

A person with dark hair in a ponytail is shown from the back, wearing a black leather harness with straps across their shoulders and back. They are standing against a dark, textured background. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the contours of their body and the texture of the leather.

Ariel
Tachna

**OUT OF
THE FIRE**

OUT OF THE FIRE

Ariel
Tachna



Dreamspinner Press

Published by
Dreamspinner Press
4760 Preston Road
Suite 244-149
Frisco, TX 75034
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Out of the Fire
Copyright © 2009 by Ariel Tachna

Cover Design by Mara McKennen

Photo Credit: "Backbone in B&W". Copyright © 2008 by Alina Oswald
alina.oswald@gmail.com <http://www.mediabistro.com/alinaoswald>

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the Publisher, except where permitted by law. To request permission and all other inquiries, contact Dreamspinner Press, 4760 Preston Road, Suite 244-149, Frisco, TX 75034
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

ISBN: 978-1-61581-213-4

Printed in the United States of America
First Edition
December, 2009

eBook edition available
eBook ISBN: 978-1-61581-214-1

To Nancy and Holly for always being willing to help,
even when my stories start as nightmares.

Special thanks to Julianne and Mickie
for sharing their expertise.

CHAPTER 1

EVAN NICHOLS stared blindly out the window as the plane hurtled through the sky, taking him toward Las Vegas, toward his best friend, toward his new “adventure.” He couldn’t quite believe he’d agreed to Rhys’s far-fetched plan, but he’d never been able to say no to the other man. Not when they were kids, and not now. The fact that they lived on opposite sides of the country didn’t matter one bit. The fact that they each had their own lives mattered even less. Rhys needed him and Evan could help. Which explained why he was on a plane with an open-ended return flight and no clue how long he’d actually be staying in Las Vegas.

He sighed. He’d never wanted a permanent relationship, never wanted a 24/7 sub, but if Rhys had his way, that’s what Evan was about to get. And not just any sub. A damaged sub. A sub he was supposed to wean *off* a 24/7 relationship. A sub he was supposed to teach the joys of a BDSM relationship instead of the horrors he’d experienced at the hands of an out-of-control sadist who called himself a Dom.

How the hell had this happened?

He knew the answer to that even as the question formed. Rhys had asked. Rhys, who had been his best friend since they were two. They’d done everything together. Played soccer and T-ball. Gone camping and fishing. Discovered they liked cock instead of pussy. And then discovered they shared a taste for domination. People in their neighborhood growing up had stopped thinking of them as two people. They were a unit. Rhys and Evan. Inseparable.

They’d been lovers for a short time. He’d given Rhys his virginity and taken his friend’s, but they were too much alike to function as a couple. Their mutual need to dominate their lovers had led them together into the world that had become their lives. Jobs had eventually separated them physically, but nothing could sever the connection that went deeper than brothers.

And that was why, even years later, Rhys had the number Evan only gave to family. Why Evan was uprooting his life, traveling across the country for the foreseeable future to try to help a sub who wasn't really a sub. A sub who had gotten caught in a mixture of miscommunication and irresponsibility and was now so broken, so incapable of functioning outside a scene, that Rhys had called him for help.

Evan still maintained that Rhys needed to be the one to help Takoda, not Evan, since he was a complete stranger to the wounded man, but Rhys claimed he'd tried and failed. That surprised Evan, given that Rhys was one of the most capable and compassionate Doms Evan knew, but they'd never lied to each other. If Rhys said he couldn't do this, then for whatever reason, Rhys couldn't do it.

Rhys hadn't explained, really. He'd been upset, drunk, and, if the uncharacteristic panicked edge to his voice was any indication, nearly hysterical as he described the shape Takoda had been in when the police found him in the basement of another local man—Evan hadn't caught the name—bound, plugged, gagged, and beaten bloody. The bastard had insisted it was consensual, but the police hadn't believed it. Rhys said Takoda still wouldn't talk about exactly what happened, but he didn't believe the scum for a minute, not when Takoda had never been part of the BDSM scene.

"How did you get mixed up in this then?" Evan had asked.

"He works for me," Rhys replied, as if that had explained everything. It did, to some extent, because Rhys deliberately hired people to work at his club who weren't part of the BDSM scene so that he could keep his customers separate from his staff. "He's been with me for five years, the perfect employee, and we became friends."

The word caught Evan's attention. It wasn't the word itself, but the way Rhys said it, like he wanted to say more but held back. The hesitation set warning bells ringing in Evan's head. "So why didn't you claim him for yourself?"

"Because he wasn't part of the scene," Rhys reminded Evan sharply. "Hell, Evan, he'd never even had a lover until this sadistic bastard started sniffing around him. I reminded the cocksucker of my policy; Takoda turned him down flat. But the prick didn't give up. And then one day Takoda didn't show up for work."

Rhys's voice broke when he said those words, self-recrimination so heavy in his tone that Evan had spoken just to break the spell. "What happened?"

“I called him, of course, but he simply said he was sick and he’d be back at work the next day. I accepted it. I let him hand me a stock excuse and didn’t press any harder than that. The next day, he was back at his post with a pasted-on smile. I chalked up his slightly off demeanor as a result of being sick, but he didn’t get better and so when he asked for a couple of days off, I said yes. That weekend, the bastard asked for Takoda by name. I took great pleasure in sending the fucker on his way, but then Takoda disappeared. It took the police almost ten days to find him.”

Evan hadn’t known what to say to that, so he had waited in silence, giving Rhys the time to regain his composure, to tell Evan the rest. “They finally found him, in the bastard’s basement, beaten bloody, suspended from his arms bound behind his back. He’d been left there for so long that his shoulders were wrenched from their sockets.”

“Did they get the guy?”

“Yes, thank God,” Rhys assured him. “He’s already in prison. And Takoda has been curled up in a corner on the floor of my house for the past five weeks. He responds to direct commands, but he can barely function without direction. Evan, I had to tell him I expected him to get up and go to the bathroom when he needs to. That I *expected* it. God, I get sick to my stomach just thinking about it, and I know I don’t know the worst of it. I saw the marks on his body, saw the torture chamber where the bastard kept him, but he won’t talk about it and I don’t know how to help.”

“Have you tried a therapist?”

“He won’t talk to anyone else at all,” Rhys explained. “Only to me, but not about that.”

That made some degree of sense to Evan, but it made his current situation all the more baffling. He hadn’t gotten a straight answer out of Rhys as to why his friend thought Takoda needed another Dom after his disastrous introduction to the lifestyle, but Rhys had insisted that Takoda only really responded when Rhys addressed him in Dom mode, and so that was where they had to start. The fact that Rhys was so determined to be involved said more to Evan about how much Rhys cared for the abused sub than any words that left his mouth. Evan wasn’t sure they were doing the right thing, but ultimately it came down to one thing: Rhys had asked.

Next to that, everything else was secondary.

WHEN Evan got off the plane in Las Vegas, Rhys was waiting exactly where Evan expected to find him: right on the other side of the security checkpoint.

They embraced in the way of family or old friends, the extended hug drawing a few stares but no comments. This was Vegas, after all, the “city where anything goes.”

“Takoda didn’t come with you?” Evan asked when they finally separated.

Rhys shook his head. “He’s still not comfortable going out in public. I can get him to go out to the pool with me, but that’s about it.”

Evan frowned. “You know this is never going to work, right?”

Rhys shrugged. “I don’t know what else to do. He isn’t functioning except to do exactly what I tell him, nothing more, nothing less. If that’s what I wanted, maybe that would be okay, but it isn’t, and honestly, even if it were, I’d feel uncomfortable taking it at the moment because how can he consent to anything in the state he’s in?”

Evan snorted. “And yet you want me to act as his Dom and do exactly that.”

Rhys’s face fell. “I don’t know what else to do.”

“Let’s get my bag and go to your house. Even if this just turns into a chance for us to visit and for me to meet your new man, it’ll still be worth the trip.”

Rhys smiled sadly. “But he isn’t my new man.”

Not yet, Evan agreed silently, *but you want him to be*. That realization was all it took. Rhys’s plan was beyond crazy, and Evan still wasn’t sure why Rhys didn’t just do it himself, but whatever the reason he was here, he *was* here now and he’d do everything in his power to make sure Rhys got what he wanted.

They got Evan’s suitcase and headed out into the hot, Nevada summer. Evan could feel the arid air sucking the water directly out through his skin. He made a mental note to get a water bottle and keep it with him and full all the time. He’d never survive otherwise. The desert wind ruffled Rhys’s longish blond hair. It hadn’t been that light the last time they’d been together, making Evan wonder if it was highlighted or if the sun had bleached it that blond. The dark tan suggested the sun was responsible. “So what does Takoda think of your hippy look?” Evan teased as they reached Rhys’s SUV.

Rhys just laughed. “He’s Native American, Evan. His hair is twice the length of mine, probably more.” His face grew more serious. “The bastard used the threat of cutting Takoda’s hair for punishment as a way to keep him under control.”

“‘The bastard’ has a name, even if I’m not sure you’ve told me what it is,” Evan said firmly, his Dom cadence slipping into his voice as he turned toward Rhys to impress the importance of this rule into his friend’s mind. “We’ll use it. Otherwise, it gives him power still, and that’s the last thing Takoda needs. He’s just a man, and furthermore, at the moment, he’s a powerless man. You did say he was in prison, right?”

“Yeah, they got him and the judge wouldn’t grant bail. The trial hasn’t started yet—I don’t know when it’s scheduled to begin, even—but Kade won’t be going free for a very, very long time.”

Kade. Evan committed the name to memory. He hoped they wouldn’t have to use it often, for Takoda’s sake, but he would use it when appropriate rather than some sobriquet that would increase his stature rather than decreasing it in Takoda’s mind.

He let the silence stretch between them for a few minutes as Rhys navigated his way out of the airport. When they were safely on their way away from the Strip and toward Rhys’s house, Evan took a deep breath and rolled the dice. “You do realize what it’s going to look like to Takoda when I leave and you step in to offer yourself as a lover and Dom.”

“What are you talking about?” Rhys asked without taking his eyes off the road.

“It’s going to look to him like you only want him if he’s ‘normal,’ since you couldn’t be bothered to deal with him yourself while he’s broken,” Evan said bluntly.

“What the fuck?” Rhys demanded, his head spinning toward Evan in shock.

“Watch the road,” Evan snapped back.

Rhys jerked his attention back to the heavy traffic, cursing under his breath as he narrowly avoided hitting another car. “Explain,” he ordered, his own dominant tone resonating in the car.

“You have yet to give me a single good reason why you can’t do for Takoda exactly what you’ve asked me to do,” Evan replied calmly. “I’m here because you asked, and that’s all I’ve ever needed, but Takoda isn’t going to see that. He’s going to see you, the one person he trusts, turning him over to another Dom rather than taking care of him yourself. And if that doesn’t drive him away for good, what self-esteem I help him regain will go right out the window when you step back into that position after having refused it when he really needed your help.”

Rhys shook his head, keeping his eyes on the traffic this time. “It’s not like that,” he protested, his tone begging Evan to understand. “I *have* tried, but

every time I have to give him an order, every time he looks at me with that damn submissive expression on his face, I see him in Kade's basement, beaten down and broken, and I freeze. The problem isn't him. It's me. *I* can't be what he needs. He's all I've ever wanted and I can't get past my own fucking hang-ups to help him."

Evan took a moment to digest that information. He'd suspected it, given what Rhys had said and not said on the phone, but the pain in Rhys's voice made it so much more real. Before he could say anything else, Rhys went on, his voice soft now. "If the worst happens, if Takoda really can't accept me later because I couldn't help him now, I can live with that as long as I know he *is* well. I'd rather have him healed and not in my life than broken the way he is now."

Evan nodded slowly. "You called me because you trust me the way you trust no one else," he began. "Do you trust me enough to let me help you too?"

"I'm trusting you with Takoda's life," Rhys pointed out. "Next to that, trusting you with mine is nothing."

"Then this is what we're going to do. First of all, we're not going to do anything for at least a week. Takoda doesn't know me, has no reason to trust me except your word, and while he'd probably do what I ask if you ordered him to, that defeats the purpose. For the next week, maybe more, I'm just a guest in the house," Evan declared. "If, in that time, an order has to be given, you will give it. No, don't argue," he insisted when he saw Rhys open his mouth to protest. "I don't want Takoda thinking of me as a Dom, much less his Dom, until he's ready to trust me on his own. Once that happens, though, I'll be the only Dom in the house. That means yours too. When we do a session, you'll be there with us and you'll do what I say just like Takoda will."

"And what purpose will that serve?" Rhys asked, his tone serious but willing to listen.

"Several purposes actually," Evan replied. "First, it'll show Takoda that a D/s relationship doesn't have to be sexual at all, because while I love you dearly, I'm not planning on fucking you while I'm here. Secondly, maybe if you're following orders, you can give Takoda what he needs. And even if you can't, at least you'll have tried, which might be the difference between him staying and leaving when I'm done. And hopefully if you're the one touching him, even if it's at my orders, he'll fall for you rather than me. You know as well as I do that new subs have a propensity to fall for their Dom."

“I know,” Rhys said, his voice barely above a whisper. “That’s another reason I called you. If he has to fall for someone else, I’d rather have it be you than anyone else because I know you’d never hurt him.”

“Oh, no,” Evan protested immediately. “No way. He’s all yours, buddy. I’m not leaving here with a sub in tow. I thought you knew better than to play matchmaker.”

Rhys rolled to a stop at a red light. “I’m not. I swear I’m not,” he insisted, turning to face Evan. Evan might have been skeptical but for the earnest look on Rhys’s face. “I want him. As my sub, my lover, my partner, or whatever combination of those makes him happy. But at least I know that if it doesn’t happen, you’ll let him down easily rather than just sending him on his way.”

Evan stared at Rhys’s expression a moment longer, until the honking of the car behind them drew their eyes back to the road. “You really do love him, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Rhys admitted hoarsely. “And the thought of anyone touching him, even you, makes me jealous as hell, but what he needs is more important than my feelings, and I can’t give it to him. And if I have to know he’s with someone else, I’d rather it be you than anyone else.”

“It won’t just be knowing,” Evan warned. “I won’t do a session unless you’re there too. Can you really do this, Rhys? Can you really watch me dominate your sub, not because you’ve decided to share him with another Dom for a session but because you can’t do it yourself?”

Rhys’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed hard at Evan’s words. “I don’t know.”

Evan almost called off the whole thing right then, but the desperation in Rhys’s voice held him back. If Evan backed out now, one of two things would happen. Rhys and Takoda would stay stuck in their current unhealthy stalemate, not really a couple but neither free to move on. Or Takoda would seek what he needed elsewhere without a seasoned sub’s confidence in his own limits, leaving him easy prey for anyone who chose to take advantage of him. As far as Evan was concerned, neither option was acceptable. He’d just have to see this through and make damn sure Rhys and Takoda ended up together.

What the fuck had he gotten himself into?

CHAPTER 2

RHYS parked in the detached garage he'd added to his bungalow a year after moving in, shouldering Evan's duffel and gesturing for Evan to precede him down the crushed shell path and through the gate to his back yard. His front yard looked pretty much like any other front yard in Las Vegas—desert sand and cacti—but he'd spent a lot of time and money transforming the back into a tropical paradise, a fact Evan knew from hours spent listening to Rhys's plans for his own "little slice of heaven."

"You really have created a thing of beauty here," Evan commented as they passed beneath the palm fronds that surrounded the pool deck at the center of the oasis. "I don't know why you ever leave it."

"I don't when I can help it," Rhys reminded him. "I go to work, I go to bed, and I work out here. At least, I did until a few weeks ago."

"You will again," Evan promised. "We'll get Takoda back on his feet. Have you asked if it's something he'd be interested in helping you with?"

"No," Rhys said shamefacedly. "He was hurt so badly still when they first released him from the hospital, even after a week of treatment, that he couldn't have helped me anyway, and I'm so used to doing it by myself."

Evan rolled his eyes. "I ought to shove you in that pool for being an idiot. How is he supposed to be a part of your life if you don't invite him in?"

"It's not that simple," Rhys started to protest.

"Bullshit," Evan interrupted. "You want him. You already told me that. You told me you love him. So start acting like it. I'm not saying you should go in there and jump him, but start including him in your life or there won't be anything to build a relationship on."

"Since when are you an expert on relationships?" Rhys challenged instinctively.

"I'm about to be an expert on yours," Evan reminded him. "That's why I'm here. You're a Dom, for fuck's sake, Rhys. Act like one."

Evan narrowly dodged the punch aimed at his head, grabbing Rhys around the waist and driving him back against the wooden slats of the high fence that surrounded his garden. The fact that the punch had gone wild was as telling to Evan as the fact that Rhys had thrown it in the first place. Pinning the blond, he stared hard into the snapping blue eyes. “We’ll go a round or two,” he promised, “because you’ve got to let this out or you’ll snap one day with Takoda, but not today. Today we’re going to walk in your house and you’re going to introduce me to your housemate.”

He released his hold on Rhys, taking a step back, light on his feet in case Rhys decided to come at him again. His best friend shook himself slightly, like he was trying to throw off the outburst. Evan knew how hard Rhys had worked when he was younger to learn to control his temper. Becoming a Dom had been a large part of that—the control he needed to run a session had helped him gain control in other aspects of his life as well. Competitive swimming had been another part, releasing his emotions through the exertion, as had music, in high school and college anyway. And when he’d moved to Las Vegas, this garden had been the final part, the nurturing of something the last step in letting go of the temper he had mastered but never truly rid himself of. It hurt Evan to realize that Takoda’s kidnapping and rape had brought that temper back to life again, and that strengthened his resolve to help his best friend as well as the victim of the crime.

They approached the back door to Rhys’s house, ducking beneath the heavy hanging blossoms of the wisteria bush that covered the beams over the patio. The sound of laughter came through the French doors, arresting Rhys mid-step. “I haven’t heard him laugh in months,” the blond whispered in awe, moving quietly forward.

The comment evoked such an image of devotion, of ongoing care, that it redoubled Evan’s awareness of Rhys’s emotions and added to Evan’s determination to see Rhys happy with the man of his choice. Following closely behind Rhys, he peeked over his friend’s shoulder to catch a glimpse of the man inside. Takoda sat on the couch, his body entirely relaxed as he laughed at something on the TV screen. His black hair was indeed almost twice as long as Rhys’s, hanging in one slick fall down the middle of his back. The shorts and tank top he wore did little to hide a body any man would give his right nut for: long and sleek, muscles defined without being bulky. Evan could feel his cock stirring in his slacks in automatic appreciation of a damn fine-looking man as he glanced over at Rhys. Rhys’s gaze was fixed on the sight inside, but it was the longing on his face, far deeper than just the jolt of surface lust Evan was feeling, that really struck Evan. Rhys didn’t just desire Takoda. He wanted the other man in every way. “You sure picked a looker,” Evan teased.

“He’s more than just a pretty face,” Rhys said hotly.

“I never doubted it,” Evan replied calmly, “but that doesn’t make him less attractive. And if you’re going to claim him, you’re going to have to get used to people commenting on it. Unless you never take him out.”

“He doesn’t want to go out,” Rhys said quietly. “He hasn’t left the house since he came home from the hospital.”

“Then it’s time he did,” Evan declared. “I need to change and so do you, and then we’re going for a run. I need the exercise after all those hours on the plane. You need to let off some steam. And he needs to get out of the house if he’s really been here for six weeks without going out.”

“He won’t agree,” Rhys warned.

“He’s a sub,” Evan countered. “He’ll agree.”

The sound of the door opening drew Takoda’s attention, not in a curious way, Evan noted, but with the same reaction he expected to see out of a cornered wild animal. The dark-haired man rose immediately, every line of his body broadcasting his tension as he backed toward the far end of the couch, putting the long line of the sofa between him and the intruders. That one of them was Rhys didn’t seem to register at all. Takoda’s eyes were fixed firmly on Evan.

“Takoda, this is Evan Nichols,” Rhys said gently by way of introduction, “my best friend since we were kids. We grew up together in Virginia. Remember, I told you he was coming to stay with us for awhile.”

Takoda nodded, but his eyes lost none of their edginess.

“So were you a swimmer or did you play soccer?” Evan asked, hoping to break the ice.

The question seemed to startle Takoda even more as he backed toward the door out of the den. “Sw-swimming,” he said softly.

“It had to be one of the two,” Evan declared. “The swimmers and the soccer players always have the best bodies.”

Takoda flinched as if he’d been struck, drawing a reflexive hiss from Rhys. Evan ignored it for the moment, focusing completely on his intended sub. “I always preferred soccer,” he added. “I could run for hours and never get tired. Find some shoes, both of you. It’ll take me a few minutes to get changed, and then we’ll all hit the pavement. I’d say we could all use the exercise.”

Without waiting for a reply, Evan walked directly toward Takoda, knowing the door at the other man’s back was the only entrance deeper into the house. He’d nearly reached Takoda’s side, fully aware of the waves of

distress rolling off the sub, when he looked back at Rhys. “Which room am I staying in?”

“The downstairs bedroom,” Rhys replied automatically. “Takoda’s in the guest room upstairs.”

“Perfect,” Evan grinned, fully aware that his pause had given Takoda a chance to edge toward Rhys’s side. “Easy access to the kitchen.”

He walked through the doorway into the hall, pausing just a moment before sticking his head back into the den in time to see Rhys place a reassuring hand on Takoda’s shoulder and Takoda flinch away in fear. He apologized immediately in a soft voice with downcast eyes, as if he had no right to feel the fear that obviously controlled him. Even with the apology, Evan could see the pain the instinctive reaction had elicited in Rhys, and he resolved to address that fear of being touched before anything else. Rhys needed to be able to comfort Takoda as much as Takoda needed to be able to accept it if they had any hope of forming a more intense relationship.

“Hurry up,” he scolded as if he had not witnessed the scene and had no thought but his own exercise. “I want to go for a run!”

Evan had deliberately kept his tone light when he issued the order, but Takoda reacted as if he had spoken much more harshly, shoulders hunching as if to avoid a blow as he scurried past and up the stairs. It wasn’t quite the reaction Evan had hoped for, but it did help him understand why Rhys was so convinced Takoda had latent sub leanings. Abused or not, frightened or not, such immediate obedience to what barely counted as an order set Evan’s Dom instincts jangling in response to a potential partner. “You, too, Rhys,” he urged. “Takoda might go with me alone, but he’d probably bolt in the opposite direction the moment my attention wandered. He trusts you.”

Rhys’s laugh was bitter. “Yeah, sure. That’s why he pulled away when I touched him.”

“He let you get close enough to touch him,” Evan replied logically. “He hasn’t let me get anywhere near that close. And he apologized for his reaction. He wouldn’t be living here with you if he didn’t trust you.”

“He didn’t have anywhere else to go,” Rhys said, barely above a whisper. “The bas... Kade canceled the lease on his apartment. All his furniture, everything is gone.”

“How the hell did he manage that?” Evan asked. “Wouldn’t Takoda have to sign something?”

“Kade forged it,” Rhys bit out. “I told you he was a fucking bastard. I’m trying to abide by your rule and call him by his name, but you’re asking one hell of a lot. I just thought I’d tell you that.” Before Evan could reply,

Rhys had pushed past him into the hallway, climbing the steps as well. Evan wondered if he'd made a mistake in insisting they all refer to Kade by name, but he hoped they wouldn't need to use it very often.

Letting Rhys go for the moment, Evan dug around in his bag until he found his running shoes and shorts, changing swiftly and waiting for them in the den. Alone with his thoughts for a moment, he pondered the difference between the Takoda he had prepared himself for—huddling in a corner, refusing to move except when given a direct order—and the one he had actually discovered—laughing at the TV, though Rhys said that was new, and far more responsive than Evan had expected. Whatever Rhys might think, he'd obviously made real progress with Takoda. It was just a question of building on that.

No surprise at all, Rhys came back downstairs first, ready to go. He went silently into the kitchen, pulling three bottles of water from the refrigerator. As arid as it was in Nevada, they'd need them even in the falling twilight. A few minutes later, just as Evan was about to send Rhys back upstairs to get Takoda, he came down the stairs as well, running shoes having replaced the flip-flops on his feet earlier.

Evan didn't approach Takoda, not wanting to scare him, but he needed answers to his questions. "Rhys told me your shoulders still bother you some. Do you still hurt anywhere else from what Kade did to you?"

Takoda flinched, but Evan didn't back down. They had to stop ignoring the elephant in the room. They had to stop pretending nothing was wrong and deal with it if they had any hope of moving forward. "I have to know what your physical limitations are," Evan insisted. "I can ask Rhys, but he may not know either. Does anything else still hurt? Any old injuries I should know about that still bother you sometimes?"

"I have allergy-induced asthma," Takoda said softly, eyes averted.

"I didn't know that," Rhys exclaimed. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't ask," Takoda replied timidly.

"Neither did Evan," Rhys muttered. "He demanded."

"You never did that either," Takoda retorted, the words so clearly a glimpse into his pre-trauma personality.

"I'll have to demand more often then," Evan said with a laugh, wanting to erase the sudden fear that had colored Takoda's cheeks as soon as the words escaped him. "Seriously, though, do you have an inhaler?"

"I got a new one while I was in the hospital," Takoda admitted. "It's in my room."

“Do we need to take it with us?”

Takoda shook his head. “I don’t have allergies in the summer.”

Evan considered that for a moment. “Humor me,” he decided. “Go get it. I’ll carry it if you’d rather not, but I’d like to have it with us just in case.”

Obediently, Takoda trotted back up the stairs, returning moments later with his inhaler.

“Let’s go,” Evan said, pocketing the inhaler and catching the bottle of water Rhys threw in his direction.

Half an hour later, they were all covered in sweat, and the sky was darkening with the amazing speed of desert night. One minute, the sun was above the horizon, the next, it disappeared and darkness fell. Evan made a mental note to keep that in mind the next time they went running, but the streetlights were popping on, providing enough light for them to make their way home, albeit at a slower pace than the one they had started at. Evan could see that Takoda was tiring, though his breathing showed no signs of distress, much to Evan’s relief.

He could tell from the way Takoda moved that he’d obviously once been in great shape, but he’d clearly lost some of that. Evan didn’t know how much of that was just recovering from his injuries and how much was losing the athlete’s lifestyle he’d admitted to having in high school, but he hoped to find out. More importantly, he hoped to convince Takoda to make some sort of exercise—running or swimming, he didn’t care which—part of their daily routine. It would help the other man feel good about himself again if he could track his body’s progress, and that would help his overall self-esteem, a necessary component to his emotional healing. It would also give him greater stamina and flexibility when it came to their sessions.

“Come on, Takoda,” Evan urged. He didn’t bother encouraging Rhys. They’d run together enough times in the past that he knew Rhys could leave them both in the dust if he decided to. That wasn’t anywhere on his friend’s agenda today, though, his pace perfectly matched with Takoda’s, his eyes slipping sideways every few strides to check on the other man. It was one more small sign of how much Rhys cared. Very little trumped his competitive nature, but caring for Takoda seemed to be one thing that did. “We’ve got a mile left to go. Can you make it in seven minutes?”

Takoda shook his head, but his feet picked up the pace, seemingly unaware of his automatic denial. It took them closer to ten minutes than seven, but given that Evan wasn’t completely sure his mile had been just a mile, he didn’t complain.

Rhys tossed another bottle of water in each of their directions when they got back inside. As Evan guzzled it down, he reflected that while the run had been neither the fastest nor the most exhausting in recent memory, it was clearly the most important. Takoda's skin was flushed as he set the water aside and automatically began a routine of cool-down stretches, his body moving with a grace and flexibility that suggested much familiarity. And that was far more than he'd ever accomplished with a simple run before, because for the time it took Takoda to complete his stretches, he showed no sign of fear or self-consciousness. And Evan got another glimpse of the man he'd once been.

The man he'd be again.

CHAPTER 3

“I HAVE to get ready for work,” Rhys said after a few minutes, breaking the relative ease between them.

“I... I’ll just go upstairs,” Takoda stuttered, his eyes darting between Evan and Rhys as he beat a quick retreat, the sudden change in his demeanor proof to Evan that the “real” Takoda, the one who’d been quietly doing stretches, still lurked inside under the fear and that he could be lured out in safe or familiar circumstances. Now Evan just had to figure out how to establish enough safe and familiar circumstances that Takoda could begin to let go of his fear altogether.

“I know it’s piss-poor timing to leave you here alone with him so soon, but none of my managers could take my shift tonight,” Rhys apologized. “And someone has to run the club.”

“I understand,” Evan said.

“You could come with me,” Rhys suggested. “Even if all you do is have a few drinks, at least you wouldn’t be here with Takoda locked in his room upstairs.”

Evan considered the offer but ended up shaking his head. “I’m going to unpack and then sit here and watch TV. And I’m going to do my best to tempt him downstairs to join me. He hasn’t had dinner and surely watching TV with me would be more fun than cowering in his room.”

“Don’t push too far too fast,” Rhys warned, starting toward the stairs. “I don’t know where he’d go if he bolted, but I don’t want to find out either.”

Evan nodded. “I’m not going to issue any orders without you around as a safety valve. I’ll offer him something to eat and some company. He’ll accept or not, and I’ll accept his choice, but he has to learn to trust me or I won’t be able to help him, even if I manage to help you.”

Rhys’s face was tight as he went upstairs, but he didn’t protest any more. Evan decided a shower was the first order of business and went to get

clean and changed. He'd worry about dinner after that, even if he just ordered a pizza, and then he'd see what he could find in Rhys's DVD collection that might tempt Takoda to join him. The hot water felt incredibly refreshing after his run, sparking another idea for later, when Takoda wasn't petrified of him anymore.

He got dressed in another T-shirt and shorts—he suspected he wouldn't be wearing much else except during their sessions—and went to find Rhys. “Where should I order pizza from?”

“Call Antonio's,” Rhys advised. “The number's on the fridge and they deliver, unlike some of the other non-franchise pizza places.”

“Thanks,” Evan said, knocking on the door to Takoda's room. He heard frantic rustling inside, but he didn't open the door, speaking through the barrier instead. “What do you like on your pizza, Takoda?”

Silence met his question. Evan frowned but tried again. “Do you like mushrooms?”

Still no reply.

“How about sausage?”

No answer.

“Green peppers?”

“No!”

“Okay, no green peppers. Does that mean mushrooms and sausage are all right with you?”

More silence.

Evan sighed. “You're going to get stuck with a pizza you hate if you don't talk to me,” he scolded through the door. “For all you know, I could be planning to order some disgusting combination.”

“No green peppers, no anchovies,” Takoda said after another long pause.

“Good. Come down when you've had your shower and we'll finish watching the film you had on earlier if you want,” Evan suggested lightly, not waiting for a reply.

Going back downstairs, Evan called in the pizza order and turned on the TV long enough to see what Takoda had been watching. He grimaced slightly at the Jim Carrey movie, tending to prefer more intellectual comedy to the bathroom humor that Carrey and his like usually provided. He stopped the film again, not wanting to subject himself to it unless Takoda was actually there with him, and headed back into his bedroom to unpack. The majority of

his belongings were the same as in any suitcase—clothes, toiletries, his laptop for work—but beneath the carefully folded garments were two less common items: a flogger and a dark blue leather collar. He frowned down at the collar now, wondering if he should have Rhys pick up another one, since he would have two subs rather than one in their sessions now. After a moment, he decided against it. He'd give the collar to Rhys as a good-bye present so Rhys could use it to finally claim Takoda as his.

The pizza arrived a few minutes later, the buzz of the doorbell sharp in the relative quiet of the house. Evan could hear Rhys upstairs getting ready, the steady footfalls betraying his location on the upper floor. Moments later, he came downstairs, snagging a piece of pizza as he walked by.

"Looking good," Evan said with a grin. And it was true. The dark brown leather clung to Rhys's athletic body, and the color went well with his light hair and tanned skin. "Have fun tonight."

Rhys quirked his lips in response. "Yeah, somehow I don't think 'fun' is the right word when I'll be worried about Takoda the whole time."

"Rhys, stop," Evan ordered. "I'm going to tell him the pizza is here and then I'm going to sit on the couch and not move again until I'm ready to go to bed. If he wants to join me, I'll be glad to sit and talk with him, or just watch a movie and chill out, but I'm not going to march upstairs and drag him down here. That wouldn't serve any purpose, even without his past. He has to trust both of us, and at the moment, he only trusts you. And before you make some derisive comment, you've obviously done a lot for him already because he isn't nearly as bad off as you portrayed him when we first talked. So either your sense of how hurt he was in the first place is skewed or else your sense of his progress is. Either way, I don't think this is an impossible task after all. Go to work. Tomorrow we'll start making plans."

"Okay," Rhys agreed finally. "I just... worry. The real damage wasn't to his body; that's mostly healed. It's his psyche that's hurting."

"It's not a bad thing, you know, to worry about someone you care for," Evan reminded him. "Now go. The pizza's getting cold and I want to see if Takoda will come down after you've left."

Rhys nodded and called a farewell to Takoda up the stairs before heading out through the garden to the detached garage.

Once Evan heard the car start, he went to the foot of the stairs. "Pizza's here," he called. "Come get it while it's hot."

He didn't get an answer, but he didn't really expect one. Instead, he went back into the kitchen, grabbed a beer and another slice of pizza, and returned to the couch to wait.

He didn't know how Takoda could tell when he was settled, but as soon as he was, the other man appeared hesitantly in the kitchen. "Rhys doesn't like food anywhere but in the kitchen," he said meekly, obviously torn between his fear of reprisal from questioning a Dom and his fear of what Rhys would do for disobeying an order. It made Evan angry all over again on Takoda's behalf.

"Thanks for telling me," he said simply, rising from his seat and returning to the kitchen. He sat at the table immediately, not wanting to appear in any way threatening. "Rhys and I have been friends for a long time, but we haven't lived together since we were fresh out of college. We were both slobs at the time. Obviously that's changed."

Takoda didn't reply, mechanically placing pizza on his plate and eating it, eyes downcast.

"I saw you were watching *The Mask*. I hear it's really funny. We could finish it after dinner if you'd like," Evan suggested.

Takoda didn't even look up. Evan frowned, letting it slide for a moment, but when the other man finished his pizza and put his plate in the dishwasher, obviously intending to go back upstairs, Evan tried again. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather watch the movie than go running back upstairs?"

"I... Is that an order, Sir?" Takoda stuttered, eyes still downcast.

"Of course not," Evan replied immediately. "An invitation, that's all. The only time I'll issue orders is during a session and I certainly wouldn't do one of those without Rhys around."

Takoda nodded and turned on his heel, leaving the room without further comment.

Fuck, this was going to be complicated.

"TAKODA, have you seen the salt?" Evan asked, even though Rhys was both closer to him and more likely to answer. Neither of those mattered as much as interacting with the abused sub in as normal a manner as possible given Takoda's own tendency to withdraw the moment Evan looked at him.

Takoda didn't reply, but he did open the cabinet above his head and toss a canister of sea salt in Evan's direction. "Thanks," Evan said, catching it handily, though he was more than a little surprised at the gesture. He hoped it meant Takoda was beginning to relax around him, at least when he wasn't thinking about it. "Sea salt, Rhys? Really? Can you get any more yuppie?"

“Hey, it’s European, not yuppie, and I like the way it tastes,” Rhys protested from where he was cutting the onions for the chicken curry Evan had persuaded him to try making. The recipe was complicated enough that having all three of them working on it at once was a real boon.

“Yeah, yeah, tell me another one,” Evan joked, measuring out the salt and adding it to the other spices. “Takoda, catch!” Waiting only long enough to make sure Takoda looked in his direction, Evan tossed the salt back to him. Takoda caught it reflexively, wincing a little as the unusual reach stretched ligaments not completely recovered from the damage done to them.

“What have you done as far as therapy for your shoulders?” Evan asked. “And don’t make me ask Rhys. He’ll probably botch it up anyway.”

“Fucker!” Rhys protested, but he didn’t answer Evan’s question, hoping Takoda would speak for himself.

After a moment, Takoda shrugged. “Doctors said it would just take time.”

Evan frowned. “That’s probably true, but it doesn’t mean we can’t do some things to help speed the process up. Have you been swimming since you’ve been here?”

Takoda shook his head.

“Well, that’s a good place to start,” Evan decided. “It’s something you like and it’ll be good exercise for your shoulders, without being too stressful. And then maybe a heat pack tonight, if Rhys has one.”

“I don’t, but I can get one on the way to work and we can try it when I get home.”

Takoda shook his head again.

“Why not?” Rhys asked softly, moving to Takoda’s side but not quite touching him. “It’s a good idea and it’s not like those disposable heat pads are all that expensive anyway.”

“What if it doesn’t work?” Takoda asked despairingly.

“Nothing’s going to work overnight,” Evan said consolingly, moving to Rhys’s side as well, although he took care not to crowd Takoda. “But if we don’t do something, you’ll end up with stiffness and limited mobility for the rest of your life. You’re a fighter, Takoda. I don’t see you settling for that if you can have more.”

Evan had intended the words as a compliment, but the sudden tense silence that enveloped the kitchen suggested a far different reaction. Takoda looked at Evan with a horrified expression on his face as tears welled in his eyes. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. Instead, he took

one step back, followed by another, before turning and running from the room.

“Shit,” Evan muttered. “What brought that on?”

Rhys shook his head. “I don’t know, but I’ll go talk to him and see what I can figure out. Sometimes he’ll tell me what’s going on in his head.”

“Just ask him if you can tell me before you share anything he might consider private,” Evan warned. “We’re starting to make progress. I don’t want to do any more damage than I’ve already done.”

“Isn’t it too late for that?” Rhys asked. “I’ve already told you things you shouldn’t know when I called to ask for your help.”

“No,” Evan said firmly. “He has to trust both of us or this won’t work. And he isn’t going to trust either of us if he’s afraid you’re going to come tell me everything he says without asking first.”

“Fine,” Rhys huffed, walking up the stairs. Evan could hear the door, presumably to Takoda’s room, open and shut, and then there was silence. He paced restlessly as he waited for Rhys to come back down. He felt helpless, letting the situation out his control this way, proof of just how deeply he’d come to view Takoda’s recovery as his to supervise in just the few days he’d been here, but he had to let Rhys do this without his interference or they’d lose all the ground they’d started to gain.

The ten minutes until Rhys came back down seemed far longer to Evan, but Rhys finally reappeared. “So what’s the problem? What did I do wrong?”

“You called him a fighter,” Rhys explained, “and he doesn’t feel like that’s what he is at all. I told you it was far more than just physical harm. He’s so totally victimized that he feels like it’s all his fault, that if he’d just fought—”

“Bullshit,” Evan spat. “I haven’t seen Kade, obviously, but from everything you said, this was a well-planned kidnapping, not some random encounter. That doesn’t make Takoda weak.”

“I tried telling him that, but I don’t think he believed me,” Rhys said.

“Maybe I should try,” Evan mused. “After all, I’m the one who made the comment.”

Rhys shrugged. “It couldn’t hurt. Just remember he’s fragile, even more so at the moment because of what you said. Go easy on him.”

“I’ll be the picture of kindness,” Evan promised, heading up the stairs. To his relief, the door was still open. He stopped outside the door, in Takoda’s line of sight but not making any attempt to come closer. “Do you mind if we talk a bit?”

Takoda's eyes flew to his face as he scrambled backward on the bed.

"I'm not going to come in. I'm just going to sit out here so we can talk," Evan told Takoda gently. "I won't ever come in your room unless you invite me in."

"But..." Takoda stuttered from his place on the bed, "but you're a Dom."

"Yes," Evan agreed, since it was very much the truth and a truth he planned on making very real to Takoda as soon as the other man was ready, "but that doesn't give me the right to violate your personal space without permission."

"But—" Takoda said again.

Evan shook his head. "No buts. No ifs, no ands. What happened to you wasn't BDSM, Takoda, no matter what Kade told you. It was rape, abuse, torture, dehumanization, but it wasn't BDSM, at least not for you, because you didn't agree to it." He heard the distressed sound from the bedroom and glanced up, tempering his tone slightly. Still firm, but not quite as aggressive.

"BDSM is different things to different people, obviously. Some people have emotional hang-ups where sex is concerned. They see it as tainted or dirty and so BDSM allows them to get the punishment out of the way before they get to the 'fun stuff.' Other people find a little bit of pain stimulating. The Greeks considered a light whipping a cure for impotence because that stimulation to the deeper nerve sensors on your backside moves around to your front side and gets you aroused. For still others, it's the act of putting complete trust in another person, of not having to make any decisions for a period of time except to obey—with the possibility that at the end of that time, some form of sexual release will occur, depending on who's involved in the session." When that didn't get a reaction, Evan glanced up again, checking on Takoda's reaction. His face was still, set, but he seemed to be listening. Evan only hoped the words were sinking in.

"As a Dom, it's my job to be aware of those variations, to find out which ones apply to my sub and then to respect that and give my sub what he needs. During a session. I'm not a lifestyle Dom. I haven't ever wanted to be. And when the session is over, my sub and I part ways as equals again. Sometimes we meet again later for another session. Sometimes it stops there, but it's my responsibility as a Dom to see to my sub's pleasure, however that looks. I know this wasn't the case for you, but the fact of the matter is, Takoda, BDSM is all about the sub."

Takoda's eyes widened during Evan's discourse, giving Evan hope that the words were really sinking in, although the almost reflexive shake of his

head suggested Takoda was more disbelieving than anything else. Evan hoped to be able to start proving the truth of his words soon, but until then, he'd keep talking and maybe, eventually, Takoda would be able to hear what he had to say. "Do you know what I see, sitting here looking at you?"

Takoda shook his head mutely.

"I see a man who has every reason to be curled up in that corner and never get up again," Evan explained. "I see a man who could check himself into a psych hospital and no one would blink an eye at his request for help. But you aren't doing those things. You get up every morning. You take a shower, you get dressed, you go out by the pool, you help Rhys cook. You watch TV and sometimes even laugh at the jokes. Yes, you have every excuse to be a pathetic mess, but you aren't. You're fighting against that. So maybe you aren't where you want to be yet. It's only been two months, for Christ's sake. You aren't even completely recovered from your physical injuries if the limited movement in your shoulders is any indication. But you aren't using that as an excuse either. I haven't heard you complain about it once, even though it obviously bothers you sometimes. So yes, when I look at you, I see a fighter, and that's something I find very admirable. And incredibly desirable. And so does Rhys."

Takoda's eyes widened slightly, body curling in on himself in a protective ball, but Evan raised his hands reassuringly. "You're safe in your room," he reminded Takoda. "And you're safe with me, even if you aren't in your room. All you have to do is say stop—or use your safe word once we establish one—and whatever I'm doing, whatever I've done to upset you, I'll stop. This isn't rocket science, Takoda. It's just simple respect."

Now he just had to convince Takoda of the reality of that statement.

CHAPTER 4

“HEY, Takoda,” Rhys called, walking into the house with a shit-eating grin for Evan. “I brought you a present.”

Evan didn’t know where Rhys had found the guitar he was carrying—he assumed there was a guitar inside the guitar case—but Rhys was obviously proud of himself for doing so and expected Takoda to be equally pleased. “Let me see?” he asked.

Rhys handed him the case and Evan opened it, running an appreciative hand over the curve of the Martin twelve-string guitar nestled within. Even used, a guitar like this one wasn’t cheap, and this one looked pretty much brand new. He plucked one of the strings. The note, crisp and clean, resonated even in the case. “This is a nice instrument.”

“The guy at the store thought so. He’s been watching for a top-quality used one for me since we realized Takoda’s stuff was gone. I’m hoping he’ll start playing again,” Rhys explained.

“Do you think he’ll let me borrow it occasionally?” Evan asked wistfully, not taking the guitar out of the case despite being incredibly tempted. This was Takoda’s gift. He deserved to be the one to take it out of its case, to test its tone first.

“Takoda!” Rhys said when he walked in a moment later. “Come see what I got for you. I know how much you enjoyed playing before, and I wanted you to have a guitar of your own again.”

Reverently, Takoda reached for the neck of the guitar, lifting it from its case and strapping it over his shoulder. He flipped open the storage compartment and found a selection of picks. Smile beginning to form, he grabbed one and strummed the guitar experimentally, wincing a little at one out-of-tune string. A little fiddling with the keys fixed that problem, and he tried again, a look of contentment spreading across his face as he lost himself completely in his music.

“I wish I’d known,” Evan said quietly to Rhys. “I’d have brought my guitar with me and we could have played together.”

Rhys’s smile grew broader. “I didn’t think to tell you to bring yours, but the guy at the store is a sometimes client of mine and he loaned me one for you to use while you’re here. It’s just outside.”

Evan was out of his seat like a shot, but even the unexpected movement was not enough to startle Takoda out of the trancelike state he’d fallen into since he started playing. Moments later, Evan returned with a second guitar, not quite as nice as the one Takoda was playing but more than serviceable. An experimental strum to check the tuning finally drew Takoda’s attention.

“You play too?”

“Since my hands were big enough to go around the neck of a guitar,” Evan admitted. “I’d been trying to figure out what I was going to do while I was here since I didn’t bring mine with me.”

“Do you know ‘Moonshadow’ by Cat Stevens?”

Evan didn’t reply, just strummed the first few bars, silently thrilled at the way Takoda’s face lit up as he joined in. Usually when Evan played, he lost himself completely in the music, letting the creation of something new and unique transport him to an entirely different plane of awareness. He suspected Takoda usually reacted the same way, although his continued wariness around Evan kept him from going there this time. Even so, this was by far the most relaxed Evan had seen the other man except for perhaps that first day, before Takoda knew Evan and Rhys were back from the airport. Other than the movement of his hands, Evan kept deliberately still as they played, not wanting to jar Takoda out of his music-induced trance. When they finished, Evan waited for Takoda to start the next song. He did, almost without hesitation. Evan grinned when Takoda started playing “Blackbird” by the Beatles and joined in.

This one was easier, not because of the music, but because Evan could sense the bond beginning that builds between musicians who play together as they learn each other’s idiosyncrasies. He could start anticipating the slight hesitation before the B minor chord, compensating for it, and he noticed Takoda mimicking his own slightly irregular strum pattern. It brought a smile to his lips, this connection, however tentative, with the man he was supposed to be helping. He’d been here almost a week already, and this was the longest time Takoda had willingly spent in his company. Even better, his posture projected an ease, at least for the moment, that Evan wanted to restore permanently.

“Hey, do you know this one?” Evan asked, starting “Take the ‘A’ Train,” hoping the jazzier riffs would let them both test their skill with a bit of improvisation.

“Oh, that’s one of my favorites. Rhys even likes that one, don’t you?” Takoda replied, looking around for Rhys. Evan saw the realization that they were alone in the room together wash through Takoda, watched the tension build as Takoda’s eyes darted around the room desperately, seeking escape.

“Takoda,” Evan said gently, continuing to play. “He’s been gone since we started. Nothing’s changed except that you know it now. You can take your guitar and go upstairs. I’m not going to stop you. Or you can stay down here with me and we can play. With something like this, I bet we could keep the improv going for fifteen, twenty minutes.”

Takoda didn’t say anything, but neither did he step farther away. Evan looked back at his fingers, letting the music flow from him without direction, idle twiddlings as he started to talk quietly. “My parents got me my first guitar when I was eight. I’d been after them for two years to let me learn, but they insisted my hands were too small and that I needed to wait until I could play a full-sized guitar so they wouldn’t have to keep buying me a new one. I remember sitting in my room stretching my hand as if I could make it grow faster that way.”

Evan didn’t look up when that surprised a chuckle from Takoda. He just kept playing and talking.

“I hung out at the music store,” Evan went on. “There was one just up the street from us, close enough that I could ride my bike. So I’d ride up there and just listen to all the people coming through, trying out the guitars, asking questions, taking lessons. The owner was a great guy. He let me try out the junior guitars, even taught me a few chords. The men who came in just to play taught me a few more. So by the time I actually got my guitar, I’d picked up enough of the basics that I could mess around. My parents signed me up for lessons, but it became obvious pretty quickly that I was learning far more at the store than I was in actual lessons.”

His fingers moved automatically as he glanced up to gauge Takoda’s reaction. Takoda had a slight smile on his face, like he was remembering something similar from his own experience, which Evan took as a good sign, even if he hadn’t moved any closer.

“Rhys always tagged along with me, but he didn’t have the patience for the guitar,” Evan confided. “He tended more toward the drums. He could keep a beat, but he still can’t carry a tune in a bucket.”

Takoda chuckled and took a step back toward the chair he'd been occupying. Seeing that, Evan tailored his words to suit Takoda's apparent interest. "The store owner, fortunately, seemed to have an incredibly high tolerance for noise because he never once scolded Rhys for banging on the drums. Of course it didn't take him long to figure out how to accompany what we were playing instead of just banging. When we were in high school, we started a band. The two of us and two other guys, one who played a mean piano and the other who could sing anything after he heard it just once. We never got any gigs, but we had a hell of a time in Rhys's garage for a couple of summers. It made the other two popular with the girls. Rhys and I weren't interested in their attentions, but Paul and Mike sure benefited."

Takoda chuckled again and sat back down.

"Do you know what our signature song was?" Evan glanced up to wait for Takoda's answer. When he shook his head, Evan grinned. "'Bang the Drum', by Todd Rundgren. And oh, could Rhys bang those drums!"

Evan didn't tell Takoda it had been another part of Rhys learning to manage his temper. He didn't want Takoda questioning now whether he could trust Rhys to stay in control. Besides, that was Rhys's secret to reveal, not Evan's. "Ironic, isn't it, now that Rhys is the boss."

Takoda looked puzzled but still didn't ask.

"It's a line from the song," Evan explained. "*Every day when I get home from work, I feel so frustrated, The boss is a jerk, And I get my sticks and go out to the shed, And I pound on that drum like it was the boss's head.* Only now Rhys is the boss."

"He's not a jerk though," Takoda said softly.

"No, he's not," Evan agreed. "So you gonna sit there or play?"

Takoda smiled and picked up the thread of the song Evan had been strumming.

Maybe there was hope after all.

RHYS was at work again; even the lure of music had not been enough to keep Takoda downstairs, and Evan was bored.

Bored, bored, bored.

So bored that he'd ventured out into Rhys's garden and picked up the watering can. He hated gardening. Hated it with the same passion Rhys felt toward it. He knew what it had brought his best friend, and so he was thrilled

with the oasis of beauty Rhys had created, but he had no desire to create his own. And yet, here he was, watering can in hand, puttering around outside to pass the time.

He'd worked his way about halfway around the garden, having to refill the can every third pot, when a muffled yelping caught his attention. Frowning, he put the watering can down and went in search of the source of the noise. He found it a few moments later.

A little beagle puppy was caught in the chicken wire Rhys used to support the bougainvillea that grew along one fence. "Well, hello, little guy," Evan said softly. "How'd you get stuck in there?"

A little investigation revealed a hole under the fence. "You like to dig? I gotta tell you, this isn't the right direction. You may think you want to be over here with all these pretty plants, but Rhys wouldn't be very happy if you dug them all up and I'm not sure you want to be around all the fertilizer and stuff he uses. Let's get you untangled and we'll take you home where you'll be safer."

The puppy squirmed, delighted at the attention it was receiving, which only succeeded in tangling it more. "Hold still, buddy," Evan urged, but the puppy didn't seem to understand.

Frustrated, Evan knelt down, trying to catch the wriggling body between his legs so he could hold it still long enough to untangle his legs from the chicken wire, but even that didn't seem to help. "Well, fuck," Evan muttered. He'd seen clippers in the shed when he got out the watering can and knew he could go get them to cut the puppy loose, but then he'd have to explain to Rhys why he had a hole in his chicken wire, and he didn't have any desire to do that. Besides, if he left even for that long, the puppy could get even more tangled, and Evan didn't want it to end up with wire around his neck where it might do more permanent damage. "What am I going to do with you?" he muttered, looking around for a better solution.

Not finding one, he went back to his original plan: trying to hold the dog still while he worked its leg free.

He'd managed to get one loop worked free in what felt like ten minutes, but from the looks of it, the dog had managed to get another leg caught in the meantime. "Fuck," Evan said again.

"Let me help."

Evan was so surprised to hear Takoda's voice that he lost his balance and landed hard on his ass in the dirt. He scowled at the general indignity of it, but a second pair of hands definitely wouldn't be amiss, so he looked up at the other man. "Please?"

Takoda knelt next to him and stroked the puppy gently. “Hold him as still as you can,” he directed. “I’ll get the wire off him.”

Evan nodded and ran his hand down the puppy’s trembling back, trying to calm its struggles to be free. He watched, impressed, as Takoda worked the wire from around the beagle’s foot, slowly releasing the coils that kept the animal bound. Finally, with only one distressed yelp from the little dog, they got him free. “I’ll take him back next door,” Evan said. “You don’t have to go back upstairs if you don’t want to. We could play some more. Or just sit and talk.”

Takoda didn’t reply, but he didn’t bolt the way he had the first day, giving Evan hope that he might still be there when Evan got back from returning the dog to its master.

Or its mistress, as the case turned out to be. The woman was terribly apologetic and promised to reinforce the fenceline so the puppy wouldn’t dig through. Evan assured her no damage was done but explained about Rhys’s garden and the fertilizers he used. She seemed to realize the legitimate threat to the puppy’s health if it got in the chemicals, and that was ultimately all Evan could do about it.

When he walked back in the house, he didn’t see Takoda immediately and sighed in frustration, wondering what it would take to get the other man to stop hiding from him.

“It’s a nice night for a swim.”

The words interrupted Evan’s growing despair, drawing his attention outside again. The sun was beginning to set, night falling rapidly as it always did in the desert, and as Evan reached the sunroom doors, Takoda turned the pool lights on, illuminating the water.

“If you want to put your suit on, we could... swim a few laps,” Takoda suggested hesitantly.

“I’ll be there in two minutes,” Evan replied, not about to pass up the invitation. He wasn’t the swimmer Rhys was, but he could hold his own for a few laps anyway.

Hurrying into the bedroom, he stripped down and grabbed his swim trunks, not wanting to spend any longer than necessary changing to minimize the time Takoda might change his mind. Not that he couldn’t always change his mind, of course, but Evan didn’t want him scuttling off while he wasn’t looking.

Dressed, he went back outside to find Takoda’s long lean body already cutting swiftly through the water. He stopped for a minute and admired the elegance of movement, marred only by the occasional hitch in the rotation of

Takoda's arms when he hit the top of his stroke. After a lap, Takoda switched from freestyle to breaststroke, but Evan couldn't decide if that was because of his shoulders or simply part of his routine.

Half an hour later, night had fallen, and Evan was feeling the burn of his workout. Pulling himself up on the side of the pool, he dried off lazily as he watched Takoda finish his last lap. When Takoda pushed up on the opposite side of the pool, Evan noticed him wince slightly.

"I could try massaging those muscles for you," he offered. Takoda's eyes flew wide and he scrambled to his feet. "Takoda," Evan soothed, "you know I'm not going to hurt you. I'm Rhys's friend, for one thing, but even more than that, I'm not the type to hurt anybody just because."

"You're a Dom," Takoda pointed out.

"Yes," Evan agreed, "but that doesn't make me a sadist. I don't go around randomly hurting people for the fun of it. That is one small part of my life that stays in the boundaries of a session. All I'm offering is a shoulder massage. You don't even have to lie down, although I really think you'd be more comfortable that way. Come sit on one of the lounges and I'll sit behind you. You'll be able to get up at any time."

"You should take him up on his offer," Rhys said from the door, startling both of them. "He's got great hands."

"What are you doing home?" Evan asked.

Rhys shrugged. "Quiet night. The assistant manager is one I'm looking to promote, so I left him in charge tonight to see how he does. Come on, Takoda. Let Evan help you."

Slowly, Takoda came around the pool and perched right at the foot of one of the lounges. Evan straddled it behind him as Takoda pulled his hair forward, leaving his back and shoulders bare. "I'm going to start on your right side," Evan warned, but even then, Takoda jumped beneath his touch. Evan frowned but didn't say anything, simply beginning the massage on the tight muscles. He heard Takoda hiss a couple of times, but the other man didn't complain or pull away, so Evan kept going, working the tense muscles, trying to get them to relax. After several minutes, he could finally feel some of the tension fading. "Move your arm a little, see if that's any better," Evan directed.

Takoda did and turned around, his eyes wide. "I can move it more than before."

"See," Rhys said. "I told you he was good with his hands."

"Let me work on the other side."

Takoda didn't jump quite as much this time, and Evan took that as a good sign. When he'd finished with the left shoulder, he started down Takoda's spine, knowing how tension in one area often translated to tension all over.

Takoda was off the seat and inside like a shot.

Evan looked up and met Rhys's eyes, stomach roiling at the thought of what he was about to say, but he didn't see that he had any other choice.

"This isn't going to work."

"I'll go talk to him."

"Rhys, there's no point. You can't force him to let me touch him, and if he can't even stand for me to give him a massage, he's not going to be able to let me be his Dom," Evan said sadly.

"He's getting better. How long did you play yesterday?" Rhys pointed out desperately.

"Hours," Evan agreed, "but there's a difference between socializing—which he's only managed once—and letting me dominate him. I want to help. I came intending to help, but the plan isn't going to work. I think it's time for me to go home."

"Don't say that," Rhys pleaded. "What am I supposed to do if you leave?"

Evan shrugged helplessly. "I don't know what the solution is, but I'm not it. I'll call in the morning and see when I can get a flight. I wish you both all the best. Truly, Rhys. But he needs more than I have to give."

CHAPTER 5

EVAN moved around the room desultorily, opening drawers and pulling out the clothes he had only unpacked a week ago. How long ago that seemed now, he realized. He'd been skeptical from the beginning, but he'd really wanted to make this work, to help Rhys. And Takoda too. In the week he'd been here, he'd seen little hints of the sub's pre-abuse personality, enough to make him want to know more. He'd have enjoyed dominating Takoda, but that obviously wasn't going to happen. Oh, he could stay and see if Takoda warmed up to him, but if he hadn't made any more progress than this in a week, he didn't see how they'd get to the point of him actually doing anything helpful before he really would have to go home. He could work remotely—and had been—during the day, but eventually he'd have to go in to the office. His boss found a reason to pull him in at least once every couple of months. And leaving when he'd started but hadn't finished would be even worse than leaving now.

He could see where Rhys got the idea that Takoda had submissive tendencies, but he hadn't actually seen or heard anything to suggest Takoda was interested in exploring those tendencies other than the fact that Rhys thought that was where the solution to their problems lay. Evan hadn't pushed for a better explanation because ultimately, Rhys had asked, and that had been all that mattered. It still was, in some ways, but not completely, not now that he'd met Takoda and had to consider both sides of this rather lopsided equation. Takoda was gorgeous, a fact obvious to anyone with eyes, but his attractiveness went beyond that. In the little moments when he let down his guard, Evan caught hints of a wicked sense of humor, and the way Takoda had played yesterday had suggested a deep spirituality that went to the heart of the man. Evan didn't know Takoda's background, but it didn't particularly matter. Takoda was in tune with the mysteries of the universe, at least when he played his guitar.

Add to that the hints of submissiveness that Evan found so attractive in a man, and Takoda had the potential to be any Dom's wet dream come true.

Evan hoped he found a Dom, Rhys or someone else, to help him reach that potential, to discover the power that came from letting someone else be in charge of his pleasure for a time. But given what he'd already suffered, having Evan hovering like a big cat ready to pounce at the slightest sign was hardly conducive to Takoda feeling at ease enough to accept that kind of interaction in his life. Evan didn't want to be responsible for him suffering any more.

He felt like he'd failed Rhys even more than Takoda. Rhys had asked him to come, hoping Evan could get him back on the right road with Takoda as well. Rhys's pain was much more subtle than Takoda's, but Evan was aware of it. He'd caught more than one longing look cast in Takoda's direction over the past week. Rhys hadn't even tried hiding them, a fact more telling to Evan than the looks themselves. Rhys wanted Takoda to catch him looking, wanted Takoda to take the metaphorical hand he'd extended, in friendship, in love, in whatever that meant. Evan didn't know if Takoda was clueless or uninterested, but he hadn't seen any kind of reciprocal longing looks. Then again, he didn't know Takoda as well as he knew Rhys, so maybe he'd missed them. Or maybe Takoda wasn't comfortable with a stranger seeing his feelings any more than he was with a stranger touching his body.

Evan sighed and punched the pillow. "This is so fucked up," he muttered as he started putting clothes into the suitcase so he'd be ready to go whenever he could get a flight.

A knock on the door startled him from his thoughts. "Come in, Rhys; you don't have to knock," he said in annoyance. "I'm not mad at you."

"Are you mad at *me*?" Takoda asked from the doorway, eyes slightly downcast.

"No, of course not," Evan said immediately, studying Takoda's posture. The other man wouldn't meet his eyes, a trait that disturbed Evan somewhat, but he'd grown used to it. There was a new determination in the set of Takoda's shoulders that made Evan wonder what was going on. "Come in. Or would you be more comfortable talking in the living room?"

