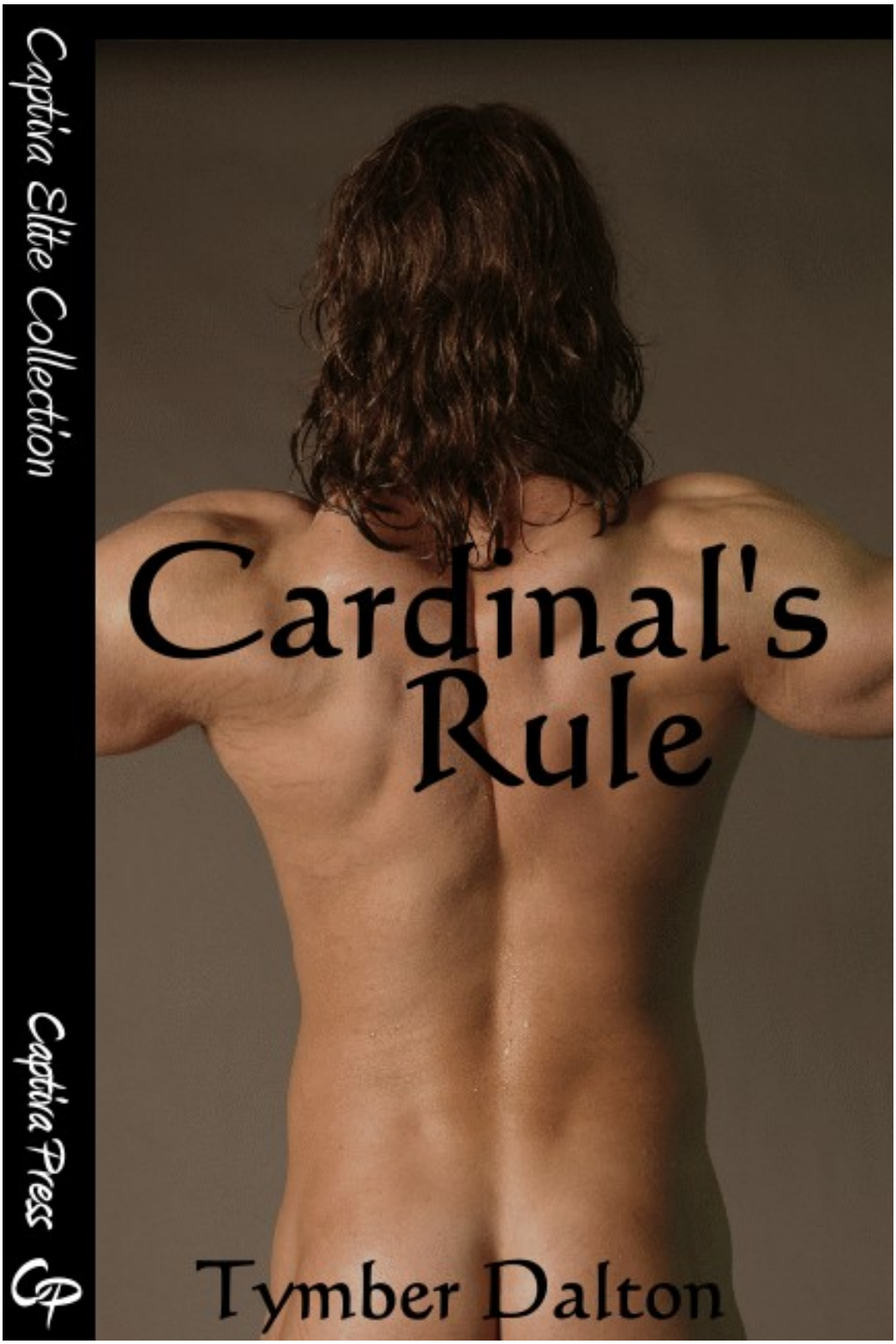
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In her world, there's only one rule: Cardinal's Rule.

She stood. "I don't want to hear this." She heard the tremor in her voice.

Undeterred, he continued. "I told him he had no right to make the decision for myself or the one he left. To not tell either about the other."

She shook her head. "We're done here, Mr. LaCroux. I've changed my mind, and I'm not going to do this. I want you both to leave. Right now." She didn't want to see slave's face. If she never saw his face, it meant it didn't happen.

"Please," he said. "I need to make amends."

She angrily jabbed a finger at him. "I don't know what kind of mindfuck you're into, but I'm not playing into it!"

He stepped forward, until he stood in front of her. "I feel responsible. Because of my shortcomings as his Master the first time around, apparently I failed to instill in him the ethic that a Master *never* abandons a slave, especially without explanation. *Ever.*"

Her knees gave out and she heavily sat in the chair as Landry stood there. He leaned in, his face inches from hers. "I have a business proposition for you, Mistress Cardinal. If you will marry me, and stay married to me for at least three years, I will pay you two hundred thousand dollars for every year you stay with me for those three years. I owe you more than I can ever repay you, for more than one reason. I need to start that restitution now. I will be back for slave at the end of the hour. Be vicious. Take your pound of flesh and then some, literally. He will take whatever you dish out."

With that he turned and walked out the front door.

Leaving the money on her table and slave kneeling on the floor.

Fuck!

After what felt like forever, she sat up and looked at the man kneeling on her floor. Her feet felt numb, her legs shaky as she stood and slowly walked around the coffee table.

He didn't look up, didn't move.

She stood over him, her breath ragged. "Look at me, goddammit," she finally said.

He slowly tilted his face up, familiar brown eyes staring into hers.

Her handsome Master was Landry's slave.

Cardinal's Rule

Tymber Dalton

Captiva After Dark

Captiva Press

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Dedication

To all my friends and adopted family at the Sarasota Society, thank you for your friendship, patience, mentoring, fun, laughs, and for welcoming me into the fold.

Cardinal's Rule

Tymber Dalton

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Chapter One

Redbird.

Tilly Cardinal didn't bother trying to conceal her smile as she pushed her grocery cart down the aisle and checked items off her list. Tonight was special. Not quite their anniversary, but Cristo had been gone four weeks on business. Celebrating his return would be fun.

Damn she'd missed him. It felt weird rattling around their apartment alone. They'd started looking at houses before he left town for this job. She couldn't wait to show him the ones she'd toured in his absence. He'd even hinted again a few weeks ago about getting married, if she wanted to.

For the first time in her life, she realized the idea of getting married didn't fill her with terror. She'd never trusted anyone in her life the way she trusted Cristo.

After buying all his favorite things, she loaded the groceries in the car and headed home. She had four hours to prepare before his return. During the drive she let her mind drift. She never thought she'd be able to love until she met Cristo, much less trust. Not after what she'd been through.

Friend, soul mate, lover, partner.

Master.

At a red light, her hand automatically went to the fluorite pendant on her necklace, the one he'd given her when she first pledged herself to him.

Her day collar.

Their silent signal between them that she belonged only to him, heart, soul, and body.

Thank god they lived on the apartment complex's first floor and not the second. It only took her ten minutes to schlep the groceries inside. As she put everything away she fought an uneasy feeling in

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her gut. Turning, she studied the apartment. Everything looked okay.

Didn't it?

The TV, stereo, DVDs, her laptop—everything where they belonged. No robbery.

So why did it feel like someone had been there?

Suppressing a shiver, she rubbed her hands along her arms to smooth her goosebumps. She hated being alone, but Cris' job as a computer programmer for a government contractor sometimes required him to travel for long periods of time. Unfortunately on this trip he wasn't able to stay in touch with her due to security requirements. That bummed her out, but it didn't worry her because it wasn't uncommon. His paycheck made it worth the occasional radio silence.

She walked into the bedroom. Now that she knew the menu for their meal, what to wear became the crucial question. Should she be his good little baby girl welcoming Daddy home? Naughty slut ready for a long, hard fucking? Or full-on slave girl outfit?

What would he be in the mood for? He hadn't left her specific instructions this time. Hadn't called, texted, or emailed his wishes. Again, not worrisome, but usually he gave her at least some hint in the days before his return.

Looking around, she felt that unease again. Something wrong, something out of place.

Then she spotted the large manila envelope on the dresser. With her name written on it.

In Cris' handwriting.

It had not been there before she left for work that morning, she'd swear it.

When she picked it up she felt the weight, stuffed so full it bulged against the sealed flap. She sat on the bed and carefully opened it.

She first found the letter on top, in his writing.

My dearest little Redbird…

Her hands trembled. She couldn't read anymore. In her lap, the rest of the envelope's contents spilled out. The keys and title to his Lexus, signed over to her. He'd hired a car to drive him up to Tampa to the airport and had left the Lexus parked outside in his usual spot next to her little Civic. A safety deposit box key. Notarized paperwork giving her permission to take over various things in his name, like the utilities and bank accounts.

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The apartment lease, signed over to her, along with a receipt dated that morning showing the rent had been paid for another year.

Everything dated that morning.

She tried to read again.

My dearest little Redbird,

This is the hardest thing I've ever had to do, and I don't want to do it…

Tilly broke down sobbing as she read the letter. Had to read it several times before she fully comprehended the finality of it.

When she called her best friend Loren, all she could do was sob inconsolably over the phone. Loren and her husband Ross used their spare key to let themselves in when they arrived in a panic twenty minutes later. They found Tilly still sobbing and curled in a fetal position on the bed.

Loren held her friend and looked at her husband. His face darkened, his jaw tightening as he stepped away from the bed and read the letter he'd found where Tilly dropped it on the floor.

My dearest little Redbird,

This is the hardest thing I've ever had to do, and I don't want to do it. I have responsibilities that pre-date my life with you. I wish I could turn my back on them, but I can't. There are things about myself I have never confided to you, never thought you would ever need to know. It's not criminal, and you're at no risk. Not that this will in any way make up for what you will go through, I'm giving you everything. All I've taken are my clothes. My last paycheck will be directly deposited into our joint account, as always, including the back vacation pay they owe me. As you can see, I've paid the apartment lease for another year. Sell one of the cars and bank the money. Have Ross help you with that so you get the best deal possible. With what's in the bank now, and with your job, you'll be able to get by until you finish school next semester and start working full-time. It should also give you a little bit of a cushion.

Please know I love you heart and soul, and I always will. Always and forever. I know you will probably hate me, and I accept that and take full responsibility. I wish I didn't have to do this. Please live your life with honor and truth to yourself. Saying that, I must release you. May you find the peace

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and joy and happiness that I am not able to give you, even though I wish I could.

C.

* * * *

Five hours later, Ross carried Tilly into Sarasota Community Hospital's ER while Loren held her purse and insurance cards. Tilly had gone practically catatonic and wouldn't respond to them. They knew enough of her background and what she'd been through in the past to worry about her state of mind, not to mention her safety.

She spent two days medicated before she would talk to a psychiatrist on staff. He ruled she could safely be released as long as she was closely supervised for the next few days while the emotional shock wore off. Loren never left her side.

Tilly spent the next several days in bed in Ross and Loren's house, not speaking, only eating, drinking, and getting up to use the bathroom when Loren made her. Her beautiful long, dark reddish hair hung in limp strands.

Then Sunday morning, they awoke to find Tilly already in the kitchen, making coffee and preparing to fix them breakfast. Loren and Ross exchanged a nervous glance before walking up to the counter.

"Honey, are you okay?" Loren asked.

Tilly nodded and smiled. "I'm fine." She'd showered and pulled her damp hair back into a low ponytail.

Ross wasn't convinced. "Do you want to talk about it, sweetheart?"

"Talk about what?" Tilly briskly mixed pancake batter with a hand whisk. "I'm fine. I need to see if I still have a job. If I don't, I need to get a new one. I've got a lot of things to do. I need to get with my teachers and get caught up on my classes, too." She checked the electric skillet, found it hot enough, and poured out batter. "Oh, can I get a ride back to my place after breakfast?"

Loren walked around the counter. "Sweetie, I'm not sure it's a good idea for you to go home alone yet."

Tilly faltered, then regained her smile. She pointed to Loren's leather collar. "I meant to tell you, I think that one's pretty. I like it."

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"Tilly, it's okay," Ross assured her. "You can talk to us."

She took a deep breath and vigorously shook her head. "I'm done talking. I spent the past, what, six years talking? Look where the hell it's got me. Nope, talked out."

"What are you going to do?" Loren asked.

"I told you. I'm going to get my shit together. I'm not looking back. He can walk away from me like that without a second thought? Fuck him." She flipped the pancakes. "*Fuck*. *Him*. He's dead to me. Right? Just as good as dead, walks out without explaining why or a chance to say good-bye." Without thinking about it, her hand stroked her fluorite pendant. "It's a whole new world out there."

Tilly managed to maintain her façade until after they'd eaten. That's when she collapsed on the kitchen floor and cried while her friends held her. This time, she pulled herself together ten minutes later and stood. After washing her face she forced another smile. "See? I can do anything I put my mind to, just like…"

Tilly couldn't finish the sentence aloud.

Just like Cris always told me I could.

Ross held her in his arms as she started crying again. "Til," he softly said, "we love you. You know that. You're scaring me."

"What am I going to do without him?" she softly cried. "He's my life."

He tipped her face to his. "Make me a promise."

She sniffled and nodded.

"You love us, right?"

She nodded.

"It would kill us to lose you. All I'm asking for is you to wear my collar. Not for play, not to Top you, just so I can take care of you and know you'll listen to me. You and Loren are like sisters anyway. And all you have to do is promise me you won't take it off until you can swear to me you won't hurt yourself, that you can take care of yourself. When you reach that day, I'll gladly take it back. Wear it as long as you need to. Until then, I want to know that I won't have to worry about you hurting yourself, and that you know you can always come to us, no matter what, and we're here."

Tears spilled down her face as she laid her head against his shoulder. "Okay," she whispered.

She closed her eyes and heard Ross whisper something to Loren, sensed her friend leave the room. Loren returned a moment later with something in her hand and handed it to Ross. He gently

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buckled the collar around her neck before pressing a kiss to her forehead. "You're free to stay with us if you want, honey. You know that."

She sat up and wiped at her face, sniffling. "No. I need to go home." She looked at Ross, then Loren. "Thank you. Both of you. I couldn't do this without you. But I need to start somewhere. I have to go home sometime."

"I'll drive you," Loren softly said. "If you're sure."

"I'm sure."

In the bathroom before they left, Tilly looked at herself in the mirror, her long hair.

An image flashed through her mind, of before Cris left, him fisting his hand in her hair and pulling her to him, kissing her and going through their usual ritual, telling her…

She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to will the memory away.

Tried to forget the sound of his voice as he said, "I love you, Redbird. Always and forever."

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Chapter Two

Mistress Cardinal.

The man, naked except for his custom-tooled leather collar, knelt on the floor in the breakfast nook, his forehead touching the cool tile that he'd finished hand scrubbing and towel drying minutes earlier. He didn't speak, simply waited on her. She let him kneel there for ten minutes while she read her *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*.

"Are you finished?" she eventually asked without looking up from her newspaper.

"Yes, Mistress."

"Baseboards?"

"Yes, Mistress. As you instructed."

"Very good." She finally looked down at him. "I'm in the mood to play." She glanced at the time. "Our session ends in ten minutes. I haven't selected a partner for tonight. If you'd like, you may go with me."

He nodded without looking up. "Yes, Mistress. I'd be honored to go with you."

"This is outside of our business arrangement. I'll be harsh."

"Yes, Mistress. I understand."

"Very good. You may get dressed. Come back here tonight at eight to pick me up."

"Thank you, Mistress!" He crawled over to her, kissed her feet, then backed away before standing and leaving the breakfast nook. He was one of only two clients she let touch her at all, even though it was only to kiss her hands and feet.

She examined her nails. She had them done earlier that morning, a deep metallic blood red. Perfect for playing.

Standing and stretching, she went to examine his handiwork. The kitchen appeared utterly spotless. He'd left his "tribute" on the counter, one hundred dollars. Cash.

Smiling, she took the money and tucked it into her jeans. He was a good client. He also never

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asked to fuck her. She'd quit counting the number of clients she'd dropped because they became too emotionally attached to her or started pressuring her for sexual acts. That wasn't part of her services. She was a pro Domme.

They wanted sex, they could hire a prostitute. She gave them more.

She gave them what they needed, not what they wanted.

He returned a moment later, dressed in jeans and a light blue button-up shirt. Head bowed, he walked over to her. His collar was still locked around his neck. He was one of the few clients she'd specially ordered a collar for. Most of them got one of the pet store generic play collars that made them feel submissive. Bob had been using her services for over three years now, one of her oldest clients. Every two weeks at least, sometimes more often as his schedule allowed. In fact, she gave him every fourth visit for half price, and every tenth one free.

She fingered the collar. "Do you have anywhere else to go today?"

He shook his head. "No, Mistress. Straight home, then back here to meet you."

She smiled. "Keep the collar on then." With an elegantly lacquered finger, she tipped his chin so she could look into his blue eyes. Even with her stiletto heels he stood taller than her. He had nice eyes. Nice body, too. Nicer than average. "Tonight is special. Social. Not business. Understand?"

"Yes, Mistress."

"You've been an exceptionally good boy for me. I like to reward good behavior. You want to bear my marks with pride?"

"Yes, Mistress. Please."

"No tribute from you tonight, but I will expect you to pay our cover charge. It's twenty per person. You can pay that?"

"Yes, Mistress! Gladly."

She smiled. "I'll see you tonight then." She offered her hand and he kissed it before hurrying out the door.

Would her neighbors notice his collar? Probably not. She watched through the living room windows as he scurried out to his Mercedes parked in her driveway. Five years old, but he kept it detailed.

Nice guy. Divorced, no kids. He ran a mortgage firm and had no time for a girlfriend. He wasn't into humiliation, but he craved strict service, obedience, and discipline. While not a pain slut, because

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of his need to obey he would take a lot of heavy impact play.

She looked around the house. *Her* house, almost paid off. Another six months and she would own it free and clear.

She had time for a work out. She changed clothes and cranked her music loud on the stereo before tackling the elliptical machine for an hour. By the time she finished she was drenched with sweat and her legs trembled.

In the shower, she rested her head against the cool tile and let the water run over her and tried not to let her mind wander. Over the years she'd gotten a lot better at not thinking about her past.

* * * *

Two men sat in a dim corner of the club. They'd arrived nearly an hour earlier. The Master, Landry, sat on a leather sofa and watched players on various pieces of equipment. The other sat on the floor at his feet, his head bowed.

"Closer" by Nine Inch Nails thumped on the stereo. "You see anyone you know?" Landry asked from the sofa.

The man on the floor shook his head without looking up. "No, Master."

"No one at all?"

"It's been over five years."

"True."

They sat and watched people play.

* * * *

Ross led Loren by the hand into the club's entryway. "Tilly coming tonight?"

"Yes, Sir. I talked to her this afternoon. She's bringing her boy, Bob."

He looked surprised. "She must be serious about him. That's like the third time she's brought him to the club."

Loren snorted in amusement. "Um, yeah. I don't *think* so. This is *Tilly* we're talking about. He's her best client. She wanted to reward him, that's all." She remembered herself. "Sir."

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He overlooked her little bout of sarcastic tone and checked them in. Shouldering their gear bag, he led Loren inside the dungeon play area where they found a place for their gear. Before they could make a run at the buffet table, their friend Ed shuffled up and pulled them close.

"Guess what I heard?" His voice sounded a little muffled because of the black leather hood he wore, but they recognized him from the red stiletto heels and ankle shackles his wife made him wear.

Ross grinned. "Scientists finally found your nads?"

"Asshole. No. Scuttlebutt is Cristo was spotted at the club in Ybor last night."

Ross and Loren exchanged a look. "That's not funny," Ross said.

"Do I look like I'm laughing?" Not that they could tell one way or the other with his hood. "They said he was there with some guy. Get this, the guy was his fucking Master and topped him in a pretty heavy scene. They got really intense."

Loren snorted. "Okay, now I know someone yanked your chain besides your wife. Count Craptastic being topped? By a *guy*? No *fucking* way." Count Craptastic was only one of the many nicknames Loren had come up with for Cristo over the years, and it was one of the nicer ones.

It was the only PG-rated one.

"I'm serious!" Ed insisted.

"Who's your source?" Ross asked.

"Kim and Kylee."

Ross and Loren froze. "What?" Ross asked, certain he'd misheard. "No shit?"

"Yeah. And Kim and Kylee knew him."

"Did they talk to him?" Loren demanded. "Ask him anything? Oh like, maybe, what the *fuck*?" Loren's face reddened in anger.

"They didn't talk to him. They weren't sure it was him at first. Not until the guys were scening, but Kim and Kylee had to leave because they rode up there with someone else. They saw his tat. They said they'd swear it was him."

"Who else knows?" Ross asked. Kim and Kylee couldn't make it to the club that night because of work.

"No one. They wanted me to tell you because they couldn't find your phone number."

"If you fucking breathe a word of this to anyone, especially to Tilly, I'll fucking crush your nuts myself," Ross threatened.

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"Dude, I'm not brain dead. Kim and Kylee wanted you to have a heads up about it. So you could, you know, keep an eye on Tilly." He shuffled away, mindful of the short chain joining his ankles, to rejoin his wife.

Normally, people within the scene didn't usually talk about others. One of the unwritten protocols.

However, everyone in their small circle of friends remembered how fragile and broken Tilly had been at first. They'd witnessed her transformation into who she was today.

They all wanted to kill Cris for abandoning her, even this many years later.

Loren looked at Ross. "What do we do?"

He shrugged. "Nothing we can do. We don't even know for sure it was him, despite what they said." His face darkened. "If he does show up, I'll deal with him. He'll wish he'd never come back."

* * * *

The slave sat at Landry's feet and watched. Ross and Loren talked with another man in the far corner. Then Ross looked angry for a moment before he regained his composure.

Loren, however, appeared homicidal for several minutes.

He cringed. Perhaps simple paranoia, but maybe he and his Master had been spotted at the Ybor club the night before.

Landry leaned forward and stroked his hair. "Talk to me. Who do you see? Do you know them?"

"Yes, Master."

Landry tightly fisted his hand in the slave's hair and wrenched his head back painfully. "Who?"

He told him who they were.

"So we chose well tonight. Good." Landry released his grip on the slave's hair.

"May we please leave?"

Landry laughed. "No. I can't believe you'd even ask."

The slave lowered his head, hoping he wasn't seen or recognized. He felt badly enough.

Landry sensed his thoughts. "You brought this on yourself, slave. Had you told me the full truth in the beginning, we wouldn't be here now."

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The slave remained silent and felt grateful for his long hair. It fell to his shoulders, and when he kept his head tilted down, it hung along his cheeks, hiding his face. He kept his eyes on Ross and Loren, praying they didn't walk over.

Ten minutes later, a couple entered the dungeon play space. With their backs to the slave, they were far enough away, and the lighting dim enough, that he couldn't tell if he knew them or not. The woman held a leather leash clipped to a collar around the man's neck. The man carried a gear bag. With her trim, borderline gaunt but lithely muscled body, he guessed her to be a long-distance runner. Her short, spiked hair had been dyed the color of a bright copper penny.

When she made a hand gesture, the man obediently dropped to his knees next to her. She stood and talked with Ross and Loren for a few minutes as she twined her fingers in the man's hair. He leaned in and rested his head against her thigh, his body relaxing in a content way he himself knew all too well.

Landry watched too. "Do you know her?"

There was something familiar about her, but the slave couldn't get a good look at her face. Her purple corset accentuated shifting highlights in the fabric of her knee-length green skirt. "I'm not sure."

"The man?"

"No."

Satisfied, Landry sat back and watched.

The woman, her back still to them, tugged on the leash and urged the man to his feet. She led him across the room to a St. Andrew's Cross. There, she had him strip, affixed leather cuffs to his wrists and ankles, then hooked him to the structure. After a few minutes of warming him up by spanking his ass with her bare hands, she started in on him with a stingy flogger. She was vicious, a true sadist with very little in the way of sensual play in her style. She paused after a few minutes, checked in with the man, then switched to a riding crop. Red welts appeared on the man's backside and thighs.

"She has good form," Landry observed. "I wonder who she learned from."

By the time she finished nearly thirty minutes later, the man was crying, sobbing, his entire back, shoulders, ass, and thighs marked from the crop, cane, and singletail whip she'd used on him, yet he never uttered a safeword. She helped him over to a nearby corner and wrapped him with a blanket, sitting there with him for several long minutes and giving him aftercare, the first time she'd expressed

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even the slightest tenderness with the man. Eventually, she left him sitting there while she cleaned up the cross and their equipment. Then she rejoined him and offered him a bottle of water.

She sat with her arm around him and let the man rest his head against her shoulder. For the first time, the slave was able to get a good, long look at her face in the dim room.

His breath caught.

It couldn't be!

Landry leaned forward again. "Stay here." He stood and walked over to the buffet table where he got them bottles of water from a nearby cooler. He stopped and talked to one man for a moment, laughing and smiling, until he thanked the other man and returned. He retook his seat on the sofa and handed the slave a bottle.

"Her name is Mistress Cardinal."

The slave tried not to react. She'd never been fat, but she not only lost over thirty pounds by his best guess, but had chopped off and dyed her long, beautiful hair.

It *couldn't* be her.

Not his sweet, gentle Redbird.

He watched as the woman finally allowed the man to get dressed. While he did, she headed for the bathroom.

Landry stood and picked up the gear bag he'd brought with them. "Come on, slave. Let's go."

He kept his head down as he followed Landry. He prayed Ross and Loren didn't recognize him, but they walked past them to the far end of the dungeon play space without incident. There, Landry quickly outfitted him with a hood and made him strip.

Landry put the slave's hands on the bench so he could feel it. The hood didn't allow him to see. "Get into position and wait for me."

* * * *

Landry didn't want to cuff him yet since he left him unattended. He waited until Mistress Cardinal returned from the bathroom to seek her out.

"I'm sorry to bother you," he started, "but I was told you might be able to help me."

She suspiciously sized him up, her hazel gaze guarded. "About what?"

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He handed her a business card. "I have a slave in dire need of training."

That seemed to relax her. She studied his business card. "I'm sorry, Mr. LaCroux. I don't work with women."

"He's not a woman, although there are times I've seriously considered gelding him." When he laughed, she laughed with him, her body language relaxing a little more.

"Hold on." She went to her bag and returned with a business card of her own. Just her name and a local phone number he suspected went to an untraceable cell phone. "Call me and set up an appointment. I'm very expensive. I also don't offer any sexual services. I'll warn you, I have a vicious reputation."

"Perfect. Exactly what he needs." He pointed across the room to the bench where his slave knelt, waiting. "I don't think I'm vicious enough."

* * * *

Tilly watched the man walk back to the bench. She collected Bob and went to say good-bye to Ross and Loren. They seemed nervous, had acted a little tense all evening. She wondered if they'd had a fight but she'd have to wait until tomorrow to call Loren and talk to her.

To leave, she had to walk past the benches on the far end of the space. As she did she saw the man, Landry LaCroux, playing with his slave. Bob nearly ran into her when she suddenly stopped without warning. The tattoo on his slave's left ass cheek…

She stared. It wasn't unusual. Lots of people probably had that same tattoo, or one similar. A Kanji character. They looked a lot alike to most people anyway, including her.

Even in that same place. She'd seen lots of people with tattoos in that location. It was popular because it was discreet.

And it had been five years. She could easily be wrong.

Without warning, her mind flashed back to a memory of her fingers tracing the Kanji character on Cris' flesh, always fascinated by it, never quite satisfied when Cris said he was drunk when he got it and couldn't remember what it meant, but willing to let the explanation go.

He was her Master.

And in her heart, she knew the shape of that character, could trace it in her dreams.

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Her mind rebelled, insisting she was wrong.

"Take me home, Bob," she said, forcing her eyes from their scene. Landry started going after the guy with vicious swings from a crop that immediately raised welts. *He* needed help controlling his slave?

Well, money is money.

* * * *

Bob drove her home. Once there, he opened her car door for her, carried the toy bag, and escorted her to her front door.

She wondered if he'd try to kiss her goodnight or not.

Unlocking the front door, she said, "Bring that inside and put it in the playroom."

He hurried to comply while she set her purse on the counter and kicked off her heels with a sigh of relief. When he returned he dropped to his knees in front of her and waited.

She studied him in silence. She felt affection for him, but she couldn't say she loved him.

She wasn't capable of love anymore.

After a moment she ran her fingers through his hair. "How do you feel?"

"Good, Mistress."

"Do you hurt?"

"Yes, but I don't mind."

"You're a very good boy, Bob."

"Thank you, Mistress."

For a fleeting moment she tried to imagine what he'd look like kneeling on the floor next to her bed, going down on her.

She couldn't.

With a reluctant sigh she affectionately ruffled his hair. "Can you come for a play date one day or evening this week? For free. I feel like rewarding you again."

"Yes, Mistress. Thank you! Anytime you say."

"Tuesday night, seven o'clock. You may go."

He stood, his head bowed, and kissed her hand when she offered it. "Thank you, Mistress.

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Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

She didn't move until after she heard his car start and pull out of her drive. She locked the front door and turned off the lights. She didn't know why she offered him another freebie. That wasn't like her. She liked to space rewards far enough apart that the client wouldn't expect them.

He was single.

She stripped and stood in the shower, the water as hot as she could stand it. If only she could feel passion, love, anything.

She couldn't even blame it on the anti-depressants, because she'd had herself weaned off those six months after…

She stopped herself from thinking his name. That fucking tat on Landry's slave had totally screwed with her equilibrium.

A long time ago she'd quit engaging in the *I wonder where he is?* game. Because it hurt almost as badly as the *I wonder who he's with?* game, but not nearly as bad as the *Why wasn't I good enough for him?* game.

It was the only explanation that made sense. Another woman. It had to be. Cris never spoke of his family or his past other than in the blandest of ways. He'd been estranged from his family for years, she knew that, she just didn't know why.

Considering her own crappy background, she'd respected his desire to not talk about it.

As she finished her shower and climbed into bed, she tried to focus on Bob's face and realized without him in front of her, she really couldn't recall anything but his blue eyes and the rounded shape of his naked back as he knelt on the floor while awaiting her instructions.

* * * *

Naked, the slave knelt on the motel room floor and waited for his Master to finish showering. Landry had been particularly vicious that night during their scene, as the slave had expected. Had been vicious ever since Master discovered the secret he'd kept.

The slave didn't deny he deserved it. And more.

Although nothing his Master dished out could compare to the mental agony he went through

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every day. The guilt.

The self-loathing.

The regret.

He heard the water shut off and Landry emerged a moment later, drying himself with a towel. "You sleep on the floor tonight, slave," he said. "No pillow, no sheets." He walked over to the A/C unit and turned the temperature down as far as it would go.

It would be a long, cold night.

"Yes, Master."

Landry sat on the edge of one of the beds and stared at him. "I did more asking around before we left the club. That man wasn't her boyfriend, he was one of her clients."

The slave prayed he masked his surprise well enough so it didn't show.

And his hope. Of course, he knew hope was a stupid emotion to have. He totally belonged to his Master, heart, mind, body, and soul, and she no longer belonged to him.

Still, old habits and feelings died hard.

Landry continued. "Apparently she's single. One person hinted something very bad happened to her a few years ago but they wouldn't talk about it. Of course, I couldn't push them, it would bring suspicion."

The slave closed his eyes, wishing he didn't have to sit and listen to this. He'd prefer another vicious beating. At least that pain ended relatively quickly and sent his mind to a beautiful place where he could temporarily abandon thought.

Landry spread his legs and in French ordered, "Come here and suck my cock."

Obediently, he knelt between Landry's legs and performed as required, wishing for a little tenderness, even a kind and gentle word, and knowing his Master wasn't yet ready to allow that. Landry grabbed his head and forced him to go deep. He swallowed his shaft and waited him out until he finally came.

When Landry finally released him, he pointed to the floor. "Go on. You're done."

The slave bowed his head, curled up on his side, and prayed for sleep.

Prayed for forgiveness.

Prayed his Master didn't force him to face Tilly.

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Chapter Three

Tuesday afternoon, Tilly parked in the public garage off Ringling in downtown Sarasota and donned her dark, mirrored sunglasses. The café where they would meet had outdoor seating. Despite having to put up with smokers, she wanted to be out in public when talking to this man.

Landry LaCroux. His voice bore the barest trace of an accent, but she couldn't place what exactly. She suspected French. Not Québécois, but more like a native of France.

When the memory of how she might know that threatened to creep in, she squelched it immediately. Too many old memories had tried to sneak in since seeing Landry's slave at the club. This happened every once in a while. A song would catch her unprepared and nearly take her knees out. Or watching a movie might bring back a memory and send her to bed crying for the evening.

Fortunately, those weak periods happened with rare frequency lately. The other night at the club was her first lapse in several months.

Maybe I should take that as a good sign.

She arrived nearly half an hour early and brought her Kindle to read. She wanted to control the situation, where they sat, everything. She had the waiter seat her on the far end of the patio where she could watch people walk by on Ringling. Ten minutes later, LaCroux showed up.

Her instincts had been right-on there.

"You are very early, Mistress Cardinal," he observed as he sat.

"So are you." She leaned back and studied him. "Tell me, Mr. LaCroux, why does a man such as yourself need any kind of assistance? I saw you playing with your slave the other night. A few minutes of it, at least. You seem to have him well in hand."

The waiter stepped in to take his order. When he left, LaCroux leaned forward. "Please, you may call me Landry."

"You may call me Mistress Cardinal. You haven't answered my question."

He smiled. Charming, disarming. Handsome and trim. Deep green eyes that could show merriment or murderous intent, she suspected. Brown hair, a little grey around the temples. "Even the

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most talented dog trainer knows when an animal should be handed over to others with different skill sets, as they say. The wisest trainers don't risk ruining a dog out of hubris over their own talents."

That's it. The nagging question drove her nuts. "Are you from France, Mr. LaCroux?"

He apparently decided not to challenge her on the formality. "Excellent ear, Mistress Cardinal. I was raised in Paris, but I attended university here in the States and decided to remain after I earned my degree. I've lived here over twenty years and became a citizen. I have no desire to return to France. To live," he added. "I do have family there I visit, on occasion. My life is here."

That handled, she studied him. While she'd worked with gay men before, most of her clients were straight. It was unusual for a gay man to come to her for her services. She'd never had a gay Master approach her about training his slave. It piqued her curiosity. "As I told you the other night, I don't engage in any sexual services. At all. I run a totally legal business, and I want that made perfectly clear from the start."

"I would not ask that of you."

She'd managed to stay off the radar as far as law enforcement was concerned. She never broke her "no sex" rule, and she didn't advertise. All her clients came through word of mouth referrals, and an opening never remained vacant more than a week or two.

"I take cash only. All fees paid in advance at the beginning of the session. For the first session to evaluate him, one hour, one thousand dollars. After that, sessions are one hour each, three hundred." More than she normally asked, but it was an easy way to weed out a poser from the rest. He'd either choke, agree, or negotiate. "Also, you cannot be there after the initial negotiations. That takes about twenty minutes. The only reason I'm letting you be there at all is because he's your slave and you need to participate in the negotiations."

"Done."

She felt her eyebrows lift in surprise. Honestly? She hadn't expected him to agree, especially to the clause of him not being present. That tweaked her curiosity. "What exactly do you hope to gain from my services?"

"Slave tends to hold back sometimes. Information, emotions, for whatever reason."

"He lies?"

"No, not lies, per se. Despite my repeated orders to the contrary, he tends to overthink things and not give me all the information I request. Be it sentiment or emotions, I don't know."

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"What made you decide to hire someone to train him?"

At this, she noticed his face clouded. "I recently discovered accidentally that he withheld some rather important information from me. For years. Had he told me when we got together, I would have made drastically different decisions than I did. You see, we were together for a few years, then we broke up. Most definitely my fault. When we reconciled after being apart for several years, I was willing to do anything for another chance with him. I'd never stopped loving him."

His gaze dropped to his hands. "The circumstances surrounding our reunion were difficult, to say the least. I willingly heard what he told me rather than digging deeper for the truth. My actions—or rather, my lack of action—unfortunately hurt another without me knowing it at the time, because of that withheld information. I doubt there is any way I can atone for it, or even rectify the situation. I must force slave to see what he has done as a result of his withholding that information. He must face the true consequences of his actions."

Tilly studied him for a long time without speaking. Her bullshit alarm hadn't gone off…yet. He still held her curiosity. "Again, I'm not sure what you expect of *me*."

"I want him to go through a vicious training regimen with another Top. One who can adequately break through this willful streak of his. Someone who maybe has better perceptions than I do. Perhaps someone who can show him a different point of view than he sees with me. Someone who can help him appreciate the error of his ways."

That didn't tell her as much as she'd like, but she let it go. "I noticed your phone number isn't local."

"It will change soon. We're moving here from Los Angeles. I have our place there on the market."

From behind the safety of her dark glasses she watched his face. He looked too pale for someone from L.A., too drawn.

"Are there any health issues I need to be made aware of, Mr. LaCroux?"

He wanly smiled. "I start a regimen of cancer treatments next week. A biopsy first, probably followed by surgery, then chemo and radiation as warranted. I have not told slave this yet and would appreciate your discretion. If your question is are we HIV negative, yes, we are negative. I can give you copies of my most recent medical chart, and slave's last check-up from three months ago, if you'd like them. No HIV, no hepatitis or other conditions. We are monogamous, and have been in the five years

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since our reunion. Other than my cancer, we are both healthy. And I assure you, you cannot catch my colon cancer, Mistress Cardinal."

She blushed. "I'm sorry." She softened her tone, the man before her now humanized in a way he hadn't been before. "Will they be able to cure it?"

He shrugged. "Hopefully. Time will tell. I survived a bout of colon cancer a few years ago. My doctors are optimistic but there are, of course, never any guarantees."

She picked up a hint of something else. "You want him to be able to respond to another Master or Mistress, don't you? In case you…" She couldn't complete her observation once the full weight of it slammed home. She genuinely felt sympathetic toward him.

He tipped his head in a nod. "You're extremely perceptive, Mistress Cardinal. That's why I feel slave will benefit in your very capable hands. I don't wish to turn him over to another Owner if I'm not sure he can be completely open with them. I also don't wish to leave him…adrift, should the circumstances turn against me. He needs a firm hand."

"Most of my clients aren't serious players. They just like a little humiliation or domination on occasion. You sound like a serious twenty-four/seven relationship."

"I own slave. He gave himself to me. I do not take that responsibility lightly. He owns nothing in his name. He works for my company. We have a contract specifying my rights over him as his Master and Owner."

She knew serious players. Ross and Loren, for example. She'd been one herself, what felt like a lifetime ago. Before…

"Mr. LaCroux, if you want vicious, I'll be vicious. Short of anything that would permanently mark or disfigure him, I will use him. He'll have a safeword. If he utters it, breathes it, thinks it, the session ends immediately and doesn't restart. I won't refund money if he safewords, even if it's only five minutes into the session."

"He will not safeword, I can assure you."

She had a feeling that wasn't just bullshit braggadocio either. "Where is he right now?"

"He's in our hotel room, naked, kneeling on the tile bathroom floor, waiting for me."

She hoped she kept the shock off her face. "How do you know he's really doing it?"

"Because I paid the maid cleaning our room one hundred dollars to randomly check on him several times. I also invited her to let some of her fellow maids take a look at him and make fun of him.

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I told her it was a hazing ritual."

"Creative."

"He despises humiliation. I normally don't use it with him, but under the circumstances, he has earned harsh treatment. It's part of his ongoing punishment until I turn him over to your capable hands."

"It's not my hands I'll be using on him."

He looked amused. "I'm counting on that."

* * * *

They agreed upon Wednesday afternoon at five o'clock. Landry would bring slave, as he requested the man be addressed, to her house, leave after the initial negotiation, and return for him at six.

She ran a few errands before heading home. Bob would stop by that evening and she had to admit she looked forward to it.

Maybe she'd finally started healing. Long overdue, but the fact that Bob crossed her mind when he wasn't in front of her hadn't happened with any other client.

Or any other man. *Well, other than…*

She nixed that thought.

He showed up, precisely on time. Bob never arrived late. All afternoon, something had pecked at her mind about him. She decided to find out. Instead of making him kneel like she normally would, she asked him to follow her to the breakfast nook and indicated for him to sit at the table across from her.

He held her chair for her first, like the good boy he was.

She studied his face for a long moment. Blue eyes, nice body, handsome looks. No movie star, but no slouch either.

Scening with him lately made her wet, and that didn't happen with any other sub. The only thing since her loss that inspired something remotely approaching passion in her otherwise emotionally dead body.

"I'd like to ask you something and I want an honest answer, not some bullshit you think I want

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to hear. Understand?"

"Yes, Mistress."

"I know you're divorced, but are you dating or involved with anyone?"

"No, Mistress."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "I'm too busy."

"You find time to see me."

"I need to see you."

She leaned back in her chair and studied him for a moment. "Why?"

"I can't afford to be outed. If I have a choice between spending my free time seeing you to get what I need, or spending my time trying to troll bars or Craigslist for a date, I'd much rather spend it with you."

Well, I wanted honesty. "If I was someone you met somewhere, outside of our business arrangement, am I someone you would go out with?"

He hesitated to answer.

"I want honesty. Regardless of your answer, it won't count against you in any way."

"Honestly?"

"Yes." Now she wished she hadn't asked. She had a feeling her ego was about to get slammed into the fucking basement.

"I think you're beautiful. If the situation were different, I would do nearly anything for a chance to go out with you."

Oh.

Oh!

"Really?"

He nodded. "Really."

She sat back and studied him some more, not sure if she liked the way his answer made her feel. The anticipation.

Hope.

She didn't want to feel hope. Hope was for chumps. Hope was what got her fucking heart broken five years ago.

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"Would you ask me out?"

"I can't."

Aaaaand, there we go. "Why not?"

He looked at the table. "You told me when we first started that wasn't allowed. That was one of the rules you said if I ever broke, it would immediately end our arrangement."

Oh.

Oh!

"That's right, I did." She considered him. "If the rule wasn't there?"

He looked up at her, unmistakable hope on his face. "Then I would ask you out on a date."

She took a deep breath and held it for a few seconds before blowing it out again. "I'm going to do something I never do and tell you a little about myself. I don't date. I don't have a boyfriend. I'm completely single. But if I go out on a 'date' with someone, I don't want to go out on a date with my 'boy.' Unless I've told him that's what I want. In real life, I am not Mistress Cardinal. If someone asks me out on a date, I want them to ask me out because they want to get to know me in real life, not because they think they're getting a freebie or because they want a full-time Domme in their life. I want someone who wants me for me, not just the parts that get their rocks off."

He nodded. "I understand." He looked like he wanted to say something else.

"What is it?"

"May I ask you a question, Mistress?"

She nodded.

"If I was to ask you on a date, what would you want me to call you?"

She smiled. "I would want you to call me by my name. Matilda. Well, Tilly. I prefer Tilly. I don't like Matilda."

"That's beautiful." He sounded sincere. Bob always sounded sincere. He'd never been a "do me" sub. He'd always let her set the tone and pace since their initial evaluation. He never asked. He was a good boy.

"Thank you."

He looked at her for a long moment. "May I ask you something else?"

"Sure."

When he leaned in, she felt his energy shift. Her "boy" was gone, and Bob now sat in his place

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across the table from her. Not a hint of submission in his posture. She suspected this was how the rest of the world saw him. His gaze grew intense. "Tilly, I'd like to take you out to dinner tonight, if you'd let me."

A delicious shiver passed through her body as she nodded.

* * * *

She quickly changed into a blouse and skirt and flats. Normally, Mistress Cardinal wore spiked heels for sessions, but those were murder on her feet. Tilly usually went barefoot around the house, or wore sneakers or comfy sandals or Crocs whenever possible, even though Mistress Cardinal had an image to uphold.

Bob stood by the front door. Not a boy waiting for his Mistress, but a man waiting for his date.

He didn't display the slightest sign of impatience.

She stopped him before they stepped out the door. "Hold on. Come here." Without the normal six-inch heels she wore during his sessions, he stood nearly a foot taller than her. When he leaned over she unlocked his collar, removed it, and laid it on the entryway table by her front door. "That's better."

He smiled. "Thank you, Tilly."

She liked the way her name sounded coming from his mouth. "How far do you live from here?"

"My condo's twenty minutes away."

"I want to stop by there first, before we go eat."

"Okay."

She studied him. "No questions?"

He shrugged. She also liked that gesture from him. Easygoing. "I just figured you wanted to make sure I didn't have any bodies laying around." She loved his playful smile.

He could make her laugh, too. *Bonus points.*

* * * *

He still insisted on getting doors for her. More bonus points. He was a gentleman. On the way to his condo they talked about music. She was surprised to find out he liked a wide variety of music

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from classical to heavy metal and they had many favorites in common. He loved to read, did a lot of it. He collected Hallmark ornaments.

That last point surprised her. He nervously ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah, I know. My mom used to buy them, then when she got older, after my dad died, I started buying them for her because I didn't want her spending the money on them. Then she died and I…"

He shrugged and glanced at her. "Is that weird?"

She burst out laughing again. "I'm sorry," she said when she finally composed herself. "You come to me for certain things," she said, "and you're asking me if collecting ornaments is weird?"

He smiled, then he laughed. He had a nice laugh. "Yeah, I guess you're right. I never thought about it like that."

"I not only think it's not weird, but I think it's sweet."

She watched while he drove, confident, one arm slung over the wheel, not too fast, no sudden stops, no pissing contest jumps from the line at a light.

Calm.

His condo lay in a gated golf course community. She knew it was his place because she'd seen his driver's license when he first started seeing her, had written his address and info down for safety. That was when she still felt super-paranoid. Since then, she'd relaxed a lot, weeded odd clients out before she ever took them on.

"I don't golf," he said, "but I liked the landscaping. I also didn't want to deal with a yard or maintenance. I'm too busy normally." He led her up to his door, unlocked it, and let her go first.

Inside, he tossed his keys on a table near the entry and flipped on the lights.

Nice.

Not a pig sty, which had been her first worry. Not anally-retentive neat, either. Lived in, clean, tidy. She never had to pay a cleaning company to come in because she had a string of clients who paid her for the privilege of doing it for her. If it wasn't for that, her house would look about like his. Lived in, but not perfect.

He picked up a few books and his mail, which lay scattered on the coffee table. "Sorry. Wasn't expecting company." He offered her a slightly bashful smile.

The walls of his den were lined floor to ceiling with books. She found the kitchen clean, a rinsed breakfast bowl and coffee mug in the sink. Counters tidy. His bedroom, also neat. Bed made, but

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not crisp, just the covers pulled up. At least he'd made the attempt.

She walked into the bathroom. Clean enough. Clothes in a hamper, towel folded and hanging from a rod.

He leaned against the bedroom doorway. "Do I pass inspection?"

She nodded. "Actually, you do."

"I was kidding."

"I wasn't." She turned to him. "I'll let you in on another secret very few people know. There's a reason I haven't let anyone into my life in the past few years. I was burned in a bad way by someone I trusted. I don't trust easily anymore."

"I get that."

"Will that be a problem?"

He shook his head. "Not really. Considering I trust you not to take pictures of me during our sessions and post them on the internet later, I think we've already got a pretty solid foundation of trust there."

The look on his face made her laugh again. "Okay. I promise no more über-bitch tonight. I'm sorry."

He stepped out of the way to let her pass as she walked back to the living room. "No, it's okay," he said. "I get it."

"You do?"

He picked up his keys and shut off the lights. "I've been to your place. You've never been here. You wanted to make sure I wasn't some grungy lying asshole. Or married. If I hadn't let you come here, you would have wondered what the hell I was hiding."

"Or who."

"Yeah. I get it."

She turned on him. "No," she softly said, "I don't think anyone can get it if they didn't see me back then and know what I went through. Maybe…" She looked up at him. He had beautiful blue eyes.

Thank god they aren't brown, like… "Maybe one day, if we get to that point, I'll let you go talk to Ross and Loren. They'll tell you. Then you will definitely get it."

* * * *

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He took her to a very nice upscale restaurant in downtown Sarasota. He didn't ask her where she wanted to go, he simply picked a place. She would have been happy with something more modestly priced, but he got another A for effort.

They had a good dinner and a very long conversation about any and everything. Vanilla.

Totally vanilla.

They shut down the restaurant, and when he drove her home he walked her to her front door.

She looked up at him. "Let's say this is the normal end of a first date. What would you do next?"

He smiled and stepped in. She suspected—hoped—he'd kiss her. Instead, he reached for her hand and gently clasped it in his. He lifted it and feathered his lips across her knuckles. It wasn't anything at all like the other times he'd kissed her hand.

It felt sensual. Seductive. His eyes never left hers.

Part of her wanted to drag him inside and fuck his brains out. Maybe her body wasn't as dead as she thought. It was the first time since her new life started that she'd felt like that.

"On a first date," he said, "I'm always a gentleman."

She didn't miss the strong, dominant undercurrent in his voice, the sensual timbre normally not there when on his knees at her feet.

"What if it wasn't our first date?" she gasped. "What if it was, like, our fifth or sixth date?"

"Do you want me to tell you or show you?"

She swallowed hard. "Show me."

The corners of his mouth curled in a sexy smile. He stepped in, pulled her into his arms, and kissed her. He didn't maul her, he tenderly brushed his lips over hers until she *really* wanted to drag him inside and fuck his brains out.

Then he lifted his head. "I'm not going to push my luck and ask if you'd like to see what I'd do if we really got to know each other better."

She laughed, letting her head rest on his chest.

A nice broad, strong chest.

He kept his arms around her, actually holding her and not just politely resting there. She took a minute to enjoy the feeling before stepping back and fishing around in her purse for her keys.

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"Bob, thank you for tonight. I really appreciate it. I had a wonderful time."

He took her keys from her, unlocked her door, and pushed it open before handing them back. "Thank you for letting me take you out, Tilly. I hope you'll let me do it again."

For once she let her instincts dictate her next statement without the filter of her super-cautious heart getting in the way. "If you could say something to Tilly right now, not Mistress Cardinal, what would it be? A total freebie."

He smiled and reached up, gently brushed a finger over her cheek and along her jaw. "I know Mistress Cardinal runs a business and I respect that. But I would love to spend more time with Tilly, outside of work. I hope Tilly finds me worthy to trust me enough to let me in more often, because I think she is a beautiful woman with a spectacular heart. If Tilly ever tells me who the hell hurt her and destroyed her trust…" His face darkened. "I'd love a shot at punching the fucker. I would hope that Tilly and Mistress Cardinal both know me well enough to know that I am not a violent man."

Her breath caught. His eyes had never left hers. She threw her arms around him again and kissed him, hard, wanting more but sensing he wouldn't let her rush tonight.

She let him come inside to get his collar. She started to put it on him, then hesitated. "I have a new client coming tomorrow for an initial evaluation at five. I'll be free after six. If you're not busy, would you come pick me up and then let me buy you dinner?"

"May I make a suggestion?"

She nodded.

"How about I bring stuff over to make you dinner?" He smiled. "Bob can cook dinner naked as well as any boy can."

She started laughing. "Wanting to mix business and pleasure?"

He laughed with her. "Okay, sorry. How about I cook for you and we have a nice dinner and discussion, and then, your choice, Bob or boy can clean up the kitchen?"

"You won't let me buy you dinner?"

He shrugged. "I'm old fashioned. Maybe once you get to know me better like that, then I'll feel more comfortable. For now, I'd prefer to buy dinner. I can afford it."

He was cute, a gentleman, and so far the weirdest thing about him was that he collected Hallmark ornaments.

Well, besides the kinky shit, and that she could handle.

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"What's the dark secret in your closet?" she asked, all teasing gone. "Seriously. What is the worst skeleton in your closet that would blindside the hell out of everyone if people found out about it in the future?"

He took her hand again and kissed it. The passionate, sensual kiss of Bob, not boy. "Mistress Cardinal."

* * * *

They agreed he would come over at six. Normally she would schedule a window of decompression after an appointment, but if she had him coming over it would discourage Landry and his slave from hanging around.

Truth be told, she looked forward to Bob making her dinner.

She stripped and went to bed, her mind spinning and a smile on her face.

She wouldn't—couldn't—call it love. But she wouldn't deny liking the feeling she got when she closed her eyes and realized she could now clearly picture Bob's face in her mind, especially his beautiful blue eyes.

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Chapter Four

Naked except for his leather collar, the slave knelt on the hotel room floor all morning while his Master took care of business. He listened as Landry talked on the phone and coordinated with others while referring to his laptop. When housekeeping knocked, Landry invited them in. The maids apparently fought for the right to clean their room now. Landry handed them each a twenty without bothering to pause his phone conversation.

The women grinned as they stared at slave kneeling on the floor.

He felt his face heat but he didn't move, didn't speak.

Master knew he despised humiliation, but slave wouldn't fight back. He'd take it.

When Master went out the day before, he didn't say where he was heading. When he returned from his lunch appointment, he wore a smile but didn't reveal any details. Since then, the slave had the distinct impression Master had a plan of some sort that he wasn't privy to.

Landry stepped outside to continue his phone conversation while the maids vacuumed the room. Slave remained in position, on the floor around the far side of the bed so he wasn't visible through the open room door.

What seemed like hours later, they finally finished and left and Master returned. He sat at the table and called slave to him.

He stood and walked over to the table.

Landry pointed at the other chair, which surprised slave.

He sat.

In the month since his discovery of the information, Landry hadn't shown slave the slightest bit of affection. Normally his sadism was tempered with equal or greater amounts of tenderness.

None of that since then. Not even a "good boy." No kiss goodnight.

No sleeping in the same bed.

No "I love you."

His Master had mercilessly used him for his own pleasure, blow jobs or fucking his ass, without

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allowing the slave any release. Even in public his Master treated him without any respect whatsoever, going so far as to refer to him as "slave" in front of others they didn't work with.

This was the first time since the revelation, other than in professional situations where he had to maintain appearances, that Master had treated him remotely as an equal.

"You have an appointment today, slave," he said. "Apparently in all these years, nothing I've done has made a dent in that thick damn skull of yours. Maybe seeing a different point of view will help you understand."

His heart seized, already knowing where this was heading, horrified by the prospect.

"No, Master, please! No!"

Landry smiled, without mirth. "Oh, yes. You have two options. You go to this appointment, or you can pack what little things you have, leave me right this second and I'll buy you a one-way ticket home, where you'd better not be when I return from this trip. Those are your only two options. No negotiations."

The slave closed his eyes and swallowed hard, but didn't reply.

"Since you're not packing I take it that means you're going to obey?"

"Yes, Master," he softly replied.

"You brought this on yourself. On all of us. You've disgraced me by your actions. If you'd told me the truth at the start, we wouldn't be here." He stared at his slave. "Open your fucking eyes and look at me when I'm talking to you."

The slave did. He hated the disgust on his Master's face.

He leaned forward. "I *never* would have abandoned you, slave. I wasn't perfect. I admitted my short-comings and owned up to them. But you left me the first time, not the other way around. I always made sure I took care of you as best I could. For you to abandon someone like that, especially someone emotionally fragile and dependent upon you…" He shook his head as he sat back. "You're lucky I didn't kick you out, naked, the second I found out. It's inexcusable. It doesn't matter how honorable your intentions."

Master said nothing the slave hadn't said to himself countless times over the years. But once he'd done it, it had been too late to take it back even though he knew as he flew from Florida to California that final time that he'd probably made the worst mistake of his life.

It couldn't be undone.

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He'd severed his ties, left her set up financially, and prayed Ross and Loren would help her emotionally pick up the pieces.

Prayed she was strong enough to make it through her grief, as he suspected she was.

He'd scoured the local papers online for weeks after, the obituaries, praying he didn't find her name. He didn't dare risk contacting her, afraid it would only make things worse for her…or make him turn around and abandon his Master to return to her. A long, drawn-out good-bye would have been worse for her. Not to mention Ross and Loren would likely want to kill him, and he didn't need their anger at him to detract from them caring for Tilly.

So he kept his focus on his Master's recovery, rounds of surgery and treatment and doctors visits, and focused on fighting to save his life and not think about her. After a while, the only time he allowed himself to take his focus off his Master was looking at her pictures on occasion. That, and praying she healed and lived a good life without him.

Praying every day she would one day forgive him, even if she despised him.

He never stopped loving her, or missing her.

"And how do you think it made me feel, hmm?" he continued. "Just some charity case. You didn't respect me enough as a person, much less as your Master, to let me know the truth. Were you expecting me to die and hoping to inherit it all?"

"No, Master. I just wanted to take care of you."

"You felt sorry for me, though, didn't you?"

"They said you might be dying. I didn't want you to be alone."

"But it was okay to abandon her and leave her alone? What gave you the right to decide that for her, Master or not? How does it feel being relegated to nothing more than a piece of meat? Do you like it? Because I want you to feel what you've done to the people in your life, slave. I want you to walk a mile in their shoes. I want you to totally comprehend how badly you fucked up by making assumptions and decisions for people without their input. Every action has a consequence." He stared at him. "Go get dressed. Jeans, button-up shirt. Keep your collar on."

Before the revelation, Master never made him wear his formal collar in public in vanilla settings. Now, it remained on him all the time except in the shower or when they went to the office. Before, they tended to have a give-and-take relationship, even as Master and slave. Landry was always fair and consistent.

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Before.

Now, Master treated him in a way he'd never treated him before, either during their first time together or since their reunion. Now the slave was little more than a piece of fuckable meat, there solely for his Master's service and pleasure.

The slave felt he deserved it.

* * * *

Tilly hung up with Loren. Her friend assured her she hadn't had a fight with Ross, but still, there was something going on that Tilly couldn't put her finger on. Ever since the other night at the club, her friends had acted on edge.

Loren was always her safe call for new clients. Clients she'd had for a while, she trusted. Just in case, Loren had access to her private online Google calendar with full contact details and descriptions of her clients.

All clients were told this up front.

Just in case.

Landry would arrive with his slave in twenty minutes. She'd already had two other sessions that morning, regulars, nothing tiring for her. The first, a middle-aged, overweight sissy who enjoyed being made to walk around in high heels and a French maid uniform while he cleaned her house with a butt plug up his ass. The other enjoyed being pelted with humiliating comments about his small cock, which in reality was fairly average, while she used him as a human footrest or coffee table.

Booooring.

She staggered her pain slut clients throughout the week after she'd once tried to do three in one day and nearly threw out her shoulder using a riding crop on the last one.

