



Sara Brookes

HARDWARE

## **Hardware**

Geeks Need Love Too

Sara Brookes

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This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

## **Blurb**

Women aren't supposed to be geeks. They aren't supposed to fix computer networks with expert ease either, but tell that to Allison—the resident computer guru in the small town of Gatlin Falls, Virginia.

Enthralled by watching her work so effortlessly, Patrick agrees to accompany Allison for a night at the movies so he can learn more about her. Even though he's a perfect gentleman who prides himself on knowing exactly what a woman wants—and when she wants it—he can't keep away from her. One scorching kiss in a dark theater changes everything.

Allison quickly learns Patrick's definition of hardware is vastly different than her own and she allows him guide her on a path where she discovers new heights of passion she's never imagined before. Taken by the calm she feels when she is around him, she is pulled into a world where there is comfort in wearing a pair of cuffs and sanctuary in accepting a collar.

## **Dedication**

To my one and only, who has the courage to chase after her dreams—you are a daily inspiration even at such a young age. May you never, ever read your Momma's books.

## Chapter One

Surrounded by the rich and alluring aroma of freshly brewed coffee, Allison stood five people deep in the line at the coffeehouse. The hands on her watch displayed the fact it was nearly seven o'clock. She wasn't late—yet—but if the barista kept up his snail's pace some serious ass-kissing would need to happen if she actually made it to work.

Being late wouldn't get her in trouble, especially if she brought her boss one of those cranberry scones in the front of the pastry case, but she was rarely ever late. She was normally a go-with-the-flow type, but standing in line for this long definitely put a huge wrinkle in her day. The coffee here certainly made it worth the hassle, and despite the inconvenience, it was also worth the wait.

The coffeehouse had recently gone through an ownership change. Luckily, this was her favorite and wasn't bothered by the few wrinkles in desperate need of ironing out. She knew Nick Connors, the new proprietor of Perfect Shot, would still be cycling through new hires as he tried to find employees who were far more reliable than the previous crew. She'd nearly given up on the place a few months ago when she'd come in one morning to find the store completely out of inventory. No coffee early in the morning led to more than a few disgruntled customers—herself included.

Nick had only been the owner for two weeks and so far, things appeared to be moving along smoothly. Except this morning, of course.

Currently, there was a man with wavy hair behind the register staring blankly at the machine in front of him. His confused expression gave away the fact he was one of the newest employees here. The logo shirt for the store he wore was ill-fitting and had the telling creases of being new. It was as if he'd pulled one quickly from a stack and didn't care what size it was or how new it was either.

Of course, how it did or didn't fit was only a matter of opinion.

To her, the tightness of the shirt fit his defined arms and chest well enough that she realized, late for work or not, she really didn't mind the wait in line. It certainly gave her something interesting to look at while the time ticked away.

To the customer in front of her who kept sighing in exasperation, the view obviously wasn't as attractive. The frustrated man tugged on his windbreaker as he stepped out of line and the small bell over the door chimed softly as he exited the store.

*All the better for me.*

Her gaze fell back on the man behind the counter and she couldn't contain a soft giggle as his lips moved slightly in a string of obscenities. She glanced at the customers in front of her to see if they noticed as well, but they seemed too annoyed and inconvenienced to pay much attention to anything else.

The employee behind the counter brushed back the deep chestnut colored hair that had fallen across his eyes and she was suddenly overcome with the desire to shove her fingers through it just to see if it was as thick as it looked. A quick glance at her watch showed that ten minutes had passed and pulled out her BlackBerry. The keys clacked under the tips of her fingers as she tapped out an apologetic email to her boss.

Never one to be far from his own means of communication, Stephen immediately replied with a confirmation and even a request for a few pastries. Working with other

technology geeks certainly had its advantages—the latest and greatest gadget was always close at hand.

As the plan in her mind solidified further, she gave a bright smile to the customer behind her and stepped from the line. She ignored the curious stares of the other customers and knew that before long, they'd appreciate what she was about to do.

The sky blue apron was soft in her hands as she pulled it off the wall after tucking her oversized messenger bag under the counter to keep it out of the way. The thin strings wrapped her waist twice and she thought about how the new colors chosen to represent the business were comforting and soothing. Something most people looked for as they relaxed with a cup of their favorite java. Of course, the blue and brown color combination was all the rage right now if the colors at the kitchen store she'd been at last week were any indication.

She gathered her hair into a high ponytail and perched one hand on the divider beside the to-go cups. The cashier was still lost in his quiet tirade and hadn't noticed she stood there. The flummoxed man jumped when she lightly tapped on his elbow. The laughter in her chest made her settle a light hand on the counter as she turned to grin at the first customer in line. It was going to be work in order to deter some of their annoyance of being made to wait around, but it couldn't hurt to give it a shot. Customer Service 101 was one of the first things you were taught when you dealt with the general public.

"What can I get for you?"

The relieved customer quickly fired off his coffee order and she clicked open a blue marker lying on the counter beside the register. As the order was scribbled on the side of the cardboard cup, she nodded and smiled at the next customer in line.

"And for you, ma'am?" She listened attentively and took note of the neatly folded newspaper in the woman's hand. One thing the years of barista duty in college had taught her, the customers who remained in the coffeehouse always enjoyed the homey touch of the reusable mugs over the cardboard version. Her hand automatically reached for one of the ceramic cups.

As the milk steamed, she squirted various syrups in each cup and noticed the befuddled man still stared at her with an expression of utter amazement. If he kept this up, no matter how handsome he was, they weren't going to get a whole lot accomplished.

"Are you going to stare at me or charge him for his macchiato with an extra shot?" Her voice was purposefully cheerful, both for the frustrated customers and the barista. Something about his confused expression had made her decide to step in and offer a hand. Besides, the years she'd spent working in the coffeehouse to pay for her tuition to Pacific Tech helped everyone out.

The barista blinked his gorgeously deep blue eyes a few more times. "I'd be more than happy to if the computer would actually do something other than just beep at me."

So that was the problem. She, of all people, knew how temperamental computers could be because she worked with them on a daily basis. Unlike most people, she thrived on the eccentricities of temperamental machinery and always had since childhood.

Faced with the loss of technology, there was only one option. She turned to the line of customers as a steaming hot coffee was placed on the counter. "That'll be three fifty—cash only."

They worked smoothly together for the next half hour and only offended a few customers with the request for cash only. Most people who frequented this type of

upscale coffeehouse would happily pay whatever they could as long as they got their fancy coffee in an equally fancy cup. The method of payment wasn't important and was a testament to the fact the world ran on caffeine.

As Allison set the last cup of coffee—a small decaf of the special house blend for the sweet old woman still in her nightdress—on the counter, she wiped her hands on the now dirty apron. It was time to get down to the business at hand—fixing the register. Her mouth salivated at the prospect as her hands itched to work on some piece of broken mechanical equipment.

There was a reason she was a computer specialist. It was easy to sort through the pieces of the puzzle and put them delicately back into place—it was more than just a hobby. Her boss always joked that she loved her job more than anyone else.

“Want to move out of the way and give me chance to look it over?” She pointed to the equipment he leaned against and nodded in thanks as he moved out of the way.

“Can I get you something to drink?” he asked in expectation.

The frustration in his voice had vanished. Evidently, her little plan to help had worked. To know she'd helped out would put a bright spot on her day.

“*Doppio*, please,” she said absently as she tapped on a few keys to see if it would garner a response from the piece of machinery. While the strong drink wouldn't help her fix the equipment, it was what she'd initially come for and when coffee was involved, she rarely lost her focus.

There was a slight hesitation before he depressed the button on top of the espresso machine to make the double she'd just requested. “You know, that's nearly lethal.”

A piece of her wispy blonde bangs fell into her eyes as she studied the keyboard. “Habit really. Started when I was a senior in college to get me through the all-nighters and I'm addicted now, so it's too late to stop. You know, you should really have your boss look into updating the system he uses. I wouldn't even give my grandmother this antique. It's a good five years behind the curve.” She tapped her fingers impatiently against the equipment while it rebooted. “Slugs move at a faster pace than this.”

“Here you go, one double espresso.” He pointed to the pitch-black liquid in the demitasse cup and smiled. “I'm not responsible for the damage done to your stomach when you drink that.”

Despite the smell of the bold coffee, the blank screen on the small monitor unsettled her. Some sort of welcome screen should have popped up by now. The fact it was still as black as her coffee didn't bode well for the status of the system. Sometimes there was screwed and then just outright fucked. She saw this as the unfortunate latter.

“Sorry to tell you, but this thing is dead.” The espresso was steaming hot and strong. She sighed in appreciation. Perfect Shot had the best coffee and this cup certainly didn't disappoint. “I have to say, you may not have a knack for computers, but you pull a mean *doppio*.”

“Glad to know I can do something right.” The tone of his voice was snide and made her frown.

“Where's your help?”

“Just me this morning. For right now, at least. I told Nick I could handle it for an hour or two, but of course, I didn't expect the register to crap out on me.”

She shrugged. “Computers are finicky beasts. Especially when they're as old as this one is. I know your boss is trying to get his feet under him with just buying this place, but

he really should think about fixing this first. Considering the way this one is acting up, the sooner the better,” she added with a quick glance at the register. “This one is about as useful as a paperweight.”

“Brother,” he clarified when she gave him a confused look. “Nick’s my older brother, not my boss. Patrick Conners, at your service.”

She leaned a hip against the counter as he started to clean the equipment now that the morning rush of customers had abated. The revelation about the relation to Nick certainly explained a lot. The similarities between the two brothers were evident now that she wasn’t rushed for time. Their builds were similar, as was their height, which was a few inches more than her five foot seven. However, she didn’t recall Nick’s hair as dark or glossy as Patrick’s, but she certainly remembered his eyes a lighter blue than what had just looked at her.

As he worked, she could also see those eyes looked shadowed as if he hadn’t slept well for a few days. That look was all too familiar to her. Each time she’d gotten lost on a gaming bender, that smudged darkness had greeted her in the mirror the next morning. While she could usually go a few days with little to no sleep, he didn’t strike her as the gamer type. In fact, he looked like the clean cut, all-American type who routinely ridiculed her all through school because she hung out with the members of the math club instead of getting drunk after the Friday night football game.

Definitely some kind of athlete, she thought. Due to her two older brother’s obsession with sports, it was obvious Patrick wasn’t tall enough for football or built sufficiently for anything more physical. What seemed to be even more curious were the brief flashes of ink under the hem of the blue logo shirt as he moved around the kitchen area.

While Nick’s brother was certainly attractive with his neat haircut, clean-shaven jaw and overall air of normalness, she could tell he was exactly the type of guy who wouldn’t give her the time of day—at least under normal circumstances. Men with his looks wanted a woman on their arm as a showpiece because they believed it would enhance their attraction somehow.

Men never gave her a second glance and she frowned as the last of her espresso left a bitter taste in her mouth. She’d spent too many years with her nose buried in computers. A social life hadn’t been her top priority and it showed as men routinely went for everything she was not.

She didn’t regret her decision now, ten years after school, and situations like this reminded her why so much hard work had been invested in order to get to where she was today. Not only could the Conners brothers find the help they needed with their grand re-opening, she could help them down the line too. Damn, those stupid business classes that had been required for graduation came in handy after all.

She pulled a business card from her back pocket and handed it to Patrick. “Tell Nick to give me a call and I’ll see what I can do to give him a break on some new computer equipment.”

Patrick tapped the edge of the card as he read off the information printed on it. “Allison Stuart, Information Specialist with Bullseye Technologies. So what are you—my fairy godmother?”

Her fingers hooked through the belt loop on her jeans. “Your brother has a good thing here, lots of loyal customers in place—including me. Besides, I’m lazy and I don’t

want to have to go across town just for a good cup of espresso if this place folds.”

“Java Joint is just around the corner.”

“You’re kidding, right?” She tried her best not to be offended by the idea. Yes, the small town had more than its fair share of coffeehouses, but none of them compared to Perfect Shot. “Have you had their coffee? I’d be better off licking the inside of an engine on a Harley.”

His snort was loud enough to turn a few customers’ heads. “So your reasons are entirely selfish then?”

“Absolutely.” As she pulled the apron over her head, it caught in her hair and pulled out the tie she’d used earlier to secure it. During the fight with the two fabrics, her watch chimed the hour. It was a signal that she was now officially late for work. She liked her job and didn’t like to push her limits. “Think you can handle this by yourself now? I really need to get to work.”

A rush of wind blew past her as soon as the words were out of her mouth. She caught a glimpse of a short girl that appeared to be barely out of her teens who rattled off apologies about being late. Patrick’s help had evidently arrived with much flourish.

Just as she bent to retrieve the bag from under the pastry case, she remembered Stephen’s request for a few pastries. A customer now, she move around the counter and pulled out her wallet.

Patrick held up a hand and shook his head. “No way. I won’t have you paying after you just bailed my ass out of trouble. Whatever you want—on the house.”

“I wouldn’t let Nick hear you say that too often.” She pointed to a selection of berry scones, cinnamon rolls and coffee flavored Danishes and waited while Patrick boxed them up. As he ducked down to get a larger box, she dropped a twenty into the tip jar. One thing she wouldn’t do is stiff the brothers during their first full week.

Her fingers brushed over Patrick’s hand as he handed the box to her and she liked the feel of his skin against hers. She couldn’t tell if it was a deliberate gesture on his part, but found she didn’t mind either way. It wasn’t often a guy took the time to flirt with her and even if he forgot about her the second she walked out the door, it didn’t matter. For a few seconds, his touch reminded her that she was very much still a woman despite the adeptness with computers and affinity for video games.

He broke the connection as he turned to give directions to the newly arrived barista. She started to leave, but stopped when he held up a hand. “Did you want another espresso for the road?”

While she didn’t want anything as strong as the first drink, it didn’t mean she couldn’t take him up on the offer. Never turn your back on an excellent cup of coffee—especially when it was free. “Can I just get a large black instead?”

“Easy enough.”

That piping hot cup of gold was clutched in her hand a few minutes later as she stepped out of the coffeehouse. Her whole body felt as if it held a rosy glow and an overall sense of calm washed through her. Try as she might, she couldn’t wipe the smile off her face because of the chance meeting.

From now on, her daily morning cup of coffee also meant an eyeful of man candy as well.

Now that was something to drink to.



## Chapter Two

Patrick fondled the business card he'd slipped into his pocket. He should turn it over to Nick so they could have the computer systems at the coffeehouse repaired and upgraded, but once he did, he'd never see it—and possibly Allison—again. Nick, a chronic case of disorganization, would lose the card at some point and the business would either be left in a lurch with a shitty computer system or another company when things became desperate.

The problem could be avoided by telling Nick he would handle the issue and then make the order with Bullseye. Nick would have one less thing to worry about. Considering everything on his brother's plate, it was more than tempting to jump in and take over.

Nick was the major stakeholder even though the purchase of the coffeehouse had been both of their ideas. Unfortunately, the timing couldn't have been worse. Vivian, Nick's wife of four years, cleaned her things out of the house without explanation two weeks ago. Nick was still trying to come to terms with what happened and Patrick found himself left to handle most of the grand re-opening duties. Luckily, right now was the slowest time of year for the small town where they lived.

Nestled amid the northern edges of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia, Gatlin Falls was a town that thrived on its tourist seasons. Each summer, it was the families on their summer vacation who sought relief from the humidity in the lower elevations. The fall brought couples in search of the mysterious romance of the changing leaves and winter appealed to the thrill-seeking skiers who enjoyed throwing themselves down the side of the mountains.

They'd grown up not far from here, so both of them were familiar with how the pattern of life went in the small town. Spring was actually the slow season for the town and that was why they'd timed their opening for mid-April. It would allow them to work out all the rough spots before the summer tourists started to arrive. The first test of that was earlier this morning when the computer system had crapped out on him.

Allison had thankfully swept in and saved the day like some modern day superhero. He'd been so caught up in the preparations his brother was supposed to handle that they had both forgotten the basic necessity to ensure everything ran smoothly. That included the computer system to make sure it ran without any hitches.

Computers weren't his favorite thing to deal with and left them to those who fully understood them. He was helpless beyond checking his email once in a while or finding directions for a business trip. Growing up, his interest had always been more focused on the baseball field.

As he began to count the inventory in the backroom, his mind wandered to a certain someone who'd swooped in out of nowhere. It was easy to remember the way she'd filled out the boy-cut jeans she'd been wearing. They were baggy around her legs, but tight around her hips and across the rounded curve of her ass. He'd taken more than a few long glances at the way those jeans stretched and pulled as she moved.

He couldn't help it. Everything about her, from the fit of her jeans to the fiery red color at the tips of her sandy blonde hair intrigued him and made him want to get to know

her better. She was obviously intelligent, if the way she'd handled the computer this morning was any indication. Something in his gut told him that computers were the only thing she sought to take charge of so easily. He was familiar enough with what most women wanted when it came to relationships and sex. Those long glances she'd cast his direction were unmistakable.

His imagination ran wild now and he nearly salivated at the picture in his head as she knelt on the floor before him. Expectation shone clear in those brown eyes and he blew out a slow breath to steady himself at the image. Despite his efforts, his cock stirred and pressed painfully against the zipper of his trousers. With a loud curse, he turned and forced his mind back to the inventory. However, the mindless task of counting supplies was too monotonous and that creative mind wandered to places he couldn't control. He couldn't get Allison—and what he wanted to do both with her—out of his mind.

The sheet of paper fluttered to the ground as he released it in frustration. He had just counted the same box of coffee filters three times. It was time to take matters into his own hands. Besides, Nick had enough to worry about. This would simply help ease the burden and, if things went as he intended, everyone would win.

Before he could change his mind, her work number was already entered into his cell phone and he'd stepped out onto the sidewalk in front of the store. The spring sun glowed high in a cloudless blue sky and he tipped his head toward it in appreciation as the phone rang. Birds chirped their sweet mating songs and he thought about how this day just couldn't get any better.

"Bullseye Technologies, Allison Stuart."

He was wrong—it could.

He closed his eyes in appreciation as her voice sounded over the line. The noise of it ran through his veins and enhanced the images he'd conjured earlier. Given his interests with out-of-the-ordinary sex, it was dangerous to let himself think this freely about someone without knowing if they shared the same interests. It forced him to focus on the task at hand. "I hear there's a new coffeehouse in town that has a barista who makes a mean *doppio*."

"Well sure, but their computer system is shit."

"Imagine that—it's exactly why I'm calling. How are you?" This call would be kept casual, no doubt. At least he was determined to keep it that way. The simple question of how her day was going seemed to be the best option. It would mean there was less danger to his libido that way.

"Calm, for now." She snorted lightly and he smiled at the noise of it. "My boss wants me to partition a new drive on the server he had me install a few weeks ago. Of course, he won't listen to me whenever I tell him he has plenty of room for right now and I just realized I'm babbling. Sorry, I do that when I talk on the phone sometimes because I'm more of a face to face sort and shit, shit, shit—I just did it again."

Her fluster was completely charming and his interest in Allison kicked up a few notches. There was more about her that he wanted to know. All in due time. "No need to apologize, it's cute."

Allison cleared her throat. "Which is to say boring. I've got two brothers, Mr. Conners. I know what it means when a girl has been fed the cute line. So what exactly can I do for you?"

His mouth formed a thin line as he hadn't meant it the way it sounded. Her curt

dismissal of the compliment made it seem as if she wasn't someone who received them often. If he had anything to say about that, it wouldn't continue. He desperately wanted to show her that she was much more than just simply cute. "Well, you said the store needed a whole new system because this one was outdated."

"You'll need a significant upgrade at least. Even then there's no guarantee it will help because the system may be too old to handle the size of the data we'd throw at it."

"And here I thought size didn't matter." He regretted the words as soon as they were out of his mouth. The intent had been to keep the tone of the conversation light and friendly and here he made some comment that could easily be construed as anything but. Damn his overactive brain.

Nick would scold him at this point in the conversation because he'd stepped far over the line. As he wondered if he'd said too much, gone too far, the musical sound of her laughter drifted through the phone line and Patrick relaxed.

"Now that's cute. My brain seems to want to be everywhere but where it should be at the moment. Now, Davis is the head of the sales department and he's the one you're going to want to talk to in order to get you hooked up with the equipment."

Disappointment thudded heavily in his gut even though he understood and could sympathize for the inability to concentrate on something. He'd wanted to deal strictly with her in the hope he would get to see her again. He did his best not to let the emotion filter through his voice. "And what's his number?"

"I'm going to transfer you and put a note on the work order that I'll handle the job at the shop personally. It's the least I can do."

He walked back into Perfect Shot ten minutes later with a wide grin in place. The computer equipment was ordered and Davis had assured him the team from Bullseye would begin the installation of the system on Thursday. Since it was Monday, and he was tied up at the shop for the rest of today, it gave him two days to prep.

Two days to hope for something more with Allison. He was actually excited about the prospect of shopping since his version was by far what most people considered abnormal.

When it came to his sex life, normal didn't even enter into the equation.

\* \* \* \*

Allison flipped the light on in her kitchen and scowled at the stack of dirty dishes that had piled up over the last few days. Her cleaning duties had gone lax even though she promised herself—each and every New Year's Eve—she wouldn't.

Resolution blown months ago, the dishes could sit for another night. Instead, she pulled a clean glass down from an overhead shelf and snagged the cordless phone from its cradle to dial her favorite Thai take-out. The plethora of delivery food services in town for tourists was one of the great things about living in a small but busy town.

She ordered more food than intended, but could always eat it cold for breakfast in the morning. Chilled ginger chicken wasn't the breakfast of champions, but it wasn't as if she were the epitome of healthy eating. Her diet consisted of so much junk food it was a wonder she managed to keep her womanly figured. More often than not, she ate out rather than cooked and had no doubt her father—a doctor—would give a stern lecture about healthier eating choices if he ever found out.

But that was the beauty of being a grownup—her life, her choices.

As she replaced the phone in its cradle, her heavy sigh echoed into the emptiness of the small cottage she purchased after arriving in town. How pathetic could one human be? She'd just ordered food that could be eaten right out of the delivery container in order to avoid the dishes. It was even worse that she already planned to eat the leftovers for breakfast the next morning to avoid the need to cook.

There was a soft chime from the computer in the corner, a signal someone wanted to chat. She scooped up her fat orange and gray tabby, Boo, as she bypassed the computer equipment entirely and sat on the couch.

She was supposed to be celebrating because Davis decided to give her most of the commission for the equipment Patrick ordered for the store. Not only would she make money from the install, she would also pull in extra cash for the sale. Given the amount, she suspected Patrick had no clue what he'd ordered. On the other hand, he could have ordered everything top of the line. If that was the case, then he should be admired for his tenacity to jump right in without knowing what he'd gotten himself into.

Davis had invited her, and the rest of the employees in the department, to the bar to celebrate the large sale. However, she hadn't been in the mood to party.

Her mind wandered instead.

Throughout the day, she'd thought about the banter with Patrick, both over the phone and earlier at the coffeehouse. She still couldn't bring herself to believe he had more than a passing interest and attributed the looks he'd given her as merely natural charm. She was a customer at his business after all.

However, she could still admire from afar. In fact, she excelled at the appreciation of a man at a distance. It wasn't as if there were a swarm of suitors to hang on her every word.

Brainy and boring were not something men went for.

Undoubtedly, she'd see quite a bit of the handsome man even after completion of the install because the store was convenient and served some of the best espresso in the immediate vicinity.

At least she possessed excellent visualization skills and it would provide her with exceptional material for months to come. She rolled her eyes to the ceiling, frustrated because it was—sadly—the best prospect for sex in months.

The doorbell rang and she swept Boo to the floor as she dug in her back pocket for some cash. A familiar face greeted her as she opened the door. "Hey, AJ."

The short, blond teenage boy tipped his head and tapped the rim of his tattered UVA baseball hat in greeting. "How's it going, Alley? Hey, I've been meaning to ask you if you ever got past the level on Halo that was giving you some trouble the last time I saw you?"

She gathered her hair back into a ponytail and secured it with a shake of her head. "Actually, no, I didn't. The team I was with at the time had to split and I haven't had time to log back in to try again. Been swamped with work."

He pulled a vivid green business card from his pocket and handed it to her along with the white plastic bag filled with food. "Here's my cousin's screen name, he's a whiz at Halo. Any first person shooter game really. I'll tell him I gave you his name and you two can hook up when you need someone to game with."

"Thanks, I'll give it a shot." She handed him a few bills to cover the tab and the tip. Still disgusted with the state of the kitchen, she settled on the couch once again and dug

into the bag. Her eyes fluttered closed at the scent of the spicy ginger and pulled out a pair of chopsticks to separate them.

She wasn't in the mood to fire up her Xbox, but what other possibility was there? Losing herself in the game world for a while would help her forget how miserably pathetic her life was. The choice to boot up the game system was yet another reason why men didn't beat a path to her door.

Most men didn't like women who worked with computers for a living or even had animated avatars to game with during their down time. It didn't help she was the only female in her department at the office. As one of the few woman in a male dominated industry, it didn't bother her because she knew how to hold her own. It was easy to keep up with the best of them and the fact she'd beaten most of their test scores was her own little personal triumph of genius. One she thought of whenever her male geek friends called or came over just to use the big flat screen television that hung on the wall. It was a damn good thing she was sure of who she was and comfortable with her place in this world or else she might start to feel sorry for herself.

"Bit late for that, isn't it?" Her voice echoed through the empty room. She'd wallowed since walking through the front door a short time ago. The warm glow she'd experienced when she left Perfect Shot this morning had dulled and faded to leave a tarnished cast on the day. The wild mood swing wasn't characteristic for her.

A deep scowl etched a few wrinkles on her forehead as the wireless headset was slipped into place over her ears. The gaming machine flared to life as she tapped the button under the television. She dug into a container as the game booted and chewed silently on a few noodles as she waited.

This was the downside of moving. She ate alone quite a bit, but it beat the suffocation of living so close to her family. The suffocation had gotten so bad, the need to be out on her own, to simply breathe, had been overwhelming.

Despite the family's protest, she'd uprooted her life a few years ago on her thirtieth birthday and packed everything important in her home on Glass Island and high-tailed it to the mountains of Virginia. Occasions like this made her miss the sparkling Atlantic Ocean just off the coast of North Carolina. Especially the early mornings she climbed the Widow's Walk in the dim early morning darkness and watched the explosion of sunrise with a cup of coffee in hand. The small cottage she currently lived in was tucked into the shadows of the Blue Ridge Mountains. While the sunrise here was certainly spectacular, with the slow rise of the glowing ball of fire over the ridges, they paled a little in comparison to the sparkling blue water.

While the island sunrise couldn't compare, there was one distinct thing the island didn't have.

Patrick Connors to serve her coffee.

### Chapter Three

“Think we’re finished up here. When you have some time, I’ll show you the basics.”

Patrick looked at the endless line that stretched away from the counter. For the past week, the three o’clock rush had become a daily occurrence at the coffeehouse. The week had flown by at the speed of light.

Now Friday, news of good coffee and decadent pastries had spread around the small town very quickly. If nothing else, people came by to see what sort of fuss the Conners brothers had made. While he wanted to talk to Allison, he also knew there were customers that needed to be attended to first because they were the priority.

Damn responsibility.

“Can you give me an hour?”

Allison swung a bag over her shoulder and nodded as the completed work order was tucked into her back pocket. “That would be great. Is it all right if I grab a cup of coffee and eat up some of your Wi-Fi while I wait?”

“We have Wi-Fi?” he questioned as he nearly burned his hand on the steam coming from the nozzle.

She stirred a packet of sweetener into her mug of fresh coffee and pointed to the router she’d had Wil mount on the ceiling in the center of the seating area. It was tucked next to an elegantly fluted light fixture and nearly invisible to the untrained eye. “You do now.”

As he watched her make her way to the far corner of the seating area and he continued to make orders for customers, the past few days came to mind. As hard as it had been, he’d let the three person tech team from Bullseye work without interruption. Since Allison was a part of that team, he’d gotten to watch her work in her element.

There had been no mistake, she took pride in everything and it was evident she knew how to do her job. It had been a brilliant decision to hire the company to install the computer system at the store. However, at the same time, it had also been the worst decision of his life.

It had been sheer torture to be in her presence and not learn more about her. He wanted to find out what she did in her free time, what sort of movies she liked, what books she read and even wanted to know how she kissed. More than anything, he wanted to tell her how he wanted to spend an entire day slowly fucking her.

The thought reminded him of the purchase that had been made yesterday. Since he was someone who followed through with plans once implemented, he intended to make use of the items in the slim black box. But that wasn’t going to happen until this rush was taken care of.

The line of customers seemed to never end but he was finally able to join her two hours later than intended. However, it didn’t look as if she minded because her focus was on the small laptop on the table. He wasn’t even sure she noticed he’d finished in the first place.

She bobbed her head a little and that was when he noticed the tiny earbuds in her ears. Though he couldn’t hear the song, he guessed it was something with an upbeat tempo given her head-bobbing movements.

Now that was charming.

Taking a moment to play voyeur, he examined her features up close. It gave him a chance to add details to the picture he held in his mind. There was a small scar over her left eyebrow and wondered what she'd done to earn that particular badge. He also noticed she chewed on her lip when she was deep in thought as well as play with a few strands of hair that had fallen over her shoulder.

For the three days she'd been there, she'd worn polo shirts embroidered with the company logo over the left pocket and khaki cargo pants. He couldn't help the thought that ran through his head about how she would look out of them.

His brain certainly didn't need any more stimulation in that particular area.

Given his reaction to her, he wondered about his sanity. His libido had kicked into overdrive to act as if he'd never had sex before. Then, of course, was the reminder that yes he'd had sex, but he'd never had sex with *her*.

He tapped lightly on the table behind her laptop, but her concentration was focused entirely on whatever captured her attention on the screen. He leaned forward to prop his elbows on the small café table and tapped a finger against the back of her hand.

"Something certainly has your interest."

The table between them jerked beneath his arms as her knee hit the underside in surprise. She winced in pain and slid the small buds from her ears as she blushed.

His mouth went dry at the way she looked. *Oh God, I'm so fucked.*

After he'd cleared his throat in order to push back the sudden stab of arousal, he repeated his statement. A shy grin appeared on her face. "Sorry, I didn't see you sitting there."

Her skin was as soft and silky as he remembered. The move had been to satisfy his curiosity to see if he'd only imagined it, but it had the added effect to gain her attention because he was certain she would have stayed in her own little world. He certainly wouldn't have minded, but he wanted to apologize for making her wait.

"We were busier than I thought. Friday afternoon rush wasn't what I expected it was going to be."

She grinned and something inside him clutched tightly in reaction. "No problem, I was catching up on my emails. How's business been going?"

"Steady since we opened Monday. I'm hoping the trend continues and isn't just because it's opening week."

He scanned the store to see customers hovering over their coffee. The atmosphere was one he and Nick worked toward even though a lot of it was left up to chance. All they could do was serve good coffee and hope the customers would continue to return. So far, they'd been successful and it certainly lightened the stress load that came along with opening a business.

"I've noticed a lot of the same regulars in this week while I've been around. New people, too."

"It's those new people I'd love to make regulars." Regulars were the backbone of any small business and the more of them you had—and could keep happy—the better off it would be in the long run.

The coffeehouse already came with a group of regulars who didn't care who owned the store as long as it was open and served good products. However, he also understood those very same customers would tell their friends and those friends and so on and so

forth. Word of mouth was golden and not just because it was free. The trick was to keep up the momentum once the season changed.

“Most of them will be back.” She shrugged as she leaned back against the chair. “You’ve got a good product and your prices are just slightly less than the other place down the street. Customer service goes a long way and watching how you work, I think you’ve got that in spades.”

“Watching how I work, huh?” His stomach twisted at the thought, even as the idea thrilled him.

Suddenly, she seemed desperate to find somewhere else to look other than him and as far as he could tell, she was embarrassed at her admission. “I just meant how you interact with the customers. You make each one feel special and your entire focus was on them for those few minutes you’re making their coffee. If I lived further away and came here for a cup, I’d be more likely to return again based on that treatment alone.”