"I don't want Rhys to overhear," Takoda said by way of an answer. It was less than Evan was hoping for, but he pushed aside his suitcase to make room to sit, gesturing for Takoda to take a seat in the chair in one corner. He doubted Takoda would be comfortable on the bed.

Silence fell in the room, broken only by the creak of the chair legs as Takoda shifted nervously on the cushion. Evan knew he should break the ice, try to make this easier for Takoda, but he had no idea what the other man wanted and so no real idea how to proceed.

"I heard you and Rhys talking by the pool," Takoda said finally. "I'm sorry if I offended you, running like that. I still don't do well with unexpected touches."

Evan shrugged. "I wasn't offended. I know you suffered terribly. I suppose I should have told you I was going to work on the rest of your back, but I didn't think about it because I know how tension spreads. Either way, you won't have to worry about me much longer. I'll be out of your hair by tomorrow night, the day after at the latest."

Takoda shook his head, eyes darting around the room, looking everywhere but at Evan. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about," he said slowly. "I don't want you to leave. I want you to stay." He paused and took a deep breath, visibly squaring his shoulders as he finally looked Evan straight in the face. "I want you to teach me how to be a sub."

What the fuck?

Evan managed to bite back his reaction. Barely. "Why?" The question was blunt, but Takoda had brought the subject up, and if they were going to discuss this, much less do anything about it, Evan wanted an explanation.

"Because it's what Rhys wants."

"Not good enough," Evan said shortly. "You can't let Rhys run your life."

"No," Takoda insisted, his voice and wringing hands betraying his agitation. "That's not what I meant."

Evan waited, expecting an explanation. When one wasn't forthcoming, he pressed, "Then what did you mean?"

Takoda swallowed visibly, his Adam's apple bobbing intriguingly in his throat. "I want Rhys. And Rhys wants a sub. So logically, I need to learn to be one."

And if that wasn't the mother of all ironies, Evan didn't know what was.

"Just when did you have this realization?" Evan asked suspiciously.

Takoda blushed and looked away, avoiding Evan's gaze once again. He fidgeted on the chair, a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "Almost a year ago."

Evan frowned. "That's a long time."

Takoda squirmed uncomfortably on the chair, his body language broadcasting his distress. "Rhys is a good man. He's not going to mess around with one of his employees."

Oh, if you only knew, Evan thought, smothering an inappropriate laugh. Given what Rhys had admitted about just how much he wanted to “mess around” with Takoda.... “You’re still his employee.”

Takoda shook his head, looking up again to meet Evan’s eyes hesitantly. “I don’t think I’ll ever be able to work there again. I haven’t talked to Rhys about it, but as much as I loved working there, that’s where”—he shuddered violently—“Kade found me.”

“You’ve been at the club for five years, right?” Evan asked. Takoda nodded, his chin tucked almost against his neck. “Then you know most Doms aren’t like Kade. You saw enough to know that or you wouldn’t be thinking about Rhys that way.”

“I know,” Takoda replied, cheeks flushing again. “I saw Rhys one night. There was a demo, a show of sorts, and as the owner, Rhys was the closing act. I don’t think I’ve ever been harder than I was by the time he was done. I would’ve given anything to be in that sub’s place.”

“Did it ever occur to you to simply tell Rhys that?” Evan asked incredulously. He supposed it shouldn’t surprise him that Takoda had found Rhys attractive. Evan had watched him in action a few times—and been on the receiving end a few other times—and knew how charismatic Rhys could be in full Dom mode. And if the vibe Takoda was sending was any indication, Takoda had fallen for it, lock, stock, and barrel. “For all you know, he could’ve been waiting for some sign that you were interested.”

“You say that like it’s so simple,” Takoda accused, “but there was nothing simple about it. I’d never had a relationship—of any kind—much less one like what I saw at the club all the time. I wanted to be in the sub’s place, but there’s a big difference between... getting turned on w-watching a demonstration and actually submitting, actually... approaching someone like Rhys and asking for it.”

Evan didn’t think it was all that different from starting any other relationship, particularly since working in the club as they did put a D/s relationship on the table as an option from the outset, but he didn’t figure Takoda would appreciate the sentiment. “So what did you do?”

“I watched and I waited and I tried to learn everything I could from observing,” Takoda explained, expression softening as he remembered what had clearly been happier times. “I hadn’t ever really paid much attention to the entertainment until the night Rhys was on stage. It was just background to the important stuff—taking drink orders, pouring them out, keeping people’s tabs straight.”

“So would you ever have done anything about your feelings?” Evan pressed. “If all the shit with Kade hadn’t happened?”

The sound that escaped Takoda's throat sounded so much like a sob that Evan almost took back the question, but he couldn't, not now. He had to force this conversation and get some answers so he could decide whether to grant Takoda's request. Saying yes would make Rhys happy, a powerful incentive to agree, but he would do it only if he could be sure it was also what Takoda really wanted. He waited in silence for Takoda to pull himself together again and answer the question.

When Takoda finally spoke again, his voice was barely above a whisper, his hands wringing together again. "You can't tell Rhys this. Promise me you won't tell Rhys."

Evan hesitated, the idea of keeping secrets from his best friend complete anathema to him. They'd never kept secrets from one another. Never. But if he didn't follow through with Takoda now, he might never get another chance, and that might mean Rhys wouldn't get one either. He nodded.

"Kade approached me in the club, but I rebuffed him. It was habit—and Rhys's policy—but the offer stayed in the back of my head. I kept thinking that if I knew how to be a sub, I could figure out some way to approach Rhys. It was stupid, but when Kade approached me again, away from the club, I said yes."

Evan boggled but held his tongue, waiting to hear what else Takoda would reveal.

"He wasn't Rhys, wasn't... who I really wanted, but it wasn't a horrible experience the first night," Takoda went on, face scarlet as he kept talking, voice breaking every so often as memories assailed him. "He started with a little l-light bondage, a spanking and then he had me suck him off until he came all over my face. I could've done without that last part, but it gave me what I wanted: proof that I could be a sub. I meant for that to be the end of it. It was supposed to be the end of it."

The last sentence was so plaintive it tore at Evan's heart. It was far too easy to imagine how a fucking bastard like Kade had viewed the situation. "It wasn't the end of it."

Takoda shook his head, tears beginning to trail down his cheeks. "He c-came by my apartment a few days later. I don't know how he found out where I lived, but he was suddenly there, barging into my apartment, calling me... slut and wh-whore and... b-boy. I tried to tell him I didn't want to do another session, but he r-rolled right over my objections, issuing orders left and right. Before I could do more than struggle a little, he had me hog-tied with a huge p-plug in my ass and his dick down my throat. After he came on my face again, calling me names the whole time, he... stuck a gag in my mouth and

used a flogger on me until I was so sore I couldn't sit down the next day. I called in sick to work that night, too ashamed to face Rhys."

"You didn't do anything wrong, Takoda," Evan soothed, "either in accepting his offer the first time or in being unable to fight him the second time."

"I should have gone to the police after the second time," Takoda choked out, "but I was afraid they wouldn't believe me since the first time I went with him willingly. A couple of days after the second session, he kidnapped me." Takoda broke off, his entire body shivering, the tremors enough that Evan started to stand, worried about the other man. Before he could, Takoda shook himself, clearly pulling himself back out of those memories. "My mind knows it doesn't have to be like it was in his torture chamber, but I can't seem to get my body to believe it."

Evan imagined that was quite probably true. "And yet you want me to dominate you. That doesn't make a whole lot of sense."

"The only way I'm ever going to get past what happened is if I have proof it doesn't have to be that way," Takoda insisted, daring to look up again. "Rhys trusts you or he would never have suggested you might be able to help. So I need you to help. I need you to force the issue so I have to get past it."

Evan shook his head. "It doesn't work that way. Not for me. I don't force anything on my subs. Never have, and I'm not going to start now. I might push their limits, but we discuss everything beforehand to avoid exactly the kind of problems you had with Kade. Did he ever once ask you how you felt about any of the things he did?"

"No," Takoda answered, eyes dropping once again at the mention of his abuser. "He ordered—or just did."

Evan's lips tightened. "Fucker doesn't deserve the title of Dom," he muttered. "I need to think a little more before I make my decision, but here's what you have to ask yourself, Takoda, and you have to be honest with yourself and me. Rhys has a taste for bondage. He isn't all that big on pain—he's not going to hang weights from your balls or shock you with a cattle prod—but he gets off on tying up his subs. Can you let us do that to you? Can you accept those ropes going around your wrists and ankles again? The spreader bar between your knees leaving you open to whatever he wants to do to you? Can you give up control of your body to him? Let him decide when or if you get to come, how much pleasure or pain you feel? Can you put yourself completely in his hands for however long he decides the session is going to last?"

Evan watched Takoda as he spoke, watched the sub's eyes widen, pupils dilated, saw his breathing speed up and grow more shallow, and most importantly, he noticed the growing bulge between his legs. "Yes," Takoda answered breathlessly.

"Now," Evan continued, "can you do those same things with me? Can you deal with my hands on your body instead of Rhys's, my dick in your mouth or up your ass? My come on your skin? Because if I'm going to train you, that's what you'll have to face. And you'll have to do it with Rhys watching."

"W-why does Rhys have to be there?" Takoda protested.

Because he needs to it as much as you do. "Because that's my price for not telling Rhys everything you just told me," Evan said aloud, knowing he wouldn't break Takoda's confidence no matter what the sub decided any more than he would break Rhys's confidence and tell Takoda that all he had to do was hold out his hand and Rhys was his for the taking. Rhys hadn't expressly forbidden him from saying anything, but Evan still felt like any kind of declaration needed to be between Rhys and Takoda without him as an intermediary. After all, he wouldn't always be there to act as their go-between. "Take it or leave it."

Takoda took so long to reply that Evan wondered if he'd gambled and lost, but finally the other man nodded jerkily. "Just don't tell Rhys."

"I'll have to tell him at least part of it," Evan warned, "to explain why I'm staying, but I won't tell him about Kade. I think you should, because that kind of secret could be dangerous to keep, and I think he'd take it better hearing it from you in private than hearing about it at Kade's trial. His defense attorney will bring it up and you know Rhys will be there the whole time to support you."

Takoda flinched but nodded. "I'll think about it."

"Get some sleep," Evan advised. "We have a lot to talk about tomorrow when everyone wakes up and your first session will be tomorrow afternoon." Takoda rose and started toward the door. "Takoda," Evan called as the sub's hand landed on the handle. When he turned back, Evan added, "Don't touch yourself except to get clean unless I tell you to. Your pleasure is my purview now."

Takoda's eyes widened slightly, but he nodded his agreement and left the room. Evan flopped backwards on the bed, landing amid the welter of clothing as he stared blindly at the ceiling.

Fuck.

He'd just acquired a sub.

CHAPTER 6

“WHEN do you leave?” Rhys asked Evan when he came into the kitchen for breakfast.

“Not for several weeks, apparently,” Evan replied, sitting down at the kitchen table. “I had a visitor last night. Takoda came by my room and asked me to stay.”

“What?” Rhys exclaimed.

“He wants to learn, he said,” Evan explained. “We talked for awhile and he said, despite what happened last night, that he wants us to teach him.”

“Us?” Rhys questioned.

“Us,” Evan replied firmly. He wouldn’t explain beyond that, but he needed Rhys at his most confident, dominant best for his plan to work. “Which means you and I have some planning to do. It’s been a long time since we’ve worked together and we need to establish our own boundaries before we talk to Takoda about establishing his.”

Rhys nodded in agreement. “After breakfast. We can talk in my playroom. Takoda won’t come in there.”

Evan was quite sure that was true. “About that,” he said. “I haven’t been in your playroom, but I was thinking we might do better, at least at first, to avoid anything that might seem secretive or shadowy. Why don’t we do our sessions, the early ones anyway, out in the sunroom? Your fence is high enough and the foliage thick enough that your neighbors can’t see in, and the natural light makes it a very welcoming place. That’s what we want our sessions to be for Takoda. We don’t want him to feel ashamed of what we’re doing or like he needs to hide his desires. I know it’s symbolic more than anything else, but I think it’s important.”

Rhys laughed. “Come with me. Take a look at the playroom before you decide.”

Evan shook his head and followed Rhys up two flights of stairs to the converted attic. Sunlight streamed through the six skylights that lined the roof. The only sign that this room was any different than any other was the collection of toys lining one wall and the spanking bench in the middle of the room. “You can’t get much more different from Kade’s basement.”

Evan had to admit that was probably true. “Okay, we’ll do our sessions up here then. But let’s go back downstairs to talk. I haven’t even had coffee yet, and I don’t want any of what we do to appear secretive. I already told Takoda we’d have to talk things through this morning before we do our first session after lunch, so if he walks in while we’re establishing our own parameters, that’s fine. He needs to see that we go through that process too.”

Settled once again at the kitchen table, coffee in hand, Evan said, “I’ll get out the actual checklist when we sit down to talk with Takoda, but for now, it’s enough to decide what our hard limits are. I’ve never particularly seen the appeal of humiliation, and I think that’s going to be even more important with Takoda. No name calling, no spitting, no boot licking, that sort of thing.”

Rhys shuddered. “Definitely not. Even with subs who get into the name calling, I have a hard time doing it. I’m certainly not going to do that to Takoda. I don’t do electricity either. That messes with the nervous system in potentially dangerous ways. And I think, given what I saw in Kade’s basement, that we shouldn’t go with any kind of hoods or other mummification.”

“Not my kink either,” Evan agreed, “but I think Takoda should make that call. Kade made assumptions about what Takoda wanted or didn’t want. We aren’t going to make that mistake. I’m not planning on bringing it up right away—I don’t want to overwhelm him—but our limits need to be about what we aren’t comfortable doing.”

“And if he won’t tell us?” Rhys asked.

Evan shook his head. “He has to learn what his limits are and how to express them to his Dom, whether it’s you or me or someone entirely different. Anything else you want off limits?”

“Golden showers,” Rhys said with a shudder, “and scat. That goes along with the whole humiliation thing for me.”

Evan nodded his agreement. “What about anything you absolutely don’t want me to do to you? Besides fucking you.”

Rhys spluttered indignantly, eliciting a laugh from Evan. “I already told you I wasn’t after your ass, so just get over it,” he teased.

Rhys flipped him the bird, making Evan laugh even harder.

“Seriously,” Evan said after he calmed down. “Any other hard limits?”

“Other than the things we’ve already talked about, I don’t think there’s anything,” Rhys replied after a moment’s consideration, though his face still bore the remnants of his scowl. “How much are you planning on doing to me?”

“That depends on a lot of things,” Evan answered, “including how well you listen during a session. I’ll expect the same obedience from you during a session that I expect from Takoda. You know as well as I do that there can only be one active Dom in a session without it getting too confusing. If Takoda were experienced, it might be different, but he’s not and we aren’t going to do anything that might make things more difficult for him.”

“No, of course not,” Rhys said immediately.

Footsteps drew their attention. “Good morning, Takoda,” Evan said when the other man walked in. “Did you sleep well?”

Takoda nodded blearily, making a beeline for the coffee pot. Evan shared a smile with Rhys at their mutual addiction. When Takoda joined them at the table, Evan turned back to Rhys. “Can I borrow your computer for a few minutes? I want to print out a checklist to make sure we don’t forget anything in our discussion after breakfast, and I don’t like to mix business and pleasure on mine.”

Takoda’s eyes got that wild expression in them for a moment, but Evan ignored it and it passed. As far as Evan could tell, Rhys hadn’t seen it while giving Evan the password to log on to the computer. Evan went into the den to do what he needed to, leaving Rhys and Takoda with some semblance of privacy so they could talk for a moment.

“Evan said you asked him to teach you to be a sub,” Evan heard Rhys ask as he sat down at the computer. He couldn’t hear Takoda’s reply, but he must have expressed some worry that Rhys was disappointed, because Rhys immediately assured Takoda that he was glad Takoda was willing to take that step, that they’d agreed to have Evan come for precisely this reason. Evan lingered for longer than it took to call up the online checklist and print it out, hoping Takoda would tell Rhys some or all of what he’d revealed to Evan last night, but when a couple of minutes passed with no more audible conversation, he gave up on that for the moment.

Checklist in hand, he returned to the table, waiting patiently for the other two to finish eating. When they had, he said, “Let’s go sit in the living room. I think we’ll be more comfortable there.”

Takoda’s posture suggested he probably wouldn’t be comfortable anywhere, but Evan had told him how the day would go, and now it was his

responsibility to follow through on those promises. He took a seat in one of the chairs, leaving the couch free if Rhys and Takoda wanted to sit together. He hid a smile when they did. How could they not see how in love with each other they were?

“We’re going to start all the way at the top of this list,” he told them, “and probably discuss things that seem obvious, but I don’t want to take anything for granted because I don’t want there to be any surprises for Takoda.” At Rhys’s nod and Takoda’s lack of objection, Evan glanced down at his checklist. “Participants: any session will involve all three of us. Even if we’re upstairs in the playroom, the session does not begin until all three of us are in the room. I will be the dominant. Takoda, you will be the submissive. Rhys will be my submissive, but he may, at my direction, dominate you.”

Takoda got that deer-in-the-headlights look again, but before Evan could say anything, Rhys had taken Takoda’s hand. “It’ll be fine, Takoda. Evan isn’t going to ask me to do anything to you that you haven’t agreed to, just like he wouldn’t do it himself. Trust him to teach you. He’s the most conscientious Dom I’ve ever known.”

“All right,” Takoda agreed softly.

Evan glanced down the list of variations of roles. “At the moment, I don’t have any interest in any role-play scenarios,” he told them. “No age play, no animal play, no servant play. Unless you have an objection, we’ll stick with the simple master/slave scenarios for the time being.”

Takoda blanched, but Rhys was right there, reassuring him. “Like you’re seen at the club a hundred times,” he reminded Takoda. “We do what Evan tells us. He rewards obedience and punishes disobedience.”

“Which leads to the next question, concerning ‘resistance’ on the part of the sub,” Evan went on. “We’re not talking about real resistance, Takoda. For that, you’ll have a safe word and I expect you to use it if either of us are doing something you can’t handle. Some subs—and some Doms—enjoy the illusion of the Dom forcing the sub to follow orders. I don’t. I never have, but it’s not a hard rule for me. I’ve had subs who wanted that illusion and at least in the short term, I gave it to them.”

Takoda shook his head. “D-don’t... force me,” he said softly. “I’ll do what you tell me to.”

Evan nodded, relieved at the answer. He’d suspected that would be Takoda’s preference, given what had happened with Kade, but he’d needed to make sure. “During a session, you will both call me Sir,” he directed. “I will use your names, nothing else. If you have reason to address each other, you will also use each other’s names.”

“I shouldn’t call Rhys Sir?” Takoda verified shyly.

“No,” Evan replied. “Even if he is dominating you, he’ll be doing so at my direction, which makes me Sir and him Rhys. The only time you would call him Sir is if you’re in a session without me. And I don’t expect that to happen while I’m here. At least not for awhile.”

Both men nodded, although Rhys looked like he wanted to object.

“Go ahead and say it, Rhys, whatever it is,” Evan prompted. “We have to be honest about this if it’s going to work.”

“I’m fine for now,” Rhys insisted. “If it reaches the point that I want to try a session with Takoda without you, or with you just as an observer, we’ll renegotiate.”

“Don’t try to top from the bottom,” Evan warned him. “I don’t appreciate pushy subs and you wouldn’t appreciate the stripes on your ass when you’re trying to work.”

Takoda got that frightened look on his face again. “Takoda, relax. I’m not going to punish either one of you for no reason. All you have to do is what I tell you when I tell you and you’ll be fine. Now, location. Rhys has a playroom already set up in his attic. You’ll like it, Takoda. It’s very open, lots of light during the day, very airy. Sessions will only take place in that room. Outside the room, I won’t issue orders and you won’t be expected to obey any suggestions I might make concerning whatever might be going on. The session will begin when we’re all in the playroom and it will end when I say ‘session over’ or when someone uses their safe word.”

Takoda scoffed slightly. Evan started to reassure him, but Rhys beat him to it. “Don’t judge us as Doms by what Kade did to you,” Rhys scolded. “I know he didn’t give you a choice, but Evan isn’t that way and you know I’m not. We’re having this conversation now so that you *do* have a choice. Your safe word is like a light switch. Use it and the session’s over, like turning off a light. It’s that immediate. And outside the playroom, outside a session, you have every right to disagree with anything we say. In fact, we want you to disagree if that’s how you feel.”

“Absolutely,” Evan agreed. “Neither of us expects you to be a mindless slave. You’re an intelligent, creative man with every right to those attributes, and they’re as much a part of what makes you attractive as your submissiveness. In the playroom, your submissiveness is what we expect, but only there. Anywhere else, we want the rest of you.”

Takoda nodded slowly, clearly not quite convinced, but Evan hoped the end of the first session would prove it to him. In the meantime, they needed to finish their discussion. “Do you have any health issues other than your

shoulders and your asthma?” Evan asked Takoda. “Heart problems, diabetes, fainting spells, vertigo?” Takoda shook his head. “Are you on any medications besides your inhaler?”

“No.”

“When we start a session, you should bring your inhaler into the playroom in case we need it,” Evan directed. “There’s a shelf where we’ll put it, but I want it nearby just in case. And if you take any kind of painkiller—Tylenol, Advil, etc.—for any reason the day of a session, tell me before we start. If anything might impair your ability to assess your own physical condition, I need to know about it. That means no alcohol before a session either, for any of us. We can drink ourselves silly the night before or the evening after, but not during the day.”

“I don’t drink,” Takoda said simply.

Evan chuckled. “A bartender who doesn’t drink?”

“My father was an alcoholic. I swore I’d never go down that road,” Takoda answered, his voice tight.

“Cokes and juice it is, then,” Evan replied, not wanting to dramatize the revelation. The look on Rhys’s face suggested this was the first he’d heard that information, too, and Evan didn’t want to make such a fuss that Takoda would think twice before revealing other personal information.

“Okay, the rest of the checklist deals with what acts are acceptable between us during a session,” Evan said, glancing down at it. “I don’t think we need to go through the entire list right now. It would probably be more productive for each of us to say what our hard limits are and then to discuss some standards for the first few sessions. We can always discuss other possibilities later.”

“Hard limits?” Takoda asked softly.

“Things we absolutely refuse to do during a session,” Rhys explained. “For example, I absolutely refuse to verbally abuse my subs. We talked about that a little already, but you won’t ever hear me insult my sub in any way. I know Doms who do that, who call their subs names, make derogatory comments about their bodies or their ability to obey, and that’s their choice. It isn’t mine.”

“No electric shocks,” Evan added. “Or any other kind of electric nodes.”

Takoda nodded, shuddering slightly before saying very softly, “No medical play. K-Kade used a... a speculum... to keep me open when he wasn’t around, and a s-sound in my....” He trailed off, face flaming.

Rhys looked as horrified as Evan felt, but once again, Evan didn't want to make a big deal out of what was obviously a painful memory. That Takoda would bring it up at all was a huge step. Nor did he want to give Rhys the opportunity to dwell on it and maybe lose his temper. Not that he'd blame Rhys for ripping Kade's balls off and feeding them to the snakes, but that wouldn't help Takoda. Acceptance would. He hoped. "That's easy enough," he said simply. "Anything else?"

"Nothing that controls my breathing," Takoda added, his voice a little stronger this time. Evan hid a sigh of relief that Takoda was gaining at least a little confidence in setting his limits.

"Okay, so no hoods, no breath play, no water play," Evan noted. "What about a gag, if it doesn't restrict your breathing?"

"I... I don't know," Takoda hesitated.

"That's fine," Evan said. "We can try one at some point and you can decide how you feel about it then. And if you don't like it, just say so. Everything we're talking about now can be revisited later if any of us feel the need. Nothing is set in stone. If we try something and you don't like it, we can add it to the list of hard limits. If at some point you want to try something you said no to today, we can take it off the list. The idea is to keep the lines of communication open so we all get the most out of a session. Let's go through a few basic things, though, to make sure nothing makes you uncomfortable."

Takoda nodded.

"You too, Rhys," Evan added. "If there's anything I mention that you wouldn't want me to do to you, now's the time to tell me."

Rhys just smirked at him in a way that made Evan want to take him upstairs and remind him that even the most jaded Dom had limits, but that wasn't why he was here. "Bondage. Obviously we have to be careful of your shoulders, Takoda, but if it doesn't strain them and Rhys is in the room the whole time, are you willing to let me restrain you?"

Takoda nodded slowly.

"What about spanking if I use my hand?"

"There's nothing like the feeling of skin on skin," Rhys purred, shifting in his seat. "And Evan's good with his hands. He can warm your ass like nobody's business."

"Okay," Takoda agreed.

"Paddles? Floggers? Canes?"

Takoda hesitated. "I... I don't know."

“So we’ll do like we agreed to do with the gags,” Evan declared, making a note. “We’ll try it lightly and see how it goes. Rhys?”

“You know I’m good.”

“It’s still a good idea to check. It’s been a few years. What about nipple clamps?” Evan asked, the thought of decorating Takoda’s body a very appealing one. “Do you have the adjustable ones, Rhys, so I can control the pressure?”

“Sure thing,” Rhys replied, his hand rubbing absently over his chest.

“You always liked those, didn’t you?” Evan teased, remembering their experiments early on, when they were still trying to figure out what everything felt like.

“Oh, yeah,” Rhys agreed huskily.

“Takoda?” Evan prompted when the other man didn’t give his opinion.

“I... I think they’re all right,” Takoda answered after a moment.

Evan hoped that meant there was at least some experience Kade hadn’t tried to ruin for Takoda. “Then the only other thing we need to talk about are safe words. Rhys, is yours still pickles?”

“No reason to have changed it.”

“Pickles?” Takoda asked.

“Don’t ask,” Evan warned. “You really don’t want to know.” He shared a grin with Rhys as he remembered the fraternity hazing stunt that had required all pledges to eat as many pickles as they could. Rhys had eaten more than anyone else—and spent the rest of night throwing them back up. “What about you, Takoda?”

“I don’t have one.”

“What’s your least favorite food?” Rhys asked. “Something you just won’t eat.”

“Hot dogs,” Takoda said immediately. “What?” he asked when Evan and Rhys looked at him strangely. “Do you have any idea what they put in those things?”

Evan and Rhys laughed. “Okay, hot dogs and pickles it is, then. I think that’s enough for us to get started. I’d suggest we go for a run before it gets too hot outside. We can get cleaned up when we get home, have lunch, and then head upstairs.”

Takoda didn’t run for the hills, so Evan figured that was a good sign.

CHAPTER 7

THE sun hadn't been up long enough to make the day miserable yet, although Evan was quite sure it would be another scorcher by mid-afternoon. He hoped the air conditioning in Rhys's playroom worked well or they'd have to delay their session until evening or even tomorrow morning if Rhys had to work. That wouldn't be the end of the world, but Evan knew how important routine was in a sub's life, especially a new one, and he had told Takoda they'd have their first session that afternoon. His body on autopilot, Evan let his attention drift to his running partners. After the revelations of the morning, Evan suspected Rhys needed this outlet for the emotions surely churned up by hearing some of the details of the abuse Takoda suffered. Rhys's face was serene, though, as they ran, so either he was handling things better these days or he'd already known the details Takoda had revealed.

Takoda seemed more at ease this morning than he had during their first run as well. His stride was long and even, eating up the ground at Evan's side like he'd been running all his life. Evan wondered how much of the change was beginning to exercise more and how much of it was regaining some sense of comfort in his own skin. Either way, it was an encouraging sign. If they could continue to rebuild Takoda's sense of self and his physical strength, he'd be his old self again in no time. That was probably overly optimistic, he reminded himself, but any progress was a good thing, and he could definitely see a change.

The last mile was still quite a bit slower than Evan's usual pace, but a glance at the clock as they walked back inside showed that they had made the circuit in less time than on their first run. Again, a definite improvement. Evan bided his time as Takoda stretched out his muscles, doing the same so he wouldn't be stiff when it came time to go upstairs for their session.

"I think we could all use a shower," he said when Takoda had finished stretching.

"Go ahead, Takoda," Rhys said. "I'll take mine when you finish."

“No,” Evan said, his voice taking on its dominant cadence, “we’re going to do something a little different this time. Go upstairs to the bathroom and get undressed, both of you. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Evan waited, half expecting one or both of them to protest, but neither of them did, although Takoda’s eyes had taken on that haunted look again. Going into his room, Evan gathered some supplies he’d bought a couple of days earlier in the hopes this moment would come. Then he went upstairs to join his soon-to-be subs.

“It’s a good thing I have a big bathroom,” Rhys grumbled when Evan walked in. As directed, both men had stripped off their sweaty running clothes.

Evan just grinned at him. “Go ahead and get in. I’ll be right with you,” he said, peeling off his own sopping T-shirt. Takoda looked away immediately, bending to turn on the water in the oversized tub and shower combo. Evan allowed himself a moment to ogle the perfect curve of Takoda’s ass. He hadn’t allowed himself to fantasize about the dark-haired man because Rhys was already in love with him, but damn, he’d enjoy getting his hands on that body. “Looking good, Takoda,” he said, resisting the urge to reach out and touch a little longer.

Takoda’s hair flew wildly as his head spun around to look at Evan in surprise.

“What?” Evan asked mildly. “You’re a good-looking man. I’d have to be blind—or maybe straight—not to appreciate it and since I’m neither of those things, I noticed. It’s a good thing, believe me. It’ll make my job this afternoon much more enjoyable, and if I’m enjoying, I can promise you will be too.”

Takoda didn’t have a reply to that, but his cheeks burned again. Evan gave him a brief respite, turning to look Rhys over critically. “You’re looking pretty good yourself, bro,” he teased with a light slap to Rhys’s butt as he stepped into the shower. “Although it looks like somebody’s been sunbathing in the nude,” he added when he noticed the marked absence of tan lines.

Rhys shrugged. “So?”

“So I’ll obviously have to work harder to pinken your lily-white ass this afternoon. Since it isn’t white anymore.”

Rhys grinned. “Just because all you do is burn and freckle is no reason for me not to look good.”

Evan ran a slightly self-conscious hand through his short red hair, cursing the pale skin that never really tanned. “Careful, Rhys,” he warned playfully. “I’m going to be the one reaming your butt this afternoon.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Evan chuckled and finished undressing, grabbing the supplies he’d carried upstairs and setting them on the edge of the tub. Climbing in as well, he pulled the curtain shut and turned the knob to activate the showerhead. Closing his eyes as the water washed the sweat from his face, he took a moment to center himself so he could explain to the other two, particularly to Takoda, what they were all doing in the shower together.

Turning back around, he picked up a canister of salt scrub. “I can’t change your past,” he said slowly to Takoda. “I wish I could, but that’s not possible. What I can do is help you change your future, and the first step to doing that is letting go of what happened. We’re going to wash away the past right now, so that when we all step out of the shower, we’re starting fresh. With each other. With ourselves.” He poured some of the scrub into his hand and handed the canister to Rhys, who did the same, eyes never leaving Evan’s face. “Rituals are often a large part of a Dom/sub relationship, the repetition allowing both people to know exactly where they stand at any given moment. One of the best Doms I’ve ever known told me the first thing he always did with a new sub was to wash away the past. If ever anyone needed that, it’s you, so that’s what we’re going to do. Just relax and let us wash you clean.”

Takoda didn’t relax, but he didn’t protest when Evan took one hand, nodding for Rhys to take the other. In silence, they rubbed the salt scrub over every inch of Takoda’s arms and carefully over his shoulders. Evan moved around to his back, Rhys to his front, and they continued the gentle scrubbing down his body. Evan could feel Takoda tense as he neared the rounded buttocks, but he didn’t pause, working across the smooth expanse of skin and lightly between them. Takoda hissed above him, but he didn’t protest or use his safe word, so Evan kept working all the way down the long, long legs to his feet, his fingers occasionally bumping Rhys’s as his best friend mimicked his gestures on the front side of Takoda’s body. A quick glance revealed Rhys’s healthy erection. Evan smothered a grin, knowing that, kneeling as he was, Rhys was at eye level with Takoda’s cock. He couldn’t help but wonder if Takoda was at all aroused by what they were doing. It didn’t matter, that not being the point of this particular exercise.

When they had finished, Evan stood again and urged Takoda under the hot water, letting it sluice down his body, washing away the salt scrub. Rinsing his hands, Evan parted the globes of Takoda’s ass, letting the water run down the dark crack. “You wouldn’t want any of the scrub to get caught there,” Evan explained when Takoda tensed again. “The crystals would seriously chafe.” He urged Takoda to turn around and repeated the process around the other man’s genitals, angling them so the water could get in all the crevices and wash him completely clean. “Relax,” Evan urged him again.

“The past is gone. All that’s left is you and Rhys and me. You’re perfectly safe with us.”

When Takoda was completely rinsed, Evan poured another handful of the salt scrub. “Rhys next,” he said, handing the canister to Takoda. “You’ll have to help me.”

Takoda’s eyes flew wide again, but he poured a handful of the crystals onto his palm. “Start with his arm and work down, just like we did for you,” Evan directed when Takoda hesitated. “Don’t be afraid to touch him everywhere. He won’t mind.”

“It’s fine,” Rhys echoed, eyes closing as he anticipated their touch.

Evan kept a close eye on Takoda as they worked the scrub over Rhys’s skin, hoping to see some hint of interest on Takoda’s face. He wasn’t disappointed. As Takoda’s hands began working across Rhys’s chest, his face took on the delighted expression of a kid in a candy shop. Evan had tried to keep his touch as functional as possible, not wanting to scare Takoda off, but Takoda’s hands lingered in their washing, every pass of his fingers over Rhys’s skin a caress. He was tempted to shake Rhys and ask him how he hadn’t realized how deeply Takoda was in love with him, but he had made a promise and his word was his bond. If Takoda didn’t trust him, the rest would never work.

Rising to his feet and stepping back, he offered a hand to Takoda. “Rinse him off. You don’t want to leave any of the crystals on him either.” Evan watched with a small smile as Takoda tentatively worked his way around Rhys’s body, making sure water got in all the creases and crevices. Takoda stayed focused on his task, but Evan watched Rhys’s face, seeing every flicker of pleasure, every little sigh that he tried to bite back as Takoda touched him. He shook his head. He really just needed to lock the two of them in the playroom and leave them there until they’d fucked each other silly and admitted their feelings. Except that Rhys, being the self-sacrificing bastard that he was, would probably refuse to touch Takoda at all out of his feelings of guilt for not stopping Kade. So Evan would have to do it the hard way. And he’d start by seeing if he couldn’t spank some of the guilt out of Rhys this afternoon.

“One more step,” he told them when Rhys was rinsed. “We’ll do Rhys first this time.”

“Do what?” Rhys asked, turning back to face Evan, his face attractively flushed from the steam of the shower and the touch of Takoda’s hand.

Evan held up an enema bag. "Finish cleaning you up," he answered. "Don't worry; it's a small one. Just enough to clean you out a little, since who knows how long it's been since you last bottomed."

"I thought you said you weren't going to fuck me," Rhys protested.

"I'm not," Evan said, "but that doesn't mean I won't order Takoda to do it."

The looks on both their faces were too priceless for words, both of them looking like fish out of water. "And even if I don't, you're still my sub for the next little while and this is part of that," Evan continued firmly. "Unless you've changed your mind?"

"Please," Takoda said softly. "Don't change your mind."

Rhys shook his head immediately. "Of course I haven't changed my mind," he said, running his hand down Takoda's arm. "I just wasn't expecting... this."

"Don't be such a baby," Evan scolded. "You know it doesn't hurt and can actually feel pretty good. Takoda, will you turn the water down? We don't want Rhys to have trouble breathing. Hands and knees, Rhys. Put that pretty ass in the air."

Rhys glared at him but knelt down on the floor of the tub, head resting on his crossed arms. "Get some of the lube and slick him up while I get the enema ready," Evan directed Takoda. Takoda's hands trembled as he did as Evan directed, but Evan noticed he didn't hesitate. Rhys moaned softly. "Good," Evan praised Takoda. "Go a little deeper. Stretch him well so all he'll feel is pleasure when we slip the nozzle inside."

Takoda did as Evan said, the tip of his finger obviously finding Rhys's prostate, if the way the blond thrashed was any indication. "Okay, here we go, Rhys," Evan warned, slipping the nozzle past the protective ring and letting the cleansing solution begin to flow slowly into his friend's body. He only used about half the bag, since this was more about the ritual than about actually flushing out Rhys's insides. When he was done, he clamped the hose and removed the nozzle. "We'll wait here while you release it," he offered, allowing Rhys that much privacy.

Rhys stepped out of the shower, coming back a few minutes later. "Your turn, Takoda," Evan said gently. "Get him ready, Rhys."

Takoda hesitated for a long moment before kneeling as Rhys had been, his entire body quaking with nerves. Evan gestured for Rhys to kneel on one side while he knelt on the other, running soothing hands over Takoda's back and shoulders. "Relax," Evan crooned. "There's no one here but Rhys and me. We aren't going to do anything to hurt you. You know how good a warm

shower feels. This is going to feel just as good, only instead of cleaning you outside, it's going to clean you inside. It's going to work its way deep inside you and wash away all the taint Kade left behind so that you'll be clean and pure again, a blank slate, not touched by anything he did to you. And then Rhys and I are going to show you what it really feels like to let go, to give yourself to a proper Dom, one who cares about you, about your needs, your pleasure. We're going to take you higher than you've ever been. You just have to trust us."

Eventually, the trembling eased, and Takoda nodded his permission. Evan handed the lube to Rhys. "Talk him through it," he mouthed. Rhys nodded and coated his fingers.

"I'm going to touch you now, Takoda," Rhys said gently. "I have to stretch your hole, just like you did for me. Evan didn't pick a large nozzle, but it would still hurt going in if I didn't take care of you first. Just relax. I won't rush so it won't hurt if you don't fight it, but you have to relax and let me in."

The words worked. Evan could see Takoda's body visibly relax, and one of Rhys's fingers slid past the tight sphincter up to the first knuckle. Rhys looked at him for permission, and when Evan gave it, worked his finger deeper, clearly searching for Takoda's pleasure point. The surprised sound when he found it brought a smile to Evan's lips. "See?" he purred. "I told you we'd make you feel good."

Rhys grinned at Evan and set to work on Takoda's prostate, massaging it until Takoda was rocking forcefully against his hand. "Enough," Evan said finally. "Rhys is going to take his finger out now, Takoda, and I'm going to put the nozzle in instead. It'll feel a little different, but it shouldn't hurt. If it does, tell me. Nothing about this process should be painful."

"Okay," Takoda grunted.

Rhys removed his finger, and Evan pressed the nozzle against the contracting muscle. It slid right inside with only a hiss of surprise from Takoda. "Doing okay?"

"Yeah," Takoda gasped. "It's... different."

"I'm going to take the clamp off now. Just relax and let it work its way inside you," Evan said softly, suiting his actions to his words. Beneath his hands, Takoda shifted a little as the water started flowing, but he did not protest or try to pull away. Evan hoped that was because it didn't hurt rather than because he was afraid of reprisals. When he'd dispensed about a pint, he stopped the flow and stroked Takoda's back again. "How are you feeling?"

"Odd," Takoda replied immediately. "Full."

"Are you cramping at all?" Evan asked.

Takoda shook his head.

“Good. Stay like you are a little longer to let it work and then you can go release the water. I’m going to take the nozzle out. Get up whenever you need to.”

Evan stood up, but when Rhys started to do the same, Evan shook his head, a quick motion of his hand directing Rhys to stay at Takoda’s side. Rhys’s gratitude was clear on his face, his hands resuming the comforting strokes up and down Takoda’s back. Evan gave them the privacy of his turned back as he rinsed off the equipment he’d used. Later, he’d wash it with soap and sterilize it so it would be ready the next time he was ready to use it, but this would do for now. He’d finished rinsing the second bag when he heard Takoda get up and leave the shower. “You okay?” he asked Rhys softly, the first chance he’d had to speak with his friend alone since Takoda’s revelations that morning.

“I will be,” Rhys promised. “I can see this helping him, and that helps me.”

“Good,” Evan replied. “I want you both to be happy, preferably together.”

“Only if that’s what makes him happy too,” Rhys insisted.

Silently cursing his rashly made promise, Evan wished again he could tell Rhys how Takoda felt. It would make this process so much easier. Takoda stepped back into the shower, though, interrupting any revelations. “Now what?” he asked.

The question made Evan smile. “Now we finish rinsing off and have lunch. And then after lunch, we go upstairs and start your lessons.”

CHAPTER 8

LUNCH was one of the stranger meals Evan had eaten in recent memory, not because of the food, but because of the odd undercurrents of tension in the room. Rhys looked alternately like the cat that caught the canary and like he'd lost his best friend. Evan could think of a couple of possible explanations for the first expression. He'd finally be getting to do a session with Takoda, even if he wasn't the Dom. On the rare occasions he subbed, he loved getting spanked, and when he and Evan had played around together in college and afterwards, Rhys always said Evan gave the best spankings.

Evan had a little more trouble coming up with an explanation for the latter expression, though. If they'd been alone, he'd simply have asked, but Evan didn't want to force the issue with Takoda there.

Takoda's expression tended more toward adoration, a feeling that made Evan a little uncomfortable. He didn't want Takoda to fall for him. That had been the whole point of including Rhys, of having Rhys be the one to prepare Takoda for the enema, the one to stay at his side as it worked. He'd just have to be even more vigilant and redirect Takoda's attention to Rhys at every possible turn.

As they were putting the dishes away from lunch, Evan turned to the other two men. "Go upstairs and wait for me in the playroom. Rhys, get naked. Takoda, strip down to your shorts. I'll be up in a minute. The session doesn't start until I get there so you can talk all you want. Once I get up there, you'll only speak when spoken to."

Trusting they would follow his orders and that Rhys would soothe Takoda through any last-minute jitters, Evan went into his room and dug out his leather trousers and vest. Pulling them on, he adjusted the pants so they stretched correctly across his groin, outlining his generous endowment. His friend Lee had designed them specifically for him so that they had a stretchy pouch in the front that allowed room for his erection without distorting the shape of the pants when he wasn't hard.

Deciding he could use Rhys's equipment, Evan left his flogger in his suitcase and climbed the two flights of stairs to the attic playroom. On the landing outside the door, he took a few deep breaths, centering himself for the session to come. When he felt his Dom headspace settling over him, he opened the door and walked inside to a scene out of any Dom's fantasies. Both his subs, for that was what Takoda and Rhys were now, were kneeling on the floor, hands behind their backs, heads bowed as they awaited his arrival. Rhys was naked as directed, already erect, the tip of his cock glistening. Takoda wore a pair of dark grey briefs that hugged his hips and cradled his package, letting Evan see that he, too, was affected by the atmosphere, though not as much as Rhys.

"Looking good," he praised, prowling around their kneeling forms, examining every detail. Rhys didn't move, but Takoda's head followed Evan's movements. "Eyes forward," Evan directed, his voice firm but not harsh. Takoda was experiencing most of this for the first time, and Evan wasn't going to punish him for something an experienced sub would know but that Evan hadn't specifically addressed.

Standing in front of them again, Evan nudged Rhys. "Face down on the spanking bench," he directed. "Takoda, take a seat on the chair over there. Adjust it so you have a good view of what's going on."

When Takoda was settled, Evan approached Rhys from the opposite side so Takoda could see everything he did as well as Rhys's reactions. He ran an assessing hand down the line of Rhys's back and over his backside. "Someone's been bad," he told Takoda, "sunbathing without trunks. Look at this. No tan lines anywhere. I think somebody needs to be punished."

Neither man spoke since Evan had not asked them a question, but Evan could see their reactions in their body language. Rhys thought it was a marvelous idea, but Takoda was warier, which was exactly why Rhys was the one currently on the spanking bench, not Takoda.

Evan started with a few light smacks, judging Rhys's reactions to see where he was most sensitive. Each blow drew a hiss of breath and a soft moan from Rhys's lips. Evan smiled at the sounds, glancing at Takoda to make sure the other sub realized these were sounds of pleasure. Takoda's posture hadn't lost its wariness yet, but his expression had softened slightly. The next few strikes were harder, though not full force, as Evan warmed Rhys's backside incrementally, getting him ready for the real spanking to come. When Rhys was arching up into each blow, Evan let them start falling harder. He kept the pace steady, though, so there was no doubt that each arch of Rhys's back was intended to solicit another slap rather than to attempt an escape or evasion.

Even with the tan, Rhys's skin grew a nice shade of pink beneath Evan's attentions. When his palm was tingling, he stepped back and surveyed his handiwork. Rhys was panting slightly, but his face revealed only pleasure. "I think he's enjoying this," he said to Takoda conspiratorially. "What do you think?"

"I think so too, Sir," Takoda agreed, his voice betraying his surprise at the realization. Evan noticed Rhys wasn't the only one, if the tent in Takoda's briefs was any indication, but he let that pass for now.

"Are we right, Rhys?" Evan asked, wanting Takoda to hear the confirmation of his impression.

"Yes, Sir," Rhys replied huskily.

Evan crossed to the glass-faced armoire and opened it, selecting a long, flat paddle. "He isn't going to enjoy the rest quite as much," Evan said, returning to Rhys's side, "but he's walking around feeling guilty because he didn't find you sooner and that's keeping him from doing what you both want him to do."

Rhys and Takoda both gasped at the blunt words, Rhys sending a betrayed look in Evan's direction, but Evan ignored it. Rhys would get over it, and Takoda needed the reassurance that Rhys wasn't just turning him over to Evan for no good reason. He swung the paddle experimentally, then laid a heavy blow on Rhys's backside. The resulting yelp had very little to do with pleasure, but Evan didn't pause, landing a second blow almost immediately.

"You know what to do, Rhys," Evan prompted.

"Two, Sir, thank you, Sir," Rhys gasped. "May I have another, Sir?"

"How many do you deserve for letting Takoda down?" Evan demanded. "For leaving him in Kade's hands for ten long, miserable days?"

Evan heard Takoda's broken sob, but he didn't look up. He had to take care of Rhys first. Then he could deal with the fallout where Takoda was concerned.

"Ten, Sir," Rhys ground out through teeth clenched against the pain. "One for each day I let him suffer."

Evan could tell Takoda wanted to protest. "Don't speak unless you're spoken to," Evan reminded him softly, not wanting to find himself in the position of punishing a disobedient sub during their first session. Takoda subsided, but Evan could see how tense he still was. He landed another blow on Rhys's ass. "Three, Sir, thank you, Sir," Rhys groaned, taking a deep breath between blows. "May I have another, Sir?"

Evan gave him a moment to catch his breath before landing the next. Each time, Rhys's reaction was the same, though his voice grew hoarser with each smack. Finally, Evan had delivered the proscribed number of blows and set aside the paddle. "Turn over, Rhys," he directed, returning the paddle to its place in the armoire.

He wasn't surprised when he turned back to see that Rhys was still fully hard, the somewhat awkward way he lay mostly on one hip not hiding his erection at all. Takoda, though, was clearly amazed. "Touch yourself," Evan directed. "Make yourself come. Takoda, come closer so you can watch. The next time, you might be the one ordered to make him come."

Takoda approached slowly as Rhys began to shunt his hand up and down the length of his swollen cock. When Takoda neared, Evan took his arm firmly, pulling Takoda in front of him so the dark-haired man would have a perfect view of Rhys's actions. Sometime during Rhys's punishment, Takoda's hard-on had faded, but Evan suspected it would be back in a matter of moments.

"Look at him," Evan purred, pressing his own aching cock against Takoda's ass. Takoda tensed but didn't pull away. "Have you ever seen anything as beautiful as a desperate man striving for release? Look at the way he strokes himself, slow, then faster, then slow again. He wants to come. He needs it, but he's waiting too, knowing he needs my approval or he'll be back over that bench with something worse than that paddle bruising his butt."

Evan ran his hands over Takoda's chest as he spoke, knowing the sight would push Rhys closer to his own release and hoping it would reignite Takoda's arousal as well. Tweaking one of Takoda's dark nipples, he went on, "Would you like to touch him? Would you like to push his hand away and replace it with yours, Takoda?"

Takoda rocked back into Evan's arms. Evan was pleased to see his cock twitching back to life beneath his grey briefs. "Yes, Sir."

"Not this time, but soon," Evan promised. "What do you need, Rhys? What's keeping you from coming?"

"Do you forgive me?" Rhys asked, his eyes fixed on Takoda, on Evan's hands on Takoda's body.

"There's nothing—"

"Wrong answer," Evan interrupted. "He asked you a question, Takoda. Do you forgive him for not finding you sooner?"

"Yes, Sir."

Evan pushed Takoda forward. “Give him a kiss to show him he’s forgiven.”

Takoda stumbled forward, falling to his knees at Rhys’s side. A part of Evan wanted to look away, to give them some privacy for their first kiss, but they were in the middle of a session, and he was their Dom.

The minute their lips touched, Rhys’s body seized, his cock twitching powerfully, sending jets of hot fluid all over his stomach. Evan waited, body aching for his own release, until Takoda finally lifted his head. When he did, Evan said, “Look at what you did to him, Takoda. Look at how good you made him feel.”

Takoda didn’t reply, but his expression gave his delight and amazement away as clearly as if he’d spoken. “You did that,” Evan reiterated. “You made him lose it. Now it’s time for him to return the favor. Come here.”

Eyes still fixed on Rhys’s semen-covered stomach, Takoda returned to Evan’s side. Evan pulled Takoda in front of him again, arms around his waist.

“For a good Dom, a session is all about the sub and what he needs,” Evan said. “Rhys needed to be punished and absolved. I provided the punishment. You provided the absolution. All of that was pretty straightforward. You’re a little harder to read, but I think ultimately you need to feel like you’re more than just the object of Kade’s twisted lust. In all your experiences with him, did he ever once make you come?”

“No, Sir,” Takoda mumbled.

“Rhys,” Evan ordered, “come help Takoda.”

Rhys levered himself up to sitting, flinching a little as the position put pressure on his sore ass. “What do you want me to do, Sir?”

Evan grabbed the waistband of Takoda’s briefs and pushed them down to the tops of his thighs, revealing Takoda’s fully hard cock. “Takoda needs to come too. Give him a hand, Rhys.”

Takoda tensed in Evan’s arms when Rhys’s hands closed around his erection, but he made no move to pull away. Evan stroked the bronzed skin of Takoda’s chest as Rhys set to work on his cock, caressing deliberately, eyes fixed on Takoda’s face to gauge which touches had the most effect. Evan was tempted to open his trousers and grind against Takoda’s ass, but he was afraid that would be too much for his still-wary sub. Next time, maybe. For now, he needed to work on proving that, in his sessions, anyway, it was all about the sub.

Takoda moaned and thrashed in Evan’s arms, but the look on his face assured Evan he was feeling only pleasure. Evan’s fingers found the taut nubs

on either side of the smooth chest, and he set to playing, rolling them between thumb and forefinger, pinching lightly, then more roughly, pulling at them, all in the interest of seeing just how much Takoda could take. The sub arched beautifully into Evan's touch, making him imagine decorating the dark areolas with clamps, perhaps even a weighted chain to stretch them so Takoda would feel them with every movement.

Oh, the things he would teach Takoda if the sub were really his!

The thought shocked Evan so much he nearly took a step back. Only the knowledge that Takoda would surely fall if he did kept him in place. Shit. He'd been so worried about Takoda falling for him that he hadn't kept a tight enough rein on his own emotions. He pushed them away. He and Rhys had never poached on each other's preserves, and he'd seen the way Rhys reacted to a simple kiss from Takoda. They belonged together. Evan would just have to suck it up and remind himself what he was there for: to get Rhys and Takoda together the way they belonged.

It's all about the sub, he chanted silently as he forced his hands to keep moving, forced himself to act like nothing had changed. He glanced down at Rhys, at the look of absolute bliss on his face as he stroked Takoda's erection. Evan could practically see him salivating, but he didn't give Rhys the permission he'd have gladly accepted. One step at a time, and this time they were using their hands.

Takoda cried out, body trembling in Evan's arms as his cock disgorged its load all over Rhys's hands. "Clean yourself up, Rhys," Evan directed, smiling again at the eager look on Rhys's face as he licked his fingers clean. "I assume you have towels in here," he added. "Get one so we can clean Takoda up too."

Rhys look disappointed that he wasn't going to get to lick Takoda clean, but he didn't say anything, simply pulling a towel out of a drawer and getting it wet in the sink he'd installed for just such a purpose.

Evan helped Takoda over to the bed pushed against one wall under the eaves of the high roof and urged him to lie down. When Rhys came back with the towel, Evan took it. "Session over," he said firmly as he handed Takoda the towel. "How are you feeling?"

Takoda blinked a couple of times before starting to wipe himself clean. As soon as he was done, he pulled his underwear modestly back in place. "Amazing," he replied finally. "I didn't know I could feel so good."

Evan smiled. "Rhys, how are you doing?"

"Sore," the blond admitted, "but it'll pass."

“Do you want some ice?” Evan offered. “Or I think I saw some arnica in the drawer that might help.”

Rhys shook his head. “It’s nothing I can’t handle. I’ll just have to watch how I sit for a few hours.”

“It’s your call,” Evan allowed, “but don’t suffer needlessly. Takoda forgave you. There’s nothing else to gain by being in pain.”

Rhys nodded but didn’t ask for ice or anything else to help the pain. The session was over, though, so Evan didn’t force the issue. Instead he urged Rhys onto the bed next to Takoda. “Rest for awhile,” he advised. “I’ll be downstairs when you’re ready to talk about how the session went.”

Evan knew he should stay a little longer to make sure they were both safely out of their sub headspace, but he couldn’t do it. He couldn’t watch them curl into each other on the bed like lovers. He’d promised to help them and he would, but he had to keep his own sanity as well.

Back in his room, Evan pulled off his leathers, tossing them carelessly in the direction of his suitcase. He put back on a pair of boxers and flopped on the bed, staring blindly at the ceiling as he tried to figure out what the hell had just happened.

He didn’t want a sub, not a long-term one. He was perfectly happy going out to the clubs in Boston and hooking up with one of several different subs he played with on occasion. They had a hot, passionate session, got their rocks off, and went home to their separate, peaceful lives.

Maybe that was what he needed to do. He could go to Rhys’s club, pick up a sub, and fuck him all night long. That would get this ridiculous susceptibility out of his system. It would probably work, too, except that Rhys would want to know why Evan had gone out when he had two subs already at home, and Evan wasn’t about to tell his best friend that he was falling for the same man Rhys was in love with. He could try making the excuse of wanting an evening with an experienced sub so he could just relax and enjoy it, and if he were at home with one of the subs he’d scened with before, that would probably hold water, but here in Vegas, at a club where the only person he knew was Rhys, any session he did would be nearly as fraught as the one today, because he’d have to go through all the negotiations again and learn the new sub the same way he had to learn Takoda.

“Fuck,” he muttered, flipping over onto his stomach. That wasn’t going to work, he realized immediately. His hard cock wasn’t happy being pressed into the mattress. Flopping onto his back again, he slid his hand into his shorts, hoping an orgasm, even a self-induced one, would help clear his brain.

A knock at the door interrupted him. “What?” he snapped. Rhys took the word as an invitation to come in.

Takoda looked like he was about to run when he saw the scowl on Evan’s face, but Rhys held onto his hand and pulled him into the room. “We were lying upstairs talking when we realized you didn’t get off,” Rhys explained. “And that just didn’t seem fair so we’ve come to remedy that.”

Fuck. Fuckety, fuckety, fucking fuck.

CHAPTER 9

DETERMINED hands pulled Evan's boxers off before he could even open his mouth to protest. When he did finally manage to make his lips cooperate, Rhys forestalled his words by the simple expedient of kissing him.

Evan wanted to be good, to resist and tell them he didn't need their pity fuck, but their hands—two confident, two more timid—were hitting all his sensitive spots, and damn it, a man could only be so noble for so long.

It had been over a year since he and Rhys had kissed, but Rhys apparently hadn't forgotten exactly what turned Evan on, because this kiss was perfect. Hot and wet, lots of tongue and teeth, Rhys taking Evan's mouth with all the confidence and control that made him such a compelling Dom. Not that Evan had subbed for him often, a handful of times in their adult lives, but they'd cruised the clubs together in college and when they were first starting out, sharing a one-bedroom apartment to save on the rent. They'd shared everything else. Sharing a bed had been nothing. Most nights, they found congenial company elsewhere; on the occasional night they were both home and horny, they took comfort in each other without even thinking about it.

All that history, all those powerful emotions, came rushing back for Evan as Rhys kissed him, caressed him, and he found himself falling into that easy familiarity, that safe and sparkling warmth that only Rhys had ever provided.

Nobody knew his body like Rhys did. His best friend's hands searched out the sensitive spots. Not the obvious ones, like his leaking, throbbing cock, but the other ones, the ones only a lover would know. The inside of his elbow, the spot just beneath his armpit where the hair thinned out. The nipple he'd pierced in college and then let close when he'd outgrown his rebellious stage. The hole was gone but the extra sensitivity remained, at least in his mind.

That meant Takoda's hands were the ones currently fondling his cock, sliding tentatively up and down the long shaft like they weren't quite sure

what to do with it. Evan might have given him a few suggestions if he'd had the breath to speak, but Rhys kept stealing it, with his soul-searing kisses and his sneaky caresses and the fact that he was here, in Evan's bed, thinking about his pleasure instead of just basking in the joy of having made Takoda climax for the first time.

He should've known Rhys would think of him. His best friend was one of the most unselfish people Evan knew, always ready with a shoulder to cry on or a loan to hold someone over until payday or a place to crash while recovering from a broken heart. It wasn't any surprise at all that Takoda would fall in love with Rhys, even before Rhys took him in when he had nowhere else to go. Evan had loved him his whole life, he sometimes felt, all his other relationships paling in comparison to the one he had with Rhys. He'd lost count of the boyfriends who'd broken up with him because they got tired of competing with another man. Evan had explained repeatedly that Rhys was his friend, not his lover, but they hadn't believed him.

Head spinning from the quartet of hands wreaking havoc on his self-control, Evan let out a hoarse shout as Rhys's hand closed over Takoda's, guiding it into the firmer strokes Evan appreciated best. His eyes closed as he climaxed with a long, low moan, hips lifting off the bed as surge after surge of lust wracked his body. Finally sated, he collapsed back onto the bed, panting harshly, almost afraid to open his eyes for fear of what he'd see. He didn't want a long-term relationship, much less one that put him as the third wheel in an already existing match. He could deal with being their Dom until Rhys got his head on straight. He wasn't sure he could deal with being their sometimes lover.

"Open your eyes, Evan," Rhys cajoled. "Takoda's afraid we've killed you."

"It'd take more than a hand job to kill me," Evan retorted automatically, green eyes flashing open to reveal Rhys's shit-eating grin and Takoda's worried frown. "Satisfied?" he grouched. Or tried to. It was hard, he discovered, to be grumpy after a mind-blowing orgasm that hadn't required anything of him but to lie back and take it. In a session, he needed to be in control, but it was nice at times to have a lover take charge outside the playroom. It had been so long since he'd had a lover instead of just a sub that he'd forgotten what that felt like.

"For now," Rhys grinned, "but we've decided we don't like your no-fucking rule. In a session, you're the Dom, but outside the playroom, you're fair game."

"Rhys," Evan said discouragingly, "this is going to be difficult enough for all of us without you blurring the lines."

“That’s crap and you know it,” Rhys insisted. “There’s more to a healthy relationship than just the sessions in the playroom and if we’re going to help Takoda, he needs to see that side too.”

“So take him to bed and show him,” Evan said, not sure how he felt about having this conversation with Takoda present, but Rhys had started it, so it was Rhys’s problem if it bothered the other man. “I don’t need to be a part of that.”

“Yes, you do,” Takoda said softly, though his voice carried a depth of conviction Evan had heard only when Takoda spoke of his feelings for Rhys. “Rhys and I talked about it upstairs. I know you’re going home eventually, and we’ll deal with that when it happens, but while you’re here, you’re a part of our lives, a part of us, whatever that means.”

“That’s an awful lot of talking for such a short time,” Evan said suspiciously. “Are you sure you’ve thought this through? Do you really want to share Rhys with me? After everything you said last night, I would’ve thought the answer was no.”

Takoda shrugged, ignoring the keen glance Rhys directed his way at the suggestion that Takoda was interested specifically in him rather than just in learning to be a sub in general. “I’ve learned a few things since then.”

Evan threw up his hands. “This conversation isn’t over, but we’re not having it now, in my bedroom with all of us naked. Go take a shower, go for a run or a swim or something. Clear your heads. We’ll talk about it tonight after we’ve had a chance to come down from today’s session. Making this kind of decision right now is stupid, not to mention dangerous. Go on. Get out.”

