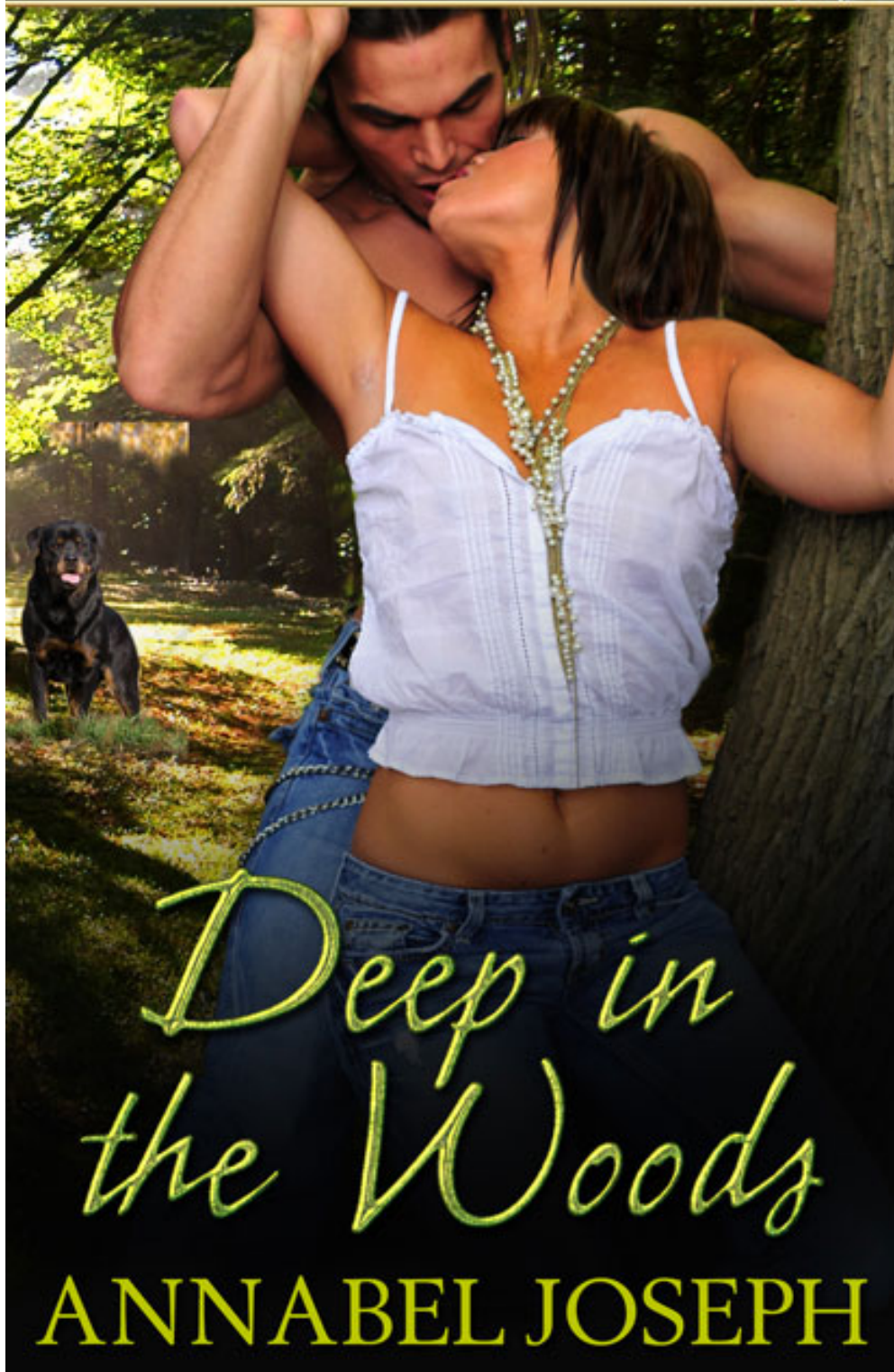


ELLORA'S CAVE TABOO



## **Deep in the Woods**

*Annabel Joseph*

Sophie finally finds the courage to reenter the Atlanta BDSM scene after extricating herself from an abusive relationship. At a local munch, she meets Dave, a funny, laid-back erotic photographer. When she sees him again later at a dungeon, Sophie is surprised by her strong attraction, and nervous about starting a new relationship, but Dave eases her fears. They embark on a sexy, thrilling D/s relationship and Sophie finds healing and fulfillment in Dave's arms.

But Sophie is still haunted by nightmares of her past. On a dark night in the woods with Dave and his friend Ryan, frightening memories overtake her. She knows that in order to move on, she must uncover the tragedy that haunts her subconscious.

Sophie's quest for answers brings her face-to-face with her previous tormentor. She finds herself once more in the deep woods, not only fighting for answers...but also for her life.

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Deep in the Woods

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# *DEEP IN THE WOODS*

Annabel Joseph

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I would also like readers to know that while I live in the Atlanta area and occasionally participate in the scene, none of the characters or situations in this book is based on real people or events, except for the descriptions of the trees, which truly are beautiful.

### *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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## **Chapter One**

Dave stretched in bed, pushing the covers down. Saturday morning. Nowhere to be, nothing to do. What to do? Masturbate? Listen to music? Read the stack of photography mags piled up beside the bed? A whine issued from the depths of the comforter as he shifted.

"Shove over, Cerby. Big baby." Dave lifted the covers to find black luminous eyes staring back at him. "That's right, I called you a baby. You're a disgrace to your breed. Whatever your breed is." He reached down to scratch his dog's ears. Although he was named after the mythological dog Cerberus, this Cerberus was no three-headed, ferocious defender of the Underworld. More like a shaggy black overgrown lapdog that needed a bath. Well, the name had seemed like a good idea at the time. Cerby crept closer and licked Dave on the face.

"You need a bath today, you mutt. I might want to bring home a girl from the play party tonight. And if I do..." He fixed the dog with a look. "If I do, you will behave yourself. No barking, no licking. I'm the only one who licks the girls. Do you understand?" He chuckled at Cerby's forlorn look, then scratched him under the chin. "I think that last girl would have come back if you hadn't made such a nuisance of yourself."

Cerberus gave a comic half-groan of disappointment, as if he understood Dave's words. Perhaps he did. Dave had picked him up on a photo shoot, an abandoned puppy skulking around a deserted train yard, starved and riddled with parasites. The girl he'd been photographing had shrieked with horror that Dave would even touch him. Fetish models. Bunch of narcissistic babies. If he'd left the dog there, it would have haunted his dreams. The vet bills had been astronomical, but a small price to pay for the adoring loyalty he enjoyed now. Within months, the medium-sized puppy had grown into a hundred-pound ball of reckless playfulness and fierce love.

But man, he was a bed hog. "Shove over, Cerb. I mean it." Cerberus stuck his muzzle into Dave's armpit, then withdrew it with a snort. "Well, I haven't showered yet. Anyway, I asked you nicely for some personal space." Dave turned over and looked at the clock. Midmorning already. It was late summer in Atlanta, and much hotter than he'd ever expected it to get, even in a place that called itself "Hotlanta". He'd almost rather be back in Boston. It was fucking hot. He'd moved south last winter, looking for warmer climes and lovely women to photograph. He'd found both. Southern girls were sweet all over. The way they talked was sweet, the way they dressed was sweet, the way they fucked was sweet.

But his last subject, Lara, hadn't been too fond of Cerberus and had declined to sleep over. Too bad, because he'd been quite attracted to her. But, love him, love his

dog. He'd thanked her for her time and shown her the door. His proffered kiss had ended up a peck on her cheek.

No matter. There was another munch today and a play party afterward. He'd found a welcoming home in the Atlanta BDSM scene. Plenty of fun, plenty of girls to chat with and plenty of would-be models who were willing to bare themselves for his thriving fetish-photography business. And later bare themselves for some fun. What was it about guys and cameras? Since he'd picked his up, he'd had women like he'd never had in his life.

He thought maybe it had to do with the exposure. With the eye of the camera, and the eye of the photographer. It was one thing to look at a pretty woman. It was another thing altogether to turn your camera on her, to capture lust or sex. Or fear. Shyness or boldness. Who ever knew? Each photograph he took surprised him in some way.

He rolled out of bed and shuffled to the bathroom. His shoulder-length brown hair was a tousled mess. He brushed it back, trying to tame the wavy strands, then shrugged and turned on the shower. He looked back in the mirror. Yes, it was definitely the eyes. He narrowed his, then widened them, pulling faces. He tried to look soulful and deep. Oh yeah, slick. Cerb snorted again from the door. Dave flexed his arms, did a curl to check out his abs. He was nothing spectacular in the looks department, but his body was pretty tight and girls always commented on his hazel eyes. *My eyes see more*. Was he trying to convince himself? He'd failed as a fine arts photographer. Well, failed monetarily. Fetish photography paid the bills, and God knew he enjoyed it, particularly the fringe benefits.

Whatever. He could pretend all he wanted that he was an artist, that he was making high art, but photographing pompous D-types and their preening, precious submissives was hardly going to win him a Pulitzer Prize. He had won a Hot Flesh award last year. Not really something to write home to Mom about. But the award and publicity had solidified his name in the business, and bills were no longer a problem.

No, he had a good life, he thought, stepping under the cool water and letting it roll over his shoulders and down his back. It felt wonderful in the sluggish heat of the Saturday morning. He felt himself waking up, coming to life. He would have to drag Cerby into the shower and get him cleaned up too. If he was lucky enough to bring a girl home, he didn't want to be making excuses for his huge, overly pungent pet. He wanted her to spend the night. He loved to wake up next to a beautiful, drowsy woman, cuddling under light, crisp sheets. And what cuddling usually led to—he loved that even more.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Daaaaave!"

Dave fielded a hug from "Special One", and another shortly afterward from "Pretty Punkin", who was, helpfully, quite a punk. It was hard to keep the lifestyle names straight sometimes, much less the real names. The girls got mad when you forgot their

real names, but when they called themselves by made-up nicknames at most of the social gatherings, it was kind of hard to keep it all straight. Add a couple beers at your average play party and there were lots of opportunities to offend.

The men also had their scene names. Dave had never come up with a good one, not for lack of trying. All the best ones were taken. "Lord Pain", "Gentle Dom", "Master Disaster", or Dave's personal favorite, "Dick Hammer". There was even a "Master Dave" already in Atlanta. Not that Dave considered himself a Master of anything. He was just a garden-variety perv. And a bit of a playful sadist. Somehow "Playful Sadistic Pervert" didn't have that certain élan the women were looking for. So he went by Dave.

"Dave!"

Another big hug from, oh god. What was her name? The one who was into needles. That had been an interesting session. And Lara was there, eyeing him from across the room. She made no move to come see him and she didn't crack a smile. He got the message loud and clear and found a place on the other side of the room near the moderator. He went to the buffet and came back to eat, making small talk with a young petite Domme and her little boi. After a while he offered them his card. They would make great subjects. They were both photogenic as hell, and judging from their conversation, quite open to a variety of kinky play.

His eyes went back to Lara. She was definitely running cold. Ah, well. She had seemed a little too controlled and inhibited for his tastes anyway. He liked to take girls out of their comfort zones, see them gasp and watch their eyes go wide as he took them to a place they'd never gone before, but a place they found they liked very much. He liked to give women erotic pain, push their boundaries, although he made sure safe words were in place first. He was all about negotiating.

But he still felt guilt at times. Sometimes he wondered if what he was doing was wrong, even with safe, sane and consensual niceties in place. Even if a girl enjoyed it, did it harm her to be hurt, pinched, spanked? Shamed? Humiliated? What if he took her out to dinner beforehand? Did that make it more acceptable?

His tastes hadn't always been so extreme. He used to be perfectly content just to slap a girl on the ass and fuck her vanilla-style. It wasn't until he started delving deeper into the lifestyle, until he started photographing others' scenes, that his own threshold of perversion began to ramp up. He could still be vanilla if he had to, he could still turn it on and off. Barely. Which is why he very much preferred to go to the munches around Atlanta and try to meet kinky girls. So many of them were already paired up though.

He was taking another bite of chicken when he heard the room go silent. Not totally silent, but silent for a munch as crowded as this one. He looked around to see what was going on and then he saw the focus of all the attention. She stood just inside the door, arms crossed over her chest. She looked as if she didn't want to be there. He looked around to see who she belonged to, who had made her come to the munch against her will.



"Sophie," said the moderator, a man called Jerry. "Come sit here." Jerry pointed to an empty chair between him and Dave.

So she was with Jerry. Interesting. Jerry was probably sixty-five if not older, and this girl looked twenty-five if she was a day. Strange that he'd never seen her at any of the munches or parties. If he'd seen her, he would have remembered. She was gorgeous. Black, black hair. Blue-black. Blacker even than Cerberus' fur. It fell to her shoulders and across her face in wispy locks. She had a pale, almost leonine face that gave her a wild, intent look, especially since she was frowning. He knew at once that he wanted to photograph her. He *had* to photograph her.

But everyone stared at her as if she had the three heads of Cerberus' namesake. Stared at her to the point of rudeness, stared to the point that Dave wanted to tell them to cut it out. To the point where he wanted to stand up and shield her from their eyes, because she looked as if she didn't want to be stared at. She was blushing when she fell into the chair next to him. She didn't have any food, just a drink. She was so perfectly proportioned that her small size wasn't apparent until she was right next to him. She was probably right around five feet tall, and he was six-four, give or take. His legs crowded hers under the table.

"Sorry," he said as their knees bumped. She looked up at him and any further words went still in his throat. My god. Her eyes. It was all about the eyes. What was that saying? "Eyes are a window to the soul." He gazed into her soul and, God fucking help him, he couldn't look away. It was only a moment, a millisecond that he saw her there before some shutter clicked closed and she looked away.

"Sorry," he said again. He rubbed his hands on his jeans. His palms were sweating. She gave a small smile, staring at the table. *Look up at me again. Look up.* Blue, blue eyes. Violet. Pale violet-blue eyes, and a soul full of raw, intense emotion. Jerry patted her hand as conversation started up again in the room.

*Don't stare.* Everyone's staring had upset her, so he couldn't stare at her now, no matter how much he wanted to. He shifted his plate over. Why were the munches always so crowded? His knee knocked hers again and she shifted away.

"I'm so sorry."

"It's okay." She shrugged. No, she wasn't Jerry's sub. Aside from a glance or two in her direction, Jerry had given her no more attention, and she held herself away from him almost defensively. In fact, she hunched herself into the smallest area possible and kept her eyes down.

Dave glanced around the room. People were still looking. He considered asking something silly like, "So, who did you kill?" but thought better of it. Instead he held out his hand and said, "Hi, I'm Dave."

After a short pause in which he thought she wouldn't reply at all, she took his hand. "Sophie."

She didn't meet his eyes, and the way she said her name sounded like, *Please don't talk to me anymore.* Part of him wanted to comply, but part of him was too fascinated and

curious. He didn't even know for sure she was a sub, although considering he was one hundred percent dominant, he hoped she was. He leaned back and tried again to engage her.

"Aren't you hungry?"

"No. Not really."

He had the sudden impulse to feed her something from his plate, or offer to go get her something. He pictured a poster on the MARTA train—FEED THE SUBS, with an image of poor Sophie and her violet-blue eyes. Jesus, she'd probably eaten a late lunch or something. What was wrong with him? He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so stupid and bothered over a girl.

"So, Sophie. Is that your real name, or the name you use in the scene?"

"It's my real name. I don't really have a scene name."

"I don't either. I mean, not that there's anything wrong with having one. It's just too schizo for me. I've answered to Dave for too long now. Although I did toy with the name 'Bringer of Pain'."

She made a small sound, and then smiled wide. He realized the sound had been a laugh. He took it as encouragement and forged ahead. "I also thought about 'Spider-Dave'. You know, instead of Spider-Man? Except then girls might think I was into spider play or something, and that doesn't exactly have them beating down the door. I'm not into spider play, by the way," he added as he saw her shift closer to Jerry. "And 'Dave the Flav' was another one, you know, like Flavor Flav? I was drunk when I thought of that. Actually, I was drunk when I thought of both of those. I don't know why I try to think up BDSM handles when I'm drunk, but I do." She laughed again, and he knew it was because he was acting like an idiot, but he didn't care.

"I like Dave better than any of those," she said. Her smile was so enthralling, wide with gorgeous straight white teeth. Dave's camera finger twitched.

"Yeah, me too." *Idiot. Is this the best conversation you can come up with?*

Jerry turned to her then and patted her hand again.

"Sophie. I'm so glad you came out. We've missed you."

She looked down and bit her lip. "Well..."

"Are you coming out later? To the play party at the Studio?"

"I might. I'm not sure."

"Are you seeing anyone new?" Jerry's eyes flicked to Dave's momentarily before darting back to Sophie's rather spectacular rack. She made a quiet negative sound, shaking her head and looking out at the other guests at the munch.

"Well, all in good time," said Jerry, tearing his gaze from her chest. "There's no hurry to get back out there."

"No." She clasped her hands together on the table. "I really just came out to see what everyone's been up to."

Jerry launched into some of the local goings-on and she listened, sipping her drink. Since she was distracted, Dave took the opportunity to finally stare. God, her hair was so black. Her skin so pale. Her lips so red. Holy fuck, he was sitting next to Snow White. And she wore white—a slim-fitting T-shirt over dark jeans. Would she let him photograph her? What would he see in the darkroom when he developed her photos? What would he see in her eyes? He would have to use film with her. Digital would be too cold, too stark. He would have to use film and chemicals to draw shades of meaning from the planes of her face, from the depths of her blue-black hair, from those eyes...those eyes... He would...he would...

Jesus, she was leaving. Her knee bumped his again as she pushed her chair back. He had to stand to let her pass. He hoped she was just going to get some food or go to the ladies' room. He watched her stalk out the same way she'd stalked in, her eyes shuttered, her chin held high. She was subjected to the same silent stares. No, she wasn't coming back.

He turned to Jerry. "Nice girl."

"Yes. A very sweet girl. Been in the community for several years now."

Dave waited for him to say more, but Jerry's voice trailed off and he turned his attention to someone else. Dave finished his food and made his way to a group of friends in the opposite corner, skirting Lara, who frowned at him. No, he didn't feel like talking to her now.

"Darling, come give me a kiss." Madame M was a statuesque Domme he'd had the pleasure to photograph on several occasions. "I see you met the little bitch. She surfaces every so often."

"M." Veronica, an older, motherly woman, scolded her. "That's not very kind of you."

"Well, that's what she is."

"She's not the only bitch in this group," said a Dom named Clark, frowning at M. "Sheathe your claws. I think it took a lot of courage for her to show up here."

"That girl I was talking to? With the black hair?" asked Dave, confused. "She didn't seem like a bitch."

"Sophie," said Madame M, waving her hand in irritation. "Too good to play by the rules. You know it's true, Clark."

"The jury is out on whether it was her or him who broke the rules," Clark retorted.

"It was him," Veronica interjected. Veronica was a longtime slave with a soft heart and a surprisingly sharp tongue. "He was the one who was all about no limits, and that consensual non-consent nonsense."

"And she was the one who agreed to it," said Madame M. "She was the one who stayed with him when everyone tried to help her. That was her decision. She made her bed."

"What are you talking about?" asked Dave. "I'm lost."

Clark turned to him. "Last year Sophie started seeing a man named...what was his name?"

"Depraved," said Veronica with a frown.

"Yes, Depraved. No one knew his real name. Anyway, he was an abuser. A fake. We all told her. We all knew what was going on. They came together to the munches, the play parties, and the things he did to her—the way he treated her—"

"Sophie let him treat her that way," M said with a wag of her finger. "We tried to step in. I did step in on several occasions, and was told by Sophie to fuck off."

Clark shook his head. "It was a terrible situation. One night at Studio Erotica, he went too far with her. Master Lawrence and Lady Marie called the police, and still Sophie did nothing. Wouldn't make a statement, wouldn't press charges. Nothing changed. The police started showing up at all the local fetish events, even to any play parties we advertised online. They were always hovering around because of this thing with Sophie and Depraved."

"She's just an attention whore," Madame M said. "Before Depraved, there was that other one, you remember?"

"But he wasn't as bad," said Veronica.

"Well, he was bad enough. Anyway," M continued, "eventually Sophie and Depraved were not welcome at the munches and parties anymore. They were blacklisted from Studio Erotica. Lawrence and Marie had to do it, otherwise the police would have found a way to shut them down."

They all fell silent. Dave looked from one face to the other. "Then what? What happened?"

"Well," said M. "They disappeared. We didn't know. None of us knew what was going on until it was too late. Sophie's parents came sniffing around, saying their daughter hadn't contacted them in weeks. Again, the cops were all over us. No one knew who this 'Depraved' character was, where he lived, where he worked. No one had seen them, but the cops were at every venue, at every event looking for Sophie. Sophie's father is some high-placed local businessman or something—"

"That wasn't the point, that the cops were everywhere," said Clark. "So you had to answer a few questions. What about her?" He turned to Dave. "They found Sophie when she turned up in the emergency room. She had been abused. Drugged." He went silent, searching for words. "Broken. She was a mess. She might have died." He scowled at M. "No one would have asked to be treated like that. So calling her a bitch—"

"She was a bitch. She made trouble for a lot of people—"

"I cried," said Veronica. "I felt so guilty."

"Exactly." Madame M frowned. "We all felt guilty, but it was none of our faults. And when she failed again and again to report him, she endangered every other submissive in Atlanta, because he didn't go away. He hasn't gone away. She never did bring any charges against him, although as far as I know, he's gone to ground. He

couldn't come anywhere near any munch or club in Atlanta without getting beaten to a bloody pulp, that's for sure."

Dave thought that sounded like a good time, beating to a bloody pulp a man who had put Sophie in the hospital. A man who had done it in the name of BDSM. A "sadist". That's probably what this "Depraved" imagined himself. A kinky sadist, just like Dave, only he hadn't known when to stop. He remembered how Jerry, a "daddy dom"-type player, had scowled at him as he'd chatted Sophie up. Jerry had probably thought, *Oh, no, she can't fall into the hands of another sadist. Not on my watch.* But there were sadists, and then there were sociopaths.

"So why do you think she came back?" Dave asked.

"Lonely, maybe?" offered Veronica.

"God, I can't imagine why she would show her face here," said M with a snort. "You saw the reception she got. Just needs more attention, I suppose."

Well, she had gotten Dave's attention. She definitely had his attention now.

## Chapter Two

Sophie moved to the side in the hallway to let her neighbor pass. He lived right across from her, but she didn't think he even knew who she was. She recognized him. When she was sure he was gone, she dug in her purse for her keys and let herself into her small apartment. She was so suspicious of everyone now. She thought she might have post-traumatic stress disorder after all. Or some other complicated syndrome that her parent-appointed therapist explained to her while she zoned out on the leather couch. Damn, she thought she probably had a session next week. If she didn't go, her dad would come bother her. Maybe she could pretend she had work.

She dropped her bag and collapsed on the sofa. She felt like shit. What was wrong with her? Why had she gone to the munch? They all judged her and made her feel even worse than she felt when she was alone.

Maybe she had just wanted to show them. Show them that she had survived, and that she had every right to be there, as much right as they had. They were, after all, her people. If she belonged anywhere, she belonged among them. Maybe she had made things complicated for the group for a while. But they were just like her, exactly like her, deep inside. They liked power exchange, and most of them liked sadomasochism too. Hell, half of them liked it harder than she did. Who were they to judge?

She stood up and went to the mirror. She was still Sophie. She had gone into the woods for a while, but she'd come back out again. She'd survived. The scars she had were mostly hidden when she had her clothes on. She wasn't going to take her clothes off, not ever again.

Well, maybe if she found the right person. But it would have to be a really special person. Someone she could really trust. Someone safe.

*Safe.* Her mind wandered again to the man who'd sat beside her at the munch. She hadn't seen him before, not since she met Barry and ended up out of the group. If she'd seen him she would have remembered. Dave. He had such a masculine, sculpted face, a tan healthiness and fitness that was instantly attractive. His sensual lips and mouth made her have *thoughts* about him, and he had the most beautiful hazel eyes. But what did that mean? That didn't mean he was safer or more trustworthy than anyone else. But he'd also had lovely, soft-looking, chestnut-brown hair she wanted to run her fingers through, and long, strong legs that he'd bumped her with twice. Probably not intentionally. Well, perhaps she'd intentionally bumped him the second time. And his hands...he was a nail biter. His nails had been bitten practically to the quick. She'd looked at his hands because she couldn't look at his face. His face, his easy smile, his kind laugh had made her start to think...start to think that maybe she might...

No. Not anytime soon. She was lonely, but she wasn't that lonely yet. For all she knew, he was a sub himself. You could never really tell, not really. He certainly hadn't been pulling any dommy crap with her. But then neither had Barry the first time they met. He had been very quiet and circumspect, all the harsh reality hidden underneath a handsome exterior. What was hidden underneath Dave's polite, humorous veneer?

There was no way to tell. That was the really scary thing. Sophie looked at herself in the mirror, started to brush out her hair, thinking how strange it was that you could look right in someone's eyes and still not be certain what was going on in there. You never really knew. And when you did finally know, sometimes you found yourself in a position you might not have chosen if you had known how things would really be. But then of course, sometimes it was too late. Sometimes you realized it was just too, too late and you were truly fucked.

She put the brush down with a clatter on the countertop and gripped the edge of it. *Past. Past.* Let bygones be bygones. She took a deep breath and willed the heavy pounding in her chest to subside. She swallowed down the hot panic, the tight ball of emotion in her throat. There was nothing to be done about it now, except to go on living. She should pull herself together and show up for the play party. She should ease back into the community. It would be a good thing.

She pulled out a black dress and black tights. Low-heeled Mary Jane shoes. She wanted to blend in. She wanted to go, watch, soak in the scene, but not play. She didn't really want to be approached, although she figured no one would approach her judging from the way they'd acted at the munch. Jerry had been nice to her, but then he had always been protective of her. It was sweet, but she knew it was only because he wanted her. She wasn't looking for a daddy-type thing, though. She wasn't looking for *nice*.

But she wasn't looking for psycho either. There had to be some middle ground there.

She applied makeup, dark eyeliner and crimson lipstick. She even painted her nails. It was nice to feel human again, to feel alive and pretty. If she wanted to dress up, she could. She could smile at whomever she wanted to smile at, and chat with whomever she chose. No one could make her do anything, at least for now. At least until she chose to give someone that power again. And she knew she eventually would, because that was just the way she was.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was ladies' night at Studio Erotica so they let Sophie in without a cover charge. The play party was already rollicking along. Studio Erotica was a full-service dungeon, one that Sophie and Barry had played at often before they were driven away. She had always loved the decor—dark plum and crimson velvet drapes, goth art and iron candlesticks on the wall. Tapestries and velvet-upholstered sofas and divans. Campy?

Sure. But effective. The low trance music was the perfect background to the moans and squeals of Studio's patrons, already entrenched in erotic scenes.

So much skin. Sophie wanted to look but she wasn't quite ready yet. She made a detour into the lounge area, but there was nowhere to sit. She scooted into a corner and looked around at everyone enjoying themselves. The chatter and laughter was kept respectfully low, but all the faces were smiling. Sophie had always loved it here. People came to Studio Erotica for one reason and one reason only – to have fun and feel good. From the lounge, Sophie could barely see a male sub bent over a spanking bench, being lovingly, if harshly, paddled by his mistress. She saw a woman in the back being hooked up to the footboard of huge iron bed. The tall bedposts had so many attachment points it was almost funny. Sophie had always been fascinated by that bed. She used to watch submissives and slaves being fixed to it and imagine the endless permutations of how it could be done. Sophie had never been tied to the bed. When Barry had played with her at the dungeon, he'd used the cross or the stocks. He had always bound her tightly, because he'd always played with her hard.

Lawrence and Marie, the owners, circulated around the room. They maintained a constant presence, making sure everyone was playing safe and playing fair. For a moment, Sophie was afraid they might escort her out. She and Barry had been banned from the dungeon last year. But that had been to keep Barry away, she knew. She never did anything, only took it. Barry had been a hard-core sadist, so the things he liked to do to her weren't that enjoyable to other people. Slapping, torments, humiliation, whippings that went on and on. They didn't use safe words. At home, he did worse things. Choking her, burning her. Scaring her with guns and knives just to make her cry and beg for mercy. Once he had nailed her hands to a wall in the woodshed. She'd been surprised that it bled so little, and more surprised that it left almost no scar once it healed. He had done a lot of bad things to her. At that time in her life, she hadn't considered them bad. It had been all about the rush, the surrender. It was only in hindsight, when she looked back on their activities, that she realized he had done dangerous things to her. Evil things. She could remember in hindsight when their activities changed from games to evil, but by that point she had become afflicted by some kind of mental incapacity. She had wanted only to please him, her terrible Master. There had been no "Sophie" left to utter *no* or ask for negotiations. No will, no self-protective impulses. It had happened so gradually, she hadn't even realized it.

But she wasn't like that anymore. She knew now how it had happened. She had experienced the sinister slide and survived it. She would recognize the signs if it happened again, she was almost sure of it.

Sophie smiled. The girl was completely bound to the iron bedposts now. She was standing up, legs spread, hands held out in their cuffs as if she welcomed the coming pain with open arms. Her Dom stood beside her holding a flogger, watching with an enraptured smile. The sub was gorgeous. Blonde hair, tall and curvy. The man started to whip her with steady, controlled movements. She arched, unable to escape. Sophie was certain the woman didn't want to. Her Dominant was short but fit, and clearly



tuned in to her reactions and needs. Sophie thought if she was closer, she could have heard the sounds the sub was making and enjoyed the expressions on her face.

Sophie noticed then that the couple was being photographed. How wonderful, she thought, to preserve something so intimate with the help of a lens. The photographer was a tall, solid man, but he was unobtrusive in his work. His movements were subtle and controlled. His shoulder-length hair was pulled back in a ponytail, but a few locks had escaped. He brushed them back from his face with a gesture she remembered. It was the man from the munch, Dave. As the scene went on, she found herself watching him instead of them. His plain gray T-shirt was understated and yet somehow very masculine. Maybe it was the way it stretched across his chest and hinted at tight muscles underneath. Each time he shifted and looked for a shot, his body seemed to rearrange itself with a natural grace. His arms flexed and his muscles realigned as he lifted the camera to his eye —

“Sophie!”

Sophie jumped and looked over to see an old friend, Tara, holding out her arms to give her a hug.

“I heard you were at the munch this afternoon. Good for you. You look wonderful, honey.” The bubbly blonde clasped Sophie in a tight hug, then backed away. “Oh god, he’s not here, is he?”

“Barry? No. They wouldn’t have let him in anyway.”

“I should hope not.” Tara looked embarrassed that she’d spoken so sharply. “So are you here looking for another —”

Sophie shook her head. “No, not really looking. Just easing back into things.” Her gaze darted over Tara’s shoulder. Dave was gone. Where had he gone? She subdued the urge to whip her head around and locate him, instead looking back at Tara. “It feels weird being here again. A lot of memories. But I feel sort of happy to be here too. Like I persevered. I survived.”

Tara hugged her again, just before her Sir came and pulled her away with a wink. “You did survive, honey. I’ll see you later.”

Sophie laughed and waved as Tara was dragged away smiling. Tara was in a gorgeous pink and red corset and drool-worthy stilettos, and little else. She remembered Tara’s boyfriend, remembered he’d had a thing for cages. He still seemed to, as he led her to a cage in the corner that was open for use. Barry had caged Sophie a lot. But then, it hadn’t been games at a play party. Once he’d caged her for nearly a week, hadn’t even let her out to use the bathroom. When he’d finally pulled her out, her legs had refused to work. He’d laughed at her for stumbling around the room crying. She had been terrified he would shove her back in and tried to run, but she’d fallen. She couldn’t run. She couldn’t escape. His hands had fallen on her, grabbing her. The terror had been so acute she could smell it. She could taste it in her spit. But he hadn’t pushed her back in. He had held her down and —

Sophie shook her head and turned to the wall. *Not now. Don't think about it.* She pulled herself together and thought she should circulate a little. Mingle. Get her mind on other things.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dave watched from across the play space. What was wrong with her? She'd been smiling at her friend a moment ago but now she looked on the verge of tears. He raised his camera and zoomed in on her. Not to photograph her. He only photographed people at Studio Erotica with permission, a requirement of the owners. No, he just wanted to get a closer look.

She was biting her lip with a pained expression. Her eyes were distant, distraught. She turned to the wall. What was she watching that upset her so much? He looked around at the various play spaces and could see nothing overly dramatic going on. A puppy play session, Sophie's friend and her boyfriend playing in a cage, a few women being flogged, a male sub being paraded around and humiliated. He looked back at her, lowering the camera. She was extricating herself from the corner where she was huddled. Was she leaving? He didn't want her to run off again. Her shoulder-length black hair fell over her face, hiding her features.

