first conversation, though. Perry had called her several times during the night. He'd even sent her text messages.

*Call me, one said. We need to talk, said another. It's important.*

Cherish balled her hand into a fist to relieve the cramping she received from holding her BlackBerry, wanting to call him back but unable to make that next step. What he must think of her now.

She heard two taps against her door before it cracked open. Cherish's heart raced. She sat up taller behind her desk, expecting to see Perry's strong face peering into her office. Instead Vonda stepped inside.

"What's up, sistafriend?" Vonda strutted to Cherish's desk wearing an incredibly short skirt, impossibly high heels, and a grin that would rival any sideshow barker.

Cherish released the breath she'd been holding as soon as she heard the knocks. "I'm good. What's going on with you? You look like you had a good weekend."

“And you look like you had a crappy one.” Her friend plopped in a chair across from Cherish. “So what's up with you? And what was up with the call? You all right?”

Cherish parted her lips. She started to tell her everything. She needed to bounce her experience off someone.

“Have you ever felt like you weren't being your true self, like everything you did was surrounded by a big lie?”

Vonda furrowed her thin eyebrows. “What are you talking about?”

She shook her head. “Sometimes I feel like I can't reconcile my work life with my personal one.”

Cherish watched her friend's lip twitch before she started laughing.

“You know why that is, right?”

“No. Why?”

Vonda sat up and leaned in close to her. “You need to get out. I don't mean out to some club around here. Take a vacation. Get out of the country. Pick up some local stranger and do bad things to him.”

Cherish laughed, a first in days.

Vonda continued. “But you know what your big problem is?”

She shook her head. “No. What now?”

“You look for approval in too many people instead of just pleasing yourself. You don't need a reason to connect your work to your private life. And you don't need to excuse it if it doesn't. You need to do what makes you feel good.”

“Is that what you do?”

Vonda raised her hands to show herself off. “Do I look stressed? And I'm still successful. And no one around here knows my business.” She stood and put her hand on top of Cherish's. “Stop looking for reasons to stop living. Stratum is not life and death. And you are not your job.”

“You make it sound so easy.”



“It is. And I really think you should go on that retreat. It would do you some good to get some separation from this place.”

“Oh, yeah, leave here so that I can spend my off time with people I work with. Sounds reasonable.”

“Maybe the people here aren't the problem.”

If Vonda only knew.

Vonda stood straight up. “And please promise me that you'll go. I hear the cabins are fab.”

“And yet you're still not going.”

“I already told you. I'm happy with my job and my life. You, on the other hand, need some stress relief. Don't turn down this offer too.”

The wisdom sounded logical, but Cherish still had a huge elephant sitting outside her office door that she didn't want to deal with at the moment.

Right about that time, Perry walked into her office. Wearing black slacks, a crisp, white shirt and a cobalt blue tie, he looked so right. Maybe because Cherish imagined him without his clothes. She crossed her legs when her clit throbbed.

“And speaking of work, I'll leave you to it.” Vonda patted Cherish's hand and offered her a comforting smile before walking away. “Mr. Stone.”

“Ma'am.” Perry nodded his head to Vonda as she strolled by him. As soon as the door closed behind her, he spoke. “The room is set up for your presentation. The client has just arrived and is in Mr. Utterman's office. And I've taken the liberty of supplying the room with different beverages, pastries, and fruits. You like strawberries, right?”

Cherish stared at Perry. Just looking at him made her forget how to control her body. She blinked more rapidly than before. Her heart pounded out of control. Her breathing came out staggered. She didn't even know how to control her hands. She rubbed them over the top of her desk, then decided it was time to go.

“Thank you. If everything is set up, I might as well go and—”

Perry grabbed her arm before she managed to get away. The connection alone melted her body. If he asked her to strip down and crawl on the floor on her hands and knees, she would have done it.

“Why didn't you return my calls and texts from yesterday? I really do need to talk to you.” His deep voice rumbled through her body.

“There is nothing we need to say to each other outside work.” She wriggled her arm out of his grip. “The scene was over, right?”

When he didn't respond to her cutting remark, she continued to the door. As soon as she touched the handle, he said, “My call pertained to work.”