They left slowly, like they weren’t quite convinced he really meant it, but finally they left him alone. Evan scrubbed at his face with his hands, cursing under his breath. This was not the way things were supposed to go.

Suddenly the smell of sex was too much. He jumped out of bed, wrapping a towel around his waist to preserve some sense of decorum as he crossed the hall to the bathroom and turned the water on as hot as it would go. It was nearly scalding when he climbed under the massage spray, but he didn’t care. The steam gave him an excuse for the sweat breaking out on his forehead as panic set in.

He couldn’t do this. He couldn’t fall in love with his best friend and his best friend’s lover. He and Rhys had always sworn they would never let anyone come between them, but Evan was very much afraid that if he let things continue as they were, Takoda would succeed in doing just that. And if not, Evan could very well end up driving Takoda off with his feelings for Rhys, and that would be even worse. Rhys might forgive him for sharing the

same tastes, but he wasn't sure Rhys could forgive him for alienating the man Rhys had fallen in love with.

Hands trembling, he reached for the soap, but the bar slipped through his fingers as the memory of the three of them together in Rhys's shower came rushing back. His heart pounded painfully in his chest as he gasped for breath. Damn it, now was not the time for a panic attack! He tried to control his breathing, but the fight-or-flight response had kicked in. There was nothing to fight, leaving flight the only option. Switching off the water, he fled back into his room, pulling on another pair of running shorts and T-shirt. Not even caring that it was late afternoon and probably well over one hundred degrees outside, he stuck his feet in his shoes and tore out the door, feet hitting the pavement with a steady rhythm. Discipline kept him from running full out, but his jangling nerves warred hard with his training.

The suffocating desert heat pressed in on him from all sides, forcing him to moderate his pace even more. His thoughts raced on at the same breakneck pace, though, images of Rhys over the spanking bench, so eager that Evan hadn't even bothered with the restraints to keep him in place, ass lifting into the spanking and then into the paddle. Takoda arching each time his nipples were tweaked. Rhys's tongue invading his mouth. Takoda's hands around his cock. Fantasies quickly replaced memories. Takoda on the bench this time, restraints holding him helplessly in place, his long black hair braided and pushed out of the way. His body arching beneath Evan's flogger as he begged for another, writhing and squirming helplessly as Evan showed him how much pleasure could be found in submitting to a competent Dom.

Gasping for breath in the dry heat, Evan stumbled to a stop, bending over to stop the dizziness and nausea from the mixture of dehydration and shock. He hobbled over to the minimal shade provided by a nearby building, slumping to the ground as he tried to catch his breath and pick apart that last image. His mind easily supplied the image of Takoda in any number of kinky positions, bound, gagged, cock ring in place to keep him from coming.

He bent double again, head between his knees as he struggled against the realization that he was lusting over his best friend's lover. Or at least the man his best friend wanted as a lover. He couldn't do this. He couldn't betray Rhys that way. They'd shared subs before, but they'd never shared a lover, because that wasn't the same thing. Lovers, real lovers, were special. Even if they were your sub too, they were yours and yours alone. That's what Rhys and Takoda were supposed to have when he was done. A relationship so complete that they didn't need him anymore. That couldn't happen with him in the middle. It was bad enough with him in the middle in the playroom, although he could control things there enough to make sure most of the contact was between Rhys and Takoda. He couldn't control things in the

bedroom, not when the whole point of having the separate playroom was to help Takoda understand that there were distinctions between sessions and real life.

And if he didn't control things in the bedroom, he'd end up fucking Rhys or Takoda or both, and maybe even letting them fuck him. And that would get messy. And what would happen when he had to go home? And oh, fuck, he was so screwed.

He wanted to get up and keep running, just head out into the desert and run until he collapsed and the snakes and scorpions got him. At least that way, he wouldn't screw up his friendship with Rhys and Rhys's romance with Takoda. His legs refused to cooperate, though. They had all the stability of a bowl of Jell-O, if that much. He slumped back against the building, wondering how long it would be before Rhys got worried about him and came looking. Or before some passerby took pity on him and gave him a bottle of water.

"Evan, get your stupid ass in the car. What were you thinking, going for a run at five o'clock in the summer without even a bottle of water?"

"I wasn't thinking, obviously," Evan muttered, trying to lever himself to his feet. His legs wouldn't cooperate. "Can I get a hand here?" he said loudly enough for Rhys to hear him.

"Stupid fucker," Rhys accused affectionately, getting out of the car and coming around to help Evan off the ground. "You could've done yourself serious harm."

Evan let Rhys help him up and into the car. The air conditioning hit his overheated skin full blast, making him shiver convulsively. Rhys handed him a bottle of water. "Drink that. And when you've finished it, drink the other one too. You need to get rehydrated or you really will get sick."

Evan gulped the first bottle in one long drink. When it was gone, he reached for the second one. "Slower this time," Rhys cautioned, starting the car and driving on in the direction Evan had been headed.

"Where are we going?" Evan asked, realizing they weren't heading back toward Rhys's house.

"The club," Rhys replied. "It's closed so there won't be anyone there other than us, and we're going to talk about what's going on in that busy brain of yours, even if I have to beat it out of you."

"Coming from anyone else, those would be fighting words," Evan said, but his voice didn't carry any heat. He'd subbed for exactly one Dom in his life, and that Dom was sitting in the car next to him. If anyone could beat some sense into him, it would be Rhys.

Rhys didn't reply and silence fell in the car as he navigated the busy streets. Evan half-expected some of his earlier tension to return, but it didn't. His run hadn't solved any of his problems, but it had exhausted him to the point that his mind could start to settle. Rhys had found him and they were going to talk. Evan didn't know exactly how to explain what was going on in his head, but he knew he'd pour it all out to Rhys. They'd never kept secrets. Ever.

Rhys parked in the empty lot behind his club and helped Evan inside, although the cool air and water had gone a long way toward restoring Evan's equilibrium—physically, anyway. Rhys switched off the alarm and led Evan over to one of the booths, nudging him onto the bench and sliding in next to him. "So, you want to tell me what the hell sent you running like that?"

"It was suddenly too much," Evan said simply. "You and Takoda and the session and the sex and God, Rhys, I could fall in love with you both so easily, and that's not what any of us need. You're so right for each other. I see it every time you look at each other, and the sight of the two of you in that bed together was beautiful. And now you want to drag me into the middle of it and I'd never forgive myself if I messed that up somehow, and—"

Rhys leaned in and kissed Evan softly, surprising him into silence. When he pulled back, Evan just stared at him. "How long have we known each other?" Rhys asked him.

"Since we were two," Evan replied automatically.

"Thirty-one years," Rhys agreed. "And in all that time, have we ever managed to mess each other up?"

Evan shook his head.

"Then what makes you think we're going to start now?"

Evan dropped his eyes, his cheeks flaming red. "I was holding Takoda while he watched you jerk off and then while you were jerking him off, and I wanted him so desperately. And then you came to my room and kissed me. Nobody kisses me like you do, Rhys. Nobody else dares."

Rhys just rolled his eyes. "That's because they never get a chance. You're too busy kissing them, if you kiss them at all," he scolded. "When was the last time you had a lover, Evan?"

"Two years ago," Evan replied. "You know that."

"And since then?" Rhys pressed. "I know better than to think you've been celibate."

“You’ve been clubbing with me in Boston,” Evan reminded him. “There are plenty of places I can go to hook up with a sub for the night or even a weekend if that’s what I want. No strings attached.”

Rhys rolled his eyes. “And I’ll be willing to bet not a single one of them has wanted anything from you but your skills as a Dom. How many of them have you even kissed?”

Evan had to stop and think before he answered that question. “Just one.”

“And did he dare kiss you back?” Rhys demanded.

“No,” Evan admitted.

“And you wonder why you reacted to a kiss?” Rhys snorted. “Of course you reacted to a kiss. You’re as starved for affection as Takoda is. Maybe more, because you’ve been having sex without the attachment. Takoda, at least, wasn’t going through empty motions. You aren’t falling for Takoda, Evan. You’re falling for the idea of having a lover of your own.”

“And how is pretending you and Takoda are my lovers going to help?” Evan demanded. He could see the sense in Rhys’s words. He didn’t know Takoda well enough to actually be falling in love with him, and while he’d loved Rhys since forever, he’d realized a long time ago that it wasn’t the kind of love that would let them live together in marital bliss for the next fifty years. They were too alike to last long as lovers, neither willing to cede control for the amount of time the other needed to have control. “I can work remotely for awhile, but eventually, I have to go back to Boston.”

“It’s a short-term solution,” Rhys admitted, “but what’s the harm in taking the genuine affection that we’re offering? And having some great sex and good fun in the process? Not to mention helping Takoda. One session hasn’t solved his or my problems, although it was a good start.”

“The harm is that I have to walk away at the end of it,” Evan reminded him. “And right at the moment, I’m not sure I can.”

CHAPTER 10

“SO TELL me about this sub you kissed,” Rhys said.

It wasn’t the question Evan had expected, but it was a welcome respite, so he jumped on it. “His name’s Patrick. He’s a big guy, not your usual sub material, but he’s amazing in his submission. He just lets go completely. One of the few subs I know, at least the ones who aren’t in long-term relationships, who can really do that. You’ll get there with Takoda because he’ll learn to trust you and know that you won’t push him more than he can take, but Patrick just goes under that way instinctively.”

“Or else he knows he can trust you even though you two aren’t together,” Rhys mused aloud.

Evan shook his head. “It’s not like that, Rhys. We’ve had some good sessions. Okay, quite a few good sessions, but neither of us is looking for anything else.”

“If he’s as sensitive a sub as you say he is, he wouldn’t let on if he wanted anything else because he’d know you didn’t want that kind of encumbrance,” Rhys replied. “Except that things have changed in the last twenty-four hours. Whether you just didn’t realize it until now or whether your feelings on the matter have changed, you *do* want something else now.”

“Whole hell of a lot of good that does me when I’m here and he’s in Boston,” Evan muttered. He didn’t want to think about this. He was happy with his life just the way it was. Or he had been until today. This was just a fluke, a product of an incredibly intense situation he had no real way of getting away from, even for a few hours. And while Rhys was trying to help by making him think about Patrick, Evan wasn’t ready to go beyond his current comfort zone.

“You won’t be here forever, as you just pointed out,” Rhys reminded him, making him squirm uncomfortably at his friend’s continued insistence. “Give it a chance when you get home. If not with him, then with someone

else. Weren't you the one who told me just last week to act like a Dom and take what I wanted?"

"And you listened to me so very well," Evan retorted sarcastically, trying to turn the conversation away from his own failings and back to Rhys and Takoda, which was what he was supposed to be concentrating on.

Rhys shrugged. "I didn't say I was perfect, but maybe this is the wake-up call you need to get your own life on track once you're done helping me with mine. You don't have to decide anything now. Like you said, you can't when you're here and he's there. Unless you'd like to relocate out here and let me introduce you to some of the subs I know who don't have boyfriends? I'm sure I could fix you up with someone you'd like."

Relieved that Rhys was backing off about Patrick, Evan laughed. "I can work remotely most of the time, but I do occasionally have to go into the office, and that would be an awfully expensive commute. Thanks for the offer, though. If things get too crazy in my head, I might take you up on it for a night or two, just to help me get my perspective back."

"Anything you need," Rhys promised. "I know just how much you're doing to help me. If I can help you in return, especially if helping me is the cause of your problems, you know I'll do it."

"It's not your fault everything's mixed up in my head," Evan insisted.

Rhys shrugged. "I'm not so sure. I'm the one who blurred the lines this afternoon. With Takoda's willing participation, but he wouldn't have done it if I hadn't agreed and taken the lead."

"Which is exactly why I didn't want to blur those lines," Evan said with a sigh. "I know how good the sex is between us, but we both know it wouldn't work in the long run. You'll give in and let me be the Dom for the few weeks I'm here because you know I'll be leaving at the end of it and you'll have Takoda to yourself. And when I leave, I'll go wishing I could have you as my sub permanently. I know it could never work that way, but this is why we stopped messing around in the first place. We left each other too frustrated."

"So what do you suggest we do?" Rhys asked seriously. "It's hardly fair to you to have to take care of yourself after you've taken such good care of Takoda and me. At least let us get you off in the context of the session."

Evan sighed. "That doesn't blur the lines any less."

Rhys raised an eyebrow. "So you mean to tell me you're going to run however many sessions it takes to teach Takoda and get me straightened out without ever getting any sexual release out of it? Tell me another one. Even your self-control isn't that good, Evan."

"I don't know, okay?" Evan shouted, at the end of his rope. "I haven't ever done anything like this before. I thought I could handle it as long as it was all in a session. And then you kissed me. And now it's all messed up in my head and I don't know what the answer is anymore. This isn't a casual session with no strings attached. Nothing that involves you is ever casual for me. We have too much history for it to be. And Takoda has the potential to be everything a Dom could want in a sub, and he's a blank slate. I know it's stupid, but it's the lure of the virgin. The chance to mold a sub into exactly what I want him to be. Only he's not mine to mold. He's yours. Or he would be if you'd claim him. Do you know what he told me last night? He told me he realized he was interested in BDSM when he saw you do a session here in the club. He hadn't paid any attention before, and then he saw you on stage and wanted nothing more than to be in your sub's place. If he's thinking at me about all, it's because I'm standing in your shoes for the moment."

He realized what he'd said the moment it was out of his mouth, but it was too late to call back the words. "Damn it, I wasn't supposed to tell you that, but I'm not used to censoring myself when you're around."

Rhys's eyes narrowed. "I won't tell him what you said. I should be glad he's talking to anyone."

"I told him he needed to talk to you instead of me," Evan asserted, trying to figure out a way to change the subject before he inadvertently revealed what he had really promised not to tell Rhys. "But I can't make him do it."

Rhys nodded. "Maybe I need to try a little harder to get him to open up."

"You could try asking him," Evan suggested. "That's what I did. I asked him why he wanted me to stay." He didn't see any harm in revealing that part of the conversation. Rhys already knew Evan had stayed because Takoda had asked. It didn't take any guesswork to imagine that Evan had asked for an explanation.

"Did he talk about me?" Rhys asked softly.

Evan grabbed the closest thing to hand, a cork coaster, and threw it at Rhys's head. "Idiot," he said indulgently. "Of course he talked about you. And no, I'm not going to tell you what he said, beyond what I already let slip. If you want to know what he said, ask him yourself. Or better yet, tell him how you feel first. Then ask him."

Rhys hesitated.

Evan considered what he could say without revealing so much that he'd violate Takoda's trust. In the end, he settled simply for saying, "Think about

how far out on a limb he's got to be feeling. If you were him, wouldn't you want to know you weren't taking such a huge risk for no reason?"

Rhys nodded thoughtfully. "Are you okay now? Ready to go home?"

Evan wasn't sure he was ready, but then, he wasn't sure he'd ever be completely ready, and at least with Rhys in such a thoughtful mood, there was a chance Rhys and Takoda would work things out fast enough that he wouldn't have to be in the middle anymore. "Yeah, I'm good."

The drive home passed in the same comfortable silence as the drive to the club, but Evan's thoughts were preoccupied with far different things. He'd tried to steer away from discussing Patrick and his love life in Boston, but Rhys's pointed questions had raised Evan's awareness. Patrick wasn't like the other subs who flitted in and out of Evan's life. He wasn't any more demanding or any more obedient than the other subs Evan did sessions with on occasion. He was just... Evan didn't even have the words for it. He was just different, that's all.

Maybe Rhys was right. Maybe what he needed really was a sub of his own. Someone to go home to at night, whether they had a session or made love or just had dinner together and slept in each other's arms. Maybe he'd finally reached a point where he could try again and not make the same mistakes he'd made in the past. Maybe, if he found the right sub, the right lover, he could actually keep someone beyond a couple of months, long enough for that lover to realize that while Rhys would always be his best friend, that didn't have to threaten Evan's other relationships.

He closed his eyes, trying to imagine his life with someone in it permanently. The details eluded him, but the more he thought about it, the more Rhys's words made sense. Takoda seemed like a great guy, and they had the guitar in common, but that was hardly enough to base any real relationship on. He was just transferring his unrealized need for companionship to the two people who were offering it.

Maybe if he kept telling himself that often enough, he'd even believe it.

Takoda was waiting for them when they came back in. He looked like he wanted to hug one or both of them, but he held back deferentially, clearly not comfortable taking the lead yet despite his show of confidence in Evan's bedroom earlier in the day. "Your phone rang a couple of times while you were out, Evan," he said softly. "I didn't answer it. I hope that was all right."

"It's fine," Evan assured him. "My voice mail will have picked up. If it was important, they'll have left a message, and even if they didn't, I can at least see who called and call back if I want to."

“Go check your phone,” Rhys urged. “I need to talk to Takoda anyway. We’ll start dinner and you can come help us when you’re finished.”

Evan nodded, willing to give Rhys some time alone with Takoda in the hopes it would result in some confessions of feelings, even if Takoda didn’t bring up all that had transpired with Kade. He figured the calls were probably from either his mother or his sister, wanting to know how he was enjoying Las Vegas and if Rhys was still as wild as ever. He’d told them he was going to visit. He hadn’t mentioned the details of why. He’d let Rhys explain Takoda to them, along with whatever degree of detail he felt like including, the next time they had a family reunion. Rhys wasn’t related by even the biggest stretch of imagination, but that hadn’t stopped him from attending Evan’s family reunions as a kid, and the tradition had carried over into their adult lives as well.

When Evan flipped his phone open and checked the call log, though, he recognized his boss’s number. Frowning, Evan dialed his voice mail and waited to see what his boss wanted. His boss wouldn’t have called once, much less twice, instead of e-mailing if it weren’t important. He listened to the message, mind racing even more when he was done. His boss insisted he be present at a meeting at the office, in Boston, on Monday. This Monday. Five days from now.

He flopped back on the bed and stared at the ceiling, the position uncomfortably reminiscent of the way Evan and Takoda had found him just a couple of hours ago.

“Everything okay, Evan?” Rhys called from the living room.

“Yeah,” Evan called back, the fatigue in his voice belying his response. Pushing up to a sitting position, he ran an impatient hand through his short red hair. “Fuck,” he muttered.

Things were complicated enough with him here in Las Vegas. Having to leave, even if only for a few days, could make things even worse. So many things could go wrong, and when they were finally starting to make progress. Still, it was only Wednesday, and he didn’t have to leave until Sunday. He could easily squeeze in one more session, maybe even two, before then, and that might be enough to get Rhys back on track, at least, even if Takoda wasn’t fully comfortable with the scene yet.

“Hey, what’s up?” Rhys asked, sticking his head through the doorway to Evan’s bedroom.

Evan sighed and propped up on one elbow. “I’ve got to go back to Boston on Sunday. My boss says I have to be present at a meeting on

Monday. He didn't say why, just that I needed to be there. He doesn't do this often, so I'm sure it's important, but the timing sucks."

"So you go back on Sunday, deal with the meeting on Monday and come back Monday night or Tuesday morning. It'll cost some money, but it's not that big a deal."

"Yeah," Evan agreed. "Who knows, if we do a couple of sessions between now and then, you might not even need me to come back."

Rhys blanched slightly. "I don't want to push Takoda too fast. He's finally starting to relax and have a little confidence. I don't want to ruin that by rushing things."

Privately, Evan thought Rhys was the one afraid of taking back control, but he didn't say that aloud. "We're all too strung out to discuss today's session now," he decided. "Let's talk in the morning and see how we feel and when we want to do our second session. That might give us a better idea of how things will go between now and then."

Rhys nodded. Then his face split in a big grin. "You could always look Patrick up while you're home."

Evan rolled his eyes. "And how's that going to help anything? It's not like I can stay since you're convinced I'll need to come back to help you and Takoda some more."

Rhys shrugged. "If nothing else, it'll give you a chance to be with someone else, to work the idea that Takoda and I are anything special out of your head. Even if you don't meet up with Patrick, I think you should go out while you're home. Give yourself the luxury of a stress-free session."

Evan sighed. When Rhys got like this, there wasn't much to do except agree, because he was like a bulldog. Once he got something in his head, he didn't let it go until he was satisfied with the results.

He didn't know what he'd done in a past life to deserve being stuck with a meddlesome best friend.

"I promise I'll go out while I'm at home."

Rhys grinned. "Dinner's ready if you're hungry."

CHAPTER 11

RHYS left Evan alone after that, and Evan chose the coward's way out, leaving Rhys and Takoda alone for dinner and the evening. After awhile, he heard the sound of Takoda's guitar, but not even that could lure him out of his bedroom. He had too much going on in his head, and he needed to get it all straight before they sat down to evaluate the session tomorrow morning.

The emotional drain of the session, combined with the physical drain of his run and dehydration, left him so wrung out that he fell asleep far earlier than usual, his mind racing even in dreams, images of Rhys and Takoda and Patrick all blurring together into one intensely erotic session that went far longer and pushed far harder than he would ever think of actually doing. When he woke up in the morning, his sheets were wet, though, leaving him with the uncomfortable thought that, dream or not, it had turned him on like he wouldn't have believed.

After yesterday, he didn't know if his legs would hold him for the kind of extended run he'd need to work off the funk he was in, but maybe he could swim it off. Going into the living room, he was surprised to see Takoda sitting there by himself, guitar in hand again. "Where's Rhys?" he asked curiously.

"He went to the store," Takoda replied, glancing up from his music long enough to smile sweetly at Evan. "He shouldn't be gone for much more than another half an hour."

Evan nodded. "I'm going to go for a swim."

Takoda nodded and went back to playing. Evan took two steps outside on the pool deck and realized if he went in the water as he was, he'd be in worse shape than yesterday by the time he was done with his swim. It hadn't gotten terribly hot yet, but the sun was already high enough for the pool to be in full sunlight, and Evan's freckled skin would never stand for that kind of exposure.

"Changed your mind?" Takoda asked when Evan came back inside.

“Sunscreen,” Evan said by way of explanation, going into his room to fetch the bottle. He smeared it over his legs, arms, chest and face, but he could only reach the tops of his shoulders and the small of his back. Not sure how Takoda would react, Evan went back into the living room nonetheless, bottle in hand. “Could you do me a favor?” he asked, voice as steady as he could make it. This wasn’t a session. He couldn’t order anything. And after yesterday, with everything still so up in the air, he wasn’t even sure he could ask, but it was that or do without his swim. “I can’t reach my back to put the sunscreen on.”

Takoda looked surprised and a little nervous, but he rose and took the bottle from Evan, spreading the lotion thickly over Evan’s broad back. Evan closed his eyes at the tentative touches, letting all the emotions they evoked rush through him instead of trying to push them down. It felt good to have hands on his body, tender, soothing hands. He hadn’t realized how much he missed it until he’d felt it again yesterday. “Thanks,” he said, pulling away before the repetitive strokes could seduce him into wanting more. “I get sunburned so easily and that would really put a crimp in our sessions.”

“We wouldn’t want that,” Takoda replied shyly. “Enjoy your swim.”

Feeling slightly better simply for having been able to walk away, Evan lowered himself into the pool and began to swim long, slow laps across the pool and back. The longer he swam, the more convinced he became of the logic of Rhys’s suppositions about his reactions. Takoda was an undeniably attractive man, and Evan had loved Rhys for forever. To have them there, living with him, willing to sub for him not in a club, but in their own space, to have them come to him afterwards offering not just physical release but affection.... Of course he responded to that. He’d have to be heartless not to. It didn’t mean he wanted to stay with them. It didn’t mean he needed *them* in order to be happy. Just that he needed to rethink his priorities a little when he returned home.

In the interest of keeping his sanity while he was here, though, he’d need to keep things in their proper places, and that meant keeping sex inside their sessions and affectionate gestures outside sessions to things acceptable between friends. Because he still had to leave eventually. Rhys might be willing to share for now, but at some point, he would want his sub and his life back, and Evan needed to be able to walk away, heart intact, if he intended to look for a relationship of his own.

Finished with his swim, Evan towed off enough that he wouldn’t drip all over Rhys’s floor and headed back inside. Rhys and Takoda were in the kitchen, putting away the groceries. “Let me take a quick shower,” he called, “and then we need to talk about the session yesterday.”

The twin calls of agreement were enough to satisfy Evan for the time it took him to rinse off the chlorine from his swim and the sweat from yesterday's ill-advised run. Stepping out of the shower, he finally felt like himself again for the first time since the middle of yesterday's session.

He could do this. He could be the Dom Rhys and Takoda needed and then go home and see about finding for himself a relationship like the two of them shared. And if he got lucky a few times in the process, well, where was the harm in that?

Pulling on a clean pair of shorts and a T-shirt—and noting absently he'd need to do laundry before he flew home on Sunday—he walked back into the kitchen, groping both gorgeous asses as he walked by.

"I take it you're feeling better," Rhys teased, following Evan into the living room and rubbing his still-sore backside as he went.

"Like a new man," Evan declared. "Come have a seat. We need to go over yesterday's session and decide on a timeline and possible script for the next one."

When they were both seated, Evan looked at Rhys. "One to ten, how did the session go yesterday?"

Rhys considered for a moment. "Seven," he said finally. "You gave me the punishment I needed—and I'm still feeling it, by the way—but when I actually make it into sub mode, it's not enough just to come. I need my Dom to fuck me."

Evan nodded. "We'll talk about that in a bit. What was the best part?"

Rhys smiled. "Having Takoda kiss me. That was definitely a ten."

Evan chuckled. "Slut," he teased. "Worst part, and not what I left out, but about what actually happened?"

It took Rhys a little longer to answer that one. "Being forced to face my failings. All of my failings."

"You know that was necessary," Evan reminded him. "We talked about it the first day I was here."

"I know," Rhys agreed with a nod, "but it doesn't make it any easier to face them."

"Anything else I need to know about how the session went from your position?"

"You've still got one hell of an arm," Rhys grinned. "When the bruises from yesterday are gone, I want you to take me under, all the way under at some point before you leave, and really work me over. It's been too long

since I let go completely that way. Probably since the last time you flogged me.”

Evan could believe that. He and Rhys were cut from the same cloth in that respect. Neither of them trusted anyone else enough to really let go and get into a submissive headspace. “When I get back from Boston,” he promised. “Do you have a good cane or should I bring mine?”

“I’ve got one,” Rhys replied. “You can check it out before you leave, see what you think.”

Evan nodded. “Takoda, I’m going to take you through the session in a little more detail since everything is new to you, all right? You can use a one to ten scale, or you can simply say like, dislike or neutral.”

Takoda nodded.

“How did you feel about having a few minutes upstairs to get settled before I came in?” Evan asked, beginning all the way at the beginning.

“I liked it,” Takoda said softly. “I think it would have been hard to get undressed while you were there.”

Evan made a mental note of that. “What about leaving your briefs on? Did that work for yesterday’s session?”

“Yes,” Takoda said. “It let me hold on to a little bit of modesty.”

“You know that won’t always be possible,” Evan warned. “When we do our next session, you won’t just be an observer.”

“I know,” Takoda replied, “and I think it’ll be easier next time for having had this first session mostly just to watch.”

“So watching was a turn-on for you?” Evan asked.

Takoda nodded, cheeks turning red.

“Watching Rhys? Or watching and wishing you were the one on the spanking bench?” Evan pressed.

“Both,” Takoda replied, so softly Evan had to lean forward to hear him.

“There isn’t any shame here, Takoda,” Evan reminded the other man gently. “Nobody’s here to judge you for what you liked or didn’t like. I just need to know so I can plan the next session to everyone’s satisfaction.”

“Both,” Takoda said more firmly. “I don’t know if I could have handled the paddle, but watching the spanking, imagining it was my butt, had me really hot.”

“Next time it will be your butt,” Evan promised. “Now, what about watching Rhys get off?”

“I really wanted to touch him,” Takoda admitted. “So I guess dislike, not because it wasn’t good but because it wasn’t enough.”

Evan smiled. “Just remember what made him come was your kiss, not the spanking, not the paddle, not his own hand. And the ways we touched you? What did you like about that?”

“All of it,” Takoda replied hoarsely. Evan hid a grin at the growing bulge in Takoda’s shorts.

“Including the nipple play?” Evan verified. He’d had subs who got absolutely nothing out of attention to their nipples and others who could come from that alone.

Takoda nodded, shifting restlessly on the couch.

Evan didn’t ask about Rhys touching him. He already knew how Takoda felt about that.

“What about you?” Rhys interrupted. “How do you feel the session went?”

“I think it went really well,” Evan replied. “It did what I wanted it to do on a couple of levels. Like I told Takoda during the session, it gave you the punishment and absolution you needed, which is important to me because I knew you needed to let go of your guilt. It let Takoda see what a controlled session, with a fixed beginning and ending, looks like without being the primary focus of the Dom’s attention. I hope it began to create an environment in which he can trust me.”

“It did,” Takoda agreed with a nod.

“Good,” Evan smiled. “And it gave me the opportunity to see what it would be like to work with two subs, something I haven’t done very often. On the whole, I think it was a very positive session.”

“You made sure we both got off, but you didn’t come yourself,” Rhys reminded him.

“And that’s a mistake I won’t make again,” Evan promised. “I still hold to my original assertion that outside our sessions, you need to treat me as just another friend. I’ve had lots of practice separating sessions from the rest of my life. I think I’d have a lot more trouble keeping sex outside our sessions from becoming more than it could ever really be between us. And I don’t know if either of you have thought seriously about what happens after I leave, but you both will have to decide how you feel about the possibility of other Doms in Takoda’s life or other subs in your life, Rhys. And that decision, like all the others you make, needs to be made free of any interference on my part because I won’t be here to be a part of it.”

“You could be,” Takoda said softly. “You could come back and visit us.”

The desire to accept what Takoda was offering was strong, so strong it hurt to resist it, but he clung to Rhys’s words as a way to resist temptation. “I could, but I’m not sure that’s healthy for any of us, Takoda, and you’ve had enough unhealthiness in the past few months to last a lifetime.”

Evan waited to see if Rhys would jump in, either to agree or disagree, but his best friend kept silent. “So then, for our next session,” Evan went on, wanting to get everything established while they were already talking. “I have a call for work I have to take this afternoon, but I don’t have anything on my schedule for tomorrow, so I would suggest we block off tomorrow afternoon for our next visit to Rhys’s playroom.”

“What about tonight?” Rhys interrupted. “I don’t have to work tonight.”

“The playroom’s dark at night,” Evan reminded him. “I thought we’d agreed to only go up there when it was light outside.”

“Why?” Takoda asked curiously.

“Because Kade’s dungeon was dark, secretive,” Evan explained. “We don’t want our sessions to remind you of that.”

Takoda shook his head. “Even dark, I don’t think it could remind me of Kade’s prison. It’s clean and fresh and everything’s put neatly away rather than hanging in my face, constantly reminding me of what he could choose to do to me at any moment.”

“If I could make a suggestion,” Rhys interrupted again. “It stays light until fairly late, and I don’t imagine you’ll be working much past six. If Takoda and I have dinner ready as soon as you’re done, we’d still have plenty of time for a session before it got dark.”

“Are you really ready to go under again so quickly?” Evan asked seriously.

“Not if you’re going to beat my butt again, but I’m up for pretty much anything else,” Rhys replied immediately.

It wasn’t Rhys’s backside Evan was interested in this time, so he turned to Takoda. “I won’t put you over the spanking bench yet because I’m not completely comfortable with the way it would stretch your shoulders, but that means using different restraints when we do our next session. Are you ready for that? Because you won’t get to be a spectator the next time we go upstairs.”

“What kind of restraints?” Takoda asked warily.

“A spreader bar between your knees so I have easy access to anything I want to touch and cuffs on your wrists connecting you to the headboard so you stay in position,” Evan replied immediately, ignoring the shot of lust at the image his words conjured up.

Takoda had the same reaction, if his sudden shifting was any indication.

“You’d just spank me?” he verified. “I don’t know if I’m ready for a paddle yet.”

“We’ll see how things go once we get started,” Evan evaded. “I don’t want to limit myself, but you have your safe word if you need it, and I expect you to use it if I push you too hard. That’s why we talked about them yesterday.”

“I guess that’s okay then,” Takoda said, though he clearly still had some doubts.

“Rhys, go get the softest pair of cuffs you have,” Evan suggested. “Takoda might be more comfortable tonight if he’s had a chance to get used to the way they feel before the session starts.”

Rhys nodded and headed toward the stairs.

“You can take them off whenever you’re ready,” Evan said. “I just want you to get comfortable feeling them around your wrists so it isn’t a big shock tonight when I put them on. Try wearing them until you stop thinking about them being on your wrists. We don’t want to make them the focus of what you’re feeling tonight, just the means by which I make sure none of us get hurt accidentally.”

Rhys returned at the end of that comment with two leather cuffs lined in lambskin. He handed them to Evan, who reached for Takoda’s hands. He fastened them around each wrist, checking to make sure they weren’t too tight. “How do they feel?” he asked.

“Strange,” Takoda admitted. “I’ve never worn much jewelry, even a watch, so I’m not used to having anything around my wrists.”

“Leave them on for a couple of hours, just until you get used to them being there, then leave them on the kitchen counter. We’ll take them upstairs with us tonight after dinner. Anything else you want to add about yesterday’s session? Or questions about tonight?”

Takoda shook his head. Evan glanced at Rhys, who also shook his head. “Okay then. I’m going to log in at work. I’ll let you know when I have an idea what time I’ll be finished.”

As he went back into his bedroom, movement caught his eye, and he turned to watch Takoda leaning into Rhys’s strong shoulder, his fingers

picking idly at the cuffs around his wrists. Rhys lowered his head, not quite kissing Takoda, but nuzzling at his cheek gently, such a clear sign of affection that Evan's heart ached. Resolutely, he turned his back on them and went into his room, pulling out his laptop and hoping work was busy enough to keep his mind off everything else. Otherwise, he was likely to go back into the living room and try to curl up between the two men in search of some of the devotion they were clearly developing for each other.

Sunday couldn't get here fast enough.

CHAPTER 12

EVAN managed to find a few minutes free at lunchtime to take a break and eat with Rhys and Takoda. He noticed immediately that Takoda had taken the cuffs off and left them on the kitchen counter. He also noticed Takoda rubbing at the inner faces of his wrists periodically. The sight made Evan smile. He'd hoped for exactly that reaction—or one very close to it—when he suggested Takoda wear them for a few hours.

Then he caught a glimpse of Rhys imitating the caress. The look on Takoda's face nearly melted Evan. Takoda's eyes fluttered closed, his breath hitching, every other muscle in his body going taut. Clearly pleased with the reaction, Rhys did it again, and Evan wondered if Takoda could come from that touch alone. It certainly looked like it! The question evoked thoughts of their upcoming session, making Evan wonder how responsive Takoda would be to everything else he had in mind. He shifted in his chair, the sudden swelling in his groin making sitting uncomfortable. He had no idea how he was going to concentrate on work for the rest of the afternoon.

"I thought of one thing we didn't talk about," Rhys said as they were finishing their lunch. "We discussed safe words, but we didn't discuss yellow words. It didn't matter yesterday since I rarely need one, but this will be Takoda's first real session and he might need to slow down without wanting to stop entirely."

Evan looked at Takoda pointedly, but the sub's eyes pleaded with him not to force a revelation, so Evan let it go. "Sounds reasonable," he agreed. "Hot dog is 'stop, don't do that, end the session now'," he clarified, looking at Takoda, "but if you need a short break, a change in what we're doing without calling the session to a halt, you need another word. Again, something you aren't likely to blurt out during sex."

Takoda considered for a minute. "Reservation," he said finally.

Since Rhys had already brought up the subject of the evening's session, Evan decided to go ahead and ask. "What did you think of the cuffs?"

Takoda's eyes darkened with desire, his pupils dilating. "I liked them," he admitted hoarsely.

Evan smiled. "They're pretty powerful for something so simple, aren't they?" he agreed. "They leave you feeling completely controlled, completely owned, even when they aren't attached to anything. And when they are, when you know your Dom's using them to keep you immobile so he can do all kinds of wonderful and amazing things to your body... well, there isn't much else like that feeling. Except maybe a collar around your neck."

"No!" Rhys protested. "You can't!"

Evan smiled at his best friend. "You know I wouldn't." He looked back at Takoda. "Some Doms put a collar on a sub just for show, but that's not the way Rhys or I see it. For us, it's a commitment. Maybe not quite a wedding ring, but a commitment to far more than an afternoon or evening of fun and games. If he puts a collar on you at some point, it's because you're his and he's yours."

Takoda's eyes grew wide at the statement, a look of such desperate need on his face that Evan thought for a second he might beg Rhys for a collar right there. Of course, the need on Rhys's face wasn't much less obvious. It wouldn't be long, Evan figured, before he'd be offering Rhys the collar in the bottom of his suitcase as a gift to Takoda. He didn't need to see Rhys put it on him. In fact, it would probably be better if he didn't, to give them the privacy of that moment, but he'd like to see Takoda wearing it so he'd know they'd reached the point of truly making that commitment. If he felt a slight pang that he wouldn't be the one to put it there, he reminded himself that nothing was stopping him from finding his own relationship when this was all over and he went home for good.

Glancing at the clock, Evan saw that he'd taken more than his usual lunch break. "I've got to get back to work. I'll let you know when I'm finished."

The afternoon was beyond frustrating, nothing going the way it was supposed to. By the time Evan shut his work computer, he was ready to either kill someone or quit. Neither was particularly conducive to being in control at the session they'd planned for this evening. He briefly considered insisting Rhys be the primary sub again, but Rhys's ass was still bruised from the paddle last night and so not a good target for Evan's aggression. And Takoda, while willing to give spanking a try, was certainly not ready for Evan's current mood. Grimacing, he wondered if he could call it off, but there was no guarantee work would be any better tomorrow, and then it would be Saturday, and he was leaving on Sunday. He didn't want to rush off after Takoda's first

session. That wouldn't be fair to Takoda, not to mention that it could well give him the wrong impression, and Evan definitely didn't want that.

He looked at the clock to see if he could maybe get in a short run to release some of his tension, but it was only five-thirty, still way too hot to run, and if he waited until the sun started to set, they'd be doing the session at night. The playroom had lights, of course, but the point was to make the room as welcoming as possible. He wondered if Rhys would be willing to fuck the frustration out of him, but that was blurring the lines again. And not even a day after he'd insisted—again—that they couldn't afford to do that. He'd simply have to keep himself under control during the session and go for a run when they were done if the session itself didn't purge his irritation.

"You all right?" Rhys asked when Evan came out into the den, scrubbing at his face with the flats of his hands.

"My boss is an idiot and my job sucks," Evan said flatly.

"I keep telling you to come to Vegas and work for me," Rhys replied. "Then your boss would be an incredibly gorgeous, generous guy, and while your job might still suck, it would be in that lovely, come-in-your-mouth sort of way."

The comment surprised a laugh out of Evan. "So you'd whore me out to whoever could pay the price?"

"Nah," Rhys said with a shake of his head. "I figured I'd just tie you to the whipping post and see who could make you call uncle first. You look like you could use it."

Evan barked out a short laugh. "Hell, after today, I probably could, but since that isn't on the agenda for tonight, I'll just have to enjoy what is."

"Takoda went to take a nap," Rhys said slowly, seriously. "Do we need to go upstairs without him for a bit so you'll be in control tonight?"

Evan was tempted. Sorely tempted.

In the end, though, he shook his head. "Just keep an eye on me tonight," he requested. "If you see me starting to lose it, safeword out. I don't want to scare Takoda or rush things with him, and I don't know for sure that he'll recognize his limits if I reach them, or dare say anything even if he does. Talk is all well and good, but there's a big difference between that and actually putting it into action."

Rhys looked at him critically. Evan could practically see the wheels turning in his head. "No," Rhys said after a moment, "that's not going to do it." He took Evan's arm firmly. "Upstairs, Evan. Now."

Evan's body recognized the tone of voice and responded to it long before his mind could catch up. And by then, they were halfway up the stairs, and Evan knew Rhys was right. He let his friend, the only Dom he'd ever accepted, guide him into the playroom and over to the spanking bench where he'd paddled Rhys the day before.

"Strip," Rhys ordered, moving around the room, gathering the supplies he needed.

Evan did as he was told, his ass already tingling in anticipation. He didn't know exactly what Rhys had planned—they weren't exactly following protocol here—but he trusted his friend with his life. Trusting him in the playroom was easy in comparison. When he was naked, his cock already hard, Rhys returned to his side, fastening a cock ring tightly around the base of his shaft. "We'll save your climax for later, in the session with Takoda. You told him you'd get off during our sessions too, and I don't want him to start questioning your word."

Evan accepted the bite of the ring, knowing he'd probably have to leave it on during the second session as well, if he had any hope of holding back his climax until after Takoda and Rhys had come. He didn't usually wear one when he was the Dom because his focus was so entirely on his sub that he didn't need it. After going under for Rhys, that wouldn't be the case.

"Arms out," Rhys instructed. Evan complied immediately, watching in silence as Rhys encircled his wrists with a pair of cuffs very similar to what he'd given Takoda that morning. Evan felt his mind turning off slowly as he gave himself over completely to Rhys's control. When Rhys nudged him onto the bench, Evan went without question, lying docilely as Rhys fastened the cuffs to the bench, immobilizing his arms. The built-in cuffs on the bench went around his knees next, spreading his legs wide and locking him in place for whatever Rhys desired to do to him.

Rhys pressed a silk scarf into Evan's hand next. "I'm going to gag you so we don't wake Takoda. Drop the scarf if you need your safe word." Evan nodded and opened his mouth for the ball gag Rhys inserted, feeling the saliva start to build up in his mouth as soon as the rubber pressed on his tongue. He'd be drooling like a baby in a matter of minutes, but the tile floor would wipe clean easily enough. Then he felt Rhys parting his cheeks and pressing lubed fingers against his hole. His eyes grew wide as the head of a large plug popped through the tight ring, going deeper until it hit his prostate. He squirmed a little, the restraints making it hard even to do that, and was almost immediately rewarded with a swat on his ass.

"Don't move," Rhys scolded. "You know better than to try to get away from what your Dom chooses to do to you."

Evan hung his head, feeling the wash of shame that came from disappointing his Dom. When Rhys fiddled with the plug a little more, apparently not satisfied with the way it was positioned in Evan's ass, Evan kept himself rigidly still despite the incredible need to lift his hips in a silent plea for Rhys to fuck him, either with the plug or with his cock.

The swat that landed once Rhys was done positioning the plug was quite a bit sharper than the first one. "You're so beautiful like this," Rhys murmured in Evan's ear. "I'm going to make you fly so high. Just let go of everything else and concentrate on what I can make you feel."

Evan nodded, not that Rhys needed any more consent than he already had, and closed his eyes, head dropping forward, not even trying to guess what Rhys would do next. Whatever it was, it would be good. It always was when Rhys dominated him.

The seconds seemed to drag by until he felt the first kiss of a riding crop on the lower curve of his buttocks, just where it met his thighs. He moaned softly, not in protest, but because it felt so good. The next strike mirrored the first, on the other side, followed by several more, growing progressively harder until Evan was sure his bottom was turning nicely pink.

Apparently satisfied with his attentions to those sections of skin, Rhys turned his attention to the rest of Evan's ass, slapping over the smooth curves in a pattern that made sense only to him, but that sent Evan flying. He gasped and moaned and squirmed and fought his bonds, but the scarf stayed tightly gripped in his hand as he struggled with the sensations and the mess in his head and the muddled desire for Takoda and Rhys, for a relationship. Each tap of the crop, each wiggle of Evan's body, stirred the plug inside him, only adding to the lust assailing him, until he felt like he could go mad with it all.

"Let it go," Rhys said sharply in his ear.

I'm trying, Evan wanted to say, but the gag in his mouth prevented him from speaking.

"I'm trying not to leave welts so you don't have to explain them if Takoda sees your ass later tonight," Rhys said, "but the crop isn't getting through to you. You'll just have to keep your pants on tonight."

Evan figured he could do that. He'd just open the zipper and have one of them suck him. The minute either of their mouths closed around him, he'd go off like a rocket. The bite of a cane across his ass brought him back to the here and now, his entire body stiffening as the heat burned through his muscles. Rhys waited patiently for him to relax again, his hand on Evan's back until he felt the tension leave his spine. When it did, he landed a second blow, parallel to the first.

Evan grunted harshly into the gag, absorbing the sudden pain. As he fought with it, fought to make his muscles relax again in preparation for the next blow, everything else faded away, until his body was the extent of his world and his desire to please Rhys the extent of his thoughts.

Suddenly, relaxing was easy. Rhys wanted him pliant for his caning, and so he was. A third blow fell, followed much more quickly by the fourth now that he wasn't fighting it anymore. His skin still twitched with each contact, soothed by Rhys's hand stroking up and down his spine, but his muscles stopped tensing, either in anticipation or reaction. Rhys struck him twice more before dropping the cane, the thin reed clattering on the floor.

Evan's body sagged when he heard the cane hit the floor. Rhys's hand continued its relaxing journey up and down Evan's spine, centering Evan and bringing him back to himself. When he lifted his head to seek Rhys's eyes, he was shocked at the lust blazing in the green depths. "I really, really want to fuck you right now," Rhys admitted hoarsely, nuzzling behind Evan's ear. "You're naked, bound and helpless, ass in the air, covered in marks I put there, and I don't know when I last saw something so desirable."

If he hadn't been so far under, Evan would have asked about Takoda, but then again, Rhys hadn't seen Takoda like this, so he couldn't really compare. If he hadn't been so far under, Evan might have questioned the wisdom of letting Rhys take him, but in his current state of mind, with the plug stimulating his prostate, his ass burning from the caning, and his mind wanting nothing but to please Rhys, he couldn't make himself say no.

Evan's ass clenched around the plug when Rhys started to remove it, like he didn't want to let it go, but Rhys leaned forward, crooning in his ear, telling him to relax, that it would feel so much better in a moment if only he'd relax and let Rhys get the plug out so he could put his cock in. The soft brush of Rhys's breath over his ear had the desired effect, and the plug popped loose, leaving Evan stretched and empty. Almost immediately, he felt Rhys move into place behind him, latex-covered cock sliding into his grasping hole, filling him far deeper than the plug had done.

Evan gasped against the gag, lifting his hips as much as he was able to participate in the enthusiastic reaming Rhys was giving him. He could feel his climax boiling in his balls already, the descent into sub space, the lingering tenderness from the crop and the cane, and Rhys's praise leaving him desperately aroused, but the cock ring held it back, leaving him thrashing beneath Rhys's pounding, unable to do anything but moan and shout and beg wordlessly for more.

To his surprise, Rhys reached beneath his hips suddenly and undid the clasp on the cock ring, letting it clatter to the floor. Immediately, Evan's

orgasm hit, every muscle in his body tight in a rictus of ecstasy, his semen joining his spit on the floor beneath the spanking bench. Seconds later, he felt Rhys's hips stutter through his climax, ramming fast and hard into Evan's bound body. He slumped forward across Evan's back, pressing hard against the striped flesh. It hurt, but Evan didn't care. He was too high from his release to really register the pain.

After a moment, Rhys stood up, pulling out carefully. When he came back to Evan's side, he draped a warm towel across Evan's ass and tenderly released the gag. He bent and kissed Evan swiftly before murmuring, "Session over."

Evan nodded his comprehension, still too wrung out from the mix of sensations to really process much more than how good it felt to let go for awhile. Rhys's hands stroked over his skin repeatedly as he unfastened the restraints. Evan didn't move right away, even once he was free, letting Rhys clean him up and rub arnica into the welts left by the cane.

"I could use some water," Evan said finally, his voice cracking slightly.

"Right here," Rhys said, lifting a glass of water to Evan's lips and helping him drink. "Relax. You can lie here as long as you need to. Even if Takoda wakes up, he won't come up here looking for us."

Takoda. Oh, shit.

"You have to tell him what we just did," Evan said urgently, pushing up on his elbows. "You can't keep this a secret from him."

"Relax," Rhys said again, urging Evan to lie back down on the bench. He offered the water again. "I'll talk to him when we go back downstairs. It was his idea to take care of you last night. I don't think he'll have a problem with me taking care of you now. And if he does, I'll deal with it. It was my choice to insist. You didn't do anything wrong."

Evan wasn't sure that was an accurate assessment of the situation, but he was too wrung out by the session to argue. He'd let Rhys take responsibility for it now, but he'd make sure Takoda was okay with his role in it before he started their next session together, before he asked Takoda to sub for him again.

If Takoda subbed for him again.

CHAPTER 13

“CAN you sit up?” Rhys asked Evan.

Evan took stock of how he was feeling. His ass burned, even with the arnica, but that was no real surprise with six welts across it. Otherwise, though, he felt pretty good. Actually, he felt pretty damn amazing. “Yes,” he said. “I think so.”

Rhys helped him roll to over onto one hip and then lean forward so his weight was mostly on the backs of his thighs rather than on the meat of his buttocks. “We have to tell Takoda what happened,” Evan repeated. “I don’t want to mess things up between you.”

“You haven’t messed anything up, Evan,” Rhys insisted. “We haven’t made any promises.”

“Maybe not yet,” Evan said, “but you want to.” And Takoda wanted to, Evan knew, although he managed not to tell Rhys that. As far as Evan was concerned, knowing those two facts was the same as them actually being together. “Just talk to him about what happened. Make it clear you were giving me what I needed so I could give him what he needed, and tell him what happened. All of it.”

“If you insist,” Rhys agreed.

“I’ll just go out by the pool until you’ve talked,” Evan volunteered. “When you’re done, I’d like to talk with him too. To try to explain that I’m really not any threat to him.”

“Of course you’re not a threat!” Rhys exclaimed. “I wouldn’t have brought you here if you were.”

That wasn’t what Evan meant, but maybe it was better to leave well enough alone for now. Takoda hadn’t told Rhys how he felt—or how long he’d felt that way—and it wasn’t Evan’s place to reveal that information. He’d talk to Takoda himself, though, and make sure the sub understood that Evan had no designs on Rhys except as his friend, but that sometimes Evan

needed to let go completely, and he could only do that with Rhys. He hoped Takoda would understand that, would see that it was only a temporary thing, that having had their session tonight, Evan wouldn't need one again for months, maybe even years.

He took his time standing up as Rhys put everything back in place in the playroom, even cleaning beneath the spanking bench so all would be in order when they started their next session, whenever that occurred. Evan hoped it would still be tonight, that Takoda would take the revelation well and be willing to go on with their plans, but whether it was tonight, tomorrow, or never, the playroom was ready.

When Evan was sure he could stand, he pulled his shorts back on, eschewing his T-shirt, and walked carefully downstairs and outside. He looked at the various chairs and decided his backside wasn't up for any of them, so he pulled one of the chaise lounges into the shade and laid the back flat so he could recline on his stomach. He couldn't have said how long he laid there, his mind drifting near sleep, in much the same place as it had been during the session with Rhys.

"I want to see the marks Rhys left on you."

Takoda's voice startled Evan out of the floating meditative nothingness his mind had retreated to. It took him a moment to process the request. Even after he understood it, he didn't quite believe Takoda had actually said it, but a glance up at the sub's bronzed features revealed his determination. Evan nodded once and reached for the waistband of his shorts, lowering them to reveal the marks on his ass.

"Do they hurt?" Takoda asked seriously, tracing the longest, reddest welt with the tip of one finger.

"Yeah," Evan admitted, "but not more than I can handle." He started to pull his shorts back up so he could roll over and talk to Takoda more easily, but Takoda's hand stopped him.

"Stay like you are. You owe me that much." His voice wasn't quite angry, but it was annoyed enough to startle Evan. He subsided onto the chaise, more than a little embarrassed to have his butt hanging out that way when he wasn't in the middle of a session, but he wasn't about to argue with Takoda over this. Not when his feelings of having violated the other man's trust were already so strong.

"Rhys said he insisted on doing it, that you needed him to do this to you. Was he telling the truth?" Takoda asked, his skepticism clear from his tone.

“Yes,” Evan replied, his voice slightly muffled by the cushion. “I had a rotten day at work. I was angry and frustrated by that and by feeling out of control of myself. If we hadn’t planned a session tonight, I probably would’ve gone for a run or a swim later to work out my aggression, but I couldn’t do it then and if I didn’t do something, I might have gotten out of control tonight.” He took a deep breath to stop the flow of words and try to organize his thoughts.

“Rhys and I have been friends since we were two,” he explained. “He probably told you that already, but we’ve reached the point that we’re far more than merely friends. We’re in each other’s heads. We can gauge each other’s moods and needs like nobody else. My mother can’t read me the way Rhys reads me. And we’ve always taken care of each other. I don’t think Rhys even thought twice about giving me what I needed tonight, not because he doesn’t care about you, but because it’s an ingrained habit between us. I’ve never subbed for anyone else. I’ve never let anyone but Rhys leave marks on me this way because nobody else has ever cared about me the way he does.”

“So where does that leave me?” Takoda asked.

“What’s between us doesn’t have any relevance to what Rhys feels for you,” Evan insisted. “He and I, we’re too much alike to be lovers. We’re both switches, but only with each other, and only rarely. With anyone else, we’re both Doms through and through. He loves me, but like he would a brother.”

“You don’t generally have sex with your brother,” Takoda retorted sharply.

“Rhys and I don’t generally have sex either,” Evan replied quietly. “This visit has been unusual in a lot of ways.”

“And when you need some sense beaten into you again six months or a year from now?” Takoda asked.

“That will depend entirely on you,” Evan answered honestly. “My inclination has always been to come to Rhys when that happens, but if you aren’t comfortable with that, I won’t come. The last thing I would ever do is something that would make Rhys unhappy. And I’ve already seen enough to know that what makes you unhappy will make him unhappy.”

Takoda sat in silence for what felt like an eternity to Evan, his fingers still on the welts on Evan’s bottom. “Don’t leave me out,” he said finally. “Even if all I do is sit in the corner and watch, I don’t want to wonder what you’re doing together every time I’m not in the room with you. What you’re saying to me, what Rhys said—it’s all so far outside my realm of experience. I want to trust you, to believe it’s what you say it is, what you need, but I look at those marks on you and think about how much it hurt when Kade left marks

on me. You say you needed it, but that's hard for me to believe. At least if I can see it, maybe I can understand."

"Rhys gave me what *I* needed today, but that doesn't mean it's like this every time between us or that every sub needs the same things," Evan reminded him. "That's why we talk about the sessions as much as we do. To make sure the sub, whoever the sub is, gets what he needs. If it had been too much, all I had to do was safeword out. Rhys would have stopped immediately."

"Another one of those things I still have trouble believing," Takoda said softly. "I need to be there. I need to see that it's consensual and what you need and what you say it is. You owe me that much."

Evan swallowed hard before turning his head and making an offer he didn't think he'd ever make to anyone but Rhys. "If it would make you feel better, we can go back upstairs and you can take a few swings at me."

Takoda seemed to consider the offer for a moment, but eventually he shook his head, fingers trailing again over the marks on Evan's ass. "No, I'm not a Dom and I don't have any desire to be one. I do, however, want you to have enough respect for me not to exclude me again."

Evan gasped at the provocative contact. He was sure Takoda didn't intend the touches to be caresses, but they felt that way to Evan, the tender attentions of a Dom after a session was over, and he had to remind himself once again that he was not really attracted to Takoda, but to the situation. He seriously needed to go home so he could find someone to prove his assertion. "I do. I will," he promised, relieved when Takoda's hand drew back.

"Good. Dinner will be ready in fifteen minutes and then I think you promised me a session," Takoda reminded him, rising and returning into the house.

Evan had no idea where the sudden gumption had come from, but he envied Rhys his handful of a sub.

When he walked back inside, he found Rhys and Takoda standing together, Rhys's arm around Takoda's waist, everything in their posture suggesting a far greater degree of comfort and intimacy than he'd seen between them up until now. Takoda leaned into Rhys's side, their bodies brushing from shoulder to hip, their heads tilting together as they talked in tones Evan couldn't hear. They stood like lovers, he realized, making him hope they'd talked about their feelings as well as about the session Evan and Rhys had shared. He wanted to ask Rhys about it, but he still felt like he was skating on thin ice, and he didn't want to make things worse by intruding

where he didn't belong. He'd already intruded enough as it was, letting Rhys fuck him.

When Takoda leaned up and kissed Rhys lightly, their lips brushing, clinging, not in any huge passionate explosion, but with a kind of quiet devotion that said far more about the state of their hearts than the state of their bodies, Evan had most of the answer to his question. A week ago, even a day ago, Takoda wouldn't have gotten that close or taken that kind of initiative. The more glimpses he got of the man Takoda had been before Kade's abuse, the more Evan understood Rhys's attraction to him. And the more Evan wanted to give the relationship he could see developing in front of him a chance to truly flourish.

He almost backed out of the room and left them alone. They couldn't possibly need him now, but then Rhys looked up and saw him, a welcoming smile crossing his face. "I'd say come sit down, but I don't imagine you feel much like sitting at the moment."

"No, not really," Evan admitted.

"Well, come lean on the counter at least. We can stand around the island and eat tonight. How's your head? Got all the shit cleared out?"

"Yeah," Evan said with a smile. "Thanks."

Rhys shrugged. "That's what friends are for."

Evan laughed, thinking he knew an awful lot of friends who would disagree. Then again, they'd probably help in whatever ways they could. Rhys was just the only one who'd ever been able to help Evan this way.

"Can you switch gears enough to still do the session after dinner?" Rhys asked him. "You were under pretty hard."

"How could you tell?" Takoda interrupted softly. "I mean, you can't read his mind."

"No," Rhys agreed, hand brushing across Takoda's as he replied, "but I can read his body. I could feel his mind fighting the experience and I could feel when he gave in. An experienced sub will go into that mindset pretty quickly with a trusted Dom, but for Evan, or for me when I sub for him, it's a lot harder. We're used to being in charge and to give that up takes time and effort. But when he finally gets there, every muscle in his body reacts. He stops moving against what I'm doing and starts moving with it. I don't know what Evan has planned for tonight, but I'll try to talk you through the stages if he'll let me."

"I think that's actually a good idea when we do our next session," Evan allowed. "Takoda's taking us at our word about the way everything should go,

but I'm sure there's a part of him that's still skeptical. In my experience, subs have three reasons for participating in a session. Some of them like pain. Some of them like humiliation. And some get off on the desire to please. Obviously there can be combinations of those three things, but those are the basic feelings. For Doms, it's a little different. It's the excitement that comes from giving the sub what he needs. For me as a Dom, it's the control, about being the one to make sure I've provided such a wealth of sensation that my sub can't do anything but come. And for me, when I sub, it's the desire to please. The pain is secondary. It forces me to accept Rhys's control, to take what he's doing to me because he wants to me to." He sighed and ran a hand through his short hair. "I'm not explaining this very well."

"No, I think I get it," Takoda said softly, hand turning so his palm met Rhys's, grip tightening visibly as he struggled with this new concept. "And Rhys knew what you needed was to go under, as he put it, so he pushed you to the point of accepting something you didn't necessarily enjoy so you'd give up control and do what he wanted in order to please him."

"Yes, exactly," Evan said excitedly. "That's what I felt. I let everything else go and focused solely on pleasing him."

"And once he reached that point," Rhys interrupted, "it was just a matter of keeping him there for awhile until the experience pushed out all the crap that had built up in his head since the last time we did this."

"Which was when?"

Rhys and Evan looked at each other, clearly trying to remember exactly. "A year ago? A year and a half?"

"It was around Christmas," Rhys remembered, releasing Takoda's hand to start serving dinner. "So it must have been about a year and a half ago. I'd wanted to be there for Christmas Day, but I couldn't get away until a little after. Last Christmas I didn't get there at all."

"This really isn't a frequent occurrence between us," Evan assured Takoda. "I'm not going to show up every other week expecting you to make room for me."

Rhys interrupted the conversation by placing dinner on the island, and Evan let it go, preferring to concentrate on his plans for after dinner. He'd been intending to focus on controlling Takoda's body pleurably rather than painfully, but after his session with Rhys and the questions it had raised in Takoda's mind, he had a rather different idea for what the session should entail.

They'd talked to Takoda about the three different kinds of subs. It was time they found out which one he was.

CHAPTER 14

THEY ate quickly, cleaning up in comfortable silence, Rhys and Takoda sneaking in quiet touches at every turn. When everything was put away, Evan took a deep breath, trying to center himself to order Rhys and Takoda upstairs to start their session. Before the words could leave his mouth, though, Rhys had grabbed him from behind, pinning his arms to his sides.

“Grab his feet, Takoda.”

Evan fought a little, more for form than from any real desire to get away as Takoda grabbed his ankles, lifting him completely off the ground. They elbowed their way out the door, taking a running leap and plunging into the pool, Evan still caught between them.

Evan came up spluttering. “Is that any way to treat your Dom?” he roared with mock outrage.

“What Dom?” Rhys teased. “All I see is a sub with stripes on his ass.”

“You should talk,” Evan retorted, grabbing Rhys’s backside and squeezing until Rhys let out a hiss. “Your backside’s just as bruised as mine.”