The opportunity to tease her was too tempting to resist. “Well damn. Here I thought it was my good looks and come to find out it’s merely my charming personality.”

One of her eyebrows winged up in surprise and a wry smile twisted her mouth as her fingers tapped over the keys of her laptop. She closed it and returned it to the messenger bag at her feet. “Ready to find out what you’re in store for?”

His mouth went as dry as the Sahara Desert—again. He knew she meant the computer system her team just installed, but his mind thought of all the other things that question could mean. He scolded himself to slow down in order not to scare her off and nodded. It was clear she was oblivious to the double entendre. As he watched her pack the rest of her equipment, he decided the process of explaining it in detail to her would be exciting. Tortuously slow and very explicit details.

“Sure.”

Two hours later, he was certain his head would explode.

It was impossible for anyone to keep all of the information straight that Allison dumped on him in such a short period. He’d always considered himself a smart guy, but this experience put a big, ugly dent in that logic. “Wow, I never realized how much went into all of this. It certainly gives me a new appreciation for the desktop computer sitting at home.”

“You’ll get the hang of all this and in no time you’ll be a pro.” She handed him the work order, which he signed with the pen provided and returned both to her.

“Only because I suspect you’ll beat it into me when I keep calling and bugging you for information on how to do something.” He scratched the back of his head and tried not to think about how delightful the idea of calling her sounded. In fact, a simple thank you just wasn’t going to cut it. It didn’t seem like enough for the favor she’d done for him and his brother. Struck by sudden inspiration, he barreled headlong with the decision. “Can I take you to dinner as a thank you?”

There was a lip chew again. Obviously the habit occurred more than just when she was deep in thought. Nervousness perhaps?

“I actually have plans tonight.”

As luck would have it, he didn’t give up easily. “Well, see that’s the odd thing about dinner. I have to eat it again tomorrow night. What about then?”

She hesitated again and Patrick scolded himself for the leap forward when he should have backed off. He’d pushed too hard because there was something he wanted to have.



Her.

Just when the apology was about to trip off his tongue and his hand lifted to wave off his invitation, she surprised him. “Listen, do you like movies?”

Unease crept across her face and intuition told him it wasn’t because of the invitation. She seemed to be afraid he wouldn’t accept. He had news for her, he would have accepted if she’d asked him to walk across the bottom of the Pacific Ocean without scuba gear. “Sure, who doesn’t?”

Her expression relaxed as she shoved her hands into her back pockets. Another nervous gesture? “I have tickets for a film festival this weekend and since my friend bailed on me, I have an extra ticket. Do you want to come with me instead? It starts tonight at nine.”

He glanced at his watch and saw it was nearly eight. How the hell had the time gone by so quickly? “That sounds great actually. I can get Mitchie to close the store for me. I’m not going to give up on dinner though, you should know that.”

“Let’s see if you still say that after we sit through a movie marathon together.”

\* \* \* \*

Allison still asked herself what drove her to invite Patrick to the movie festival as he stepped inside the theater a bit later. It wasn’t out of the ordinary for her to go to the movies with a man, but generally he was one of her gaming buddies. Usually, the entire group bought tickets to attend the weekend long festival together. But various work projects kept everyone else tied up this time and she was left to fend for herself.

The group used Friday nights as the standard gaming night. However, they broke tradition once a month to attend whatever movie marathon session Cooper threw. It was a nice way to show support for his hobby. Tonight would mark the first occasion she would attend with someone she hadn’t pulled an all night gaming session with.

It wasn’t as if she objected to the thought of some sort of all-nighter with Patrick—especially one not of the gaming variety. However, it was also the first time in four years she’d been on anything that could be classified as a date. In her mind, to call it a date was a stretch.

He probably thought he was doing her a favor. To think it was a date was foolish. Still, nothing said a girl couldn’t dream. Or continue to dream.

The past few days of work at Perfect Shot had been stressful, but it wasn’t solely because of the installation job. That could be done blindfolded. No, instead she had been afraid she’d do something stupid in front of him. Being a bit of a klutz, to fall flat on her face at any moment, was always a high probability.

She shook all doubts away because she knew her face would read like an open book and the nervousness would clearly show. It was better to seem completely at ease. Calm, cool and collected—even though she was anything but.

Patrick, who looked comfortable in jeans and black cotton tee under a loose blue shirt, held the door open for her. It was the main entrance to the floor seats in the theater. She shook her head with a sly grin and pointed to the stairs on the far side of the lobby.

The balcony was a favorite part of the monthly film festival. Both she and the rest of her friends agreed, it was technically the best place to sit because of the way sound carried and the view. She secretly loved the experience of sitting so high and completely removed from the rest of the audience. It made her feel transported to another world.

Patrick moved behind her as they carefully made their way up the curve of stairs and she finally acknowledged the fluttering in her stomach. She grabbed on to it and let it spread through her. To dismiss it outright would just make it worse later. The feeling melded with the rush experienced every time she entered the theater. The sensation caused her to close her eyes as her hand wrapped around the cool metal of the oversized handle on the swinging door.

This theater wasn't about coming to see a movie or a date where you both tried to grab popcorn from the same bucket. It was the experience of a few nights of entertainment in one of the towns' oldest and grandest movie complexes. Most people preferred to spend the extra cash and drive to Charlottesville for the big, multi-screen house that boasted a clearer picture and state of the art sound. While that was great for some of Hollywood's newest releases, this type of movie festival deserved so much more.

The theater was smaller, ornate and definitely more intimate.

Patrick let out a low whistle as he stepped up behind her. "Impressive. Even more knowing we're the only ones up here. Is that normal?"

She led him to a row of seats closer to the front and sat down in the center seat. "It is if you know the projectionist. Cooper puts on these festivals once a month, a different theme each time. This month is Hitchcock."

"An impressive storyteller." A line formed between his eyebrows as he frowned and looked around. "But I would think your friend would cut you a better deal on tickets. You're so far removed from the crowd."

"How do you think we got the entire balcony to ourselves?" Friends in high places—if a projection room in a theater could be considered a high place—was certainly an advantage. She would have to remember to thank Cooper the next time they saw each other even though he wouldn't have a clue what she meant. "Crowds have their place, but not right now. Dilutes the sound quality."

Patrick smirked. "Well now, that makes sense. Movie buffs would go for where the sweet spot is in the theater. Place this size, that spot has to be up here in the balcony."

"We try to mix it up once and a while. Move around a little but we usually stay right around here." She shrugged off the light sweater she'd worn to keep away the chilly spring night air and straightened her tank top. Comprehension sunk in and she turned to find him smiling almost expectantly. "Wait a second. You know about the sweet spot?"

His smile widened and her insides melted a little. *Great, as if I wasn't already infatuated enough.*

"My life isn't just about coffee and tea, Allison. I may not be as technologically savvy as you are, but there are a few things I can hold my own with." His voice dropped a bit as he leaned over the padded armrest to poke her lightly on the shoulder. "And just for clarification purposes, I know about quite a few sweet spots."

The theater plunged into darkness as the auditorium lights were cut and the movie began. She was grateful there had been no chance to respond to what he'd just said. There were words to reply even if she'd had the time. Ever since she'd first met him at the coffee house, struggling with the poor equipment, there had been something about him that she found herself drawn to.

For all outward appearances, he was nothing out of the ordinary. Everything about him, from his brown hair to the deep color of his eyes and even the fabulous build, were

all things that would undoubtedly send most women's mouths watering.

It didn't for her though. While it certainly helped, it was the brief flashes of ink hidden under the hem of his sleeves and the few suggestive comments he'd made that told her there was more than met the eye when it came to Patrick Connors. Those were the things she was attracted to. Never let it be said she was normal when it came to what she found attractive about people.

She wanted to get to know him better and learn what it was that made him tick. Maybe learn if there was more to those comments than mere words. It was a normal, healthy reaction for an adult woman, right?

However, a small voice inside her wouldn't stop nagging. It repeated over and over that his comments were meant to be friendly and were nothing different than the ribbings from her friends. She faced that reality long ago when she realized men would more than likely classify her as a friend than as a companion.

The house lights blazed to full as the heavy red curtain slid back over the screen. She'd missed the entire movie and scolded herself for getting that caught up in her own head. As she turned to face Patrick, curious if he enjoyed the show, his gaze was already on hers. Suddenly nervous, she took a sip of the soda she'd bought before he arrived.

The interest in his eyes knocked her for a loop. Men didn't look at her like that—at least sane ones. "They'll have intermission for ten minutes before the next film starts. Gives everyone a chance to stretch and maybe get a refill or two. Empty the bladder, you know."

His head tilted in acknowledgement. "And what are we in for next? Action? Suspense? Horror?"

Hitchcock had produced and directed a number of films, so they could be in for anything. Cooper never played them in the same order twice. Since they'd just finished *North by Northwest*, which could be classified as an action movie, she suspected they were in store for something a little heavier.

"Thriller, I think." She pulled out the slip of paper she'd picked up earlier. "*Strangers on a Train*. Easily one his best movies, in my opinion. Two men sit within the small, confined space of a train and discuss murder. Movies like that would bore most audiences today. They just don't make movies like that anymore."

"May I kiss you?"

"What?" she stuttered, surprised. It was an effort to cover her astonishment. Here she'd gone on about movie audiences today and he'd just ask to kiss her. Who did that?

"I asked for permission to kiss you."

Tension flared in a knot between her eyes and she rubbed absently at it. She'd heard him loud and clear. Part of her rejoiced even as the other part thought it was some kind of joke. "I know. I just—most guys just claim a kiss and worry about the consequences later. Unless things have changed that much since the last time I'd been in a position to worry about this sort of thing."

"So you assume I'm not still worried about the consequences." The expression on his face was unreadable and she was sorry to see him close himself off. If there was ever a time to be open and completely honest, this was it.

"That doesn't make any sense." Unless this really had been a joke.

"It makes perfect sense. What if one kiss isn't enough?"

Her mouth snapped shut, unprepared for that answer. The lights flickered twice as a

signal the movie would start in five minutes and she shifted in the seat. The curtain in the front of the theater blurred in front of her eyes and she scolded herself because nothing came to mind. How was she supposed to respond to something that caught her so off guard?

She wasn't accustomed to it.

The house lights dimmed and her breath quickened as Patrick leaned over to press his lips against the exposed skin of her shoulder. The moment his mouth touched her flesh she felt as if a live wire had been placed in her hand. It was as if she were suddenly alive and wide-awake for the very first time in her life. Her body roared in response and she wondered why she'd never felt this way before.

"You didn't answer me," he whispered tenderly against her skin.

Arousal did a lazy summersault in her gut as the softness of his voice slid through her. Despite his hushed tone, there was need in his voice. She'd heard about it and even dreamed about it a few times but never experienced that kind of need until this very moment. Why shouldn't he kiss her? She couldn't remember the last time she had been kissed. And hell, no one had ever asked to kiss her before.

There could be more to this.

"Yes," she said quietly even as her chest ached from the out of breath feeling that made her heart hammer against her sternum. Nervous energy made her shove sweaty hands between crossed legs in order to prevent the shake that had started when he'd asked.

Patrick emitted a soft moan of approval and she wondered if she'd done something wrong. His gentle fingers tucked under her jaw and his warm palm pushed lightly on her chin in order to turn her face to his. Just as his lips met hers, the theater lights went dark.

They both breathed into their first kiss. She waited for him to angle his mouth over hers and add even more heat. However, he surprised her—yet once more—with only a light kiss. Despite the casualness, she felt the overwhelming heat of arousal that surrounded them both and she was puzzled why he refrained from going further.

Just as she was about to break off the kiss to ask, his other hand slid up under the weight of her hair. Despite the hesitation, she melted into his touch and marveled as they both shifted to face one another. Her knee banged hard into the metal arm between them but pushed away the pain in order to focus on how he made her feel.

The air around them crackled with energy and she opened to him more easily than she would have guessed possible. He seemed to feed off the heat generated from their bodies and there was no way to tell which way was up anymore.

Her body had never felt more responsive and found herself addicted to the way he drew sensations from deep inside her. They were raw and feral things she never knew existed. It wasn't something she thought herself capable of.

His tongue slipped past her open lips and she groaned in response to the feel. Guided along a slow and arduous path that she was unfamiliar with, she felt comforted at the same time.

*How in the world is it possible for him to take me so far away from everything I've known and make me feel so safe at the same time?*

She urged more from him and loved the blaze of embers that kindled inside her. As she started to move into his lap to be closer, he broke away. His hands still cradled her face with a gentle touch. Her eyes studied his, looked for a sign that he regretted their

kiss.

Lit by the movie that played on the tall screen, there was raw lust in his expression and knew immediately why he'd pulled away. If things progressed between them here in the movie theater, they could find themselves in a highly compromising position within seconds.

It was out of character for her and not behavior she engaged in even when she found herself attracted to a man. The problem was she'd never had this reaction before. Nor had there ever been this deep-seated need that taunted her now that her body had a sample of what he could offer. If the kiss was any indication of what he was capable of, she couldn't begin to fathom what it would be like to have sex with him.

She had to have him. The thought scared the hell out of her.

Pulling away, she muttered a feeble excuse about the restroom as she shot to her feet. He said her name as she pushed past, but couldn't make herself stop. Her feet carried her down the staircase at breakneck speed, despite her proclivity for clumsiness.

Once safely in the facilities, she bypassed the stalls entirely and folded herself over one of the sinks. Her lungs burned in her chest as she fought for breath and tried to set herself to rights again.

What the hell was wrong with her?

Her reflection in the mirror caught her eye as she reached for the handle of the cold-water knob. Her hand froze in mid-air as she noticed her lips were red and swollen from Patrick's kiss. Unable to resist, the pad of her thumb slid against the now highly sensitive skin and jumped at the reaction it caused. The slow spread of heat between her legs surged anew and her hands clenched around the rim of the white porcelain sink for balance.

While she was no stranger to arousal and all it entailed, her body had never been this out of control. How in the world could a simple kiss from Patrick cause this sort of reaction? It didn't take a rocket scientist to answer that question. It may have been just a kiss, but there was nothing simple about it.

She could exist on his kisses and be sated for the rest of her life.

Her mind started to form images of how his flesh would feel against hers and tried desperately not think about what it would be like to lie beneath him.

With a strangled cry of failure, she pushed away from the mirror and leaned back against the cool tile of the wall. The chill caused her to shiver and she used it to settle the fire that had ignited inside her.

After a few minutes, she stepped out of the bathroom, only to stop short at the sight of Patrick at the bottom of the balcony stairs. He took the two steps necessary to reach her and her heart rate spiked when he pushed into her personal space.

"I wanted to make sure you were okay."

*Oh, God. Just when I'd had a handle on myself again, he had to go and do something chivalrous.*

If they returned to the theater, they wouldn't watch the movie or any that followed. Good sense also told her she couldn't leave with him either because they would sleep together. The thought of hot, sweaty sex sounded like an excellent prospect. However, common sense told her that giving into her hormones wouldn't be a good idea.

She plastered a fake smile on her face. If she stayed, it would mean her undoing. With incredible timing, her phone rang and she slid it out of her pocket. The number

indicated her mother wanted something and the smile on her face became real. For once, her mother had just given her the perfect out. "My office. They've run into some problems, so I'm going to head over there and see what's going on."

"I can drive you," he offered.

It was a tempting offer, but she couldn't accept. It had nothing to do with him and everything to do with her, but she couldn't tell him that because it sounded like some sort of cliché. "No. Stay and enjoy the movies for a while. I don't know how long this is going to take and I don't want for you to have to sit around and wait for me."

His shoulder lifted in a dismissive shrug. "Isn't Bullseye in the building over in Farpoint Square on the other side of town? It's a bit far for you to walk and it's on my way home. I don't mind, believe me. I'd rather you were safe."

"I appreciate it, but my car is right across the street. She needs a workout anyway since I don't drive her enough." She had no doubt he truly meant that despite the fact this was the safest town she knew. In contrast to his assurance he wanted to see her safely home, the presence of raw lust on his face couldn't be missed. He wanted her and it was frightening how much she wanted him in return. It was better left unacknowledged and exactly the reason she needed to step away for a breather. "So, thank you, but I really have to go."

Like a skittish cat, she turned and pushed her way through the door before she could change her mind. The chilly April air hit her face, but did nothing to curb the heat that burned her cheeks.

## Chapter Four

Two days later, Patrick stood in the back room of Perfect Shot and stared blindly at his cell phone. He was afraid to call Allison for fear he'd scare her off again. Yes, the stunt he'd pulled at the movie theater had been a mistake, but it was one he would gladly make again because he wasn't ashamed of it.

When he'd kissed her, the feel of her lips pressed hot against his and her initial reaction, had absolutely blown his mind. If it was any indication of what they'd be like together in bed, he was a goner. He didn't normally give in so quickly, but had recognized the need to step back and reassess what he'd done.

Interest lost in the Hitchcock movies without her there beside him, he'd left five minutes after in order to give her some space. The walk had cleared his head a little, but not enough and certainly not as much as he wanted. She'd already infected his blood and he found it nearly impossible to stop thinking about her. As he'd neared his loft, he'd detoured to the warehouse he kept on the first level of the building. As it turned out, the choice to go to the room had been a huge mistake. His recent purchases sat on top of the table and he'd spotted them even before the door had slammed shut.

The images of those magnificent pieces of leather were still burned on the back of his eyelids as his thumb stroked over the face of the phone. Some would probably call him crazy about his outlandish obsession with someone he barely knew. Others would say if he did manage to cultivate a relationship with her, she'd leave him in the dark—literally—once she discovered his preferences in the bedroom. It was a risk he wanted to take for her.

That risk made him nervous—a first. Above everything, he didn't want to screw this up.

The cell phone vibrated in his palm and he stared at the screen in shock. There'd be no need to make that phone call because Allison had called him.

"Hello?" he asked, cautious, in case she'd dialed the wrong number.

"Hi." Her voice was subdued and made him swallow the sudden dryness in his mouth. "I wanted to call to apologize for splitting a few nights ago."

He wanted to reassure her it hadn't been an issue and decided to keep the tone of the conversation out of murky waters. There was no way he would allow himself to screw this up again. "You had to work, I understand. Did you get everything done?"

"It took a while, but yes." The line went silent for a few moments before she continued. "How was the rest of the festival? Are you sufficiently burnt out on the genius of Alfred Hitchcock?"

His laughter was light. "I ended up leaving right after you did. It didn't seem right to be there having fun while you had to work."

"Patrick, my work is fun," she said in protest.

The metal shelving unit that held rows of paper coffee cups was his support while he pressed his back against the opposite wall for balance. "Of course, I'd forgotten you're one of those sadistic few who actually enjoy their job."

Her throat cleared and she proceeded to shock the hell out of him. "Listen, I was calling to find out if that invitation for dinner is still open."

Dryness tightened his mouth even more, made it hard to speak. If that was even possible. "Of course. Just name the date and I'm yours."

*Keep it fucking together, Conners. You're going to blow this.*

It was too easy to slip into this skin with her and wondered if this was really such a good idea. He hated to think he'd messed this up because of innuendo laced comments.

Her laughter loosened the knot in his stomach and he relaxed a little. "That's quite an offer. How about just dinner for now and we'll discuss who can be whose over dessert. Are you free tonight?"

If the suddenness of her call stunned him, the speed of her choice to have dinner knocked him flat on his ass. Maybe he hadn't screwed up. "Sure. Shall I pick you up or do you want to just meet at The Copper Nickel?"

"How about we meet there at nine?" she asked without hesitation. "I've got some work to finish up here and that would give me a chance to go home and change."

The blatant choice to meet him there kept a certain amount of distance between them, but it was a decision he agreed with. Anything that would make her feel comfortable. He didn't want a repeat of the movie theater incident again, which was why he suggested The Copper Nickel. The restaurant had a casual family-friendly atmosphere and they wouldn't be alone again like last time. "See you there then."

He disconnected the call and blew out a shaky breath. It amazed him that one woman could cause him to react like a schoolboy in a candy store. He'd never had this reaction to a woman or wanted someone like this. She was something special and he'd been given another chance.

A quick glance at his watch told him he had a few hours before dinner and a business to close. Luckily, the hours passed rapidly and before he realized it, he stepped through the doors of the restaurant shortly before their agreed upon arrival time.

He spotted Allison immediately and was surprised to see her already there. She'd either finished up at work early or intentionally arrived before him. As he made his way to the table, Patrick noticed she'd chosen something other than the usual casual attire he'd grown accustomed to during the installation. While it wasn't formal or anything he would classify as dressy, the casual slacks and cotton shirt suited her. He smirked when he stepped up on the raised dais to their table and saw the pair of well-worn sneakers that peeked out from the hem of her pants.

That smirk spread into a full blown grin as her gaze met his and all the jitteriness on his nerves melted away. He leaned forward and pressed a gentle kiss to her cheek.

*Keep it friendly and light. No rushing.* "Good to see you again."

"And you. How have you been?"

He hated small talk. There was a necessity to it, especially when he considered the amount of it he had to engage in while at the coffeehouse, but he didn't enjoy it. In fact, because he did so much at work, he preferred not to say much when away from the business. For her, however, he'd talk as much as she wanted. "Good. You?"

"Stressed," she said with a strangled laugh.

"Is everything all right?"

"I'd like to apologize again for leaving the other night."

"It was work, I understand."

"It wasn't work," she said with a rush breath. It was as if she'd lose her nerve if she hadn't spoken right then.



His initial suspicion as to why she bolted so quickly was confirmed and scolded himself for acting so rashly. He'd moved too fast at the theater. In for a long night of regret, he gathered his composure and steeled himself. "I should be the one apologizing then because I scared you off when I kissed you."

The waiter appeared then to take their order. Allison played with the napkin in front of her and he watched, amazed, as she seemed to conduct a small war with herself. She leaned forward against the table as the waiter moved away. "Yes. Your kiss petrified me, but not the way you're probably thinking. That's the reason why I wanted to have dinner with you."

"So what way am I thinking?" he asked. Maybe he'd jumped to the wrong conclusion. She licked her lips and took a sip of water from the glass in front of her. If he wasn't mistaken, her fingers shook a little against it.

"That I didn't enjoy it and don't want you to do it again? For some reason, which I've yet been able to explain to myself, I want to know a lot more about you and what you have to offer. I can't stop thinking about the kiss at the theater and how it made me feel."

If he had his way about it, there would be more than just kissing. A swell of triumph speared through him. He hadn't been wrong at all and could tell from her tone, she was unsure of his reaction. It also endeared him to see her filled with nervous energy and shifted in his seat. The approach of this was important because he didn't want to scare her off and chose his words carefully. "I think I'd like that very much, Allison."

The blush he'd already come to love returned to her cheeks and he wanted to say something more that would assuage any trepidation. For once, he drew a blank. There were, of course, things she would need to know. Even things she would need to understand long before they went anywhere near the compromising positions that would inevitably follow more kissing.

The waiter delivered their meals at that moment and Patrick cursed the cook of The Copper Nickel for his efficiency tonight. The conversation he intended to have with her would have to wait because it wasn't on the level of light and casual dinner banter. Instead, he decided to sing her praises for the installation job she'd completed at the coffeehouse.

As the night wore on, he was pleased to see her relax and decided to indulge himself in a piece of chocolate cake in order to draw things out. Now that they knew of a mutual interest, he could relax. He wasn't afraid to expose his sexual desires to her and had passed the point where he worried about what people thought about his out-of-the-ordinary interest.

He wanted to draw out the moment in order to savor it a little more. It was merely a means to extend his pleasure because she was blissfully unaware of it.

That's what made this whole thing so enjoyable.

All good things must eventually come to an end, however. He sipped his after-dinner coffee and stole a glance at her. There was no way to deny the tension on her face and decided it was time to alleviate her fears. "So, are you surprised you enjoyed my kiss?"

Her gaze met his and he watched the anxiety drain from her face. "In fact, I was."

"Is that because you enjoyed it or because I'm a good kisser?" he teased.

Her laughter was light and she sipped her own coffee. "This is where I'm supposed to tell you that you're pretty self assured and full of yourself."

That wasn't an answer to his question. "But?"

"You're right on both counts." His head fell back as he gave a deep laugh. "Shall we leave and go to my house or yours?"

He'd swallowed the coffee in his mouth luckily because otherwise, she would have worn it. "Well, you certainly don't waste any time once you've set your mind to something do you?"

"I've done a little soul searching the past few days and decided I analyze things far too much. While that is certainly a good work ethic, it's not necessarily so when it comes to sex. My body's trying to tell me something and for once, I'm going to listen. I've decided I want something, Patrick, and that something is you."

Her narrowed gaze caused a rush of heat to flood his groin and he covered the uncomfortable press of his cock by shifting in his seat. He reminded himself they needed to slow down a little so he could stick to his own set of carefully constructed rules. "Before we convene to somewhere better suited to both of us, why don't I clarify something." She gave him a curious look but he continued on, determined this time things would not fly off track between them. "I require something from my lovers that makes some people...uncomfortable."

"Like what?"

Her curiosity was an aphrodisiac all its own. Someone could make a fortune if they managed to bottle it. "Let's just say, I have an affinity for a certain amount of restraint."

"Restraint? You mean like handcuffs?" she whispered.

Silver flashed as he played with the piece of silverware the waiter hadn't yet cleared away. *Handcuffs. If only it was that simple.* He sometimes wished it was. Then others moments, he basked in the fact it wasn't. He was quite fond of his particular affinity for leather and never hid it from the woman he decided to share it with. "My tastes go beyond handcuffs, Allison."

It was inevitable for her face to become a riot of emotions. However, she surprised him. "I'm a big girl, Patrick. If you're trying to deliberately scare me off by telling me you're into kinky stuff—it's not working. In fact, it just makes me want to know more."

There was a defiant glint in her steely glare and a signal she meant exactly what she said. He folded his hands on the table as his nerves jumped with anticipation.

*Why the hell am I so anxious about telling her what I like?*

It was as if he were twenty years old again. He pushed away the lingering doubts and plunged in feet first. "Fine. I'll start this conversation by telling you there are ground rules we both have to abide by before this goes any further."

"Why?"

This was always the hardest part for most people. To understand, that for him, it wasn't just about the leather or fancy words. More than jumping each other to fuck until they were both satisfied. It was so much more.

"Trust plays a huge role in what I'm talking about and part of developing the trust is having a conversation such as this before anything physical happens. That way feelings and emotions don't cloud everything. Now, tell me Allison, how much experience do you have with dominant and submissive roles?"

She didn't appear to be taken aback by his question, which he took as a good sign. "About the same as most people who are curious, I think. Had a boyfriend once who used an old plastic clothesline once to tie my wrists to the bedposts of his bed. To be honest, it

wasn't exactly comfortable."

No, it certainly couldn't have been and he cursed the bastard who'd done that to her because it was entirely the wrong way to go about things. Stupid young male hormones tended not to think about the consequences of their actions when sex was involved. Women should be cherished and appreciated, not hog-tied like something that was only useful when the man didn't want to jack off with his hand.

There was one bright spot in her admission. While she said it hadn't been comfortable, she didn't deny that she'd liked it. He saw it as a focal point and latched onto that piece of information. "So you enjoy that sort of thing, being the recipient of something done to them as opposed to initiating the act?"

Allison coughed once and took a drink of water before she spoke again. "If you're asking if I'm aggressive, no. Though it's not as if I've had a whole lot of experience with that sort of thing, either, but that's only because I've always been the best friend instead of the girlfriend. All through high school and college, I kept my head buried in books and computers. Video games too, when I had the time. When my friends, most of who were male, wanted to get together, it was for RPG. Not to take me on a date. To be honest, not much has changed in those years since then. To answer your question, yes. I think I much prefer being the submissive in terms of what you're talking about."

"You know, role playing can be good." His gut tightened at the thought.

She made a noise he thought could be classified as a grunt. "Not when it's for dragons, elves and wizards. Not exactly high on the sexy meter. I was just one of the guys. To be honest, I'm still content with it." Her shoulder lifted in a shrug and for some reason, he got the distinct impression she wasn't being honest—with him or herself.

"Are you really?" he asked quietly.

A rush of breath fluttered the napkin in front of her and Patrick knew he'd struck a chord. "No. But it always sounds better when people ask instead of spouting how sexually frustrated I am. There are only so many times I can use my hand or whatever vibrator I happen to pull out of the drawer that night. A girl can only date her hand for so long. I'm babbling again in addition to spouting off an embarrassing amount of TMI."

Despite the sudden outburst of information, he understood her predicament and sought to reassure ruffled feathers. "It's very informative babbling. You're not afraid of toys and such things. It means you have an open mind about sex. Most people can't say that about themselves. Sure some people pretend about it to the rest of the world but do you think many actually admit to owning or using toys to help get them off? It's highly doubtful."

"Well then you're welcome to do a little informative babbling of your own." Her arms crossed as she sat back in the chair. "What about you? What were you like in high school?"

There was her effort to turn the table on the conversation again and he conceded the point for now. He'd wondered when it would come out since she seemed too strong-willed of a woman to leave it under wraps for long. She deserved to know a little about him other than just his sexual interests. Besides, trading stories about their youth could prove interesting. Not only would it let her know they weren't so different, but would also serve to reassure any lingering concerns she had about spending time with him in a more intimate setting. "Typical jock throughout high school and college."

"Where did you go?"

Where he'd attended college wasn't as important as the fact that he'd done whatever possible in order to be a pro at avoiding responsibility for long stretches of time because he'd been in denial about the new reality. "UVA. Got my business degree there. I blew out my shoulder senior year and took it pretty hard but my mother forced me to stay since I was so close to graduating. Baseball was all I knew up to that point and not being able to play forced me to take a long, very hard look at my life and what I wanted out of it."

"Oh shit, you're *that* Patrick Conners." Her eyes went wide in surprise and her fist banged against the table. The remaining dishes shook in response to the violent motion.

"Every morning when I wake up," he responded with a quiet chuckle. It had been a while since someone had pointed out who he was. Back in school, it hadn't been that unusual of an occurrence. In fact, when he'd still played, he'd done everything he could to make sure everyone knew who he was. Now, because of the injury, he did his best to avoid anyone who might recognize him. They reminded him too vividly of what he'd lost. He'd long since come to terms with the change in his life because it allowed him go into business with his brother in this wonderful town they'd found situated in the mountains.

For the very first time ever, he was actually glad for the injury and the decisions that brought him to this point in his life. Lived any other way, he may not have arrived at that very moment in time and the very gorgeous and entertaining woman sitting across from him.

"Sorry. My brothers are sports nuts. Any sport, any score and they could spout statistics to you as if it just happened. They were fanatical about baseball when we were all still living at home. I heard stories about you. About how you blew out your shoulder during the final game of the—crap on buttered toast—there I go again. I'm sorry. Somehow I seriously doubt you want to relive something like that."

Nervous, she rubbed at the line on her temple, and despite her frustration, he was amused. It wasn't an annoyance from Allison—if fact, he rather liked it. Oddly enough, it gave him a thrill that she knew about him long before he'd met her—even if it was in name only. "I like hearing you talk about me that way."

"So when did you figure out this whole...thing?" Her fingers hit the edge of the water glass as she waved her hand with a flourish and scrambled to catch it before water spilled everywhere.

She righted the glass before shoving a hand through her hair in frustration. The thick fall of her hair tumbled around her shoulders as she pulled out the tie that held it back. His fingers itched to run through it. He could almost feel the texture against his palms as he cradled her head while she sucked him dry. His body shivered in anticipation and the nervous energy in his stomach melted away. It was replaced with lust.

If that was the only reaction she experienced after listening to what he asked of a lover in bed, then he was ahead of the game. A potential lover once spit in his face and called him various names he'd never heard before. Inventive names, but needless to say, that talk hadn't gone well. Nervousness was definitely something he could handle from Allison and decided to soothe her worries. "It's all right. You can call it what it is."

"And that is?"

"BDSM." Her face blanched and he offered a hand across the table. He squeezed in reassurance when she took his hand. "That's an umbrella word, Allison. A catch-all. Your immediate thoughts are probably not even close to the reality."