She turned to him.

He held up a group of papers in his hand. “I have some information about your client that you'll need before you do your presentation.”

After straightening her jacket, she approached Perry and pushed the papers against his chest. “Thank you, but I won't need them. I figured out that my problem is that I've forgotten to rely on my own instincts. All I really need is what's in here.” She tapped her index finger against her temple. “I've never let myself down.”

“Never?”

Standing so close to him, she caught the scent of his masculine aroma again, the same one that clung to her clothes from the weekend. She had to get him out of her head, out of her heart.

“I have my report. I know what I need to do, what I need to say.” She started to walk past him.

“I know how much it bothers you to do something that goes against how you're perceived.”

She glanced up at him and swallowed hard.

“I know how hard you've worked to maintain your integrity. This will help you see that you don't have to compromise. Not all the time.”

She stared at the papers in his hand, then glanced up at him. When she saw him swallow hard this time, a prickling feeling itched across her skin. “Why do I get the feeling that there's more to what you're saying?”

From his back pocket, Perry pulled out a folded piece of paper. “This is my resignation. I'm putting in my two-week notice. I've already informed human resources. This is a copy for your records.”

Everyone in the building and even in the next town must have heard Cherish's heart cracking. She wanted to scream that he couldn't go. But why would he stay and work for a woman who couldn't talk to him?

“Now? You choose this very moment to give me this news?”

“Now that I have you in front of me, I figured I had better lay everything on the line.” Perry took a deep breath. “Including—”

As her throat tightened and her eyes itched, she pointed to her desk. “We'll discuss this when I'm done. For now, grab your laptop and go to the conference room to take notes.”

He sighed. “Yes, ma'am.”

Cherish rushed to the conference room, not concerned if Perry followed her or how close. It took all her strength to get to a chair at the head of the table.

Even there, Perry approached her. “Just in case you change your mind.” He slid the research under her face, then turned away.

The information Perry had found for her on Diamond Unique didn't matter to her right now. She pushed the research away and opened Perry's letter. In it, he talked about wanting to branch out to realize his full potential. He also thanked Cherish for all the invaluable lessons she'd taught him.

*Working with Ms. Burke has been the singular most exciting experience of my life, one that I will always remember. She saw the possibilities in me that I didn't know I could achieve. For that, I am forever grateful.*

Cherish read those lines over and over again until it seemed like her stare burned the paper. She sniffed and looked up to see Perry sitting at the end of the room where the assistants sat during meetings.

He stared at her, then started to stand. The door burst open, and Utterman and Mr. Von Forten of Diamond Unique walked inside. Cherish plastered on her usual business mask that included a fake smile and shook her client's hand.

"Mr. Von Forten, great to see you again. I take it your trip in was good." Cherish hoped that her eyes weren't too red.

From the way her client smiled at her, he must have been fooled.

"It was pleasant." The mature man with stark white hair bent over to look into her eyes.

"And the hotel?"

"Very nice. Thank you for the suggestion." He patted her hand, a move that felt patronizing to Cherish.

"Actually, you can thank my assistant." Cherish motioned to the back of the room.

Perry gave the man a cursory nod and resumed his work on his laptop.

"The Westin. A very nice place."

Cherish's breath caught in her throat. Why would Perry suggest that her client go to the same hotel they normally stayed? Did he want them to get caught? Was he trying to out them?

"Glad your accommodations were to your liking. Coffee? Tea? My assistant has also taken the liberty of stocking the room with refreshments." She pointed to a completely full buffet set up next to a wall.

"Don't mind if I do." Her client walked toward the gourmet coffee.

As she thought about Perry's action, from the research to the hotel choice, she considered the information he collected that sat in front of her. She placed her hand on top of the stack of papers, hoping to get a sense of the content.

Her thumb caressed the top page. What he found could only help her.

“If you gentlemen will excuse me for one moment, I have something to go over very quickly. Then we can get started.” She picked up the other papers and walked out of the conference room.

In an empty hallway, she read over pages of his research on how Diamond Unique only employed local residents to mine their diamonds and how they were paid well above the standard. It even detailed how much the company gave back to the impoverished country, including building new schools and improving their water systems.