Landry told her he wanted her to go full-out, assured her that slave's pain tolerance was high even though not a pain pig. "He's trained to take it," Landry said. "I would not call him a no-limits slave, because I do have limits. I don't wish to damage my property. He'll take whatever you see fit within the confines of our agreed-upon boundaries."

That could be interesting. Her evening before with Bob had been a nice change of pace, especially since it hadn't ended with her using a riding crop on his ass just to make him take it.

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Some of her clients wanted the pain. Some of them despised pain but wanted the obedience. Bob was the latter.

And tonight…

She smiled. She felt like laughing. It'd been too damn long since she'd looked forward to anything.

The last thing she'd looked forward to…

She ended that thought.

It would be nice to have vanilla interactions with someone other than Loren and Ross.

There came that pesky hope again. God, she hated that.

For today's initial evaluation she'd opted for a mix of comfort versus form. Jeans, because she could move in them and they offered her a greater layer of protection than a skirt in case something went bad. Four-inch ankle boots. Comfortable, yet adding to her height, and the heels were sturdy enough she could kick with them and use them as a weapon of self-defense. She could also run in them, if needed. Push-up bra, tank top, topped by an oversized, long-sleeved, black button-up shirt, open, with the cuffs rolled to her elbows. The shirt's hem hung past her ass and concealed the stun gun she kept clipped to her waistband in the small of her back.

Another precaution with new clients. So far, she'd never needed it. Well, not defensively, at least. She had two clients that begged her to use it on them on a regular basis.

No jewelry today, especially no dangly earrings that could get caught or pulled.

She checked herself in the mirror one last time as she heard a car in the drive. Landry rang her doorbell one minute before five.

Maybe he figured he'd better not push the being really early thing.

She opened the door and studied Landry. His slave stood behind him, head hung, brown, shoulder-length hair obscuring his face. She led them into the foyer.

"Glad to see you didn't change your mind, Mr. LaCroux. One thousand cash. Payable now."

He smiled, never taking his green eyes off her, and handed her a bank envelope. She opened it and counted it in front of him, ten one hundred dollar bills that appeared to be genuine, then returned it to the envelope, folded it in half, and tucked it in her back pocket. "Thank you, Mr. LaCroux."

"Don't thank me yet, Mistress Cardinal. You haven't worked with slave yet. And please, call me Landry."

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She ignored that last part. "Does slave have a name?"

"Slave." He smiled. "It's the only name he deserves."

She led them inside and pointed to the couch. Then she turned, walked around the coffee table, and sat in a chair on the other side. As she did, slave had already dropped to his knees on the floor between the couch and the coffee table, forehead touching the carpet, facing his Master.

Landry looked down at him with unmistakable disgust on his face. "I never said you could touch me," he told the other man.

Slave scooted back a few inches.

She had yet to glimpse his face.

Ooookay. She almost felt sorry for the guy, but she knew darn well that sometimes what looked bad to outsiders was part of a beloved kink for the individual players.

She returned her attention to Landry. "I know you made the dog training analogy, but you and I both know there's a lot more to it. I need to know exactly what you expect to get out of this and what he expects to get out of this. Remember, if he doesn't want to make changes, nothing I teach him will matter."

"I know. Perhaps it will help if I give you a little background. I first met slave when he was nineteen. I was twenty-eight and his first serious relationship." He paused, staring at his hands. "I was also very young, stupid, and egotistical. I told you, I attended college here in the States. I felt very full of myself. I'd embraced my sexuality, as clichéd as that might sound, and enjoyed discovering the BDSM scene. I wanted it all.

"I met slave through a professor friend of mine. Slave was one of his students. I saw an opportunity to have my very own slave. I'm afraid at the time that I truly didn't take the time to get to know him perhaps as well and in the ways I should have."

"Vanilla ways?" she asked.

He nodded. "Exactly. Not to blame slave, because he was young and impressionable and eager to please. He came from a dysfunctional family. Because I was older, he saw me in many roles I not only failed to recognize, but failed to live up to." He sighed. "We were together nearly six years when I decided in my egotistical Dominant mind that I needed more. I thought slave wasn't enough for me. I informed him I wanted to be poly, and he would accept it or leave."

"He left?" During Landry's entire soliloquy, slave never moved, never made a single noise. He

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could have been a piece of furniture.

He nodded. "Rightfully so. I spent the next several years angry at myself for letting him go. I realized I loved him, that he truly was my soul mate, and I had let my ego get in the way." His face softened. "I swore if I ever had a second chance with him, I would do anything, whatever it took, to try to talk him back and I wouldn't repeat my mistake. I felt empty without him. He had loved me, truly loved me, and I was too foolish to see it until after I lost him."

Tilly didn't interrupt. She felt Landry's sincerity, his regret.

He cast a contemptible glance at the man on the floor. "Five years ago, Fate played a rather nasty trick on me. Except for my employees and a few old friends I had managed not to run off with my anger, I was alone. Then I nearly died in a car accident. When they performed emergency surgery, they discovered my cancer. Only two people showed up at the hospital to stand vigil for me, my oldest friends. One of them tracked slave down and sent him an email about my condition. The doctors had told them I would likely die without cancer treatment."

He looked at slave again, this time his contempt tempered with love. "Imagine my shock when I awoke in the ICU. I couldn't speak, I had a tube in my throat. The doctors told me about my condition, that I might not make it. I needed to continue treatment for the cancer to have any hope of beating it. There, standing by my bed and holding my hand, was my angel. I thought I dreamed him until he squeezed my hand and started talking to the doctors about our next steps."

He closed his eyes. "*Our.* I wanted to cry. I might have cried. I don't remember. I later learned that when slave showed up and found out I was alone, he immediately stepped in and took over. As poorly as I had treated him before he still forgave me and insisted on coming back. He quit his job, returned to L.A. to be with me, took over my business. He had worked for me before we broke up, had been my second in command, had helped build my company. My success was due, in no small part, to his hard work.

"When they finally took the breathing tube out, my first words were, 'I'm so sorry.' My second words were, 'I love you.' He smiled his beautiful smile and told me he still loved me, too. Eventually, as you know, I beat the cancer. I'll be honest with you, if it hadn't been for him I wouldn't have tried. But then I had something, someone to fight for. He wanted me, and I wanted him. I suddenly wanted to live again. I didn't want to get him back just to lose him because of my death."

He glanced away for a moment, staring out her sliding glass doors, which looked upon her

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backyard garden. When he next spoke, his voice sounded soft and sad. "I asked him about his life. I couldn't believe he was single. His job, all of it. He told me he would not leave me again as long as he would be the only one in my life. Of course in my condition I was more than willing to agree to that. He asked we not talk about his life since he'd left me, told me all he wanted to do was focus on my healing." He turned back to her. "And that's what I did."

"So what changed?" She didn't like the sudden chill creeping over her that had nothing to do with the A/C kicking on.

"I'd sensed a deep sadness in him since his return, but I had agreed not to talk about his life. I did ask if he had children, and he assured me he didn't. I couldn't have lived with myself if I took him away from children. Still, I knew there was something. Jump forward five years to nearly a month ago, while I worked from home and my laptop died. Slave had gone to work at our office and left his laptop at home, so I used it. I have our company VPN portal bookmarked on my computer and couldn't remember the exact web address off the top of my head. I knew it was in the history in his computer and so I looked there. That's when I discovered he made regular visits to an online photo storage site. Out of curiosity, I followed the link. His login was the same as for everything else he uses, per my instructions.

"Imagine my surprise when I found pictures of him with a woman. I knew slave was bisexual when we first met. That wasn't shocking. What shocked me was the time-date stamp on the pictures. Taken during the years we were apart, the last several taken mere weeks before he returned to me.

"When he returned home from work that night, I asked him about the pictures out of curiosity. I wasn't particularly concerned about them because he had returned to me. As I said, none of the pictures were recent. I assumed a break-up and more perfect timing on the part of Fate to reunite us. Imagine my shock when he refused to talk about her."

He stood, circled the couch, then walked to the sliding glass doors where he stood, staring out them. "The first time in our relationship he ever balked at one of my commands—besides when he left me, of course. I ordered him to tell me about her and he finally did." His voice softened. "Confessed what he'd done."

Tilly's heart pounded in her chest. She didn't want to hear this. She did *not* want to hear this!

"Do you know what he did, Mistress Cardinal?" Landry softly asked.

Her voice escaping her, she shook her head.

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He faced her. "I will be the first to admit I made mistakes. But in the years we lived apart, I learned from them. I changed, matured. Even while slave and I were together the first time my priority was him, even if I screwed it up in the end. I took very seriously my role as his Master, protector, Owner. I never abandoned him. I never capriciously threatened to throw him out. I gave him the choice to leave when I issued my ultimatum about me wanting to see others outside our relationship. Even then, I did not let him leave without support. I made sure he was cared for, could take care of himself. Gave him money so he could build his life without me. Treated him equitably."

Her gaze fell upon slave, who still crouched on the floor behind her coffee table. His brown hair. The tattoo she'd seen on his ass at the club the other night.

No!

"When I asked him why he returned to me," Landry continued, "he told me he wanted to take care of me, didn't want me to be alone. Still loved me. Yes, we thought there was a better than good chance I might die, but he took it upon himself to leave another to come back to me. He lied to me when he told me he was single. Well, not technically lied, because I lay unconscious in the ICU for nearly two weeks and he'd been there most of that time. Except when he made a trip back home to take care of business. So when he told me he was single it was mostly true because by then he'd severed ties with her."

She stood. "I don't want to hear this." She heard the tremor in her voice.

"You have to. I want slave to face the consequences of his actions."

"No, really. I don't want to hear any more."

Undeterred, he continued. "I told him he had no right to make the decision for myself or the one he left. To not tell either about the other. His rationale, while well-intentioned, was of course seriously flawed. He thought he knew what was best, just as I thought I knew what was best all those years ago when I insisted on a lifestyle he couldn't live with."

She shook her head. "We're done here, Mr. LaCroux. I've changed my mind, and I'm not going to do this. I want you both to leave. Right now." She didn't want to see slave's face. If she never saw his face, it meant it didn't happen. With trembling fingers, she dug the envelope out of her back pocket and tossed it on the coffee table. "I don't want your money. I'm sorry, but I can't do this."

"Please," he said. "I need to make amends."

She angrily jabbed a finger at him. "I don't know what kind of mindfuck you're into, but I'm

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not playing into it!"

He stepped forward, until he stood in front of her. "I feel responsible. Because I should have questioned him further. I should not have turned a blind eye. Because of my shortcomings as his Master the first time around, apparently I failed to instill in him the ethic that a Master *never* abandons a slave, especially without explanation. *Ever.*"

Her knees gave out and she heavily sat in the chair as Landry stood there. He leaned in, his face inches from hers. "I told you about my cancer returning," he said, barely more than a whisper, so softly she knew slave couldn't hear him.

"I have a business proposition for you, Mistress Cardinal. I am worth a helluva lot of money. I have no wife or children. If you will marry me, and stay married to me for at least three years, I will pay you two hundred thousand dollars for every year you stay with me for those three years. If I die before then, you get everything I own, including my business. If you wish to stay married longer we will, and I will at that point sign over everything to you.

"Please consider my offer. I owe you more than I can ever repay you, for more than one reason. I need to start that restitution now. I will be back for slave at the end of the hour. Be vicious. Take your pound of flesh and then some, literally. He will take whatever you dish out."

With that he turned and walked out the front door.

Leaving the money on her table and slave kneeling on the floor.

She'd never fainted in her life, but she felt close to it. She leaned forward and put her head between her knees and took deep breaths like she'd learned in nursing school. When she realized she gasped for air, she knew she was close to hyperventilating and tried to slow her breathing.

Fuck!

After what felt like forever, she sat up and looked at the man kneeling on her floor. Her feet felt numb, her legs shaky as she stood and slowly walked around the coffee table.

He didn't look up, didn't move.

She stood over him, her breath ragged. "Look at me, goddammit," she finally said.

He slowly tilted his face, familiar brown eyes staring into hers.

Over the years she had imagined many things. At first, that if he ever darkened her door again she would take him back even though she'd been hurt and pissed. As the months, followed by years, rolled by, that fantasy changed. She imagined running into him and spitting in his face. Laughing at

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him. Pretending she didn't recognize him. Acting friendly but cool, as if his leaving hadn't ripped her sanity from her soul.

Prayed he'd grow ugly and fat and bald.

He still looked like her Cris, although his brown hair was much longer, down to his shoulders. He'd always kept it short and neatly styled when they were together.

Her handsome Master was Landry's slave.

She stared for long, countless minutes as blood throbbed through her temples, her pulse pounding.

Then she turned on her heel, walked to her bedroom, and slammed the door behind her. After a second, she locked it.

She screamed.

After ten minutes her body shook and her throat felt raw and hoarse. She snatched a riding crop from her closet. When she almost tripped on her heels, she ripped her boots off and then unlocked her door and threw it open so hard it bounced off the bedroom wall.

Landry's slave still knelt on the floor, where she'd left him.

Barefoot, she ran over to him and with ragged, wordless screams, she began beating his shoulders, his back.

He never cried out, never moved, made no effort to protect himself.

After five minutes she stood there, staring at him as her chest heaved. It felt like she couldn't breathe. She felt like she was choking, then she realized she was crying again. She dropped the riding crop.

"You fucking son of a bitch!" She circled the living room and came up behind him, kicked him in the ribs. As large as he was, it probably didn't hurt him nearly as much as it hurt the fuck out of her toes. She dropped to her knees next to him and beat her fists against his back, screaming, raging. "Why? Why did you leave me? Why wasn't I good enough for you? Why did you break your promise to protect me!"

Beyond sanity, she knew she still sobbed but she felt drained, weak. He'd never moved even though he breathed heavily.

She shoved him as hard as she could and he rolled onto his side. He wouldn't look at her.

"You fucking asshole!" she sobbed. "Why won't you fucking say anything! What the fuck is

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wrong with you!"

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"That's not good enough!" When she lost her balance and fell back onto her ass she kicked at him, caught him in the thigh. "That's not fucking good enough, you bastard!" She kicked him again, recognizing it probably didn't hurt him in the slightest.

She fell back onto the carpet and sobbed, screamed, cried, tried to hold on to her sanity.

He didn't move.

"You fucking asshole," she raggedly gasped as she rolled over and pressed her face to the carpet. This couldn't be happening. This had to be a really bad nightmare.

After she caught her breath she sat up. He lay where he'd fallen when she shoved him. She started pounding on him again with her fists. "I want him back!" she screamed. "I want my fucking Master back! You took him from me and I want him!" She fell back again, panting for breath. "Sit up!" she screamed. "Fucking face me like a man!"

He rolled onto his knees. "I'm sorry," he whispered again. "I didn't want to hurt you."

Another wordless, strangled cry broke free as she launched herself at him. She tried to claw his eyes. This time he did react. He caught her arms and spun her around, pinned her to him, her back against his chest and her wrists caught in his as he held his arms crossed around her.

She shrieked, cried, kicked, and finally went limp as she sobbed. "You took him from me, you fucking bastard! I want him back. You fucking son of a bitch, I want him back!"

* * * *

He knew he deserved every bit of it and more. He held her as she cried in his arms, trying to ignore how painfully thin she felt compared to the last time he held her. He never would have let her get this skinny if he'd been with her. "I'm so sorry, baby," he whispered through his own tears. "I'm so sorry."

She cried long and hard, not struggling against his grip. Finally, she broke free and away from him, turning to sit and look at him.

He forced himself not to drop his gaze to the carpet again. Her hair had been so beautiful. He remembered how it felt to run his hands through it, the natural color perfect for her. She'd chopped it

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short and dyed it a harsh color that added years to her looks and didn't suit her at all. Small lines that hadn't been there before etched her face, around her eyes and across her forehead.

She looked gaunt. Haunted.

She scooted even further away from him. "No." She jabbed her finger at him. "You don't *fucking* get to call me *baby*. Not after you fucking abandoned me!" She scrabbled to her feet and backed away from him. "Get out!"

He nodded and slowly climbed to his feet. Damn, he would be black and blue tomorrow. He started for the door.

"I just want to know one thing," she said before he reached the hallway. "Why? Why didn't you tell me? Why did you abandon me?"

He took a deep breath and finally forced himself to meet her gaze again. "Because I didn't think you would want me," he said. "If I'd told you about my past."

She looked shocked. "What? Why would you think that?"

Well, this was progress. She hadn't ordered him out again and she wasn't attacking him anymore. "Because I heard you and Loren talking one day. About a FetLife posting you guys saw. You were discussing if Ross or I ever wanted to switch, what you'd think. You told her you couldn't handle that. That you needed a strong Master. That it would freak you out if I ever did that." He shrugged. "I'm sorry. Master's right. I should have talked to you and told you the truth from the start."

She stared at him. "Did the thought of *asking* me what I would think ever occur to you?"

"I'm sorry."

"Quit fucking saying that!" she screamed, her voice cracking. "It doesn't help! There are not enough 'I'm sorries' in the goddamn world to make up for what you did to me!" She stomped across the room and shoved him again. "Do you have any idea how long I spent in the fucking hospital, drugged out of my mind after you left? Ross and Loren carried me into the ER." She punched him, hard, in the shoulder. That one did hurt. "I had to go to the fucking parole hearing alone, you son of a bitch!"

She started crying again. "Did it ever cross your mind that if you had told me the truth about him that maybe, just maybe I would have offered to go with you? To help you? To serve him *with* you?"

That rocked him harder than any of her blows. No, he hadn't thought it. It never crossed his

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mind. "I just assumed—"

She threw up her arms in disgust. "Fuck. Me. Thanks a lot, asshole, for not having faith in me and my goddamned love for you!" She turned her back on him and walked over to the sliding glass doors. "They let the fucker out," she quietly said. "They let him out on parole."

His gut tightened even more but he didn't say anything. Nothing he said could be right and he knew it.

"I begged them not to let him out," she continued, "but they looked at me like I was some freaking pitiful, hysterical little douchebag. Then they let the fucker out, said he was rehabilitated. I could barely talk I was so fucking frightened, but I went there by myself and I talked to them even if it didn't do any goddamned good. Then the son of a bitch raped a thirteen year-old girl six months later."

She turned to him. "You know, maybe if you'd been there, maybe if I hadn't been pissing my pants scared to be there alone, maybe I could have talked like an intelligent person. Maybe they would have listened to me. I've never stopped blaming you for that."

The fun house of horrors just kept getting bigger.

She drew herself up to her full height, still nearly a foot shorter than him in her bare feet. "I do have you to thank for one thing. I kept thinking to myself, 'Fuck him.' You were right that I could do anything I put my mind to." She held up her arms and spun around. "This house, my car, everything. I took the mindfuck you put me through and turned it into a profitable living.

"Oh, I spent the first several months in Ross' collar because he and Loren both felt terrified I'd kill myself. Maybe I would have if it hadn't been for them. He made me promise not to and just let me be myself. He told me I could take his collar off when I felt strong enough to go on with my life. I finally could."

She planted her hands on her hips. "Then I finally decided fuck you! I don't want any goddamned collars in my life. Not on *me*." She advanced on him again. "*I* collar people. They pay *me* to mindfuck *them*. They pay *me* to beat *them*. They pay me pretty damn well, too."

She shook her head as she looked him up and down. "There's part of me tempted to take him up on his offer just so I can kick you in the balls every fucking morning first thing when I get out of bed."

Offer?

She looked near tears again. "I would have done anything you asked of me. Would it have shocked me? Yes. Under the circumstances, had you told me about him, I would have helped you. I

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would have loved you for feeling responsible for him. I was your fucking *slave*! I was willing to be your *wife*! Don't you think I knew how strong that bond can be? Too bad you didn't appreciate my gift of submission." Her eyes widened. "Wait. Stay right there, asshole."

She turned and raced from the room. He heard her rummaging around, then she returned a few minutes later with something in her hand. She grabbed his left hand and jammed the item into his palm and closed his fingers around it.

"There. You can have that back. I almost threw it away. Once I realized you weren't coming back and gave up that little illusion, I took it off. Probably the third worst night of my fucking life, I cried myself to sleep that night because I knew it meant you really weren't there for me anymore. I finally had to admit it to myself. I couldn't hold on to my pathetic dream that maybe you'd come back. You're not my fucking Master anymore. A little late to say it, but I want to make it official just in case there's any doubt in that pea-brain of yours: I withdraw my submission to you. Now get. The fuck. Out of *my* house."

He fought his own tears as he felt the fluorite pendant dig into his palm. He'd spent weeks looking for something for her to wear as a day collar. The colors were perfect, purple and green and blue, her favorites. She'd never willingly taken it off while they were together. One time the clasp broke and she was in tears when he made her leave it at the jeweler's overnight so they could fix it.

He turned to go.

"You can't even say anything to me?"

"I wish I'd made a different choice," he softly said. "I love you. You deserved to be treated better than I treated you."

"Fuckin' A I did."

She slammed and locked the door behind him.

He didn't know what else to do, so he sat on the step at the end of the walkway and waited for Landry's return. He held up the pendant. He could still conjure her happy squeals when she opened the box and saw it. How she'd cried, happy tears that time, when he draped it around her neck and hooked the clasp for her.

How he'd kissed the back of her neck and said, "Always and forever, Redbird. My promise to you."

He closed his eyes and didn't bother fighting his tears.

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When he heard a car pull into the driveway, he opened his eyes and flexed his body to stand, but it wasn't Landry.

The Mercedes wasn't new, but the driver kept it spotless. When the man stepped out, jealousy rolled through slave's belly.

The man glanced at him, then proceeded to walk around to the trunk and unload several bags of groceries. He locked the car, then cast another curious glance at slave as he walked past but didn't speak to him.

He recognized him as the man she'd been with at the club the other night.

Before the man even reached the door it opened and slave heard her voice. "Hi!" She sounded happy to see him.

The slave closed his eyes and felt the pendant digging into his palm.

"Tilly, did you know there's a guy sitting on your walk?"

"Yeah. He's waiting for his ride. Come on in."

* * * *

Tilly barely kept it together as she let Bob in. Her hands violently trembled as she shot the deadbolt once she closed the door behind him. He walked over to the counter and set the bags down. When he started to speak, she didn't understand what he said as the shakes hit her.

Suddenly, a strong pair of arms held her as she sobbed against his shoulder. He picked her up and carried her to the couch, his voice full of worry.

"Tilly, are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

"No, I'm not okay, but no he didn't hurt me." She angrily laughed. "At least not recently." When the stun gun dug into her back, she carefully fished it out from under her shirt and put it on the table. Finally mustering the courage to look into his face, the strength of the protective anger there took her breath away.

"Who is he? Do you want me to call the cops?"

"He's a skeleton from my closet." Sitting up, she wiped her face with her hands. "A blast from the past."

"Is he an old client?"

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She snorted. "No. I *wish*. He's my old Master. Former boyfriend. He was the topic of our conversation last night, surprise, surprise. Right out of the clear blue sky, speak of the Devil, and there he is."

She'd never seen literal homicidal rage in real life until that moment. As Bob jumped up from the couch, sending her tumbling out of his lap, she realized he'd been deadly serious about getting violent with Cristo. He had the deadbolt open and flew out the door before she even managed to untangle her own legs and climb off the couch.

By the time she reached the front door, Bob was down the walk and standing behind Cris, who still sat waiting for Landry.

"Hey, asshole. Stand up."

She swore as she raced down the walk.

Cris turned to look up at him with…

Resignation?

That's when her worry changed from hoping Bob didn't get his ass kicked to praying Bob didn't kill Cris. Where the fuck was Landry? He was late.

"I said stand up, asshole."

She watched Cris look at the pendant before he slipped it inside the pocket of his jeans. Then he slowly climbed to his feet. He looked like he was already in pain from the beating she'd given him.

She grabbed Bob's arm. "Bob, please, it's okay. Let's go inside."

"No, it's *not* okay, Tilly. I finally get a chance to make you happy and this fucker walks back into your life the next goddamned *day*?" He gently shook her off. "I don't know what the fuck you did to her, and frankly, it's none of my business unless she wants to tell me, but you fucking hurt her."

She grabbed his arm again. "*Please*, Bob, let's go inside. He's not worth it."

He started to argue with her when Landry's car pulled in. *Oh thank you, Christ!*

"Who's that?" Bob asked.

"That's his Master. Come on, let's go inside."

Landry shut the car off and took his sweet time getting out. "How did our training session go? I hope he's got a lot more bruises than I left him with." He looked at Bob. "Are you by any chance about to kick his ass?"

"Yeah, actually, I was just about to do that."

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Tilly wouldn't let go of Bob. "Landry, *please*! Take him and get the fuck out of here!"

Landry laughed and leaned against the hood of his car. He crossed his arms in front of him. "Actually, if slave has another ass-kicking coming to him, I'd really like to watch. I'll even hold him down for you, if you'd like."

"Landry!"

"I don't need him held down," Bob assured him.

Tilly wished she'd kept the damn stun gun on her belt. She forced herself in front of Bob and scruffed the back of his neck, pulling his head down so she could look into his eyes, the way she often did when he wore her collar.

"*Please*," she whispered, "don't do this. He's not worth it and someone will call the police. I could be in a lot of trouble if that happens."

As she'd hoped, that took the fight out of him. He still glared at Cris. "If I ever run into you again, I will kick your fucking ass," he growled.

Landry slapped the hood of his car. "Goddammit! I really wanted a show. I can give you our hotel address if you want, and you can come kick his ass later."

Bob looked startled. "What?"

"Seriously." He grabbed a pen out of the car and jotted information on a business card, then started to hand it to Bob.

Tilly snatched it from Landry's hand and jammed it in her pocket. "Get out of here before I do call the cops."

He sighed. "Party pooper. I'll be calling you to discuss my offer, Mistress Cardinal. I was serious." He looked at Cris. "Well, what are you waiting for, slave? Get in the fucking car unless you want to walk back to the hotel."

During the whole incident, Cris stood there without speaking or making any attempt to protect himself or run away. Tilly watched Cris bow his head and silently walk to the car and get in.

She despised that a tiny part of her deep inside her heart didn't want to see him to go and hated to see him looking like a beat dog.

* * * *

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It took her nearly twenty minutes to calm Bob. He vacillated between apologetic for blowing his cool and enraged that he didn't take a swing at Cris anyway.

She thanked God it had been Bob who'd been there and not Ross or Loren. They *would* have killed him.

Aw, shit.

She sent Bob to the kitchen to start dinner while she made her safe call.

"I was about to come over," Loren said. "You're never late with a safe call."

"I know, I'm sorry. Things got hectic."

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Bob came over for dinner after my client and I lost track of time." She decided omitting the details about Cris would be the wisest move.

"Bob…*Bob*? From the club? Your boy, Bob?"

"Yeah, we went out for dinner yesterday and—"

"What? Wait, you and *Bob* went out for dinner? When?"

"I thought I told you that?"

"No you didn't freaking tell me that! That's…that's good, right?"

Okay, this she did *not* need tonight. She had no patience for Momma Loren's twenty questions. "Yes, it's good. He's here tonight making me dinner."

"Oh."

"Not like that. Bob and Tilly dinner, not Mistress and boy dinner."

"Oh!"

"Yeah, oh. Now can I get back to my date, Momma Loren?"

Her friend laughed. "I want all the delicious details! Call me tomorrow."

Tilly got off the phone, then washed her face and returned to the kitchen. Bob's expression softened when he saw her. He pulled her to him for a hug.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah. Just in shock. I wasn't expecting to see him."

He looked down into her face. "How about you go take a shower and get into sweats or whatever you like to chill out in and let me handle making you dinner." He stroked her cheek. "You look like you're wiped out. Go relax."

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"I hope you don't want me to be Domme-y tonight."

He smiled. "I want to spend the evening with Tilly. Despite my jokes about boy cooking and cleaning, I had kind of hoped Mistress Cardinal would decide to take the night off."

She stared into his blue eyes. "Yeah?"

He nodded. "I want to get to know Tilly. I want to get to know her very well."

Tilly didn't have to force her smile.

* * * *

Tilly wished she could pull her mind from the memory of Cris looking up at her from the floor, but she couldn't. Especially not when after dinner she sat curled up on the couch with Bob, watching TV and talking with him.

Her gaze repeatedly went to where Cris had knelt behind the coffee table.

"I'm sorry this isn't the evening I had in mind," Bob softly said.

Distracted again. She looked at him. "What?"

He stroked her cheek. "It's okay. That had to be a really bad shock earlier."

She'd taken a shower and changed into an oversized T-shirt and comfortable shorts while he cooked dinner. No make-up, and her hair wonky from air drying. He had such sweet, blue eyes, but now all she could think about was Cris.

Not to mention Landry's offer.

She snuggled against him. His body felt very comfortable holding hers. "I'm sorry I'm not good company tonight."

"It's okay. I understand. Want to try again next Thursday? I'll bring dinner and cook for you."

She snuggled closer and closed her eyes. "I'd like that. That'd be nice."

"Is it really just me and Tilly tonight?"

Cracking open one eye, she caught his playful smirk. "Yeah. Why?"

"Because I don't want Mistress Cardinal beating me for this." He placed a long, slow, sensual kiss on her lips. With a mind of their own, her hands slipped around his neck, relaxing into his embrace and for once driving all other thoughts out of her mind for a few blissful moments.

When he broke their kiss his playful smirk remained. "Was that okay?"

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She smiled. "Way more than okay."

He glanced at the time. "I hate to say this, but I need to head home."

"It's only ten-thirty."

"I have a Sunrise Rotary meeting in the morning. I don't feel like getting my balls busted by them two weeks in a row for being late."

"Rotary, Hallmark ornaments, and as big a bookworm as I am. Explain to me why we didn't hook up sooner?"

He nuzzled her nose with his. "Because I'm a good boy. I follow orders."

She reluctantly walked him to the door, still wondering if she shouldn't try to talk him into staying. Before he left he turned to her and gave her one last hug and kiss.

"Believe me, it's not that I don't want to stay later. If I do, I'll be too tempted to take you to bed."

"Who says that's a bad thing?"

He stroked her cheek again. She loved that. "It's not a bad thing, but after the shock you've had today, I'd feel like I was taking advantage of you. I'd rather take things a little slower. I've waited nearly three years to ask you out. It won't kill me to wait a little longer to take things to the next level."

After one last lingering hug, he left. She waved to him from the open doorway until his taillights disappeared down her quiet street. Then she stepped inside, closed and locked the door behind her.

Her living room lay empty before her except for the ghostly memory of kicking Cris and screaming at him.

The wonderful feelings her evening with Bob had brought her evaporated.

She closed her eyes and groaned. *Did I really say that? Did I really tell him I wanted my Master back?*

She hoped it was a figment of her shattered composure, but the more she thought about it, the more she realized that's probably exactly what she'd said.

Another round of tears threatened and she held them back. Despite all her claims, deep in her heart it was the truth. As much as she hated Cris for what he did to her, and as much as she never wanted to make herself that vulnerable again, deep down inside part of her missed and craved that connection, that love.

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The service.

Sleep wouldn't be possible, no doubt about it. She spotted Landry's business card on her dresser, where she'd laid it after undressing before her shower. Picking it up, she saw he'd scribbled their hotel and room number on it. On U.S. 41, near where Fruitville ended.

She could be there in twenty minutes. Just to talk.

Just to hear his nutty deal. If she took him up on it, she could pay off her house and maybe take some time off, catch up on credits to renew her nursing license.

Quit being Mistress Cardinal forever.

Closing her eyes, she tried to think about Bob's blue gaze and all she could see now was Cris' brown eyes.

Or Landry's intense green stare.

There was no way she'd be able to put this evening behind her, one way or the other, until she got some of her many questions answered.

Swearing, she pulled on a pair of jeans and grabbed her keys.

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Chapter Five

Landry didn't look at his slave as he drove away from Mistress Cardinal's house. "So? What happened?"

The slave studied his hands.

"Twenty-five with a cane for not answering immediately. I asked you a question. Answer it now, or you'll get fifty."

"She was very upset."

He laughed. "Duh. I figured that much. Who did I save you from out there? What was his name, Bob?"

"I don't know. He was the man we saw with her at the club."

"Ah. Maybe the information I received at the club was wrong and she has a boyfriend after all." *Dammit.* That would put a kink in his plans.

"I don't think so, Master. I get the impression they haven't been seeing each other long."

A little relief and hope crept in. "Good. Now tell me what happened."

As slave related how she'd reacted, Landry nodded, trying not to speak or comment during the story. His heart broke for the woman, for the pain she'd gone through at his expense.

He never wanted to hurt someone. Well, not like *that*, at least. He was a sadist, not an asshole.

Slave gave him as verbatim a recollection as he could. Landry contemplated what she'd said. "You took her Master from her. That's an interesting comment for her to make, considering what she did to you and how she formally withdrew her submission."

Slave shrugged.

"Do you think she still loves you?"

Slave looked out his window. "I doubt it," he softly replied. "Not as badly as I hurt her. I think what she said was probably more out of pain, over what she went through then, not what she really feels now."

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Landry wasn't sure he agreed with that assessment, but he let it go. He didn't know the woman beyond what slave told him and his own brief interactions with her.

But he intended to get closer to her.

Much closer.

Back at their room, he made slave strip and bend over the end of the bed. He delivered twenty-five vicious strikes with a rattan cane, not breaking the flesh but immediately raising welts on his skin, crossing the existing bruises from their previous nights at the clubs.

Slave took his punishment without complaint.

After their pizza arrived, he allowed slave to sit, naked, at the small table to eat before ordering him back to the floor again where he could work on his laptop. Then he settled on the bed, still dressed, to watch TV.

Occasionally glancing at his phone, Landry wondered if she'd call. He didn't miss that she snatched the card with the hotel room info on it from him and pocketed it before Bob could take it.

He also hadn't missed the brief longing that crossed her expression before slave got in the car at her house.

He suspected a little tiny piece of her didn't want to see him go.

* * * *

Landry glanced at his phone when it buzzed on the table between the beds around a quarter after eleven. Pleasantly surprised, a smile creased his face as he read the caller ID. Honestly? He'd almost given up on hearing from her that night. He answered. "Hello."

He listened for a moment and then said, "Not at all, I was still awake. I'll be right there." He hung up and stood. Slave remained kneeling on the floor. "You'd better be right there when I get back. Do not move. I don't know how long I'll be gone. Could be a few minutes, could be a few hours. Could be all fucking night."

He slipped on his shoes, grabbed his room key, patted his pocket to make sure he had the ring, and walked outside. In the dark he quickly scanned the parking lot and saw her parked next to his rental. She drove a brand new Lexus SUV.

The passenger window slid down. "Get in."

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He reached for the door handle. "I'm glad to see you. I'll admit this is rather unexpected."

She drove without speaking to a nearby park overlooking Sarasota Bay. He waited her out as she stared at the water.

"What the fuck is your game, Landry?" she finally asked.

"No game, I assure you." He didn't miss the fact that she used his first name.

"Why not leave everything to Cris? He's your…partner, right?"

"Because he has lost the right to own anything after this. Before I found out about his transgression, yes, I considered him more than just my slave. He was my partner in every way. My lover. My love." He took a deep breath. Why hold on to his pride when he had nothing left to lose? "I owe you."

"You don't owe me shit."

"You're wrong. No, it's not technically my fault what happened, but I still feel responsible. For example, take your boy today. If he got into a fight at a club—"

"He's not my boy."

Landry successfully suppressed his smile. "Oh. I'm sorry, I thought from what I saw—"

"He's a client. And…a friend."

"Boyfriend?"

"That is none of your fucking business."

"I'm asking you to marry me, therefore yes, it is my business."

"You're crazy."

"No," he said, settling back in the seat. "I'm tired. Honestly? I don't know if I'm going to get through this or not. They say I probably will, but there are no guarantees. I need this cleared off my plate one way or another as soon as possible."

"Doesn't Cris love you? Why not forgive him and move on? He didn't hurt you."

Landry dropped his voice. "He told me about your step-father."

He watched her hands clench into fists. Her voice trembled. "That's still not your fault."

"I love him. Yes, I'm upset with him for how he treated you, and yes, I feel guilty, right or wrong. I'm human. There's another issue, however." He looked at her. "He still loves you. I'm not a moron. I know he loves me, but he's still *in* love with you and always has been. He didn't leave you because he didn't love you enough or because he loved me more. He honestly thought I would die. So

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did I, for a while. He knew you had people who loved you and would help you. I didn't have anyone. I was completely alone and had alienated almost everyone who gave a damn about me. He made a decision for both of us without asking what we wanted."

"Why do you feel you have to marry me?"

"Well, I own slave. He'd become community property," he joked. "Seriously, I wanted to move here anyway. Ironically, Tampa has one of the best cancer centers in the country and it's not a bad drive from Sarasota. I'd already been looking at relocating to this area because it's cheaper to live out here and I'm sick of California. Most of my clients are on the east coast, not out on the west coast. Unfortunately, Florida has a few laws that can make life complicated for same-sex couples."

She turned to look at him but didn't speak.

"If you're my wife, you can make medical decisions for me, automatically step in and take over if the worst happens, without all the horrific red tape slave would have to go through. Not to mention it will further humiliate slave, for me to be married to the woman he loves."

"Why can't you say his name?"

"Because I'm still too angry." He stared at the water again, but his voice gentled. "You can make sure he gets into the hospital to see me, to be with me. To be honest, I don't want him going through this alone a second time, if you can bring yourself to help him."

"Who says I want to be anywhere around the son of a bitch?"

He took a gamble. "Because you still love him as much as he loves you. Somewhere, deep inside you, part of you wants him back."

"I don't want another Master. Especially him."

"I didn't say a Master." He also noticed she didn't deny his statement about her loving him.

She went quiet for several minutes. He waited her out. "What do you expect of me?" she softly asked.

He breathed a silent sigh of relief. If she asked a question like that she had already decided to accept his offer, even if she wasn't ready to admit it quite yet. "We'd be married in name only. You don't have to have regular contact with us if you don't want to, except when I'm undergoing treatment and I need you to sign forms or whatever so he can be there with me. You can live your life exactly as you do now. Even have Bob if you want him. Date, whatever. Hell, move in with someone, I don't care." He felt no compunction about telling her the lie. If she would just agree to the arrangement, he

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could then work his way into her life.

But he had to start somewhere.

"What's going to happen? With your treatment."

He shrugged. "I'm scheduled for a biopsy this coming Wednesday. Then they'll go from there, whether surgery or radiation or chemo, I don't know yet."

"Have you told Cris?"

"No. I wanted an answer from you first."

"Why?"

"Because if you're going to tell me no, I'm going to release slave without telling him about my cancer. I'd rather go through this alone than have him tied to me because he feels he has to be here out of pity or duty."

She stared at him for a moment, apparently stunned. "You are seriously nuts."

"No, I'm sick of knowing that for all these years someone owned his heart besides me. I thought he loved me as much as I love him. I *do* love him. I never stopped loving him when we were apart, I told you that."

* * * *

Tilly studied Landry as her emotions swirled. This was crazy. Totally nuts. As much as she hated Cris for what he did to her, the part of her that could still feel compassion and empathy, no matter how small it had shrunk, felt sorry for Landry.

Then there was the miniscule, yet annoyingly tenacious particle of her soul which still loved Cris.

And the mercenary part of her soul told her she'd be a moron not to accept his offer. Get out of the pro Domme business and back into nursing.

"If I say yes, and I'm not saying I will, how would this work exactly? We'd sign a pre-nup?"

He nodded. "Exactly. I will also change my will. I would specify that everything you own now is fully yours and I'm not entitled to any of it, and any money you earn while married to me is also yours, not joint assets. But everything I have and earn will be yours."

"Is this some half-assed attempt to get me and him back together?"

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"No. In fact, feel free to beat him as much as you want while we're together." He smiled. "He deserves it."

"You are a fucking sadist, aren't you?"

He laughed. "Not all of us do it for money, Mistress Cardinal. Some love inflicting pain for the sheer enjoyment of it. Although I never used humiliation on him before all of this."

"Tilly," she absently corrected him as her brain still struggled to comprehend the situation. "What are your chances of surviving this? Seriously."

He shrugged again. "One doctor said seventy percent, another said eighty, a third said ninety. Unfortunately, if you add in my previous bout, it can skew the odds against me. I just found about it two weeks ago at my regular check-up. Blood work picked it up, scans confirmed it. I could beat it this time and it could come back a year or a decade from now, or maybe not at all. They all agree that it's likely I'll beat it and go into remission. Just how hard I'll have to work for that remains to be seen."

"How long did it take you to recover from it the first time?"

"Over a year before they knew I'd turned the corner, but that time, I was already at a much more advanced stage. Much of that time I was too weak to even get out of bed, between healing from my injuries and the cancer treatments."

"Tell me about your wreck."

He looked away. "I'd rather not."

That's when her bullshit alarm went off. "You'd better."

He took a long, ragged breath. "I never told anyone this, and I would appreciate you not saying anything about it either, but I was trying to kill myself. Actually surprised the hell out of me when I woke up." He laughed, but it sounded harsh. "What does it say about me that I could fuck up my own suicide? I forgot to take off my seatbelt before the crash. They said it's the only thing that saved me."

* * * *

They talked for over two hours, mostly Landry talking while Tilly asked him questions. She hated that she actually liked the guy. It'd be a lot easier to tell him to go fuck himself if he was an asshole. Still, her anger at Cris burned, seethed. Her pain. Her memories of what she'd gone through.

As for Landry, he was a nice guy, smart, funny, witty. Handsome. If he wasn't gay she might

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have dated him. They had a lot of common interests.

Then there was his Master and sadist side, which she knew lay dark and deep. Definitely a lifestyle Dominant, not just a weekend slap-and-tickle player.

He also felt very scared, even though he didn't admit how deeply in so many words. She knew from listening to him, how he talked, how his body language changed. It humanized him and gave her insight beneath his thin veneer of bravado.

He worried he'd have to release Cris, and then he would be alone. His personal honor code wouldn't allow him to keep Cris if she wouldn't agree to this insanity.

"What if the cancer hadn't come back?" she asked. "Would you still be here?"

"Yes. I hadn't expected it to be like this, though. I considered taking him to a club where everyone had once known him and let anyone who wanted a turn to take a swing at him. I also seriously considered releasing him in front of everyone. The ultimate humiliation for what he did. I would have ordered him to take whatever punishment I deemed to mete out, and he would have."

She shuddered. She remembered how Cris had stood there as Bob threatened him. The old Cristo would have defended himself. With a black belt in karate, he could have easily kicked Bob's ass.

But Cristo the slave would have let Bob beat the crap out of him. The only time he defended himself was when she went for his eyes, and even then after she'd calmed a little he let her take more whacks at him.

As upset as she felt at Cris, she felt a little sorry for him. "You don't have to release him if I don't agree to this. I told you, I don't hold you responsible. Don't feel guilty on my account."

"Yes, I do have to release him. Because I would rather be alone. It's the principle of the matter."

"This is your *life* you're talking about. Time to shelve the principles, don't you think?"

"I disagree. It's even more important now. I would hate to die knowing I didn't do what I felt necessary to make amends."

"You just said the odds are in your favor. And you don't need to make amends. Jesus, you're fucking dense. I don't hold you responsible."

"I hold myself responsible."

She looked out over the bay again. A few sailboats anchored nearby bobbed on inky black chop. While lights shone in a few, most lay dark, tied to mooring buoys. "Three years?"

"Yes. After that, if you want to stay married, we can re-negotiate the annual salary if you'd like.

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But everything I own will be yours if you stay with me, if that's what you want."

So much pain. So much anger. Could she ever look at Cris and not want to pound him in the nuts?

Then the irresistible pull. She did like Landry. Frankly, she liked him as much as she liked Bob, in many ways. Different ways.

Dominant ways.

The fact that they had their anger at Cris in common only made her feel closer to him. Not that she wanted to admit it, but it did touch her that he felt so upset on her account despite not knowing her. That spoke volumes about his character.

She also felt sorry for him. Obviously, Cris had loved him very much to do what he did, right or wrong. It wasn't hard for her to see why Cris loved him.

A damn good guaranteed paycheck, a chance to use her nursing skills, and a break from being a Domme. She could hang Mistress Cardinal in the closet with her corsets and stiletto heels and just be Tilly again.

She would have someone to take care of, in a way she hadn't since Cris left. Despite what she did, she had her own needs that had gone unmet for far too long.

Wanting to serve.

Not wanting to be alone, even if it meant being tied to the man who had broke her heart and crushed her soul.

The man Landry claimed still loved her.

What did she have to lose? Well, other than her sanity. Hell, if she could survive what she went through, this should be a cakewalk. And it would mean getting her life back, not having to be a pro-Domme anymore.

"If I'm marrying you," she said, "I need a few concessions."

"Of course."

"You're not my Master, my Dom, or my Top. If you try to pull any bullshit like that, you'll wish you hadn't."

"Of course not."

"For now you'll move in with me. I'd rather have you at my house than have to schlep somewhere else to take care of you. You can contribute to household expenses."

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Even in the dark car she saw his eyebrows lift. "What? What about Cris?"

She gritted her teeth. "He can move in too."

"I can't ask you to do that. I'm not asking you to take care of me, just to marry me and assure Cris has access to me in the hospital. Why would you want me living with you?"

"Did Cris mention I went to nursing school?"

"No."

"Yeah. I graduated, worked at it for nearly a year. After I got into doing this I quit doing it and my license lapsed." She tapped her head. "Knowledge is still there. So if I'm earning that money, I might as well earn it."

"He'll still be my slave, though. I'll be using him when and where I see fit. Is that going to bother you?"

"Nope. Have at him. I don't want him as a slave but he can clean my damn house and do chores when I tell him."

"Absolutely. He's yours to use and abuse *however* you need him."

She didn't miss how he accented that word, however. "I won't interfere with what you do with him if you don't interfere with what I do with him," she said.

He nodded, smiling. "That'll humiliate him. Good."

An idea struck her. It would be a particularly painful revenge for Cris. "You ever sleep with a woman before?"

He looked confused. "Tilly, I'm not asking you to do that. I don't expect anything like that from you."

"Answer my question."

He looked even more puzzled as he studied her face for a moment. "I've slept with women before, years ago. Before I finally admitted I was gay."

"How long ago?"

"Before I met Cris."

"Think you can still get it up for me?"

"Tilly, I said—"

"Answer the damn question, Landry."

He took a while to mull it over. "I'm sure I could oblige you, but while I'm undergoing cancer

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treatment you could shoot me full of Viagra and have Adam Lambert go down on me and it wouldn't raise the dead."

She smiled. He had a good sense of humor. "I only need you one time. One really good, hard, long time. If I'm going to marry you, you're going to fuck me on our wedding night."

That dropped his jaw. Finally, something to shatter that annoyingly unshakable composure of his. "What?"

She turned in her seat to face him. "Yeah. That's one of *my* conditions. I want one really big 'fuck you' in his face before we get down to the business of taking care of you. I want *my* pound of flesh. Otherwise, all I'm going to do is hate him more every day. You want to know something? I haven't slept with a guy since he left. I didn't have the heart at first, then I finally got to the point where I considered it and Bob comes into my life. Then you bring Cris back the next *fucking* day. Super sucky timing, dude."

She took a deep breath. "So here's what I want. I want a good, long, hard fucking on my wedding night. I want you to make me come so hard the top of my head blows off. Not Master/slave stuff either, just good ole vanilla sex. I want you to spend the night making love to me, and Cris has to sit there and watch and listen to every second of it while he's tied up and can't move. Who knows, maybe I'll make him suck you off after you've been inside me. Cuckolding and humiliation aren't my personal kinks, but I'm willing to get into it for one night if it means I can hurt him. I want my revenge so I can move on with my life once and for all. Otherwise, it's going to eat me alive and I don't want to live like that anymore. I want to hurt him as badly as he hurt me. If you're telling the truth how he feels about me, I can't think of a better way to do it."

Landry stared at her for a moment in shock, then he laughed. It rolled out of him, long and hard, until he finally composed himself a minute later. "You haven't slept with *anyone* since he left?"

"That's all you got from what I just said?"

He laughed again. "No, I like that, it's perfect. Yeah, it'll humiliate him, all right." He shook his head. "Jesus, it's perfect. You're as big a sadist as I am. I never would have thought of that. I never assumed you'd want to—"

"That's another thing. No more goddamned assumptions. Ever. You ask me what I want or don't want. Got it?"

His face turned solemn. "Yeah. I think we're both in firm agreement on that one."

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"What about Bob?"

Bob. "I don't know," she wistfully said. "I thought he might be the one I could finally open up to. I meant it when I said you had horribly sucky timing."

"Sorry."

"I have a feeling if he ever sees Cris again he'll nail him."

"Let him."

"You really were going to let Bob pound the shit out of him in my driveway, weren't you?"

"What part of sadist don't you understand?" He smiled. "You're not the only one looking for a pound of flesh."

"How long do we keep him suffering?"

"I don't know about you, I think only you can answer that for yourself. Frankly, my pride's still in the damn toilet. I have a feeling next Wednesday will realign my priorities."

"When do you tell him about that?"

He shrugged. "Don't know. Haven't decided yet." He looked at her. "How do you want to do this?"

"Come pick me up tomorrow at ten. I need to call my clients and cancel. Come alone. I don't want to see him again yet. When do you write my first check? I have bills to pay."

He chuckled. "I already have a lawyer here in town. How about we go there first, handle that, then I'll take you to lunch and we'll go to the clerk's office from there. How much debt do you have? I'll help you out with that, too."

"I pay my credit cards off every month, and I only owe twenty thousand on my house. Paid cash for my car. My student loans are repaid."

She felt another jolt of satisfaction when his eyebrows arched. "What?"

"Being a pro Domme in this town pays pretty well. I'm actually taking a pay cut. Lucky for you my house is almost paid off or I would never agree to this."

* * * *

Still reeling from her revelation, he watched her drive off. Funny, he'd imagined her to be barely hanging on, even after seeing where she lived, especially after what Cris had told him about her

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personality.

What Cris put her through changed her. For the better? Only time would tell.

One thing for certain, she was a woman who went after what she wanted. He couldn't think of anyone better to have by his side. The fact that she bumped his timetable up by months by insisting they move in with her was a bonus.

That he found himself attracted to her had come as a genuine surprise. He should have known Cris would never lose his heart to some sniveling, weak-spined trollop. Tilly was unlike any other woman he'd ever met.

He couldn't wait to get to know her better, this woman who still owned his slave's heart even when she herself had been his slave.

He unlocked the hotel room door. Slave still knelt on the floor where he'd left him. "Do you have to use the bathroom?"

"Yes, Master."

"Go do it and get ready for bed."

Slave slowly stood, then turned and walked to the bedroom. His back was covered with fresh bruises from where Tilly had beat the crap out of him. Looked like she'd used her fists, maybe a crop. *Nice.* No slices from a cane. A particularly large bruise on his thigh where Landry suspected she'd kicked him.

Damn. Had to hurt like a son of a bitch.

He stripped and pulled the covers back on his bed before lying down. When slave returned, Landry pointed at his cock. "Get busy."

Slave knelt between his legs and went down on him. Landry tightly gripped his head, fisting his hair, pulling on him, driving his cock deep into his throat and nearly choking him.

Slave never complained, never fought, never tried to pull away as Landry fucked his mouth. Slave took it.

After a few minutes, Landry shot a load down his throat. He didn't even give slave a gentle pat on the head or a "good boy."

"Go to bed. You can sleep on the other bed tonight. On top of the covers."

"Thank you, Master."

Landry turned off the lamp and pulled the covers over himself. He didn't crank the A/C down

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like he had the previous nights. He hated sleeping alone, missed the feel of Cris' taller body stretched out beside him. Maybe now, being able to make reparations for what happened, he'd finally be able to let Cris back in bed with him without feeling guilty or angry about his presence.

Or without feeling like a goddamned pity fuck.

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Chapter Six

Tilly laid in bed and stared at the ceiling. She realized sleep would be a long time coming as she replayed her conversation with Landry.

What the fuck.

What.

The.

Fuck?

Why the *hell* was she agreeing to this? And why the fuck had she come up with that crazy idea of hers?

She didn't really want to fuck Landry! Well, okay, great eye candy, sure, but in all her revenge fantasies over what she'd do if Cris returned to her life, that wasn't one of them.

Although something about the idea gave her a deep sense of satisfaction.

She tried rolling onto her side. A little after three, she finally fell asleep and dreamed about Cris, about their life together. All good times, even during her blackest emotional storms he stood solid and patient beside her, loving her. When she awoke a little after seven the next morning her resolve had faltered. She stared at the ring on her left hand. Cris had wanted to give her a ring and she'd refused for the longest time, terrified over the thought of being married to someone after what she'd seen her mother go through.

After what she'd gone through.

What if she'd let Cris marry her when he'd wanted to? Would he still have left and gone back to Landry?

Nothing good could come from that line of thinking, so she ended it.

It's just another job, she tried to think. *I wanted to be a nurse, wanted to help people. I get to do that.*

There was that. No more making men dress up in diapers or trying not to kick them in the teeth,

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literally, while they licked her boots, or whatever their kink was.

After a couple of years she found it a lot easier to slip into the role of "Mistress Cardinal" as she felt nothing but contempt for most of her clients. Otherwise, if it wasn't for the paycheck, she'd never do it. It left her emotionally empty inside, a bottomless void only one thing had ever filled.

Her service and love for Cris.

She only enjoyed taking care of Bob and one other guy, but that guy was married and his wife knew about his kink. A pain slut on the high end of the scale who wanted to be used hard. She'd had coffee with the guy's wife at the very beginning, Tilly pleasantly shocked to find out as long as no sex was involved and everything was kept transparent with her, the wife had no problem with it. Maybe the fact that she was a psychologist helped. She'd wanted to watch one session. Once satisfied it didn't cross any of their marital boundaries, she let him have one session a month with Tilly. Usually two or three hours that left him barely able to walk later, but happy. Lately, she'd been asking Tilly questions about what they did and asking for advice on things she could do for him at home.

Tilly was more than happy to show her proper techniques to cause pain without injury. She couldn't scene as heavily with him as he craved with Tilly, but it helped bond them closer as a couple.

A job well done.

Then…

She sighed. Then there was Bob.

She did *not* want to give up Bob.

Not just as a client either. It annoyed the snot out of her when she felt a twinge of guilt over that, picturing Cris' face.

She also thought about the road ahead for Landry. Taking care of Landry, at first, would most likely be a full-time job in and of itself. Anyway, she didn't have to worry about that for several days. Bob wasn't supposed to come back until next Thursday. She still had time to make up her mind there.

Two cups of coffee, an hour on the elliptical, and a shower later, Tilly dressed and was waiting when Landry pulled into the driveway.

Even though she'd told him not to bring Cris, relief to see Landry alone mixed with longing and a pang.

Goddammit.

She couldn't possibly miss the asshole, could she? Was she that sick and twisted to seriously

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want to see him after what he did to her?

She didn't go out to Landry. She made him walk to her front door and ring her bell. She'd opted for slacks, a blouse, and a blazer. Conservative heels, her hair smoothed back, not gelled into her usual wild, spiked mess.

"You look very nice. I feel underdressed." He wore jeans and a long-sleeved button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

"That's not my problem, Landry." She picked up her purse and pulled the front door shut behind her, locking it.

He kept his tone light. "I didn't say it was." He opened and held the car door for her. When he spotted her arched eyebrow, he smiled. "Holding doors isn't just a slave thing, Tilly. It's a gentlemanly thing." His face darkened. "Or did slave never hold doors for you? I taught him better than that, I thought."

"No, he held them. I just didn't picture *you* being a man used to doing it."

"There are a lot of things about me you don't know. Was that an assumption on your part? I thought we agreed to banish those from our marriage."

She loved the sound of his voice, the hint of his accent. "Touché. Very true." She took a deep breath and let it out as he took his place behind the wheel. "I'm sorry I'm bitchy this morning."

"It's all right. This is rather stressful. I'm aware of that. You are not alone in your feelings there."

The question popped out of her mouth before she could beat it back. "So is he kneeling naked on the floor today?"

Landry slipped on sunglasses while he drove. "No. I let him get dressed and walk down to the park near the hotel. I told him I want him to sit there and think about his life and the things he's done to the people who've loved him."

"What did you tell him about today? About me?"

"Absolutely nothing." He turned to her when he had to stop for a light. "It's none of his business. He's my slave. He gets no say in this. I terminated his rights as my partner when I found out what he did to you. I want him to truly comprehend what he's done to us."

She snorted. "He didn't do anything to you, when you think about it."

He returned his attention to the highway when the light turned green. "You spent the last five

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years wondering why you weren't good enough. I've spent the last weeks looking back on the past five years and wondering how much of what we had was really a lie. I went from feeling loved to feeling like a pity fuck. I think you and I each have a lot of issues to work out for ourselves. You have your life ahead of you, regardless. You've moved on. I'm left to wonder if I'm even going to survive, much less if I want to. If it's worth fighting this time. Or if the man I thought I'd spend the rest of my life with would rather be with you."

She stared at him, speechless. *Yeah, that would suck.*

* * * *

The attorney was waiting for them. Tilly assumed getting the pre-nup negotiated would be a very complex process. Landry overruled the attorney on most matters, meaning it when he said he wanted it very cut and dry. Tilly kept all her pre-marital assets, no matter what, and anything she earned during their marriage. If he died, it all went to her.

Just as they'd discussed.

While they sat in the attorney's office and waited for the secretary to finish creating the documents, Tilly stared at Landry. "How much are you worth, anyway?"

"Roughly?"

She nodded.

He shrugged. "With the business and properties, over fifty million."

She knew her eyes widened at that, because he laughed. "Not so much of a pay cut now, is it?"

"I'm not hoping you die. You realize that, right? I'm not going to try to kill you to get it, either."

He smiled. "I know. You're a kind soul. You would have made an excellent nurse had you kept up with that."

"How can you say that when you don't even know me?"

He leaned forward, his gaze on her. "Because you have kind eyes. Nothing that's been done to you has managed to kill the sweet and giving spirit within you, the soul who wants nothing more than to lovingly serve. Buried behind an extremely thick and well-defended wall, yes, but it's still there." He took her hand in his and kissed it. "I don't deny we've both been through a lot of crap to get to this point. Honestly? I'm very glad you'll be beside me through this."

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Well didn't *that* just fill her with warm fuzzies. She had no idea how to reply, so she kept her mouth shut.