The waiter returned at that moment with their check and Patrick cursed him silently for his lousy timing. He signed the thin slip of paper with a flourish, then stood and took her hand again. She followed with a nod of reassurance. As soon as they were a block away from the restaurant, he swung around and backed her against the wall of bricks of the old building. He fit his fingers against her chin as he tilted her face up. Comforted by the clear resolve in her eyes, he softened his voice to ensure that she was reassured by what he had to say.

“I’m not going to beat you into submission. In fact, I won’t hit you in any way. I’m not particularly into the whole spanking for punishment or pleasure. Regardless, this isn’t about pain or humiliation. It’s also not about making you feel less about yourself or feeling worthless. I don’t discipline. You’re an adult and perfectly capable of making your own choices. The last thing I want to do is have you feel any amount of animosity toward me because I’ve done something you don’t like.”

“That’s very encouraging.” She chewed her lip again and he desperately wanted to kiss her worries away. He saw her blank look and read it as apprehension. She confirmed it a second later. “But if I don’t know what I do and don’t like?”

Her question sent a hot slash of emotion spiraling through him and before he gave into his desire to kiss her, she needed to know she wasn’t in this alone. “Then it’s a journey we shall take together, if you’ll have me.”

She nodded and rested her hands against his chest. Pleased she didn’t push him away, Patrick held still, allowed her to use him for support. “Since I’m obviously the one on the less experienced side, I should probably be the one asking you if you’ll have me.”

He played a hunch, pushed his hips against hers and was rewarded with her quiet intake of breath. “There should be no question that I want you, Allison. I thought you would have been able to tell from the kiss at the movie theater that I do. But just in case there’s doubt left, allow me to give you small demonstration.”

His mouth claimed hers, hot and passionate. It was a possessive kiss, nothing at all like the one he’d asked for at the theater. He wanted her to realize he intended for her to be his. She gave a soft whimper and the ripple of it traveled through his body. Instantly intoxicated with the sound, he desired more.

But not here and not now.

What he had in mind was too explicit to carry out on the street. While he would never overrule sex in public, right now he didn’t think it would suit either of them.

He tore his mouth from hers and found himself fascinated by the glazed look in her eyes, the tinge of pink on her lips. He was eager to see what other surprises were in store for them.

“Come to my place with me and we’ll find our way together.”

## Chapter Five

Allison had agreed without hesitation and they'd spent the half hour stroll from The Copper Nickel deep in a discussion about their jobs and daily life. As mundane as it sounded, she'd actually learned quite a bit about him. By the time Patrick stopped in front of a large brick building and turned to her, she felt utterly at ease with him. Enough so that she wondered why she'd made a fuss at the movie theater a few nights ago. She'd meant what she'd said to him earlier about the search through her soul.

Relationships had never been a priority for her since puberty and the realization just how good-looking some men were. There had been a small handful of less than meaningful dating experiences in high school and even fewer sexual encounters in college. Certainly nothing that compared to how Patrick had made her feel at the movie festival. It intrigued her enough to call him and accept his dinner invitation in order to find out more about him. To hear about his interests did nothing to deter her despite the inexperience. She had always been open to new possibilities and right now, he was definitely someone she wanted to teach her things that expanded her horizons.

Her attention returned to him and he flashed her with a mischievous grin. "What is this place?"

"It's a warehouse. I share rent payments with a few others." Allison watched as he dug around in the pocket of his pants and pulled out a small ring of keys. "After college, I fell into a habit of buying properties, fixing them up and then selling them off for a profit. Came across this place and I just couldn't let her go. I actually own the whole building outright and my apartment is on the second floor. I charge the three others rent and put it toward upkeep for the entire building. Since I'm the owner though, I named the place Sanctuary."

Lights flickered on as she stepped through the front door. The bare wood in front of her created a long hallway that stretched out to the left. It resembled a typical warehouse, with exposed steel beams overhead and plain gray concrete floor underfoot. Her shoulder pressed against the wall and watched as he slid the ring of keys over a hook next to the front door. "Is Nick one of the other renters?"

"Uh, no," he said with a quiet chuckle. "Nick's not interested in anything that goes on in here."

The bolt on the door slipped into place as he turned the lever to lock the door. A twinge of nervous energy coursed through her at the metallic sound and she ordered the butterflies in her stomach to settle. She was committed now and had been since he'd first mentioned his interests at dinner. While she'd never partaken in anything like he referred to, it didn't mean the thought had never crossed her mind before. Something told her that Patrick would do what he could to ensure they both had an enjoyable time, especially after the way he'd kissed her after dinner.

Around him she felt special and needed to explore how much further those feelings went. The thought of all this excited her and she'd felt a tug deep within her when he talked about dominance, submission and bondage. She'd believed him when he swore he didn't delve in the darker side of the world she knew existed but never stepped in.

She was curious to know just how dark her own desires ran.

“So, Sanctuary? Just what goes on in here?” she teased as he punched in the numbers on the alarm control panel next to the front door.

He turned and slid her hand in the crook of his arm as they walked down the hallway. *So not only does he ask for permission to kiss me, he also walks beside me and holds my hand.*

She had the distinct impression Patrick believed a man should take great care of the woman in his life. It flew in the face of the conversation about restraints and BDSM. At least as far of as her knowledge of the terms went. Realizing he said something, she focused her attention on him.

“Various things happen around here, depending on whose company you’re in. They’re all friends of mine which is how this all got started in the first place. We discovered a mutual interest for things outside of the norm and here we have it.”

Wow. She could never talk about this sort of thing with her friends. He was lucky to have people who kept his confidence, especially in a town with a large population influx every few months. “You know there’s a sex club just outside of town, before you get to Old Man Reeve’s Ranch. Elementals or something. Why couldn’t you just go there?”

“Element Twenty-Six. So named after the element—”

“Iron,” she interrupted with a quiet laugh. Stupid high school chemistry labs. “The twenty-sixth element in the Periodic table. Quite clever for a sex club actually.”

“Very much so. Have you been there?”

His tone changed a little and caused her to think she’d offended him.

“Considering the fact I’ve spent most of my adult life single—no. I have no idea what types of things go on there.” She could take a guess based on the stories she’d heard from the occasional tourist with a computer issue. It was the quiet little secret no one—at least the locals—talked about.

If the town wasn’t as young as it was, the presence of the club wouldn’t be an issue because it wouldn’t exist in the first place. It didn’t sound like the sort of place that catered to the staunch conservative types like her parents. If her parents knew more about the town she lived in, they would do everything they could to persuade her return to Glass Island. She hated to think what they’d say about this warehouse.

Patrick touched a finger to the back of her hand and she took it as a sign of reassurance. “There’s nothing wrong with it by any stretch of the imagination. However, that type of activity is better left to those who prefer to engage in sexual acts with multiple partners or even perhaps like to play voyeur while other people have sex. I, unlike them, prefer one at a time and to keep a private audience.”

A strong surge of emotion ran through her. Without any further encouragement, the sensation swelled and the delicate skin between her legs tingled. “Mr. Connors, we seem to have a lot in common when it comes to sex.”

“Care to find out just how much?” He spun, put himself in front of her as he released his hold on her arm. She couldn’t help but admire the feral heat she saw in his eyes.

While she appreciated the offer, they would both regret giving in so soon. Especially after the build-up that brought them to this point. Anything that didn’t involve what he’d told her earlier would be a serious disappointment and she wasn’t about to have their first time together be anything less. She was interested to know if those images in her head were anywhere close to the reality he’d referred to.

They both needed time, patience and attention at this point.

Those three words weren't ones she'd thought of in reference to BDSM. Maybe it was a stall tactic on her part, but she wanted to know about the unique building. "Give me a tour first. Please," she added when he looked at her curiously.

"Fair enough. As I said, this place is one big warehouse." He released her arm and walked over to the closest wall. "These walls can be erected and rearranged depending on what activities are going on. Right now, all the walls are up and there are four distinctly individual rooms."

Those rooms were arranged so they were tucked into each corner of the large area to leave a walkway up the center in order to access the doors that led into each room. While she was curious about each room, she wondered even more about something else he'd said. "And what sorts of activities happen when all the walls are down?"

His hand skimmed over the nape of her neck and a shiver travelled along her spine. "Anything a person's imagination can conjure up, I suppose. From what I hear, Elena had the whole floor opened up for a party for one of her friends once. Having heard the stories about Elena's parties, I chose that particular weekend to pay a visit to my mother."

"A sex party? Like an orgy?"

"No, Allison. Just a regular party for a friend. A birthday party, I believe. While the vast majority of things that happen here are sexual, sometimes it's simply used for function." He tapped the end of her nose and smiled. "That being said Elena has had an orgy or two in here. She is not opposed to multiple partners at once and quite enjoys the voyeurism aspect of sex. Both watching and being watched if I remember correctly. Beauty of a space like this—highly functional."

"I can see that." With the familiar way he spoke about Elena, she wondered if he'd ever done more than watch. Maybe he'd even participated. It certainly wouldn't surprise her if she took everything she'd heard so far tonight into consideration. His past was his own, however, and not something she was particularly interested in. She only cared about the here and now.

There was a practical application of the arrangement. Not only did it provide a private environment where only those you invited could enter, it was also safe. Once here, there was no worry about someone else forcing their way into whatever scenario was set up for yourself and your companions. She assumed that wasn't the case inside the sex club. This set up allowed the four to keep their living quarters completely removed from their sex lives as all their activity could be confined within these walls.

She thought of the other more practical application of a room this large. "Just think of the servers you could have in here or even set up a massive screen over on that wall—"

"I have other ideas for that wall." His voice was low and the question lay frozen in her throat as she wondered what he meant. She dismissed the thought instantly since it would be much more fun to let him show her.

With a sheepish grin, she shrugged. "Once a geek, always a geek. Sorry."

"I find I'm quite fond of this particular geek." His mouth closed abruptly over hers again. While it wasn't as demanding as their earlier kiss, it still spoke of control and desire. It was clear he meant everything he'd said during their dinner conversation and she found herself utterly enthralled.

He ended the kiss and continued on as if nothing had happened as he told her about the room tucked in the far left corner. "Donovan is the one who uses this place the most as he shares a place with a roommate. It seems easier to find someone who disagrees with your



lifestyle choices than someone who agrees. Needless to say, Donovan's choices aren't ones his roommate condones."

She waited for him to continue, but he gave her a blank look instead. Finally, her curiosity got the better of her. "Okay, I'll bite. Why?"

"Donovan isn't exactly discriminate of his sexual needs. That's not to say he's unsafe or has sex with everything that moves, but he once talked about having multiple partners at the same time."

Now that didn't surprise her. While she was female, a close-knit group of male friends gave her insight into the testosterone-filled psyche. Probably more insight than she wanted, to be honest. If she asked any of her gamer friends what they wanted when they were with a woman—if any of them could actually *find* a girl who wanted to be with them—they'd want their date and her best friend. "Ultimate male fantasy. Several women at once is like some test to see if a guy has the stamina to please them all at once."

He leveled his eyes at her and realized her mistake before the words were out of his mouth. "It was a woman and another man. Donovan's bisexual. Though, if you ask him, he'll tell you he's tri-sexual. He'll try anything once. I'm not scaring you, am I?" he asked suddenly.

She wasn't, but not because she was shocked or disgusted by what she heard. It was because somehow this all felt right to her. That surprised her more than anything. She'd always kept an open mind about how other people conducted their sex lives, but had never realized that openness extended to her own sexuality.

Patrick had confirmed it at dinner earlier, but to hear even more about this world truly made her feel better. "Actually, it's fascinating. You always hear about stuff like this, but to know it's actually happened right here—wow. So, that's Elena and Donovan. Who's the third?"

"That would be Ryan. His tastes run to the extreme and that's his room." He pointed to the door nearby then pushed his hand through his hair and unintentionally mussed it. "I have no idea what's behind the door either, before you ask. I have my suspicions based on living above this place, but I don't know for certain."

Now that sounded like a story to hear. "Suspensions?"

"Considering I hear Donovan or Elena and not Ryan when I know for a fact he's here on a particular night, I suspect Ryan has soundproofed his room. I've always taken it as a good indication of some hardcore interests. Well beyond my realm of knowledge, that's for certain." From the tone of his voice, it may have been something beyond his scope, but he still respected it.

She respected the whole setup as well. Most people hid themselves away from things because they just didn't understand them. These four people, though, had evidently found a way to make it work for each of them. Not everyone was so lucky.

"You said his room was a secret, but you also said all the walls can be taken down." Upon closer inspection, she looked to where the walls met and found the seam. He hadn't kidded around, the damn walls were portable.

"If someone needs anything rearranged, Ryan is the one who handles the setup and take down. That also ensures that he's the only one who knows what's in his room. Privacy is something Ryan believes in wholeheartedly. That's part of the agreement I made with him and don't bother to ask more questions than are needed. There's a reason the four of us have this place and confidentiality is the biggest. Besides, my interests are

far more tuned to my room than the others.”

Since he mentioned his room, it seemed like a perfect time to ask him the question that had been on her mind since he’d pointed out each of the rooms and who owned which one. She extracted herself from his arms and walked over to the one room he hadn’t said anything about. “And your room?”

“Not as exciting as you probably think.”

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The sound of her laughter echoed off the high ceiling and he loved the sound of it.

“Patrick, you’re one fourth of a group of people who rent a warehouse where they’ve built rooms to fulfill their sexual needs—whatever they may be. From the sound of it, they’re pretty varied. Somehow, I think it’s far more interesting than you’re leading me to believe.”

“When you put it that way, I suppose so.” He shook out a single key from his pocket and slid it into the lock. His heart rate spiked and he shook away the sensation he experienced whenever someone came here for the first time. The nervousness amplified even more because of the feelings he struggled with in regards to Allison. As he’d told her about each of the other rooms, he hadn’t thought twice. His room was an entirely different matter.

In this room, he’d be totally exposed.

“You know, I could hook you up with some type of key card device instead of a tumble lock. One good kick and someone would have no problem breaking in. Maybe something to keep in mind, considering how tight-lipped one of your roommates tends to be.”

He swung open the door and shoved the key back into his pocket so he wouldn’t forget it later. “Most women wouldn’t try to sell me a new security lock for an interior door right at this moment.”

A flush of pink tinged her cheeks and her gaze fell to the floor, clearly embarrassed. “Now you understand why I’m single.” She snorted and a stab of anger lanced through him and overtook his apprehension.

His fingers trailed over her shoulder before they wrapped around her upper arm. “Any jerk that broke things off with you because you were simply yourself is a complete ass who deserves to have his balls twisted in a knot and secured there until they fall off. They have no idea what a good thing they let go.”

His mouth took hers as he swung them both into the room and slammed the door shut. She was immediately responsive in his arms and pushed hard against the ridge of the zipper in his jeans. Despite the sudden rush of adrenaline, he reminded himself he wanted to take things a little slower, ease her into this, and reluctantly pulled his mouth away. He wanted to show her the room first before things progressed to a point where neither of them could think clearly. “On the other hand, maybe I should be thanking them for their idiocy.”

He reached to the side and tapped the rocker switch to flip on the lights as he kept an arm around her. The connection was too precious to sever. Soft lights flared to life and he looked around with her as she took it all in. Even after all the years he’d been a part of this agreement, all the time he’d spent here since then, he still marveled at the fact he’d made this space his own. He’d worked long and hard to make sure he, and anyone he chose accompany him through the door, felt as comfortable as if they were in their own

home. The colors were soft and muted and the furnishings were simple and understated. While he'd spared no expense, he'd kept things low-key and sedate.

A wide row of windows along one wall was currently uncovered. With the touch a button, light-blocking curtains would swing into place. He took his privacy very seriously when it came to this space. "This is the only room with windows. One of the perks of being the landlord. I got to force my hand about which area I wanted."

"You made a good choice and totally not what I expected at all."

"What did you expect? A dimly lit dungeon with floggers, ball gags, ropes and whips?"

"As silly as that may sound—yes."

He didn't blame her. Most people had those preconceived notions about what this sort of lifestyle entailed. The St. Andrews cross he'd attached to the wall behind them showed he wasn't entirely opposed to the darker aspects of this and probably just the thing most people thought of when they heard about BDSM. It was the one piece of equipment in the room that stood out as bold and downright sinful.

"Those have their place—for the right person. I'm more apt to mix seduction with my tastes. I will say that there's a certain fascination with tying someone up and it's more than just slapping leather around and ordering someone to do what you want. However, that's always seemed a little one-sided to me because sex is definitely not just about getting each other off." He paused, probably more for dramatic effect than anything else because he wasn't above it from time to time. "That being said, Allison, what gets you off?"

She leaned in, pressed her forehead into his chest. A lot had been dumped on her all at once and now in a world where she obviously faced new territory. He fought the sensation of tightness across his chest as he waited for her to respond.

"Definitely not orgy, multiple partner type stuff. I'd rather be focused on just one person at a time."

A surge of energy revved the thoughts that formed in his mind. It didn't surprise him to hear her preference. It was normal and he preferred the same.

*It's time to find out just how similar our interests really are.*

"How do you feel about leather?"

She hitched against him and he looked down to see her smile as she gestured to her hips. "My ass is so not made to wear it."

It wasn't what he meant, and had to laugh. He'd waited long enough, put off the inevitable, so he caressed her jaw before he stepped to the small box on a table near the door. The delicate silver latch was cold under his fingers as he flipped open the ornately carved box.

Situated in the center of the white silk were the items he'd bought a week ago. He turned after he shut the box and presented his gifts to her with little flourish.

"While I'd like to dispute how I think your ass would look encased in leather, I was thinking more of the wrist area."

## Chapter Six

Allison stared at the circles of leather he offered. Those butterflies in her stomach suddenly increased tenfold and her fingers shook as she reached out a tentative finger to touch the edge of one of the cuffs. The leather was surprisingly warm against her skin. For some reason she'd expected it to be cold to the touch.

Patrick cleared his throat. "You should know I bought these just recently—just a day or so after we first met in fact."

Her eyebrows winged up in surprise and pulled her hand away, unsure if she wanted to touch them any longer. "Some would say that's a bit presumptuous of you."

"Some may, but they aren't the ones standing in front of me right now," he stated firmly.

"No, they certainly aren't." And thank God for that. A sudden thought struck her and she realized it wasn't entirely presumptuous of him. Well, it was, but guessed it was because he was a man who was conscientious of his chosen lover. There was a certain amount of practicality to it—after all, she wouldn't want to wear anything one of his previous lovers had worn.

She immediately wished that statement could be retracted, but to do so now would be foolish. Instead, she decided to use another tactic. "Do you buy a new pair of each of your lovers?" From his softened expression, she'd guessed correctly.

"Yes. I would never ask a current lover to wear something an old lover once wore for me. It trivializes you both. While I may be the Top in the sexual part of the relationship, I refuse to resort to humiliation, just as I said earlier. I refuse to demean anyone for my pleasure. That's not what I find enjoyment in."

Reassured by his words and everything he'd shared with her to this point, this was what she wanted. Not just him, but everything about him. She wanted him to be the one to show her, to experience those things he mentioned. "Looks like we really are on the same page, Patrick," she stated firmly as she held out her wrists to him.

At first, she thought he would refuse her for some reason, but instead tucked one of the cuffs into his palm while he closed the other over her right wrist. Unlike the cheap snap versions from the few trend stores she'd been in, these cuffs had heavy duty silver buckles. These weren't some cheap knock-offs anyone would purchase for a few dollars.

They were the real deal.

The weight of the leather felt different against her bare skin and for some reason, once he buckled the first one in place, a sense of calm washed over her. It was an odd sensation and not something she guessed she would have experienced upon being bound. It wasn't unlike how she'd felt when he'd kissed her on the balcony at the movie theater.

Safe and secure, but completely out of control.

Her initial impression of the wide leather cuffs was that they would feel confining and tight, but the effect was quite the opposite. She watched in fascination as he secured the other cuff around her free wrist. The leather slid through the metal clasp with a soft rasp as it slipped into place. Her mouth went dry as he gave a light pull to make sure it was snug.

He released her hands and she turned them over as she examined the leather that

circled her slim wrists. She was free to move about as she chose because the cuffs weren't connected. However, as she turned both her wrists over, she saw two small D-rings with one-way latches. They appeared to hook together or a chain could be threaded between them to allow the wearer some freedom of movement. Her finger touched one of the rings and she looked at him in expectation.

"Those are known as panic snaps. In addition to other means of communication, they allow the wearer a way out. If things are too intense or someone finds themselves in a dangerous situation, a sharp tug will release the buckle."

Once she was done examining them, he surprised her as he lifted one of her wrists to his lips. He pressed a tender kiss to her open palm and she could feel his lips move against her skin as he spoke. "You have your computers and games," he whispered quietly as he lifted her other hand and pressed another kiss to the delicate skin. "And I have my own version of hardware."

His gaze met hers as he lifted his head. The smile she'd been about to give him faltered. The intensity in his gaze overwhelmed her, but any hesitation vanished as he looked at her with hungry eyes.

She let her arms fall to her side and felt the gentle weight of the bindings as they made her more aware of her body. Anticipation raced through her to touch sensations she'd never experienced before. Her heart raced as he walked a slow circle around her and from his quiet murmurings of approval, she guessed he admired his handiwork. Evidently satisfied, he stopped behind her and simply stood there.

Finally, his chest pressed against her back and her breath quickened as his hard length fit against the curve of her bottom. Even though there was no skin-to-skin contact, she felt the heat build between them. It was a heat so intense she could nearly taste it.

His body shifted and pushed against her harder, causing her eyes to flutter closed as his mouth brushed over the delicate lobe of her ear.

"Does the thought of surrendering wholly and completely to me excite you? Does it frighten you to know that all through dinner, I was thinking about locking these cuffs around your wrists and make you beg?"

A thrill traveled down her spine. She was shocked to discover, even as the unknown stood before her, there wasn't an ounce of fear to be found. Any uncertainty prior to this moment was merely because she hadn't done anything sexual in nature with anyone else for such a long time. If she thought hard about it, really dug down deep, she suspected there was actually a lot more strength inside her than she thought. The cuffs brought it to the surface. This was right and just as it should be.

"No," she said firmly.

"That's surprising because it scares the shit out of me," he murmured.

Shocked, she spun around and looked directly at him. "But you're not the one wearing the cuffs," she stammered.

"Not all cuffs are physical, Allison. I've opened myself up for possible rejection and I'm scared as hell that you're going to walk out of here right now and never look back."

She swallowed carefully, considered what he said. It astounded her to hear his confession. Given his taste of something out of the ordinary, she would have thought he would be more confident about the matter. Her heart jumped, endeared that he was just as vulnerable as she was.

This was what she wanted as well. Two hours ago, if someone had told her she

would be standing in the middle of a half empty warehouse wearing leather cuffs, waiting for someone to tell her what to do next, she wouldn't have believed them. She would have said they were off their rocker and had mixed their fantasy games with reality.

"If I wasn't entirely sure and onboard with you, I would have never continued the conversation during dinner. I may not have a whole lot of experience with this whole thing, but I know my limits."

"Do you?" he asked quietly.

"What does that mean?" Wasn't that why she was here? To learn if her limits were beyond were more than she thought they'd always been?

Patrick tunneled his hands through his hair. "This is about finding your limits or toeing the line of those boundaries as much as it is about finding pleasure for both of us."

She'd expected to hear that. Despite not having his experience with this type of thing, the idea it would be one-sided was preposterous to her. If it was, people still wouldn't choose to partake in this sort of activity willingly time and time again. "Limits I assume both partners put in place long before those lines they've agreed upon are approached. Given that, I would assume most of the ground rules we've covered are vital."

"Yes, they are essential." He nodded and let his hands fall slowly to his sides to mirror her position. "As is a safe word."

That was something she was familiar with only because she'd heard the term before. "Do I get to choose?"

"Of course."

Her hands lifted so they settled lightly on the center of his chest. The metal buckles of the cuffs clinked together and his heart leapt hard against her palm. As she felt it, she realized he was genuinely nervous this moment would end right now. It didn't shatter the image she had built up in her mind on how this sort of thing was supposed to progress. His nervous energy added a new facet to this experience for her. This was a lifestyle he chose willingly and despite his outward show of confidence, he was truly worried about what she thought.

It wasn't because he was afraid of not getting what he wanted. Instead, he was worried that she wouldn't get what *she* wanted out of this.

Allison had to admit, there was a fire burning that spread through her that wouldn't be ignored. Though her experience was somewhat limited, she was versed enough to gauge her body's reaction. Her blood pulsed with a life of its own and she wasn't about to walk away even though she didn't understand everything about his world. If she didn't try at least once, how would she know if she found pleasure in it?

"Let's find those limits," she said firmly, leaving no room for misinterpretation.

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Patrick nodded, crossed the room and flipped off all but one or two lights. Allison stood in a circle of light and he was pleased that his intent to make this only about her was successful. "What's the safe word?"

"Unicorn."

He smothered a chuckle because it wouldn't be very authoritative to show amusement right now. He had no idea why she chose that particular word, but the reason ultimately didn't matter. It had been chosen for a reason and it wasn't his job to question. At the moment, his task to take her on a journey she enjoyed so she wouldn't have to use

the word. He hadn't had a lover use their safe word yet and he wasn't about to start now.

His body urged him to take the few steps forward to be near her. Separated from her was the last thing he wanted, but there was little choice in the matter. If he stayed nearby while he gave the first command, everything he planned would fall apart. "Take off your clothes."

She stripped to her bra and panties in the space of a few nervous breaths and he stepped forward, halting her further. Despite his impeccable control, he had to touch her. Her eyes shone as his finger trailed over the curve of her breasts.

Her breath quickened under his touch and his finger dipped below the line of her bra. His nail touched the edge of her nipple and her breath hitched in response. That was just how he liked things. He circled around her again, stopped behind her.

*My God, she has no idea how incredibly gorgeous she is.*

"Continue," he said in a firm voice and stepped back to admire the graceful slope of her back as she removed her bra and panties. The scraps of fabric fell to the floor with minimal sound and he indulged himself by admiring her from this vantage point.

Her hands moved to cover her nudity and he fought against the frown that threatened to pull down the corners of his mouth. Once he circled around in front of her, those hands would block his view. *Unacceptable.* "Put your hands at your sides and keep them there until I say otherwise."

She did as instructed and he admired the picture she made standing there, wearing only the leather cuffs. She was gorgeous before, but now she was downright stunning.

He reached forward to lock the cuffs together and discovered a surprise he would have never expected of her.

A tattoo.

The reason for her safe word now made sense. His fingers ached to reach out and glide over the ink, but he resisted for the moment based on his own rules.

Centered between her shoulder blades was a unicorn. Not just any unicorn either. An origami unicorn, done only in shades of gray like a charcoal drawing, the paper folds seemed delicate and vividly life-like. The piece was phenomenal and whomever she'd gone to have it done was certainly an expert in their field. He was certain it meant something, but at this point he didn't care. The sight of it gracing her body gave him new energy. He hadn't expected to find ink on her skin.

She probably wasn't aware of the fact that with a simple glimpse he'd learned there was a darker side to her. The presence of the intricate artwork opened a door he originally thought he'd have to pry open. Not that he minded, but the ease at which she would succumb to him made things all that much easier. The thought sent him soaring and the apprehension he'd experienced since dinner melted away.

However, there was something he needed to say first before they continued. "Just so there aren't any questions or doubts in your mind, I want you to know something about those limits. Yes, it's about finding them, but it's also about exceeding them until all that is left is pure, unrestrained pleasure. There are two types of limits—hard and soft.

"For now, until you and I both know a little more about each other and what we each like, we'll stick to a soft limit. A few orders and nothing more than these cuffs, all right?" He waited a few beats before continuing. "Now that we've settled on that—get on your knees."

He kept his tone firm and noticed she only gave a slight hesitation before she

lowered herself to her knees. Satisfied with her position, he moved away to lower himself into his favored chair several feet away.

This room had always been about indulgences and the chair was certainly no exception. That extravagance was why he kept the piece of furniture down here instead of up in his loft. The color didn't match anything else in the room, aside from the sunny yellow throw pillows of the same shade on the couch across the room. It also didn't fit his lifestyle upstairs and wasn't even comfortable—at least for extended periods. It wasn't meant as a lazy Sunday morning chair to enjoy coffee and the paper.

As he sat in the chair, he studied her form as she knelt. His usual practice was to move on from the given command and tell his partner what else he expected. But something about Allison and the way she currently looked made him want to simply stare and drink all of her in. Based on her inexperience, she had no idea how extraordinary she looked as she knelt before him so submissively.

It was a picture to treasure and he wanted to pull her in front of a mirror to show her how she looked. But he was selfish and didn't want her to move. It would ruin the moment and he enjoyed this too damn much.

Instead, he watched, took in the slope of her collarbone and the elegant dip of her shoulder. Even the draping line of her arms as they pulled gently behind her. He'd not said anything, but her head was bowed a bit so her gaze was on the floor. She probably wasn't aware how easily she'd slipped into this role and he'd be sure to point it out later. Done now, it would draw her out of the moment and he wanted her deeper.

His gaze traveled down further, admired the slow sweeping curve of her waist and hip. Even with the light that shone down from overhead, there was still a shadowed area at the junction of her thighs. As he felt himself grow harder in response to what lay there, he realized he'd kept both of them waiting long enough. Most off all, he wanted his mouth pressed against her skin to see if the rest of her tasted as sweet as her kiss.

"Come here and stand in front of me," he said with a stern tone to his voice and was pleased when she immediately moved. She stumbled as she tried to push herself up with just her legs and he surged out of the chair in an effort to catch her. She righted herself without his help and compensated for the misstep, but not without the telling color of embarrassment in her cheeks. He settled back in the chair and watched as she took a few steady breaths before she came to stand in front of him.

"Are you all right?" he asked with genuine concern. It was a break in the atmosphere he created for her, however, he felt they both needed the reassurance.

She nodded and the tint on her cheeks faded a little. "Yes. I'm fine, just clumsy."

"Good." He reached out, trailed one finger across her abdomen, pleased to hear her soft intake of breath. "I don't want you to hurt yourself."

His usual method of operation would be to slow down even more now that she was near and explore the expanse of skin spread out before him. But again, he couldn't resist breaking some of his rules when it came to her.

He leaned forward to press his lips against her heated skin and allowed himself to trail a damp line under her belly button. Her breath whistled quietly between her lips and he was pleased at some of her unsteadiness. If she was completely confident with all of this, it would mean she hadn't been truthful.

"Spread your legs and put your right foot on the arm of the chair. I want to taste you." His hand closed around her ankle as she lifted her foot and he helped guide it in



place. With her legs open like this, her scent enveloped him and he groaned quietly in satisfaction because she was completely oblivious to the fact she slowly drove him mad.

The aroma of her arousal washed over him and he inhaled the heavy musk scent as he trailed a line of openmouthed kisses over her inner thigh. He felt her muscles tremble under his touch. His fingers parted the scorching hot flesh between her legs and his tongue slowly rasped over the bundle of nerves he found. Without warning, her knee buckled and he immediately shifted his hands to take her entire weight in his arms in order to hold her steady.

She whimpered quietly.

“Hush,” he calmly ordered as he glanced up to her face and saw that ever present gnaw on her lip. Her gaze met his and despite her fumble, he could see the expectation in her expression. “I’m going to touch you now. I have to know what you feel like.”

One finger, lubricated by her juices, slipped easily inside. While it was nice to know she was this excited, he had news for her—he’d just gotten warmed up.

Since she’d taken his finger so easily, he slid another inside, felt her body shiver in response. He guessed she could comfortably take another, but decided against it for now. Two would do nicely in order to bring her to the first orgasm.

His fingers started to withdraw and her hips moved slightly as if she didn’t want him to leave her. He would stick to the plan this time and just before his fingers were completely withdrawn, he slid them back inside with exact precision.

She broke eye contact and let her head fall back as she gave a soft sigh. Her hips moved again as they reached for him. Caught up in the moment, and forgetful of his promise to himself, he moved his fingers with steady, sure strokes. Her body fell into the same pattern and her voice filled in the quiet space around them.