His gaze followed her. She was moving among the chatting, watching groups. Aside from the one girl, Tara, no one else really talked to her. A few people nudged friends and gestured at her. He saw a few D-types sliding interested looks her way and suddenly Dave felt jealous. He could stand around staring at her like some lovesick schoolkid, or he could go try to make something happen. He started toward her, only to be stopped by a couple he knew. They were frequent customers, a handsome Master and his very sexy slave. He spoke to them for a while, trying to concentrate, trying not to spin around and look for her. After an interminable amount of polite conversation, he had set up a time and place the following week to do an outdoor session with the couple. They said goodbye and moved off into one of the private back rooms.

Dave took off his camera and put it in the bag. He was done working. He was going to talk to her. The girl looked like she needed a friend, for God's sake.

His attention was arrested by a scene developing in the center of the dungeon. A hard-playing masochist was being fixed to the square frame. He recognized the woman, an older slave. Her Master bared her back while she moaned. She looked as if she were already falling down into subspace. He took a few steps back as a crowd gathered in the area, drawn to the drama of the scene. The woman's Master snapped a single-tailed whip at his side, a faint smile playing at the corners of his mouth. Dave watched the scene begin. *Crack!* The sound of the whip was amazing against her bared skin. The whip left red streaks that stood out in stark relief against her pale back. Dave felt his breath coming a bit faster. It was beautiful to him, as a sadist. The amazing dance of pleasure and pain, the way the woman willingly bared herself to be hurt. The trust and

care involved. The woman screamed and moaned, but was clearly enjoying the encounter. Dave turned to Sophie to see her reaction.

She was not enjoying it nearly as much. She watched with her hands clutched in front of her. Her chest rose and fell quickly and her lips were set in a tense line. Her eyes were wide open and communicated distress. As he watched, she turned and fled.

The woman's cries grew louder, more animallike, but Dave wasn't listening anymore. All his attention was centered on Sophie's retreating figure. She dodged her friend Tara, who looked after her helplessly. "I'll go to her," he said to Tara as he passed. Sophie pushed out the door and started down the street. He followed, his footsteps echoing on the sidewalk. She spun on him with a gasp.

He held out his hands. "It's okay. It's me, Dave. Do you remember me from the munch today?"

Her breath was coming in short little pants. She ducked her head and started walking again. He fell into step beside her.

"Sophie?"

She didn't answer.

"Are you okay?"

She just hugged herself and walked faster.

"You know, that woman was fine. She was enjoying herself. Sometimes it can appear as if someone's going too far with someone else, but usually everything's okay—"

"Oh, is it?" She spun on him. "Usually everything's okay? Really? How do you know?"

He was taken aback by the vitriol in her words. "I don't know. No one knows for sure but her. But I assumed, based on her body language, and the fact that she wasn't safe-wording—"

"Sure. Whatever."

He held up his hands. "Okay, Sophie. Don't get mad at me. I was just concerned when I saw you run out. You seemed really upset."

"I'm just... I'm just... I haven't been to the Studio in a while. I just..." For a moment, she looked as if she were about to cry, but then she seemed to master herself. She brushed her hair back behind her ears and raised her chin. "It just wasn't my thing."

He looked at her. Not her thing? From what the others had told him, it had been very much her thing at one time. God, those eyes of hers. He had no idea what to say next. People passed back and forth on the street, glancing over at the two of them. What did they think? Did they see two lovers fighting? Her stance was defensive.

"Would you like to go get some coffee?"

"No. Why would you think I want coffee?"

Dave shrugged. "Okay. No coffee. How about a walk? Would you like to just walk for a while?"

"Why?"

"Because you look like you're in a bad place. Let's just go walking." He stood back and gestured to the sidewalk ahead of them. "You don't have to talk." She was agitated, anxious. Why did he want to go walking with her? To calm her, yes, but he wanted more than that. He wanted to know her, to learn more about the upheaval behind her eyes.

"Walk where?"

"Anywhere. Nowhere." He shrugged. "Just walk around downtown for a while."

"It's not safe to just stroll around this part of Atlanta at night."

"We'll be safe."

"How do you know?"

"I know because I can defend myself. And you."

"How?"

His lips quirked into a patient smile. "You're full of questions, aren't you? I know because I've trained in self-defense, for one."

She was silent, looking at her feet.

"Come walk with me," he asked one last time. "I won't let anything happen to you."

Finally, to his relief, she nodded yes.

She was so annoyed with herself. Running out of Studio Erotica, making a scene. It was so embarrassing. They all already thought she was a whack job. Her behavior only reinforced what they already suspected about her.

*Take a deep breath, Sophie. Let it go.* The night air was comfortable, warm but not muggy. The streets were quiet. She would never have walked around at night alone, not like this. She slid a look at the man walking beside her. Strangely, she felt secure with him. She believed him when he said he could protect her. The way he'd moved in the dungeon, even the way he loped along beside her hinted at a special physicality, a quiet strength. He finally broke the silence with a casual question.

"So how long have you lived in Atlanta?"

"Oh, years now. When I dropped out of college—" She stopped. *Yes, talk about how you dropped out of college, Soph. Talk about how you work at The UPS Store and live in your hole of an apartment alone.*

"What were you studying?" he asked when she went no further. "Why did you drop out?"

"I couldn't pass freshman biology and chem. Or the math courses I needed to go pre-med."

She hadn't thought about college in a long time. One more failure in a long line of failures. She'd wanted to become a doctor since a childhood hospital stay for pneumonia, but the courses, even the introductory ones, had proved too difficult for her. She still remembered the excruciating conference with her college counselor. *You simply do not have an aptitude for this.* Her lifelong dream had slipped away in the space of one semester. Her father's face when she'd told her parents she was dropping out...

"What do you do?" she asked to change the subject.

He held up his camera bag with a smile. "This is what I do. Photography. Mostly arts photography. Well, kink photography now, but it pays the bills pretty nicely. I teach classes too, every now and again."

"Photography classes?"

"Martial arts. Would you like me to show you some moves?"

He came at her then, too quickly. She flinched and felt ridiculous. The awkward silence made her want to run.

"I was just playing," he said in apology. "I wouldn't have hit you."

She set her teeth and stalked on, feeling very near to crying. She concentrated on the clop-clop of her wedge heels on the pavement to drive the sudden emotion away. "Let's just walk," she muttered. "Isn't that what you wanted, to walk?"

"Okay, sure. Let's walk. Look, I'm sorry I'm such a dork. I just find you really interesting. And really beautiful. I mean, I'm a photographer," he said, gesturing to his camera bag. "I notice these things."

"You find me interesting? You mean I'm weird, right?"

"I never said you were weird. Are you weird? I'm a little weird," he added with a crooked smile. "I did meet you for the first time at a BDSM munch. So how weird are you?"

"I don't tell that to just anyone. Only people I'm trying to scare away."

He laughed, and she was amazed to realize she'd just made a joke. Wow, and his laughter. Low and masculine, but light and playful at the same time. His eyes were so warm and relaxed. He made her want to let her guard down and play along, but as soon as she felt that, she wanted to run away. Why did she want to run? God, everyone was right, she was a psycho. She wanted him to hug her. She wanted him to hold her. He was so strong, so vital. So confident and assured. Why was she so attracted to him? Because he was dominant and she was submissive? Or because she was lonely and sad, and he seemed so kind?

"Please—" She clamped her lips shut. *No. No.*

"Please what?"

"Please...will you?" She stopped and reached out to him, feeling foolish and vulnerable. He didn't hesitate. He took her in his arms and clasped her against his chest. He didn't grope her or try to kiss her. He seemed to understand that wasn't what she needed. She needed to be held. She needed to feel the warmth of another human being

who didn't mean her harm. She needed strong arms around her that were soothing her, not holding her down.

*Oh, no. No.* Tears flooded her eyes before she could stop them. No, she didn't want to start crying. She couldn't. He would know. He would know she was every bit as messed up as he probably suspected. *Shit. Shit.* Stupid tears. She tried to wipe them away before he noticed them. Her entire body tensed and more tears flowed, more than she could hide, more than she could control. Her face grew hot with embarrassment. "I... I... I..." she stammered, trying to explain it all. But she couldn't explain. She couldn't do anything.

And Dave said nothing, asked no prying questions. He didn't ask "What?" or "Why?" or make her explain. He just pulled her closer and held her. He was so solid. He smelled clean, like soap tinged with cigarette smoke from the Studio. He held her even after she soaked his shirt and turned the heather gray material dark and wet.

"Please, please don't let go of me," she whispered to the thump of his heartbeat in her ear.

He threaded his fingers in her hair and pulled her closer still. "I'll hold you as long as you need me to. All night, if you like."

All night. *All night.*

\* \* \* \* \*

She knew it was a bad idea to go to his house. Of course it was. She had only met him for the first time earlier that afternoon, and then they'd only spoken briefly. But when he'd walked her to her car and asked if she wanted to follow him to his house so she didn't have to be alone, she'd agreed. Ridiculous. Even now, driving there, she fought the urge to peel off and retreat to her safe, lonely place.

But there was something about him she couldn't resist.

He looked at her and something in his eyes both terrified and drew her closer. Not terrified her in the way that Barry's eyes had terrified her. No. Terrified her in the way that he seemed to understand how badly she was hurting, even though they'd barely talked. He seemed to know the secrets she tried so hard to hide.

But of course that was ridiculous. How could he know? Her secrets were her own. Any secrets that troubled her, any secrets that hurt and made her feel as if she might die from exposure and pain, all those secrets could be buried away—by choice. The choice was Sophie's, Dr. Perez said, and Sophie had made her choice. She had buried the secrets away. She didn't want them anymore, and she most certainly didn't want anyone else to know them in all their horrible ugliness. She had begun to feel better now that they were buried. Still sad, still isolated, but better.

Isolation was safe, if lonely. Doing what she was doing now...it didn't feel safe at all.

But she didn't turn around. She followed his car down city block after city block, until they left the industrialized part of the city and entered a sleepy residential section. The homes were small and close together, but she was quite sure they cost more than she could ever afford. They passed a small neighborhood park, a community garden, and then turned into a narrow lane. He stopped and put his car in park. She stopped behind him and did the same, taking deep gulps of air. It was after midnight and there was no moon, so that when she cut her headlights the night turned black, lit only by a faint streetlight down the road.

He came to her window. "Did you call someone?"

"Call someone?"

"Tell them where you are? Who you're with?"

"N...no. No, I didn't. I don't really have anyone to call. Except my parents. I don't really want to call either one of them right this second and tell them I'm at the house of some guy I just met."

He laughed. "Well...maybe not the best idea. But you should call someone. I could be a maniac, you know."

Sophie looked up at him. Her heart was doing flip-flops. He *was* a stranger, and he could be a maniac. But then she shook her head. "I know maniacs. I don't think you are one. And if you are, you won't be the first maniac I've tangled with." She opened the car door, got out, and slammed it behind her.

"I'm not a maniac. And your friend Tara saw me go after you when you left the dungeon. So I suppose we'll call you safe enough this time."

He wanted her to be safe. It was a novel experience. Had Barry twisted her view of men so much? Of course Dave wanted her to be safe. Most men didn't mean women harm. *Safe, safe, safe*, her mind repeated. *Relax. You're safe*. He held out his hand and she took it. It was warm and rough. He led her up the walk to the covered porch of his small bungalow.

"I suppose I should have asked you this sooner, but how do you feel about dogs? Large, smelly, affectionate ones?"

Sophie could hear deep barking from inside the house. "How large?"

"Massive. But he's a good dog." He started to laugh as the scrabbling of claws on the door intensified. "He's mostly a good dog. Here, let me go first."

Sophie watched as he turned the key and inched in, pushing back what appeared to be a black bear.

"Down, Cerby. Come on, I've got a visitor. Don't embarrass me."

She grinned listening to him cajole his dog. Cerby—*Cerby?*—was barking and straining to get to her. She held out a hand gingerly. The huge black dog sniffed it and then licked it with a warm tongue full of drool.

"He likes to give kisses." Dave sighed. "I'm so sorry. I'll hold him. Come in please. He'll settle down in a minute. He really is somewhat trained when he's not excited."

Sophie wasn't that comfortable around dogs, especially dogs of this size, but she trusted Dave and so she decided to trust his dog. She smiled at the huge black beast and he stared back with big, dark eyes.

"His name is...Cerby?"

"Yeah. Short for Cerberus, the three-headed watchdog of—"

"Of the Underworld. Yes." She laughed. "He looks like he could be quite the watchdog."

"Aw, he's a big pushover." He finally released his dog's collar with a strict warning. "Be good."

Dave went ahead of her and Cerby followed. He put his camera bag on the table and switched on the lights to reveal a lovely floor plan of brightly painted rooms and colorful furnishings. The kitchen and dining room were one large space painted bright red. The walls and countertops were covered in tastefully arranged pottery and artwork of every color and type, from staid toile etchings to riotous South American pottery to flowery Nordic prints. She stared at the explosion of color as he crossed to turn on the lights in the adjoining living room. The walls there were a light green and deep blue. Instead of pottery and glassware, the walls were decorated with photos and hand-drawn artwork. Sophie stood and took it all in as Cerberus again began to lick her hand. She patted his head, noting that his height was nearly to her waist level. Dave turned to her and smiled.

"He likes you."

"He likes everyone, doesn't he?"

"No, not really. I mean, look at his stance. He wants to protect you."

*Protect me from what?* Dave walked past her to the kitchen.

"Should I put on some coffee? Would you like a drink? Water? Beer? How about a glass of wine?"

"Sure. Whatever you like."

"Go on into the living room. Sit down."

Sophie was already moving before the tone he'd used registered with her. She lifted her gaze to him. He looked back, aware, but not apologetic.

"If you want to. Don't let me boss you around."

She sat on the edge of the couch and pressed her legs together. Dave's dog came to sit in front of her. When she reached out to pet him, he buried his massive head in her lap and sighed. She stifled a giggle and caressed his black fur. For a big, scary dog, he was quite personable.

"Cerby, come on. Give her some space, Casanova."

Dave came in with two glasses of wine and nudged the dog with his knees before settling down next to her on the couch. He handed her a glass.

"To new friends."



"To new friends." And possibly more. She glanced down at his leg, so long and muscular beside hers. She took a small sip of wine and peeked over to find him looking at the same thing. She choked slightly and wrapped her fingers around the wineglass so she didn't drop it. What did he expect of her? What did she expect of him? She wanted to put her hand on his thigh just to see what it felt like.

"What are you thinking?" he asked in the silence.

"I want to put my hand on your—" She shook her head, horrified at herself. "I mean...your leg. I mean... I was just... I haven't... I haven't been this close to a guy in..." She laughed. "Okay, I'm embarrassed."

"Don't be embarrassed."

"It's just that my last relationship...it ended very badly. So I've been a little..."

"Gun-shy?"

Sophie nodded, mesmerized by the understanding in his eyes.

"Well, I'm flattered that you chose to trust me. When I saw you at the munch, I have to admit I was interested."

"Were you? Even when everyone was glaring at me?"

"Especially then."

She laughed, but he sobered and turned to her.

"You know what, Sophie?"

"What?"

"I want to touch you too. But I'm not sure I should."

Sophie's breath left her. *Ouch*. She swallowed hard and downed a gulp of wine.

He took her wineglass away and put it on the table, then moved closer to her. He traced her jaw with a light fingertip. "I just want to proceed carefully here. I mean, it's clear you're not in a completely comfortable place when it comes to this thing we do—"

"No, I am. That meltdown at the dungeon, that was just because...because I hadn't been there in a while...and something about the way she was screaming..."

"You don't know anything about me. Maybe I like to make women scream like that too."

Sophie stared at him. "Do you?" It was true. He could be a hard-core sadist. Evil personified, wrapped up in a smiling package. Again, she was leaping into a risky relationship without looking first. "Well, I do like... I like..."

"You like to be hurt. I figured that. But I won't hurt you like your last guy did. I can't. If that's what you're looking for—"

"No." Sophie shook her head. The big black dog raised his head from under the coffee table at the stridency in her voice. "No, I don't want that again. It wasn't healthy."

"No, it wasn't. And I'm not into unhealthy relationships."

Sophie wrung her hands together in her lap, humiliated. "You're assuming that I'm a nutcase. I don't blame you –"

He placed a fingertip against her lips. "I'm not assuming anything. I am telling you that if I kiss you...if I touch you tonight the way I want to..."

The way he was staring at her made it impossible to concentrate on his words. Her eyes dropped to his lips, full and sensual. His bottom lip was perfection, something to lick and nibble. Before she could stop herself, she drew her tongue across her own lips. His hand cupped her chin and his gaze forced her to focus. "Listen to me. If I kiss you... Sophie..." He leaned forward and she parted her lips with a sigh.

The moment his lips touched hers, she felt relief. She felt a peace that had eluded her for months, perhaps years. He held her face in his hands as his mouth possessed hers. The kiss quickly intensified and his tongue pushed into her mouth. He moved closer. His hands grasped her shoulders, then ran down her arms to pull her against his chest. The entire time, his lips never left hers. He tasted her eagerly, and his kiss was demanding. She felt possessed, challenged. He could master her and she knew it. He was letting her know he could master her if that was her desire.

*Oh god.* One hand moved up her back to twist in her hair. He pulled hard, sending thrills of stinging pain down the back of her neck and around to her flushed face. She arched her spine and moaned against his lips. It was not in her nature to beg, although she wanted to at that moment. She wanted to plead for what she wished. She wanted to prostrate herself before him. She wanted to surrender to the intensity and fire of his touch. His touch, his touch...his fingertips were trailing back down her arms, then to the hem of her dress. She broke away and looked around. The light. *Not in the light.* She pushed at his hand and he stopped and pulled back.

"What's wrong?"

"I...can't we...the light is so bright and...and your dog is staring at me. It's kind of freaking me out. Can't we...? I'm sorry..."

"Turn out the lights?"

She blushed, feeling like an idiot. "Can we please?"

"I would like to see you, Sophie. Your lovely body. Your beautiful eyes."

She bit her lip, hating this moment, hating everything about it. She could run. She could just run out the door and... No. She didn't want to run. But she couldn't show her body to him, not at this moment. Later. She would deal with it later. And if he rejected her when he saw the scars, at least then she would have had one night to be with him.

"Please, Dave. I'm just shy. It's been so long and..." She looked over at Cerby again, who was helping her case by gawking at them from a couple feet away. "Your dog is sweet but –"

"You're telling me you're embarrassed to get naked in front of my dog."

"Yes." *Yes, and please believe me. Please just go along with this.*

Dave sighed. "That's really the problem? It's not that you don't want to get intimate tonight? Because hey, we just met. I'm fine with waiting. Really, Sophie, I am."

Noooo. "No, I want to. I'm just... I'm weird that way." *I'm weird. I'm weird. Don't make me show you just how weird I am.* "Maybe...maybe the first time would be better in the dark. So we can really feel each other. You know?"

He nodded, his fingers caressing her hip. "Depend on our other senses?"

"Yes, exactly."

"Well, you realize I'm a photographer, that I'm very visual. We can always shut Cerby out of the bedroom. In fact, it would probably be a good idea."

"I guess. I mean, we could. But something about me is that I really... I really like the dark. I really, really like darkness, especially when I'm feeling..."

"Scared?" he supplied when her voice got too tight to continue. "Are you feeling scared right now, Sophie?"

"Nervous," she whispered. "Because I really want to be with you."

He looked down at her trembling hands and then back at her face, and something in her expression must have caused him to relent.

"Okay. Only because the first time is always slightly scary. My bedroom is really dark with the lights off, you'll like it. We can get to know each other by touch alone."

## **Chapter Three**

Dave was fairly sure she wanted sex. He had scrutinized her, analyzed every signal. She was obviously aroused. Her cheeks were flushed and her body language was open and willing. He was ninety-nine percent sure she wanted sex.

And he was one hundred percent sure she wanted it in the dark.

Well, it would be a new and novel experience for him, sex in the dark. He liked girls under 500-watt photography lights. He liked to see everything, every mole, every muscle, every secret place. He liked to expose girls. He liked to make them see there was nothing they could hide.

But this one, she clearly needed to hide, at least for now. She would need to be introduced gradually to his particular brand of exposure. He would train her to it.

Now was not the time.

Her hand trembled as he led her into his bedroom and shut Cerberus out. He ignored the dog's indignant whine. Cerb was never allowed in when Dave was with girls, because he sometimes took umbrage when Dave played rough. His canine instincts, while finely honed, could not always differentiate between moans of pleasure and pain. The first time the dog had nipped at Dave to stop him from "hurting" his partner, Dave had understood and hadn't censured him. But for safety, he locked Cerb out now every time.

"There, no more staring dog," he said, turning to Sophie with a grin. She returned his smile and looked around his bedroom. It wasn't huge, but it didn't need to be. He let her see it in the light, gave her a moment to look around. He watched her take in the king-sized bed that took up the lion's share of the space. And yes, the photography lights rigged in the corner. Cerberus' dog bed, completely unused of course, took up another entire corner. A door on the right wall led to a bathroom. He went in to get some condoms, showing them to Sophie before he placed them on the bedside table.

"If we need them they'll be there. We can do as much or as little as you like. I mean that, no pressure. I actually didn't ask you here expecting you to fuck me."

She looked away and then back at him, blushing. "I didn't really come here to fuck you. But to be totally honest, there's nothing in the world I want more right now."

"To be totally honest, I hoped to God you would say those exact words."

She giggled. She was so sweet, so beautiful. He thought of the terrible things he'd learned about her last relationship, and wondered how anyone could harm someone like her. He took her in his arms, his hands sliding around her slender waist to rest at the small of her back. He kissed her, reveling in the soft, tentative way she gave herself to him. He drew away to take one last look at her eyes before he turned out the lights.

He saw so many things there in that luminous violet gaze. A jumble of emotions—fear, excitement, lust, happiness, sadness. He traced his thumbs over her delicate eyelids before dropping a kiss on each soft surface. Her long black eyelashes fluttered. Beautiful lost princess. Snow White in the forest.

“Sophie, you can trust me. I promise you can.”

“Okay.” Her voice trembled a little.

He turned out the lights and they both stood still. Darkness. It was true and total darkness. There was no moon to cast even soft light, just black empty space. No, not empty. He could feel her there beside him like a magnet. Elemental pull. His hands went to her of their own accord, drawn to her soft skin, her womanly curves. His fingers traced over her shoulders to grope for a zipper at the back of her neck and she bowed her head toward him. He felt her forehead come to rest against his chest. In the black darkness all his other senses were heightened. He could smell her fresh, flowery scent and feel the lightest brush of soft hair against the side of his chin.

He drew the zipper down and opened his hands on the skin of her back. His fingers nudged the dress down and off. He could barely make out the outline of the black bra against her pale skin as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. He reached for the clasp and undid it. She didn’t stop him, but he could feel she was tense. He stroked his fingers across her breasts, then cupped their weight. As the pads of his thumbs teased the taut peaks, he was finally rewarded with a shivery moan and the feel of her relaxing against him.

He skimmed her tights down over her hips, taking a moment to explore her curvy ass with his palms. No panties, just bare, smooth skin. It was impossible for him not to give her a couple tentative slaps. She gasped and pressed herself closer, reaching for him in the darkness. Her hands seemed at a loss for what to do, fluttering against him like lost birds. He took them hard and whispered, “Put them behind your back. Keep them there.”

That seemed to settle her. She did as he asked and stood still, her breathing even and measured. He took a few more moments to explore her exquisite ass cheeks, landing a few more smacks. Then he resumed pushing her tights all the way down her legs, his fingers tracing down thighs, knees, calves, ankles. Going by feel in the dark only made him appreciate the exquisite sensations more. He breathed in the faint scent of her arousal. Without thought, he used his thumb to probe the folds of her mons, finding hot slickness. She gave a low moan as he slid the pad of his thumb against her clit and then pressed and teased the sensitive nub. She reached for his shoulders and made a small hip movement forward.

“Hands,” he reminded her. Her hands left him and returned to the position he’d told her, but not before she sighed, “Oh, Dave...”

“Go get in bed.” He turned her in the right direction, guiding her with firm hands on her shoulders, then set to tearing off his own clothes, letting them fall in a heap at his

feet. He slid in beside her, finding her by touch and scent. He clasped her, aligning her body to his. He trapped her hands behind her and found her lips in the dark.

God, she tasted wonderful, sweet. The way she kissed drove him mad, alternately tentative and eager. His cock poked against the front of her and she arched her hips forward in response. Dave was bursting. He had to be inside her. He explored her full breasts and hard nipples, then stroked down her thighs and parted her again. She was so wet. She moaned almost inaudibly as his fingers smoothed across her slick center. He wished he could see her eyes.

"Do you like when I touch you, Sophie?"

She sighed in reply.

"Yes or no?" he prompted. "Answer me."

"Yes." The word came out as a gasp.

"Touch me. Take my cock in your hands."

He released her hands, felt her shift, felt her fingers trace down across his hip to wrap around his throbbing cock. He drew in his breath. Every sensation was deepened, intensified by the darkness they moved in. He heard her breathing quicken as her fingers moved on his member, stroking it, caressing it. He shuddered, feeling pleasure, yes, but something more. Something deeper. He felt so connected to her, as if they had shared a lifetime of intimacy, not just one evening. He thought, for a moment, *This is going to get complicated*. But it was not in his power to stop and grasp for distance. She pressed closer to him, eager and warm, and his cock swelled under her enveloping touch.

"Oh Jesus, Sophie. I need you. I need to have you, right now."

Her arms came around him. "Please take me. Please..."

He groaned and pulled away to grope in the dark for a condom. He sheathed himself and pushed her back, nestling between her legs. He grasped for control. He didn't want to hurt her, even though some primal instinct made him want to thrust wildly inside, possess her as his own. He held back, entering her one inch, then another, then another. As much as he wanted to impale her recklessly, he also wanted to enjoy every moment of this new joining, draw it out. Her hands tightened around his neck and he pulled them away, pinning them to the bed.

"Be a good girl. You'll get what you want."

"Oh god." She squirmed as he drove deeper in a slow, deliberate movement.

"You like that? You like the feel of my hard cock filling you up, don't you?" Her low whimper registered in his balls before it registered in his brain. He withdrew and pressed forward again, gritting his teeth against the hot pleasure of her walls clenching his dick. "Jesus, Sophie." He tightened his grasp on her arms and pressed his forehead to hers. Her hands squeezed his as he held her down, entering her again and again in a rhythm as old as time. Her hips arched and seemed to cradle him perfectly. The darkness held both of them like a magic spell. Sex magic. Dark, pure ritual come to life

to electrify them both. Each time he sank inside her again she shuddered and made sounds that made him feel wholly powerful and male. Her hands clenched and unclenched in his grip.

"Sophie..." he groaned on a long breath.

"Dave!" Her cry was high and frantic. "I can't— I can't take this—"

"What? What's wrong?"

"It's too much—" She shook her head against his cheek, trembling against him. "It feels too good. Every time you move in me—"

Dave stroked her hair back in the darkness and then twisted it in his fist with an intensity of feeling that came over him like a surprise. She was shaking. Her lips opened, searching for him. He kissed her deep, and each time he thrust in her she gasped into his mouth. Her pussy gripped him so he almost lost his mind. Just when he thought he couldn't hold on another second, he felt her begin to tremble.

"Oh...oh," she cried. "Please. Please..."

He bit her lip and drove deeper, harder. Her limbs shook and she tensed, her breath irregular and fast. One hand still held her arms pinned above while the other held her thigh hard, held her open as he sank into her, possessing her, branding her as his own. "Yes, come on. I want to feel it."

She came unwound in his arms, struggling against him, caught in the throes of her orgasm. He held her down and felt his own essence, his entire being empty into her. She wrapped her legs around him and milked him until he was drained. He collapsed on top of her, never wanting to move. Her breathless gasps tickled the hair that had come loose from his ponytail. He rolled with her onto his side so he wouldn't crush her, but he didn't withdraw from her. Not yet. He wanted to stay joined with her another moment, just one more moment. She, too, seemed unwilling to pull away. He felt her chest rise and fall against his. She was so small, so feminine. Perhaps that was why his protective impulses were in overdrive. All the sensations—skin, hair, scent, subtle movements, the slick heat between her thighs—all of it multiplied in the dark. Without sight, his other senses were so much more acute.

"I liked it with the lights out," he whispered against her ear. "It was a nice way to begin. You were right."

She snuggled closer. "I always feel more comfortable in the dark. Well, usually."

Usually. Something in her voice made the magical sheen of their encounter ebb away. The phantom ex-partner. What had he done to her in the dark? Dave had completely forgotten about her traumatic past in the heat of the moment, until he heard that note in her voice.

Well, Dave would take it all away. He would love her and nurture her, play with her until the laughter outpaced the fears. He kissed her forehead and nibbled her lips before he finally parted from her. He removed the condom and tossed it in the can under the nightstand, by feel, not sight. He still didn't want to turn on the light. It was as if the darkness held the intimacy they'd just shared like a secret. The light would

dispel it, break the moment. The light would come soon enough, in the morning, and then they'd have to talk, negotiate, make plans to move forward.

But not tonight. Tonight he only kissed her again and again in the enveloping blackness they shared. He didn't say anything, because there were no words to express how strongly he felt. Only the kisses, the endless, adoring kisses, and the hands that refused to let her go.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sophie came awake with a start just before dawn. Holy hell, what had she done? She'd fallen asleep right there in his arms and slept for hours. The last thing she remembered, he had been kissing her, dropping soft kisses across her shoulder and over her breasts. She had felt so warm, so drowsy. So satiated. She had intended to make her excuses, get dressed and head home. But she must have fallen asleep instead.

She had a feeling he would have put up a fight anyway. Even now, his arm was slung possessively across her waist. She really didn't want to go home. She wanted to stay there in his bed, in his arms, forever. But he would see...he would see in the light of day how messed up she was. She had to go. She *had* to go. She didn't want the scene.

She tried to inch from under his arm. Her dress was still over by the door. If she could just get dressed before he woke up... She heard Dave's dog scratching at the door and whining.

"Mmrh. Sophie. Don't mind Cerb. I'll let him out in a bit."

He pulled her closer again. God, he smelled so wonderful, like aftershave and sex and sleepy man. His face was relaxed and his eyes didn't even open. His lashes lay thick and black against his tan skin. His lips were so beautifully formed, and his cheeks had a smattering of dark stubble, a texture she wanted to explore. *No. Get dressed. Go home.*

"I can let him out, Dave. I have to get up anyway."

Suddenly he came awake. She pulled the sheets closer around her as he looked at her.

"Are you trying to steal away from me?"

"I just had to... I mean... I wanted to—"

"You wanted to sneak away while I was half asleep so you never had to see me again," he accused, teasing her. His eyes crinkled into beautiful laugh lines. She thought he must smile all the time. He was so handsome, sleep-rumpled and easy.

Sophie laughed too, a more mournful note. "No. Not at all."

"Stay here in bed with me then. Let's snuggle."

She rubbed her eyes. The temptation proved too much and she sank back down beside him.

"So, Sophie," he whispered against her ear. "How about breakfast?"



She sighed. "I—"

"I know The UPS Store is not open on Sunday, so don't even try it."

"No, I don't have to work. But I have some things to do—"

"What kind of things?"

His hands were roving over her under the covers, making it very difficult for her to think up excuses.

"I just—"

"You just what, baby?"

He pulled back the covers and lowered his head to kiss her neck and then down her chest. *Shit*. She felt it, the instant he froze. She tried to pull the sheets back up but he pulled them down. They tugged them back and forth. It would have been funny if she didn't feel close to tears.

"Sophie?"

"I just want to get dressed. Just please let me up."

"What happened to you? What are these scars?"

His fingertips traced over the ugly burns on the side of her breasts, then down to the faint stripes of scars on her stomach. She wanted to turn away, to turn her back on him, but the ones on her back were worse. She hunched over instead, then took flight. She pushed his hands away and ran for her clothes in the half-light. She had her dress half up and her arms in the sleeves before he got to her.

"Sophie. Hey." His arms came around her. He hugged her close from behind, his stubbly cheek rubbing against her neck. "Please don't run away. Talk to me."

She pulled away from him. "I don't want to talk. There's nothing I can do now to change it. I can't make the scars go away. And as for the rest of it, I have a therapist. I do enough talking about it with her."

She turned away, pulling her zipper up and reaching for her tights, hating the fiery blush that spread across her face. The way he was looking at her. *Ugh*. Why hadn't she left during the night? It had been such a wonderful experience being with him. Now it was all ugly and ruined. Just like her, just like everything she touched, fallen to complete and utter ruin—

"Sophie, it's okay. We don't have to talk. If you don't want to talk about it, we won't. But please don't push me away...last night...look, I have some pretty strong feelings about you. Please don't just run away from me now. That's not fair."

The kindness in his voice undid her. Her throat grew tight and the tears that threatened to overwhelm her began to fall. "It's just... I didn't want you to see the way I look. Those scars, they're so ugly. I hate them. I wish I could make them go away."