* * * *

Landry must have researched where to eat because he drove her out to St. Armands Circle, to a nice restaurant with an outside patio, without asking her for directions. Fortunately there weren't a lot of smokers and they could enjoy the beautiful day.

"I've decided I have another rule," she said after the waiter took their drink orders.

He looked amused. "And that would be?"

She leaned in, dropping her voice. "What you said in the car on the way to the attorney's office, about not knowing if you even want to fight. If I'm doing this for you, you *will* fight. Do I make myself clear? I'm not signing on for you to just give up and roll over and cave in. Understood?"

He studied her for a long time. "You don't know me," he quietly said. "Why is this so important to you?"

"I'm uprooting my life. I wouldn't do it if I didn't think you were worth it."

He clasped his hands together on the table. "Why is it so important to you *now*?"

She loved his eyes. *Fuck, why'd he have to be cute?* "Because he left me for you, to stay with you, to help you recover. You obviously meant a lot to him for him to do that. If you give up and die, then I lost those years and went through hell for nothing. If he gave you back your will to live and kept you going, no matter how wrong it was or how much it hurt me, I can't totally fault him for that. Even if he acted like a moron," she added.

When he grinned, the corners of his eyes crinkled playfully. "Okay. I can understand why you think that. It's flattering."

"Oh, geez. Ego alert."

He laughed and sat back in his chair to take a drink of water. "You're a ball-buster, Tilly."

"The Domme gig wasn't a clue?"

He leaned in again, still grinning. He dropped his voice. "About your other…condition. For our wedding night. Can I make a condition of my own?"

She nodded.

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"You said you wanted vanilla. I'm fine with that, as long as you don't try any CBT on me."

She had to cover her mouth with her napkin to keep from spraying her own water all over the table as she laughed. When she finally managed to recover, she smiled. "I promise I will only verbally bust your balls."

He held his water glass up in a toast, and they clinked them together. He waited until she took another sip to add, "But feel free to literally bust slave's balls as much and as hard as you'd like."

Both of them laughing, he helped her mop up the puddle of water she sprayed over her side of the table.

* * * *

She helped him find a parking space at the county courthouse. Her breath caught when they walked in.

I'm really going through with this crazy plan.

As they stood in line, she glanced at her left hand. The ring had to be expensive. Landry gently took her right hand and laced his fingers through hers. She looked up at him. Shorter than Cris by a couple of inches, but still taller than her. "Second thoughts?" he asked.

"Too late for that by about five dozen."

"I see you're not running away."

She sighed. "No, I'm going to do this. It'll be a nice change of pace. Besides, nursing and being a Domme are pretty similar."

When he smiled, his eyes crinkled again. She loved that she could lift his spirits. He normally wore a sad expression and looked like he felt as heartsick as she once had.

The line moved forward. Four couples waited in front of them. "I just thought of another rule," she said.

"Do I need to take notes?"

"Asshole. No." She tugged his hand. He leaned in close and she lowered her voice. "No matter what happens or how bad it gets, you can't kill yourself. Seriously. Okay? Promise me."

His expression turned solemn. He stroked her cheek and she hated that part of her felt so starved for the contact that she desperately wanted to lean into his touch. How long since someone had touched

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her like that?

Well, besides Bob.

"I promise. If you're willing to fight by my side, I'll give it everything I've got."

She nodded. Then, without considering it, she rose up on her toes and brushed a quick kiss across his lips. "Okay." She poked him in the ribs. "I'll hold you to it."

* * * *

He wasn't prepared for the wave of emotion that nearly swamped him. He almost wanted to turn around and call it off. She would go through with it, totally. Wanted to stand beside him, right or wrong. Not out of love, not even out of like because they barely knew each other. Not even totally for the money, he suspected.

Because she felt it was the right thing to do.

He didn't deserve it.

When she kissed him, it nearly took his breath away despite not seriously lusting after a woman in…well, a long time.

The raw honesty in that simple kiss.

She squeezed his hand and nudged him forward as another couple finished at the clerk's window. They were next.

He didn't deserve her.

How the fuck had Cris walked away from her?

In their time together the night before, Landry realized how much they had in common. He could see why Cris loved her.

He'd never admit to feeling a little nervous about performing as required on their wedding night. The thought of having Cris there strung up and helpless, ironically, would be a helpful boost for him.

It's good to be a sadist.

Their turn. He produced his information, she produced hers, and they filled out the forms. Fifteen minutes later they were one step closer to being married.

It felt natural to hold her hand on the walk to the car.

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"How do we get to the beach from here?" he asked.

"Why?"

"I'd like to see it. Am I not allowed to go for a walk along the beach with my fiancée?"

He liked that he could make her smile. "Okay. Turn here."

They drove across the John Ringling Causeway, through St. Armands Circle again, and twenty minutes later, they were on Lido Key at a public park. She left her jacket in the car, kicked off her shoes and locked her purse in his trunk. He removed his shoes too, and together they walked across the white sugar sand to the Gulf of Mexico.

Beautiful. Even prettier than California, and he'd thought those to be some of the most beautiful beaches in the world.

She let him hold her hand and they walked for nearly an hour in one direction as they talked. At one point they stopped to rest, sitting in dry sand away from the water so they didn't get wet.

"Do you still love him?" she quietly asked.

"Absolutely. Part of me wishes I didn't. It'd make life a lot easier for me in some ways. I could be a cold-hearted bastard and kick him out." He slipped his arm around her shoulders. It felt natural, comfortable to cuddle her close. He'd been lacking in affection since the revelation, missed that contact with Cris. He pressed a kiss to the top of her head, noting the sweet scent of her shampoo. "Do you still love him? Honestly?"

She let her head rest against his shoulder, relaxing into him. "Yeah," she admitted. "I wish I didn't. What kind of pitiful freak does that make me? That after what he did, I do still love him."

"It doesn't make us pitiful. It makes us human." He nuzzled his chin against the top of her head. "Thank you, Tilly. I know I said it before, but I mean it. I guess I should have warned you I'm a really crappy patient."

"Don't thank me yet. I'm a pretty bossy bitch." She looked up at him with a smile on her face.

He wanted to kiss her again, so he did.

* * * *

She didn't want to stop kissing him. He was a damn good kisser.

Why the fuck's he got to be gay? Just my luck.

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Why's he got to be Cris' Master?

She didn't want him to leave. Despite the weird, whacked-out situation, she wanted to spend more time with him.

The thought of spending her evening alone after such a nice day with Landry made her heart throb in a bad way. Back in the car, she turned in her seat to watch him while he drove. "What do you have planned for tonight?"

He shrugged. "Back to the room, eat dinner, torture slave. The usual."

Tilly smiled. "We going to keep him in the dark until it happens?"

He nodded. "I want to. He knows something's going on but he doesn't dare ask. Not when he knows how upset I am."

She took a leap of faith. "Why don't you spend the night with me?"

"I thought you wanted to do that on our wedding night."

"I meant to talk." She picked at her fingernails. "I mean, unless you don't want to."

He reached over and patted her thigh. "I'd love it. We need to make a quick stop first."

They pulled into the hotel parking lot a little after four. She nervously looked around for any sign of Cris but didn't see him. Landry parked several doors down from their room. "I'll be right back. I need to leave him money for dinner. He didn't have lunch and not much for breakfast."

She stifled another sympathetic pang for Cris as Landry climbed out, walked down to his room and disappeared inside. Yes, she'd been Cris' slave, but he never controlled her like that. She'd never felt restricted, could spend money as she needed without asking first.

A few moments later Landry returned, smiling and carrying both a rolling carry-on bag and a laptop case. He put them in the back seat before climbing behind the wheel.

"Was he there?"

"Oh, absolutely. If he wasn't he knew he'd better not come back at all."

"What's so funny?"

"The look on his face when I handed him the twenty and told him he'd better answer the room phone whenever I called. He's dying of curiosity and knows damn well he can't ask what's going on."

He waited until they reached U.S. 41 and headed south before he pulled out his phone and dialed. "Good. I was just checking. Eat between six and seven." He hung up and dropped the phone into the center console before looking at her. "He despises mindfucks almost as much as he hates

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humiliation." An evil grin curled his lips. "That's why they're so damn fun."

"How often will you call tonight?"

"Every so often."

"Did you tell him where you're going?"

"Nope. None of his business." He caught her hand and laced his fingers through hers. When he gently squeezed, her heart raced. "If I want to spend the night with my fiancée, I will."

* * * *

She offered to cook him dinner. "If you're going to live with me you might want to sample the wares first."

He laughed as he pulled into her driveway. "I could take that more than one way."

Her pulsed throbbed a counterpoint to her clit. "Maybe I meant it more than one way."

He leaned in and stroked her cheek. "How about we spend the night getting to know each other with our clothes on? So when we do have our wild night, we can both be more relaxed about it."

"Why wouldn't you be relaxed?"

He shrugged. "Lot of pressure. I want you to enjoy yourself."

She felt a stab of conscience. "If you don't want to do that, we don't have to. I know I said it was a condition, but I don't want to force you."

He shook his head. "Oh, no you don't. You don't get to back out on me like that," he teased. He leaned in and kissed her. Sensual and tender, his lips and tongue gently exploring hers, not trying to take over or maul her. "I don't know about you, but even if it wasn't for the cuckolding and humiliation aspects, I'd still be looking forward to it."

"Really?"

"I'm gay, not dead. I got over the 'girls have cooties' stage of my life before I hit puberty. You're beautiful. It's a great bonus that you'll be my wife."

"Let's see if you still feel that way after I cook you dinner."

He offered to help with preparations. She started him making them a salad. Being with him felt different than it felt with Bob. Before they sat down to eat, she pegged it.

It felt a lot like it had with Cris. Landry was very similar, including his physical mannerisms.

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They moved around in the kitchen together, weaving between the cabinets without bumping into each other, as if already synchronized.

In a way that terrified her. How easy it could be to live with him. To lose her heart to him. "Did you say you were Cris' first serious relationship?"

He leaned back against the counter. "How much are you comfortable knowing?"

"I want to know everything."

"Did he ever tell you about his family?"

"No. Only that his father died. He didn't talk about them. Especially once he found out about my family…issues."

"He probably didn't wish to burden you. Why don't we talk about this while we eat?"

They settled on the sofa, in front of the TV. She liked the familiar feel, less formal than staring at each other over a table.

Once they were comfortable, he told the story while they ate. "His father kicked Cris out when he was only sixteen, after he caught Cris watching gay porn on the internet. Very conservative Spanish Catholic family. Cris' father was the second youngest of eight children, and the first of the siblings born in the States after their parents moved to California from Barcelona.

"Cris' mom wouldn't stand up to his father about it. Cris went to live with one of his uncles on his father's side, who believed beating him straight was the answer." He chewed his food, then paused, looking thoughtful. "The irony, of course, is that Cris isn't gay, he's bi. But a teenage boy at that stage of life, with a less than supportive family, I don't need to tell you how destructive that can be. Not just that they were strict Catholics, but the whole male machismo dynamic.

"I also don't have to tell you how smart Cris is. Despite what he went through, he still managed an academic scholarship to college. That's where I met him, at a dinner party thrown by one of my friends, Cris' professor. He hadn't had time for any kind of dating because between classes and working three part-time jobs to pay his bills, he had a full schedule. I offered to take him in, in exchange for working for me, although I hinted I would enjoy a chance to get to know him better. Within a week he was also in my bed.

"I suppose in hindsight I acted in a predatory manner, taking advantage of his desperation like that. I truly did like, then come to love him. He was more than willing to explore boundaries and take a submissive role to me. I was older, I had money and provided security. I gave him understanding and

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affection. I accepted him. For the first time in his life he didn't have to hide who or what he was."

She let the silence lay between them while he contemplated his next words. "We'd been together a couple of years when his father had a massive heart attack. His mother contacted him, and we hurried to the hospital. Mind you, he had no contact with his father since he left home. I had never met them, although his mother knew he lived with me even though she didn't approve of our relationship.

"The man grew enraged to see Cris there, and that was with me standing outside the room where he couldn't see me. He screamed at him that he didn't have a son, especially a 'fag' son, and threw him out of the room. He died later that night."

"What about his mother?"

"She blamed Cris for his death. Convinced herself that if he hadn't shown up at the hospital, his father wouldn't have died."

"But she called him!"

"Exactly. Rather convenient for her to forget that fact. I think Cris wanted to blame himself too, for a while. The only blame was on his father, a two-pack-a-day smoker and heavy drinker with a fondness for junk food." He sighed. "Then a few years later I had to go and ruin it all by thinking he wasn't enough for me. I didn't put it together in my egotistical brain that no matter how much I reassured Cris I wanted to be poly because of me, not because of any shortcomings on his part, he saw that as one more rejection in his life. It wasn't until he left me that I realized how stupidly I'd acted."

"How did that happen? Your 'come to Jesus' moment?"

He sat back. "One of our friends came to me and told me I acted like a selfish asshole for doing that to Cris. Asked me if I was supposed to be his Master, why the hell didn't I see how badly that hurt him? That was never my intention, obviously. I just thought it was my right, as Master, to seek what I wanted. I thought Cris was being a poor slave by being jealous. I lost sight of the fact that I failed as his Master by forcing that decision on him. When we first got together, we'd agreed to be monogamous and not seek others outside our relationship. I had promised him he was the only one I wanted. When I tried to locate him and tell him I'd reconsidered, he'd already left the area. The friends he remained in contact with, he'd asked them not to give me his information or pass any messages from me to him. Said he'd cut them out of his life if they tried it."

"So why did you try to kill yourself?"

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He shrugged. "I became angry at myself, then wrongly focused it on Cris. I convinced myself I could find someone as good as or better than him. That it was his loss, not mine. I had a string of meaningless relationships. None of them lived up to him. I had failed to see how selflessly Cris served me in any way I asked of him. All he wanted was to be the only one in my life. That was all he ever asked of me, to not share me. He would have, literally, done anything else I asked of him, no matter how mundane or how kinky. If I had sent him out to serve another Master or be the center of a gang bang, he would have done it. Wouldn't have liked it, but he would have done it."

She felt a little ill. "You didn't do that, did you?"

"No. Used it as a threat a few times in scenes to mindfuck him, but never did it. My point is, he could go to work, be there ten or twelve hours, then come home and clean house or whatever until two or three in the morning and get up and do it all over again for me. He helped me build my business. He never complained. He never questioned me on anything, until I threw it all away. I took him for granted, how his love for me permeated everything he did, no matter what the service. I never had to lift a finger at home. After I lost him, I could find someone who wanted to play slave for a week or two, but eventually they would whine and complain that they wanted free time, or that they were bored, or that they wanted to do something else.

"Cris never did that. Ever."

She tried to process that. She couldn't reconcile Landry's Cris with her strong Master. "Why do you think he became a Dom?"

He shrugged. "Why did you?"

"Honestly? I did it for the money."

"Not just. For the control. The independence. The 'fuck you' to the world, no?"

She thought about it. "Maybe. Mostly it was twice the money for a fraction of the work."

"How was he as a Master?"

"I wondered why he never had a problem chipping in with the chores."

Landry laughed. "The man can fold and iron clothes like no one's business."

She snorted, amused. "Amen." They clinked glasses in a toast.

"He took a class for that, too. One of the groups where we used to live, they ran a three-month course for lifestyle slaves. A professional butler taught them things like that."

They finished eating and he helped her with the dishes. "So tell me about yourself," Landry

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said. "Cris told me just the basics." She must have frowned at that. He clarified. "It wasn't that he didn't want to talk about you because you meant little to him. He wanted to protect your privacy. It was quite obvious to me from how he sounded when talking about you that he loved you very much."

She didn't know how to deal with that information. "Oh."

"He told me your step-father went to jail for attacking you."

Her stomach turned. "Do we need to talk about that right now?" she asked, her jaw tight.

"Of course not. Not if you don't wish to."

"Good."

After they finished eating and he helped her with the dishes, she yawned. "I'm going to go change clothes. Want to watch TV for a while?"

"Ah, we're already acting like an old married couple."

She changed into an oversized T-shirt and comfy sleeping shorts. He didn't change, but he pulled the shirttail free of his jeans and unbuttoned it. She didn't miss the pale scars twisting across his abdomen.

He followed her gaze. "Yes, I'm not very pretty, am I?" He patted his lap. "Put your feet up here, Madame."

She laid back on the couch and moaned as he began massaging her feet. "That's great!"

No one had given her a foot massage since…

Even though a few of her clients were into foot worship, she couldn't stomach the thought of most of them touching her. No one had really touched her since Cris left. Cris had always given damn good foot rubs.

"Yes, I taught him this," Landry said as he slowly kneaded her feet. "Does that surprise you? That a Master enjoys doing this?"

She looked up at him, caught his teasing expression. "I know. No assumptions."

He grinned. "No assumptions. Absolutely."

They talked until well past midnight. Landry called Cris twice more, never revealing where he was or what they were doing. Eventually they moved to her bedroom. He went into the bathroom and changed into a pair of silk boxers.

"So I don't get a preview tonight?" she teased.

He laughed as he slipped under the sheets with her. "Let's let the sexual tension build. You

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barely know me."

She wouldn't deny letting him draw her close and cuddle her in his arms as they settled on their sides felt good.

Damn good.

She liked the way his body fit hers. He kissed the back of her neck. "Comfy?"

"Yeah. Actually, I am."

"Good."

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Chapter Seven

The slave didn't know where Master had spent the night. It wasn't his business, although he was curious.

He hoped whatever Master had planned that it didn't involve Tilly.

He also hoped that Master didn't drag her into their lives any more than he already had. He loved her, would always love and miss her, but how cruel to interrupt her life when she'd obviously moved on?

Bob. Was he her boyfriend and not just a client? The guy sure had acted pissed enough to be a boyfriend.

Slave beat back his jealousy again. He'd released her. He'd chosen his path.

He had no right to feel jealous over who might be sharing her bed. Surely she'd found someone else by now.

Hadn't she?

Part of him prayed she had, that she hadn't spent those years alone while he warmed Landry's bed, relatively happy except for the hole in his heart where he would always miss and love her. And he would feel even guiltier if she hadn't.

Part of him hoped she didn't have anyone, that she still in some small way belonged to him. Because the thought of another man touching her ripped his heart out even though he knew he had no right to feel like that.

At seven-thirty that morning, the room phone rang. He answered it before the first ring ended.

"Master?"

"That's my good boy. Get a shower, get dressed, go eat breakfast. Walk around a little if you'd like. Be back at the room by ten. You may stay dressed until I say otherwise."

"Yes, Master."

Master hung up, leaving slave listening to a dial tone.

He smiled. Master had called him his good boy.

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That was the most affection he'd had from him in a month.

* * * *

Landry laid his cell on the bedside table. Tilly still slept beside him. They'd need a bigger bed, that's for sure. He liked room to move around.

Would he be able to convince her to stay after their agreement ended? He'd caught glimpses of her slave nature throughout the day yesterday. No, he wouldn't exploit her like that. He promised not to top her and he'd meant it.

How would Cris react? Would he maintain his slave status, or would having Tilly around bring out his dominant nature and end his service? Could Cris live with his dual nature with both of them? Would he try to win her back?

Would he stay?

He rolled onto his side so he could look at her. Her request had shocked the hell out of him. He suspected it was more an angry reaction on her part than a genuine desire for revenge. It wouldn't surprise him if at the last minute she couldn't go through with it. Truth be told, he looked forward to it. He felt his cock stiffen in his shorts, morning woody time.

Normally he and Cris would make love, if they had time. Since the revelation he'd ordered slave over to his bed to service him when he felt like it.

He missed the affection more than he'd ever admit. He'd slept better last night than he had in the past month. Having Tilly in his arms definitely didn't feel like a chore or a sacrifice.

When she opened her eyes he was glad he'd pulled the sheet up to his waist. His cock thickened, throbbing as her hazel eyes met his. Her gaze flicked down to his waist and back up to his face.

"Would you like a little help with that?"

He laughed. "Then you'd know my secrets before our wedding night."

"I don't mind."

He leaned in and kissed her gently, which only made his cock throb harder. "I know you don't, and I appreciate it. I'll survive. I think I'd rather draw out the sweet agony a little longer."

"See? You like me being a Domme. You enjoy tease and denial."

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He fell back on his pillow and laughed long and hard at her playful expression. "You, my dear, are sweetly evil. I adore you already."

* * * *

He took her out to breakfast, and then asked her to direct him to the closest mall.

"Why?"

"I didn't bring any suits on this trip. I planned on securing us a place to live, then returning home to arrange the move. My diagnosis changed my plans." He glanced at her. "I refuse to get married dressed like a slob."

She arched an eyebrow at that. He looked like a businessman on casual Friday—pressed khakis and button-up shirt. No tie, but the last thing she thought when she looked at him was slob. "Don't dress up on my account."

He pulled into a parking space. "Love, I have never been married. I realize this is a bit of a rush and all, but I would like to make an attempt at doing this the right way."

"I suppose you want me to dress up, too?" she teased.

He leaned in and kissed her. "I don't expect a formal white gown."

"I would hope not." She smiled. "I'm far past wearing something as light as ivory, I'm afraid."

He laughed. "That makes two of us."

He purchased a black designer suit at a high-end department store and paid them extra to complete the alterations that afternoon. He let her pick the purple silk tie, and when they finished, he led her to the women's department and coaxed her into a beautiful, deep purple dress. When she went to pay for it, he gently took it from her and laid it on the counter. "I'm paying. This is for *my* fiancée."

Her heart skipped in her chest at his tone. She had to swallow before she could speak. "You don't have to do that."

"I know." He leaned in and kissed her, leaving her breathless. "I want to do it."

* * * *

But he wasn't finished. On their way through the mall he pulled up short outside of a jewelry

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store and smiled. "Come along, love. Another chore. I don't know why I didn't think of this sooner." He walked inside.

She swallowed hard and followed him. He browsed through the display cases of wedding band sets. "What strikes your fancy?"

"Just get something cheap. Whatever." Another thought struck her. "How'd you know my ring size?" The engagement ring fit perfectly.

"I guessed based on your pictures. Slender hands, light bones. Ooh, I like this set. What do you think?" He pointed to a beautiful gold set, engraved with an intricate pattern and inlaid with small diamonds.

"It's beautiful." The sales clerk pulled it out. When Tilly saw the price, she choked. "Landry, seriously? That's over two grand."

He turned his green eyes on her. "So? Do you like it?"

"Yes, but—"

"We'll take it," he told the clerk.

Tilly tried to protest. "Okay, I mean, I know you have money, but seriously? Is this necessary?"

He turned to her and gently grabbed her hands as he pulled her close. With his forehead touching hers, he whispered, "Please, humor me. I don't ever plan on getting married again in my life, and I would prefer to do it as right as I can under the circumstances. I can afford this."

Jesus Christ, the guy might not make it. She found it hard to remember when he acted like he was fine.

With a deep sigh, she agreed. "All right."

Her heart fluttered over his beaming smile. "Thank you, sweetheart." He kissed her.

Well, okay then.

He sent her to the mall's food court to get him coffee while he paid for the rings. Then they had lunch and returned to her house. He hadn't called Cris, unless he did it when not within her sight.

She wondered what was going through Cris' mind, if he felt worried, jealous.

Angry.

Fearful that perhaps he'd been abandoned?

On that last point she sincerely hoped so. Give him a taste of it.

"You feel sorry for him," Landry said as they pulled into her driveway.

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"Excuse me?"

"You look deep in thought."

"You're spooky."

"Cris tells me that a lot."

She smiled. "Aha. You said his name again."

He carried her packages inside for her, including new shoes she'd bought to match the dress. "As you said, after the big night it will be easier to move past this."

"Don't be pissed at him on my account."

"I'm not. I'm pissed at him on mine."

She smacked her forehead. "Aw, crap."

"What?"

She winced and looked at him. "It's Friday. I'm supposed to have dinner with Ross and Loren and then go with them to the club tonight."

"Ah." He thought about it for a moment. "I'd like to meet them."

"Oh, yeah, great plan," she snorted. "How the fuck am I supposed to explain you? 'Hey, Ross, I know you said you'd castrate Cris with a propane torch if you ever saw him again, but I'd like you to meet my *fiancé*, his *Master*. Oh, by the way, they're both living with me.'" She laughed. "Um, yeah."

His eyebrow arched. "Propane torch? I like his style. I'll hold slave down for him."

"That's a recurring theme with you, isn't it? You really *are* a sadist."

"I have no use for his testicles. I only need his ass and his cock." He frowned. "Then again, I don't need his cock, either. We have some really nice toys that do just as well and never go soft."

She snorted. "No. His testicles and cock stay attached to his body. If anyone should get first crack at them, it's me."

"That's my girl. Now you're talking." He sat on the sofa and studied her. "So you haven't dated anyone since Cris? Except for your date with Bob, I mean."

Heat filled her face. "Do we need to talk about this right now?"

"Well, it does make it more difficult to explain me to your friends, I suppose," he said. "They won't buy the 'secret internet boyfriend' excuse." He patted his lap. "Come here," he softly said.

"What?"

"Just come here. Please?"

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Warily eyeing him, she walked over. He gently caught her wrist and pulled her down onto the couch so she straddled his lap, facing him. He rested his hands on her thighs. The position put her eye to eye with him, making her jeans suddenly feel way too tight, rubbing her clit in an uncomfortably erotic way.

"What do you want to do?" he asked. "I would be more than happy to explain the situation for you, if you wish. I will gladly take the brunt of their ire."

She rested her hands on his chest. *Nice chest. Very nice chest.* She slipped them up to his shoulders and settled her bottom a little more comfortably onto his thighs. Nice, firm thighs.

Oh fuck. I am sooo screwed.

"I can't keep this from them. They come over for dinner and movie nights. Loren comes over a couple of times a week for lunch or to help humiliate a client who wants a witness. We can't keep Cris locked in a closet."

His hands slid up to her waist before settling on her hips. "Sure we can. Why not? He won't mind."

She smiled. "Seriously," she said.

"I was serious. Again I ask, what do *you* want to do?"

She knew the question pertained to the whole Loren and Ross roasting Cris' chestnuts on a not-so-open fire issue, but she let that drop in lieu of leaning in and kissing Landry. She relaxed into it, enjoying the feel of his arms slipping around her and pulling her to him as she draped hers around his neck.

When she finally lifted her head she found she had trouble catching her breath. "If you fuck half as good as you kiss, you might find yourself getting laid by a woman on a regular basis, gay or not."

He stroked her back. "Can I ask you a serious question?"

She nodded.

"Did he leave you with triggers set?"

Her face reddened and she tried to stand, but he wouldn't let her. "Tilly, please," he said. "Tell me."

"Why should I?" Her heart raced. *This was a bad, baaaad idea.*

"I promise I won't exploit them. Please?"

She closed her eyes and nodded. "I knew I could have had Ross get rid of them for me," she

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whispered, "but I didn't have the heart to." It surprised her when she broke down crying.

It surprised her even more when she let Landry draw her close, comforting, holding her, soothing her. "Is that why you never dated?"

"No," she sniffled. "I never met anyone worth dating before Bob." She didn't want to think about Bob now. She felt badly about him, because he would, undoubtedly, be hurt by this turn of events. Especially now that she sensed she was uncomfortably slipping into unknown emotional territory with Landry. "I mean, I knew it wouldn't stop me from being with anyone else, but…" She sniffled again.

He continued gently stroking her back. "It hurt more to get rid of them than to let them lay dormant," he quietly said.

"Yeah." She lifted her head. "How'd you know?"

He sadly smiled. "How do you think Cris learned to place them? He said the same thing when he returned. I think that's partly why he became a Dom, because he couldn't stand the idea of someone else topping him without them changing or eliminating his triggers first. He knew because of the way he is that they would have to use triggers on him when playing."

He had her lay on the couch, her head in his lap, and close her eyes. His voice soothed her, no doubt about it. "Did he use French?" Landry asked.

She nodded, then another piece of the puzzle clicked into place. "He learned that from you, too."

"*Oui, ma cherie*."

She laughed.

"Shh." He stroked her forehead and softly spoke to her. She did trust him not to go back on his word, to not take advantage of her. She let him lead her not into subspace, but into a light trance where she relaxed and let go of her tension under his gentle guidance.

When he started to remove her long-dormant triggers, her pulse suddenly raced, panic setting in. She grabbed his hand as she broke into full consciousness. "No, wait. Stop. I can't." She started crying. "Don't do it. Please don't do it!"

He quickly gathered her close and held her. "It's all right, love," he soothed as she sobbed against him. He stroked her hair. "It's okay."

She didn't want to move. As stupid as she knew it was, she felt safe in his arms. Just more

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wishful thinking on her part? She didn't know. That's when an idea hit. "Set your own," she said. "Anchor me to you."

* * * *

Landry was glad she had her face buried against his shoulder and couldn't see the shocked expression he knew he wore. "What?" He couldn't have heard her right.

"Set your own triggers for me. Leave his and set your own."

His hand faltered as he stroked her hair. It wouldn't be difficult. In someone who'd never gone through the process, who wasn't used to hypnosis and trances and subspace, it usually took a while to accomplish after a bond of trust was established. But she already had triggers.

Deeply engrained ones.

Most people going through what she went though would eventually release them naturally on their own. Yet she still loved Cris. If she'd dated and had relationships with others, her triggers would have faded as she fell in love.

"Why?"

"I'm marrying you." She poked him in the arm without lifting her face from his shoulder. "This doesn't mean you can top me like a Dom. But maybe it'll make Monday night easier on both of us if you use triggers."

She had a valid point. "How much French do you know?" he asked.

She looked up at him. "*Je crois toi.*"

I trust you.

It both warmed his heart and scared the crap out of him. He'd fucked up the first time with Cris. She'd been through so much, he didn't want that responsibility with her, didn't want to destroy what little love and faith remained in her. "That didn't answer my question."

"*Je parle un peu francais.* Not as much as you or Cris, I'm sure."

He smiled. "Smartass."

"*Oui, monsieur.*"

He had to hand it to her, her pronunciation sounded spot-on. Cris was mistaken for a native speaker when he took him to France, and if he'd taught her, it made sense she'd learned the same

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accent. She had a good ear. No wonder she'd picked up on his accent, even though most people couldn't tell he had one. He'd worked damn hard to sound like an American.

"Lie down."

She settled in again, tightly gripping his hand, their fingers laced together. He took her back down into a trance and slowly started working with her, her grip on his hand relaxing as her trance state deepened. He gently stepped around what Cris had done, triggers still embedded unbelievably deep in her mind.

Cris had learned well.

Landry had eagerly studied first NLP, and then later hypnosis, when introduced to it by another Dom before he met Cris. In his youthful egotism, he'd used Cris as his guinea pig with mind-blowing results for both of them.

He shoved those memories out of his mind as he worked with her. She wasn't lying about trusting him. Considering her past, if she hadn't trusted him no way would she let him move through her mind like this.

He kept it simple, a few basic things that might make Monday night go more smoothly for both of them. And yet, that guilty pang. Would she want him for him, or because he'd made it easy for her to let go and relax with hypnosis?

Or because she would be handsomely compensated?

He squeezed her hand as he set the triggers, eventually bringing her back up to full conscious.

She lay there, staring up at him with those sweet hazel eyes. He stood, then scooped her up and carried her to her bedroom despite her laughing protests.

"What are you doing?"

"I have to test them, don't I?" He kissed her, silencing her as she tightened her grip around his neck.

He gently placed her on her bed and climbed in with her, laying on her right, propped up on one arm. "Close your eyes," he whispered.

Her lower lip had caught under her teeth, betraying her nerves. Her eyes dropped closed.

With a feather-light touch, he trailed his fingers up her left arm. "You're beautiful, love," he whispered.

Her body started relaxing under his touch even as her sexual tension ramped up. Her face

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flushed as her breath quickened.

He drew his fingers down her arm again and laced them through hers. Gently, he guided her hand over her flat tummy to the waistband of her jeans.

He nuzzled her forehead, his lips brushing her flesh. "Open them," he whispered.

Loosening his grip so she could free her hand, she did, unbuttoning them and lowering the zipper. He felt the slight nervous tremor in her hand before he released it.

"Very good," he softly cooed. "That's my very good girl. My very beautiful girl." He kissed her forehead and prayed she didn't feel his painful erection pressing against her thigh. He could fuck her right this second except they needed to talk a little more about that first. Not to mention he didn't want to take advantage of her in this state. He laced his fingers through hers again. "Keep your eyes closed and listen to me."

He brushed a gentle kiss across her lips even though what he really wanted to do was devour her, plunge his tongue into her mouth and fuck her with it the way he now wanted to fuck her with his cock. "How long has it been since you last came?"

"Since then."

He blinked, her answer almost startling him out of his role. He bit back his surprised, "*What*?" in lieu of a calmer, more controlled response. "No, love. I didn't mean with Cris. I meant when was the last time you played with yourself?"

"I haven't. I don't."

Part of him wanted to sit up and discuss it right then, because he suspected she wasn't understanding him. Part of him felt loathe to break the spell he had her under.

He guided her hand under the waistband of her panties, pleasantly surprised to discover she kept herself shaved. Her breath quickened, shallow, almost gasping.

Nuzzling her ear, he gently nipped the lobe. "Play with yourself for me."

That's when her body tensed. "I…can't."

"I won't move my hand, I promise. I'm here with you."

Slowly, her fingers started stroking her clit as he quietly whispered encouraging words in her ear, coaxing, gently soothing her as her body first relaxed, then filled with a sweet sensual tension he knew signaled she'd really got into it. He slipped his hand down further, enough he could curl two fingers and press them inside her.

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She gasped at the feeling, her own hand's motions quickening as she turned her head toward him, burying her face against his shoulder.

He switched to French. "Don't come yet. Be my good girl."

She softly whimpered as her hips joined the party, rocking and pressing her hand against his as he slowly finger-fucked her wet pussy.

Jesus, she's soaked! She was also fucking tight. He'd be shooting off in no time if he didn't wear a cock ring. He tried to ignore his throbbing erection as his fingers easily slipped in and out of her.

After a few minutes she'd totally let go, her hips bucking and rocking as his fingers plunged into her again and again, her body writhing against his as she begged in French for release.

He studied her face. "Open your eyes. Look at me."

Her eyelids fluttered open.

"Come now!" he ordered. He pressed his fingers deep inside her, feeling her muscles squeezing him.

He hoped she didn't hear him groan over the exquisite sensation as she cried out. He pressed his palm against her hand, holding her fingers tight against her clit. "Again!"

Her back arched as she moaned. He leaned in and kissed her, hard, this time letting his tongue do to her what he wished his cock could do to her body. He gathered her to him, tightly holding her she sobbed in his arms. Forcing back his impatience to find out if these were good or bad tears, he waited her out.

As she relaxed, her cries turning to sniffles, he looked down into her eyes and smiled.

When she smiled back, he relaxed, relieved. "Good?"

She nodded, deliberately squirming against his cock. "What about you?"

"What about me?" When she tried to reach down and squeeze him through his pants, he caught her hand in his and brought her fingers up to his mouth where he sucked them between his lips, laving his tongue over them.

"How about I take care of you?" she asked.

"I don't need taking care of."

She snorted, amused. "Um, yeah. Don't make me ask if that's a dildo in your pocket or if you're just happy to see me."

"I can wait until Monday."

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He wished he'd phrased it differently when a cloud drifted through her expression. "Okay," she softly said. "Sorry."

He mentally swore. "I didn't mean it like that."

She sat up and edged away from him as she wiped her face with her hands. "No, it's okay. I get it. It's hard to remember you're gay when you can blow my fucking mind like that."

Hooking an arm around her, he pulled her to him, rolling her on top of him. "Maybe I'm not gay after all."

Her hands landed on the mattress on either side of his head when he grabbed her. "Then what the hell are you? You're not bi, you said so."

He shrugged. "Maybe I'm homoflexible. Straight for you." He reached up and stroked her hair, then cupped his hand around the back of her neck and pulled her down to kiss her again. "How do you feel about blow jobs?"

She ground her hips against his, making his cock ache in a good way. "Pretty good, as long as you don't mind that I'm out of practice."

He laughed at her playful smirk. "Then feel free to ravish me, Mistress Cardinal." Her body tensed again, in a bad way. "What's wrong?"

Her voice lowered. "Can you please not call me that? At least not like this. Not when we're alone together."

He reached up and stroked her cheek. "Of course. I'm sorry."

"It just feels…weird. She's not a real person. She's a job. I don't want her in our bedroom."

"Is that another Cardinal rule?"

He loved her cautious, vulnerable smile. "Yeah."

"What about Monday?"

Her face hardened. "That's different. That's me giving him a majorly well deserved *fuck you* ass kicking."

He pulled her down to him and kissed her. "You said 'our bedroom.'"

She blushed. "So?"

He smiled and stroked her cheek again. "If we're going to share a bed, at least let me take you shopping for a new one. A larger one we can comfortably spread out in."

That broke her funk. She laughed, dropping her head to his chest while he stroked her back.

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Then he realized she was creeping south and he let her, lacing his hands behind his head so he could watch her.

Her gaze rose to his as she unfastened his slacks and tugged them down, pleasantly surprised to find he'd gone commando. She never broke contact with his gaze as she slowly stroked his cock with her fingers, slipping his foreskin back and working from sac to head and back again, before swirling her tongue around the tip, flicking the ridge as she explored.

"Oh, fuck!" he breathed.

Torturously slow, he watched as his cock disappeared between her lips, deep into her throat until all eight inches were encased inside her sweetly hot mouth right up to the very root.

She knew what she was doing to him, he watched the corners of her eyes crinkle in amusement as she slowly worked her way back up to the head again. When her hand cupped his sac, her fingers drifting lower to play with his taint, he didn't bother holding back. He threw his head back, eyes closed, and worked his hips in time with her movements. Eventually he reached down and rested his hands on her head as he thrust, until she finally pressed a finger against his rim and he exploded.

She went deep again, staying with him until he eventually finished and softened and she freed his spent member. He stroked her head as she rested her cheek against his abs.

After a few minutes, he sighed. "Okay. I'm *definitely* homoflexible. I'll have no problem being straight for you."

She laughed and kissed his stomach before straddling him again. "Yeah?"

He opened his eyes and looked at her. "Yeah."

* * * *

They took a shower, barely avoiding ending up back in bed. She enjoyed standing under the spray, cradled in his arms, the feel of his warm flesh surrounding her as steam curled around them and water beaded on her skin. After, she called Loren and asked if they minded an addition to their dinner and found out not only did they not mind, but friends of theirs, Kim and Kylee, would be joining them as well. Tilly hoped that would keep her friend's questions to a minimum until Loren cornered her in private later. They frequented the same restaurant, a family-owned Italian bistro on U.S. 41 they'd gone to for years. Loren wanted to quiz Tilly about her date, but she artfully avoided her questions with the

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old, "Sorry, incoming call, I'll see you later," line.

Dodged that bullet. Temporarily.

Their routine was to eat first, then run home, change, and meet at the private club. Sometimes Tilly brought a client, normally she didn't. If she went alone, she usually ended up helping top other sub men, invited to play by her friends.

"We need to go bed shopping too, if we have time," he said. "I also need to stop by the hotel and leave more money for slave and get my toy bag."

Fear gripped her. She held up her hands, angry. "Whoa! Stop right the fuck there! You are *not* fucking topping me tonight!"

He pulled her into his arms. "Of course I'm not, love." He kissed her. She hated that she wanted to melt right there. "It's just to fuck with slave's mind. I don't plan on removing the toy bag from the trunk. I do plan on making sure he sees me taking it, as well as clothes to wear to the club."

Relief flooded her. "Oh. Okay. Sorry."

"No, please don't apologize. I'm sorry. I should have clarified that comment. I didn't mean to upset you." He gently cupped her face in his palms. "I meant what I said. I won't top you. I won't try to be your Master or Dom. I do, however, want to be the best husband I can be." He kissed her again. "Why had you gone so long without coming?"

She reddened. "We can discuss that later," she mumbled.

He hugged her tightly before releasing her. "Very well. Now let's go."

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Chapter Eight

Landry didn't want to think the word.

Love.

He barely knew her, but he loved her. She felt so sweetly vulnerable in his arms, he didn't need to top her to want to protect her and care for her, to make her forget past hurts, heal her emotional wounds and make her smile. She was the kind of woman who wouldn't want to be anyone's DIY emotional repair project, but he couldn't help it.

Love.

They still had three hours until they'd meet with Tilly's friends. With him driving they took her SUV and visited two different bed stores until found a queen-sized mattress they both liked. A third store, and they found a bed frame she liked that matched her existing bedroom set well enough. Everything would be delivered the next day.

On to the hotel. He sensed her tension as they pulled into the parking lot. Before he left her house he'd called ahead and told Cris to stay in the room and get undressed. After they reached the hotel, Landry stopped by the office and paid their room tab until Monday so there wouldn't be any problems.

He parked several doors down from their room. Even if Cris managed to look, he wouldn't recognize her car, which she kept in her garage and he hadn't seen it the other day.

When he entered the room he found Cris naked and kneeling on the floor.

That made him pause. "Have you been sitting like that all afternoon?" He'd only told him to be naked, not to be formally posed.

"No, Master. I heard you unlocking the door."

"Oh. Okay." He reached into his wallet and pulled out five twenties and dropped them onto the dresser. "I'll be gone all weekend. You can use this for food and expenses. You are allowed to leave the room provided you wear your formal collar. Take your cell phone with you if you leave the room. If you do not answer it, or don't call me back immediately if you miss the call, don't bother being here on

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Monday when I return. Understand?"

"Yes, Master."

That's when he noticed the quarters on the dresser, two dollars worth. "What's with the change?"

"I did the laundry, Master."

"I didn't leave you money for laundry."

"I used my food money."

Landry immediately felt guilty, which pissed him off. "How'd you eat?"

"McDonald's."

He swore under his breath. "Next time I leave you money for food, use it for food."

"Yes, Master. I'm sorry."

Fuck. So much for his grand entrance and exit. He had difficulty shaking his guilt that Cris had been limited to fast food in lieu of doing their laundry. He walked over to the closet, pulled out the toy bag, and dropped it on the floor next to the room door, where Cris would absolutely see it.

Cris didn't ask. He remained kneeling on the floor without looking up.

Landry rummaged through the dresser drawers, found the clothes he wanted as well as extra regular clothes, and tucked them into the toy bag. He turned and stared at Cris. Part of him wanted to pull him to him and hug him as his heart ached for him.

He loved him. Nothing would ever change that, no matter what had happened.

Part of him wanted to beat the shit out of him for hurting Tilly. Fuck, he was falling in love with her after only a couple of days, and Cris walked away from her after being with her for years?

"I will return for you between ten and eleven Monday morning. Have all our bags packed, be dressed in slacks and a decent shirt, your formal collar, and be kneeling on the floor just like you are now. I want to pick you up and leave immediately.

"May I ask a question, Master?"

"No."

Cris' body tensed, like he wanted to challenge Landry, but he remained silent.

"All right, what is it?" Landry asked.

"You took your laptop. Do you want me to check in with the office at all, or are you handling it?"

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He arched an eyebrow. He'd been expecting a question about their plans. He should have known better. He softened his tone. "No. I'm handling it. You have no responsibilities this weekend except what I just told you. Answer that phone if I call. Feel free to sightsee. If you spend all your money before Monday, you'll go hungry until I return. Keep that in mind."

"Yes, Master."

He suspected Cris wouldn't leave the room except to eat or possibly do more laundry.

He turned and picked up the toy bag. "Be a good boy for me. Don't disappoint me. I have plans for you on Monday. It would be a shame for you to ruin them."

He left Cris sitting there and returned to the SUV. He tucked his bag in the back hatch and slid behind the wheel again.

Tilly looked at him, her eyes hidden by sunglasses. "Well?" she softly asked.

He smiled. "He's a good boy." He fastened his seatbelt and backed them out of the parking space. "I told him I'll pick him up on Monday."

* * * *

Tilly's heart raced as they approached the restaurant. She spotted Ross and Loren's car in the parking lot and pointed it out to Landry.

He leaned in and kissed her. "We don't have to do this tonight if you don't want to."

"We need to get it over with. Maybe Ross won't blow up in public."

He brushed his fingers along her cheek. "Do you want me to break it to them?"

She vigorously shook her head. "If I could face down that fucker at the parole hearing, I should be able to do this. They're my best friends." She glanced at him. "And if they come after you, I think you can hold your own against them."

He returned her smile. "Okay."

He got out, walked around, and opened her door for her. When she stepped out he laced his fingers through hers and walked with her inside the restaurant.

Tilly's nerves tightened, like coiled barbed wire inside her gut.

I can do anything I put my mind to.

Loren smiled when she spotted Tilly. Ross smiled, but she didn't miss his slightly puzzled look.

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Landry squeezed her hand and offered her a quick smile as he let her lead him across the restaurant. Tilly made the introductions and Landry even pulled her chair out for her before sitting next to her.

She didn't miss the odd look on Kim and Kylee's faces. The women seemed shocked to see Tilly arrive with a guest.

As Tilly had expected, Loren started in immediately. "So! How did you two meet?"

"Mutual acquaintance," Tilly said, hoping Loren wouldn't want to kill her later. "Boring story, seriously."

They asked him about his job, appropriately impressed to find out he ran a software firm and made good money. Loren had asked that question, unashamedly stepping into her overprotective best friend role.

The waitress took their orders. When she left, Kylee leaned in. "You look really familiar. Like I've seen you somewhere before."

Landry smiled. "I've been told I have one of those kinds of faces."

Kylee didn't look convinced.

Before their food arrived, Tilly had to go to the bathroom, her glass of tea already stretching her nervous bladder to the max. As she expected, Loren and Kim both jumped up to accompany her. The bathroom door was no sooner shut behind them that the two woman stood outside her bathroom stall, hounding her with questions she quickly dodged. Then they went strangely silent as Tilly heard the door open and someone else enter.

"Look, can we talk about this later? Seriously? And please don't scare him away, I really like him." She washed her hands and dodged out the door. Ross and Landry sat alone talking at the table. That meant Kylee had most likely been the one to enter the bathroom. So why hadn't she chimed in with her questions?

She pushed it out of her mind as she returned to her seat. Landry offered her a smile and a quick peck on the lips.

When she looked at Ross she didn't miss his beaming grin. "I was just telling Landry you look really happy, and I asked him what drug he slipped you."

She laughed.

Ross cleared his throat. "He, ah, also told me he's sick."

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She shot a glance Landry's way. The man shrugged. "He asked if we would be at a party next week. I told him you were going with me to my biopsy, and that I probably wouldn't feel like attending. I couldn't speak for whether or not you'll be there." She knew Ross couldn't see him wink at her.

She relaxed. He hadn't spilled the beans.

Ross continued. "You would have made a great nurse, Tilly. This'll give you a chance to kick back and relax for a while."

Okay, maybe he *had* spilled the beans.

Landry clasped her hand. "I also told him you offered to let me stay with you during my treatments." He looked back at Ross. "I wouldn't feel right about staying there if I didn't pay my own way, and pay for her time."

She relaxed again. Her irritation at him faded. Maybe this would be okay after all. And what the hell was taking the girls so long?

Ross looked down suddenly and pulled his BlackBerry from his belt. He thumbed it, scowled as he read a message, then his face shifted to a strange, blank expression Tilly wasn't sure how to interpret. "Can you excuse me for just a minute?" He got up from the table and walked away.

Landry leaned in. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. It seemed easiest that way, straightforward. I didn't tell him about getting married, or about Cris."

"Great," she whispered, almost a hiss. "So how the fuck am I supposed to work those little factoids in?"

He was about to answer when Kim and Kylee returned, both of them looking…weird.

They managed to uphold a stilted conversation for a few moments until Ross and Loren returned.

Whatever message Ross had received, he looked ready to kill and cast a murderous glance toward Landry.

"What's wrong?" Tilly asked him.

He shook his head, his face clearing. "Nothing. Sorry, got an issue at work I'm dealing with."

She felt relieved. If she didn't know any better, it was like they'd all suddenly passed an unfavorable judgment on Landry.

The conversation felt forced from that point on but Tilly couldn't put her finger on it. Kim and

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Kylee didn't seem to want to talk to Landry now, and Ross barely talked to anyone. Loren had slipped into dutiful slave wife mode in that Tilly would swear she was only acting normal due to some order on Ross' part for her to act that way.

It creeped Tilly out.

After their meal, Tilly hugged her friends and told them she'd see them in an hour at the club. When they got into the SUV, Landry glanced at her. "I suspect your suspicions mirror mine. The text message Ross received had nothing to do with work."

"Yeah," she admitted. "I think you're right."

* * * *

They returned to her house, changed clothes, and headed out again. Tilly liked that he helped her tighten her corset, but she felt unsettled. "We don't have to go tonight if you don't want to." Truth be told, she wouldn't mind staying home and trying to talk him into a repeat performance of that afternoon.

"That's all right. I don't mind. Unless you wish to stay home?"

Part of her wanted to do just that. On the other hand, she wanted the chance to introduce him to her friends before they had to take time away from the scene for his treatments.

He carried her toy bag inside the club for her. Ross and Loren had already arrived. Tilly and Landry no sooner walked in when Loren cornered her.

"I need your help with my corset, please."

Tilly couldn't help but notice Loren seemed agitated. "Since when?"

"Please, Til?"

Tilly rolled her eyes and left Landry out in the dungeon playspace while she followed Loren into the bathroom. They were alone, and Loren's corset didn't need tightening.

"Sweetie, I don't know what's going on with that guy, but please, just let him go handle his problems by himself!"

"What the fuck, Lor?"

Her face looked torn between pained and murderous. "We didn't want to tell you this the other night." She took a deep breath. "That guy, Kim and Kylee saw him up in Tampa at the old club we all

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used to go to. The one in Ybor."

"So?"

"They saw him with Cristo."

Tilly closed her eyes. Okay, so in some ways this would be easier, and some ways this would be harder.

Loren wasn't done. "So please, just tell him no-go, you can't help him. I'm still not sure how you met him, but—"

"He's Cris' Master," Tilly quietly admitted.

Loren's eyes widened. "What?"

Tilly nodded.

Her friend stood there, shocked. After a long moment, she finally spoke. "What?"

"You said that."

"What the *hell*?"

"That's different."

"Tilly, quit fucking around! You *know* he's with Cris?"

She leaned against the counter and folded her arms over her chest. "Yeah. I've already seen and spoken to Cris. He doesn't know about Landry's cancer returning."

Her eyes widened even more. "What?"

Tilly took a deep breath and gave her the short version of the story, leaving out the whole marriage and revenge plot part of the equation.

Loren stood there, stunned. "So, after what the fucker did to you, you're just going to let him back into your life like that?"

"No, I'm helping *Landry*. He's a nice guy, Lor. Get to know him, you'll like him. We have a deal. It'll let me pay off the house without having to work for a while. It's the right thing to do."

"It's fucking bullshit!" That's when she spotted the ring. She grabbed Tilly's hand. "Holy crap, when did you buy that?"

Might as well bite the bullet. "I didn't," she quietly admitted.

She frowned. "Cris?"

Tilly shook her head.

Loren's voice dropped to a whisper. "*Landry* bought it for you?"

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She closed her eyes, ready for the outburst. *So much for keeping it quiet.* "He asked me to marry him. It'll make the bookkeeping easier."

Loren didn't disappoint. "What the holy fuck?" she shrieked. "Are you *crazy*?"

"Yeah, I am. But you want to know something?" she shot back. "He's great in bed, I'm sick of being alone, and all I'm obliged to do for the next couple of years is make sure Cris can get into the hospital!"

"That Cris…Wait a second. Good in bed? Did you say good in bed?"

Tilly clenched her jaw. "Yeah. Damn good. And so far we haven't even fucked yet."

That was enough to shut Loren up for a moment. She stared at Tilly for a long time. "What is this going to do to you emotionally?" she quietly asked.

"I'm not the girl I was. You know that. I'm a strong, tough bitch. Helping Landry out is the right thing to do. I'm not doing it because of Cris, because he's totally in the dark about this. He's stuck in a hotel room right now, completely clueless."

"Cris has a Master." She shook her head. "I still can't wrap my mind around that fact."

"Oh, believe it. Landry's a sadist, too. Makes me look like Winnie the Pooh." She told her the story about Bob and the confrontation with Cris, and Landry volunteering to hold Cris for Bob.

"Holy fuck!"

"Yep." She checked her make-up while trying to slow her pounding heart. "Now please, I'm asking you as my friend, just give him a chance. He's as upset about this…" She thought about it. "He's upset about what happened to me, and he's trying make amends. He's a good man. I mean it when I say I really like him. I've spent the past two days with him."

"So what happens with Cris? He moving in too?"

"I guess so." She smiled at Loren in the mirror. "I already told Landry he'd better let me boss Cris around."

"Oh, fuck yes! I damn sure want to watch that!"

When they returned to the dungeon, Ross looked less than happy and Kim and Kylee had arrived. Landry stood a little away from them, leaning against the wall, waiting.

She waved him over and clasped his hand as she led him to Ross. "Ross, I need to tell you something," she said.

Landry looked at her but remained silent.

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She told him the same story she told Loren, again leaving out the revenge part of the equation. When she finished, Ross looked a little less murderous.

"Will you hold him for me if I want to cut his nuts off?" he asked Landry.

Landry laughed. "I would say gladly, but Tilly has already told me I'm not allowed to let his nuts or his cock be removed. I already offered to let you take a propane torch to him." He squeezed her hand. "She's such a spoilsport about some things."

Ross' face tensed before he burst out laughing. "Jesus, this is fucking nuts." He scrubbed his face with his hands, then stepped in and hugged her. "Congratulations, sweetheart." He turned to Landry and held out his hand. "Hurt her, and you *will* lose *your* nuts."

Landry smiled as he shook Ross' hand. "Believe me, I am rather fond of them and would prefer to keep them intact."

Loren smacked her, hard, on the shoulder. "And why weren't we invited to the wedding? More importantly, why didn't you ask me to do it?"

Tilly winced and rubbed her shoulder. "Okay, first of all, *ow*! Second, duh! I worried the whole 'Loren wants Cristo dead' issue might have caused problems."

"No. You'll get married at our house. I'll perform the ceremony."

Landry cleared his throat. "Will that be an issue, having Cris there?"

Ross frowned. "Why will he be there? I thought you said he didn't know?"

"Well, I will admit I looked forward to him witnessing it. To rub his face in it. Show him what he threw away."

Loren laughed. "Okay, Til? I gotta say, I like his style. Fuck yeah, if Count Craptastic is going to be humiliated, I'm definitely in!"

* * * *

They spent the evening talking and watching others play. Landry enjoyed watching Tilly top a pain pig, the husband of another friend of hers. By the time they left, Loren had already invited several dozen of Tilly's friends, many who knew Cris, to attend the wedding.

It was more than Landry and Tilly had planned. It was also moved to the club at seven on Sunday night, because of parking issues and so more people could attend.

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Cris' humiliation would be total.

As they drove back to her place a little after two in the morning, he thought of something. "What was that Loren called him? Count something?"

She smiled. "Count Craptastic. You know, Cristo, the *Count of Monte Cristo*? That's the nicest thing she calls him. Usually, she refers to him as 'that goddamn fucking asshole'."

"Her husband, he is the one whose collar you wore?"

"For a while, yes." Her voice softened. "Not for play or scening, just to help me regain my footing again. If it hadn't been for them I wouldn't have made it. Cris called that one right. They picked me up, wouldn't let me give up, wouldn't give up on me. Thank God I had them."

At home she kicked off her five-inch heels in the foyer. "Man, these things are murder."

He scooped her into his arms. "Allow me, love." He carried her to the bedroom. "I'll rub your feet for you before we fall asleep."

"Oh. We're falling asleep, huh?"

He nuzzled her nose with his. "For tonight, let's. We need to be up early in the morning for the deliveries. They promised us by ten, remember? And then we're supposed to meet with Loren at noon to plan things."

She groaned. "She's taken over. Momma Loren strikes again. I should have known she would." He set her on the bed. "Can we elope?"

He smiled. "Too late for that." He sat on the end of the bed and massaged her feet. "She'll be heartbroken."

"True." She unfastened the front of her corset as she lay there enjoying the foot rub. "Hey, I've got another rule."

He smiled. "Name it."

"I want foot rubs on demand. Well, I mean, I won't ask for them if you feel like crap, of course. Only if you're feeling okay."

He picked up her foot, sucked her big toe into his mouth, and seductively swirled his tongue around it before removing it with a pop. His eyes never left hers. "Anytime, love. It will be my pleasure."

Her clit pulsed and she softly moaned. He smiled, noticing her reaction. He put that foot down, switched to the other, and repeated the same action.

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"Fuuuuck me. You're too good to be true."

"I will most assuredly fuck you Sunday night," he promised. "I will fuck your brains out, and then some." He gently pushed her legs apart and lay between them, then pulled her panties aside and licked her clit.

The sphere of Tilly's universe ended with the feel of Landry between her legs. Her whole body trembled as her hands went to his head, holding him there. He slipped two fingers inside her, flicking her clit with his tongue as he did. He felt incredible inside her. She didn't know if it was because it just felt so damn good to climax after a five year dry spell, or if he really was that good. But in another moment, she was there, crying out as she came for him.

He laughed and gently rearranged her panties before he crawled up the bed to lay beside her. "Think you can sleep now, love?"

She rolled into him. "Uh huh."

"You going to get undressed?"

She let out an aggravated sigh. He helped her remove her corset, her short skirt, and her garter belt and stockings. He dropped his clothes and curled behind her in bed, spooned against her back.

"You feel so good," she mumbled.

He kissed the back of her neck. "So do you. Can I ask you that question again?"

"What question?"

"About why you didn't make yourself come."

She rolled to face him. He gathered her into his arms as she buried her face against his chest. "Because he made me do it. Not like you did," she quickly added. "I trust you. He was…evil."

"Cris?"

"No!" She couldn't suppress the shiver. "My step-father," she whispered.

* * * *

Fuck! Another wave of guilt washed over him. "Sweetie, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"No, it's okay. Seriously. It was different with you." She sighed. "Cris used to do it like that with me sometimes. It's okay if you're right there with me, helping. If you'd ordered me to do it and just sat back and watched and not been there…" She shivered in his arms again.

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He nuzzled her forehead, then kissed her. "So that really was the first orgasm you've had since then?"