The sound struck a chord with him. It was unexpected after he’d given her the order to remain quiet. He found it odd that he wasn’t bothered by it. Normally, he would have issued his partner a stern warning or even walked away completely as a form of punishment. With Allison, however, it added a new facet to the moment.

“Louder,” he demanded suddenly. “I want to hear you.” His body grew heavy with arousal as the pitch of her voice altered and wrapped around him. His cock pressed painfully against the ridge of his jeans. Instead of easing the pain, he drew on it, used it to keep his focus entirely on her.

Each time his fingers slid into her completely, he curled the tips of his fingers forward. After only a few times, he garnered a strangled moan from her. He backed off a bit to alternate the touch and felt her muscles tighten around his fingers in response.

She was close. But close wasn’t enough. He wanted her to tumble helplessly out of control and be his without question. Her pelvis ground against his fingers and he pushed hard into her, all the way to his knuckles. The pads of his fingers stroked against the sensitive spot inside her and was rewarded with a keening cry as her entire body went rigid.

While her body shook, he removed his fingers and surged upward to undo the buttons on his jeans. One hand worked at the waistband while the other snaked around her waist. He toed off his shoes and stepped out of his pants in one smooth move.

He pulled her body close against his and hungrily claimed her mouth.

She melted into him and allowed him to pull her along until the backs of his thighs contacted with the bed. His fingers found the clasp that locked the cuffs together and

released it as he pulled her down to the bed with him.

Her eyes snapped into focus in reaction to the sound and her post-orgasm euphoria was over for the moment. That would only last as long as he allowed it. He smiled at her questioning gaze.

“You didn’t expect me to keep them latched together the entire time did you?” He pointed to the slatted metal headboard above his head and the D-rings welded to two of the spindles. “How else would I lock you to the bed and order you to ride me?”

The clarity on her face disappeared entirely as each ring was snapped into place around the loops of solid metal. He tugged against them in turn and trailed his fingers along her arms in order to luxuriate in the feel of her skin against his.

One hand snaked between them as he reached over to extract a condom from the wooden box he kept on the nightstand. The foil crinkled between his fingers in his rush to open the package. As he lifted it to tear the stubborn square with his teeth, he caught a glimpse of her face. Her brown eyes were wide with apprehension.

“I’m not going to do anything to harm you. I thought we’d already made that clear and if what just happened—”

“It’s not that. I don’t normally...er.”

Understanding dawned and he fought back a chuckle. “Vocalize when you come?” The blush on her skin deepened, spread out further and heated the places where their skin made contact. It was a confirmation that he’d been correct. “Then I take it as a personal challenge, to find out how loud you can really be.” When her eyes took on a skeptical shadowing, he reached out, grazed a finger under her chin. “You’re safe here, Allison. I find the sound you make when you come undone quite enjoyable. I intend to hear more of it.” His hips pressed up between her spread legs as a show of faith.

Brown eyes went wide in surprise and her blush spread further. Only this time, it wasn’t from embarrassment. Interest caught, he lowered his hand to move between them and levered her up out of the way so he could roll the condom down over his rigid cock.

Precaution in place, he lowered her into position, but held her body in place so that the tip of his erection nudged her entrance. “Now. Ride me,” he said with firm authority behind his words.

Without further instruction, she sank onto him in one hard movement. His eyes nearly rolled back in his head as he slid into that tight, wet heat of hers for the very first time. Prepared to give her the time she needed to adjust, he was surprised when she shifted up and plunged down again. Hands still secured to the metal rings, she used the headboard as leverage and undulated her hips against his. She was certainly no novice at this and he thanked the stars for this moment with her.

Her movements quickly became hurried and frantic as she became caught up in the moment. It was a sign she’d finally given herself over and had done so without apology. He was thrilled with the prospect of awakening something inside her that he would enjoy exploring and discover just how much she could endure. How much they both could. It was inevitable as he was already under her spell.

She was under his skin, a deep craving he couldn’t ignore. The taste he’d sampled of her wasn’t enough. He needed more. Needed everything she had to give.

Muscles clenched tightly around him, a signal the moment was about to come to a boiling point. “Give me another one. I want to feel you lose control while I’m buried inside you.” That streaked blonde hair fell softly around her face as she bent her head. It

skimmed across his chest, tickled tight muscles. Leather creaked over his head, her hands white as she clenched them.

It was a clear indication of the intense strain as she fought to maintain some evidence of control. “Give it to me now, Allison. Share it with me, show me.”

She jerked in response as something inside her released. The high-pitched sound of her voice filled him as she came, her body tight as her muscles rippled around him, milking.

The sensation swept through his body. It was unavoidable, despite the fact he wanted to hold back and wait for her to finish. He was going to come—and come hard. His hands clamped low on her hips and held her in place, driving up into her with a roar that reflected his own loss of control.

Without words, she pulled him along with her.

## Chapter Seven

Patrick felt Allison stir on the bed and skimmed his hand down the side of her torso as she stretched. He loved to have this much of her skin exposed. It was a feast for his eyes and he couldn't get enough. "Do you have any plans for the day?"

She groaned softly and buried her face in the pillow. The sheet slid around her as she shifted and exposed all but one leg for him to stare at. In fact, he was fairly certain he'd start to drool in the next few seconds, especially if that sheet drifted down any further. His fingers itched to touch all her gorgeous skin even though he'd stroked it just hours ago.

Just as he was about to pull away, he realized there was absolutely no reason not to indulge himself. She flinched in response when he lightly touched the nape of her neck. As his fingers followed the line of her spine, she relaxed completely.

He stirred against her hip as his fingers traced the graceful swell of her ass. There was a muffled groan from the pillow and she pushed against his hand as he scraped his fingernails over her skin. Unless he read this completely wrong, she wanted a harder touch.

As he filed that information away for later, he pushed up, pressed his lips to her lower back. More than anything, he wanted to continue, discover what else she liked. But the opportunity to tease her had been too tempting, so he pulled away and repeated the question.

"Bastard," she swore quietly as she shifted to face him. "You did that on purpose."

"You're damn right I did."

She scowled at him, but there was no heat behind the expression. "I'm off today so that means I have a few errands to run. You're welcome to join me. They're nothing overly exciting and come to think about it you'll probably be bored out of your mind."

"If you're going to geek out at some computer store, I may take a pass. I wouldn't think of trying to compete with something like that." His fingers mapped a slow path across her abdomen now that she lay on her back and a surge of pleasure spiked when she sighed softly in response. "Or we could stay in bed. Nick's covering the store for the day."

There was a loud groan of protest. "I really have to get some things done today."

"Then we'll run your errands and a few of my own, then come back here. I have the warehouse for the rest of the weekend." She nodded in agreement and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Patrick reached out and lightly pinched her upper thigh.

She used the edge of the bed for balance as she caught herself. Her mouth opened in protest, but something else caught her attention instead. Her fingers sunk into the mattress and it gave under her hands as she pushed down. "Why is the bed so high?"

He waited until her gaze lifted to his because he wanted to make certain he had her full attention. "Would you like for me to show you?"

As she caught the meaning, it was delightful to watch her expression change. "Oh. Wow. That's nice."

"Then it's definitely something we'll have to explore—at a later time unfortunately because I have some things that need to be taken care of today as well. However, there is

motivation in knowing the faster we get our errands done, the quicker we can return here.” He saw a quick flash of her artwork as she moved away to retrieve her discarded clothing. There was something he’d wanted to ask her since last night. “When did you get your ink?”

“Got it when I turned twenty-five.” She finger-combed her hair into submission and tugged a shirt over her head. “My brother’s best friend did it for me. Yours?”

He glanced at the brightly colored stylized phoenix on his arm just below his shoulder. “Right after my hopes for a career in baseball died. To remind myself not everything is permanent.” It was ironic when you thought about it—a permanent reminder marked on his arm about how life was only temporary, but that was rather the point.

“That’s a bit philosophical of you, Patrick.” She winked as she tugged on her pants and crossed the room to settle at the foot of the bed. As he shifted to sit, she reached out to glide her hand over his bicep and the intricate artwork. “It suits you. I like it.”

“Thank you,” he pushed a hand under her shirt to skim his fingers over her back where the unicorn was. “And yours? Does it have some deep, thought provoking meaning?”

“I thought you would have figured it out. The unicorn is a mythical creature. It isn’t supposed to exist. Just like me. You know the whole geek girl mystique.” She shrugged. “It’s also from one of my favorite movies. *Blade Runner*, in case you were wondering. Gaff left an origami unicorn for Deckard as some sort of symbol about...uh, never mind. Shit. I’m babbling again and I don’t need to do anything to further my case about being some sort of anomaly.”

“Well, you are certainly one of kind.” He brushed away the hand she’d lifted to her forehead and pressed his lips to hers. “It’s striking, just like you are.” He groaned in appreciation when her mouth pressed to his.

He had to get some errands of his own done, but she nearly derailed those plans. The thought of securing her to the binding cross on the other side of the room spun in his mind even as they kissed. It was vital they come up for air to ensure their heads remained clear. It seemed especially true after last night because he was certain he would never get enough of her.

As much as he hated to, he had to stop her. When she crawled into his lap and ground against him, his mind went blank. The buzz of need started to drown out coherent thought and he couldn’t afford that right now. “Come on, you can tell me things that make me feel like a dumbass while I think about how you’ll look later bent over for me.”

He left her at the warehouse while he went upstairs to shower and change, then drove her to her cottage so she could do the same. Then there was her long list of places to go despite the fact they lived in a small town. Main Street was relatively quiet for a weekday and before he knew it, they pulled up to the last errand on her list.

He gave a quiet hoot of laughter as he put the car in park. This store was certainly somewhere he never thought he’d step inside as an adult unless he had a child in tow.

The smell of ink and aged paper hit Patrick full force as he followed Allison into the single comic book store in Gatlin Falls. He tried to take it all in at once but surrounded by so many vivid colors, it made him feel dizzy. Pop art and culture slapped him in the face and he felt like a twelve year old again.

Summer days were stretched out before him and the cash he’d earned from mowing

lawns burned a hole in his pocket. He remembered spending countless hours at the drug store spinning the carousel rack to peruse through the new releases for the week.

This, however, was somewhat different.

Allison jutted her chin at the rail-thin teenager who stood behind the counter and wore a shirt that advertised the fact that Han shot first. "Hey, Edgar."

"Missed you last week, Al."

"I've been working on an important client's computer network. You should check out Perfect Shot the next time you need a buzz." Patrick met her gaze and she winked before she turned back to the clerk. "Have my haul for the past few weeks?"

Patrick hadn't missed the way the cashier shortened her name despite the fact she stood there in a short olive green skirt and slim fit shirt that accented her hourglass shape. Dressed this way and despite those shabby sneakers she wore with everything, she was unmistakably female. It did give him some insight on what she'd meant about being counted as one of the guys.

He suspected whenever she was normally here, the males were more interested in their hideously ill-proportioned cartoon women than by the living breathing female that stood right before them. They had carelessly assimilated her as one of their own with utter disregard for her feelings. While it was good for him, it was bad for her because it stuck her in a vicious cycle that led her to believe she wasn't worth more.

The cashier reappeared and slid a plain brown paper bag on the counter before Allison. She pulled it into her arms with a smile. "Thanks, I'll stick what I don't want back up on the shelf." She wagged a finger and gestured for Patrick to follow her across the store. "Want to come with me?"

She led him through a sheer curtained covered archway that opened up to another room where even more comic books were tucked into plastic sleeves and filed in tall, narrow boxes. The musty smell of aging paper was even more prevalent here and he decided this was the equivalent of some sort of geek Mecca.

He watched, enthralled, as she set the bag down on a high table to their left and slid a stack of slim glossy comic books out of the bag. Each one was handled delicately, as if it were a precious object that needed to be held with care. He didn't see anything in the stack of books he recognized, but since he hadn't seen or touched a comic book since childhood, that wasn't especially surprising. One or two titles he did recognize and they seemed out of place with the rest of her selections. The combination of wildly outfitted superheroes next to gory, horrific looking characters was an odd mix.

He was about to ask her about the attraction to each when his gaze fell on her face, the words caught in his throat, and he was struck speechless by the look of sheer joy. Her chocolate colored eyes were bright and a tinge of pink darkened her cheeks.

She'd looked the very same way last night when he'd brought her screaming over the edge.

Each book was carefully scanned as she held it with her fingertips and he watched in fascination. This was so much more than a hobby for her. It was a very serious and deep unshakable passion.

Arousal pooled in his groin as he watched and when it flourished without any encouragement, he realized he couldn't wait until later to have her. He scanned the room and noted they were the only people in the store aside from the clerk. The small alcove they stood in only had a single entrance and if he angled just right, he'd be able to see if

anyone approached.

He maneuvered himself behind Allison as she continued to study the books in front of her. He pushed the hem of her skirt to the side and she jolted in response to his touch. "I'm going to have you now." His breath blew hot past his lips and her body shivered against his.

"Okay, let me get—"

"It wasn't a request." Patrick lowered his voice, his stern tone unmistakable. "I'm going to fuck you right here and right now."

\*

Allison let herself be pushed into the corner of the room and her body sang in response to the demands Patrick issued with quiet words.

*What is it about this man that makes me want to melt into a puddle?*

She'd never felt this way before and certainly never expected to have him react this way to her. Never mind the fact he was someone who felt as if there was nothing wrong with sex in the side room of a comic book store she frequented almost weekly.

As her back hit the wall, he pushed her skirt up and lifted her legs in one smooth motion. His fingers scraped through the heat between her legs as he pushed her underwear to the side and suddenly she didn't care where they were. She only knew she needed him even though her body should have been sated from the previous evening. He'd already left quite an impression on her and she already missed the weight of the cuffs around her wrists.

His movement was frantic and hurried, nothing at all like the smooth grace he'd exhibited last night. That had been about seduction and enjoyment as they'd learned each other's bodies after their initial coupling. This was pure, unadulterated need and about satisfying it as quickly as possible. She fed on it and loved the flood of desire it created through her veins. It was wonderful to discover, like him, she couldn't wait.

His hand moved away from her hips and she heard the familiar crinkle of a condom wrapper. Her lips curved against his. "Ever the prepared one, aren't you?"

"You bet your ass I am." His voice was low and so strained the words nearly came out as a growl.

The sound of the emotion in his voice sent a thrill through her. "Why Mr. Connors, I didn't think my ass was up as an offer."

He rolled the thin sheath on and she watched as his eyes shut in reaction. His head fell against her shoulder and as a quiet shudder passed through him she realized he was precariously close to losing it even more so than he already had. While she'd enjoyed their time together at the warehouse the previous night, this was new and invigorating.

Seizing the opportunity, she snaked her hand between their bodies, closed it tightly around him. His head snapped up in surprise and she could see the intensity in his eyes grow. She moved her hand to guide him to the heat between her legs and his breath hissed out as he pushed his hips forward to slide inside her.

The chime of the front door sounded through the store, but he didn't let it deter him. She bit her lip in order to not make any noise as he moved. It was a choice that became remarkably hard to maintain as he pushed fully forward.

His voice was soft and low in her ear, a sign he possessed far more control than she did despite his urgency. "I want to keep you at the warehouse, naked. Ready for me at any time. To do my bidding, whatever I say. I want to fill you, worship you for the

gorgeous creature you are.”

With his words, her body soared beyond her control. There were quiet voices coming from the other room as some customer discussed the latest and greatest releases with Edgar. However, Patrick moved as if he didn’t care others were in the store. Of course, had he cared, he wouldn’t have started this in the first place.

The hushed sounds of pleasure seemed to fuel his words as he spoke again. “You are so soft inside. Wet. Warm. Made just for me. Perfect.”

She hissed softly as he started to move his hips so that he plunged into her over and over. This wasn’t like the carefully choreographed seduction he’d planned especially for her. This was entirely different and not what she expected to experience with him. She liked to see this completely different side of him that was out of control and wild.

The muscles inside her flexed around him and a guttural moan escaped from his lips. “Oh God, that feels good. You feel good. I belong inside you, Allison.”

Even as she fought to maintain control, her body rocketed toward release, and despite the fact they were in a very public place, she let go. They could get caught at any moment and that was probably the reason she found herself so violently aroused. Right now, the only thing she cared about was falling over the edge he’d dragged her to.

His pace increased just as the bell to the store sounded again. There was yet another customer in the store who added to the risk. Unable to hold off, her teeth bit into his shoulder as her body shuddered out the orgasm. Patrick gave a quiet groan as he drove himself completely into her and held himself in place. His fingers dug into her flesh as he gave himself over to his own body.

There was a shout from the adjoining room, followed by the sound of footsteps and they scrambled to separate themselves from each other. They ordered their clothes as quickly as they could and stood against the table, intently studying the comic book Allison had spread out on the table between them when the curtain parted. Edgar, with his messy hair, poked his head into the room.

“Hey Al, is there a Black Widow comic in your stack? I may have put in there by accident.”

She straightened and shook her head as she gathered the comics that had been set aside from her pull list. “Nope.”

“No smartass comment about it being a piece of drivel?” When she only shook her head, Edgar’s eyebrows lifted in surprise. She saw the moment comprehension bloomed on his face and watched him shake his head then swear quietly as he left them alone.

She lowered her head to the table, blew out a breath that was warm and moist against the tabletop and searched for a small thread of sanity. She hadn’t been able to answer Edgar with more than one word because she couldn’t make her throat work to form coherent words. Patrick’s sudden demand for her had left her speechless and her entire body was loose and pliant.

A firm hand pressed to her lower back and her thighs trembled as he moved to caress the curve of her bottom. His body pressed up tight against hers and she leaned against both him and the table for support.

Someone entered the alcove with them but it didn’t deter Patrick. His body pressed firmly against hers and with him so close, it wasn’t hard for her to detect the scent of sex.

“Errands are done,” he demanded quietly in her ear and the tone of his voice left no room for any sort of misinterpretation. “Unless you don’t want to find out what it feels



like to be restrained up against a wall.”

## Chapter Eight

Evidently, she had wanted to find out and she was absolutely divine—just as he'd known. It broke his heart to know that no one had ever taken the time to tell her how special she was. Or show her just how much she deserved to be worshipped and cherished.

Patrick had taken note of how self-conscious she was and he intended to break her of it.

As a simple test, he'd secured her to the slats of wood bolted into one of the brick walls at Sanctuary and been purposefully rougher than he normally would have been. He'd wondered if she would throw her safe word between them and call a halt to things. While he refused to strike a woman, in any manner, he could still be rough and never lay a finger on her. Even spanking was a hard limit for him. Men had no right to beat a woman for any reason.

Just as he suspected, she hadn't said a thing. In fact, her reaction had been quite the opposite. Secured to the St. Andrews cross on his wall with leather cuffs, she faced him, her skin had a pink flush and her nipples stood out in hard peaks. He was tempted to reach forward and drag the pad of his thumb over one of those hard nubs. Maybe even lean forward, scrape his teeth or tongue across her skin.

He'd made a promise to himself and despite it, gave into some of the temptation and brushed his hand against her skin. She didn't make a noise, just as she hadn't for most of their time in bed.

They'd have to work on that. For now, he had other plans. "I'm going to break you, Allison. I'm uncertain how long it's going to take, but it will happen and you're going to enjoy it. Last night was just the beginning." Her heartbeat hitched against his knuckles as he moved his attention to the other nipple and that was the signal he'd waited for. "Did you know I can force you to orgasm? I can tell from the look in your eyes that the idea intrigues you, but you don't understand how it's possible. Allow me to demonstrate."

He held up a slim, credit card sized controller in one hand and a harness in the other. "While I may not enjoy watching others engage in intercourse, I do particularly enjoy watching my sub out of control."

There was a tight clench at the base of his spine as those chocolate eyes of hers glazed over and lost focus. Something told him he wouldn't hear the safe word at any time this evening. He tucked the remote into his pocket so his hands were free.

Like most things he owned or purchased for this room, the harness was a specialty item. Like each woman he'd had here was different in their needs, so was the harness. The previous version he'd owned had been made for a lover who'd been particularly fond of anal sex. While he never discredited it, he guessed Allison didn't have an interest in it yet because of her lack of experience. He'd had another harness fashioned with a few modifications that suited his desires with her in mind.

"Would it excite you to know I had this toy fashioned specifically for you?" He waited a heartbeat and continued without her answer. "I've learned that a woman should be shown exactly what her body is capable of as it puts her more in touch with her sexuality."

“You have certainly done more than enough to make me aware of that,” she stated with a quiet laugh.

The sound caused his arousal to spike and ordered himself to maintain his composure. He held the sturdy leather up in order to allow her a better view as he explained. There was no fear in her eyes, but there was curiosity. “These straps loop around each of your thighs and connect in the center where this metal ring is sewn into place. Depending on preference, there are various attachments that can be utilized. If you find it’s too much, we’ll make adjustments as necessary, but for now I went with something a bit small.”

He held up a four-inch plug, pleased to note her expression didn’t change. “This isn’t meant for actual movement, more for a feeling of fullness. Once it’s in place, it won’t move until I take it out. This was specially made just for you as well,” he added as he flipped it over. “It’s been outfitted with a bullet, so it will vibrate. Ups the intensity, takes another level of control away from the wearer.”

After he’d knelt in front of her, he allowed himself to appreciate the sound of leather as it slid against skin as one of the straps slipped around her leg. Her body tensed and a quick glance told him it wasn’t the feel of the material that bothered her and continued.

Unable to stand not being able to touch her, his fingers slid against her skin. They dipped to where he felt the heat and slickness between her legs. Her breath caught in her throat as a finger slipped inside. He was pleased to discover she was already slick for him. Given that fact, he withdrew his finger and pressed the tip of the toy to her opening. He took his time to slide it inside her in minute increments.

“In case you’re wondering, it’s perfectly safe for you to wear that for as long as I choose. Another Top I know once presented something similar to his bottom with the instruction she was to wear it for five consecutive days without removing it. But don’t worry, I have nothing like that in mind tonight. I do plan to take my time, spend all night finding that point in which you lose complete and utter control.”

Once it was fully slipped in place, he secured the other strap over her thigh and buckled it into place. He stepped back to admire his handiwork and slid his hands into his pockets as he studied her. While he could have gone for a more functional harness that allowed for other possibilities on other occasions, he was glad he’d taken the time to have this one fashioned.

He extracted one of his hands and slid a finger along her jaw. “You are simply mouth-watering strapped before me like this. Do you know that? It’s so simple, how it provides me an unencumbered view to all of that luscious skin of yours. You should see yourself, so helpless with one of my harnesses between your legs. I wish you knew, had some idea of what level of pleasure you’re going to find tonight.” He made himself remove his hand, step away from her because he wasn’t sure he could keep himself under strict control if he continued to touch her.

The heavy sound of his shoes was loud on the floor as he stepped away. From experience, he knew the sensation of the vibrator fitted inside her was agonizing enough, especially when the person was already aroused as much as she was. And he hadn’t really gotten started. The device wasn’t even turned on, but the thought that at any moment it could be was certainly alluring.

To draw out the moment, he spun on his heel and crossed to the kitchen where he kept a small supply of liquor. He hooked a finger over the rim of a highball glass as he

pulled out an opened bottle of Glenlivet whiskey. Even without a glance her way, he knew she watched him intently and wondered what his motives were. He mulled over the idea to remain in the kitchen, drink the whiskey and pretend she didn't exist, but found it difficult. He wanted to look at her, see her reaction the first time the vibrator was switched on.

Choice made, he carried the bottle and settled in the chair placed a few feet away from her. He shifted his pants so they wouldn't pull and bunch as he sat and lifted one leg so his ankle crossed his knee. The whiskey bottle made a dull sound as he sat it on the floor beside him.

When he finally looked up, she stared directly at him. It was almost as if she defied him to tell her to do otherwise. While it was an admirable sight, it wasn't what he wanted. There were two ways he could handle this. Ignore it completely or address it.

Patrick wasn't the type to ignore.

He took the remote out of his pocket and tapped the button closest to his palm—the highest setting—and watched her body jerk and strain against the ties that bound her. Her eyes immediately fell away from his and landed on some arbitrary point on the floor between them.

Pleased, he tapped the off button.

The whiskey was warm on his tongue and he tasted the full body of the ginger, cinnamon and nutmeg. When he swallowed, the spices opened to an exotic fruit flavor that made him nearly close his eyes. The liquor was as decadent as she was and he indulged himself with another sip. In a way, it reminded him of her—complex and intense but with a hint of sweetness that was silky on his tongue.

"I'd leave you alone to have your little affair with the alcohol, but I'm in a bit of a precarious position." Despite the sardonic tone of her voice, the hint of a smile turned up one corner of her mouth.

"A position I put you in. You'll do well to remember that someday. Now, don't speak unless you're directed to."

After he took another sip of his drink, he tapped the first button on the remote. She followed his instructions and didn't make a sound. However, he heard the leather around her wrists and ankles creak as she strained against them.

Heat spread through his veins as he watched her cheeks flush and her body bow ever so slightly away from the wall. He'd purposefully left her waist unsecured even though he owned a wide strip of leather used solely for that purpose. He hadn't wanted anything on her other than the four cuffs and the bands that held the vibrator in place.

Despite the complicated nature of his desires when it came to sex, he liked to keep the visuals simple. Just the sight of his lover naked, wearing cuffs and a collar was enough for him.

Collars would come later with Allison. For now, he enjoyed the sight of her just as she was.

He took another sip and noticed the increased flush of her skin. The button on the remote pushed in under his thumb. Again, the bow of her body increased and decided it wouldn't take long before she strained the binding as far as it could go. To take advantage of her reaction, he thumbed the slide control next to the row of buttons used to incrementally increase the vibrations instead of taking it to the next level.

It was a slow form of erotic torture.

He pushed the button up a bit more, pleased to hear her quiet gasp of surprise. Given the fact this was a new experience for her, he allowed her the small concession. She was close so he engaged the medium level and set the remote down on the arm of the chair.

Her body went rigid as she strained away from the wall and the shimmer of an orgasm made her body taut. She didn't know it yet, but this was only the beginning. The pink flush of her skin made him want to push up from the chair, cross to her and lave his tongue over every single inch of that heated skin and feast on her until he was sated. To keep in line with the scene he'd set up, he refrained.

As the orgasm faded, her gaze lifted from the floor to meet his. There was no doubt in his mind that she believed the one release was the end of the scene. He took another sip of the liquor, savored it and made no move to take up the remote again. Her eyes went wide as her body strained against the restraints and he watched her have another orgasm.

It had taken her by surprise and he wondered if it was the first time she'd experienced multiple orgasms in quick succession. The idea of the opposite reaction—delayed orgasm—delighted him and made the experience even more enjoyable. It was something to aspire to one day and promised himself to develop another scene at a later date when they could explore that particular aspect.

He sat the whiskey to the side, took up the remote and dropped it into his pocket as he approached. The coarse brick skinned his palms as he laid them on either side of where she was secured to the cross. "How does it make you feel? Is it too much or not enough?"

"No. Just right." The tension in her voice caused his cock to jump in response.

*Down boy.*

"We can't have that." He reached into his pocket and flicked his thumb over the slider control for a higher level. Her arms jerked against his. "Just right isn't good enough. I want you at the edge and you're not even close yet. I want you begging for me to give you more. I want my name to be the only sound on your breath as you scream."

Her body hitched, but not because she'd had another orgasm. His fingernails dug into the mortar between the bricks as his groin tightened even more. He forced it aside as this wasn't about him. "Find that edge—balance on it for as long as I command. Is that clear?"

"Please." Her plea came out as a sob.

Nearly wasn't enough.

"No." The single word was succinct and resonated through the quiet of the room. He showed her the remote and pushed the slider up a bit more, just under where the next speed would kick in and thumbed the lock to keep it in place. Then he shoved the slim control into his pocket before replacing his hand on the wall beside her.

He wouldn't touch it again.

Confusion darkened her eyes. "You said you wanted me to beg and I am."

"Please isn't enough. You have to mean it."

"I do."

"Not yet you don't." He noticed how dark his voice sounded even to himself and it sent a thrill through him.

"I don't—I don't understand."

He pushed into her space, forced a feeling of claustrophobia. Still, he didn't touch her. "You have to surrender yourself wholly. You haven't done that yet. When you think you have—you haven't. You have to go further and stop thinking completely. Don't force

it to come, let it happen. Let me be the one who says you go, not you. Now—*show me*.”

“I can’t.” The words were said through gritted teeth. He knew she could, but she just didn’t believe in herself enough. Some of that would come with time, as her confidence built. He intended to ensure it happened but one step at a time.

“That’s because you’re still reaching for it, trying to do it in order to please me. Don’t think.” She needed something extra to help her over and lowered his hand, cupped his palm against her clit. He pushed hard against it so she would be feel the pressure. His fingers wrapped around, rested under the leather and he could feel the vibrations through the thick, heavy material.

“Let yourself go. Even though I’ve told you to do it, you’re not giving yourself permission. I told you that you could, but you haven’t told yourself. You’re wondering about the ‘what if’. I’m ordering you to stop it right now and just *feel*.”

Her body sagged in the restraints as she sought to do as instructed and by the set of her body, he could tell the instant the powerful orgasm rocketed through her body. An oath ripped from her throat as she drenched his hand and the leather, but it still wasn’t enough.

“Again,” he demanded, pushed against her over-sensitized muscles again. “God dammit—I want to hear it.”

She didn’t protest this time and he listened as the oath slid into his name. As she became his, the sound of his name morphed into a scream that ignited his body. He reveled in her loss of control and waited while she rode out the quick-fire series of completely unrestrained orgasms.

When her body sagged in the restraints again, he took her weight as he flipped the panic snaps to free her from the cross. He reached around to unlatch the same type of releases on the harness and let it fall to the floor. Its job was done for now.

With her body in a reactive state to the powerful releases, he lifted her into his arms and carried her over to the bed in the corner. He lowered her onto the bed then toed off his shoes and, still fully clothed, climbed into bed with her.

She curled into him and rested her head against his shoulder, her legs twinned around his as she fit herself against his body. Patrick smiled in the darkness when the sound of her breathing fell into a pattern as she succumbed to sleep.

Surrender had only begun.

## Chapter Nine

In the dark of an early Thursday morning, the Conners brothers worked in tandem to prepare the shop for the first round of customers. The sun still hadn't yet peeked over the horizon and Patrick found he enjoyed the hushed silence this time of day brought. His life had changed dramatically in the past month all because of a chance encounter right here in this very store. He would never scoff at the idea of fate ever again.

Plastic crinkled as he slid a sleeve of paper cups into the storage area under the counter. He balled up the trash and turned to find Nick's gaze on him. "Am I running this place by myself now?"

"Says the man who's been hard to find quite a bit lately." Nick checked the contents of the cash drawer and slid it shut before he keyed in the security code that allowed the register to be handled when the customers started to file in. "What's put such a bright smile on your face lately?"

"Nothing." Patrick shrugged and plunged his hands into the hot soapy water used to wash the steaming pitcher for when he prepared orders.

Nick gave him a dry look over his shoulder and wiped the counter down in front of the register. He moved on to dilute the concentrated mixture Mitchie had prepared last night for the iced drinks. "Don't try to bullshit me, Patrick. I know better. The only time I've ever seen that expression on your face was when you pitched that no-hitter junior year."

Well, he certainly had him there. Patrick couldn't remember a time when he'd been happier as he looked back over the past four weeks. There was nothing secret about the remarkable change that had taken place in his life, but he hadn't made it a point to shout it from the rooftops. He hadn't said anything to his brother either.

He'd kept mum about the new relationship with everyone. The only people that would have been able to see something was out of ordinary were the three people he shared Sanctuary with. He'd been more of an active participant on the schedule. In fact, he'd snapped up every free day available since he and Allison had dinner at The Copper Nickel.

Maybe it was time to come clean. If he didn't, Nick would continue to hound him repeatedly and to be honest, there was only so much of that he could take from his brother. "Remember the IT Company I hired to come upgrade the computer system here?"

"Sure. They did a fabulous job." Nick tapped the top of the screen next to him.

Patrick chuckled as he nodded in agreement. "She really did, didn't she?"