Relieved, Cherish leaned against the wall. Her shoulders slumped, and she breathed easier. Aside from the situation going on with Perry, she worried how she would present to this company that, from what she knew and read, they weren't very reputable. Good to know that she had been right about them.

As a businesswoman, she knew she would encounter corporations and businesspeople with shady backgrounds. She just didn't want to be one of the people trying to keep those types of businesses running.

She returned to the conference room feeling renewed, at least for work. Cherish flew through her presentation. She never once saw a look of disappointment from either her boss or her client, which spoke volumes. Although Utterman liked her, he couldn't hide his feelings if he didn't like something.

The more she spoke, the stronger she felt. Feeling confident, Cherish decided to go off script to make a statement to both her client and to Perry.

“In conclusion, gentlemen, diamonds are a worthy investment. The perception of diamonds and the industry vary. Although everyone finds the gems beautiful, they're hard.” She glanced at Perry, who returned her stare. “They're difficult to mine, and lots of controversy has been made on how to extract these beauties.”

Mr. Von Forten and Utterman cleared their throats and shifted in their seats.

Cherish stepped closer to the duo. “No matter the perception, the end result is an exquisite piece of heaven.” She ran her fingertips over her necklace. “No matter

what it took to get the product, you bring your customers exactly what they want. No one needs to know how their keepsake ring or bracelet or necklace got there.” She released a long breath. “All they need to know is that their jewelry is important and will last them a lifetime. And I hope that I can have that same long-lasting relationship.” She broke her stare from Perry. “A relationship with your company, of course.”

At the end of her presentation, both men stood and applauded. Perry gathered his laptop and walked out of the room.

“Another hit, Cherish.” Utterman patted her on her shoulder.

“Thank you, sir.” Cherish attempted to head toward the door. The other part of her unfinished business just walked out of the room.

The client offered his hand. “Of course you'll maintain my account, Ms. Burke. I wouldn't have it any other way.”

Cherish shook Mr. Von Forten's hand. “Thank you, sir. If you'll excuse me.”

She ran back to her office. Perry stood at his desk, an empty box in front of him. Her smile slipped down to a frown.

“Mr. Stone, may I see you in my office, please?” She walked inside her office, expecting and hoping he would be behind her.

When she reached her desk, she turned and leaned her backside against it. Perry walked inside, but just barely. He stayed in the doorway, his hands down in front of him.

“Please come in and shut the door behind you.”

With great reluctance, Perry closed the door behind him; however, he still maintained his spot by the door. When he faced her, she beamed.

“We did it.” Cherish clasped her hands in front of her.

“You did it.” Perry dropped his gaze to the floor and remained stoic.

“Out of all my clients, how did you know what bothered me about this one?”

He brought his gaze up. “I know you.”

His response sent a shiver up her spine. "If you truly knew me, you would know that I don't want you to go." She held up his folded resignation that she stowed in her jacket pocket. "Is this really the answer?"

"All I've ever wanted for you, here and, um, elsewhere, is to make you happy. I don't think I can do that for you."

"Why? You've never really told me why." She took a step closer to him. "And why is it that for this instance you know exactly what I want, but in others you don't. Why would you tell Mr. Utterman that I didn't want to do the retreat?"

The hard stare he maintained since coming into the room softened. "One question at a time. First of all, I didn't say a word to Mr. Utterman about your decision. Why would I betray your trust like that?"

From the conviction of his words and how indignant he appeared, she believed him. But if he didn't tell her boss about her decision, who did?

"And secondly, I will never be your equal. And the longer you're with me, the more I would always wonder if I'm truly good enough for you."

Cherish felt her eyebrows rut together. "Wait. You're willing to leave here and let me go because you think—"

"Ms. Burke." After one knock, Utterman opened her door and walked into her office, causing her and Perry to create space between their bodies. "Wonderful job."

Perry started to leave the office when Utterman grabbed his arm. "Before you leave, young man, I must tell you what an excellent job you do here." He glanced at Cherish. "Your boss says nothing but great things about you."

"She's a pleasure to work for, sir." Perry started toward his desk again, but her boss pulled him back into the conversation.