"Yeah. I didn't have the desire at first. Then I was on meds for a while. Anti-depressants. Those helped my mood but not my libido."

"So how'd I do?"

She lifted her head to look at him. "You keep that up you might just find yourself married for life, mister."

He smiled. "Promise?"

"Yeah."

He kissed her once more, unable to get enough of the taste and feel of her lips. "I'll hold you to that."

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Chapter Nine

Tilly had another great night of sleep while tightly snuggled in Landry's arms. Landry helped her make breakfast and they took a shower together. He resisted her playful advances even though she left him with a raging hard-on in the process. The mattress and bed frame arrived almost at the same time. The delivery crews took the old ones away and Landry helped her make the bed up with the new sheets he'd purchased.

He stretched out on his back and held his hand out to her. "Come here, love."

Tilly loved the playful look on his face. She climbed onto the bed, straddling him. "What? Want to break it in already? I did try to play in the shower, if you'll recall. We have to meet Loren in an hour."

He smiled and let his hands settle on her hips. "Tonight we can break it in properly."

"Ooh, am I wearing you down? Maybe I can get laid tonight?"

He rolled her onto her back, under him. "Not exactly. We don't get to do many things normally, love, but I want to do this one thing. Have our wedding night truly on our wedding night."

She laughed. "Okay, with some BDSM, cuckolding, and humiliation thrown in."

"Everyone should have a hobby." He kissed her.

"You do realize there will be a lot of people there tomorrow night who'll seriously want to take a whack at him? You and I might have to stand guard over him."

"They can turn him into a human piñata, if they wish."

She gently poked him in the chest. "No, they can't."

He swore.

"What's wrong?"

"I need to call him and change the plans. I told him I would be back for him on Monday." He reached over to the bedside table for his phone. She watched as he sat up, still straddling her, and dialed. He leaned in and quickly kissed her before Cris answered.

"Very good," Landry said. Apparently Cris answered on the first or second ring. "Change in

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plans. Be ready by ten tomorrow morning. Other than that, the other instructions I gave you still apply. Understand?…Good." He hung up and dropped the phone to the bed. Then he slid his hands along her arms, raising them above her head and gently grasping her wrists. When he ground his hips against her, she felt his stiff cock rubbing through his khakis. "In one way, moving this to tomorrow night is better because it means one less day of a throbbing cock."

She laced her fingers through his. "I told you I'd take care of that for you."

"I know, love. And this leaves us another free day to play before my biopsy."

She didn't miss the shadow that floated through his expression. It was easy to forget that hung over their heads.

She squeezed his hands. "We need to go pick up your suit, too."

"Ah, yes, we do." He kissed her, then lowered his lips to the base of her throat and gently nibbled. "Perhaps I could take a few minutes to play first though."

She wiggled her hips against him. "Now you're talking."

He nipped her. "I know I said I wouldn't top you, but did I mention I have a thing for biting?"

She laughed. "Marking your territory?"

His low, throaty growl sent a wave of passion through her body. "Absolutely." He lifted his head, his eyes boring into hers. "I want to renegotiate one of our rules."

Her heart raced. "Yeah?"

"Yes." He nuzzled her neck again. "I promise I won't top you, unless you specifically ask that of me. But I do want to be the only one in your life romantically. I don't want to share you. I'm finding myself feeling extremely possessive of you."

She had to swallow to speak, her voice even weaker than before. "What about last night at the club?"

"That was different. You only played with others. I don't consider that sex. They were just your friends." He lifted his head again to look into her eyes. "Is that a rule you can live with? Because the idea of another man making love to you doesn't fill me with happy thoughts. I know when I first proposed this—"

"Yes."

A slow, sultry smile painted his face. "Yes?"

"Yeah. I mean, not like it'd be a great sacrifice anyway. You're fucking awesome in bed so far,

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and I haven't had men beating down my door. Turnabout's fair play, though. I'm the only one for you, too."

He kissed her again and she had to stifle her moan. "What about Cris?" he asked.

She blinked. "What about him? I'm not doing him."

He laughed. "No, love. Me and him." His smile faded. "If you ask it of me, I won't have sex with him."

"You said you wouldn't release him."

"I won't, but if it would make you uncomfortable, I won't use him like that."

What a mixed bag. Part of her found the thought of seeing Cris being used like that exciting. She'd always loved the thought of two guys together. "I don't know," she finally answered. "I don't think it'll bother me. As long as it's him and only him, no other men or women. Can I reserve the right to change my mind about Cris later?"

"Absolutely." He nibbled on her neck, this time behind her left ear. "As my wife, if you ever want to use him, feel free."

Her stomach rolled, conflicting emotions struggling for control. "I don't think I can do that."

"Even if you just want to top him, love. God, that would be fucking sexy, sitting back and watching you work him over with a singletail, watching his ass dance as you mark him."

She swore she felt his cock throb, even through his slacks. "Now I know what to get you for our first anniversary."

"If I'm around."

She glared at him. "Stop it. What's one of our rules?"

He lifted his head and smiled. "Sorry, love."

"Hmph. Might have to take a cane to *your* ass, you do that again. I don't want to hear you talking like that."

He kissed her before sitting up and releasing her hands. "Does it bother you that I'm fifteen years older than you?"

"No. Should it?"

He shrugged. "You'll be married to an old man."

"Okay, another damn rule—"

He laughed, cutting her off. "Let me guess. No talking myself down?"

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"Bingo."

"On one condition."

"What?"

He leaned in and brushed his lips over hers, tenderly, sensuously. "Tonight, we talk. Seriously. I feel badly that I could have easily done something yesterday that would have triggered bad memories and feelings for you. Cris didn't talk to me about that aspect of your relationship. I want to get to know you like that."

She took a deep breath and nodded. "Okay," she softly said.

"Thank you, love."

* * * *

He tried on the suit when they picked it up.

"Rwooar!" she growled.

He laughed and turned to her from the three-way mirror. "I take it that's approval?"

"Hell yeah!" He filled it out well, had the perfect body for it, broad shoulders tapering to a firm waist and super-tight ass. Shorter than Cris by a couple of inches in height, slightly beefier build but still trim. He looked damn good.

They arrived at Loren's right on time. Loren threw the door open for them before they even made it up the walk.

"Wait'll you see what I came up with!" she squealed, waving them in.

"Oh, boy," Tilly muttered under her breath.

Landry softly chuckled as he squeezed her hand. "Steady, love. At least it's only one day."

"Thank god! I couldn't handle weeks or months of her plans." Loren led them to her dining room table, which was already covered with paperwork and brochures. "Holy crap, Lor! What the hell have you been doing?"

"Planning, duh. You think I'm letting you skate on this and doing nothing but a bowl of chips and dip and a box of cookies for refreshments, think again!"

Landry slid into a chair, amusement on his face. "I'll stand by with my credit cards ready."

Tilly glared at him. "Not helping. Besides, I'll go dutch with you on it."

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He arched an eyebrow at her. She'd noticed that seemed to be a favorite facial expression of his. "No, you won't. I told you, I'm paying for all of this."

She turned to face him, hands planted firmly on her hips. "I sense our first lover's spat coming on."

"I asked *you* to marry *me*. I sprang this on you. Trust me, caring for me while I'm puking my guts up from chemo is not a pretty picture. You'll wish I'd paid for it all if you don't let me do this."

Loren punched her shoulder. "Listen to the guy, would you?"

She rubbed her shoulder. "Okay, again, *ow*! Would you *please* stop doing that? Why the hell are you punching me all of a sudden?"

"Want me to kiss it and make it better?" Landry chimed in.

She glared at him. "Sooo not helping."

Loren laughed. "Tilly, as crazy as this is, I have to say I really do like this guy."

"You just like him because he beats the crap out of Cris."

"'The enemy of my enemy is my friend,'" Loren quoted. "Am I right, Landry?"

He nodded. "'If Hitler invaded Hell, I would make at least a favorable reference to the Devil in the House of Commons.' Winston Churchill."

Loren grinned. "Oooh, he's rich, cute and smart!"

"*Oui*, Madame."

Loren sighed. "And he speaks French. Fuuuck me, girlie, you landed a keeper and he's gay. What kind of luck do you have?"

"He *is* French, not just fluent in it. He's also decided he's homoflexible where I'm concerned." She winked at Landry. "By the way, just so you know, *darling*," she told him, "Loren and I are BFFs, meaning she'll be pounding on our front door Monday morning and wanting a status report from me about you in bed."

Loren pretended to be offended. "No, I wouldn't do that! I'd wait until after lunch, duh. Let you sleep in."

Landry smiled, leaned back in his chair, and crossed his arms. "Would it be easier to give you a demonstration with her right here and now?"

Tilly glared at him again. "I feel a new rule coming on, dude."

He held up his hands in surrender. "I know, I know. Sit there, shut up, and keep the plastic

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handy."

Loren happily sighed again. "And he's a 'yes, dear' Dom. Fuck me, you lucky bitch. And yes, I do want a status report on Monday."

"He's not my Dom, he's my fiancé."

Loren waved her off. "Yeah, whatever, we need to decide this stuff *now* so I can get everything ordered ASAP. Butter cream or cream cheese frosting on your cake?"

* * * *

Tilly wondered how many people ran up a two thousand dollar tab with Publix for last-minute wedding and reception plans. Loren rode with them to the store close to her house and they went over everything with the bakery and deli managers, who were more than happy to oblige when Landry produced his American Express Centurion card to pay for everything.

Loren grabbed his hand, her jaw gaping. "Holy fuck!" she said, awestruck, then looked at Tilly. She held his hand, which still held the Amex card. She shook his hand at Tilly. "Do you know what the fuck this is?"

"It's a credit card."

Landry looked amused but remained quiet. Tilly didn't fail to notice he never so much as blinked in shock when the total was announced.

"It's a *black* Amex, babe. That's what they call them." She stared at Landry. "How the hell did you get one of these? This is a fucking *Centurion*!"

"I know. I do work for some very elite and wealthy clients. I charge well for my services."

"Lor, let go of his hand. You're drooling on the man."

"I've only seen one of these before, when I worked at the Ritz Carlton. A movie star had one." Loren spent several years as a manager at that and other high-end resorts before Ross' business took off and she could stay home full time. Her specialty was acting as a private concierge to the rich and famous who visited Sarasota, especially during the hectic film festival week. "Unbefuckinglievable." She let go of his hand and looked at Tilly. "Do you have any *clue* how much money you have to have to be offered one of those puppies?"

Tilly didn't reply because she honestly didn't know. Landry handed the card to the bakery

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manager so she could get everything rung up. "Yes," Landry said. "A lot." He looked at Tilly and winked.

She stifled her laughter.

Landry offered to unload Tilly's SUV at Loren's house and sent the women inside while he did.

Loren snagged Tilly's arm. "Three years, huh? Not a bad deal. I can see why you agreed. He's a sweetheart."

"Yeah," she agreed, her stomach nervous. This wasn't like her mother's situation, where she had no options and a child to care for. She had a job, a house, a considerable savings account. She could even go back to work as a nurse.

She wasn't trapped. Not to mention she had legal protection in the form of the pre-nup.

"So how are you going to handle this shit with Cris?" Loren asked.

She shrugged. "I don't want to think about that right now." She'd desperately tried to *not* think about it all day.

* * * *

Landry had also bought fixings for their dinner, declaring he would cook for her. He proved to be a damn good cook. She helped him clean up the kitchen before they retired to the bedroom to watch TV and talk. He stretched out, on his side, and held her close.

"Time for our promised talk, love."

She closed her eyes. "Okay."

"First of all, the easy part. Do I need to wear a condom?"

She bristled. "I'm clean. I told you, I haven't been with anyone since Cris. I got tested after he left to make sure the son of a bitch didn't give me something."

He kissed the nape of her neck. "I meant for birth control. Unless you took them when I wasn't with you, I never saw you do it, and there are no packs in your bathroom."

Her face reddened. "It's not an issue. Don't worry about it."

"Why?" he softly asked.

"Landry—"

"Please. I won't force you. Can't force you to tell. I do want to know."

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She rolled to face him and buried her face against his chest. "Because of what *he* did to me."

"Not Cris." It was a statement, not a question.

"Not Cris," she agreed.

He stroked her back. "All right, love. You're safe with me. Let it out. Please."

She took a deep breath. "When he raped me, I had internal injuries. Bleeding and infection and scarring. They told me I can't have kids."

Landry held her more tightly and nuzzled the top of her head. "Talk to me," he coaxed. "Tell me everything and I will never ask you to talk about it again if you don't wish to."

As stupid as it was, she did feel safe with him. They had a common bond, right or wrong. She told him the story, of the nightly visits that started when she was fourteen. Her step-father molested her, had her get him off, and it continued every night for several weeks until the night he brutally raped her.

"I couldn't tell my mom," she whispered. "He threatened to kill both of us if I told her or went to the cops. Said no one would believe me, that he'd tell people he'd caught me with booze and drugs, and that I was lying to get even. I never even drank in high school. He was a fucking bully. Abusive. Used to beat the crap out of her. He ran when he realized how badly he'd hurt me, how bad I was bleeding. Took them three weeks to find him."

"What happened to your mother?"

"She died before I met Cris. I was at work after school, and she had to go to the pharmacy to get her medicine refilled. She had asthma really bad, so bad she could only work part-time and was on partial disability and stuff too. That's why she stayed married to the fucking asshole for as long as she did. She thought she had no options." She took a deep breath to steady herself. "The pharmacy was only two blocks away from where we lived, so she walked because I wouldn't be home for several hours and I had the only car. Hit and run driver got her when she was crossing the street."

"Did they catch them?"

"Yep. Two days later. Little rich asshole. His buddies tried to lie for him and say his car was stolen, but they eventually proved he'd been out drinking before." She tipped her head back to look into his eyes. "I fucking sued the pants off his goddamn family for it, too. My mom deserved better than that. I used the money to get me into college."

"What about your father?"

She frowned. "What about him? He left my mom when she found out she was pregnant. She

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was only seventeen when she had me, he was in his twenties. I have no clue where he is, and I could give a shit."

* * * *

They talked for hours, until after ten that night. When she yawned, he realized exactly how tired she must be, how stressed from talking about all the old garbage.

Such a strong woman, incredibly so. He stroked her chin. "Let's go to sleep, love. We have a long day tomorrow and an even longer night."

Her eyes searched his. "No playing tonight, huh?"

"How about a nice romantic cuddle to save our strength?"

"What happened to breaking in our new bed?"

"I truly need a good night's sleep. I have a feeling it will get more than a thorough breaking in over the next few days." He kissed her. "If I have my say, I won't let you out of it any more than necessary."

"You don't have to pretend if you don't feel it."

"Have you not heard a word I've said to you?" He grabbed her hand and placed it over his cock, which had grown hard. "If I wasn't interested in you, I wouldn't have that now, would I?"

She grinned. "Oh, come on, let's play."

He bent his mouth to her neck and nipped, more than just a playful tease. "Love, it is all I can do not to fuck you this second, believe me. I already told you I wish to do this properly." He lifted his face so he could gaze into her eyes. "Besides, I would prefer our very first time to be when he can hear the lovely moans I know you'll make as I take you and make you mine. I want him to see my face and hear the sounds I'll make. I want that pain to cut through his soul in a way he won't soon forget. Perhaps that will remind him to think before he acts in the interests of others without talking to them about it first. I want to look into his face as I slide my cock inside you and see the pain in his eyes and know he truly understands what he did to us."

"You don't have to do this on my account, you know."

He smiled. "I know. I'm doing it on mine. I have my pride."

"Aaaaand you're a sadist."

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"Well, there is that, of course."

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Chapter Ten

Tilly awoke Sunday morning to find Landry propped up on one elbow and staring down at her with a playful smile.

"What?" she asked.

He shook his head, leaned in, and kissed her. "I mean this in the best way possible, but I cannot believe I am marrying you today."

"I'm glad you qualified that first."

"I felt it necessary, to prevent any misunderstandings." He kissed her again, this time long and slow, gently, his tongue slipping between her lips and tasting. His cheeks felt rough with morning stubble and it wasn't long before her hand slipped behind his neck to hold him in place.

He rolled on top of her and she enjoyed the feel of his solid weight pressing her body into the mattress. It'd been way too long and she craved his touch. His hard cock rubbed against her thigh through his boxers.

He lifted his head. "You are an amazing woman, Tilly," he said, his eyes searching hers. "You have a beautiful soul and a limitless heart."

His mushiness made her a little uncomfortable. She didn't want to open her heart to him just to get hurt. Her house, bed, and legs? Sure. Not her heart.

Not yet.

But she found it hard to keep it closed.

"Most women," he continued, "would have told me to go fuck myself."

"I'm not most women."

"For that I would thank the heavens if I were a religious man." From the look in his eyes, she suspected he wanted to say more. She waited him out. "May I ask something?"

She nodded.

"If at the end of our agreement you do consider leaving, would you at least allow me the chance to argue my case or renegotiate for you to stay?"

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"Don't want to lose your shirt?" she quipped, trying to lighten the tone.

His face looked sad. "I have been broke before. I'm more worried about you taking my heart than my money."

* * * *

She pondered his comment after he left their bed to go make them coffee. She headed into the shower. Maybe she wasn't the only one seeing this as more than "just" a business deal. As stupid as it sounded, she did feel something for him.

Loren pulled strings with the place that did her nails and asked them to take care of them special on a Sunday even though they were normally closed. Landry paid extra for that, of course. She would be on her way there soon to pick up Tilly and take her for the rest of the day. Landry would meet them later at the club with Cris before the wedding.

As Landry stepped into the shower, she turned and their eyes met. Without thinking about it she was in his arms, kissing him, voraciously trying to devour him then and there.

He returned her kiss with equal passion, his cock stiff and pressing against her body. His large hands slid down her wet skin to her ass, holding her still so she wouldn't wriggle free and sneak his cock between her legs.

"Later, love," he hoarsely said as he held her. "Please don't torture me yet. I'm too close to the edge."

Her hands moved to his back, her fingers tracing his spine, his firm muscles. "Why is this so important to you? Why can't we do it now and just pretend it's the first time in front of Cris?"

"There have been enough omissions in my relationship with him and in yours also. A few more hours of torment are well worth it." He rubbed his chin in her wet hair. "Believe me, love, you shall be fucked well and hard tonight."

She wanted to be fucked well and hard right now. She tried to squirm against him, but he clamped his elbows against his side, trapping her arms around him. "Behave, love," he playfully chastised.

"Easy for you to say. You didn't go through a long dry spell."

A little tension flowed out of his body. "You're right." He stepped forward until her back

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pressed against the wall. Then he dropped to his knees and looked up at her. "You're absolutely right. I owe you this." He pushed her thighs apart and lowered his mouth to her mons. His talented tongue swept along her clit, driving rational thought from her mind.

She held on to his shoulders for support, not realizing how hard she dug her nails into him, her legs trembling as he pressed two fingers inside her. It didn't take him long to draw a hard, screaming orgasm out of her. Once he did he stood and pulled her into his arms, holding her as she laid her face against his chest and cried in his arms.

"Shh, love, it's all right." He gently maneuvered her until they stood under the spray, still holding her, soothing her. "Good?"

"Fuck. Good isn't even on the same planet as that."

He chuckled. "At least I know of one way to possibly keep you with me then. I shall make sure you stay well-satisfied in bed."

She roughly laughed. "How do you know I'll be any good in bed?"

"If what you did to me was any indication of how good you are, love, I have no doubts I will be more than satisfied."

* * * *

He finished showering first and returned to the kitchen with a towel wrapped around his hips. When the doorbell rang a little after eight, it didn't surprise him. Loren wasn't due until eight-thirty, but he knew from the time he'd spent with her yesterday that she loved Tilly and after she'd recovered from her initial shock over the news, she was looking forward to the wedding.

Mug of coffee in hand, he walked to the front door and opened it.

Loren immediately walked in. "I know I'm early, but I—" She noticed his towel and blushed. "Sorry. I didn't mean to get you out of the shower."

He smiled as he closed the door behind her. "I was already out of the shower. Coffee?"

"Oh. Um, yeah."

He smiled to himself as he led the way to the kitchen, knowing she studied his body as they walked.

He heard Tilly call from the bedroom. "Was that the doorbell?"

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"Yes, love. Loren's here."

"Goddammit!"

He laughed as he sat at the table and crossed his legs. Loren's blush deepened. "Don't mind her," he said. "She's a nervous bride."

Loren's gaze had firmly fixed on his towel, which he knew was in danger of falling open and exposing him. He didn't bother adjusting it.

Tilly bustled into the kitchen, wearing a bathrobe and with a towel wrapped around her damp hair. "Lor, I knew you'd do this to me, I—" Her mouth snapped shut when she spotted Landry sitting there. "Jesus Christ, would you *please* go put some clothes on! Loren, quit drooling over him."

Loren had poured herself a mug of coffee. "Dammit, Tilly, you can't ask me not to look."

"He's my fiancé. Let me get a ring on him before you start ogling him."

Landry stood and pulled Tilly into his arms for a long, deep kiss. "I'm sorry, love. I was in here getting my coffee. Forgive me?"

She looked stunned by his kiss. "Uh huh."

He smiled at her and gently chucked her on the chin. "I'll go put on something less revealing." He walked out of the kitchen, chuckling all the way to the bedroom.

Behind him, he heard Loren say, "Jesus Christ, Tilly, the guy is fucking haaawwwt!"

"Will you shut *up*!"

He closed the bedroom door before he burst out laughing. It appeared he'd won the hardest battle—charming Tilly's protective best friend.

When he emerged a few minutes later, dressed in jeans and a button-up shirt, he also realized Loren must have seen the red claw marks Tilly's short but lethal nails had left on the back of his shoulders.

He only hoped those marks lasted until after he picked Cris up. What a mindfuck that would be.

Tilly now had her coffee and looked a little more composed. When Landry returned to the kitchen, she stood. "I'll get dressed so we can go."

"Can I have a kiss?"

She rolled her eyes, but she smiled and leaned in for another kiss. Before she pulled away, she nipped his lower lip. "Behave," she warned him before heading to the bedroom.

He laughed as he watched her leave.

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"She'll be a handful," Loren warned him from her seat at the table.

He turned to her. "I know. That's what I'm hoping."

"This is none of my business. Wait, fuck that, it is my business. She's my best friend. What the hell will happen with Cris?"

He shrugged and took another sip of coffee. "That's up to Cris. He'll sleep in the guest room. Or on the floor or in the garage if I tell him to. Maybe the backyard, if he does anything to piss her off. If he doesn't like it, he knows where the front door is."

Loren studied him for a moment. "She didn't exaggerate," she finally said. "You really are out for blood." Her expression hardened. "You fucking hurt her, I'll kill you myself."

He moved to the table and sat across from her. "Loren," he softly said, "I'm going to tell you something with the full expectation that you'll probably repeat it to her. Tilly is very special. Only a moron could miss that. I am many things, but I am not a moron. I already told her this morning that if she does try to leave at the end of our arrangement I will be lobbying very strongly for her to stay."

She stared at him for a moment before speaking. "And not because of the money."

He shook his head. "Not because of the money. I also refuse to make the same mistake Cris made and walk out on her."

Her face hardened. "I want to fucking strangle that asshole."

He grinned. "I'm sure that could be arranged. As long as we get Tilly out of the house first so she doesn't stop you."

Loren laughed. "She wasn't kidding that you're a sadist, was she?"

"No, she wasn't."

She leaned in and dropped her voice. "This is between you and me. Are you falling in love with her?"

He didn't care if she told Tilly or not. He nodded. "I believe I am, yes."

"So when I ask you today if you'll love, honor, and cherish her, you'll mean it, right?"

"With every breath in my body."

* * * *

The women made it out the door a little after eight-thirty. They'd have breakfast on the way to

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get their nails done. Tilly took her dress with her and would ride to the club with Loren and Ross. Landry wouldn't see her again until at the club that evening.

He'd prepared a little surprise for Tilly and hired a limo to drive him and Cris to the club and then bring the three of them home. There they would begin Cris' torture in earnest.

Tilly had told him he could unpack his things in her bedroom, and had already shuffled a few drawers around to make room. He was surprised to discover she didn't seem to own a lot of clothes. There were two distinct personalities in this way as well, what was obviously "Tilly's" wardrobe and what belonged to "Mistress Cardinal." Tilly was fond of baggy jeans and shorts, and oversized, comfortable shirts that hid her shape. She owned a few slacks and casual dresses, and a black multi-purpose formal dress, but not very many clothes, truth be told. Mistress Cardinal owned several corsets and fetish dresses, stiletto heeled boots and shoes, but again not very much. There was still a comfortable amount of empty space in her closet when he moved clothes around and pushed them closer to make room for his things.

She's not a clothes horse, that's for sure.

After unpacking the clothes he had with him, he wandered the house. She'd given him a cursory tour earlier, but now he had time to explore on his own before retrieving Cris. She loved books. The walls of one room, her office he guessed because of the desk and laptop, were lined floor-to-ceiling with books. She had a small room, probably originally a den, containing exercise equipment. Another room was obviously a dungeon playroom for her clients. And a guest bedroom. With a split floor plan, the master bedroom was situated at the far end of the house from the other rooms, on the other side of the living room. The playroom lay at the opposite end of the house, the last room in the hall. Then the guest room, office, with the exercise room closest to the kitchen and living room areas.

He'd have to see how far sound carried. It wouldn't do if Cris couldn't lay in bed and hear him fucking her brains out.

He might have to make Cris sleep on the living room floor just so he could get the full effect.

After making himself some breakfast, he picked up the keys Tilly had left for him on the counter. He studied them. His keys from California, their cars, office, and house, were on the dresser at the hotel.

He'd have to send Cris back to coordinate the move. The office wasn't an issue because he could telecommute. Eventually he'd open another office out here, once he knew how his treatments

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would go.

He felt a little guilty over not revealing his cancer to Cris sooner, but only a little.

He'd learn about it soon enough.

Landry arrived at the hotel fifteen minutes early and found Cris ready to leave as instructed. When he walked into the room he immediately unbuttoned his shirt and tossed it on the bed. "I want my light blue shirt," he instructed as he walked to the bathroom to use the toilet.

In the mirror over the vanity counter, he saw Cris staring at his shoulders, at the claw marks still visible. Tilly hadn't broken the skin but she'd dug in hard, raking her nails along his shoulders in a delicious way even he could enjoy. He smiled at him in the mirror as Cris stood there holding the shirt he'd just discarded, a stunned look on his face. "Is there a problem, slave?"

He shook his head. "No, Master. No problem."

* * * *

Slave stared after his Master when he closed the bathroom door. His heart raced in his chest. He knew damn well what Master had been up to. Master wanted him to see those marks on his shoulders.

Who the fuck had he been with?

Jealousy raged within him, forcing him to take a deep breath to remain in control and not confront Landry. When the revelation of where he must have been hit him, it startled him out of his reverie and he remembered he was supposed to be getting Master's other shirt. As he hurried to do it, he tried to talk the idea out of his head.

Not Tilly. He wouldn't do that to her.

She wouldn't do that with him. Not his Tilly.

He squeezed his eyes closed and took a deep breath. She wasn't his anymore. Not since the day he walked away from her and released her.

Then again, he never dreamed she'd become a pro Domme either.

His Master was a sadist. Slave knew damn well how upset Master felt over what had happened, but this…

No.

He refused to jump to conclusions.

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When Master returned, slave had the shirt ready and the other put away, their luggage sitting on the floor by the door, waiting.

Master stared at him, one corner of his mouth quirked in an amused smile as he buttoned his shirt. "What's wrong, slave?"

"Nothing, Master."

"What were you staring at when I walked to the bathroom?"

Cat and mouse. It only confirmed slave's suspicions. "The marks on your shoulders, Master," he quietly replied. It wouldn't do any good to lie or say "nothing," because he knew his Master would draw the game out until he admitted seeing the marks.

He grinned. "Ah, those." Master offered no other explanation, but slave knew damn well from his Master's pleased grin that's exactly what he'd planned. A show for his benefit and for Master's amusement.

The slave loaded their luggage in the car. Before he could ask if Master wanted him to drive, Landry slid behind the wheel and started the car.

The slave climbed into the passenger seat and buckled up.

"Did you eat breakfast, slave?"

"Yes, Master. They had a continental breakfast."

"Good." He slipped on his sunglasses before turning to him. "Here are the ground rules for today: you do not speak unless I tell you to. Understand?"

He nodded, hoping that was safe.

"Good." He backed out of the parking space and headed south on U.S. 41. The slave's heart tripped in his chest as he recognized the route they took. The same route as the other day.

He felt the fluorite pendant digging into his hip through his jeans, where he carried it in his right front pocket.

When they pulled into Tilly's driveway, Landry got out and slave scrambled to follow. He didn't fail to notice Master pulled out a set of keys and unlocked the front door.

"Bring the luggage," he ordered as he walked in.

As if he owned the place.

With a deep cold settling inside his heart, slave complied. He wasn't allowed to speak. That meant no asking any of the thousands of questions racing through his brain.

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Master stood by the counter and laid his keys there in a familiar manner. "I'll show you where to put your things." He walked down a hallway and slave followed him to a guest room. "This is your room from now on," Master said as he stood inside the doorway. "You will put your things in here. This door is never to be closed unless I tell you to close it. Understand?"

He nodded.

"I'll show you where to put my things."

On numb feet he followed Master. Tilly didn't appear to be home. Master walked into the master bedroom and opened several drawers in a large dresser. A few of his things, the clothes slave knew he'd taken with him, already lay there neatly folded. "You can put my things there, and in the closet." He walked over to a large walk-in closet and flipped on the light. "There." He pointed.

He led him back through the house to the garage. "Laundry is in there. That will be one of your jobs, of course. Not just for us, but for her as well." He led him down the hallway again, to what looked like an office. "Set up my laptop in here, on that desk. I'll be getting another desk and we'll rearrange later."

He left that room, down one more door. The slave needed no explanations for this room's use. "You might be spending a lot of time in here if you don't behave yourself," Master teased. "Or even if you do." He turned on him, his face hardening. "You have two choices, and only two: stay, or leave. If you stay, you stay under my terms. There will be no negotiations, no safe words, no equality. You gave up all rights to that by your actions. Do you understand me?"

The slave nodded.

"Good." Master headed back to the kitchen, slave on his heels. "Sit." He pointed at the table.

The slave sat.

A legal pad lay in front of Master's chair. He'd started a list on it. He sat and added to it. "You will coordinate moving our things from California. We'll need a large enough storage unit close to the house to put our things. Next week you'll fly back home, arrange the move and a car transporter, and handle any issues at work that need personal attention." He made a few more notes. "I will handle transferring the bank accounts. If they need personal signatures, you can do that while you're out there."

He looked up at slave. "We are living here for the foreseeable future. Make sure when you pack that you clearly label cartons so we can easily find things we'll need here, versus things that have to go

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to storage. I will not be able to help you unpack, so keep that in mind."

The slave had thought nothing could break through his stunned fog, except that cryptic comment. He desperately wanted to ask what he meant by it and forced himself to remain silent.

After a few more minutes, Master sat back, stared at his list, then turned the legal pad around and shoved it across the table. "Read through that. If anything needs clarification, you may ask about that and nothing else."

He tried to focus on the words and not his emotions. After three read-throughs, he nodded. Master had been crystal-clear. No explanations needed. He looked up at Master and waited.

Master's green eyes bored into his. "My cancer's back," he said.

Well, he'd been wrong thinking he'd hit bottom. The three words echoed through his brain, seizing his heart in a hard, cold grip.

Master continued, "I have a biopsy scheduled for Wednesday."

The slave hated that he felt the tears in his eyes. He closed them and swallowed, trying to control himself, not wanting to break down.

"The only reason I'm telling you now is because I wanted to be the one to tell you and I know you'll probably hear about it later tonight." He stared at slave for a moment. "You may speak."

The slave looked at him. "I love you," he whispered. "Please don't make me leave. Please let me stay with you and be with you for this."

For the first time, he saw his Master's expression soften. "I'm not going to make you leave. Well, I mean leave our relationship. You have to be the one to go to California to handle the move because I'll be going through treatments. Tilly will be here for me while you're gone. The Realtor said he has an offer on the house. You will, however, go through your own hell before you come out on the other side. If you choose to leave, that will be your decision to make, not mine." Master looked at him for a long time before speaking again. "I do love you, Cris, but I'm human. You know how I am. Before I can move forward, I need my pound of flesh out of you for this. It's the only way my healing and hers can begin."

The slave nodded but didn't speak.

"I feel guilty for what we've had for the past few years. I thought I had my angel back. Then to find out what you did to her…" He looked away for a moment, composing himself before returning his attention to slave. "She went through hell because of what you did to her. I can never repay her for that.

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I can never give her back the peace of mind she lost when you betrayed her. You didn't just take her happiness. You stole her trust and broke her heart. She deserved better than that from you."

Master sat back, his hard mask descending again. "We will leave here at six-thirty for our appointment tonight. Wear jeans, black shirt, and your formal collar. You will not speak tonight, no matter what is said to you, unless I give you permission to do so. Understand?"

The slave nodded.

"This is what is going to happen. From Wednesday on, my focus will be on my health and my healing. Tilly and I have an arrangement in place. For the next three years, she will be with me, helping me through this. I'm amply compensating her for it, don't worry. I am not taking advantage of her. This agreement is between her and myself, and she is looking forward to being able to use her nursing training again. You will obey her and any orders she gives you. You have no say in this whatsoever. I have also changed my will. If I die before the three years are up, she will get everything I have and whether she chooses to give you anything or not is up to her."

He nodded, still stunned.

"As you can see, I am sleeping in her bed. I suppose you have now put together in your mind where the marks on my shoulders came from."

He slowly nodded.

Master's voice dropped almost to a growl. "Do not get in my way in regards to her, Cristo. If you try, you will find yourself out on your ass before you can blink. Any comments?"

He found his voice. "Please don't hurt her, Master," he whispered.

Master laughed. "I am not like you," he said as he sat back. "I don't go back on my promises. And I promise I will never hurt her. She, on the other hand, might hurt you in ways you never imagined possible and far more deeply than I ever could." He glanced at his watch. "Make me lunch. I want a salad with chicken. There are leftovers in the fridge."

Master started to stand. The slave didn't bother wondering how Master knew the contents of the fridge. "Master, may I ask you something else, please?"

"Yes."

He took a deep breath. "How bad is your cancer?"

"We don't know yet. That's what the biopsy on Wednesday will determine. Make me lunch then put our things away. I'll tell you what to do after that."

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* * * *

Landry headed for the bedroom and took a deep breath. He must be losing touch with his sadistic side. He almost felt sorry for Cris when he dropped that bombshell on him about his cancer. He looked horrified.

He closed his eyes. Wednesday. He would push the envelope until then. From that point on, he would look forward, not back, and resume their previous relationship if Cris hadn't bailed on him before then.

Whether Tilly could look forward was up to her.

After lunch he went to the office to catch up on email while Cris put their things away. He ignored Cris when he returned to the office after completing that task. Landry knew without looking that Cris stood in the doorway, waiting for his next instructions.

Ten minutes later, he heard a low gasp and turned. Cris knelt in front of a bottom shelf in the corner, not the most convenient place for books because of where it was situated and that a chair blocked easy access to it. His finger trailed along several spines as he examined the titles.

"What is it?" Landry snapped at him.

Cris didn't look at him. "They're mine," he softly said. "I left them all when I…" He finally turned to Landry. "I didn't take them with me. They were some of my favorites. She kept them. These three shelves here were all my books."

"Hmph." Landry returned to his email, but inside he felt a little satisfaction. She couldn't get rid of his books.

That gave him hope that one day maybe she could forgive Cris and open her heart to him again.

* * * *

Around two, he loaded Cris in the car. They drove to a nearby Walmart. Cris silently followed him, pushing the cart as Landry found candles and other assorted items he wanted for that night.

Cris didn't want to contemplate why Landry bought them. He suspected they weren't for his benefit.

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When they returned to the house, Landry ordered him to put the things in the master bedroom, on the bed, then to go get his own shower and shave and wait for him in the living room.

He did as ordered. On his way back to his room, he paused in the living room. In the corner containing a massive entertainment center, he studied her CD and DVD collection. He found ones that had belonged to him, but either put on the highest shelf where she wouldn't normally reach them, or tucked away low and in the back where it would be inconvenient to store them if they were frequently accessed.

When he returned to his room, he couldn't help but stop by the office again. As far as he could tell, she'd kept all his books. Ones that had been his alone and not hers were crammed on the inconvenient shelves in the far corner. But books they'd bought together and both enjoyed, she still had those, too.

He wanted to talk to her, to apologize again, hopefully without her trying to take his nuts off in the process. He knew he could never make it up to her, but he wanted her to understand why he'd done what he did.

He couldn't let Landry die.

Cris tried not to think while he took his shower and dressed. He waited as directed in the living room. A little before six, Landry emerged from the bedroom. Cris' heart thumped in his chest when he saw the way he was dressed.

The man looked damn good, especially in the tailored suit. Cris wondered when he'd bought it.

"How do I look?" he asked as he turned. "You may answer."

"Very handsome, Master." No lie. He wanted to drop to his feet and cling to him, beg him to forgive him and let them move forward. The loneliness he'd felt since the revelation ate at him.

Landry smiled. "Tilly picked out the tie."

Cris didn't know if he was expected to reply to that, so he kept his mouth shut.

"I will remind you that, no matter what, you do not speak unless I give you permission to do so."

Cris nodded.

"Go get the toy bag. I want you to put on your locking wrist cuffs, the black leather ones, not the suspension ones. I want a double-ended clip and the braided leather leash to take with us. Lay out the coil of blue rope on the bed, along with your ankle cuffs and the big ball gag." He hooked a thumb

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over his shoulder, indicating the master bedroom. "On that bed in there. Do it fast."

Cris' heart hammered as he went to comply. When he carried the items into the bedroom, he spotted how Landry had arranged the unlit candles. The fresh flowers had been transferred to vases full of water.

It looked romantic.

He suspected those weren't for his sake. He had an even stronger feeling that the rope and other accoutrements were.

Promptly at six-thirty, he heard a car in the driveway. The doorbell rang a moment later. He went to answer as Landry walked up behind him. A limo driver stood there. "Mr. LaCroux?"

"Yes," Landry said. "We'll be right there." He grabbed his keys, turned off the lights, and locked the door behind them. Cris carried the leash and clip as ordered.

The driver held the door for them. Landry climbed in first then pointed to one of the side-facing seats. "You, there," he told Cris.

He complied.

Landry sat back and then patted his pocket. "Wouldn't want to forget."

Cris didn't ask what.

"Remember, no talking tonight."

Cris nodded.

Landry smiled. "That's my good boy."

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Chapter Eleven

Cris felt hope mix with his fear.

That's my good boy.

If Landry still wanted him, he would tough out whatever punishment was headed his way. He had no doubts that whatever his Master had in mind was a doozie in terms of retribution.

He recognized they were heading to the club. Cris tried to beat back his anxiety. He would do whatever Landry asked of him, except hurt Tilly again. He'd hurt her enough already. She'd deserved better than he gave her, no arguments there.

When the limo pulled up to the club, Landry's face hardened as he leaned forward. "Remember, no talking. If you don't like what happens tonight, you can leave and I'll put you on a plane back to California. You get no say in the matter."

Cris nodded.

Landry motioned him over, snapped the leash to his collar, and used the other clip to secure his wrist cuffs together. Cris had a feeling this wasn't the worst torment he'd endure tonight, even though it'd been several years since Landry had put him on a leash in public for punishment.

He despised the leash and the humiliation it brought him.

When the driver opened the back door, Landry exited first. Cris followed close behind when Landry jerked on the leash. He cringed when Ross met them in the club's lobby. No one else was there, although the many cars in the parking lot indicated more people were inside the dungeon already.

Ross greeted Landry with a friendly smile and a handshake and totally ignored Cris. He waited, head bowed, while the two men talked. After a few minutes, Landry's sharp voice and a snap of the leash caught Cris' attention.

"Slave!"

Cris stepped closer, keeping his eyes on the floor.

"Ross has something he wants to say to you, slave," Landry said. "Look at him when he talks to you."

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Cris forced his gaze up. The man he used to consider his best friend wore a murderous look. "You fucking son of a bitch," he growled. "Losing you nearly killed her. Tilly won't let me castrate you, but Landry said I can do this." He punched Cris square in the gut, doubling him over in pain.

Landry stood there, smiling, his arms crossed. "You should have heard his better revenge fantasies involving a propane torch," Landry teased. "Unfortunately, my sweet Tilly is a spoil-sport. Lucky for you, she's forbidden castration and maiming."

Cris struggled to catch his breath and finally did, coughing, his restrained hands on his knees as he stayed doubled over for another moment to recover. Even through his pain he didn't miss the possessive term Landry used to describe Tilly.

"I would let him answer for himself, Ross," Landry continued, "but I've forbid him to speak without my permission tonight. That will have to wait for another time." He slapped Cris on the shoulder. "You did very well, I must say. I expected at least a cry of pain or a swear word, but you remained silent."

His eyes on the floor again, Cris nodded after he straightened, praying Landry wouldn't let Ross take another swipe at him.

The door leading to the dungeon opened and a woman stuck her head out. "Ross, Loren just called. They're on their way."

Ross and Landry, with Cris following behind at the end of the leash, entered the dungeon area. Cris didn't want to look around. He knew the brief, angry silence that greeted him even while people cheerfully greeted Landry told him more than he needed to know. With a practiced, familiar flick of his wrist, Landry jerked the leash downward. Cris knelt on the floor at his side, head bowed.

If he had to endure this, he would endure it as best he could. He suspected it was the only way to regain Landry's good graces. He tried to ignore the conversations around him, choosing instead to drift into his memories. Not a day went by he didn't think about her, miss her. It felt weird to be in her house without her there, familiar and strange signs of her presence all around, things he remembered, things he'd never seen before.

A well-known stranger.

Voices near the door greeted someone. When Cris didn't look up, Landry jerked the leash hard, indicating he wanted his attention.

Loren wore a beautiful blue brocade corset and long, flowing black skirt. When Tilly walked in

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behind her…

His breath left in a rush. The purple dress suited her, gorgeous.

Landry leaned over and viciously pulled his hair to yank his head back. "Isn't she beautiful? Just think…you could be in my position right now instead of on your knees like a dog." When Landry released his hair, he patted the top of Cris' head.

Tilly and Loren walked over. When it looked like Loren wanted to kick him, Cris didn't miss how Tilly deftly stepped between them as they talked.

Cris felt a measure of relief at that, immediately followed by a wave of guilt that after what he'd done to her, she felt she had to protect him.

Landry smiled and leaned in for a kiss from Tilly. "You're beautiful, love."

She was. Cris wanted to stand, take her into his arms, and kiss her.

He also realized that might get him killed, considering the gathered group of people and how they glared at him.

Landry offered her his arm and, without hesitating, jerked Cris' leash. Cris scrambled to his feet and scurried to keep up, knowing Landry wouldn't hesitate to yank him off his feet and drag him across the floor if he didn't follow fast enough.

Loren and Ross left Tilly's side and went to talk to some other people. Cris had a bad feeling what was about to occur, even though he didn't want to believe it. When a photographer started taking posed pictures of Tilly and Landry, together and with other people, he knew.

After Landry spent a few more minutes talking with Tilly and others, Landry patted her on the arm and kissed her cheek. "I'll be right there. I need to take care of something."

She walked off, talking with others, while Landry pulled him into one of the curtained alcoves set aside for privacy. He pulled the black curtain shut behind them and turned on him, his voice low.

"You will not ruin this for her, do you understand me, slave?"

Cris nodded.

"You've behaved perfectly so far. Keep it up." Landry unclipped Cris' hands but left the cuffs on him. Then he reached into his pants pocket and withdrew a ring box. He opened it and took out a beautiful, delicate wedding band and handed it to him.

"You'll be my best man, slave. Apropos, is it not? You get to help me marry the woman you love. She's asked Ross to stand up for her." He studied Cris. "Everything changes back to some

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semblance of what we used to have as of Wednesday, because that's when I go into the hospital. Until then, if you wish to stay by my side, you will behave and obey without hesitation, question, or complaint. Understood?"

Cris nodded.

"Good." He led Cris out of the alcove.

Loren waved Landry across the room. "Ready?" she asked when they joined her.

He nodded.

Everyone, about thirty people in all, gathered to watch. Dressed in everything from evening casual to full fetish gear, Cris knew about a third of the people in attendance.

He suspected everyone knew who he was.

Tilly walked up, her arm hooked through Ross' and carrying a small bouquet of purple flowers. Ross tenderly kissed her cheek before handing her off to Landry.

She never looked at him, her eyes only on the man she was about to marry.

Cris didn't listen to the words. He couldn't. His heart breaking, he watched as she recited the vows Loren told her before she slipped the ring Ross handed her on Landry's finger.

Only because Landry reached back for the ring did Cris know to hand it to him. Cris fought his tears, refused to cry in front of everyone and spoil this for her.

Loren sounded genuinely happy. "By the power invested in me by the laws of the State of Florida, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride."

* * * *

Tilly couldn't believe she was actually going through with this. The day had rushed by in a blur with Loren unerringly steering her through the preparations, her nails and hair and make-up, everything.

She tried not to focus on Cris. This could have been her day with him. She'd been willing to spend her life with him.

His loss.

Instead, she let herself sink into Landry's green eyes. His gentle hands felt scorching hot against hers as he slipped the ring on her finger and recited his vows, his gaze never wavering from her.

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When Loren declared them married, Landry leaned in and kissed her with a gentle passion that threatened to unleash the fires raging below her surface. Dammit, she did want him, revenge or not. She wanted him to fuck her brains out. She knew his game, and maybe he didn't love her, maybe she couldn't honestly say she loved him—yet—but she could and would enjoy tonight.

Everyone applauded as they kissed. When he lifted his mouth from hers he whispered, "I can't wait to take my beautiful wife home and ravish her."

Her knees weakened. She felt thankful he'd already offered his arm for her to hold on to. For a gay man, he damn sure pushed her buttons with precise accuracy.

Cris trailed behind them as they walked to the other side of the dungeon where tables and chairs had been set up. Landry paused only long enough to clip the leash to the table leg next to his chair, snap the clip onto his cuffs to hold them together, and point to the floor.

Cris obediently knelt beside Landry's chair.

She swallowed back the uncomfortable lump in her throat. Shouldn't she be enjoying this? Seeing him cut down? Participating in his public humiliation, even? Isn't that what she'd wanted?

Landry distracted her by offering to get her a plate of food. She nodded. While he was gone, even as she talked to others and accepted their congratulations, her gaze wandered to Cris' bowed head.

When Landry returned, he sat next to her and blocked her view of Cris. She didn't miss how Landry occasionally took pieces of food from his plate and reached his hand down beside him.

She tried not to think about that and focused on their friends. Loren and Ross sat at their table, as did Kim and Kylee. When it came time to cut the cake, that's when Tilly felt her next apprehension. Even though it was a beautifully decorated sheet cake, not a traditionally tiered wedding cake, Landry stood with her to help her cut it. While everyone cheered them on, trying to get them to smash the cake into each other's faces, Landry winked at her and gently fed her a small, manageable bite.

He kissed her on the cheek and whispered in her ear, "I am not a stupid man. I don't wish to upset a woman so skilled at wielding a whip as you are."

His eyes twinkled and she couldn't help but laugh. When it was her turn, she deliberately brushed the piece of cake against his chin, dabbing a little frosting on him in the process. The spectators hooted, albeit slightly disappointed.

Landry laughed too, but before he wiped his chin she leaned in and licked the frosting off, prompting a pleased round of cheers from the others.

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Before she could step back he kissed her again, the taste of cake fresh on his lips.

"We should have bought extra frosting," she joked. "For later."

He grinned. "You're my kind of girl."

"I'd better be your only girl."

* * * *

Landry set a small piece of cake and a fork on the floor next to Cris. Then Ross stood to give the toast.

He smiled at Tilly. "Most of you here know how special a friend Tilly is to my wife and myself," he said. "Loren and I love her like part of our family, more than just a friend." He grinned at Landry. "You're a lucky guy to have her, and I suspect she won't have any trouble keeping you in line."

"None at all," Landry agreed with a grin.

Ross' face softened. "You deserve the best, Tilly. You're a brilliant woman and have come a long way in the past several years. I know the two of you have a little bit of a challenge ahead of you, but Landry, you've picked the best damn woman—besides my own Loren," he clarified, "to walk this journey with you." He lifted his cup. "Here's to happiness, a complete recovery for you, Landry, and hopefully some vicariously enjoyable hell for someone else that we can all witness on a frequent basis."

Tilly laughed, forcing her eyes to stay on Landry's face and not drop to Cris on his other side. With plastic cups instead of real glasses to clink, everyone started pounding on their tables for another kiss from the newlyweds.

With a wink Landry leaned in and kissed her, long and slow and leaving her body sizzling in his wake. With their audience loudly hooting their approval, he whispered, "Let's hurry this up so we can finish with them and get down to what we really want to do."

Unfortunately, Loren had hired a DJ. They had to have a few dances, and more pictures, before Loren was happy she'd thrown Tilly a proper wedding. As they stepped into the middle of the dungeon for their first dance, where all the benches and other equipment had been pushed out of the way for clearance, Landry took her into his arms and led her around the floor. As they turned she again caught sight of Cris kneeling beside Landry's empty chair. Except for the empty plate next to him, it didn't

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look like he'd moved, his head bowed, hair hiding his face.

Landry turned them so they faced the other way. "Focus on us, love," he whispered. "Not him. Don't let him spoil your day."

"You're fucking spooky."

He chuckled as he nuzzled her ear. "No, I'm possessive. I want your mind on me, not him. And on what I plan on doing to you later." The sensual dance soon took her mind off everything else as she looked into his eyes and saw her own passion mirrored there.

At one point he ground his hips against hers and she felt his stiff cock through his trousers. "That's for you later, love," he promised with a playful smirk.

"I'm glad you're flexible."

"That makes two of us."

She rested her head against his chest as they finished the dance. Even despite the circumstances she couldn't say she didn't feel special. She felt safe with him, definitely. She sensed he was a man of his word who wouldn't hurt her. She already felt cherished.

When the song ended, everyone applauded before pounding on their tables again and chanting, "Kiss! Kiss!"

One corner of his mouth slid up in a sexy smirk. "How about it, Mrs. LaCroux?"

Heat flared deep within her belly as she draped her arms around him and gave him a long, sensual kiss. His hands cupped her ass and he ground his hips against hers as they embraced until finally he lifted his mouth and broke their kiss.

"I think I love you, Madame," he said with a smile.

She returned his smile. "I think I love you, too."

Tilly wanted to stay and help clean up, but Loren waved her off. "No, you're going to go have fun." She hugged her, then Landry. "Go do whatever it is you vanilla, non-kinky couples do," she teased.

"Who said we're vanilla and not kinky?" Tilly protested with a laugh. "That's a dirty thing to call me after all the years we've known each other."

"Well if he's not your Dom, and you're not his Domme, what the hell else is there?"

Landry pulled Tilly to him, taking her by surprise and making her squeal as he nipped her neck. "I'm sure we'll think of plenty of things to do."

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Tilly swatted him on the ass. "I'm sure we will."

Loren pointed at Cris. "Oh, you. Asshole. Come here."

Landry laughed as he unsnapped the leash and removed the clip holding his wrist cuffs together. "Better go with her."

All Loren needed was his signature on the marriage certificate as witness, yet another indignity. Loren smiled as she looked at where he'd signed. "How's it feel to know you helped marry her off, asshole?"

Cris didn't respond even though Tilly noticed how his body tensed. Tilly felt another round of sympathy for him. "Okay, enough torture," Tilly said. "I want to get going."

Loren stuck her tongue out at her. "Landry's right, you are a spoilsport."

Others would stay and play. Landry sent Cris out to the limo first, instructing him to get in the back compartment, but to sit all the way at the front. Everyone else gave the newlyweds a birdseed shower as they ran for the car and jumped in. Ross had already made sure Tilly's things were transferred to the limo.

Landry pulled Tilly across his lap as the limo driver shut the door before they pulled away. "Now, home."

"Home." She ignored Cris' silent presence at the front of the passenger compartment. Instead, she ran her hands through Landry's hair. "You sure can wear a suit well. You look damn good in that thing. Even better than you did at the store."

"I like finely-tailored clothes. You should see my wardrobe. I'll have to take over a closet in one of the other rooms. I believe I have more than you do." He looked up at Cris. "Isn't that right, slave?"

Cris nodded.

He returned his attention to her and dropped his voice low enough Cris couldn't hear. "Are you ready for tonight, love?"

"Yeah." She snuggled closer. "Very ready."

It seemed as if his expression softened, saddened as his eyes roamed her face. "I promise I will never leave you, Tilly. Not unless you tell me to go."

Emotion threatened to swamp her. "Please don't say that."

He frowned. "Why not? I mean it."

She struggled not to cry and finally succeeded in keeping her tears in check. "Don't make me

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promises you might not be able to keep." She didn't want to ruin her wedding night thinking about the possibility that his treatment might not beat the cancer back this time.

Or that he might choose to leave one day.

Apparently sensing her distress, he slowly nodded and caressed her cheek, cradling her face in his palm. "I promise, with every fiber of my being, to the deepest corners of my soul, that I will fight to stay with you until the very last breath leaves my body."

She gasped, unable to respond.

"Does that settle your heart, love?"

She nodded, feeling the prickle of tears in her eyes. "Yeah." Pulling his head down to hers, she kissed him, long and deep and enjoying the feel of his hands on her, his arms around her. She wanted to cry and didn't know if he'd understand, didn't want to let go in front of Cris, either.

Landry apparently sensed it anyway. "I take my vows seriously. You're stuck with me for a long time. I told you, don't be surprised if you try to leave in three years and I'm clinging to your leg, begging you to stay. You'd hate to see a grown Dom cry, wouldn't you?"

She giggled over his playful smirk, easing her tension. "I can't think of anything more pitiful." She rested her cheek against his palm, which still cupped her jaw. His fingers stroked the back of her neck, up under her hair. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "I'm difficult to live with. I've gotten used to doing things my way."

"Then that's the way we'll do them. Cardinal's rules."

She cracked an eye open. His eyes were still fixed on her, his expression serious. She knew Cris couldn't hear them if she whispered. "If you get tired of me—"

He kissed her. "Stop. I will *not* get tired of you. Although you may be ready to kick me out by next week after you see what a whiner I am."

"I don't want to fall in love with you and get my heart broken."

He nuzzled her forehead with his. "I guess Loren meant it when she asked me."

"Meant what? Asked you what?"

"This morning, when she arrived to pick you up. She said it was between her and myself, but she wanted to know if I was falling in love with you and if I would mean my vows. Apparently she meant it when she said she wouldn't tell."

Her heart raced. "What did you say?"

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"I told her yes, that I am. And yes, I meant every word."

"Please don't tell me what you think I want to hear."

"I will always be honest with you, Tilly. Good or bad. You know my past, you know about Cris. If I ever feel I can't continue, I will tell you. But prepare yourself for me doing my best to woo you whenever I get the chance."

Her fingers tightened on his shoulders. "Woo away, buddy."

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Chapter Twelve

Landry knew it wouldn't take them long to reach Tilly's house, but he wanted to torture Cris as much as possible, in addition to being unable to keep his hands off his wife.

Now there was a word he never thought he'd use in reference to himself.

His wife.

He slid one hand up her thigh, under her dress, until his fingers brushed against her panties. He hooked one finger under them and gently tugged, his finger rubbing against her bare pussy. She was already as wet as he was hard.

"Mmm. That is a rather pleasant surprise, love."

She squirmed against his hand as her eyes dropped closed and she rested her head against his shoulder. He slowly fucked her with two fingers, softly murmuring to her so Cris couldn't hear. Then he withdrew his fingers and, with his eyes firmly fixed on Cris, who silently watched, he sucked her juices off his fingers before slipping his hand under her dress again.

* * * *

Cris' fingernails dug into his palms as he watched, unable to look away. She wasn't faking it, he knew the signs far too well.

The edges of Landry's mouth curved in a smirk as his gaze narrowed. Cris also knew that expression.

Challenge me. I dare you.

He wouldn't—couldn't—challenge him.

After Landry apparently knew he'd made his point, he returned his attention to Tilly, whispering to her and kissing the hollow of her throat even as she made little moans he could hear from the front of the passenger compartment.

His sweet little Redbird, now his Master's wife.

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Landry truly was a sadist. Not that there was any doubt about that fact before.

When they reached the house, Landry withdrew his hand and smoothed down her skirts before he kissed her. Her eyes looked glazed with passion. Landry hadn't let her come yet, although Cris had an idea that was a top item on the menu for the night.

His own cock throbbed, remembering times with her and wishing it was his ring on her hand.

"You get out first," he ordered Cris. "Open the front door for us and take her things inside." He tossed Cris his keys.

He did as ordered while the limo driver opened the trunk for him. Once outside the limo, Landry scooped Tilly into his arms, drawing a startled squeak from her.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"I'm carrying my wife over the threshold," he said as he walked toward the front door. "It's only proper."

She draped her arms around his neck. "I think we're anything but proper."

Cris scurried to get the front door unlocked and opened and move out of the way while Landry swept inside with her.

"Take her things into our bedroom and wait for me there," Landry ordered.

Cris went to do it, his mind spinning. Whatever he cooked up in his own imagination was probably worse than anything Landry would do to him.

He hoped.

After a few minutes, Landry entered the bedroom and shut the door behind him. The smile he'd worn vanished from his face. "Strip."

Cris didn't dare argue. He kicked off his shoes and immediately began unbuttoning his shirt. Once naked, he neatly folded his clothes and stood holding them, waiting for instructions.

Landry reached for them. "Give them to me. Go use the bathroom." Landry took his clothes and shoes into the large walk-in closet by the bathroom while Cris went to relieve himself in the master bath.

His heart racing, he returned to stand beside the bed where Landry waited with the coil of rope in his hand and the covers and pillows already stripped from the bed. "On the bed. Face down."

Cris obeyed. Without any perfunctory explanations, Landry began to hog-tie him. Well, not totally, he left his hands in front of him. He recognized the pattern in Landry's rope work, one designed

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to securely hold him and yet not cut off his circulation so he could remain bound longer.

Landry rolled him over on his back, roughly passing the rope between Cris' legs and binding his cock and balls as well before immobilizing his arms. Then Landry shoved the ball gag into his mouth and tightened the strap around his head.