"Oh, baby." He turned her around and held her to his chest. His fingers caressed her nape, slow and soothing. "You're a beautiful girl, Sophie. Nothing that someone else did to you is ever going to change that."

She shook her head against his chest. It wasn't true. Barry had changed her. He had made her horrible and ugly both inside and out. She realized that she wasn't ready to begin another relationship at all. That she could never be in another relationship. It was way too hard. She wanted to break away from him and run away, run to her car, drive home and be alone again. But at the same time, his warm hands were soothing her and she wanted to stay in his arms. He made her feel so treasured, so safe. She couldn't decide what she wanted more, so in the end, she just stayed still and rested her cheek against the soft hair on his chest. His heart beat against her ear, slow and steady.

After a few minutes, she heard the scratching of his dog at the door again and a more insistent whine. He pulled back from her, turning to step into a pair of sweats. "I have to let Cerberus out. Come with me."

She might have begged off and left for home if he hadn't used his Dom voice on her. As it was, she fell into step behind him as he went to the patio door to let Cerberus out into the backyard. The house wasn't very big, but the yard was large and wooded. Cerby bounded after a chipmunk before stopping to lift his leg against a massive pine.

"Come on. Come outside with me." He held the door open. Again, she hesitated. If he had asked, "Come outside with me?" she would have said, "No, I have to go". But he didn't ask. He told. He told her to come outside, so she did. She followed him out onto his deck and blinked in the sunlight. It was a beautiful morning, cool and not too muggy. A light breeze ruffled her hair against her cheek and over her eyes. She glanced up to find him watching her, and she looked away. There were a couple padded lounge chairs that looked quite comfortable but neither of them sat. They just faced each other, her in her stark black dress and him in his rumpled sweats. She tried not to notice how the pants sat low on his hips, revealing a light trail of hair flanked by tight, defined muscles at either side of his hips. What were those called, those muscles men had there? She was having trouble thinking. He was staring at her, and she didn't know him well enough yet to untangle the emotions in his gaze.

"I'm sorry," she began. "I should have told you. I would have eventually, I just didn't know —"

"Sophie."

"I didn't really plan—I mean, I didn't expect to be here. I didn't know I was going to spend the night —"

"Sophie —"

"I mean, I just met you yesterday afternoon. If I had known, I would have thought about how to handle it. But it was wrong of me to just hide in the dark like that. But I...I didn't know if I was ever going to see you again after tonight, so, anyway, I'm sorry —"

He scowled at her, then drew her close and kissed her hard. She pulled away but he persevered, parting her lips, thrusting his tongue inside. He kissed her until she responded to him, until she went pliable in his arms. Soon afterward, he broke the kiss and scowled down at her again.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

"To shut you up. You apologizing for what he did to you really drags my nerves. Don't do it again or I might go crazy."

"I'm – I'm sorry –" Sophie blushed and swallowed the rest of the sentence. "That wasn't apologizing for him that time. Just for me."

Dave was nodding with a dire look. "Mm-hm. How about no more apologizing right now?"

"Okay." She looked down at her feet, wanting to sink into the ground. He lifted her chin and gazed into her eyes.

"Repeat after me. *I'm beautiful.*"

"You're beautiful," she agreed with a nod.

He shook his head, fighting a smile. "Don't test me. I'm dying to spank you. Dying to. But now probably isn't the time. So try again. *I'm beautiful.*"

"I'm..." She stopped. "I don't believe that. Just saying so doesn't make it true."

"No. My saying so makes it true. I'm waiting."

She swallowed and pursed her lips. "Okay. You find me beautiful."

She couldn't have sounded more unconvinced, but he accepted her attempt anyway. "That's right, because you are beautiful. Those scars don't bother me. I've seen things, I've photographed things you really wouldn't believe. Really ugly things. But those marks on you, they're not ugly. Do you know why?"

She shook her head.

"Because you're not with him anymore. You're here with me. You left him and you're with me now, and if I get my way, you're going to be with me for a while. What do you think about that?"

Neither one of them noticed Cerberus watching this time, his luminous dark eyes intent on his owner as Dave kissed the pretty new stray he intended to adopt as his own.

## Chapter Four

"Mmmmmrrrrrrhhhhh...ahhhh..."

Sophie stretched awake to the feeling of Dave's lips on her nape, licking slowly up to her hairline. "Ohhhhh..." She shuddered and pressed her hips back against him.

"Oh, yourself." Dave pulled her sheer panties up between her cheeks until she squirmed, then peeled them down over her arched hips. "Good morning, Sophie," he breathed in her ear as he poked his cock against the back of her thigh.

"Mmmmm..." The wordless plea was the only sound her sleepy brain could come up with. She was relieved to feel him turn and open the bedside drawer. He was back in an instant, although it was too long for Sophie when she was in this mood. Something about waking up beside him in the warmth of his cozy bed, cradled in the strong, capable arms that kept the nightmares at bay...

"Dave, please."

"Correct address, Sophie." Dom voice.

Sophie tried to push the fog away and behave appropriately. It had been nearly two months since they'd met, and two weeks since she'd moved into his comfortable home. For the first few weeks, Dave had insisted they interact as equals except in the bedroom. For the getting-to-know-you phase, he'd explained. Sophie had felt lost at that, but Dave insisted, based on her history, that she know him well before she gave up significant power to him.

It was only in the last week he'd begun to lay down some basic rules and protocols, which both relieved and thrilled her.

So Sophie changed "Dave, please" to "Sir, please" and burned even hotter for him when she heard his approving "Good girl". He took her hips in his hands, guiding himself to her pussy. Without thinking, she reached back as if to control the depth of his thrust, but his grunt of disapproval froze her.

"Hands over your head. Grip the headboard."

"Yes Sir." Her palms closed around the cold iron and she tried to open herself to him without reservation. *He won't hurt you. He hasn't hurt you yet.*

She still flinched from him sometimes, still cringed in self-protective moments, but they were growing fewer and farther between. At first Dave had been beside himself each time she ducked from him, and she hated to see the guilt in his eyes, but she was doing better now. He was better too. She had finally convinced him that it was merely habit, that she did trust him. So far, he had given her no cause to withdraw her trust.

But she would if she had to. She repeated it to herself every day. *Careful, careful. Beware.* The closer she got to him, the more he required of her, the more she steeled

herself against giving herself away completely. She kept one small part of herself apart, one small corner of her psyche to monitor if the relationship was still okay. Even times like this it didn't go away.

But almost. "Oohhhh..."

"Yes, baby. Sir likes to fuck your pussy in the morning, doesn't he?" It was a rhetorical question, one that made her moan. "Because it's my pussy, isn't it?"

"Yes Sir...oohhhh."

"Mm. I know you like that." His deft fingers traced around her hip, then trailed down the front of her mons to spread her slick pussy lips. She bit her tongue to keep from begging, and then to keep from blurting out a babble of thanks as he stroked her clit and tingling fire raced up to her pelvis. She arched her back, her hands opening and closing on the iron bars.

"Don't let go. Obey me, even if it feels really good."

"Yes Sir." She felt breathless by now, quivery with lust.

"Because that's what we do, little girl. I instruct and you obey."

"Yes Sir." *You'll answer when I speak to you. You'll address me as Sir.*

Of course, he didn't require her to call him Sir all the time, or answer formally, or even obey every word he said. Sometimes they interacted like regular couples, laughed over movies, shared stories about their day. Sometimes when he was giving her self-defense lessons they got silly and started to wrestle like puppies, and yes, she even bested him sometimes, although she knew he let her. Sometimes they just sat together and made out like teenagers.

No, she knew when she had to obey and use proper address by the *voice*. Dom voice. She dreamed of the voice now.

It was so much better than the dreams she used to have, nightmares of the things Barry had done to her. Those nightmares came a lot less seldom now that she slept in Dave's arms. No more sleeping on the floor on a hard, cold pallet, or worse, in a locked metal cage. The only cage she was locked in now was the cage of his arms and his body. He curved around her now, holding her close, alternately stroking her clit and pinching her throbbing nipples.

"Oh, oh, oh..." she panted, unable to smother the frantic noises.

"Shhh. You'll get Cerby wound up."

Sophie tossed her head back and forth and sealed her lips together, but Dave only intensified his skillful manipulation of her sensitive nub. Her pelvis ached as she twisted back against him, then she felt everything unravel. Blessed release. She turned her head into the pillow to muffle her cries as the waves of pleasure shook her, made her jerk in ecstasy. Her hands gripped the headboard so hard she was always surprised afterward that she hadn't left imprints in the iron. Dave pumped his own orgasm into her, shaking the bed and growling into her neck. They both shuddered, coming to rest in the aftermath.

When they opened their eyes again, Cerberus was standing at the foot of the bed staring at them.

"Relax, boy," Dave said. "She likes it, I promise."

Sophie giggled and let go of the headboard, turning her head for Dave's kiss. As he turned from her to throw away the condom, she reached down and buried her hand in Cerby's fur.

"You're a good boy, aren't you? You're such a sweet boy."

As she scratched behind his ears, the dog made a groaning sound not unlike the sounds Dave and Sophie had been making moments before. He inched up the comforter, closer and closer, until he'd insinuated his hundred-pound body between Sophie's and Dave's. Dave rolled his eyes.

"You're lucky we love you so much. Bed hog."

Cerby grunted and turned pleading eyes on Sophie.

"I know, he's a big beastie sometimes, isn't he, Cerb?"

They both laughed as Cerberus buried his muzzle under Sophie's arm with a sigh.

"I think you have a friend for life." Dave scratched Cerberus' ears for a moment before he threw back the covers. "Up and at 'em, Sophie. It's beautiful out. I feel like a hike today."

\* \* \* \* \*

Sophie smiled over at Dave as they walked along the dusty path. He held her hand, swinging it beside him. She took a deep, cleansing breath. He was right, it was far too gorgeous a day to stay inside. Dave hated to stay inside. He loved nature, fresh air and exercise, so they spent at least part of every weekend outdoors. Sometimes they went geocaching, a kind of communal treasure hunt that thrilled the child in Sophie, and sometimes they just hiked and enjoyed Atlanta's lush woods.

And even though Sophie had lived in the area nearly her entire life, and Dave had only moved there recently, he knew every picturesque, wooded area in the entire greater Atlanta area, beautiful parks and trails that Sophie had never known existed. They had been to several since they met, but this particular park, Overton Park, was Sophie's favorite.

The trails weren't too long or difficult to reach, but they were densely wooded so you felt as if you were in the deepest forest even though you really weren't. Now, in early fall, the shedding trees reached up to the sky in stark, zigzagging patterns, branches of orange, yellow and red leaves crowded together far above. One thing Sophie had always loved about Atlanta was the absolute profusion of trees. Trees flourished in every part of the city, even encroaching on interstate ramps and busy roadways. In the summer heat, this same bright path of limbs would be cool and dark under a thick canopy of leaves.

Today they were taking a steeper path into the densest part of the forest. Cerberus bounded ahead of them down the unfamiliar trail. "Here, boy. Come back!"

Cerberus blissfully ignored his master's order. Dave looked over at Sophie with a lopsided grin. "At least one of you is obedient." Sophie didn't answer, basking in the fondness she saw in his eyes. Who could have imagined her life would be so different from one year to the next? Last year she had been at the depth of her darkness, the time when she really thought she might die. But here she was, alive and kicking.

"I love you, Dave," she said in the silence of the bright afternoon. She immediately blushed. Where had that come from? The look he gave her banished her fears. He stopped on the path and took her head between his hands, lowering his lips to hers. He kissed her softly at first, then more roughly. His hands clutched her close, pressing her to his front. She felt his lips against her ear, a caress and then a whisper.

"I love you like crazy, Soph. I really do." He slipped his fingers through her hair and massaged her nape in that possessive way that melted her. "Are you happy with me?"

"God. Yes. I can't even explain..." She peered up at him, feeling dangerously emotional. He smiled, kissed her again and drew back to gaze at her.

"All I care about is that you're happy. Please remember that. If you ever don't feel happy with our relationship, you need to let me know."

"Yes, I know." He told her that at least once every week, and in the beginning he'd said it daily. Her heart was so full of love and gratitude for him, for the positive changes he'd brought to her life, changes she was responsible for too. On her own, she'd enrolled in some night classes, math and chemistry refresher courses. Dreams she had banished forever were suddenly alive again. Going to medical school seemed possible. He made her feel she could accomplish anything.

They were still gazing into each other's eyes when Cerberus came bounding back through the brush, carrying a branch twice as long as he was. The gravity of the moment was broken, and Dave released her with an affectionate squeeze. He took up his camera case and started fiddling with lenses and settings. Sophie watched him, fascinated by the quick dexterity of his fingers. She never wanted him more than when he was taking photographs. There was something about the way he moved, or the way his eyes seemed to capture the surroundings as effortlessly as his camera did. He looked up at her then.

"You today, Sophie. It's time."

*Oh crap.* He had wanted to photograph her for a while, but the idea of it terrified her and she had held him off with excuses. She didn't want to see herself in the mirror of the lens – Dave's ruthless lens that captured every detail.

"I look awful today. I'm not dressed for modeling."

"Hmm." He smiled at her hiking clothes, thermal tee and faded jeans, with a glint in his eye. "That doesn't matter. You're going to take them off."

Her mouth dropped open. "No. No way."

He turned away, shrugging. "We'll see. Come. Follow me."

Ugh. Dom voice. Sophie lifted her chin and walked after him. Cerberus dogged her heels, dragging his huge branch along the ground. She wouldn't panic yet. He wouldn't do anything to humiliate her. He was an unrepentant sadist but humiliation and exposure weren't his thing, although he surely realized he could hurt her terribly that way. Well, she had no choice but to trust him. After all he had done for her, she owed him this. She would be brave.

He led her along a path that arched up into an even denser area with some wild shrubs and bushes. They climbed up and ever farther away from the main area of the park. The way the trail was situated, they would have plenty of warning before any other hikers came upon them. It gave Sophie some semblance of comfort.

At last he stopped in a sheltered area where five large trees rose close together from the root-riddled ground. Between the roots, leafy bushes had taken shelter, creating what Sophie, as a child, would immediately have seen as a fort or secret clubhouse. Dave led her to the center of the trees. She waited for an order to strip, but he only stepped back and looked around, perhaps framing the scene in his mind. Then he told her to sit, arranging her beside an overgrown shrub.

"Just relax."

He backed up, looked at her a moment, then lifted his camera. The black lens obscured his face and disquieted her with its impersonal blankness. She looked away.

"Look at me."

Sophie looked up reluctantly. "Do you want me to smile, or...?"

"You can look however you feel. If you don't feel like smiling, don't."

Sophie kept her face raised to him with an effort. She felt too tense to smile but she didn't want to frown either. A moment later he stopped and pulled out a different camera. This one had an even bigger lens, and he loaded it quickly with 35mm film. The *click, click, click* of the film advancing in the camera sounded loud in the stillness. Cerberus gnawed carelessly on his stick a few feet away.

"Why don't you shoot Cerby?" Sophie suggested, in a last-ditch effort to avoid the lens.

"I've taken a thousand photos of Cerby. Now I'm photographing you. Is this really so difficult?"

She shrugged. "I just don't understand the point."

"The point is that I'm in love with you and I want to photograph the woman I love."

"But you see me every day. Why do you need photos of me?"

"Because I'm a photographer. I see photos of you in my head all the time, and so I'd like to have some in real life."

Sophie pursed her lips. "I'm not photogenic." *Click, click, click.* He photographed her anyway, despite the petulant look on her face.



"Enough. Don't make me cut a switch, girl. Because I will." He went back to fiddling with the camera settings, so Sophie gave in to the urge to roll her eyes. He looked up a moment later and smiled at her. "Give me your shirt and your bra."

She gave him a look but complied. He laid them over his shoulder and crouched down in front of her. She hugged herself, hunkering down behind the bush, although it wasn't really dense enough to hide her. He began to snap photos again. She expected him to order her to stand and expose herself, but he didn't. Just *click, click, click*.

"Look at me."

Sophie dragged her gaze to the camera. She couldn't really look at him. All she saw was the scrutinizing lens. Barry had never photographed her, although it would have been an effective torture. No, he played harder games. Was this a game? She didn't smile as she stared at Dave's camera, and he didn't ask her to smile. After what seemed like hundreds of clicks but probably wasn't, he stopped to reload.

"Hanging in there?"

"Yes Sir."

"Are you too cold?" *Just lie and say yes.* But she couldn't lie to him. He would know.

"Not cold. Just feeling a little exposed."

"I'm almost done."

He clicked the film door shut and crouched down again, closer this time. He held the camera like he held her when he loved her — assured and focused, but with a gentle touch. *Click, click, click, click*.

"Stand now, Sophie. Just stand there behind the bush. Take your jeans and panties down but don't take them off. I won't photograph you from the knees down."

Great. That was reassuring. She only paused a moment before she obeyed. He watched dispassionately, observing her as his subject and not his lover. She undid the button of her jeans and drew down the zipper, taking a deep breath to work through the feelings of nervousness. They were snug jeans so she had to do a kind of dance to shimmy them down over her hips. She stood and faced him, lowering her arms to her sides. She tried to be open to him. He had told her many times that he found her scars beautiful, a mark of her survival and strength. He hated when she tried to hide them, when she covered herself and felt ashamed, so she tried hard not to feel that way. Or at least not to look as though she felt that way.

She sensed the weight of her breasts in the cool open air, and her nipples tightened to an almost painful hardness. He drew in a breath and looked at her for a long moment before lifting the camera to his eye. As his fingers adjusted the controls — the zoom, the focus — she felt used by Dave in a very hot way. He ravished her with the camera. He seized her image again and again, his finger clicking on the shutter. She thought she understood now about those cultures that believed photos might steal your soul. He snapped two, three times more, then lowered the camera in an abrupt motion.

"Okay. Pull your jeans up. That's it for today."

Sophie pulled up her panties and jeans in relief while he turned off his camera and recapped the lens. Then he came to her, handing over her bra and helping her pull her shirt over her head. When she was dressed again he pulled her close. His strong arms came around her and he pressed a kiss on the top of her head.

"My good girl. I know that wasn't easy for you."

Sophie didn't answer, just nestled closer to his chest. His happiness made it all worthwhile. She fought back the urge to tell him he'd be disappointed later when he developed the film, that she'd never had a good picture taken. She hadn't even smiled in any of them. But then she thought better of it, and after that Cerberus went tearing through the trees after a squirrel or chipmunk again and Dave got distracted calling him back. Once Cerberus was reclaimed, they returned to the main trail by a different route. The sun was high in the sky now, it was probably noon or later. It filtered down onto the floor of the quiet forest, creating a soft light. They walked slowly, in silence, as if they both just wanted to enjoy the peaceful solitude.

"This way," Dave said when they came to a fork in the path. They walked around a bend, stepping over gnarled roots and stones, and then came to a small clearing where the path sloped down sharply. "Be careful here," Dave murmured, reaching for her hand. But Sophie stopped.

She looked around, experiencing an odd feeling of alertness, or déjà vu, or some strange mixture of both.

"What is it?" he asked.

She didn't answer for a moment, couldn't answer, because she didn't know what to say. She knew this place. She had been here, she was sure of it, but her mind couldn't settle on when. She was vaguely aware of him lifting the camera again. She heard the short series of clicks as if in a dream, as she looked up at the sky, the pattern of the branches against the blue, cloudy backdrop.

"Are you okay, baby?" he asked, lowering the camera.

"Yes." She hugged herself and narrowed her eyes in confusion. "It's just... I know this place. But I don't know how."

"Maybe you came here as a child."

"Maybe." But she'd never gone hiking as a child. She turned around once more, trying to clear the confusion in her mind. She looked down the steep slope before them. "I don't know. It's so weird. Oh well."

"It's pretty here, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's beautiful with the clearing and that slope." She looked downward at the rock-pocked, eroded pathway flanked with dense trees. "It feels special here, I guess. Almost as if that path could go anywhere."

Dave smiled and took her hand again. "I know exactly what you mean."

They continued down, slip-sliding when the path grew steepest. Cerberus blew by both of them, waiting at the foot until they finally caught up, laughing from the exertion

of not tumbling down in a heap. On the main trail again, as the trees cleared and the sun reached its zenith, Sophie smiled up at Dave. He winked at her and strolled a few more yards before he dropped her hand and made his way over to a tree. He flipped a few of the smaller branches back and forth. It only took a moment for Sophie to realize his intent and start to flush crimson. *Don't make me cut a switch, girl. Because I will.* When he returned, he was holding a thin whippy branch. He sheared the leaves from it with casual movements as they continued on their way back to his car. When he finished stripping it bare, he handed it over to her.

"Hold this until we get home."

"Yes Sir." Sophie accepted the switch with shaking fingers. Cerberus ran ahead, jubilant and oblivious, until Dave called him back to snap on his leash. Then Dave took her other hand, squeezed it, and whistled a bright tune as they made their way out of the forest into the city park.

She blushed as they walked through the parking lot. Did anyone wonder why she was carrying what was obviously a switch? Dave opened the door for her, ushering her into the car. Sophie held the switch on her lap, hot and scared and aroused and joyous, the entire drive home.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dave tried not to smile like an idiot. It wouldn't be conducive to the scene he was trying to develop. But he couldn't stifle the grin that lurked just around the corners of his mouth. There was nothing on earth like a midmorning hike into a forest to photograph your beautiful sub, and then making her drive home with a switch on her lap. A switch she very well knew was going to be applied to her gorgeous, heart-shaped bottom as soon as they arrived home. He was looking forward to bending her over and cuffing her to the bed. Maybe even making her stand facing the wall. And then he would mark her lovely ass with the switch, watch her cry out and fidget as he disciplined her—

He cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. His jeans were growing tight in the groin region. But God, he loved her. He reached out for her hand and she had to move the switch to her other hand to take it. Nice sweaty palms. Well, he wouldn't really hurt her. Not too much.

No, just enough. He was finally getting to the point of feeling comfortable with just how much she could take and not going any further. At first, it was always a tentative dance. Giving out pain, gauging reactions, the guilt of going too far, or the disappointment of not going far enough.

The intensity of pain play had never mattered to him. All he really needed was reaction. The gasps, the sobs, the tumble down into subspace and the freeing of sexual and emotional energy. That was all he needed to feel a scene was a success. He'd been with girls who'd given him complete surrender after a light spanking over his lap, and he'd been with girls for whom no less than outright torture fulfilled them. He drew

lines at scarring or maiming, but otherwise he was up for however much, or little, pain a woman desired.

Sophie, so far, seemed most comfortable somewhere in the middle. A light spanking or sensation play was not enough. Serious violence and hard pain, on the other hand, drove her into a shell, and no wonder.

It had taken Dave a long time to get over the feelings of rage and vengefulness every time Sophie showed him her body, marked by scars. Some were more noticeable than others. Some were so faint that he only saw them when he was right up close to her, licking her shoulder or stroking her bottom cheek under the high-watt lights. He thought he must have seen them all by now. He subjected her to such scrutiny the first days and weeks of their relationship, as much to soothe and reassure her as to inure himself to the damage. He spent hours going over every inch of her, whispering, *You're beautiful. You're lovely. You're perfect as you are.* Thinking the whole time that he'd like to smash walls for what Barry had done to her. Thinking of what he'd do if he ever met him face-to-face.

But there had been no word of Barry in the months since Dave met her, and she claimed she hadn't communicated with him for months before. Dave made a halfhearted effort to get her to press charges against him, but her face at those words had stabbed at his heart. "I just want to let it go," she'd said. "I can't. Please don't make me." So he hadn't, although he was a hard-ass about getting her to her therapy appointments even when she didn't want to go. He knew they were helping. He'd seen a huge difference in her since they'd been together.

He also worked with her on self-defense techniques gleaned from his martial arts experience, which gave both of them peace of mind. If Barry ever showed up at her work or night classes when he wasn't there to defend her, he was determined she be able to defend herself. He practiced with her a couple times a week at least, wonderful, grapply sessions that always put him in an amorous mood.

He squeezed her hand. Speaking of amorous moods... He turned into the driveway and looked over at his girl.

"Tell me, Soph. What's the rule about eye-rolling?"

"I...uh... I didn't think you —"

"Answer me. Is eye-rolling respectful behavior, even if I'm not looking?"

She swallowed, her hand opening and closing on the switch.

"No Sir. It's not respectful at all. I'm sorry."

"I'm glad to hear you're sorry but we have a rule about disrespectful behavior, don't we?"

"Yes Sir."

"Remind me of the rule." Ah, the squirming was delicious.

"It's...um...ah..."

"Answer me without the stammering."

"The rule is that disrespectful behavior is punished, Sir."

"Punished how?"

"However... However you see fit, Sir."

"Mm." He took the switch from her fingers and tapped her thigh with it. "Inside. Take your clothes off and stand against the wall in the bedroom."

He watched her go, secretly thrilling to the reluctance in her movement. Lovely subbie. He would hurt her a little, but he would love her a lot more than that.

He took his time corralling Cerberus from the backseat and collecting his photography equipment, enjoying thoughts of Sophie waiting, nervous and tense, in the bedroom. He even took a few moments to get a cola in the kitchen, then as an afterthought grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator for Sophie. He left Cerby waiting at the bedroom door.

"Sorry, friend. You won't like this scene. I'm going in there to bring the pain to your favorite person." Cerby gazed up at him, droll canine accusation, and let out a small whine. "She likes it, Cerb. Don't give me that look. But you'd best stay out for now, boy."

\* \* \* \* \*

She heard him shut the door. She was assailed with familiar feelings of fear, excitement and base lust. She tried to stand straight and still, her nipples and knees to the wall the way he'd taught her. Hyper-alert, she heard each soft footfall until he stood beside her and then the brush of hair against her ear.

"Hello, naughty girl."

"Hello, Sir," she whispered into the wall.

"Here. Drink. Don't want you to get dehydrated when you start crying." She snorted, stifling laughter as he nuzzled her. As she took a few sips of water, Cerby's low whine sounded from just outside the door. "Go lie down, boy," Dave called. "She's in good hands." He ran his hands down over her ass cheek. "Very good hands. Aren't you?"

"Yes Sir." She took a shuddery breath.

He ran his fingers through her hair, parting it, soothing the tension in her neck. "You hate it when I make you wait, don't you?"

"Yes Sir. To be honest."

"Well then, let's not make you wait any longer. Put your hands on the wall."

When she was in position, he stepped back and striped her bottom with the switch. She yelped and went up on her toes from the searing pain. Another stripe of fire and she was already pleading.

"Sir, Please!"

He put his hand on the small of her back. "Take some deep breaths. As you know, it's not meant to feel good. You're being punished for being disrespectful."

She couldn't help the whimper that escaped her throat. She loved his discipline, but she hated it. Each painful stroke destroyed her and yet fulfilled her. They elevated her to a higher plane of existence—Dave's will, and her submission to it. But it *hurt*. "I'm okay, Sir. I'm sorry. Please punish me as you see fit."

"I will. But let's remember once more why you're submitting to this. When you disrespect me, even subtly, it undermines the entire basis of our happiness. Doesn't it?"

His kind, patient voice shamed her more than any ranting or railing. "Yes Sir. I hate when I'm disrespectful to you."

"And I am respectful to you, am I not? I handle you very carefully. I do that out of respect for you and respect for our dynamic."

"Yes Sir." She would cry in a moment if he didn't just get on with it. "Please, Sir. I'm so ashamed."

"That's good sometimes, isn't it? To feel ashamed? Sometimes it suits you." He nuzzled her again, running his hand over her ass and between her cheeks, probing her asshole. It took every ounce of her control to be still and let him do it.

"Good girl," he said, recognizing her effort. "I think I'll plug you before I whip you. I know that always makes you feel very submissive and remorseful."

Sophie couldn't do anything but emit a small sigh of agreement and wait. She heard him rummage in the chest of toys and then go into the bathroom. He returned and she resisted the impulse to look over and see what toy he'd selected. She'd know soon enough anyway, by feel. He had larger toys he used to truly punish her. She wasn't sure how angry he really was today. Disrespect was a huge sticking point with him. However, it hadn't been an overt or verbal show of will, and he seemed in a pretty good mood. Maybe he'd just use the smaller one he put in to warm her up for anal sex.

She tensed and then willed herself to relax as he pushed the plug against her tiny hole. He eased it in slowly, pausing when she drew her breath in, when it reached that widest point of girth and she had to pant to accept it. He gave her just a moment before he pressed it all the way home. She felt full, impaled. It wasn't the largest one, that made her feel pried open, but it wasn't the smallest one either, that delivered mostly sensation. It was a medium one, enough to remind her that he was teaching her a lesson, but not so much that she forgot what the lesson was.

She'd barely adjusted to the fullness of the invasion when Dave resumed the punishment. Now there was the sharp, fiery sensation of the stripes to bear, on top of the throbbing in her ass. *One moment at a time*, she reminded herself. *You earned this. Present and accept*. Her hands made fists as each stroke fell. The switch licked across her flesh with a hot, stinging pain that made her rise up on her toes and grit her teeth. He didn't make her count out loud but she counted in her head in desperation. *One, two, three, four, five*. Six was the hardest yet and she pressed her forehead to the wall with a soft cry, her body strung up tight.

He tapped her thigh with the switch. "Don't tense. We've talked about this. It doesn't help and it makes you mark worse."

She managed a "Yes Sir" through clenched teeth as seven and eight fell. The fire spread out and throbbed from her buttocks down to her pelvis and thighs. She wanted to beg for mercy as much as she wanted it to continue. She had a safe word but she knew she wouldn't use it, not unless he was killing her. She wanted nothing more on earth than to endure this pain for him. And then afterward, when he held her and soothed the pain away...

She choked back sobs and danced on her toes as nine, ten, eleven, twelve fell in quick succession. Tears were running down her face, frustration and desperation in liquid form. *Please, please, please, please. Please be finished soon. Please let me live through this. Please let me make you happy.*

He set the switch aside after fifteen. She slumped forward against the wall in relief as she heard him lay it across the bureau. Her ass was on fire. She could feel each of the fifteen stripes aching individually in a lattice, and underlying that, the humiliating sensation of the plug still lodged between her ass cheeks. He always made her stand for long moments afterward knowing he watched her, letting her wonder what he was thinking.

At last, when her breath slowed and her spine straightened again from its relieved slump, he came to her side. He gave her aching ass a quick slap and pushed the plug deeper, drawing a groan from her. He shed his clothes. She heard them drop to the floor one after the other. Shirt, jeans, the whisper of boxers drawn down over long thighs. She needed his touch, she needed him close. After Barry used to whip or punish her, he would send her to stand in a corner or lock her in an isolated cage for hours.

Dave always made love to her.

His arms came around her from behind and she gasped with the same convulsive pleasure she always felt when he touched her. "Ohhh..." The quivery sigh escaped her before she could bite it back.

"Okay, baby," he said against her ear. "Who do you belong to?"

"You, Sir. Thank you for punishing me. I'm so sorry I was disrespectful."

"You're forgiven. You're my good girl, aren't you?"

"Oh yes, Sir. I love you."

"I love you too. You're my own girl. You belong to me, and I'll always take care of you."

She turned her face into him. He turned her in his arms and caught her heartfelt thanks with his kiss. As he lifted her and cupped her bottom in his hands, she kept repeating, "I love you. I love you. I love you," until he shushed her with a gentle nudge.

"I'm going to fuck you now. Open." She wrapped her legs around his hips as he guided her arms around his neck and backed her to the wall. "And I think I'll leave that plug in your ass to remind you that I'm the one in charge here."

"Yes Sir," she said. He braced her against the wall and released her throbbing ass to open the package in his palm and roll on the condom. When he nudged against her pussy she arched her hips to accept his thick length.

God. *God.* She was filled to bursting as he slid it in. Sensations overwhelmed her—his cock sliding into her hot, slick passage, the answering pressure of the plug filling her ass, the strong hands that squeezed her stinging, striped cheeks, the hard pelvis that ground against her swollen clit. The iron-hard abs that slid against her front, and the arms that held her safe and protected. The hot lips at her ear and the stubble against her cheek.

"Mmmm...oohhhh..." The transported sounds she made blended with his animalistic grunts. He varied the speed and force of his thrusts, fast, slow, rough, gentle. Shallow, teasing, and then so deep. "God, Dave. My god!"

"You like that, girl? You like taking my cock deep? You're stuffed full, aren't you?"

"Yes! Yes Sir." She groaned into his chest as he manipulated her on his cock. The shimmering tingle in her clit reached a peak and then broke wide. She bucked in his arms, thrashing in the throes of her orgasm. He held her tight, then yelled out his own release, pressing her hard against the wall and pumping against her hips.

When they finally came back to their senses, they both laughed at the sound of Cerby's frustrated whine on the other side of the door. Dave let her down slowly, and Sophie felt so loose and satiated her legs barely worked. Even the intrusive plug barely registered. Dave kissed her until she was a mindless puddle, then sent her off to the bathroom to clean up.