Nick turned to his older brother and slapped his hand down on the counter in celebration. "So that's it."

"What?"

His brother pointed a finger in accusation at him. "Her. You said 'she' instead of 'them'. You're seeing her, aren't you? Allison, isn't it?"

He'd already committed to tell Nick about Allison and decided to forgo the incessant teasing Nick would surely make him endure once he found out. At least this way, he could mitigate the joking.

“Have been since the last day she came here to finish the install. Thought I’d messed things up the first time we went out, but that was easily remedied. But, this is more than just seeing—Nick, she does something to me. It’s like I have to have her. Like I can’t exist without her.”

Nick studied his face as he listened to him go on and on about. He felt a little self-conscious about it and stopped mid-sentence before his rambles turned into incoherent babbles. Seemed as if she was rubbing off of him already.

Nick clapped his brother on his back and gave a hearty laugh that bounced off the walls of the empty coffeehouse. “Love is like that.”

Patrick stopped and eyed Nick. Was that what this was—love? The attraction was certainly there, that was indisputable. However, it was rare for love to be in the equation for him. He was usually very careful and believed he had even become a master at keeping a separation between sex and love. When he did allow himself to feel something more than just the heat of sexual want for a woman? It was a step he never took blindly. He also never took the step without knowing full well how the woman felt about him in return. Without a doubt, Allison found as much pleasure as he did when they were together. But anything more was something he questioned.

For now, he was content with the arrangement they’d fallen into.

“Why didn’t you say anything sooner?” Nick asked, the question snapped Patrick from his thoughts.

The mood between the two of them instantly changed. Patrick knew exactly why he hadn’t said anything and it wasn’t entirely due to the fact he didn’t want to be ribbed by his brother. They were close, it was only natural to rib one another. Nick’s life was in turmoil right now. The last thing he wanted to do was make it more difficult for Nick to deal with the fact Vivian had left him.

“I know you’re going through a lot with Vivian right now. I didn’t want to seem like I was parading a new relationship around in front of you.”

“It’s something you rightly deserve to do after all the years I hounded you about being single while I was married.”

A few lines formed on Nick’s forehead and Patrick wondered if he made the right decision despite the congratulations. It didn’t seem like a good idea to talk about his love life while Nick’s life fell apart. *Smart, Connors. Real smart.* “How are things by the way? I’ve been wrapped up in things with Allison and haven’t thought to ask you how you’re doing.”

“As well as can be expected.”

Nick’s shoulder lifted in a stiff shrug, but Patrick knew better. His brother had fallen for Vivian in high school. He’d watched them go to dances, graduate together and even attend the same college so they could be near one another. If there were ever two people more in love with each other, it had been his brother and sister-in-law. Nick was heartbroken since the separation, but was too proud to admit it to anyone. Even himself. “I know better, Nick. Just say ‘ridiculously shitty’.”

Patrick watched Nick worked though a wide range of emotions. Just as he was about to scold his brother for feeling sorry for himself, Nick sighed heavily and threw down the cleaning towel. Evidently, the morning preparations could wait.

Patrick turned away from the sink, gave Nick his full attention and noticed his brother looked every bit of his thirty-seven years. It pained his heart to see him in this



much pain and wished there was something he could do in order to make this all go away.

“It’s difficult—at best. Some days are better than others. If I’d have seen it coming, it probably would have been easier to swallow.”

“There’s no way to see something like this coming,” he replied even though Nick would immediately dispute it. Sometimes, his brother was just as stubborn as he was.

As expected, Nick shook his head in disagreement. “If I had been paying attention—then yes, I would have seen it. I was too wrapped up in getting this business off the ground to pull my head out of my ass and realize I was losing my wife. She was everything to me, Patrick. What the fuck am I going to do without her?”

Guilt settled in his gut with a heavy weight. In some way, he felt responsible. If he hadn’t kept Nick so busy, he would have seen those signs. It hadn’t helped that he hadn’t been around as much as he liked because of Allison.

Right then and there, he vowed to take on more responsibility around the shop in order for his brother to get a handle on his life again. If no one was there to share it, then what was the point? He understood that better now than any time before in his life. Allison had opened that door for him and he didn’t want it to shut anytime soon.

He’d just gone through the motions before she’d showed up so unexpectedly in his life.

Nick found that once and deserved to have it again. “Have you thought about trying to get her back? I can handle the rest of the stuff with the store and if I need help with something, I can find someone else to do it. She’s your world, Nick. You can’t have all of this without her and we both know that.”

Apparently, Nick didn’t agree. “It’s too late for us now, Patrick. I appreciate the offer but it’s just not meant to be.” He pushed away from the counter and disappeared into the storeroom without another word.

The store opened on time and the rest of the day passed in a blur, mostly because his focus remained on Nick and his estranged wife. Nick’s mood darkened further throughout the course of the day and Patrick had agreed to close up the shop to give his brother a break.

Night had fallen by the time the store finally closed. He debated about calling Allison to grab a late dinner as he walked along the sidewalk on his way home. They hadn’t seen much of each other for a few days because she’d been working late hours as well. He missed her and the feel of her wrapped around him.

He dismissed the idea almost immediately. He’d fallen fast and hard, the distance would do them both some good.

A quiet cough caught his attention and looked up in surprise to find Ryan and Donovan near the entrance door to the warehouse. “Hey, guys. Sorry, I didn’t see you standing there.”

Donovan held up a hand to stop him. “We saw you caught up in your own little world. Wasn’t sure if we should disturb whatever fantasy you were living inside your own head.”

Patrick tossed the keys in his hand a few times. “Just thinking about a few things.”

“Is one of them the reason you’ve been hogging the warehouse lately?” There was a glint in Ryan’s eye and Patrick felt a deep sense of guilt about how he’d spent his time lately. Not that he regretted his actions in any way. It was only because he’d kept the others from their own usage of the building. “Yeah, I’ve been hogging it a bit, haven’t I?

Sorry about that.”

“No, you’re not,” they both replied in unison.

The three men laughed and Ryan leaned against the building as he shoved his hands into the pockets of his trousers. “And before you try to say anything otherwise, I think I speak unanimously when I say it’s about damn time.”

Patrick dipped his head to hide a smile and actually shuffled his feet a little. It had been a while since he’d thrown his name back on the schedule the four of them kept and knew full well he wouldn’t apologize for it either. Though, it wasn’t as if Ryan, Donovan or Elena expected him to.

He’d glanced at the calendar earlier and knew no one had the warehouse tonight, which was probably why Ryan and Donovan currently stood before him. “You two up to anything tonight?”

Donovan pulled the key out of the lock on the door to Sanctuary and stuffed the ring into his jacket. “We were just heading to dinner over at Rippers. You up for it?”

Once Donovan asked, Patrick decided to alter his plans for the night. It had been a while since he’d hung out with his friends and one more night away from Allison wouldn’t kill him. Besides, the quiet rumble of his stomach was a reminder that he’d skipped lunch today since Mitchie had called in sick.

“Actually, that sounds like a great idea. I was just about to figure out what to do about dinner anyway.”

## Chapter Ten

Within forty minutes, the three men walked through the doors of Bodice Rippers, the sports bar and grill they'd spent plenty of time in during their late twenties. The atmosphere hadn't changed much over the years and within the first few minutes of his arrival, Patrick felt as if he'd never left.

Usually a popular hangout for the tourists, the locals took it back during the one off-season Gatlin Falls had. A season that just about over.

Rippers, as it was fondly known by those regulars, was owned by Ryan's brother, Sam—though everyone called him Beckett because of his fondness as a teenager to the show *Quantum Leap*. He stood behind the bar and waited to load up a waitress's tray with a few pitchers of beer.

There was always a game on at some location in the world and Rippers would show it on one of the many oversized televisions that line the walls. Right now, there was a group huddled around one of the sets. They gave a loud shout as the team they rooted for scored. Patrick shook his head as he turned back to the bar. "Place never changes."

There was comfort in the knowledge that no matter how long you stayed away from something, whenever you came back, it was exactly as you remembered it. He'd spent a lot of time here after he'd moved into the warehouse years ago. Had picked up a lot of women—mainly tourists who looked for that no-strings-attached summer fling—right at this very bar when he got bored. On the other hand, his group of friends definitely had some memorable times here when he hadn't been in the mood for sex. Most of those incidents he'd never want repeated out loud now, but that was rather the point of youth, wasn't it?

Patrick made a mental note to bring Allison here when he had a chance. She'd be amused by the ambiance. It seemed like a place that would be right up her alley. Loud, raucous and just plain fun.

The three men settled on high bar stools and waited for Beckett to finish up. When he was done, three mugs of freshly poured draft beers were set before each of them before they could even give their orders.

"Donovan. Patrick. Haven't seen the two of you in a long time. Out causing trouble tonight?"

"You wouldn't know what trouble was if it knocked you over the head," Ryan fired back as he took a sip of his beer.

"Unlike you, dear brother, who goes out of his way to find a problem. You're like the AAA of trouble."

Donovan snorted into his beer.

*Yeah, sometimes it's damn good to come home.*

"Beckett, missed seeing you lately. Business seems to be doing well."

Beckett scratched at the three days worth of growth on his jaw and skimmed a hand through his cropped hair. "Fine. Not booming, but never is this time of year. The regulars keep me busy and I do enough to get by until the tourists hit in a few weeks. What about you? Heard you and Nick opened a place over on Main. A coffeehouse or some other such bullshit."

It wasn't the first time Patrick had received such a reaction when people learned he was a partner in Perfect Shot. "We did indeed. Opened about a month ago. Don't knock it. Just like beer and sports, people need caffeine. They line up for it in fact, sometimes eight or nine people deep at any given moment. And that's just the regulars. We're hoping with a little hard work once the tourists start coming, it'll just be good business then."

"Damn, I went into the wrong business." Beckett shook his head and gave a short chuckle as he leaned against the bar.

Patrick couldn't imagine Beckett pulling shots of espresso or how a demitasse cup would look between his large hands. No, Beckett was right where he belonged. "How's Tessa?" he asked, then immediately wondered if he should have when Beckett frowned.

Beckett and Ryan's niece used to hang out at the bar after school to do her homework. That was when she wasn't off on tour with Ryan. Patrick relaxed a little when Beckett gave a wide grin, just like a proud papa.

"Doing great. Aced her finals."

"Is she going anywhere special for the summer?"

Beckett's smile faltered a little and he recovered quickly, but not before Patrick took notice. "Denver. To see her father."

Donovan stepped in and changed the topic of conversation. Patrick wasn't sure if it was an improvement because the direction was south. "So, Patrick, what hot number have you been spending your nights with?"

For some reason, he found it easier to talk about his current lover with his friends. Maybe that was because they weren't family and wouldn't judge him for his choice. With family, it was different because he didn't want to disappoint someone he'd known all his life.

"Her name is Allison Stuart. Works for Bullseye Technologies." A small thrill zinged through him at the mere sound of her name on his lips.

Ryan seemed a bit surprised. "Really? You don't usually go for the secretary type, but I guess there's a first time for everything."

The assumption annoyed Patrick far more than he would have thought. Especially since he'd just assumed no one would make any sort of judgment about him or his decision. "She's one of the IT specialists there." The statement came out a bit sharper than intended. There was nothing wrong with secretarial work, but it bothered him that Ryan would make an incorrect assumption about a woman just because she worked for a technology company.

He'd always thought women were more than capable of handling themselves in such a profession and for some reason, he felt as if he needed to defend her. "She installed the new setup at the shop for us. Damn smart. Sexy as hell, too."

"You're dating a geek? Talk about really not in your spectrum."

"Not that it matters, Donovan, but sometimes it's not all about looks. Not everyone is as superficial as you are." From Donovan's pained expression, Patrick hit him where it hurt the most.

Donovan's tumultuous love life was no secret because he complained about it on frequent occasions. He often went after the wrong type of lover simply because of the way their hair was styled that day or how well toned they kept their body. To say that Donovan had never been lucky in love was an understatement. Patrick felt it unfair of

him to judge Allison before he'd even met her.

Yes, Allison was physically attractive, but he would still be happy with her if there was no sexual aspect to their relationship. It certainly enhanced things, but he loved that he could have an intelligent conversation with her about just about anything. Books, movies, even coffee. She seemed to know a little bit about everything and it made her one hell of an interesting person to know.

Just as Donovan opened his mouth to reply with what Patrick suspected was a snide comment, the cell phone in his pocket rang. A quick glimpse at the screen showed it was Allison. "Hang on, I have to get this." Without another word, he exited the bar and pulled up the collar of his coat and stepped out in to soft rain that fell from the night sky. "Hey, I was just thinking about you."

"Well then I'm flattered. Unfortunately, I can't return the favor as I've been too damn busy to think about anything else but work."

Frustration was ripe in her voice and he wished there was something he could do to ease it. He could probably duck out on Ryan and Donovan, but he'd already committed to them for the next few hours. Besides, she'd be fast asleep even if he were to show up in her apartment. While the prospect held promise because he'd already thought of several different creative ways to wake her, he didn't want deny her the rest it sounded like she needed.

But he could make her rest a little more pleasant. It was time he pushed on her comfort zone again. "Where are you?"

"Home, thankfully. I'm about to collapse into bed and forget today happened."

"Good."

"I'm glad my exhaustion pleases you," she responded wryly.

He nearly chuckled, but bit his lip to contain the noise. "Do you have a pair of shorts you can wear to bed, preferably ones that are made of denim and the fabric is a bit sturdier?"

"Uh, sure," she stated, confused by his question.

"Get them, but don't put them on." Fabric shifted, a drawer closed and then he heard her mattress give as she sat down. He waited a few beats. "I suspect, like most women, you keep your toys in your bedside nightstand."

"Damn, I hate being predictable."

Patrick smiled at a couple who walked past and waited while they disappeared inside Rippers. It wasn't because he was shy, it was simply because he only meant for Allison to hear him. "I also suspect you have a variety of toys."

Her soft chuckle filtered over the line. "You know, I changed my mind. I do like you knowing me so well."

Familiarity did have its rewards. "Remember the harness I had made? The piece that sat inside—do you have anything like that?"

"I do. It's just a dildo though, it doesn't do anything."

Patrick wondered if that was a new procurement since the day he'd bonded her to the cross or if she'd had it before they'd met. It was a question for another time. "Actually, that's perfect. I want you to slide it into yourself. Full tilt and nothing else. No moving it once it's in place, just like before at the warehouse. You don't get to fuck yourself, I'm the only one who gets that honor. Understand?"

His words were met by silence and then she gave a quiet sigh of satisfaction. He let

the silence stretch out and made her wait because he wanted to listen to her measured breaths. He imagined her as she lay in bed, her long legs spread wide and holding the device in place. The image intoxicated him more than any liquor the bar behind him served. His body hummed with arousal and he shifted the seam of his pants so they didn't press against his hardened cock.

It took everything inside him to resist going to her so he could finish her off himself. His name was a soft whisper over the phone line and he leaned against the brick wall behind him for support at the sound of it.

"Put the shorts on." His voice wavered and he cleared his throat quietly. Never had he ever wanted to be somewhere else more than right now.

"What next?" Her voice was low and seductive. His eyes fluttered closed at the hum of heightened arousal in her voice. He swallowed hard and forced himself to follow his rules.

"Go to sleep, baby." He ended the call abruptly and tilted his head back against the wall while his imagination kicked into overdrive. He saw her as she slept clad only in the shorts and watched as she shifted in her sleep. In his mind, she wore an expression of sheer joy and contentment.

He dug his fingers into his eyes, imagined himself climbing into the bed with her to find out how much time would pass before he allowed her to orgasm. His mouth salivated at the thought of that first precious taste of her release as she gave herself over to him.

The need to outright ditch Ryan and Donovan and go to her became a power struggle. His body nearly shook from the desire to have her in every way. However, the thought he would see her at the coffeehouse tomorrow, after a night where she slept with one of her toys placed securely inside her, was an alluring temptation.

Demands were nothing new for him. He'd issued them before. But he'd never done something like this and couldn't for the life of him decide what caused him to do it in the first place. It had been highly erotic and knew without a doubt that he wouldn't harbor one ounce of regret in the morning. If he guessed correctly, she wouldn't either.

He wanted obscene dreams to plague her the entire night. Sexually charged dreams explicit enough in detail that she would awaken in an enhanced state of arousal come morning. Dreams he would ask her to describe to him in exact, highly explicit detail the next time they were alone. The thought of those kind of words spilling from those luscious lips of hers caused him to nearly shake in anticipation.

The smoky atmosphere of Rippers hit him full force as he stepped inside the pub and realized all of his senses were now on full alert. The phone call made him hyperaware of everything. Every scent. Every person.

His intent had been for Allison's pleasure, but something told him he wouldn't get any rest tonight until he bled off some of the excess energy. The warehouse was empty tonight, his for whatever use he deemed necessary. Granted, his hand was a poor substitute for the feel of that slick, hot heat of hers surrounding him, but it wasn't as if he'd never jerked himself off. However, it wouldn't be fair to make Allison wait while he found relief. If he stayed at the bar for another few hours, it would ensure he would collapse into bed later, too exhausted for anything more.

Granted the whole point of dominance and submission wasn't about fairness, but the lines continued to blur when it came to Allison. Not much, but enough that he would deny himself tonight simply because he'd deprived her.

Ryan and Donovan both stared at him as he settled onto the barstool he'd vacated when Allison called. While he'd never been one to share specific details about his sex life, he would joke around with his closest friends about non-specifics. Those friends were the two men who sat to his left. The same ones he was annoyed with because of their earlier behavior.

He ignored them, instead took a long swallow of his beer.

Donovan broke the silence. "Find yourself in need of the warehouse tonight after all?"

"Nope," he said as he finished off the last of his beer and signaled to Beckett for another round. Cryptic seemed the best avenue to take. "She's otherwise occupied for the rest of the night."

"Aw, the big bad Top was shot down," Ryan teased as he finished off his own mug of beer.

Patrick knew of plenty instances when he'd watched Ryan get slapped down in front of a crowd of people. Just when he was about to point that fact out to his friend something else caught his attention. Something—or rather someone—that was out of place. "Be right back."

He tapped his hand against his thigh as he approached the small table situated in a darkened corner. The three women who sat around the table looked up at him and he nodded in their direction. While they were all dressed for a night out, the woman who sat with her back to the corner wore a frown that marred her pretty angular face. He didn't blame her, he was probably the last person she wanted to see.

"Vivian."

His estranged sister-in-law scowled as she tossed her black hair over one shoulder and took a sip of her drink. "Spying for Nick?"

Her two companions snorted and shot him vile looks, which he ignored. "No, Vivian. Not that I need to explain to you, but it was a last minute decision to come here. What's going on between you and Nick is between the two of you. I have nothing to do with it."

She made a noise he didn't think was very ladylike, even for her. "I think you have more to do with it than you realize. Goodnight, Patrick."

The dismissal was unmistakable and Patrick lifted his head as he backed away from the table. He knew when to cut his losses and after that statement, it was clear Vivian was not in a friendly mood. He wasn't of the mind to ruin his good mood, especially not from some cryptic remark from his soon-to-be ex-sister-in-law.

She wasn't worth it.

An empty beer glass on the bar acted like a paperweight for the twenty he used to pay his tab. "Thanks for the beer, gentleman. Unfortunately, I'm going to call it a night."

The rude comments from both Ryan and Donovan made about just where he was really headed were ignored and he pushed through the front door. The brisk air cleared the smoke from his lungs and despite the quick glance at the vicinity of Allison's, he turned in the opposite direction, toward his loft.

He really would have preferred to go to her—if only to find out if she really carried out his request. But Vivian's comments left an unpleasant feeling in the pit of his stomach. There was something his brother hadn't told him and he intended to find out just what it was. Unfortunately, his cell phone's clock indicated it was too late to do anything about it now.

It was best to call it a night. It had been one hell of day.



## Chapter Eleven

The orgasm ripped through Allison the moment her eyes opened and she gasped into the empty bedroom. She grabbed for the sheet under her in order to have something to hold onto. It was a quick hit that faded just as rapidly as it appeared and she blinked at the ceiling a few times, tried to gain her bearings.

Her entire body tingled—both from the remnants of the orgasm and a night spent sleeping with one of her toys inside of her. It hadn't been hard to follow Patrick's request once he cut the phone call. Exhausted from the rigors of the day, she'd nearly been out like a light before her head hit the pillow. In a deep sleep, her dreams had been filled with stunning images. Explicit imagery she would have never thought her own brain capable of.

A quick glance at the alarm clock on her bedside table indicated that she was a few minutes late. She had a quick debate with herself on whether or not to go to work or remain right where she was. That argument was brought to an abrupt halt when Boo—short for Boolean—the homeless cat who'd adopted her two years ago while she was on her way home from work one night, jumped onto the bed and whined loudly for his breakfast.

Twenty minutes later, freshly showered and owner of a cat with a full belly, she locked her front door and trotted down the stairs. The bright sunlight of the morning greeted her as she stepped out onto the sidewalk and automatically headed for Perfect Shot.

She strolled down the sidewalk and thought of Patrick and how he'd given her the instructions. Even on the phone, he'd been authoritative and she'd wanted to follow his every demand. He hadn't even been there and he still overwhelmed her. The need to obey was there simply because there was no other option in her mind. It amazed her how easily she had slipped into the role of a submissive.

There would be no way to forget how he'd sounded on the phone last night. Firm and demanding, yet she'd be able to detect a hint of strain to his voice as he'd spoken. He hadn't been as calm and collected as he'd tried to sound like the Top he claimed to be. It was the second time she'd identified a crack in his tough exterior and a nice little secret she would hold close to her heart for the time being. When the time was right, she'd tell him.

For now, the thought made her smile.

The narrow sidewalk passed quickly beneath her feet and the fresh scent of blooming flowers drifted to her on the soft spring breeze. The season was in full swing and while it wasn't her favorite season by a long shot, she certainly had a new outlook on life. Her mood lifted even more the closer she got to Perfect Shot. By the time she reached it, she nearly walked on air.

The small bell over the door of the coffeehouse sang as she stepped inside to find a line of customers. They all waited patiently to order. Patrick was behind the counter and prepared orders much more efficiently than several weeks ago.

His gaze met hers, his knowing smile caused her stomach to flip in a lazy somersault. Muscles deep inside immediately tightened and she nearly gasped in surprise. The

instructions for her last night had made her much more aware of her entire body. Being near him apparently heightened those sensations even more.

*Oh, I could get used to this.*

It was then she realized why the phone call with him had turned out as it had. The direction he'd purposefully taken it once he'd heard she was exhausted by her horrible day.

Her body was now in a perpetual state of arousal and it wouldn't be satisfied until proper relief vented some of it. That relief was Patrick and there was no doubt in her mind he knew it. It was a form of delicious torture and they'd barely lifted a finger.

Need spiked and swelled so quickly, she almost felt uncomfortable. It caused her to swallow hard as she carefully stepped into place at the back of the line. He signaled for her to join him behind the counter, but politely shook her head no. She needed some distance from him for the moment. If she didn't, the other customers would find themselves observers of several of those very pornographic images she'd dreamed last night.

It was ten minutes before it was her turn to order. Those minutes weren't nearly enough time to settle herself to rights and she stepped up hesitantly to the counter. Afraid of what could happen in the next few seconds, she pressed her palms against the cold metal and used it to focus.

She couldn't find the presence of mind to speak, so he was the one who spoke first. "Good morning, Allison. Would you like your usual?" His tone was clear and bright and gave no hint of the devilish man who'd been on the phone with her last night.

For that, she was grateful. Of course, they were in public and she suspected that fact had a lot to do with it. "Yes, please."

He moved away to prepare the double espresso for her, allowed her to observe him at work. Those talented hands of his cradled a steaming pitcher as he waited for the espresso to brew. She tried not to notice how his biceps bunched and flexed as he pulled out a gallon of skim milk to dump into the pitcher for the next customer who inevitably came along and ordered a latte.

When he turned to replace the container in the refrigerator opposite the bar, it was everything she could do to not vault over the counter and sink her teeth into his flesh. It wouldn't take much to make a few of those dreams a reality. To strip each other of clothing, suck and lick every exposed piece of flesh. To listen as sweat drenched skin glided together when he stood behind her and slowly fucked her as she leaned over the wide coffee bar.

She could almost feel the length of him inside her as he moved with sure, even strokes. As he purposefully denied her release or commanded she come so he could feel her muscles spasm around him.

Even better was the image she created in her mind about something they hadn't gotten around to. Her mouth watered as she thought about the way his cock would feel against her tongue as she brought him to climax.

"How did you sleep?" he asked as he slid the take-out cup across the counter toward her. She shook off the images and met his gaze. Her chest gave a hard hitch and she leaned against that very same counter for support.

"Fine." Her voice sounded a little strained and hoped she had been the only one able to detect it. Most of all she didn't want to add sheer embarrassment to the rush of emotion

she experienced. Besides, it would take the edge off her craving for him and that was the last thing she wanted.

"I'm glad to hear it." He pushed a damp towel over the counter as he swept away a few crumbs an earlier customer had dropped. "I had a very, very long night myself. Oddly enough, my mind seemed to be focused elsewhere."

His gaze lowered to some point below her side of the counter and heat speared down between her legs. Her body screamed for the man across from her and was very tempted to listen to it with utter disregard for the mixed company.

He cleared his throat before he spoke again. "I can't seem to think why however. Perhaps you know?"

Just as she was about to tell him in vivid detail, his expression changed. She guessed a customer had just walked up behind her and changed her mind. She licked her dry lips and shook her head. There was no way to respond how she wanted because she would have told him exactly what she was feeling. Instead, she settled for innuendo. "Give me a call later and maybe we can come to a resolution together."

She walked out of the store before he could respond because she was fairly certain he wouldn't be as judicious with his words. He'd been right on the edge of out of control and that was something she found herself drawn to. Given different circumstances, they would have undoubtedly been all over each other.

Now instead, she had to go to work and suffer through the next nine hours thanks to an intense conversation with her boyfriend. She stopped dead in the middle of the sidewalk and stammered out an apology to the man who walked into her.

*Boyfriend.*

She'd just referred to Patrick as her boyfriend.

Was that what he was?

The past few weeks they'd spent together certainly spoke volumes. The movies they'd seen. The dinners they'd had together nearly every night for a week solid and the meal they shared at least once a week after that. And even the time they'd spent as they'd got to know one another—both sexually and personally.

She knew about the rocky childhood he'd had with his mother because of the choices he'd made in high school that pertained to his studies and baseball. He knew about the accident with her bike that had given her the small scar over her eyebrow when she was fourteen.

They knew personal and intimate details about each other. People only shared that type of information when they dated.

Whenever something went right—or more importantly, wrong—at work, he was the one she wanted to talk to about it. A perfect example of such a case was last night. She'd called him to blow off a little steam because Stephen had been such an asshole yesterday.

She also realized it wasn't just relegated to just work either. Whenever she'd done something in a gaming session that she'd been previously unsuccessful with, he was the one she talked to—not her gaming buddies. Even though Patrick didn't have a clue what she talked about, he'd still listened attentively and even asked questions about it with genuine curiosity. He'd made the everyday seem important and it made her want to be with him even more.

*Oh God, he is my boyfriend.*

Surprised, she fumbled the cup in her hand and managed to right it before she spilled

too much. The hot liquid burned the side of her hand and she absently wiped it on her pants as she moved again.

She had no idea when it had happened either. Had she more experience in the area, she would have probably noticed sooner. Her last steady boyfriend had been just after she'd graduated college and he'd dumped her for some secretary who had a knack for wearing clothes two sizes too small.

Sometime during the past few weeks, they'd become a couple. He was someone she cared deeply for and couldn't imagine her life now without him in it in some capacity.

It caused her to wonder if Patrick felt the same about her.

\* \* \* \*

Patrick rang up the pound of decaf coffee beans the customer ordered and approved the sale after she swiped the credit card through the machine. "Do you want these ground, Ms. Teefer?"

The kind woman who lived in an apartment over the coffeehouse gave him a warm smile and shook her head. "No. My grandson likes it freshly ground and he won't arrive for few days. I picked up one of those grinders on the wall over there yesterday so he can have freshly ground coffee every day."

He watched the portly woman wind her way through the tables and shook his head. No doubt, she would find some way to return before her grandson arrived. People who lived alone such as she did tended to show up at the coffeehouse just to have company to converse with.

With the break in the crowd, he started to clean the ceramic cups that he'd dumped in the sink behind him during the morning rush. The simplicity of the chore allowed his mind to wander and it wasn't long before he thought about how he'd felt when Allison had stepped into the shop earlier. The expression on her face said a lot. The tension in her body indicated that she'd followed his instructions to the letter. It made him anxious to talk with her more in-depth to discover how the night had gone.

He hadn't been kidding when he told her about his restless night. A raging hard-on had kept him awake for the few hours he'd been in bed. Frustration had forced him into the shop earlier than usual and anticipation had nearly caused him to go insane. The second he'd spotted her in the doorway, it had all been worth it.

When his shift ended, he would call her and make plans to take her to dinner somewhere. Maybe the place where they'd first had dinner since they hadn't been back there.

Nick called out in greeting as he walked in and Patrick filed away any more thoughts about Allison. He needed to talk to his brother about the encounter with Vivian last night. Something still didn't sit right with him about it and he was positive a conversation with Nick would take care of everything.

He checked to see if there were any customers in line and saw no one, then strolled to the back office where Nick sat at the small desk. "Business has been steady all morning."

"That's good. Have you seen the invoices for the milk deliveries? I think the bill is due in a few days."

"Uh yeah, third stack on your right, second sheet of paper down. Due next Thursday."

Nick extracted the thin sheet of paper and blinked a few times after he'd read it. "How the hell do you do that?"

"It's a gift." Patrick glanced at the oversized clock on the wall behind Nick's head and noted it was just after one. "Hey, listen. Darla's due any moment and she can handle things for a bit. Why don't you and I have lunch over at Wayne's Deli? My treat."

"I'd love to Patrick, but I've got too much to do." Paper shifted as Nick lifted another stack of paperwork and searched for something else only he was aware of. "I have got to get all these invoices paid and filed before it gets away from me."

"Nick, I saw Vivian last night at Rippers." There was a slight movement as Nick's fingers twitched. If his brother hadn't held the paperwork in his hand, he would have never noticed.

"So? She's evidently free to do what she wants," Nick finally said after he tossed down the paperwork. His blue eyes closed and he pressed his fingers against the lids.

As much as he hated to see his brother like this, they needed to talk. Vivian's comment couldn't go ignored because Patrick didn't appreciate being held accountable for something he hadn't done. Or at least wasn't aware of. He would admit it if he fucked up, but this seemed to be something else entirely.

"Does that include blaming me for whatever's going on between the two of you? I mean, I don't know about you, but I'd sure as hell like to know what I'm responsible for."

Nick dismissed his words. "She's just trying to lay the blame somewhere else."

"For the first time in your life, I do believe you're lying to me," he said without the slightest bit of happiness in his voice. It bothered him that his brother would dismiss something like this so quickly. If he hadn't run into Vivian last night, he wouldn't have known he was being blamed for their problems. He didn't take kindly to it and didn't appreciate Nick's nonchalance about the subject even more.

"It's my business, Patrick. Back the fuck off."

Patrick's hand slammed down on the papers Nick had been about to organize. His temper flared to life, which rarely happened because he prided himself on his ability to maintain control. He'd watched his father lose his temper too many times growing up to let it happen now that he was an adult.

"It was your business until your wife called me out and said I was the one to blame for your separation. I think that's plenty of justification as to why I'm owed an explanation."

"Fine," Nick said tightly. "Give me twenty minutes."

## Chapter Twelve

The smells of various meats and freshly baked bread greeted the men when they entered Wayne's Deli. The last of the lunch crowd still mingled and they settled into a vacant booth across from the gleaming glass case that held pounds of fresh meat. Patrick wasn't particularly hungry, but he ordered a roast beef on rye anyway.

His brother ordered the same before he struck up a conversation. "How are things with Allison?"