He tried to slow his breathing, remain calm, but he had a feeling he didn't want to be part of what was about to occur. Landry leaned in and viciously grabbed his hair, making Cris wince. "You get no safeword tonight. Unless you are in serious physical distress, you don't tap out or do anything I don't order you to do. Not if you want to remain my slave. If you safeword for any other reason than physical distress, you're out on your ass. And you will not close your eyes other than to blink. You will watch every single second of tonight. I want it seared into your brain. Understood?"

Cris nodded.

Landry's eyes narrowed even as he smiled. "Good."

The look and his tone of voice chilled Cris. He'd never seen that expression directed at him before, although he'd seen Landry act that way in the course of business negotiations.

Landry manhandled him until he was at the head of the bed, stretched out across the width of it and laying on his side. Landry lightly slapped Cris' bound cock and balls, hard enough to make him wince. "You won't have use for these tonight. You're lucky I'm letting you keep them at all, but as I told you, Tilly said I'm not allowed to geld you." He lit all the candles and set the cable TV to a classical music channel before he left the room.

* * * *

Landry emerged from the bedroom with a playful smile on his face. She'd managed to get the champagne bottle open without it fizzing everywhere. He walked into the kitchen and kissed her, hard and deep and taking her breath away.

"Ready to begin our night, love?" he asked.

She nodded. "It's all I've thought about all day."

"Me too."

She put a staying hand on his chest. "Not because of our revenge fantasy," she admitted. "I've wanted you. At this point, I could do without the other part if you wanted to."

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He pouted. "Aw, but love, I have such a prettily wrapped surprise awaiting you."

Laughing, she asked, "What did you do?"

"Let me show you." He handed her the bottle and two empty glasses and took her by the hand, leading her to the bedroom door. He stepped behind her and covered her eyes with one hand. "No peeking," he warned. He reached around her with his free hand and opened the door, pushing it so it swung all the way open.

He guided her into the bedroom and kissed the back of her neck. "All right love, I present your bridal suite."

When he removed his hand from her eyes, she gasped before she ever spotted Cris. "Oh, the flowers are beautiful! And candles, too." She leaned into him as he slipped one arm around her waist. "You weren't kidding when you said you wrapped him, were you?"

He nipped her earlobe. "Love, would I tease you about something like that?" He took the bottle and glasses and poured their champagne. Then he handed hers to her and they linked arms. "To my beautiful bride," he said, his eyes holding hers.

Her heart raced. "To my handsome husband," she breathlessly replied. They both sipped, then he took her glass from her and set it on the bedside table with his.

"Come here." When he opened his arms to her, she kicked off her shoes and walked to him. His kiss felt gentle at first, then more persistent as he slanted his lips across hers and took control.

For tonight, she was more than willing to let him have it.

It was easy to ignore Cris lying there trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey. Landry consumed her soul as his lips explored hers. He reached around her back and found the zipper of her dress. Slowly, as he held her firmly cocooned in his arms, he lowered it. Cool air brushed against her flesh as the fabric parted.

He lifted his head and smiled. "I suppose I should take this jacket off." He shrugged it off and tossed it onto the chair in the corner. Then he caught her hands and backed over to the bed, leading her along. He sat and pulled her onto his lap. "This is where I want you. Now, I believe I was somewhere about…here in the limo." He slipped his free hand up her skirt again, under her panties.

Eagerly nodding, she draped her arms around his neck again. "Yeah. Right there."

She moaned as he easily slid two fingers inside her. Her muscles grabbed at him as he slowly fucked her with his hand.

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"Do you like that, baby?" he teased.

She closed her eyes and fought the urge to whimper. "Uh huh."

* * * *

Landry fought the urge to rip her dress all the way off her, throw her legs in the air, and fuck her brainless right there. His cock throbbed almost painfully as he felt her slick pussy. "I want to make love to you all night," he said. "I want to show you how special you are."

She rocked her hips against his hand, wanting more. She whined with disappointment when he withdrew his hand.

"Shh, it's all right. I'll give you what you want." He grabbed the elastic of her panties and worked them down her hips under her dress. She helped him, and a moment later they'd been discarded to the floor beside the bed.

She reached up and loosened his tie as his fingers returned to her pussy. He kissed her, loving the way she responded to him. Cris' body was hard and angular, while she felt soft and pliable in his arms. His tie ended up on the floor, soon followed by his shirt. Her hands roamed across his chest, over his nipples, making his cock throb even harder. He worked her dress off her shoulders and down around her waist, then bent his head to her right breast. She rocked her hips even harder against him as he flicked her nipple with his tongue while still fingering her.

He lifted his head and met her gaze. "Do not come yet, love. I want you to feel it like you've never felt before."

Tilly moaned as her fingers tangled in his hair, urging his mouth back to her breast.

Every flick of his tongue against her nipple earned him a responding clench of her muscles around his fingers, until she'd truly slipped into that passionate realm where she didn't care what happened next as long as he didn't stop.

He pulled her to her feet again and led her around the end of the bed. There, he reached over to the dresser for the remote and changed the channel to jazz music. She kept her arms around his neck as she tried to lick at his nipples. He helped her step out of her dress and left it on the floor.

"Dance with me, love," he hoarsely commanded. How much control would he have when he finally reached that point with her?

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Her body melded against his as they swayed in time with the music. He captured her mouth, a slow burn of kisses down her throat, across her shoulder, and back again. He let his hands roam her back, the heat of her bare body reaching him through his slacks and comfortably warm against his bare chest. So smooth and beautiful. For a few moments, as they danced and he lost himself in her eyes, he almost forgot about Cris watching them from the bed.

He slowly maneuvered her around so Cris could get a full view of her naked back. Landry took great pains to stroke his fingers down her spine and splay his fingers across the rounded curves of her ass.

This had to be killing him.

To add insult to injury, he winked at Cris over her shoulder and held his gaze for several long moments before turning to the side again so he could watch them in profile.

She tried to reach down and unfasten his slacks, but he laughed and caught her hands. Bringing them up to his lips, he kissed her wrists. "Slowly, love. We have all night long and even then some."

He backed to the end of the bed and sat, making her stand between his legs. After placing her hands on his shoulders, he bent in and laved his tongue across her tummy, working lower, teasing.

Her fingers tightened on his shoulders as she softly moaned.

"Do you like that, baby?"

"Yes!"

He felt Cris' eyes on his back and knew the bound man had a great view of her bare body. Landry spent several minutes tormenting her, until her inner thighs were slick from her passion. She pushed him back onto the bed and straddled him as he laughed.

"What do you plan to do with me like this?" he asked.

She grabbed his hands and pinned his arms over his head as she kissed him. Her hips ground against his, drawing a moan from both. "You fucking tease," she said, "you're killing me."

"I thought it was the man who's supposed to lose control?" He flipped her over, reversing their positions, her hands now pinned over her head. When he sat up and released her hands, she didn't move her arms, left them over her head.

"Please," she begged.

He switched to French and knew that would slice right through Cris' very core. "Do you want me love?"

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"*Oui!*"

He smiled. She was so close to subspace like this that it wouldn't take much to tip her into it, but he'd promised never to take advantage of her like that.

Leaning in, he nuzzled her throat, grazing her skin with his teeth. He would leave at least one really good love bite somewhere on her neck where Cris couldn't miss seeing it over the next few days. "Are you ready for me?"

"*Oui!*" She squirmed under him, but never moved her hands.

He stood and slowly unfastened his trousers, never taking his eyes off her. Still in French, he asked, "Are you only mine, love?"

"*Oui, monsieur!*"

He hesitated. She was dangerously close to subspace. The temptation was too great to let her get any closer. His eyes flicked to Cris', whose expression had darkened. Yes, he'd noticed it too. How could he not? This was as close to the woman he once knew as he'd probably ever get again. She'd changed too much over the years.

He leaned over, his hands planted on the bed on either side of her, one knee between her legs. He bent his head to her neck again. He switched back to English. "My beautiful wife," he said as he nuzzled her flesh, "you don't need to call me that."

Her arms wrapped around him as she started rubbing her mound against his thigh, her body writhing beneath him as her hands roamed his flesh. One of her legs hooked around his. "Please make me yours!" she begged in English.

"That I will do, love." He nipped and sucked at her neck, below her ear. Her gyrations below him increased in urgency as her nails raked down his back. When he finally lifted his head, he knew the red mark would be just enough to last a few days at least, but not be horribly obvious. "Mine," he whispered in her ear. "My sweet, beautiful wife." He hooked his arms under her knees and shoved her farther back on the bed before he stood again and finished removing his trousers.

One more glance at Cris. Their eyes met and Landry read the mix of anger and agony there.

Good.

* * * *

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She watched Landry's body, the candlelight flickering off his solid, trim form as he pushed his pants down and stood there watching her. His cock looked even larger in the dim light, his sac heavy below it, framed by dark hair. Her body ached for him, wanted to feel that cock take her, wanted it not just because it'd been a difficult five years, but because she longed to connect with a real body again, needed the warm strength of a trustworthy man to release her from her mind even if only for a few minutes.

She needed *him*.

God, how she wished she didn't.

He came to her, his body covering her as his lips roamed hers. She tried to rock her hips to find his cock and take him in, but he teased her, keeping himself just far enough out of her reach she couldn't capture him.

He lifted his head again and spoke in French. "Are you ready for me?"

She nodded.

Slowly, torturously slow, he pressed forward just so his thick knob teased her desperate sex. "Do you want me to fuck you?" he asked, still in French.

She nodded. "Please!"

As if holding back, his body trembled while he took his time sinking his entire shaft inside her, spreading her slick muscles apart as he took possession of her.

Damn, it felt good, that hard cock touching places that hadn't been touched in so, so long, her muscles straining, stretching her.

Once buried inside her, he rested his head against her shoulder. His breath rasped in her ear. "Jesus, you feel so fucking good," he said in English. "I knew I should have used a cock ring." She tried to thrust against him, but he dropped his weight on top of her, forcing her to remain still. "No, don't move. I'll explode."

She wrapped arms and legs around him and nibbled at places she could reach on his shoulder. "Please fuck me!"

"Easy, baby. Give me a minute. I don't want to cheat you out of this. You are so fucking tight, you have no idea how close I am." He kissed her again, taking her mind off the fact that he wasn't moving yet. When he slowly withdrew, his thick head just at her entrance, she whined when he ordered her still again. "Next time, I will fuck you as hard and fast as you want," he promised, "but let me savor

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this, please."

It wasn't nearly fast enough for her tastes, his body slowly sliding across her clit but not fast enough to get her off. After a few minutes he picked up the pace and reverted to French. "Are you my good girl?"

She moaned, feeling her senses spinning as her body opened even more to him. "Yes!"

"Do you want to come for me?"

"Yes!"

He lifted his head. "Open your eyes and look at me."

She forced her eyes open. In the dim room, his green eyes looked as dark as emeralds, his face hard and strong. "I'm close, love. If you're my good girl, come for me…now!"

The sensation ripped through her, amplified by him suddenly thrusting hard and fast. Fighting to keep her eyes open proved a losing battle. Her back arched as her muscles clenched around his solid cock. He drove himself into her harder, faster, deeper. Their bodies, slick with sweat, moved in perfectly synced undulations as she released herself to him.

"One more!" he ordered. "Be my good girl and come *now*!"

She sobbed as the climax washed through her. He swelled and throbbed inside her as he pushed deep one last time. His body tensed and he let out a moan of his own before he lowered his body onto hers and tenderly kissed her.

Eyes closed, she felt her tears and let them flow. She couldn't have stopped them if she tried. It didn't matter why, she didn't care to take a time out to analyze herself. Armchair quarterbacking could happen later.

Much later.

After he finished thoroughly fucking her.

After she quit making comparisons between him and Cris in her mind.

He wrapped his arms around her and rolled them onto their sides without withdrawing. "Are you okay, baby?" he asked in English.

She nodded against him, gladly letting him hold her close. He didn't ask why she cried, didn't speak, just lay there with her in his arms and his lips pressed against the top of her head.

After a few minutes she rubbed her face against his chest, his hair softly scratchy against her lips. When she felt the subtle, firm bump of a nipple, she flicked it with her tongue and enjoyed his soft

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hiss of pleasure.

"You're risking another fucking if you keep that up," he teased.

She nipped him.

Laughter mixed with his startled protest. When he rolled her onto her back, his cock was already stiffening inside her. She raised her arms over her head again in a gesture of submission she knew he wouldn't miss. "I'm *your* very good girl," she said, in English that time.

His brief look of pleasant surprise was worth it.

She hoped they were ripping Cris' heart out.

He slid his hands up her arms and laced his fingers through hers. When he pulled her arms down, she pushed them back up and met his gaze with determination. She wanted him to fuck the pain and hurt and loneliness out of her. She wanted every thrust of his cock to drive the memories that much farther away from the woman she was today. This woman wanted this man—her husband—to fuck her so hard and fast that she wouldn't ever think of herself as anything but his wife, because that's all she would remember. It would form the sum of her existence and she could forget her past.

The good as well as the bad.

"I need you," she said. "Please. Take me."

He untangled his hands from hers and withdrew from her. Before she could protest, he sat up, flipped her over, and pulled her to her knees. His hands stroked her back and ass before he aligned his cock with her pussy. The coarse hair of his thighs rubbed against the backs of hers as he used his legs to nudge hers farther apart.

"Are you my good girl?"

Shivers of anticipation flowed through her. Her eyes briefly locked with Cris' and she felt another shiver. "Yes!" She wiggled her hips, trying to get him to fuck her.

Landry's voice turned amused, playful. "Does my good girl want another hard fucking?"

"Please!" She tried to rock back and impale herself, but his strong hands held her hips still.

Cris' eyes never left hers.

Landry's hands massaged her ass. "How did you enjoy the first time I fucked you, baby?"

"I loved having your cock inside me!"

Cris blinked, but his eyes never wavered.

"Well, I loved fucking you. You have such a sweet, tight pussy. Any man would love to fuck

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you, and yet I'm the lucky bastard married to you." His hands tightened on her. "I'm the *only* man who gets to do this to you." He thrust, hard and fast, sinking all the way into her.

Her hands fisted the sheet as she cried out.

It felt so.

Fucking.

Good.

* * * *

Cris watched them, the look of satisfaction on Landry's face, the look of passionate pleasure on hers. He had the dubious distinction of knowing neither was faking it.

The bed shook as Landry fucked her hard and fast. Her spine rounded as she threw her head back and moaned, "Don't stop!"

"I'm not going to stop. I'm going to make love to you all night long."

Cris wished he could fall through the floor, that it would open and swallow him. He'd been painfully wrong earlier. His imagination and wondering what Landry had in store paled in comparison to the reality.

Landry sat back, holding her tightly to him, and made her sit up. She threw her head onto his shoulder as she rode his cock. His hands roamed her body, then settled over her breasts where he cupped them in his palms and rubbed the pads of his thumbs over her nipples. She reached back, stretching her body, and hooked an arm around his neck as she rocked against him.

Their lips connected and Cris was once again relegated to silent witness instead of forced voyeuristic participant. He tried to tune out, to imagine himself in Tilly's place, impaled on Landry's cock and lost in the moment, and he couldn't.

All he could think about was the last time he made love to Tilly, not knowing at the time it was the last time he'd ever make love to her.

The night before he flew out to L.A. for the job where, almost three weeks later, he read an email only two hours old from an old friend of his. On an email account he rarely checked anymore, and hadn't checked in nearly six months. While he sat in a hotel room less than five miles from the hospital.

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A perfect storm of coincidences.

Landry fucked Tilly as Cris thought about walking into the ICU and finding Jaimie and Gentry sitting in the waiting area, remembered seeing the shocked surprise on the men's faces.

Gentry had stood and warmly embraced him. "Fuck! I didn't know you lived here."

He'd kept his face schooled to an expression of dispassionate concern. "I don't. What happened?"

Gentry and Jaimie, who'd taken the condo next door to Landry's, had received a knock on their door from the CHP officer doing a next of kin search early that morning.

He listened to Gentry run down Landry's injuries. "Is he going to make it?" he'd hoarsely asked his old friend.

Gentry hesitated, wetting his lips before answering. "They don't know."

"Who else is here for him?" He looked around.

Jaimie shook his head. "We're it, bro. He's got nobody unless he's still got family in France."

Gentry and Jaimie lied for Cris and told the nursing staff Cris was Landry's partner. They left out the little factoid that Cris hadn't had any contact with Landry in over six years, since the day he moved out.

The nursing staff paged one of the on call physicians, who explained to Cris about the seriousness of Landry's condition. Not the accident injuries, for while serious, he would heal from those. But the cancer they'd discovered during the surgery.

"What has to be done?" Cris felt numb, hadn't yet been able to bring himself to touch his former lover, the man he still loved.

His Master.

"He must have immediate treatment. I need a signature on the forms though."

Cris felt himself nod. "Whatever you need."

When the doctor left to get the forms, Cris barely noticed him leave. All he could see were Landry's closed eyes, both blackened and swollen, his broken nose, the ventilator tube taped in place, the IVs in his arms, and the bandage around his head.

Wake up, he thought. *Look at me you son of a bitch.*

The man who had haunted his dreams all these years, even while he loved Tilly, didn't move, a machine breathing for him, monitors logging every heartbeat.

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The man he once thought had a heart of stone.

The man he hated because he couldn't stop loving him no matter how hard he'd tried to forget him.

The doctor returned, handed Cris a clipboard, and indicated where he should sign.

Cris didn't read the paperwork, but he didn't sign at first, pretended he was looking it over.

Considering.

"Is he going to make it?" Cris asked, hating how choked his voice sounded.

The doctor looked grave. "I can't make any promises, Mr. Guerrero. His condition is very serious. If we start cancer treatments immediately, we have a chance of saving his life. We can do more surgery tomorrow. He'll need radiation and chemotherapy in addition to surgery. I won't lie and say it'll be easy, but the oncologist said he's seen people survive who are in much worse shape."

He'd signed the paperwork and walked to the waiting room to talk to his old friends again.

Tilly's moan brought Cris fully back to the present as Landry slowly fucked her. He'd dropped one hand between her legs and spread his own farther apart, forcing her to open wider.

Cris watched Landry's cock as it repeatedly disappeared inside her, his balls bouncing at the bottom of every stroke. Landry extended his middle finger, flipping Cris an upside-down bird before he used two fingers to rub her clit. That drew more happy moans from her.

* * * *

His cock felt *damn* good inside her. She felt the restrained strength in his hands, enjoyed knowing he could be so gentle and tender with her while the dark master within could beat Cris to a pulp. Hands that could torture and inflict pain, yet for her alone brought so much pleasure.

Safety.

"I want another one from you," he said. "I want to feel you squeeze my cock again."

The sound of his voice stripped every ounce of will from her soul. All she wanted was to be part of him, to let him take her however he wanted.

"Please make me come." She kept one arm hooked around his neck as her fingers burrowed into his hair. Along her back she felt the fine hair on his chest rubbing her flesh, his skin warm against hers.

Her husband.

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"I'll make you come all night long if you want, sweetheart. Anything to make you happy."

Her heart fluttered.

Sweetheart.

He was the first man to call her that in a romantic way since…

Resisting the urge to open her eyes, she ground her hips against him even as his fingers skillfully strummed her clit and drew her closer to climax.

The part of her that didn't ever want to want or need another human being in her life tried to resist despite how good it felt. That part of her knew she grew dangerously close to loving this almost-stranger.

Right now, for the first time in years, she let the notion of spending the rest of her life with someone take root in her heart.

"Baby, please, give it to me," Landry coaxed.

The tone of his voice more than his actual words set her off. Her grip on him tightened as she held on, riding her orgasm out as he slammed his cock into her. His hands moved to her hips and she felt his fingers clamp down, holding on as he fucked her to his own completion.

Instead of lowering her to the bed, he leaned back on his heels, holding her, cradling her body against him, his breath rasping in her ear.

"Jesus, I can't get enough of you," he said.

Her heart surged again. If it was part of his revenge act, he was a damn good actor. He sure sounded sincere.

"You'll be sick of me in three years," she assured him.

His arms tightened around her. "Now *you* stop talking like that." He bit her shoulder, not painfully, just enough nip to make her pleasantly squirm and send pulses of need back to her clit.

He chuckled. "Ooh, you *like* being bitten. Why didn't you tell me that earlier?" He repeated it across her shoulders for several long minutes, back and forth until she writhed on his cock, which had grown hard again. "Had I known you enjoyed it so much I would have done more of it sooner."

"You never asked me if I liked it. You only warned me that you do it."

"So, do you like it?"

"Like that, yes."

He licked the mark he'd left on her neck earlier. It was already in the process of turning a

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slightly darker shade. "How about that? Did you like that?"

"Just don't leave me looking like I lost a fight with an octopus."

He grazed his teeth across the nape of her neck before biting her there. Not even close to hard enough to break the skin. Her heart raced as her body responded to him.

"What else do you enjoy?" he asked.

"Wouldn't that be spoiling the fun of trying to figure it out for yourself?"

His lips brushed against her ear. He whispered so quietly she knew Cris couldn't hear. "Can I make a new rule?" he asked.

"Okay." She could barely think, much less speak.

He kissed the back of her neck again. "I'd like to keep my wife as happy as possible. If you don't mind us making love, I damn sure don't mind. I just don't know how up to it I'll feel over the next few months."

She laid her hands over his. "I don't mind. I want to. I kind of worried you'd cut me off after tonight."

"Not on your life." Another nip. He changed position, laying with her on their sides across the bed, their backs to Cris. "I told you, I want to keep you happy."

"I've got a rule, too."

He laughed, his breath warm against her neck. "Yes, love?"

"No bugging me about if I've made up my mind to stay yet or not, okay?"

She heard the hesitation in his voice. "All right."

She craned her head around to look at him. This time, she dropped her voice. "You can work on the assumption, unless I say otherwise, that I'll be here for a long, long time. As long as you can put up with me. Okay?"

He smiled widely and stroked her cheek. "Thank you." When he kissed her she wanted to forget about the rest of the world.

After a few minutes he carefully untangled his body from hers and leaned in for another kiss. "Ready for some more slave torture?"

She was actually ready for another round of fucking, but wasn't sure he was. "If you are."

He stood and walked over to Cris. She rolled over to watch, propped on one elbow.

Landry grabbed Cris' hair and yanked his head back so he could look down into his face. "Did

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you enjoy watching that, slave?" He leaned in closer. "I can truthfully tell you I loved every second of it. I hope you did too, because you'll be seeing a lot of it. Not just tonight, either. I'd forgotten how sweet it feels to make love to a beautiful woman."

He reached around the back of Cris' head and unfastened the ball gag harness. Then he ripped it off Cris and stepped closer. "In fact, I want to make love to her again. Open your mouth and suck me. Get me nice and hard for my wife."

She realized she'd been holding her breath. She breathlessly watched as Cris obediently opened his mouth and sucked Landry's cock between his lips.

"Just think, slave," Landry continued. "This is the closest you'll ever get to fucking her, sucking her sweet juices off my cock." Then he looked at her and winked. "Unless, of course, I let you eat my come out of her pussy." He waggled his eyebrows at her.

She realized he wasn't serious but played along. "I like how you think."

His intense eyes never left hers. "Do you, now?"

"Oh, I certainly do." She crawled across the bed and watched Cris working Landry's cock. "I don't mind letting him fluff you for me. It means I'll have an even harder cock fucking me, a real man's cock."

Landry sucked in a sharp breath. "My sweet, vicious little wife, I absolutely love your evil mind. I think that's rather ironic, having slave fluff me before I fuck your pussy. Why would I ever want to fuck his ass again when I can be with such a beautiful woman?"

She flicked Cris' bound cock with her fingers. "Look at that. He likes it. He likes knowing one of his jobs now is getting you ready to fuck me." The head of Cris' cock, engorged and purple, peaked out beyond his bindings. She knew damn well he was hard because of how Landry tied him up, because of his training, and because he hadn't been allowed to come in weeks, not so much because of what they were doing to him.

"You're right, love. Guess what, slave? I think one of your new jobs is just that. To make sure that when I want to fuck my wife, my cock is nice and hard. Then after I get done, lucky you, I'll let you suck me clean."

He pulled out and she realized he'd grown fully hard again, whether from Cris' actions, genuine desire, or perhaps prescription medication in the form of little blue pills.

Honestly, she didn't care why. She rolled onto her back and spread her legs. "Whenever you

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want me."

She'd quickly come to recognize the evil gleam in Landry's eye. "Scoot closer, love," he said.

She did.

He slipped two fingers inside her well-fucked pussy and gently stroked. "Look how wet you are. Did I get you that wet?"

"You fucked me damn good."

"So I see." He withdrew his fingers and shoved them in Cris' mouth. "See what a real man does, slave? A real Master? He takes proper care of his lover." He repeated the motion, slipping his fingers into her, liberally coating them with their mixed juices, then pushing them into Cris' mouth again. "See how well I fucked her? It'll be a long damn time before I think about fucking you again when I have such a beautiful woman wanting me to fuck her."

He knelt between her legs and pushed into her. "Ah, love, you feel magnificent." He fell still and reached over to Cris' cock. Wrapping his fingers around the rope harness binding it, he squeezed, hard, drawing a low, pained moan from Cris.

"What do you think, love? Should I let him come?"

"That's up to you. I say if being a cuck gets him hard, let him enjoy it."

He pumped Cris' cock. Tilly suspected Cris was close to subspace, if not already tipped into it. If so, Landry might not have much trouble getting him off. "All right, cuck. If watching me fuck my wife and cleaning my cock are what get you hard, then come for me." He switched to French. "If you don't come, I'll take a fucking cane to your balls."

Cris groaned as he stared at Landry, his hips working in time with his Master's hand.

"Come now, slave!"

He let out another groan and she watched him climax all over Landry's hand.

Landry laughed and wiped his hand on Cris' stomach. "Look at that. What a pitiful man you are. Needing to watch your Master fucking his wife—your ex-girlfriend—to get off. You are a natural cuck, aren't you?"

Tilly felt her stomach turn a little. She knew damn well it wasn't the situation that got Cris off, but Landry's careful training and conditioning. While at first this seemed like a grand idea, maybe they'd gone a little too far.

Landry turned to her and kissed her. "Can I coax one more out of you, baby?"

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"No, I think I've had about as much fun as I can stand for one night." Plus she knew Cris had been bound like that for over an hour and she worried he might lose circulation in his feet and legs. The Domme in her couldn't turn that worry off once it'd clicked on. Sliding her hands down Landry's back to his tight ass, she wiggled her hips. "Time for you to have some fun again."

She loved his playful smirk as he slowly stroked. "He's good for at least another hour tied up like that."

"That's fucking spooky."

He nipped her neck. "You glanced at the clock."

She dug her nails into his ass and squeezed. "You don't miss much, do you?"

"Not anymore." He rested his forehead against hers as he thrust. This time when he came his soft gasp as his body tensed was the only warning she had before his movements stilled. He pressed a gentle kiss to her brow. "I promise to be the best husband I can be, Tilly," he whispered. "I'll never leave you wanting for anything within my power to give you. I swear it."

She closed her eyes and enjoyed the feeling of his warm, strong body wrapped around hers. "I'll hold you to it."

* * * *

Cris silently watched them together, couldn't hear their intimate whispers over the music.

Just a few weeks ago, that was him where Tilly lay, feeling safe and cherished. It felt like light years since then. If he'd simply let go of the past, let go of her, of all ties to her, they wouldn't be here now. He had rarely gone more than a few days before he logged in to stare at the pictures of her, the only thing he had to remember her by other than his memories. How could he let go of her when he still loved her?

If it wasn't for that selfish indulgence, Landry never would have known about her.

Finally, Landry stood and turned to him. He prepared for the next inevitable humiliation, but Landry untied him while Tilly pulled a sheet over herself and turned away, not watching.

Landry didn't help him sit up after he freed him. He stared at Cris. "Did you enjoy that, slave?"

Cris didn't reply despite knowing his silence might earn him another punishment.

Landry surprised him with a laugh. "Get your ass out of my bed, slave. You can go to bed in

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your room, but keep the door open. I want you to be able to hear anything else we might do."

Cris nodded and carefully climbed out of bed, mindful of the pins and needles sensation in his feet. He heard Landry softly talking to her as he left the bedroom. The walk to his room felt more like a death march.

He hesitated inside the doorway. Before this weekend, even if not in Landry's bed, at least they'd been in the same room. How long before he'd ever feel the warm comfort of his Master's body again?

Or would he?

The empty bed mocked him. Yes, he could finally curl up on a mattress. Use covers to keep the chill away. Soft, comfortable pillows.

If given the chance, he'd take the hard floor next to his Master's bed.

Slowly, he made his way to what to him amounted to solitary confinement and crawled under the covers.

* * * *

Tilly couldn't help but watch Cris when he left the bedroom. Landry slid back into bed with her and slipped his arms around her. His lips feathered along the back of her neck.

"What troubles you, love?"

"What's his tat mean?"

"Hmm?"

"The Kanji character on his ass. What does it signify?"

Landry chuckled. "Why? Do you wish for one of your own?"

She knew her voice sounded sharper than she meant. "Quit kidding around."

He sighed. "It means 'slave'."

"How long's he had it?"

"Tilly, this is old—"

"Answer my fucking question."

His lips hesitated on the nape of her neck. "Six months after he moved in with me, he saw another slave at one of the clubs we frequented get marked by their Master during a formal collaring

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ceremony, and he begged me to mark him as well. By that time we were living full time as Master and slave. I had already formally collared him."

"Mark him?"

"Well, that slave was branded. I'm sorry, while I admit I am a sadist, I do draw the limit somewhere. I told him if he truly wanted to be marked, he could accept a tattoo or nothing at all. I was also realistic that if for whatever reason in the future we were no longer together, I wanted it to be something that would not be so instantly recognizable as to cause him grief, and in a discreet location." He snuggled her tightly. "May I ask why it is so important?"

"Because the other night at the club, when you first approached me, I saw it and it triggered a flashback. I didn't realize it was him, just thought it was a very similar tat. He never told me what it meant. He always said he was drunk and couldn't remember."

"Hmm." He chuckled. "I don't know if I should punish him for that lie or not."

"Please don't. That's not why I asked. I just wanted to know."

He lay there quietly for a moment. "Are you all right?"

She took a deep breath. "Yeah."

"You don't sound like a woman pleased with herself."

She rolled in his arms and buried her face against his chest. "I'm not," she softly admitted.

He nuzzled the top of her head. She loved it when he did that. "Regretting this?"

"Give me a day or two to get back to you on that." She felt his body tense and lifted her face to meet his gaze. "I meant the revenge, not marrying you. I absolutely do not regret marrying you." She might have many regrets in her life, but marrying Landry wouldn't ever be one of them.

She hoped.

She felt him relax as a smile creased his face. "You scared me, Mrs. LaCroux."

A pleasant shiver raced through her body. "I definitely don't regret being called that," she whispered. She ran her fingers over the wedding band that coexisted with her engagement ring. Both so new, and yet it felt right. The sight of the matching band on his finger sent another pleasant chill through her.

He belonged to her, and she belonged to him.

At least for the next three years, she wouldn't have to face being alone, waking up to an empty bed.

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She had someone to love.

He kissed her, and while her body had hit its limit for the evening, her heart and soul filled and swelled with emotions she hadn't been able to feel in too damn long.

"I'm glad to hear that," he said. "Because I absolutely do not regret marrying you, either."

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Chapter Thirteen

When she awoke early Monday morning, Tilly instinctively sought out Landry and didn't have far to move. She found him nestled behind her, his thighs pressed against the backs of hers. Her first night as a married woman, tightly cuddled in her husband's arms, was everything she could have asked for.

If she didn't count the sour presence pecking at her conscience.

Hurt Cris? Hell, yes, she wanted to pound the shit out of him. The softer side of her, the part of her that could still conjure compassion and empathy, felt more than a little sick at what they'd done. After five years couldn't she have just moved on? They'd been apart as long as they'd been together.

The devil on her shoulder said *fuck no*, that the son of a bitch deserved every single bit of it and more.

Siding with the devil made her feel less guilty, so she chose to listen to it.

Landry woke up and slipped his hand between her legs, not probing, just comfortably resting his fingers there. "We need to run by the courthouse and file our marriage certificate." Even the deep, sleepy sound of his voice filled her with need.

Choosing to make love to him over thinking guilt-inducing thoughts was a no-brainer. She wiggled her hips at him, trying to entice him to do more. Earning a soft chuckle in reply, he kissed her. "Let me have some coffee first and wake up. You completely wore me out last night."

"Maybe I can completely wear you out again today."

"Tempting woman." His teeth grazed her shoulder, biting down with just enough force to send bolts of need through her core.

She was going to get up to make the coffee when she realized she already smelled it.

Cris.

He always was an early riser. Another piece clicked home when she belatedly understood why. Of course he was an early riser. He was used to getting things ready for Landry.

Landry headed for the bathroom while she pulled on her robe and walked out to the kitchen.

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Cris wasn't in sight, but the full coffee pot giving up its last gurgles was a sure sign he'd been up and about recently.

Part of her hoping he wouldn't appear, she grabbed her usual mug and fixed herself a cup. Landry joined her, naked, wrapping his arms around her waist as he ground his hips against her backside.

"What a beautiful way to start each morning," he said.

She started to reply when she sensed Cris enter the kitchen behind them.

"Good morning, slave," Landry said. "Did you sleep well?"

Tilly closed her eyes.

"Well enough, Master. Thank you."

"My wife and I will take our breakfast in an hour. Pancakes, bacon, and eggs." He playfully nipped her earlobe. "Anything else you would like, love?"

She shook her head.

"Oh, and slave?"

"Yes, Master?"

"You shall address my wife respectfully. She is Mrs. LaCroux to you. I also expect you to stand when she enters the room."

Tilly didn't think she imagined the slight quiver in Cris' voice. "Yes, Master."

"Good. Her word is law to you, especially in my absence. If she ever tells me you've been lacking, or have refused to follow her orders, or even if it's just for her amusement, I will punish you more severely than you've ever known. Understood?"

"Yes, Master."

"Excellent. Stay right there." She felt Landry's cock harden against her ass, through her bathrobe. His hips provocatively rocked against her as his teeth nibbled her ear, draining every last ounce of will from her body. It hadn't taken him long to figure that out about her.

His arms slipped around her and he untied her robe, letting it fall open. She kept her eyes closed as her hands clenched on the counter. Slow and hot, his hands roamed her flesh as she felt Cris' eyes on them.

"My wife is very beautiful, is she not, slave?"

"Yes, Master." Tilly heard the catch in his voice. She might not have the stomach to repeat the

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previous night's torture, but Landry apparently did.

She felt the robe slide down her shoulders as Landry's lips followed it. "I'm blessed to have such a sweet, beautiful wife, slave. Don't you think?"

"Yes, Master."

His lips returned to her ear. "Do you trust me?" he breathed in her ear.

She nodded.

"Will you allow me this?"

She nodded again. She wasn't sure what he had in mind, but with the heat of his body enveloping hers, she didn't have the will to deny him.

The robe dropped farther. He smoothed his hands down her arms, prompting her to move them so he could pull the robe off. It fell to the floor in a puddle of fabric.

Tilly never opened her eyes.

His hands roamed her body, stirring her desire despite knowing Cris stood only feet away. Cupping her breasts, Landry's thumbs rubbed her nipples. "I can't get enough of you, love," he said, this time loudly enough Cris could hear. He rocked his hips against her again and his cock, hard and proud, pressed into the seam of her ass. "Do you feel what you do to me?"

"Yes."

His right hand left her breast and slipped down her tummy until his fingers found her cleft. There, he sought entrance, her juices already flowing and easing the way.

Landry's sharp intake of breath honed her own need. "Oh, love! Did I do that to you?"

"Yes!" She realized she was rocking her hips against him in time with his movements.

He slowly finger-fucked her, his hand sliding over her clit with each thrust. "You enjoy it when a real man fucks you, don't you?"

She let her head fall back onto his shoulder. "Yes!"

His foot gently nudged her legs wider. "Do you feel how hard my cock is, baby? That's what you do to me."

"Please!"

"Please what, baby? What's wrong?"

"Please fuck me!" All thoughts of Cris fled as her passion built. Landry knew damn well what his attentions had done to her body.

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"I'm going to fuck you so good, baby. Just keep your eyes closed and enjoy this." His left hand left her breast. She heard him snap his fingers. Then his left arm dropped to her waist and held her against his body as he shuffled them away from the counter a step. "Lean against me. I won't let you fall."

A brush of contact against her leg and she understood what he'd done.

"Stay with me, love," Landry murmured in her ear. He switched to French. "Trust me, wife."

She nodded. "*Oui*."

She felt him change position slightly. From the brush of Cris' hair against her inner thighs, she knew what he'd ordered. Landry reached around her with his left arm and she suspected he had fisted his hand in Cris hair as Cris sucked his cock.

"That's it, cuck," Landry gasped in English. "Make sure I'm hard for my wife."

Landry never stopped moving his right hand, keeping her passion simmering enough to pull her thoughts away from Cris kneeling between her legs.

"All right, cuck," he ordered. "Put my cock inside her."

Her body trembled as Landry withdrew his fingers and she felt his thick knob press against her entrance. With one thrust, he was buried to the hilt inside her.

He leaned forward so she had her elbows resting on the counter.

"Suck my balls, cuck," he hoarsely ordered. "And lick her pussy."

Landry's hands returned to her breasts. When Cris' tongue swiped over her clit her legs trembled. Landry switched to French again. "Hold it, wife. Hold it for me. Do not come."

She dropped her head to the counter, whining as Landry's hands moved to her hips. He thrust slowly, the feel of his cock inside her nearly sending her over the edge as Cris' hot tongue skillfully worked her clit before moving to Landry's balls and back again.

"What a pitiful cuck you are," Landry chastised. "I bet your cock is rock hard, being able to do this. Reduced to nothing more than a fuck toy for my amusement. And you're enjoying every second of it, aren't you?"

Landry's thrusts grew harder, faster. In French, he said, "Come for me, love!"

Tilly pressed her ass hard against Landry as her climax hit. Her muscles clenched around his thick cock as what Cris did catapulted her over the edge with an earth-shattering wave. Landry waited until he was certain she'd finished, then withdrew and shoved his cock into Cris' waiting mouth.

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"Now, cuck. Suck every drop."

Tilly stood there, breathing hard as Landry grunted and his body tensed before relaxing. Landry held her close as she heard a few soft slurps from between her legs. Finally, Landry let out a satisfied sigh. "All right, cuck. Thank my wife for the privilege of licking her, sucking my cock, and for the privilege of getting to take my come."

"Thank you, Mrs. LaCroux," he whispered.

Landry wrapped his arms around her, holding her body against his. "Now get out of here and leave us alone, cuck. And don't you dare let me catch you playing with your cock. You don't have permission to come."

"Yes, Master." She sensed him leave the kitchen.

Landry didn't move. She didn't want him to. Moving meant she'd have to think about what just happened, and she wasn't ready to do that yet. Landry nuzzled the back of her neck, kissing, gently scraping his teeth along her flesh and making her pleasantly shiver. "Are you all right?"

"Still processing." It had felt better than good, but the fact that she'd allowed Cris to touch her like that conflicted her.

Especially considering it felt like they hadn't spent a day apart.

"Are you angry with me?"

"No."

Landry placed another kiss along her shoulder. "Can I ask something of you?"

"Getting pushy?" she said with a chuckle to break the tension and push away her growing guilt over once again helping torture Cris.

"No. This is a request." He kissed the back of her other shoulder. "I have a thing for long hair. Would you mind growing your hair out, at least a little? Maybe shoulder length? Perhaps return to dying it your natural color? It would look so beautiful on you that way. This short style and the color makes you look much older and harsher than you truly are." He nipped her right ear lobe, then whispered, "I know you said no Dom stuff. I'm fine with that because I have Cristo to torment. I still like having something to hold on to. I like being able to grab your hair when you go down on me, or when I kiss you. I find it incredibly sexy."

Her heart pounded as her eyes dropped closed. Already, her clit throbbed again. "On one condition," she said.

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"Name it."

She turned and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Fuck me again. Right now."

He grinned and stepped forward, pushing her against the counter. "Love, give me a challenge next time why don't you?" He lifted her to the counter as she wrapped her legs around his waist. His stiff cock slid home without resistance as he grabbed her hips and held on.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him, letting his tongue take over hers as he swallowed her soft moan.

He fucked her hard and fast, fiercely, possessively. She let her head drop to his shoulder as she hung on, her body struggling to make it over again.

He nipped her and spoke to her in French. "Prepare for me, love."

She squirmed, moaning as each stroke plunged deep within her.

"I am so close," he said, his lips brushing her neck. "You *will* come with me."

She felt her body tense, coiling under his words, with his touch, wanting him to take it from her.

"Come for me now!" he ordered.

Not as hard as the previous one, but her body obeyed, releasing to him. Her nails dug into his back as she cried out.

"Very good," he said in English, loud enough she knew Cris had to hear. He fucked her harder, finally plunging home with one last, deep thrust. His body trembling, he leaned against her for support. "Very good, love," he whispered against her neck, kissing a trail down her shoulder and back up to her ear again. "My sweet, beautiful love."

She kept her eyes closed as she sat there in his arms, her head against his chest. She didn't want to move. She wanted the moment to freeze, with the comfort and safety she felt. He wouldn't be sick or in pain, she wouldn't have to worry about him or see him suffer through his treatments.

She'd feel no guilt over what she'd helped him do to Cris.

With her still wrapped around him, he carried her into their bedroom like that and sat on the bed as he stroked her back. "Talk to me," he softly said. "Tell me what troubles you."

She shook her head. "I'm okay."

"Is it me?"

That's when she laughed. "In a good way."

He made her sit back and look him in the eye. "I promise, I will never try to top you." He

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smiled. "Unless, of course, you ask me."

This time she didn't try to hide the tears prickling her eyes. "I like how you make me feel. I like feeling safe with you." After a five year dry spell, she didn't know if it was her emotions overriding her common sense or a genuine feeling that would persist as they spent more time together.

She prayed for the latter.

He used his thumbs to gently brush away her tears. "I want you to tell me how to love you. At least until we get to know each other better and I can read your body and mood more accurately. I can and will be whatever you tell me you need."

"How do you turn that off?"

He looked genuinely confused. "Turn what off?"

"Being a Master. Or a service Top, or whatever you're doing right now. How do you separate that?"

"I could ask you the same question. I'm simply being your husband, Tilly."

"You know what I mean. How can you not want that from me? You've always been dominant."

He smiled. "I told you, I have Cris." He laid another kiss on her that had her muscles throbbing in a pleasant way. As the kiss lengthened, so did his member until he was fully stiff and ready again. He easily slid inside her. "If I want to beat someone, I'll take it out of his ass."

"You snuck in a little blue pill this morning, didn't you?" she teased when he let her come up for air. She tussled his hair with her hands.

One eyebrow arched. "Believe it or not, no. Last night, yes. I thought perhaps it would be wise to take out a little insurance. However, this morning he seems to have a very determined mind of his own." He rolled her onto her back and took a long, slow stroke.

"Really?"

"Really. I think he likes you, Madame LaCroux."

She giggled. Landry in playful mood might take a little getting used to in a good way. "Yeah? Well, I like him, too."

He thrust again. "Good. Because he damn sure loves to be inside you."

"Well then show me, dammit."

He nuzzled the base of her throat. "One more, for me?"

"Not this morning. Maybe later."

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He dropped his voice. "Mind if I embellish just a little?"

She giggled. "Go right ahead."

"Feel free to join in." He lifted his head and stared into her eyes, then raised his voice loudly enough she knew Cris had to hear him. "Oh, fuck, baby, your pussy is so hot!"

Her heart melted at the evil twinkle in his green eyes. "Fuck that hard cock into me. I love having a real man fuck me!"

His grin widened as his strokes quickened. "I'm going to come inside your sweet, gorgeous cunt." He waggled his eyebrows at her, forcing her to suppress her giggles.

"Come for me. Quit holding back and give it to me." She dug her nails into his ass and that finished him. He let out a loud cry as he pounded into her before finally falling still on top of her, his lips pressed to the base of her throat.

"Beautiful," he muttered. "Absolutely beautiful." He lifted his head. "Cuck!" he bellowed.

Landry pressed a kiss to her lips before he withdrew and stood. She pulled the sheet over her as Cris appeared in their bedroom doorway, head bowed.

"Yes, Master?"

Landry pointed at his cock. "I believe you know what to do."

Queasy regret mixed with curious arousal as Tilly watched Cris silently kneel before Landry and open his mouth. Landry viciously fisted Cris' hair. "Suck me clean, cuck. Then get out there and make our breakfast."

With his eyes closed, Cris laved Landry's cock and balls for several moments until Landry pushed him away. "That's good enough, cuck." He climbed onto the bed with her. "Breakfast better be hot and waiting for us when we finish our shower. And close the bedroom door behind you."

Cris climbed to his feet, head still bowed. "Yes, Master."

As the door closed on his back, Landry pulled her into his arms. "Are you all right?"

She nodded. "I think I'm ready to ease up on the revenge stuff."

He nipped her throat. "Of course, love. As you wish."

* * * *

Cris stood by, waiting, as they ate breakfast. Shirtless and in jeans, his formal leather collar and

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matching leather cuffs were locked on him. Landry ignored him except to snap his fingers at him to refill their coffee.

When they finished eating, he looked at Cris. "Get the kitchen cleaned up, cuck. Take a shower, and get dressed. Jeans and button-up shirt. Collar and cuffs. Be ready to leave in forty-five minutes.

Cris nodded. "Yes, Master." He bowed to her. "Mrs. LaCroux."

Landry led her to the living room while Cris cleared the table. He sat on the couch and pulled her into his lap. "Are you all right, love?"

No, she wasn't all right, her guilt returning to peck at her like a bird in a Hitchcock movie. "I'm fine."

He stroked her cheek. "Love?"

Rolling her eyes, she snuggled close and dropped her voice. "Let's ease up on the cuck stuff, okay?"

"As you wish."

She enjoyed just sitting there in his lap, cradled in his arms. No doubt about it, she could get used to this. After a few minutes she heard Cris finish in the kitchen and head to his room. She looked into Landry's eyes. "Are you going to spend tonight with him?"

He looked genuinely confused. "No, why?"

She poked him. "Duh. To give him a night before your biopsy?"

He slowly shook his head. "Why would I do that?"

"Are you screwing with me or deliberately being dense?"

"I mean it. Why?"

She fought the urge to smack him. Keeping her voice low and steady, she said, "Because you love him."

"You're my wife. Why would I sleep with him when I have you?"

"Give me a straight answer."

He smirked. "I'm sure the pun was unintended. Love, I am giving you a straight answer. I love you. My wife. Mrs. LaCroux. He can fend for himself."

More guilt. "That's not fair to him."

"I never said I was fair. He knows what he signed up for." He brought her hands to his lips and kissed them. "He's my slave. He will do what I tell him to and happily accept whatever scraps of

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attention I throw his way."

Still more guilt. Her cup runneth over. "That's not what I want to happen. I never meant to take you away from him."

His expression darkened. "Why not? Give him a taste of what you went through."

"I thought we weren't going to torture him past Wednesday."

"Is it Wednesday yet?"

She rolled her eyes. "So you're saying you'll get back to whatever passes for normal between you two on Wednesday?"

He shrugged. "Perhaps. It is too soon to say." He nuzzled her neck. "I have no complaints about who's sharing my bed. Let him have a dose of loneliness."

* * * *

Cris drove while they rode in the backseat. She wasn't sure she felt comfortable with Cris wearing his collar and cuffs, but it wasn't her call. At the clerk's office, they filed their marriage license and she received her paperwork to take to the tax collector's office where she changed her driver's license.

Landry smiled as he looked at her license. "Matil—sorry, love. Tilly Cardinal LaCroux." He showed it to Cris. "Has a beautiful ring to it, does it not, slave?"

His eyes flicked her way before he stared at Landry. "Yes, Master," he softly replied.

Landry returned her license and led her from the office to where Cris had parked the car. Cris trailed close behind. "Let's go have lunch," Landry said.

"We just ate," Tilly reminded him. "You're hungry already?"

His eyes gleamed in that wicked way she knew meant he had more up his sleeve. "There are some lovely little shops here in downtown Sarasota that I would like to explore. I'm feeling in the mood to take a walk." They reached the car and Cris darted around them to grab the door for them, but she stepped into his way, blocking his path.

Her gaze fell on the collar and cuffs Cris wore. She dropped her voice. "What about him?"

"What about him?" Landry asked.

"What he's wearing."

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He glanced at Cris. "He's appropriately attired. Why?"

Yes, she had promised not to interfere with what Landry did with Cris, but this was pushing things just a bit too far. The absolute last thing she wanted to do was get into a battle of wills with Landry over this.

The collar and cuffs were made of brown, hand-tooled leather. Custom made, from the looks of them. No doubt they set Landry back a couple hundred bucks. Very nice and, yes, totally unobtrusive in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, or even Miami. "Sarasota is a fairly conservative town despite its artsy atmosphere, Lan."

He arched an eyebrow at her. "Yes? What are you implying, love?"

Cris waited, watching her. She felt his gaze on her. She refused to look at him.

"What I'm implying is perhaps Cris could leave something in the car while we sightsee."

"Love, I'm sure they'd want him to wear his shirt in the shops." His playful smirk dared her to defy him.

She knew damn well he understood what she meant. He wanted her to challenge him. She had no doubts if she ordered him to make Cris remove at least the cuffs, if not the collar and cuffs, he probably would, but then the point in this game he played would be his.

In this intellectual game of chicken, she would have metaphorically blinked first.

The stubborn dominant streak in her wouldn't let this go. She'd be damned if she'd outright order Landry to make Cris remove them. Her pride also wouldn't let her outright tell him what she wanted. She finally looked to Cris for any hint of how to proceed.

"I don't mind, Mrs. LaCroux," he softly said.

No help there. "What are trying to prove?" she asked Landry.

Wide-eyed innocence. "Prove, love? Whatever are you implying?"

"Innocence doesn't become you."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean." He snapped his fingers at Cris, then pointed to the back door. Cris stepped in to open it.

She stepped in front of Landry to block him again and turned her back to the car. Time to play dirty. She dropped her voice so a couple walking to their car nearby couldn't hear. "I live in this town. I'm fairly well-known among certain circles. Some of my former clients frequent this part of town… professionally, if you get my drift. One of the things I'm known for is my discretion. *Not* drawing

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attention to myself."

Ball in his court. Landry's jaw tensed and worked until he finally laughed. "Point to you, love." He looked at Cris. "Did you bring the key?"

"Yes, Master."

"You can remove your cuffs and collar after you get in." He tipped his head to her. "Well played, darling." She stepped out of the way so Cris could open the door. Landry extended his arm, indicating for her to climb in first. "Well played."

After they were inside the car, she turned to him. "New rule, dude."

"Ah, I should have guessed."

She didn't miss Cris watching in the rear view mirror. "You try to play mind games with me again, any more pissing contests like this, we're done. Immediately. Got it?"

He sighed melodramatically. "I suppose, love. If you really wish to take all the fun out of life."

She goosed his crotch, making him jump. "If getting your brains fucked out isn't enough fun, then mind fucks are not going to give you any joy. I will shut you down faster than a turd in a public pool. Just try me if you think I'm kidding. Don't forget Cardinal's Rules."

He laughed again before he leaned in to kiss her. "Touché, darling. Touché."

She didn't miss Cris' amused smile reflected in the rear view mirror as he started the car after removing his collar and cuffs.

* * * *

Cris found a parking space. Landry and Tilly walked hand-in-hand down Main Street, heading toward Five Corners Park across from the Selby library. Cris silently trailed behind them, carrying the things Landry insisted on buying for Tilly. She suspected he mostly bought stuff just to make Cris carry it, not because he really wanted it. Damn sure not because she wanted it. By the time they reached the Calliope Café on Pineapple and Main, Tilly was ready to put an end to the games. Cris looked like a loaded down pack horse.

Tilly took charge and asked the hostess for a table in the corner. Fortunately, they'd arrived on the tail end of the lunch rush and were able to be seated immediately.

Landry smirked after the waitress took their drink order and left them. "I must say, I admire

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you, my love."

"Why?"

He nodded toward Cris, who silently sat with his gaze on the table and his hands in his lap. She felt like kicking him under the table just to elicit some sort of reaction from him.

"What?" she asked.

He leaned in and dropped his voice. With his lips by her ear, he said, "You feel sorry for him."

"Uh, duh. Sherpa the pack pony here could use a break, I'm sure. It's hot today."

She didn't miss how Cris' lips curled in a slight smile.

She also didn't miss how her heart throbbed at the sight, that she could still make him smile. How many times had she earned herself a tickling from her snarky comments?

They ordered. Rather, Tilly ordered, and Landry ordered for himself and Cris. It was late afternoon when they finally returned home. When they walked in the door, Landry scooped her up into his arms again and carried her to their bedroom.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I would think that's rather obvious." He laid her on the bed and stood back so he could unbutton his shirt. "I want to make the most of tonight."

Her heart throbbed at the sight as he dropped his shirt to the floor. He crawled onto the bed, predatory, stalking her, until he straddled her. "Do you know how utterly beautiful you are?"

"No, but maybe if you hum a few bars."

He laughed and kissed her. "Oh, sweetheart, *je t'adore*."

I adore you.

Tilly wrapped her arms around him. "*Moi aussi*, *je t'adore*."

I adore you, too.

And she did.

She was staring into his eyes when he said, "Just put everything in the closet and close the door on the way out."

She realized he'd left the bedroom door open. She craned her head around his shoulder and saw that Cris stood there, his arms full. He walked in, put everything in the closet, and left, closing the door behind him.

"Now, where were we, love?"

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"How did you know he was there?"

He smiled before leaning in to nip the base of her throat. "I saw his reflection in the vase over there."

She craned her neck and looked, then started laughing. "I thought maybe you had ESP."

One eyebrow arched. "Extra sensory perception?"

"Excellent slave positioning."

He burst out laughing and fell to the bed beside her. "You shall keep me on my toes. I can see it now." He pulled her on top of him. "What kind of mood are you in tonight, love?"

"That sounds like a loaded question."

"It most certainly is." He pulled her to him and kissed her. "Sweet and fun, hot and heavy, or beating the crap out of the cuck?"

"Definitely not door number three."

He sighed melodramatically. "Spoil sport. You truly have a soft heart, love."

"Shut up and kiss me."

He did, soon driving all thoughts over their prior discussion out of her mind as he worked his lips down her jaw to her throat, where he started nibbling. Her blouse and bra soon hit the floor with his shirt. He smiled as he traced his finger around her right nipple. "So you've gotten your vengeance out of your system?"

"You want to keep me in the mood, you'll drop this discussion right now."

He bent over and licked her nipple. "Consider it dropped." He repeated the treatment with her left nipple and soon had her squirming under his hands.

Landry worked his way down to her slacks, his lips exploring and teasing. Tilly tangled her fingers in his hair and tried to urge him to go faster, but he refused to be rushed. By the time he finally had her naked beneath him on the bed, she felt half out of her mind with need. He knelt on the floor beside the bed, pulled her ass to the edge, and pushed her thighs apart.

"This is what I wanted, love. Make as much noise as you want. The more, the better." With that, he bent his head to her mound and licked.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Fuck yeah!" Her body trembled as his tongue snaked inside her, slowly, teasing her.

He draped her legs over his shoulders and clamped his hands around her thighs. Like that, she

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couldn't have escaped his wicked mouth if she'd wanted to.

She most definitely did not want to.

In such a short time he'd learned more than enough about her body to keep her hovering on the edge forever, it felt like. Before long she found herself begging him for release.

He lifted his mouth from her clit. "Louder, love," he said. "And perhaps I shall."

Fuck. She'd give him this one, but they'd talk later when she felt sane and not so desperately in need of coming. "Please, goddammit, make me come!"

He chuckled. "Excellent." He slid two fingers inside her and it felt like the back of her head exploded as her climax slammed into her brain. He managed to hit her g-spot and her back arched as it felt like the orgasm never would end.

Once she lay limp on the bed, he kissed the insides of her thighs before untangling himself from her. Standing before her, he dropped his slacks, exposing his rigid cock.

"No little blue pills, love," he teased as he grabbed her legs and pushed them up, sinking deep inside her in one slow thrust. "That's all for you, because of you."

There was something about his green eyes that entranced her, held her hostage. He leaned in and kissed her as he fucked her, his slow, deliberate thrusts stirring more passion inside her. "My beautiful wife. I am a damned lucky man."

Another moment she wanted to freeze in time, to hold him here with her in this perfection. No Cris, no revenge, no past pain, no future worries over his health. "I consider myself pretty lucky, too."

A slow smile curved his lips. "Come with me," he whispered. "I want to feel what I do to you."

No triggers, no switching to the sure-fire tactic guaranteed to make her explode. Nothing but his eyes, his sweet, sexy smile, and the damn fine feeling of that wonderful cock sliding across her already swollen clit and stroking nerve endings inside her that had laid unused for too long.

He shifted position slightly, leaning forward with her legs over his shoulders. "Show me what I do to you, baby."

She felt more than her body shattering. This time, it felt like her heart wanted to explode, to latch onto him and never let go.

Landry kissed her, tenderly, slowly. "I'll never betray your trust, love. I swear it. Let me in."

She felt her release, stealthy and soft, like a too-large soap bubble giving way to a sudden breeze. And all the sweeter for the simple beauty in that connection with Landry. Tilly gasped as she

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felt it and in two hard thrusts, he joined her.

The tears caught her by surprise. Without withdrawing, he immediately rolled them over, him on his back with her tightly encased by his arms. "That's it, sweetheart," he whispered, kissing her forehead as his fingers stroked her spine. "That was so very, very beautiful."

For a moment she worried she'd hyperventilate as she tried to catch her breath. Never before had that happened like that. Ever.

Not even with Cris.

No triggers, no commands to come, no assistance from a hand, a tongue, or a vibrator. Just his body and those damn fine eyes.

"Please tell me," he whispered.

She shook her head and buried her face against his chest, not able to talk yet.

He didn't ask again. He waited her out until she felt reasonably rational. "Thank you."

"For what?" He sounded amused.

She lifted her head and kissed him. "For marrying me."

"I think you have that backwards, but as you wish, love. You're absolutely welcome."