"Which is why it troubles me to hear that you're leaving. Are you sure that's what you want to do? Times are hard out there, even for a man as talented and as full of integrity as you."

Perry glanced at Cherish for a moment. "As much as I enjoy working for Ms. Burke, I feel like I'm not working to my full potential. I have so much I could offer the right person, uh, company."

"I know you do. Maybe within your two weeks, Ms. Burke can convince you to stay. For you, I would even consider allowing you to attend the executive retreat."

Cherish hoped her gasp that caught in her throat hadn't become audible. An assistant being invited to the retreat? Maybe her boss saw something in Perry beyond just his ability to weaken Cherish's knees.

Perry gave Cherish a quick glance before addressing Utterman. "Sounds like a tempting offer, sir."

"Please think about it. And I hear your boss is coming, too. But don't worry. I won't have her working you to death on the trip." Utterman laughed.

Cherish managed to squeak out a fake laugh, but in her head all she thought about was Perry tying her down to her bed in her cabin and pouring hot wax on her body. Looking at his conflicted expression, Perry must not have come to those possibilities like she had.

Perry excused himself and shut the door.

"I don't think I need to tell you what a great job you're doing." Utterman put his hand on Cherish's shoulder and guided her to her long white leather couch in her office.

"Just doing my job, sir." Cherish took a seat and crossed her legs.

"You do a lot of that. But don't miss the forest for the trees." Utterman jutted his thumb over his shoulder toward her door. "You have a valuable resource out there."

"I know that. But he's not the only person capable of being my assistant. Not to sound too arrogant, I'm sure there are lots of people out there right now who would kill to work for me."



Utterman nodded. "You're right. But sometimes it's the little things that an established assistant can do for us that a new one can't. Once you have someone broken in to make a comfortable fit, you don't want to monkey with that dynamic." Then the man did something he'd never done before. He held Cherish's hand. "You know, for as many years as I've known you, even when you were just an intern, you've always worked so hard and I never see you out or hear about your social plans."

Cherish opened her mouth to spew various reasons on how a public image may tarnish the company, but her boss stopped her.

"I couldn't care less what you do on your off time. Just understand that you need that balance or you'll crack. I would hate to lose two gifted employees."

Cherish soaked in his words and nodded. Both he and Vonda gave her the same sound advice. She had to stop trying to control every aspect of her life and just be free. Part of that freedom had to do with letting Perry know how she truly felt about him and telling him, no, begging him not to leave her. She needed him more than she needed a good stock tip. She had to bring that wall down and stop letting their relationship be so casual.

"Why don't you take the rest of the day off? I think you've more than earned it. And if you're not here—" Again, he motioned toward Perry.

"Thank you, sir." Cherish patted his hand.

He smiled and stood. As he headed to her door, a thought hit her.

"Sir?"

Utterman turned.

"How did you know I had decided to go to the retreat?" She hadn't even told Perry, which cleared him of her accusation of telling him when she said she didn't want to go.

"Word gets around, Cherish." He winked, then left.

With so many things swirling around her head, Cherish floated to her chair behind her desk. She straightened herself, sat up tall, and called Perry back into her office.

After a few seconds, he stepped inside, as always, with pad and pen in hand.

"Close the door." She pointed behind him.

Perry returned to the door and closed it. She wanted to tell him to lock it, especially after Utterman waltzed right into her office. But a small part of her enjoyed the thrill of getting caught.

Perry stood by the chairs in front of her desk, a stance he always took whenever she ordered him to see her.

Cherish took a deep breath, then stared at him. "Sexy six."

Perry blinked, peered over his shoulder as though someone had heard her, then brought his attention back to Cherish.

"Excuse me?" Still holding the pad and pen, his hands froze in midair.

"Who made you question your ability to make me happy?" She slipped off her jacket.

"What are you talking about?" Perry tried playing off the serious question. When he noticed that Cherish didn't fall for his fake bravado, he succumbed. "Ann."

Cherish's body went cold. Although she didn't think she had been the first woman in Perry's life, she didn't expect him to utter another woman's name.