“Maybe that makes me the Dom,” Takoda mused softly, to the surprise and then amusement of the other two men.

“He has a point,” Rhys replied. “Of the three of us, he’s the only one not walking around with marks on his body.”

“Yet,” Evan promised direly. “And the next time we have a session, I’ll be sure to have you remedy that.”

“The next time?” Takoda asked. “I thought we were having one tonight.”

“We were,” Evan replied, “but with everything that’s happened today, I’m not sure it’s a good idea. I’m wrung out from the session earlier with Rhys and while I have no idea what happened between you two, something obviously did for you to have acted like you did out here earlier. You need some time for all of that to settle before we dive back into a session.”

“Act like what?” Rhys inquired.

“Like a jealous lover,” Evan replied honestly.

“You said you were fine,” Rhys said, turning to Takoda with surprise on his face. “You said you understood.”

“What else was I supposed to say?” Takoda demanded. “You weren’t asking permission, so I couldn’t tell you not to do it, and I’m not stupid enough to tell you to choose between your best friend, who you’ve known since you were two, and me, when we’d only kissed once, and that was at Evan’s direction. And then you come and tell me you did to him everything I’ve ever wanted you to do to me. Of course I was jealous!”

Evan wished he was just about anywhere else, but he didn’t know how to get there without drawing attention to himself again, and he definitely didn’t want to do that.

“Everything you’ve ever wanted?” Rhys parroted. “Since when have you wanted anything but a job from me? Before Kade kidnapped you, I mean.”

Evan held his breath, hoping Takoda would answer truthfully. The resulting explosion wouldn’t be pretty, but maybe with everything out in the open, they could finally begin to move forward.

“Since I watched you at the club’s anniversary party last year,” Takoda admitted softly.

Rhys stared at Takoda, stunned. “Why didn’t you say something?” he asked, stroking Takoda’s cheek gently. “It might not have kept Kade from taking you, but at least you’d have had some positive experiences to fall back on.”

“I worked for you,” Takoda reminded him, moving into Rhys’s arms nonetheless. “You’d always been so adamant about not mixing business and the scene. I was afraid to bring it up, especially when I wasn’t really a sub. I didn’t even know if I could give you what you needed.”

“That didn’t stop me from falling in love with you,” Rhys pointed out. “I have yet to be your Dom. You have yet to try a session that isn’t forced. But neither of those things changes the way I feel about you.”

“Once...” Takoda murmured, though the memory was clearly not a pleasant one. Takoda pulled out of Rhys’s embrace, backing away, his face contorting in pain. “The... the first time, I went with Kade willingly,” he whispered.

“You did what?” Rhys shouted, aghast. “You knew what everyone at the club thought of him—what *I* thought of him!”

Takoda stiffened but stood his ground. “I didn’t want to go with *him*,” he explained softly, “but I didn’t think there was any way I could have you, and none of the other Doms at the club would touch me because they knew your policy about employees at the club and didn’t want to risk being banned. Kade was the only one who would come near me.”

“You still knew what he was like and you went with him anyway.” Rhys shook his head, his hands clenched into fists at his side. “Is that what you want? Some bastard who beats you bloody? Because I’m pretty sure I can oblige at the moment.”

Evan almost intervened, if only to stop Rhys from doing physical harm, but Takoda didn’t back down. “You’ve already proven you can do that,” he spat. “I saw the marks on Evan’s butt.”

“We told you—”

“You told me,” Takoda mocked. “So did Kade. He said he was teaching me to be a good little sub, obedient to whatever my Dom ordered. He was at least honest in what he wanted. He never pretended to care about what I wanted under the pretext of getting me to agree to something.”

“And that’s where he and Rhys are different,” Evan insisted, earning glares from both of the other men. “I might have the same marks on my ass as Kade left on you, but Rhys didn’t put them there maliciously or cruelly. He put them there as part of a carefully designed session intended to help me clear my head. And when it worked, he ended the session and let me go.”

“No,” Takoda said. “He fucked you; then he let you go.”

“It’s not like he was some random guy I picked up in the bar,” Rhys protested. “It’s just Evan.”

“Just Evan,” Takoda repeated in shocked disbelief. “*Just* Evan. You don’t get it, do you? Of anyone you could possibly fuck, he’s the one who’s the most threat to me. He’s the one I’ll always be measured against because he’s the one who will always be there, will always be a part of your life.”

Evan doubted Rhys saw the “I told you so” look he aimed in his friend’s direction, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to add that to the mix, although Rhys couldn’t have made his opinion on the situation any clearer if he’d tried.

“I already told you how it happened,” Evan reminded Takoda softly. “But if it makes you feel any better, the first thought I had when I came out of the session was of you, and that we shouldn’t have done what we did without talking to you first. I also told you that I’d walk away from that side of our relationship if it in any way threatened Rhys’s happiness.”

“You’ve seen enough sessions at the club to know how aroused the Dom can get,” Rhys reminded Takoda bluntly. “And Evan is such a responsive sub when he finally lets go. That tension had to go somewhere. What would you have done if I’d come to you that way? Would you have had the slightest idea how to handle it?”

“I don’t know,” Takoda replied honestly, “but I would’ve appreciated being given the choice.”

“You want me to give you the choice now, but you didn’t give me one when your only other choice was to go with Kade,” Rhys argued. “Not exactly respectful of me on your part.”

Takoda flinched as if slapped, but Evan grabbed Rhys’s arm. “Stop being an asshole. You hadn’t shown any interest in him. Why shouldn’t he have explored his newfound interest in the scene?”

“Because he *knew* what kind of a bastard Kade was,” Rhys repeated hotly, pulling away from Evan. “That same night he says he fell in love with me, I put my fist in Kade’s face and had him tossed out of the club for accosting the sub I dominated that night. Matt was a friend who agreed to do the show with me, but that didn’t give Kade the right to take liberties.”

“No,” Evan agreed, “but did you toss Kade out or did you ban him?”

“I tossed him out.”

“Then you made your displeasure with his actions that night clear, without making it clear to him or to Takoda that you didn’t approve of him at all,” Evan reminded him. “Don’t blame Takoda for your choice.”

“I think I’m entitled to a little anger when I’ve been blaming myself for what happened to him ever since, for not banning Kade when I had the chance and so giving him access to Takoda later,” Rhys said angrily, though Evan knew it was as much self-directed now as it was anger at Takoda. “And now I find out he went with Kade willingly. Did you only go with him once?” He turned anguished eyes on the other man.

Takoda nodded. “I told him ‘no’ the second time he came to find me, and repeatedly after he kidnapped me—every time he left my mouth free to talk, I told him I didn’t want this, begged him to let me go.” He closed his eyes, every line in his body proclaiming his pain. “Hate me for going with him the first time if you must, but please don’t ever think I wanted the rest of what he did to me. The only thing that kept me sane was hoping someday I’d get a chance to find out what it was supposed to be like. What it had been like for Matt. With you.”

With a feral shout that could have been interpreted many different ways, Rhys dove for the edge of the pool, pulling himself over the concrete

lip and running for the house, not even bothering to pick up a towel to stop the water streaming down his legs.

“No!” Takoda cried, starting after him, but Evan caught his arm.

“Let him go,” Evan counseled. “He needs time to calm down, to deal with his anger, his frustration, this new layer of guilt he’s going to feel.”

“He didn’t do anything wrong,” Takoda insisted.

“He doesn’t see it that way,” Evan said simply. “And he’s always had a temper. Better to let him work this out on his own and come back when he’s calmed down. If you try to force the issue now, he’ll get angrier until he forces you away as a means of self-protection. If you’re going to be his lover, his partner, you’ll need to learn when to leave him alone.”

“I don’t know why you aren’t his partner. No one will ever know him the way you do,” Takoda said sadly.

“Because I can tell you not to provoke his temper when it’s directed at you, but when it’s directed at me, I pick and push and demand until he snaps,” Evan replied honestly. “I don’t have the patience to let him resolve things on his own when his anger is at me. And if we were lovers, real lovers, I’d be the one rubbing him the wrong way occasionally. Those little stupid things would build up until we ended up hating each other. You haven’t seen it because we’ve both been too focused on you to pay enough attention to each other for it to start, but it happened off and on all through college and when we were sharing an apartment afterward too. The last time we had a big blow-up, Rhys moved to Vegas to get away from me. We haven’t had once since then because we aren’t together enough for it to accelerate to that point.”

“That’s a pretty drastic separation,” Takoda said with a small laugh.

“It was a pretty drastic fight,” Evan replied, remembering all too vividly the shouting matches over little things—dirty dishes not in the sink, mail not sorted, laundry not folded or put away—that had gone on and on until they were both dragging up incidents from first grade to justify the trends they claimed to see in each other’s behavior. “It took us a good six months after he left before we talked again and cleared the air. We’re too alike to live together as friends, let alone as lovers.”

“So what do I do now?” Takoda asked seriously.

“That depends on how you’re feeling,” Evan answered in the same vein, pulling himself out of the water and starting to dry off. “Are you still angry at him? Or at me?”

“I’m still jealous as hell,” Takoda admitted, following Evan out of the pool. “All I’ve gotten from him are a few kisses and the hand job he gave me

at your direction, and you've gotten a full-fledged session and a round of sex. But I'm not angry really. I can understand how it happened, and I can even understand, to some extent, why Rhys doesn't see why it bothers me. That has to change, though. I can try to learn to tolerate the sessions you occasionally need, but I don't know that I'll ever get to the point of being comfortable with Rhys fucking you, even during a session."

"It isn't about the sex," Evan said softly. "Sure, I get aroused by what Rhys does to me, but the arousal isn't the point for me. I need to let go. If I can get that, I'm perfectly happy to go back to my room and jerk off while Rhys takes his lust out on you. And I think he'll agree to that too, once he's not dealing with all the revelations you threw at him today. I'm glad you told him, but it's going to take him time to accept it all."

"I just feel so...."

"Helpless?" Evan suggested. Takoda nodded. "All relationships are about negotiation, Takoda. A D/s relationship simply has a few extra layers added in. And nothing is ever set in stone. You may think it is, and six months or six years from now, you may find you're willing to be flexible on something after all. You have to roll with the punches. That's just part of life."

Takoda nodded again, his expression thoughtful. "I think maybe I'll go play my guitar for awhile."

"Good idea," Evan agreed. "Maybe Rhys will see it as a peace offering since he gave it to you. And even if he doesn't, hopefully it'll help you relax a little."

"See you in the morning then," Takoda said, wrapping the towel around his waist and heading up the stairs. A few moments later, Evan heard the distinctive sound of a guitar being tuned, followed by a song Evan didn't recognize.

Evan checked the entire house, but Rhys was nowhere to be found. Evan figured he'd gone for a run—Rhys's usual reaction to stress—and set his watch to beep in half an hour. If Rhys wasn't back by then, Evan would take the car and go looking for him. In the meantime, he'd see about getting a little better acquainted with his best friend's soon-to-be lover. He hoped.

Takoda's door was ajar, so Evan tapped lightly on the jamb, careful to keep his promise of not entering without Takoda's express invitation.

The smile Takoda sent him was both welcoming and sad at the same time. "He's gone, isn't he?"

"Just for a run, I'm sure," Evan replied, not entering the room. "He does that when he needs to let off steam. We'd have seen him take his car. I'll give

him half an hour and if he isn't back, we can go looking for him. Assuming you want to find him, that is." He'd intended it as a joke, but Takoda's face took on a pained look.

"Of course I want to find him. I love him."

To hell with Rhys's secrets. "He loves you too, in case he's been too pig-headed to tell you that."

Takoda shook his head. "He told me. This afternoon when we talked, before I came out to talk to you by the pool. Although he's got kind of an odd way of showing it."

"Has Rhys ever talked about his family?" Evan asked. In for a penny, in for a pound.

"A little," Takoda answered. "Why?"

"Can I come in?" Evan asked. "This isn't going to be a short conversation."

"What? Oh, of course," Takoda said. "Sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"Don't worry about it," Evan said, coming into the room and taking a seat on the chair in one corner. "So what has he told you?"

"Not much," Takoda replied. "Just little comments about going home to visit. That sort of thing."

Evan nodded. "If you ever meet his family, he'll introduce you to his parents, but what he won't tell you is that his father isn't his biological father. His stepfather adopted him when he was eleven, so they're legally a family, but Rhys's mother divorced his birth father because he was abusive. I swear, Rhys spent more time at my house than at home until his mother finally kicked the old man out. And when she brought Rhys's dad—because I think of him that way too—around, Rhys lost it. I've never seen him so out of control. The only adults he would listen to for quite awhile were my parents. Eventually, he figured out that his new dad wasn't like his old one and he settled a little, but by then his issues with his temper were well ingrained. Even now, if there's anything guaranteed to push Rhys's buttons, to make him lose control of his temper, it's knowing someone else was abused."

"And yet he's a Dom," Takoda observed.

"Being a Dom doesn't make him an abuser," Evan insisted, knowing Takoda was still too new to the scene to understand the control Rhys's role as a Dom had helped him develop. "You said you watched him at the club. What did he do to his sub?"

"Tied him up and flogged him," Takoda said, clearly lost in those memories.

“And yet that attracted you to him,” Evan reminded him. “So you obviously didn’t see it as abuse. Do you really think he did?”

Takoda shook his head. “I know he didn’t. Every few strokes, he’d stop and run his hand down the sub’s back or legs or ass to make sure he was all right. And after the show was over, the sub was all over Rhys, hugging, cuddling. He wanted to be with Rhys.”

“What are you really more jealous of, Takoda? The fact that Rhys fucked me? Or the fact that he left stripes on my ass?”

“Both,” Takoda replied, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Tomorrow,” Evan promised. “When Rhys gets back, we’ll see if we can’t get his head out of his ass. And tomorrow, I’ll make sure he gives you the marks you want.”

“And the rest?”

Evan threw his head back and laughed. “If you need my help with that, you’re even worse off than I thought. His room’s right down the hall, Takoda. There’s nothing to stop you from simply climbing into his bed. He won’t turn you away.”

CHAPTER 15

THEY heard the sound of the door opening and slamming downstairs. Takoda started to his feet, but Evan got up first. “Let me go talk to him first, if you don’t mind,” he requested. “If he hasn’t calmed down yet, there’s no reason for you to deal with his anger. And it might make him angrier still.”

“If we’re going to make a go of a relationship like he said he wanted to, he’ll have to learn to deal with me even when he’s angry,” Takoda pointed out.

Evan had to agree with that. “But not today. Not when so much of his anger is self-directed and you’re the cause, in his head. That doesn’t mean you did anything wrong,” he hastened to add when he saw the hurt look on Takoda’s face. “It’s his screwed up perception of events because he takes things very deeply to heart. He’ll need to hear again that you don’t blame him, even with everything he learned today. I know you told him yesterday, but he’ll need that reassurance probably for a long time. You went to hell and he thinks he should have prevented it.”

“I really don’t see how,” Takoda said. “However stupid it was to go with Kade, I wanted that first session, even if I’d have preferred having Rhys as my Dom. And once I took that first step, Kade’s cruelty did the rest without any prompting from the outside.”

“Rhys’s reactions aren’t logical,” Evan reminded Takoda. “In his head, he should have realized you’d gotten interested in the lifestyle, in him, and he should’ve offered despite his policy to the contrary, because if he’d been Superman, you wouldn’t have gone with Kade the first time, and the rest might not have happened. Let me talk to him, make sure he’s calmed down a little, and then you can talk to him too, and try to get him to see you don’t blame him.”

“Okay,” Takoda agreed.

Evan headed downstairs, saddened to hear the water running in the hall bathroom. Rhys hadn’t even gone upstairs. Not bothering to knock, he opened

the door and went inside, hopping up on the counter by the sink. “Got your head out of your ass yet?”

“Fuck you.”

“You already did,” Evan retorted without heat. “That’s part of the problem.”

“That isn’t what you were saying earlier when I was pounding your ass.”

Evan sighed. Rhys was clearly still itching for a fight. “No, it wasn’t, but it’s what I should’ve been saying. I knew you’re in love with Takoda. I shouldn’t have agreed when you asked me if you could fuck me. Fortunately, Takoda’s willing to forgive both of us for being thoughtless bastards.”

“I can’t believe he went with Kade rather than coming to me,” Rhys muttered from behind the shower curtain. “Why would he do such a stupid thing?”

“Because you’re his employer and you have a strict policy against blurring the lines?” Evan reminded him. “Because when you’re in Dom mode, you’re damn near unapproachable to anyone but your sub of the moment? Because you were everything he wanted and it was easier to dream and never have than to risk being turned down? Some other reason I haven’t figured out yet? It doesn’t matter why he did it, Rhys. He did. It was a mistake. He knows it. You know it. At this point, I even know it. Are you going to keep making him pay for a mistake that’s already cost him dearly?”

Evan heard the sound of a choked sob from inside the tub. “There’s a wonderful, sweet, gorgeous man sitting upstairs right now, biting his nails in the hopes that you can forgive him for a moment of stupidity. A sub who’s as jealous of the marks you left on me as he is of the fact that you fucked me earlier today. You’ve got a chance at happiness here, Rhys. I’ll admit I was skeptical when I first got here, but Takoda’s convinced me he’s the right one for you. Are you going to let your guilt keep you from taking that chance? Or are you going to march upstairs, apologize for being an asshole, and make love to him until he can’t see straight?”

Rhys’s head popped out from behind the curtain. “He’s jealous of the session?”

Evan rolled his eyes. “Yes, Rhys. He wants your full attention for himself. The Dom and the lover. Preferably rolled into one, although I’m pretty sure he’d settle for one or the other. But he shouldn’t have to settle and neither should you. Not when you can both have what you want if you’ll stop blaming yourself and move forward.”

“But he said he wasn’t sure about pain,” Rhys marveled.

Evan knocked his head against the wall. “You’re as bad as he is. It’s not about the pain, Rhys. It’s about belonging to you, about being the one—the only one—you leave marks on. Give him a month and he’ll be parading around your club in nothing but a jock so everyone can see his stripes and know he’s yours and you’re his. He probably isn’t and won’t ever be a pain slut, but he will be *your* slut if you’ll let him.”

Rhys reached for a towel, eyes wide as he considered what Evan was saying. “You really think so?”

“Get dressed,” Evan ordered. “We’ll go back upstairs right now and you can ask him. We aren’t doing a session tonight. Everyone’s emotions are too crazy, but we can talk and figure things out for tomorrow. And maybe rearrange your sleeping arrangements for tonight too.”

Rhys got out of the shower and started unselfconsciously toweling himself off. Evan felt his cock start to stir despite his best intentions. “Rhys,” he said seriously.

Rhys looked up, mid-swipe. “Yeah?”

“We aren’t fucking each other again. You know that, right?”

Rhys nodded. “Yeah.”

Evan jumped down from the counter, swatting Rhys’s backside playfully. “Just making sure.”

Rhys glared at him and returned the swat, aiming for the welts he’d left, but Evan angled his hips at the last moment, so it landed harmlessly on his side instead. “You better work on your aim if you want to leave pretty patterns on your new sub.”

“My new sub won’t be dancing around unrestrained,” Rhys promised, his voice deepening in anticipation. “You’ll just have to console yourself this weekend when you go home.”

“I think I can withstand temptation,” Evan mocked. “You’re cute and all, but a little on the meaty side.” An image of Patrick, easily Rhys’s equal in terms of muscle mass, popped into Evan’s head, but he pushed it aside. He had enough to worry about now without adding the question of his possible interest in one of his occasional hook-ups to the mess.

“That’s the way you like ’em,” Rhys countered, flexing his chest. “Strong enough to give you a run for your money if they choose to. You know exactly how much control you have when you dominate a man like that.”

That was certainly true, and one of the reasons Evan had so enjoyed his sessions with Patrick, but he didn’t really want to talk about that right now.

“Let’s go,” he insisted. “Takoda’s probably paced a hole in the rug worrying about what’s taking us so long.”

There wasn’t a hole in the rug when they reached Takoda’s door, but there was one of the most arresting sights any Dom could ever desire to see. Takoda knelt on the floor, still fully dressed, but with his head bowed and his wrists clasped behind his back in a posture of perfect submission. Evan waited on the sill as he’d promised, but Rhys felt no such constraints, crossing to Takoda’s side and sinking to his knees next to his sub. “Did you tell him to do this?” he accused Evan as he pulled Takoda into his arms.

“No,” Takoda said before Evan could reply. “I did it myself. I wanted you to see that I’m choosing this for myself, not only for you. I’m on my knees because I want to be here, not because you or Evan or Kade or some other Dom told me to be. Maybe if you understand that, you’ll stop blaming yourself for choices that weren’t yours to make.”

“Except that I didn’t give you a choice,” Rhys said, voice breaking.

“So give me one now,” Takoda suggested softly.

“Will you stay?” Rhys asked hesitantly. “Will you let me be your Dom? Will you be my sub?”

“Is that all you want?” Takoda asked.

Rhys shook his head. “I want you in every way.”

Takoda’s smile was radiant. “Then I’ll stay.”

“Promise me one thing,” Rhys asked.

“Anything,” Takoda replied, adding to Evan’s conviction that Takoda would allow Rhys pretty much any liberty in a session as long as it pleased his Dom.

“Promise me you won’t wait for me like this except when I tell you to,” Rhys requested. “We talked about this before, but I don’t want a slave. When we aren’t in a session, I don’t want you to be subservient. I don’t want a lover who will agree with my every whim or let me roll over him when I get going. I don’t want someone who will let me get away with stupid shit or lose my temper or make unilateral decisions. I want someone who will be my partner, not just my submissive.”

“Of course,” Takoda promised.

Evan didn’t think it would be quite that easy. As eager to please as Takoda was, Evan wasn’t sure how well he’d be able to stand up to Rhys when he got a full head of steam going, but maybe he was wrong. Maybe the fact that Rhys loved him would give Takoda a power none of Rhys’s other subs had ever had.

There was still the matter of Rhys's fears of not being able to dominate Takoda, the reason he'd called Evan in the first place, but perhaps today's revelations would ease those fears, and Evan would be able to stay home when he went back for work on Sunday. They'd have to see how the session went tomorrow and maybe even try to get one more in on Saturday, so he could decide.

His presence obviously superfluous, Evan slipped away quietly, leaving the two lovers to their kisses and cuddling and, he hoped, lovemaking. He'd have serious words with Rhys tomorrow if he botched this up now.

Going back into his room, Evan flopped down on the bed, staring blindly at the ceiling. God, what a day! His ass ached, and it would hurt even worse tomorrow if past experience was any guide, but he could live with that. He'd needed it, and the pain would remind him of the lessons he'd learned.

His phone beeped, interrupting his thoughts. Surprised, Evan flipped open the phone and glanced at the number on the missed call log, but it wasn't one he recognized.

Well, at least it wasn't his boss calling to add another meeting to the one he already had to attend on Monday. Accessing his voice mail, he waited to see who'd called.

"Hi, Evan, it's Patrick," the message said. "I hadn't seen you at any of the clubs in a couple of weeks and I wanted to make sure everything was all right with you. I... I miss you. Call me if you... if you want to get together some time."

The message ended abruptly. Evan hit save automatically, ending the call as he stared at the far wall, his mind reeling. He hadn't even known Patrick had his number. Not that it was some huge secret or anything, but Evan couldn't remember ever having given it to the other man. Which meant he'd asked around until he could find it. And that meant.... He had no fucking clue what that meant.

But it had to mean something, didn't it? A guy didn't go around asking for someone's number just because he was bored. Or horny. A guy like Patrick, he could have a different Dom every night of the week if all he wanted was a hot session or some wild sex. He didn't need to look Evan up for that. But he'd been—what? Concerned enough? Caring enough? Desperate enough?—to do just that after not seeing Evan for only two weekends.

He closed the phone automatically, staring at it in disbelief as he tried to figure out what to do now. He was going home on Sunday. He'd promised Rhys he'd go out that night, and maybe Monday night as well, to help release

some of the tension that was building up from being with Rhys and Takoda. He could call Patrick, set something up at one of the clubs.

“Hey, you all right?” Rhys asked, sticking his head in Evan’s door. “You disappeared.”

“I didn’t figure you wanted a witness the first time you made love to Takoda,” Evan replied archly.

“Well, no, but you could’ve at least said good night. We were still talking when you left,” Rhys pointed out.

Evan summoned a smile. “I didn’t want to interrupt. I was pretty obviously superfluous.”

Rhys shook his head. “You won’t ever be superfluous. If you hadn’t come and helped talk some sense into us, we’d still be dancing around each other instead of trying to really deal with our issues.”

“I’m glad I could help,” Evan replied sincerely.

“Are you all right otherwise?” Rhys pressed. “You’ve got a strange look on your face.”

Evan started to shrug. He wanted to say he was just tired from all the ups and downs of the day.

“I got a message from Patrick.”

Damn his big mouth.

“Oh, really?” Rhys drawled. “Now isn’t that interesting? And what did he have to say?”

“Just that he noticed I hadn’t been around and he wanted to make sure everything was okay,” Evan stalled.

“Uh huh,” Rhys teased. “And he’s just another sub who you dominate when you’re bored and horny. Tell me another.”

“There’s nothing to tell,” Evan insisted, though images of Patrick bound and begging assailed him.

Rhys rolled his eyes. “You’ll get home early enough to meet up with him Sunday night,” he proposed. “Or else meet up with him on Monday and work off whatever aggression builds up at your meeting. Maybe something will click.”

“I’m not going to use him to get my head on straight!” Evan protested. “That isn’t fair to him or to me. And it’s not exactly conducive to starting a relationship either.”

Rhys shrugged. “If you’re only home for two days, you can’t start a relationship anyway. Think of it as a chance to see if you can still be satisfied

with what you had before. If the answer is no, then ask yourself if you think you could have something more with him.”

“I barely know him!” Evan protested, not mentioning yet the possibility of staying in Boston beyond the two days he needed to go home for work. “Outside our sessions.”

Rhys grabbed one of Evan’s flip-flops and bopped him on the head with it. “Are you being deliberately obtuse? Or have you forgotten how to have a lover? The sex is obviously good enough that he’d look you up. You’ve kissed him so it’s obviously good for you. That isn’t enough, but it’s a place to start. If you don’t want to do a session with him, take him out to dinner. Or take him out to dinner and then do a session. Take him to your place, do the session and then take him to bed and see if he’s as responsive a lover as he is a sub. My point is that you can’t figure out if you might want something more with him if you don’t take the chance. And we’ve already determined you need to be with someone else to help you get things back in perspective where Takoda and I are concerned. Just call him. See what happens.”

Evan almost refused on the principle that Rhys was meddling, but what could it hurt? Worst case, he’d get shot down and be able to tell Rhys to drop it once and for all. And if he got lucky, maybe Patrick would be free and they could grab a bite to eat and go a round or two in his playroom. There were worse ways to spend a Sunday evening.

“Fine, I’ll call him,” he said, gesturing for Rhys to leave the room.

“Oh, no,” Rhys refused. “If I leave you on your own, you’ll end up screwing up the invitation somehow and then you’ll come back from Boston even more messed up than you are right now. I’ll just sit here while you call to make sure you do it right.”

“Fucker,” Evan muttered, but he picked up his cell and scrolled through the call list until he found Patrick’s number. He saved it so he’d have it for future reference and then hit dial. Patrick answered after only two rings.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Patrick, it’s Evan,” he began, not entirely comfortable with having this conversation while Rhys was present. “I got your message. I’m out of town helping out a friend, but I have to come home for business on Sunday. Any chance you’d be free that evening?”

He felt like an absolute idiot for the rush of words that didn’t even let Patrick acknowledge him, but at least the invitation was out.

“I don’t have anything planned at all this weekend,” Patrick replied easily. “Any chance I could tempt you to come home a little early? We’d have time for two sessions instead of one.”

Evan felt like someone had kicked him in the stomach. Could Patrick actually want to him—not just a Dom, but him specifically? “I can’t get away any sooner, but I probably won’t be able to finish up at work early enough to come back to Vegas until Tuesday morning. If things go well on Sunday, we could maybe meet back up Monday evening. Even if it’s just for drinks or something.” He hadn’t talked to Rhys and Takoda about the possibility of him not coming back, and he didn’t want to promise Patrick more than he knew he’d be able to deliver.

“Things always go well when you’re the Dom,” Patrick purred, the sound of his voice sending a hot jolt of lust through Evan’s body. Damn, if this kept up, he’d be taking Rhys and Takoda back upstairs now instead of waiting until tomorrow or Saturday like he’d planned. Or getting reacquainted with his fist. “Where and when shall I meet you on Sunday? Janus? Or would you rather go to the Fire Side Club?”

“Actually, I was thinking about dinner first,” Evan said with a gulp, not quite sure what to make of this eager, somewhat forceful side of a man he’d only ever dealt with as a sexual submissive. “And then we could decide what we wanted to do next. There’s a Mexican place, Casa Romero, off Newbury Street. It’s got a wonderful outdoor courtyard and the food is first-rate.”

“It sounds wonderful,” Patrick replied. “What time do you want to meet?”

“Let’s say six,” Evan suggested. “That’ll give me time to get a shower after the flight comes in.”

“Perfect,” Patrick said. “I’ll see you on Sunday.”

The phone clicked off before Evan had a chance to say anything else. He looked up at Rhys, who was grinning from ear to ear. “Sounds like somebody’s got a date for Sunday night,” he chortled.

Evan gulped. “I think you might be right.”

Fortunately, that was admission enough to get Rhys to leave him alone. Evan’s mind raced as he pondered possibilities for the weekend. The fact that he and Patrick were having dinner first rather than meeting at a club made it easier to suggest doing their session at Evan’s place if they chose, adding a layer of intimacy if it felt right. And if it didn’t, they could just as easily go to one of the clubs.

They’d had enough outstanding sessions there in the past.

Eyes closing, he conjured up an image of Patrick the last time they’d been together. He wasn’t quite as tall as Evan’s own five-eleven, but he wasn’t short by any stretch of the imagination, and while Evan hadn’t ever checked to be sure, he was pretty sure Patrick’s shoulders were broader than

his own. That had been what initially caught Evan's eye: the fact that he wasn't a skinny little twink. Not that Evan had anything against twinks. He was just always afraid he'd break them. He never worried about that with Patrick. The big sub was a total pain slut, but even more than that, he went under completely, in a way Evan had rarely seen outside long-term committed couples. Hell, half of those subs didn't even go under the way Patrick did. He lost himself totally when he was in a session, taking whatever Evan gave him and begging for more.

Evan blinked a couple of times, the conversations of the last few days—and especially the conversation he'd just had with Patrick—making him reexamine his assumptions where Patrick was concerned. Had he been blind? He'd known Patrick was a real treasure of a sub, but he'd assumed the other man was that way with any Dom. Patrick hadn't sought out any Dom, though; he'd sought out Evan.

Could that mean...?

He shook his head, not wanting to get his hopes up, but memories of their sessions together followed Evan into his dreams.

CHAPTER 16

THE scream that rent the air had no place in the fantasy currently playing out in Evan's dreams, the sound enough to awaken him and have him running for the stairs without even pausing to consider that Rhys was already up there, maybe even with Takoda already.

Breathless, he stumbled to a halt at the door to Takoda's room, but the bed was empty. Grateful for whatever small blessing that was, he went down the hall to Rhys's room, the sound of disconsolate sobbing drawing him over the sill. Takoda lay huddled on the bed, Rhys spooned firmly around him, trying to ease the shudders wracking the darker man's body. "There's a cup in the bathroom," Rhys said as soon as he saw Evan. "Get some water for him."

Evan nodded and went into the bathroom, returning a moment later. He knelt on the bed next to Takoda, helping Rhys lift him into a sitting position so he could hold the glass to Takoda's lips. He drank, but mechanically, his body reacting, but not his mind.

"Nightmare?" Evan asked softly, not letting himself speculate about what they wore beneath the sheets or whether the fact that Takoda was in Rhys's bed meant they'd done more than just sleep. He needed to be focused on Takoda now, not on his prurient interest in their love life.

Rhys nodded. "When he first moved in, he had nightmares almost every night. I'd wake him up, hold his hand until he calmed down, and hope he'd escape with just one for the night. They've gotten less frequent, but I guess everything yesterday triggered another one."

"It was a pretty emotional day," Evan agreed. "I can see that causing a nightmare."

"Takoda, lover?" Rhys cajoled. "Are you all right? Can you tell us what happened?"

Takoda shook his head. "Kade," he gasped, the word almost a moan. "Hands, grabbing me... blindfold, couldn't see, couldn't fight...."

Evan wrapped his arms around Takoda as well, helping Rhys enfold him in a cocoon of warmth and safety. “Hurt,” Takoda sobbed. “Always hurting me.... Make it stop!”

“It’s over now,” Rhys crooned, rocking Takoda gently in his arms. Evan went with the movement, letting Rhys guide them but adding his own layer of strength and protection. “You’re safe. There’s no one here but Evan and me. No one to hurt you. Just to take care of you.”

Takoda’s eyes flew open with a gasp, awareness slowly replacing the glassy panic that had glazed them over when Evan had first entered the room. “Rhys?” he said softly, his voice pleading.

“I’m here,” Rhys assured him. “And so is Evan. We aren’t going to let anything hurt you. Not even us.”

“You didn’t,” Takoda murmured, burrowing deeper into Rhys’s arms. Evan let him go now that he was awake and making sense. “You didn’t hurt me. Kade did, but it didn’t hurt with you.”

That answered Evan’s question about what they’d been up to before they fell asleep. Good for them. Hopefully it would help Takoda recover from the nightmare more quickly.

“The first thing he did after he kidnapped me... was—” Takoda looked away, tears springing to his eyes. “Was rape me. He said he’d let me off... easy... during the first two sessions, just using my mouth, not my ass. The whole time, he... called me names, nasty, foul names. Said I wasn’t good for anything—” Takoda choked on a sob. Rhys’s arms tightened, and Evan moved closer again, not wanting Takoda to feel smothered, but offering his silent support the only way he knew how. “Anything except being his fucktoy. I was a hole to be filled. And not even a good one at that. Not yet. I could barely take his cock, he complained. How was I supposed to take his fist? Or survive a gang bang? He’d loosen me up, he said, until he could put anything inside me he wanted.”

Evan felt sick to his stomach. He’d known Kade was a sick fucker, but what Takoda was saying was beyond disgusting. How anyone could do that to another human being astounded him.

“It was all lies,” Rhys interrupted, “to cover up his own inadequacies. No real man needs to tie down a lover to have sex with him. No real man wants a used-up, stretched out hole. He knew he couldn’t make you scream with pleasure so he made you scream with pain instead. That’s his weakness, not yours.”

“Rhys is right,” Evan added when Rhys seemed to run out of steam without his words consoling Takoda. “A real man wants a lover who’s tight

for him, who squeezes around him in welcome and makes him feel like the most potent man alive when he stretches out that tight entrance just enough to get inside. And a real man cherishes that giving nature, taking his time to make sure it doesn't hurt past the initial burn, that it doesn't tear you up inside. Even if he's pushing your limits a little with a big dildo or an extra finger, a real man makes sure his lover is taken care of first. Kade was slime, not a man."

"And if his lover is also his sub?" Takoda asked, voice tremulous.

"Then he makes sure everything he does is acceptable to his sub before, during, and after doing it," Rhys replied firmly. "Because when his lover is also his sub, a real man wants what's best for them both. And believe me, a real Dom's happiness comes from his sub's happiness."

"I want to believe you," Takoda said softly, "but it's going to take time."

"Time and experience," Rhys agreed. "We have all the time in the world, and we'll start with the experience as soon as you're ready."

The comment surprised a watery laugh out of Takoda. "I've been ready for almost a year," he protested.

"Then tomorrow morning, we'll discuss our next session, and when Evan has a break from work, we'll start giving you the kind of experience Kade could never have managed in a thousand years," Rhys promised. "Right, Evan?"

Evan smiled. "Absolutely."

"Do you think you can sleep again?" Rhys asked Takoda.

Takoda nodded. "Stay with me?"

"Of course," Rhys said immediately. "I'm the one who asked you to stay, remember?"

"I remember," Takoda replied, summoning a smile that made Evan's heart catch in his throat.

"Sleep well," he said to both of them. "I'll see you in the morning."

They both looked his way and smiled, but even before Evan had crossed the threshold, they were lost in each other again, making Evan glad he'd pushed as hard as he had earlier in the day. Takoda would probably be plagued by nightmares for some time to come, but at least he wouldn't be waking up alone anymore. And hopefully, good memories would eventually outweigh the bad. It might not stop the nightmares, but it might help put them in perspective.

Crawling back into his own empty bed, he wondered if he could conjure his dream of pounding Patrick into the mattress back up.

EVAN wasn't particularly surprised when he woke before Takoda did the next morning, but he was somewhat surprised Rhys wasn't already downstairs. His best friend was a disgustingly early riser, even when he'd been up late the night before. He considered going up to check on them, but he had no desire to disrupt any early morning lovemaking, if indeed that was what they were doing. He rather thought that's exactly what they ought to be doing, but Rhys might have decided to save that for their session.

Evan had spent a lot of time tossing restlessly after he went back to bed following Takoda's nightmare, trying to use the time to weigh various options for today's session. Takoda wanted marks, but Evan didn't want to subject him to anything terribly painful the first time out. Better to work up to the truly painful instruments, if Takoda and Rhys decided that was where they wanted to take their relationship. For now, he'd stick with small things: nipple clamps, a thorough, measured spanking, the same paddle he'd used on Rhys to make sure Takoda got the marks he wanted, a cock ring to make sure he didn't come too soon. After that, they'd see how he reacted and go from there. He'd liked the cuffs when he wore them during the day, so they could definitely use them. Rhys had all manner of ropes and bars and harnesses designed to keep a sub immobile during whatever erotic torture he had planned. Evan wondered how Takoda would react to being bound and masturbated without being allowed to come.

Evan bet they could have Takoda begging in a matter of minutes.

Not that they'd let him come that quickly. Oh, no, one of Evan's favorite parts of a session was controlling the sub's climax until he simply couldn't stand it anymore. And then making him wait just that much longer. Most of the time, given that he wasn't in a relationship, he let the sub come at the end of a session, but when he'd had long-term relationships, he'd sometimes even given orders for them not to come until that evening or the next morning, just to prove their submission to his will. He wouldn't do that to Takoda today. That would be something else for Rhys to try later, when Takoda was more comfortable with the whole process.

He hadn't seen a swing in Rhys's playroom, but he could find some other way to restrain Takoda: on the spanking bench, on the bed, even simply on the floor with his wrists bound to his knees so he was immobile. They'd take things slowly, checking in with him often to make sure they weren't overwhelming him, but Evan thought they ought to give him a little taste of a

lot of things today so he could start to make some more informed choices with Rhys. After all, the better able he was to express his own needs and desires, the more likely Rhys would be to be able to grant them, especially right now when he was still hesitant himself.

“You’re up early.”

Evan turned and smiled at Rhys and Takoda as they came into the kitchen. “There’s fresh coffee,” he said, “and I’m not up any earlier than usual. You slept in today.”

Rhys shrugged. “We had a rough night.”

“Did you have another nightmare?” Evan asked Takoda solicitously.

“No, thank God,” Takoda said, “but it took me a long time to go back to sleep.”

He said it without a blush, and Rhys didn’t look particularly discomfited either, so Evan decided not to read any deeper meaning into the words. Although, if he’d been Rhys, he’d have loved Takoda so thoroughly that the sub couldn’t have thought about anything else. He forcibly tamped down the tinge of arousal the thought generated. It had no place in their current situation. It did make him a little more sympathetic to Takoda’s imminent plight of delayed release, though, since Evan would have to wait for Sunday to let himself go completely.

“I’ll have to look at my calendar when I log on for work this morning,” Evan told them, “but it’s Friday, which is usually a pretty light day. I often end up with a couple of hours between meetings and calls I have to be on. If that’s the case today, we can do the session then or we can wait until this evening. Whichever you prefer.”

“I’m supposed to work tonight,” Rhys said with a frown. “I wonder if I can get someone to fill in for me.”

“We can do it during the day,” Takoda interrupted. “I don’t want you to miss work. I’ll be fine this evening here with Evan and I’ll simply wait until you get home to go to bed so I won’t be alone if I have another nightmare.”

“What are you planning?” Rhys asked Evan. “I assume you’ve been thinking about it.”

Evan nodded. “A little sampler to introduce Takoda to a wide variety of sensations,” he replied. “He wants to wear your marks, so we’ll warm his ass for him a bit with one of the paddles, enough for him to feel it tomorrow anyway. A little bondage. A little sensation play. And then we’ll see what he likes best and go from there.” He turned to Takoda. “Sessions don’t have to be perfectly scripted ahead of time, as long as the general elements are within

the limits the people involved have discussed. And you have your safe word and your yellow word, which I expect you to use if you need them. I expect you to trust me to slow down or stop. I expect you not to let me abuse you, however unintentionally.”

“Yes, Sir,” Takoda replied dutifully.

“Not ‘Sir’,” Evan corrected. “Not down here, outside a session. Down here I want your thoughts and feelings and concerns. I’d rather address them here than have them surprise me upstairs.”

Takoda paused, clearly considering. “No, I think I’m okay with everything you said. And I can use my safe words if I need to.”

“You can and should,” Evan agreed. “Are you going to be comfortable with me participating as well as directing? Having us both touching you at the same time could be a little overwhelming.”

Takoda nodded silently, face pensive. “I think it would be more awkward to have you always speaking to direct Rhys,” he said after a few minutes. “You keep telling me to use my safe words if I need them. If I feel overwhelmed, that’s what I’ll do.”

“That would be a good situation for your yellow word,” Rhys added. “Ask us to ease up a bit rather than end the session entirely.”

“That’s exactly what it’s for,” Evan agreed. “Let me get logged in at work and see what my schedule looks like. I’ll give you an idea of what time I should be free in a few minutes.”

Evan logged onto his laptop quickly, checking his calendar. As he’d expected, he had a large chunk of time in the late morning, Vegas time. Unless something came up, he looked to be free from around eleven until close to three. That was more than enough time for what he had planned, even if the morning call ran later than expected. He went back into the kitchen to tell Rhys and Takoda, only to find Takoda sitting by himself, looking a little forlorn.

“Where did Rhys go?” Evan asked.

“Outside,” Takoda replied.

“I told you yesterday that Rhys goes for a run when he’s angry, but there’s another part of losing his temper for him, and that’s feeling like he’s put something positive back into the universe to counter all the negativity of his anger.”

“How does he do that?” Takoda wondered aloud.

“He works in his garden,” Evan replied. “He’s always had a garden, and it keeps him sane. So if you’ll take a suggestion from an old friend of his, put

on some old clothes and go work beside him out there. He may not say anything to you other than to give you directions, but he'll know you're there, know that you chose to be there with him. And that'll be worth more words than you could ever say."

"Thanks, Evan," Takoda said, rising from his seat. "For everything."

Evan smiled. "If it makes Rhys happy, it's worth any effort on my part."

As Takoda went to change, Evan stuck his head out onto the patio to see if it had an outlet. When he saw it did, he grinned. He could spend the day working and watching Rhys and Takoda at the same time. Maybe the eye candy would keep today from being as horrid a day as yesterday.

There was certainly enough smooth, tanned flesh to go around when Takoda joined Rhys in the garden, shirtless and glistening from the sunscreen Evan could smell as he walked by. Deciding he owed Rhys for his meddling last night, Evan prepared to do a little meddling of his own. "Hey, Takoda," he called, "the way Rhys rushed out here from breakfast, I'd bet he forgot to lotion up. You wouldn't want him to get burned. He might not be able to take care of you this afternoon if he did."

Takoda sent him a delighted grin and went back into the house, reappearing moments later with the bottle of sunscreen. Rhys held out his hand for it when Takoda came back out, but Takoda kept it out of reach, pouring some into his palm. "Turn around," he instructed.

Rhys scowled automatically at the order as Takoda smoothed the thick cream over his back, but Evan couldn't help but notice the way he leaned into the touch as Takoda rubbed the lotion in. He bit back a grin at the slight swelling Rhys's shorts did nothing to hide. Rhys could scowl all he wanted. He liked having Takoda's hands on his body.

Evan half expected Rhys to protest when Takoda moved around to put lotion on his chest as well, but he didn't, standing still as Takoda's hands wandered. The ping of an email message arriving drew Evan's attention back to work, but that didn't impede his hearing, and the slight moan that escaped Rhys's throat didn't have anything to do with pain. A quick glance showed Takoda's palms rubbing across Rhys's pecs, kneading the strong muscles.

Still smiling, Evan answered the email, glad to see this new boldness in Takoda outside their sessions. Rhys would never be bored.

CHAPTER 17

TAKODA and Rhys worked in the garden until lunchtime, sweat pouring off them as the day grew hotter, but neither of them commented on it. Evan had to admire Takoda's devotion. Evan wouldn't have stuck with it nearly as long as the other man did. Even sitting in the shade, he was sweating buckets, and they were working hard and in the sun a lot of the time.

When they finally stopped for lunch, Evan sent them both to take showers while he put together a Salade Niçoise. It was too hot for anything else. He couldn't decide, when they came back down holding hands, if they'd showered together or if they'd simply waited to come back down together. Either way, it was one more quiet intimacy to add to all the others he'd observed in the past day.

When they had finished eating, Evan set the dishes in the sink and turned to his subs. "Takoda, take the cuffs upstairs and get undressed. Rhys will put them on you when he comes up in a moment. Rhys, dig out your leather shorts, the red ones. I want you in those for the session today. And put cock rings on both you and Takoda. I don't want anyone coming without permission."

For a moment, Evan wondered if Rhys would protest the shorts. They were more sub attire than Dom attire, but then again, Rhys wasn't really the Dom in their session, even if he'd be the one touching Takoda.

Rhys accepted the orders without comment, though, following Takoda up the stairs. Evan went into his room and pulled his leathers back out, inhaling the pungent scent as he readied himself for the afternoon's festivities.

The scene he found when he walked into the playroom was almost unbearably romantic. Takoda knelt on the floor, naked as directed except for the cuffs around his wrists. Rhys knelt right behind him, braiding his long black hair into a single thick plait. The everyday intimacy of the gesture knotted Evan's stomach, especially when Rhys tied off the braid and Takoda leaned back into him.

Evan cleared his throat, not wanting to shatter the moment with a sharp order. Both men focused their attention in his direction, but they did not jump apart or give any indication of feeling guilty for what Evan had witnessed. With a soft smile on his face, he gestured for them to stand.

“Hands and knees on the bed, Takoda. We’ll start by giving you the marks you wanted and then we’ll see what else we can do. Rhys, get the Spencer paddle while I get Takoda settled.”

Both men did as he directed. Evan followed Takoda to the bed, stopping to collect a hank of rope. He drew Takoda’s wrists together and affixed them to a ring on the headboard. “Do your shoulders hurt?” he asked solicitously, sweeping a hand over the joints in question.

“No, Sir,” Takoda replied.

“If they start to bother you, *at all*,” Evan stressed, “use your yellow word and ask me to adjust your restraints. Some of what we do to you today may hurt, but your shoulders are not to be part of that. I don’t want anything to complicate your recovery.”

“Yes, Sir,” Takoda replied, gratitude evident in his voice.

“Spread your legs a little more,” Evan directed, moving behind Takoda and positioning the sub’s legs the way he wanted them. “Don’t move now. We want you wide open for whatever we decide to do to you.” To demonstrate, he slid his hand between Takoda’s legs and palmed the pendant sac. “Maybe later I’ll try a ball stretcher on you,” he mused. “It’s amazing how that restraint can make a sub feel owned.”

Takoda shivered but didn’t say anything to protest.

Evan looked up when Rhys joined him. “Doesn’t he look beautiful, Rhys?”

“Oh, yes, Sir,” Rhys breathed. “Like my favorite dream come to life.”

The assertion brought a smile to Evan’s face as he watched the hungry way Rhys was staring at Takoda’s bound form. He was all but drooling, his ringed cock pressing hard against the tight placket of his shorts. With a grin, he reached over and squeezed Rhys’s erection. “I’m not going to have to worry about *you* coming without permission, am I?” he teased.

“No, Sir,” Rhys replied dutifully, his eyes never leaving Takoda’s raised backside.

Deciding waiting any longer was unnecessary torture for both men, Evan nudged Rhys into position behind Takoda. “Warm him up a little before you start with the paddle. Let’s try five to each cheek with your palm and see how he feels after that. As dark as his skin is, we’ll need to go carefully so we don’t reach his limits before he gets the marks he wants.”

Moving to Takoda's head, Evan stroked the sub's cheek. "Relax and let Rhys take care of you."

Evan watched Takoda's face critically as Rhys began the prescribed number of swats, starting gently, almost tenderly, alternating between sides as he worked his way up to swats that had Takoda rocking forward and moaning. His face didn't show any distress, though, much to Evan's relief. He wanted to grant Takoda's request, but he could hardly do that if the sub couldn't even bear a spanking. A slight flinch accompanied the hardest blow on each side, but Evan caught the smile that ghosted across Takoda's face when Rhys's hand lingered in an almost-caress that was his trademark. Evan had watched Rhys with many, many subs, and that periodic caress always accompanied any kind of whipping, especially during the first few sessions. He suspected that with Takoda, it would always be there.

"Is he warming up?" Evan asked Rhys.

Rhys flushed a little at being caught caressing instead of spanking, but he didn't move his hand. "Slowly," he replied.

"How are you feeling, Takoda?" Evan asked deliberately.

"Fine, Sir," Takoda replied breathlessly.

"Still hard?" Evan verified, hand sliding beneath Takoda's body to check.

"Yes, Sir," Takoda moaned, rocking into the hand. The spanking hadn't been hard enough to convince Evan that Takoda was a pain slut, but his earlier supposition about Takoda being a slut for Rhys's attentions seemed to be proving true.

"Another ten," Evan told Rhys. "Harder this time. Even his bronzed skin will get pink with enough stimulation and I want him a lovely shade before you pick up the paddle."

Rhys did as Evan instructed, the intermittent caresses coming more frequently between swats. Evan trusted Rhys to handle the increase in pressure. He was more interested in Takoda's reactions. He hadn't been terribly surprised at the relatively mild reactions to the first round, but Rhys wasn't holding back now, each blow resonating with a sharp crack. While Takoda's body moved in response and he gasped softly, he didn't cry out or grimace or try to pull away in any way.

In fact, as Rhys landed the last two blows and the tender caress, Takoda's eyes closed in something Evan would've called bliss in a more experienced sub. When Rhys looked at him expectantly, he tilted his head toward the long, oblong paddle.

“Three blows,” he told Rhys and Takoda both. “Right across the meat of his ass so he’ll feel it tomorrow.”

If Evan had thought about it, he would have expected Takoda to tense, perhaps even to try to pull away, but his eyes simply closed, his breath bated as he waited for the promised smacks. Rhys landed the three blows in quick succession. Takoda’s eyes flew open in surprise, a sharp groan escaping his throat, but that look of contentment did not leave his face. Evan smiled at him, trailing his hand down Takoda’s spine to the cleft of his ass. “Oh, yes, that will be a pretty mark by tomorrow morning,” he assured Takoda.

“Thank you, Sir,” Takoda murmured.

“Put the paddle away, Rhys,” Evan directed, running his palm over the heated skin of Takoda’s ass. “We need to cool him down a little so we can flip him over and have fun with his other side.”

Rhys moved away to put the paddle back in its place. Evan noticed Takoda’s eyes following him hungrily and felt a tensing in the muscles beneath his hand, though he had done nothing that should have caused it. Except that he wasn’t Rhys. He snorted in amusement. Takoda was going to make one hell of a sub, but only for Rhys. With anyone else, Evan suspected he’d be calling his safe word in a matter of minutes.

“Gel, Sir?” Rhys asked when he’d put the paddle away.

Evan grinned. “Oh, surely we can think of something more enjoyable,” he drawled. “You do have ice in that mini-fridge, don’t you?”

Rhys nodded.

“That should cool Takoda down very nicely,” Evan declared.

Takoda shivered as Evan continued stroking his skin, his eyes never leaving Rhys as he brought a tray of ice cubes from the freezer. Curiously, Evan slipped his hand between Takoda’s legs again. Not quite as hard as before, but definitely still erect. And the closer Rhys drew to the bed, the harder he got.

Dutifully, Rhys offered the ice cubes to Evan, but Evan shook his head, taking the tray and extracting two cubes. He kept one for himself and returned the other to Rhys. “Pay special attention to the paddle marks,” he instructed. “We want Takoda to be able to turn over when we’re done here. I want to see how responsive his nipples are.”

“Very responsive,” Rhys replied right away. “Sir,” he added quickly when Evan glared at him. The jump of his cock against his shorts told Evan that Rhys had spent quite some time with the little nubs the night before. Good. They’d take advantage of that sensitivity soon.

Evan held the ice cube an inch above Takoda's upturned ass, letting the melting water drip onto the burning skin. Takoda gasped and squirmed with each drop, far more so than he had during the spanking. "Look at him, Rhys," Evan purred, "wriggling his ass in the air. What do you suppose he wants? More spanking? Or does he want the ice on his skin? Or is it more than that? Maybe he wants you to peel down those tight red shorts you're wearing and pound his sweet cheeks."

Takoda and Rhys both moaned. "Please, Sir," Rhys begged.

"Not yet," Evan cautioned. "We've hardly started playing with him. You can fuck him later."

Takoda whimpered, his hips moving instinctively upward in invitation. Evan accepted, although not the way Takoda probably intended, running the ice directly over his skin, pleased at the little yelp that escaped. He enjoyed hearing those little sounds from his sub, even a borrowed one. He smiled when Rhys added a second ice cube against Takoda's skin, his free hand wandering as well. Evan let it go for the moment. He'd stop Rhys if he took too many liberties.

When the ice in his hand was reduced to a sliver, Evan grinned wickedly and slipped it between Takoda's widespread cheeks and into the little pucker, impressed when even the shock of cold didn't make Takoda pull his legs together. He twisted and squirmed, but held his position. "Yours too," Evan told Rhys. "He was getting a little too much pleasure out of your hands on his body. I wouldn't want him to come too soon. Punishing him wasn't on my agenda for today."

Rhys did as Evan directed, sliding the remnant of his own ice cube, slightly larger than Evan's piece, into Takoda's body. If his fingers played around the entrance a little longer than Evan's had done, Evan figured it was a lover's prerogative. Takoda would have to learn to control himself regardless of whose hands were inciting him.

Turning his mind back to the business at hand, Evan ran a testing hand over Takoda's backside, finding the temperature had returned to normal. "Find a set of adjustable clamps," he told Rhys. "Since you say his nipples are sensitive, we're going to try a few other things so Takoda can experience the variety of pleasures we have to offer. If you have a fur mitt and vampire gloves, get those too."

"Yes, Sir," Rhys said, getting up from the bed with a last trail of his fingers over Takoda's calf.

While Rhys was rummaging through his drawers, Evan repositioned Takoda. "Stretch out flat on the bed," he directed. "I want you to roll over

onto your back, and I don't want to hurt your shoulders. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes, Sir," Takoda said, moving slowly to do as Evan had instructed, but his movements suggested he was merely being careful, not in pain. Evan approved. He didn't want to hurt Takoda's shoulders.

Once Takoda was settled on his back, Evan used soft silk rope from Evan's collection to stretch his legs wide, binding his ankles to each corner of the footboard. He took a moment simply to enjoy the sight of Takoda lying open on the bed. He ran a hand up one smooth thigh to the short thatch of pubic hair. He hadn't taken Takoda for one to shave his groin, but it was obvious to his experienced eye that he'd been shaved not too long ago. Glancing toward Rhys, who was still gathering supplies, Evan knelt on the bed, bringing his lips close to Takoda's ear. "Let it grow back in," he whispered. "As a rule, Rhys likes a full bush on his subs, and on the rare occasion he feels otherwise, he likes the pleasure of shaving it himself."

Takoda nodded, his eyes clouding over momentarily. "Kade," he said simply.

"Was a motherfucking sadist who had no business messing with a sub as responsive as you," Evan finished, his voice hard despite the low tone. "Forget about whatever he told you, whatever he said about being a good sub. Your concern now is pleasing Rhys, not Kade, and believe me, Rhys is pleased."

"Is he?" Takoda asked haltingly.

"Look at him," Evan instructed as Rhys walked back toward them. "See that bulge in his shorts? I didn't put that there. You did. You and your beautiful submission. If he doesn't take you downstairs and fuck you silly when we're done, let me know and I'll personally beat him black and blue for his oversight."

Takoda blushed, a most endearing sight, as Rhys joined them again. If Takoda had been his sub, Evan would've kissed him right then, for the pure pleasure of it and because such sweet innocence after all Takoda had suffered deserved a reward. As it was.... "Rhys," Evan said, taking a step back from the bed, "I think Takoda's earned a kiss. Make it a good one since you only get to give him one."

Rhys didn't hesitate, climbing onto the bed so he straddled Takoda's waist, his hands framing the sub's cheeks as he pressed his torso along the length of his lover's, mating their mouths in a deep, wet kiss that made Evan's toes curl just watching. Ever grateful for Lee's ingenuity, he adjusted himself discreetly in the pouch in the front of his trousers and wondered if he

should've put on a cock ring himself. The last thing he wanted was to lose control in front of his subs.

Rhys managed to obey the letter of Evan's dictate while totally abusing the spirit of it, keeping his and Takoda's lips locked so that Evan could not say it was more than one kiss while fucking the sub's mouth repeatedly with his tongue. "Enough," Evan barked, though his voice carried no heat. When Rhys still didn't immediately break the kiss, Evan swatted the back of Rhys's thigh. "Enough," he repeated, his voice stricter.

Rhys lifted his head, his eyes slightly glazed as he registered Evan's order. "Sorry, Sir," he apologized. "I got carried away. He tastes so good."

"Careful," Evan warned playfully, "or I might decide I want a taste of him myself."

Jealousy flashed, hot and fast, in Rhys's eyes, fading only when Evan made no move toward Takoda.

Evan considered making Rhys watch as he put the nipple clamps on Takoda instead of letting Rhys do it himself, but the point of this whole exercise wasn't really to control Rhys, but to help him dominate Takoda. "Put the clamps on him," he told Rhys. "Only tight enough to stay in place." He looked at Takoda. "They pinch going on, and then explode like crazy when the blood rushes back in when we take them off. As sensitive as Rhys says you are, it should be a mind-blowing experience."

Rhys pinched at Takoda's nipples until they were peaked, making the sub squirm on the bed. When he was satisfied Takoda was ready, he adjusted the tweezer clamps, keeping a close eye on Takoda's reactions as he affixed them to the little brown nipples. Takoda winced at the sudden bite of pain, but he didn't use either of his safe words, relaxing after a moment as he grew used to the sensation. "Beautiful," Rhys murmured when he'd finished.

"Another time, when you're used to them, Rhys might play with them," Evan said huskily, "pulling and twisting them, driving you absolutely wild with the mixture of pain and pleasure, but we'll save that for another day." He handed Rhys one each of the pair of fur mitts and leather vampire gloves, the palms studded with little metal nubs, keeping the other of each pair for himself. "Above or below the waist?" he asked Rhys.

Rhys looked torn between the lure of the expanse of Takoda's chest and the possibility of getting at least one of his hands on Takoda's cock. Takoda's cock won. "Below."

Evan grinned and gestured for Rhys to switch places with him. "Oh, and Rhys," he said, grin turning devilish. "You can't touch his cock."

"Bastard," Rhys muttered, but he didn't contest the order. Evan simply laughed and swatted Rhys's backside lightly in retaliation for the

inappropriate comment. When he finally let Rhys touch Takoda, he was quite sure the sub would go off like a rocket.

CHAPTER 18

EVAN kept a close eye on Rhys as he fitted the different gloves on his hands and moved down to Takoda's feet. Whenever Rhys used the vampire glove on Takoda, Evan made sure to stroke the sub's arms or belly with the fur mitt. And when Rhys alternated, Evan used the vampire glove on Rhys, knowing his friend enjoyed the little prickles of sensation from the dull metal nubs on the palm of the glove. He hoped he wasn't making a mistake in letting Rhys explore at will with the gloves, but directing every stroke of his hand felt ridiculous with a Dom as experienced as Rhys. He'd dictated the spanking to set the tone and remind them both that he was in charge, but they'd learned that lesson now. He didn't need to beat a dead horse.

Takoda tossed restlessly between the contrasting sensations, the muscles in his legs twitching whenever Rhys used the vampire glove, as if he would've pulled away were it not for the ropes restraining him, and then quivering when Rhys switched to the fur mitt, as the slight tickle replaced the other sensation.

The stroke of Evan's mitt always brought that twitch. Evan kept a close eye on Takoda's face, looking for any sign that he was overwhelming the sub by combining his attentions with Rhys's, but the expression on his face was one of a man heading deep into submission, so Evan continued with his plan.