Ah, the small talk he hated to deal with. This was yet another reason why he hated it. Nick wanted to avoid the subject they'd come here to discuss, but Patrick wouldn't let him get away so easily. "Great, but we both know that's not why we're here to talk. What's going on?"

Nick fidgeted on his side of the booth. Patrick knew he had a right to know why and would wait this out for as long as it took.

His brother sighed heavily and folded his hands on the table in front of him. "I know why Vivian moved out, despite my insinuations otherwise."

The statement confirmed the suspicion he'd had all along. It was a rare instance when a spouse didn't know why their loved one had suddenly packed all their belongings and left. There were always signs, however minute. Nick had to have known, but Patrick had never thought to push. "So you knew. What I can't figure out is why she said I'm responsible for it."

"You're not, at least not directly. Vivian is mistaken."

"And indirectly?" Patrick didn't like either choice, but there seemed to be little he could do about it. "Can you please enlighten me so I know what the fuck I did?"

"I told her about Sanctuary."

Patrick wasn't surprised. It wasn't as if he'd kept the space a secret from Nick. Of course, he'd never told him exactly what went on inside the warehouse. No one had any right to that information other than the four renters and the lovers they chose to invite there.

However, he'd never made it a secret to Nick about his choices either, especially one night when he'd gotten caught at the boarding house their mother owned because Nick had barged in while Patrick had been entertaining. If binding a woman to a chair so that her legs were spread wide could be classified as *entertaining*.

It had been one of the main reasons he'd come up with the idea for the warehouse in the first place. While the choices he made weren't things to be ashamed of, he recognized the fact not everyone shared his open mind. Vivian had never struck him as a close-minded prude, but stranger things had happened.

"So she's offended by my choices when it comes to sex? Seems like more of an excuse to me."

Nick kept his voice low as he answered. "She thinks your choices influenced me when I asked her how she would feel about exploring different sides of our sexuality. Find out what sort of things we liked that were something more than just the plain old missionary position. So she's blaming you when she should really be blaming me. I mean, she is blaming me, but you're bearing some of the brunt as well. I told her about

Sanctuary because it would be a safe place we could explore...well, I don't have to tell you."

Nick shoved the rest of his sandwich into his mouth to prevent himself from saying more. Patrick now understood Vivian's vitriol the previous evening. That didn't make it better, but it made him understand more about what was going on between them.

"Christ, Nick. You can't let that be a reason to end your marriage. Can't you try to work it out with her?"

His brother's hair fell over his eyes as his head shook and Nick lifted a hand to push it away. "I've tried to talk to her twice and she's refusing to speak to me. About anything. You can't work out something when the other person simply denies you the right to have your say. Maybe I was wrong for bringing it up in the first place."

He wanted to tell Nick just how wrong he was. He'd been down the path of trying to make someone else happy and knew that wasn't any way to live your life. It was time to pass on a little tough love.

"So instead you could be in an unhappy marriage? That sounds like a great way to fix it. You know as well as I do that it would just be something else down the line. Some simple problem that flares wildly out of control because other issues aren't resolved."

"But I'm unhappy now," Nick protested.

"Very true. However, that can be worked with. If you didn't say anything—which you have a right to do—you'd be miserable for the rest of your life. Is that what you want?" He could tell he hadn't made his point clear enough. "Remember what you told me when I first said something to you about Allison?"

Nick shrugged and averted his gaze. "Not exactly, but I'm guessing it was about love?"

What Nick had unknowingly done was remind him what a relationship was like. What it meant to think about someone else's needs and wants over his own. It caused him to realize, in a very short amount of time, that he'd found that special place with Allison.

The trouble Nick and Vivian had reminded him relationships, regardless of what stage they were in, required the work of both partners. While the sex with Allison seemed one-sided, it was anything but. She would have never agreed to do anything with him if it hadn't been something she desired in return. He may have taken her to new territory, but it wasn't anywhere she hadn't wanted to go. That was the purpose of the safe word and since she hadn't used it yet, he assumed they hadn't found her hard limit. He'd pushed her a little farther each and every time they were together, but never in any way that made it seem as if he forced her to do it. Based on her reactions, he suspected they'd reach his hard limit before her.

"It goes both ways. If Vivian refuses to talk to you because of some wish or desire you have then maybe it's time to move on." He certainly didn't condone giving in so easily and suspected Nick didn't either. There were only so many instances, however, when someone could stand next to a wall and beat their head against it. He'd done it enough to know better.

This couldn't have been the first time Nick and Vivian had problems that needed to be resolved as every healthy relationship went through tumultuous times.

"Remember Mom always told us relationships are a two way street especially when it comes to compromise. Jesus, if nothing else, our parent's marriage falling apart like it did should be a reminder of what not do. Mom stayed even though Dad couldn't give two

shits about any of us unless we made a handy punching bag. Do you really want that for any kids you and Vivian could possibly have in the future?"

Nick emphatically shook his head. "No, I would never want to wish our childhood on any kids."

Neither would Patrick. "Then if Viv's not willing to work with you on the issues, there's nothing you can do to force her. In fact, from what it sounds like, forcing her would definitely be the wrong thing to do. Maybe this is for the best for both of you after all. This gives her a chance to move on and find someone she is willing to compromise with. Before you say anything, I agree, everyone should make sort of effort to bend a little, but not entirely. Not if it's a compromise that makes you utterly miserable. Maybe this is your chance to figure out what you're looking for."

Nick rolled his eyes. "Of which I don't even know. I wanted to explore that with Vivian."

"And she slammed the door in your face." Patrick studied Nick's face and saw the frustration that painted those lines. Lines that had only appeared recently due to the strain of current events. Patrick knew of something that could possibly help, but found himself hesitant to make the suggestion considering who he sat across the table from him. He wouldn't condone the behavior, but desperate times sometimes called for desperate measures.

"I hate to say it because I would never suggest something like this under normal circumstances, but have you thought about going out to Element Twenty-Six? Not participate or anything, but ask if you can look around to see if it's something that interests you enough to maybe participate in one day. Try to get a sense if that's the option you're really looking for."

"No, it's too soon," Nick said in disagreement.

"Which is completely understandable given the circumstances and I totally agree it is much too soon. But it is something to think about for a later point in time." It was the answer he'd expected. It wasn't that he doubted his brother. In fact, he knew him well enough to know that once Nick made up his mind about something, he was determined to do what he could to make it happen.

Perfect Shot was the best example of that determination.

Above all, he didn't want to see Nick let the current situation sway him if that's the direction his life took. Patrick advocated the need to fulfill your desires, especially if no one got hurt in the process.

"Whenever you're ready, if that's what you really decide you want to explore, let me know. I'll see if I can't work something out for you." He had no idea how, but he would do whatever it took to ensure something was done. It would make him feel better to know Nick had someone experienced at his side to guide him.

Nick smiled in thanks and pushed away the empty plate that sat on the table in front of him. "You know, I should be the one saying this sort of stuff to you. Be the one giving the brotherly advice, I mean. Looking after me."

Luckily, Patrick wasn't insulted. There were quite a few instances where he'd stepped up to the plate for Nick, but he wasn't the type of brother who held it over his head. "Why? Is it because you're older? Sometimes older doesn't necessarily mean wiser."

It was a quiet jab and caused Nick to smirk. It was a nice sight after the earlier



tension. The two men had dealt with enough fighting in their life when they were younger, so they made it a point to work things out long before it ever became a shouting match. Patrick's temper at the office earlier had been about as heated as it ever got between them.

"I envy you, Patrick. You've always known about yourself and what you wanted."

"You have no idea," He scoffed because life was never that simple. He wished it had been because he could have coasted through much easier. For a long time, he'd been in denial. Luckily, he'd taken his own advice—the very same kind he'd just handed to Nick—and basically gave the world the great big middle finger. No one got hurt and it had always been consensual with his partners.

*Do it if it feels good.*

Maybe it was a hedonistic approach, but so far, it hadn't failed him. "For a long time, I denied everything completely. Getting where I am now hasn't been an easy journey, but one I don't regret a bit. Especially now."

The image of Allison formed in his mind and reminded him he needed to get back to the store so he could make sure everything was set up for the rest of the day. It would leave the rest of his night free to do as he pleased.

What he wanted to do was Allison.

He signaled to Nick they should leave, but his brother stopped him with a firm hand on his forearm.

"Thanks. For everything, I mean. For making me talk about this because I've been keeping it bottled up. Most of all for opening the shop with me, I couldn't have done it without you."

"Of course you couldn't."

## Chapter Thirteen

The Copper Nickel was packed to capacity tonight, but Allison and Patrick had been able to find a table in the furthest corner of the main seating area. It backed to the knee-high wall that separated the bar area from the dining room, but the flow of the wait staff was minimal despite the business of the restaurant. For now, the bar area was virtually empty as happy hour was over and the late night crowd hadn't yet emerged.

Allison suspected they would be long gone by then. It had been just over four weeks since opening day of the coffeehouse. Thirty-six days since she'd first laid eyes on Patrick and nearly twenty-fours since his unbelievable phone call. She never would have suspected her life would have made this drastic of a turn during that period, at least the sexual part of her life. Now she couldn't imagine not being with him or his warehouse.

It was her little secret. Both the clandestine room he kept for sexual indulgences and the man himself. Those same pleasures had quickly become the same as hers and she was anxious to return. She'd gone through the day more on edge than ever. She wanted him to tip her over that edge and more than anything, wanted to take him with her.

Since she realized how much he meant to her, constant thoughts about him occupied her time. While the vast majority of those thoughts were sexual in nature, large portions of them were not. Sometime during the middle of the day, she'd come to the conclusion she was in love with Patrick Conners.

Based on his interests, however, it was something she kept to herself. Her initial reaction to him had been purely physical. It hadn't taken long for him to confess the same and she knew while sexual attraction was important between partners, you couldn't base a relationship simply on sex.

Not a long term one, at least.

For now, the sex suited them both. He found what he needed in her and she discovered new things about herself each and every time they were together—which had been quite a bit. If nothing else, this was a journey where she had learned far more about herself than she ever thought possible.

Despite her thoughts throughout the day, time had taken away the razor sharpness she had balanced on since awakening that morning. Now, instead of a quick release to ease the tension, she wanted a leisurely fuck that lasted all night. He had always anticipated her needs, so she was interested to see what he had in store for her.

The conversation through dinner was quiet and relatively uncomplicated with no mention of the phone call or what his plans were for the night. When the waiter brought their after-dinner coffee, the conversation shifted to familiar territory.

"I've never taken the time to ask you about all of this. My assumption is that you find enjoyment in it as you continue to be a very active participant. But I'd really like to know what you think about all of this. How you feel about my giving you orders and especially about the restraints."

She thought it over for a few minutes before responding. "It's odd in a way. Not at all what I expected."

"How so?"

It was hard to articulate her feelings into words that made sense. She'd tried to do it

herself and couldn't quite grasp the concepts needed in order to understand it. However, she wanted to try, for him. "I feel safe with the cuffs on. I was a bit surprised to discover that I'm not alone with what I like either."

"Ugol's Law." He continued on when she looked at him oddly. "No matter how odd or bizarre your kink, there's always someone else out there who likes the same thing. While I've never personally been bound, as I like to be the one doing the binding, I've heard some people say it's a comfort. Like they don't have to think—they just follow the instructions given."

Her eyes widened in shock and shook her head. "Oh, no. I still think, even with the cuffs on, so I don't agree with that statement. Sometimes the anticipation heightens the sensation to make it better when something does happen."

"And the cuffs?" he asked.

"Enhance that. Strangely enough, as I said, not what I expected to feel at all. I know wearing them everything is confined to that very moment in time, whatever is happening. I like the weight of them against my skin. Hell, given enough time, I could probably get off when simply wearing them and you doing nothing. Which is probably why I could never wear them all the time."

"Why's that?"

Her gaze met his and she noticed his intense look as he waited for her answer. It wasn't hard to see that his mind worked over the thought of her as she wore the cuffs all the time. To her, the appeal of wearing nothing but the cuffs while he looked on for long stretches of time, was tempting. The edge that had dulled marginally throughout the course of the day sharpened again and she shifted in her seat. A cold sweat erupted on her skin as her cheeks heated. "It would remind me of sex with you too much. I'd never get anything done if that were the case."

He tapped his spoon on the table and smiled. "Well now, we can't have that. However, that does lead me to my next question." He hesitated for a moment and took a sip of his coffee before he continued. "How would you feel about being collared?"

"You mean like asphyxiation?" A series of warning bells sounded in the back of her brain. This was territory where she wouldn't hesitate to pull out her safe word. It hadn't been used yet as he hadn't found anything that made her think to use it.

"No, of course not. That would be one of my hard limits," he said in a rush and she sensed his panic at the tone of her question. "While I realize some people may find enjoyment in such a thing, I meant more of something to match your cuffs."

Allison eyed him skeptically and studied his face. He hadn't been totally honest with her. He hadn't lied, but something about the set of his expression and the sound of need she detected in his voice gave away the fact he talked about something that interested *him*. It was as if he wanted to gauge her interest in something before he voiced his next idea. "You know, something tells me you've already made the purchase—like the cuffs—they're sitting at the warehouse waiting."

"Very perceptive. Do you find you like that idea?" He didn't confirm her suspicions, but he hadn't denied them either.

"Yes, I do," she said quietly as she met his gaze with unwavering determination. It didn't bother her in the least that he'd purchased something for her again without consultation. She didn't mind being surprised and actually found comfort in being with someone who always wanted to explore.

“Then yes,” he dropped the spoon and folded his hands together. “I recently purchased one for us. As always, the decision is entirely up to you.”

She noted the use of the word ‘us’ in that statement. A warm glow started to come to life inside her. He truly meant it some time ago when he said this wasn’t all just about him—it was about them together. Their likes and dislikes and about the journey they took together as they reached a place where they both found something enjoyable. “You’re a complete gentleman, you know that, Patrick?”

“Is that bad?”

“No. No, I find I quite enjoy the contradiction you make.”

“I’m assuming that’s a compliment of a sort?” he asked with a bit of skepticism of his own.

“Of course it is. At work, even on a date, you’re a gentleman. You hold doors for other people, even pull out their chairs for them. Then you ask them how their day went and care about what the answer to that question is regardless if it interests you or not. Most men today completely forget about that sort of thing and to be perfectly honest it’s probably our own doing. Women’s lib and all that ‘I can do it myself’ type of thing. However, in the bedroom, you are anything but. I would never have guessed you were into this type of thing.”

His mouth twisted into a frown. “I beg your pardon? I’m still a gentleman in the bedroom.”

She’d offended him. That hadn’t been her intention. “I didn’t mean it like that. I meant the whole cuffs, collar and telling me what you want once we’re in the room at the warehouse. Even when you had me secured to the cross. It’s like once you step through the door you become a completely different person. Like you allow yourself to let go and truly be yourself.”

He was quiet for a few minutes. A long enough stretch of time that caused her to wonder if she’d put her foot in her mouth. “So you’re saying outside of that room, I’m not who I want to be?”

She let out a sigh, relieved that she would get another chance to explain herself. She hadn’t intended to explain this to him quite yet, but she’d already opened her mouth and there was no way to turn back now. “You are—in a way. But in that room you are truly free. You have slipped before however.”

“I have?”

She nodded and shot him a wicked smile. “At the comic book store and again on the phone last night. Even sometimes when we’re together, you...say things most people wouldn’t normally say out loud.”

“Does that bother you?”

He was certainly full of questions tonight. Not that she blamed him. She had sprung this on him out of nowhere when he’d asked a perfectly innocent question. “Not at all. And the answer is no, by the way. I’ve never worn—or even thought about wearing—a collar. That doesn’t mean I’m not willing to. For you.”

His expression softened and the worry melted away. “You do know just because I enjoy something I still realize that doesn’t mean you will.”

“Well, the same goes for me. There may be things I’ve yet to discover about myself that you may find don’t interest you.” She exhaled a slow breath. “The point is that neither of us will know until we try.”

Without a word, he tossed the napkin down on the table, pushed his chair back and stood. He offered his hand and her stomach jumped as she reached out and wound her fingers with his. They threaded their way through the busy dining room and he even kissed her fingertips as they walked. Once outside, he turned to her and brushed back a few strands of hair that had blown across her face in the slight spring breeze.

“I agree, we won’t. So, with that in mind, I’d like to take things a little further.”

## Chapter Fourteen

Twenty minutes later, he unlocked the door to his room at Sanctuary. He reached into the small black box as he shut and locked the door behind them and Allison chewed her lip. A thick length of leather was his hands and her heart rate spiked in response.

Based on their earlier conversation, she'd known what he had in mind, but had never actually seen one. The sight caused butterflies to flutter around in her stomach. This really was new. That trepidation melted away when the cuffs she'd worn before came out of the box. She shuddered in anticipation and those butterflies vanished.

His thumb brushed against her cheek and realized she stared blindly at the collar. Gentle fingers blazed a trail over her jaw. At this close distance, she felt the heat of him cradle her. It kept her safe and made her feel loved.

"Are you okay?" His voiced was hushed as he asked.

She swallowed hard as she moved her eyes from the collar to his face. Emotion read clear on his face. He second-guessed himself and the next step they both agreed to take. Above all, she hadn't intended for that to happen. She'd meant what she said earlier, that she wouldn't know until she tried. "I'm fine."

"No, you're not." He shook his head and pulled away. "Your pupils dilated as soon as I pulled this out. That's usually a sign you're afraid. We'll maybe try this some other time, all right?"

This was new ground despite the places he'd taken her to recently. Someone actually cared about what she wanted. Their wants weren't priority and she was given a choice about whether to continue or not. It wasn't what she associated with the whole dominance and submission aspect.

She realized why she reacted that way. He truly cared about her and how she felt. This wasn't a one-sided sexual relationship where one person cared only for what they wanted. The experience was for them both, not just him. Maybe she'd been wrong when she'd said he was more of a gentleman outside of this room than inside it.

Her hands slipped around Patrick's wrists and guided the round collar to her neck. The expression on his face altered and she saw a sudden flash of hunger. *There you are.* There was the man she'd glimpsed a time or two. The one she'd seen that day at the comic book store. The one who so desperately tried to keep his control firmly latched so no one knew the truth.

She fed off that energy and let it spread like warm fingers through her. Control was an easy thing to give him now and she felt comforted because he knew exactly what he wanted. She admired—and wanted for herself—that certainty.

With him, she was certain she would find it.

"This is a posture collar." His voice was quiet and heavy with need. The quick slide of arousal touched between her thighs at the sound of it. The smooth leather immediately warmed against her skin as he slipped it around her throat and despite the fact she'd never worn anything like this, she felt comfortable right away. Most of all, just like the first time he'd slipped the cuffs on her wrists, the collar felt as if it were exactly what she wanted and needed.

The gentle curve of the material cradled her jaw and didn't prevent movement of her

head, but definitely prohibited a wide range of movement. She could comfortably swallow and open her mouth, but that was all. When she realized that had been his intention, her body flooded with heat and she inhaled sharply in response as a quiet laugh passed her lips.

The expression on his face changed. His gentle smile vanished as he secured the lock on the back of the collar. "This isn't intended to be amusing." The words were spoken carefully and through gritted teeth.

"This isn't amusement." Her voice matched his in tone and sounded foreign to her.

Despite the charged air around them, she was safe. She couldn't explain why the circle of leather made her feel that way but decided not to question it. What she did know was that her wrists felt bare because he'd always cuffed her by this point. Missing their weight, she held her wrists out. "Something's missing."

"Aren't I the one who is supposed to be issuing demands?"

It hadn't been a demand, but she realized her mistake. "I'm sorry."

His face softened as he slipped out of the moment. "Don't be. Don't ever, ever be sorry. This isn't just for me. We're in this together, understand?"

She nodded in response and watched as he buckled the left cuff first, then the right, around her wrists. He blew out a shaky breath as soon as the last piece of leather was threaded through the buckle. Confused, she lifted her gaze to his and saw the raw emotion in the depths of his eyes.

His finger grazed over the curve of her ear and he pressed a light kiss to her forehead. "You have no idea how gorgeous you are right now, do you?"

No, she didn't, but she'd seen the change in his body—even felt it. That was a clear indicator as to what he saw. Arousal filled the room and the space around them so thick that it sank into her skin and nearly drowned her. Its scorching hot touch traveled along her spine, around her hips and pooled low in her abdomen so that her entire body tingled.

He never failed to surprise her and this was no exception. The expected order didn't come. Instead, he took his time to carefully disrobe her. First her tee, then her pants. He paused and admired her as she stood before him in a thin pair of panties and a bra.

With light contact, he reached out and traced the underside of her breasts with one finger. Even through the padded material, she felt his sizzling touch. Her breath caught as he traced a pattern.

"That is completely perfect and absolutely you."

Startled, she saw that he'd traced the outline of the Superman logo laser-cut into the fabric at the top of the bra cup.

*Dear God, of all the times to get caught wearing this bra.* Mortified, she shrugged off the strap as he lowered it and listened to his chuckle.

At least he was amused by it.

The scraps of fabric fell to the floor as he undressed her and she stood before him entirely naked. She could tell the instant he slipped back into the scene and her stomach flipped in anticipation as he locked the cuffs together behind her back.

His hand closed over both her shoulders. "On your knees," he ordered with determined force and she lowered herself in compliance. Her breath altered as it fell into a familiar pattern. She had already slipped into the hazy state she succumbed to when they were together.

Patrick's fingers worked the button of his jeans and her anticipation jumped with

each slide of metal through denim. Before she knew it, the pants pooled around his ankles and he pushed them away. Freed from the confines of the somewhat heavy material, she scented his arousal. Musk mixed with power. She'd smelled it before, as most lovers did when they engaged in some kind of sexual activity with their partner. However, in this position, it washed over her like a spring rain shower.

Something about this time was different.

He slid off the briefs he wore and stood before her completely nude. He was a glorious sight to behold and the image he made was not one she would soon forget. She would always cherish the picture as he stood over her this way.

Taken by the moment, she leaned forward and slid her tongue over the already swollen head of his thick length. The taste of the salty fluid danced on her tongue as his breath hissed between his teeth, the quiet moan he gave filled with need. His body jerked in surprise and she realized she'd tasted him without thinking. The sound he'd made fueled her and she opened her mouth wider to surround the entire head of his cock. His hiss was drawn out, sharpened as he tunneled his fingers through her hair in encouragement. She relaxed her jaw as much as the collar would allow and under his hands, surrendered her control.

"I have thought about this all day. About how I'd order you on your knees so I could feel what your mouth was like as you swallowed me." He moved his hips slightly and she rolled her tongue along the underside of the hardness in her mouth. His fingers tightened against her head as a quiet gasp escaped from between his lips. Again, the sound of it coupled with his words, fueled her and she dragged her teeth against his flesh as he started to pull away.

His legs trembled and she wondered if his control was merely an illusion. Though Allison—the submissive—was the one on her knees in front of Patrick—the dominant—she was the one who actually had all the power. She could put a stop to this at any moment and he would heed her wishes.

One word, that's all it took.

That thought empowered her and fueled the heady arousal that coursed through her. His muscles shifted as he started to remove himself from her mouth, but she wasn't finished. Not even close. She'd wondered what it would be like to be on her knees before him and now that she was, she wasn't about to give it up so easily. She'd had her first taste and now she wanted it all.

She pushed forward and took more of him into her mouth. Her teeth grazed over the surface of his hard skin as she moved and he gave a strangled cry in response.

"You are so fucking wonderful, do you know that? Your mouth is so fucking wonderful." His voice faltered a bit. It was as if he could barely maintain control. He hadn't expected her to do what she had.

His fingers tightened against her head and he rolled his hips, prepared to push himself more deeply into her mouth. She was grateful that he seemed to understand the mechanics involved with the current position. They found a rhythm that suited them both and as he shifted, he moved deeper. It allowed her to gradually relax her throat muscles to take each and every inch he offered to her.

His movements quickened and she surrendered full control and completely relaxed her throat and jaw. He groaned in approval as her nose brushed against the coarse hair on his lower abdomen. She expected him to move again, but instead, he surprised her by



holding her in place.

“Swallow,” he said with a strained tone to his voice. She’d barely heard him over the buzz that filled her entire body. Her throat muscles worked over him as she did as instructed and he groaned in appreciation. The sound drove her to swallow again and she felt him grow harder and larger in her mouth.

The need for air caused her to pull back a few inches and draw a few quick breaths in through her nose. She moved again, swallowed him entirely once more. Her tongue cradled the underside of his cock and used the muscles in it to caress him. The muscles of her mouth and throat flexed and moved around him as she milked him.

A deep, guttural moan of unreserved satisfaction sounded over the roar in her ears and she felt his erection go rock hard seconds before the orgasm tore through him. As she greedily swallowed, she urged more from him and moved with shallow thrusts as he bathed her throat.

She wasn’t finished until she drank him dry.

It was a long few moments before his orgasm abated and his entire body trembled as he fought for control in order to stand before her. Now his knees shook.

Unwilling to sever the connection with him just yet, she curled her tongue over his softened length and lightly sucked. The taste of his spent flesh in her mouth made her close her eyes and savor him. He pulled away after a moment and knelt before her as his hands shook.

She’d done this to him. The geek who spent most of her time behind a computer screen had just brought this statue of a man to his knees. His touch was light, his hands cradled her jaw as if she would shatter into a million pieces.

Her gaze lifted and she smiled at the clear blue sparkle that greeted her.

“How is it possible that you’re mine? How can one man get so lucky to have a woman in his life that is so completely open to anything?” His lips lightly caressed her face as he asked questions that needed no answer. He mapped the graceful planes of her face before finally settling his mouth over hers. Without hesitation, she opened for him when his tongue slid against the seam of her mouth.

She savored the taste of his mouth as it mingled with the remnants of his release. His fingers cradled her head again, but this time, he unlatched the lock on the back of the collar. The leather fell to the floor with a heavy thud and she mourned the loss for a moment.

Her mind blanked when Patrick’s lips slid down the side of her neck, and kissed where the leather had pressed against her skin. He inhaled deeply and savored the smell of the leather that still hovered over her skin. Moving with exact precision, he pressed his mouth to every surface he could reach in their position. Seemingly satisfied for now, he moved on, let his mouth graze over the gentle slope of one of her breasts before he nipped the sensitive skin.

She sighed at the sensation and relished the feel of his warm, moist tongue against her nipples. Heat curled in her belly to flow out to her extremities and made her feel as if she were on fire. She nearly whimpered when he abruptly severed the connection.

“Stand up,” he ordered, his tone firm, the tenderness between them gone for the moment.

Her eyes fluttered open as she watched him stand and put at least a foot between them. He offered no assistance and she smiled inwardly because she wouldn’t need it. In

one fluid motion, she pushed up and proudly stood before him, her hands still bound behind her. If he was surprised, he hid it well.

It was a marked difference from the last time he'd put her on her knees and she'd stumbled. Her confidence soared as she met his gaze squarely. Even without words, she knew he approved.

He surprised her, though, when he spun on his heel and left her where she stood.

## Chapter Fifteen

Stunned, she watched as he disappeared into the small kitchenette on the opposite side of the room. He didn't turn on the lights as he moved around and there was only a brief flicker of light as she heard the door to the refrigerator open and then shut.

She wondered if this was similar to the time he'd fastened her to the cross.

His shadowed form stepped out of the dark kitchen and approached her. He held a glass in his hand and a piece of white paper sat inside it. There was no indication of his intention as he walked past her and stopped in front of the box he kept on one of the small tables next to the bed. Even without the telltale sound of the foil, she knew exactly what was in that box.

Anticipation flared to life inside her as he moved in front of the wide window. The soft light of the security lamp outside backlit his body as he placed the items on the wide sill.

He turned and even with the distance between them, she felt the tension that radiated from his body. "Come here."

She kept her head up as she approached, despite the fact she had no idea what he had planned. In her mind, it didn't matter. They were in this together.

"Turn around," he commanded and her body moved even before she thought to follow the command. The metal of the D-rings on the cuffs made a click as he released them. However, he kept his hands clutched tightly around her wrists just under the cuffs so she couldn't move.

Without a word, he maneuvered her to the wide board that formed a seat at waist height in front of the window and lifted her onto it. She watched in curiosity as he pressed each of her wrists to a loop of metal welded to the upper part of the lower window. The D-rings slipped easily around the hook created for the sole purpose to keep her in place.

*Handy.*

"I love you like this. Bound up and held in place for me." His lips dragged over hers and she moaned in approval as his tongue slipped into her mouth again. She returned his kiss with equal fervor, savored the taste that intermingled on her tongue. With her legs unrestrained, she wrapped her calves around his waist so she could pull him against her. He broke the kiss and put some distance between them.

"Do you know some Tops can train their bottoms to orgasm on command? Some take another approach and deny orgasm completely for days on end."

The thought of both intrigued her. That someone would knowingly deny their lover the pleasure orgasm brought or even tell them when to come. In a way, they'd done something similar when he'd called her on the phone. He'd never told her she couldn't orgasm, just that she couldn't move the dildo to seek completion.

"No."

"Does the suggestion of either excite you?"

"Yes," she stammered once she had a handle on the sudden spike of arousal her body experienced. Apparently, the thought of either option thrilled her more than she'd expected.

He lifted a hand to her face and skimmed his thumb over the surface of her lips. “We’d both need to work on the coming on command because I don’t have enough experience in that area. I would never tell you can’t find pleasure through not having an orgasm for however long I deem necessary. It’s an interesting prospect, but I find I can only make a lover suffer so much. I do have some experience with short spans of denial and I came up with my own little twist on it.”

Even as she was nodded in agreement, he reached for the glass he’d placed nearby. When he held up the square of paper, she recognized it as a Popsicle.

His gaze never left hers as he removed the wrapper and slid his tongue along the entire surface to lick away the small ice crystals that had formed on the dark purple surface. He lowered himself to his knees and she immediately understood his intent and the twist he’d spoke of.

The cold touched her skin and pulled a loud gasp of surprise from her. He took advantage of her reaction by slipping some of the confection inside her. The shock of cold startled her at first, immediately relaxed into it. The feel of something solid and icy against blazing hot skin was intense.

She shivered as he withdrew the length of the dessert from inside her and watched as he ran his tongue up one side before he closed his mouth around it completely. His eyes closed and she watched him smile around it as he suckled.

“Sweet, just like you.” His tongue, slick with the sticky syrup, slid against her clitoris and she hissed out another breath as he slipped it inside her again. He continued the pattern, alternated between sliding it into her and sucking on it until it was nearly gone.

There was a soft noise as the stick was dropped back into the glass and he rose to stand. His gaze never left hers as he reached past the glass and plucked up the foil square he’d tossed there earlier.

Her mouth watered as he sheathed himself with the latex and she squirmed against the wood sill in anticipation despite the cold that spread through her. While she was distracted, he moved forward and closed his mouth over hers.

She arched toward him, wanted more.

Apparently, just as much on the edge as she was, he grasped her hips and lifted her a little so he was positioned perfectly between her legs. Muscles, confused by the hot and cold sensation, cried out for relief. She was certain the coldness would vanish once he entered her.

However, once he did, she was surprised to find the cold didn’t immediately abate despite the heat from him. It was an odd mix of cold and hot that made her want more.

Just when she thought she had control and could use it to fuel a release, the chill would smother whatever heat had built. It was a frustrating mix that was both powerfully addictive and highly frustrating.

He had been right when he’d said it was a way to delay orgasm. While it didn’t have the same effect as outright denial, the cold deadened sensation in the muscles enough to prevent anything from happening until they were sufficiently warmed.

Despite the fact it felt like a lifetime, the battle only lasted a few minutes. Her body finally overcame the cold and flooded with a rush of heat that caught her off guard.

“That’s it, I feel it inside you, Allison. It’s mine. You’re only allowed to come for me. I’m the one who controls it, not you.” His words were gritty and rough and her body

listened to the orders.

The spark of warmth was just as intense as the cold and it quickly overwhelmed her. She was swept to another world where she couldn't control anything. Every move Patrick made, every thrust inside her or slide of his hand against her hip, sent her spiraling even further out of control.