"What I've grown to, um, love in you is your strength. Before you, I owned a submissive. Her name was Ann. The arrangement started off perfect until she questioned everything we did together. I can't be with someone who doesn't trust me."

His statement hit its target.

"I'm so sorry I accused you of telling Utterman my plans for the retreat. I know you didn't say anything." She eased her feet out of her heels under her desk.

"Who will you get to replace me?" Perry brought his hands down and stood up taller. With his chin up, he almost looked indignant.

Cherish shook her head. "No one can replace you."

"I mean here."

"I meant both." She swept her fingers over her pearls. "What would it take for you to stay?"

"You mean here at work?"

"You can't answer a question with a question." She undid the buttons on the cuffs of her blouse.

"Then you need to be more specific."

Cherish cocked her head but didn't bother clarifying her statement.

"Okay, if you mean here at work, I guess if you were aware of some junior executive position here that you could help me get, I would stay. If you mean in other areas of our lives, it would take trust."

She planted her hands on her desk, nearly leaping to her feet. "I trust you completely."

"I think you *want* to trust me, but you're not there yet."

"How can you say that? The things I let you do to me, I wouldn't let anyone do." She shook her head.

"You couldn't say my name the last time we made love. If I stayed, would you change? Can you break that wall down?"

Cherish's insides quivered as she thought about his concern. "I want you. Outside the Lifestyle, it scares me to be so open, to put so much trust in other people." She connected her stare with his. "But I want to change. If keeping this closed off means losing you, I can learn to change."

"I know. I mean I need to learn to trust in myself. Sometimes my skills are enough. If you wanted someone who made as much as you did, you would have him by now."

She smiled. "I have no doubt in my mind that you'll do great things. You've already gotten me convinced that I look fabulous in hot wax."

He laughed. The levity broke the tension in the room.

Perry's face slowly morphed back to something serious. "What would it take for you to be my submissive beyond the weekend?"

She took a deep breath. "I think I'm ready for that step. Just understand my position. I can't go out to these parties and clubs with my face exposed."

He held up his hand to stop her. "Haven't I always protected you?"

She smiled. "Yes, you have."

"If you'll have me, I always will."

"When can we go back to the way we were?" She undid the top three buttons on her shirt.

Perry shook his head. "We can't."

Her hands and her heart stopped.

"We have to learn from the past and move on. Do you really want to start all over and going over the wall we had between each other again?"

She shook her head. "You're right."

"When can I get you back to my house again?" He sat his pad and pen on her desk and moved closer to it.

"Today. Utterman was so impressed by the presentation that he gave me the rest of the day off. If I'm not here, you don't have to be here either." She winked. "Where do you see us in five years?"

"Us? There's an us now? I like the sound of that." He rubbed his hands together. "Happy. That's where I see us. Just making each other happy."

And she loved his response. No pressure about work or marriage or children. He made making one another happy their number one goal.

"Where can I take you to play with you?"

Cherish knew the question tested how she truly felt about him and the situation. She answered it from the heart. "I'll go wherever you want to take me. I trust you completely."

If the smile that spread from one side of the room to the other was any indication, he must have been pleased at the response.

"Why me?" she asked.

Perry rolled his eyes. "After everything we've been through, I can't believe you're asking that same question again."

"I'm hoping for a new response this time." She reached behind herself and undid the button on her skirt and pulled down the zipper, but she didn't remove her skirt. Not yet.

He leaned over her desk to stare directly into her eyes. "Because, Cherish Burke, my little lamb, I love you. I love you with all my heart. I can't imagine what I would have done without you."

He answered just what she had hoped to hear. "I love you, too, Perry. And I love that you love me, just me. Stripped down, bare. I love what we have, and I don't want to change it."

"My turn. Why are you undressing?" He licked his lips.

Cherish cocked a smile at the side of her mouth. "This time, I'm going to answer your question with a question, but it's a 'how' question, so it should be okay."

"Says who?"

"How do you want me?" She stood and shimmied out of her skirt.

Two buttons fastened together at the bottom held her shirt together. She watched Perry scanning her body. She could almost hear his pulse racing.

"Not here." He shook his head.

His response erased the smile from her face. This time she wanted to push her comfort zone and do something risqué and sexy. It shocked her that Perry had no interest in pushing that envelope.