She stroked his jaw with her fingers, feeling the shadow of stubble already there. What did this mean? That she trusted him more in a few days than she had trusted Cris in years? That she'd been able to let loose with him in a way she never could with Cris?

Why did she feel guilty that in all the years she'd spent with Cris, she'd never been able to achieve that one simple release despite their countless hours of trying.

"It feels like I belong here, with you," she quietly admitted.

His gaze traveled her face for many long moments before he spoke. "Maybe that's because you do."

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Chapter Fourteen

Tuesday morning, Tilly finished her work-out to find Cris in the office. He stood at the windows, looking out over the backyard while he engaged in a pretty serious-sounding conversation. Jeans, barefoot, no shirt, his formal collar, and wrist cuffs. The muscles in his back rippled as he shifted position, still not turning, and lashing out at whoever he spoke to on the phone.

Unbidden, a memory flashed through her mind, of giving him seductive backrubs that always turned into even more seductive lovemaking sessions. His angry voice snapped her out of her reverie.

"That's *not* acceptable! We need those numbers finalized by Friday night. That's been the planned deadline for three months, and no one mentioned we weren't on target to make it. What's the problem?"

She leaned in the doorway and listened. He sounded pissed. Obviously, the person on the other end of the cell pressed to Cris' ear had no idea of how he was dressed or what he'd been subjected to over the past several days.

"No. Get me those numbers, have them by tomorrow night. I'm flying out there Thursday morning. If those numbers aren't ready for me, we won't consider renewing your contract." He hung up and swore, then turned and started when he saw her standing there. "Hey." His voice softened, gentled.

Slave in the house. Bye-bye Cristo the executive. "You do still own a set of balls. Nice to see." She couldn't help the snark and didn't want to.

He tossed his cell onto the desk. "They're going to cost us a very valuable contract if they don't get me those quarterly stats like they promised." He scrubbed his face with his hands, then seemed to remember his status as his posture stiffened. His voice changed, deferential. "I'm sorry, Mrs. LaCroux. Did you need the office? I'll move my laptop if you want to work in here."

She shook her head, still not used to hearing that name come from his mouth. "No."

"What is it?"

She shrugged. "Nothing." She wasn't up to having a "conversation" with him yet, but she couldn't quite bring herself to leave, either. His brown hair hung to his shoulders, but he kept it neatly

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trimmed. He brushed his fingers through it, pulling it away from his face.

A thought hit her and she winced. "Goddammit."

"Ma'am?"

"I need to call Bob and break the news to him."

He didn't ask. She looked at him. "You know, you met him. I-don't-need-you-to-hold-him-for-me Bob."

"Ah. Him."

"Yeah, him. I told Landry he had the world's suckiest timing. I mean, seriously. I finally met a guy I might…" She remembered who she was talking to. "Never mind. I don't want to have this conversation with you."

That gave her a perfect excuse to leave.

* * * *

She made the call she didn't want to make and asked Bob to meet her for dinner at a different restaurant than they'd eaten at the week before. Part of her wanted to do nothing more than stay curled up beside Landry in their bed and enjoy their time together before his new round of hell started in the morning.

The fact that Landry understood why she needed to get this done sooner rather than later eased some of her guilt in that regard. At least Cris was home with Landry and helping him with the preparations for tomorrow's procedure.

It didn't make her feel any less guilty over what she was about to say to Bob. She nervously waited for him and felt badly that he offered her a hesitant smile when he walked in a few minutes after her arrival.

He knew. She felt it in her gut.

She stood as he approached the table and stepped into his hug as she wistfully wondered how he would have been in bed.

They sat. After the waiter took their drink order, Bob leaned forward and clasped his hands together. "Go ahead and start from the beginning, but I have a feeling I know how this tale will end." He nodded toward her left hand.

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She looked at the rings there. Still not used to wearing them, she'd forgotten about them. "Shit. Bob, I'm sorry. It's a weird story."

"I'm sure."

She left out the sex and revenge aspects, and her suspicion that in a few months she would be more than on her way to totally in love with Landry. When she finished, she reached out to touch his hand and he didn't pull away. "I'm sorry. I know it sounds crazy, but I miss being a nurse. And I can take some time off from the rest of my clients. If you want, I'll meet you at the club to play when I can. Just as friends. You know, Bob and Tilly." She took a deep breath, hoping he'd understand. "It's not that I don't want to see you. And I'd totally understand if you're pissed off or upset. I never wanted to hurt you. I'm so sorry."

He squeezed her hand and smiled, but he didn't let go of her. "You're an incredible woman. Just my dumb luck. What time is the biopsy tomorrow?"

"We have to have him there by eight. Hopefully, he can come home tomorrow afternoon."

He looked thoughtful. "Lucky man." His thumb stroked her hand. "A nurse, huh? Promise to torture your ex for me."

She nodded. "Oooh, yeah. There will be a lot of torture of the not-fun kind coming his way." *Although the worst is behind me now. I hope.*

They had a good dinner, and she felt guilty when he insisted on paying. "No, this is on me. Consider it a wedding present."

She didn't detect any sarcasm in his voice and made a decision. "Look, let me get through this next week, find out what's going on, and then we can resume our sessions again. No charge."

He smiled, but the boy was gone. This was all Bob. "I don't think I can risk being in the house with your ex there. I mean it. It would be too much temptation to beat the crap out of him. I don't want you stressed out any more than you need to be."

"I feel so crappy about this. I can't tell you how sorry I am."

He shrugged. "It's okay. We all have to do what we need to do." He stroked her hand. "Maybe once life settles down we can meet at the club to play or something."

Or something. She didn't want to say it, but she knew. In his heart, he understood the opportunity had slipped through his fingers. Her heart ached. Maybe not exactly what she'd needed in a partner, but she had no doubts he wouldn't have left her without warning.

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Or permission.

Outside, he walked her to her car and gave her another long hug before stepping away. "Take care, Tilly. If you ever need anything, please, call me." He smiled as he caressed her cheek. "And promise me if you find yourself free again, you'll give me first shot."

She forced a smile to cover her breaking heart. "I will. Thank you."

He nodded and turned to walk to his car. As she slid behind the wheel her rings caught the light from the security lamps in the parking lot and winked at her.

Had she made the right call? Only time would tell.

* * * *

Tilly returned home, heartsick. *From being alone to having men falling out my fucking ears.*

Including one she wasn't sure how she felt about who now occupied her guest room.

It was after eleven when she pulled into the garage and shut her car off. She sat there for a while, thinking. She'd set her feet on this path, now she had to see it through. What would it say about her if she changed her mind, went back on her word to help Landry, all so she could pursue a relationship with Bob?

What did it say about her that she didn't want to relinquish the small bit of safety she now felt when she looked at the rings on her left hand? Safety that had absolutely nothing to do with money.

Despite the hour, Cris sat at the kitchen table, working on his laptop in the otherwise silent house. He stood upon her arrival. "Good evening, Mrs. LaCroux."

She wanted to scream. "Okay, stop that. I know he told you to do it, but I can't stand it. I'll tell him I overruled him on this one. My house, my rules. Just call me Tilly, and quit the ma'am stuff."

"All right. As you wish."

She waved at the table. "And you don't need to stand like that when I enter a room, either." She pulled a bottle of Boylan cola from the fridge, grabbed the church key from where it hung on a magnetic strip on the side of the fridge, and popped the cap. She slid into the chair across from Cris' laptop, where he'd retaken his seat. "Late work?"

" Yeah. I know we'll be busy tomorrow. I want to be able to focus on him."

"So what exactly do you do? Professionally, I mean. Are you still coding software, or just an

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office wonk?"

"I run the place for him, mostly. I work on a few pet projects, but for the most part, I'm doing administrative stuff, negotiating contracts, things like that. My official title is chief operating officer."

"What does he do?"

"He's the owner, the chief executive officer, and president. He still does some coding, but we have a stable of programmers working for us now. He doesn't have time for hands-on stuff much anymore. He does more beta-testing than anything, because he co-ordinates compiling the training materials we ship with the software."

"Do they know about you and him?"

He smiled. She recognized that knowing expression, playful, with just a hint of the fun kind of evil behind it. "They know we're lovers and business partners, yes. I'm reasonably sure my administrative assistant has connected the dots, because Master once made me kneel in my office before he called her in to have her set up a conference call with two of our off-site programmers." He smiled. "I'd had a long day and got a little mouthy with him. He wanted to remind me of my place. As for the others, they probably suspect more, the people closest to us. But considering our company made the list of top twenty tech firms to work for in L.A. the last three years running, no one says anything, much less complains. Human resources always has a waiting list of people who've submitted resumes to us. We could easily fill another hundred positions, if we had them available."

"How many people work there?"

"I've got five programming teams of fifteen each, some freelancers we bring in on a regular basis, and an administrative staff of twenty. My administrative assistant is the office manager."

She studied him in a new emotional light. The Cris she'd known worked mostly alone, except when he had to travel and work on-site. Early in their relationship they'd established a system where she didn't disturb him during his working hours. It was the rare day she came home from school or from work that he wasn't there, unless he had to travel. Even if he was working, having his solid, albeit silent presence in the apartment was a comfort.

She'd missed that.

Letting her fingers trail through the cold condensation on the bottle, she softly asked, "Does he make you happy?"

From his frown, she knew he didn't want to answer.

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"I wouldn't have asked if I didn't want to know."

He eventually nodded.

"I wish you'd told me about him." She held up a hand to stay his comment. "I can't change the past and neither can you. I'm still trying to figure out how I feel about all of this. About you." She couldn't look at him. It would start her crying again. "You lied to me. Not telling me about him was the same as a lie. Honestly, I don't know how to deal with you now. I don't trust you. What else was there you didn't tell me? How many more secrets?"

He shook his head. "Just Lan."

"Tell me the truth. Tell me it wasn't my fault. Tell me it wasn't me."

He waited for her to meet his gaze. "It wasn't you, Tilly," he softly said. "You did nothing wrong."

She nodded and finished her soda. With a soft belch, she dropped the empty bottle in the recycling bin under the sink and headed for bed.

* * * *

"I've overruled you," she said as she slipped into bed with Landry.

He looked exhausted, the course of laxatives he had to take to clean out his bowels in preparation for the biopsy wearing on him. "What?"

"Cris." She rolled onto her side and kissed him. "I told him not to call me Mrs. LaCroux, or ma'am. I don't mind being called that usually, but the formality…" She didn't know how to explain it.

"Creeps you out?" he suggested.

"From him, yes. There's no reason to make this any harder on him than we need to, and it'll make it a lot easier on me. I also told him he didn't have to stand every time I walk into the room, either."

"Oh, but love, I was looking forward to him doing that."

She kissed him. "Moving forward, remember?"

He arched an eyebrow at her. "Have you?"

Guilt surged within her as she remembered what they'd done to Cris. "I need to. I can't do that to him again, and I'm beginning to wish we hadn't."

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"Oh?"

"I'm not a true sadist at heart like you are."

He held her close. "You have a beautiful soul, sweetheart. Thank you for standing beside me through this."

"Don't thank me yet. I'm a bitch when it comes to nursing."

"I'll be an equally crappy patient, never fear."

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Chapter Fifteen

None of them spoke much Wednesday morning. Tilly had planned to get up even earlier than necessary to make coffee before her workout, but Cris beat her to it. When she walked through on her way to work out, he nodded to her. She nodded back.

Subdued, Landry stepped into the shower with her later and pulled her into his arms. When he hardened against her, she kissed him and leaned against the wall as he quickly sheathed himself inside her. No words were necessary. He couldn't hide his closely guarded worry from her, and she relaxed and turned her body over to him as he switched to French and whispered a command in her ear for her to come for him.

It surprised her when her body responded, a gentle climax that nearly brought tears to her eyes as he finished with her.

Live her life like this? As they both stood there recovering, she thought it would be a damn good life, married to this man. If he could beat the cancer, possibly a very long damn good life.

He encouraged her to go eat breakfast even though he wasn't allowed to. When she tried to refuse, he yelled for Cris to prepare her a bagel and sent her out the bedroom door with a playful swat on her rear end.

Later at the hospital, Landry held her hand on the walk from Tilly's car to the building. Cris grabbed their things from the car and quickly followed.

Tilly felt Landry's fear humming through him as stress, tension from the way he held her hand to the way he walked. She squeezed his hand and when he looked down at her she winked, prompting a smile.

Good. He needed to smile today.

"You promised you'd fight for me," she reminded him.

He nodded."I will."

They went through registration, Cris silently standing by unless Landry asked him a medical question about his history he couldn't remember. Cris seemed to have it all memorized. They received

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a few odd looks from the staff, including the nurse who came in to prep Landry once he was in a pre-op bed. The nurse suggested Cris could wait outside. Landry told her no, he couldn't, that his wife and partner would stay with him as long as they could.

When Tilly snuck a glance at Cris, she noted he'd perked up a little at that comment.

The thaw has started. Thank God.

Before the orderlies came to take him back, Landry called Cris over and asked him to bend down to where he lay on the gurney. Landry whispered something to him, then kissed him.

Cris nodded, perhaps a little too hard, his eyes squeezed tightly shut as he whispered, "I love you, too, Lan."

Tilly's turn. He kissed her. "Keep him in line while I'm asleep, okay?"

"Just a short nap. Then we'll get you back."

"Can I tell you I love you?"

She smiled. "Only if I can tell you."

"Okay then." He stroked her cheek. "Love you."

"Love you too, buster." He kissed her once more before they took him.

Cris stood by the door, almost looking like a lost puppy.

She didn't anticipate the flood of pity and compassion she felt for him. No matter what, Landry loved him, and he loved Landry. Only an idiot would miss that. Even after their few short days together, she saw why Cris loved him. Master or not, sadist or not, Landry wasn't difficult to love. You took him as you got him, and he didn't play bullshit games.

Well, normally. And the games he did play usually had fairly concrete rules of engagement you could understand as long as you understood the man and the Master.

Cris didn't want to meet her gaze at first. He stood there holding their things, his eyes focused on the floor. She reached up, touched his chin, and tipped his head so he looked at her. If she didn't say it now, especially when he seemed so vulnerable, her nerve would escape her. If she couldn't say it now, she probably never would.

For the sake of her sanity, and her guilty conscience, she needed to say it.

"I forgive you," she whispered. "And I'm sorry for what we did to you."

He sobbed and threw his arms around her. "I'm so sorry, Tilly," he said over and over again. She put her arms around him and held him as he cried, finally navigating them over to the chairs so she

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could sit with him.

When he finally composed himself, she took his hand and squeezed. "He'll be okay. He'll make it. We'll get him through this."

"Yeah."

She squeezed his hand again. "Please don't trip all over yourself trying to suck up to me, okay? Yes, I'm still angry and hurt. That won't magically disappear. I need time to work through that. Don't be surprised if I throw it in your face, either. From this point on, I want us focused on him. Whatever happens between you and me during that time, we'll keep him our priority and deal with the rest as it comes."

He hugged her again. "Okay. Thank you, Tilly. Thank you for doing this for him."

They moved out to the waiting room. She let him drape his arm around her shoulders and enjoyed leaning into his solid body.

She'd missed this. Feeling wrapped in safety when with him.

Well, she didn't feel emotionally safe with him anymore, but the physical safety was still there. If she couldn't be with Landry, she'd settle for letting Cris comfort her.

For now.

She tried to lighten the mood and gently poked him in the side. "Don't think you can step back into a Dom role with me, either. You try that, I'll smack you."

He kissed the top of her head. "I promise I won't. I'm just happy you're talking to me."

They both jumped to their feet when the nurse called for Tilly nearly two hours later. She tried to take only Tilly back to the recovery room, but Tilly, glad for her years as a Domme, rolled right over her and grabbed Cris' hand to drag him with her. "Sorry, we're a package deal."

Landry didn't open his eyes when she leaned over him and kissed him. She brushed the hair from his forehead. "Hey, handsome. Welcome back."

Cris took hold of his other hand. Landry squeezed, but still didn't open his eyes. "I hate feeling like this," he groggily muttered.

Cris leaned in and kissed him. "We'll take you home, get you settled in, and you can spend the evening watching her beat the crap out of me," he joked.

Landry mustered a weak smile and cracked open an eye. He looked at Cris, then turned his head to see her. "You two okay?"

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She nodded. "While you were napping we hashed out the peace accord and declared your sick bed a DMZ."

He closed his eyes again as he nodded. "That's good. Just make sure you gag him when you beat him. I don't want his screams to keep me awake."

* * * *

Landry still felt pretty out of it when the doctor came in to talk with them. "I think this was caught fairly early," the surgeon said, "but we need to aggressively treat it considering your history."

Landry remained quiet. Tilly let Cris take the lead role in the discussion. Thank God he was there. Even though she was familiar with the terminology, she had no clue about Landry's treatment history. As she listened to Cris talk she spotted a ghost of her Master in his manner.

When the doctor tried to bring her into the conversation as Landry's wife, she shook her head. "He's doing just fine," she said. "Keep going. If I have any questions, I'll ask."

She glanced at Landry and noticed he'd opened his eyes again. A faint smile painted his face. Then he winked at her.

They helped him get dressed after they finished speaking with the doctor. Cris helped him into a waiting wheelchair then hurried out to get her car and bring it to the front door.

Landry apparently didn't care the nurse waiting with them could hear every word. He reached up and patted Tilly's hand, which rested on his shoulder. "So I did hear you right that you and slave worked things out between you? Or was that wishful thinking on my part, combined with the effects of the anesthesia?"

She struggled not to laugh at the nurse's shocked expression. Tilly leaned in and kissed the top of his head. "I think you're still a little zonked out, but yeah, *Cris* and I have worked out our differences."

"Good." He squeezed her hand again.

A thought hit her and she knelt beside him to whisper in his ear. "Even though you said it wasn't, this was all about getting me and Cris back together, wasn't it?"

"No. I told you it wasn't." He kissed her. "But if I don't make it," he whispered, "I know you'll keep him going for me, won't you?"

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It slammed home, finally. Landry didn't think Cris could survive it alone if Landry died.

"You're *not* dying, dammit."

He stroked her cheek. "Promise me if I do that you won't let him kill himself. That you'll take care of him for me. You'll keep him going for me."

She couldn't feel mad at him. Not when he looked like shit and there wasn't a hint of Masterly demeanor in him at the moment. "You're not dying, you stubborn man."

"Please, promise me."

She sighed. "I won't abandon him like he did me, if that's your worry."

"Thank you, love."

* * * *

She sat in the backseat with Landry while Cris drove. Landry's face looked years older than the day before. He lay with his head in her lap. At one point she realized he'd fallen asleep.

When she looked forward, she caught Cris' gaze in the rearview mirror. Part of her hated she still felt that little spark his gaze could light in her.

They got Landry settled in bed in her bedroom. After he fell asleep again, she changed clothes and walked out to the kitchen where Cris was already preparing something.

She felt drained, exhausted. She sat at the table. "Do you mind if I just sit here?"

He turned to her, a playful smile on his face. "Why would I mind? It's your house. This is my job."

He'd already put his leather collar and wrist cuffs back on and stood there wearing no clothes other than his jeans. "I know what he said, but let's get serious. I don't expect you to be my slave, Cris."

"You and I lived twenty-four/seven. Why do you think I would have a problem doing it now?"

"This isn't the same."

"It is, in a way."

"Does it bother you that he broke his promise to you?"

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"He married me. He fucked me. He brought someone else into your relationship."

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He leaned against the counter and pondered his response for a long moment. "I don't see it that way."

"Because it's me?"

He slowly nodded. "Yeah. I think so. If it'd been someone else, anyone else, I would have been pissed even though I think I deserve it."

"He loves you."

"I know he does. If he didn't, he would have kicked me to the curb." He turned back to the counter.

"We have to work together to take care of him."

"I totally agree."

"If I tell you something, will you promise not to tell him I told you?"

His shoulders tightened. She recognized that gesture. He finally turned back to her. "I can't make you that promise," he said. "I'm sorry. I can't hold anything back from him ever again. I won't get a third chance with him."

Fuck. "Fine. If I hadn't agreed to this, he was going to release you without telling you about his cancer."

Cris looked shocked. "What?"

"Yeah. Because since he found out about me, part of him worries that the only reason you came back to him is because he was a pity fuck, in his words. He didn't want you to feel obligated to stay. If I wouldn't be here to help, he didn't want you going through it alone. I think he also worries that you wouldn't want to go on if he died and left you alone."

He closed his eyes and blew out a long breath. "That's *not* why I went back to him. Jesus. I really fucked shit up, didn't I?"

"Ya think?"

He looked at her. "I know he tried to kill himself, Til. He's a damn good driver. The Highway Patrol said it looked like he deliberately aimed for the tree. He never hit the brakes. There were no skid marks. Clear night, no traffic, he was stone cold sober, and he's damn lucky the car had OnStar. They called it in. Saved his life."

Time for her to feel shocked. "He doesn't think you know that. I made him tell me about the accident. He made me swear not to tell you."

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He laughed, long and hard. "Jesus, we Doms are a bunch of assholes sometimes, aren't we?"

"Again, ya think?"

His eyes traveled her face. "I knew he wouldn't fight the cancer," he softly admitted. "Not after that. He didn't have anyone. It's not that I loved him more than you, or that I felt sorry for him. I…" He picked at his fingers. "Put yourself in my place, Til. Yeah, I handled it absolutely the wrong way. I admit that. But even though I was your Master, I was still, in my heart, his slave. I always have been. Even though I loved you, I never stopped loving him. I prayed Ross would take care of you until you grew strong enough to take care of yourself. But I knew you could, eventually, take care of yourself just as surely as I knew he wouldn't. I couldn't let him die. I couldn't have lived with myself if I turned my back on him when I knew he would willingly die otherwise. I made the best choice I thought I could, even though I know it was a horrible situation for you. I'm sorry."

She felt a wave of anger and grief try to overtop her mental walls. She fought it back. "I wore Ross' collar for six months. The only thing he required me to do was live, to lean on them. I was allowed to remove the collar for good once I could promise him and Loren that I wouldn't hurt myself and that I could make it on my own. He never topped me. No one else has ever topped me."

He didn't respond.

"Would you have left me if we were married?" She didn't want to know, and yet she felt she had to have the question answered once and for all so she could quit worrying at it like a dog with a bone.

He took a long time to answer. "I don't know. I would like to be able to say no, I wouldn't have left, but that would be a lie because I honestly don't know what I would have done." He sighed. "So the only reason you're with him is because he forced you? Because of me?"

"No. I made the decision based on what's right. He's a nice guy. I do think the two of you need some serious work on your communication skills."

His smile looked sad. "Maybe you can help us with that. Keep us in line."

"Fuckin' A."

He turned back to the counter to prepare dinner. From the ingredients he'd assembled, she assumed some sort of soup.

"Where do we go from here?" she asked. "You and me. I don't know how to deal with you. Part of me wants to beat your fucking brains out and part of me…" She couldn't continue as guilt swept

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through her again.

"I've already got more than I dreamed I could have." He cast a glance over his shoulder. "I never thought I would ever have your forgiveness. Anything else I consider a bonus."

She watched him for a few minutes. "What are you making?" *That should be a safe topic.*

"Chicken soup. It's one of his favorites. He won't want anything heavy to eat, not feeling the way he does. It'll keep his stomach settled and be easy for him to digest. He'll sleep for several hours and it'll be ready when he wakes up. I use fresh ginger in it to help soothe his tummy."

The giggles rippled through her, unexpected, taking her by surprise until the laughter rolled out of her. He stood there patiently waiting her out. "What's so funny?"

She snorted. "'Soothe his tummy?' Wuddums want his bwankie and baba, too?"

Cris smiled. "Hey, just because he's a sadist doesn't mean he doesn't like to be babied once in a while. He hates feeling crappy. Did he warn you he's a horrible patient?"

"Yeah, I think he did mention that."

"He meant it. He's a really cranky asshole when he's sick. I guarantee you, at his worst, you'll earn every cent of whatever he's paying you."

* * * *

She sat in bed with Landry, reading while he slept. After a while, Cris quietly walked in and sat on the floor on the other side of the bed, his chin resting on his arms on the matress. She'd left the door open in case he wanted to come in, so he wouldn't have to knock and disturb Landry.

Tilly tried not to notice him, but she couldn't help sneaking glances out of the corner of her eye. Cris' gaze never wavered from Landry's face, focused totally on him.

Had she ever held that level of pure devotion for Cris as her Master? She'd once thought she had. The more she watched how Cris interacted with Landry, it became apparent to her how much deeper a Master and slave relationship the men had than she'd ever had with Cris.

With Cris they'd been lovers, friends, partners, and almost engaged until he disappeared. But while she'd served Cris and thought of him as her Master, he was more her protector, her lifeline.

Her anchor to sanity.

Fuck.

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He was her service Top more than anything, truth be told.

When she felt her hands shake she realized she needed to get out of there and be alone. With her book in hand, she carefully stood without disturbing Landry and went to her office where she closed the door behind her. The book fell from her trembling fingers as she hugged herself. She walked over to the window to look out at the garden and that's when her tears flowed.

No matter what she thought of herself in the past, what she'd had with Cris paled in comparison to what he had with Landry.

Cris held Landry together. Cris had held her together when they first met, seeing her through hell to the other side.

As much as she didn't want to admit it, Cris had been right about her surviving losing him. He knew she would probably be okay, whereas Landry would not. Cris was their glue. And before she ever embarked on this crazy venture with Landry, they had that in common whether they'd realized it or not.

She closed her eyes and sobbed, and at first she didn't hear the soft knock. By the time she turned Cris had already opened the door.

Hating herself even more, when he walked over, arms opened, she fell into them and let him guide her to the floor where he held her while she cried.

He didn't speak, didn't try to soothe her, he simply held her until she finally sat up and turned away from him to wipe her eyes and sniffle.

Her laugh sounded harsh even to her. "You're a better slave than I ever was," she said.

"That's not true," he firmly countered. "You were wonderful. I was so proud of you."

"Past tense." She turned to look at him. "Let's face it, you are a thousand times more devoted to him than I ever was to you. I thought I knew what it meant. Then I see you with him and… Fuck, Cris, if you'd done a fraction to me of what we did to you, I'd have killed you."

He sadly smiled. "He needed his pound of flesh and so did you. It's okay. I deserved it."

"No, you didn't deserve what we did." She stood and backed away from him while he remained seated. "You didn't deserve that."

"I'm sure once he's feeling better there will be more. Just not so intense."

"How can you be okay with that?"

He shrugged. "What choice do I have?"

"You could leave him."

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"Is that what you want me to do?"

She studied him long and hard. "No," she quietly admitted. "I don't."

He climbed to his feet, moving as smoothly as ever. She felt her heart flutter in response as her mind flashed back to hours spent watching him do tai chi or work through a fighting form, fascinated as his muscles rippled under tanned skin.

"It's not what I want, either," he said. "I love him, and I still love you." He walked to the door, but he stopped and turned before leaving. "What set you off? If you don't mind me asking. Was it something I did or said?"

"I don't think I ever sat in bed and spent hours staring at you while you slept."

He nodded, a sad smile quirking one corner of his mouth. "That's okay. I spent plenty of hours watching you sleep."

Her breath caught in her throat as he disappeared down the hall. Her knees gave out and she sank to the floor again.

* * * *

Cris silently padded down the hall to check on him. Landry still slept. The pain meds combined with the residual effects of the anesthesia would keep him down until late that evening. He retook his place on the floor next to the bed and waited.

He would never presume he could sit on her bed, even if she offered, without his Master's permission.

After a while, Tilly finally returned, her eyes red and face splotchy. He felt for her, wished he could give her more comfort than he did.

Wished he could promise to make it all better for her like he used to.

She climbed into bed without disturbing Landry and rolled onto her side so she could watch him. When their eyes met, Cris wanted to hold her, reassure her he was okay with the new status quo, and knew all those words had to remain unspoken.

This was his Master's will. That's all that mattered.

No, he never would have done anything to her remotely like what Landry put him through. He also knew some would think him a weak fucking pussy for tolerating it.

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Deserve it? He felt so.

He knew the gig. Absolute. No shades of grey except the ones decided by Landry, although usually he gave Cris a voice and opinion in matters. Still, underlying all those things remained the fact that in Landry's world, there was but one credo: *Because I said so.*

Which left him with only two options, stay or leave.

Leaving was not an option in his heart or mind.

After another hour, Landry stirred. He first looked to Tilly, who smiled and brushed the hair from his forehead. "Hey, sleepy," she said. "How you feeling?"

"Crappy. Where's Cris?"

His heart leapt as he reached over and touched his shoulder. He'd said his name! "I'm right here, Master."

Landry slowly turned over to face him. "Is that your special soup I smell?"

"Yes, Master. I made it the way you like."

Landry's eyes closed. "That's my good boy. You take good care of me, don't you?" He squeezed Cris' hand. "Why do you put up with me?"

"Because I love you, Master."

"I love you too, Cris."

* * * *

Tilly watched the exchange as a lump rose in her throat. Landry's demeanor toward Cris couldn't be any less like it had been on their wedding night or in the days leading to it. In her heart, no matter how much seeing them together might hurt in some ways, she would never demand Cris leave.

Landry needed him.

She might be able to help heal his body, get him to doctor appointments and force pills down his throat as prescribed, even warm his bed, but he could pay any nurse or prostitute to do that for him. He didn't need her.

He *needed* Cris.

Part of her wished he needed her, no matter what he said while they made love.

He reached back and patted her thigh. "Can I ask a favor?"

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"Sure."

"Bring me my computer bag from the office, please?"

She glanced at Cris, who made a *beats the hell outta me* face at her. "Yeah, sure." She brought it and handed it to him.

With a pained grunt he sat up and opened the front flap, from which he withdrew a black velvet ring box. "I didn't tell you about this," he explained to her, "because I wasn't sure what would happen between Friday and today. I didn't know if Cris would be here, or if you'd be stuck alone with my sorry ass."

She smiled. "Your ass isn't sorry."

"This is me being a good patient. You haven't seen grouchy asshole patient mode yet. I'm sure he'll vouch for that." Cris smiled but said nothing while Landry opened the box and withdrew a ring identical to his wedding band. "Remember the other day at the mall, at the jewelry store, when I asked you to run over to Starbucks?" he asked her.

"Yeah?"

He held up the ring. He reached for Cris' right hand and slid it onto his ring finger. "I wanted to give you a little reward for making it this far. Seriously. I know you're here for the long haul. There's a reason I want it on your right hand instead of your left."

Landry glanced at Tilly. "She is my wife. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't falling in love with her. She has a right to not share me if she decides. I'll only wear her ring on my left hand. This is my pledge to you as your Master, and a tangible reminder, that I'll always take care of you no matter what. But as my slave, you belong to her, too. You obey her, whether she tells you to kiss her ass or wash her dishes or whatever. Understand?"

He nodded, staring at the ring on his hand with wide eyes. "Yes, Master."

He ruffled Cris' hair in an affectionate way that made her heart hurt from the love she sensed between them. "That's my good boy. How long until dinner?"

"Whenever you want, Master. It's ready."

"Good. I'll eat in here. Give me a kiss and fix Tilly's dinner too, if she's hungry."

Cris looked at her.

"Yes, please," she said.

Cris jumped to his feet and kissed Landry before scampering out of the bedroom. She never

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thought she'd ever associate Cris and scampering, but it was the best descriptor she could think of.

After a moment, Landry looked at her. "Are you all right, love?"

She nodded, still processing.

"You aren't upset by that, are you? Me giving him a ring without telling you about it first?"

"I'm not upset, but why didn't you tell me? What happened to honesty?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't know what would happen between the wedding and now. I was operating on the presumption it would just be you and me. That was just in case. I am more shocked than anyone that he didn't leave." His tone softened. "I think it speaks to how much he loves us."

"He…" She paused. "Us?"

"Us." He looked at her for a long time before speaking. "I can forgive him and move forward. Can you?"

"Again with the whole you forgive him thing when I'm the one who got screwed." She closed her eyes and took a deep breath to pull back her anger. "I already forgave him, but I also warned him it might get thrown in his face from time to time. I'm still angry."

"Good. That's healthy." He grinned. "He usually goes naked at home, except for his collar. Do you mind if—"

"Can we not push things quite that fast?" Truth be told, the sight of Cris walking around naked wouldn't be a bad one, just really confusing emotionally. No wonder he'd always seemed so comfortable in his own skin, something he'd gently tried to help her overcome in their time together.

He stroked her cheek. "If you ever wish to discuss the situation, if your feelings for him ever change in a positive way, I want it out on the table that I wouldn't hate it."

"You are a kinky man."

"Well, as someone once told me, duh, the Dom gig wasn't a clue?"

* * * *

Cris wondered if he could feel any happier. Tilly forgave him, and so did Landry. The ring flashed as he worked and he frequently glanced at it. He and Landry had discussed getting married when the laws had changed in California, then they'd changed back so quickly they hadn't had time to get it done. They'd never exchanged rings, because as far as Cris was concerned the collar around his

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neck was the only symbol he needed.

He pureed Landry's soup in the food processor to make it easier on his stomach. He dished out Tilly's for her, got everything else ready, and took it in to them.

Then he sat on the floor next to Landry's side of the bed and waited.

He noticed Tilly kept glancing at him. She finally asked, "Are you going to eat?"

"I'll eat after both of you are finished."

Another few minutes later, she apparently couldn't take it. "Would you please eat? You're hovering."

"He hovers well," Landry joked. "That's one of the things I love about him." He looked down at Cris and ruffled his hair again. "He's my good boy."

Pleasant heat rolled through Cris as Landry left his hand resting on top of his head. After weeks of what sometimes felt like constant cold torment, to have this tenderness from him again was such a relief.

He's my good boy.

Cris nuzzled Landry's hand, content.

Landry patted him on the head. "Take the night off, Cris. I mean it. Go ahead and eat. It's all right."

He looked up at him. "Are you sure, Lan?"

Landry touched his chin. "Absolutely. I'm very proud of you. Besides, you have to prepare for your trip."

Cris rose to his knees and kissed Landry. "If you need anything, call me." His eyes briefly fell on Tilly, whose gaze quickly darted away from him.

He couldn't blame her.

"I will," Landry assured him. "Go on, now."

Cris rose and returned to the kitchen, his head and heart buzzing. Whatever happened from this point on, he knew he could handle it.

Because his Master still loved and wanted him.

He looked at the ring again, his smile nearly painful.

* * * *

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She slept fitfully that night, memories of watching Cris stare at Landry keeping her awake. With their bedroom door open, she heard Cris moving around in the kitchen even though he didn't make much noise. She glanced at her alarm clock and saw it was a little after four a.m. He'd have to leave in less than an hour to have time to return their rental car and catch his flight.

Landry still slept. At some point he'd rolled over away from her, but he'd had a peaceful night otherwise.

She pulled on her robe and walked out to- the kitchen. Cris looked up, surprised, from the coffee maker.

"I'm sorry, Til. I didn't mean to wake you." He'd already showered and dressed.

He looked like her Master for the first time since she'd seen him…

Since that day.

Khaki slacks, a chambray shirt with the top button loose, loafers. Gone was his leather collar. In its place she spotted a heavy silver necklace. His day collar, obviously. Necktie loosely knotted and ready to snug up once he fastened his top button. He'd shaved and brushed his damp hair back from his face.

He finished making the coffee and laid a piece of paper on the counter, then nudged it her way. "There's all my contact numbers. I'll have my BlackBerry, plus the office and home numbers. I'll be in and out of meetings but if you can't get me, call the office and ask for Jennifer Carson, my administrative assistant. I wrote her name down. I'll tell her I told you to interrupt me—"

"Cris," she softly said, "it's okay. He'll be fine."

He tensed and didn't meet her gaze. "I feel horrible I'm leaving him."

She sat on the other side of the counter, on one of the bar stools. It would be too much temptation to walk around the counter and hug him to comfort him if she entered the kitchen. She looked at the paper he'd left for her. "He told you to do this. You're following his orders. You won't be gone long, just a few days."

"Doesn't mean I don't feel shitty about leaving."

"Stop. Please. It's all right. He'll be fine."

He laid his hands flat on the counter, palms down. "I know you'll take good care of him, Til. That's not why I'm upset."

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"I know. You love him and you're worried about him. It's understandable."

He nodded. For a moment, the only sound in the kitchen came from the burbling coffee pot and the quiet hum of the fridge. "I made enough soup for him for several days. He won't want to eat much today, probably. He'll spend the day in bed or on the couch sleeping and watching TV." He slowly smiled before he looked up at her. "And being grumpy. Maybe it is a good thing I'm getting out of here."

She returned his smile, this time not having to force it. "You don't mean that."

"No, I don't. But he really is a bad patient."

"So you two keep warning me. He can't be any worse than some of my clients."

He nodded. When the coffee finished brewing, he poured her a mug and slid it across the counter after fixing it for her just the way she liked.

All these years and he still remembered how she took her coffee. She didn't know how that made her feel and she really didn't want to think about it right then.

"Thank you." She stood to go.

"May I come in and say good-bye to him before I leave?"

She frowned. "Huh?"

"I didn't want to come in without permission."

Tilly chewed on the inside of her cheek. Another conversation she didn't want to have this morning. "Sure. Of course you can. He's still asleep, though."

"I won't wake him up."

She returned to the bedroom and grabbed some work-out clothes from the closet. *Might as well do that since I'm up.* She locked herself in the bathroom to change. When she emerged she found Cris kneeling on the floor on Landry's side of the bed and staring at him in the dim light.

Part of her felt sorry for Cris.

Part of her still wanted to kick him in the nuts. Fortunately, that part of her was slowly giving way to reason.

Very slowly.

Then there was the guilt-ridden part of her that wished she'd chosen screaming at him for a few hours instead of playing a revenge-filled sex game with Landry. Cuckolding did not suit her well at all and still left her with a sour taste in her mouth.

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After a moment he leaned in and gently kissed Landry's forehead. The man never stirred. She remained in the deep shadows by the bathroom door as he left the bedroom, although he had to know she stood there watching.

She walked to her office and dug through her desk until she located her headphones. Normally she worked out with the stereo blasting, but didn't want to wake Landry. Next best thing would be her ear buds, but she worried she wouldn't hear him if he needed her. She could drape the headphones around her neck and crank her music up loudly enough to hear it and still be able to hear him if he called out for her.

She felt Cris standing in the doorway behind her and ignored him until he cleared his throat. She didn't turn. "Yeah?"

"I'm going."

"Okay. Have a safe trip." Goddamned tears threatened…*again*. When the fuck would she get her equilibrium back? She hadn't cried this much in years and hated herself for the weakness. It was impossible not to think about their usual parting routine…before.

The kiss, his hand fisting her hair, his usual parting words to her.

"*I love you, Redbird. Always and forever."*

He didn't move and she fought the urge to turn and order him out. She could do this.

"Thanks again, Tilly. For taking care of him. I appreciate it."

She closed the drawer a little harder than she'd intended and yanked another open. *Where are those fucking headphones!* "Yeah, no problem. I told you, he's a great guy."

"Yeah." More silence. "Okay. I'll get out of your hair. I'll keep my phone on as long as I can in case you need me. My flight leaves at seven-thirty."

"Yeah. I know." *Please, just go away!*

She sensed him leave, then heard the front door quietly open and shut a moment later. She relaxed, resting her forehead on her arm, which lay draped on her desk. At least this time she didn't cry.

There's progress.

She worked out nearly twice as long and hard as she usually did, until sweat pooled around the waistband of her shorts and her shirt clung to her, even in the cool, air conditioned house. She grabbed her stuff and showered in Cris' bathroom because Landry was still asleep. She'd just walked through the kitchen when her cell, charging on the counter, rang Loren's custom ring tone. She dove for it to

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answer it before it woke Landry.

"Hey, girlie. How's hunky hubby this morning? He okay?"

She walked into the office and closed the door behind her. "Hi, and he's still asleep."

Loren hesitated. "So?"

"So what?"

Loren sighed. "Results. What's going on? Is he okay? Are *you* okay? Talk to me."

"We won't get results back for a couple of days. We already know from the scan and his blood work that something's going on. He will have surgery, but what kind and how much they take out is to be determined."

"Sooo…how's that other thing going?"

"If you're asking if I've killed Cris yet, the answer is no. In fact, he's not here. Landry sent him back to L.A. this morning to handle packing and moving their stuff and to take care of business issues."

Loren's tone brightened. "Oh! He's not there? Mind if I drop by?"

"Sure, come on over. Wait a while though, maybe after ten. Landry might be awake then and you can say hi. Oh, and one more thing?"

"Yeah?"

"Please don't call him hunky hubby to his face, okay?"

Loren laughed. "But he is! Hey, his nickname is a lot better than all the ones I have for Cris."

"True. Bye."

When she returned to the bedroom, Landry opened his eyes and held out a hand to her. She carefully sat next to him so as not to jostle him and leaned in for a kiss. "Morning. How do you feel?"

"Like shit. Cris leave okay?"

"Yeah. He should be in the air by now."

He nodded.

She decided to add, "He came in to say good-bye before he left. You slept right through it."

She didn't miss his sad smile. "Thank you."

"For telling you, or for letting him into my bedroom?"

"Both."

* * * *

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Master Grouchypants acted a little grumbly, but not too bad. He moved out to the couch to watch TV and read. When Loren arrived, he enjoyed talking with her. From the way he kept her laughing, Tilly suspected Loren enjoyed talking with him, too. A little before lunch time Tilly's cell rang and she stepped into the kitchen to take it.

"Hey, I've only got a minute between planes, but I forgot to tell you how to heat up his soup."

She quickly moved into the office and pulled the door shut behind her. "Cris, I'm more than capable of reheating soup."

"I know, but he likes it a certain way. You have to heat a bowl of it for two minutes, then puree it in the food processor for him. It's easier on his stomach that way. And don't use a blender, use the food processor because—"

She fought her irritation. "Go catch your plane."

"Tilly, please, wait! It has to be heated first, but not too much, because if you try to puree it when it's cold—"

"Cris, enough. Seriously. It's okay. I can handle it."

"I'm sorry."

She reined in her irritation. "Look, I know you're worried, but focus on what he wants you to do and I'll take care of him while you're gone."

"Is he okay? Can I talk to him?"

"He's fine. He's in the living room talking with Loren. She stopped by. I'll get him for you."

"No, that's okay. I don't want to interrupt him." He didn't sound snarky when he said it either.

"It's all right, I'll go get him."

"No, I'm going to go catch my plane. Would you mind telling him I called? That I asked about him?"

She wanted to beat his deference to her out of him. "I'll tell him. Have a safe flight."

"Thanks."

When she stepped out of the office she nearly ran into Loren going to use the guest bathroom, now Cris' bathroom.

She pushed Tilly back into the office, concern on her friend's face. "You okay, girlie?"

"Yeah." She rolled her eyes at Loren's arched eyebrows. "It was Cris checking in to make sure

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Landry was okay."

By late that evening, Tilly had managed to heat and puree his soup for him several times, in the proper order and apparently the right way because he didn't complain and it didn't end up on her kitchen ceiling. She'd have to get an immersion blender though. She'd never needed one, and her old food processor was a bitch to clean.

Landry asked her to watch TV with him, so she sat at the end of the couch with his head in her lap.

"I like this," he admitted. "This is fun."

"Yeah. Barrel of laughs around here."

He tipped his head so he could look at her. "I mean it. I like spending time with you." He grinned. "Even if you are wearing far too many clothes for my liking."

She ruffled his hair. "Easy, tiger. No play for you, doctor's orders. You're supposed to rest."

He laced his fingers through hers and squeezed her hand. "Thank you, Tilly. You're a true blessing."

As she sat there, her other hand on his shoulder, she couldn't deny it felt nice relaxing like this with him.

One of those many things she'd missed since her life had been ripped away from her.

* * * *

The doctor's office called Friday morning before lunch. No surprise, the pathology report came back positive. The doctor fit them in late that afternoon for a consult.

"I can work you into the surgical schedule as an add-on late Monday. Otherwise, it'll be two weeks because I'm going out of town to a conference. I'd rather do it before I leave, quite honestly."

Landry nodded even as his grip on Tilly's hand tightened. "Okay. Schedule it."

He sat quietly in the passenger seat and looked out the window as she drove. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yeah. Cris isn't scheduled to get back until Thursday. He needs to be at meetings on Tuesday."

Back to that. Having Landry all to herself, she could almost forget about Cris.

He needed Cris, despite all they'd put the man through.

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Loved him.

Wanted him.

But most of all, more than anything, he needed him, even if he wouldn't admit it. "I'll call him and let him know when we get home."

Landry didn't turn away from the window. "No. That's all right. He'll feel guilty he can't be here. There's no reason to upset him."

She couldn't let that go. "Landry, I don't feel comfortable keeping that from him. It'll upset him more if he doesn't know."

His soft tone disquieted her. "Tilly, please. It's all right. I'll tell him when I think it's best. I don't want him worried."

Ah, there is a soft heart in there. Buried somewhere.

Deeply buried.

"He's already worried about you." She had enough guilt on her plate to deal with after their weekend cuckold caper. Withholding this information might put her over the edge.

"Please?" He didn't even sound like himself. His soft, resigned tone didn't bear a hint of Masterly command.

She wasn't all right with it, but she didn't want to argue with him and stress him out. "Whatever."

By Sunday afternoon, Landry still hadn't told Cris about his surgery. Tilly couldn't stand it anymore. He laid down for a nap and she took her cell into the office and closed the door behind her.

Cris answered his cell on the first ring. "Til?"

"Yeah. Don't panic, he's fine."

Part of her hated that she recognized the knowing concern in his voice. "What's wrong? What happened?"

This was going directly against what Landry asked of her. Then again, he had agreed to follow Cardinal's Rules. And in her mind, it would be best if Cris were at least kept in the loop.

"First of all, this is me and you talking, not slave and Tilly, okay?"

"Yeah."

"Landry didn't tell you that they've put him on the surgical schedule tomorrow as an add-on. We have to be there in the morning, and we don't know when his surgery will be."

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"*Tomorrow*?"

She'd never heard Cris sound like that, the combination of shock and fear. "Yeah. He didn't want to worry you, said you have meetings Tuesday you have to be at—"

"Oh, fuck *that* shit! I'll grab the first plane I can get a seat on."

"I didn't call you to make you come home. That's not what he asked."

"Tilly, I can't sit here while he goes into surgery. I just can't. I need to be there for him."

"You'll get in trouble."

He snorted. "Won't be the first fucking time, believe me."

Those were stories she'd want to hear.

Later.

When she could emotionally handle hearing them.

"I just didn't want you finding out after the fact."

He went quiet for a moment. "Is he still mad at me?"

"No! Jesus, I wish you two fucking Doms would get your communication shit together."

Another hesitation. "I'm not a Dom, Tilly."

No, you were my *Dom*. "Men. I meant men." She closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. That's not what she meant and he damn well knew it, but he let it slide. "Just…I'll call you from the hospital or send you text messages to this phone if I can't get away. Okay?"

"I'll be home as soon as I can."

"Cris—"

"It's okay." She heard the smile in his voice. "It's my ass he'll beat, not yours. Thanks for telling me. I appreciate it."

"No problem." She hung up and sat in her office chair as she stared out over her garden.

When Cris called later that afternoon to check in with Landry and update him on work issues and his progress arranging the move, he made no mention of her earlier phone call. As she lay curled next to Landry that night, long after he'd fallen asleep, she stared at his face. He looked troubled even in his dreams.

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Chapter Sixteen

After a mostly sleepless night, Tilly climbed out of bed a little after five and went to work out. She started to make coffee on the way through the kitchen, then decided against it. Landry could only have a few sips of water, since they didn't know when his surgery would be, up until seven a.m. It would be cruel to taunt him with the smell of the brew when he couldn't have any.

Then again, he is a sadist. He might appreciate the irony.

She still couldn't do it.

After her work out, she glanced at her cell phone charging on the counter. She checked it, but no messages from Cris. Would he really show up?

Of course he would. He was Cris.

She didn't know how much she could handle today, emotionally. In some ways, it'd be nice to have Cris there for support.

On the other hand, having Cris there would be a strain on her maintaining appearances.

Despite her repeated offers, Landry insisted on driving. "Allow me this, love," he said. "Please?"

She nodded. He also took her small tote bag holding her Kindle, mp3 player, and crossword puzzle books and carried it, along with his own overnight bag, out to the garage. They arrived at the hospital a little before eight that morning.

As he had before the biopsy, he held her hand and continuously stroked her with his thumb. They checked in and were shown back to a pre-op holding area where Landry changed into a hospital gown, received his IV, and the wait began in earnest.

It took every bit of strength she had not to check her phone, which she'd put on silent mode, for messages from Cris.

They'd been warned upon their arrival that it might be late afternoon before they took Landry. By nine-thirty Tilly was ready to slip out to the bathroom and text Cris with an update, but then the surgeon's surgical nurse came in with the anesthesiologist.

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"Hello, Mr. LaCroux. Looks like you get bumped to the top of the class. Our second surgery of the day was cancelled because the patient caught a cold. Dr. Evans wants to take you next."

Tilly's nerves neared the breaking point. Landry grabbed her hand and pulled her in for a kiss. "Steady, love," he whispered. "I'll be right back."

She smiled and kissed him again. "I love you. Remember the rules. You'll fight to come back to me."

His beaming grin nearly broke her heart. "Absolutely. And I love you, too."

She managed not to cry as she watched them wheel him away. On unsteady legs, she found the bathroom before making her way to the waiting room. How had Cris gone through this alone? Well, he hadn't been alone, probably. Surely they'd had friends he could lean on for support.

Then again, so did she. She could always call Loren, didn't know why she didn't think of that before.

Her fingers hovered over her phone's keypad. Then again, hadn't she asked Loren and Ross to do more than their fair share over the years? After an hour, a cup of coffee, a stale danish from a tray of them in the waiting room, and one update from the OR to let her know Landry was doing fine, she decided she couldn't be as strong as she thought she was. She pulled out her cell, ready to call Loren, when Cris ran through the waiting room door.

She'd never been so glad to see someone in her entire life.

His eyes immediately locked on her. It felt natural to stand and let him engulf her in a hug.

She'd consider the ramifications later. For now, she welcomed his support.

"How is he?" Cris asked.

"They said he's doing good. Stable."

He guided her back to her seat and together they sat without talking, Tilly leaning against his shoulder for a little comfort.

* * * *

The nurse updated them an hour later. Still doing fine, the doctor was just making sure there were no other places to remove before he closed Landry up. Between that and post-op recovery, it'd be at least another two to three hours.

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Cris carried her tote bag for her as they walked to the cafeteria. "Did you eat?" she asked.

"No. I had to change planes in Dallas. I didn't have time to eat."

Tilly's emotions, already stretched to the snapping point, wouldn't allow her to open up to Cris too much. She opted for a distraction. "What'd you mean yesterday that it wouldn't be the first time you'd gotten in trouble?"

He smiled and looked down at the table. This time not in slavish deference, but in amusement. He glanced up and around, to confirm no one could hear, and lowered his voice. "I'm not a brat. I never have been. But no way in hell will I sit back and not be there for him when he needs me. One time, I had to fly up to Seattle for a series of training meetings. One of his procedures was moved up nearly a week because the surgeon had to go out of town. I flew home immediately, and as soon as he was able to hold a riding crop again, he tanned my ass." He smiled. "But then he cuddled me in bed with him all night long and thanked me for being there."

He played with his coffee cup. "Landry and I have a different dynamic than you and I had," he said as he eventually met her gaze. "I'm not a masochist. I mean, I know you weren't either. But I get what I need from our relationship by serving him. If that means I have to endure punishment or painful play, I'm okay with that."

"You never made me do anything like that. You never punished me. You never hurt me."

He smiled, but she'd swear it looked sad. "Remember that time you scared the crap out of me by forgetting your cell phone and you went out all day with Loren to get massages and see a movie? Neither me nor Ross could find the two of you. She got spanked too, he told me."

She snorted. "Oh. I'd forgotten about that." How could she? She couldn't sit comfortably for two days after he spanked her with his bare hand. That was the only time he'd ever punished her like that. There were times he'd made her stand in a corner for thirty minutes for forgetting to do something like eat a healthy breakfast when he'd told her to, but he'd never used corporal punishment.

How could she have forgotten the fear on his face, followed by relief, then anger, when she walked in the door that night? How he'd hugged her, desperately, before he dragged her over to the couch, bent her over his knee, and spanked her.

She'd never forgotten her cell phone again. "That's nothing like he does to you." She'd enjoyed impact play with Cris, his touch with the implements always on the sensual side, never what she'd classify as painful.

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He nodded. "I know." He took a deep breath and let it out as he slowly turned the coffee cup around in one direction, then reversed it and started rotating it the other. She didn't speak because she sensed him working up to his next comment.

Some things never changed. That was an old habit he'd had, unconsciously turning his cup or water bottle or whatever it was in front of him back and forth as he tried to think.

His gaze dropped to his hands again. "If…if I start saying anything you don't want to hear, please tell me to stop."

"Don't worry. I will."

He smiled again, but didn't make eye contact. "Please don't take anything I'm about to say the wrong way. I was ready to spend the rest of my life with you. You know what happened. I don't need to rehash it." He sighed. "Yes, I went back to him. But I love him. And I'm not an idiot. I know that he still thinks about how I left before, and while he blames himself, he's only human. In the back of his mind is that 'what if' memory. Every beating I take, everything I endure, it's the only sure way I know I can prove to him I love him. I will take it. Because I love him. As whacked as it sounds, the more I take, the more he feels secure that I'm here for the long haul."

Even more whacked, now knowing Landry the way she did, she totally understood exactly what Cris meant.

They returned to the waiting room and…waited. She read her Kindle and put on some soothing Celtic instrumental music to help calm her nerves. Cris apparently didn't bring anything with him to do. Finally, the surgeon came out to talk with her. She introduced Cris and was happy to be able to tune out past, "He did fine, everything looks good."

Tilly closed her eyes, took a deep, relieved breath, and let Cris take over asking the questions. A recovery nurse would come get them once they moved Landry from post-op to a private room.

She'd never found comfort in religion. Not much of a praying person, she closed her eyes and breathed a silent thank you to the powers that be for keeping Landry safe.

Now if he could beat his disease, maybe for once she could have a happy ending.

Anxiously waiting, she jumped to her feet an hour later when the nurse stepped into the waiting room and waved them over. Two other nurses were pushing the bed with Landry in it down the hallway toward an elevator. Portable monitors kept track of his vital signs, and he'd been put on an IV pain pump.

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She fumbled for Cris' hand and held on as they stepped into the elevator with everyone. Landry's eyes were closed and if he had awoken in post-op, she suspected the pain meds and residual effects of anesthesia had claimed him again.

After the nurses had him settled in a room, hooked up to monitors and an oxygen cannula, Tilly leaned in and pressed a kiss to his forehead after smoothing his hair back.

He let out a sigh she realized meant he was marginally awake.

"Hi, handsome," she whispered. Cris pulled a chair over for her and she sat, then reached through the bedrail and found his hand. "How you feeling?"

"Like someone sliced my guts open."

"Funny you should say that."

He squeezed her hand as he managed a weak smile. "No laughing, love. It'll hurt too damned much right now."

Cris pulled another chair over to the other side and reached through the bedrail to hold his hand. "Hi, Master."

Landry let out another sigh and Tilly watched him squeeze Cris' hand long and hard before relaxing his fingers. "Hello, love."

Tilly pretended not to see the tears welling up in Cris' eyes. "How many did I earn?"

She didn't miss the slight smile that curved Landry's lips. "We'll discuss it later. I suspect my wife will lobby on your behalf for me to not punish you."

"Well, I did tell him," she admitted. "What? Not like you can beat me or anything," she teased.

"What shall I do with the two of you ganging up on me?"

"Remember my rules, mister," she told him. "Do what I say, do what the doctors say, yadda yadda. I made an executive decision to call him."

"True." He finally cracked an eye open and looked at her. "I'm a lucky man to have both of you taking care of me." He turned his head toward Cris and tugged his hand. Cris leaned in and Landry kissed him. "I'm all right, Cris. You can fly back out. I suspect I'll be in here for a few days at least."

Cris looked at Tilly, indecision painted on his face.

"If you want to go, it's okay," Tilly assured him. "I'll bring a riding crop in to keep him in line."

Cris laughed. "Lan, you do realize she'll be more of a hard-ass than I am in terms of your care, right?"

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Landry met her gaze. "I hope so."

* * * *

Landry made Cris call the airlines and find out when the next flight was back to L.A. There were seats available on a flight that night, leaving in four hours.

Enough time he could drive back to Tampa, where he'd flown in, return the rental car, and make it through security.

Landry squeezed his hand. "Go. I'm okay."

Tilly knew Cris didn't want to go. She couldn't blame him, either. When Cris looked to her for her input, she couldn't bring herself to overrule Landry. She had promised to abide by what he did, and it wasn't worth stressing him out just to make Cris feel better.

Cris finally nodded and booked the reservation.

With a smile, Landry held up his hand to Cris and pulled him in for a kiss. "I love you, Cristo. After all we've gone through, you still risk your ass being shredded to come to my side."

"Yeah, well, what can I say." He smiled. "You're irresistible."

Landry winced as he suppressed a laugh. "Go on. Don't miss your flight." He looked at Tilly. "You too, love. Go home and rest. It must be close to dinner time. I'll be all right. I'm going to sleep all night, I suspect." He hit the button on his pain pump.

They both kissed him good night and Cris silently walked her downstairs to her car. She didn't fight him when he pulled her in for a hug. "Thank you, Tilly," he quietly said. "From the bottom of my heart."

She didn't know what to say, so she opted for, "Do you have time for a quick dinner? There's a sub shop right around the corner." She paused as she laughed. "You know what I mean."

He smiled. "That sounds nice. Thank you."

He followed in his rental car and wouldn't let her pay as they staked out a table in the back of the small restaurant. They were the only eat-in customers, even though the take-out business appeared brisk that evening.

He kept his voice low and his eyes on his food. "Thanks again for calling me. I don't expect you to go to bat for me with him though. I'll take whatever he dishes out. I disobeyed him."

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She reached across the table and brushed her fingers across the back of his right hand. He wore his ring. She suspected he'd never take it off.

She didn't begrudge it.

"I didn't feel right keeping you in the dark. I know you love him. He's just being stubborn."

Cris smiled before his gaze rose to hers. "You think he's stubborn now, wait until he's home."