His hand closed around the back of her knee and lifted her leg for better leverage. The shift in position didn't allow her any semblance of control and the sudden rush of orgasm exploded through her. A second one began almost immediately and she gave herself over to the pure sensation of it.

She felt as if she floated.

The descent was agonizingly slow and just when she thought it was over, she was surprised when her body rocketed upward again. She listened as her voice echoed off the surrounding walls and let it push her even higher.

Reality returned in slow increments.

With each exhale, she became more aware of everything around her. Patrick had released her arms from the window and she used them to support her upper body despite the fact her entire body felt limp.

"Fuck me," she swore quietly as the last vestige of the orgasms melted away. Her entire body felt as if it was alive, but she didn't have the energy to move.

He pressed his lips against her neck. "Forgive me for not attending to that request right away. I'll need a few moments to recover." He pulled her over to the bed before he collapsed next to her.

She blew out a shaky breath as she stared at the exposed beams overhead until they went out of focus. "That was..."

"Yes?" he asked and reached over to undo the cuffs that still circled her wrists. The leather hit the wood floor with a loud noise, but neither of them cared.

There were no words to describe how she felt right now. Or what he'd done to her to make her feel like this. "I have no clue. What was that?"

"That out of control feeling where you're not sure if you can take anymore, but find—quite delightfully—that you can? Its most commonly referred to as subspace to those in the lifestyle and usually achieved when one partner pushes the other further than they've ever been before. I believe I once told you something about pure, unrestrained pleasure."

Nodding in agreement, she found the strength to curl onto her side and settled her head against the strong curve of his shoulder. For a few minutes, there was only the sound of his strong and even breathing.

She thought he'd fallen asleep when he suddenly turned his head and pressed his lips to her forehead. His breath fluttered against her skin as he spoke. "I call it sanctuary."

## Chapter Sixteen

Friday night was game night for Allison and her group of friends. This week she served as host to four of her gaming buddies. They were currently camped out on the living room floor while she was in the kitchen organizing soda and snacks for the rest of the night. Pizza was on the way as well and she had to grab a stack of paper plates since she didn't own enough dishes for them all. A terrifying thought occurred to her just as she stripped the plastic overwrap off the plates.

At the same moment, she heard a roar of laughter from the living room and she leaned her head against the cabinet in defeat. A wolf whistle screeched over the laughter and blood rushed to her cheeks in embarrassment as realization dawned.

Last time she'd gamed, she'd redesigned the outfit her avatar wore. Since she'd spent so much time with Patrick lately, she hadn't had a chance to revert it to the way it was normally kept.

Her eyes screwed shut as she quietly cursed herself for not taking the time to switch things back before everyone showed up tonight. They wouldn't let her live this down. Never in a million years.

As the noise in the other room grew to a deafening level, she knew she had to face the music and get it over with before things got too out of hand. Still berating herself for her absentmindedness, she stepped back into the room, paper plates and napkins clutched tightly in her fist.

There, in bold high definition color, was her gaming character in all her 64-bit glory. The avatar's clothing looked fairly normal for this particular video game as over the top was expected in this universe. It wasn't unusual to see Allison's av wear a skirt with slits up the front that exposed her thighs. Neither was it odd to find her breasts tightly confined in a skimpy leather vest that looked as if it would burst at any moment.

What were completely out of character, however, were the black and silver cuffs around her avatar's wrists. To make matters worse, the cuffs matched the collar that circled the character's throat. It had been on the character's neck for two weeks, a time that coincided with the first time Patrick presented her with his collar.

She cleared her throat and the noise in the room immediately ceased. Four pairs of eyes met hers as plates were set on the pizza boxes that had evidently been delivered while she was in the kitchen. Reaching forward, she tapped the eject button on the game. The critical mission she'd been in at the time would have to wait. She'd rather face the work it would take to get back to the same point some other time than let the men stare lecherously at it.

Ignoring them completely, she slipped the Halo game disk into the console then tapped the button in the center of the wireless controller to activate it. She looked expectantly at each man as she settled herself on the center of the couch and waited for the game to load.

Cooper made a sound and all eyes shot to where he sat near the television set. He snorted again as he apparently tried to contain whatever comments and laughter that was on the tip of his tongue.

She rolled her eyes and blew out a resigned breath.

*This is going to be a damn long night if they don't get this out in the open.*

This was part and parcel for such a close knit group of friends. "Go ahead, Cooper. Get it out of your system."

In response, he snorted again and dropped the controller he held. He carefully folded his hands in front of himself and offered them to her. "Mistress Allison, will you punish me?"

Her other three friends burst out laughing and she gave him a wry look. "You should all be punished for being complete asses." A knock sounded at the front door and it would be better to answer than add more fuel to the fire.

However, they evidently didn't feel the same way. The next comment shouldn't have surprised her given their attitude tonight. "Is that what you do to Patrick? Spank him on his ass for punishment when he misbehaves?"

There was another roar of laughter and her rolled eyes in disgust as she flung open the front door. The next comment died in her throat as Patrick stood in the hallway with a surprised look on his face. "Am I interrupting something?"

"High school jerkwad class apparently," she responded before waving him in and closing the door. He kissed her lightly on the cheek, for which she was grateful since they stood in full view of the living room. "Glad you could make it over."

"I would never pass up an opportunity to spend time with you."

The statement gave her a warm feeling all over and rose up on her toes to give him a firm kiss. Screw the fact her friends—who were acting like complete Neanderthals—could see. Why should she censor herself just because they were jerks? There was absolutely no reason she couldn't give her boyfriend a kiss if she wanted to. It wasn't like they would strip off their clothes and have sex right here on the floor in full view of everyone.

She tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow and encouraged him to follow her. "Come on, I'll introduce you. Hey guys, this is Patrick."

"Shouldn't you be introducing him as Master?"

She fought the urge to stride across the room and deliver a sharp slap to the back of Tony's head. Instead, she pointed to each of them in turn as they were introduced.

"Patrick this is Cooper, Mark, Scott and Dick."

"Hey, my name is Tony." There was a definite whine to his voice.

"Yes it is," she agreed. "But since you're being a dick this seems more fitting, doesn't it?" Sometimes she forgot how bad her friend's manners could get. However, it also reminded her how rarely anyone came over that wasn't part of the gaming circle. "Come to think of it, it seems even more fitting given your sexual proclivities." She gestured to her mouth with a cupped fist and made a motion that would be taken for exactly what it was. A roar went up from the group and she raised an eyebrow in defiance at him.

He'd dispute it, of course, and vow it wasn't the truth. Some comment would be made later when she wasn't around as he defended himself.

However, she knew better.

Sometimes, fact was the most powerful weapon of all.

She tugged on Patrick's elbow again and gestured for him to follow since she didn't want him around these guys alone. At least not right now. There was no way to prevent what would happen if so. "I'll get you a beer in the kitchen."

“Did I interrupt something?” he asked once they were alone in the small kitchen.

“No, they’re just in their prime tonight.” If only it were that simple. Her friends’ razzing was nothing out of the ordinary. The only thing unusual was the fact Patrick was here and not to play any sort of game with her.

Well, they’d certainly played their fair share of games, but nothing like the ones in the other room. “Just don’t put too much value into whatever they say right now. They seem to be a little full of themselves.”

“May I suggest you find yourself full of something else instead?” His lips were insistent and hot against hers and she melted into him. What she wouldn’t give for her friends to be somewhere else right now.

He spun her around so her back was tight against the refrigerator and sighed against his mouth as he slid his hand under her shirt. The guys in other room let out a shout as they celebrated their triumph while she and Patrick celebrated in their own way.

His dexterous fingers cupped both breasts for a fraction of second—just long enough for him to rocket her up to that precipice. Those hands moved down between her legs and slid through the wet heat that already soaked her underwear.

He had a dangerous glint in his eyes as he backed away and touched the tip of his tongue to his finger—the very same one that had just been inside her. A stab of lust nearly had her growling out her need for him and as she started to reach for him, he neatly avoided her grasp. The beer bottle he’d set on the counter was in his hand instead. He gave her a sly look as he lifted the bottle and walked out of the kitchen as if nothing were out of the ordinary.

*This man is going to be the death of me. And it’s a death I will willingly experience a thousand times over.*

It took a few breaths before she was steady enough to step back out into the living room. Her friends had quickly assimilated him into the game with them in a short amount of time. Even though he clearly didn’t know what he was doing, everyone appeared to have a good time.

She liked to see Patrick here with her small group of friends. They probably weren’t the type of males he typically associated with. She made it a point to ask him at some other time about his friends and if she could meet them. Their whole world had been each other lately. Not that there was anything wrong with spending a lot of time together.

As the night continued, Patrick seemed agitated. She thought back and tried to find the reason for his edginess, but could think of nothing. Maybe it was residual from the incident in the kitchen, but given the level of control she’d seen in him the morning after the infamous phone call, she dismissed that idea. No, something else bothered him and she intended to find out what it was.

She didn’t have to wait long as within the next ten minutes, the problem reached up and smacked her in the face. Mark had just made some comment about a woman he’d tried to get into the pants of lately and Scott had responded with a snide comment that was misogynistic in nature. Tony had then chimed in with another comment that made direct reference to Allison and the sight they’d discovered earlier with the cuffs and collar. Patrick’s face had darkened even further.

It was normal and even expected behavior for her friends—from her at least. Their comments were nothing out of the ordinary, and yes, uncouth and very crude. She’d grown accustomed to them over time. In fact, she expected it, knowing they only teased



her because they knew she could take it. Never would she ask them to censor themselves just because Patrick happened to be in the room. Nor had she expected him to join in unless he'd chosen to do so. He was too much of a gentleman to do that.

And that, she guessed, was exactly the problem.

She pushed away from the couch and tapped Patrick on the shoulder. "Hey guys, go on without us for a little bit. I need to talk to Patrick alone."

"Which is code for don't mind the noises from the kitchen for a few minutes while I let my Master have sex with me," Mark said just loud enough for everyone to hear and they all snorted in response.

Everyone, except Patrick.

Allison watched as he curled his hands into fists as he stood over her friends and grabbed him in order to pull him out of the room. The pocket door shut with a sharp snap as she closed it and automatically pressed a hand to his arm for comfort.

"Hey, are you okay?" Anger lit the blue in his irises and she tightened her hand around his arm. "Patrick."

"I'm fine."

From the tone of his voice, she knew it was an outright lie. It bothered her that he couldn't be more forthcoming. "What's the problem?"

"I didn't know you invited me over here to listen to a bunch of insults," he said hotly, the muscles of his arm flexed under her fingers.

She removed her hand and crossed her arms in front of her. "Patrick, these are my friends."

"Then you're friends with a bunch of assholes." He crossed his arms, mirrored her defensive position as he gestured to the living room with his chin.

"As are most men in my experience." Gauging the expression on his face, he wasn't pleased with her choice of company. Funny thing was, she wasn't happy with his behavior. Right now, he reminded her of some overbearing ass who pouted when he didn't get his way.

"They don't treat you as you should be treated."

She could tell from his steely gaze, he was genuinely pissed off about the way her friends had talked. The hair lifted on the back of her neck as warning bells sounded in her head. This wasn't the sort of behavior she'd expected from him. It flew in the face of the whole gentleman persona she'd spent time with. "And how's that?"

He reached for her, wrapped his hands around her upper arms before pulling her closer. The force of his grip surprised her and she tried to shake his hand off. "You aren't one of them."

This was one thing she would stand up for. "My friends aren't new additions in my life like you are. And I don't appreciate your tone about all of this either. There are certainly some things I'm willing to give concession to you for, especially when I'm down on my knees for you." She narrowed her eyes as she stepped back and shook off his hands. "Yes, I am like them, Patrick. The only difference between us is I don't have a dick. On all other playing fields, I'm equal. I'm just as smart as they are, if not more so in some instances."

"Their comments say otherwise."

"I'm used to their comments because they don't mean them. To them, I'm just me and I told you that when we first started seeing each other."

“It shouldn’t be that way,” he said in defiance.

The temper she’d kept at bay flared to life and balled her fists at her sides. “So what—they should collar and cuff me? Put me on my knees before them so I can suck their pecker? Funny, I thought you were the only one who held that honor.” She could tell from his glare that she hit a nerve. Good, he deserved it after his insistence on how he thought they should treat her. She may have been his submissive, but she still had a spine and damn well knew how to use it.

“Yes, my proclivities during sex are a little out of the norm for most people, but in no way have I ever made you feel as if you were anything less.”

His statement caused her to freeze and she stared at him in utter amazement. He stared her down and she blew out a heavy breath in defeat. *He’s oblivious.* Her chest burned with both anger and heartache. Everything had been so right, so perfect between them and now the shattered remains lay on the floor between them. “You’re right, Patrick, you never have. But you’re certainly doing a damn good job of it right now.”

She spun on her heel and stormed from the room. It didn’t matter if he was there when she came back—if she even did.

No one spoke as she threw herself over the back of the couch and slid the headset into place over her ears. Tears burned hot at the back of her eyes and she refused to break down in front of everyone, especially not a room full of men. They’d undoubtedly heard the argument given the fact only a thin door separated the kitchen and living room. However, she refused to acknowledge the press of the words that still hung in the air. If she did, the weight of them would hit her even harder and she didn’t think she could stand it.

Cooper gave a yell as he confronted someone else in the game they’d been on the search for and everyone’s attention turned back to the television set. She forced herself to focus on the task at hand, but made mistakes better suited for a newbie.

Her head snapped around at the sound of the front door closing and she fumbled the controller. There was a loud crash as it hit the coffee table and she gave a sheepish smile as everyone looked at her. She couldn’t get her mouth to work to find the words to apologize.

“Allison—” Mark started but stopped mid-sentence when he saw her expression.

Four pairs of eyes looked at her expectedly and she suddenly rediscovered the muscles that made her vocal chords work. “Sorry, I must have butter-fingers tonight.” The controller’s smooth surface slid into her palm as she closed her hand around it and used it as an anchor.

*Breathe dammit, this isn’t the first time a man has left you.* She gritted her teeth and forced herself not to think about what had just happened. To not picture the simmering fury that had clouded those stunning blue eyes of his.

*Does it have to hurt this much?*

“We can hold off on this until next week.”

The pity evident in Scott’s voice and her wildly swirling emotions, angered her. What she didn’t want right now was for them to feel sorry for her. She brushed away the argument with Patrick and forced herself to focus on the game. “Let’s do this.”

For the next two hours, with her concentration shot to hell, she never was able to focus solely on the mission they’d set out on for the night. Her friends seemed to understand and compensated for her lack of awareness without a word. They even made

sure they never abandoned her completely. Even Tony stepped in on a few skirmishes when she floundered. It was completely uncharacteristic of her. She'd never gamed this badly and as the night wore on, her mood deteriorated further.

Exhausted from the emotional upheaval, she didn't last as long as she would have liked and everyone reassured her that it wasn't a big deal. They made plans to get together on Tuesday night and try again. As she shut and locked the front door, she blew out a relieved breath.

She made it to her bedroom before she broke.

## Chapter Seventeen

Allison stood in front of her building a week after the incident in her cottage and stared at the dark storm clouds that hung in the sky. Granted, it was nearly June and spring showers were expected this time of year, but did it really have to pour today?

Since that night, she'd taken the longer way to work so she didn't have to pass Perfect Shot. The circuitous route made the walk twenty minutes longer, but the last thing she wanted to do right now was run into Patrick. The normal route would take her right past the wide, panoramic windows of the coffeehouse.

The heavy rainfall this morning would make the longer walk completely miserable. Even with an umbrella, she'd be soaked to the bone by the time she got a block away from her home. There were no other options this morning and would have to suck it up. She gritted her teeth and forced herself to turn in that direction.

It wasn't really the fact she didn't want to see him that kept her away from normal routine and her usual cup of coffee. She just wasn't sure what to say to him if they did run into each other. Still hurt and confused, she'd outright ignored his phone call and subsequent voice mail. It was an avoidance tactic and not something she usually did, but felt as if she had no other choice. He'd stepped over the line and she wasn't going to stand for it.

Her pace automatically slowed as she approached the brightly lit window of the establishment. Unable to resist, she glanced in the window as she started to pass. It appeared as if her worry had been for nothing because he wasn't behind the counter at all. Instead, a short redhead worked the long line of customers already stacked at six in the morning.

*Something's wrong.*

The sudden surge of panic made her scramble through the front door and fight her way to the counter. She ignored the customers as they complained. "Where are Patrick and Nick?" she demanded after reaching the counter.

The redhead's brilliant green eyes blinked in surprise. "Well good morning to you too."

Allison frowned and ordered herself to settle down. She had no right to demand so much from this woman. But the immediate thought of something so wrong that neither Patrick nor Nick had opened the store this morning caught her off guard. "I'm looking for them. Where are they?"

"Funny from what I understand, you've been doing a bang up job of avoiding one of them, so your rush to know seems a little misplaced." For a few seconds, it became a staring contest neither woman wanted to lose. One of the customers in line loudly cleared his throat and the redhead gave a resigned sigh. She reached behind her for a ceramic cup, filled it with the house blend and pushed the steaming cup of coffee across the counter.

"Everything's fine. Go have a seat and when things have calmed down, I'll explain everything. Deal?" She moved off before Allison had a chance to respond.

Since she'd already made a huge ass of herself, she pushed away from the counter with a nod. An overstuffed chair in a corner of the shop cupped around her as she tapped

out a quick email to her boss. Time to take a personal day. Stephen usually referred to the lost time as a sanity day and he actually preferred his employees take them occasionally just to keep everyone from going a little loopy. Their work was stressful and technical, both things that could get the best of you if allowed. Her attitude hadn't been the best at work recently and he would probably be quite pleased to hear she'd followed his advice.

The coffee was hot and strong, exactly the way she liked it. She really missed this piece of her daily routine. The crappy instant coffee she'd relied on lately couldn't come close to the custom blend Perfect Shot served.

The change of plans gave her an opportunity to watch the woman behind the counter work. The redhead gave off an air of authority, but not one that put people off. She didn't demand the attention, she just had it. She exuded it as if it were simply a part of her. It surprised Allison, given the woman's small stature. Her movements were so efficient and precise it was evident she'd spent some time behind a coffee bar and was no novice when it came to the preparation of coffee.

Why in the world hadn't Nick just let this woman handle things instead of Patrick that first week? Granted, the computer system would have still been an issue, but she may not have had to jump in and help Patrick.

It was then Allison realized if things had gone differently, she wouldn't have met him. There were things she would have never learned about herself and wasn't sure if she wanted to take those steps backward and not be the person she was right at this very moment. Despite her confusion about the current situation, he'd made an enormous impact on her life in a very short period of time. It left a lasting impression.

She would certainly never look at sex the same way again.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a chair pulled next to hers and the woman behind the counter settled herself comfortably in the seat. She'd removed the Perfect Shot apron and wore a pair of perfectly cut slacks and a shiny shirt. *Bit high class for a simple barista.* That thought solidified further, when Allison saw the two-inch heels on the woman's feet.

The hollow feeling in the pit of her stomach returned. This was the kind of woman Patrick deserved. Not some computer geek who split her weekends between binge gaming and comic book stores. Her wardrobe consisted of cargo pants, logo shirts and sneakers. Not the high-end type of things this woman obviously kept in her closet.

"So, I assume you're Allison? Elena Mitchell." Allison's coffee cup halted in mid-air and nearly choked on air as she inhaled sharply in surprise. Elena grinned and flipped her hair over her shoulder. "I see you've heard of me."

Allison used a napkin to wipe her mouth and nodded. This was not what she'd expected when Patrick had described the woman who had orgy parties at Sanctuary. "You could say that."

"Good things, I hope. Now before you grill me anymore about what's going on, the Conners boys are fine." Elena's expression softened as she settled back in the chair and crossed her legs. "I don't know if you're aware, but their mother took a tumble down her front porch a few nights ago. She runs a boarding house just outside of Staunton that caters to travelers who don't want the coldness of a hotel room and don't want to pay the prices of most of the bed and breakfasts around here."

"Is she okay?" Allison's stomach sank at the thought of something horrific despite the fact she'd never met the woman.

Elena gave a bark of laughter as she tapped her fist against the arm of the chair. “I dare say she is. Fell down and broke her ankle while trying to get frisky with her boyfriend after a date. I can only hope to be as spry and randy as she is at that age. She was released from the hospital today and Nick said they’ll be home in a day or so after they get her settled. As much as I don’t mind doing favors for them—and don’t take this as I’m complaining—I hope they get back soon. I can only handle so much of this foam and steaming. No one ever has a plain, old cup of coffee anymore.”

Allison nodded in agreement and something about the woman warmed her. Elena seemed like the type who insisted the brothers go when they probably balked at the thought that they couldn’t leave their business. “Seems as if you’re right at home.”

“Only because I use to pull the graveyard shift as a waitress to put myself through college.” Elena took a delicate sip of coffee and smiled at Allison over the rim of the cup. “What’s wrong?”

“I just...never expected you to be so—”

“Normal? One does have to work to support their indulgences.” Elena flipped her hair over her shoulder again and leaned forward. “Now, why are you in such a rush to find Patrick?”

“I’m not. I panicked when I saw you working instead of Nick or Patrick.”

Elena tapped a perfectly polished nail against her cup. “Ah, but you panicked and if that doesn’t scream you’re in love, I don’t know what does. And think very hard before you deny it and dirty what it is the two of you have found.”

Allison stared at the finger now pointed directly at her and saw the woman Patrick described. Sure the exterior was still there, but there was now an air of authority that crackled around them. This woman knew exactly how to garner the right kind of attention and how to handle it when she got it. Allison envied someone who could do that and swallowed hard as she set her empty cup down on the table between them. Elena was right—lying about her emotional reaction was uncalled for and unnecessary. “I won’t deny it.”

“Then what is it?” Elena asked, then waved her hand in the air in dismissal. “Wait a minute before you answer. I think this conversation is better suited for somewhere else other than a coffeehouse because something tells me this isn’t going to be a quick conversation. Why don’t you swing by the warehouse tonight and we’ll talk there?”

Allison agreed she’d be much more comfortable discussing this sort of thing without an audience. However, she didn’t want to cause any sort of problems for Elena either. “But it’s your night there. I don’t want to interrupt your...date.”

Elena pushed herself out of the chair and collected her delicate cup. “Oh, I don’t have any plans for tonight—at least with anyone else.”

The statement was cryptic and several months ago, Allison wouldn’t have had a clue what Elena meant. It was obvious now. Still, despite everything she’d learned recently about herself and the world Patrick was in, she struggled to contain her shock. “You have to go to the warehouse for that?”

If Elena was offended, she didn’t show it. “Of course. It’s still about sex, regardless if I have a partner or not. Occasionally, I take a night for myself. Then I don’t have to worry about telling someone what I want. I already know. Simple.” Elena winked. “I’ll be there around seven if you want to stop by for a little while.”

## Chapter Eighteen

Patrick had screwed up.

He'd forgotten for just a moment that he'd spent his entire adult life doing everything he could not to be like his father. For a short five minutes, the specter of his father had returned to haunt him.

Without question, he was nothing like his father, but in those moments at Allison's cottage when he'd been so angry he'd seen red, he'd realized he could give himself over. It would have been as easy to flip the switch.

He'd made a mistake and now, he had no clue how to rectify it.

*God, what she must think of me.*

He hated himself, so surely she did too. For the first time in his life, he cared what someone else thought.

A quiet sound from the den startled him. He tossed down the kitchen towel he'd used to dry the dishes, happy for the respite from his own thoughts.

"Mom? Are you all right?" he asked as he stepped into the front room of the boarding house and watched as she struggled to sit up.

"I'm fine. Will you get me another pillow for my foot? It's out in the hall closet."

As he got it for her and propped up her foot, he tried not to let disappointment show on his face. At nearly seventy, with a petite build and steely gray eyes, Sadie Conners was more than capable of handling herself. But like most of the Conners, she sometimes took it to the extreme. He'd purchased the rundown house and restored it for her ten years ago. Never in his wildest dreams thought she'd turn it into the efficiently run business it had become. While he was proud she'd taken it and made it her own, sometimes she forgot she needed to be taken care of as well. "You know the doctor told you to rest."

"I broke my ankle, for Pete's sake," she scoffed and ran a hand over her silver hair. "Rest isn't going to do me a whole lot of good. Besides, there are guests to take care of."

Leave it to her to think more of the guests than her own welfare. That courtesy was what kept the house filled to capacity most of the time. "You broke it in three places. I'd say you qualified for some downtime. Besides, Nick and I are here and we can handle the guests."

Due to the fact it was off-season, there were currently only three guests in residence, so it wasn't as if it was an enormous task to take on. He'd been around enough to know the basic work that went into the business and how she ran it with little margin for error.

"I told you not to come."

Of course she did. And he and Nick had come despite her wishes against it. One thing he knew, customers wouldn't take care of themselves. There was a reason the travelers came to stay at the house just like there was a reason Perfect Shot's customers came when they were perfectly capable of brewing their own coffee. "And what would you have done? Tell them to take care of themselves? I think we remember enough to know what to do without you looking over our shoulders."

"Did you chop up the vegetables for dinner tonight? And extra towels, did you make sure everyone that needed them had some?"

"Mom," he stated firmly. "I can handle this."

“Fine. You’re frustratingly obstinate you know.”

“I come by it honestly. Do you need a blanket?”

She blew out a sigh as she shifted on the couch. “Yes, that would be nice. Thank you.” When he returned and settled the blanket over her legs, she patted her hand on the cushion. “Come, sit with me for a few minutes and give me someone to talk to that isn’t going to throw a bunch of medical jargon my way. Damn doctors at the university hospital always talk three feet above your head.”

He hadn’t understood most of the terms the doctors had tossed out either. Six weeks to heal, as long as she stayed off of it. That’s the part he understood and would do his best to see she listened. “You do know this just further cemented the fact that I don’t like you living alone here. Not with all these people coming and going like this.”

Her slim fingers reached out and brushed his hair behind his ear. “I’m not alone. I have a steady influx of guests coming through. Besides, you two were the ones who moved away. I had to have something to do.”

She was right, of course, as she usually was. After he’d moved around repeatedly, he’d wanted somewhere to settle down for an extended period of time. A place of his own to call home. The warehouse had proved too enticing of a property to turn his back on and he’d snatched it up as soon as he’d found it. “There’s something about that town, Mom. I can’t stay away from it.”

Her gaze softened and her palm lightly pressed against his cheek. “Is that so? Way I hear, it’s more accurate that it’s a woman you can’t stay away from.”

His heart hitched at the reminder of the bang up job he’d done in that department. Leave it to Nick to make sure their mother knew everything “Well, it’s not as if I have to worry about it now.”

His mother snorted and gestured her hand toward the tea he’d made for her. “Nothing a good talk or two won’t fix.”

He picked up the delicate teapot they had purchased on her last birthday and filled an empty cup with her favored hot tea. “No, not in this instance.”

“Have you even tried?”

“No,” he stated, ashamed to admit as much to the other woman in his life. The cast on her leg was hard under his hand as he sipped the sweet ice tea he’d prepared for himself earlier.

“Then that’s not the boy I raised. Or at least tried to do when your father wasn’t butting his damn opinion in. Tell your mother what you did.”

The last thing he wanted to do was discuss his love life with his mother. “Mom, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Bullshit.”

Sadie had never been one to mince words so it didn’t surprise him to hear such language from her. She was also very determined and wouldn’t give in until he talked about it.

“Fine. I screwed up with her. Forced my opinion about the company she kept and generally made an ass of myself.”

That steely gaze of hers was back and it made him feel like a small child again. “Never tell a woman who she can and can’t associate with, son. She’ll get in your face every time and put you in your place. Did you apologize?”

“I haven’t had a chance.” Which wasn’t accurate. He’d tried with no success, then



spent a few days wallowing and had judiciously avoided his phone with one hand on the whiskey bottle. It had been the very wrong approach and it hadn't been normal behavior for him. She was the one thing that had gotten under his skin and thought it could be solved by drinking it away. With the alcohol, he'd forgotten about the problem. At least until Nick showed up at the loft and informed him their mother had fallen and broken her ankle.

That was a sobering moment.

"Then march yourself back to that town and do it," she ordered and crossed her arms. It was quite a sight to be the object of her hard glare.

"It's not that simple." *But, oh how I wish it was.*

"And that's a line of crap if I ever heard one."

It would take more than a simple phone call. More than a slurred apology said to voice mail. "I'll go, I promise. But you're more important right now."

"Son, while I did my best to instill a sense of family in you boys despite your father, no mother is more important than the woman he's fucking."

He choked as the ice tea slid down the wrong pipe. "Jesus Christ, Mom."

She smiled widely, which caused the wrinkles around her eyes to deepen. "What? You think I'm some angelic prim and proper woman who's never had a good lay? Your father finally leaving was the best damn thing that happened to my sex life."

"I cannot be having this discussion right now." He looked over to find her hands folded neatly on the afghan he'd tucked around her. He'd known, of course, that his mother was human and had needs. But that didn't mean he actually wanted to hear it admitted out loud or hear about it firsthand. Hell, he didn't even want to hear his mother even mention sex.

She smiled at him, a sweet, innocent smile. "After your father was thrown in jail, I had myself a bit of a wild period to celebrate. Nice thing about running this place, handsome, single men traveling alone and needing a place to stay for the night."

"Stop, Mom. Just stop, please." He groaned and rubbed at the spot of tension that had just bloomed between his eyes. Maybe he should have asked the doctors to give her something stronger, then he wouldn't be put through this particular version of hell.

Nick entered the room and immediately questioned the mood of the room. "What's going on?"

Patrick sat the tea glass on the table and wiped the condensation off his fingers. "Our mother has decided I needed to hear the intimate details of her sex life because of what happened with Allison."

His brother settled himself on the arm of the pale blue couch and nodded his head. "If it helps him get over himself, keep talking, Mom."

She opened her mouth, but Patrick held up a stiff finger to stop her. "No. I do not need to hear anymore. I'm better off not knowing—ever."

Evidently, taking pity on how uncomfortable he was, Sadie pulled the blanket tighter around herself and changed the subject. "Son, I'm fine. Go back to Gatlin Falls and talk to her."

That was something he should have already done long before now. Instead, he'd let his temper get the best of him and stormed out. If the situation had been reversed, he wouldn't want to talk to himself. "After what I did, talking to me is the last thing she's going to want to do. It's better if I keep my distance."

“Talking is the best thing for you—it will at least offer closure.”

Patrick sneered at his brother. He didn’t need the two of them to gang up on him. “Take your own advice, Nick.”

There was a huff of breath as Nick sighed. “I tried. Vivian’s shut me out completely and there doesn’t seem to be anything I can do about it. You haven’t even tried with Allison.”

His mother’s eyes went wide in surprise. “It’s not like you to give up so easily, Patrick.”

No, it wasn’t. The fact his mother pointed it out just made it even more of a bitter pill. “I know. This time was different.”

The room was quiet as they waited for one another to speak. Finally, his mother was the one to break the silence. “Do you love her?”

“I do,” he answered without hesitation. There was no need to think about it because he knew it with everything he was. “So much sometimes it hurts.”

His mother’s expression softened. “Which is why it’s so damn painful now. I did not raise my sons to let their women get away from them. Nick’s done what he can. Vivian wasn’t meant for him. It sounds like you have a different story. Patrick, have you told her?”

“No.”

Her hand closed over his and squeezed. “She needs to hear it. Whatever you’ve done, son, she at least needs to know you love her. Then both of you can go your separate ways if that’s the way of things. But my gut instinct tells me otherwise from the way you’re broken up about her.”

Nick’s hand slid over Patrick’s shoulder and squeezed as well. The contact with his family gave him an anchor and he reaffirmed how important both of these people were to him. They’d all been through traumatic and emotional upheavals in the past and they’d used each other for support to get through it. He’d always known it was there but coming home allowed him to discover that comforting hold again.

It wasn’t quite complete though—someone was missing.

As if his brother could sense it, Nick gave him a shake.

“Patrick, go. I can watch over Mom. Besides, I think I’m going to stay here for a little bit. See if I can’t sort things out. It’s too late for me and Vivian. Don’t let it be that way with Allison.”