Rhys worked his way over Takoda's lower body with obvious expertise, studying the sub's reactions to different pressures in different places. The bottoms of his feet easily withstood the vampire glove, even when Rhys squeezed slightly to increase the pressure, but they jerked helplessly against the fur mitt.

Evan spent several minutes enjoying the way Rhys arched beneath the vampire glove on his back while Rhys taught Takoda to accept the soft tickling rubs on his sensitive soles. It was a damn shame Rhys was such a Dom through and through, because his body was so responsive to his toys. His mind was far harder to tame.

The muscles of Takoda's calves were far more sensitive to the vampire glove, each press of the metal nubs wringing a short gasp from Takoda's throat as Rhys cradled each leg in his palm, letting the weight of Takoda's leg press his skin against the bumps.

While Takoda struggled to assimilate that sensation, Evan discovered that his triceps were also exquisitely sensitive, the fur mitt making him writhe and moan. The sight was enough to set Evan's cock throbbing again. He closed his eyes for a moment, forcibly replacing the vision of Takoda with a memory of Patrick. He didn't know what would happen on Sunday, didn't know if Patrick would be the right sub for him in a longer relationship, but he knew he couldn't have Takoda, so it was far better for everyone if he fantasized about Patrick instead.

When Rhys's hands worked their way up the insides of Takoda's thighs, Evan thought Takoda's hips were going to come flying off the bed. "Please, Rhys," Takoda moaned.

"Please, who?" Evan rebuked sternly. "Rhys isn't the one who decides what happens to you today."

"Please, Sir," Takoda amended, turning beseeching eyes in Evan's direction. "Let him touch my... my... dick."

"You wouldn't like the vampire glove on your sweet cock," Evan warned him, "and I know what'll happen if he touches you with the mitt, even with that cock ring on. I'd hate to have to put you over the spanking bench and punish you for coming without permission."

Takoda subsided, though his face still showed every bit of his desperation. A sudden jerk of his body made Evan's head spin around, glaring at Rhys when he saw the fur mitt brush across Takoda's balls.

"You said not to touch his cock," Rhys reminded him. "You didn't say anything about his balls."

Before Evan could take Rhys to task and remind him who was in charge, he heard a pained gasp from Takoda. "Reservation, Sir," the sub said, his voice breaking.

"What is it, Takoda?" Evan asked immediately, pulling off the mitt and gesturing for Rhys to move to Takoda's other side. He hadn't forgotten Rhys speaking out of turn or so disrespectfully, but they needed to see to Takoda first.

"My shoulders, Sir," Takoda gasped.

"Rhys, get his arms loose."

Rhys went to work on Evan's knots, releasing them with the ease of experience, far faster than Evan could have done. "Relax," Evan told Takoda. "Don't try to move. Let us move for you until we're sure you're not hurt."

Takoda nodded as Evan massaged one shoulder joint while Rhys worked on the other one. When Evan felt the muscles starting to unknot, he took Takoda's wrist gently, lifting it straight up so the muscles would only have to move in one direction. "Tell me if the pain gets worse," he urged.

On Takoda's other side, Rhys mimicked the movement until Takoda's arms lay by his sides. "All right?" Evan verified.

"Yes, Sir," Takoda replied. "I was doing fine and then I moved suddenly and the pull was too much."

"Then we'll have to make sure we keep any stress off them for awhile. Rhys, do you have water in that fridge?" When Rhys nodded, Evan gestured for him to get some. Turning back to Takoda, he asked, "How are you otherwise? Do you need us to stop the session?"

"We don't have to stop, do we?" Takoda asked, voice quivering. "I mean, it's been amazing, and my shoulders don't hurt now that my hands aren't above my head."

"Rhys?" Evan verified as his friend joined them again. "You're the bondage expert."

Rhys grinned. "I'm sure we can come up with something." He went to the cabinet where he kept his restraints and came back with a long, black rope. "Lift your wrists, Takoda," he directed, releasing Takoda's ankles as well and lifting Takoda's legs so his knees were above his hips. "Will it bother your shoulders if we tie your wrists to your knees?"

Takoda shifted a little, testing the position. "I don't think so."

"Not quite yet," Evan insisted, annoyance with himself growing as he realized his mistake in asking Rhys's opinion. He knew Rhys was in a difficult position, acting as the Dom but not thinking that way, and Evan had just made it worse by allowing him to position Takoda for the next part of the session. "Sit up for a minute, Takoda," he directed, firmly taking control again. "Have a drink of water. Make sure the shoulder spasms have completely passed. Your eagerness does you credit, but there's no rush. Even if we stop today and continue tomorrow."

"No! Please, Sir," Takoda begged, though he accepted the bottle of water from Rhys. "I don't want to stop. You've got me all worked up. I want to see where it takes me. This... this is what I've dreamed of feeling since I watched Rhys at the club's anniversary party."

Before Evan could reply, Rhys cradled Takoda's face between his hands and kissed him tenderly. "As often as you want," he promised softly. "All you have to do is say the word."

Feeling totally superfluous, Evan seriously considered using the hiatus to withdraw and leave Rhys and Takoda to finish the session alone, but he'd never turned control of a session he had started over to another Dom, and his pride refused to let him do so now. He could end the session and give them permission to play without him, as if Rhys needed permission. That would let him keep his pride. Or he could rein Rhys in and finish this session as planned. And relegate himself to the position of observer, if they even wanted him at their next session.

"Rhys," he said sharply. "The session isn't over yet."

Rhys glared at him but released his grip on Takoda's face and sat back, mostly submissively. Evan debated how to punish the lapse. He could stripe Rhys's ass again, but he didn't really want Takoda to think all punishments were physical or painful. "What would you do to a sub who stepped out of line like that, Rhys?" he asked, pretty sure he already knew the answer.

"I wouldn't let him come," Rhys replied immediately. "Sir."

The tone of Rhys's voice made the title a curse. Evan glanced at his watch. "It's one-fifteen," he informed his subs. "Rhys, you aren't to come until one-fifteen tomorrow. And don't argue or I'll make it longer."

"Yes, Sir," Rhys said, somewhat sullenly.

That was the final straw. Grabbing Rhys's upper arm, Evan pulled him across the room, aware of Takoda's eyes following them. "Are you about done?" he demanded sharply, though he kept his voice low. "You know better than to buck your Dom's authority this way during a session."

"This is a whole hell of a lot harder than I thought it would be," Rhys replied.

Evan frowned. "You knew it wouldn't be easy or you'd have done it yourself," he reminded Rhys. "I know you're used to being a Dom and I know you want to be one now, but you aren't at the moment, and Takoda has to learn proper behavior for a session. Now, can you go back over there and do what I tell you to do? Or am I going to have to put you in display position and make you watch while I finish the session with Takoda?"

That threat wiped all the sullenness off Rhys's face. "No, I'll be good," he promised. "Please, Sir, don't keep me from participating."

With a short nod, Evan walked back over to Takoda, summoning a smile for the younger sub. "Are you ready to go on, Takoda?"

“Yes, Sir,” Takoda replied eagerly.

“Very well.” Evan bound Takoda’s wrists to his knees as Rhys had suggested, leaving his groin even more revealed than before. “Session resumed,” he told them when he’d finished. “Normally, I’d have asked Rhys to reward you for knowing your limits, Takoda, but Rhys has been taking liberties instead of waiting for my orders, so instead of another kiss from him, it’s my turn.”

He wet his fingers with the condensation on the bottle of water Rhys had set on the table next to the bed, pressing the cold digits against Takoda’s entrance. Takoda tensed and twisted restlessly as much, Evan was sure, because he was the one touching Takoda as because his fingers were cold.

Rhys looked ready to explode. Evan stared him down, fingering Takoda a moment longer, pressing deliberately against his prostate, which earned him a long, deep moan, before relenting and removing his fingers. He grabbed the cold bottle and pressed it tightly against Takoda’s cock, smiling at the yelp. “You looked like you were getting too close to coming,” Evan explained, trailing his finger through the damp spot growing on Takoda’s belly despite the cock ring. “I’ve already had to punish one sub today. I’d rather not make it two.”

The cold caused a slight shrinking in Takoda’s erection, but he was too aroused for the sensation to douse it entirely.

“Rhys, take off one of the nipple clamps,” Evan directed before Rhys could decide to rebel. “Only one. We’ll leave the other one for awhile so Takoda can anticipate its removal later.”

Rhys released the circle holding the clamp tight around Takoda’s nipple. The moment the pressure lessened, Takoda’s back arched off the bed, a sharp scream coming from his lips. Evan couldn’t help but notice the little spurt of fluid that escaped the tip of his cock as he collapsed back onto the bed, panting harshly.

It seemed Takoda’s nipples were as sensitive as Rhys said.

Smiling, Evan picked up the bottle of water and held it against the surely throbbing flesh. Takoda moaned again, thrashing on the bed.

“Get a towel wet, as hot as you can stand to touch it,” he told Rhys as he continued to roll the bottle over Takoda’s skin. Takoda’s eyes rolled back in his head as he squirmed beneath the damp cold, but his face had regained the blissful expression from before his shoulders had bothered him, reassuring Evan that he was enjoying it. “He liked the contrast of sharp and soft with the gloves. I want to see how he does with hot and cold.”

Rhys turned the water on full in the sink and got a towel from beneath it. When the water was steaming, he soaked the towel, leaving one corner dry for his fingers. He didn't even try to wring it out, letting it drip on the tiles as he crossed back to Evan's and Takoda's side. His expression had cleared as well, Evan noticed, now that he was involved again, even if he probably would've preferred Evan not to be touching Takoda at all. That was just too bad. They'd renegotiate for tomorrow, but for now, Rhys would have to remember his place.

Evan tested the temperature to make sure it wasn't hot enough to burn. Some subs could handle it that hot, but it wasn't his intention to push Takoda quite that far. Rhys could make that call later depending on how Takoda reacted now.

Lifting the bottle of water away from Takoda's nipple, Evan tipped his head, the silent command clear. Rhys draped the towel across the chill-pink flesh, taking care not to let the towel touch the still-clamped nipple. Takoda's moans were constant now, little gasped sounds, almost grunts that could have been pleasure or pain or both, but a glance at his face showed no hesitation, no fear.

Evan pressed the water bottle against the sub's balls, watching with pleasure as they drew up tightly against his body. He squirmed, but the restraints did their work, making it impossible for him to get away. "I think he likes it," Evan said to Rhys as he rolled the bottle back and forth across the shrinking sac and the lower edge of Takoda's buttocks. "Look at him, hard and leaking at the thought of being at our mercy. Is that what's turning you on, Takoda? Knowing we can do anything we want to you?"

"Yes, Sir," Takoda gasped, though he looked at Rhys rather than Evan as he spoke.

"I'm down here, Takoda," Evan scolded with a sharp pinch to Takoda's perineum. "I know Rhys is your lover, but here in this room, I'm your Dom, not him."

"Yes, Sir," Takoda apologized. "I'm sorry."

Evan reached up and grabbed the other nipple clamp, pulling it off hard without releasing the circle first so it stretched Takoda's nipple before popping free. "Move the towel to the other side," Evan ordered Rhys as Takoda thrashed and moaned. The sounds grew louder as the wet heat of the towel intensified the throbbing in his abused nipple. Despite the pain, though, another spurt of fluid coated Takoda's belly.

"He's making a mess, Rhys," Evan purred. "Clean him up a bit before we go on."

Rhys reached for the towel, but Evan stopped him. "Use your tongue, but only on his stomach. His cock is still off-limits to you."

Both men groaned as Rhys bent his head and began licking eagerly at the salty fluid, working his way over as much of Takoda's stomach as he thought Evan would let him get away with. The answer was anything between Takoda's ribs and his groin, with the exception of his cock. Any time Rhys inched too close to that or to Takoda's nipples, Evan swatted his tender backside, but otherwise, he let Rhys play as he wished, watching Takoda's face grow tighter and tighter.

"Please, Sir," Takoda gasped, making the effort to form words rather than moans. "I need to come."

"Not yet," Evan warned him, pressing the water bottle against his cock again. "Not until I tell you to."

Takoda thrashed, trying to get away from the cold plastic, but Rhys's weight kept him pinned. "I don't think I can wait, Sir," he wailed.

"Yes, you can," Evan assured him, pinching the tip of Takoda's cock tightly. "You may not believe it yet, but you can. Rhys, that's enough."

Rhys sat up, looking to Evan for his next command.

"Takoda says he needs to come," Evan told Rhys, though Rhys had heard Takoda's words as clearly. "You can't fuck him like I'd planned since you forgot your place, but you can still bring him off. Do you think he'll be satisfied with your fingers or should I have you get one of the big dildos?"

"Please let me use my fingers, Sir," Rhys requested. "Let me touch him."

"I shouldn't," Evan told him, "after the way you acted, but that would punish Takoda too, and he's earned a reward, not a punishment. Very well. You can fuck him with your fingers, but he can't come until he's made me come."

Rhys looked like he was going to protest, but Evan stared him down. If Rhys didn't want to watch Takoda make Evan come, he shouldn't have been so insistent on Evan finding some pleasure in their sessions as well. Evan had been willing to walk away and take care of himself, but Rhys had insisted.

He'd made his bed. Now he had to lie in it.

"Rhys, help me get Takoda onto his knees."

Between the two of them, they wrestled and rolled Takoda into a kneeling position, the ropes keeping his legs wide open, his wrists still bound. "Perfect," Evan purred, unfastening the pouch on his pants and letting his cock spring free. He knelt on the bed so his cock brushed over Takoda's lips,

gut tightening as the sub's tongue flicked out to taste. "When I come, you can come," he told Takoda, rocking his hips forward to make his intentions clear.

Takoda's mouth opened automatically, letting Evan's cock slide into the warm heat. Evan groaned, eyes closing as he concentrated on not grabbing Takoda's head and fucking his face for all he was worth. Kade had done that. Evan wasn't going to do the same.

When he had himself under control—as much as possible with Takoda's head bobbing up and down on his cock—he opened his eyes again to check on Rhys. His friend had coated his fingers with lube and was busy working two of them inside Takoda's body. Evan groaned at the sight and ran his fingers lightly over Takoda's scalp. "Does it feel good?" he asked, though Takoda could not respond. "Do you like knowing you've got a man in each end? Another time, when Rhys has behaved, maybe I'll let him fuck you while you suck me off, and then you'll have a cock in each end. You'd like that, wouldn't you? Greedy sub. You know what happens to greedy subs, don't you?"

Takoda shook his head as best he could with Evan's cock in his mouth.

Evan grinned. "They get fucked," he promised.

Takoda moaned, the vibrations of his throat transferring to Evan's cock. He could feel his balls drawing up tightly in preparation for coming. He considered coming down Takoda's throat, but they hadn't talked about that, and Takoda had made his dislike of having his face splattered very clear. Pulling back, Evan had barely enough time to aim for Takoda's chest before his climax tore through him, spurt after powerful spurt leaving him trembling.

"Make him come, Rhys," he gasped, leaning back to enjoy the sight of Takoda's face twisted in pleasure, his cock pulsing hard against the ring. Taking pity on the sub, he reached between Takoda's legs and released the clasp on the cock ring. Immediately, Takoda's body convulsed as much as possible within the restraints.

"Session over," Evan said as soon as Takoda's climax passed.

Rhys was on Takoda immediately, releasing his restraints and pulling the other man into a hot, desperate kiss. Evan left them to it, fixing his pants and going to find the arnica and another wet cloth, this one at a more comfortable temperature.

When they still hadn't separated when he returned, he swatted Rhys lightly on the shoulder. "Let him up for air," he scolded teasingly.

Rhys glared at him. "You've had him for the last hour. It's my turn now."

“How about we clean him up and help him come down from his first real session first?” Evan suggested calmly. “Then you can take him to bed and make him come as often as you want. Just so long as you remember to contain yourself.”

“You’re a bit of a bastard in Dom mode,” Rhys grumbled.

Evan threw the towel in his face, sitting down on the bed and taking one of Takoda’s hands in his. “How are you feeling?”

Takoda paused for a moment before replying, eyes closing as Rhys tenderly cleaned his belly and groin. “Good,” he said finally. “Really good.”

“Part of that is still the endorphins,” Evan warned. “Your ass, and probably your nipples, are going to be sore later. We didn’t work you over as hard as we could have, but we didn’t exactly go easy on you either.”

He poured some of the arnica into his palm and dabbed it on Takoda’s nipples. “I’ll get your butt when Rhys is done cleaning you up, but if you start hurting again later, take something for it or get some more of the arnica.”

Takoda nodded, obviously still too blissed out to really register Evan’s words. He let it go for now. He’d check in with Takoda periodically throughout the day and evening and make sure he was taking care of himself.

When Rhys had him cleaned up, Evan helped Takoda roll over onto his stomach. He was about to smooth the arnica across the clearly visible paddle mark, but Rhys grabbed the bottle from his hand. “Mine,” he growled.

Evan rolled his eyes. “Yes, he is.” He leaned down and kissed Takoda’s cheek. “I’m going to let Rhys finish taking care of you. I’ll be downstairs if you want to talk about anything later.”

CHAPTER 19

“YOU could’ve picked a different punishment,” Rhys complained, coming into the living room where Evan was working again. He’d changed clothes, Evan noticed immediately, but his cock hadn’t subsided in the least, tenting the front of the loose shorts he was wearing as dramatically as it had the leather ones during the session.

“You could’ve suggested one,” Evan countered, “although honestly, I’m glad you didn’t. Takoda needed to see that disobedience merits punishment, but that punishment doesn’t have to equal pain or humiliation. I’m quite sure he didn’t learn the latter from Kade even if he learned the former. You’ll decide for yourself when you’re doing your own sessions with him after I leave whether you ever want to use pain as punishment, but that wasn’t my decision to make today.”

“I have to go to work tonight,” Rhys reminded him, “and walking around with a hard-on is hardly professional.”

Evan couldn’t stop a snort at the unintentional pun. “I’m sure you’ve got a cock cage I can put you in. That’ll keep your mind on business instead of Takoda’s sweet ass.”

“Careful, Evan,” Rhys warned. “I might be willing to share during a session, but that ass is mine. You don’t want to go getting ideas.”

Evan shook his head. “A couple of days ago, you were offering to include me outside the playroom as well,” he reminded Rhys.

“Yeah, well, things change,” Rhys defended himself.

“They do,” Evan agreed. “You don’t need me the way you thought you did. There isn’t really any reason for me to come back next week. You and Takoda will be fine on your own.”

That took the wind out of Rhys’s sails. “Are you sure you won’t come back?” Rhys pleaded.

"I'll gladly come back to visit in a few months," Evan promised, "but you *don't* need me now. I was in the way up there today, Rhys, and you know it. If you'd needed me, you wouldn't have questioned my orders and overstepped your bounds. You're hurting now because you didn't need me. Your natural dominance came out without any help on my part. You knew what you wanted to do to Takoda and you did it. And he enjoyed it."

"Then why I am so unsettled now?" Rhys demanded.

"Because you didn't get to come?" Evan suggested. "Because you had to hold back and do what I told you instead of what you wanted to do yourself?"

Rhys shrugged a little.

"No?" Evan asked. "The maybe it's because you had to watch me touch Takoda too? Because you have to go to work tonight when all you want to do is take Takoda back upstairs and erase every memory of anyone's hands but yours on his skin? There are a hundred reasons why you might be feeling off at the moment, and any one of them would be sufficient. I'd bet you're feeling most of them. If it will really make you feel better, we'll do one more session before I leave. I'll sit in the corner and watch. I won't direct unless you need my help, but I'll be there just in case. How does that sound?"

"I don't know if Takoda will be ready for another session so soon," Rhys delayed.

Evan rolled his eyes. "Takoda will be ready for whatever you want him to be ready for."

"You didn't see how badly he was hurt," Rhys began.

"No, I didn't," Evan interrupted, "but I saw him upstairs today. More than that, I watched him. Closely. He didn't protest anything but the pain in his shoulders, which I was very insistent he do, but I watched the way his body reacted to everything else. He reacted differently when you touched him than when I did. He doesn't want a Dom, Rhys. He wants you. He'll sub for you as often and in any way you want because of that, but with anyone else, he wouldn't be nearly as at ease. I'd put money on it."

"You'd lose that bet because I wouldn't let anyone else near him," Rhys growled.

Evan rolled his eyes with an indulgent shake of his head. "I'm going home on Sunday, Rhys. We can do another session or not, as you please, tomorrow sometime. Either way, though, there's no need for me to come back next week. Now, unless I miss my guess, you've got a sleepy sub in your bed who would probably love a good long cuddle before you go to work."

“No,” Rhys corrected. “I’ve got a horny sub in my bed who would love a long hard fucking, and I can’t give it to him.”

“Don’t tell me you don’t have any toys in your room,” Evan scoffed. “You’ll find a way to give him what he wants, and he’ll be all the more ready for the real thing tomorrow at one fifteen.”

“Bastard,” Rhys muttered, but he left the room, and a few moments later, Evan heard the door to his bedroom shut. Less than a minute after that, Takoda let out a wailing shriek that had Evan hardening again. Grabbing his iPod, he resolutely turned his attention to finishing his work for the day.

RHYS timed his departure so that all Evan saw of him was his leather-clad ass disappearing across the garden as he stepped out of the bathroom, having taken a shower so he’d have enough privacy to jerk off. Even with his music blasting, enough of the sounds from Rhys’s bedroom had filtered through that he’d needed the relief. Evan shrugged philosophically. He only hoped that if Rhys had disobeyed his order not to come, no one would tell him about it. He didn’t want to have to add to Rhys’s punishment, but he couldn’t let it pass if he found out about it. He couldn’t let Takoda get the idea that he could ignore orders from inside a session once the session was over.

Speaking of Takoda.... “You’re walking a little stiffly there,” Evan commented as Takoda made his way into the living room. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Yes. Rhys put more of that salve on me before he left and made me take two Advil,” Takoda replied. “I’m a little stiff, but it doesn’t hurt as much as I expected.”

Evan had a few choice thoughts about the prick who’d given Takoda such awful expectations, but he kept them to himself. “How are you feeling otherwise?” he asked instead. “About the session and everything.”

Takoda’s face was radiant. “I knew it had to be like that,” he said softly. “I knew it couldn’t always be like what Kade did to me, or why would subs stay?”

“Today was barely the tip of the iceberg,” Evan promised. “I’ve seen what Rhys can do with his ropes. He can have you deep into a submissive headspace fully dressed, simply by the way he binds you so he’s the one with all the control. And once you’ve let go, he’ll send you flying.”

“I saw him do that to another sub,” Takoda admitted. “He bound his arms so the sub was bent over at the waist, his arms stretched to the side and

behind him. And then he spanked and flogged him. It was the most amazing thing I'd ever seen. The sub loved every second of it."

"And you loved watching it," Evan finished.

"I did," Takoda admitted. "I went home and imagined myself in his place. And I've been imagining it ever since."

"With your shoulders, Rhys wouldn't be able to pull your arms that way, not yet, but I'm pretty sure he could recreate the rest of it. Your backside won't be up for another spanking or a flogging for a few days, but I don't imagine he only flogged the sub's ass. That's the beauty of the soft floggers. You can use them all over a sub's body. To use a paddle elsewhere, you either have to really want to hurt or you have to have a sub who's seriously into pain. But the flogger is soft enough to use almost anywhere except a sub's face and spine. I've even seen Doms use them on their subs' cocks."

Takoda flinched at that.

"Don't worry," Evan reassured him. "Rhys isn't like that. He wouldn't do that unless you wanted him to, and even then, he'd do it lightly. That's the other thing about the flogger. Used correctly, it can go from barely tickling to breaking skin. It's all in the way it's wielded. Given how you reacted to the clamps today, I bet you'd appreciate the kiss of leather across your chest too. Not hard enough to leave welts, only enough to sensitize the skin."

Takoda's face fell. "There's so much I still don't know," he complained. "How am I supposed to keep Rhys satisfied when I don't even know what the possibilities are?"

"You worked at his club for five years," Evan reminded Takoda. "Surely you figured out a few things."

Takoda shrugged. "A few, but I was always behind the bar and far too busy to pay much more attention to what was going on than necessary to keep track of patrons and orders. Sure, I saw things, but I didn't watch, if you know what I mean."

Evan understood perfectly. "Then it's time you did. You can't go to the club dressed like that. You'll never pass for a Dom and Rhys would kill me if I put a collar on you even for your own protection." He paused to reflect. "Get the cuffs you wore today for the session. Those will have to do in place of a collar. And I want you to stay within touching distance of me at all times, unless you're that close to Rhys. The regulars know you, but I don't want anyone getting ideas simply because you're on the floor, not behind the bar."

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Takoda asked warily.

Evan wasn't sure at all, but he didn't tell Takoda that. "Metamorphosis is a part of Rhys's life. That isn't going away, whether you ever work there

again or not. At some point, he's going to want you to go with him. Maybe not regularly, but what about the next time they try to cajole him into doing a demonstration? Are you going to let him take some other sub up on stage?"

"No!"

"Then you need to get past the fear of going there again now, before that becomes an issue between you later," Evan advised. "Stay close to me or to Rhys. Doms recognize other Doms or they find themselves in trouble pretty quickly. No one will bother you while you're with me. And they sure as hell aren't going to mess with Rhys."

"Okay," Takoda agreed slowly. "What should I wear?"

Evan knew better than to suggest the outfit that flashed into his mind, nothing covering Takoda's gorgeous body but a jock strap, the cuffs, and a chest harness to emphasize his swollen nipples. "Something simple, restrained," he said instead. "Dark colors. I don't know what you have."

"Not much," Takoda admitted. "I haven't needed anything other than shorts and T-shirts."

"You're not that much off Rhys's size. Let's raid his closet and see what we can find," Evan suggested. "And I need to change as well. If I'm going as your protection, I want every Dom in the room to recognize me as one of them."

An hour later, they climbed into a cab, attired very similarly in dark pants and shirts, though Evan's pants were leather instead of cloth. Evan had rolled up the sleeves on Takoda's shirt so the cuffs around his wrists were visible. Takoda had questioned his choices hesitantly, but Evan reminded him that they weren't going with the idea of showing Takoda off as a sub, either with the intention of finding him a Dom or of inspiring lust and envy in other Doms, but rather as observers, and the less attention they drew to themselves, the better. Later, when Rhys had claimed and collared Takoda, he could attire the sub as he pleased and show him off to the entire world. Evan liked his balls where they were. He had no desire to have them ripped off and shoved down his throat by a ballistic Rhys.

Ramón, one of the bouncers at the club, recognized Takoda the moment they exited the cab. "Takoda! How are you, *amigo*?" he exclaimed, enfolding Takoda in a tight embrace. Evan stepped closer, prepared to interfere if Takoda showed any sign of distress, but the sub returned the hug, smiling up at the scarred face of the Guatemalan bouncer.

"I'm doing better," he replied. "Rhys is taking good care of me. Oh, Ramón, this is Evan. He's a friend of Rhys and he's been staying with us the past couple of weeks."

“Any friend of the boss is welcome here,” Ramón said, offering his hand to Evan, “but are you sure it’s smart, bringing this one here?” He inclined his head toward Takoda. “The boss ain’t gonna like that.”

“I won’t let anything happen to Takoda,” Evan promised. “And I’ll take care of Rhys too, if it comes to that.”

“They’re your *cojones*,” Ramón answered with a shrug, opening the door to let them inside. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

As their eyes adjusted to the dim interior of the club, Evan put a heavy hand on Takoda’s shoulder. “Don’t move any farther from me than this,” he reminded the other man. “Not unless you’re with Rhys.”

A few heads turned in simple curiosity as they walked farther into the club, looking for a table or a booth if they could find one. Evan really wanted the extra security of being able to put himself between Takoda and anyone who might approach them. They finally found one in the far corner of the club, Takoda pressing hard against Evan’s back as they crossed the room.

“Slide in first,” Evan ordered quietly, though Takoda was one of only a few subs in the room sitting on a bench instead of standing behind a Dom or sitting on the floor at his feet. That was fine with Evan. He wanted the other Doms to know that Takoda was different.

The waiter who came up to take their orders, clad professionally in black pants and a white shirt—nothing suggestive or risqué to give the patrons inappropriate ideas about the staff—recognized Takoda immediately. “Hey, T! The boss didn’t say you were coming to visit tonight.”

“Hi, Brian,” Takoda replied. “The boss doesn’t know I’m here. This is his friend, Evan. We decided to come have a drink and watch for a bit, that’s all.”

Brian nodded. “Probably smart, coming with a Dom. You don’t want any of these jokers getting ideas just because you’re out here and not behind the bar. So what’ll you have?”

Evan ordered a beer, but Takoda requested only a glass of water.

Almost as soon as the waiter left, a string of regulars started by, asking Takoda how he was feeling, when he was coming back, whether he was coming back. Evan could see Takoda shrinking in on himself under the unwanted attention and cursed silently for coming. Before he could figure out how to extract them from the situation without causing a huge scene, Rhys swooped down on the table, scattering the mostly well-meaning Doms and giving Evan a glare that promised retribution. Nudging Evan out of the way, he held out his hand to Takoda, who took it gratefully, moving into Rhys’s embrace without hesitation. Not a single Dom in the room missed the way

Rhys's hands slid possessively down Takoda's back to close over his ass, squeezing just enough to elicit a soft gasp from Takoda at the pressure on the marks only Evan, Rhys and Takoda knew were there. By the time Rhys was done with his little show, Evan was pretty sure every Dom watching could imagine what lay beneath the snug pants.

"I thought your employees were off limits," one of the Doms jabbed.

"They are," Rhys replied firmly. "Takoda isn't working here at the moment. And before any of you gets ideas, he's here as *my* guest with my old friend, and I'll take it as a personal insult if anyone does anything to upset him. Now back off. You've seen him. You know he's here and that he's fine. And you know he's still as off limits as when he worked here."

The well-wishers backed off, leaving Rhys, Evan, and Takoda alone. "We'll talk about this when I get home," Rhys growled, handing Takoda back into his seat between Evan and the wall before stalking off.

"That went well," Evan said with a short laugh.

"Well?" Takoda parroted.

"He didn't punch anyone and he didn't tell us to leave," Evan elaborated. "By my count, that's pretty damn amazing."

Takoda subsided into the seat as Brian returned with their drinks, leaving again without any more conversation.

Across the room, Evan saw a Dom urge his sub up onto the table, face down. He pulled down the short shorts the sub was wearing, baring his ass to the onlookers who appeared appropriately impressed at the collection of welts on the sub's backside. Next to him, Takoda squirmed uncomfortably. "He isn't embarrassed," Evan said softly. "He's proud to show the others how he bent to his Dom's will, how he took what his Dom gave him and asked for more. They aren't marks of shame any more than the marks on your ass are."

"But I'm not face down on the table, showing them off for the world to see," Takoda stressed.

"Rhys might not have pulled your pants down, but everyone who saw his little show knows he left his marks on you," Evan informed Takoda. "They all saw the way he touched you and heard your little gasp when he squeezed. He didn't have to show them."

Takoda's face flamed.

"Why are you ashamed now?" Evan challenged softly. "You asked for them. You wanted Rhys to leave them. So why not be proud of them, of having Rhys as your lover and Dom? No one in here is going to judge you for it. If anything, the Doms are jealous they didn't get to you first and the subs are jealous because you got Rhys and they didn't."

“Really?”

“Yes, really,” Evan insisted. “Now, put your shame aside and look around the room. The subs are all here because they want to be, just like the Doms. Imagine yourself where they are and Rhys where the Doms are. But remember, too, that Rhys isn’t like a lot of Doms. You felt that today when he was spanking you.”

“He did the same thing to the sub during the demonstration,” Takoda confided. “He was obviously the one in control, yet he wasn’t cruel about it. He was always checking on the sub, ruffling his hair, kissing him, caressing the skin he’d just flogged.”

“And that was a demo,” Evan said. “Think how much more he’ll be like that with you, his lover as well as his sub. You’ll be the envy of every sub in the room when they see how indulged you are. If you think you can let them see.”

Takoda didn’t reply right away, the noise level in the club suddenly going up as the lights on the stage came on and a Dom led a collared and cuffed sub onto the stage for a show. The Dom bound the sub to a St. Andrew’s Cross and proceeded to work him over thoroughly with a riding crop, to the delight of the crowd.

The sub moaned and thrashed theatrically.

“He’s playing the crowd,” Takoda said after a moment, “making it out to be more than it is.”

“That’s right,” Evan agreed, “but the crowd’s eating it up. And he’s enjoying it too. He isn’t faking that log in his shorts.”

Takoda chuckled. “No, I guess not.”

“Think you’d ever get up on that stage?” Evan asked softly. “Let Rhys work you over for the crowd? You wouldn’t have to fake anything with him wielding the crop or flogger. He’d make you feel it exactly the way you like it, so it would be all you could do not to come in your pants like a kid before he was done with you. But you’d be so far under that you wouldn’t do anything that might upset him. And when he was done with you, he’d take you off stage and into his office and reward you for being the best sub in the club.”

Takoda’s soft moan came as no real surprise to Evan, but he was encouraged by it nonetheless. Some Doms never took their subs out, never wanted to, but Rhys enjoyed a bit of exhibitionism every once in awhile. From the sound of it, Takoda would enjoy it as well.

CHAPTER 20

EVAN didn't see Rhys when he came home that night, despite leaving his door open and his light on in invitation if Rhys wanted to talk. He heard the door open, heard Rhys's boots clomp up the stairs, and then heard the distinctive sounds of Takoda being ravished again. He pulled the pillow over his head and tried to sleep.

The next morning, the sound of the two men in the kitchen making breakfast woke Evan up. He showered and dressed quickly, not sure what his welcome would be. Takoda glowed at him; Rhys glowered. Evan decided that meant Rhys had obeyed Evan's orders and found other ways to satisfy Takoda during the night. He decided not to tempt fate by asking.

They had barely sat down with coffee and breakfast when Rhys commandeered the conversation. "How would you rate yesterday's session?" he asked Takoda. Evan considered protesting Rhys taking his role, but he was trying to remove himself from their relationship, so perhaps it was better to let Rhys do this as well.

"Ten," Takoda said immediately, the adoration in his gaze no surprise to Evan. "It was everything I'd hoped it would be."

"Was there anything you didn't like?" Rhys prompted.

Takoda didn't reply immediately, eyes sidling toward Evan.

"Go ahead," Evan encouraged. "If I did something you didn't like, Rhys still needs to know about it so he doesn't do the same thing again."

"It wasn't that," Takoda hurried to explain. "It's just... well, I could feel the tension between you and I didn't like that. I liked what you both did to me, but I'm not sure I liked what the session did to you."

"You're a good man, Takoda," Evan said with a smile. "If we were going to continue doing sessions with all three of us together, that would be a real concern, but I'm leaving tomorrow, only to come back for occasional

visits. From now on, Rhys is your one and only Dom, so the tension between us won't mar any more of your sessions with him."

"Anything else?" Rhys asked, taking back the reins of the conversation.

Takoda flushed. "I didn't like that you didn't fuck me. That you still haven't fucked me. But I guess that's something I won't have to worry about from now on either."

"Not as long as you do as I say," Rhys agreed. "Every session might not end that way, but unless you give me a reason to punish you, I don't see why a night wouldn't end that way."

Evan suspected Takoda's pout would ensure that every session ended that way for a while. A good, long while.

"What was your favorite part of the session?" Rhys went on.

Takoda pondered that question for a moment. "I'm not sure I had a favorite part," he said finally. "I liked different parts for different reasons. One of the things I've fantasized about since I watched the demo was the way you mixed caresses between swats when you were spanking the sub. That was my favorite part of the spanking—well, and seeing the marks this morning."

"How was the pain level?" Rhys interrupted.

"Five, maybe," Takoda said. "I felt it, but it wasn't anything I couldn't handle. I wouldn't mind a little more. It really took me out of myself."

"More than the sensation play later?" Rhys verified.

"In a different way. That was more about restraining myself, keeping myself from coming, but the spanking was about accepting what you wanted me to feel, regardless of whether I wanted it," Takoda struggled to explain.

"Was there anything in the sensation play you didn't enjoy?" Rhys asked. "The vampire gloves, the mitt, the temperature changes, the nipple clamps?"

Takoda shook his head. "The nipple clamps were my favorite, I think," he said shyly. "I'm still sensitive from them, to the point that my shirt rubbing against them sets me off."

"That's also good to know," Rhys said with a smile. "I want to do things that push you a little, that leave you with physical memories of what we did together. We talked about anything that would restrict your breathing, but we didn't mention restricting your sight. How would you feel about that? If I put a blindfold on you so you wouldn't know what I was going to do next?"

"I... I don't know," Takoda stuttered. "I don't think I'm ready for that."

“Then we’ll wait,” Rhys assured him right away. “I’m not going to deliberately do anything to scare you.”

“And if you do, I’ll use my safe word, I promise,” Takoda said immediately.

Rhys smiled and leaned in for a tender kiss that quickly grew heated as Takoda clung to Rhys’s shoulders.

“When can we do our next session?” Takoda asked breathlessly when they parted.

“Right after lunch,” Rhys promised. “The minute the clock says one-fifteen, I want to be able to fuck you the way I haven’t been able to do.”

Takoda’s lips parted on an eager moan. “Will you flog me the way you did the sub at the demo last year?” he asked breathlessly.

Rhys’s pupils dilated sharply. “Are you sure?”

Takoda nodded. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve come dreaming about being in his place. I know you can’t put my arms that way because of my shoulders, but Evan said you’re good at bondage. You can figure out some other way to tie me. Please, Rhys.” Takoda’s eyes dropped suddenly. “Sir.”

Evan thought for a moment that Rhys would forget about his order, his presence, and everything that didn’t involve taking Takoda upstairs and into a session right then, but Rhys restrained himself with great effort. “I’ll figure something out, lover. I promise. Now, go for a swim or a run or play your guitar or do anything to keep yourself busy for awhile. I need to talk to Evan for a bit and if you stay, I’m not going to keep my hands to myself until it’s time for the session.”

“You don’t have to,” Takoda said softly.

“Yes, lover, I do,” Rhys replied hoarsely, “or I’m going to disobey Evan’s orders and then we’ll be wearing matching stripes on our backsides.”

That earned Evan a glare from a different direction than usual, but Takoda didn’t argue, going upstairs for his suit and heading out toward the pool.

“Let’s go for a run,” Evan suggested when Rhys didn’t say anything immediately. “It’ll do us both good.”

Rhys nodded and disappeared to get his shoes. Silence reigned between them as they began their run, feet pounding hard against the pavement as they let their bodies work out their aggression. “You shouldn’t have brought him to the club last night,” Rhys said when they’d hit their stride toward the end of their first mile.

“No, you’re right,” Evan agreed. “You should’ve. The club’s a part of your life and so’s he. And they aren’t incompatible.”

“He’s not a plaything to be displayed for other people’s enjoyment,” Rhys protested hotly.

“What about for his enjoyment?” Evan countered. “He was so turned on by the thought last night he was practically salivating. I told you before; give him a month and he’ll be begging to go to the club to show off the marks you leave on him.”

“What if I don’t want to share?” Rhys demanded.

“Nobody’s going to touch your sub,” Evan reminded him. “You saw that last night. The minute they realized he was yours, they backed off. If you’ve claimed him even more publicly than that, he could walk around that club naked and no one would do more than drool. You’re the ultimate alpha there.”

“That didn’t stop Kade.”

Evan rolled his eyes. “We’ve been over this. Nothing would’ve stopped Kade. And that isn’t your fault because Takoda was your employee, not your sub, when it happened. That’s not what I wanted to talk to you about anyway. Are you sure you’re okay to do a session? You’re pretty tightly wound.”

“I’m a little horny,” Rhys retorted. “Of course I’m tightly wound. The discipline of the session will help me keep that under control until my time’s up. And it’ll put us in the perfect position once it is for me to release some of that pent-up lust.”

Personally, Evan thought they’d do better to wait, let Rhys and Takoda have few rounds of sex first, and then do the session, but Rhys wasn’t listening to anything Evan had to say at the moment, and Evan didn’t want to push too hard lest Rhys decide not to let him even watch.

They finished the run in uneasy silence, Evan hesitant to push the other Dom any further. The rest of the morning was an equally tense affair, Rhys heading out into his garden and ordering Takoda inside when he started to help.

“He’s worried about the session,” Evan told Takoda, hoping he hadn’t misread his friend’s reactions. “He wants it to be perfect and he’s already on edge from having his orgasm denied and from seeing you at the club last night. He’ll be fine once the session’s behind him.”

“Finish your lunch quickly,” Rhys ordered, coming in from outside about the time Evan finally convinced Takoda to sit down and eat. He dropped a quick kiss on the crown of Takoda’s head as he walked by. “Then

go upstairs and put on the cock ring again. I want you in display position in the middle of the room by the time I'm done with my shower."

Takoda's eyes grew wide as he looked at Evan. "Do what he says. I'll talk you through the position when we get upstairs," Evan said reassuringly. "He probably forgot we haven't talked specifically about positions. Do you want me to go talk to him, to make sure he's okay before we start?"

"I'm sure he's fine," Takoda said slowly. "He's hot and tired from working outside and wasn't thinking clearly. That's all."

Evan wasn't sure it was that simple, but he didn't want to unsettle Takoda any more than Rhys had already done. Grabbing his sandwich, he summoned a smile for Takoda. "I'm just going to check on him. I'll meet you upstairs in time to help you get in position."

Not giving Takoda a chance to reply, Evan bounded up the stairs and into Rhys's bathroom. "You all right?" he asked through the steam.

"Yeah," Rhys replied shortly. He didn't sound upset, but he didn't sound exactly thrilled about the upcoming session.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm hot and sweaty and horny," Rhys grouched, "and I've got another forty-six minutes until I'm allowed to come."

"Are you sure you want to do a session in this state?" Evan asked worriedly. "You startled Takoda downstairs, even with the kiss afterward. You don't want to scare him so badly that he leaves. I'll rescind the order. You can take him to bed and make love to him for a couple of hours and then do the session."

Rhys's head appeared around the shower curtain. "I'd be more likely to scare him that way than in a session. You know being a Dom has always been as much about controlling myself as controlling my sub. I don't know if I'd have the control I need outside the playroom at the moment, and that would be far more likely to scare him than a session in the playroom where I give him exactly what he asked for."

Evan still wasn't sure this was a good idea, but he couldn't argue with Rhys's contention, not when he'd seen for himself exactly how much difference the discipline of the lifestyle had made in Rhys over the years.

"We'll be waiting for you upstairs," he said after a moment, leaving Rhys to dry off and dress in private.

Upstairs in the playroom, Evan found Takoda naked as ordered, the cock ring already attached, awkwardly braiding his hair so it would be out of the way during the session.

“Show me how he wants me to wait for him,” Takoda requested as soon as Evan walked in the room. Evan couldn’t help but wince at the hint of trepidation in Takoda’s voice, but he didn’t want to interfere if he could help it. The idea was to let them figure it out on their own so he could go home. “Sit on your ankles,” he directed, “knees as far apart as you can get them. Clasp your fingers behind your head. Your head should be up, back straight, but your eyes should be down respectfully.”

Takoda moved as Evan indicated, face flushed as he opened his body wide in front of a man who was no longer his Dom. Evan circled him quickly, making sure everything would meet Rhys’s approval. He didn’t see how it wouldn’t. Takoda’s cock was already hard in its ring, jutting up against his belly, eager for attention. His bronzed skin was smooth and unmarked, except for the rather noticeable bruise across his ass. His nipples still looked swollen from the clamps yesterday, or perhaps they always looked that way when he was aroused. The Dom in Evan acknowledged the functionality of the pose, its purpose in reminding the sub of his role in pleasing his Dom, the way it left him open to whatever Rhys wanted to do from the moment he walked in the room.

The man simply gaped at the beauty of the vision in front of him. He hoped Rhys had the good sense to value the treasure he’d found.

Hearing footsteps on the stairs, Evan retreated to a chair in the far corner, where he would observe, out of the way, unless Rhys needed him.

The Dom who strode into the room, coming to a halt in front of Takoda and examining his position critically, bore little resemblance to the somewhat frazzled man who’d come in from the garden. Gone was the nervous energy, replaced by a focused calm that centered entirely on the sub kneeling on the floor. Unlike Evan, Rhys didn’t hesitate to touch as he circled Takoda, pinching the swollen nipples lightly, running his thumb over Takoda’s lower lip, urging him to lean forward so he could examine the bruise across his ass with deliberate pressure of his palms, and then finally grasping the darkened cock, tugging gently to bring Takoda to a standing position.

“Remember that position,” Rhys directed, his voice firm, but not harsh, relieving some of Evan’s concerns. “Unless I specifically tell you otherwise, you’ll wait for me in the playroom like that.”

“Yes, Sir,” Takoda replied, his voice already hoarse and trembling as Rhys’s hand continued to masturbate him lightly.

“Arms at your sides now,” Rhys directed, releasing Takoda’s cock and gathering his ropes from their cabinet. Returning to Takoda’s side, he took his time positioning the cordage so that every knot, every coil would add to Takoda’s sense of helplessness and of being owned by the man in front of

him. Evan could practically see him sinking into a submissive mindset as Rhys worked, wrapping his arms and then binding them to his body with carefully placed bonds so that the ropes holding his wrists to his thighs barely brushed his balls. The length around his belly slid beneath the head of his cock, and the one around his upper arms passed directly beneath his pecs. By the time Rhys was done, Takoda's eyes had closed, and his body was visibly trembling with desire.

"I'm not going to bind your feet this time," Rhys told him. "I don't want to worry about you losing your balance. When this isn't so new, though, I'll truss you up so tightly you can't move a finger before we start."

Takoda's moan was no discouragement. Rhys smiled and leaned in to kiss the sub quickly. "So beautiful. So willing to take what I give you."

"Yes, Sir," Takoda whispered. "Anything for you."

Evan closed his eyes against the incredible intimacy of the scene, feeling like the worst kind of voyeur for all that he had been invited to attend. His heart pounded in his chest as Takoda leaned into Rhys's touch, so clearly eager for more, whatever that entailed.

His cry when Rhys suddenly pulled hard on one of his nipples bordered on rapturous. Evan's nipples throbbed in sympathy, and he wondered how long it would take before he'd be squirming as much as Takoda.

Rhys moved away again to fetch a soft deerskin flogger, the kind whose bite felt far more like a kiss than a blow unless wielded with considerable force. He trailed the ends over Takoda's shoulders first, then up over his thighs, cock, and nipples. Takoda all but danced in delight. "Please, Sir," he begged. "Let me feel it."

Rhys sent the leather dancing across the skin of Takoda's upper back, barely even hard enough to make the usual distinctive thud, and the resulting sensations had Takoda dancing as well, arching and bending into the blows as much as the restraints on his upper body would allow.

Circling the enraptured sub, Rhys titillated Takoda's chest the same way he'd done with the darker man's back, alternating slaps of the leather with sweeps of one palm over the tantalized flesh. Evan couldn't decide which sensation Takoda preferred—gasps accompanied the flogging, and purrs accompanied the caresses, both sounds of unadulterated pleasure.

Landing a final blow directly across Takoda's nipples, Rhys found his sub's hand with his own as he moved again, squeezing lightly and receiving an equally soft squeeze in return. Takoda's eyes opened, and his head turned, seeking Rhys with his gaze, the weight of love and lust and trust so obvious that Evan could see it from across the room.

The backs of Takoda's thighs merited Rhys's attention next, the blows harder there than they'd been on his chest as Rhys urged Takoda to lean forward a little to reveal his target more clearly. Takoda's gasps turned to moans as Rhys heated his skin, but the expression on his face never changed.

Evan couldn't stop the smile on his own face as Rhys glanced over at him. Rhys smiled back, lifting his arm to deliver the hardest blow yet. Evan had no doubt Takoda was ready for it.

Until it landed flat across his ass instead of across his thighs.

The sharp wail was a complete contrast to every sound that had left Takoda's lips up to that point, startling Evan into half-rising from his seat. He subsided again when he saw that after the initial shock, the expression of bliss returned to Takoda's face.

From his vantage point, though, Rhys couldn't see Takoda's face. He could only see the way Takoda's body stiffened, back arching, hips moving forward as if to avoid another blow. The whip clattered to the floor, horror etched in every line of Rhys's body as he took a step back and then another.

"Rhys!" Evan said sharply, trying to snap his friend out of whatever panic had grabbed him.

It didn't work.

"Session over," Rhys cried, turning and fleeing the room.

CHAPTER 21

SHIT.

Shit, shit, shit.

Loyalty to Rhys urged Evan to go after his friend, to figure out what had caused such a reaction, but Evan had a trembling sub on his hands, struggling to make sense of something for which only Rhys could provide an explanation. And since Rhys wasn't here to do that, Evan was going to have to pick up those pieces first before he could figure out what Rhys's problem was.

"Easy, Takoda," he soothed. "Let me get you untied."

"What happened?" Takoda asked, his voice trembling as tears threatened. "What did I do wrong?"

"Nothing," Evan replied immediately, voice firm as he worked on the knots holding the ropes around Takoda's body. "You didn't do anything wrong. I don't know what's going on in Rhys's head, but you didn't cause it. You didn't disobey him. You didn't do something you shouldn't have done. Whatever the problem is, it's with him, not you."

Takoda shook his head, the tears spilling over his lashes as Evan released his hands and cock. "He doesn't want me. I should've known better than to think he'd want Kade's used up—"

"Stop!" Evan roared, interrupting Takoda, though the shout brought more tears to his eyes. Tempering his voice, he pulled Takoda into his arms, wishing he had a robe or something to wrap around the trembling sub. "You're not Kade's anything. You're Rhys's precious sub. You're his lover. You're the man he's in love with." He drew Takoda with him to the bed, sitting down and urging the other man to settle in his lap. "I don't know what happened with Rhys today, but I can venture a guess. I don't think he intended to flog your butt, and I think when he did and it hurt, it made him feel out of control. I'm sure you've figured this out already, but Rhys doesn't like feeling out of control."

“But why did he run?” Takoda asked, the tears easing slightly. “Why not just stop the session?”

“I don’t know,” Evan repeated, gut roiling at the insecurity he heard creeping back into Takoda’s voice. He had a few choice things to say to Rhys! “Come on; let’s go downstairs. You’re worn out. Take a nap and I’ll talk to Rhys. When you wake up and he calms down, we’ll talk and figure out what happened.”

And how they could make sure it never happened again.

Evan helped Takoda down the stairs to the second floor bedrooms, supporting most of the sub’s weight as little hiccoughed sobs continued to escape him despite his attempts to steady his breathing. Each one tore at Evan, driving deep the knowledge that he’d pushed Rhys to try the session alone so he could go home and stay home. Obviously that had been a misjudgment on his part. He only hoped they could salvage something from this mess, because they’d come too far to see the relationship crumble now.

Evan didn’t bother asking Takoda’s permission to come in as he helped the sub into his room and tucked him gently in bed. He should have, he knew, but Takoda was upset enough as it was without unwanted reminders of earlier troubles. He perched on the edge of the mattress, stroking the long braid until Takoda quieted finally, eyes closed. Evan wasn’t convinced the younger man was asleep, but he was calm enough for Evan to consider leaving. Pressing a platonic kiss to Takoda’s forehead, he left the room quietly to confront Rhys.

The door to Rhys’s bedroom was closed, but Evan didn’t consider that a deterrent, walking in without bothering to knock. “You want to tell me what the hell—?”

The sound of sobbing and retching silenced the rest of his demand. Coming to stand on the threshold to the bathroom, he took in the pathetic scene on the floor. Rhys’s long hair had come loose from its band, tangling around his face as he leaned over the porcelain bowl, dry-heaving wretchedly between sobs.

Lips thinning, Evan ran a glass of water at the sink and knelt next to Rhys, holding the rim to his friend’s mouth. “Drink.”

Docilely, Rhys followed Evan’s orders, swallowing the contents of the glass. Setting it aside, Evan took the washcloth, still damp from Rhys’s shower, and ran it over the tear-streaked face. “Come on. We’ll be more comfortable talking in your room.”

Silently, Rhys let Evan help him to his feet and trailed behind him to the bed. Evan propped the pillows up, sitting down and pulling Rhys onto the

bed next to him. “What happened up there?” he asked, much less angrily than before. “I’ve never seen you lose it like that.”

“I hurt him,” Rhys choked out. “I heard him scream like that when I led the police to Kade’s dungeon.”

“Okay, first of all, you didn’t hurt him. You surprised him a little, but I could see his face, Rhys. I’ve been reading subs’ expressions for as long as you have and I know pain, even welcome pain, when I see it on a sub’s face. You startled Takoda when you hit the bruise from yesterday, but that flogger isn’t the kind that would seriously hurt him even on a bruise.”

“I heard him,” Rhys protested.

“So did I,” Evan agreed, “but that wasn’t a real scream. And even if it was, I’ve seen you deal with worse in sessions before. You always take a step back, make sure the sub’s okay, and then try something different. So what happened today?”

Rhys shuddered. “I wasn’t in my playroom anymore,” he admitted, voice low and hoarse. “In my head, I was back in Kade’s dungeon, only instead of Takoda lightly bound with my ropes, he looked the way he did when we found him. And instead of the flogger in my hand, I was holding the heavy cat Kade had been using on him. I couldn’t... I couldn’t get that image out of my head. And I couldn’t trust myself not to do something unforgivable.”

“Tell me,” Evan ordered. “You’re so afraid of doing what Kade did. Tell me in every detail you can remember what he did.”

“He had Takoda on a spanking bench,” Rhys began haltingly, “and from the smell and the mess, he’d had him there for a long time without letting him up. Takoda already told you about the speculum. But it was worse than that. He was torn, bloody, all around it, like Kade had delighted in stretching him until it literally ripped him open. He was covered in welts and bruises from his neck to his knees, some of them older, some very fresh. I don’t know how he escaped without scars, except that none of the welts were deep. His hair, his long, beautiful hair, was dirty, matted with sweat and come, and his face was streaked with tears. And when the police arrested Kade on kidnapping and abuse charges, the bastard had the nerve to contend it was consensual.”

Evan’s heart broke for what Takoda had suffered, for what they knew of it and what they didn’t and perhaps never would. “Now look at me,” he insisted, “and tell me what part of that you have any desire to recreate.”

Rhys’s head came up angrily. “What the fuck, Evan? You know me better than that!”

“Yes, I do, but apparently you don’t,” Evan said baldly. “You seem determined that you’re going to hurt him the way Kade did, but nothing either of you has told me about Kade’s choices reflect anything you actually like to do to a sub. Other than maybe turning one over a spanking bench, but even then, you usually prefer other, more creative methods of restraint. And you occasionally like to leave your mark on your sub, witness the stripes on my ass and the bruise on Takoda’s, but not to the point of covering him in injuries. Do you even own a speculum?”

Rhys shook his head.

“What about a cat like the one you said Kade was using?”

“I had one, but I got rid of it. It didn’t have enough range of sensation,” Rhys admitted.

“Then where is this fear coming from?” Evan demanded. “I understand that you’re angry at what happened to Takoda, but you’d never treat him the way Kade treated him. He knows that. I know that. So why don’t you know that?”

“Because I don’t get why Takoda would want anything to do with any Dom after the way Kade treated him,” Rhys whispered. “Because I’m afraid I’ll do something he won’t like and it’ll remind him of what Kade did. And because if that happens, I’m afraid he’ll lump me in the same category and then I’ll lose him forever.”

“So you’d be satisfied with vanilla sex for the rest of your life rather than risk losing him?” Evan challenged.

“Yes.”

The whispered admission did more to convince Evan of how much Rhys loved Takoda than any shouted declarations would ever be able to do. For a dyed in the wool Dom like Rhys to be willing to give that up rather than lose his lover was the ultimate sacrifice. “And when you lose him because he wants more than vanilla sex and you can’t provide it?” Evan asked.

“He’s barely had any experience with sex of any kind,” Rhys reminded Evan. “He isn’t likely to get bored any time soon.”

Evan shook his head. “You’re underestimating him. He started down this path because he wanted to be what you wanted in a lover, but he’s gone beyond that now. He’s gotten a taste for submission and he’s turned on by that state. Last night at the club, once he got over his ingrained reaction, he was turned on by the exhibitionism of it all too. He wants to be your sub and he wants you to be proud of him so he can be proud of his place in your life.”

“So what do I do now?” Rhys asked seriously.

“The first thing you do,” Evan replied in the same vein, “is go in Takoda’s room and beg his forgiveness for walking out on him the way you did. That hurt him far worse than anything you could do to him with your ropes and floggers and canes. And when you’re done groveling, you climb into bed next to him and ravish him thoroughly so he gets over any lingering doubts about how much you desire him. When you’ve done that and you’re both feeling better, come find me and we’ll talk about what happens next.”

“Next?” Rhys repeated.

“I obviously can’t just go back to Boston and leave you to your own devices,” Evan pointed out. “You lost it the first time you did a session with him by yourself. Go take care of Takoda. That’s your main concern at the moment. We’ll deal with the rest later.”

Rhys nodded and rose from the bed, stripping off his Dom leathers and pulling on a robe instead before walking slowly down the hall to Takoda’s room. The phrase “dead man walking” popped into Evan’s head, the way Rhys dragged his feet making his trepidation clear. “Takoda?” he said softly when he reached the door.

“Rhys?” Takoda’s voice from inside the room was watery still. “I’m sorry I disappointed you.”

“God, no! Don’t think that,” Rhys exclaimed, stepping into the room. “I’m the one who let you down.” Evan waited only long enough to see Rhys reach the bed and pull Takoda into a loving embrace before stepping back and closing the door. They needed to work this out between them, even if he’d had to give them the push to get started.

Downstairs, Evan put away the suitcase he’d started to pack a second time. He didn’t need clothes since he had plenty at his apartment. He could fit the few toiletries he didn’t have duplicates of in his computer case. He’d leave everything else here for when he came back on Tuesday.

Going back into the living room, he flipped the TV on to cover any noise from upstairs and let his mind wander, turning over various possibilities in answer to Rhys’s question of what next. Rhys’s only bad moments in their session the day before had come when his desires conflicted with Evan’s commands, so it wasn’t the actions themselves that seemed to be the problem. The paddle had hurt Takoda worse than the flogger Rhys was using today could do. And while they’d kept the touch of the vampire gloves and nipple clamps light, those, too, could be far more painful than the deerskin flogger. The problem seemed to be Rhys’s perception of Takoda’s reactions.

He’d have to talk to Takoda, but it seemed to him the best way forward was to push Rhys to deal with his fears by doing to Takoda in moderation the

things he feared would drive him away in excess. They could do that in the session with Evan as the nominal Dom so that the decisions were his rather than Rhys's, although Evan would do a few other things differently as well. And outside the sessions, Evan thought the best medicine for Rhys's doubts was for Takoda to love him as often and as thoroughly as possible. Somehow Evan didn't think Takoda would mind that too much.

THE next morning, Evan led a thoroughly briefed Takoda into Rhys's bedroom, Rhys trailing behind, looking more than a little bemused at this suddenly forceful side of his submissive lover. Rhys and Takoda hadn't come downstairs last night until almost dinnertime, both of them with red-rimmed eyes but contented smiles. Evan had asked a few questions, not wanting to meddle too much. They'd assured him they'd talked about what happened and that they still wanted to be together, still wanted to have a relationship that encompassed sessions. And that they still wanted Evan to help them achieve that goal. Evan had left it at that, not comfortable pressing for more intimate revelations. It was bad enough to be part of their sessions. He didn't want to be part of the rest of their sex life too.

This morning, he'd sent Rhys out to get more milk—he'd dumped the little bit left in the fridge last night so he'd have an excuse to get Rhys out of the house for a few minutes—and talked through his plan with Takoda, who had agreed enthusiastically. As soon as Rhys got back, they set their plan in motion, knowing Rhys would be too curious not to follow them into the bedroom.

"Here's a dildo," Takoda said, opening the drawer in the bedside table and tossing the implement in question on the bed.

"Good. What else does he have hidden away in here?" Evan asked, completely ignoring Rhys's presence. He opened the top drawer of Rhys's dresser, digging through the underwear and socks to make sure there weren't any sex toys hidden inside.

Between the two of them, they cased the entire room, making a pile of anything sexual other than condoms and lube. When they'd finished searching, Evan dumped everything they'd found into a bag and carried it upstairs to the playroom. "Did you find the key?" he asked Takoda when he came back to the base of the attic stairs.

"Right here," Takoda replied, the grin on his face suggesting he'd employed some seductive persuasion to get Rhys to give it to him.

Evan made a show of locking the door at the foot of the stairs and slipping the key into his pocket. “Now, no sessions while I’m gone,” he ordered both of them, although he kept his eyes pointedly fixed on Takoda. “That doesn’t mean you can’t have sex, though. In fact, I expect you to seduce Rhys as often and as thoroughly as you possibly can while I’m gone. If you can still walk when I get back, he hasn’t fucked you long or hard enough.”

“Evan!” two voices protested in unison, both faces flaming.