She took care of the toy, showered quickly and dressed in comfortable clothes for hanging out. They had standing Saturday night plans for pizza delivery and a movie, so she doubted they'd be going out. She decided to forgo makeup and just applied some light gloss instead, staring at her reflection. Sometimes, after their sessions, she didn't even recognize herself. Who was that happy, loved-up-looking girl in the mirror? It was her. Lucky, lucky her.

Her reveries were interrupted by Dave's peal of laughter from the bedroom. "Soph. Come see this."

With one last smile at herself in the mirror, she followed the sound of his laughter to find Cerby waiting for her beside the bed, chewing and gnawing the switch into twisted, slobbery bits.



## Chapter Five

Dave mixed chemicals in the darkness, a process he rarely did anymore. How long had it been since he'd crouched over the enlarger with sheets of photographic paper? Since he'd mucked in development and stop baths? Darkrooms always felt slightly oppressive to him, especially the tiny one he'd created in the unfinished basement of his house. He had chased the light from one small corner, banished it with special, filtering walls, sodium vapor light bulbs and a double door that took up half the space, forcing him to creep around the closet-sized area where he could touch both walls with his arms outstretched.

He had processed the hundred or so negatives after tucking Sophie into bed. He could have gone to sleep next to her and done all this work on a lazy Sunday, but no. He couldn't wait. He had picked out the most interesting shots from the contact sheet, the ones with the most striking composition and best focus, although part of him wanted to print all one hundred so as not to miss even the smallest nuance. Bah. He was sure he would eventually print them all. But not tonight. Tonight he would print just five or six. Or seven. Okay, ten at most.

He put his mind to the process, exposing the paper, slipping it into the tray of developer. The image appeared slowly over several moments, a magical-feeling process he'd missed since the advent of digital photography. *Hello, beautiful girl.* She was made for black and white. Her pale skin contrasted beautifully with her dark hair, and those eyes... He grew so distracted enjoying her image that he nearly overdeveloped it. He slipped it into the stop bath with a stifled curse and then into the fixer. He placed it on the screen shelf to dry and repeated the process. Beautiful. Beautiful. *Beautiful.* Each print was more beautiful than the last. Her wide eyes looked somber but not unhappy. There was a hint of humility, or perhaps submission, that he recognized. The pairing of the hiding in the bush with her cloaked expression was perfect. And aside from all that, she was just gorgeous in every way. Not photogenic, my ass. He wanted to examine them more closely, pore over every detail, but that would take time and the chemicals were aging. *Focus.*

The screen filled with drying prints. He worked on a couple of the shots he'd taken at the crest of the steep path, when she'd stopped and seemed to experience déjà vu. They weren't great. He'd snapped them on the fly, in a hurry, but there was something in her expression that compelled him to print them anyway. Finally, he decided to print only three of the nudes where she was standing, the ones where he'd asked her to expose herself. He'd debated whether or not to ask it of her, but she had handled it well. If she'd balked, he wouldn't have gone through with it. As it was, she had been endearingly brave, baring herself in public. And God knew she was still sensitive about those scars.

The corners of his mouth drew down in a frown. Those scars. If they remained an issue for him, they would remain an issue for her. He was determined to convince her the scars didn't matter. They didn't matter to him, at least not in the way she feared. No, it was just the idea of what she had endured to bear such markings. He thought, as he always did, how badly he wanted to maim Barry. Hopefully Barry would be wise enough to stay away, if he was even in the area any longer.

Anyway, Dave could make the scars go away.

He adjusted the settings on the enlarger. He would underexpose the prints just a little. It would give them a fuzzier, softer aspect, and it would minimize or perhaps even hide the scars completely, make the most obvious ones fade into her light skin. It took a few tries in the developer to get the exposure where he wanted it. When he was happy with them, he put them beside the others to dry. The rack was full and it was late, after midnight. He decided to look at them tomorrow when he could study them in natural light. He stowed the exposed film and then cleaned up quickly under the faint red-orange light. Just as he was rinsing out the last of the trays and laying it in the sink, he heard Sophie cry out.

He dropped the tray with a clatter and bolted up to the bedroom. She was wailing, he could hear it even from the stairs. He burst into the room to find Cerberus licking Sophie's face as if to soothe her, but she was caught in a nightmare, her face a canvas of grief. He looked at Dave and whined softly.

"It's okay, boy. She's okay," he reassured the troubled animal, who slunk over to his bed and curled up with a sigh. "Sophie, honey," Dave whispered, lifting her in his arms. "Sophie, you're dreaming. Sophie, sweet..." She fought him, still in the throes of whatever monsters haunted her dreams. At last she seemed to come to her senses and wake a little, and then her frantic cries turned into something even more disturbing...heartbroken sobs. "No, no, no," she sobbed over and over. "No. No!"

Dave rocked her, holding her close. He ached for her distress, but knew she would calm down eventually. This wasn't the first time he'd dealt with this. In fact, the nightmares had come so frequently at the beginning of their D/s relationship that he'd almost broken things off with her, fearing he was the one triggering them. She had pleaded with him not to release her. *The nightmares will go away. I know they will.*

And they had soon afterward, but every so often, out of the blue, another one arrived. At last, he felt her breath grow more even and her sobs quiet. Her trembling subsided into a tired slump. She turned her head into his shoulder.

"Okay now?" She nodded. He lifted her chin and looked into her eyes in the faint moonlight. "Really okay?"

Her gaze slipped away from his. "That was a bad one." One last shiver racked her small frame.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No. I don't even remember what it was about. I was just really..."

"Scared?"

"Yes."

He caressed her cheek. "This isn't...it wasn't...this afternoon—"

"No. God, no, Dave. No. This afternoon was fine. It was lovely. Please, don't think I'm having nightmares about you."

"What are they about then? You never tell me what you're dreaming."

"Because I don't— I don't really know. I wake up and they just—" She threw up her hands, invisible disappearing dust. "They go away. I'm fine, really. I'm sorry I woke you up."

"I wasn't sleeping yet. I was just coming to bed. I developed some of the photos from today." He went on, feeling her relax by degrees, soothed by casual chitchat. "They turned out beautifully. I think I printed at least twenty, although I only intended to print ten or so. We'll look at them tomorrow."

"When are you going to show me how to use your darkroom?"

"One thing at a time. I think I enjoy our martial arts lessons more."

Sophie laughed. "Yes, because I excel at them so brilliantly."

"You do pretty well for a newbie. You almost took my legs out from under me last time. Your problem is that every time I grab you, you go all gooey."

"There's a reason for that."

She looked up at him, smiling. God, if only she knew how he felt when she looked at him that way. He squeezed her affectionately.

"I love you, Sophie. From now on, I want you to have sweet dreams. Only sweet dreams."

Her hand was tracing over his pecs and down his stomach. His groin tightened as she looked up at him in invitation. "I don't know what on earth might induce me to have sweet dreams. Maybe if something really, really wonderful and relaxing was to happen to me just as I was drifting off to sleep—"

Her voice cut off in a yelp and giggle as he tossed her down on the bed. Words, commands, orders crowded his mind. *Lie back. Spread your legs. Open for me.* In the end, he just took what he desired without words, pulling off her panties and tossing them across the room. He spread her thighs and held them parted wide with his palms, an unspoken order to expose herself to him. He leaned down to taste her, sweetness and heat. She tensed, already moaning. She was so sensitive that oral undid her. It completely broke her down, and not in a good way. The sensation was just so strong for her so as to be almost painful. Even though they weren't in role right now, even though this was only playtime, the sadist in him couldn't resist holding her down and making her squirm, at least for a little while.

He licked her center, then flicked her inner labia with light teases that had her shaking her head and begging for mercy. "Dave, please! Ah, ah—"

"Shh." He made sibilant noises against her swollen clit until she rose up off the bed.

"Please, please—"

Dave smiled. "I know, baby. Doesn't this feel good?"

"Pleeeeeaaase! Please—" He began to nibble and tease her clit. He could barely stifle his laughter as she broke down into a panting, pleading mess. The first time he'd gone down on her she'd literally screamed for respite. When she'd explained her unusual sensitivity, he had played with her another half hour just for the thrill of seeing her go crazy. Much like she was doing now. "Oh god, Dave, Sir, Please!" Her thighs clenched beneath his palms. Her hips arched to him in wild, uncontrolled thrusts, then just as quickly she tried to pull and twist away. Soon it became less like loving and more like wrestling. Cerby whined softly from his bed and Dave released her to get up and shut the dog out of the room.

His cock was bursting. "Don't move. Keep those legs spread wide for me." He lunged for the drawer and rolled on a condom with world-record speed. She lay still, gasping with relief and, Dave hoped, the same kind of lust that was racing through his veins. "Good girl. You want my fat cock, baby?"

She made an incoherent noise that sounded very much like *Yes, right now*. He fell back on top of her, grappling, pushing, pulling. She arched her back, reaching for a handhold. He pushed her arms to the bed hard and impaled her at the same time. She moaned, writhing under his forceful thrusts, her slick pussy gripping him. Her legs were trembling and he knew she was already on the verge.

"No. Wait for me."

"I can't. I can't wait."

"Wait for me," he growled, biting her neck. He felt every inch of his dick entering and leaving her tight pussy and it was making him lose his mind. He wasn't going to last much longer either. He leaned down and kissed her hard, capturing her moans and pleas in his mouth.

"You want to come, baby?" She whined against his lips, bucking her hips against him. Her arms struggled to get free, to come around him. "No," he whispered in her ear. "Answer me. I'm gonna hold you down and fuck you until I come, and if you're a good girl, I'll let you come too. But you have to be a good girl. Now answer me nicely. Do you want to come?"

"Yes Sir!"

"Yes Sir, what?" he prompted with the last shreds of his control.

"Yes Sir, please, I want to come. Please let me come."

The harder he held her down, the harder she came. She fought him with a moan that died to a gasp. She flew apart and went limp, trapped in his arms, breathless fulfillment. He came inside her, groaning her name.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Really. Truly. Dave, I swear it."

Dave scrutinized her from across the breakfast table. "You're sure? You're absolutely positive that our playtimes don't bring them on?"

She rubbed her eyes in frustration. "Even if they did, I would still want you to play with me. I live for our times together."

"But you're not absolutely certain it's not the source of your bad dreams." She looked down and pressed her lips together, no doubt fighting the urge to disobey his "no sass" edict. Dave was big on fighting fair, and not just in the martial arts arena. No threats, no exaggeration, no storming off when the fights got difficult. No passive-aggressive hiding and stewing. "Talk to me, Soph."

"I am talking to you." She tried to keep her voice modulated, he gave her that. "I'm just...look... I don't know what's going on in my brain, especially when I'm sleeping. I can't control what I dream about. I can only tell you that I love when we play. I can't imagine it giving me nightmares."

Dave shifted and ate another segment of grapefruit. Sophie grimaced as he salted it first.

"I suppose that's a Northern thing," she said.

"It's not a Northern thing, and it's very delicious. You should try it sometime instead of sitting across from me pulling faces."

"I don't like the taste of grapefruit."

"Neither do I. That's why I salt it. Makes it taste completely different."

He resisted the urge to force her to try a piece in the interests of keeping their discussion on track. Before breakfast he had gone downstairs to collect the photographs he'd developed and pored over them on the porch while Sophie lazed in bed. The trick with the underexposure had worked perfectly. He showed them to her in the bedroom, and was heartened to see her smile. Hopefully she wouldn't be such a reluctant model anymore.

But he didn't show her the last two photos. The ones of her standing, bewildered, at the top of the steep path. Nor did he show her the cropped versions, where he zoomed in on her face. He had stared at her eyes under the red-amber lights, trying to understand the expression there. Not fear or confusion, but something more elemental. Something he wasn't even close to understanding.

"Soph, when is your next appointment with Dr. Perez?"

"Tuesday."

"Do you talk to her about the nightmares? What does she say about them?"

"She says they're normal. Just my mind working through some of the things that happened to me." Sophie reached across to take his hand, stroking it in that soothing way she had. "She says the important thing is to remember that it's over. That I don't ever have to live that way again. And you, more than anyone, helped me see that. So please don't get that guilty, suspicious look, like maybe this is your fault. I can't stand when you do that."

"I just don't want you to stay with me and put up with things because you think you're in love with me when you're really not."

"I am in love with you."

"Did you think you were in love with Barry?"

She clamped her mouth shut and frowned at him. "That was different. So different."

"You never said anything to him, no matter what he did to you."

"Because I was enslaved. I wasn't in my right mind. Now I am. Don't I seem sane to you?"

Dave quirked the corner of his mouth to lighten the mood. "Well. Most of the time I suppose you're halfway normal. But I still don't understand why you never said anything about what he did to you. Even now. Now that you realize how he abused you —"

"I was consenting to it at the time."

"Bullshit."

"I was. I never told him to stop anything he did to me."

"I'm sorry, but I find that a little difficult to believe."

"Well, it's true."

She crossed her arms over her chest. Dave fell silent. He hated when he got this way. Guilty and suspicious, just as she said. And angry at something he couldn't change. "What if he's with another girl now? Doing the same things he did to you?"

"Not my problem," she muttered into her pancakes. "Anyway, I just don't want to. Dr. Perez says that's something I need to gauge more carefully in my life. The things I want to do and the things I feel pressured to do." She glared over at him.

"Or pressured not to do," he replied evenly, returning her gaze. "Don't want to upset Daddy, do we?"

"Oh, here we go." She threw up her hands and stood to begin clearing the plates. "My decision not to press charges against Barry had nothing to do with my father. If I'd told him I wanted to, he would have supported me."

"Really? I find that difficult to believe as well. Bad for business." Dave shut his mouth and stood up to help Sophie. Sophie's father was right up there with Barry in harming Sophie in Dave's opinion, but it got him nowhere, trying to point that out to Sophie. Her family, her blood. None of his business.

"They're expecting us Saturday evening for dinner."

"Great. Dinner with the general." He was coming dangerously close to breaking his own rules on sarcasm and disrespect. "But the munch is next Saturday," he reminded her. "We were planning to go."

"The munch is at two. Dinner is at seven."

Again, Dave bit his tongue. He did this for her, because he loved her. Her father and mother were as anxious as him about what she'd been through, so he didn't fault them for wanting to be kept in the loop. But the formal dinners every other Saturday were about as pleasant as a root canal. The casual but probing questions, the assumed suspicion. Well, they weren't stupid. Surely they knew based on her last relationship that Sophie had some hard-core kinks. Kinks he was likely to share. He felt he had to constantly be proving to them that he meant her no harm, that he loved her.

"I can try to make up an excuse if you want me to," she offered.

"No. You're a horrible liar. Anyway, they'll just assume I'm behind you forcing the lies out of you with my Dominant mojo." He bumped her hips and reached over her head to put the dried dishes away in the cabinet. "They'll send the SWAT team over."

"SWAT team, my ass," Sophie giggled.

"What's that? You want me to SWAT team your ass? I think I could make that happen." Her giggles rose to screams as he started to tickle her. Forget floggers and nipple clamps. If he really wanted to torture his girl...

"Dave, no, stop!" She screamed when her pleading wasn't effective, screams laced with maniacal laughter when she could catch her breath.

"That's what you get," he said. "Torture for torture. I have to eat dinner with your family, then you get tickled. Now we're even." He smiled as Sophie slid breathlessly to the floor. "Had enough?"

"Mercy. Seriously. Please never do that again." Cerby came over and nudged her, licking her face as he stood over her. She patted his muzzle before shoving him away. "Don't you start too. And see, Dave? I just told you to stop very clearly. So I am capable of expressing when you've gone too far with me."

"Tickling is your hard limit?" He shook his head and pretended disappointment. "Pathetic. And you call yourself a sub? Wait until they hear about this at the munch."

## Chapter Six

Sophie generally enjoyed the munches. Where else could you sit, have a meal and talk about kink and lifestyle issues with a crowd of other people who understood your point of view? But this month's topic had unsettled her. It made her feel singled out. *The Importance of Consent and Limits*.

Jerry smiled right at her when he revealed it, as if he'd intended it all along for her benefit. It had embarrassed her and she hadn't smiled back. Of course, she was probably just being oversensitive. Projecting, as Dr. Perez said. The topic applied to everyone, not just her.

It was only that everyone in that room had watched from a distance while she and Barry had royally fucked up the whole business of limits and consent.

She only half listened to the discussions, choosing instead to concentrate on her food, and later, snuggle close against Dave's side. She breathed in the smell of his cologne and rested her hand on his thigh under the table, the long, muscular thigh that had battled for space with her...what was it...just a few months ago? She shot a look across the room at Lara, who quickly looked away.

This was the first munch they were attending as a couple. They had skipped the previous ones, caught up as they were in the thick of her nightmares and complicated decisions about how to relate as a D/s couple.

What a difference a few months made. She felt so fortunate to be at his side, and for his part, he didn't let her get farther than an arm's reach away, not with all the other Doms in the vicinity. She chuckled at his show of territoriality, but she was secretly thrilled that he was so possessive of her. All her old friends smiled and hugged her. They could see the relationship was a good one. Even those who had frowned and stared at the previous munch were cordial and welcoming to her now.

But the topic. Ugh.

Dave looked over at her and squeezed her hand under the table. She knew it was important to him to be involved in the community. It was how he got most of his business, through face-to-face interaction. Attending play parties, going to area munches and conventions, talking to people and handing out cards. She smiled back at him, relaxing, tuning out the woman who was talking, a self-righteous s-type named SuzieQ who was trying to insist she had no limits when it came to her Master's needs.

"Really?" asked an older Domme. "You have absolutely no limits? What if he wanted to break your legs? What if he wanted to cut off your arms?"

"I don't think he would ever ask that of me," replied Suzie with a frown. "But if he did, I would submit to whatever he wished."



A handsome switch in the corner laughed out loud. Jerry frowned and stood to moderate. "Listen, people. Let's be polite. Everyone is entitled to their opinion. And we adhere to the belief that all kinks are okay, even if they're not your kinks."

"But not all kinks are okay."

Dave's deep voice surprised her. She felt color rise in her cheeks as everyone turned to them. "It's politically correct to say they are, but where do we draw the line? Isn't there a line somewhere? Doesn't there have to be?"

The room fell silent, and Sophie felt the questioning gazes directed at her. *Where do we draw the line, Sophie? You crossed it. So tell us?*

Luckily, SuzieQ was back on her slave soapbox, drawing attention away. "If you are a true slave, if you are truly devoted to your Master, your needs and wants should no longer matter —"

"Wrong!" This time the tone of his voice made her jump. He paused, as if gathering his temper, and glared at the woman. "If you believe that, more power to you, but it's a piss-poor choice to present it as reality in a group like this, with newbies and vulnerable players who might buy into that shit at their own peril —"

Jerry jumped in, cutting Dave off. "Okay. This is a controversial topic. Maybe it's best to agree there are no absolutes. What is devotion to one may look like danger to another. For some, setting limits is an important exercise. For others, their only limit is common sense."

"Not everyone has common sense," said a voice from across the room. Madame M was glaring at Sophie. Sophie felt Dave go rigid against her side. She squeezed his thigh, trying to calm him. Jerry jumped in with a joke to dispel the tension but the damage was done. Sophie didn't want Dave to alienate himself from the community. He was the happy-go-lucky one, the one who put his subjects at ease with his casual, laid-back attitude.

But by the end of the munch, he was still seething. They made their way out with clipped goodbyes to friends, Sophie trying to smile over the tension. If the topic had been Jerry's idea of a nod to Sophie and Dave's new relationship, it had gone horribly awry, and Jerry went out of his way to avoid them as they left.

Sophie sat beside Dave in the car on the way home, wanting to lighten the mood, but not wanting to irritate him further. In the back of her mind was the dinner at her parents' they were supposed to attend in three hours or so. Joy. She always depended on Dave to lighten things up with his sense of humor, but he seemed pretty humorless at the moment. She finally blurted out, "I can't stand Suzie. She's such an idiot."

Dave drew in a deep breath and blew it out. "Yeah. I should have just kept my mouth shut. But that kind of no-limits, mindless submission is what got you into trouble. I mean, forgive me, but that type of attitude is harmful."

"I know. She shouldn't be preaching it as if it's the one true way."

"It's not any way you should ever practice BDSM, true or not."

She fell silent. His tone was almost accusatory. She crossed her arms over her chest. "Well, I suppose we are all not as perfect at this as you."

"Careful with the smart mouth, Soph. I'm not in a good mood right now."

"I'm not in a good mood either. How do you think I felt sitting there with everyone looking down their noses at me? And Madame M, that bitch —"

"Why didn't you speak up then? Talk about your experiences? Your silence only adds to the problem —"

"What? So I have to confess in front of everyone now? The whole munch?"

"Confess? Who said anything about confessing?"

Her voice rose with his as her temper flared. "It's like I'm wearing a big red 'F' on my chest all the time. For fuckup. For fool. Maybe I do need to confess. Maybe I just need to stand up in front of everyone and beg their fucking forgiveness for being a manipulated, brainwashed idiot. 'Cause Lord knows —"

"Sophie —"

"Lord knows no one else ever did stupid shit before because they thought they were in love with someone, because they wanted to please someone they cared about. Jesus. Maybe then you'll stop throwing it in my face every other fucking minute —"

"Sophie, Enough!" His sharp reprimand silenced her. She knew she'd be punished now for speaking to him with such disrespect. Whatever. She was so tired of everyone judging her for her mistake. Sure, it had been a big, terrible mistake, but hadn't she already paid the price for it?

"It's just not fair," she mumbled, turning away to look out the window. "I'm blamed for getting into the relationship, but no one gives me any credit for getting out of it."

"No one's blaming you."

"You do it all the time. You just said it's not any way you should ever practice BDSM —"

"When I said that I meant *you* in general, not *you*, Sophie."

"It's just the way you said it. I know you meant it at me."

"I meant it at you? What the hell does that mean? You're not even speaking English."

"I am speaking English. You just don't understand me."

"That's the fucking truth. I don't understand you sometimes. What you don't understand is that this is all in your head. No one's blaming you, no one's angry at you or looking down on you, not to the extent you believe."

"Yes, I know, I'm just a psycho. It's all in my head. Like everything, always."

She gasped as he slammed on the brakes and brought the car to an abrupt stop on the side of the road. As he ground it into park, she tensed, waiting for a slap, angry words. She lifted her face to his. She wouldn't cringe away or take back her words, not

even if he punished her here, now. But the anger she expected never came. No, this was Dave, not Barry. Dave took her arms and pulled her close and kissed her. He kissed her until she relaxed, until the tension melted away and she opened herself to him. His lips moved over hers in a soft caress, then his tongue thrust deep. His hand came up to hold her face still for his intimate assault. When he finally pulled away she was nothing more than a breathless pile of girlfriend. He looked at her with a masterful, brooding gaze.

"When I get you home..."

And with that, he turned away and put the car in gear, pulling back onto the road.

*Oh my god. When you get me home...what?*

He left her to wonder about it, and not by chance. Fucking sadistic Dominants, she thought. Inflicting their devious mind fucks. Based on the kiss he'd just given her, he was either going to make her very happy or very sorry.

Or knowing him...both.

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Cerby was locked in the bedroom and Sophie stood in the living room feeling naked. Because she was naked. Very naked. And very scared. And horny. But mostly scared.

Dave looked at her, thinking. Scheming, she could tell. He was nude—tall, vital male. His hands were open at his sides, as if he might at any moment just come at her and do...what? Whatever he wanted. Something bad, but something good. His hands always made her feel good, even when they felt bad. She stood with her arms at her sides the way he'd taught her, trying not to shake. Whatever he planned to do, she hoped he did it soon.

He crossed to her then, slowly, until he was behind her. She stood, alert and yet open. His arm came around her neck, putting her in a jolting headlock. Weeks of training kicked in and without thinking, she jammed her elbow into his stomach, then squirmed around to go for his eyes. He deflected her with a smile. "Good girl. On your knees."

She sank to the carpet, his smile and *good girl* making her heart beat hard and fast. She waited for instructions the way he had taught her. He loved to give instructions.

His instructions always made her wet.

"Hands behind your back. Tease my cock and lick my balls. No hands."

His cock was already hardening. Sophie took a few stolen moments just to admire it, resting on a mat of dark, wiry hair. His balls underneath, large and pendulous, hanging down in a testament to his maleness. Sophie loved everything about Dave's cock. Every shape, every scent, every texture. And the way he used it...

*Concentrate.* She leaned forward, balancing on her knees with her hands at the small of her back, and drew the tip of her tongue from the base of his cock down to the tip. It twitched against her lips, hard but velvety soft. She licked around the head, then

nibbled and sucked at the most sensitive part just below the crown. He groaned, burying his hands in her hair and pulling her closer. She leaned lower and lapped at his ball sac, teasing it with the tip of her tongue and tracing around both testicles before drawing them gently into her mouth. His fingers tightened in her hair as he sucked in his breath. After toying with his jewels a few more moments, she licked along his now fully engorged shaft with broad strokes of her tongue.

"Ohhhkay...now suck me. Take me deep. Yes..." He sighed as Sophie opened and took as much of his length as she could into her mouth. "Yes. Use your hands now. Jack me while you suck me." Sophie threw herself into pleasuring her Dominant, taking him deep again and again, driven on by his hoarse encouragements. "Yes, good girl. Suck me. You like to suck my cock, don't you?"

"Mmm." Sophie made an affirmative noise around his shaft.

"Look at me."

Sophie peered up at him, the man who ruled her, to find him gazing down with such affection her stomach flip-flopped. His hand in her hair kept her head tilted back. He began to fuck her face, controlling her, challenging her, loving her. With a groan, his thighs tensed and he shot thick cum down her throat. She sucked him, teasing out every last drop of the salty fluid. She loved that she could have this part of him, that in this, at least, there was no barrier between them. They used condoms during intercourse even though they'd both been tested, because Sophie didn't tolerate the Pill very well. But for oral sex, there was no need for birth control and she was able to enjoy him fully. She swallowed, familiar taste and scent in her throat.

She waited for him to release her and back away, and then stayed, waiting, on her knees. He moved to the sofa. She thought he probably looked at her, although she kept her eyes cast down. She had angered him, then she had pleased him. What would he do to her now? She had a pretty good idea she was about to be disciplined, but how long? How hard? What implement?

"Put your forehead on the floor." His quiet words made her shudder, but she obeyed. He didn't rise to get any whips or crops or paddles though. He just watched and waited. Sophie tried to concentrate on being his girl, his plaything, his obedient slave.

"Come here," he said finally, and she hurried over on her knees. He indicated that she should kneel up beside him. She looked up, only wanting to please him, to make his anger go away. "Do you think you behaved well today? Or do you think you could have acted more respectfully?"

"Oh, Sir." Sophie's brows drew together in consternation. "I really fucked up. I'm so sorry. I just got all agitated at the munch, and then —"

"Are you going to make excuses?" he cut in quietly.

Sophie sighed. "No Sir."

His hand came out and patted her head, ruffling her hair. "It was a difficult afternoon for me too. I also lost my temper. We're both only human."

Sophie wanted to take his hand and kiss it. He was so unlike Barry. He wasn't ruled by his temper, by strange demons she didn't understand. He was controlled and responsible. She wanted him to kiss her. His fingers moved down over her forehead and down her cheek to caress her slightly parted lips.

"I'm sorry too, for drawing you into an emotional argument when I knew you were already punchy. I'll try not to do that again."

"Th... Thank you, Sir. You are so wonderful. You're so thoughtful with me."

"Why am I thoughtful with you, Sophie?"

"Because you love me?" Even though she knew it was the answer he wanted, even though he told her many times a day that he loved her, the words still stuck in her throat, a wonder and impossibility.

"Say it again, this time without the question mark." Her gaze flew to his. He had that sweet, warm challenge in his eyes.

"Because you love me," she repeated. She felt so emotional. It had been an emotional day. He cocked his head to the side, smiling his wonderful crooked smile.

"Yes, that's right. And why do I punish you when you've been disrespectful or disobedient?"

"Because you love me." This time her voice was clear and sure.

"Good girl." He nodded and pinched her chin. "Now, crawl into the kitchen and get the wooden spoon, and crawl back here with it in your mouth."

Sophie swallowed hard, but turned and did as he bade her. She always felt awkward and silly when she was crawling, especially knowing he watched, but she understood the exercise. *I'm in charge. You serve me. Know your place.*

In the kitchen, she sat up on her knees to open the drawer beside the sink and draw out the wooden spoon. There were several, but only one he spanked her with, thicker and smoother than the others. She took it in her mouth, between her teeth, and began the long crawl back with the instrument of her own torment. Each move forward, she grew wetter, more open to him. *God, please let him fuck me afterward. Please let him satisfy this lust.*

When she was back at his side, he took the spoon from her mouth and patted his lap. "Up and over. You know the drill."

She draped herself over his hard thighs, thrilling to the feel of his scratchy hair against her belly and the lingering scent of his maleness. She positioned herself the way he preferred. He pinned her with one thigh and placed a firm hand at the small of her back.

*Thwack. Thwack. Thwack!*

Ow, ow, ow! Hot, hot burning pain! She hated the wooden spoon. The sting was so unbearable, and it was humbling to realize that a simple kitchen tool could break her down faster than a hundred-dollar flogger.

*Thwack. Thwack. Thwack. Thwack.*

"Ohhh! Ow... Mmmm..." She bit down on her lip, trying to keep the wailing in check. He rarely gagged her but he did sometimes hit harder if she whined too much. God, her ass was on fire. She started to squirm, trying to dodge the blows. Her hands tightened on his calves. In a minute they would fly back of their own accord and try to deflect his discipline.

"Be still." He delivered another barrage of smacks with the wooden tool.

"Ohhh. Pleeese!" She kicked her legs, tensing. He stopped abruptly and released her.

"Kneel. And wait."

Sophie knelt on the floor as he stalked to the kitchen. She resisted the urge to reach behind her and massage her throbbing hindquarters. She needed ice to put out the fire. She heard the refrigerator open, heard a drawer slide on its rails, and then percussive sounds as if he was chopping. What was he doing, making an omelet?

He came back with a misshapen, partially shaved hand of ginger and waved it in Sophie's face.

"You remember the talk we had about tensing and struggling? You promised to work at doing it less."

"Yes Sir. I'm sorry. It's just...the wooden spoon..."

"I told you if you didn't tone it down we would try a new training tactic, didn't I?"

"Yes Sir. Figging."

"Yes, figging. This ginger is going in your ass, and it's going to burn like hell when you clench on it. I'm sure you understand the purpose of this method."

"Yes Sir," she whispered. *Holy fuck.*

He patted his lap again and with a sigh, she bent over it. His fingers parted her cheeks, working the fresh, cold ginger into her anus with a clinical detachment meant to humiliate. She buried her head against his leg, flushing red. When the slender stalk was inserted, she thought it wasn't as unbearable as she'd feared. Just a tiny sting.

Then, *thwack*. Sophie tensed and then yowled as the tiny sting turned to acute torture. "Ooowwwwww!" she wailed in protest as the juices from the ginger burned her tight passage. *Thwack, thwack, thwack*. Sophie gasped, trying not to tense, but it was inevitable. Each time a blow fell she endured the sting on her cheeks and then the burn in her ass. She heard Dave chuckle at her predicament. Sadist.

He stopped and rubbed the small of her back. "Okay, focus. Think. If you relax and take your spanking, if you open to it and accept it, there won't be as much pain. If you keep fighting me, the pain will be twofold. Twice as bad. You choose."

Sophie snorted. Some choice. *Thwack, thwack, thwack*. She moaned and fidgeted through the rest of the spanking, so overwhelmed with sensation that by the end she was nearly out of her mind. Dave had to hold her tight to keep her still. She tried to grind her teeming clit against his thigh, to find some small measure of relief. But no. He

just reprimanded her and gave her five more cracks in a row. The fire built and her ass ached, overwhelming sensation.

Just when she was sure she would have to start begging, he stopped and rubbed her ass with the evil wooden implement. It felt cool against the fire in her cheeks. She relaxed and prayed he was finished. The ginger still burned dully inside her sensitive walls. He eased the ginger plug out, then let her up. She knelt beside him with her head bowed.

"Thank you, Sir." She knew she was supposed to be thanking him for correcting her, but she was thanking him, too, for making it stop.

"Go to the bedroom and get the stainless plug. The small one. And some lube."

*Jesus, help me.* She went into the bedroom, ordering Cerby to stay when he jumped up to greet her and soon let herself back out with the flanged silver toy. It was the smallest of the stainless ones, but it was still intrusive. Worse, it was the one he preferred when he was plugging her for long-term wear. She held it out to him. He placed only a small dot of lube at the top and then rubbed the rest of the plug with the remaining juices of the raw ginger.

"Turn and bend over."

Even though there was nothing on earth she wanted to do less, she obeyed. He worked the plug into her, stretching her open and renewing the aching sting that had only just begun to dissipate. She blushed red at the humiliation of being plugged this way. Even worse, she had a strong feeling that the desperate ache and wetness between her legs was not going to be assuaged anytime soon. Her clit was throbbing, sizzling with lust. Her entire pelvic region felt hot and used, ready to be fucked.