They bid good-bye and she didn't mind that he pulled her in for another hug. It felt comforting. She watched him drive away before she started her car and headed for home.

She didn't bother turning on the lights in the living room, using the glow from the light over the stove in the kitchen to guide her. The house felt more than empty.

It felt lonely.

Even Cris' presence would have been welcomed.

She showered, changed, and made herself a cup of hot chocolate. Rather than trying to sleep in her bed alone, she settled on the couch in front of the TV and fell asleep.

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Chapter Seventeen

Landry was finally discharged a day after Cris returned from California. The plan was once he healed from the surgery, his chemo would start. Tilly even volunteered to pick Cris up from the airport. Their belongings and cars were in transit and would arrive early the next week.

After the first couple of days of taking primary charge of Landry's care, Cris pulled back to focus more on work and let Tilly take over.

Reluctantly, but he did. Tilly recognized the signs, how he still hovered, jumped to attention every time she asked him a care-related question as if worried something was wrong with Landry. By the time the movers arrived with their things, the three of them had settled into something resembling normalcy.

Tilly was surprised to realize she liked it.

Landry was asleep when the movers arrived with the batch of boxes and furniture that wasn't earmarked to go into storage. Tilly helped Cris coordinate moving everything into the garage until they could sort it out later. The movers had no sooner left than the car transporter showed up. Finally, an hour later, and with an Acura sedan and a Mercedes unlike anything she'd ever seen in her life sharing her driveway, she was alone with Cris.

She walked around the car. "What the heck is this?"

He smirked. "Master's toy. His four-wheeled toy," he clarified. "Mercedes-Benz SLR McLaren."

"Expensive?" She nervously looked for any signs of birds in the trees over her drive. The transporter had delivered the cars in an enclosed trailer, not an open truck like she'd seen dealerships use.

He smirked. "Til, let's just say the insurance on this car for a year usually runs more than most people pay to buy an average mid-priced car."

"I'm guessing it needs to be in the garage when we finally get the garage cleaned out again?"

"Wouldn't be a bad idea. You look pretty nervous." He grinned.

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"Bite me." She mentally winced as soon as she said it, but he didn't totally rise to the bait.

"No comment," he said with a mischievous smile.

She swatted him on the arm. "Be nice to me if you want my help."

They sorted and unpacked boxes all afternoon. When Landry awoke, she immediately nipped in the bud any protests to her helping Cris. "I volunteered, and I don't mind doing it because it was either that or stare at you sleeping. I want this house put back into some semblance of order as soon as possible."

Landry laid back against his pillow and smiled. "Yes, dear."

Cris brayed with laughter. "I should mark this date down, the date hell officially froze over. He said 'yes, dear.'"

They were back out in the garage when she spotted a few old boxes in the far corner, ones she remembered packing and while upset, had never had the heart to dispose of. Over the years she'd forgotten them.

She walked over to the shelving units, where they took up all the top shelves. "Hey, Cris?" she softly called.

"Yeah?"

She pointed. "You'll want these, too." Then she turned, hurried into the house, and locked herself in Cris' bathroom for a few minutes to regain her composure. She didn't dare go to her bedroom, knowing Landry would immediately spot her tears.

When she returned to the garage, Cris had pulled all the boxes down and opened them. He sat cross-legged on the floor, shirtless and in his collar, as he slowly sorted through them.

He didn't look at her when he softly spoke. "I can't believe you kept all this." Mementoes, family pictures, miscellaneous odds and ends. The books, CDs, and DVDs she left in the house. He finally looked at her. "Thank you."

She nodded, struggling to keep her composure. "You're welcome." She cleared her throat. "Anything else I can help you do out here?"

"Um, yeah, if you want, there's a few boxes of his clothes over there. They're marked. And the wardrobe box. I sent most of our winter clothes to storage until I can go through them later."

She took over doing that, grateful to blame her red eyes on dust and heat when she carried the first box into her bedroom and started unpacking it.

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Landry watched from the bed. "I'd offer to help, love, but I suspect that will earn me grief from both you and slave."

"Got that right, buster. Just sit there and look pretty."

He smiled. "Have I told you how much I love you?"

She stopped and looked at him. A few weeks ago, she'd been alone. And now…

She smiled. "I love you, too."

* * * *

By the end of the next week, Landry felt a little perky and wanted to go to the club. Both Tilly and Cris tried to talk him out of it, but that only seemed to cement his determination. Rather than fighting him, they caved. On Friday night, with Cris behind the wheel and already wearing his formal collar and cuffs, they drove to the club.

Loren glared at Cris, but gave Tilly and Landry a hug. Whenever Loren stopped by the house, Cris always disappeared into his bedroom, the only time Landry told him he was allowed to close his bedroom door without asking permission first.

"I hope you're beating the shit out of a certain someone tonight," Loren said to Landry.

Tilly intervened. "No, you can't help."

Loren pouted. "He's right. You are a spoil sport." She started to say something else, but Ross was ready for her and hollered at her. "Oops, gotta go." She grinned at Landry. "I'll catch up with you later, when Tilly is busy." She stuck her tongue out at her friend and flounced off to join her husband.

Tilly couldn't help but notice how Cris gave her the slightest of smiles when he caught her eye. He couldn't outright tell her thanks in front of Landry, but when Landry turned his back to reach into the toy bag, she did give Cris a wink.

That drew a full, albeit brief smile from him.

Other than the brief glimpse the very first night she encountered Landry at the club, she'd never watched him scene with Cris. He hadn't felt well enough. Another friend she hadn't seen in a while caught her attention, and when she returned a few minutes later, Landry had Cris stripped and bound to a bench with wrist and ankle cuffs.

Landry had picked a bench in the corner, and she stepped around behind them, to the wall, and

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took a seat on the floor next to their gear. She'd opted for slacks and reasonable heels with her corset instead of ridiculously high stilettos. She wasn't Mistress Cardinal tonight, she was Tilly LaCroux, and she didn't feel like being dressed uncomfortably.

Landry slowly stroked Cris' back. He'd been blindfolded, instead of hooded. Tilly watched Landry's strong hands as they caressed the other man's flesh and a flare of heat roiled in her belly.

She wished it was her.

Stop that. Forget it. You've got more than you should ask for to start with.

After a few minutes, she realized this Landry, sensually dominant, was a far different man than the vicious sadist she'd witnessed just a little of. If this was indicative of their normal relationship, it eased her mind and conscious marginally, that he could express that kind of tenderness for Cris.

It didn't last.

Once he had Cris settled into a mindset she guessed probably wasn't quite subspace, Landry started spanking him with his bare hands. She watched Cris tightly grip the handholds on the bench and wiggle his ass into Landry's swing, making him laugh.

She also noticed Landry spoke French. "My slave feels playful tonight. That pleases me." He switched to a riding crop, immediately raising welts on Cris' ass and thighs. It surprised her he didn't start with a flogger, but she wouldn't question it. He obviously knew what he was doing.

From that point on, Landry's sadism took over. She watched him skillfully stagger the level of play, building up and stepping down, taking the level of pain up a notch each time, until he switched to a cane, then a singletail.

Tilly smoothed her hands over her arms as she watched, fascinated and terrified at the same time. She'd seen heavy play before, plenty of times. Been the top in countless heavy scenes. Landry's skill took it to another level, calculated strikes that left Cris' body red and welted.

He paused and stepped around to Cris' head, grabbed his hair, and roughly hauled his head up so he could speak in his ear. She couldn't hear what Landry said to Cris, or the reply, over the loud music rolling through the dungeon space.

Landry smiled and released Cris, then picked up a heavy mop flogger.

He swung it, nailing Cris squarely in the balls and making Tilly wince in sympathy.

She didn't miss how Landry ordered him to come, in French.

Three more hard strikes and he did, his body convulsing on the bench until he collapsed, spent

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and exhausted. Landry unhooked his ankles first, rubbing his feet for him before unhooking his wrists and helping him sit up.

The feelings swirling through her as she watched them together caught her by surprise. Landry stood there, eyes closed, holding Cris. Cris, no longer blindfolded but with his eyes also closed, wrapped his arms around Landry's waist and sat there on the bench, leaning against his Master's body.

There was something heartbreakingly tender in the way he held Cris. The bond they had, she knew, could never be usurped by her.

While they were distracted, she carefully slipped away to the bathroom and splashed water on her face. She'd opted for no make-up other than lip gloss, even her hair, now starting to grow out and dyed its old color, wasn't gelled or spiked.

She loved Landry, and he loved her, without a doubt.

But where did she fit in?

* * * *

He went through his first round of chemo. Over the week before his second round started, even though Landry still made love to Tilly, she caught him in intimate situations with Cris as well. One morning she finished her work out to find Landry sitting on Cris' bed, with Cris on his knees in front of him, going down on him, his fingers tangled in Cris' hair.

Another time she walked in from grocery shopping to catch Cris on the tail end of giving Landry a blow job on the living room couch.

Cris didn't meet her gaze when Landry sent him out to help her unload the rest of the groceries.

Another time Landry stepped into the shower with Cris, and when she listened at the bathroom door they'd left cracked open, no doubt purposefully on Landry's part, she heard Landry letting Cris beat off and Cris' familiar moan of pleasure as he climaxed.

Conflicted feelings raced through her as old memories struggled to mash her composure into a bloody pulp. She couldn't honestly say she minded Landry using Cris like that.

But the longing she felt and couldn't clearly identify truly troubled her. Did she miss Cris? Did she wish she was a part of their lovemaking? Did she, in fact, want Landry all to herself?

Did she wish she was bound to the bench with Landry in charge?

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She couldn't answer any of those questions.

* * * *

The night before his next round of chemo was scheduled to start, he made love to her, leaving her thoroughly sated and ready to go to sleep. As she started drifting, he kissed her. "Would you mind if I spent a little time with Cris?"

Almost asleep, she mumbled her assent and rolled over. It wasn't until she heard the *click* of the bedroom door softly shutting that her brain caught up with his comment and her eyes popped open. Now that she thought about it, she realized he hadn't climaxed.

She sat up, sleep driven from her system. After a few minutes, she climbed out of bed, grabbed her robe, and quietly opened the bedroom door.

Down the hall, she heard soft voices from Cris' room. Landry had left the door halfway open. After fighting and winning over a bout of guilt, she silently walked down the hall and stood just outside the doorway. She couldn't see the bed directly without pushing the door open farther, but she could see everything reflected in the dresser mirror from the light of the full moon flowing through the open blinds.

They lay on their sides, Landry's back pressed against Cris' chest. Cris had his arms around Landry. The men kissed and she realized Cris was fucking Landry.

"That's my good boy," Landry softly told him. "You take good care of me, don't you?"

Despite her earlier session with Landry, where he pulled three strong climaxes out of her, she felt her clit throb as she watched them together. Landry still might have been Cris' Master, but she watched two men in love making love.

Cris arm slid down Landry's abs and grabbed his cock, slowly stroking as he fucked his lover. "Jesus, Lan, I love you."

"Show me how much you love me, buddy."

She leaned against the wall, her heart racing as she listened to them. Part of her wanted to crawl into bed with them.

That's a dangerous thought.

The look on Cris' face couldn't be any different than the submissive mask she'd gotten used to

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over the past couple of months. He kissed Landry again, his hips flexing as he thrust. "You gonna come for me?" He squeezed Landry's cock, slowly stroking it. "I'm not gonna come till you come for me first."

Her knees weakened. He even sounded like her old Cristo. She grabbed onto the wall when her knees threatened to give out.

"Fuck me," Landry urged. "Give it to me." His voice bore a needy edge she'd never heard from him.

Not even at their most passionate of times together.

"Oh, I'll give it to you, all right." He kissed Landry again, fiercely. Landry let out a low moan she knew all too well before he cried out.

"That's it," Cris gasped as he thrust harder, before he too let out a familiar cry and fell still.

The men lay there, entwined, kissing as they recovered from their lovemaking.

Tilly almost forgot to move when he heard Cris softly say, "I'll go get a washcloth for you, Master." Back to slave.

She ducked into the office, behind the door, and listened as Cris ran water in the bathroom. A moment later she heard the men talking in the bedroom again.

On silent feet she raced back to her bedroom and quietly closed the door, tossed her robe into the closet, and dove into bed. Hopefully her pulse would slow before Landry returned.

* * * *

Landry smiled as he waited for Cris to return with the washcloth. It'd been a struggle for him not to meet her gaze in the mirror as she watched them. He'd hoped she'd come join them, but that was a point he couldn't press her on no matter how hard he wished he could.

He hoped she'd enjoyed the show.

Cris knelt next to him on the bed and wiped him down. Landry crooked a finger at him and Cris leaned in for a kiss.

"I love you, Cristo. Always and forever, love. You know that, right?"

He'd kill for the smile Cris gave him. "I love you too, Lan." His smile faded. "Thank you."

"For what?"

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"For not throwing me out when you found out."

He motioned for Cris to lie next to him. "I love you. Was I tempted? Honestly? Yes." He stroked Cris' cheek. "I love you beyond measure. You have more than proven yourself to me. Please don't think I don't see that."

"But you love Tilly."

He nodded. "I do. I love her very much. Why?"

Cris looked troubled. "What if she orders me gone?"

He propped himself up on one elbow. "Then I supposed I'd have to lobby her as strongly for you to stay as she lobbied for you to keep your cock and balls, wouldn't I?"

He was glad he could leave Cris laughing. He climbed out of bed and made his way back to their bedroom. Tilly had arranged herself in the bed as if asleep, but when he slipped his arm around her waist and kissed the back of her neck, he felt the tension in her body, the way her pulse still raced. He suspected if he plunged his fingers between her legs he'd find her even wetter than he'd left her from what she'd witnessed.

"Good night, love," he whispered to her.

"Good night."

Slowly, he thought. *Patiently. It's well worth the wait.*

* * * *

Landry's next round of chemo stripped away what little remained of his good mood even as it worked to kill off the cancerous cells in his body. Tilly fought the urge to intervene between the men on Cris' behalf as Landry took his bad mood out on their resident slave. As Master Grouchypants turned into Master Major Assholio, she realized fully what Cris had suffered through—alone—the first time around. Landry occasionally acted terse with her when he felt particularly bad or tired, but he always immediately apologized for it.

Unlike with Cris, who took the full brunt of it head-on, usually without question or complaint.

Two weeks into his chemo, Cris was in the kitchen with his laptop, trying to multi-task between fixing dinner and handling a crisis at the office, where it was only three in the afternoon. Tilly volunteered to take over dinner, but Landry, stretched out on the couch, heard her offer.

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"Don't you dare do it, slave!" he yelled. "I told you to fix dinner, goddammit, and that's what I meant."

She watched Cris close his eyes, recognizing that old expression of his as he tried to rein in his irritation. "Yes, Master," he called back before looking at Tilly. "Thanks anyway," he whispered, offering her a half-hearted smile.

She returned to the living room. "Lan, listen, he's busy. Let me do it, sweetie. I'm not doing anything."

"No." The petulant look on his face meant he'd dug in his heels on the principle of the matter. No amount of wheedling on her part would probably change his mind.

That didn't mean she wouldn't try. She knelt beside him and forced a sultry smile. "Please? I promise I'll do a little modeling for you later, if you'd like."

His eyes flicked her way, then returned to the TV. She might be making ground. "No. He can handle it. You don't need to do his job. I don't want my wife to have to work. That's slave's job."

From the kitchen and out of Landry's line of sight, Cris anxiously shook his head at her, warning her to drop it, but she couldn't. She understood Landry felt like shit, but he'd hardly paid Cris a single kind word in days.

She took a deep breath. "I really think I should take care of dinner toni—"

"*Goddammit*, Tilly, I fucking said no. Now drop it."

Tilly blinked, shocked at his tone as much as his words. She was about to let him have it, but Cris raced around the counter before she could come up with a response.

Cris stepped in front of her. "Landry, goddammit, don't you *dare* take that fucking tone with her!"

Landry sat up, his face red with rage. "What the *fuck* did you say to me, *slave*?"

Tilly tried to get between the men, but Cris gently pushed her behind him. "You fucking heard me. Lay off her, she was just trying to be helpful. You want to be pissed off, take it out on me, not her, goddammit."

Landry stood, although she saw the effort pained him, and got in Cris' face. "How dare you, you ungrateful bastard!"

"Ungrateful? You're the one treating her like shit right now, and you're calling *me* ungrateful?"

"Boys, please, stop! It's okay."

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Landry ignored her and stepped forward, but Cris refused to give ground. "No, it's not okay, Til," Cris insisted. "He's just being a pain in the ass."

"I'm going to beat that attitude out of you, slave," Landry growled. "Need to remind you who's in charge. Teach you respect."

Tilly didn't like how pale Landry suddenly looked. She stepped around Cris and resurrected her own Domme-y voice. "Stop it, *both* of you!" She forced herself between Landry and Cris. "*I* am going to cook dinner, and that's all there is to it. Cardinal's Rule, remember? It's *my* fucking house. *You* are going to sit your ass back down on that couch and watch TV, and you're going to let him get his work done. That's a fucking order!"

"He can't talk to me like that! I refuse to tolerate that behavior from him."

"What," Cris taunted, "you mean calling you out for acting like a dickhead and treating her like shit? At least I never treated her like that. I *never* raised my voice to her, you fucking asshole! You want to abuse me, fine, I'll take it, but you treat her like shit and you and me *will* get into it, because *I* won't tolerate it."

Tilly winced as Landry roared, enraged, and lunged around her trying to get at Cris. She refused to budge and that's when Landry's face went from pissed to pained and he gasped.

Cris didn't miss it either. "What? What's wrong?"

He doubled over in pain. "Sick…"

Cris raced for the kitchen garbage can as Tilly steadied Landry. They got it under him just as he vomited bright red blood.

Stunned, Cris froze.

"Call 911 right now, Cris." She was too busy holding the garbage can under Landry and trying to get him back to the couch.

When she realized he hadn't moved, she looked at him. "Cris! Get the fucking phone and call 911! Get an ambulance!"

That broke through his shock and he bolted for the phone. She rode with Landry in the ambulance while Cris secured the house and followed in Tilly's car. He caught up with her in the ER waiting room, where they stayed only fifteen minutes before Landry was taken back for surgery. A nurse showed them where to wait for word from the OR. Tilly led Cris to two vacant chairs in the room, which seemed unusually crowded for six o'clock at night.

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Cris wouldn't look at Tilly. "This is my fault," he said, his pained voice little more than an agonized whisper. "This is all my fault. He's going to hate me."

She grabbed his hand. "Stop. This is not your fault!"

"If I hadn't made him upset, he wouldn't have yelled at me. This is just like my dad all over again. I'm sorry, Tilly. I should have just kept my mouth shut and not pissed him off more, but I couldn't stand hearing him talk to you like that."

Pushing back her conflicted emotions, she focused on comforting him. "Maybe that saved his life. If he hadn't thrown up blood, he could have bled a lot worse before we knew he had a problem. You didn't cause his bleeding, so just stop."

He pulled his hand free and wrapped his arms around his body, trying to hug himself. "Tilly, I appreciate it, but you don't have to spare my feelings." His voice dropped. "I should have just kept my mouth shut. I'm so sorry. If you want me to, I'll leave."

She wanted to scream at him but the waiting room full of people prevented that. She squatted in front of him, grabbed his head in her hands, and did something she had never done to Cris before.

She scruffed the back of his neck.

"Listen to me, *slave*," she whispered, "you did *not* harm your Master." She gently shook him for emphasis. "You guys had a fight. It didn't cause his bleeding."

His eyes widened as he looked at her, his instincts at war inside him, hers at war within her.

She knew she had his attention and pressed the advantage. "If he wakes up and finds out I didn't snap you out of this, he'll want to take a cane to *my* ass. Let me tell you something, I don't plan on letting that happen. You're the only whipping boy in our house."

He slowly blinked before his lips curled in a faint smile. She stood and hugged him, his face pressed against her tummy as he wrapped his arms around her and softly cried. "Jesus, I love him, Til. I'm sorry. I know this sucks for you. I'm so sorry. I couldn't stand hearing him yell at you. I'm sorry. I love him, but I can't listen to him treat you like that and not stand up to him."

She stroked his hair. "It's okay. I love him, too."

His body tensed as he looked up at her. "You really mean it, don't you?"

"Yeah, duh. What do you think I've been saying the past couple of months? No job is worth putting up with that kind of shit without love being involved."

He looked hopeful. "Does that mean you might not leave after three years?"

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"Possibly." She stroked his hair again. "You know the rules. No bugging me about it."

"Cardinal's rules." He laughed and rested his head against her again, his body relaxing. "I love you, baby girl. So much."

He tensed again as he realized what he'd said.

"Til, I'm sor—"

"It's okay," she quietly reassured him. She leaned in and kissed the top of his head. "I still love you, too. I'm just not sure I like you very much yet. Give me some time with that."

* * * *

An hour later, the doctor walked out to talk to them and they both stood to follow him to a quiet corner to discuss Landry's condition. "He's doing well, he'll be in recovery for a few hours, then we'll move him into a room. I want him to stay in for at least a couple of days just to make sure."

They both sighed in relief. "How bad was it?" Tilly asked.

"It's a good thing you got him in when you did. If he'd waited a day it could have severely complicated his condition."

"What about his other treatments?"

"I've already consulted with his oncologist. They said we'll give him a few days to heal from this before they start him up again. But his blood work actually looked good, other than being anemic from the loss of blood, so that's very promising. Don't worry, this isn't an uncommon occurrence."

She relaxed against Cris' comforting arm as he drew her close to his side. "Thank you, Doctor." She hugged Cris. "See?" she mumbled against his chest. "He'll be okay."

He stroked her back as he nuzzled the top of her head. "Thank you, Til. Thank you for being here for him."

She poked him in the chest. "Not just him. You, too." She looked up into his face, stood on her toes, and kissed him. "No more whining about stuff you can't control, right? New rule."

He smiled. "Understood. I need to write these down. You have more rules than he does."

"There's only one rule you need to write down."

He grinned. "Cardinal's Rule: She must be obeyed."

She let him hug her again as she laughed. "That's right. Cardinal's Rule. And I'm going to

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smack Master Grouchypants upside the head when he gets better. He violated my 'do what Tilly says' rule."

Cris snorted with amusement. "I'd hate to be him."

They let them know when Landry was out of recovery and in a room. He looked pale and weak. Tilly's heart ached for him, wanting her strong husband back and knowing he had a long road to travel before that occurred.

Meanwhile, she realized she didn't mind holding on to Cris' hand for her own comfort.

Landry opened his eyes when she kissed his forehead. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I warned you I'm a suck-ass patient."

Forcing a smile, she gently poked his shoulder. "Yeah, well, you get a whipping of your own for not listening to me and doing what I said. You promised."

He nodded. "I deserve it." He turned to Cris. "I'm sorry."

Cris looked shocked. "For what?"

"For being an asshole, dumbass. That's why. Why do you put up with me when I get like this?"

"Because I love you. So how badly am I getting beat for that little transgression?"

A weak smile curled Landry's lips. "No. You stood up for her. I can't punish you for that. If I hadn't snapped at her, you wouldn't have jumped in. That's my fault. I admit it."

Her heart ached as she watched Cris quickly wipe at his eyes. "I love you, Lan. Jesus Christ, you scared the hell out of us."

"So, you're still stuck with me? I'm not checking out yet? That couldn't have been good."

Tilly smiled. "Yeah, you don't get away from us that easy, buster. Doctor says you'll be okay, it's just a minor setback. Ruptured blood vessel. They fixed it and after a couple days here for observation, you can go home."

He started to say something when the nurse came in to take his vitals and check his IV meds. "I'm sorry, but visiting hours are over," she said.

Landry crooked a finger at them. "Come give me a kiss. Both of you."

Cris let Tilly go first. When they stepped back, Landry pointed at Cris. "You keep taking good care of her, you hear? That's an order."

He smiled. "Yes, *Sir.*"

Landry settled back against his pillow. "Smart ass."

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"Grouchy bastard."

"Brat," Landry shot back with a teasing, albeit tired tone. Tilly got the impression this was some sort of tradition with them.

"Stubborn."

"*I'm* stubborn?" Landry said. "You're pigheaded."

"Look who's talking—"

"Boys," Tilly interrupted. "Focus."

The men chuckled. Cris leaned in for one last kiss. "Don't harass your nurses, Lan. They might make your stay miserable. Especially if I bribe them."

Landry smiled. "Say good night Gracie, and take my baby home."

Tilly knew Landry addressed that to Cris, but she grabbed Cris' hand. "Good night, Gracie. Now let's go home."

Cris drove as she sat slumped in the passenger seat, her nerves shot. Nearly midnight, she was starving, exhausted, and belatedly realized she was looking at a night alone in a too-large bed.

Even though she'd spent years sleeping alone, now she couldn't face the empty real estate on the other side of the mattress.

Cris fixed them both sandwiches. She took a long, hot shower and didn't even try to go to sleep. Instead, she changed into an oversized T-shirt and sleeping shorts and curled up with a blanket on the couch with an old movie channel on. A little after one, Cris returned to the living room, dressed in nothing but sleeping pants and his collar.

"Can't sleep either?"

She shook her head.

"Mind if I join you?"

He looked like he expected her to make room at the foot of the couch, but she sat up and patted the other end. Once he sat, she settled herself in his lap. "Don't make anything out of this," she groused.

He held her hand. "I told you, I'll settle for any scraps thrown my way and be damn grateful for them."

She fell asleep in his lap five minutes later.

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Chapter Eighteen

The next morning she awoke with a start to find herself cuddled against Cris on the couch. At some point during the night they'd changed positions. He was stretched out next to her with his arm comfortably draped over her waist.

A rush of memories swept through her, making her heart ache. More than one night they'd curled up to watch a movie just to fall asleep like this.

"I'll make us coffee," he mumbled behind her, "if you want to call and check on him."

"How'd you know I was awake?"

"I've been awake for a while."

That's when she realized the firm shape pressed against her ass was his hard cock. It had felt so comfortable, so familiar, it took a moment to realize what it meant. She'd even snuggled more tightly against him, like she'd used to.

Reality finally broke through. Like a hot poker to her flesh, she jumped up from the couch. "Um, okay. Yeah. I'll call. Thanks."

Racing to her bedroom, she closed the door behind her, all sleep gone from her system.

It had been all she could do not to roll over and kiss him, to make love to him.

She pressed her forehead against the door and took several long, deep breaths to calm herself.

Landry's nurse assured her he'd had a comfortable night and might be allowed to eat breakfast, albeit a clear liquid diet, that morning. When she returned to the kitchen, this time with a bathrobe on over the clothes she'd slept in, she didn't miss Cris' playful smirk.

"What?" she asked.

"It won't bite you."

She felt her face redden. "You know, I'm not forcing you to walk around with twenty pounds of weight hanging from your balls, and I told him he's not allowed to castrate you. Cut me some slack."

"I'm sorry, Til." He still looked amused as he poured her coffee first and fixed it before handing it to her. "It's just you ran like a scalded cat. The look on your face was hysterical."

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Unfortunately, she couldn't get the thought out of her mind as she took a shower. She'd slept damn good, like a fucking rock.

It was the rare night she hadn't slept well when with Cris.

Filing those conflicting feelings away under the heading of *Ignore at All Costs*, she got ready to go visit Landry.

* * * *

Unfortunately, the memory of what Cris called her in the waiting room kept creeping back to mind.

Baby girl.

The unexpected flood of memories and emotions that simple endearment had brought back startled her. Despite that, she still slept on the couch the next two nights, with Cris, quickly falling asleep while watching movies, until Landry returned from the hospital.

Upon returning home Landry immediately went to bed to sleep and she lay there and stared at him, studying his features. She'd missed him, even with Cris' presence to soothe her. Maybe one day she could bring herself to talk to Landry about it, to broach the subject and let him in that much more, to confess that longing to him.

To be his baby girl.

She went to sleep with the soothing, steady sound of his breath lulling her into sweet dreams.

* * * *

Landry's healing and treatments progressed until he had another break from chemo six weeks later. Tilly was working on her computer one evening when Landry walked into the office and kissed the back of her neck.

"Busy?"

"Not too much. Why?"

He draped his arms over her shoulders. "I have a favor to ask."

His tone of voice more than anything put her on alert. "What?"

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"Would you mind if I spent some time with Cris tonight?"

Her body tensed. "Why would I mind?" He hadn't spent time with Cris like that since the last time, the night she watched them together without them knowing about it.

"It is all right if you wish to say no."

"It's okay," she insisted.

He stroked her hair. "Are you sure? I don't wish to cause you any distress."

"It's fine." She shut down her computer. If Cris was going to get laid, frankly, she wanted to be on the other end of the house with the door shut and the TV turned up loud enough to drown out the sound. Sharing him wasn't as easy to agree to as it once had been.

Despite how she'd promised herself she wouldn't do it, she still crept down the hall later after Landry made love to her and left her bed to go to Cris. As he had the last time, he held off his own climax, yet gave her two mind shattering ones that normally would have put her to sleep like a light.

Cris' bedroom door stood open more than halfway, but she kept back far enough to watch them in the mirror. Landry held Cris, kissing him, two lovers embracing and not a Master using his slave. Her clit throbbed as she watched Landry straddle Cris and impale himself on his cock. It took every ounce of will inside her not to join them.

Cris stroked Landry's thighs, twisted his nipples, then reached down and grabbed his cock. "That's it," he hoarsely said. "Use my cock. Let me make you come."

She felt an uncomfortable flashback as she remembered many times he'd said the same thing to her, in the same tone, as she rode him in their bed.

Cris closed his eyes and threw back his head, and that's when Landry looked into the mirror and met her gaze.

Without words, she knew. He'd known about her presence the whole time, and probably the other time, too. He smiled at her but didn't stop his slow rise and fall on Cris' cock

Still looking in the mirror, he crooked his finger at her.

She bolted for their bedroom and quietly closed the door behind her, leaning against it and gasping for breath as tears spilled down her face. Dammit, she didn't want to lose control like this.

She couldn't be with Cris, not even like that.

Not after what she'd survived.

Never again could she make herself vulnerable to that man, even if she had Landry as her rock

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to keep her steady. Sleeping—clothed—on a couch was one thing. Watch him get the shit beat out of him? Sure.

Not this. Maybe one day, but not now.

She crawled under the covers and tried to go to sleep, but her heart raced in her chest. After what felt like forever, but she knew was maybe a half-hour later, he returned and slipped into bed with her.

Not a drop of sleep in her system.

He kissed the back of her neck. "Are you all right, love?"

"Yeah."

He made her roll over to face him. "Do you wish for me not to do that again?"

She shook her head. "No, it's okay."

He brushed the hair away from her face. It was now long enough he could run his hands through it while they made love. "If you ever wish it," he rumbled, "you are always welcomed to join us." He nibbled on the base of her throat and she softly moaned as her body betrayed her.

He entered her, slowly stroking. "I saved that for you, love. Just for you."

Her body melted as she writhed against him. Before he could ask for it, she climaxed as her throbbing clit rubbed against him perfectly.

Another quick thrust and he joined her. With his lips buried against her shoulder, he whispered, "You are my love. I will always save the best for you."

She immediately dropped to sleep in his arms, with his softening cock buried inside her.

* * * *

One more round of treatment, then another break. With his break in chemo, Landry returned to a playful, if somewhat subdued mood. He awoke the next Saturday morning and rolled on top of her, kissing her.

"Good morning, tiger," she teased.

"Let's go to the club tonight."

She frowned. "Are you feeling up to it?"

"You are worse than Cris."

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"Well, the nurse part of me can't forget the whole vomiting blood incident. I don't want you pushing yourself too hard."

"The doctor said I can do what I feel like doing. I feel like going to the club tonight. I'll take a nap this afternoon."

She didn't miss the playful gleam in his eye. "Aaannnd?"

He grinned. "I want to take you out to breakfast, and then shopping."

"Shopping?"

He kissed her, long and hard enough she felt her own desire stirring. "Shopping."

Cris didn't react when Landry told him not to bother making them breakfast, that the two of them were going out. He nodded. "Yes, Master. Any instructions?"

"Use the day for any work-related issues needing your attention. Make sure you don't wear yourself out before we go to the club tonight."

She supposed Landry didn't miss the almost invisible curl to Cris' lips at that revelation. "Yes, Master."

She insisted on driving despite him trying to take the keys from her. "Stop it, you stubborn man. Let me take care of you."

"We're already fighting like an old married couple, and it's not even our first anniversary yet. How about that?"

"Shut the hell up and get in the car."

He snapped her a salute. "Yes, ma'am."

She flipped him a bird from the other side of the car, but smiled at his amused laugh.

After their brunch, they returned to the car. "So where do you want to go shopping, and why didn't we bring Cris?"

"And spoil the surprise? Love, what do you take me for?"

"A sadistic Dom."

"Ah, you know me so well. Has familiarity bred contempt yet?"

"No, that's about the only thing you haven't bred with me yet, you damn horn dog."

He roared with laughter. "Let's go to Temptations. That's my plan."

She could only imagine what he wanted to buy there, and it didn't take long to sate her curiosity. As they walked into the store on U.S. 41, which sold various items from adult toys, to

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novelties, to club and stripper gear, she knew he'd set his mind on something.

A friendly clerk greeted them. "Anything in particular you're looking for?"

Landry took Tilly's hand. "I'm feeling particularly pervy today. Any chance of turning my beautiful wife into a Catholic school girl?"

Tilly blushed while the clerk laughed. "Right this way."

When Tilly tried to object, Landry leaned in and whispered, "Please, love? I've been dying to see you dressed that way."

She grumbled her assent. She'd once had a schoolgirl outfit.

Years ago.

In fact, she and Cris had shopped for it in this very store. If they had the exact same one in stock, she'd be forced to put her foot down. That would just be too much for her to handle.

She breathed in a sigh of relief at the short blue plaid skirt, not red like her other one had been. And the blazer part of the ensemble looked different. When she modeled it for Landry, complete with a set of platform Mary Janes he picked out, his pleased grin melted her heart.

Yes, she'd wear it for him. To see him that happy, she'd wear nearly anything.

Or absolutely nothing.

He walked over to her. "We'll take it," he told the clerk. Then he nuzzled her ear, pressing close enough Tilly felt his hard cock rub against her thigh through his pants. The man didn't seem to own any underwear. At least, none that he ever wore under trousers. "Do you know how long I've fantasized about this?"

"So are you going dressed as a priest or a nun tonight?" she teased.

He nipped her ear, knowing damn well what that did to her. She successfully fought back her moan. "I'm going as the horny Dom who will beat the shit out of his slave before he fucks his wife's brains out."

* * * *

His words rang in her ears as they prepared to go to the club. As Landry scened with Cris, she felt her body respond as she watched them together. Several times Landry's eyes caught hers as he played with Cris, pulling her in as a participant even as she sat against the wall and did nothing more

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than watch. She didn't miss that he denied Cris release as he spent nearly an hour going after him with canes, crops, and a singletail.

Cris didn't seem to mind, looking happy as Landry held him, giving him aftercare.

She took the keys from Cris' jeans pocket before he started getting dressed. When it came time to leave, she immediately stepped to the driver's door and waved the men into the back. "I'm driving. It's my car anyway."

Landry didn't argue with her. She glanced in the mirror a few times and spotted Cris leaning against Landry, Landry's arm around him. When they reached the house Landry sent Cris to bed. When he started to follow her to their bedroom, she stopped him.

"Go spend some time with him," she told him.

"Love?"

She stood on her toes and kissed him. "I mean it." She smiled. "Save some energy for me, though." Without another word she walked to her bedroom and undressed. She knew what she wanted to do, but didn't know if she'd have the guts to go through with it.

Ten minutes later, naked beneath her robe, she walked down the hall and stood in Cris' bedroom doorway. Landry hadn't bothered closing the door at all tonight. Cris lay naked in bed, on his back, Landry kneeling between his legs and going down on him. After a few minutes, as she stood there with her clit throbbing and her own juices sliding down her legs, Landry straddled Cris and mounted him, both men letting out pleasured moans as he completely impaled himself.

With her heart racing, she walked over to the bed. Landry didn't appear at all surprised to see her there. He pulled her to him and kissed her, further inflaming her own need. His eyes looked a deep, jungle green in the dim light.

She didn't break eye contact with him as she climbed onto the bed and straddled Cris' face, facing Landry. This was her husband, and she wanted to make sure Cris remembered that. She lowered herself onto him, Landry's arms steadying her as Cris immediately licked her clit.

"You're beautiful, love," Landry murmured as he kissed her. "Gorgeous."

Cris wouldn't take long to make her come. His tongue plunged deep inside her, tugging her closer to release. "Don't you dare come, Landry," she said. "You're my husband. Play with him as long as you like, but your cock better be in my pussy when it explodes tonight."

Cris moaned beneath her, but not in complaint. Her words had the desired effect, triggering his

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climax. She hung on to Landry for support as her orgasm swept through her, making her cry out.

As she recovered, she looked into Landry's eyes and read the passion simmering there. Kissing him, she dragged herself off Cris and grabbed her bathrobe from the floor. "I'll be waiting."

She'd planned a sultry, seductive, hip-swaying flounce from the room, but she could barely walk. She no sooner made it to her bed when she heard Landry in the doorway. By the time she turned around, he was on her, scooping her up and tossing her onto the bed where he landed on top of her, his body covering hers.

"You are fucking beautiful, wife," he growled against her throat, his teeth grazing her flesh. His hard cock plunged home, fast and deep. "So damn sexy."

She met each thrust with her hips. "Show me."

He nipped, a little sting in his bite. "Show me first." He switched to French. "Come for me now!"

Tilly slammed her hips into him as her body responded. "Very good." He switched back to English. "I love you so much." Then he bit down on her shoulder as he fucked her, almost violently.

This spun out her climax, stretching it, her body shuddering beneath him as he poured his seed into her. Finally he collapsed on her. Rolling to his side, he pulled her with him. "Jesus, I love you."

She snuggled tightly in his arms. "I love you, too."

Chuckling as he stroked her back, he said, "You are diabolical, love."

"Why?"

"Bullshit, you ask me why?" He hugged her tightly. "Staking your claim on me like that. Brilliant."

"Well, you did say I was free to use slave however I needed, right?"

"Ah, do I sense a thaw in your heart where he's concerned?"

"Nope." She closed her eyes. "Like you said, I'm staking my claim. On you."

He nuzzled the top of her head. "Consider me well-staked, love."

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Chapter Nineteen

Six months after Landry's treatment started, and all the doctors felt confident he would beat the cancer. Now all they had to do was wait for the next round of blood work results to come back to see if he'd need more than one additional round of chemo. With his birthday a week away, Tilly wanted to come up with something special for him to celebrate.

Cris had to fly out to L.A. for a meeting, which he hated because he'd miss Landry's birthday. Landry overruled him, albeit gently. Even Tilly had to admit he handled it tactfully. He promised Cris he'd make private time for him upon his return, which mollified him a little.

Meanwhile, they'd have the house to themselves.

Skittered thoughts leading to jittery nerves took over. An idea she'd considered, briefly, off and on since this whole crazy thing started. With Cris almost constantly on hand, even though they could shut the bedroom door, she couldn't let go of her last remnants of distrust to seriously consider it.

Letting Landry top her for real. At home, of course. Not at the club.

Just the two of them. Just once, to see what he'd do.

She took the time to prepare while Landry drove Cris to the airport the day before his birthday. It'd give Cris a little time alone with him and she wouldn't have to face dodging Landry's curiosity if he saw her getting ready.

When he returned two hours later from the Sarasota airport, she'd already stashed what she'd need in the playroom, in her toy cupboard there. Landry had no reason to go in there. She stood at the counter making them a salad for lunch when he walked in and laid his keys on the counter.

"There's my baby girl." He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her neck. She didn't mind the way her heart fluttered over the endearment. He ground his hips into her backside. "Are you in the mood to fool around a little after lunch, perhaps?"

"When am I ever *not* in the mood to fool around with you, mister?"

He nipped her neck before continuing to kiss it. "I'm so lucky." He let her go so she could finish preparing their lunch. She was uncomfortably aware of how wet he'd made her just from that

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little bit of affection.

He helped her clean up the dishes later. Then he pulled her into his arms. "Still in the mood?"

She slid her hands into the back pockets of his jeans and pulled his hips against hers. "Duh."

Landry grinned. "That response would have earned Cris a spanking."

"That response would have been designed to earn one." She quickly kissed him, laughing over his arched eyebrow, and turned to walk to the bedroom.

A light swat landed across the seat of her jeans, making her jump. When she turned, he wore a devilish smile and an innocent look. How he managed to successfully combine the two beat the hell out of her.

"Well, you *did* say so, love."

She had originally planned to do it tomorrow night, on his birthday, but during their lunch he'd mentioned going out to eat at Ruth's Chris steakhouse.

Why not now?

She returned to him."Do me a favor, sit on the couch and wait for me, please?"

Up went the eyebrow again. "Why?"

"Please? It's an early birthday surprise for you."

He considered her for a moment, then slowly nodded. "Will I enjoy this?"

It'd been a few weeks since he'd scened with Cris. She had to trust he wouldn't take that frustration out on her. "Pretty sure. I'll call you when I'm ready." When he'd sat on the couch, his back turned to the hall and unable to see where she went, she walked to Cris' bathroom and used it before quietly heading to the playroom.

Could she do this? She'd felt full of nervous bravado and more than a little pleasant anticipation until faced with the reality.

Quickly stripping, she stashed her clothes in the closet and donned a garter belt, fishnets, stilettos she hadn't worn in months, and a corset. She put on the smallest leather wrist cuffs she had, which were still big on her because her customers had all been men larger than her.

No locks. She couldn't go that far today.

Her fingers hesitated as she reached for the collar, the one Ross had given her. Soft, supple cowhide with a hand-tooled floral design. Regular buckle, not lockable.

She put it on but left it a notch looser than she normally would have worn it.

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She left the ankle cuffs on the floor where he could quickly grab them if he wanted to use them, panic snaps attached to them already. She laid out the crops, a cane, a couple of floggers—and her four-foot singletail. Not that she didn't trust him, but she knew the fall and popper on hers wouldn't cut even in his skilled hands. She put out two bottles of water and her mp3 player hooked to the small stereo, set to her favorite play list.

A set of music she hadn't been able to listen to in years, but knew she'd need today.

Finally, the blindfold and the bow. She peeled the adhesive backing from the bow and slapped it in the middle of her ass.

Her heart thundering, she laid face-down over the kneeling bench and slid the blindfold over her eyes. Working by feel, she clipped her wrist cuffs to the eyehooks on the bench.

She had to swallow before she could speak. "Okay," she called out.

At first she wasn't sure he'd heard her. But then she heard the door open and his sharp intake of breath.

"*Mon dieu*!"

Warm shivers engulfed her. Anticipation. Need. She felt herself tipping toward subspace and he hadn't laid a hand on her yet.

After a long moment he still hadn't touched her and she didn't sense him step close. Then he spoke, sounding like he stood near the gear she'd laid out for him.

"Love?" he softly asked.

She'd rehearsed the lines a thousand times in her head, but still her voice trembled as she spoke them. "This is your birthday present, from me to you. I trust you. I wanted it to only be you. Needed it to be only you and me. Not him."

More silence. She heard a noise and suspected it was the sound of him kicking his shoes off. When he spoke again, his lips almost beside her right ear, she startled. "I don't need this from you, love, although I appreciate it. I can love you without this."

"I know." She had to force air into her lungs. "I want to give it to you. At least once. My birthday present to you."

One hand gently caressed her hair. "I don't know what to say, baby."

"You don't have to say anything."

She felt her pussy clench in a familiar way as his fingers tightened in her hair, fisting it,

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possessing her, until he pulled her head up. His voice changed tone, deep, commanding. "You're giving yourself to me today, girl?"

She'd thought long and hard about this, what she wanted to call him.

"Yes, Master."

Another sharp intake of breath from him. He released her hair and stepped around her. She had a sense of where he was and after a moment she heard the gentle swish of fabric as he dropped his shirt to the floor. He now stood there in nothing but his jeans. In her mind she imagined his muscular chest and arms, still handsome despite the ravages of his cancer treatment.

One finger traced light, lazy patterns across her left ass cheek, then her right. He chuckled. "Wrapped with a bow?"

"Yes, Master."

"You know I don't play with a safeword."

She swallowed hard. "I know. I trust you."

His hand disappeared again. She felt him pull the bow off. He unhooked her garter belt and removed it and her shoes and stockings.

She felt him buckle the leather cuffs around her ankles and hook them to the bench. With her ass spread and open, she was a prime target in more ways than one.

"Hmm." One hand returned, his fingers stroking her flesh. "I honestly can say that for the first time in a long time, I have no idea where to start." He chuckled again. "This is a wonderful dilemma."

She tried to slow her breathing, relaxing into his touch as he dipped his fingers between her legs and slowly pushed two inside her.

"Oh, love, you *are* eager to give yourself to me today, aren't you?"

"Yes, Master."

"Part of me wants to fuck you right now, and part of me wants to turn that sweet, pretty pale ass red first. Decisions, decisions."

Cris had always used a safeword with her, but she'd never needed it. He'd always stopped long before she wanted him to, even though she knew she didn't come close to tolerating the level of pain he took from Landry.

His hand gently swatted her ass, not even enough to sting. "I think I'd like to spend all afternoon playing and fucking you, baby. Would you like that?"

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"Yes, Master."

She felt his fingers on the collar. "Where did this come from?"

"It's the one Ross put on me."

She felt him unbuckle and remove it. Then he kissed the nape of her neck. "If any collars ever go around your neck, they'll be placed there by *me*." The rumbling tone of his voice melted what few solid places remained inside her body.

For the first time, she gave serious thought to begging him to collar her.

She felt his lips on her ass, then he bit her, harder than he normally did but then again, he wasn't worried if he left a mark there. She suspected that was his point. She moaned, squirming, wishing she'd opted to beg to go straight to the fucking portion of the afternoon.

He bit her other cheek, equally hard, almost enough to draw a gasp of pain from her. Then he rubbed the marks with his hands. "Oh, love. That looks beautiful." She sensed him sit on the floor behind her and he alternated biting her with licking her pussy, until she begged and squirmed and cried from need and pleasant pain flowing through her. She wanted subspace with him, dammit, and he wasn't quite putting her over the edge.

"I normally don't do this, but I have to say this because I love you. You know how I play. Are you willing to let me take anything from you I wish to have while you are bent over this bench and under my control?"

Her stomach fluttered. "Yes, Master."

"This is my rule. Don't agree to it if you aren't prepared for the circumstances. I will not stop until I feel the need to stop. This is your only chance to decline and I'll free you and take you to bed and fuck your brains out right now."

It was sooo tempting, but with her adrenaline cranking, she didn't want to give this up. "I'm yours for today, Master. To play with any way you want. As long as it's only you."

His hands stroked her again. "Of course it's only me." He flicked his tongue over her clit, making her jump but not getting her off. "Very well, love. I will play with you, and I will totally own you."

He disappeared for a moment and she heard him rummage through the toy cabinet. She couldn't tell from the sound what he picked up, but he returned and rubbed her ass with his hands. "Are you truly ready for me, love?"

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"Yes, Master."

He swatted her ass barehanded, quickly picking up the speed and force after a few minutes until he was giving her a hard spanking, even harder than Cris had ever given her. Her tears flowed as she twisted against his hand, crying but feeling her climb resume in altitude until the endorphins kicked in and she knew she'd tipped.

If he'd keep her there, even for only a few minutes, she'd let him do whatever the hell he wanted.

He gave no quarter, spanking her until her flesh stung and felt hot and she knew if she looked in a mirror it would not only be bright red, but the clear imprint of his hand would be readily visible along with the bite marks no doubt already turning interesting shades of purple.

When he let up she gasped for breath, her face wet with tears and yet desperate for release.

"You're beautiful, love," he said, his tone deeper than normal but even in subspace she recognized he wasn't giving it his all yet.

"Don't hold back," she gasped. "Please."

His hand caressed her ass. "I won't." Then she felt something cool and wet against her rim and realized he'd drizzled lube over her.

She dimly understood what he meant to do and part of her wanted to kick and fight against him.

Part of her wanted to beg him to do it.

"I haven't had you here yet. It's my right to take you here, no?" He slowly probed her virgin rosebud with one gentle finger, taking his time until she moaned and twisted against his hand and begged for more. He used two, then a third. When he slipped fingers from his other hand into her pussy, she wanted to explode but he anticipated this.

"Do not come," he ordered. "I haven't given you permission to do that." All his fingers disappeared and she whined, disappointed. Something else pressed against her rim then. "Push."

She gasped, crying out as the butt plug slid home inside her ass with a burning pinch as her muscles struggled to accept it until he'd seated it all the way inside her. "Oh, god! No, it's too big, take it out!"

"No. You can handle it. It stays until I'm ready to remove it and fuck you. I don't want to injure you. I need you ready because I'm going to fuck you hard and fast and claim this sweet virgin ass." Fingers returned to her clit and within seconds he'd turned the pain into a deeply burning pleasure she

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struggled not to let overwhelm her.

"That's better, now, isn't it, baby?" he said. "You just needed me to play with your clit and make it feel good again, didn't you?"

She whined, beyond coherent speech.

He slapped her ass. Not gently, either, but a hard, stinging slap that made her cry out. "Answer me, baby. You needed me to play with your clit, didn't you?"

"Yes!"

"Yes, *what*?"

"Yes, Master!"

"Very good," he cooed. "That's my good girl."

Tilly lost track of time as he used the floggers on her, then the riding crop. He kept her hovering at the brink of release, refusing to let her climax, her pain and passion fueling her frenzy. If this kept up she'd agree to almost anything if he'd just let her come.

All activity stopped. She moaned and squirmed, the butt plug still inside her, her ass hot and stinging from the riding crop and his spanking. Apparently he'd fetched something else, because she heard the toy cabinet open and close before she heard him unzip his pants and he tugged the butt plug loose. Almost immediately, he pressed his thick knob against her rim.

"Beg me for it, baby."

She'd beg for anything at this point. "Please, please fuck my ass!"

"That wasn't the right way to ask. You know better. Ask me the right way."

Her mind raced. *Wasn't right?* It hit her. "Master, please! Master, fuck my ass!"

"Oh, baby, that's so good." She heard something click on with a hum and didn't have time to process the source. He deeply thrust his lubed cock home inside her before he reached under her and pressed the vibrator against her clit. "Come for me right now, baby."

She screamed as her body arched off the bench and strained against her restraints, waves of pleasure washing over her. He fucked her hard, holding the vibrator tightly against her until she sobbed and squirmed and tried to get away from it. "Come again, now!" he ordered.

She vaguely realized at some point he'd switched to French and had been speaking it for a while. Her body responded, bucking against him as he fucked her and kept her coming with the vibrator. Three orgasms later, he ordered her to beg him to stop making her come before he'd turn off

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the vibrator. Then he grabbed her hips and thrust, his balls slapping against her ass with each stroke, the pleasure churning back to an erotic burn as his cock plunged inside her.

"Beg me to come inside you."

She sobbed. "Please, Master! Please take me! Please come inside me!"

One last thrust and he held still. As her body spun down into a post-scene crash, she felt his jeans against the backs of her thighs, his body draped over hers on the bench as he recovered.

She lay there panting for breath and winced as he withdrew. She was vaguely aware of sounds from Cris' bathroom as he washed himself. A moment later something wet and cool brushed against her tender ass.

"Hold still, baby," he said, his voice gentle again. He cleaned her up with the wet washcloth before pulling the blindfold off her. He unclipped her wrists and ankles and helped her sit up. When she tried to stand she realized she had no strength in her legs.

He picked her up and carried her to their bedroom. She weakly clung to him and when he laid her on their bed he didn't let go. He stretched out next to her and let her drape her body over him. He nuzzled his lips over her forehead, brushed them over her closed eyes.

"Do you hate me?" he softly asked.

Without opening her eyes, she smiled. "No, Master. I don't hate you. I love you more than I can tell you."

* * * *

His heart pounded hard and fast. Hell, she could probably hear it from the way she was laying on top of him.

Master.

He could understand her saying that during the scene, which had surprised the hell out of him in the first place. But to say it now?

"You are so beautiful. I love you so much."

She snuggled closer. "Can we take a nap?" She sounded content. He'd witnessed lots of emotions in her. He honestly couldn't remember ever hearing her sound content before.

"We'll do whatever my sweet baby girl wants to do."

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Her voice took on an almost little girl quality. "I want to lay here with you and take a nap, and then later I want to cuddle and watch TV."

A mental image struck him between the eyes. Of him sitting on the couch with her curled in his lap and Cris kneeling naked at his feet, his head resting against his knee. Of the three of them content and happy in their kinky little way.

"Did I hurt you, baby?" He had no doubts when she fully recovered from subspace that the only time she'd call him "Master" would be with more than a hint of sarcasm.

She did seem a lot more relaxed than he'd ever seen her.

"Nope."

Another thought suddenly struck him. He realized how stupid and short-sighted he'd been once again. It was worth the risk though. Hopefully, this time his failure to see the nose on his face hadn't harmed someone.

He shifted her in his arms just a little, until he had her cradled securely against him. "You were Daddy's very good girl, weren't you?"

If a human being could melt, she did. It was as if all tension suddenly flowed out of her. Her voice sounded even softer. "Yes."

He tipped her chin up to him, meeting her eyes. "My God, you are full of surprises, love." He tenderly kissed her. "You want to be Daddy's little girl, don't you?"

Her eyes went wide, but she nodded.

Landry took another risk, searching for another chink in her emotional armor that he suspected lay waiting for him to discover. "Daddy's sweet little girl, except when you want to be my sweet little slut?"

Her eyes dropped closed again. A soft moan escaped her. "Yes!"

His cock hardened inside his jeans. Holy fuck, all these months together and in some ways she was still a stranger to him.

It also explained why she wouldn't let go of her old triggers. It wasn't that it hurt more to get rid of them, but she couldn't trust someone enough to let go with them and fulfill that need for her, needing that Daddy/girl dynamic to feed a part of her soul. He wondered how long she'd been with Cris before he discovered that about her.

He rolled on top of her, kissing her. "My sweet baby girl doesn't want a harsh Master." He

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kissed her and her legs spread, wrapping around his hips so she could grind against him. She looked up at him, her gaze full of wonder. "My sweet baby girl wants her Daddy to treat her like a princess, except in the bedroom. Then she wants to be his playful little slut, doesn't she?"

She nodded, her eyes still wide.

He slid his hands up her arms, firmly gripping her wrists and holding them pinned over her head. "But only for me, correct?"

She nodded a little harder, her eyes never leaving him, her hips moving in time with his.

"Because if I take good care of my sweet little baby girl, she'll be my playful little slut whenever I want, won't she?"

Tilly nodded, her lower lip now caught under her teeth. Her skin flushed. He had no doubt she was already close to coming just from how he'd talked to her.

Gripping both her wrists in one hand, he reached down and unfastened his jeans with the other and pulled out his stiff cock. "My little slut wants another good fucking right now, don't you?"

An eager nod and playful smile.

How many other secrets were locked inside her? Maybe he'd have to have a long, private talk with Cris and see if he could offer any insight. Then again, that might be crossing the boundary of respecting her privacy.

Not to mention she was no longer the girl Cris knew, even if her love life hit a stasis between Cris' departure and his own arrival.

When he lined his cock up she tipped her hips, giving him better access. He viciously speared her, fucked her hard and fast and didn't need to order her to come. Within a few strokes she was already crying out, her muscles contracting around his shaft, surprising him at the intensity but with that encouragement it didn't take long for him to climax too. He rolled over, keeping her on top of him.

"So who are you now, baby?" he asked.

She squirmed against him before nipping one of his nipples. "I'm your good little slut," she whispered.

He laughed and held her close, stilling her motions. "Then be a very good girl and let's take a nap. You wore Daddy out."

* * * *

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Tilly awoke from her nap still draped over Landry's chest. He'd never bothered removing his jeans. She closed her eyes and silently moaned. *Jesus, what would happen now?* Yes, it'd felt better than great. She hadn't counted on how safe he'd make her feel, how natural it felt slipping into old habits even if she'd never played with him before.

But ever since Cris had called her that at the hospital that afternoon, it had remained in the back of her mind.

When he nuzzled the top of her head, she knew he was awake. "Can we talk?" he asked.

She couldn't look him in the eyes. "Okay."

"Love, let me be what you need me to be for you. Please."

"I don't know what I need."

He tipped her chin so she had to look at him. "Whatever happens is between you and me. Not Cris. This is about us. I told you when we first started that I want to be what you need."

She felt safe with him. He'd literally die before he left her alone.

Crossing her arms over his chest, she rested her chin on them and stared at him. "I don't think I can scene with him in the house. Not right now, at least."

He played with her hair. Now down to her shoulders, he loved to run his fingers through it. "Do you want Daddy and girl?"

She nodded. "Sometimes."

He playfully smiled. She loved that about him, that she could bring out sweet and playful Landry whereas Cris didn't get to see that part of him very often. "Will I be lucky enough to see Daddy's playful little slut on a regular basis?"

She laughed. "Yeah."

He faked a relieved sigh. "Oh, good. I was afraid I might never see that chick again. She's wild."

Tilly poked him in the ribs until he started tickling her. They ended up with her on her back under him, being tickled. She squealed in protest, but he wouldn't stop until she finally realized what he wanted.

"Daddy, please stop."

He laughed and nipped the base of her throat. "You do learn fast, sweetheart." He rolled them

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over again, Tilly on top, his hands resting on her ass. "Am I allowed to instigate?"

She frowned. "Huh?"

"I know I can't top you, but am I allowed to start play like that with you or do I have to wait for your lead?"

Fear gripped her, mixed with more than a heaping dose of longing. She crossed her arms over his chest again and stared into his eyes for several minutes. He still had one more planned round of chemo to endure, then the doctors would wait and see what happened. It likely could be his last round as long as he continued to improve.

She had to be strong for him, to help him through that. Meanwhile…

"I want you to," she softly admitted. "But I reserve the right to change my mind about that if I need to."

"Of course."

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Chapter Twenty

Her agitation returned as she counted down the hours until Cris' return. For the past couple of months she had tamped her jealousy back and held it securely in check. Landry spent every night with her, although it wasn't uncommon for him to spend private time with Cris before he came to bed, or even get up in the middle of the night to go to him for a little while.

That she didn't mind. If he did it with anyone else, she'd have castrated him with her bare hands, but for some reason, she could deal with it.