“What?” Evan asked. “You”—he pointed to Rhys—“need to know he really does want you. The best and fastest way to prove that is for him to jump you every chance he gets. And you”—he pointed to Takoda—“need to know you’re enough for him. The best way for him to prove that is to ravish you so thoroughly that you’re drunk on sex. So those are your Dom’s orders for now until Tuesday morning. After morning sex on Tuesday, though, put your cock rings back on and don’t touch each other again in any sexual way other than kissing until I get back. You can kiss—above the neck only—as much as you want.” Remembering what had caused the tension between Rhys and himself during the last session he had run, he added, “Even during a session as long as it doesn’t interfere with you obeying my other orders.”

Rhys clearly recognized the generosity of the offer, his soft smile signaling his thanks as he wrapped his arms around Takoda from behind and pressed a tender kiss to the line of his neck.

“Now, are you going to drive me to the airport or do I have to call a cab?” Evan teased as Takoda’s eyes closed and he leaned into Rhys’s embrace.

He didn’t think they’d have any trouble obeying his orders while he was gone.

CHAPTER 22

DAMN, it felt good to be home. A little odd after the dry heat of Nevada, but good.

Evan tossed his laptop bag on the bed and went to take a shower before meeting Patrick for dinner. His eyes closed beneath the hot water as it washed away the illusory grime of traveling and the exhaustion from the conflicted emotions he'd been dealing with in Nevada, his own and his friends'. He hoped he hadn't made a mistake by arranging the date with Patrick. Date or no date, relationship or not, he needed a successful, stress-free session tonight, and probably tomorrow night, before he went back to the fraught situation in Nevada. Always before, Patrick had provided that, his presence a guarantee of a rousing, arousing session that left Evan feeling as good as he left his sub. That was what gave him the idea that they might be compatible outside the playroom as well, but he really couldn't afford to have his own head muddled when he flew back to Vegas on Tuesday.

As he finished his shower, he debated calling Patrick and canceling their dinner by inviting the sub over early for a session, but truth be told, he wanted more than that. Much as he'd never admit it to his friend, Rhys was right. He wanted the date, the chance at a relationship. If it didn't work out, he could still go to one of the clubs and find another of his occasional subs. If the session and the sex weren't quite as good as with Patrick, it would still be better than nothing.

Evan took his time dressing, selecting a linen suit and button down shirt, leaving the top two buttons undone. Not enough to do more than tantalize, but enough to draw the eyes in the hope of seeing more. Patrick knew Evan's body almost as well as Evan knew Patrick's, but he didn't see the harm in the temptation. Regarding himself in the mirror, he was pleased at the image reflected back at him. He looked exactly like what he was: a successful mid-level bank employee out for a dinner at an elegant restaurant. Only the steel in his eyes hinted at the Dom hidden beneath the surface.

Patrick would see it, but he'd also see, for the first time, the rest of what Evan had to offer. He hoped the man would be as interesting to his date as the Dom.

Heading across town toward the Boston Common, he got off the T at the Back Bay stop and walked the three blocks to the restaurant. It wasn't the most elegant way to arrive, but he didn't want to search for parking that near the river and the Inner Harbor. Some fights just weren't meant to be won. Besides, it was chic to be environmentally conscious and use public transportation. One more way to impress his date.

If he said it often enough, maybe he'd even believe it.

Patrick was waiting for him, even though Evan was ten minutes early. He greeted Evan with a shy smile as he picked at the sleeve of his jacket, a gesture Evan found most endearing. "No reason to be nervous," he murmured as he shook Patrick's hand. "You know how the evening's going to end."

"I'm not worried about the end," Patrick promised as the maitre d' came up to seat them. "I'm worried about the middle."

The maitre d' showed them to a mosaic-covered table for two.

"Don't be," Evan said with a smile. "We're going to enjoy a delicious dinner, have a chance to talk about something other than what we might want out of a session, and get better acquainted. Once dinner is over, we can discuss the rest of the evening. Deal?"

"Deal," Patrick said, returning Evan's smile.

They both turned to browsing the extensive menu when a thought occurred to Evan. "Patrick," he said, his voice no louder than before, but the cadence changing to one the sub recognized, instinctively sitting straighter as he looked up at Evan. "No onions. I don't want to smell them every time I make you moan tonight."

Patrick's eyes went wide, pupils dilating as he shifted in his seat. "Yes, Sir," he replied, his voice soft.

Evan smiled, slipping his foot out of his loafer to rub against Patrick's ankle. "Relax. Tell me something about yourself, something you like to do when you aren't working or at the clubs."

The simple caress had its desired result. The tension left Patrick's spine and the submissive expression disappeared from his face. "Sailing in the summer," he replied, his face lighting up in delight. "When it's too cold to go out on the water, I play ice hockey."

"I love to sail," Evan said, thrilled at having an additional connection, "but I haven't been out in a couple of years."

“Why not?” Patrick asked, surprised. “There are tons of places you can rent a boat for a day.”

“Time,” Evan admitted with a shrug. “I spend too much of it at work. And no one to share it with.”

“Well, that’s just a shame,” Patrick said. “I’ll take you sailing next weekend. How does that sound?”

The arrival of the waiter to take their order forestalled Evan’s reply.

“Does the *Pechuga de Pollo a la Mexicana* have onions in it?” Patrick asked the waiter, not looking at Evan as he spoke. Evan hid a triumphant grin. Patrick clearly had the same hopes for after dinner that Evan did.

“No, sir,” the waiter replied.

“Good, that’s what I’ll have,” Patrick declared, “and a glass of iced tea.”

“The same for me,” Evan requested, wanting the waiter gone so he could return his full attention to the man across from him. As soon as the waiter left, he picked back up the thread of the conversation. “I’d love to go sailing with you sometime, but unfortunately, I won’t be in town next weekend. I told you I was out of town when you called, right? Well, I have to go back on Tuesday morning and I don’t know how long I’ll be gone.”

“You mentioned helping out a friend,” Patrick replied with a nod. “What’s going on? If I’m not prying.”

Evan considered brushing it off, but his relationship with Rhys had been the end of his last three relationships. Better to find out now if Patrick couldn’t deal with that friendship.

“My friend Rhys called and asked me to come out to Vegas,” Evan began. “We’ve been inseparable since we were two. Anyway, a couple of months ago, one of his friends got in trouble with a bastard who called himself a Dom and ended up pretty badly abused. Rhys was there when they found him, and it’s messing with his head, so he asked me to come help them get their relationship straightened out. I think we’ve gotten Takoda, the sub, on the right track, but Rhys still has all kinds of demons in his head that he hasn’t managed to exorcise. Having started trying to help, I don’t feel like I can back out now. Takoda trusts me enough finally to listen to me when Rhys is being stupid and Rhys trusts me enough to listen when I tell him he’s being stupid. If they had to start over with someone else, who knows how long it would take before they got to this point again.”

“You’re not just talking to them, are you?” Patrick verified slowly.

Evan shrugged, not really sure how to explain the awkward threesome that had developed between Takoda, Rhys, and himself. "It's complicated. Rhys is a good Dom, but he's hamstrung by his memories. He can't do a session with Takoda on his own without freaking out, so I'm trying to direct his actions so he sees how much Takoda wants to be there. It's a temporary thing, I promise. They're so in love. They won't want me there in the long run, but I agreed to help. I can't back out now."

"It's not my place to tell you what to do or not to do," Patrick reminded him. "We've had some amazing sessions, but this is our first date. I don't have any right to be jealous."

"Does that mean you are?" Evan asked, heart pounding.

"I'm always jealous when another sub has your attention," Patrick admitted after a moment's pause. "That doesn't mean I have a right to feel that way."

Damn, he wished he didn't have to go back to Vegas on Tuesday. "Let's see how tonight and tomorrow go," Evan suggested, voice deepening. "I still have to go back, but there's nothing that says I can't change the terms of my assistance."

"You'd do that for me?" Patrick asked, surprised.

"I'm only a Dom in the playroom," Evan said by way of explanation. "If all we're going to do is scene together, maybe not, but I suggested dinner hoping we'd find more in common than that. We've already discovered a shared interest in sailing. Who knows what else we might find if we keep looking? And for a lover, there's a lot of things I'd be willing to do."

"As long as we can still have our sessions, I'm definitely open to other things as well," Patrick said, a slow grin spreading across his face. He leaned forward confidentially. "Do you know why I called you?"

"To set up a session, I assumed," Evan replied. "That's what you said in your message."

"That's true," Patrick agreed, "but I didn't tell you why I called *you*. I'd been keeping an eye out for you, hoping to see you at one of the clubs. When I didn't find you, well, I let another Dom talk me into a session, and then spent the entire hour thinking, 'Evan does that better' or 'Evan would never let me get away with that'. The entire experience left me unsatisfied, so I decided it was time to look you up. When you suggested dinner on top of it, I was over the moon. Speaking of dinner, how'd you find this place? It's really nice."

Evan barely had time to process Patrick's revelation before the sub had changed the subject.

“I went to Emerson College,” he explained automatically, mind reeling at the thought that Patrick was as invested in starting something with him as he was. “It’s not far from here. Not that I could afford to eat here when I was in college, but I learned the area pretty well.”

“What’s your degree in?” Patrick asked, curious.

“Marketing communication,” Evan replied, relaxing now that the assurance of Patrick’s interest had eased some of his first-date jitters. “I do marketing research and strategic campaigns for Mercantile Bank. Mostly, I work remotely, and can pretty much set my own hours as long as I work enough of them. It’s made my trip to Vegas possible, but occasionally I have to go into the office for a meeting. Tomorrow is one of those days.”

“Can I be selfish and be glad it is since it brought you back to Boston for a few days?” Patrick asked, winking at Evan.

“I’m certainly glad to be here,” Evan replied, enjoying the light flirting. “I needed a break from all the craziness in Vegas, but even more than that, I’ve been looking forward to our date.”

“And the session?”

Evan’s grin widened. “I always look forward to those.” And he did. Patrick went under like no sub Evan had ever known, taking anything Evan dished out and begging for more. In all the times they’d been together, Patrick had never used either of his safe words, no matter how hard Evan pushed him. And he kept coming back for more. It made Evan wonder how far it would be possible to push Patrick. Maybe tonight, if Patrick agreed to come home with him, he’d find out.

“What about you?” he asked, clearing his throat as he pushed away the lusty image. “What’s going to drag you out of my bed in the morning?”

“Your bed?” Patrick squeaked, not answering Evan’s question at all.

“I certainly hope that’s where you’ll be sleeping tonight,” Evan admitted. “I thought we could go to my house for our session, if that doesn’t make you uncomfortable, and then maybe, well, maybe you’d like to stay. But first you have to answer my question.”

“I’m the field half of an architectural design partnership,” Patrick replied slowly, his voice returning somewhat to normal as they moved away from the charged subject of where he was going to sleep. “I work with the construction foremen to make sure what’s on the page is what’s on the ground as well.”

“Sounds interesting,” Evan commented, remembering Rhys’s stories about how he’d had to fight with the contractors when they were building his house to make sure everything met his specifications. “Very active.”

Patrick shrugged. “It has its moments. And then other moments when it’s tedious as anything. It’s a decent living, though, and it’s an old buddy and me so there isn’t an annoying boss to drive me crazy.”

“That’s nice,” Evan said, thinking about his day on Thursday and his love-hate relationship with his own boss. “I’d gladly trade out bosses, although I’m not sure I’d trade jobs. Mercantile is a good company, generous with benefits, even to less traditional families. And I can work from pretty much anywhere as long as I have an Internet connection.”

Their food arrived, distracting them for a few moments as they ate.

“What do you do with your free time?” Patrick asked between bites. “You said you don’t sail anymore.”

“I’m a runner,” Evan answered. “Or I swim sometimes, but that’s more left over from tagging along with Rhys. It’s a good alternative to running when it’s too miserable to go out though.”

“I knew you had to be an athlete of some sort,” Patrick confided. “You don’t get to look as good as you do just by going to the gym occasionally.”

Evan smiled at the compliment. “I’d had the same thought about you more than once,” he admitted. “Most subs aren’t as muscular as you are.”

Patrick shrugged. “When I was younger, I was always afraid I’d hurt the guys I was with just because I was bigger. I didn’t often find guys bigger than me, but that’s what I wanted so I wouldn’t have to worry about accidentally breaking some willowy thing. It made sense for me to bottom, and that led naturally to being a sub.”

Evan knew a lot of “bottoms” who would disagree, but he could see how it had happened for Patrick. “I still have that concern with some of the really small subs,” he agreed. “I know they can take more than I’m willing to give them, but I’m always afraid to take that chance.”

“What about with me?” Patrick asked. “Are you willing to take a chance?”

That was a loaded question, and Evan had a sudden suspicion they weren’t talking about sessions anymore. “I think I am,” he said. “Eat fast. I’m suddenly eager to get home.”

CHAPTER 23

THEY finished eating with almost indecent haste, not giving the food nearly the attention it deserved, the overwhelming desire to be alone driving them to hurry. Patrick finally gave in and let Evan pay the bill, but only after Evan agreed to let him pay on their next date. The thought that Patrick wanted a next date was enough to make Evan capitulate immediately.

“Where’s your car?” Patrick asked as they left the restaurant. “I’ll follow you home.”

“I came in on the subway,” Evan replied, snatching the keys out of Patrick’s hand. “I’ll drive us to my house. It’ll be easier than giving you directions.”

Patrick was apparently too eager to get somewhere private to care. He led Evan to a late-model sedan, climbing in on the passenger side. Evan took the driver’s seat, but instead of fastening his seat belt, he leaned over and grabbed the back of Patrick’s neck, pulling the sub into a hot, wet kiss.

Patrick moaned into Evan’s mouth and gave in to the kiss entirely, lips parting in welcome as Evan claimed him. “Kiss me back,” Evan growled, lifting his head for a moment. “The session won’t start until we get to my house.”

Released from the imagined constraints, Patrick returned the kiss avidly, his tongue dueling with Evan’s, sending passion jumping along his synapses as he struggled to assimilate the demanding lover with the yielding submissive he already knew. He had a feeling the contrast would keep him enthralled for some time to come.

His cock already aching, Evan ran his hands over the smooth cotton of Patrick’s shirt, feeling the muscles beneath, testing their strength beneath his fingers, tweaking one nipple, stoking the desire that sparked between them. When touching wasn’t enough anymore, he pulled away, hands gripping the steering wheel. “We need to go or I’m going to push you into the backseat and fuck you right here,” he told Patrick.

“And this is bad why?” Patrick demanded hoarsely.

“Because we’re in a public parking garage,” Evan suggested wryly. “And because I’d much rather have you in my swing or over my spanking bench instead of crammed into a backseat that will barely fit either of us. We’ll both enjoy it more that way.”

“I’m pretty sure I’d enjoy it either way,” Patrick grumbled, but he fastened his seatbelt as Evan started the car and headed toward his condo in Mattapan.

When they were en route, Evan asked, “What do you want out of tonight’s session?”

“Anything and everything I can get,” Patrick replied fervently.

“Anything you don’t want?” Evan asked, though Patrick’s answer had not really been an answer. He thought he knew the sub’s preferences well enough to extrapolate.

“Don’t be gentle with me,” Patrick replied. “Take me under hard and fast and keep me there until there’s nothing left but pleasing you.”

Fuck.

“If you say things like that, I’m not going to stay in control long enough to give you what you want,” Evan groaned.

The look Patrick gave him spoke of complete confidence. “Yes, you will,” he averred. “You always do, and that’s when it was just a session. Now that it might mean something, it’ll be even better.”

“Has anything else changed since the last time we were together? Any new injuries or anything like that?” Evan asked, wanting everything out of the way before they reached his house, because as soon as they were inside, he wanted to be able to start the session. He was having trouble waiting even that long, but he didn’t really feel like he knew Patrick well enough to order him to start stripping here in the car. Particularly not when Evan would have to park his car in the alley next to his house since his car was already in the garage.

“Nothing serious,” Patrick replied immediately. “A few scrapes and stuff from the last time I went sailing, but nothing major. And I haven’t had anything today that might interfere with my pain tolerance. I expected to go to a club, not your house, but I did hope we’d end up having a session so I made sure not to do anything that might interfere with that.”

If Patrick’s goal was to inflate Evan’s ego, it was working. It was also having that effect on his cock. “We’ll be at my house in twenty minutes,” he told Patrick, reaching for the zipper on his pants and working it down. “I want

your mouth on me, but don't make me come. The only place I'm coming tonight is in your ass."

Patrick's head was in his lap in a heartbeat, and he finished the job of fishing out Evan's cock so he could work his mouth around the tip, beginning a blowjob designed to take Evan to the edge of release but not push him over. Evan hadn't specified the punishment for failure, but he figured Patrick's imagination would come up with something suitably dissuasive. He wasn't new to the D/s scene. He'd seen enough Doms come up with enough creative punishments not to take that risk.

Patrick's mouth was hot and wet, alternately slurping at the tip of Evan's cock and sliding down the full length, never lingering on one activity long enough to push Evan past the point of no return. He found it more and more difficult to concentrate though, grateful they'd pulled off the interstate and back onto city streets. While they were moving, Evan managed to restrain himself and focus on the road, but whenever they stopped, his hand landed on the back of Patrick's head as his hips lifted, forcing his cock all the way into Patrick's throat. The sub swallowed around him each time, making Evan resolve to do a session at some point that involved some serious cock worship on Patrick's part. He could just imagine fucking Patrick's face with the sub bound to his spanking bench so Evan would have access to his back and ass at the same time. He had floggers long enough to motivate the other man.

Evan's thighs were trembling with the need to come by the time he pulled into the alley behind his house. "Stop," he ordered, parking the car and pocketing the keys. When Patrick lifted his head, Evan tucked himself back into his pants enough for decorum's sake. "Inside," he said simply.

Patrick scrambled out of the car, waiting, hands at his side in perfect stillness, for Evan to lead the way. The silent submission fired Evan's blood even more. He led the way into the house, stopping at the bathroom. "Take care of anything you need to. The playroom's directly across the hall. Strip and present by the time I get back."

He didn't wait to see if Patrick moved to obey his orders. He didn't need to.

In his own room, he pulled off his suit, debating what to put on instead. He had another pair of leather pants in the closet, a variety of shorts and vests and harnesses he could wear, but they weren't going out tonight. He didn't need any of those trappings to prove he was a Dom. Patrick knew it already. All he needed was the bark of his voice. Sliding a cock ring on himself to be safe, he strode back down the hall to the playroom in nothing but his boxers.

He found Patrick exactly as he'd ordered, standing in the middle of the room, hands clasped behind his head, feet shoulder width apart, completely

naked. And very aroused. Approaching his sub, he encircled the darkened shaft in his fist, squeezing firmly. Patrick gasped but didn't speak. "Do you need a lesson in control?" he growled into Patrick's ear.

"Yes, Sir," Patrick replied immediately, though Evan knew it wasn't really necessary. When Patrick got into a submissive headspace, he wouldn't do anything, even come, without his Dom's permission, no matter the provocation. Releasing Patrick's cock for a moment, he went to his storage cabinet and withdrew a new toy he'd found a week before leaving for Vegas, one he hadn't had a chance to use on anyone yet. Coming back to Patrick's side, he held it up for the sub to see.

"See the little ball?" Evan asked when Patrick's eyes widened. "That goes in your ass to make sure the ring stays in place, no matter how hard I stretch your balls. And every time you move, it'll remind you that it's there."

Patrick shivered as Evan fastened the ring around his cock and balls and inserted the anal ball, but other than widening his stance slightly, he didn't break position. "Good boy," Evan praised, stroking his hand up Patrick's thigh lightly. Outside a session, he'd never address the other man in such a seemingly demeaning fashion, but the look of surprise and delight on Patrick's face at the praise suggested Evan couldn't have given him a higher compliment. Even so, if this turned into something more, he'd have to find a better sobriquet.

He circled Patrick slowly, taking in every detail of his appearance, stopping when he saw the long scratch down the side of Patrick's back. "What's this?" he demanded, fingers tracing the length of the mark.

"A sailing accident, Sir," Patrick replied shamefacedly. "I ducked to avoid the boom. It missed my head, but dragged all down my back. It's only a scrape, Sir."

It might have been only a scrape, but it changed Evan's plans for the evening. He could hardly take a flogger to skin that was already broken. He'd have to do something else instead. Inspiration hit when he felt the full-body shiver that went through Patrick at his light, almost ticklish touch. It would be different from what they usually did together—Patrick was a pain slut, the more the better—but that wasn't a bad thing. It would remind the sub who was in charge and let Evan push his limits in a different way. And if Patrick was good, Evan could always reward him later. After all, the scratch didn't reach his ass. His pert, white ass that begged to be turned a delightful shade of red....

Evan cleared his throat, glad for the cock ring that kept him from embarrassing himself at the thought. "On the spanking bench," he barked. "If you're good, you'll get what you want in the end."

A slight snicker escaped Patrick at the inadvertent pun. Evan frowned, grabbing Patrick's arm and stopping his forward motion. "Do you need a lesson in manners?"

"No, Sir," Patrick replied immediately. "I'm sorry, Sir."

"The next time it happens, you'll be on your knees instead of your feet any time I tell you to move," Evan warned. "I don't like disrespectful subs."

Crestfallen, Patrick walked to the spanking bench, positioning himself on it with the ease of practice. Evan walked to his head. "I'm not going to use the restraints. I trust you to hold your position, no matter what I do to you."

"Yes, Sir," Patrick replied, the glow returning to his face at the comment. "I won't disappoint you again, Sir."

Evan hid a smile as he moved back out of Patrick's line of sight again. If he'd been going for a paddle or a flogger or a cane, he imagined that would be true, but he wondered how Patrick would stand up to a different kind of sensation. Selecting a long, soft feather tickler from his collection of toys, he returned to Patrick's side, keeping it out of the sub's sight until he ran it up the back of Patrick's leg. The muscle twitched in surprise. "If you hold your position, I'll alternate the tickler and a spanking each time I finish with a part of your body. If you move, I'll start all over again. Each time I have to start over is another hour before you get to come."

"Yes, Sir," Patrick asked. "Am I allowed to move other parts besides what you're working on?"

"As long as you don't pull away from the tickler," Evan agreed, stroking the feather over the bottom of Patrick's foot. His toes curled immediately, but he didn't pull away.

"Am I allowed to beg?"

Evan smiled at the desperation he could already hear investing Patrick's voice. "All you want. But don't expect me to be merciful. This is one of my favorite games."

It took less than a minute before Patrick started pleading with Evan. Evan ignored him, continuing to stimulate the sole of his sub's foot. When the tone of the pleas changed, becoming almost desperate, Evan relented, moving the tickler away and swatting the upturned buttocks sharply. All the tension left Patrick's body at the familiar, welcome bite of pain. Because the smooth, resilient flesh was too tempting to resist, Evan swatted the other cheek as well, leaving matching handprints before returning to Patrick's other foot and repeating the process.

He made Patrick wait a little longer this time before rewarding him with another two swats, enjoying the power he had over the big man's body as Patrick struggled to keep his foot in place, to accept Evan's right to command him. It was a heady experience, watching Patrick submit. When Evan dealt him a thorough spanking, a flogging, even a caning, Patrick relaxed into it almost immediately, the pain pushing him directly into submissiveness, but the tickler pushed the sub in different ways, harder ways for one used to a much harsher touch. More satisfying ways for Evan, who knew Patrick was submitting to him, not merely to the pain he loved.

Turning the tickler around, Evan used the handle as a crop, rewarding Patrick for not moving as Evan teased his calves and the backs of his knees. The moan that accompanied the sudden bite of pain sent an additional jolt of lust through Evan's system. He hadn't specified how many blows would reward each successful obedience, so he allowed himself three more whacks with the handle, leaving four pink lines across Patrick's ass.

"Please, Sir," Patrick pleaded. "More."

"You want more?" Evan teased, tracing the marks with his fingers. "I'll give you as many as you want, but you have to earn them first. Where should I use the feathers next? On your balls, all bound up in their little ring?" He flicked the feathers between Patrick's thighs in illustration. "Or maybe on your sides? Are you ticklish there?" He didn't wait for an answer, running the feathers up Patrick's side. "Or maybe I should use it on the underside of your arms."

"Nooo," Patrick moaned as Evan brushed the feathers over the sensitive flesh.

"Your arms it is," Evan decided. "I want your complete submission to my will."

"Yes, Sir," Patrick gasped as Evan began tormenting him with the feathers. His entire body twitched, his other arm moving restlessly as he clenched and unclenched his fists in the effort to keep his arm still beneath Evan's ministrations.

"Good boy," he praised finally, ending his torture of Patrick's arm with several more slaps across his sub's ass. "You're turning a pretty shade of pink back here."

"Harder, Sir, please!" Patrick begged, his ass lifting when Evan withdrew his hand.

"Harder?" Evan asked, though the request was no surprise. "You have to earn harder."

Without any prompting, Patrick lifted his other arm, the one Evan had not yet tickled, offering it for the Dom's attentions.

"No," Evan said after a moment, "I don't think that would earn you harder. No, if you want harder, you'll give me the other arm, the one that's already buzzing from before. It's your choice, Patrick, but if you fail, you know the consequences."

"Yes, Sir," Patrick replied, switching arms to give Evan access to his left arm again, the one that was still twitching from Evan's previous attentions.

Impressed, Evan set the tickler back to work, watching as Patrick's entire body shook and twitched. All but his arm. This was it, Evan decided. He'd push Patrick's limits a little more, and then he'd give him the best spanking of his life, followed by a hard fuck. And then he'd take him to bed and spend the rest of the night showing Patrick how good he'd made Evan feel with his submission.

Or maybe he'd hold off on the fucking. He'd spank Patrick and make him come, and then take him to bed and make love to him. That sounded even better.

A strangled shout escaped Patrick's lips, enough to let Evan know he'd pushed the sub to his limits. Not wanting to have to deal with a punishment now, when everything had gone so well, he dropped the tickler and turned his attention to Patrick's backside, spanking the smooth swells with full force. The moans changed in tone but didn't stop as Patrick begged and pleaded for more.

"Do you need to come?" Evan asked, pausing with his hand on the now-red flesh.

"Yes, Sir," Patrick sobbed. "Please let me come."

Popping the anal bead free from Patrick's hole, Evan worked a finger inside, finding the sub's prostate and manipulating it ruthlessly, his other hand continuing to land smacks on the backs of Patrick's thighs. "Come," Evan ordered. "Now."

With a long wail, Patrick did.

"Session over," Evan said softly, his hands gentle as he stroked Patrick's back.

It took a moment, but finally, Patrick turned his head. "But what about you?"

Evan smiled. "I said the session was over, not the night," he replied. "Unless you changed your mind about staying?"

“No, Sir,” Patrick responded quickly.

“The session’s over now,” Evan chided. “You can call me by my name again.”

Patrick nodded slowly. “No, Evan,” he repeated. “I’d like to stay.”

“Good. Rest a minute while I get some water and the arnica. I don’t think I bruised you, but I don’t want you too sore for another round tomorrow night.”

Patrick moaned in delight, relaxing back onto the spanking bench as Evan moved around the room. He returned a moment later with the water, which he held to Patrick’s lips so he could drink without sitting up, and the arnica. He took his time rubbing the clear gel over the slowly-fading handprints and welts on Patrick’s ass, hoping the attention would help interest the man in another round, in bed this time.

When the gel had soaked in, Evan reached between Patrick’s legs and slid off the now-loose cock ring. He stood and offered Patrick his hand. “Let’s go to bed.”

CHAPTER 24

EVAN had to help Patrick down the hall, the combination of going under and coming hard leaving the other man's knees a little shaky, but Evan didn't mind. It was one more opportunity to get his hands on Patrick's body. Getting them into the room, he urged Patrick onto the slate grey duvet, lying down next to him so they faced each other. He stroked his fingers gently over the other man's face, through his dark hair, trying to help center him and bring him back out of his sub headspace. As much as he was tempted to flip Patrick onto his stomach and simply pound into him, he wanted this to mean more than that. And that meant making sure Patrick was with him all the way instead of merely accepting the situation because Evan ordered it.

Eventually, the green eyes opened, meeting Evan's, a good step given Patrick's downcast eyes during their session. They blinked a couple of times, and then Patrick smiled. At least, Evan assumed he smiled; he didn't actually break Patrick's gaze, but the corners of Patrick's eyes crinkled, and they lit up.

"How are you feeling?" Evan asked.

"Amazing," Patrick said breathlessly. "I didn't know I could go under that far without a whip or a cane. Apparently I still have quite a bit to learn about myself."

Evan kissed him softly. "You go to a club, you tell the Dom what you like, and the Dom gives it to you," he reminded Patrick. "There isn't any experimentation unless you ask for it because the Dom wants to satisfy you. If... if we try to make a go of something, we can experiment some more. If you'd like, that is."

Patrick nodded. "I'd like, but what I'd really like now is for you to fuck me. As good as your fingers felt, they weren't enough."

"We'll get there," Evan promised, "but not quite yet."

"I was good!" Patrick protested.

“And you got to come,” Evan reminded him. “Now let me get you all hot and horny again, and then we’ll both come.”

Patrick started to roll to his back, but Evan’s hand on his hip stopped him. “Stay like this. I don’t want to put any pressure on your ass until we know if it bruised.”

“You know it wouldn’t bother me even if I am bruised,” Patrick reminded him.

Evan shrugged. “Pain is for sessions in the playroom. In bed, it’s all about pleasure.” Not giving Patrick a chance to protest, he captured the sub’s mouth again, kissing him eagerly. Patrick responded to the kiss but didn’t take any initiative.

Deciding to finish luring Patrick out of his sub mentality, Evan rolled to his back, pulling Patrick on top of him. He slithered down on the bed so he could latch on to the tight nubs of the other man’s nipples, licking and sucking at them while his hands stroked up and down Patrick’s back, taking care to avoid the scrape and stopping each time at the top of Patrick’s ass.

At first, the position clearly left Patrick too stunned to do anything except hang there on his elbows above Evan’s face, but once that passed, he started to shift, his motions showing Evan where to linger as Patrick’s cock twitched against his belly. Smiling, he bit down slightly on Patrick’s nipple, wishing he’d put nipple clamps on Patrick earlier. If he had, the little buds would be even more sensitive than they already were. Shrugging internally, he nipped a little harder. There was more than one way to skin a cat.

Patrick gasped at the slightly harder bite, but when Evan would’ve pulled away, Patrick rocked to one elbow, leaving a hand free to hold Evan’s head in place. Satisfied he wasn’t doing anything Patrick wouldn’t enjoy, Evan settled in to nip and nibble and lick and bite until Patrick was begging. It happened with gratifying speed, the little gasps and mewls that escaped Patrick’s throat all the encouragement Evan needed to continue.

Lowering his hands to the backs of Patrick’s thighs, Evan encouraged him to slide up more until Evan could get his mouth around the tip of Patrick’s cock. He didn’t suck his subs, always ordering them to suck him instead, but they weren’t in a session now. And in bed with a lover, he delighted in having a cock in his mouth, in making his partner squirm and writhe and gasp.

“Evan!”

Just like that.

He wanted to be patient and find the lube and prepare Patrick properly, but that would mean releasing the prize he was currently doing his best to

swallow, and he had no intention of doing that. He settled for sliding two fingers into his mouth next to Patrick's cock and getting them wet that way. If it wasn't enough, Patrick would tell him.

Grabbing a handful of ass, he parted the still-warm cheeks, giving his fingers access to the hidden entrance. Silently, he appreciated the smooth skin. He didn't think he'd ever told Patrick, but he liked a man who kept his ass shaved. It made rimming much more enjoyable. He'd have to remember to mention that. Or maybe he'd just shave Patrick himself the next time.

For now, he pressed his fingers against the little hole, feeling it stretch to let him inside. Patrick thrashed and moaned above him but made no effort to pull away. Still....

"Okay up there?" he asked, releasing Patrick's cock for a moment.

"Fuck, yeah," Patrick groaned. "Don't stop."

Not needing any more affirmation than that, Evan returned to the task at hand as Patrick began rocking back and forth between Evan's hot mouth and probing fingers. When he felt the other man's balls drawing up against his chin, he pulled back.

"Don't come until I'm inside you," he requested, sliding out from between Patrick's legs and ripping off his boxers. He leaned down and ran his tongue up the musky crack, grinning as Patrick jumped at the touch, head turning, eyes wide.

"Don't tell me no one's ever rimmed you," Evan teased.

"No Dom's ever rimmed me," Patrick replied.

"I don't see any Doms or subs in this bed," Evan insisted, his face serious. "All I see are two lovers about to have sex. If that's okay with you."

Patrick nodded shyly, his eyes wide as he struggled to adjust to the different expectations of Evan the lover and Evan the Dom.

"Top drawer," Evan directed. "Condoms and lube. I doubt I can do slow after the blowjob in the car, the session, and sucking on you for the last ten minutes, so spit isn't going to do it."

Patrick dug through the drawer until he found the indicated items, handing them eagerly to Evan. He started to roll over, but Evan stopped him. "Stay like this. I don't want pressure on your ass. The skin's still pretty hot. Tomorrow, I'll let you ride me, but I'm not sure I can be that passive tonight."

Patrick moaned at the words, bringing a smile to Evan's lips. "What part of that did you like?" he teased. "The thought of me pounding you from behind tonight or the thought of having control in the morning?"

“Both,” Patrick husked, “but especially riding you in the morning. I don’t usually have that kind of control during sex.”

“We’re going to start separating sex and sessions,” Evan decided. “I expect a passive sub, but I like an active lover.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Patrick promised, “but for now, would you please, *please* fuck me?”

“With pleasure,” Evan grinned, rolling a condom on and spreading lube along his shaft and over his fingers. He took a minute more to make sure Patrick’s entrance was well-stretched and plenty wet before lining up and pushing inside.

Patrick rocked back against him immediately, taking Evan deeper than he would’ve gone on his own on the first thrust, but the amazing heat was enough to draw him deeper, so that with his second thrust, he seated himself completely in the welcoming passage. Patrick groaned, fingers clawing at the pillow.

“I’m sorry,” Evan apologized, starting to pull out, thinking he’d gone too fast and hurt the other man.

“Don’t apologize,” Patrick growled, his voice the most demanding Evan had ever heard. “Fuck me already.”

The demand was its own turn-on. Evan’s hips snapped forward hard, rocking Patrick toward the headboard. The brunet’s hands moved, grabbing the top of the headboard to keep from bumping it and pushing back against Evan with as much force as he could muster. Giving up on control, Evan grabbed Patrick’s heaving ass and started pummeling, grunts and groans and expletives falling from his lips and Patrick’s as they rutted against each other.

Evan’s skin felt too tight, like the heat between him and Patrick had somehow shrunk it so that it no longer fit. He was sure he was leaving bruises on Patrick’s hips, but he couldn’t get his fingers to release their death grip, as if they were afraid Patrick would somehow slip away and the amazing feeling of actually having a lover, even if only for one night, would disappear in a puff of smoke.

“Harder,” Patrick demanded.

Evan had no idea how he was supposed to respond to that. He was already giving Patrick everything he had, except that his body seemed to have other ideas, pressing Patrick’s shoulders down as he leaned forward, the change in angle allowing another hair’s breadth of penetration, and that was all Patrick needed, his cock spewing all over the bedspread as he climaxed with a hoarse shout.

The contractions squeezed Evan almost painfully, drawing his orgasm from him in wave after potent wave until he couldn't breathe, couldn't see, couldn't think, couldn't *be* except to come and come and come.

He collapsed forward, his weight forcing Patrick down onto the bed. In a distant part of his mind, he knew he needed to pull out, to deal with the condom and the mess and the fact that he was lying on the ass he'd spent the evening spanking, but that was all too much work. He wanted to lie there and wallow in the afterglow of the first sex outside a session in longer than he could remember.

Why had he waited so long to do this?

Patrick shifted beneath him, finally kicking Evan's brain back into gear. He pitched the condom and went to get a washcloth, cleaning them both up thoroughly. "How's your butt?" he asked Patrick.

"I've always been told it was hot," Patrick teased.

"Fucker," Evan growled, resisting the temptation to give him a smack for being a smart ass. "Do you need more arnica?"

"Evan," Patrick said, rolling onto his back in exasperation. "I'm a grown man. When a session's first over, it's nice to be taken care of, but you don't have to be a mother hen now that I'm aware of what's going on again. If I tell you I'm fine, you have to believe me. Otherwise we're going to end up fighting outside sessions because of what you did to me in a session. In a session, I want a Dom. Otherwise, I want a lover who doesn't smother me."

"Am I not supposed to ask?" Evan asked, trying to imagine that. He couldn't. Not because he was a Dom, but because he cared about Patrick enough to make sure he was all right.

"Of course you can ask," Patrick said, "but you have to believe me when I answer. I've told you three times that my butt isn't bothering me, but you keep harping on it like I don't know how I'm really feeling. I'm submissive. I'm not stupid."

"You're right," Evan said, immediately apologetic. "And I don't think of you that way. But it's been two years since I've had a lover instead of simply an occasional sub. It may take me awhile to remember how to separate the two. Keep reminding me if I get too overbearing outside the playroom."

"I will," Patrick promised. "Now, make sure you set the alarm early enough that I get that ride you promised me. I'm looking forward to making you moan for a change."

"So am I," Evan replied, setting the alarm and rearranging them so they lay comfortably beneath the covers. He fell asleep to the thought of how good it felt to have someone sharing his bed again.

EVAN barely had a chance to hit the snooze button on the alarm before a hot, wet mouth surrounded his cock. He gasped as his back arched, summoning enough presence of mind to turn the alarm off so it wouldn't disturb them again in nine minutes. That task completed, he gave his full attention to the man currently doing his best to suck his brains out through his cock. Pushing the covers out of the way, he stared down at the vision before him, lust hitting him hard at the sight of Patrick's full lips stretched around his morning erection.

Another morning, he'd have let Patrick keep going, blowing his wad on the other man's face or chest, but he'd made a very specific promise last night and that wasn't going to be possible if Patrick didn't.... "Stop!" Evan ordered, his voice desperate. "You're gonna make me come and there isn't time for you to get me hard again."

"Then give me a condom," Patrick ordered, his voice far more commanding this morning than anything he'd said last night. The thought sent another jolt of lust through Evan. Could he finally have found a sub who could give him the rest of what he needed as well?

He pushed the thought away, knowing it was a combination of lust and proximity. He could examine it more closely later, when Patrick wasn't kneeling over him impatiently. Instead, he reached for the drawer, pulling out supplies. Patrick rolled the condom on Evan, taking his time fondling the hard cock and heavy balls as he did. "Patrick," Evan growled in warning. "Much of that and you're going to be a disappointed man."

"You'd figure out some way to satisfy me," Patrick replied with complete confidence, but he finished with the condom quickly and slathered it with lube. Not bothering to stretch himself given that it had only been a few hours since they'd last fucked, he straddled Evan's hips and sank down onto the hard length. Evan groaned his pleasure at the combination of being surrounded by Patrick's body again and of giving up control for a few precious minutes.

Despite his rush in getting them to that point, Patrick took his time once Evan was inside him, riding languidly, leaving Evan reeling and gasping for breath at the slow, deliberate seduction. He wanted to move, to thrust up into Patrick's welcoming heat, but the other man kept him pinned, leaning forward and stealing his attention with a soul-stirring kiss. Evan couldn't help himself. He could feel his heart opening, blooming under Patrick's attentions. It had been so long. He didn't count the session with Rhys or even the night when Takoda and Rhys jumped him. Yes, it had been release, but as strong as his

feelings for Rhys were, there had never been anything romantic about them. They'd always known that kind of relationship would never work between them, and so their interludes, when they happened, were more about Evan regaining his balance than they were about love or anything remotely close to what he was feeling now, with Patrick.

He couldn't do this. He knew better than to believe he'd fall in love after one night together, except it was already more than that. He'd had Patrick beneath his paddle, his flogger, more than once. He knew how incredibly compatible they already were on that level. They'd had a great date the night before, finding a shared interest outside their sessions, an activity they could enjoy together. Patrick wasn't afraid to stretch his limits with Evan during a session, and he was willing to take the lead, at least to some degree, outside their sessions. That all added up to nearly everything Evan wanted in a lover, and given his wildly fluctuating emotions in Nevada, he was primed, in a sense. He wanted what Rhys and Takoda had. And everything in the last twelve hours pointed to the possibility of having it with Patrick.

Now he had to see if he could make that possibility into a reality.

The decision acted like a switch, turning off his control and turning on his orgasm. Before he could make any effort at staving it off, he was coming hard, filling the condom as his hips stuttered up into Patrick. "Come here," he managed to gasp, his head spinning with his climax. He reached for Patrick's hips, urging him up so he could get his mouth around the weeping tip of the other man's cock. His fingers replaced his cock in Patrick's ass, shunting in and out in time to his sucking, trying to give Patrick as much pleasure as the brunet had given him.

It didn't take long for Patrick to come hard down Evan's throat, not even choking out a warning. Not that Evan minded. He wanted to go through the day knowing he'd started it with Patrick's cock in his mouth. And if that wasn't proof this was more than mere lust, he didn't know what was.

Patrick snuggled up to Evan's side, only adding to his desire to pull the covers back over them and tell the world to go to hell so he could keep exploring this new... whatever it was.

"What time do you get off work?" Patrick murmured against Evan's neck.

"I should be home by six," Evan answered.

Against his skin, he could feel Patrick's lips curve into a smile. "I'll be here by six thirty."

CHAPTER 25

THE droning of the plane's engines lulled Evan into that mostly zoned place where his body didn't really feel like moving and his mind drifted uncontrolled. Fortunately, he'd been able to upgrade to first class, so his seat was reasonably comfortable, and he had enough legroom that he wasn't constantly knocking his knees against the seat in front of him.

He probably could've been packed in like a sardine in economy class and not paid any more attention to his surroundings, though. His mind was fixated on the last thirty-six hours and their implications for the future. He'd gone home hoping his date with Patrick would go well and that it would get his head back on straight for his return to Nevada. He'd gotten that and a whole hell of a lot more.

He'd spent every minute he wasn't at work wallowing in Patrick's company. They couldn't keep their hands off each other. Or their lips. Or their cocks. It was like they were trying to cram the first month of courtship into the few hours they had together since they didn't know how long it would be until Evan would be home again. It hadn't all been fucking, although they'd done plenty of that. Evan couldn't remember the last time he'd come so many times in such a short time, even when he'd actually had a steady lover, live-in or not. But they'd talked too, about all manner of things, personal and less so, from their families to what they did for fun to how they felt about the new president and his promises to improve things for the gay community.

They hadn't agreed on everything, of course—Patrick was far more of an idealist than Evan was—but they'd kept the conversations on the level of healthy debate rather than angry arguments, which Evan took as a good sign. One of his previous lovers had viewed all disagreement as a personal attack. Needless to say, that relationship hadn't lasted long.

They'd spent another hour in the playroom Monday night, leaving Patrick with six beautiful stripes from the cane as his reward for everything else Evan put him through. And it had been amazing. Liberating. He didn't have to worry about juggling Rhys's and Takoda's different needs and fears.

He didn't have to worry about Rhys trying to take control. He could simply relax into the session and focus on Patrick. On his sub.

His sub.

He felt more than a little guilty going back to Vegas now, but Patrick insisted he understood. He also insisted he didn't want any other Dom if he could have Evan, and he'd rather wait for Evan's return than go trolling in the clubs. Evan had tried to refuse that offer, given he was going back to Vegas for the sole purpose of dominating Rhys and Takoda until Rhys could do it himself. Patrick had brushed off that concern with the insistence that he'd rather wait for Evan than have a substandard session with someone else.

It should've been reassuring, but it only made him feel guilty. Evan had tried to promise Patrick that he wouldn't touch them. He'd only direct.

"And take away your most powerful motivator for Rhys if he falters?" Patrick asked incredulously. "Why would you do that?"

"What do you mean?" Evan inquired.

"If he's as love with Takoda as you say he is and if he's a real Dom, the best way to get his ass in gear is for you to do to Takoda all the things he can't. And deny him the right to touch his sub in any way for the rest of the session if he doesn't do what you tell him to do. They're lovers, you said. A good session between them would naturally end the way it has between us the last couple of days—with Rhys fucking the stuffing out of Takoda and Takoda loving every minute of it. If you're directing the session and let Rhys fuck his lover at the end, that's as much a reward for his good behavior as it is for Takoda's. And if Rhys doesn't obey, then watching you fuck Takoda will be the worst punishment you could inflict on him."

"A week ago, I'd have agreed," Evan replied, "but things have changed. I just found you. I don't want to mess things up by going back to Vegas and being with them."

"If it's just Takoda and just in the context of a session where Rhys disobeys you, it's helping a friend, and that won't mess anything up," Patrick insisted. "I admire your dedication to your friend. Think of it this way: The sooner Rhys gets his head out of his ass, the sooner you can come home and we can see where this takes us."

That had reassured Evan more than anything else, the constant assumption on Patrick's part that they'd be together when Evan came home. Maybe not the same hothouse environment of practically living together for the two days Evan had been back in Boston, but a real relationship with real dates and hopefully exclusivity in their sessions and their sex, functions at

work, and meeting each other's friends and seeing how far their compatibility extended.

They weren't, he supposed, a perfect match as a Dom and sub. Patrick was a total pain slut, to the point of a caning being a reward for him, whereas Evan, while willing and able to inflict that kind of pain on his sub, preferred varying his methods. Fortunately, Patrick seemed willing to compromise, if last night had been any indication. He'd bound his sub this time, using the tickler again until Patrick couldn't stay still anymore and twitched away. Not far, in the restraints, but what little he could. Evan would move somewhere else for a bit, and then return, increasing how long Patrick could resist each time.

Evan knew it had been far more challenging for Patrick than any amount of pain would've been, but Patrick had agreed to endure it, to learn to submit to it in exchange for a caning at the end of the session. Evan squirmed in his seat at the memory of the six evenly spaced stripes he'd left on Patrick's ass and the tops of his thighs, of how hot the cheeks had been when he dove between them, pounding into the upturned ass, of how Patrick had thrashed and begged for more when Evan was fucking him.

And then Patrick had clung to him after the session was over, snuggling into Evan's arms, kissing Evan anywhere his lips could reach, touching him over and over as if to prove Evan was still there, that he hadn't disappeared after the end of the session like he would have done at a club. He hadn't even complained when Evan insisted on getting an ice pack in addition to the arnica.

That had started to ease one of Evan's concerns—besides the speed of their developing relationship. He was the kind of lover who needed to care for his partner outside of a session as well as during one, whether the injury was something he had inflicted or it had come from some other source. He'd been accused more than once of being a mother hen, most recently by Patrick himself, but that was part of his personality, certainly highlighted by his experiences as a Dom, but even before that, he had always been the one checking on his teammates to make sure they weren't suffering from dehydration and that they were taking care of sore muscles. That aspect of his personality wasn't going to change. He could try to tone it down or to phrase things in such a way that Patrick didn't feel babied, but he wouldn't stop checking or caring, especially if they became long-term lovers. Fortunately, he didn't think Patrick really wanted him to, as long as he didn't get overbearing about it.

Of course, this complicated his return to Las Vegas immensely. He had no idea how he was supposed to concentrate on Rhys and Takoda when what

he really wanted was to turn around, fly back to Boston, and spend the next month fucking Patrick silly. In Boston or in Vegas, that wasn't realistic, since they both had to work, but at least in Boston, he could see Patrick in the evenings and on the weekends. They could have dinner together, go sailing, attend the symphony or the opera or any of the dozen other fine arts performances on any given weekend. Or go to one of the clubs together so he could stake his claim on Patrick to all the other Doms who might once have had his sub's attention.

And that was how he knew Patrick was right about the best way to handle Rhys. The thought of someone else, even Rhys, putting his hands on Patrick was enough to make every muscle in Evan's body tense in preparation for the fight that would ensue. And Evan wasn't even to the point of loving Patrick the way Rhys loved Takoda. Oh, he could see himself getting to that point, given a little more time to know the other man. He suspected it would be easy to get to that point, if everything he already knew was any guide, but he wasn't there yet. Rhys was. And if it came down to it, watching Evan fuck Takoda might be exactly what it took to force Rhys to let go of whatever lingering reservations held him back.

As long as Takoda agreed.

TO EVAN'S delight, Takoda had come with Rhys to pick him up at the airport this time, proof of how much he'd improved in a matter of weeks. The restless way he squirmed on the seat, constantly shifting as if he couldn't quite find a comfortable position, suggested Rhys had followed one set of Evan's orders for the weekend. Deciding to reassert his dominance as soon as they were in the car, Evan grabbed Rhys's cock, feeling for the strap at the base of the erection. "Good, you remember how to follow orders," he said when Rhys yelped and batted his hand away.

"You could've asked," Rhys grumbled.

"That wouldn't have been nearly as much fun," Evan replied, turning and winking at Takoda in the seat behind him.

"I'm wearing mine too," Takoda promised.

"Your obedience wasn't in question," Evan said with a smile for the sub. "Rhys is the one with issues."

Rhys's grumbling increased, but he didn't lodge a specific protest for Evan to address.

"So what do you have planned for us?" Takoda asked seriously.

“Teaching Rhys how to be a Dom again,” Evan answered in the same vein. “He’s lost his confidence in his ability to read his sub, to walk the fine line between pleasurable pain and painful pain. You aren’t like Patrick. You don’t like pain for pain’s sake, which means Rhys does have to walk that line. He can’t simply beat you until his arm gets tired.”

Takoda flinched.

“Stop,” Evan ordered immediately. “You know he’s not going to do that. I’m back here instead of in Boston with Patrick because he couldn’t even flog you the way you wanted, much less until his arm gets tired. And even if some day he reaches the point where he could, you know how to stop him. Don’t you freak out on me too. One edgy sub is enough. I don’t need two.”

Takoda didn’t reply, but his expression did lose its panicked edge. Evan let it go. He’d talk to Takoda more when they got home, because he needed the sub’s express permission before he could put his plan to work. Sure, they’d talked about it in general terms when Takoda first asked him to stay, but things had changed radically since then for all three of them, and Evan didn’t want to abuse the trust that had grown between Takoda and himself by surprising him with something totally unexpected if it came to that. Evan hoped it didn’t. He hoped the weekend spent making love had convinced Rhys that Takoda wanted to be with him, that Takoda loved him and didn’t see him in any way like Kade, but only time would tell.

When they got home, Evan sent Rhys upstairs, not even trying to invent an excuse other than wanting to talk to Takoda alone. Both men looked surprised, but neither argued as Rhys trudged upstairs and Takoda followed Evan into his bedroom.

“What did you want to talk about?” Takoda asked when they were alone.

“Did you have a good weekend?” Evan asked, gesturing for Takoda to make himself comfortable.

“Yes,” Takoda replied slowly, obviously not sure where the conversation was heading.

“Did Rhys take good care of you?”

Takoda nodded, smile spreading across his face.

“Did you play or was it all vanilla?” Evan asked, knowing he was prying, but he needed the answer.

“You said no sessions,” Takoda reminded Evan defensively.

“I did,” Evan agreed, “but I didn’t say no kinky sex. Rhys knows the difference, even if you don’t.”

“You put all the toys in the playroom though,” Takoda protested.

Evan laughed. “Anything can be a toy if you’re creative enough. A wooden spoon or a hairbrush takes the place of a paddle. The feather duster takes the place of a tickler. His ties take the place of ropes or cuffs. It’s entirely a question of motivation.”

“So he doesn’t want to be my Dom. Is that what you’re saying?” Takoda asked sadly.

“Not at all,” Evan insisted. “I think he’s afraid to be your Dom.”

“So what do we do?” Takoda asked.

“Convince him you want a Dom, first of all,” Evan said, “and then convince him you want it to be him.”

“I told him over and over that I wanted him while you were gone,” Takoda said softly, cheeks flaming. “Every time we made love.”

Evan sighed. “Stupid stubborn bastard. I told you about Rhys’s birth father and his temper. The other result of that is this tendency to dig his heels in when he gets his head set on something. Pretty much the only way to get him to change his mind once it’s set is to knock some sense into him. I’d hoped having you jump him left and right would do that, but apparently it hasn’t.”

“So what do I do?” Takoda asked. “I don’t want any lover or any Dom but him, but I want him to be both.”

“You have to get through that block he’s built,” Evan said. “You could try losing *your* temper at him. That gets his attention when it’s someone he cares about. Threaten to leave him, or at least to look for a different Dom.”

Takoda shook his head immediately. “I couldn’t, not even if I didn’t mean it,” he insisted. “I’d never say it in a way he’d actually believe.”

Evan had been afraid of that. “My concern, if we don’t force a reaction from him, is that he’ll spiral down into a self-loathing depression that ends up tearing you both apart. It happened once before, when we were fresh out of college. He got involved with a guy who wanted to be part of the scene but didn’t really know what it meant. From where I was standing, he was stringing Rhys along, keeping him in the relationship with promises of things he never really meant to offer and guilt trips any time Rhys tried to ask him for more. Rhys didn’t see it that way, though, and tried his best to be vanilla for the guy. It worked for awhile, plenty of vanilla sex with just the occasional mild bondage—those ties I mentioned—but it took a toll on Rhys. He got edgier and edgier until his temper exploded from the stress. I wasn’t there when all hell broke loose between them, but I heard about it from someone

who was and I talked to Rhys soon after. He'd come to hate the kinky part of himself for costing him his lover as much as he'd come to hate the ex-lover for making him deny who he was. It was months before he'd do a session with the same sub twice, and even so, I've never seen him as hard as he was then. You watched him at the club. You've been in sessions with him. He's a caring Dom, solicitous, tender almost. But he wasn't that way then. He picked the subs who got off on pain and he pushed even some of them to using their safe words because he needed to get all that venom out. I'm not saying he'll treat you that way, but I don't want him to end up back in that dark place because he tries to deny who he is."

"But I don't want him to deny it," Takoda protested. "I want to be his sub as well as his lover. I don't care if all our sex is kinky, even outside the sessions. He can tie me up, hold me down, spank me, and fuck me six ways to Sunday. I want that."

"And he doesn't understand how that's possible after everything you went through with Kade," Evan said sadly. "So either you have to yell and scream and pitch a fit until he does understand or we have to find some other way to get it through his head."

"What other way?" Takoda asked immediately.

"He's a Dom and he's in love with you," Evan replied. "If you won't yell and make demands, then the best way to get through to him is to make him jealous."

"How?" Takoda asked suspiciously.

Evan's stomach roiled. He *so* did not want to suggest this. "By making him watch me do what he can't or won't do to you himself."

CHAPTER 26

“ARE you sure that’s a good idea?” Takoda asked hesitantly. “I mean, if he’s questioning his abilities as a Dom, won’t that drive him away even more?”

Evan shrugged. “I don’t know, Takoda,” he replied honestly. “It might. But I’m trying to look at it like lancing a boil. We can probably do it another way, coaching him through sessions, cajoling and punishing when he balks, but it could take weeks, maybe months, for that to work, if it does. At least this way, we’ve forced a reaction from him. He’ll either take a swing at me and claim you once and for all, simply to keep my hands off you, or he’ll decide for good that he can’t do this and walk away. I don’t want that to happen any more than you do, but if it’s going to happen, better that it happen now, rather than six weeks or six months from now, when it will tear you both apart even worse.”

“What, exactly, do you want me to do, or to do to me?” Takoda inquired, expression haunted at the idea that Rhys might leave.

“I don’t *want* to do anything,” Evan insisted, “except guide him through a successful session and get him over his doubts so I can go home to the sub who’s waiting for me. My sub instead of you and Rhys. But I can’t do that until I know he’s got his head on straight again. We’ll talk to him. And talk and talk and talk, but if that doesn’t work, then my suggestion is to have a session, the same session he tried to give you on Saturday, and if he can’t finish it, if he can’t give you the flogging you want, instead of ending the session, I’ll take over and finish it with him watching.”

“So it would just be the flogging?” Takoda asked slowly.

Evan’s stomach churned. “No. You’re lovers. A good session between you would end in sex.”

“You want me to let you fuck me while he’s watching?” Takoda squeaked, panic spreading over his face.

“Oh, God, don’t look at me that way,” Evan pleaded. “It’ll be bad enough when Rhys looks at me like I’ve betrayed him. I can’t do this if you look at me the same way.”

“But aren’t we betraying him?” Takoda asked seriously. “I mean, he’s my lover. We made certain promises and now I feel like I’m breaking them.”

“I’ve tried not to meddle in your relationship outside the playroom because you seem to have that part under control,” Evan said slowly, “but I’m going to ask now. Did Rhys say anything about total monogamy?”

Takoda shook his head. “But isn’t that understood?”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Evan replied. “In the lifestyle, a committed relationship doesn’t always mean a completely monogamous one. Doms have been known to share their subs as a way of proving the sub’s obedience. I’m not saying Rhys will do that. In fact, I’m gambling on him not wanting to do it, but if you haven’t expressly agreed on it, we’re at least in a grey area rather than firmly in the wrong. And I’ll have that argument with him if it comes to that. My idea, my responsibility. If you agree.”

“You’re asking me to cheat on him, even if you say he might not see it that way,” Takoda pointed out acerbically. “You’re asking me to force him to watch me cheat on him. Forgive me if I’m a little hesitant.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Evan asked seriously, thinking of the potential ramifications on his own relationships—with Patrick, but especially with Rhys—as well. “I don’t want to do it, but none of my other ideas will be nearly as effective as provoking Rhys. Professionally, I can probably afford to be gone for a few months, but I’ve got a sub waiting for me in Boston now. I want to go home. And I want to go knowing you and Rhys are happy.”

“You don’t play fair,” Takoda grumbled.

“If you really aren’t comfortable with it, we could try something else,” Evan proposed with a jokingly lascivious wink. “Something sexual that doesn’t involve fucking. You’ve already sucked me with Rhys watching, but he was involved then too. I could rim you. That would still make Rhys jealous without being full-fledged butt sex.”

Takoda squirmed on the bed, making Evan wonder how long Rhys had spent with his tongue up Takoda’s ass. “Rhys likes rimming,” the sub admitted. “That would probably be almost as bad in his eyes as outright fucking.”

“Does it have to be bad?” Evan cajoled. “You don’t think it might turn him on even as it pokes at his jealousy? Think about how thoroughly he’ll make love to you as soon as I end the session because he’ll want to erase all thoughts of me touching you from both your minds.”

“Promise me you won’t provoke him unless there’s no other choice,” Takoda demanded.

“I promise,” Evan said immediately. “I’ve got almost as much at stake here as you do, Takoda. I’d be lost without him. I’m not going to jeopardize that without a damn good reason, but I happen to think keeping him out of depression and giving the two of you a chance at real happiness is about the best reason there is. And I could be wrong. We could go upstairs and he could be in perfect control in the session. I’d like nothing more. But I want to be prepared, I want you to be prepared, if he falters again. Come on. Let’s go see if I can talk more sense into Rhys as a friend and fellow Dom than you’ve been able to do as a lover.”

Takoda nodded and followed Evan out of the room. “I think I’ll stay here while you talk to him if that’s all right,” Takoda said when they were in the living room. “He might be more open with you if I’m not there to hear.”

“I don’t want you to feel like we’re keeping secrets,” Evan said. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” Takoda replied. “He’ll watch every word he says if I’m in the room and that won’t help. I might not be able to lose my temper at him, but maybe you can.”

Evan nodded and went up the stairs to the second floor, expecting to find Rhys in his bedroom pacing. He found him instead at the door to the steps up into the attic playroom, forehead on his knees as he picked at the edge of his red leather shorts. Surprised, Evan sank down onto the floor next to Rhys. “That eager to get started?” he teased lightly.

“You told me to go upstairs while you talked to Takoda,” Rhys reminded him.

“I meant to your room so we could talk without you listening in,” Evan explained. “I didn’t mean to the playroom. I guess I should’ve been more specific.”

Rhys shrugged. “We’ll end up there eventually.”

“And is that a good thing or a bad thing?” Evan inquired.

Rhys sighed. “I want it to be a good thing. It should be a good thing.”

“Then why isn’t it?” Evan asked.

“You know why,” Rhys retorted.

“Look, Rhys,” Evan said firmly. “You’ve been around. You’ve seen subs switch Doms because the Dom lost his edge. I don’t want to see the same thing happen to you because you can’t give Takoda what he wants.”

“He isn’t really a sub,” Rhys protested.

“Like hell he isn’t,” Evan disagreed. “He may have started thinking about kinky sex because he was falling for you, but he fell for you because of a session in your club. He wouldn’t complain if you never had vanilla sex again. And I’m not talking about sessions. I’m talking about in bed at night as lovers. At the moment, he’s so in love with you that you can’t do anything wrong, but you can’t guarantee how long that will last. He’s gotten a taste for kink, and he’s either going to get that from you or he’s going to look for it somewhere else. We had this conversation before. I didn’t think we’d need to have it again.”