## Chapter Nineteen

Shortly before seven, Allison stood under the awning of the bookstore directly across the street from the warehouse. It was still raining and there didn't seem to be any hope it would stop anytime soon. She'd spent most of the day vacillating on whether or not to actually come tonight.

It was an odd sense of curiosity that made her come. As was the fact, she could have someone to talk to about what had happened with Patrick. Elena wasn't one of her friends who would judge her as soon as they heard about her proclivity toward the unusual. That was, of course, after they'd laughed and pointed—as they'd already done based on the reaction her gaming avatar had received.

This was important to her and she didn't want to screw up. Besides, when it came to her sex life, the guys wouldn't want to hear about it anyway. While she might seem like one of the guys, she was most definitely a girl. The discussion of her love life with Patrick certainly seemed to be in the realm of female conversation.

Elena approach the front door of the warehouse with quiet footsteps. Allison waited until Elena unlocked the door then bolted across the street in an effort to stay dry. Once inside, both women shook their jackets and small rings of water formed on the concrete floor.

"I hate the rain," Elena stated as she looped her shiny rain slicker on a hook fastened to the wall directly behind the front door. "Makes life hell for those of us who actually take the time to look decent."

The comment caused Allison to glance down at her own wardrobe and the faded jeans and polo shirt she'd thought were nice enough just minutes ago. She felt woefully inadequate now as she looked at how well Elena had put herself together. The woman didn't have anywhere to be and still wore a pencil skirt, boots to her knees and a crisply pressed shirt. Of course, the entire ensemble was black and the boots looked to be some sort of shiny vinyl material, but Allison knew she couldn't have put that look together in a millions years. Caught up in her assessment of Elena's clothing choice for the night, she missed the question she'd been asked. "Sorry?"

"I asked about your jeans. I've been trying to find a pair that would make my ass look like that."

"Uh, I don't remember. Old Navy or something?"

"I should go there more often. They have some really cute things. I've just been so swamped recently with work." Elena pulled a single key out of the bag looped over her shoulder and swore loudly as she fought with the lock. "I've been asking Patrick to take a look at this stupid thing for months."

"You know, I mentioned something to him when he first brought me here about replacing all the locks here with electronic ones. I'd forgotten all about it though," Allison said absently as she thought about the things that made her forget because they'd happened behind the door to the room across the hall.

"That's all right. I assume your mind has been elsewhere." Elena swore again as she threw her shoulder into the solid door and it finally gave with a loud pop. "Not exactly high on the sexy scale to bring a potential lover here and find yourself coated in sweat by

the time you get the damn door open. Tell you what, do whatever it is that you have to in order to make it happen and I'll pay for everything. We'll tell Patrick later."

Allison followed Elena into the room and shut the door firmly behind them. The whole building held enough reminders without the addition of the torture she felt when she stared longingly at Patrick's room. She was the one who'd walked out on him, not the other way around. Of course, his behavior was to blame but it didn't mean she still couldn't miss him. "Sure. I can put the order in at work tomorrow and have them send someone out to do the installation. There's a confidentiality clause already built into the work orders, so you wouldn't have to worry about anyone saying anything."

"So you wouldn't do the work yourself?"

There was a hint of disappointment in Elena's voice. Allison would love to do the wiring work since she'd itched to get her hands on the new cipher locks she'd heard her boss mention the other day. Her work focused mainly on the network systems, but she was fairly certain her boss could be convinced to let her do the job.

There was, however, one problem. "I'm not certain Patrick would want me to do the work."

Elena gave her a wry look. "I find that hard to believe. I saw the job you did at the coffeehouse and know I wouldn't hesitate for a second to have you install something here."

"Yeah, well, you didn't have a fight with the owner." Allison thought about the confrontation in her kitchen. Those images still caused restless nights and she'd taken to sleeping wherever and whenever she could. She'd even fallen asleep in the break room at work two days ago, which was unheard of for her. His behavior may have been uncalled for, but she knew there had to be more to the story. She was just too afraid to see him face-to-face because she didn't trust herself. What she needed to do right now was stand her ground and keep her distance.

Elena dropped her bag near a small table and immediately headed for the small bar tucked into one corner. Allison took the opportunity to take in the room she'd only heard about from Patrick in bits in pieces. Like his room, Elena's space was simply furnished. An understated couch and two chairs sat near the door and a small kitchenette was off to the side. Unlike the other room she'd spent so much time in, this room was nearly empty. She didn't want to think about why that was or what Elena did with all this free space. Luckily, she didn't have to because Elena slid into the chair across from her and placed two highball glasses on the low table between them.

"So let's get to the nitty gritty of all this. Did Patrick do something you didn't like? Hit you? Beat you?"

Allison's eyes widened in surprise as she bobbled the glass and nearly spilled the contents everywhere. Maybe she was better off without alcohol right now and twiddled her thumbs in order to give herself something to do with her hands. "No, no of course not. Surprisingly enough, he's more of a gentleman than most other men I know or have dated."

Elena quietly studied her for a few moments. "You know, I'm still waiting to hear the bad part about this. The part that has you spooked, I mean."

Allison felt as if she could trust Elena implicitly and decided to confide in her. "It's this whole dominant and submissive thing. It's entirely not what I expected. As I told Patrick, it's far more comforting that I would have ever imagined."

Elena's laughter filled the space around them. "You're not telling me anything I don't already know." Allison rolled her eyes and Elena held up an apologetic hand. "Sorry. Go on."

"He seemed to take it one step too far when he starting telling me about my friends being disrespectful. I willingly went along with the dominance in regards to sex, but we always kept it exclusive to the bedroom or at least the sexual aspects of our relationship. He tried to assert it in my home, with my friends and it hurt. Bad."

"Of course it did. Patrick is a very passionate man, sometimes that's to be expected. It sounds like he made a mistake, let his mouth get ahead of his brain. He's a very good guy most women would jump at the chance for this kind of opportunity."

Allison wet her lips. "Sometimes that's a bad thing."

"Not in this instance. I think he was just being protective." Elena gave Allison's hand a reassuring pat before she crossed to the small bar in order to fix another drink. She returned a minute later and sunk back into the overstuffed couch.

"Maybe, but I can handle myself. I can speak up when someone says something I'm offended by."

Elena's eyebrows winged up in surprise. "Seems as if he was offended for you."

While Allison agreed, Patrick had taken it one step too far. "It's not his place to be. I surrender control to him in the bedroom but that's it."

Elena blinked, then burst out laughing. The tone of the laughter caused Allison's cheeks to flush bright red and she buried her face in her glass to hide it.

Once Elena had controlled herself again, she patted Allison's free hand. "Honey, the sub is the one in control. Once they learn they have all the power, only then can they truly submit. Does it bother you to know that? To find out Patrick really isn't the one in control?"

Stunned, Allison placed the glass on the table again and stared at the intricate scrollwork. "No, it doesn't. He's never said anything like that, but I figured it out just recently. I didn't tell him I had though."

"Have you asked him or talked about any of this?"

The words sunk in and something clicked into place, just like the lock on the collar she'd worn for Patrick. Elena was spot on.

"No." Filled with nervous energy, she did her best not to seem agitated. What Elena said made sense—to her heart. Unfortunately, she'd never let her heart be the driving force that guided her because she'd had so little opportunity to use it.

"Don't you think maybe you should?"

"I'm not sure it's going to do any good."

Fabric shifted as Elena rose and settled next to Allison. She softened the expression on her face as she reached over and gathered Allison's hand in her own. "I'm going to let you in on a secret. It's not mine to share, but I'll tell you enough so maybe you'll understand the situation a little better. The Connors family wasn't the traditional model, unless having an abusive father is typical for most families. As a Top, Patrick needs the level of control that it brings for him. It makes him feel as if he's in charge of his life because of what happened when he was younger. Being that dominant allows him the control he believes is needed to keep him from turning into his father. From what it sounds like, that sterling silver control of his slipped. The best of Tops make mistakes or they wouldn't be human otherwise. Let me ask you this. He left, didn't he?" The ice in

Elena's glass hit the side of the glass with a loud clink.

"Yes." Allison quietly replied.

"My guess would be he recognized it and removed himself from the situation. Think about why he's a perfect gentleman. He feels a woman should be treated a certain way because he spent his childhood watching his father treat his mother as if she were no better than common dirt. Patrick cherishes women and everything they stand for. For him, the domination isn't about humiliation or degradation, but eliminating it entirely. I'd hedge my bet that he needs you just as much as you've found you need him. While you give him what he needs sexually, you also give him love and that is something he needs but may not know. Though he might. I just don't know, I haven't seen him in order to talk with him."

Allison grinned slyly at Elena. "We've been a little busy."

A warm smile spread on perfectly painted lips in response. "As should be the case."

"I've never met anyone like him. Or had a lover like him."

Ice cracked as Elena popped a cube in her mouth and chewed. "Do you mean the whole domination aspect?"

Allison's chest constricted and her heart slammed against her rib cage. She struggled to find her voice. "Well, no, but that too. I meant someone who made me feel cherished and alive. Safe and secure at the same time they've bound me to a wall and forced orgasms, or used things to delay them, or...any of it. He cares what I think outside of Sanctuary too. It's not at all what I imagined the whole dominance and submission relationship dynamic to be."

Elena shrugged her shoulders and set the now empty glass on the table between them. "Some live it twenty-four-seven. It's not just their lifestyle, it's their life. Most choose it because it's something they need. It makes them safe and secure—just as you said."

Allison wasn't sure if it was a lifestyle she could live outside of the bedroom. She liked the camaraderie between her and Patrick even while they did the most mundane things. "But why did I never know I needed it before now?"

Red hair flipped over her shoulder again and Elena propped her hand on her hip as she stood. "The time wasn't right or the right person hadn't come along. So, it wasn't something you knew you needed. You could easily find part of what you and Patrick have with another person who favors dominance. However, you two have the added benefit of love. I don't need to ask Patrick because I can tell by what you've said that you both love each other. It's a rare thing and you've found a way to make everything work. You just need to hear it from him."

## Chapter Twenty

A painful headache continued to stack up behind Patrick's eyes as he worked behind the coffee bar. He literally counted the minutes before his shift ended. He'd called in one of the other staff members to take the evening shift because Nick decided to stay with their mother for a little while. Patrick suspected he wanted more time to try to sort through the ruins of his life and didn't blame him. The plan had been for him to arrive in town sometime in the afternoon, but he'd grown antsy and had arrived early enough to fire off a quick text message to Elena and open Perfect Shot before the rush.

Work hadn't eased his headache or made him feel better about the crappiness he'd made of his life. The last thing he wanted to do was be pleasant to customers, but he couldn't justify pawning it off onto someone else for longer than necessary.

He was exhausted, emotionally drained and just plain spent.

Despite how he felt, he was still responsible for the business. He made a few ticks on the inventory sheet Nick kept by the register to allot for the sleeve of cups he'd pulled out of the back and heard a customer approach the counter.

"Welcome to Perfect Shot, can I help you?" he asked. He was already prepared to fix whatever ornate concoction they wanted. That was his job and he had to do it despite the fact his world had fallen apart.

"Perhaps."

Everything inside him went cold when he heard Allison's voice and realized she was the customer who stood on the other side of the counter. His breath caught in his throat as panic seized him. Nervous energy made his hands shake and dropped the pencil as if it was a hot poker in order to stuff his hands into his pockets to still the sudden twitches.

He was afraid to look up when he considered their last encounter and how badly he'd handled things. He'd lived under the premise they'd never see each other again, contrary to the fact they lived in such a small town. Despite that, he'd held onto a small thread of hope that she would drop by the store occasionally. After all, she lived nearby and stated time and again that she loved the coffee here.

Now, here she was in living, breathing color.

"Allison, I—"

She tapped her finger on the counter between them. "I heard you were back and I needed to see for myself you were okay. You're back, but I don't think you're okay."

He shook his head. "No, I'm not. I was an ass."

"You were," she said casually. "We need to talk and I don't think this is necessarily the time or the place. Can I just get a coffee and we'll talk later tonight? I've got to get to work."

He swallowed, poured a tall cup of coffee and handed it to her. "The Copper Nickel at six?"

She nodded in agreement and he stared at her back as she walked away.

\* \* \* \*

Six couldn't come soon enough, but when it did, he was surprised to find himself

still nervous. In was uncharacteristic and he wasn't accustomed to it. However, Allison had made some jerky movements of her own when he'd seen her earlier, so he guessed she was as nervous as he was.

A waiter appeared as soon as they sat and took their drink orders. In spite of Patrick's sour mood, he noted—with some amusement—that they both ordered water. He could tell from the way she sat forward in her seat, and her elbows propped on the table, she had something to get off her chest. It was best to allow her the opportunity to speak first and probably better in the long run so he didn't put his foot in his mouth again.

"I know how much you despise small talk, so I don't think you'll mind me getting to the point."

He preferred it. "By all means, please."

They waited while the server set their drinks in front of them and he watched as Allison took a few sips of the ice water. In a few seconds, he noted the dark smudges under her eyes and wondered if the past week had been just as hard on her. He hated that he'd done that. That he was the one responsible for any pain in her life.

"You once told me you'd never hurt me." She paused when he nodded. "Sometimes pain is more than just physical."

"Oh, believe me, I know all about pain—both mental and physical," he murmured.

She stared at him for a few long moments and he watched her slowly work through something in her mind. "That's what you meant when you said you weren't into humiliation or pain for pleasure. It's one of your hard limits, isn't it?"

"Yes. It is." They'd never talked more about that limit once he'd made it clear he was unwilling to compromise. Maybe now was the right time to explain it a little more.

Seconds before he tried to make light of the dirty little secret he spent most of his life trying to forget, he changed his mind. A little wasn't going to cut it. He owed her that much after what he'd done.

"I would've never blown out my shoulder senior year if my father hadn't been an abusive prick. He was quite fond of using his fists on whoever was the closest at the time to make sure he got his point across. It was usually my mother, but Nick and I weren't exempt, depending on his mood. One night, I watched him trying to pick a fight with Mom and something in me snapped. I stepped between them and when he went for me, I fought back. He made sure I paid for it by beating the hell out of me on the front lawn right in full view of everyone. The cops threw him in jail and that was the last any of us saw of him, thankfully. The doctors told me I would never play baseball again because nearly every ligament in my shoulder had been torn in some fashion. Being the arrogant son of a bitch I was, I played the state tournament anyway. You know the rest. It's because of him that I will never, ever lay a hand on someone for any reason."

It pained him to remember, yet also reminded him of the blatant choice he'd made to not be like that. He'd slipped and was ashamed because of it.

"I'm very sorry."

He heard the hint of sympathy in her voice. One thing he would not have was for her to feel any sort of pity for that monster. "Don't be. He's dead now and he doesn't deserve to have anyone think about him for even a second." He skimmed his fingers against the glass in front of him and used the chill of the condensed water on the side to cool the irritation that rose in reference to his tumultuous childhood. "I let my anger get the best of me and it scared me because I realized I was very capable of being just like him. I'm



sorry. I've regretted it every second since I spoke those words. I never intended to say any of those things to you. They are foremost your friends and I respect that. I should have let you know it right then."

"Yes, you really should have."

It pained him to know he'd hurt her and it was too late to take it back now. "I wanted to apologize about what an ass I'd made of myself, I did. I wanted to fix what I'd done. I was going to and then I got the phone call about Mom getting hurt. Then there just wasn't time." He suddenly felt a little claustrophobic surrounded by the light dinner crowd. He needed air and space. Somewhere he could breathe deep and not feel crowded by the memories that now hovered over the table. "Listen, can we get out of here? I need some air."

She nodded and before long, they walked down the sidewalk side by side. Dusk blanketed the street and soon the antique streetlamps would switch on and puddles of light would illuminate the concrete.

He fiddled with the change in his pocket. "I would have called you later tonight if you hadn't showed up at Perfect Shot. I probably should have called while I was away, but I didn't. Any reason I could give would probably sound like an excuse."

"Try me."

He snorted and shook his head. "It was a mix of embarrassment and pride. My stupid fucking pride got in the way, not to mention the fact I saw shades of my father in myself." He stopped and caught her arm mid-stride to spin her around. Her face held no hint of surprise and he got the impression she'd waited for him to put his hands on her. He placed firm fingers on her chin and lifted her face.

"Regardless, the bottom line is this, Allison, I want the world to see and appreciate you the way I do. You're not someone who should be lumped into some off-hand category of 'just one of the guys' because you are in a class all your own. I want people to see you just as I do and damn me for getting angry when that doesn't happen. I can't promise it won't happen again, but I will try to mitigate the damage if it does. One thing I refuse to be is just like him."

"Don't you see? Everything you've done, until that moment in the kitchen, made me feel special and like a woman. I was cherished and loved and so very much not like one of the guys. I don't know your father, Patrick, I only know you. But I imagine you're nothing like him. In fact, from what Elena has told me, you've done everything in your power to be very far removed from your father."

It didn't surprise him to find out that she'd talked to Elena. She had always been like the sister he'd never had and was one of the few females he'd let in completely. At least, until now.

Until Allison.

Needing her closer, he gathered her into his arms, pleased when there was no resistance. His lips pressed against the top of her head and he inhaled the coconut scent of her shampoo. He needed to look at her and cradled her face in his palms. It was time he put that advice from his mother to use. "I want you to know I think you are an extraordinary and amazing woman that I don't think I could live without. I have found myself because of you and by God I love the hell out of you for it."

He watched relief wash over her face. "I kept telling myself I was silly for feeling this way. That it's just some adolescent crush even though I'm a grown woman. I thought

I only felt this way about you because I just didn't know any better and I was too much of a newbie to know what the hell was going on. You know, confusing how wonderful you make me feel with the Dominant/submissive and mistaking it for genuine love. That I wasn't too wired to tell the difference."

She babbled, but he didn't want to point it out to her. It would darken her pretty features. That babbling was one of the many things he loved about her and they soared too high right now to be brought down by the reminder.

"No, you haven't been confusing it at all. I know the difference and it's knocked me completely off kilter too. We'll figure this out and it will be right for us. I promise."

He touched his lips lightly to hers to seal that promise.

## Chapter Twenty-One

A month later, Allison watched as Patrick entered The Copper Nickel. The conversation with Elena came to a screeching halt when she noticed the look he gave her. Would they even make it through dinner? Her eyes never left his as he made his way to the back where the wait staff had set up a table for their large party.

She felt a soft tap on her shoulder and broke her gaze from Patrick's. Elena stared at her in wide-eyed wonder. Embarrassment heated her cheeks and stammered out an apology. "Sorry."

"That's perfectly all right." Elena's green eyes sparkled. "Believe me, I understand."

Allison felt Patrick walk up behind her and her eyes fluttered closed as his fingers skimmed over the back of her neck. His touch firmed a little and she felt his stance change in expectation.

"If you will excuse us, Elena."

His voice pulled at something inside her and Allison was in his arms before she could think of anything else. A cheer came from their crowd of friends as their mouths met.

The kiss was sweltering hot and not the type they usually engaged in while out in public. At the moment, she didn't care. She let herself be bowed back a bit and could feel the already rigid length of his cock through the summer-weight slacks he'd chosen to wear tonight. In response, her arms wrapped around his neck and pulled as she opened her mouth to him. Another cry went up from the table next to them and she gave him a long, smoldering look when they finally broke apart.

"Hi."

His voice held a touch of breathlessness and a small thrill zinged through her. "Hey there. How was your day?"

"Uneventful. I'm hoping to find some excitement later by wrapping a few things up." His fingers brushed over her forehead and he tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. The touch sent a wave of heat through her that ignited the already swollen flesh between her legs. Suddenly, she wanted nothing more than to duck out on dinner and go to Sanctuary.

"Hey you two, we're hungry here and we can't eat with you two steaming up the place."

"Which is exactly why they've seated us apart," she stated under her breath in annoyance and Patrick squeezed her elbow. He pressed a light kiss to her cheek and greeted everyone else around the table as he made his way to the chair reserved for him.

Blowing out a somewhat unsteady breath, she lowered herself into the chair and waited for him to settle himself directly across the table. She immediately decided it was ten times worse to have him directly in her line of sight than next to her.

*Sweet Christ, I'm going to kill whoever concocted this seating arrangement.*

Nick sat to Patrick's immediate right, followed by Donovan and Elena. Cooper was at Allison's left elbow with Tony, Mark and Beckett rounding out the party. Ryan had to fly to New York in order to settle some legal matters, so he had to miss this little get-together.

In a few hours, they would all head over to the theater for Cooper's movie festival this month. She hadn't checked the schedule, but thought they were all in store for a night of comedy. A mix of slapstick, satire and screwball if she wasn't mistaken.

They'd all decided this would become the new routine once a month. Dinner and a movie for the entire group. In a short amount of time, these people had become her life. It seemed so natural and she couldn't imagine it any other way.

She felt a light touch on the back of her hand and turned to Elena. "I've haven't had a chance to ask how things are. Though, gauging from that kiss, I'm fairly certain I don't need to ask."

If there was something else that surprised her from her chance meeting with Patrick, it was the friendship she'd struck with Elena. Kindred spirits, Elena had called it.

Whatever it was, Allison never realized how much she missed the female companionship with only men for friends. She still loved her video games, movies and comic books, but there were times when she thoroughly enjoyed meeting with Elena to have a few drinks. "We're fine. What about you?"

"Busy, but not as busy as you've obviously been."

Allison laughed and thought of the petite woman she'd met last week, among other things. "Patrick took me to meet his mother."

One of those perfectly arched ruddy eyebrows arched in surprise. "And how did that go?"

"She's tenacious. Finally kicked Nick out simply because she couldn't take him being there anymore. Made us bring him back when we left."

"How is he?"

Patrick and Nick had their heads bent toward each other and in deep conversation. Discussing business no doubt as the summer tourist season had begun with a bang over Memorial Day weekend. Most people wouldn't notice, but she saw the shadows beneath Nick's eyes. Even the dusting of hair that indicated he hadn't shaved for a few days. "Coping. The divorce papers arrived a few days ago."

"So they're going through with it," Elena stated in a hushed tone.

"Evidently. Patrick said every time Nick and Vivian tried to talk, it just erupted into a shouting match. They finally decided they were better off separated and he's buried himself in work to compensate. To be honest, I'm surprised he agreed to come tonight. I was certain he'd find some excuse to duck out of it."

Elena sipped her wine. "He may be hurting inside, but he wants to be there for his brother. He'll push away his discomfort, stand up when his younger brother needs him. Everyone deals with stress differently. Knowing those two, Nick will bounce back just fine when he's ready."

Allison thought she detected a note of longing in Elena's voice as they spoke about Nick, but she couldn't be sure. It was too soon to push Elena to seek out something more with him, but would keep it in the back of her mind for a later time. "Patrick still feels as if he had more to do with their separation. I know they've worked it all out and he truly didn't, but still..."

"It's all part of them being family. Something I suspect you'll be part of soon enough." There was a mischievous twinkle in Elena's eyes and Allison gave her new friend an odd look.

There was movement on the other side of the table and she watched as Patrick stood

and circled the table. His hand was a comfort on her shoulder as he leaned over and pressed a quick kiss to Elena's cheek. "I think we're going to skip the movie overload tonight."

He'd barely been here a half hour and hadn't even touched his food. As Allison started to protest, Patrick took her hand and pressed his lips to her fingers. She had no idea what he planned, but her objection died in her throat when the look on his face darkened. "We can make it up to Cooper another time."

They thanked everyone for their time and didn't bother to offer any sort of excuse.

Twenty minutes later, Patrick pushed her against the wall of his building and pulled her into the kiss he'd started at the restaurant. His teeth and tongue worked together and a groan of pleasure vibrated her throat.

When the kiss finally broke, they were both breathless. "I have something I've been meaning to talk to you about."

"Is talking really what you want right now?" she asked as her hips pushed against his. The hard stab of his erection against her leg told her of other things he had in mind. In response, his sharp intake of breath fluttered her hair. His eyes closed for the barest of seconds and when he opened them again, unmistakable lust darkened his eyes. It made her want to pull him in for another kiss. But she could also see the resolve on his face. "Go ahead."

"I've been putting this off, but something just feels right about it. I've watched the changes in you since we met and I want to do this now."

Confused, she shook her head. "Patrick, what are you talking about?"

"Remember the day I strapped you to the cross and told you about forced orgasms?" He pushed in closer and her breath caught as she remembered.

"How could I forget?"

"Did you know you have that same power? And before you dispute that—think about it. What about the first time I collared you? Once you started, you could have easily stopped. Even though I told you what to do, you have the power and always have. It was up to you to decide what you wanted."

"And what I wanted was for you to find pleasure as well," she offered as an explanation, still uncertain of his intention. Everything had been fine recently, both with their relationship and sexually. She didn't understand where this had come from.

"Exactly. The key point is that you wanted to make sure I enjoyed myself as well. As displayed several times, I'm perfectly fine just making sure you're taken care of. Seeing that excites me. Yet, when the situation allowed, you ensured I was satisfied as well."

She thought about the times she'd been the only one to reach orgasm when they were together. The situation had never been reversed. "I never thought of it that way before."

He tugged on her hand and opened a door to the right of where they normally entered the warehouse. "Come with me."

"Wait, where are you going? Isn't it your night on the schedule for Sanctuary?" In fact, she knew it was.

"Yes, it is. But tonight is different, it's not meant for the warehouse."

She pulled back on her hand. Not because she wouldn't follow him, but wanted to know what he had up his sleeve. While his secretive nature was normal, this was different. "Patrick, what the hell are you talking about?"

"Just come with me." His tone was authoritative, but she could tell that it wasn't a

demand. He needed her to do this for him without question. She climbed the stairs behind him and wondered with each step what he had in mind.

Patrick's loft above the warehouse held few similarities to the room he kept downstairs. The colors were rich and dark and wood panels covered the walls. There were no paintings or pictures on those walls either. It was the mark of a man who had been a bachelor for quite some time.

Despite the masculine appearance, there were homey touches that made the space his such as pictures of his brother and mother. They sat on the bookcases to her left. There was even a snapshot of Donovan and Ryan with their arms linked with Patrick and Elena.

She turned in an unhurried circle and slowly examined everything, to take it all in. It was an intimate glimpse of the man she'd dated for several months. One she'd never seen before.

Once she'd turned a full three hundred and sixty degrees she stopped to face him again and he grinned at her. "What?"

"Nothing. I just enjoy watching you."

"I figured that was something we determined a while ago." She winked and his laughter filled her with warm energy. "You know, I would think for someone so adept at knowing what women want you'd do a little more to spice up the décor of where you live."

"I haven't had to because you're the first."

"Pardon?" she asked, stunned by his admission.

He waved a hand in the air as if to dismiss what he'd just said. "Well, with the exception of Elena and my mother for family gatherings, of course. I don't routinely invite women up here. That's why I have the room downstairs—to keep this space mine. You're the first woman I've been with who I've invited up here."

Emotion overwhelmed her and heat stung her eyes. For whatever reason, he'd decided to share this with her and she would cherish it. "Patrick, I don't know what to say."

He crossed to her, pressed warm lips to her forehead before wrapping his arms around her. "Don't say anything. Just listen to what I have to say. After everything, I need to do this. I've been putting it off for far too long. Did you know whenever we're not together all I can think about is you? It's another control and you haven't done a thing except be yourself. You're just you and that's enough. Remember that day at the comic book store—when I came up to you and told you I was going to have you?"

She blushed at the memory, thankful he couldn't see her face. "Yes. Of course. How could I forget something like that?"

"All you were doing is flipping through your books. But you did it with such passion—honest to God passion—and I wanted a piece of that with you. You're so quiet and reserved, I had this uncontrollable desire to be the one who broke you of that. Now, I have these emotions and feelings for you I can't even begin to explain and honestly, I don't want to. I broke a few of my own rules when it came to you and I found myself willing to do it when I'd never done it before. Even now, I've brought you here to my home. Sex has always been relegated inside Sanctuary's walls instead of here."

The reasons made sense to her. "It's a way you've distanced yourself. Kept a space of your own no one could impose upon. I understand that but, why...oh," she said suddenly as she realized what he meant. This is what had kept him so tightly wound for

the past month. “Patrick, I don’t know what to say.”

He smiled as he pulled away and tugged on her hand so she followed him. “You make me want to break rules. Set new ones. Find new limits I didn’t even know existed. Even find things I’ve purposefully avoided because I was afraid to become my father.” His hand was gentle on her neck as he claimed her mouth for a thorough kiss.

It was a kiss filled with passion and intensity and caused sparks to light behind her eyes like fireworks. He’d purposefully brought her here and broken one of his hard limits for her. This was Patrick as exposed as she’d ever seen him—even more so than anything they’d ever done in that room downstairs.

Once they broke away, he pressed his forehead against hers. “I’m not afraid anymore. That’s because of you, Allison.”

He pulled her down to sit on the bed and cradled her in his lap so she straddled his thighs. She balanced there and noticed the excitement in his eyes.

“I want you to wear something for me.” Patrick pulled out a small circle of leather, one that was significantly thinner than the posture collar he’d locked around her throat before. This one resembled a small choker and was only about a half inch in height. The pale gray color was also a startling contrast to the deep black of the one she’d worn previously. The silver buckle at the back was polished to a high shine and was the only metal on the collar.

“Wear it tonight, for me. Just the collar and nothing else.” She opened her mouth, but he pressed a finger to her lips to silence her. “But more than that, I want you to wear it tomorrow too, while you’re at work. When you come to visit the coffeehouse or sit with our friends at dinner next month. I want to see it circling your neck every time I see you.”

She let out a shaky breath and clasped her hand around his wrist so she could move his hand away. “Is it because you’ll see it and think about the times I’ve been on my knees for you and had you in my mouth? Maybe even think about the possibility of simply standing there watching me orgasm over and over and know you’re responsible for it? Or is it because I’ve been meaning to tell you that I want you to learn shibari?”

“Oh God, all of it,” he said quietly as he shuddered in response to her last comment about the rope tying technique she’d been researching on the internet. She certainly didn’t want to flip gears, take over as Top, but away from the bedroom they’d always talked about things they held an interest in.

He brushed his mouth against hers and as she gave herself over to the kiss, she realized it was yet another layer of control. She held the advantage. All she had to do was say she wasn’t comfortable with the idea of walking around day after day with his claim around her neck.

She had news for him. “I won’t do it for those reasons.”

His eyes went flat with worry. “What?”

“*Those* reasons are the icing, Patrick. They are simply a benefit to being with you. I won’t wear it solely because of those reasons, but because I love you.” She offered her neck and sighed as his fingers brushed against her skin and secured the strip of leather in place.

Once he was done, she pushed off his legs and stood. Moments later, stripped bare, she stood before him, proud and unashamed of her nudity. Instead, she took comfort in it. There was power in the ability she’d gained to stand here in front of him in such a manner, exposed and bare.

He'd given her that.

The only item she wore, the collar, was light around her neck and felt as if it had always been there. It had found its place—its home—and she savored the feel. It would be simple to do as he asked and wear it for him always. And it wasn't just because he wanted her to, she wanted it as well.

She crawled onto the bed and lay across the comforter. As he pushed up and away, a sly smile spread across her mouth. His magnificent body was revealed as he stripped his own clothes and stood confident and proud.

A finger hooked in the air, she gestured for him to come closer and he gave a low groan as he finally moved onto the bed. His kisses were soft yet still insistent and the importance was undeniably clear as to what he wanted and needed from her. This was unexplored territory for them both and they would make the journey together.

It wasn't long before he nudged her knees open and his weight pressed over her with a heaviness that reassured her.

His eyes closed and that powerful body of his shuddered in response as he slid inside her. Filled with him, her legs lifted to circle his hips. She wanted to take as much of him as possible. They soared as their bodies became the driving force that demanded their release instead of words.

Tonight they were equals as Allison staked her own claim.

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

Sara is an e-book author that has always been fascinated by the strange, the unusual, the twisted and the lost. She enjoys writing about reality with a razor sharp edge and loves where that sometimes takes her during the journey.



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