But she knew she wasn't going to be fucked. Not anytime soon. He had her stand, then kissed her forehead and squeezed her sore ass with a playful smirk.

"I hope you can manage to get through dinner without fidgeting too much," he whispered against her ear. "It would be pretty awkward to explain the reason you were fidgeting to your parents. Wouldn't it?"

"Yes Sir," Sophie agreed with a sigh.

\* \* \* \* \*

Maybe, just maybe, it was a little nasty of him to plug her. And rub ginger on the toy beforehand. Okay, so that was downright mean, but he couldn't feel too guilty. If he had to sit through dinner with her parents, fielding barely disguised insinuations about the nature of their relationship and prickly questions about his intentions toward her, he would entertain himself at the same time.

And he was highly entertained. He looked over at Sophie and winked. She was half goopy, half embarrassed. The plug in her ass would be keeping her mind centered on only one thing. Which was probably somewhat distressing for her as her mother asked her to pass the potatoes and her father smiled over at her. Their precious little girl. *Your*

*precious little girl was on her knees sucking on my balls less than four hours ago. Then I crammed ginger in her ass and paddled it scarlet. Now she's wearing an anal plug. You don't want to know what I'm planning to do to her later.* He wished he had his camera. He would love to record the expression on her face. It was nothing so overt that her parents would notice, but knowing her as intimately as he did...

"So how are your classes going, darling?" Her mother, Ashley, smiled at her fidgeting daughter. Dave knew her name was Ashley, but he couldn't bring himself to call her anything other than Mrs. Wheeler. Same with her father, James. Mr. Wheeler all the way. Dave listened as Sophie launched into a description of her classes and finals coming up.

"And this time around, it's been easier for you?" asked her father. "I guess we have this man to thank."

He winked at Dave, which made Dave uncomfortable, but it was his words that annoyed him the most. Somehow insinuating that Sophie was only succeeding because someone else was helping her.

"No, actually, she's done all the work and it hasn't been easy. She's a very smart woman, Mr. Wheeler. And I never passed high school pre-calc, to tell the truth. I suppose she just wasn't quite ready the first time around. Hmm, Soph?"

She shrugged. "Maybe I just have better teachers this time. The classes are smaller since it's a local college."

"Well, when you're ready to start applying to medical schools, you let me know. I have plenty of friends who'll be happy to help. And Daddy still has money put away for you, pumpkin."

Dave ground his teeth. *Asshole*. Friends, money, connections. How about letting her do what she was very well capable of on her own? And she was capable of a whole lot when removed from her father's toxic handling. No wonder she hadn't made it through college the first time. Her father probably offered to pay for her grades on top of everything else.

"Maybe you can apply for scholarships, Sophie. To cover some of the costs," Dave suggested.

"Maybe. I still haven't decided what program to apply for. I have to get these prerequisite courses out of the way. It will be a few years yet."

"There are plenty of wonderful programs right here in the Atlanta area, honey," Mrs. Wheeler said. "You won't want to leave your dashing boyfriend just to go running off to school." She batted her false eyelashes at Dave with a flirtatious smile and picked up her wineglass. "When I went to school, many moons ago, I went for one reason and one reason only. To get my MRS."

"Oh, Mom, stop," said Sophie, rolling her eyes. "I mean, wow, that was really progressive of you."

"Well, it wasn't about being progressive back then, honey. It was about finding a place in life that you could be happy. And I am happy with your father."



Dave barely managed to suppress a snort. Mr. Wheeler was Ashley's third husband, which Sophie pointed out dryly.

"Third time's a charm!" her mother returned without missing a beat.

This was going far worse than the previous times they'd dined at Sophie's parents' finely appointed home. Dave stretched his legs under the table. Perhaps he could make some excuse to get them out of dessert. Although Mrs. Wheeler made a killer cheesecake.

"What about you, Dave?" Mr. Wheeler turned to him with a forced smile. "How is your career going?" He said career as if he thought Dave's photography business was anything but. He had been honest with them, describing himself as a fine arts photographer specializing in erotic composition. Mrs. Wheeler had gone all aflutter over that.

"It's going well, Mr. Wheeler, thanks for asking. This is always a busy season, just before the holidays. People want to have photos made for family and friends." For Masters and Dommes. Dungeon-inspired Christmas cards.

"And have you taken any photos of our lovely Sophie yet?" asked Mr. Wheeler.

"Yes." Dave smiled. "She did finally agree to let me photograph her. We took some beautiful photos in the woods just last weekend when we were hiking."

His face crinkled in relief, as if the fact that Dave had taken them outside meant they were not of the "erotic" type. "I'd love to see them."

"I'll bring some prints for you next time we're over," Dave said with a nod. "She's very photogenic. A great model."

"Of course she is. And how are things with Dr. Perez, honey? Still going well?"

"Going great." Sophie nodded. "I think I could probably stop going. It's been a year since—"

"No," Dave and Mr. Wheeler said at the same time. They glanced at each other, and Dave saw it there for just a moment flashing hard and sharp in Mr. Wheeler's eyes. The deep, abiding distrust for Dave and what he might want with Sophie.

Dave cleared his throat and looked away. "You should keep going, Sophie. Just a while longer. I think it would be for the best."

"Yes," Mr. Wheeler agreed. "It can take a long time to get over really traumatic experiences."

Dave watched Sophie hunch over miserably. All she wanted was to be out of there. He could see it in the set of her shoulders and her frown—the feeling that she was still being blamed for what was not really her fault.

"Just a few more months, maybe," Dave offered. A truce.

She shrugged. "Whatever."

"Who wants cheesecake?" her mother interjected, hopping up to clear the plates.

"I would love some, Mrs. Wheeler," said Dave. "But I don't know about Sophie." He looked over at her and caught her eye with a subtle grin. "She looks absolutely stuffed."

\* \* \* \* \*

He let her vent all the way home. Before long her irate ranting and strings of unintelligible arrrghhs and ughhs burned themselves out and they began to laugh together over the most awkward moments of the night. It was wonderful to hear her laughter after all the tension. She still squirmed beside him, no doubt enduring sore butt cheeks above and beyond the plug in her ass. He reached over and squeezed her knee.

"It's been a long day. I'm going to take you home and fuck you silly and put you to bed. If you're lucky, I'll let you come first." He could practically feel her tumble into submissive headspace. "Would you like to come tonight, Sophie?"

"Oh god. Yes Sir, I need to."

"Do you think you deserve to?"

"I...Sir...that is for you to decide. Whether I come or not is up to you."

"What if I said you could come only if you also had to wear that plug all night afterward?"

He laughed out loud at the strangled noise she made in her throat. "Well, don't worry. It's coming out as soon as we get home. Of course, that's only because my cock is going to replace it for a while. It may or may not go back in later," he added with an ominous quirk of his brow.

At home, he sent Sophie to remove the plug and bend over the bed while he let out Cerby. He took his time, throwing a ball for the energetic dog, thinking the whole time of his lovely sub waiting to be fucked. Finally he let Cerby in and had him heel in the living room. Dave ignored his complaining whine as he shut the door.

He took a moment to admire Sophie's bottom before going into the bathroom to wash his hands. He returned with a condom and a brand-new toy and went to her, slapping her ass cheeks as he pressed against the back of her thighs. "Stand up," he said in the silence.

When she did, his arms came around her waist to pull her closer, back against his chest. He nuzzled her, breathing in the fresh vanilla scent of her hair, then he held up the new toy in his right hand. "I brought you something." He held it still and let her look at it. It was a new gag, and in place of the red ball they usually had, this one had a short, thick mouthpiece styled to look like a cock. She was silent, and he couldn't see her expression, but she pressed closer against him. "I know, baby. It looks scary but it will be okay. Do you know why I want you to wear this?"

"No Sir."

"It's because I like you best when your holes are all filled up. Airtight. I like you a lot that way. Did you know that?" She turned her face sideways, pressing it against his chest. His cock poked her sore cheeks as he caressed the line of her jaw. "Beautiful girl. I wish I could fill every hole. Someday I will. Would you like that? All three holes full of your Sir and perhaps one of his friends?"

"Yes Sir. That sounds wonderful." Her voice was quivery but lovely. My god, she was so sweet.

"We'll talk about that later, baby. For now..." He drew the gag into her mouth and buckled the straps around the back. She stared back at him, her gaze a lovely amalgamation of shame, wonder and jittery excitement.

"It's okay. It's okay to like it," he soothed her. "I want you to like it, Sophie. Because I like it very much."

Sophie was so hot she thought she would burst into flames. The way he was speaking to her, the way he talked in such a coarse way about filling all her holes. And his comments about possibly sharing her with one of his friends. It made her quake with horniness. She knew he would take care of her no matter what, and the idea of being with two men at once was one of Sophie's longtime fantasies. She had confessed a fascination with the idea soon after they met, but she never imagined the fantasy might become a reality. Her thoughts were scattered all over the place, but she snapped back to attention as he lifted the gag. She felt like his own sexual thing, his own toy, as he worked it gently between her teeth. It filled her mouth, depressing her tongue. She felt instantly, totally in submission to him. His hands on her waist soothed and yet aroused her. Barry hadn't used gags, but Dave enjoyed them. And Sophie...Sophie liked the way they made her feel so powerless. The smallest pressure on the small of her back had her bending over the bed.

She heard the condom wrapper, felt the cold dab of lube deposited at the opening of her ass. She resisted the urge to tense, even though it always hurt at least a little when he took her anally due to his size. He pressed the head of his cock against her and slipped inside just a little.

She drew a deep breath around the barrier of the penetrative gag. The worst pain came in the initial probing of the thick crown. He stopped while she breathed in and out, giving her a moment to adjust before he surged ahead, and she was grateful for it. Then he fell forward, filling her, pinning her to the bed. The feel of him was nothing like the feel of the plug. When he was in her ass, it felt like his cock was the entire world, and she existed only to receive it. *Ohhhh...* His hands tightened on her hips. She moaned, a muffled sound from behind the gag.

"Yes, you're my good girl, aren't you? My good little girl. You love when I fill you up like this."

She moaned louder. If not for the gag, she would have been falling over herself babbling, *Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes!*

"I'm deep inside your ass, you horny little girl. I love how you feel, how tight you are. The way you accept me even when I'm way too big for you."

His words curled through her brain on a straight path to the throbbing center between her legs. Her thighs tightened in arousal, clenched around his cock as it plowed in and out. He was already shaking behind her, nearing orgasm. He pulled her up so her back was against his front, turning her head toward him with the black strap of the gag.

"Sophie. Do you want to come?"

Her cry of assent was distorted by the dildo in her mouth but surely he got the picture from the way she thrust back against him.

"Do you want me to touch you?"

*God, please touch me.* When he finally reached around her front to part her slick lips and slide his thumb over her clitoris, she almost howled from the pleasure of it. Hot pangs of wondrous sensation made her shiver and moan. Her uncontrolled, desperate noises made him chuckle softly in her ear.

"Don't try to talk. Just let me touch you. Be still. Let me fuck you."

Sophie stilled her jerky, erratic movements and let him take her. Slow, then fast, he surged into her ass and out again while his fingers stroked over her clit in a slow rhythm. Waves of sharp, erotic pain and pleasure swirled around, completely centered on the button between her legs. The double penetration, the skillful touch, the domination. Her teeth would have chattered from arousal if not for the gag. Then, like a bolt of lightning down her legs and up through her ass, she felt a contraction and then a release of hot, thrilling fire.

She moaned and let him hold her as her legs gave out. He held her tight and pumped into her as the orgasm shook her, joining her in her climax.

With a gasp, he fell forward, covering her, his fingers twisting into her hair. "Good god, Sophie. My god." Sophie turned her head to him, needing his nearness. He licked along the strap of the gag, still holding her impaled on his thick tool. "I want to kiss you but I don't want to leave you yet. I want you to stay filled a little longer. I belong inside you, don't I? You aren't complete without me filling you. We belong together always."

As soon as he removed the gag, as soon as her mouth was her own again, she said, "Yes Sir, yes, yes, yes, yes." *Yes, and yes, and yes* again until his deep kisses silenced her fervent words.

## Chapter Seven

It was nearly Christmastime and Atlanta was experiencing an unusual cold snap. Sophie was curled up on the sofa studying for exams, thinking that fleece blankets were the best thing ever invented. Although, who needed a blanket when you had a one-hundred-pound furry friend sprawled against the better part of your frame? She shifted, rearranging Cerby's paw so it didn't dig so badly into her rib cage. He looked up at her with a small snuffle.

"You silly mutt." Sophie scratched him under his muzzle and then up around his ears. "I know you love me. You're my own special boy, aren't you?"

At those words he pressed even closer to her, shimmying up to cover her face in canine kisses. Sophie laughed. "Yes, yes, I love you too. You're the number one man in my life. Well, number two, after your wonderful owner. I'm trying to decide who's pushier about getting in my space, him or you." Cerby sighed and dropped his head, burrowing his muzzle under her chin. "Mm-hm. I think it's you."

She rearranged him again and turned her attention back to her books. Dave was off for the day to one of the regional munches and some photography appointments afterward. At first Sophie felt pangs of jealousy to see him go off and photograph other kinky, beautiful—and available—women. She didn't know why, it wasn't like he didn't photograph her too. Since that first day she'd posed for him, he'd taken hundreds of photos of her, disappearing for hours into his darkroom to develop the prints. Some silly, some serious, some intimate. She had long since overcome her shyness about posing nude. He photographed her naked a lot, but those were only for him, he told her. He collected all his many photos of her in archival-quality storage boxes. *Archival-quality*. He had explained the term to her one afternoon in a voice heavy with gravity. "*Archival*" means it will last a lifetime, *Soph*.

So over time, she relaxed about the fact that he photographed other women, just as she relaxed about worries of him pushing her too far. He was so careful with her, so attentive to her feelings and reactions in every situation. If only the nightmares would go away. But she wouldn't think about that now, about the horrible dreams that always found her wandering, lost and confused, in the woods. And it was always the same stretch of woods, the same canopy of trees and dense bushes at the top of the hill on the trail she and Dave often hiked. Every time they went there she stood and tried to remember. *Why, why do I keep dreaming of this place?* Barry was never with her in her dreams. At least, she didn't think he was, although there was some strange evil that seemed to hover in the air, smothering her with confusion and sadness. Even when she woke, the feeling lingered, a foggy sensation of mourning and an evil she couldn't describe, even though she'd tried to explain it to Dave on many occasions. She had even

gone on her own, with Cerby to keep her company, to the quiet clearing at the top of the path. She had a feeling the area was connected to her ongoing nightmares, and that if she could just figure out the reason, they would go away and she wouldn't have to wake up every few nights sobbing and gasping for breath.

Well, it was frustrating but nothing she was going to solve in the moment. She returned her mind to studying her biology text and was just getting wrapped up in cell structures when the phone rang. Expecting it was Dave checking in, she picked up the receiver from the side table. "Hello?"

"Sophie?"

His voice registered like a blow. Just as she was about to hang up, his words arrested her.

"Please don't hang up."

Her pulse sounded loud in her ears. She knew she should hang up on him. The very fact that he was calling her at Dave's number unnerved her. But part of her wanted to show him that he hadn't broken her after all.

"Why are you calling here? I'm with someone else now."

"I know. Sophie—"

"And I'm very happy. I don't really have anything to say except that I've been in therapy for over a year now and I still have nightmares."

"Sophie, I'm calling to apologize. Please let me speak."

She looked over at Cerby, sitting up alert at her troubled expression. She stroked his head to calm him.

"I'm so sorry if I hurt you, Sophie," Barry said. "But you have to realize that I didn't understand how unhappy you were. You never tried to leave, you never told me to stop anything I did to you—"

"Because you ignored me when I did."

"But you seemed happy with that arrangement."

"Well, I wasn't. I wasn't happy."

"I just wish you had told me. I would have changed if you'd spoken up. I would have done things differently to keep you. Sophie, I miss you."

His voice was the same calm, smooth voice she remembered, the voice that hid so much callous depravity beneath its soothing lilt.

"I don't believe anything you're telling me. Not for a second." It felt good to finally mouth off to him without fear of reprisal. No more time in the cage. Ever. "I have to go. I have important things to do. Please don't call here again, Dave won't like it."

"Dave." The first tones of cruelty crept into his voice. "Does he really make you happy?"

"He makes me ten times happier than you ever did. A hundred times happier. A million!"

"Still prone to exaggeration, I see."

"You're an asshole, Barry. You always were. I'm so glad I see it now. And now I know what a real man is like. A real Dom, not an abuser."

"Abuser. Nice. Who told you that? Your fabulous new boyfriend-fake-Dom? I really cared about you, Sophie—"

"Good god, please!"

"I did. We had a once-in-a-lifetime connection, a special bond."

"That's just another way of saying you haven't been able to find another girl who will let you beat her up as bad as I did."

"Honey—"

"Look, I have to go. I have to study. I wish I could say it was nice chatting with you. You're just lucky my dad is paying the therapy bills and not you. Have a great fucking day."

She hung up the phone and took a deep breath, trying to calm her beating heart. *He can't hurt you. Not anymore.* She began studying again and retained her stubborn nonchalance about the conversation until she and Dave sat down for dinner. He was telling her about the topics at the munch and about the scenes he'd photographed afterward between a Master and his three female slaves. Sophie tried to listen because it was quite an arousing story, but she kept looking at Dave and thinking about how much she appreciated him, how thankful she was to be with him now. In the middle of his story, she stood up and crawled into his lap.

"Sophie?" Dave brushed back her hair. "What is it?"

"Nothing. I just missed you. I love you so much."

But he knew her better than that. He tilted her chin up and gazed into her eyes. "What happened? Are you having problems getting ready for your exams? How did your studying go? You didn't goof around all day, did you? Because if so I might have to—"

"Barry called here today."

She saw the flare of alarm in his eyes turn to anger and then concern.

"How did he know to find you here?"

"Everyone in the local scene knows we're together now."

"So he's still in Atlanta? Give me the phone." Sophie went to grab the receiver, then returned and let him pull her back into his lap. Dave clicked to the caller ID display to find Barry's name and number. "What did he say? Tell me the whole conversation."

Sophie related as much of it as she could remember, emphasizing the part where she'd told him to fuck off at the end. Dave messed with some more buttons on the phone.

"Okay, I've blocked him from calling here again. But listen, if he ever contacts you—here or anywhere—I want you to call me immediately." He kissed her forehead,

then both her eyes before clasping her to his chest. "You worried about this all evening, didn't you?"

"I just can't believe he called here. It was horrible to hear his voice after all this time."

"He's never going to be part of your life again. You know that." Sophie nodded, soothed by the deep rumble of his voice against her ear. "And even if you ran into him, you're not his anymore. You owe him nothing, not even acknowledgement. And we've been working on the self-defense training. So you can defend yourself from him if need be."

"Yes, I know."

"Not that I worry about that. He's not stupid."

Sophie suppressed a shudder. "No, not Barry."

"He's not going to try to win you back. I should hope not."

No, thought Sophie. He wouldn't try to win her back. He wouldn't do it that way.

\* \* \* \* \*

Long after he took Sophie to bed, long after he loved her senseless, Dave lay awake worrying about the events of the day and those little tense lines he'd seen around her mouth. She was more upset than she was telling him, but Dave didn't want to force the issue and reveal the depth of his own misgivings.

For Barry to call, he would have had to uncover Dave's unlisted home number, which was a little aggressive. And it didn't escape his notice that he called while Dave was away. Coincidence? The alternative gave him a chill—that Barry might be monitoring him and Sophie in a more involved way.

It made him never want to leave her alone again. Thankfully Cerberus was always around when he left her. Dave knew without a doubt Cerb would do his best to deter anyone who intended Sophie harm. He looked down at her in sleep. The strength of his feelings for her always surprised him, never more than in quiet, intimate moments like these.

Dave jumped as the phone jangled in the silence. He lunged for the receiver and saw his friend Ryan was calling. He left Sophie to sleep, taking the call out in the living room.

"Hello?"

"David, you jerk. Why haven't you called me?"

"Why haven't you come to visit me?"

"Well, what are your holiday plans? 'Cause it's cold as fuck up here and I'd love to head south."

Dave smiled. Ryan was one of his oldest buddies, a tall, dark-haired, Irish Bostonian with the intelligence of Albert Einstein and a mischievous streak a mile wide.



Ryan loved reason and bedlam, discipline and disruption, and smart girls who were sluts. Dave had met Ryan in his fifth-grade class in parochial school. Ryan was the one who both charmed and flabbergasted the nuns. Dave, the shy one, had watched him from a distance until they'd ended up in a karate class together. Their personalities clicked and they'd been fast friends ever since, even rooming in college together. It was in college he and Ryan set about exploring the world of BDSM, discovering they shared similar tastes in kinks and girls.

"You have to come down, Ry. Seriously. As long as you like. Atlanta is awesome."

"How about the week after Christmas? Are you going to be in town?"

"Sure, we're not going anywhere."

"I can't wait to meet your lovely subbie. How is Sophie?"

Dave had been telling Ryan about Sophie since the week he met her. Ryan knew about her past with Barry – and about her unfulfilled fantasy of being with two men at once. He and Ryan had shared a few women in their kink history, but those had been nothing more than play partners. Dave heard the unspoken query in Ryan's conversational question.

"Sophie is great. We're closer than ever. When you come down, we'll have to spend some time together. I think you'll really like her. And I'd like her to spar with someone besides me. It's too hard for me to be tough on her, to really teach her self-defense –"

Ryan's raucous laughter interrupted him. "It's too hard for you to be tough on her? Who are you and what have you done with my friend?"

Dave joined in his laughter. "It's a different kind of tough. I can be her sadist, but I can't be her assailant."

"I'm just teasing you. I get it. Yeah, I'd be happy to spar with her a little. Think she can hold her own against me?"

"I don't know, but I'd like to find out."

Ryan didn't miss the sudden tightening of Dave's voice. "What's up?"

"The psycho ex actually called here today. I mean, I've been working with her, so she's pretty prepared. She's a scrappy fighter, but as I said, it's hard for me to come at her like he would come at her."

"Sure. I can help out. I'd be happy to."

"The rest, we'll see. I can't make any promises just yet."

"I wouldn't expect you to. We'll see how it goes. Either way, it will be great to see you both."

A scream sounded from the bedroom.

"What's that?" asked Ryan.

"Sophie. Nightmares. Gotta go."

Dave was already running into the bedroom. He felt a moment of panic to find the bed empty, but there she was, huddled in the corner with Cerberus plastered against

her side as if he could rescue her from her dreams. He'd expected this tonight of all nights, after the phone call.

"Sophie. Baby..." He knelt beside her and hauled her into his arms, ignoring her halfhearted attempts to fight him. Cerby's soft whines sounded along with Sophie's sobs. He patted the dog, soothing him, as Sophie grew still in his arms. She buried her head in the crook of his neck and he felt hot tears trickle down to his shoulder. "Sophie, it was just a dream. Wake up."

"I'm awake."

"Take some deep breaths. Tell me about it."

She turned her face away from his inquiring gaze. "I don't want to."

"You know you can tell me anything."

"I know. I don't want to tell you about this. I just want it to go away. I don't even know why I dream these terrible dreams. And sometimes they feel so real."

"Maybe if you talked through them with me, just to defuse the—"

"No!" She sounded horrified. He decided not to push her any more in her current agitated state. She was closing him off purposely, and he didn't like it, but now was not the time to press her. He rocked her until her breathing slowed and the shudders went away. Long after she drifted off, he saw her eyes move and twitch beneath her closed lids. *If only I could see what you see*, he thought. *If only I could save you from these nightmares...*

## Chapter Eight

Sophie's shift was nearly over. Finally. The afternoon had crawled by. Sophie thought for the thousandth time that she didn't even need to be here, she didn't even need to slog through her interminable shifts at The UPS Store. Dave had told her many times that he was happy to support her while she was in school. But she had plenty of downtime to study and do assignments at work, and she felt better contributing something to the bills and Dave's mortgage payment. And a part of her just didn't want to ever depend completely on a man again.

Dave understood. Somehow he understood everything. Just like the lens of his ever-present camera, he always took in the whole picture, saw and understood nuances that most people missed. That's why Sophie worried so much about him finding out about her secret trips to Overton Park.

She let Dave think she got off at five, even though she got off an hour earlier some days. She glanced at her watch. She would have a good half hour to walk the trails before Dave would start to get suspicious about her coming home late.

To assuage some of her guilt, she told herself it was only for exercise. Anyway, she was his submissive, not his child. If she chose to hike a trail after work for relaxation and exercise, she didn't suppose she needed to report to him like some little girl. She was a grown woman. But she knew deep inside those weren't the reasons she didn't tell him. She didn't tell him because he would ask too many questions she didn't want to face. Not yet.

She was still trying to unravel the mystery that dogged her, a mystery that made her heart beat hard and her stomach ache with some kind of uneasy pain. She wanted to figure it out on her own, so she went a few days a week to the small clearing at the top of the rocky, eroded pathway and sat. She sat and tried to remember what it meant to her. She knew it was tied to her nightmares, horrible vague nightmares where nothing made sense and bright flashes blurred her vision so she squinted and cried. Even those nightmares she tried to hide from Dave now, from his probing, dissecting gaze. And at Dr. Perez's office, she only smiled and said she was doing better.

And she was doing better, mostly. She was excited about tonight, because Dave's friend Ryan would be arriving for a stay. Dave had spoken highly of his old friend, showing Sophie photos and telling her stories of their childhood together, and all the scrapes they got into as teens. And their experiences with women. Dave had asked her in the course of conversation if it was okay if he loaned her to Ryan, and Sophie had said yes.

He was very cautious in the language he used. "I'm considering lending you to him. I think he would enjoy you." He phrased it as a statement, but Sophie knew it was

a question. If she had made the slightest movement or expression of unease, he wouldn't have mentioned it again, but he knew she was curious about being shared. There was something so hedonistic about being loaned out to another man. Of course, it wasn't just any man. It was a man Dave trusted to be with her, and a man who shared Dave's proclivities. "He plays hard, harder than me, but he plays safe, Sophie. I think between the three of us, we'll have fun."

So Dave would be there. He wouldn't just shove her at Ryan and wait in another room for her to be returned later. No, she had known all along that wasn't his style. He was far too possessive of her, which was a big part of why it felt so okay.

It would be an interesting experience, but before then, while last night's dream was still fresh, she would spend a little more time out in the woods.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ryan's flight was early, so Dave decided they might as well swing by Sophie's work on the way home. Lord knew she always complained about how bored she was. They could rub it in while she was trapped behind the counter. Dave had told her enough times that she could quit any day she wanted to. When her medical courses started in earnest, he and Sophie's father both agreed that she would not continue working, but let them support her. Sophie, of course, had other plans.

Well, Dave knew how to get his way with her if he really needed to. He could always bring out the Dom voice, but he didn't want to overuse it. She was getting mouthy enough now that he was hopelessly wrapped around her finger. Maybe the Dom voice did need a little fine-tuning. There was always tonight. He glanced over at Ryan.

"So I spoke to Sophie about the group thing."

Ryan stretched his long legs out in the passenger seat. "And what did she say?"

"She sounded up for it, but we'll see how the evening goes. No pressure on either side."

Ryan nodded. "Sure. I mean, it will either click or it won't. No need to force anything."

The two men fell silent as Dave remembered exactly why he and Ryan had been friends for so long. Things were always easy between them. Dave felt a sense of pride in introducing Sophie to Ryan. At the same time, he was worried about them not hitting it off. When they arrived at her workplace, Dave didn't recognize the guy behind the counter and Sophie was nowhere to be seen.

"Can I help you?" the guy asked. He looked like a high school dropout. Why the hell was Sophie wasting her time working here?

"I came to say hi to Sophie. Is she around?"

"She left almost an hour ago. She got off at four."

The kid turned his back on Dave as if that settled things. Dave narrowed his eyes and looked at Ryan, then back at the skinny kid behind the counter. "I thought she was supposed to work until five today."

"She only works to close on Fridays now."

"That's interesting," Dave mumbled, before turning on his heel. Ryan followed him out the door. "Let's head home. I'm sure she's waiting for us there."

Luckily for his temper, Sophie was waiting back at the house. He introduced her to Ryan and then waited for her to tell him where she'd been. When she didn't, he pulled her into the bedroom and shut the door, leaving Cerby to entertain the new visitor. He turned to face her with his arms crossed over his chest.

"So we stopped at The UPS Store on our way home from the airport." The alarm that flared in her eyes confirmed his suspicion that she was keeping secrets from him. His frown deepened. "Rather than giving me any apologies or excuses, let's cut to the point where you tell me exactly where you've been going between the time you leave work at four and the time you come home after five."

"I've been going to Overton Park."

"You'd better add a Sir."

"I've been going to Overton Park, Sir. To walk after work."

"And is there a reason you thought I wouldn't want to know that?"

"I don't know." A hint of petulance lurked around the corners of her voice. "I just like to get some fresh air after being shut up in the store all day. And get exercise."

"I've told you how many times by now that you don't have to work there if you don't want to?"

"This doesn't have anything to do with that. Sir," she added quickly as he arched his brow. "I mean, I've explained to you why I want to keep working."

"Fine. Now explain to me why you're sneaking off to the park after work."

"I wasn't sneaking off. I just...they started letting me go at four and I thought I'd use the extra time to visit the park. I just...I like it there."

"It's not safe, you going off on your own on those trails without letting anyone know where you are. I don't understand this behavior, Sophie. I really don't."

"I just need some alone time sometimes. And I was afraid if I told you about it you'd stop me from going—"

"If I were you, I wouldn't say anything else."

"Yes Sir."

"Because what you're admitting is that you knew I wouldn't like it and therefore kept it a secret from me." He scrutinized her, trying to figure out what was going on behind her shuttered gaze. "If you wanted to go to Overton Park after work, all you had to do was ask me. I could have met you and we could have gone together. Talk to me. Are you getting tired of me? You don't like being with me anymore?"

"No! No Sir, that isn't it at all."

"Then what?"

Again, the closing off, the shutting down, just as she'd done the other night after her dream. He rubbed his eyes, not knowing what to do. Lecture her? Ask her again when her next session was with Dr. Perez? She just loved when he did that. He decided the best thing to do was to salvage what was left of the night. He placed one thumb under her chin and lifted it. "Do you ever go anywhere without telling me? Yes or no?"

"No Sir. I'm... I'm so sorry, Sir. I know I should have told you but...I just didn't want to."

"Yes. I see that. Not very good behavior, is it? I try hard to take good care of you. To protect you. There is an agreement between us that you don't keep secrets from me. Not secrets like this."

"Yes Sir. I know."

"I'm afraid I have no choice but to punish you."

She was truly sorry. He could see it in her downcast gaze, the tremor in her lips. She looked up at him in sudden embarrassment. "But...Ryan—"

"Yes, Ryan will hear you being punished. He's a sadist like me, I'm sure he'll enjoy listening to you get your due. Anyway, it's strange that you're so concerned about Ryan when I'm the one you should be worried about. I'm not happy with you, girl."

She nodded, looking devastated. Part of him wanted to relent, pull her close and hug her until the situation ebbed away, but that wasn't how things worked between them, especially with serious breaches of conduct like this. So instead he took a deep breath and said, "Undress."

He stood and watched her take off her clothes with his arms crossed over his chest. When she stood before him nude, flushed and anxious, he took one nipple and pinched it hard. "As you are now, Sophie, that's how I want you always. Naked to me. Open. Exposed. Do you understand what I mean? I don't want you keeping secrets and hiding yourself away from me. If that's what you want, you're with the wrong person." She sniffled through a quick miserable shiver. He took the other nipple and twisted it for good measure. "You're my girl and I take care of you. I can only do that if you let me. You know I love you, Sophie."

She shivered again before answering. "Yes Sir."

"Get the cane for me and go lie down on the bed." Those words brought real tears. Dave only used the cane for bona fide punishments because Sophie didn't like it at all. She brought the implement back to him like it was a knife or firearm, handing it over with a stricken look. "Are you worried about being too loud? Would you like to be gagged?"

"Oh yes, Sir." She nodded in relief.

"Go get the ball gag then. Quickly. Cerby can only keep Ryan entertained for so long." He watched her pert ass cheeks shift as she hurried across the room and knelt to

find the ball gag. Although he was upset, he still managed to daydream a moment about the marks he was going to impart on the gorgeous canvas. She returned and he fitted the gag in her mouth, tightening the straps. Sophie crawled onto the bed, lowering her body with a reluctance that made his dick throb. God, he had to punish her and get back out to his guest. He didn't have time to fuck her now, but Jesus Christ, she made it hard to resist. "Arms up." He strapped her hands into the cuffs that were kept permanently attached to the headboard, and then fixed her ankles to the cuffs on either side of the footboard so she was held tight. He had learned some time ago that Sophie needed restraints to take the cane. Speaking of restraint, it took every ounce of his self-restraint not to fall on her when she was this way – trembling in fear of what was on the way, but submitting to it anyway. And even with her tears and shame at being punished, it was impossible not to notice the shiny wetness between her legs.