“It’s a stupid, irrational fear,” Rhys agreed, “but it doesn’t make it any less real. I’ll keep struggling with it until I get over it.”

“Struggle fast,” Evan said. “I want to go home sometime this century.”

“The date went well then?”

Evan grinned. “The date and the session and the sex and spending the night and more sex. And another session and more sex. And another night and more sex.”

“I’m glad you had such a good time,” Rhys said sincerely. “So are you going to share the details or am I going to have to drag them out of you?”

“We had two really good sessions,” Evan reiterated, “a good mix of things he likes and things I like to do. I was going to flog him because I know how much he likes that, but he had a bad scrape on his back, a sailing accident, so I had to change my plans.”

“And?” Rhys prompted.

“I thought about what we’d done with Takoda and the opposite sensations,” Evan replied. “He likes pain so I went to the opposite extreme and got out my feathers. If he held still until I was done, he got a spanking.”

“Sounds like a successful compromise,” Rhys agreed with a grin. “I’m assuming he got his spanking.”

Evan’s smile broadened. “In spades. And we tried it again with a slight variation last night. He was so good that he’s walking around with six welts on his ass today.” He couldn’t keep the smugness out of his voice.

Rhys’s eyebrows rose, clearly impressed. “You must be really taken with him if you gave him that many. You’re not one for the cane usually.”

“He’s the kind of sub you could probably cane all night,” Evan replied, “but you’re right. That’s one of the things we’ll have to work out when I get back to Boston. I’m not entirely comfortable with the level of pain I know he

craves so we're going to have to make some adjustments on both ends if it's going to work beyond an occasional session."

"That tells me about the sub, but I know you didn't keep him in sub space the whole time you were together," Rhys teased. "So tell me about the man."

"He's an architect, owns half of a design firm," Evan said with a chuckle. "He likes to sail and has his own boat on the Harbor. When I get back to Boston, he's going to take me out. I haven't been sailing in too long."

"It sounds like you have some things in common outside the playroom too," Rhys affirmed. "That's good. We'll get you back to him as quickly as we can."

"He knows why I came back," Evan shrugged. "He knows it might be awhile."

"And he's okay with that?"

Evan shrugged again. "He says he is. And if he isn't, I'll deal with it."

"I don't want to mess things up for you," Rhys insisted.

"You won't," Evan replied. "You can't. Because if he and I were together, had been together, and you called and needed me, I'd still drop everything and come. I might bring him with me, but I'd still come. If he can't deal with that, then he isn't the right man for me."

"You know the same's true for me," Rhys said. "And that means that if you need to leave, I want you to go."

Evan laughed. "We're a right pair. So, why is Takoda still walking straight?" he teased.

Rhys laughed as well, the sound welcome in Evan's ears after the tension. "Because my lover apparently has a far greater tolerance for being pounded than you anticipated. I promise, I kept him on his back most of the time you were gone."

"Try making him do a little of the work next time," Evan suggested. "Maybe then you'll have the stamina to actually fuck him 'til he feels it."

"He felt it," Rhys retorted, "and kept begging for more."

"That's what toys are for," Evan joked.

"You locked all of mine in the playroom," Rhys reminded him.

"So?" Evan asked. "Be creative. I know you remember how. God, some of the things we used when we were poor students who couldn't afford 'proper' toys. I shudder to think of it now."

“I wasn’t sure he’d want anything kinky outside our sessions,” Rhys admitted.

“Did you ask him?”

Rhys shook his head.

“I ought to beat you,” Evan said, exasperated. “You said yourself he kept begging for more. How much more is it going to take for you to believe him when he tell you he wants more, in the playroom or in the bedroom? Trust him, even if you don’t trust yourself.”

“I told you, it’s not a rational fear. I don’t see him bound and in pain when I have him in bed because Kade never took him to bed. But in my playroom, that image pops up at unwanted times,” Rhys justified.

“If the location is the problem, we can change locations,” Evan suggested. “We can go to the club. Or you can bring some stuff down to your room, or his, or the living room.”

Rhys shook his head. “We told him sessions happened only in the playroom.”

“So we talk to him about changing the rules to help you get past your hang-ups,” Evan said. “He’s not a child and he’s not scared anymore. He can deal with adjustments.”

“Not until I know I can keep him,” Rhys whispered. “If he leaves, it’ll be hard enough to have memories of the sub in my playroom and the man in my bed. If the whole house is full of memories of both, I’m not sure I’d ever recover.”

Shit, shit, shit. He couldn’t do this. He couldn’t hurt Rhys the way it would if he carried out his plan. Except that it couldn’t hurt any worse than losing Takoda to his own fears.

“So what do we do now?” Evan asked, trying to find some viable alternative to his own miserable idea. “What’s going to help you get over this as fast as possible so you don’t lose Takoda and I can go back to Patrick?”

“I don’t know,” Rhys said honestly. “I guess I just have to keep trying until I can be Takoda’s Dom again without you.”

“Then we should think about going to get your sub and taking him upstairs,” Evan replied. “You were fine with the sensation play and even the spanking last week. It was the flogging that tripped you up. We can start the session however you want, but I think we should end it with a flogging.”

Rhys nodded but didn’t immediately come up with a suggestion.

“Takoda liked the nipple clamps,” Evan suggested. “We could put those on him again and you could play with them a little this time, instead of it just being the pressure. We haven’t really done anything with the idea of him serving you sexually. You’re good with ropes. Truss him up some interesting way—I know you know how—and have him suck you for awhile, get you both worked up before you start flogging him. He’ll enjoy it even more if he’s turned on.”

Rhys nodded again. “I can do that. The flogging still makes me nervous, but I know I can do the rest.”

“You have to trust him, Rhys,” Evan said urgently. “You have to believe that he’ll use his safe word if he needs it. If you can’t trust that, you’ll never be comfortable in a session with him, no matter what you’re doing to him.”

“I know,” Rhys agreed, “and he’s already used his yellow word. It’s not rational. That’s all I can say.”

Evan didn’t have an answer for that, but it made him afraid only an equally irrational reaction would override Rhys’s fears.

CHAPTER 27

“WHY don’t you go find Takoda?” Evan suggested. “Help him get undressed. Do his braid. Put the cuffs on him if you want or need them. I’ll get the key and meet you upstairs in a few minutes.

Rhys nodded and went downstairs to find his lover. Evan scrubbed his palms over his face with a sigh, hoping against hope that everything would go well and he wouldn’t have to provoke Rhys to get him past his fear.

Pushing himself to his feet, he went downstairs as well, to find the key to the attic and to shed some unnecessary layers of clothes. He didn’t pull out his leather pants. He was sweaty from the trip, and the idea of pulling them on was too much. He could do the session in shorts.

Walking back up the stairs, Evan found both men at the door to the playroom. “No cuffs?” he teased Rhys.

“They’re in the playroom,” Rhys reminded him. “I’ll put them on him when we get upstairs.”

Evan nodded and unlocked the door, giving both subs a light smack on the ass as they climbed the stairs ahead of him. Not enough to hurt. Just enough to remind them both that he was nominally in charge of the session.

Evan waited while Rhys fastened the leather cuffs around Takoda’s wrists again, pausing to give him a lingering kiss. Evan selected the same nipple clamps as before from Rhys’s collection and brought them over to Rhys. “Decorate him first. Then you can truss him up. It’s a shame you don’t have a swing. That would be perfect for the first part of the program.”

Rhys took the clamps and smirked at Evan. “I don’t need a swing to take his feet off the floor.”

The confidence in Rhys’s tone gave Evan hope. Takoda gasped as Rhys affixed the clamps to his nipples, but he didn’t protest, even when Rhys tugged on them a little, stretching the tender buds.

“Ropes next?” Rhys asked Evan after playing with the clamps for a bit.

Evan nodded. "Something to, as you said, get his feet off the floor and his head at the right level to take care of you."

Rhys grinned and gathered several long strands of rope. "Cross your arms behind your back," he directed Takoda, beginning to bind the sub's wrists to his elbows so his arms were completely immobilized. The next rope went under his arms and around his chest, a few inches above the nipple clamps, which Rhys tweaked each time he worked another length around Takoda's body. "This will support your weight without straining your shoulders," he told Takoda reassuringly. He started on the sub's thighs next, just below the curve of his buttocks.

Evan watched the care Rhys took in positioning each rope, making sure it wouldn't pinch or chafe. He could imagine the nerves jumping in Takoda's stomach at this new side of Rhys. Still caring, but far more dominant than he'd been before, even when he was running the session by himself. To distract him and hopefully reassure him, Evan reached over and pulled lightly on one of the nipple clamps. Takoda moaned softly, squirming from the dual sensations of Rhys's hands positioning the ropes and the pressure on his acutely sensitive nipples.

Rhys looked tempted to bat Evan's hands away, but he didn't, probably remembering what had happened the last time he bucked Evan's authority in a session. Evan really wished Rhys would order him away. If he did, if his jealousy got the better of his common sense now, Evan wouldn't have to go through with the rest of his plan.

Ropes affixed the way he wanted, Rhys led Takoda across the room so he stood beneath a series of pulleys attached to the beams. "Trust me," he told Takoda. "You'll feel like you're falling, but only for a moment. The ropes won't let you fall for real."

Takoda nodded, and Rhys attached the connectors, then pulled on the rope attached to Takoda's thighs, tipping his body forward as it lifted his legs off the ground. Takoda gasped at the sudden feeling of helplessness, and Evan felt an answering echo in his groin. Rhys had trussed him up more than once, and he knew there was nothing like it for feeling a Dom's control.

The change in angle caused the nipple clamps to shift, eliciting another moan from Takoda. Inspiration striking, Evan went to Rhys's cabinets and dug out two small weights. "Put these on the clamps," he told Rhys. "They'll do your tugging for you while he's sucking your cock." He moved into Takoda's line of sight. "You'll like that, won't you, Takoda? The weights pulling at your nipples constantly while Rhys sets you swinging in your ropes, his cock sliding in and out of your throat like it'll be sliding in and out of your ass before long. Don't worry, though. He's just warming you up a little. Then

we'll get to the good stuff. Can you imagine the flogger dancing across your skin while you're bound like this? Not an inch of your body in any way protected. Open and helpless and waiting for anything Rhys wants to do to you."

Takoda didn't answer, but the way his eyes glazed over was all the answer Evan needed. He turned and grinned at Rhys, taking a step back and handing Rhys the weights. "He's all primed and ready for you. Put the weights on, so he really feels your control over every aspect of his body."

Rhys affixed the weights, then moved to stand in front of Takoda, unzipping the tight shorts and letting his ringed cock bounce free. Even without direction, Takoda's mouth opened, his head leaning forward as if reaching for a treat. "Go on," Evan urged. "Feed him your cock. He's hungry for it."

The glare was back. Evan retreated a bit and let Rhys take things at his own pace for a bit. As tempting as it was to micro-manage the session, the whole point was to make Rhys independent again, and if he didn't need help, Evan didn't want to interrupt too much. The sight of Takoda's upturned ass, legs slightly parted by the ropes and the weight of his body, was too tempting to ignore, though. Rummaging in the drawers, Evan found a medium-sized butt plug. Coating it with lube, he returned to stand directly behind Takoda, positioning the plug so it bumped against the sub's hole every time Rhys rocked him backward.

The howl that tore from Takoda's throat when the plug finally penetrated the tight ring drew Rhys's attention and got another glare. *Come on, Rhys*, Evan thought as if he could make Rhys act by force of will alone. *Tell me to get the hell away from your sub.*

Rhys didn't say anything, though, returning his attention to Takoda, stroking his face and hair tenderly as the rocking of the ropes thrust his cock deeper and deeper into the sub's mouth and throat. Evan wondered how Takoda was doing with his mouth plugged that way so he couldn't use his safe word even if he wanted to, but his body wasn't straining in the ropes, and when Evan moved so he could see Takoda's face, his expression was serene. He wondered if it had been that calm when he had been touching Takoda to put the plug in. Somehow he doubted it.

"Please, Sir." Rhys's pleading voice interrupted Evan's musings. Looking back at his sub, he arched an eyebrow. "Please let me come, Sir."

"Already?" Evan demanded, coming up beside Rhys and pinching one of his nipples sharply. "Since when do you have so little control?"

"Since Takoda became my lover," Rhys replied, face flushed.

“And if I let you come now, will you be able to get it up again when I want to see you fuck him?” Evan asked.

“Yes, Sir,” Rhys replied immediately. Evan glanced down at Takoda, whose eyes showed his delight at the thought of Rhys replacing the plug currently stretching him lightly.

“Very well,” Evan agreed, unfastening the snap on Rhys’s cock ring. “Down his throat, but you don’t get to come again until after he’s had a proper flogging.”

“Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir,” Rhys gasped as his hips stuttered into Takoda’s mouth. Evan’s eyes closed as he pressed his palm hard over the bulge in his shorts, thinking about Patrick going down on him the night before and imagining what Rhys was feeling at the moment.

Circling Takoda as Rhys recovered, Evan debated configurations for the flogging to follow. “Raise his shoulders some,” he directed Rhys when Rhys pulled free of Takoda’s mouth. “Change the angle on the weights a bit.”

Rhys did as Evan said, adjusting Takoda’s position so his chest was at an angle instead of level with his hips. Evan walked around behind Takoda again, poking at the rounded butt to make sure no bruising remained from the paddling last week. Takoda twitched beneath the touch of a hand that wasn’t Rhys’s, but he gave no indication of being in pain. “Good. All healed,” Evan declared. “Rhys, get the deerskin flogger, the same one you used before.”

Walking into Takoda’s line of sight, he took the sub’s chin gently in his hand, lifting it so their eyes met. “Do you want Rhys to flog you, Takoda?” he asked, though he already knew the answer. He needed to make sure *Rhys* knew the answer.

“More than anything, Sir,” Takoda replied earnestly.

“And if you want him to stop, what will you do?” Evan prompted.

“Use my safe word, Sir,” Takoda responded immediately.

“Work him over thoroughly, Rhys,” Evan directed. “He’s been dreaming about this for a year. I’ll tell you when to stop.”

That brought a tinge of panic back into Rhys’s eyes, but Evan simply gestured toward Takoda’s backside. Rhys took a deep breath and stepped into range, running his hand down Takoda’s back tenderly. Evan bit back a smile at the tender gesture, waiting for Rhys to begin properly. Then again, for him, that was the proper beginning.

Takoda had tensed in anticipation, waiting for the flogging to begin, but Evan could see the lines of his body relaxing beneath the caress. Rhys’s hand drifted over one pert cheek before drawing back and swatting hard, harder

than he had the first time he'd spanked Takoda. That was good, Evan decided. He wasn't holding back now like he had before, so maybe the time away from anything kinky this weekend had given him a chance to reflect on what he wanted.

When the spanking continued, the flogger hanging limp in Rhys's hand, Evan decided it was time to intervene. "You've warmed him up enough, Rhys," he said firmly. "He doesn't need to be pampered. Start the proper flogging now." He didn't add the threat of doing it himself if Rhys couldn't. He wanted Rhys in control for the session rather than angry if at all possible. He'd prick Rhys's temper only as a last resort.

Rhys didn't look happy about the order, but he switched the flogger to his other hand, starting so lightly Evan doubted Takoda could even feel the blows, working across the bound sub's shoulders. Eventually, the thuds increased in force without Evan having to say anything about it. With the harder blows came the wonderful sounds Evan associated with a session.

Keeping his hands carefully to himself—he wouldn't touch Takoda again unless Rhys cracked—Evan stepped closer to murmur provocatively, "Enjoying yourself, Takoda?"

"Yes, Sir," Takoda gasped between smacks of the flogger across his ass. "It's even better than I imagined it would be."

"You're turning a beautiful shade of pink, but I think it should be darker. Do you want more?"

"Yes, Sir," Takoda begged. "Please give me more."

"You heard the man," Evan said to Rhys. "Harder now. Make him feel the burn."

This particular flogger wasn't harsh enough to break skin or leave bruises, but repeated blows could heat the skin beautifully, leaving the sub tingling with pleasurable pain. Rhys still wasn't swinging the implement full force, but Evan could hear that he'd obeyed, both in the thud the leather made when it connected with Takoda's thighs and in the way the sub cried out. While Rhys was paying attention to Takoda's shoulders, Evan ran a testing hand over the skin of his ass, feeling the heat from the flogging. Deciding it was hot enough for the moment, he stopped Rhys with a wave of his hand. "Have you had enough, Takoda?" he asked, a question any experienced sub would know better than to answer with anything other than a "whatever you desire, Sir," but Evan hoped to actually get an honest answer from Takoda.

"No, Sir," Takoda whined, wriggling as much as he was able in the confining restraints.

“Move around in front of him, Rhys,” Evan directed. “Let’s see if he likes it on his front as much as his back. Take the clamps off first, though. The flogger will feel exquisite on his sore nipples.”

Rhys moved so he was standing in front of Takoda’s suspended body now. Evan watched with bated breath as Rhys lifted trembling hands to the weighted clamps, pulling off one, then the other. Takoda grunted as each one was removed, squirming as much as his restraints would allow.

“Kiss him again,” Evan suggested when Rhys dropped the clamps to the floor. He could see the nerves jangling in Rhys’s body and hoped that would help calm him. He’d promised himself, Takoda, and Patrick that he’d do everything he could to help Rhys through their sessions without taking over and fucking Takoda. Now he had to find a way to keep that promise if he could. “Taste how desperate he is for more.”

Rhys’s mouth closed over Takoda’s again without hesitation, his hands skimming over the long lines of the sub’s bound body, turning the simple kiss into something far more powerful and intimate, but Evan let it go. If this was what it took for Rhys to be comfortable in the session, it was worth it. And he’d told them they could kiss any time they wanted. He could hardly complain if they did it now. When Rhys finally pulled away, he stared deeply into Takoda’s eyes for a moment.

Whatever he saw must have reassured him somewhat, because when he finally stepped back, he swung the flogger gently against the tops of Takoda’s thighs, reddening the skin slowly with incrementally harder blows. Takoda twitched and moaned and pulled at the restraints around his wrists, but his face was calm, blissful even.

“Higher,” Evan directed when it became clear Rhys was hesitating again.

“Don’t ask me to do that, Sir,” Rhys pleaded, turning to face Evan.

“Why not?” Evan asked seriously. “Look at him, Rhys. Look at him. He isn’t hurting. He’s so high on endorphins that you could use a far more severe flogger and he wouldn’t complain. He’s not going to complain about that one dancing across his skin. You know how good it can feel. Why are you denying him that pleasure?”

“Please, Rhys,” Takoda begged. “I want to know what it feels like. I want to know how high I can go.”

Rhys turned back to Takoda again, conflict visible in every line of his body as he raised his arm, aiming for Takoda’s chest. The flogger connected one time, Takoda crying out in real pain for a moment as he absorbed the impact on his swollen nipples. Rhys’s face contorted, arm shaking as he tried

to raise it again. After a moment, the limb fell back to his side, his eyes closing in anguish and defeat. "I can't," he said finally.

"What do you mean, you can't?" Evan challenged, getting in Rhys's face, though he knew what was going on in Rhys's head. He could read it on his face. Despite all the precautions, all the talking, Rhys was back in Kade's dungeon again. Fuck. He didn't want to do this. "I know you can flog a sub until he screams. I've seen you. Takoda's seen you. So what's the problem? Have you forgotten how to be a Dom? Did you turn into a weak-kneed vanilla twink while I was gone? Flog Takoda the way he wants or I will."

"I said I can't," Rhys repeated, dropping the flogger. His face showed his fear, his self-doubt, his anguish, making Evan long for another way to help his friend, but he didn't know what else to do.

"Then sit in the corner and watch while I do," Evan ordered, turning his back on Rhys and picking up the abandoned toy. He met Takoda's eyes and saw comprehension and compassion in the dark eyes.

He heard footsteps slowly retreating. When they stopped, he glanced in Rhys's direction, making sure the blond had followed his orders. "Don't look away," Evan directed. "Keep your eyes on Takoda the entire time. I want you to see how much he enjoys what you wouldn't do to him."

The words stung, Evan could tell. He arched an eyebrow and held the flogger out to Rhys, giving him another opportunity, but his best friend didn't move, his face set. With a shrug, Evan turned his attention back to Takoda, meeting the sub's eyes and waiting for the slight nod before letting the strands of the flogger dance across the bronzed skin of his chest. He could see the return of awareness now that had been mostly absent when Rhys had held the flogger in the sideways glances toward Rhys, in the way Takoda tensed slightly between blows, as if he was convincing himself to accept Evan's dominance in the interest of helping Rhys instead of enjoying it for its own sake.

"Do you really want to sit there and watch this?" Evan asked, pausing for a moment and holding the flogger out to Rhys again.

"Please, Rhys," Takoda begged. "I'd much rather you be the one to give me what I need."

Rhys looked torn, shifting restlessly from foot to foot like he wanted to step forward, wanted to be the one wielding the flogger, but finally he shook his head again, shame investing every line of his body at his inability to give Takoda what he so clearly wanted.

Evan shrugged and adjusted the ropes again so he'd have easier access to Takoda's body. The position gave Takoda a little more movement, and his

back arched when the flogger landed across his stomach, right above the tip of his cock.

Evan smiled and reached out to stroke the bound shaft. "It looks like someone's asking for some attention," he teased lightly, waiting for Takoda's reaction.

The sub's eyes went wide for a moment, but Evan could see the moment when the caress of his hand outweighed the fear. "Yes, Sir," he whispered, his eyes darting to Rhys and back to Evan again. Evan's gaze followed the sub's, seeing the jealous anger building on Rhys's face. *Come on, Rhys*, he urged silently. *Get the hell over here and claim him.*

"What was that?" Evan asked, beginning to rock his wrist back and forth, stroking more enthusiastically.

"Yes, Sir," Takoda said, louder this time, a moan escaping along with the words. "Please, Sir."

Evan had just lifted his hand, drawing the flogger up to resume the whipping, when Rhys launched himself across the room and tackled Evan to the ground. "Pickles," the blond spat. "Get out so I can take care of Takoda. We're going to go a round when I'm done here, but I refuse to do it in front of him."

Evan nodded, despite itching for a fight now too. Rhys was right, though. Takoda didn't need to hear it or see it, especially not hanging from the ceiling. He started toward the door, checking back to make sure Rhys was all right to give Takoda the attention he needed.

"Get out!" Rhys bellowed again as he lowered Takoda's feet to the floor again.

Evan's face tightened as he shut the door behind him.

CHAPTER 28

“WHAT the fuck did you think you were doing?”

“What you couldn’t,” Evan replied, sensing Rhys was still spoiling for a fight. It had only been about ten minutes, so he’d lay money on the fact that Rhys hadn’t fucked out his aggression. He’d come out onto the patio figuring there wasn’t anything out here they could damage permanently if their fight turned physical again. “Have you gotten your head out of your ass yet? Or should I take Takoda to the club and help him find a real Dom?”

That did it. Rhys lunged at him again, fists flying.

Evan dodged about every other blow, landing a few of his own as Rhys finally let out all the venom that he had been storing up inside him, anger toward Kade and guilt over Takoda he couldn’t express any other way. “He’s mine!” Rhys shouted, his fist connecting with Evan’s jaw. “You can’t have him. I won’t let you touch him!”

Evan snorted, dodging the next blow and landing one of his own hard on Rhys’s belly. “You can’t give him what he needs. Why the hell should he stay with you? Did you see him today? He was begging for a flogging. He doesn’t need some tentative, scared weakling. He needs a Dom who can make him scream and beg and plead until he loses track of everything but what’s being done to him.”

“And I suppose you think you’re the one to do it,” Rhys spat, doubled over from the blow.

“You sure as hell haven’t been doing it,” Evan pointed out. Rhys lunged at him, the two grappling like ancient Greek wrestlers. “He’s been patient with you so far, but that’s only because he’s afraid of giving you the ultimatum he should’ve done last week. If you don’t get your act together, he’s going to start looking elsewhere for someone who isn’t afraid of him.”

“Afraid of him?” Rhys scoffed, breaking Evan’s hold before lunging at him again.

“Yes,” Evan insisted. “Afraid of what he makes you feel. You’re so madly in love with him that you know he could hurt you like no one else, and so you’re holding back. But that’s going to drive him away and using Kade as an excuse doesn’t change anything. He’s not thinking about Kade. He’s thinking about you and how good you make him feel. You’re the one who’s stuck in the past.”

“Bastard!” Rhys shouted, getting a grip around Evan’s waist again.

“What?” Evan goaded. “No answer to that? You know I’m right. You’ve finally found someone who could make you happy and you’re doing your damndest to fuck it up. Well guess again, Rhys. I’m not going to let that happen and neither is Takoda, no matter what we have to do.”

“No matter what?” Rhys said bitterly. “Does that include fucking my lover?”

“Whatever it takes,” Evan repeated, pushing back hard when, with a hoarse sob, Rhys lunged at him again. The motion sent them both tumbling into the pool.

Evan barely made it up for air when Rhys grabbed him from beneath the surface, pulling him back down again. Water went up Evan’s nose and down his throat as he wrestled to get away or take Rhys down with him. They broke apart for a moment, gasping for air. Then Rhys was on Evan again.

The next time they broke apart, Rhys wasn’t quite as quick to lunge. “Had enough?” Evan asked, swiping at the water trailing down his face.

Rhys shoved his own dripping hair from his eyes and glared at Evan for a moment, but it didn’t take long for the glare to fade and a hesitant grin to replace it. A moment later, Rhys started to chuckle, and before long, he was laughing so hard he blew water out his nose.

Seeing Rhys’s reaction, Evan let the tension drain from him, hilarity bubbling up inside him as well until they were both holding their sides as they roared with laughter.

“We okay now?” Evan asked when they finally calmed.

“Yeah,” Rhys said, pulling himself onto the edge of the pool. “Although, would you really have fucked him?”

Evan shrugged, joining Rhys on the concrete ledge. “If it had come to that, probably,” he replied honestly. “Because I couldn’t think of any other way to shock you into a reaction and you weren’t coming up with any solutions either. I didn’t know what else to do.”

“And now?” Rhys asked, a slight edge returning to his voice.

“That depends on you. Can you be the Dom Takoda needs now?”

"I can," Rhys asserted. "I needed you to kick my ass enough to let go of all the ugliness holding me back first." He pulled Evan into a tight hug, the connection between them repaired in that moment.

"Then I'll hang out and watch for a few days, just to make sure you don't get freaked on me again, and then I'll go home and enjoy my new sub," Evan said firmly. "As soon as I'm sure you won't be dragging me back out here in a week."

"If I'd known you were going to try to steal my sub, I wouldn't have invited you at all," Rhys grumbled, softening the words with a wink.

Evan chuckled and shook his head. "Did you watch Takoda just now when I was the one holding the flogger? He didn't react to me the way he did to you. Oh, he reacted, I'm not saying that, but there was a difference in how wary he was. I told you before. Takoda isn't a pain slut or a bondage slut. He's your slut."

Before Rhys could reply, Takoda stormed through the French doors where he'd clearly been watching to be sure they didn't kill each other. "Is that how you see me?" he demanded. "I'm not some cheap whore to sleep around. You're the only lover I've ever had, but if that's all I am to you, I'm not sure I want you after all!"

He was gone before either of them could speak.

Evan and Rhys looked at each other for a split second. "Shit!" they both muttered, jumping out of the pool and running after Takoda.

They found him curled up on his bed, sobbing miserably. Evan wanted to go to him, to insist he hadn't meant the words the way Takoda had taken them, but he doubted Takoda would hear anything he had to say at this point.

Not that Evan blamed him. He could imagine with perfect ease the thoughts running through Takoda's mind as Rhys climbed onto the bed behind him, murmuring soft reassurances and declarations of love. Takoda tried to pull away, the gesture enough to make Evan wince as if struck, but Rhys wouldn't let him, his arms tightening, keeping Takoda close as he sobbed, rocking him in his arms.

"I'm not a slut," Takoda cried. "You don't have any right to think those things about me. Or were you lying when you said you respected me? You said you wouldn't humiliate me during a session, so what gives you the right to call me names outside of one?"

"Baby," Rhys eased, "Evan wasn't calling you names. We know you're not a slut."

“Then why did he say it?” Takoda demanded. “I thought you were different, thought you wouldn’t demean me because I chose to be your submissive.”

Damn, Evan wished Patrick were here. He’d learned from watching subs that many of them had trouble balancing their desire to submit and their self-respect. Patrick had figured it out, given the way he switched in and out of a role. He’d be able to explain it to Takoda in ways Evan and Rhys, naturally dominant, didn’t fully appreciate.

“Takoda,” he said from the doorway, “in BDSM vernacular, a slut isn’t someone who sleeps around. He’s someone who will do anything for a particular experience. Patrick, the sub I visited in Boston, is a pain slut. He’ll do anything I ask for the promise of a caning. All I meant was you’d do anything Rhys asked in order to be with him.”

“Why should I believe you?” Takoda challenged. “You’re the one that got me into this mess, telling me it would help Rhys if we made him jealous.” The sub turned back to Rhys. “I didn’t want to agree, but I didn’t see any other choice. I don’t want him. I don’t want anyone but you.”

“Which is what Evan was trying to tell me when you overheard the comment that upset you,” Rhys said calmly. “And he was right about it helping me. In a twisted way, it took the reality of someone else touching you to make me face the fact that my own actions could drive you willingly into the situation Evan had created.”

“No! I’d never do that,” Takoda protested. “I don’t want anyone but you.”

“I know that,” Rhys said, “but as Evan reminded me, you want more than just a lover. You want a Dom too. And you deserve to get what you want. I needed that kick in the ass to remind me that if I don’t give you what you need and want, you have every right to go looking for it elsewhere. We told you the sub was the one with all the power, and it’s the truth. No one in the lifestyle would blame you one bit for leaving a Dom who can’t dominate you.”

“But I don’t want to leave.”

“I don’t want you to leave either,” Rhys assured him, kissing him gently. “I want you to stay and be happy and explore this new world with me. I want to find out what you like and then give it to you. Over and over and over. And I want to show you what I like and hopefully help you come to like it as well.”

As the kisses became more intimate, Evan decided mending his own fences with both men could wait a little longer. He retreated to his room,

leaving them alone to make up however they felt best. His wet shorts were chafing, so he tossed them in the hamper, lying down on the bed as guilt for his plan to provoke Rhys—although that had worked even better than he'd hoped—and for the careless slip of the tongue that had caused Takoda so much anguish started eating at him.

His phone exerted an irresistible pull, and before he could question the impulse, he picked it up and dialed Patrick's number. The other man answered on the second ring. "Hey there, lover," Patrick's voice purred across the phone. "I didn't expect to hear from you until at least tomorrow."

"I miss you," Evan said. "And I screwed up."

"Your friend didn't get jealous?" Patrick asked, surprised.

"No, that part worked fine," Evan replied, "although I may have a black eye and some bruised ribs. No, Takoda overheard a comment that upset him. I didn't mean it the way he took it, but I was talking to Rhys and not watching my words. I didn't know he could hear me."

"What did you say?" Patrick wanted to know. "Surely it couldn't have been as bad as that."

"I was trying to convince Rhys that Takoda reacts to him differently than to me. Takoda's a one-Dom sub. Except that, of course, I didn't say it that way. I said he was Rhys's slut."

Patrick whistled under his breath. "Yeah, you did screw up," he agreed. "You know what you meant. Rhys knows what you meant. I know what you meant, but for a new sub, that word is a hard one. I remember when I first started in the scene. That word alone was enough to pull me out of my headspace. I came up fighting more than once because of it."

"So how'd you get past it?" Evan asked immediately. "I mean, I've heard you describe yourself as a pain slut. It obviously doesn't bother you anymore."

"Time," Patrick said, "and being in the lifestyle long enough to realize that it wasn't an insult to my character but a description of my preferences. I imagine you've told Takoda that already, but from what you told me of his background, that word's gonna hurt for awhile."

"So what do I do?" Evan asked.

"You apologize first of all," Patrick said, "if you haven't already. Actually, even if you have, you apologize again. And then you make sure to keep your hands off him and your approach respectful. He isn't your sub. He doesn't have to put up with anything from you. He's dealing with enough shit without having to question his value as a human being."

“Oh, God,” Evan groaned.

“You didn’t do it on purpose,” Patrick reminded him, “and you probably only hastened a crisis he’d have had eventually. A lot of subs go through this, even without any abuse in their past. He’s struggling with the balance between his dignity outside a session and his submission during a session. If you’re going to be a part of any more sessions between them, even as an observer, you might want to suggest to Rhys that he leave Takoda at least partially clothed, even if it’s just a jock strap. And maybe limit the sexual contact between them while you’re in the room. If the slut comment bothered him that much, even having you see him naked or having sex with Rhys could add to it for awhile.”

“The sex definitely isn’t the problem between them,” Evan agreed. “I think, after our fight today, Rhys is finally ready to really be Takoda’s Dom, so hopefully I’ll only be observing for a few days and then I can come home. If my comment hasn’t caused too much of a setback. I’ll mention it to Rhys and see what he says. It might not be a bad idea for me to get a hotel room for a few days too, to give them some privacy.”

“Something else that helped me,” Patrick added, “was having the opportunity to get to know a really committed lifestyle couple. I didn’t—and don’t—want anything as extreme as what they shared, but watching them together and talking to the slave about his feelings really helped me find my own balance. I couldn’t live the way he does, but he helped me see that he wasn’t any less of a man because of his desires. If all of you were here in Boston, I’d offer to talk to Takoda, but maybe Rhys knows someone there. You’ve got to remember that he’s living with two Doms. I don’t know if Rhys is as... potent as you are, but you exude dominance even when you aren’t in Dom mode. If Rhys is anything like you, then he’s got two examples of one version of masculinity in front of him, but they’re not examples he can follow.”

“I wish we were in Boston or you were out here,” Evan admitted, “and not just so you could talk to Takoda. How can I miss you so much after two days spent together and only a few hours spent apart?”

“I’m irresistible, that’s all,” Patrick crooned.

“Careful, boy,” Evan replied immediately. “That kind of cockiness will earn you a punishment.”

“Must you whip me, Sir?” Patrick whined playfully. “My poor bottom hasn’t recovered from the last time yet.”

“It’s not my fault you’re a naughty boy who can’t behave respectfully,” Evan growled, relieved at being able to joke and tease this way with his sub

after having to walk on eggshells with Takoda. “What are you wearing right now?”

“Jeans,” Patrick replied immediately. “I left my work boots at the door to my apartment and threw my T-shirt in the laundry, but I hadn’t finished changing when you called.”

“Take them off,” Evan ordered. “If you’re wearing a jock strap, you can leave that on, but I want your ass on display.”

“Yes, Sir,” Patrick replied, his voice suddenly husky. Evan could hear rustling as he stripped. “They’re off, Sir. All I have on is a red jock strap.”

“Find a mirror,” Evan directed. “I want you to watch what I’m doing to you so you can tell me how beautiful you look.”

A muffled moan came back across the phone line. “And I know you have a dildo. Get the biggest one you have. I’m going to stuff you so full you won’t be able to breathe without feeling me.”

That earned him a second, louder moan. “I’m ready, Sir,” Patrick’s voice rasped in Evan’s ear after a moment.

“Describe your ass to me,” Evan ordered. “In detail.”

“I’m standing in front of the mirror,” Patrick said softly, “looking over my shoulder. My back and shoulders are a little pink still, but not marked. You didn’t leave marks on me until you reached the top of my ass.”

“How many marks are there?” Evan asked, though he knew the answer. He’d almost been late to the airport this morning because he couldn’t stop himself from licking them. Over and over and over again.

“Six,” Patrick replied immediately. “They’re thin, purplish stripes, perfectly spaced down my cheeks. And in between them are two light green marks from the handle of the tickler on Sunday night.”

“Run your hands over them,” Evan said hoarsely, closing his eyes to appreciate the visual. “Are they warm to the touch?”

“I’m warm all over,” Patrick replied. “Thinking about you has that effect on me.”

“Are you hard?”

“Desperately, Sir,” Patrick groaned.

“Don’t come without permission,” Evan warned. “I want this to last a long time.”

“Yes, Sir,” Patrick promised right away. “I’ll be good.”

“Tell me about the dildo. I want to know what I’m fucking you with.”

"It's black, about seven inches long. The realistic ones are creepy. It's maybe two inches wide," Patrick husked. "Big enough to really stretch me open, just like you said, Sir."

"Then I'd better make sure you're prepped well before I put it in you," Evan replied, beginning to stroke his cock slowly as he imagined what Patrick was doing to himself. "The lube's cold because I'm in too much of a hurry to get my fingers inside you. Two of them, because I fucked you this morning and even if you aren't loose from that still, you like it when it hurts. I just bend you over in front of the mirror, pull the thong out of the way, and drive them inside you."

Patrick's hoarse groan assured Evan his sub was following orders. "Yes, Sir," Patrick said a moment later. "It does hurt a little, but it's for you so I don't care. And it feels so good too, being stretched."

"I'm in the mood to hear you moan," Evan gasped, his hand moving faster. "A thorough prostate massage ought to have the right effect. Moan for me, boy. I want to hear how good it feels to have my fingers up your ass."

Patrick moaned loudly enough Evan could hear it even when the phone clattered to the floor. "Please, Sir," Patrick begged, "may I move closer to the bed so I can set the phone down and use two hands?"

"As long as your ass is still in the air," Evan agreed. "I want to pound into you with nothing holding me back. Are you stretched enough for me?"

"God, yes," Patrick nearly shouted. "Fuck me, Sir. Please!"

"As soon as you're situated," Evan promised. "All the way in with one hard thrust, exactly the way you like it."

The shout that came back through the earpiece assured Evan Patrick was fully impaled. "Now," he purred, "I'm going to fuck you 'til you scream."

Evan closed his fist around his cock, creating a channel to thrust into, not nearly as satisfying as Patrick's ass, but it would have to do for today. "Squeeze me tight," he husked to Patrick. "Use all those muscles to massage my cock while it splits you in two."

For a few minutes, they didn't say anything else, grunts and groans the only sounds that passed between them. Then Patrick spoke. "Please come, Sir. Come so I can."

The whimper in the sub's voice broke Evan's resolve and he climaxed all over his hand. "Will you look at that?" he drawled, his breath still sawing in and out. "I seem to have forgotten the condom and made a mess all over your pretty, bruised ass."

“Please, Sir,” Patrick mewled, “may I come?”

Evan gave permission and listened to the glorious sounds Patrick made during his orgasm.

Eventually, the moans and gasps quieted. “How soon can you come home?” Patrick asked after a moment. “Phone sex is great, but I really wish you were here to hold me.”

Evan’s eyes closed. “Soon,” he promised. “As soon as I know Rhys and Takoda will be all right.”

CHAPTER 29

EVAN didn't see Rhys or Takoda again that evening, but he didn't go looking for them either, only leaving his room to grab some leftover pizza from the fridge. He thought he heard Rhys in the kitchen right before he fell asleep, but he didn't go out to see. Better to leave them to work things out between themselves tonight. He'd see where he stood with them in the morning.

Rhys was already up in the morning when Evan came out into the living area. "I was thinking about going for a run," Rhys said. "Want to come along?"

"That would be great," Evan said. "Takoda, are you going to join us too?"

"No," Takoda said, his voice firm but cold in a way Evan had never heard it be. Evan flinched a little at the blunt rejection, not even softened by a half-hearted excuse, but accepted the sub's decision. Maybe this way, he could talk to Rhys and see how things stood between them at least.

Evan grabbed his shoes and got ready quickly, following Rhys out the door, relieved to see the tender kiss that passed between them as Rhys left. "How's Takoda?" he asked when they hit the street.

Rhys shrugged. "Pretty shaken up," he admitted. "I suppose it's better for him to be upset when I've mostly calmed down rather than us both being upset at the same time, but I could do with a few drama-free days."

"I called Patrick last night," Evan said. "He suggested finding someone—a sub—Takoda could talk to about everything that's going on in his head. He said neither of us could really explain to him what it meant to be a sub and how to balance all the parts of his life. He said it's something a lot of subs struggle with."

"He said, he said, he said," Rhys mimicked teasingly. "Sounds like he had a lot to say."

“He’s a special guy,” Evan defended himself. “I wish he were here. He could talk to Takoda, but I don’t think it’s a very good conversation to have over the phone with someone he doesn’t even know. Surely you know somebody from the club who’s got a good, balanced view on life as a sub. Someone who could help Takoda figure out how to submit to you and keep his self-respect at the same time. I don’t care if he never talks to me again. I just want him to be happy with you and in the life you build together.”

“I know lots of subs,” Rhys said slowly, “but I’m not sure how many of them I’d trust to give Takoda advice. A lot of them seem to use it as a way to escape from reality for awhile, and that’s not the way I want it to be for Takoda. I’m not a sub, but even I know that’s not healthy in the long run.”

“I could talk to Patrick,” Evan suggested. “Maybe see if he’d be willing to come out for a few days, maybe for the weekend. He’d still be a stranger to Takoda, but the subs here could well be too.”

“Let me think about it a little more,” Rhys delayed. “That’s an awfully expensive ticket if I can think of someone closer to home.”

“I know Takoda’s mad at me. Are you?”

“No,” Rhys said immediately. “I was yesterday, during the session and afterward, but you were right about what I was feeling and why I was acting the way I did. And you acted the way you did to force me to get past it. I couldn’t see it when it was happening, but I see it now. You’d have to try a lot harder than that to drive me away.”

“Hell no!” Evan exclaimed. “That was quite hard enough, thank you very much.”

“You mean to tell me there are limits on what you’d do for me?” Rhys teased.

“Fucker,” Evan muttered.

Rhys laughed, and Evan knew that whatever else happened, they’d be okay.

THAT evening, while Rhys was at work, Evan took a chance and approached Takoda while he was outside in the pool.

“Do you mind if I join you?” Evan asked, sitting on one of the deck chairs.

“It’s a free country,” Takoda muttered.

“That isn’t what I asked,” Evan pointed out. “If having me here disturbs you that much, I’ll go back inside.”

“Why did you say such an awful thing?” Takoda demanded suddenly. “You told me it wouldn’t be cheating to let you touch me, that it was something a lot of subs, even committed ones, did. And then you turned around and called me a slut. I think I have a right to be upset.”

“You have the right to be whatever you want,” Evan agreed, “but despite what you’re thinking, I wasn’t insulting your integrity when I used that word yesterday. I know Rhys told you how I meant it, but I’ll tell you again because you’re going to keep hearing it if you stay on as Rhys’s sub. In a BDSM setting, it’s a descriptor of preference. Someone who’s a pain slut, like Patrick, gets off on pain, and not just a little pain but enough pain to send most people running for the hills. He wanted a caning as a reward for his obedience. I’ve watched you in the sessions I’ve been a part of. You get off on submitting to Rhys. It’s not what’s done to you, but who does it. That’s *all* I was telling him.”

“I reacted when you touched me,” Takoda reminded him, the pain in his voice enough to make Evan wince.

“You’re a man,” Evan said with a laugh. “You’re going to react when someone strokes your dick. It’s the way we’re made. It’s not that you get turned off by other people as your Dom, but from the moment I took over the session, your eyes were on Rhys, not on me unless I spoke to you directly. You weren’t interested in how I reacted. You were interested in how Rhys reacted. When Rhys was holding the flogger, you were under. When I was holding it, you weren’t. That’s what I said to him in one little word.”

“Fine,” Takoda said, though he didn’t really sound convinced. “Apology accepted.” He climbed the pool ladder, grabbed his towel, and went inside, leaving Evan to wonder if he’d made matters better or worse.

“EVAN, this is Matt.”

“Nice to meet you, Matt,” Evan said, rising from his seat and extending his hand to the younger man.

“Oh, Rhys,” Matt gushed. “Where have you been hiding this one? You should’ve brought him to the club. He’d be an instant hit with all the unattached subs.”

“He came in last Friday with Takoda,” Rhys informed the other man. “You must not have been there.”

“What a pity,” Matt said, his eyes raking over Evan’s body. “I’d take anything he could dish out.”

“I thought Matt could maybe talk to Takoda a little,” Rhys explained to Evan, “like you suggested.”

Evan wasn’t sure the flamboyant sub was the best choice, but he figured Rhys had a reason.

“Where is he?” Matt asked, looking around.

“Upstairs,” Evan replied. “He tends not to come out unless Rhys is around.” He hated that it had returned to that point, but he didn’t feel like he could force the issue when he was the one who had caused the rift in the first place. He trailed behind them to the bottom of the stairs up to the second story where Rhys’s and Takoda’s bedrooms were.

He could hear Rhys introducing Matt to Takoda, hear the new arrival’s cooed comment. “Oh, you lucky man. Living here with two studly Doms at your beck and call.”

Evan’s eyes widened in surprise. Maybe Matt would be able to help Takoda put things in perspective after all.

Rhys came back downstairs almost immediately. “I’ve been dismissed.”

Evan laughed. “Yeah, from what little I heard, Matt certainly seems to understand where the real power rests.”

“Don’t let the queen exterior fool you,” Rhys said with a laugh. “He plays it up, but underneath, he’s got his head screwed on right.”

“Was he one of yours?” Evan asked.

“Not really,” Rhys said. “I mean, we had some sessions, a little like you and Patrick before last weekend, and he agreed to do the demo with me at the club’s anniversary last year. Matt was the sub in the scene Takoda keeps talking about that got him interested in the lifestyle.”

“You don’t think Takoda might be a little jealous?” Evan asked carefully.

“Maybe,” Rhys admitted, “but I couldn’t think of anyone else I knew well enough to trust to give Takoda sound advice. Unless we fly to Boston and let him talk to Patrick.”

“How about this?” Evan proposed. “If Matt’s advice isn’t enough, I’ll see if Patrick would be willing to come here to visit for a few days. I’ve got enough frequent flyer miles to pay for a ticket. I don’t know what his schedule is like, but maybe he could get free for a long weekend.”

AN HOUR later, Matt came back downstairs, shooting a glare at both Doms. "I've talked to him," he said, all hint of the queen gone. "I'm not entirely sure he believed me, but that's more a matter of time and you two not doing anything else stupid to upset him. Being a sub is objectifying enough. Making him feel like he's caught between you is a recipe for disaster, especially for a new sub. You're too good of a Dom, Rhys, to let this happen to a new sub like Takoda. Find a way to fix it because he wants to be a good sub. He wants to be your sub. I'll call in a few days and see how he's doing." He left the house, still shaking his head and muttering about stupid Doms who didn't have the sense to realize when they were jeopardizing a sub's self-esteem.

"It's not your fault," Rhys said before Evan could speak. "I put you and Takoda in that position. All you did was what you've always done and think of me first."

"Maybe, maybe not," Evan said quietly, "but if he has to blame one of us, far better that he blame me. I don't want to jeopardize your relationship."

Rhys chuckled. "Yeah, well, I think I did that well enough on my own. He's talking to me, which is more than he's doing to you, and he'll cuddle and kiss and let me suck him off, but we haven't made love since you got back."

"Fuck," Evan muttered. "I'm so sorry. That wasn't my intention at all."

"I told you, it's not your fault," Rhys interrupted. "This is Takoda's way of punishing me for being a prick and not getting my act together sooner. And he has every right to be angry with me. I put him in a position of having to accept another Dom's, another man's, touch in order to get my attention. That's not fair to him. And don't say it was your idea. I know it was, but you wouldn't have needed the idea if I'd dealt with my shit from the beginning instead of pretending Takoda was the only one with problems."

Evan didn't have anything to say to that. "I've apologized to him a couple of times, but I feel like I ought to keep apologizing until he believes me."

"All that'll do is annoy him," Rhys replied. "I knew that even before this all started. I watched him brush off people who'd annoyed him for years at the club. And we've both done far more than annoy him."

Evan shook his head in agreement, making Rhys smile as he stood up. "I'm going to see if he wants to talk for awhile."

Personally, Evan thought Rhys would be better served by seducing Takoda, but he'd been wrong enough times already where Takoda was concerned. He'd let Rhys make his own decisions from now on unless his friend asked for his advice.

EVAN answered another email from one of his team with a question about an ad they were proposing to the bank and hit send. He was contemplating his reply to the next email when he heard laughter from the upstairs bedroom. It brought a smile to his face. He'd heard Takoda laugh far too rarely in the time he'd been in Vegas and not at all since his gaffe two days ago. He hoped that was a good sign. Surely if Takoda could laugh at whatever Rhys was saying or doing, things were getting better between them.

The laughter continued, Rhys joining in, as Evan finished up with his emails and sat down to study the data that had come in from the previous month. He'd barely gotten started when the laughter changed tone, becoming huskier, interspersed with moans. Evan's eyebrows jumped as he reached for his iPod, not wanting to listen in on Rhys and Takoda making love, if indeed that was what Rhys had convinced Takoda to do.

An hour later, his stomach grumbling, he turned off the music, hoping he'd given them enough time to do what they needed to. No unusual sounds met his ears, so he decided they'd finished. He wanted to mend his own fences with Takoda now that Rhys seemed to have mended his. Listening carefully for anything to suggest he would be interrupting, he went up to Rhys's room, finding the door ajar. He pushed it open slightly, getting ready to call their names, when he caught sight of the two men still on the bed, Takoda riding Rhys for all he was worth. Rhys's hands were tied to the headboard with two of his ties. Another one covered his eyes.

Face flaming, Evan backed out of the doorway, hoping he hadn't disturbed them. Rhys's moaned "Please!" followed him down the hall. When Evan got back downstairs and past his embarrassment at walking in on such a private moment, he marveled at how much Rhys obviously loved Takoda to have given up that much control to him, even outside a session. As far as Evan knew, the only other person Rhys had ever given that kind of control to was Evan himself, and then only rarely and only in the context of a session.

It looked to him like Rhys had finally met his mate.

EVAN pulled out the guitar Rhys had rented for him and settled on the couch, plucking idly as he tried to decide what he was in the mood to play. His thoughts raced too much for him to settle on anything, so he just let the music flow, chord following chord in random progression as suited his mood.

He didn't know how long he'd been sitting there playing when Takoda walked in carrying his guitar as well. "Mind if I join you?"

"It's your home," Evan replied. "I'm just a guest."

"You'll never be 'just a guest' in Rhys's house," Takoda insisted. "You know that so there's no need to pretend."

"But this isn't Rhys's house anymore," Evan countered, fingers stilling. "This is yours and Rhys's house, and if you don't want me here, then it's time for me to leave. Even if I stay in Vegas for a few more days, the city is full of hotels."

Takoda shook his head. "That isn't necessary. Rhys wants you here as a safeguard for at least one more session. I don't know that it's necessary, except that if he'd walked out on me last Friday, I'd have been in trouble, so I'll put up with you for a few more days."

"I won't touch you unless it's an emergency," Evan promised. "In or out of a session. And I was going to suggest to Rhys that he find a pair of shorts for you, like his red ones, for the session or sessions I observe. I've made you uncomfortable enough. I don't want to make it any worse."

"That's considerate of you," Takoda allowed, looking down at his guitar. "Rhys will let you know when I'm ready to try again."

"Please, Takoda," Evan begged. "Hate me all you want, but don't let my stupid mistake change your mind about Rhys or about either side of your relationship with him. If it really bothers you to have me around, I can sit in the hallway between your bedrooms so I'd see if Rhys leaves without you and only come up to the attic then. But don't deny yourselves the enjoyment of a session because of me."

"This isn't about you," Takoda reminded him sharply. "When *I* decide *I'm* ready, *I* will dictate the terms of our next session, including your participation or lack thereof. In the meantime, 'Sound of Silence' sounds better with two guitars than with one."

CHAPTER 30

“I WANT to try another session this afternoon,” Takoda said over breakfast on Friday.

“Are you sure?” Rhys asked immediately. “I mean, I don’t want you to feel rushed into anything.”

“I’m sure,” Takoda replied firmly. “I’ve been thinking about it, about the things I like best, and I made a list of what I want you to do to me during the session.”

Evan’s eyebrows jumped in surprise, but he had to let Rhys handle this. Right or wrong or somewhere in between, this was Rhys’s decision to make.

“We can certainly discuss it,” Rhys said, his voice taking on its more dominant cadence, “but I’m not keen on pushy subs. If I agree to your list, there will be a price in return.”

“What price?” Takoda asked warily.

“It depends on the list. What do you want? Then we’ll see how badly you want it.”

Takoda swallowed visibly but took a deep breath and began. “I want the nipple clamps again, with the weights. I like the vampire gloves, but no ice or heat this time. And I want you to flog me properly this time instead of stopping halfway through.”

Rhys nodded slowly at the list. “Those are all reasonable requests, but since you chose to demand them rather than ask, here’s what I want in return. I want you on the St. Andrew’s Cross and I want you blindfolded. I’ll only do the things we agree upon, but if you know what’s going to happen, then I don’t want you knowing what order they’re going to happen in.”

“I... I don’t know about the blindfold,” Takoda hesitated.

Rhys shrugged like the answer was unimportant, though Evan knew that was not the case. “You can leave the blindfold off,” he offered, “but if

you do, then I get to decide what happens in the session rather than following your list. It's your choice."

"If I wear the blindfold, you won't do anything we didn't talk about?" Takoda verified.

Rhys nodded. "That's right."

"Okay, I'll wear it," Takoda agreed after a moment.

"What about Evan?" Rhys asked.

"What about him?" Takoda's voice cooled noticeably as he turned in Evan's direction.

"Can you stand for me to be in the room watching?" Evan asked. "I'm not going to touch you because there's no need for me to be involved, but you have to decide what to do with me otherwise."

Takoda glanced from Evan to Rhys. "Would it make you feel better to have him there?"

Rhys nodded. "At least this once."

"You can watch," Takoda said, turning back to Evan, "but don't interrupt. Don't talk or do anything else to influence the session unless there's a problem and Rhys or I need help."

"That sounds fair," Evan agreed. "Would you be more comfortable with something on? A pair of shorts or briefs?"

Takoda considered it for a minute. "No," he said finally. "That would be giving in to my fears and I won't do that ever again."

"EVAN, it's time."

Evan looked up from his laptop to see Rhys in leather chaps and a chest harness, looking every inch the Dom.

"Nervous?" Evan asked as he logged off from work and shut his laptop. Rhys didn't usually put on the full Dom regalia unless he was in public or unsure of himself.

"A little," Rhys admitted, "but more about disappointing Takoda than about losing it again."

"I'd say I didn't think you could disappoint him, but we've both let him down pretty badly this week," Evan agreed. "Let's make sure it doesn't happen again."

“Definitely not,” Rhys breathed. “He’s strong enough to face his fears. I owe it to him to be strong enough to face mine.”

“Let’s go prove to him he’s picked the right Dom,” Evan said, setting aside the laptop and slinging an arm around Rhys’s shoulders. “Not that there was ever any doubt.”

Going up to the attic, they found Takoda as Rhys had instructed, kneeling on the floor, his legs spread wide, his hands clasped behind his head, cock already encircled by the leather band. His braid hung thick down his back. Evan moved quietly to the chair in the corner so he wouldn’t be a distraction.

“On your feet,” Rhys directed Takoda, who rose gracefully, proudly even. Evan had a sudden vision of a captured Indian brave refusing to cower before the soldier who had imprisoned him. He wouldn’t mention the scenario, not sure Takoda was ready for any kind of role-playing and particularly for one that touched so closely to his heritage. It didn’t stop the image from dancing around the edges of Evan’s consciousness, though, as Rhys fastened the familiar leather cuffs around Takoda’s wrists, adding a pair to his ankles this time, and led the sub to the saltire cross screwed into the far wall. Positioning Takoda so he faced outward, Rhys affixed the cuffs to the cross, leaving Takoda completely open to whatever Rhys decided to do.

The blindfold went on next, the patches adjusted carefully to block Takoda’s sight completely. Evan could see Takoda tense as the world went dark around him. Rhys obviously saw it too, because he leaned in and captured the sub’s lips, kissing him hard and hungrily. “You make me so proud when you do something difficult because I asked you to,” Rhys murmured, the words barely carrying to Evan’s ears. “You’re so beautiful right now, blind and helpless because I want you that way. I’m going to make you feel so good. Relax and trust me, lover. I’ll blow your mind.”

The words—or Rhys’s hand stroking Takoda’s cock—worked, because Evan could see the tension leave Takoda’s body in a rush. The moment it did, Rhys smacked Takoda’s thigh lightly, not quite enough to hurt but definitely enough to make the bound man jump. Evan watched, impressed, as Rhys picked up an alternating rhythm of light slaps to Takoda’s inner thighs and teasing strokes to his cock and balls. Before long, Evan could see Takoda beginning to anticipate the touches. The moment he did, Rhys changed the pattern, slapping and stroking randomly so Takoda never knew which touch was coming next. The sub moaned softly as his body tensed and relaxed depending on which touch he anticipated next. Rhys regularly gave Takoda the opposite of what his body seemed to expect.

Then the touches stopped altogether as Rhys went to find the other implements he would need to give Takoda what he'd asked for.

"Rhys?"

"Who?" Rhys said sharply, grabbing Takoda's balls and squeezing just to the point of pain.

"I'm sorry, Sir," Takoda gasped.

"Don't speak unless I ask you a question," Rhys reminded his sub firmly, but not unkindly. "I'm not going to leave you alone and even if I do, Evan is here to release you. But I can't very well clamp your nipples or flog you without going to get what I need. You have to trust me, remember?"

"Yes, Sir," Takoda whispered.

"That's what I like to hear," Rhys praised, leaning in and giving Takoda a reassuring kiss. "You know I'm not going to do anything we didn't agree on, so relax and let me get everything I need. I'll be back before you know it."

"Yes, Sir," Takoda said, visibly trying to relax as he hung in his bonds. Evan watched the ebb and flow of the sub's nerves with interest as Rhys audibly opened and closed drawers and doors, rattling items in their cupboards as he selected the items they'd agreed on. Takoda would take a deep breath and exhale slowly, his body relaxing with the concentration, but as Rhys continued to stay away, the tension would creep back in until Takoda was twitching in his restraints again. Then the cycle started all over again.

Finally, Rhys returned to Takoda's side, grabbing one nipple and pinching it roughly until it pebbled enough to attach a clamp. Takoda cried out in surprise, panting through the pain of the clamp shutting tight. Rhys hadn't selected the same ones as before, Evan noted, instead picking a pair that would grow tighter the more weight he put on them. Evan smiled to himself. It seemed Rhys had more than one way of dealing with a pushy sub.

Evan approved.

Particularly when Rhys didn't immediately put the other clamp on, bestowing gentle caresses on the other nipple and then stroking Takoda's outstretched arm with one of the vampire gloves instead. Evan could just imagine the prickly sensation of the metal nubs on all that sensitive skin. Rhys wasn't pressing hard enough for it to hurt, but it was definitely more than a tickle. Takoda pulled helplessly at his bonds, trying to move his arm away.

"Don't do that," Rhys purred. "I might think you don't want me to touch your arms. And if I think that, I might have to touch you somewhere else. Somewhere you really wouldn't like." To illustrate his threat, he cupped Takoda's cock and balls with his ungloved hand.

“No, Sir,” Takoda begged. “I’m not pulling away, I promise. It just startled me.”

“Are you sure?” Rhys asked, stroking Takoda’s arm again with a little more pressure this time.

The reaction was the same, although Evan could see Takoda fighting it. “I’m sure, Sir,” the sub pleaded.

Evan wouldn’t have been satisfied, but Rhys apparently was, switching to stroking Takoda’s inner thighs but not working up as high as his cock and balls.

When Takoda began thrashing and pleading in his bonds, Evan understood Rhys’s choice. God, there was nothing like hearing a sub beg! He was hard, and Takoda wasn’t even his sub.

Rhys bent his head and bit sharply at Takoda’s bare nipple, wringing another hoarse shout from his throat. Evan squirmed on his chair, pressing hard on his erection when Rhys bent lower and swiped his tongue across the tip of Takoda’s cock.

“You taste so good,” Rhys praised, tender caresses accompanying the praise. “Hard and leaking, even through the cock ring. Begging for my attention. I love it when my sub shows me how much he wants me. What’ll make you beg even harder?”

He didn’t give Takoda a chance to reply, pressing lightly against the sub’s bound cock with the vampire glove. Takoda threw his head back with a wordless shout as Rhys moved his hand.

“You’re so far under I could jerk you off with the glove and you’d love every minute of it, wouldn’t you?” Rhys purred.

“Yes, Sir,” Takoda replied, though Evan couldn’t tell if that was an honest answer or if Takoda had already learned the knack of telling his Dom what Rhys wanted to hear.

“Maybe later,” Rhys declared, pulling the glove off as he bit down on the tendons in Takoda’s shoulder, wrenching another wail from the sub’s throat. Then he stepped away again, simply standing and watching as Takoda’s head turned left and right, as if looking to see where Rhys was.

Evan worried for a moment about Takoda’s shoulders as the sub twisted in his restraints, but they didn’t seem to be bothering Takoda at the moment, and he’d proven he’d use his yellow word if they started hurting.