He strolled behind her desk, and with just his sheer presence, he forced her to sit back down. Then he leaned over her, placing both hands on the arms of her chair.

“How fast can we get to your house?” he asked.

She beamed. “Let me get dressed, and I'll get my driver to take us.”

“Aren't you afraid that—”

She stood, snaked her hand to the back of his head, and pulled him in for a sultry kiss. Her tongue explored his mouth as she held him close. She broke from the kiss long enough to say, “The only thing I'm afraid of is losing you again. It would tear me apart to be without you.”

“Get dressed now. I'll make some phone calls to clear your schedule for the rest of the day; then I'll make arrangements to get my own cabin for the trip this weekend.”

Cherish nodded.

Perry gave her a quick peck before racing to the door. Before he left, he turned back to her. “Get ready for Friday.”

“No more Westin hotel for us anymore.” Cherish kind of missed that part of their relationship already. She liked how he had their room set up and how he had everything planned.

“You got that right. And I plan on taking you to a play party this Friday. I can't wait to introduce you to my friends.”

Cherish swallowed hard. Then she thought about the possibilities with Perry. He would never do anything to hurt her. He would always protect her. What did she have to worry about?

\* \* \*

Perry couldn't keep his hands off Cherish the entire ride to her house. As promised, he didn't make a move on her in her limousine until she put up the privacy glass between them and her driver, who didn't need to know anything about her private life.

He'd longed for her to finally admit her feelings, to drop the wall that she had built around her heart. The speech she'd made to her client spoke volumes to him. He knew what she said had more to do with their situation than with Diamond Unique. Had Utterman and Von Forten not been in the room, Perry would have fucked Cherish right there and then.

He watched her with pride as she spoke with such conviction. And the fact that she did so without apology or fear washed him over with a warm feeling. Although he didn't give her his letter of resignation to break her, he marveled at how she'd kept her composure. Ann would have crumbled. Ann wouldn't have fought for him.

When Cherish made her admission of how much she wanted him, needed him, he couldn't help but admit his own feelings, how much he loved her. He wouldn't know what he would have done without her.

As his lips connected to hers and his tongue explored the inside of her mouth, his hand cupped her breast through her blouse. Even through her blouse and bra, he felt her hardened nipple.

Cherish massaged his thigh, then slid her hand up to his crotch. She rubbed his cock through his pants, making him harder.

He couldn't wait to be inside her. Their bodies lunged forward when the car stopped in front of Cherish's house. Perry pulled back from her and helped adjust her clothes.

Before the driver could get to them, Perry helped Cherish out of the car and ushered her to the front door. Once inside, he wasted no time in taking her, taking his woman, his property, his submissive.

He felt closer to Cherish than ever before. This time he wouldn't assume to know what she would want like their first time, and he wouldn't feel disconnected

like their second time. Now they knew each other. They had opened up to each other. And he wouldn't be waiting for ideal moments either.

He pressed her against the door. He released her hair from its bun as she undid his tie and ripped open his shirt. Then he yanked open her blouse, popping off her buttons. Perry pressed his lips against hers again.

Cherish returned his passion as she hiked her skirt up.

"I love you." Perry pulled down her bra cups to expose her luscious tits.

"I love you too." She pulled down her panties and wrapped a leg around his.

Perry pulled out a condom from his wallet before dropping his pants. Cherish helped sheathe him. As he held up her leg he plunged deep inside.

"Oh, God!" Cherish clawed his back and clamped her legs around his body.

He pumped into her cunt. Her pussy walls constricted around him so tight he found it difficult to pull out of her. This type of constraint suited him. Perry fisted her loosely curled hair and made her stare into his eyes.

Cherish attempted to move her head forward to kiss him, but he teased her, keeping his head back from her reach.

"I need you," she said breathlessly.

Perry stared at her. Her statement went beyond just needing to kiss him. She opened so much to him; her final wall came crashing down.

"I need you." She clutched his shoulders and maintained her stare.

He scooped his hands underneath her butt and scuttled over to the couch. In a careful motion, he placed her on her back and lay on top of her. As Cherish wrapped her legs around his body again, he continued thrusting.