He resisted the urge to molest her and instead landed the first stroke. His cock twitched as he watched her whole body tense and come alive from the pain. The first had been a warm-up, smarting but bearable. The second made her cry out in a long muffled wail. He waited between each stroke, letting the searing fire burn, spread, and subside before laying on the next. By the fifth stroke, she started begging for respite behind the gag. By the seventh, her pleas changed to sobs of self-recrimination and despair. Each stroke made her leap and then writhe in the aftermath, pulling at her restraints so her whole body seemed to fight the pain. When she had ten livid stripes across her backside, he stopped and put the cane away in its place beside the bureau. He listened in the silence to Sophie's sobs. He returned and sat beside her on the bed, but she turned away.

"Look at me."

She turned back, a mess of tears and slobber. He removed the gag and wiped her chin with a tissue, then brushed away her tears as she stared back, pain still coloring her gaze.

"Do you feel better now that you've been punished for what you did?"

She nodded. "Yes Sir. Thank you for punishing me. I deserved it."

"It was a hard punishment, but I want you to understand how important it is not to keep secrets from me."

She nodded, a few last tears straying down her cheeks as Dave went about unfastening her wrists and then her ankles. When he finished, he pulled her into his lap and pinched her sore ass cheeks. She whimpered a weak protest but he ignored her discomfort, stroking the welts to feel her tense against his chest. *Not now. Don't fuck her now.* He forced himself to stand and pull her to her feet.

"Now, go get the medium plug and the clamps. You're going to write lines while Ryan and I go for some takeout."

Sophie crossed to the chest of toys again, returning with the nipple clamps draped over one arm by their connecting chain, and the medium silver anal plug in her hand,

already dabbed with lube. He noticed with amusement that she had been quite stingy with the lube. Nothing like a subbie who punished herself. "Bend over the bed."

Sophie grasped the footboard and bent over, spreading her legs without being told. Dave worked the plug into her, in and out, judging by her short moans of discomfort when to shove it in to the hilt. He pressed the base against her, making sure it was fully seated. "Who do you belong to, Sophie?" he asked against her ear.

"You, Sir." She exhaled with a shudder.

"Stand and present your breasts to me."

Sophie stood and turned to him, taking deep breaths as he pinched her nipples and applied the biting clamps to each tender point. "Now, you know what to do. When you're finished, remove the clamps and get dressed again. You'll continue to wear the plug until I tell you otherwise, as a reminder of how naughty you've been. I'm going to go with Ryan to get Chinese for dinner."

"Yes Sir." She swallowed. A telltale scarlet blush was flooding her cheeks. "Will I be eating with you both tonight?"

"You certainly will. When I come back I expect to find you sitting in the living room waiting for us."

She blushed even redder. "I'm just so embarrassed, Sir. For my behavior, and having to be punished with him waiting out there—"

"As well you should be. But when the lines are done, your punishment will be over and you'll snap out of it and be a pleasant hostess for my friend. Let's turn the night around, baby." He smiled and tugged on the chain dangling across her chest. "Now get busy. The longer these stay on, the more sore you'll be, and you're already going to have a hard time sitting."

\* \* \* \* \*

Sophie moved to the desk and pulled out some of the lined notebook paper Dave kept on hand for one purpose and one purpose only—writing lines.

Sophie wrote lines at least once every week, although not usually for such serious misbehavior. More often than not, she wrote them with clamps on her nipples, a nagging background of ache to add to the humiliation. The chain hit against the edge of the desk as she leaned over and picked up her pencil. She shifted on the hard wooden chair, feeling every one of the ten stripes on her burning cheeks, not to mention the intrusive plug in her ass.

*I will not keep secrets from my Sir.*

*I will not keep secrets from my Sir.*

*I will not keep secrets from my Sir.*

*I will not keep secrets from my Sir.*

Some small part of her, as ever, whined, *Why are you doing this?* But the greater part of her was careful to write in neat, even print, to capitalize every *Sir* and dot every *i*. She



knew why she did it—because she needed it. Why she needed it was a more difficult question, but thankfully one she felt less and less worried about answering. She loved Dave and he loved her. They made each other happy. Enough said.

But those thoughts made the tears come again, confused tears of gratefulness mixed with self-reproach and shame.

*I will not keep secrets from my Sir.*

*I will not keep secrets from my Sir.*

Sophie thought she might have written *I should not keep secrets from my Sir* instead. Or *I really, really wish I hadn't kept secrets from my Sir, because now I feel so awful. Or I'm the luckiest girl on earth to have such a wonderful Sir, so what was I thinking sneaking around behind his back?*

But Dave probably wouldn't appreciate her efforts at creativity, or an essay on why she loved him so much and how she would never keep secrets from him or go into the woods again without his knowledge. Look at what happened to Little Red Riding Hood when she went traipsing alone around the forest. Sophie smiled and shifted again on her aching hindquarters. She had a sudden strong urge to touch herself, to lie down and masturbate herself silly on the bed where Dave had just caned her, but that would have been tragically reckless. Ten more cane strokes on top of the ones she had didn't sound very nice. And then more lines with her poor nipples clamped and the chain dangling down between them.

*I will not keep secrets from my Sir and then masturbate myself silly after he punishes me.*

*I will not touch myself without Sir's permission, no matter how much I ache for that relief.*

*I will not fantasize about Sir sharing me with his friend with Sir's cane marks on my ass and my breasts still aching from his clamps.*

*I will not obsess about the plug in my ass and the likelihood that Sir will use me there later.*

*Or perhaps Sir's friend.*

*Or perhaps both.*

*I will concentrate on my lines. I will be a good sub.*

Sophie sighed. The ache in her nipples was building, nearly throbbing now, and she still had two pages of lines to fill.

*I will not keep secrets from my Sir.*

*I will not keep secrets from my Sir.*

*I will not keep secrets from my Sir.*

## Chapter Nine

"What's the longest and largest nerve in the human body?" Ryan asked.

"Easy," said Sophie. "Sciatic nerve."

"And the opening that connects the esophagus and stomach?"

"Cardiac...um...cardiac orifice," Sophie shouted after a moment. Dave snorted and almost spit out a mouthful of Chinese wine. Ryan crowed, "Correct," and slapped Dave on the back.

Dave had shown Sophie pictures of Ryan so she knew he was handsome. Tall, dark-haired and fit, with gorgeous deep brown eyes. She had assumed he was funny and intelligent, just in light of the fact that he was Dave's best friend. But Dave hadn't told her that Ryan was a doctor, a neurosurgeon with his own practice up in Boston. It didn't escape her that he was quite young to have gotten through medical school and already established himself in such a demanding field, but Sophie had no problem believing Dave when he told her Ryan had made it through medical school in half the time most others required. Ryan was like a grown-up Doogie Howser, she thought, only much sexier and a lot more intense. After grilling her on biology over chow mein and sounding her out on ethics while they munched on dumplings, Ryan began quizzing her on anatomy, one of Sophie's favorite subjects. Like some bizarre game of Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes, Ryan named some obscure muscle or body part one after the other, and Sophie endeavored to show him where it was, to the soundtrack of Dave's approving laughter. So far she had been almost one hundred percent correct, only getting tripped up when she confused the "subclavian" vein with the "clavicle", which was obviously a bone.

"Laryngeal prominence."

"Oh, easy." Sophie pointed to her neck. "Adam's apple."

"Not on the medical boards, my dear. Okay...latissimus dorsi."

"Even I know that one, Ry," scoffed Dave as Sophie pointed to her upper back.

Ryan held up a hand. "Leave this to the actual medical experts, Dave. Sophie—the Circle of Willis."

Sophie tapped the side of her head. "A ring of arteries in the brain."

"Wow, I'm impressed." He turned to Dave with a smile. "Your girl has all the marks of a genius, my friend."

"Those aren't the only marks she has."

It was Sophie's turn to snort wine up into her nose and begin coughing uncontrollably, to the amusement of both men.

"Well, a punished sub is an obedient sub, yes? I know some Masters and Dominants don't care to dabble in punishment and discipline, but it's always suited my girls well."

"And how many girls are you with right now?" asked Dave with an ironic quirk of his brow.

"Oh, just a few. A couple. Maybe four." He shook his head as both Dave and Sophie dissolved into laughter. "Look, I'm just not ready to settle down yet."

Sophie didn't know if it was the wine or the banter that was making her laugh so hard she could barely catch her breath. Her cheeks hurt from smiling, and her ass hurt each time she shifted on her chair, but it had been an incredibly fun night. The two men sobered and she did, too, as she realized they were both looking at her.

"She's a very beautiful, smart girl, Dave. I don't blame you for settling down, not at all. I should be so lucky. And I believe she'll make a fine doctor. How soon before she starts medical school?"

Sophie felt the sudden shift in the room, Ryan addressing Dave instead of her even though she sat right beside him. The feeling of sinking from Sophie to girl to object was one she knew well, and honestly, one she loved. She let Dave answer for her, a tacit agreement to submit to the objectification.

"She has a couple more years of undergrad to go. She could start sooner, but she insists on continuing to work."

"And you let her?"

Sophie blushed at Ryan's words. The scene was in full swing and she felt it in her clit, in her plugged ass, in the sore tips of her breasts as her nipples tightened against the scratchy lace of her unlined bra.

Dave looked over at her, knowing, then back at Ryan. "Once she begins med school in earnest, I think it's understood that she'll quit work and focus on her studies. I'm more than happy to support her through med school. After that, of course, my reward is free medical care for life," he said with a grin.

Sophie smiled, looking down at her lap. *For life*. He used those words quite a bit with her lately. On Christmas morning, when he'd gone with her to her parents for a brunch that left her in tears of frustration, he'd squeezed her hand on the way home and said, "I would put up with a lifetime of them for you." They had come home and exchanged gifts in front of the small fireplace, sweet, comfortable things like sweaters, fragrant soaps and little kitschy knickknacks. He had made a framed print of her like the one he'd made for her parents, of Sophie hugging Cerby. They had sipped hot chocolate and snuggled on the sofa, with Cerby trying to insinuate himself between them as always, and Sophie had thought, *Yes. For life. Please*.

She looked back up at Dave, and Dave looked at Ryan, who took one last sip of wine before leaning back in his chair and fixing his gaze on her. Dave looked over at her, too, and smiled back at Ryan.

"She's not only smart. She has many other wondrous talents."

"I bet she does."

"Not that they'll do her much good in medical school."

"I suppose that depends on her professors."

Sophie suppressed a giggle and Dave laughed out loud. "Sophie won't share her talents with anyone I don't approve first. But I'd be happy to share them with you, if you'd like."

Sophie saw Ryan's subtle nod and let herself sink deeper, deeper into submissive headspace.

"Sophie, go into the bedroom and undress. Get a condom and come back. Leave the plug in for now."

Sophie flushed red as she pushed back from the table and went into the bedroom. She undressed, glancing at herself in the mirror. The familiar constellations of scars—some subtle, some more obvious—had long since ceased bothering her because Dave was so matter-of-fact about them. But Ryan would notice. What would he think? Perhaps Dave was telling him about the scars right now. *Don't stare. She has scars all over her.* Sophie tossed her head and took a deep breath. It would annoy Dave if she slunk out there embarrassed about her imperfections. It was Dave's preference that the scars not be an issue, and she obeyed Dave. She checked her hair and makeup one last time, then went to the drawer for a condom. She noticed her fingers shaking. Nerves? Or excitement? She didn't know and she didn't have time to dwell on it. She hurried to the door and then paused to collect herself. She took a deep breath and returned to the men in the dining room. Her breasts felt heavy and her skin thrummed with electricity. She kept her gaze on the floor but she could feel the men's eyes on her, looking their fill.

"Go to Ryan," Dave said. "Guests first. On your knees."

"Yes Sir."

Sophie went to Ryan and sank down before him. She kept her eyes averted but as she reached for his fly with trembling fingers, he said, "Look at me." She froze and looked up. Although she was willing, it was impossible to hide her nervousness. He ran a thumb across her cheek and looked down at her with a thoughtful, probing expression. Gauging her consent? He seemed satisfied. "Beautiful girl," he said. "Go on."

Sophie recommenced, his words curling warm in her belly. He was obviously no more put off by her scars than Dave was, and a great weight of self-consciousness lifted off her. She unbuttoned Ryan's jeans with a new enthusiasm and drew down the zipper. His cock sprang free—of course a man like him would go commando—and Sophie took it in her hands. Even in this, the men were similar. He was thick and rather large, like Dave. She was unsure if she was supposed to sheathe him for oral. Ryan took the condom from her in her confusion and rolled it on himself. "Owner's orders," he said, pinching one of her nipples. She contained the gasp—her nipples were still tender.

"Yes Sir," she replied, then lowered her lips to the head of his cock, swirling her tongue around the bulbous crown. Alike and yet different. As she explored Ryan's cock

with her mouth, she felt similar sensations but different reactions from him. A sigh instead of a groan, a fidget instead of a shudder. Ryan's fingers, when they finally grasped her head to pull her deeper onto him, were gentler and more tentative than Dave's. The piquant taste of the wine they'd sampled at dinner mixed in her mouth with the earthier tastes and smells of latex and Ryan's own maleness, transporting her to a place where she existed to serve him, and by extension, the man who ruled her world.

As if on cue, she heard a quiet "Good girl" from Dave, and Ryan concurred with a groan. Sophie cupped his balls and took Ryan deep, bracing against the reflex to gag, the reflex nearly trained out of her now. Ryan shuddered. "Yes. Yes, again, Sophie." She used a little more pressure, squeezing and cradling his sac as she sucked his length harder and faster. "Good god, fucking...Jesus!" His fingers on her head tightened and then curled in her hair and squeezed as he reached a sudden climax, bucking beneath her, finding the back of her throat. A moment later his fingers released her, smoothing down the hair he'd just mussed. "Holy fuck. Okay."

All three of them erupted into laughter.

"I mean, seriously, Dave. Holy fuck. She has some cocksucking skills. And look at her. Gorgeous. Looking down at these just about brought me off alone," he said, tracing and pinching the fresh cane stripes on her ass. Sophie blushed, thinking of the base of the anal plug which was also surely quite apparent.

"Thank you for the compliments, Ry. I'm sure she's happy to hear them. Now she can bring her cocksucking skills over here." Giggling softly, Sophie crept over to her owner, her lover. He pulled her up into his lap and nuzzled her. "Okay?"

She nodded into the crook of his neck. He picked up his glass of wine and held it to her lips, making her drink. He drank too and then kissed her deeply before pushing her back down to her knees. She took his already hard cock in her mouth and began again, stroking, licking, sucking, nibbling the frenulum and the base of the crown. As she teased him, she was aware that Ryan was probably watching her now, watching her ass stuck out as she bent over her Sir and sucked him off. Before long, Dave lost patience with her playing and pulled her face down over his length, thrusting and withdrawing, controlling her rhythm with a firm grip on either side of her head. She took him deep, shallow and deep again, trying to keep the perfect suction and touch he liked. Her fingers curled around the bottom of his sac and squeezed gently, then moved lower to rub and massage his taint. He was apparently worked up from watching her bring his friend off. He groaned with each touch, each foray deep into her throat. His own orgasm came quickly, his thick cock spewing loads of cum which she nearly choked on, he came so hard. She swallowed, enjoying the taste she was so familiar with after the latex impersonality of sucking off Ryan. When he pulled away from her, she sat back on her heels. She waited in silence as Dave toyed with her breasts, flicking her nipples. She licked her lips and glanced up at him. Each flick and touch made her clit flare. God, she was so hot by now, she was close to begging. If she didn't get fucked —

Dave chuckled. "Okay, girl. Back in the bedroom. Take out the plug and get cleaned up, then wait for us on your hands and knees on the bed, facing the window. And no touching that wet, hungry little pussy. Do you understand?"

"Yes Sir." His words made her tummy quake and flip over. *Wait for us*, he had said. She couldn't even manage to look at Ryan. With one last caress and pinch of her nipples, Dave sent her from the room.

She worked quickly in the bedroom, removing the plug, cleaning it, putting it away. She used the bathroom and cleaned herself thoroughly. She was embarrassed by how wet she was, but she knew cleaning up was but a temporary solution. As soon as she knelt on the bed the way he'd directed, she would get hot and wet again. What a slut she was...but Dave liked her that way, and it definitely had its perks.

While she waited on her hands and knees, she heard sounds of male conversation from the other room, dishes being cleared, Cerby being fed and let out in the backyard to relieve himself. Her arms got tired and she sank her head down to the mattress, arching her back and stretching. It seemed as if hours passed, but it was probably only fifteen minutes or so before she heard Dave tell Cerberus to "Stay". She got back up on all fours, took a deep breath, and heard the doorknob rattle, the door open and close.

"Wow." It was Ryan. Sophie thought her blush must certainly spread right over her back and down to her ass cheeks. She was never this shy with Dave, not anymore, not after he'd touched and caressed and tweaked and photographed every blessed inch of her. But Ryan was something new. Two men at once was something new, something she'd never experienced. Well, not until tonight.

The men approached and a hand snaked up her thigh and between her legs. Dave said, "Don't look. Who's touching you?"

"You," she answered at once. She knew his touch as well as her own. They laughed as Dave probed deeper, making her moan and squirm.

"She makes the most wonderful noises," said Ryan. "I hope you don't have any plans to use a gag."

"Not if you don't want to. I usually only use gags for punishment. And she's already had one of those today."

Another hand joined Dave's in exploring her bottom and the wet crevice between her legs. This hand—Ryan's—again traced the tender welts. "I wish you had let me watch."

Dave snorted. "Hi, Ryan. Welcome to Atlanta. This is my girl Sophie. Come on in and watch me cane her."

"Would have been the best welcome ever."

"Maybe we'll punish her some other day this week. She does have a naughty streak a mile wide."

Low chuckles, and then fingers parting her again. This time she wasn't sure if it was Dave or Ryan. Perhaps it was both.

"Who's touching you now, girl?" asked Dave.

"I don't know, Sir."

"Let's blindfold her, Dave. It'll be fun."

"You're reading my mind again."

Sophie watched Dave cross to the chest of toys with Ryan following. Dave returned with a blindfold while Ryan continued to poke through Dave's collection. The last thing Sophie saw was Ryan inspecting a particularly wicked strap of Dave's, and Dave's smile as he winked at her. He buckled the blindfold behind her head and brushed a kiss against her ear. "You won't need to see to enjoy this," he whispered.

She was plunged in darkness. "But I won't be able to tell who's doing what to me."

"That's the whole point."

Sophie heard the condom drawer open, then close. She felt a hand lift her chin and a cock nudge her mouth. That was simple enough. It wasn't sheathed, so it was definitely Dave. She knew his scent anyway, and exactly how his girth filled her mouth. She sucked him, thrilling to the feeling of him growing more rigid against her lips. She tasted the salty tang of precum leaking from the tip and pressed her tongue into the source, lapping, sucking for more. Dave sighed and held her face firmly, driving in and out, taking her mouth. Then another sensation at the back of her, delving fingers and a dip in the bed. Strong legs parting hers even farther, strong hands on her hips, and then a cock nudging at her pussy. She moaned against Dave's cock as Ryan slid into her. She was so hot, so aroused it was almost painful. Each stroke in and out sent waves of exquisite sensation to her pulsing core. *Please touch me. Please...*

She moaned again, all her pent-up frustration and desperation channeled into worshipping Dave with her mouth. *Please, please, please...* Dave knew it was hard for her to come without clitoral contact, something he took advantage of when he was feeling particularly sadistic. She swiveled her hips and pressed back against Ryan, trying to arch so that his balls would bang against her clit as he fucked her. The short, heavenly contact wasn't enough. She whined and Dave laughed. "Shall we make her come over and over, Ry, or make her wait until the end?"

"Hmm..." Ryan's pounding rhythm never ceased as he considered. "She was a bad girl today, wasn't she? Perhaps one orgasm is all she should be allowed."

"You're probably right. We'll have to be careful she doesn't come before we give her permission. Although, if that happens, you'll get your wish to see her punished."

Ryan laughed. "Ever the sadistic bastard. Ah, well, you learned from the best..." And with those words, he reached down and began to finger Sophie's clit. To her horror, she felt herself teetering on the edge of orgasm. She made an urgent sound, which Dave muffled with an especially deep thrust.

"Concentrate on pleasing me, girl. Don't come yet. Focus on me, not your horny little cunt."

Sophie tried to do that, but Ryan somehow knew the exact spot, the exact pressure to make her crazy. Again she made pleading sounds for mercy, but the only answer was the sound of male laughter. "She's fighting the good fight, Dave."

Dave pulled away from her mouth. "She's a fighter. Here, lay her down on the bed."

Ryan pulled out from behind and she felt herself pushed back on the bed, two sets of hands holding her legs spread open. "She may be a fighter, but if she withstands this..." Deft fingers manipulated her clit. She could feel how wet and swollen it was just from the contact. Her hips arched off the bed. She wanted to pull away, avoid being punished for coming too soon, but at the same time, she knew it was a losing battle. She reached down to stop them, to save herself, but Dave pinched the inside of her thigh so she yelped.

"Hands up. Out of the way. Keep them there."

When fingers parted her wide and a tongue lapped up her throbbing center, she thrashed her head back and forth. *No, no, no...yes...yes! Yes! Oh my god, yes, please, please, never stop. I don't care, I don't care what kind of punishment I have to take.* A different set of fingers parted her, another eager tongue flicked and teased her center, sparking crippling, searing excitement from her pelvis outward. Her hands made helpless trembling fists above her head as the men tortured her with light flicks that made her jump and tremble, followed by broad licks that had her groaning. She felt herself tumbling out of control. It was unbearable, unbelievable. It was arousal such as she'd never known before. She felt the climax building up inside, impossible to turn back. She held off as long as she could, moaning and bucking away from the questing tongues. Large hands held her down, held her thighs spread, as if she was a sacrifice to their urges, some ancient goddess on an altar of long ago. She twisted her fingers in her hair to ground herself, her moans rising higher and higher, but she was powerless to control it, powerless to do anything at all. A press of a tongue against her clit, a teasing nibble, and with a cry of capitulation, Sophie let the coiled-up tension inside her disperse into orgasm. She bucked and shuddered, grateful now to be held down as multiple aftershocks racked her body. At last she returned to her senses, only to hear a soft *tsk, tsk, tsk* against her ear.

"Bad girl." She turned to Dave's voice, felt a tongue trace across her cheek and then plunge into her mouth. She tasted her own essence, the familiar scent of her arousal. On her body she felt two sets of hands stroking and pinching, and then felt herself pushed and pulled to the edge of the bed and draped across a lap. She was too weak and satisfied to care.

"Don't be gentle," said Dave.

"Oohhhh!" She cried out as the spanking started. Ryan's spanking was all business. It was quite possibly the hardest spanking of her life. The pleasurable stupor of the moment before dissipated as the nerves of her bottom screamed in protest and pain. She jerked and tried to pull away, but Ryan pulled her arm across her back so she couldn't go anywhere. *Ow! Jesus!* Sophie's ass was still sore from being caned, but Ryan took no



mind of that. She felt the heat build quickly, nearly turn to blessed numbness, and then he stopped. He ran his hands over her bottom, soft broad strokes of soothing sensation. Thank God it was over, she thought.

Then she heard a soft chuckle. "I wonder if she thinks I'm finished."

They both laughed at her answering whimper of distress.

"She's a powerful thing though, little as she is. I had to hold her hard."

"I told you she was strong. If you like I can hold her legs still for you. After a while, when she really gets antsy, she starts to kick."

"Yeah, sure. Sounds like a plan." Ryan's probing fingers parted her, making her go still. The pain blazing in her ass cheeks faded into the background as his ministrations started another hum of pleasure in her clit. He spread her slickness around on his fingers, stroking her whole slit before he released her and went back to massaging her throbbing globes. "What an amazing ass. I don't know how you do anything but fuck her all day."

"Sometimes I don't do anything but fuck her all day. Speaking of fucking, get back to it so we can fuck her when you're through."

Sophie gritted her teeth as Ryan's fingers tightened on her wrist and the spanking recommenced. "Think we can both fit in her at once?"

"We can try. I get her asshole."

"You selfish bastard."

"Hey, she's mine after all. You're just borrowing her."

Sophie's clenched teeth emitted a pleading moan that was ignored as Ryan's slab of a hand continued to pummel her.

"Listen to her." He laughed. "She wants to be fucked again already. She likes our idea."

"She likes to be fucked. The more holes the better." She started kicking and felt Dave's hands capture her ankles in a firm grip. "You would think one orgasm would be enough. I don't even know if she should be allowed another one."

At those words Sophie wailed out loud. "Ohhhh! Please!"

"Please what, honey? Please fuck you?"

"Yes, please what?" Ryan asked, joining in. "Please stop spanking you? Or please fuck you? Which is it? We're confused."

"Please...both." Sophie gasped. "Please, Sir."

"Please, Sir, finish spanking me so I can take both of you in my ass and pussy," Dave prompted her.

"Please, Sir – finish spanking me and fuck me –"

"No, no. Pay attention, girl. Say it nicely. Please, Sir, finish spanking me so I can take both of you in my ass and pussy –"

"Please, Sir, finish spanking me so I can take both of you in my ass and pussy. Please."

The relentless hand stopped falling on her ass and again she felt herself rearranged, manipulated. She was pushed forward onto a hard male body that she guessed was Ryan's based on the hair on his chest. She tried to be pliant in spite of her nervousness. She felt so many emotions...fear, confusion, excitement and crippling horniness that rocketed all through her body like some wild intoxication. Each place they touched her, sensation tingled hot and electric against her skin. She felt two sets of hands on her waist, felt his cock nudge her pussy, felt his hands cup and squeeze the ass flesh he'd just punished. Then one set of hands left. Sophie let herself be impaled again and again on Ryan's length, gave herself up to his skillful handling, until another sensation stilled her. Her ass cheeks were parted, and a cold dab of lube was deposited against her tiny hole. Dave's finger worked the lube in, advancing, retreating, advancing again and then leaving her. The rattle of cellophane again. She felt his weight behind her, felt both men rearrange themselves, and then both sets of hands were on her and Dave's very hard cock was nudging at her asshole.

"Be a good girl," he said, soothing her, holding her close. "Be a good girl and open for Sir and Sir's friend. Won't it be nice to take both of us at once, to be all filled up, little Sophie?"

"Ohh..." Sophie tried to form words of assent, but none would come, only a feral, animal moan that rose to a cry as he pressed the head inside. Sophie felt the familiar ache and inexorable pressure. She let go, she didn't fight. Wearing the plug earlier made her more receptive to Dave's invasion. She felt Ryan withdraw to let Dave slide all the way in.

"Holy fuck," Dave groaned as he seated himself. "Fucking...God...Jesus..."

"Fuck her, Dave, don't pray," Ryan grunted from below. Ryan pushed into her as Dave withdrew, both men advancing and retreating in slow, measured strokes. Sophie felt completely filled, completely mastered. It was impossible for her to move an inch in any direction, possessed as she was. Without her sight, she depended on scent, touch, movement. She felt every inch of both cocks as they moved in and out of her, incredible pleasure and uneasy fullness all rolled into one decadent experience she was certain she would never forget. She felt Dave's fingers in her hair, pulling her head back. He thrust two fingers in her mouth and ordered, "Suck."

Sophie sucked, her mouth, pussy and ass full of her lovers, their fingers and thrusting cocks.

She came with a gasp, her whole body seeming to contract into something new and brilliant. A shaking core of woman and animal and Dave's girl. Dave's girl, loved and treasured and overcome by blind, earth-shattering release.

## Chapter Ten

Sophie caught herself drowsing again. She wanted to stay up until midnight to see the ball drop on TV and ring in the New Year. But something about being cradled between two warm male bodies on a soft, cushy sofa after a night—several nights actually—of rollicking sex really took the energy out of a girl. Sophie drifted on thoughtless daydreams, barely registering the guys' quiet conversation about the sparkly catsuit the singer was wearing on TV.

Whatever. Catsuits were lovely. Everything was lovely to Sophie right now. So warm, so cozy. Her belly was full of beer and popcorn because they decided they were too tired to cook after their latest fuckfest. And Ryan wasn't going home for two more days.

The last two days, though, they had plans to take a camping trip. The guys had just let Sophie in on that after a couple days of secretive plotting and slanted looks. Sophie hadn't been camping since she was a child, not the overnight, sleep-in-a-tent kind. She'd done plenty of hiking, though, so she thought she'd do just fine, as long as there were no bears in the campsite and no spiders in the tent.

But no, the bears would be hibernating, they assured her. And spiders...well, if she screeched loud enough, hopefully they'd scurry away. Still, she wondered what else was going to go on. She knew them both well enough by now to know when a plot was afoot. Fortunately, she trusted them one hundred percent. Dave had assured her before he arrived that Ryan was okay, and he had been proven right. Ryan could be sadistic in the bedroom, even more so than Dave at times, but he never crossed that line that Sophie now recognized, never even came close. And even if he had, Dave would have stopped him because when she was with Ryan, Dave was never more than an arm's length away.

But it wasn't all just hedonistic fucking with them either. They sparred together, too, every day. Sophie felt her reflexes getting quicker, her reactions getting stronger. The second day of his visit, Ryan had jumped her while she was walking past him, tackled her and put her in a headlock. It was only Dave's quick, "No, Cerberus. Down!" that saved Ryan from getting his head ripped off by a hundred pounds of protective black fury. After that they made sure Cerberus was outside or in the bedroom when they practiced martial arts together. Sophie watched in awe as Dave and Ryan faced off, too, each as light and practiced as the other, displaying menacing defense and an economy of movement in taking each other down. It was like some intricate, wondrous dance.

It was all an intricate dance, their week with Ryan. It was a dance of respect and balance. Sophie had worried that Ryan might spawn jealousy or uneasiness between

her and Dave, but so far it had been nothing but fun. They played together and then Sophie and Dave went to bed and Ryan slept on the couch. When they woke up, they sat and had breakfast like three close friends. Part of Sophie wished it could go on forever, like when she was lulled into a sense of total security between them on the couch. But part of her knew that the only reason it worked is because they all knew it was only temporary. A diversion. Like this camping trip they had planned. Sophie knew that in the end, it was her and Dave. It would always be her and Dave. Forever, she hoped.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dave stretched in bed the next morning next to Sophie. He tried to scoot Cerberus farther down the bed, but the dog only grunted and crept up closer. Sophie stirred and yawned.

"Gotta wake up soon, sleepyhead." He nuzzled her. "It's a new year and the forest awaits. I know how you like to sneak off into the woods whenever you can."

Sophie moaned. Dave was a little disappointed that the cane marks he and Ryan had admired the last few days were already starting to fade. He could always add more, he supposed, although he didn't like to cane her too often. Her feelings had to be accounted for too. He knew a lot of sadists who believed it was only about fulfilling their needs, and their needs alone, every time they played. That taking their submissives' needs and desires into account was a sign of weakness. Dave wondered why they didn't realize they were always alone, always chasing after someone new because their "last girl had run off". Of course, then there were the dangerous ones like Sophie's last partner, who used mind control and psychological games to get their victim to stay when any sane person would run screaming. Dave wanted to save the world, save every girl and make sure they only played safely with sane, healthy partners, but that wasn't possible. He had to content himself with saving one very special girl.

He looked down at her, stroking her tousled hair out of her eyes. His beautiful Sophie. She looked so happy, so relaxed and content there in his bed. Cerby jumped down, no doubt to wander out and wake up Ryan, who had taken to feeding him in the morning and letting him out. Dave and Sophie both took the opportunity to move closer, drawn together like two magnets. Skin against naked skin, and Dave hard like a rock at the feel of her curves under his hands. He turned and grabbed a condom from the drawer, rolled it on and pushed Sophie onto her back. He parted her thighs and pressed into her, groaning at the delicious pressure. She was already slick and warm.

"Good little girl," he whispered against her ear. "Always wet for Sir."

"Yes, always..." Her returned whisper died away into a sigh as he sank all the way into her and held still. He did this often in the mornings. Just pushed inside her and enjoyed the feeling of being one with her, joined together, her clinging walls squeezing

against his cock. After a moment, he rocked in her slowly, a minute movement that made her shudder nonetheless.

"Do you like the feel of my cock inside you? What does it feel like?"

"Oh god." She wiggled her hips a little, arching to him. "Like perfection. Like...the way things should be."

"Amen." Dave laughed and cupped her bottom, pressing even deeper.

"Oh, you fill me up all the way. Dave...Sir..."

*Dave...Sir...* In the mornings, the two always merged, and more than ever he felt himself both things at once. Dave, her lover and Sir, her Dominant and owner. But she was always Sophie, his willing, lovely sub. She lived to please him, to love him, and he tried to live up to that gift always. He tried to be worthy of what she gave, which was everything. She gave everything for him. He kissed her cheeks, her eyelids, her brow, feathery worshipful kisses that made her smile. She spread her legs wider, drawing him closer, ever closer. He angled his hips to rub his pelvic bone against her clit and was rewarded with a shaky sigh. He drew back and entered her again, looking for that perfect angle, the one that made her start babbling. He had read in a recent news article that the G-spot was just a myth, but he happened to know that in a certain position, a certain angle, he could hit it until Sophie turned to goo. It was quite a diversion for him.