Usually.

Landry had casually asked her before Cris' return if she minded if he spent the entire night with Cris—in Cris' room, of course—upon his return. To make up for Cris missing his birthday.

"Why would I mind?" Unfortunately, she realized she did mind. *He's* my *husband, dammit.* Sharing him for an hour or two, no problem.

All night?

Landry carefully watched her. She knew from the way he tipped his head that he studied her reaction. "Love?"

She turned away and wouldn't look at him. "Seriously, it's okay. I don't mind. I had private time with you for your birthday. It's all right."

"I promise I won't discuss any of that with him. That's between you and me."

"I know." She'd suspected, but to hear his reassurance comforted her.

When Landry left for the airport to pick up Cris after giving her a soul-melting kiss, she called Loren.

"Hey, chica. How's hunky hubby?"

"He's fine. Not looking forward to the next round of chemo, but it's probably the last round, so he's feeling good about that."

"Good. What's on your mind?"

"You guys going to the club tonight?"

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Wrong approach. Tilly picked up Loren's caution tone. "Yeah? Why? What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. Cris had to go out of town and I got to spend Landry's birthday alone with him, so I thought I'd be magnanimous and let Cris have the evening alone with him. Landry's picking him up now."

Loren's tone marginally relaxed. "Oh. You're right, that is pretty adult of you. Dammit, that means you're not making him sleep in the garage, are you?"

Tilly laughed. "You know damn well I'm not."

She sighed. "Well, a girl can dream, can't she? Sure, you want to come with?"

"Dinner first?"

"Abso-friggin-lutely."

She glanced at the clock, it was nearly four. She knew Landry would take Cris out to eat before bringing him home. "I'll just come over to your place and bring my stuff with me. I'll ride to dinner with you and then change at your place."

Aaaaand cautious tone returned. "Til, are you sure everything's okay?"

"Yeah, I just don't feel like hearing a slave get beat tonight."

Loren roared with laughter. "So you want to go to a BDSM club? Um, logical much?"

"I meant the slave I live with. I'll see you in a little while."

"You're coming right now?"

"If you don't mind."

"No, I don't mind, but the Marquis de Sade's been playful today. Give me enough time to get a little less uncomfortable."

Tilly could only imagine what Ross had done to her. "No visuals, please. Let's say I'll be there around five-thirty."

"That would work perfectly."

Tilly hung up and quickly gathered what she'd need to take with her. She was about to walk out the door when she realized something.

She needed to leave a note for Landry so he'd know not to worry.

Leaving her stuff by the front door, she sat at the counter and tried to work up something in her mind that wouldn't come out looking petulant and jealous on paper.

Have fun fucking your slave tonight, I'll be fine…

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Don't worry about me, enjoy yourself…

I made plans…

"Fuck!" She stared at the blank sheet of paper.

She finally wrote something. *Going to dinner with L&R, then to the club for the evening. Will probably be back very late.*

She hesitated.

Love, T.

To kill time before Loren's, she headed to the bookstore and bought herself a hi-test coffee. It'd been two months since she'd gone to the club and she wasn't used to the late nights.

Being a happily married couple had tamed her.

She sat in a corner of the bookstore and paged through a magazine someone else had left on a nearby table, but she didn't do more than look at the pictures. She couldn't concentrate anyway. In the back of her mind she couldn't escape the mental image of Landry sleeping curled around Cris.

Why now? She could watch him torture and humiliate and fuck Cris, but the thought of him *sleeping* with the man roiled her jealousy?

But he's my *husband.*

Was this a result of their new dynamic? Realizing she trusted him more in a few short months than she'd trusted Cris in their years together? Not much more, but then again, she also had the comfort that he wouldn't simply up and disappear on her the way Cris had.

Maybe that had been her mistake. Getting her fucking hopes up.

Hope was for chumps, and she never should have forgotten that.

* * * *

Loren opened the door as Tilly carried her bags up the walk. Loren wore a bathrobe Tilly suspected covered whatever remained of Ross' kinky diversion for the day.

"What's wrong?" Loren asked.

"Nothing's wrong!" She dropped her bags in the doorway to the guest room. "Why are you so convinced something's wrong?"

"You're frowning, and you're biting my head off." She scowled. "What the fuck did Cris do?

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Can I castrate him?"

"Jesus! Enough with the castration fantasies, all right?" She took a deep breath and, after sitting at Loren's counter, admitted a little of what bothered her.

Not what she'd done with Landry. That was something she wouldn't even talk to her best friend about.

Loren's face softened. "Tell Landry you're not okay with it and fuck Cris and his feelings. Landry's *your* husband. You said he told you he'd give Cris up altogether if you asked."

"I don't want to ask that. Normally it doesn't bother me."

"Because normally you're there."

Tilly nodded.

"Then tell him you're not okay with him spending the night with Cris."

"You just want Cris' feelings hurt."

"No, I don't want *your* feelings hurt, girlie. Him getting his feelings hurt is just a nice bonus, in my book."

Tilly leaned back and laced her fingers behind her head. "My feelings aren't hurt. I'm not sure what my feelings are or why I'm having them."

Loren smacked her shoulder. "Duh. You're in love with your husband. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure that out, Einstein."

* * * *

Kim and Kylee joined them for dinner. Later, Tilly rode back to Ross and Loren's house with them to change clothes and head to the club. She tried not to look at her phone, to check the time and see if there were messages or missed calls from Landry. She rode to the club with her friends, knowing they were usually one of the last to leave.

No excuse for her to duck out early and go home.

Less chance of listening to sounds of the men making love behind a closed door she didn't feel right about opening.

She immediately regretted her decision to ride with Ross and Loren five minutes after arriving. Bob walked in, alone.

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Oh, fuck me.

Loren apparently picked up on her apprehension and followed her gaze. She leaned in. "Yeah, as much as I hate to tell you this, I feel sorry for him. He misses you."

Bob spotted her and the smile that lit his face filled her with more guilt. He walked over and she mustered the courage to deal with him.

"Hi, Tilly." She didn't miss the way he glanced around, as if looking for someone.

"I'm here alone," she told him. "Well, I came with Ross and Loren, but just me." He relaxed. So she'd picked up on that correctly. "So what are you doing here?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I come here sometimes." His gaze flicked down to his feet. "You know. Just… hanging out." She realized he wore the collar she'd bought for him.

If Landry could be fucking Cris' brains out tonight, then dammit, she could do something to take her mind off it. "Are you meeting anyone tonight?"

He pulled his gaze back up to her face. "No. Just thought I'd cruise in and hang out."

Part of her brain warned her this might be a very bad idea. "Would you like to play? As friends," she added with a smile. "Tilly and Bob."

The sweet smile on his face made her want to cry. "Yeah. I'd like that a lot."

When she tried to grab her gear bag, he beat her to it and carried it for her.

She led him to the far corner of the dungeon where few people were playing yet and staked out a bench.

This was wrong on many levels. She shouldn't be playing with him just to take her mind off Landry.

Then again, even Landry had said he didn't have a problem with her playing. Not like she'd be sleeping with him.

She tried to ignore the wistful pang that elicited.

He waited for her instructions like the good boy she remembered. Tonight, she could be more than just Mistress Cardinal.

"Get undressed," she softly told him. He smiled and started unbuttoning his shirt.

Digging through her bag, she found a pair of wrist cuffs and when he stood before her she fastened them to him.

He did have a nice body. Every bit as nice as Landry's.

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And Cris'.

Won't think about that.

She hooked him to the bench and started massaging him with her hands, something she'd never done before with him. He relaxed under her touch and she immediately recognized when he'd started tipping into subspace.

Tilly allowed her heart into the scene. She took her time, stepping him up and back time and again, sensual sadism instead of her usually vicious way with him. Her anger at Cris, and Landry, broke through. Leaning in, she whispered in Bob's ear.

"Do you want to be my good boy?"

"Yes, Mistress!"

She didn't correct him. Deep in subspace, he'd probably do anything she asked of him.

"You want to come for me?"

"Yes, Mistress!"

She'd never been able to give him this before. Dammit, he deserved it. At least one of them could end the evening feeling better than when it started. She reached under him with her left hand and grabbed his stiff cock. With her right, she spanked him bare handed.

"Come for me, boy."

His hips frantically worked in time with her motions, until he let out a cry and she felt his hot juices coating her hand, slicking his cock even more. But she didn't stop, spanking him with more force, milking him, forcing his cock to stay rigid until a few minutes later he was begging her to stop even as she pulled another, smaller orgasm from him.

Only then did she stop. She wiped her hands on a towel and unhooked his wrists. Grabbing a few antiseptic wipes from the canister by the bench, she cleaned herself and him up, then helped him sit up.

His body still trembled. She closed her eyes and held him, remembering the brief interlude in her life where she'd allowed herself to hope maybe he would be a part of her future.

Without realizing it at first, she stroked his back, his hair, as he clung to her.

She kissed the top of his head. "You're a good boy," she softly told him. "Thank you for letting me play with you tonight."

"Thank you," he said back.

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When he recovered enough to get dressed, she let him get up and wiped down the bench to make it ready for the next players. A quick trip into the bathroom to wash her hands, and when she returned, Bob still stood by her gear bag, waiting for her. They staked out a small corner sofa and sat, talking, for hours. Not much had changed in his life.

"Thank you for this, Tilly. I appreciate it."

She offered him a smile. "I'm glad you came tonight. No pun intended."

He rested his arm on the back of the couch. His fingers brushed her arm. "Are you doing okay? He treating you well?"

"Yeah. Still abusing my ex."

That made him grin. "Good. I'm glad." His smile faded. "You happy?"

Buzzkill. "Landry's a good man. I love him. The doctors are pretty confident he's going to beat the cancer."

His fingers didn't leave her arm. "He's not jealous of you being here?" He met her gaze. "I can't say I'd be happy about my wife being with another guy like this."

"He's not a jealous man like that." She smirked. "He probably would have enjoyed watching me do that to you. Landry and I have something in common, you know."

"What?"

"We both enjoy naked men." When he looked at her in confusion, she explained a little more of the story.

He laughed. "So if I run into you here with him I shouldn't be surprised if he offers to play with me, too?"

She grinned, a sudden thought filling her with heat. "Maybe I could get you a twofer if you wanted."

His eyes widened a little. "Holy fuck," he muttered. "I'm not gay, but I have to admit the thought of that made me hard."

Before she stopped herself, she leaned in and brushed a kiss across his lips. Not long enough to be passionate, but a little longer than just friends. "I'll talk to him about it."

* * * *

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Tilly sat in her car in the driveway for almost twenty minutes and stared at the darkened house. She'd sat and talked with Bob most of the night. Not quite four a.m. now, she could easily go to a hotel and wait to come home until later that afternoon.

But that would mean sending Landry a text or calling him to let him know she wouldn't be home so he wouldn't worry.

She slammed her fist against the steering wheel. This was her house, dammit. Not Cris' house.

Her husband, *not* his.

Never mind she now felt guilty about what she'd done, even though truthfully, Landry probably would be more than happy to help her top Bob. He also probably would have enjoyed watching her top him tonight. She knew enough about Landry to know not only would he not consider that inappropriate considering the context, but he'd probably think Bob was hot.

She grabbed her bags and let herself in the front door. She thought about taking the toy bag down to the playroom, then decided against it. The door to Cris' room was shut and she'd have to walk past it.

She dropped her bags in her closet. They could wait until tomorrow. She turned and surveyed the room, the bed exactly as she'd left it, made, with the corset she'd decided not to wear still laying on the coverlet.

The unexpected lump in her throat was hard to swallow down. Except for his times in the hospital, this was the first night since their wedding they hadn't spent together, at least in part.

Logic tried to break in. *Landry belonged to Cris first, not you. Cris spent the past several months unable to sleep with him at all.*

How's it feel?

She shoved that line of thought out of her brain and grabbed the corset before she yanked the sheets down. She dumped her clothes in the closet then slipped between the sheets. By four-thirty, she knew sleep wasn't coming.

She got up, found her robe, and yanked it on. Then she quietly opened her room door and walked down the hall.

Silently, she held her breath and listened at Cris' door.

Nothing.

Well, duh. They're asleep. Which you should be, too.

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She didn't like the ache in her heart. Part of her was tempted to open the door, walk in, and lay down next to Landry. He'd welcome her, no doubt.

It wouldn't be the mature or fair thing to do, but who said anything about fairness or maturity, dammit?

She returned to her room. As she closed the bedroom door, she locked it behind her.

* * * *

Daylight streamed through the skylight, into the bathroom and reflected off the sink faucet, bouncing into her eyes. She'd forgotten to push the bathroom door closed.

"Shit."

She rolled over. After nine-thirty, but she didn't hear anything going on in the house. Both men should be up.

She used the bathroom and decided to go ahead and take her shower now. It would mean not making an excuse to Landry about why she didn't want to shower with him this morning.

Not that she didn't want to, but she couldn't face him yet. She admitted it—she was avoiding him.

I'm sure Cris slept like a rock.

Okay, clear those thoughts out right now.

I wonder how Bob slept last night.

She stood under the water, hot as she could stand it, and let it soak into her. Bob had looked so happy last night when she offered to play with him. Even happier the way she played with him. And when she left the door open to future playtime with him?

It nearly broke her heart how hopeful he looked.

If there was a victim in all this, it was him, even if she'd never slept with him. By all rights she should be happily dating him, falling in love with him. What the hell had she done?

It's not like Landry fell in love with her because he knew her and wanted to be with her. He wanted someone to help take care of him.

Whereas she'd spent three years working with Bob. Okay, so only a day here and there, and total time together, she'd spent a lot more with Landry, but still.

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Who said you couldn't buy love?

Landry had bought hers.

* * * *

She dressed and walked out to the kitchen to make herself something to eat. Landry sat at the table in the kitchen with his laptop. He looked up at her approach. At first he smiled, then it faded.

"What's wrong, love?"

"Nothing." She popped a bagel into the toaster oven and waited for it without walking over to give him a good morning kiss.

He pushed back from the table and went to her. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." When he wrapped his arms around her from behind, she let him kiss her cheek but she didn't turn around to reciprocate like she normally might.

"I tried to come in this morning. You locked the door."

"Oh, did I? Sorry. It was really late when I came in."

He finally released her. She heard Cris down the hall, in the office probably, talking on the phone. Landry didn't leave her alone, however. He leaned against the counter and crossed his arms and watched her slather way more cream cheese than she usually used over the toasted bagel.

He dropped his voice. "Are you going to talk to me?"

She headed for the lanai and hoped he wouldn't follow her. "There's nothing to talk about. I just want to eat breakfast. Is that a crime?"

He didn't follow and she felt even worse for giving him the brush-off.

Eventually she returned to the bedroom, and that's when he followed her and pursued the topic.

"Love, did something happen at the club last night?"

She refused to meet his gaze. "No. I'm fine."

"Did you play?"

She thought about lying to him and decided not to. "Yes."

"Who did you play with?"

"Does it matter?" He sighed, but he didn't force her. She finally admitted, "Bob."

"I see."

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She wheeled around, immediately on the defensive. "What? I'm not allowed to play? You said as long as I didn't have sex with someone else that you didn't care."

He slowly nodded. "That's correct. I did. However, you've never been this upset before. I'd like to know why."

She so didn't want to go there, but it spilled out and she knew if she didn't say it, it would continue to fester. She stalked over to him and lowered her voice so Cris couldn't hear. "You told me when you found out what Cris did to me that you felt like a pity fuck, right?"

He nodded, eying her, but didn't speak.

"Well, I guess it finally slammed home for me that it's about the same way I feel. Like you married me because you felt sorry for me because of what he did to me. Let's face it, you're gay. Straight for me notwithstanding, normally I wouldn't have even crossed your radar." When she tried to turn away, he grabbed her arm and wouldn't let go.

"Love, that's *not* how I feel about you! Yes, in the beginning it was a transaction, one designed to punish Cris, but I have never lied when I've told you how I feel. I love you. You are my wife, and I plan on doing my damnedest to convince you of how I feel no matter how long it takes."

She jerked her arm away and pulled back. "Yeah. So I don't leave with your money."

He shook his head. "No! Jesus Christ, I love you. What do I have to do to convince you of that? What caused this?"

"When the three years are up," she said, "we'll go back to your attorney and change the pre-nup so everything's yours again. I don't want anything, only the salary you promised." She wouldn't look at him. "I want to be fair."

He crossed the bedroom and grabbed her arms, shaking her. "You promised you wouldn't leave me! You *can't* leave me!"

"I can, and I don't have to leave you. This is *my* house, remember?"

"Dammit, Tilly, please talk to me!"

She thrashed against him, but he held on tighter until she finally gave in and collapsed against him. He pulled her into his arms and sat with her on the bed. "Talk to me, baby girl, please. Don't do this to me. Don't kill me like this, I can't take it. I can't lose you."

"You belong with Cris," she admitted. "You're his Master, and he loves you."

"You said you loved me," he hoarsely asked. "Didn't you mean it?"

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"Yeah. I mean it. That's why I can let you go be with him." How ironic, the two men who could break her heart getting to ride off into the sunset together without her.

"No. I won't lose you. I'll send him away."

"You can't do that to him."

"I told you from the beginning that I would do it if you told me to."

"But you love him."

"And I love *you* and you're my wife. If you think I'm leaving you without a fight, think again." He made her look at him. "This has nothing to do with the money. We can go down there today and redo the pre-nup if it'll make you feel better. If I lose you, I lose my fucking heart, and I can't go through that again."

"You love Cris. I know you do. It's not fair to him to do this. I'd moved on after he left. It took a while, sure, but I did it. I can do it again. You need him and he needs you. He can't find someone else to be what you are to him. You, on the other hand, are proof that given enough time, I can find someone else." She tried to climb out of his lap and he wouldn't let her go.

He shook his head. "Stop it. I won't leave. I can't lose you." Then she spotted the tears in his eyes and it froze her in place. "I *can't* lose you," he repeated, his voice hoarse and choked. "Please, Tilly, reconsider! Talk to me. Just…dammit, tell me what I did wrong so I can fix it! I need you!"

She reached up and gently brushed his tears away with her thumb, fascinated by the feel of them on her fingertips. This wasn't the strong and angry Master, or her playful husband, or even gentle and loving Daddy.

This was a desperate man in a lot of pain.

"If it tells you anything," he said, "I didn't cry when Cris left me until much later. You're killing me, baby girl. You're my life and I can't lose you. I *need* you. I don't want to live without you. Please!"

She threw her arms around him and tried to deal with the crush of emotions swamping her. No, she couldn't leave him. He loved her.

As much as she loved him.

He *needed* her.

He muttered into her hair, "Please, I love you. I can't lose you. Don't leave me."

"How can you say you'd get rid of him and keep me? You've loved him longer than you've loved me."

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He lifted his head and touched his forehead to hers. "As you yourself said, I've lost him before and I survived. To lose you would kill me."

"You almost killed yourself."

"That was my stupid choice. I didn't have to make it. Thank god I didn't succeed or I'd never have met you." He kissed her. "I'll admit it. I'm a selfish man. I want both of you. I love both of you. If forced to choose, however, I will always choose you."

What was she doing? Why get upset over this? Why be an immature brat over this?

"Would you rather be free to take a chance with Bob?" he quietly asked. "Is that what brought this on? That you want to see where things might lead with him?"

"No!" It hit her—that absolutely was the truth. She did not want to be free. She felt sorry for Bob, but she didn't want to lose Landry. "Okay. I won't leave. I'm sorry. I'm… I just really got broadsided by all this."

He hugged her tightly, desperately. "Jesus you scared twenty years off my life, baby girl. Please don't frighten me like that again."

Tilly closed her eyes and let him hold her. No, she didn't want to be anywhere but here.

"I think I need some time to reconsider the Cris issue," she admitted. "It's not fair to him to keep him like that, not able to spend time with you, but I don't know how to get over my jealousy."

"Is that what upset you?"

He waited for her answer even though it took her a long moment to finally admit it. "Yes. I don't know why it doesn't bother me seeing you use him or play with him, but when I'm not allowed to at least watch… Yeah, it's a double standard. I admit it."

He stroked her cheek. "I'm sorry it upset you. If I'd known, I never would have done it."

"See, that's the point. I didn't know it would upset me that much and in all fairness, I should man up and deal with it."

He grinned. "I would prefer you don't get manly."

"Ugh. Pain in the ass, that's what you are."

He closed his eyes and rested his forehead against hers. "Whatever I have to do to make you happy, I will. If you want, we'll go to the lawyer today and change things. I can't lose you, sweetheart. Please."

She thought about it for a while. "No, that's okay." She took a deep breath. "I guess I'm not as

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big a person as I thought I was. You're my husband and sharing you with him isn't as easy as I thought it might be."

* * * *

Landry squeezed his eyes shut and held her tightly, afraid to let her go. He could not lose her. Would not lose her.

If she would just open up and let Cris back into her heart, no way she'd leave the two of them. He had to bridge that gap before something else happened and he risked losing her forever.

He didn't need to lie to her about how he felt. Losing her would rip his heart and soul apart. And he did need her, every bit as much as he needed Cris.

He just needed to make her admit how much she still loved Cris and find a way to bring them together again for good.

* * * *

Tilly's way of working through her issues was to make Cris' life miserable over the next few days. Landry didn't miss her harsh tone, sarcastic comments, and less than charitable treatment.

In one way, Landry was glad to see it. It meant she felt something, anything. Her avoidance of the issue over the past several months had frustrated him. While sick he didn't have the energy to devote to changing the situation. Barring any unforeseen complications, his own future looked exceedingly bright.

Meaning he could now focus on the problem at hand.

Landry stayed out of it for the most part, other than watching. He ignored Cristo's frustrated glances his way whenever Tilly yet again berated him for something. Landry opted not to enlighten him. He suspected Cris would object on conscientious grounds, and if Tilly thought they were working together, it could, in fact, drive her away.

Losing her was not an acceptable option.

Even if it meant Cris would have to suffer the slings and arrows of Tilly's jealous rage, they would soldier on.

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Certainly, Cris had suffered far worse at his own hands over the years.

Not to mention, the sadist in Landry took great pleasure over his slave's discomfort, especially when Cris tripped all over himself, even when Cris knew Tilly's attacks were unwarranted, to try to mollify her.

Over the next week, her anger bubbled up, seething, until the littlest thing could set her off. Landry sat at the kitchen table, working on his laptop, when Cris came in from grocery shopping and started putting things away. Tilly had gone out for lunch with Loren and arrived home just as Cris finished unpacking everything.

Landry sat back, crossed his arms over his chest, and waited for the show to begin. He knew it would, too, because Cris had already violated one of Cardinal's rules.

She didn't disappoint. She grabbed the wad of plastic bags off the counter and shook it in Cris' face. "What the fuck is this?"

Cris immediately took a deep breath and Landry watched his struggle to keep his voice calm. "I'm sorry, Tilly. The reusable bags were in your car and I forgot to get them out before you left."

She threw them on the floor. "They're fucking ninety-nine cents each!" She pointed at Landry. "How many millions is he worth, and you can't fucking spring for ten bucks worth of reusable grocery bags? Did you fucking lose your ability to think for yourself, asshole?"

Landry smirked. Oh, she was definitely pissed. At least four fucks in just a few breaths. He watched Cris take another deep breath to maintain control.

"You're absolutely right. I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

She yanked the refrigerator door open. "Where's my fucking cola?" Tilly didn't drink much in the way of sodas. Only one specific brand—Boylan—and only the ginger ale and cane cola flavors. She didn't drink it all the time, either, but when she wanted it, it'd better be there.

"They were out." He had to hand it to Cris, he was doing his best to keep his tone calm. Landry recognized the effort from when he'd let loose on Cris during his sick periods. "They said they should be getting more tomorrow—"

She slammed the fridge door shut and advanced on him. "You mean to tell me there are at least five Publixes in a ten mile radius of this house, and *all* of them were out of Boylan cola? You are fucking worthless!"

Landry sensed the situation reaching critical mass. She'd never gone after him so directly

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before, and for such an extended time. Usually she preferred a hit and run attack, a snarky comment here, an insult there, and let it drop. She looked like she was deliberately trying to egg him into a major confrontation.

Maybe this was the opportunity he'd waited for, the chance for Cristo's impeccable control to take enough of a beating he would react emotionally.

"I'm sorry. I'll go out and find you some. Normally you don't drink it every day, so I didn't think—"

"Nice job, asshole. You think. That's the problem, isn't it? You think too much. Your job, *slave*, isn't to think, it's to follow fucking orders. Maybe he hasn't beaten that into your pea brain. Maybe I need to give you a session of my own to fucking beat some sense into you and remind you that you aren't here to think, *you goddamned asshole*!"

The last three words were delivered at something akin to a scream. Landry smiled to himself as he watched the last of Cris' control dissolve in frustration. *Here we go. This is my chance.*

* * * *

Landry sat laughing at the table as Tilly stormed off and slammed the bedroom door behind her.

"What's so fucking funny?" Cris asked, temporarily forgetting who he was speaking to in his anger.

"Why the hell do you let her treat you like that?"

He frowned. "What?"

Landry rolled his eyes. "Have you gone simple, slave? Why do you let her treat you like garbage?"

He stared at his Master, certain he'd misheard him. "You told me I had to do what she said when you married her."

"I said you had to *obey* her. I never said you had to let her treat you like shit, asshole." He grinned, amused.

"Okay, now I'm confused."

Landry stood with his coffee mug in hand and headed for the work-out room. "Go after her. You love her, she loves you. I never said you had to let her treat you like trash. It's time you show her how

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much you still love her." He turned to Cris. "But if she takes your nuts off in the process, it's your own damn fault."

"I can…" He couldn't finish, not sure he'd heard him right.

Landry rolled his eyes again. "Go. Fuck. Her. Brains. Out." He pointed toward the master bedroom. That said, he stepped into the work-out room and closed the door.

Cris stared at the closed door for a moment, then rushed out of the kitchen and across the house to the master bedroom.

He didn't bother knocking. When he threw the door open, she turned, startled, from where she'd been changing clothes. The sight of her standing there in her bra and jeans hardened his cock immediately.

"What the fuck are you doing in here? Get out!"

Without a word he crossed the distance, grabbed her, and kissed her, hard. He fisted his hand in her hair and held her until her struggles weakened and he felt her respond. Only then did he lift his head.

His voice choked. "I love you, Redbird. Always and forever, and I meant it. This isn't about your fucking soda, and you know it. I'm going to show you how much I still love you and want you."

She started struggling again as he scooped her up and dumped her onto the bed. She sprang up, coming at him, murderous rage in her eyes.

He caught her and pushed her back onto the bed, then straddled her, her arms pinned over her head. "Get it out of your system now, *right* now, baby girl. Scream at me, yell at me all you want. I love you, and you still love me, and I'm tired of trying to pretend seeing him fuck you and not being able to touch you myself doesn't kill me."

"Good!" she screamed, tears welling in her eyes. "Good, because I hope it fucking eats you up from the inside out!"

He kissed her again, until she gave up struggling. When he lifted his head she said, "He's going to tear a strip out of your hide for this. Get the fuck off of me!"

"He told me to come after you."

"Bullshit!"

"I did," Landry said from the bedroom doorway. His sudden appearance startled both Cris and Tilly.

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She went limp again, this time in apparent shock. "What?"

Landry smiled and walked over to the bed. "I didn't think he'd have the balls to do it. I'm glad to see I was wrong." He stretched out next to her and kissed her. "You still love him. He still loves you. I would love to see the two of you finally kiss and make up. Literally. Not just getting along for my sake, but back together."

"You son of a bitch! I *knew* it!"

"No, love, I didn't mean it like that. I can see the way you watch him, the look in your eyes when I use him. The longing you still have for him, as much as he has for you."

"He's not my fucking Master!" She struggled again. "Get the *fuck* off of me!"

"Stay right there, Cris," Landry said. "I didn't say become his slave again. I mean forge a new dynamic with him."

"I thought you didn't want to share me. Another lie?"

"No. I don't consider this sharing. I told you from the start that if your feelings for him ever changed I would welcome it. He still loves you, you still love him. I love both of you, and, well, before this moment I think you really loved me. *N'est-ce pas*?"

"I love you," she softly said. "I do love you. You know that."

He arched an eyebrow at her. "You don't hate me now for ordering him in here?"

After a long moment, she finally shook her head. Just a little, but enough.

"Let her go," Landry commanded.

Cris sat back on his knees and released her hands, but she didn't move.

Landry kissed her again. "I will order him out if you really want me to. Otherwise, why don't we see what happens?" He softened his voice. "Aren't you tired of trying to find reasons to be angry with him, love?"

Cris leaned forward and gently nipped at the base of her throat. Landry didn't move.

Her eyes dropped closed as she softly moaned.

Cris worked his way lower, down her chest, between her breasts until he freed the left one and sucked her nipple between his lips. She gasped. Her hand gripped his hair, not pulling him away but holding him tightly to her. He didn't want to allow hope into his heart, but he couldn't help it.

Landry freed her other breast and licked her nipple. "Tell us to stop if you wish, love, but you would miss out on the delicious experience of two men catering to your every sexual whim. From

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today on, we are totally under *your* control."

Cris closed his eyes, her scent filling his lungs. He never dreamed this day would come, even after she forgave him. Never thought Landry would ever let him be anything other than a cuckolded toy for them both.

He would've happily settled for that too, just to stay with Landry and see her every day.

"Please don't stop," she whispered.

"There's my sweet baby girl," Landry muttered around her breast.

Cris relinquished the breast in his mouth and worked his way further south, unfastening her jeans and tugging them down her body. Her panties soon followed.

He pushed her legs apart and bent his head to her mound. His tongue licked her, swirling around her clit, along her already damp folds, plunging into her hot pussy. Her moans sounded like absolute heaven to him.

"Let him show you how much he still loves you," Landry told her. "Let him back into your heart. Quit fighting what you know you still feel. It's only making you miserable."

She moaned again, her hips gyrating against Cris' mouth. He wrapped his hands around her thighs and licked, sucked, memories of many nights spent just like this flooding back to him with nearly overwhelming strength.

"Come for him, love," Landry whispered to her. "Let go, it's all right. I'm right here. I promise I won't leave you. I want you to come for him."

Tilly's entire body trembled as Cris brought her close to the brink. Her hands fisted his hair, almost painfully, and he welcomed it. She held on tightly as he slowly licked her clit, her body vibrating beneath him.

Landry softly murmured encouragement to her. It suddenly struck Cris this had been his plan all along.

I'm a fucking dumbass.

He'd deal with Landry later. For now, he wanted every second he spent between her legs spent focused on her and her pleasure. She moaned and writhed beneath him as he drove her toward release.

Landry kissed her. "Come for me, baby girl. Let it happen."

She cried out as her grip tightened on his hair. He wondered if he'd have bald spots by the time they finished and realized he didn't care. He stayed with her, wringing every last drop of pleasure out

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of her until she lay trembling on the bed. Her fingers eventually loosened and fell away.

When she rolled toward Landry, who gathered her into his arms, he climbed up the bed to lie behind her. Finally meeting Landry's gaze, he didn't miss the satisfied smirk his lover wore. He glared at Landry, to let him know he figured out his game. Landry's smile brightened, beaming, and Landry blew him a kiss.

Cris closed his eyes and shook his head, struggling not to laugh.

Damn Doms anyway.

* * * *

Tilly lay there in Landry's arms with her eyes closed, trying to process what happened. She felt Cris change position and fought the urge to snuggle into his body.

What did this mean?

So many years spent in pain, hating him, loving him.

She chose to remain in Landry's arms, letting him hold her.

He stroked her cheek. "Love?" he softly said. "Are you all right?"

"Let me get back to you on that."

She felt him kiss her forehead. "You're so beautiful. I love you so much."

When she felt strong enough to deal, she opened her eyes and looked at him. Beautiful green eyes. She read worry there. Maybe he wondered if he'd finally pushed her too far.

She rolled in his arms, her back securely pressed against Landry's chest, and stared at Cris without speaking. He also looked worried. "Was this your plan?" she asked him.

Landry answered first. "No, love. He was as shocked by my suggestion as you were." He nipped the back of her neck, sending a shudder of pleasure through her and making her gasp. "You were growing increasingly angry. I worried things were reaching critical mass, as it were. I needed to find a way to break through your pain. I'm sorry. If you're angry at anyone, be angry with me, not Cris."

She hugged his arms tighter around her. "You said his name."

"In this case, I think the three of us need to talk as equals, no?"

"Yeah."

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Cris silently watched.

She stared at Cris for a few minutes. "What am I supposed to do with all this emotional garbage rolling around inside me? Tell me that."

Cris caught her hand and kissed her fingers. "I'm so sorry. I'll do whatever you need me to do to make it up to you."

Part of her wanted to let go of her pain and rage. Part of her didn't know how to.

She didn't pull her hand away. That was a start, in her book. Using him as a cuckold for sexual pleasure while making love with Landry, and allowing herself to enjoy Cris the man were two separate things.

Although using him as a cuckold still left her with a sour taste in her mouth.

"Do you want me to send him out?" Landry asked.

"No." She stared into Cris' eyes. "I want to watch you fuck Cris," she told Landry.

She didn't have to ask twice. In one smooth movement, Landry left the bed and quickly stripped. Cris also stood and removed his clothes before he silently climbed into bed, where he lay on his stomach.

Landry grabbed the bottle of lube from their bedside table and slicked himself before drizzling some over the seam of Cris' ass. Her eyes never left Cris' as she lay beside him, close but not touching.

She didn't know why she asked this. All she knew was she wanted to see it.

Be a part of it.

Landry slid home, making both men gasp. He gave Cris a moment to adjust before he started thrusting. "How would you have me fuck him, love?" he asked her. "Hard and fast, or should I make it last a while?"

Cris didn't break eye contact with her. "Make it last a while," she told him. "I want to see how you make love to the man, not the slave."

She moved closer, her face inches from his. He struggled to maintain control, his breath tight and shallow as he tried to hang on and not come.

"Don't come," she whispered to him.

His eyes widened a little, but he didn't look away.

Tilly kissed him, tentatively at first, before she let herself go just a little. He eagerly kissed her back, his tongue thrusting between her lips, finding hers, stroking it.

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Landry caressed his back, his thrusts long and slow, hesitating at the bottom of each stroke before withdrawing to leisurely plunge inside him again.

She reached under Cris and found his cock, hard and already leaking pre-come. "You want to come for me?" she whispered in his ear.

"Please!"

She made him sit up without letting Landry withdraw. Climbing under Cris, she grabbed his cock and placed it at her slick entrance. Cris looked happily shocked.

She didn't miss that Landry looked pleased.

"You want to come, you do it inside me."

He kissed her as he sank his cock inside her, holding still as he dropped his head to her shoulder and moaned. "Oh, Tilly, Jesus I love you, baby."

She wrapped her arms around Cris and looked at Landry over his shoulder. "Fuck his brains out," she ordered.

Landry grinned. "Your wish is my command, love." He grabbed Cris' hips and started pounding into him, a punishing, brutal fuck, the sound of his balls slapping against Cris' ass at the bottom of every stroke filling the room. The entire bed shook.

Tilly grabbed Cris' hair again. "Do you like feeling his cock in your ass?"

"Yes!"

"Then come for me and show me."

He cried out, his hips barely thrusting again before she felt him throbbing inside her. Landry felt it too as his ass muscles clamped down on his cock, and he finally let go and climaxed.

As they all fell still, Tilly didn't release her grip on Cris' hair. "If you ever come home without my cola again when I've put it on the list, I'll take a cane to your ass myself," she muttered before biting his ear.

Even as he yelped in pain, he laughed, Landry joining him. She finally released his hair and he lifted his head to meet her gaze.

"I love you, Til."

She stroked his cheek and felt tears in her eyes. "I love you too, Cris." She pulled him back down to her, this time to kiss him, tenderly. Her pain dissolved in a rain of tears as she clung to him and sobbed.

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At some point Landry left the bed to clean up, and Cris rolled to his side with her in his arms. "Whatever you want me to do, I'll do it. Anything to make it up to you, I swear it. I only want to make you happy, baby."

Eventually she settled down and lay there. It struck her Landry hadn't returned to the bed. "I don't know what I need from you right now. I'm probably going to swing between loving and hating you for a while yet."

He kissed her. "Whatever you dish out, I'll take it. Anything. Whatever you need."

She stared at him. "I need time."

* * * *

Cris' demeanor changed. Landry let protocols drop for the day as Tilly took her first tenuous steps toward their new life. Landry offered nothing but his love and support, knowing that with this first connection made, only good could follow if he remained patient.

At bedtime, he prayed she would reach out to Cris, and she didn't disappoint. They'd watched a movie on the couch together, Tilly laying with her head in his lap and her feet in Cris'. When she sat up and announced she was heading to bed, she turned to Cris and softly said, "There's room for three, if you want."

Landry resisted the urge—barely—to cheer.

He also resisted the urge to tackle her on the bed despite his screaming cock. She pleasantly surprised both men by undressing before kissing Landry, then Cris, and laying back on the bed, waiting for them.

They made love half the night, straight vanilla sex without any dominance dynamic of any kind. By the time they exhausted themselves, Tilly quickly fell asleep between the men, her back tightly pressed to Landry's chest and Cris' hands clasped in hers.

Landry looked at Cris and smiled. "Happy?" he softly asked.

Cris still looked stunned, shocked. "Yeah." He smiled. "You're not jealous?"

"The two loves of my life have finally reconciled. Why would I be jealous?"

Cris smirked. "You finally get to be poly, you sneaky bastard. It's what you always wanted anyway."

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"Are you complaining, love?"

Cris stared down into her peaceful, content face. "No. I'm definitely *not* complaining."

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Chapter Twenty-One

At the one-month mark following the end of his last round of chemo, Landry's doctor looked pleased. "I'll see you in six weeks. Then after that I think we can move to every three months.

Landry closed his eyes and let out a sigh of relief as Tilly squeezed his hand. "Thank you, Doctor," he said.

Cris smirked from the other side of the exam room, where he stood leaning against the wall, his arms casually crossed over his chest. "I sense a celebration."

Landry looked at him and grinned. "You bet your ass."

"Literally," Tilly snarked. Since the reconciliation, as she thought of it, she'd finally found a comfortable dynamic with Cris. Landry eased up on the Master stuff in some ways with Cris, still having that dynamic with him outside of bed, but inside, they were three lovers without labels.

Cris slept with them in their bed every night, except when he had to fly out to L.A. for business. Then the old Landry emerged, and Tilly welcomed the chance to let go and submit to him.

Maybe one day she could enjoy that dynamic with Landry around Cris, but she needed time to get to that place.

It was a Friday, and later that night they went to the club. Landry persuaded her to wear her school girl outfit. As he scened with Cris she sensed a carefree joy in Landry that she'd never witnessed before.

Even Cris, despite the walloping he took, seemed happy and at ease. Watching Landry scene with him, she realized, made her wet. Not entirely because of Landry, either. There was something delicious in watching Cris take it, knowing he enjoyed it as much as Landry did.

Thinking about how they could pin her to the bed and melt her will before fucking her brains out without being her "masters" only amped up her own need.

Her heart raced. She would be the happy recipient of a really good, hard fucking times two when they got home.

She couldn't wait.

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Loren leaned in close. "You three look happy tonight. Even Count Craptastic."

She hadn't yet confided in her friend about their change in relationship status. Pulling Loren aside into one of the private alcoves, Tilly closed the curtain. "Promise me you won't yell at me. Or punch me."

Loren frowned. "What's going on?"

"Well, for starters, Landry got a clean bill of health this morning."

"That's good, right? So what's wrong?"

Tilly had put this off, concealing their change in relationship dynamic from Loren. "I'm sort of together with Cris again."

Loren stared at her, stunned. "By together you mean kicking the shit out of him every morning, right?"

Tilly shook her head.

Loren swore. "After what that fucker did to you, how can you even think about letting him touch you?"

"Because Landry was right. I never stopped loving him. You know that."

"Can't you send him a Hallmark card? Do you have to let him back into your heart?"

"I'm stronger now, Loren. He's not my Master or my Dom. He's just…Cris."

"What about Landry? He loves the hell out of you."

"And I love him. That doesn't change."

Realization struck. "Oh, fuck me, you went poly. Honey, are you sure you want to do this to yourself?"

"I'm not leaving Landry, and he's not leaving me. No matter what, we've always got each other. If Cris decides to leave, that's his problem. I'm tired of trying to pretend I don't have feelings for him."

Loren sat on the padded bench in the room, mulling it over. "What are you asking me to do here, Til? I can't be nice to the sonofabitch yet. I can barely stand looking at him, unless it's to watch Landry beat the crap out of him. Which I enjoy the hell out of, by the way. We should sell tickets, we'd make a fortune."

"I'm not asking you to like him, or even like what I'm doing. I just want you to support me as my friend." She tried to find the words. "I feel complete. Finally. Lan's never tried to make me submit to him." She wouldn't tell Loren about the birthday celebration. Some things were best left unshared.

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"He loves me and I've healed with him. It actually makes this easier, being with Cris, too. My jealousy's totally gone. It feels right loving both of them. I don't seriously think I can ever go back to being Cris' slave, but I feel safe and secure with Lan. It's like having my cake and eating it too. For the first time since Cris left me, I really feel happy again."

Loren let out a melancholy sigh. "I can't judge you. I didn't walk in your shoes and I hope to god I never will. Promise me you'll let me kill the bastard if he hurts you again."

"I promise you'll get first crack at him if I leave anything left."

Loren stood and hugged her long and tightly. "Please be careful," she said. "Please don't let him hurt you again."

"He won't. He still loves me, too."

"Funny damn way he had of showing it."

Tilly smiled. "Don't worry, Landry and I got our pound of flesh out of him on our wedding night. And then some."

Loren snorted. "Wish I could have been a fly on that wall."

The men were finishing up when she spotted a familiar face walk through the door.

Bob.

A crazy thought hit her. Landry had agreed that if Bob was open to it, he'd willingly help her scene with him. And no, it hadn't bothered him that she made him climax.

"If he'd made you climax, love," he'd said with a smirk, "then yes, I would certainly feel different and less charitable."

She walked over to him and didn't miss his smile as she hugged him. "Nice to see you here," she said.

"Nice to see you, too."

"Alone?"

He smiled. "Yeah."

She pulled him off to the side and pointed at Landry and Cris, who were winding down their scene. "I talked with Lan. I can scene with you, or if you'd like, he can, too."

He looked a little hesitant, but she didn't miss the bulge in his jeans. He nervously licked his lips before responding. "I don't want your ex to help."

She squeezed his hand. "He won't."

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He looked good in her collar. His blue eyes turned on her. "Okay," he softly said. "If it gets too intense…"

She offered him a smile. "I'll call the scene if you safeword."

"Even if he doesn't use one?"

"We'll play by Cardinal's Rule—She Must be Obeyed."

He laughed.

* * * *

Cris sat along the wall nearby, watching. Wrapped in a light blanket, he was still recovering from their intense scene despite the peaceful smile on his face.

Tilly took over getting Bob ready while Landry leaned against the wall, arms crossed over his chest, and watched. After Bob was blindfolded and bound to the bench, she motioned Landry over. Together, they started massaging him, quickly settling him into a relaxed state. Tilly stepped to the front of the bench to stand by his head and massage his back while Landry started bare-handed spanking him.

Bob moaned, but he wiggled his hips, enjoying it.

Landry smiled at her.

As the scene progressed, Tilly used implements on him while Landry took over massaging him and keeping his sexual tension amped up. She had him begging to come by the time she reached between his legs and stroked his cock while Landry pinched his nipples. Bob exploded with a loud cry, his body arching off the bench as far as his restraints would allow him until he collapsed again.

Landry leaned over him and placed a deep, passionate kiss on Tilly's lips. "You're fucking sexy, love. I hope you realize you're getting one hell of a hard fucking when you get home. That was gorgeous." His lips moved to her ear. "Maybe one day you'll help me top slave?"

"Give me some more time before that happens."

They helped Bob sit up, and Tilly sat with him by the wall, giving him aftercare while Landry cleaned up their toys and the bench so other people could use it. Later, as the four of them sat in one of the social areas, Tilly next to Bob, they talked.

Bob stared at Cris. "I guess I can't kick your ass now," he joked.

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Landry grinned. "Oh, no, you absolutely can, if you wish. I'll even hold him down for you."

Tilly laughed. "Stop. No ass kicking, no holding anyone down."

Bob didn't take his eyes off Cris, but he directed his comment to Landry. "I'm not complaining, but you're really okay with this?"

Landry nodded. "As long as you remember she's married to me, and respect me as her husband, I don't have a problem with it. I trust Tilly. The question is, can you be okay with this?"

Kim and Kylee chose that moment to come over and say hi. They eyed Bob. "Who's your friend, Til?" Kim said. "Are you getting greedy?" While the women had settled down together, they made no secret about the fact that they were bi. They didn't live the lifestyle twenty-four/seven, but Kylee usually took the dominant role when they played.

Tilly rolled her eyes. "You've met Bob before. He was one of my clients."

Kylee opted for brazen. "I saw you playing with him. You back in business, or is he a free agent?"

Tilly laughed. "Bob, you realize a target just appeared on your forehead, right?"

He smiled. "I wondered what that feeling was."

Kim, a short, petite little thing, slithered into Bob's lap and draped her arms around his neck. "So, Bob. I'm Kim. You single?"

By the time Tilly corralled her two men and said good-bye to everyone to head home, she'd spotted both her friends with their tongues down Bob's throat.

She couldn't help but smile. Kim and Kylee were persistent and had often lamented they couldn't find a good man who didn't want to be dominant with them.

Why didn't I ever think about pairing him up with them before?

She answered her own thought. *Because I was jealous.*

Cris slid behind the wheel to drive them home. He caught Tilly's gaze in the rearview mirror. "Divine intervention?"

"Sure seems like it."

Landry draped his arm over her shoulder. "I hope Kim and Kylee don't mind if we still play with him. That was fun. It's been a long time since I've been able to do that."

She didn't miss the way Cris' shoulders tensed. "Don't worry," she reassured him. "I have no desire to add a fourth to our arrangement. Play only. It's all I can do to keep the two of you assholes in

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line some days."

Both men laughed.

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Epilogue

They celebrated their one year wedding anniversary at the club, playing. Tilly decided to mark the occasion by helping Landry top Cris for the first time before she and Landry topped Bob. Kim and Kylee didn't mind sharing their "love stud" with Tilly and Landry in the dungeon, as long as he still went home with them.

The wistful guilt had finally disappeared, too. Tilly no longer had the little nagging "what if" thoughts where Bob was concerned.

After returning home, the three of them made love until they collapsed, exhausted. Landry lay sandwiched between them, Cris on his left. Cris had rolled onto his right side and lay with his right hand tucked against his chest, his left splayed flat on Landry's abs.

Tilly studied the wedding band on Cris' right hand before her gaze fell to the rings on her own left hand. Landry let out a soft snore she knew meant he'd fallen deeply asleep. Her heart pounding, she reached across Landry, to Cris' right hand, and gently tugged on his ring. At first surprised, he relaxed his hand and silently watched as she slipped the ring off his finger. Then she reached over to his left hand and slid it onto that ring finger before she laced her fingers through his.

"There," she whispered. "That's better."

He looked stunned, his eyes on their hands. When his gaze silently swiveled to meet hers, she winked.

A slow smile crept across his face. "I love you, baby girl. I love you so much, and I'm so sorry I hurt you. I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to you, I swear."

She squeezed his hand tightly. "I love you, too. If you leave again, I'll hunt you down and kill you in a very slow and painful way. Then I'll hold you down while Bob, Loren, and Ross have their way with you."

He tried to stifle his amused snort so he didn't wake Landry. "Never again. I'm not leaving unless he orders me gone."

He let out another soft snore from where he lay between them.

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"Good." She laid her head on Landry's chest and closed her eyes. She enjoyed the feel of Cris' thumb gently stroking hers. "You still have my pendant?"

His finger froze. "Yeah?"

"I'd like to wear it. Not as your slave," she quickly added. "I miss wearing it. I loved that necklace." She eventually added, "I always knew you loved me when I had it on. It was like a wedding ring, in a way. I can't be your slave again. And I can't wear your ring because I'm his wife. But I would like that back. I love you. I never stopped loving you even when I hated your guts. I wear his ring. But I wouldn't mind wearing your necklace again. I'm sure he won't either. Just to be fair," she clarified.

"I love you, too. Always and forever," he softly promised.

She smiled. "Always and forever," she agreed.

THE END

(Keep reading for a preview of *More Than Make-Believe* by Tymber Dalton.)

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Also by Tymber Dalton

More Thank Make-Believe

Blurb

When you fall for a fantasy, how do you know if it's more than make-believe?

Travis, an unquestionably straight college student, finds himself in a financial bind. He'll do anything legal—including going gay for pay—and spends a weekend as Craig Rocke, letting gay porn star Marston Cougar have his way with him on film. Marston tells him to remember it's all just a fantasy for the camera, even though it sure feels like more.

Gary, also known as Marston Cougar, has a respectable day job. A straight guy, he started out making gay porn to pay his way through college. After getting his heart broken he has a no-dating rule. Now paired with "virgin" Craig Rocke, he finds it hard to keep it make-believe when he's losing his heart.

Gary's young niece needs surgery, and he almost has enough money to quit for good. But now that he feels a true connection with his fantasy co-star, will he be able to find a happily ever after with him when it's more than make-believe?

Contains hot manlove, movie magic, flipped perceptions, and a cranky three year-old who really wants her pizza.

Content Warning: *Graphic language, sensual and explicit scenes of m/m sexuality including oral sex, anal sex/play, sex toys, public exhibition, and public sex.*

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Excerpt From *More Than Make-Believe*

Travis felt another mask descend over Marston's face. This time he was on camera and playing to that. "So you looking to make some cash, huh, Craig?"

Travis nodded. "Yeah."

Mars leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands clasped. His intense hazel eyes bored into him. "You ever think about fucking a guy before?"

"No."

"And you've never sucked a cock before, right? Never had a guy blow you?"

"Right."

"I love taking a straight cock virgin. Stand up." He did, and Marston's eyes slowly roamed his body. "Turn around for me. Let me see your pretty ass."

He did, blushing. He didn't jump when Mars reached out and touched his butt through his khakis, but only through sheer effort of will.

Marston stood and pressed his body against his back. The other man was about three inches taller, not too much heavier. Marston's hands came to rest on his hips and he forced himself to relax.

"You have a very nice ass," Marston said. "I'm going to enjoy being the first guy to fuck it." Marston's fingers tightened on him. He felt the man's cock thicken against his ass through his slacks as he rocked his hips against his butt.

Marston turned him around and kissed him. Travis didn't know what to do or expect at first and finally went with it. He closed his eyes. After a minute he realized it wasn't bad. Actually, Marston wasn't a bad kisser. As he relaxed into it, Marston ran a hand through his hair, fisted it, kissed him with more force and added a little tongue.

His breath caught as he tried to fight the resistance that crept in and tensed his body.

Go with it. It's all make-believe.

Relaxing again his lips parted, giving Marston full access. The man took it, his other hand dropping to his lower back and holding him tightly against him, his rigid cock pressing against Travis

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through their clothes. Unsure what to do with his own arms, Travis let them slide around Marston's body and held on.

Marston lifted his head. "That's it, baby. Just go with it. You'll be begging for my cock by the time we're done, I promise."

Mars kissed him again. This time Travis threw reserve to the wind and got into it. If he couldn't kiss the man, how would he suck his cock?

Picture Ben Franklin.

After a few minutes of kissing, Marston lifted his head and looked down at him. "Okay?"

Travis nodded.

Mars grabbed one of Travis' hands, placed it over the front seam of his trousers, and squeezed. He was hard. Understandable, his own cock had started throbbing, whether from the Viagra or damn good method acting or genuine desire, he didn't care. He felt a little more confident since he wouldn't be on film looking like a limp noodle.

"That cock is going in your sweet virgin mouth first. I'm going to teach you how to suck a cock the right way. Then I'm going to take it and drill your untapped ass until you're begging me to make you cum. How's that sound?"

His mouth had gone dry, but he nodded.

Mars smiled. "I'm going to suck your cock too, baby. Show you how it should be done. No woman can suck cock as good as I can. By the time I'm done with you, you won't ever want pussy again. You'll beg me to be my full-time bitch."

Marston guided him over to the bed, where he sat and leaned back, propped on his arms. "Take off your shirt for me."

Travis pulled it off over his head and dropped it to the floor.

Marston smiled, his lower lip caught under his upper teeth. He let out a low hiss. "Fuckin' beautiful. Come here."

Travis nervously stepped forward. The other man's hands roamed his body, pinching his nipples, tracing the curve of his flesh, until his fingers stopped over his slacks.

Marston grabbed his crotch and squeezed, prompting a moan from Travis. Yep, he was officially hard now. "Feels like you've got a nice cock of your own. You like me touching you, don't you, baby?"

Travis nodded.

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"Say it. I want to hear you say you like it."

"I like it."

"You want me to play with your cock, don't you?"

"Yeah."

"You want to suck mine too, right?"

"Yeah."

"Say it."

It's only make-believe. "I want to suck your cock."

"Oh, fuck yeah, baby." He quickly worked on Travis' belt and slacks until they hung open. "Take your cock out for me. Show me what you got, I want to see it."

Fumbling with nervous hands, Travis pulled his stiff member out.

"And look at that." Marston trailed one finger from the base to the tip. It twitched under his touch. "It's nice and hard for me. Can't fake that kind of interest, can you?"

"No."

"Get out of those pants. I want you naked." He leaned back, propped on his hands while Travis stripped his pants off. It got easier to ignore the crew as he focused on Marston's intense gaze.

Marston studied him for a moment before he leaned forward again. He stroked Travis' sac, palming it and giving his cock a quick squeeze that prompted another moan from him. "You like that?"

"Yeah."

"You want more than that, you know what you have to do. Your first lesson on how to suck a cock starts now." He leaned back again and pointed at his own pants.

Travis met his gaze. Marston's eyes flicked down before they returned to him and Travis knew what he wanted. He dropped to his knees between Marston's legs. With trembling hands, he started unfastening his belt, then his slacks.

"Look at that, you're a total natural. Knew just what to do. I bet you were made to suck cock, baby."

He'd gone commando, and the cock he'd seen in the still photos sprang free. He didn't know what kind of fabric softener Marston used, but his clothes smelled good. He nervously glanced up at him. Marston tipped his head in a nod.

"Go on, hold it. It's not going to hurt you. Think about how you like your cock touched and

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touch me."

Okay, he could do that. He gently stroked him, growing bolder as his brain feverishly worked to translate his potential earnings into a substantial breakdown he could focus on to take his mind off what he was doing. Minimum seven grand, over three days, equaled twenty-three hundred a day. If they worked ten hours a day, that was two hundred and thirty-three dollars an hour. Meaning he'd already earned a minimum of twenty dollars just from what he'd done.

He could do this.

It's only make-believe.

Marston reached out with one hand and cupped the back of his head, gently but insistently. "I want your sweet lips on my cock, baby. Come on, quit teasing me and suck it. I bet you're a natural."

Travis picked out individual veins on the man's shaft. Marston didn't shave, but he wasn't very hairy and looked like he trimmed his bush. Travis slowly leaned forward, his eyes focused on the slit at the end of his stiff cock.

"Open wide and suck it. Don't make me fuck your mouth. I don't want to be like that with you. Take it, or I'll make you earn your money the hard way."

He tentatively licked the large, purple head, thick, round. It was a hell of a lot larger than the doctor's finger.

Marston let out a low hiss. "That's it. You can do it. Suck it."

He closed his eyes and wrapped his lips around it as Marston's fingers tightened on the back of his head. His hips thrust forward, working in time with how fast Travis licked and sucked.

"I don't want to choke you, so you'd better start taking it." His thrusts grew a little harder, faster, deeper. As Travis grew accustomed to the feel and taste of it in his mouth, he went even deeper without coaxing.

Marston moaned. "Oh, shit. Yeah, baby. That's it. Perfect. You know you want it." The pressure of his fingers on his head eased. Marston loosely held his head in place with both hands as he thrust in time with his movements. "That's it. Take my cock, straight boy. Suck it good. I'm going to make you my bitch, and you're going to crave sucking cum when I get done with you. I'm going to turn you into an expert at giving head. Maybe rent you out."

Something flipped inside Travis. He realized the words, knowing it was make-believe, excited him. He could play this role.

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Especially with visions of Ben Franklin flapping in his head.

He eagerly went deeper as Marston urged him on, talking filthy to him and honing his own need. He tasted precum and realized he wanted to make him cum, wanted to swallow it.

That's when Marston's fingers grabbed his hair and pulled him off his cock as he laughed. "Whoa, baby. You're too eager. Don't want me to pop yet, do you?"

Travis tried to get back to his cock, making Marston laugh even more. He shoved two fingers between Travis' lips. He eagerly sucked as Marston fucked them in and out of his mouth. "That's it. You'll suck anything, won't you? I knew you were a natural, you just needed the right cock to flip you. You're an eager slut now that you know you're getting fucked." He pulled him up and kissed him again, then shoved him back onto the bed and stood over him.

As he slowly pulled his shirt off, Travis stared at his body. Not a body builder, but he obviously worked out to keep in shape. He felt wimpy next to him, yet the hard, rigid cock standing straight out from his co-star's body didn't seem to mind his slighter frame. He noticed a tribal band tat circling Marston's left bicep.

Marston kicked off his loafers and shoved his slacks down his legs. "Gorgeous body, kid." He knelt over him, straddling his head. "Suck my balls. Lick them good."

Travis did, ignoring the camera now less than a foot from his head. He closed his eyes and finally settled for planting his hands on Marston's ass.

Hands stroked through his hair. "You've got a good tongue on you, baby." He rose up, shifted position, then his cock brushed against his lips. "Open up."

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Tymber Dalton (who also writes as Lesli Richardson) lives in southwest Florida with her husband (aka "The World's Best Husband™"), son, and too many dogs. She is a bestselling author in several genres, with over twenty published titles—and counting—to her credit. The author of works such as *The Reluctant Dom*, *Domme by Default*, *Fierce Radiance*, *Out of the Darkness*, and *Trouble Comes in Threes*, she is happy to know that having a pervy and twisted imagination can lead to something other than incarceration.

She loves to hear from readers, so drop by her website to keep track of her current news, reviews, and snarkage.

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