Perry felt her pussy walls tighten around his shaft. He connected with her so deeply he already knew her orgasm approached.

He grabbed her hands and held them over her head and against the couch. She didn't struggle against his control this time. And she maintained eye contact.

"Oh, yes!" She squeezed her legs around him even more.



“Say my name.” He gritted his teeth and tried not to come. He wouldn't climax until he finally heard her calling his name as a lover, not as a boss.

“Oh, God!” Cherish closed her eyelids and leaned her head back.

“Say it!”

She opened her eyes and brought her attention back to him. “I love you, Perry. I need you, Perry. I want to come. Please.”

“Come, Cherish. Do it!”

Cherish growled, then screamed. She embedded her nails into his back. If Perry could bottle this perfect moment, he would. As it was, he would just have to keep making love to her and hoping that every reaction topped this one.

Perry came. His body froze, and his heart pounded so hard it sounded in his head. When he came down off his high, he allowed his body to relax on top of hers.

“You still want to go to the retreat?” He smiled as he looked at her, not wanting to pull out of her just yet.

“I don't know, Mr. Stone. Will you be there too?” she asked with a smile.

“Is there a reason I should be there?”

“We just made such a great connection. I don't want it to stop, um, Sir.”

This time when she said “sir” it curled his toes. “Ready to play, Little Lamb?”

“I don't have any toys here.” She chewed on her lower lip.

“After all this time as your assistant, you don't think I'm resourceful?”

Cherish beamed. “I'm all yours.”

“Always will be. But the true test will be this weekend.”

If Cherish could make it through a play party, she would be perfect. Perfection didn't exist in Perry's world. Could he be that lucky?

## Chapter Eleven

“Look at me,” Perry commanded.

Outside a stranger's house, Cherish faced him. Wearing a full hood complete with zippered mouth and eyeholes, she felt secure. The rest of her getup matched the hood. Perry had her wear a red leather corset that he cinched tight and hard around her body. Then she had on a short black leather skirt that barely covered her ample ass.

She would have been dubbed the Money Honey had anyone seen her in this outfit.

Perry tugged the headgear back and forth to make sure she could see and breathe, both very important for where she had to go.

“You ready?” Perry grabbed her hand.

She squeezed his. “Yes, Sir.”

The old Cherish Burke wouldn't have donned an outfit like this and gone to a stranger's house at midnight for a BDSM party. The new Cherish Burke would follow Perry to the ends of the earth and back again, and would do it naked if he requested it.

Perry helped guide her up the steps to the front door. Instead of knocking, he walked inside with Cherish trailing behind him.

“Hey, everyone.” Perry waved to the group.

The ones standing all acknowledged him. Those with heads bowed or on their knees remained silent.

“This is Little Lamb.” He wrapped his arm around her waist. “I own her.”

Those three words meant just as much as those other three little words. Her heart pounded as he continued to introduce her around to his friends, who all seemed nice. And they all seemed normal, like they could be teachers, nurses, librarians. No real deviant-looking one in the bunch.

“On your knees here.” Perry pointed to a spot next to another kneeling submissive.

Cherish obliged.

“We'll be playing soon.” He patted her head and left her.

Cherish refrained from starting a conversation with the man next to her, who looked to be well into his sixties and a bit on the pudgy side. He, too, wore a full hood, except his eyeholes had been zipped shut and his mouth hole had a perfect ring shape securing it open, the perfect size for a penis or dildo.

The row of submissives and slaves faced the front door. When it opened again, Cherish couldn't help but look to see who would be arriving next. The array of submissives, slaves, Doms, and Dommies surprised her. If Perry opened her eyes to BDSM play, then coming to this party gave her an eye-opening experience on the dynamics within the Lifestyle.

A mature but stunning woman walked through the door. Even through the zipper holes, Cherish recognized that the woman wore head to toe Chanel. Her makeup looked fresh. Aside from her wardrobe, she seemed so familiar.

“Thank you for the invitation, darling.” The woman air-kissed the woman Cherish had been introduced to earlier as being the hostess. “Has my little piggy been a good boy?”