"Oh my god...gah...mmmaaahhhh..."

There it was. She clutched at him and he teased her, holding back, just probing the edge of her happy spot. Then he moved forward again, slow and deep, rocking back and forth when he felt her tremble.

"Sir! Please...ahhh...mm...mm..." Her voice trailed off into some unintelligible exclamations.

"Reach down and play with Sir's balls," he whispered. She was going to come in thirty seconds or less and he wanted to come with her when she did. She reached down and stroked his testicles, her fingers squeezing the base lightly and sending waves of pleasure through his pelvis. He felt his own body coil and start to tense. Again he moved against her spot, then again, teasing her beyond the ability to verbalize at all. She was a mess of tense, jerky movements and ecstatic panting. "Are you going to come hard for Sir, baby?"

"Yes, yes, yesss..." Her fingers caressed his balls, cupping and massaging them as he moved in and out of her with controlled movements. He felt the shaking reach its peak and then felt her body clamp down on him and heard her weak, relieved cry. Her undulating walls triggered his own powerful orgasm, sparks of almost painful release shaking him to his core. They rode the waves of ecstasy together until they collapsed, spent.

"Oh, Soph." Dave sighed when he caught his breath again. "I want to stay connected to you forever. Just like this."

She giggled. "That might be a little awkward in public."

"It would make those interminable dinners with your parents a little more bearable."

They both laughed then, and Cerby came bounding back in and jumped on the bed. Ryan called out from the living room.

"If you two lovebirds are done sexing each other up, you might consider getting your lazy asses out of bed. It's time to go camping."

Dave smiled down at Sophie. The night after Ryan arrived, he had told Dave about a new pastime of his, something he fondly dubbed "chase fucking". Which involved, well, chasing someone through the woods and fucking them silly when they were caught. They were going camping, and he and Ryan were going to do some chasing. And lovely Sophie...she was the one who was going to get fucked.

Not that she knew that yet. He thought she probably had some vision of them sitting around a campfire roasting marshmallows. And hell, they'd probably do that too. But they had found a nice wooded campground ten miles or so outside the city and rented out an entire area of sites to ensure their privacy. Dave had a feeling Sophie would enjoy chase fucking as much as he and Ryan, if not more.

"Breakfast first, little girl," said Dave, kissing her nose. "Camping takes lots of energy."

"I don't know," she said, stretching as he pulled away from her. "Camping has always seemed kind of boring to me. Maybe we should take some board games or something to pass the time."

Dave stifled laughter as Ryan appeared in the door of the bedroom wearing an indignant frown. "Board games? You've obviously never gone camping with me before. I promise you, Sophie. The last thing you will be is bored."

\* \* \* \* \*

Sophie licked the last of the chocolate from her hands, watching the two men from across the campfire with suspicion. "What? Why are you staring at me like that?"

"We're not," said Dave. "Did you enjoy the s'mores?"

Sophie had actually enjoyed the camping experience more than she'd thought. She had thrown herself into the spirit of it, helping the guys clear the campsite, pitch a tent and build a fire from scratch, even lighting it with a flint instead of matches. Of course Ryan would insist on that.

The weather was perfect too, not too warm or too cold. It was unseasonably pleasant for early January and Sophie felt fine in her jeans and hoodie. The woods were quiet and peaceful as night fell.

But those looks...

"You have some chocolate right here, Soph," said Dave, pointing to one side of his mouth. "Come here, I'll lick it off."

Sophie stood up and walked to Dave with a smile. He took her in his arms and licked off the chocolate before proceeding to lick her entire face. Sophie squealed and pushed him away. "Stop, you crazy man."

"He's putting his scent on you," Ryan said with a grin.

"You're weird, Ryan, you know that?" Sophie laughed, but Ryan ignored her, suddenly busy typing away on his phone. Dave looked over at him.

"Almost dark enough, do you think?"

"Almost," replied Ryan, not looking up.

"Almost dark enough for what?"

Dave looked at Sophie. "We're going to play a little game tonight, baby. It's called 'Chase Sophie through the Woods'."

"Really?" Sophie suppressed a little shiver as Ryan looked up to gauge her reaction. "And what are the rules of this game?"

"The rules are, you get a ten-minute head start, and then we come find you. First one to catch you gets to fuck you then and there."

"In the woods?"

"Right on the ground, in the woods. In the darkness."

Sophie looked up at the sky. It was a new moon. There was no light at all aside from the campfire. "But...how will I see? How will I find my way?"

"It's actually more fun for us if you flounder around like a lost lamb. Oh, and you'll wear these so you don't hear us coming when we do catch you."

He reached in his pocket and produced a pair of wax earplugs. Now Sophie's shivering began in earnest. The idea of this "game" both terrified and excited her. What would it feel like to wander lost? Hunted? Knowing the outcome of being found? Hmm...

"How many times can we play?" Sophie asked. Dave and Ryan laughed.

"As many times as you like until daybreak, or until you run out of steam," Dave assured her. "Greedy little lamb." He was squeezing the wax around in his fingers, getting it warm and soft in order to work it into her ears.

"I suppose you've both done this before," Sophie said, raising her eyebrows.

"Ryan has."

"Okay, Sophie," said Ryan, getting up and bringing her his phone. "Whatever you do, don't lose this. Zip it into your pocket. Under no circumstances are you to use it though. If we really can't find you, we'll call and you can give us your coordinates. But there's almost no chance of us not being able to find you," he added with a smirk. "Still—safe, sane and consensual, isn't that what they say?"

"You know how to find your coordinates, Soph? Like when we go geocaching?"

"Yeah," said Ryan. "Push the geocache app and your coordinates will pop up."

"Oh, you geocache too. Shocking," said Sophie, taking the phone and stashing it in her pocket.

"And don't break my phone, or I might have to punish you."

"Lots of switches to make use of." Dave swung his arm, indicating the many trees around them. Sophie groaned.

"Not that again. Please."

"Then behave. Don't break Ryan's phone. It's like his child."

"Shut up," Ryan said.

Dave laughed and turned Sophie to face him. "Ready, baby? I'm going to put these in your ears and then you have ten minutes. And you need to move for ten minutes. No picking a bush two hundred yards away and hiding under it. You have to keep going. Make it fun for us."

"Yes Sir."

Dave kissed her and then plugged her ears. The wax filled her ear canals and Sophie was amazed to find she truly couldn't hear anything. In the stark, unfamiliar silence, she moved off into the woods. At first, she jogged straight ahead in a line, jumping over branches and finding it fairly easy to navigate through the trees and shrubs. But the farther she got from the camp, the darker it got. Once well away from the fire, it was pitch black. She felt shaky suddenly, and slowed down. Each step was more careful, and the trees around her began to take on menacing shapes.

How long had it been? Were they coming after her yet? Part of her wanted to be found, just to not be wandering alone in this smothering darkness. She turned her head, straining to hear out of habit, even though it wasn't an option to her now. She thought she saw a movement in the darkness and she froze. She almost reached up to her ears to tear out the earplugs. She resisted the urge to scream and then realized it wasn't anything but a branch waving in the breeze. *The bears are hibernating. The bears are hibernating.*

Sophie laughed at herself, at her obsession with bear attacks. So that was all it took to make her crazy, some earplugs and a dark forest. Then she realized that if Dave and Ryan were nearby they would hear her laugh in the silence. Even her clumsy stumbling through the forest would be loud and obvious to them. She turned around in a circle. God, she was so lost. *You have to keep moving.* She picked through the forest, suddenly wishing they had brought Cerberus along instead of leaving him home with a dog-sitter. Cerby could have been her partner, they could have played teams. Then it would have been a fair fight, she thought as she stumbled through the brush, pushing a branch aside to get past it. Cerby would have alerted her as soon as they were within fifty feet of her, so perhaps not so fair a fight. Then she could have run as soon as she knew. She could have run in the other direction—

A shape came at her from the left, a soundless menace that registered in her brain a moment before she felt the grab. She screamed and tried to run, but a hand clamped over her mouth. She still screamed, the muffled sound loud in her head despite her



useless ears. She struggled but her assailant pinned her. She fought harder, instinctive drive. Then she felt lips against her cheek, smelled a scent she knew, a weight she remembered. Dave.

His hands were groping around the front of her, pulling down her jeans. She lay still, captured prey, shaking with lust as he sheathed himself and impaled her. The ground was hard under her, a jutting root banging against her hip in rhythm with Dave's thrusts. The silence, the darkness, it all effaced her, made her feel as nothing more than his vessel to use. She was caught, and now she was taken. He finished quickly to the background of Sophie's blood beating in her ears. Just as quickly, he hiked her pants back up and pulled her to her feet. She buttoned them with shaking hands before she looked up at her lover. His eyes looked wild and happy. He said something to her, one word it was easy to read on his lips in the silence.

"Run."

She turned and ran again, into the same enveloping black darkness. Her pussy pulsed now with the lost heat of Dave's possession and her own unfulfilled desire. She felt loose and animalistic, no longer thinking or planning escape. She was running on blind instinct alone. The trees and shadows that frightened her earlier seemed to belong to her now, to be her own world and her own people. The creatures of the woods. She was breathing hard, practically flying through the forest the next time a shape tackled her to the ground.

That it was Ryan, she had no doubt. She could see his dark eyes flashing inches from her face, and only Ryan would be so rough with her. She fought him harder than she'd fought Dave, egged on by the stubborn grimace on his face, until he covered her nose and mouth with one sweaty, dirty palm. Even then she fought. She never gave up until he flinched first and released her.

He kissed her, then bit her lip until she yelped. He trapped her hands and she went still, the throb in her lip fading to a dull ache as she looked up into his eyes. Ryan's eyes were changed now, less animal and more human. His torso pressed her to the ground as he released himself and yanked at her jeans. Her clit flared with each rough jerk of his fingers. His cock bobbed between them, male protuberance, a weapon Sophie wanted used on her. He rolled on a condom and slid into her. In the darkness, he pulled her on top of him, pushing her up and down on his cock, but her jeans prevented her from spreading her legs to straddle him. After a moment of fumbling and fighting again, he rolled her back into the dirt. Sophie reached out and felt pine needles and sticks. Her fingers found a rock and she thought she could knock Ryan out with it if she was truly endangered. If he was truly a predator to her prey.

But instead she curled her fingers into fists and let him take her. Some small part of her that was still sensible saw Dave photographing them, flashes in the dark. Ryan's pounding thrusts pushed her into the ground and the fire Dave had lit between her legs flared to fever pitch. She arched up against him. *Yes, yes, yes, yes!* And then the silence and darkness shattered into an orgasm that shuddered from her pelvis over her entire body as it bucked on the forest floor. Behind her eyes, she saw red and violet and more

flashing. She forgot Ryan completely, transported out of her mind. The world seemed to spin as she watched from somewhere outside it, and then she opened her eyes and looked up at the sky.

And then she heard the muffled scream, the terrible, awful scream that sounded far away and yet seemed to resound in her own head. It shattered her peace and brought her crashing back to earth. She realized with a start that she was the one screaming, and she clamped her mouth shut.

Ryan's and Dave's faces both stared down at her in shock. They were talking to her, yelling at her, but she couldn't hear them. Ryan was still inside her. She was still lying on the cold forest floor. She looked up at the branches crisscrossed above her, looked up at the dark lattice of tree and flash and night and again, without conscious thought or movement, another piercing scream tore from her throat.

## Chapter Eleven

Ryan shoved everything in the car and put out the fire while Dave checked Sophie over with trembling fingers for some insect bite, some sprained muscle or broken limb. Nothing. Then he remembered that Ryan was the doctor and asked him to look at her. Ryan checked her head, peered into her eyes with a flashlight looking for concussion. He determined that she was perfectly fine physically, aside from the shivers that shook her.

They started back at once. Ryan drove while Dave cradled Sophie in the backseat. At first she hadn't responded to any of his questions, and he truly began to panic until Ryan reminded him that the sound of his voice was still dampened by the plugs in her ears. Dave fished them out and spoke to her as calmly as he was able, asking her name, her age, how she was feeling, whether anything was hurting. She answered with quiet sighs and responses, but her gaze was still somewhere far away.

"Hospital? Or home?" asked Ryan when they reached the interstate.

"Home. We'll call Dr. Perez in the morning. This isn't a physical problem, I don't think."

"No hospital," Sophie moaned.

"No, baby. Are you sure nothing hurts?" She shook her head and buried her face against Dave's side. He stroked her hair. "I would feel better if you could explain to me what happened."

"Nothing. Nothing happened," Sophie said, sighing against his chest. They rode in silence until Dave felt Sophie unwind against his chest, her breathing slow and regular.

"Dave, I swear I did nothing to hurt her," Ryan said quietly. "I was a little rough, but I was careful. I didn't—I hope—God—"

"It's okay, Ry. I was there the whole time. She seemed to be enjoying herself until the end."

"It was almost as if some switch turned or something. I was looking down at her and it was like...Sophie went away someplace."

"I know. That happens sometimes, usually after nightmares. But never anything like tonight."

"Has she had a brain scan? What does her psychiatrist say?"

"She sees a counselor, not a psychiatrist."

Ryan was silent a moment. "You may want to consider— Well, it's none of my business. Just playing doctor. I'm sure she's getting excellent care. But the human brain is a very complicated organ. And who knows how much he knocked her around in addition to drugging her."

Dave's throat tightened. "You know, I just don't know sometimes. I don't know if she's okay or not. And I don't know what else to do to help her get better."

"You're doing all you can do. You're taking care of her, you're loving her. You're supporting her through some difficult moments. Don't be too hard on yourself, David. You've always been too hard on yourself."

"I saw something," Sophie blurted out, coming awake abruptly. "I screamed because I thought I saw something. But it was just my mind playing tricks on me. Maybe your camera flash freaked me out. You don't have to take me home. What about our camping trip? I wanted to sleep in the tent tonight."

"The camping trip's over when you wig out and start screaming, hon. Let's get you home and put in a call to Dr. Perez."

"I'm fine, Dave. Ryan has to leave tomorrow. I'm ruining all the fun."

"You're not ruining anything, Sophie," said Ryan, glancing back over his shoulder. "Don't worry about me. I've had more fun on this trip than I've had all year. We'll just take it easy and make sure you're okay."

Dave sighed as she relaxed against him again. Soon her breathing became slow and steady. Looking down at her pale face in the innocence of sleep, he felt another pang of guilt. What was wrong with him? Dragging her out into pitch blackness, making her run? Frantic, pursued? Standing to the side taking pictures while his friend fucked her? What the hell did he expect her to do?

He knew what had happened, felt it hard and jagged in the pit of his stomach. He had finally pushed her too far. She played along to please him, and he had taken advantage of it, just like *him*. Barry. It was his responsibility as her lover, as her owner, to set the limits she wouldn't set for herself. He saw that now, that she wouldn't say no out of a sense of duty or love for him. It would be up to him to draw the lines from now on, and he silently pledged to do better.

He would never take her too far again. If only because he couldn't bear to ever again hear those miserable screams.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sophie shifted and looked up at Dr. Perez through swollen, red eyes, thinking how kind it was of her to meet on such short notice. Dave had placed the call and she'd agreed to see her first thing in the morning at her office.

Dave told Sophie to tell Dr. Perez whatever she felt she had to, not to hold anything back on his account. He meant if Sophie needed to tell her about the camping trip, about Ryan and their antics together, that she could. But Sophie felt that was none of Dr. Perez's business, and it didn't matter anyway. That wasn't why she was upset.

No, it had nothing to do with Dave, nothing to do with Ryan. Sophie had a horrible feeling it had to do with her.

"Sophie, sometimes the mind suppresses memories or feelings it doesn't want to deal with. You did a lot of that, didn't you? There are a lot of things about your last relationship that you chose to 'put away'."

"You told me to put things away, remember?"

"Yes, and that's certainly a valid coping mechanism, especially when you are trying to move past bad experiences and get on with your life. You tell me you're very happy in your new relationship, and you've been taking steps toward fulfilling your lifelong dream of becoming a doctor."

"Yes. I am happy."

"What may be happening is that your previous defenses are weakening, letting these 'put away' memories surface again when you are most relaxed and least able to fight them."

Sophie frowned, pulling her knees up. Yesterday had been the clearest vision yet. The nightmares grew more and more vivid, but nothing like what she'd seen last night under the trees. She remembered pain, experienced a horrible feeling of sickness. She saw Barry leaning over her, his face standing out in relief against the treetops above him. She remembered rain and lightning. She remembered Barry holding her down...

"How often have you been experiencing these flashbacks?" Dr. Perez asked.

"Often."

"Would you like to share them? Would that help? Perhaps we could work through them together —"

"No!" Sophie flushed. "I mean, not really. I kind of wish...I really wish I could just put them away again."

Dr. Perez was silent for a moment. "You could try, of course. But you may find it sapping more and more of your energy. If they won't be 'put away' it may be that you will have to find a way to come to terms with them, make peace with the memories as best you can."

"Make peace with them? How?"

"Perhaps you could write a letter to your old partner, if they concern him. You don't have to send it. Just get it down on paper. Put voice to your feelings. Work through the memories and how they make you feel. Sometimes that can be enough to help you move on. Or you might call or meet your ex-partner in some neutral place and talk through things, say the things you need to say. Did you and your previous partner ever reach any closure at the end of your relationship?"

"No, not really."

"Have you talked any time recently?"

"Just once, on the phone. I'm kind of...I'm a little afraid of seeing him again."

"That's perfectly natural. But I can see you're struggling, Sophie. Just remember what we talked about. Often the weight of the memories is something we impose on ourselves. Be certain you're looking back with an honest eye."

"That's just it, Dr. Perez. I'm having trouble looking back at all. It's like my eyes are clouded, like I can't see. If only I could, maybe I could stop having these nightmares and —"

She clamped her mouth shut. *And maybe I could stop seeing the darkness and the lightning. Maybe I could stop hearing my screams and feeling this awful fear.*

"Sophie? Sophie? Is everything all right?"

Dr. Perez's cool voice brought her back from the bleakness of her thoughts. She looked at her psychologist's serious gaze behind wire-rimmed glasses.

"I'm all right, Dr. Perez," she heard herself answering. "I think I just need to work through things. I don't know how. But maybe — soon — things will get clearer."

Dr. Perez leaned forward in her chair. "Just remember that you have people around you who love you, people who really care. I am always here, just a phone call away if you have a breakthrough. For now, though, are you okay?"

"Yes," Sophie said. "For now, I am okay. I'm feeling much better actually. I mean, I think I will be. I just need to — I just need to work through things. But thank you for seeing me today. You've helped a lot."

Outside Dr. Perez's office, Dave fell into step beside her. "How are you feeling?"

*How are you feeling? Is everything all right? For now, though, are you okay? No, no, no, no...but yes, if it makes you feel better. Yes.*

"Yes, I'm fine. She made me feel a lot better actually. She said this is normal. That traumatic memories you've suppressed can resurface during times when you're really relaxed and happy, because your defenses are down. I'm sure that's what happened."

Dave seemed content with that explanation, and Ryan seemed relieved later when Sophie told him the same thing.

"So you see, your game wasn't the cause of it," she assured him. "I told you the truth, Ry. I had fun all week, and I'm really glad to have met you." It seemed like too little to say to someone who'd fucked your brains out all week, but to say more would have felt awkward to them both.

Ryan smiled and stroked her cheek one time, softly. "I'm glad to have met you too. I knew all along I would like you, only because Dave loves you so much. He doesn't give his heart to just anyone. He's really found someone special in you."

Sophie smiled, feeling the familiar blush. "If by special, you mean strange..."

Ryan laughed. "I think we're all a little strange. But it's good. We're strange together. That's the important thing."

Later, just before Dave left to take Ryan to the airport, Ryan drew her aside and held out a scrap of paper in his palm. No, not a scrap of paper. Sophie looked closer.

"It's an origami crane," Ryan said. "In Japanese culture they're a symbol of loyalty. And they say if you fold a thousand of them, a wish will come true."

"A thousand?" Sophie smiled. "Just nine hundred ninety-nine to go."

"I would have made you a thousand, but we were kind of busy doing other things all week," he teased.

Sophie studied the delicate work of folded paper. "You made this yourself?"

"I made it for you. I hope you'll keep it to remember me by."

"Remember you?" Sophie glanced out at Dave on the porch with Cerby, then back into Ryan's dark eyes. "You'll be a hard one to forget. Anyway, I'm sure I'll see you again."

"Of course. But you know how life is. I don't know how long Dave will feel like sharing you with me, at least the way he did this time. But I'm sure we'll always be friends." He held out his arms and Sophie leaned into him. He squeezed her just a moment before releasing her. "I want you to remember that I'm here for you if you need any help in your studies, or afterward, finding a good internship placement. I've made a lot of contacts in my career I'd be happy to share."

"Thanks, Ryan. Honestly, this is..." She looked down at the intricate crane, amazed that blunt, hyper-intense Ryan could ever sit still to form something so delicate with his massive fingers. But then she remembered lovely moments under their dexterity, and that he was a surgeon. "I'll keep it always. And yes, I'm sure we'll be in touch."

"Okay. Just take care. Take care of yourself and your nightmares will work themselves out. Dave will take care of you too."

Sophie smiled. She knew he would take care of her, that he wanted nothing more than to see her better, see her move on from the shadows of her past. That's why she felt so obligated to act as soon as Dave and Ryan were gone.

She picked up the phone and paged back through the incoming calls list. She found Barry's number and dialed it quickly before she lost her nerve. *God, please answer*, she thought. If he didn't, she'd never have the nerve to call back. And if Dave found out she was calling Barry...

But Dr. Perez had encouraged her to do this. She was right, the only way to move past him was to talk things out with him. He had no more power over her, but he had something else Sophie wanted. Answers.

"Hello?"

His voice stilled her racing brain. "Barry. Hi. It's Sophie."

"Sophie. This is a surprise." His tone sounded brittle. She remembered their last call had not been very friendly.

"Um...are you busy?" she asked.

"No. Just curious why you've called me. Did your boyfriend throw you out already?"

Sophie frowned. "No. And I don't want to talk about him. I actually called for a specific reason."

"And what reason is that?"

"I've been having a lot of nightmares. A lot of memories that don't make sense, and I thought maybe you could help me figure out what it is I'm remembering."

There was a short silence on the other line. "Help you figure out...? What the hell are you talking about?"

Sophie took a deep breath. "I have these nightmares about a night in the woods. And... I don't know. I don't remember what happened. But I'm pretty sure you do."

Again, silence. The silence stretched so long Sophie thought he might have hung up. But then she heard a long sigh. "I don't know what you're talking about. I never took you out in the woods."

"Yes, you did. You took me to Overton Park, to the trails, one night when it was storming."

"I most certainly did not."

"Why are you lying? I won't get mad at you, okay? I just need to know, so please just tell me the truth."

Barry laughed. "I am telling the truth. I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I remember being in the woods with you, in that clearing at the top of the path. There was lightning and you were there, and I don't know – I don't know what you did to me but –"

"Oh, Jesus Christ, Sophie. What, have you been watching horror flicks or something? What a load of –"

"Just please tell me," she said, her patience fraying.

"There's nothing to tell. I never went to Overton Park with you. I think you make a lot of stuff up in your head. You always have. You did it when we were together and you're doing it now."

"It's not made up. I keep having these flashbacks –"

"Flashbacks? Please. I think maybe Daddy needs to spring for a new shrink. The one you've got isn't working." Sophie gritted her teeth, frustrated to the point of crying. This was the cruel Barry she remembered. It infuriated her that he could still bring her to tears.

"Just tell me!" she yelled. "Why won't you just help me? I'm so tired of these nightmares, you don't understand what this is like –"

"I don't really give a flying fuck about your nightmares, Sophie. I don't know what the fuck you're talking about, and frankly, I don't care to discuss it further."

Sophie slammed the phone down into the receiver and covered her face with her hands. God, she hated him. Why couldn't she move past all this and get on with her life? Cerby whined and nudged her, but she pushed him away and stood, going for her jacket. She was going to figure out what the fuck was going on before she went crazy.

She was going to the clearing in the woods, and she wasn't leaving until she found some peace.



\* \* \* \* \*

It wasn't until she was in the car that she realized she should have left a note for Dave. She didn't even have her phone with her to call him. She should at least have brought Cerby. God, Dave would be pissed. She was supposed to check in with him whenever she went anywhere. She'd just been punished for the exact same thing she was doing, not even a week ago. In fact, she'd been punished for sneaking off to this exact same place. She thought she should just turn around, deal with it later. But she was so close to remembering... She felt her memories teetering on some cusp of her brain. It was like knowing a word but not quite being able to remember it. She knew if she could just remember, then the nightmares would stop. At least she hoped so. She argued back and forth with herself to the point where she was so near the park, it seemed stupid to turn around.

She pulled in and parked. It was late afternoon, nice and cool, and lots of families were still on the playground, while others exercised on the circular path surrounding it. She passed them all, deep in thought. *Remember, remember, remember...*

She took her time walking to the trail, trying to remember that night. She passed into the thicker woods where the trail changed from concrete to earth. She climbed the path until she reached the clearing and then sat in the center of it. She was determined to sit here and try to remember until she shook it loose from her brain. The sun was dropping in the sky, making her squint as it shone through the barren winter trees. She closed her eyes and let her mind drift.

Nothing.

She pursed her lips in frustration and lay back on the cool earth. She looked up at the trees over her, the crisscrossing branches. *Remember, remember...* She'd never meditated before in her life, but now she tried. She emptied her mind and made her body relax. In time, the cool breeze and faint chirping of birds soothed her and she felt herself taken back to that time. *Remember...*

She remembered darkness, cold. Rain on her face. She was so sick, so nauseous. Sickness, lightning, pain...blood... She drew her hands up to her face and saw blood on her fingers. Barry pushing her back. Blood, blood, blood... She heard thunder and felt the rain on her face. *My god. My god, it hurt so badly. Let me up. Let me up...* She forced her way up and saw blood on her thighs, on her hands. Barry raped her, hurt her, that's what happened. No. There was too much blood for that. Sickness, lightning, screams, rain, horrible pain and cramps that made her double over...blood...and cramping that seemed to tear her asunder...

Sophie sat up with a cry, grasping her middle, caught between past and present. She knew now, she remembered. It had to be... She'd had a miscarriage. And Barry had been there, holding her down while she cried for him to help her. *It hurts. Please!* Barry was there now, coming closer. Oh god. *Barry.* No, it was just another dream. *Wake up, wake up now.*

No. It wasn't a dream. She wasn't sleeping. Barry was there, a few yards away from her. He was watching her with a curious expression on his face.

She leaped to her feet, shaking off her confusion. "What are you doing here?"

He shrugged. "I knew you'd come here. I always knew exactly what your next move would be. That's what made me such a good Dom."

She swallowed down fear. He couldn't hurt her now, not anymore. She raised her chin and faced him down. "You were a horrible Dom."

"Was I? You seemed to enjoy yourself when we were together."

"Yeah, when I was coherent. When I wasn't drugged and mindfucked to within an inch of my life."

"You liked it, Sophie."

"No. You abused me. The things you did to me were wrong."

"Who says? You never said they were wrong. You never told me to stop. That's what made you such a good sub," he said with a grin. She wanted to rip his face off.

"I know what happened," she said instead. Emotion rose in her throat, straining her voice so she could barely speak. "I know now. I remember. I lost a baby here. Our baby."

He looked at her, his eyes narrowing. "You had a miscarriage, yes. Not that it matters now. Why do you want to bring all this up, why now? It's ancient history. We went home afterward and you were fine. Who gives a shit?"

She shook her head. "You held me down. You held me down in the dirt right there. I was sick, I was in horrible pain—"

"You had a miscarriage," he said more loudly. "It was a mess."

"It was a mess?" Sophie's sorrow spun into disbelieving rage. "That's what you have to say about it? It was a *mess*? What's wrong with you?"

Barry snorted and crossed his arms over his chest. "What's wrong with *me*? It was you, you lost the baby. It was your fault."

"How was it my fault? What the hell are you talking about?"

"It was your fault," he yelled, suddenly enraged. "You forgot your damn pill or something. It was all your fault, Sophie. You belonged to me and me alone—"

He turned away in agitation. Sophie stood openmouthed, completely robbed of words. He spun back and advanced into her space. "No baby was going to come between us. As soon as your periods stopped coming, I knew. Believe me, I tried every other way to get rid of it. I drugged you, I kept food and water from you. I even took you to get an abortion but you were too out of it sign the papers and then they started asking all these questions—goddamn it!"

"What did you do?" she asked in a low, shaky voice. "What did you do to me?"

He scowled at her. "I got some herbs from this hippie friend of mine, they were supposed to cause an abortion. I drugged you up, twice the normal dose I kept you on,

and I gave you the herbs. And they worked. I brought you out here because of all the blood, and you laid down there and you lost the baby, Sophie. There in the fucking mud, in the middle of a storm. You asked for it. Don't try to pin this on me, like I'm the bad guy. You look back at everything and paint me as the bad guy when you were just as much to blame. You tried to get pregnant to get away from me."

"I tried to get pregnant? I never even had a clue I was pregnant —"

"You did it on purpose! But I was the one in charge of our relationship. It was my right to make it go away."

Sophie's hair stood on end. He was a psychopath. She had known he was all along, but this...this was worse than she ever realized. Her body was shaking, whether from terror or fury, she didn't know. She couldn't think of what to say. Only one question came to her mind.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, Barry? Why are you so fucking insane?"

He drew a hand across his mouth and glared at her. "Why? You have to ask me why? Because you drove me fucking crazy, you little cunt. I always loved you, always. You were supposed to be for me alone. You and your fucking pregnancy. No fucking way."

She wanted to kill him. She screamed at him through tears. "You selfish, depraved motherfucker! If there was any justice in this world, you would be dead instead of my baby —"

"No, you bitch! You would be dead. If it wasn't for me, for the way I loved you, I would have killed you, too, for all the pain you caused me." His eyes went blank and then he lunged for her. His hands closed around her neck. "But you don't love me, Sophie. You never loved me, did you?"

Sophie shook her head, trying to extricate herself from his choking grasp, but he mistook it for denial and it inflamed him more. His hands tightened like a vise around her neck, cutting her breath off.

"Exactly. You never loved me. Who's the selfish one, you fucking bitch?"

Sophie scratched at his iron grip. Her face felt flooded, swollen, as if it were going to explode. All the self-defense maneuvers Dave had taught her fled her mind along with her oxygen. *Defend yourself! Fight back!* She could only claw helplessly at his iron forearms. The edge of her vision was growing dim. She tried to say, *No, please*, but she was, once again, powerless in Barry's grasp. She thought of Dave as she went limp, of the note she should have written, the call she should have made.

*I will not keep secrets from my Sir.*

*I will not keep secrets from my Sir.*

*I'm so sorry, Sir. I'm so sorry I did this.*

*I'm so sorry it ended this way...*

Then she heard a sound like a growling wind through the gates of Hades. Just before she blacked out completely, she saw a blur of angry, dark hellhound bound into the clearing, black fur and bared teeth, and nothing more.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time Dave caught up to Cerberus, the dog had the situation firmly in hand. He had one massive paw braced on the man's chest, while his bared teeth dripped slobber onto his terrified face from scant inches away.

"Barry?" The man's short nod confirmed Dave's suspicions. "I wouldn't move if I were you," Dave muttered, stepping over him to where Sophie lay limp and sprawled out, livid bruises already purpling around her neck.

He checked for a pulse, felt a thready beat and gasped with relief. He made a call to 9-1-1 on his cell and then buried his face in Sophie's hair, murmuring prayers already answered to a God he didn't believe in until just now. He whispered to her as he tried to revive her, heartfelt words of love mixed with babbling recriminations, punctuated with pointless, silly orders like "keep breathing", and "lie still". Meanwhile Cerberus growled at Barry, keeping him from moving one iota.

"Hey," Barry's voice came weakly. "Could you call off your dog?"

"No fucking way," Dave muttered as Cerby let loose with an *I'm-going-to-rip-your-head-off* snarl that Barry answered with a moan of fear. The sound awakened Sophie, and she looked around in alarm. "Barry—"

"It's okay. Cerb's got Barry. I think the man's going to wet himself. Look."

Barry's whimpers of terror with Cerby's teeth at his throat satisfied Dave's urges for revenge. He would let the police handle the rest. He focused on Sophie instead, helping her sit up. "Are you okay? Can you breathe okay? How does your head feel?"

She nodded slowly. "I'm fine." As he gazed down at her, he saw her eyes fill with tears.

"Don't cry, honey. It's okay."

"I'm so sorry."

He pulled her into his arms and held her as she sobbed into his chest. "Shhh. Just rest. Don't try to talk right now."

The police and EMTs arrived shortly afterward in a bustle of activity. Her statement and the bruises on her neck proved sufficient to result in Barry's arrest for attempted murder—that is, once Cerby released him into police custody. "Okay, boy," Dave reassured him. "You can let him up now. Sophie's safe. Good boy."

In the hospital, Sophie told Dave the whole story of what had happened in the clearing in the woods many months ago, and Barry's attack on her. Her mother and father arrived and she told it again, remembering even more details that made his heart break. Dave took her home, promising to keep her parents updated on her condition.

He kept her in bed all night and into the next day, admonishing her to rest as he held her close. "Punish me," she begged him. "Please."

"Absolutely not," he answered each time she asked. As if he could even consider such a thing when it seemed to him that every breath she took was a miracle. It was a miracle she was alive. When he had arrived home to find her missing, he wasted precious moments calling her work, calling friends she might have visited. It was Cerberus who had paced and unnerved Dave so much he had finally realized something was wrong.

Then Dave had asked himself, *Where? Where was she?* Overton Park had been the first place that came to mind. He thought about her recent secret visits there, and a horrible idea occurred to him. She was still communicating with him. Barry. Why? He'd picked up the phone and found Barry's number was the last one dialed. In a blind fury, he'd charged out the door, not even stopping to bring Cerberus along. But the dog had stood in Dave's way until he ushered him with a curse into the car.

And if he hadn't...Sophie would no longer be with him. Dave was sure of that. When Cerberus had broken away from Dave, dragging his leash behind him up into the woods at breakneck speed, Dave knew something was horribly wrong. If not for Cerberus, Dave would not have found Sophie in time. It seemed so random in hindsight. If he had not been so angry, he wouldn't have driven so fast. If Cerby hadn't tangled himself in Dave's legs until he couldn't leave without him, he would have left him behind. If he hadn't caught Sophie in her secret forays to Overton Park by deciding to meet her at work because Ryan's flight was early, he never would have thought to go there this day. If he hadn't decided that day in the train yard to bring that starving, flea-ridden mutt home... So many random chances to lose her. So much unbelievable luck that she was there, alive and well, lying in his arms.

So punishment? Not very likely. At least not now. There was a time to punish and a time to cradle and soothe. Worse, Dave wasn't sure what she wanted to be punished for. Frankly, he was afraid to ask. Did she want to be punished for leaving without telling him where she was going? Or did she want to be punished for some perceived sense of collusion in the tragedy of her miscarriage? It would be just like Sophie to blame herself, to see the crime through some warped lens of personal culpability. Dave looked down at her neck, at the garish evidence of Barry's last assault, and thought to himself how sad all of it was. He had much more important work to do than punishing her. He had to help her rebuild the wreckage of her heart.

Later, when she slept, he went down to the darkroom. He mixed chemicals and set up developing trays, forcing himself to the work. He exposed every negative in the enlarger, every shot he'd snapped of Ryan and Sophie on the forest floor. He developed them all and watched each print appear, twenty-five in all, in the developer tray, hazy grayscale blurs strengthening into clear, sharp images that were difficult for Dave to look at.

Sophie in ecstasy. Sophie wild and unfettered in the dark of night. Sophie's face changing, a flinch as she looked up at the sky. Her eyes closing, mouth opening in the rictus of a horrible scream.

Dave made himself look, but he knew he would never understand, never feel what she felt at either moment in time. The moment she suffered through in drugged confusion, and the moment she relived as a memory long after the fact.

He looked, and then he collected every negative, every print, and burned them all to ashes, staring into the blazing conflagration until it died.

## Chapter Twelve

Dr. Perez shook her head gently at Sophie. "You must remember, none of this was your fault. Your former partner drugged you, he abused you. He isolated you and broke you down. He was an expert at manipulating you, and manipulating the truth. There is no one to blame here but him."

"I know," Sophie answered, shifting on the leather sofa. "My head knows that, but my heart..."

Sophie felt as if she'd been crying for weeks. As soon as she started to feel better, something would make her remember and the tears would begin again. She'd never even known she carried a child, much less lost it. She felt robbed, cheated. Only now, long after the fact, had she learned what was taken from her, long, long past the time she had any power to do things differently. If only she had known she was pregnant, she might have found the strength to leave him, and her baby might have had a chance. If only she hadn't met Barry in the first place, if only she'd left him at the start, when things started changing. If only...if only...if only... None of it mattered now. There was nothing now to be done, nothing to do but mourn.

Sophie hadn't returned to Overton Park in the two months since she left it. She knew she could never go there again. It was a cursed place to her now, a place she lost a baby and almost lost her life. She'd found the answers she wanted there, but at a terrible price. Hazy, confusing nightmares had been replaced by waking knowledge she could never forget. She possessed the truth now, the whole truth of what happened in that clearing, and Barry was finally going to pay for his crimes, but closure still eluded her. Sophie feared closure was something she would never know.

"And how is your relationship with Dave holding up, Sophie? Everything okay?"

"Yes. He's been wonderful. Sometimes I think...if not for him..."

Dr. Perez frowned. "I'm glad to hear things are going well. But remember what we talked about. It's not healthy to be dependent on someone else for your own happiness—"

"Happiness?" Sophie cut her off. "I'm just trying to get through each day. Dave is the only thing keeping me sane with all the shit going on right now—"

"Sophie. Don't get upset. This is an issue we've been talking about for some time now. It's perfectly fine to lean on trusted friends and loved ones, but at the end of the day, who does Sophie need to be at peace with? Who nurtures Sophie?"

"Me. I do." Sophie sighed. It was easy to say, but harder to accomplish.

"What about your studies?" Dr. Perez asked. "Still keeping up all right?"

"Yes, just fine. Great." Actually, the new semester was the best thing that could have happened, allowing her to get her mind off the loss she felt and the messy ongoing legal case. "And I think I'm finally going to quit my UPS job and focus one hundred percent on school."

"That's wonderful, Sophie. That's a big step. Focusing on the future, doing what's best for your progress."

"I hope so." She had broached the idea of quitting with Dave on one of her more tired, defeated days when she didn't want to get out of bed. Now, even though she was feeling better, he was holding her to it. Now if she could just bring herself to turn in her two weeks notice... "Dave wants to spend more time with me anyway."

"I think that's a wonderful idea. This is an important time for you to stay connected to your partner." Dr. Perez put down her notebook and smiled at Sophie. "When you talk about him, it's really obvious to me that he makes you happy in a very positive way." She looked at her watch. "Well, that's about it for this week. Call me if you need me. And Sophie, this week, try to reach for happiness, however you are able. It's something only you can do. We are not always able to be at peace with our past, and we are not always fortunate enough to live without sadness. But we can always strive to move toward happiness. Just keep that in mind."

Sophie nodded. She wanted to strive for happiness. She wanted to move on, it was just the feat of actually doing it. As she drove home, she thought to herself that Dave wasn't exactly helping her move on either. He had remained awfully cautious with her, even though the bruises around her neck had faded from purple to pink to yellowish green and then completely away. They still made love nearly every night, close, intimate encounters, but they were totally vanilla from start to end. She needed her Dom back.

That night over dinner, Sophie told Dave about the things she and Dr. Perez had talked about. He told her about his photo session with a Master and his very inexperienced and nervous slave in his inimitable style that always made her laugh. Then she looked across the table at him.

"When are you going to photograph me again?"

Dave fell silent.

"Don't you want to photograph me anymore?" Sophie hated the insecure way her voice sounded.

"Oh, Soph." Dave stood to clear the table. "I just don't want to add any more pressure to your life right now."

"It's not pressure." Sophie got up to help him. They started loading the dishwasher together, letting Cerby pre-clean each dish with a few broad laps of his tongue. "I like posing for you. We just haven't done it in so long. I didn't know if there was a reason."

"There's no real reason. I just—the thing is—when I photograph you, you're so exposed. There's so much I see."

Sophie frowned. "You don't like what you see?"



"No, I love what I see. It's just the intensity of it. Jesus, Sophie. I almost lost you a few weeks ago."

"But I'm here. I survived. And I haven't had a nightmare since..." Her voice trailed off, but Dave looked up, his brows drawn together in thought.

"Hey, you're right. You haven't."

"I also haven't had a spanking." She blushed as soon as she uttered the sentence. It felt as if she were topping from below, but Dr. Perez had told her to strive for happiness. Well, she was striving. She hoped she didn't live to regret it.

Dave shut the dishwasher and straightened slowly, his arms crossed over his chest. "That's true too. Not that you don't deserve a whopper of a punishment for what you put me through. So what would you rather have? A photography session, or a punishment session?"

"Please, Sir," Sophie answered. "I would like both."

\* \* \* \* \*

He took his time undressing her. How long had it been since he'd played with her this way? He wanted to trace every curve, lick every freckle. They had been physically close since that fearsome January day, but their lovemaking had become tentative, too gentle for them both. He had known it and now he realized Sophie felt it too.

But no matter. He could easily correct that.

"What should I use to punish you? It should be something quite harsh, shouldn't it? For running off alone? For scaring me out of my wits?"

"Yes Sir. But —"

"But what?"

"You know I've never been very good at taking pain."

Dave laughed. "I think before anything else, you deserve a gag for telling lies like that. But I like the noises you make when I hurt you. No gag. But no more lip either. Do you understand?"

"Yes Sir."

"Go bend over the bed. Hands behind your back."

He watched her lean her beautiful body over the footboard until her breasts rested on the comforter and her heart-shaped ass was up in the air. Her face turned to the side, resigned and peaceful.

"Do you like when Sir punishes you and gives you what you deserve, little one?" he asked as he walked to the toy chest and started rifling through its contents.

"Yes," she sighed.

He turned back to her. "Yes Sir, you mean?"

He saw the slight tense and shudder. "Yes Sir."

"That's better. Just because you know I'm going to fuck you senseless at the conclusion of your punishment doesn't mean you should be off in dreamland now."

"No Sir," she replied, shifting from foot to foot. Very nice. Trying to distract him with her cute proffered ass. Well, it was working. His cock was already growing hard and he hadn't even commenced the punishment yet. He finished choosing his instruments and went back to the bed. He laid them out in a line in front of Sophie's face. Cuffs. Thigh straps. Nipple clamps. Lube. Anal plug. Crop. Wooden Spoon. Cane.

Her audible gulp had him stifling a smile. "You wanted a session, Sophie. Ten with each and then a thorough fucking. That should teach you a lesson."

"Y-yes Sir," she stammered, her eyes wide.

"Stand up." He reached for the last item he'd shoved in his pocket as she straightened and faced him. "Sophie, you remember the first time I made love to you?"

"Yes. Oh yes, Sir."

"What do you remember about it?"

She bit her lip for just a moment. "I was really nervous."

"Yes. What else?"

"You made me come. You felt so perfect when you came inside me and filled me up. It was amazing."

He dropped a kiss on her forehead. "Yes, sweet girl, it was amazing. But what else do you remember? What do you remember seeing?"

She smiled, understanding. "Nothing. It was dark."

"Absolutely dark, wasn't it? Pitch black. You insisted on it. Now I'm going to insist on the same thing." He lifted the blindfold and placed it over her eyes as she closed them in submission. As he fastened it in the back, he spoke in her ear. "That night, because it was so dark, the only thing we concentrated on was sensation and emotion. That's what I want you to do today. Okay, baby?"

"Yes Sir." She was so excited her voice was quivery. He resisted the temptation to grope her between the thighs, but then the impulse became too strong. He reached down and slid his fingers between her slickened lips. She gasped as he nuzzled her cheek and plunged his fingers deeper, bringing her up on her toes. "It's okay, girl, I've got you."

She sighed as he withdrew his fingers, drawing them back across her swollen clit with teasing slowness. Her hips twitched against his hand.

"No, not yet. Behave yourself." He brought his fingers to her lips and let her smell her musky feminine fragrance before he slipped them into her mouth. She licked and sucked them obediently, and Dave thought with approval that she was already far off in subspace. It was always easier to punish her then.

He dropped his hand and pulled away, lifting the nipple clamps. She tensed at the small rattle and clink of the connecting chain that identified the sensation to come. The sadist in him made her wait, not knowing when each clamp would close its painful jaws

on her nipples. She was so aroused that the pink peaks of her breasts were already drawn up tight. Taking care to make no noise, he attached the first clamp. She made a small jerk and sob at the sudden biting ache.

"Yes, girl. That's one." She made a low keening sound as he made her wait for the other one, and then again, the cry and sob as the second clamp attached to its target. Dave turned her, bending her over the bed so her clamped nipples were pressed against the mattress.

"Enough whining. Spread your legs."

She spread them, and then he spread them wider still, buckling a wide leather strap around the top of each slender thigh. With that done, he took each wrist and attached a matching leather cuff, which was then clipped to an eyehook on the thigh strap, in effect pinning her arms at her side. He looked down at his sub, blindfolded, clamped, restrained. Totally and willingly at his mercy. As usual the sight of it made his breath catch and his cock throb even more. He lifted the silicone anal plug and added lube to the tip, then parted Sophie's cheeks to deposit some of the slippery substance to her tight hole. She flinched but held still. "Don't tense," he warned her. "You know it only makes it harder. No matter what, it's going in."

Sophie sighed and he felt her relax. He pressed the tip against her anus and pushed the plug in steadily. Her urgent mewls built in intensity as the broadest part of the plug parted her. Her noises faded into a little sigh as it was fully seated inside.

"Your little ass is filled up now, yes, girl?"

"Yes Sir." She shifted onto her toes and back down again. Dave fought for control, tried to modulate his voice.

"And you are completely at my mercy. My own girl, to do with as I please."

"Yes Sir." She arched her hips again and then ground them against the covers. He picked up the crop and brought it down across the back of her thighs.

"Owww!" Her hands jerked in the restraints and she wiggled her ass, prompting him to land the second stroke without delay.

"No masturbating yourself against the footboard," he said as he brought the crop down again.

"Ouch...ow..."

"We've discussed this before. When you're bent over to be punished, you're not to rub your clit against the bed like a horny little slut."

*Whack.* Another blow, and another one before she found her breath.

"I'm s...sorry, Sir."

He finished ten strokes with the crop, half on her ass and half on the tight skin across her upper thighs, enjoying the sight of her hopping up and down on her toes. He picked up the wooden spoon next and rubbed it over her ass cheeks and between her thighs. "Your favorite."

Her only answer was a drawn-out moan.

"As I recall, you were the one who asked to be punished. Be careful what you wish for. And for your horny little masturbatory display, I think we'll do twenty with this."

He paddled her fast and hard with the stinging implement, ten firm swats one on top of the other on one cheek, and then the same torturous treatment on the other cheek. She wailed as the blows rained down, no respite between them. By the end, she was gasping and her ass was beet red.

"Please, Sir. Please!"

"Please, what? Please may I have some more, Sir?"

"No, no, no, no..."

In her current state of distress, he excused her omission of the honorific and instead distracted himself pinching her crimson ass. "Man, those are some hot butt cheeks, Sophie. That must have really hurt."

"Ohhhh..." she whined, clenching around the thick plug in her ass.

"But the cane will hurt worse, don't you think? Or perhaps not. You may still be feeling numb from the wooden spoon. Let's see."

He lifted the cane and delivered a stroke across the center of her bottom. She cried out pitifully, her head thrashing from side to side until she buried her face in the comforter. He gave her the next stroke about thirty seconds later, and then two more above and below it. Her whole body was strung tight and tense like a vibrating bowstring. He landed another stroke on the tender skin between her ass and thighs and she screamed.

"Hush." He stroked hands down her back, calming her, willing her to relax. He wasn't even using his normal amount of force, due to the fact they hadn't played in so long. It had to be the blindfold, the sensory deprivation that was increasing the intensity to an almost unbearable level for her. "Okay, Sophie. It's okay. If you need me to stop, I'll stop. There are five more. Do you want to finish your punishment, or have you had enough?"

His hands were so warm, so soothing against her skin. Her whole body was thrumming as if electrified. *Do you want to finish your punishment, or have you had enough?*

No, it was never enough with him. No, she didn't want to stop now. She shook her head, her hands making fists at her side.

"Speak to me," Dave prompted. "Five more. Yes or no?"

Sophie gathered herself up to speak. "Yes Sir," she said. "I can take five more."

She needed five more. She needed to know he would give what he promised to give, and that she could take it. She needed to know that she was tough enough to take it and that she'd survive on the other side. Not just survive, but bask in the act of surviving it.

But *owwww*. God, it hurt. It stung like fire laid across her ass. *Breathe in, breathe out. Only four more. Owwwwahhhhh...*

*Three more.* But it was so difficult because he waited between each blow. Just when the pain from the last blow faded to a point where it was bearable, the horrible cane would fall again, and again Sophie's nails would dig into her thighs and her whole body would resist the urge to beg, to flee, to collapse at his feet and kiss them...

Sophie sobbed as another blow fell. Was that eight? Or nine? He was counting the strokes aloud but Sophie's breath and wails were too loud in her ears to hear. She was crying in earnest, muffling her tears in the same soft coverlet that kept her warm at night when she cuddled next to him. She waited in her dark world, held fast in the embrace of Dave's restraints, her nipples throbbing in their bondage. Her ass felt vulnerable, helplessly offered for punishment as his insidious toy mastered her from inside.

Another blow and a falling away. Her body took the pain in and accepted it at long last, almost reveled in it. When the last stroke fell diagonally across her aching ass, the joy outpaced the pain and she sobbed with relief behind her blindfold. By this time it felt wet and cool against her eyelids. Soaked. She moaned as large hands landed on her cheeks and squeezed them, a hard, possessive pinch. She heard his own sigh, the rattling condom wrapper.

*Yes, please, please, please...*

His cock slid into her to the hilt, his balls tickling her clit as she arched back against him. His hands closed on her wrists. He pressed her down and fucked her hard. His pelvis pummeled against the plug, driving it deeper. From inside, she felt wild and full, full of this man, her lover. He pulled away with a grunt and she whined in protest, suddenly cold and empty again, her clit aching to contact something, anything to ease the hot madness she felt. He reached down and eased the plug from her ass. Before she could even gasp it was replaced by the nudging head of his thick cock. He wrapped one arm around her pelvis and used the other to guide himself inch by inch into her narrow passage. Sophie reveled in the familiar feeling of being overpowered, impaled. He put his hands on her shoulders and lifted her back against him. He held her close, held himself near, seated deep in her ass. "I've got you. You're mine. I'm deep inside you now."

She could only groan in agreement. His hand trailed up her belly to tug the chain hanging down between her breasts. The surge of pain and ecstasy made her ass clench around his cock as it bucked in and out. "Oh, please, please...take me...fuck me," Sophie begged.

He pulled harder on the chain. She threw her head back against his solid chest, her arms still pinned at her sides, her legs straining and trembling. "Come for me, baby," Dave said. "I want to feel you come with my cock inside your ass. Come for me."

Sophie ground back against him, completely gone. The only thing that existed in her dark world was his breath in her ear, his tugs at her tortured nipples, his pelvis ramming against her ass and his cock deep inside. Then his other hand trailed around her hip and lower. His fingers found her center and massaged the aching button there. Sophie's voice left her, replaced by incoherent sounds of pleading. The fingers left her

and then returned again, stroke, stroke, and the world ceased to exist around her. Her entire body convulsed and the orgasm took her. She fell forward, limp, as Dave growled deep in his throat and pumped his release into her.

Sophie lay gasping in darkness, adjusting to the emptiness she always felt when Dave pulled out of her and away. She stayed still, unmoving, until she felt gentle hands undoing the cuffs at her sides and unfastening the blindfold. He drew it away and Sophie gazed, transfixed, into Dave's deep hazel eyes.

"Thank you, Sir," she whispered.

"My pleasure," he answered with a smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

They showered together, washing and caressing each other in the afterglow. Sophie scrubbed Dave first, enjoying the wonderful textures and taut, sculpted surfaces of her man. She loved his broad shoulders and the way his hairy chest curved down into the flat plane of abs. And then lower, his male organ, sexy and virile even at rest. Dave took a long time too, exploring every curve, every crevice of Sophie, gently soaping and rinsing. He turned off the water but he wouldn't let her dry off. While she was still covered in dewy drops from the shower, he took up his camera and turned it on her.

He took his time photographing her. He ran warm fingertips across the slick surfaces of everything he photographed, her belly, her breasts, her hips. She loved his face as he took pictures. His eyes looked so soft and yet so perceptive. His lips pursed in a small frown she wanted to kiss. Then he did kiss her, holding the camera out to the side to snap photos of them. Sophie barely noticed, transfixed by his lips and the fingertips exploring her body. Then his fingers stopped short and his palm went flat against her belly. He lowered the camera, his brows drawn together in a serious expression.

"Sophie, honey. Did you get your period last month?"

"No," she said after a moment. "I totally skipped it. Stress, I guess."

Dave's serious gaze transformed into a kind of guilty shock.

"What? What is it?"

"I...wow...fuck...with everything that happened, I totally forgot to tell you, Sophie—" He was babbling, something she had never known him to do since the day she'd met him. She reached out and touched his face.

"Dave, what is it? Talk to me."

"That night in the woods, when we chased you...the night before you went to Overton..."

"Yes?"

"After we fucked there on the ground, in the woods, after I stood up and sent you running off again, I looked down and realized the condom had broken. I meant to tell you next time I saw you but then you flipped out with Ryan and I forgot about it. I

remembered again on the way to the airport the next day but then everything with Barry happened and it just...it just completely slipped my mind until now. God, Sophie, I'm so sorry."

"Sorry? Why? You think I might be pregnant?"

Dave traced her breasts again, the curve of her hips. "I just noticed tonight that your body is changing. Your breasts are getting fuller. Your nipples are getting darker. Have you been feeling sick at all?"

Sophie swallowed down panic. "I have been, but it's just because I haven't been eating. I haven't been feeling right since a couple weeks ago..." Her voice trailed off as the import of her words sank in. "God. Really, Dave?"

"Oh, Soph." The way he looked at her made her heart ache. As if she could be angry with him, as if she would blame him. If she was pregnant, it was just an accident, an unfortunate twist of fate. She realized then that her situation with Barry had been the same. She had no control over what Barry had done to her that night, no more control than Dave had over a broken condom. "It wasn't your fault," she said, stroking his hair.

"But if I had remembered, we might have done something. You could have taken one of those morning-after pills."

"Morning-after pills? You mean that morning I found out I lost a baby? The day after I almost died?"

"Oh, Sophie. I guess it wasn't the best time to bring it up, but I shouldn't have forgotten altogether. This is my fault."

"It's not your fault. It was an accident. I'm not upset with you."

He sighed. "If you decide you want an abortion, I'll live with it. I mean, I don't want you to, but I'll understand—"

"Dave, we're not even sure I'm pregnant, so don't go scheduling any abortions yet. Besides, there's no way in hell I'd ever want to get rid of your baby. This wasn't exactly on the schedule, but..."

Dave looked up at her, hopeful again. "God, Sophie. We could make it work, I swear. We'll do whatever we have to. I'll work a second job so we can get a nanny and you can stay in med school—"

"Okay—"

"We'll figure out a way so one of us can always be home with the baby. My schedule is really flexible—"

"Okay—"

"And if we have to ask your parents for help, God. I guess we will, if we have to—"

Sophie giggled and put her hand over Dave's mouth. "I said okay. I'm sure everything will be fine. But before you flip out any further, maybe I should actually take a pregnancy test."

They found a twenty-four-hour pharmacy and Sophie took the test right there in the restroom, neither of them willing to wait another moment to find out. She brought the

completed test out to show Dave—two pink lines, dark and solid. She smiled at him, her eyes alight. “I guess you were right.”

Dave threw his arms around her and started whooping right there in the store, bringing a look of alarm to the cashier’s face.

In the car on the way home, Sophie hugged herself, feeling emotional and excited. Another pregnancy. A new chance at life—again. It was amazing how life kept throwing her second chances. Into the woods and back out again, and again.

“What are you thinking about?” Dave reached for her hand.

Sophie squeezed it and sighed. “You know, it’s really weird. I lost a baby on the ground, in the woods on a dark winter night. And now this baby, it was conceived—”

“On the ground, in the woods on a dark winter night. I know. Believe me, I’ve been thinking about that too.”

“Do you ever think this is all just...I don’t know...fate? I mean, if I’d had that baby, Barry would have used it to keep me with him. I never would have met you. Who knows how things might have ended up. Me and the baby would probably both be dead by now.”

“I know what you mean. I think about that all the time. It’s like, life sends you on this path or that path, and you never know where you’re going to end up, or why things happened the way they did. It seems so random, and yet...when you come out on the other side...”

“Mm-hm,” Sophie agreed. “Totally random. You never know.”

“But I know this,” he said, kissing her hand. “For me now, forever, all paths lead to you. However we got here, I’m so happy with you, honey. I’m so happy with our life together.”

“Me too,” said Sophie, resting her other hand over her still-flat tummy. “God, me too.”



## **Epilogue**

### *Nine Months Later*

Sophie looked in the mirror to fix her lipstick, then combed back her hair, which had grown quite wild in the last year. It was amazing the changes pregnancy wrought, even now, almost two months since she'd given birth. She was finally starting to feel like herself again. And her big boobs, well...she hoped those never changed.

She heard baby Hunter start to whine in his bedside crib. Cerby thrust his big black head in the door to the bathroom and woofed softly at her.

"I hear him, Cerb. I'm coming."

She took one last look at herself and went into the bedroom to find Cerby peering down at Hunter. She smiled at the dog as she picked the baby up.

"Where would we be without you, Cerb? How would we know when the baby needed something? Or when the baby was crying?" She was teasing the overprotective mutt, but he gazed back, smiling his happy canine smile. Cerberus was special to Sophie and Dave for many reasons, and his love for Hunter was just one more. Since the day they'd brought the baby home from the hospital, Cerby had never been more than a few feet from the newborn's side. Every time Hunter shifted in his sleep at night, Cerby awakened and looked up attentively. *Baby okay?* Every time Hunter coughed or sneezed or made the tiniest whimper, Cerberus would nudge Dave or Sophie to be sure they knew it. *Yes, Cerb, we heard.*

And when Hunter cried, which wasn't often, Cerby would pace and worry until Dave or Sophie had the baby calmed down. It was endearing, if somewhat annoying. Sophie only hoped Cerby relaxed a little before it was time to send Hunter off to school. She smiled imagining the big dog with his nose pressed to the window of Hunter's classroom, keeping watch all day. At least Hunter wouldn't have to worry about bullies...

"Ready, hon?" called Dave from the living room.

"Coming."

Sophie dressed Hunter in a soft blue velour crawler. They were taking a family photo for holiday cards and presents, and Dave had his tripod and digital camera set up and waiting.

"I hope I look okay," Sophie fretted as she came out. Dave had snapped hundreds of photos of her during the pregnancy and after the birth, and she thought she looked like a bloated whale in all of them, although he framed them all and mounted them in every room of the house, blown up to tragic proportions. *Gorgeous*, he sighed over each one. She couldn't nurse Hunter without Dave whipping out the camera. That, at least,

she understood. She loved the photos of Hunter nursing. She felt so motherly and content when she fed him. She loved all the photos, she supposed, just because she adored her baby boy.

Hunter had been born in mid-September, seven pounds even and healthy as a horse. They had originally toyed with the idea of calling him Forest, because of the way he was conceived, but it seemed too kitschy. They settled on Hunter instead. After the birth, Sophie's and Dave's parents had all descended on the household. They got along well, thankfully. Sophie barely had to do anything with all the help around the house, only hold her baby and nurse him when he was hungry. All in all it had been a wonderful experience, but Sophie and Dave both breathed a sigh of relief when the parents finally left.

Now they were settling in to being their own family. Dave, Sophie, Hunter and Cerberus, of course. Sophie and Dave had even resumed their D/s playtimes after the standard six weeks of recuperation—gingerly at first, but they were definitely picking up steam. Only the nipple clamps were verboten, for fear they might interfere with her nursing. Everything else they had played around with the last week.

Dave smiled at Sophie, perhaps remembering their early morning lovemaking, stolen moments before Hunter woke. She smiled back and sat on the sofa where he pointed. She arranged little Hunter on her lap and scooted right or left based on Dave's directions as he focused the camera. He pushed a series of buttons that set off a blinking light and then came to sit at her side. He pulled her close just as the light blinked faster. With a flash, the camera took the photo.

"Oh, Cerby wasn't in that one," said Sophie.

"That was just a test, babes."

Dave stood and checked the camera, chuckling over the photo. "You have to prop Hunter up a little, he's all slouched down."

Sophie rearranged Hunter and Dave beckoned Cerby over to sit between their feet. When he had Cerby where he wanted him he told him to stay, and once again set the timer.

"Okay, here goes."

Pause. Blink, blink, blink, blink. *Click.*

Dave stood up again and checked the picture. "That was a good one. Let's take a couple more, just to be sure."

A couple more turned into twenty, and at twenty, Sophie thought Dave showed admirable restraint. After that, Dave suggested they go for a walk. It was a beautiful day for November, high sixties with a balmy wind. They put Hunter in the stroller and Cerby on a leash. At the door, Dave ran back to slip something into his pocket while Sophie made sure Hunter was bundled up tight.

"It's so nice out, Soph. Don't suffocate him."

"He's a baby. He's not like you and me. They don't regulate their body temperatures as accurately."

"I'll regulate your body temperature," he teased, grabbing her ass. "I'll regulate you 'til you can't take any more regulation."

Sophie giggled. "Yes, I know you will."

They walked to a small park at the edge of the neighborhood, just a cluster of trees and a gazebo next to a pond. Sophie pointed out the Japanese maples to Hunter. They were her favorite. They were vivid red, their branches still full of leaves while the sweet gums and oaks were already shedding. Dave and Sophie crunched yellow, orange and bronze leaves under their feet as they wheeled the stroller to the gazebo and hooked Cerby to a bench. Then they did what they always did in the gazebo, they kissed. And kissed and kissed. God, Sophie could kiss Dave forever and never get tired of it. Her handsome, wonderful man. To her delight, Hunter looked exactly like his father, down to his wispy head of chestnut-colored hair. And she was fairly sure his blue eyes were turning hazel. She pointed it out to Dave, asking if he thought so too. Dave gazed down at Hunter, who blinked back, already half asleep again.

"Hm. You could be right. They do look greener, don't they?"

"It's not really fair," said Sophie, pretending annoyance. "Your hair color, your features and now your eyes. What about me?"

"Tell you what..." Dave kissed her again, running a hand up her leg to the apex between her thighs. "Let's go home and start practicing for another baby. A girl this time, one who looks just like you."

Sophie giggled into his neck, but she couldn't help thinking of her other baby. Maybe she had been a little girl. Would she have looked like Sophie? There was no way to know now, and it didn't matter. Sometimes life took you down a path from which you couldn't go back. But now she had Hunter, and yes, perhaps more babies. But not anytime soon.

"Practice...sure." Sophie smiled. "But no more pregnancy, not for a while, please."

Dave laughed. "Deal. We'll give you a few more weeks before I put away the condoms again."

At her outraged expression, he dug in his pocket with a smile. "Anyway, first things first. We've already had one child out of wedlock."

Sophie's mouth fell open as he took out a box and flipped the top open. "God, I guess I'm supposed to kneel down or something, but that just feels weird."

Sophie laughed as he fell to his knees before her. "This is a reversal for sure."

"I'm already nervous, honey. Don't make it worse."

Sophie's laughter roused Hunter from his catnap, but he drifted right back to sleep. She turned to Dave, smiling as she ran fingers down the side of his face.

"Don't be nervous. Surely you know I'll say yes."

"And surely you knew all along I would ask you this." He took her hand and squeezed it, then kissed her palm. "Sophie, will you marry me? I already feel married to you in my heart. It's been forever for me ever since the day we met, ever since I held you in the dark that first night. Forever and ever and ever..."

His voice broke off, hoarse and emotional. Sophie bit her lip. "You're going to make me cry."

"Not for the first time," he said with a crooked grin.

"And hopefully not the last. Of course I'll marry you. I love you so much. You changed my life, Dave. You made it wonderful, and I want to be with you forever too."

He slipped the simple, elegant solitaire onto her finger, and then Sophie pulled him up from his unfamiliar position at her feet. They stood together, two lovers in the middle of an urban forest, the trees blowing and leaves rustling in the late autumn wind. Cerby snuffled beside them as Hunter shifted in his blankets and sighed.

Sophie thought, *This is the life I was meant to have. This is the path I want to be on. Finally, I'm out of the woods.*

## About the Author

Annabel Joseph is a writer of erotic fetish novels that explore the drama, romance and beauty of power exchange. She especially loves to craft stories that take place in the world of the arts; her characters are often artists, dancers, writers or performers, with all the creative energy that entails. Most of all, she strives to build deep relationships between characters and deliver those moments that make readers laugh or cry.

Annabel loves to hear from her fans via her website or email, and she can also be found on Twitter. Besides writing, Annabel enjoys walking, hiking, dancing, making art, shopping at Anthropologies, playing Rock Band and wearing vampy lipstick.

Annabel welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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