“I don't know. You may want to ask his mistress. Has anyone seen Vendetta?” the hostess asked.

From her voice and appearance, Cherish could swear she had met this woman before. She looked very familiar. Maybe the woman shopped at the same store or ran in the same circles as Cherish.

After a beat, a woman screamed, "Here I am!"

Instead of walking around the row of submissives, she stepped in between Cherish and the older man next to her, nearly knocking the man to the floor.

On instinct, Cherish helped him sit back up on his knees. She grabbed his hand. His bracelet slipped down his arm and touched her hand.

Briefly, she peered down at the bracelet before resuming her spot. She blinked when she noticed it was a MedicAlert bracelet, kind of like what Utterman wore. Since she'd never seen the man without a full suit and tie, she couldn't identify this man as her boss. How many men this age wore those same types of bracelets? He could be anyone.

Cherish redirected her attention to the front again. The Domme that nearly knocked the man next to her down approached the woman who had just walked inside.

The Domme had on skintight black latex pants that looked sprayed onto her body and complemented her burnt honey skin tone nicely. And she had on a black leather bra. Cherish couldn't see the woman's face.

"Your little piggy has been a very, very bad boy." The Domme shook her head.

"Oh, good. I like it when you wear him out." The woman laughed. "But don't be too harsh. He has a trip tomorrow."

"I know." Vendetta spun around.

She, too, wore a mask, but it only covered the top half of her face. She sauntered to the man next to Cherish and crouched down. Too afraid to look, Cherish kept her gaze forward. She heard a slow zipping sound. Vendetta must have undone the eyeholes for him.

"Your wife wants to see you get your ass spanked, and I know you like it when she watches you, don't you?"

He nodded, unable to speak with his mouth held open.

Cherish felt a head next to hers. "You want to watch for a bit before we play?" Perry asked.

She nodded, afraid her vocal chords would betray her, and also scared that if she did know these people, that they would know her as well and may be able to connect the dots faster than her.

"V, do you mind if we watch you?"

"You know I love an audience." Vendetta laughed.

As Cherish struggled to her feet, she felt another head next to her face.

"Welcome to the dark side," Vendetta whispered in her ear. "Glad to see you finally getting out of the house."

The dots connected. Holy shit! Vendetta was Vonda. Cherish's skin prickled at the idea. So Vonda got her relaxation from spanking men? Not that Cherish had any room to talk. She loved it when Perry disciplined her.

And Perry walked around this party without a mask. That meant Vonda knew Perry's proclivities and made up the homosexuality claim. Under her mask, Cherish smiled.

"Come on, kids. Everyone this way." Vonda strolled down a long hallway to a back room. When Piggy crawled by her, she said to him out loud, "Don't worry. I won't fuck you up too bad for your camping trip." She winked at Cherish when she went by her.

Holy shit! Utterman, the no-nonsense man who formed her business career, liked to be dominated and disciplined? Now his words and Vonda's advice rang true in her head. Be herself. Find what relaxed her. Don't worry about what anyone thought. She still wouldn't be removing her mask. But it felt good to know she kept good company.

And that meant that the well-put-together woman had to be Lena, Utterman's wife. Now when Cherish made suggestions for a night out, she had other options to give.

“Fuck, I love Fridays!” Vonda slammed the door behind the group.

And now that Cherish learned to be herself and to trust Perry, she loved her life. She leaned into him. “I love you.”

Despite her hood, he kissed her forehead. “I love you, too, Little Lamb.”

And now they didn't have to keep anything casual.

THE END

## Bridget Midway

Don't let the 1940's-sounding name fool you! Though she may sound sweet, Bridget Midway writes what everyone else fantasizes about. An avid writer for all things fun, unusual and passionate, she enjoys making her readers laugh as much as she likes seeing them fan themselves down after reading a hot, sexy scene. She writes long contemporary romance, single-title romance, some light paranormal romances, science fiction, historicals and erotica, all with multi-racial characters and/or with interracial romances (because when you have a box of chocolates, you have to taste each one and enjoy the differences). Some of her short stories have been published by *The Sun* magazine. She was a finalist for the title of Sexiest Fiction Writer sponsored by BetterSex.com.