As quietly as he could, Rhys picked up the light flogger, waiting as Takoda tensed and then finally relaxed. The moment the relaxation settled in to stay, Rhys flicked the leather strands at Takoda’s unclamped nipple,

making the sub's body dance within the restraints. "I'll put the other clamp on you later," Rhys promised Takoda, "but not yet since I doubt you're ready for me to flog your nipples with them on. Or I could switch sides after awhile and flog the other side."

"Please, Sir," Takoda begged.

"That wasn't a question," Rhys scolded, smacking Takoda's thigh with the flogger, hard enough for Evan to hear the thud from across the room. Takoda flinched but stayed silent.

"Much better," Rhys praised, his hand stroking the red mark the flogger left behind. He added a small weight to the clamp on Takoda's nipple, pausing as the sub hissed and wriggled, but Takoda didn't use his safe word and eventually settled down again.

"Now," Rhys said, kissing Takoda again, "I'm going to give you the flogging you wanted."

The sob that escaped Takoda's throat was rife with anticipation and gratitude as Rhys kept his promise, setting the flogger dancing all over Takoda's body, sparing only his clamped nipple. The blows, interspersed with Rhys's trademark loving caresses, varied in power depending on where Rhys landed them, but by the time he was done, Takoda's bronzed skin showed traces of the flogger's kiss. He kept up a litany of praise the entire time, telling Takoda how beautiful he was, how much Rhys was aroused by his submission.

It was a feeling Evan wholeheartedly shared.

Playing with the weight on the clamped nipple, Rhys leaned in and kissed Takoda again. "I think I won't take this off after all," he mused aloud. "I want you decorated when I fuck you, so this side will either have to do without or you'll have to let me flog it with the clamp on. Which will it be?"

Evan's eyes grew wide at that suggestion. Even with a relatively gentle flogger, such a blow would hurt. A lot. Takoda obviously realized it as well, if the tension investing his body again was any indication.

"I want it, but I'm scared, Sir," Takoda answered finally.

"One strike," Rhys decided. "And then you may ask for more if you want it."

Takoda nodded his head slowly.

The "blow" could barely be called that, so lightly did Rhys apply the flogger to the clamped flesh, but it was enough to set the metal jiggling. Takoda cried out sharply. Evan tensed, afraid of how Rhys would react, but his friend simply reached for Takoda's other nipple, tweaking it and kneading

the surrounding muscle as he waited for Takoda to settle. "One more?" he asked when Takoda's pained breathing eased slightly.

"N-no, Sir," Takoda whimpered. "Please, no."

Rhys didn't reply, picking up the other clamp and attaching it to the nipple he'd just been fondling, adding a weight so it matched the other side. "One on this side, then," he declared.

Takoda visibly braced himself for the blow, but he didn't try to pull away or use his safe word. "Very good," Rhys crooned after he'd struck the pinched flesh. "There's no turn-on like an obedient sub." He trailed the leather down Takoda's stomach, letting it brush over the tip of the sub's cock. "You're leaking again."

He caught a droplet with his finger and lifted it to his mouth before catching another and brushing it across Takoda's lips. Takoda whimpered as his tongue flicked out, chasing the probing digit. "Get it good and wet," Rhys instructed.

Takoda complied immediately. Rhys left his finger there for a few moments, his other hand tugging lightly at the clamps, before withdrawing and pressing his finger between Takoda's widespread thighs.

Evan looked away when Takoda moaned. He already felt like the worst kind of voyeur from observing the session. Watching Rhys make love to his sub was simply too much. He couldn't leave, though, not while Takoda was still bound to the cross, helpless to free himself if something happened with Rhys. Not that Evan thought it would at this point, given they'd already come through the flogging that had triggered Rhys's meltdowns the previous two times, but it wasn't a risk Evan felt he could take.

"Please," Takoda begged after only moments of Rhys's finger teasing him. "Please fuck me, Sir."

"Not yet," Rhys chided, withdrawing his finger from Takoda's ass and trailing it teasingly over the juncture of his thigh and then up his midline to tug alternately at the two clamps. "We've only begun."

The sound that escaped Takoda's throat could only be described as a sob.

Carefully, tenderly even, Rhys undid the restraints on Takoda's wrists, lowering his arms to his sides one at a time and checking his shoulders before releasing his feet and leading him, still blindfolded, to the bed against the far wall of the room. Takoda's feet stumbled at first, until he relaxed into Rhys's guiding hands, trusting that his lover wouldn't lead him astray.

“Hands and knees,” Rhys directed as he helped Takoda onto the bed. The sub moved accordingly, his ass sticking up temptingly. Evan started to stand, intending to slip away quietly, when Rhys ran his hand over the curve of Takoda’s backside and then slapped it sharply. Takoda gasped and wriggled, his body free to move now, but his mind clearly not registering that fact as he made no effort to escape despite his unbound limbs. Evan sank back into his chair. As long as Rhys was still in session mode, Evan needed to be there. Just in case.

The spanking went exactly as Evan would’ve predicted if asked. Rhys interspersed tender caresses with the ever-harder smacks, and Takoda writhed and begged and pleaded for more until Rhys finally silenced him by parting the red cheeks and running his tongue up the surely sweaty crack.

When his friend reached for the lube and rolled a condom on, Evan took that as his sign to withdraw, leaving Rhys and Takoda to finish the session in private. He was pretty sure they’d forgotten he was even there. Takoda couldn’t see anyway with the blindfold on, but Rhys hadn’t looked at Evan since the moment the session began, his attention completely focused on Takoda.

When he reached his room, it took all of three tugs on his own cock for him to come harder than he had since he left Boston. Without even questioning the need, he reached for the phone, dialing Patrick’s number.

CHAPTER 31

“Is TAKODA still sleeping?” Evan asked when he came out to get coffee the next morning.

Rhys smiled. “Yes. I imagine he’ll sleep for another couple of hours. He was up late last night.”

Evan smirked at his friend. “Fucking him during the session wasn’t enough?”

Rhys’s grin proclaimed his self-satisfaction for all the world to see. “No. He woke me up twice during the night.”

“I take it he’s feeling better then? Has he forgiven me yet?”

“I don’t think it’s a question of forgiveness at this point,” Rhys said slowly. “I think it’s a question of him feeling comfortable in his own skin again. He was finally getting to the point of feeling good about being my sub despite my ongoing stupidity when he overheard your comment. It probably bothered him a little more than it would have anyway because of what had just happened between you and him, but honestly, I think it would have thrown him the first time he heard it, no matter what the context. He’s struggling with how to be a sub and still keep his self-respect.”

“Yeah, Patrick said a lot of subs go through that,” Evan agreed. “How’s he managing? Did the session help?”

“I think so,” Rhys replied. “We talked for a long time, once he’d recovered, about how I see him when he submits to me, about how hard I know it was for him to be helpless that way, blindfolded and bound, and that I admire the strength of mind it takes to let go that way. I think this was the first session where he could really do that because he wasn’t worried about you being involved or whether I was going to make it through to the end.”

“I know he won’t believe it right now, but I feel nothing but admiration for him, for how hard he’s fought to come back from what Kade did to him and to claim his desires for himself,” Evan said quietly. “I wouldn’t be able to

do it. I don't have the guts to let go like that, except on those very rare occasions when you put me under."

"It's one of the reasons I love him so much," Rhys admitted. "I've always been in awe of the true subs, the ones who aren't just playing around but really let go completely. Matt's a great guy and a good sub, but the few times we did a session together, he was always laughing and joking throughout the session, even when it was painful. Takoda, though, he gives in, gives up himself and becomes the epitome of my desires. I wasn't sure I'd ever find someone who could give me that."

Evan nodded, understanding completely. It was what made Patrick such a rare find too. "Do whatever it takes to keep him," Evan advised. "People talk about not spoiling your sub, but I don't think you can when you've got a good one. No amount of praise, no amount of adoration is too much when you have someone who puts himself completely in your hands that way and loses himself to what you're doing."

A choked sob followed by hurried footsteps interrupted their conversation. Rhys made to stand and go after Takoda immediately, but Evan caught his arm. "Let him go for now. Let him digest what he overheard. Are you all right with everything that's happened?"

Rhys stared after Takoda's retreating back for a long moment before turning back to Evan. "What? Oh, um, yeah, I'm not sure I've ever been better," Rhys answered honestly. "I've never felt so good at the end of a session. Thank you for kicking my ass until I got my shit straight and stopped being afraid to give Takoda what he wanted."

"You're welcome," Evan said warmly. "So what was Takoda's favorite part of the session yesterday?"

"Being at my mercy the entire time," Rhys marveled, equal parts awe and concern coloring his voice. "Having me be the one to take him from beginning to end, from negotiation to the discussion afterward."

Evan smiled. It was the perfect answer. "And your favorite part?"

"The fact that he let me push his limits and didn't safeword out," Rhys said. "I didn't do anything we hadn't agreed on, but at the same time, flogging his nipples with the clamps on, even once, was a lot more than he'd taken before. It feels good to have a successful session behind me."

"I can imagine," Evan agreed. "He'll need a day or two to recover, probably, before he's ready for another one, unless you only work on his back next time. You can use the time while he recovers to convince him of what he overheard just now. We'll see how the next session goes and then maybe I can go home."

"You don't have to stay," Rhys said right away. "We're fine now."

“One good session doesn’t guarantee anything,” Evan warned him. “You managed the flogging—with your lightest flogger—on the third try, but how are you going to handle intensifying the pain threshold? How are you going to handle punishing him the first time that happens? You know it will eventually. No sub is perfect and if he disobeys you during a session, there have to be consequences. No, I think I should stay a little longer. My bank balance isn’t unlimited. I can’t afford to be flying back out here every other week.”

“We haven’t even talked about our next session,” Rhys protested. “It could be weeks before Takoda’s ready for anything more intense and who knows how long before I might have to punish him. You can’t stay indefinitely.”

“No,” Evan agreed, “I can’t, not least because I don’t want to ask Patrick to wait that long, but I can stay for another week easily enough. Long enough to make sure things really are stable between you. So tell me what you think the stumbling blocks are going to be and let’s see if we can make a plan to address some of them before I leave.”

“I’m still high from yesterday,” Rhys protested. “I can’t even contemplate stumbling blocks at the moment. I can’t imagine there being any, as good as I feel right now.”

Evan snorted. “And if that isn’t a recipe for Top Drop, I don’t know what is. Even if you manage to avoid it for a few sessions, at some point, something’s going to go wrong, and if you haven’t thought about it, it’s going to send you right back down into chaos again. It’s hard work always planning and preparing for sessions, trying to keep things interesting while at the same time not always upping the ante. You may not have found them yet, but Takoda’s going to have limits and there’s going to be a point where you’re going to have to level things out in terms of intensity.”

“I know all of that,” Rhys snapped. “I’m not a green Dom.”

“I’m not saying you are,” Evan replied calmly, “but you are a Dom in love with his sub for the first time, and I’ve seen that make a huge difference. You aren’t just balancing the man and the sub anymore. You’re balancing the lover and the sub.”

“That should make it easier, not harder,” Rhys protested.

“Should it?” Evan challenged. “How would you feel if you told Takoda to do something and he didn’t?”

“He wouldn’t do that!”

Evan’s lips quirked. “Not at the moment, no, but I’ve yet to meet a sub who didn’t occasionally act up. So what would you do?”

Rhys's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard a couple of times. "I see what you mean."

Evan arched an eyebrow. "You still haven't answered my question. What would you do?"

"I'd have to punish him," Rhys said slowly, "assuming it was in the context of a session."

"How?" Evan pressed. He knew he was being a bastard about it, but Rhys needed to think about these things. He pushed aside the thought that if all went well, he'd have to ask himself the same questions before long.

"I'd give him a choice," Rhys said finally. "Either not coming for a certain period of time or a certain number of strikes with the cane. The time or number would depend on what order he disobeyed."

"That's generous of you," Evan replied. "Most Doms wouldn't bother giving their sub a choice."

"Most Doms aren't dealing with a sub whose first experiences with the scene were abusive," Rhys retorted. "I won't do anything without his consent, even a punishment. He'll always have a choice, even if it's between two things he won't like."

"He has a safe word," Evan reminded Rhys. "Even without you giving him a list of options, he has a choice."

"That won't be any consolation if he screams for mercy as I cane him," Rhys muttered.

"Yes, it will," Evan insisted. "Because all he has to do is scream his safe word and even his punishment would end. If he screams anything else, he isn't actually at his limits. What about the first time he uses his safe word? Not his yellow word, but 'hot dog', to get you to end the session. Have you thought about that?"

"I'll stop," Rhys said, obviously insulted at the suggestion he would even consider any other answer.

"That's not what I meant," Evan said. "How will you feel when you realize you've pushed him as far as he can go and beyond?"

"I don't know, all right?" Rhys snapped. "But Takoda isn't my first sub. I'm not going to do anything stupid or rash. I'll deal with things as they come up."

It wasn't all right, but it was obviously the most Evan was going to get for the moment. "Okay, okay," he said soothingly. "We won't talk about it anymore today, but you need to think about these things, and I'd rather get them out of the way before I leave. In the meantime, why don't you go talk to

Takoda? I imagine once what he heard has had time to sink in, he'll have questions for you."

Rhys stood up, clearly eager to get away from Evan's uncomfortable questions. He reached the foot of the stairs to the second floor and paused, turning back to his friend. "Thanks for leaving when you did last night," he said softly. "Takoda wasn't aware of it, but I was, and I appreciate the consideration."

Evan shrugged. "There are some things I really don't need to see."

Rhys chuckled and climbed the stairs to talk to Takoda.

"LET'S go for a run."

Evan looked up from the book he was reading, surprised to see Takoda since Rhys had left an hour ago for the club. "Sure," he agreed. "Let me get my shoes."

They started out at an easy pace in deference to the heat that hadn't dissipated despite the sun having set half an hour earlier.

"I don't get it," Takoda said after they'd found a steady, comfortable rhythm, their legs pumping to keep the pace, habit taking over so their minds were free to focus on other things. "How can you talk about a sub being strong when we give up all control during a session?"

"I suppose it is counterintuitive if you haven't done a lot of sessions," Evan agreed, "but the Dom only has the physical power. Rhys can tie you up, flog you, tickle you, fuck you, whatever he wants, but he's doing it to satisfy you, to give you what you need so you can give up control. If you're not satisfied at the end of a session, he hasn't done his job. But it's more than that. A Dom might have the physical strength, but you're the one with the courage—the mental strength—to put yourself in Rhys's hands, to trust that he'll give you what you want rather than your going in demanding it, either before or during a session. You don't need to make demands. A simple request will get you anything you want. Rhys has to make demands and give orders because that's how he gives you what you want." He sighed at the confusion he still saw on Takoda's face. "I'm not explaining this well at all."

"No," Takoda agreed with a chuckle. "So if I'm the strong one, why don't I feel that way?"

"That's really a question I can't answer," Evan replied immediately. "I'm not a sub, except on rare occasions with Rhys, and I never have been. I've lain on a spanking bench and had all kinds of toys and tools used on me so I'd know what they felt like to a sub, but I didn't submit the way serious

subs do. I can see the allure of it, but I can't do it. And so I have the utmost respect for people who can."

"And yet you call them sluts."

"Only to someone else in the lifestyle who understands what I mean when I use that word," Evan insisted. "I wouldn't walk up to some random person on the street and call you Rhys's slut. I wouldn't even necessarily walk up to another Dom in Rhys's club and call you that. I'd use it if someone asked me about what you like in a scene. What gets you off hard. And from what I've seen, for you, that's Rhys. Rhys's control. Rhys's dominance. Obeying Rhys's orders or submitting to Rhys's will."

"I guess that's true," Takoda allowed. "It didn't feel nearly as good when you were the one flogging me, and obviously it was hell when Kade had me."

"I can't tell you how to resolve all of this in your head," Evan said, at a loss for how to address any of the issues Takoda was obviously wrestling with. "I'm not a sub. All I can tell you is how I view subs and the role they play in my life. You need to talk to someone with a sub's perspective if you're still wrestling with these issues."

"Talking with Matt helped," Takoda admitted, "at least a little. He had so much to say. I'm not sure it all sank in."

"Call him back or get Rhys to bring him back over," Evan said seriously. "Or I can give you Patrick's number in Boston. I realize you don't know him, but he'd be glad to talk to you. He keeps giving me advice, but you don't need to hear things from Rhys or me. You need to hear them from another sub."

"I'll think about it," Takoda agreed after a moment.

"How are your shoulders?" Evan asked, changing the subject. "They didn't seem to bother you yesterday even with all the thrashing you did."

"They seem to be doing better," Takoda replied, face flushing, eyes darting away at the mention of the previous day's session. "The doctors said they'd heal with enough time."

"Good," Evan declared. "That'll be one worry off Rhys's shoulders."

"I THINK you should do your next session this afternoon without me," Evan told Takoda and Rhys over breakfast on Sunday morning.

Both men looked at him in surprise. "I thought you were staying so you could monitor the sessions," Rhys said. "What's the point of you being here if we're doing a session without you?"

“You won’t need me for this one,” Evan said with utmost confidence. “Takoda’s getting all tripped up in his head about being a sub. I thought maybe it would help if you did a session without anything kinky except your control. It’s understood in a session that the sub won’t come without permission, but then we turn around and do all these unusual things to them, and I wonder if that’s making it harder on Takoda. So here’s my idea. Obviously you don’t have to agree, but hear me out. Take Takoda to bed, either in the playroom or your bedroom, whichever. Don’t tie him up. And make love to him. But he can’t come until you give him permission. He has to hold back and do what you tell him.”

“How would that be different than us just making love?” Takoda asked seriously. “I mean, I get the holding back bit, but what purpose does it serve?”

“Everything in the playroom is still new to you,” Evan explained. “Your mind focuses on what Rhys is going to do next. I thought not having that concern, not worrying whether the next touch would be soft or painful or somewhere in between, would help you focus on the headspace that goes along with being a sub. All you’d have to think about was how good it felt to have Rhys touch you and on keeping yourself under control. On being his sub.”

The way Takoda squirmed in his chair suggested he wasn’t unmoved by the idea.

“I’d want to use a cock ring still,” Rhys said after a moment. “I wouldn’t want to have to punish Takoda if he came before I gave permission.”

“It’s your session,” Evan said slowly, “but I think that defeats the purpose, at least partially. The idea is for Takoda to control himself, not for you to control him externally. He knows what an orgasm feels like. All he has to do is ask permission. If you say no, you can help him hold back. And when he does finally come, it’ll blow his mind because he’s waited instead of giving in sooner.”

“I think it’s a good idea,” Takoda said slowly. “Experience is the best teacher, after all. If I can come in and out of my headspace often enough, maybe I can figure out the balance I need.”

Evan grinned. “I think I’ll go to the casinos for the day. That way you don’t have to worry about me overhearing anything or being around if you don’t want to stay in the playroom the whole time. I bet Rhys could make the entire day one long session of foreplay if he put his mind to it.”

Takoda’s eyes got wide as Evan stood up and set his cup in the dishwasher. “I’ll be back at seven tonight,” he told them. “Enjoy your day.”

CHAPTER 32

“DID you have fun yesterday?” Evan asked Rhys and Takoda the next morning.

The matching grins that spread over their faces were answer enough, even without Takoda’s delightful flush. “I’ll take that as a yes. So what do you have planned for today?”

“I have a doctor’s appointment,” Takoda replied. “Hopefully the last one. They want to make sure my shoulders are healing up properly.”

“Good!” Evan exclaimed, though that hadn’t been what he intended when he asked the question.

“The rest of our plans depend on what the doctors find,” Rhys added. “I want to see what they say about his shoulders before we make concrete plans.”

“We should go out to celebrate if they give you a clean bill of health,” Evan suggested. “I bet Rhys knows a nice restaurant where we could get a juicy steak and a drink or two.”

“Sure,” Rhys said, “we could go to Gallagher’s. I think they even have live music some evenings. Although maybe not on Mondays.”

“That would be fun,” Takoda agreed. “Assuming the doctors say I’m all healed up.”

“We could go anyway,” Evan replied. “Just to get you out of the house. I don’t know why you haven’t gone stir crazy.”

Takoda shrugged. “I like it here. I feel safe here.”

“You’ll always be safe here,” Rhys promised.

EVAN was on a call when Rhys and Takoda got home from the doctor’s appointment. They smiled and gave him a thumbs-up sign, which reassured

him on one count. Rhys mimed making a phone call, and they disappeared up the stairs, presumably to make reservations.

When they came back down a few minutes later, Evan had finished his call. "So, everything checked out?"

"I'm still not at full strength, but they said I had normal mobility back and to simply keep exercising them to regain my strength," Takoda replied. "I don't have all the flexibility that I had when I was swimming, but that can be improved with practice too."

"And we have seven o'clock reservations at Gallagher's," Rhys added, hand stuck casually in his pocket.

Takoda walked into the kitchen, and Evan heard a little squeak. The hand in the pocket suddenly made sense.

"You dog," he teased Rhys.

"It was his idea," Rhys defended himself. "Well, mostly. He asked me if there were things we could do, subtle things, outside the playroom. So we talked about some options and he picked the vibrating plug. He'll wear it until after dinner, and then I'll decide when to take it out during our next session when we get home. If that's all right with you."

"As long as we're drinking tea tonight instead of something harder, I have no problem with it," Evan agreed.

"We'll save the alcohol for after the session," Rhys suggested. "We can celebrate your imminent return to the fair Patrick."

Evan chuckled. "He's awfully dark to be called fair, but I'll drink to that anyway."

Depending on how the session went.

"SO NOW that you're better, what are you going to do with your time?" Evan asked Takoda as they sat on the couch watching a DVD. Rhys had disappeared for the moment, Takoda relaxing somewhat with the remote out of the room. That lasted all of a minute until he bit his lip and squirmed on the cushions.

"The remote has quite a range," Evan said, chuckling when Takoda flushed. "He can probably get you with it from anywhere in the house. Don't think about it. Just answer my question."

"I don't know," Takoda replied honestly. "I can't go back to Metamorphosis even if I wanted to because of Rhys's policy on employees

and the scene. I guess I'll have to look for a barman's position somewhere else."

"If you really want to come back to Metamorphosis, I'll make an exception for you," Rhys offered, coming into the living room. "You said you didn't think you could go back."

"I didn't think so at the time," Takoda admitted, "but things have changed. And I need a job of some kind. I can't just live off you. I need something productive to do or that self-esteem battle we've been talking about will be a lot harder to win. I've got enough savings to live off for a few months, but not forever."

"Do you want to come back to Metamorphosis?" Rhys asked. "Our relationship aside—because your answer doesn't change anything between us—would you enjoy working there again?"

"I liked working for you," Takoda replied immediately, "and I think it could be even more interesting now that I care to look beyond the next drink order, but I don't want you to start making exceptions for me. The reasons behind your policy of not mixing business and the scene are as sound in my case as they were when you started the business. If I'm running things behind the bar, people can't be wondering about whether I'm fair and capable and everything else because I'm your sub."

"If you were a new employee, I'd agree with that," Rhys said, "but you've been there for five years. The regulars know and trust you and a random visitor isn't going to know that the bartender is also my lover."

"But you're still playing favorites," Takoda insisted, "and that's not fair to everyone else."

"Rhys," Evan interrupted, "is there an improvement you've been wanting to make to the club, some new lighting or a new piece of equipment you want?"

"What's that got to do with anything?" Rhys asked, perplexed.

"I was just thinking that nobody looks askance at you for being part of the scene because you're the owner," Evan explained. "Takoda mentioned having some savings. If he were to invest that in the club, he might become a partner in it. Not a full partner, probably, but if he had a share in the ownership then nobody could question his working there."

"I've got about twenty thousand saved up," Takoda said softly. "I was going to use it as a down payment on a house, but I could maybe use it for something else since I'm living here. My salary ought to be enough to cover some expenses and maybe even allow me to keep investing in the club until we're equal partners."

“Evan, you’re brilliant,” Rhys said with a huge grin. “Now we just need to plan a party to introduce the new co-owner of Metamorphosis to the regulars so there’s no misunderstanding.”

Takoda shook his head. “You don’t need to do that. I don’t need the fanfare.”

“Actually,” Evan said slowly, “I think it’s a good idea. It defines your role for the regulars who might otherwise question—or even try to take advantage of—your dual role and for the other employees who wouldn’t otherwise understand why you’re different. It doesn’t have to be right away, but when you’re ready to go back to work, I think you should do it.”

“Maybe we could do it this weekend,” Takoda said slowly. “Before you go home.”

“HAVE you discussed the session for tonight?” Evan asked on the way home from the restaurant. They’d each eaten a huge steak with a salad and baked potato, and Evan was stuffed. He was glad Rhys was the Dom for tonight’s session. He was too full to do anything energetic.

“I’d like to try a spanking or a flogging without being bound,” Takoda said softly, his words a request rather than a demand. “I feel my helplessness when you truss me up, but I want to try submitting without that enforced restriction. I want to be held in place purely by your will, rather than by your ropes.”

“You’ve been talking to Matt, haven’t you?” Rhys said with a laugh.

“You don’t mind, do you?” Takoda asked. “There’s so much I still don’t know and you and Evan can’t always answer my questions because you aren’t subs.”

“Of course I don’t mind,” Rhys said quickly. “I was amused, that’s all. Matt has some definite preferences when it comes to feeling his submission. He’ll accept being bound if the Dom insists or for something like the demo we did at the club, but he prefers not to be, to hold his position by force of will alone. He says it takes him under farther because he could move if he chose to.”

Takoda nodded. “Yes, that’s what he said. It made sense, especially after yesterday and wearing the plug today. I could’ve gone in the bathroom and taken it out, but I didn’t because you told me to wear it.”

“Did you enjoy it?” Evan asked curiously.

“It felt odd at first,” Takoda admitted, “and then it was distracting, never knowing when Rhys was going to hit the remote. But I kept reminding myself that he wanted this, that I was showing him how I felt by my obedience, and after awhile, instead of being distracted, I found myself wanting to feel it go off so I’d know he was thinking about me. And every time it did, I’d get this warm feeling, not physical from the vibrations, but emotional, from knowing I was giving Rhys what he asked for, knowing that Rhys controlled my pleasure, not me.”

“And now?” Evan asked. Takoda had jumped often enough during dinner to assure Evan that the sub was still wearing the plug.

“Now I feel owned.”

“That’s exactly how I want you to feel,” Rhys replied, taking Takoda’s hand in one of his as he navigated toward home. “I want you to remember every time you move that you’re mine. And I want you to know I’m thinking about you and taking care of you. I’ll always be thinking about you, about ways to take care of you.”

They stopped at a red light, and Takoda leaned in closer to Rhys, his head tilted in silent supplication. Rhys answered the request immediately, his lips closing over Takoda’s in a tender kiss that made Evan’s heart ache. He wished Patrick were there so he would have someone of his own to lean over and kiss.

“When we get home,” Rhys said hoarsely, “go up to the playroom and lie on the spanking bench. Don’t get undressed. I’ll remove your clothes when I want bare skin. I’ll be up as soon as I change.”

“What are you going to do to me?” Takoda asked, his voice husky with desire.

“Nothing I haven’t already done,” Rhys promised. “The intensity will come from you being able to move if you choose rather than from me picking some new, more challenging toy.”

“You realize there probably isn’t anything in your cabinets that Kade hasn’t already used on me,” Takoda reminded him.

“That isn’t the point,” Rhys snapped. “I made love to you the first time like you were a virgin. As far as I’m concerned, you’re a virgin where all my toys are concerned unless I’ve used them on you myself. You stayed still through a spanking on Friday, but a flogging, even if I use the same flogger as before, is a lot more intense. If you jump suddenly because the pain is too much, I could miss my target and hurt you if I was using something you weren’t accustomed to. Trust me, Takoda. The session will be as intense as you want and possibly more.”

“If you really think it’s best,” Takoda said after a moment.

“If he wants something harder, give him one blow at the end,” Evan suggested. “Even if he jumps at that point, he won’t until you’ve connected and you won’t miss your mark.”

“Fine,” Rhys said, though he didn’t sound entirely convinced it was a good idea. “You’ll pick it out,” he added to Takoda, “but pick carefully because I won’t hold back with that any more than with the flogger.”

EVAN was surprised when Takoda picked the tawse out of Rhys’s cabinets until the sub asked Rhys what it was, saying he’d never seen one before. That shouldn’t have come as a surprise. Tawses weren’t nearly as common as whips and crops and floggers. Evan knew a lot of Doms who’d never used one, much less owned one. He supposed it made sense that Kade might not have had one either.

Rhys ordered Takoda’s hands behind his head and lowered his pants and briefs only enough to bare his ass before ordering him face down on the spanking bench. As promised, he didn’t restrain Takoda’s hands, simply giving him instructions to hold the restraint bars and not to move. He pulled up the edge of Takoda’s T-shirt enough to frame his butt perfectly between the two pieces of cloth. His hands moved over the smooth skin, stroking appreciatively before landing a resounding smack on each cheek in quick succession. Takoda jumped, but his hands remained where Rhys had instructed.

When the sub relaxed again, Rhys proceeded to deliver a very thorough, very rigorous spanking to the upturned buttocks. Takoda moaned and writhed, pushing his backside up into the blows as much as the position on the bench allowed.

When Rhys’s hand grew tired, he switched to the same deerskin flogger he’d used before, sliding Takoda’s pants down to his knees so he’d have access to the back of Takoda’s thighs as well as his ass, switching regularly between the two.

Evan could tell it was becoming harder for Takoda to maintain the position without anything to bind his hands, but he managed so far.

The final crack of the tawse across his ass, though, was too much, his body arching up as his hands went automatically to his aching backside.

“Hands down,” Rhys snapped.

“Sorry, Sir,” Takoda said, returning his hands to their place.

“Since you didn’t stay still the way you were supposed to, that smack doesn’t count,” Rhys informed his sub. “We’ll have to do another one. If you stay still, that will be the last one. If you move, I’ll start over again.”

“Yes, Sir,” Takoda replied.

The tawse cracked again, slightly lower than before so it wouldn’t land on the same mark. Takoda jumped and moaned loudly, but his hands stayed in place. Rhys rubbed the heated skin tenderly. “I knew you could do it. Session over.”

Takoda rolled as much as rose from the bench, Rhys catching him and pulling him into a tight embrace, his hands still moving over the burning flesh.

Evan slipped quietly down the stairs, leaving them to their aftercare in private.

“YOU really can go home now,” Rhys insisted. “I’ve managed three sessions successfully, if you count the one where I didn’t let Takoda come. I’ve even punished him.”

“If you call that punishment,” Evan scoffed.

Rhys’s face tightened in warning. “He moved when he wasn’t supposed to. I corrected him and started over. The fact that it was only supposed to be one blow in the first place doesn’t change the fact that I did it.”

“Takoda mentioned going to the club for his coming out party,” Evan replied, changing the subject. “He specifically said he wanted me to stay for that.”

“We haven’t even set a date, much less made any kind of announcement,” Rhys protested. “I thought you didn’t want to stay indefinitely.”

“I don’t,” Evan insisted, “but I do want to stay until I’m convinced everything is well between you.”

Rhys muttered something unflattering under his breath. “Fine, we’ll schedule the party for Saturday so you can go home on Sunday.”

Evan didn’t agree or disagree. He couldn’t really say why he was so adamant about staying on longer, but his gut told him this wasn’t really finished yet.

"I NEED to run some errands," Rhys told Evan and Takoda. "I'll be back in a couple of hours, probably. Be good while I'm gone."

Evan and Takoda both rolled their eyes at the comment and ignored Rhys as he walked out the door.

"Are you ready for the big party Saturday night?" Evan asked Takoda.

"I'm a little nervous still," Takoda admitted. "We've talked about it over and over. I know Rhys isn't going to 'do' anything to me during the party, but it's still a big step."

"Too big a step?" Evan asked, immediately concerned. "Are we pushing you too fast?"

"I don't think so," Takoda assured him. "I think I'd be nervous no matter when we did it. Better to do it now and get it behind me than to spend weeks or months dreading the moment it arrives."

"Why are you nervous?"

"I'm afraid I'll do something to make Rhys lose face in front of the other Doms," Takoda said honestly. "I'm afraid someone will say or do something and I'll respond inappropriately instead of letting Rhys handle it."

"As long as you do what Rhys tells you to do, you won't make him lose face," Evan assured Takoda. "As for the other, if Rhys is right there with you, he'll handle anything inappropriate before you get a chance to react, and if he isn't, you have a right to defend yourself from unwanted advances unless Rhys has ordered you to accept them."

Takoda's eyes flew wide.

"Stop," Evan scolded. "You know he's not going to do that. He couldn't deal with me touching you. He certainly isn't going to want anyone else's hands on you. Anything else on your mind?"

"He keeps saying he has a special outfit in mind for me to wear, but he won't let me see it," Takoda said. "What if it's something I can't possibly wear?"

"First of all, whatever he's picked out, it isn't going to be anything the regulars in the club haven't already seen a thousand times—or worn, in the case of the subs—so you have nothing to worry about on that count," Evan replied. "More than that, though, you'll wear whatever it is because your Dom told you to wear it. Rhys won't touch you in the club like he would in a session, but effectively, the entire evening will be one long session. He'll tell you how he expects you to behave and you will because you're his sub and he's your Dom. And if halfway through the night, he tells you to strip, you'll

either obey or you'll use your safe word. There won't be any arguing or questioning while you're there as his sub."

Takoda gulped.

"If you aren't ready for that, you need to tell Rhys soon," Evan warned him. "But for now, don't overthink it. Talk to Rhys about it when he gets home."

"Okay," Takoda agreed. "Let's see if there's anything on TV. That'll pass the time until he gets back."

Evan nodded and reached for the remote, flipping idly through the channels until he found a baseball game.

They got so lost in the game that neither heard Rhys's car drive back in a little over an hour later.

"Hey, Evan," Rhys called, coming in the door. "Go look outside. I've got a surprise for you."

Evan rolled his eyes and walked to the door to the garden.

"Patrick?"

"Surprise."

CHAPTER 33

“WHAT are you doing here?” Evan exclaimed, closing the distance between them and embracing the other man eagerly.

“Rhys called and invited me to come for a visit,” Patrick explained. “He said you were having trouble making up your mind to come home and maybe I could tempt you into it.”

“Fucker,” Evan muttered with a glare at Rhys, but he didn’t release Patrick. He was too happy to see him. “Come on inside. You’ve met Rhys, obviously, but you haven’t met Takoda yet.”

Evan performed the introductions, watching the two men size each other up carefully. They both apparently liked what they saw, because Patrick extended a hand, which Takoda took amicably. “Welcome to Las Vegas,” Takoda said with a smile.

“Thanks,” Patrick said. “I’ve heard so much about you and Rhys. I’m glad to finally have faces to go with the names.”

“Only good things, I hope,” Rhys joked.

“About Takoda,” Patrick agreed. “Evan had a few choice things to say about you.”

“Hey!” Rhys protested.

Patrick batted his eyelashes in mock flirtatiousness. “Oh, Sir,” he simpered, mirth making his eyes dance. “How could he be anything but rapturous about such a fine Dom as yourself?”

Rhys glared at him for the teasing. “Evan, someone needs some discipline.”

“Can I borrow your playroom?” Evan retorted, taking a seat at the table and gesturing for Patrick to do the same.

“Anytime you want.”

“Ooh,” Patrick joked, “are you going to punish me?”

"I'm thinking about it," Evan teased.

Patrick opened his mouth to reply, but the sight of Takoda's pained face stopped the teasing remark.

"How can you be so eager for something you know is going to be painful?" Takoda asked, feeling three sets of eyes on him. "I saw Evan paddle Rhys. I know that had to hurt."

Patrick glanced at Evan, who nodded in encouragement. Takoda had learned to appreciate the sensuality of a spanking or a flogging, Evan knew, but he hadn't worked up to the intensity of a caning like Patrick so enjoyed. "Everyone likes different things," Patrick began slowly. "Evan told me a little of what happened to you, and there's no excuse for any kind of abuse, but I'm not asking Evan to abuse me. I'm asking him to 'punish' me. It's not real. I know he's not angry at me."

"I know that part," Takoda insisted. "It's the fact that it's going to hurt whether it's punishment or abuse."

"Has Rhys not spanked you?" Patrick asked, surprised.

"Well, yes," Takoda replied.

"And did it hurt?"

"A little," Takoda admitted, "but not more than I could handle."

"And that's the key to being a good Dom," Patrick explained. "Knowing what you can handle. And I can handle quite a lot. It's a question of degree, that's all."

"But... why?"

Evan caught Rhys's eye and tipped his head toward the kitchen. Rhys nodded, and the two Doms went in the other room, leaving Patrick and Takoda to talk privately.

"So what's this about me going home?" Evan asked when they were alone.

"Takoda and I are fine," Rhys insisted, "and yet you're hanging out here like you've got nowhere else to be. I thought Patrick might disagree with that and maybe having him here would remind you to take care of your own sub as well as taking care of me and mine."

Evan glanced toward the other room, where they could hear the sound of Patrick's and Takoda's voices, though not loud enough to pick out actual words. "Thanks, Rhys. I don't think I realized quite how much I missed him until I saw him standing outside, which is really rather ridiculous since it's not like I had all that long to get used to having him around."

“It isn’t always a matter of time,” Rhys reminded him. “Sometimes it happens. How long had your grandparents known each other when they got married? And how long were they together?”

“Yeah,” Evan said with a smile, remembering his father’s parents, who had gotten married only a month after meeting and had lived together in wedded bliss for nearly seventy years before his grandmother died. His grandfather had joined her in a matter of months. “So how long is Patrick here for?”

“His return ticket is for Sunday evening, at the moment,” Rhys replied, “but we can change the flight until later if necessary.”

Evan whistled softly. “You spent some money on getting him out here. You didn’t have to do that.”

Rhys shrugged. “I could afford it. It makes you happy. And maybe if you’re focused on Patrick, I can get a little more alone time with my sub.”

“Have I really been that obnoxious?” Evan asked.

“Not really,” Rhys replied. “I needed you to come back. But we’re good now. You really can go home with Patrick on Sunday or Monday, whenever you decide you’ve enjoyed all Vegas has to offer.”

A burst of laughter in the other room drew their attention. “I think maybe we should go see what kind of tales Patrick is telling Takoda,” Evan suggested.

Rhys laughed as they went back into the living room.

“Share the joke with us poor Doms,” Evan insisted.

“I was telling Takoda how lucky he was to have two Doms to see to his pleasure,” Patrick explained, “and he told me I was the second sub in less than a week to make that comment.” He glanced at Rhys appraisingly before turning back to Takoda. “We could come up with some wicked scenarios with four of us instead of just two.”

“We haven’t done any role-playing,” Rhys said with a shake of his head.

“Why not?” Patrick inquired. “It’s so much fun.”

“Because Takoda had enough other things to worry about without adding another level of stress to a session,” Evan explained.

Patrick looked at Takoda. “You don’t know what you’re missing out on, man. I’ve always found it liberating to imagine I’m someone else during a session.”

“Like who?” Takoda asked curiously.

“Like anyone you can think of,” Patrick replied. “Your imagination is the only limit. You could do pirates and captured sailors, or highwaymen and the local lord if you wanted a ravishment scenario. Or you could do student and principal or cop and prisoner if you wanted a punishment scenario. Or you can mix them up and have one lead to the other.”

“But why bother with the roles?” Takoda asked. “Why not simply agree that’s what you’re going to do in the session?”

“For one thing, it lets you get out of your own head for awhile, lets you be someone else,” Patrick explained. “For another, the role lets you act in ways you might not during a normal session—and it lets your Dom do the same. Take the pirate scenario. Evan would be the pirate and I’d be a sailor on a ship they’ve robbed, only I’m part of the booty now too, and Evan’s going to take his due no matter what I want. We both know I’m willing in reality, but the fantasy lets him overpower me—or seduce me. I’m at his mercy. Or if you prefer a punishment scenario, let’s say he’s my jealous lover and he catches me flirting with another man. That gives him a reason to beat the hell out of me—which I’ll enjoy, but it adds the appearance of it being forced.”

“It also means some of the regular rules don’t apply,” Evan added. “You can talk instead of having to wait for Rhys to ask you a question. You might be allowed to come without permission since you aren’t Rhys’s sub in the scenario. And of course, your safe words still apply, so you can stop the session at any time if it gets to be too much.”

“It can also be a way to include more than two people,” Patrick added, his eyes sliding sideways toward Rhys again. “If they’re pirates and we’re sailors, we can start out the session together, even if by the end, we’ve split into two couples again.”

“You’re obsessed with pirates today,” Evan teased Patrick.

“We drove by TI on the way home and caught a glimpse of the pirate show,” Rhys explained. “It might not be what it used to be since they changed it to Siren’s Cove, but it’s still enough to put pirates on your mind. Takoda, is this something you think you might want to do?”

“I don’t know,” Takoda replied slowly. “I mean, I can see it being fun, but I’m not sure about the illusion of being unwilling. I don’t know how I’d deal with that.”

“So don’t pick a role that requires force,” Patrick interrupted. “Rhys is a sultan; you’re his new slave. You know you’ll be killed if you fight him, so you don’t dare, but he, being used to taking what he wants when he wants, doesn’t ask your permission. He simply tosses you on the bed and has his way

with your virgin ass. And you have to pretend he's the best lover in the universe."

Takoda made a moue at that scenario. "I think I like the pirates better."

"So, if you decide it's something you want to try, instead of being rebellious, be resigned. Promise Rhys you'll do whatever he wants if he won't hurt you," Patrick proposed. "There are as many variations on a scenario as there are people to play it out. Rhys could be attracted to your downcast eyes and trembling lower lip the same way Evan is attracted to my fiery rebelliousness. Even if we're playing together, we don't have to take the same approach to the scene."

"And we don't have to do it at all if you're not comfortable with it," Rhys added. "Even if Evan and Patrick go upstairs and play out all kinds of kinky scenarios, we don't have to participate in any of them."

"Do I have to decide right away?" Takoda asked hesitantly.

"Of course not!" Rhys exclaimed. "And regardless of what you decide now, you can change your mind later."

"While Takoda's thinking and you two are talking, I'm going to get Patrick settled," Evan said, rising from his seat and leading Patrick toward his bedroom.

"He's still pretty scrambled in the head, isn't he?" Patrick asked when they were alone.

"He's a lot better than he was," Evan insisted. "When I first got here, I could hardly even get him to talk to me."

"I hope I didn't make it worse," Patrick offered. "I didn't even think about it before bringing up the role-playing idea."

"I don't think you made it worse," Evan assured him. "If Takoda's ever going to leave the house as Rhys's sub, he has to get used to the idea that other people might be turned on by things that he doesn't enjoy. Even if we don't go the role-playing route, it might not be a bad idea to do a session while you're here so Takoda can see you in your sub role and start to assimilate the fact that you like things he has no interest in."

"He's not into pain?" Patrick asked with a smile.

"Not for its own sake," Evan replied. "He'll accept what Rhys asks him to, but he hasn't really asked for it on his own."

Patrick nodded. "So, how long are you going to make me wait before you show me the playroom?"

“Minx,” Evan scolded. A thought occurred to him. “That’s your sobriquet now,” he informed his sub. “I’ve never liked calling my subs ‘boy,’ so you aren’t my boy or my pet. You’re my minx.”

“Yes, Sir,” Patrick said immediately, eyes dropping.

Evan caught his chin and tilted it up. “Later, minx,” he promised, kissing the soft lips. “For now, why don’t you put on your suit, if you brought one, and let’s enjoy the pool. There will be time to play later.”

“YOU’VE been awfully quiet this evening, Takoda,” Rhys said when they’d finished dinner. “Are you all right?”

Takoda nodded slowly. “I’ve been thinking about what Patrick said earlier today, about role-playing. I want to try one.”

“Any one or a particular one?” Rhys asked.

“I was thinking about the pirates idea Patrick mentioned,” Takoda said slowly. “We could each decide how much we wanted to resist our captor so you wouldn’t have to force me as much as Evan might have to force Patrick. And it wouldn’t be out of character for me to give in more easily.”

“Don’t do this if you aren’t comfortable with it,” Patrick interjected. “I don’t want to bring back unpleasant memories for you. We can come up with something less likely to bother you.”

Takoda shook his head. “No, I’ve been thinking about it since you mentioned it earlier and I’d like to try it. I’ll struggle a little, bargain some with Rhys that I’ll do anything he wants as long as he protects me from the other pirates, that sort of thing. And then it’ll just be him asking me to do things for him or endure things from him. But that won’t be any different from any other session. And if you want a rougher persuasion, you can still have it. Evan can force you while I bargain with Rhys.”

“When do you want to do this?” Rhys asked. “It’s a little late tonight to get things set up.”

“How about tomorrow morning?” Evan suggested. “And to get in the mood, we can watch some pirate movie or another tonight and drool over the men in tight breeches and billowing shirts.”

“Now that’s a plan I can get behind,” Patrick joked.

Evan cuffed him lightly on the head. He was tempted to call Patrick “minx,” to see how he’d react here, outside any kind of formal session, but he didn’t want to spring that on Takoda. The other sub had enough to worry

about as it was, with contemplating the role-play and with doing a session with another sub in the room.

“Is there anything you absolutely don’t want me to do during the session?” he asked Patrick instead.

“You can do anything you want,” Patrick replied. “You know what I like.”

Takoda blanched slightly, not quite flinching, but almost.

“Are you sure you want to do this, Takoda?” Evan asked again. “Patrick likes it rough. Is that going to be a problem?”

“Actually,” Rhys interrupted before Takoda could reply, “I think it might be a good thing. If Takoda’s going to return to the club, as part-owner and as my sub, he’s going to have to get used to other people with different tastes being around while he’s in his sub headspace. Better to start now, with familiar faces and an idea of what he might see and hear, than have him caught off guard by his reaction to it Saturday or later.”

“What’s happening Saturday?” Patrick asked.

“Takoda’s making his official debut as Rhys’s sub at Metamorphosis,” Evan replied. “It’ll be his first time going out as a sub.”

“Congratulations!” Patrick told Takoda. “Rhys will have to mark you well tomorrow so you’ll have some pretty stripes to show off.” He glanced over at Evan. “My bruises are gone too. Think you can give me some new ones?”

“I’m sure that can be arranged,” Evan replied with a grin. “Rhys has a lovely cane upstairs that doesn’t get nearly enough use, and I can tell you from experience that it leaves some beautiful marks.”

“You should get him to use it on you too, Takoda,” Patrick proposed. “Every sub in the club will be jealous that you’ve got the owner’s stamp fresh on your body.”

Takoda gulped. “I don’t think I’m quite ready for that. But maybe the paddle again. That left marks for a couple of days.”

Rhys reached for Takoda’s hand, squeezing reassuringly. “And if you’d rather not have any marks, that’s fine too,” he assured his lover. “There are other ways of showing your submission besides bruises.”

“So what movie are we going to watch?” Evan asked, changing the subject when he saw how edgy Takoda was becoming. He didn’t want to make things worse.

"I've got all three *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies," Rhys suggested. "Lots of pretty manflesh to ogle."

Evan grinned. "Admit it. You've got a thing for Johnny Depp."

Rhys glared at him. "That's no worse than your crush on Orlando Bloom."

The two bickered all the way through cleaning up dinner, leaving Patrick and Takoda to share amused glances. When they'd all settled on the couch, the opening credits playing, Patrick leaned over and whispered in Evan's ear, "Orlando Bloom?"

Evan flushed a little and shrugged. "He's pretty, especially with long hair."

Patrick grinned. "I'll remember that the next time I think about getting my hair cut."

Evan scowled, but inside, his heart beat a little faster at the thought that Patrick would take his preferences into consideration when it came to his appearance.

NOT surprisingly, Evan could hear Rhys in the kitchen already when he woke up the next morning. Another day, he'd have gotten up and gone out to join his best friend, but he had a warm, naked man in his bed. Rhys could wait a few more minutes.

Patrick stirred in his embrace, green eyes opening slowly. "I could seriously get used to waking up in your arms," he murmured as he tilted his face toward Evan's for a kiss.

Evan gave it immediately, thinking Patrick wasn't the only one who could get used to this. When they finally broke apart for air, Evan nuzzled his lover's jaw. "When you shower this morning," he said, running his hand up the inside of Patrick's thigh to the short curls around his groin, "shave for me, minx. I have a treat for you during the session."

Patrick's eyes widened, and Evan could tell he wanted to ask, but the sub held his tongue. Evan kissed him again. "Trust me. I'll make it worth your while."

Patrick nodded, pulling Evan's head back down for another kiss. Evan let himself be drawn in, his fingers sliding lower to probe Patrick's still-loose entrance firmly. Patrick squirmed and moaned softly. "Shh," Evan scolded. "Rhys is in the kitchen. If you keep quiet, I'll let you come. If you make any noise, you'll have to wait for the session later today. If I let you come then."

"I'll be quiet," Patrick gasped, his voice barely a whisper. "Please, give me your fingers, Sir."

"Is my little minx horny?" Evan teased, reaching for the lube so he wouldn't hurt Patrick. His lover might enjoy a little pain now and then, but Evan wanted him eager for the session later today, not too sore to play their scenario out to its conclusion.

"Yes, Sir," Patrick whispered. "Hard and horny and empty without you inside me."

"God, I love a sub who knows how to beg properly," Evan murmured, his cock hardening as Patrick undulated against his demanding fingers. He added a third one. He didn't know what time Rhys was planning on starting their session, but if he got Patrick well stretched now, he wouldn't need much, if any, preparation later, which would add spice to the ravishment dynamic.

It didn't take long before Patrick was begging to come, three fingers inside him, the knuckles pressing directly and repeatedly on his prostate enough to steal his control, exactly as Evan intended.

"Quietly," Evan allowed eventually, sealing his lips over Patrick's to silence any sounds that might escape. Patrick convulsed against him, but no sound left his throat as his body shook and shivered with his climax.

"My obedient minx," Evan praised when the contractions eased. "Go take a shower and join us for breakfast. I'll reward you during the session."

"Yes, Sir," Patrick said, cuddling close for a moment longer before rising and gathering his clothes for the day.

Evan stretched languorously, listening for the water to start running before he dragged himself out of bed. He'd shower when Patrick was done, but in the meantime, he wanted coffee.

CHAPTER 34

“DID you sleep well?” Rhys asked with a mocking grin on his face when Evan walked into the kitchen.

Evan’s grin was rakish. “What makes you think I slept at all?”

Rhys chuckled. “With a sub like that in your bed, I don’t blame you. In fact, I can’t quite figure out why you left him in Boston and came back out here.”

“Because you needed me,” Evan said simply. And that was all there was to it. Rhys had needed him. He didn’t need any other reason.

Takoda wandered in before they could say anything else.

“How are you this morning?” Evan asked Takoda, sending a triumphant look at Rhys, who rolled his eyes in reply.

“Fine,” Takoda said groggily. “A little sleepy.”

“Better have some coffee then,” Evan suggested. “You wouldn’t want Rhys to catch you napping during our session after breakfast, assuming you still want to give the role play a try.”

“I do,” Takoda said, his voice, though sleepy, more confident than it had been the day before. “Rhys and I talked a lot last night after we went to bed about how things might go and what I would be comfortable with. It might not be a conventional approach, but I think it’ll work for me.”

“And that’s all that matters,” Patrick interjected as he walked in. “If the session results in a happy sub and a happy Dom, then it was a good session. Nobody else has to approve of the way it went but the people involved.”

“You and Evan will be involved,” Takoda pointed out.

“Only at the beginning,” Evan replied. “Once Rhys and I have each picked our ‘prize,’ there won’t be that much interaction between you and us. It’ll be more like two concurrent sessions rather than one session involving all four of us.”

“And your entire focus once that happens should be on Rhys and on pleasing him,” Patrick added, “not on whatever Evan decides to do to me. Although he did promise me something special.”

“That reminds me,” Evan said. “Rhys, do you have any candles I can use?”

The reactions on the two subs’ faces couldn’t have been any more different if Evan had told them how to react. Patrick’s eyes were glazed over in delight, while Takoda looked absolutely horrified. “Wh-what are you going to do with candles?” he asked.

“Cover me in wax, I hope,” Patrick answered in Evan’s place.

“I thought you might like that idea,” Evan grinned. “And to answer your question, Takoda, yes, it will hurt, but only for a second. Have you ever gotten wax from a candle on you when you blew it out?”

Takoda nodded.

“That’s what it feels like, only instead of once, it happens over and over until I’ve decided Patrick’s had enough,” Evan explained.

“I have candles upstairs,” Rhys answered, “and a tarp you can put down so you don’t have to sweep up all the wax shavings when you’ve gotten them off him.”

“Let’s eat and get started then,” Evan suggested, “before Takoda gets any more nervous.”

IN LESS than an hour, they’d finished eating and cleaned up the kitchen. In a reverse from their usual routine, Evan and Rhys instructed Takoda and Patrick to wait ten minutes before coming up to the playroom to give the Doms a chance to prepare everything they’d need for the role play. The session would begin the moment Patrick and Takoda started up the stairs from the second floor to the attic.

Evan spread the tarp out under the spanking bench, the leather easier to clean than the bed. That way, Rhys would have the bed for Takoda if he wanted it. He placed the candles and a collection of other potentially useful toys on the floor under the bench. He doubted Patrick would go willingly—within the confines of their acting anyway—so he didn’t want them where they would be in the way. He brought the straight-backed chair over as well. The spanking bench wouldn’t give him access to Patrick’s front.

“I don’t have any cutlasses,” Rhys told Evan, “but we could use a couple of crops as props.”

“Or we could use ropes and grab them the moment they come in the door,” Evan suggested.

“Good idea,” Rhys said, taking two lengths of rope and fashioning them into lassos so they would pull tight around the subs’ arms, although he kept the crop for good measure. “You sure you don’t want one?”

Evan considered a moment, then took one, sticking it into the waistband of his pants.

They took up their places on either side of the steps, lying in wait for their hapless victims. A few minutes later, they heard Patrick’s voice on the stairs. “Quietly, Takoda,” he said as they started to climb up. “We don’t know where the pirates are. We won’t be any help to the captain and crew if we’re captured as well.”

“Then maybe we should have stayed hidden,” Takoda muttered as they neared the top of the stairs.

“No, they’d have found us eventually,” Patrick insisted. “This way we can at least put up a fight.”

Takoda muttered something Evan couldn’t hear, and then Patrick was through the door, closer to Rhys. Rhys threw the rope around his shoulders, pulling tight and lifting the crop to his throat. “Not a sound or I’ll slit you wide open.”

Patrick froze, helpless to do anything to save his companion as Takoda came in and was similarly trussed up with a flick of Evan’s wrist and a hard pull on the end of the rope.

“What ’ave we ’ere?” Evan asked in passable imitation of a very bad pirate accent.

“More booty,” Rhys replied with a grin, running his hand down Patrick’s chest and squeezing his cock appreciatively. “Let’s get ’em tied up with the others. Since we found ’em, maybe we’ll get to claim ’em. The one ye’ve got there looks ripe for the taking.”

“Leave us alone,” Patrick insisted, struggling against Rhys’s grip. “We’re decent sailors, not some prize to be claimed by heathen pirates.”

“That one ’as spirit,” Evan observed, eyes roving leeringly over the attractive form. “I’ll enjoy breaking ’im.”

“Ye can ’ave ’im,” Rhys said, tying Patrick to the chair Evan had prepared. “I like mine a little less feisty. We can trade.”

Evan pushed Takoda in Rhys’s direction, the sub stumbling to his knees at the unexpected shove. “Now that’s the way *I* like ’em,” Rhys grinned,

using the tip of the crop to trace the line of Takoda's jaw. "Stay nice and docile like that and I won't hurt ye."

"Wh-what are you going to do to me?" Takoda asked.

"Whatever I want," Rhys replied with a grin. "Ye're my property now, my share of the booty off yer ship. We don't see many women in our line o' work so we learn to take our pleasure where we can. Yer job, if ye value yer life, is t'see t'mine."

Takoda shuddered, but Evan could see the sub's cock starting to swell. Satisfied that they were settled for the moment, he turned to Patrick, who was still fighting the ropes that bound him to the chair. "And what am I t'do with the likes o' you?" he asked, running the slapper end of the crop over Patrick's chest.

"Go to hell!" Patrick spat.

Evan took the words as an invitation, the tip of the crop biting into the sub's chest through the thin fabric of his T-shirt. "Ye're goin' t'give me hours o' fun, aren't ya, boy? Ye'll do what I ask ye or ye'll feel the weight o' my displeasure."

"So you'll beat me into submission?" Patrick spat. "What kind of man are you?"

"One who enjoys teachin' insolent boys like you a lesson." Evan grabbed the neckline of Patrick's shirt and pulled, tearing it from collar to hem. He heard a gasp behind him and turned his head to see Takoda watching them with wide eyes. Rhys had him naked on his knees, hands bound behind his back and attached to his ankles with a length of rope.

"Oh, 'e's a pretty one," Evan leered. "I might see about enjoyin' his booty later."

Rhys glared. "Ye've got yer own booty t'worry about. Leave mine alone."

"Miserly bastard," Evan muttered, turning back to Patrick. "Now, boy, where were we?"

Patrick glared up at him.

"Oh, aye, I remember now. I was about t'beat ye into submission." Before Patrick could say anything to encourage or discourage him, Evan started in with the crop, applying it with precision all over Patrick's heaving chest, paying particular attention to the pink aureoles and taut nipples. When the entire expanse of skin had taken on a rosy hue, Evan set the crop aside, pulling hard on one of the nipples as he moved closer. "Are ye willin' t'listen t'reason now?" he demanded, unfastening his pants and drawing out his cock.

“And what reason is that?” Patrick demanded.

“Suck me,” Evan ordered.

“Fuck you!” Patrick replied, clenching his jaw.

“Nay,” Evan drawled, “’tis I who’ll be fuckin’ you before the day’s over, but ye need t’learn some manners first.” He grabbed the waistband of Patrick’s shorts and pulled them down to the sub’s knees. He reached between Patrick’s knees and fondled his balls, pleased to see Patrick had shaved his groin as directed. “Be careful,” he warned. “Ye don’t need these t’pleasure me.”

Evan didn’t wait for a reaction, bending to pick up the leather ball stretcher and the weights he’d gathered before the session began. “Ye probably won’t like this much,” he warned Patrick, snapping the ball stretcher into place and fastening the small weights to the D-rings. Patrick groaned and shifted on the chair as the weights pulled hard on his balls.

Behind him, Evan heard a squeak of protest from Takoda. He paused, hoping he hadn’t gone too far—Patrick certainly didn’t think so.

“Don’t ye worry, lad,” Rhys purred reassuringly. “That’ll only be yer lot if ye disobey me. Open wide and let me fuck yer mouth like a good little slave and I won’t even put a ring on ye.”

Evan glanced over his shoulder in time to see Rhys’s cock disappear into Takoda’s mouth. “Now that’s what I like t’see,” Evan said, grabbing Patrick’s head and turning it so he had a clear view of Rhys and Takoda. “A boy on his knees seein’ to his master’s pleasure.”

“I have no master,” Patrick ground out.

“I beg t’disagree,” Evan insisted, “but if ye need me t’prove it t’ye, I’d be glad t’oblige.” He lit the white candle, holding it in front of Patrick’s face, close enough the sub could feel the heat from the flame. “Maybe if I decorate ye a bit, ye’ll realize who it is that owns ye now.”

Patrick glared but wisely kept his mouth shut as Evan waited for a small pool of wax to build up at the base of the wick. When it had, he tipped the candle to the side, letting a single drop fall on Patrick’s collarbone.

The bound man hissed, but when he lifted his head, Evan read acceptance and pleasure in his eyes. Judging that a sign the wax was not too hot, he began the pleasurable task of decorating Patrick’s chest, feeling his cock swell with each moan and gasp and squirm.

The sudden thud of a flogger hitting flesh startled Evan out of his concentration, a large glob of wax falling on Patrick’s stomach, eliciting a much louder moan and a glare. Tweaking one wax-covered nipple in apology,

Evan righted the candle for a moment and turned to watch Rhys and Takoda. Takoda was still on his knees, licking eagerly at Rhys's balls as the flogger landed repeatedly on his upper back. "It seems yer friend weren't as obedient as he said he'd be," Evan said with relish. "Although he seems t'be learnin' the way of it now."

"Unless your friend is as much of a sadist as you are," Patrick retorted, "beating poor Takoda for the pleasure of it rather than for any offense."

"Sadist, am I?" Evan asked, turning his attention back to Patrick and dribbling wax down his belly to his groin. "Perhaps I should show ye some real pain then."

Before Patrick could reply, Evan moved the candle slowly to the other side of Patrick's body, the trail of wax going directly across the underside of his cock. Patrick's hips lifted in supplication as a tight wail escaped his throat.

"Oh, ho," Evan chortled. "Methinks ye liked that."

Patrick shook his head, but he didn't refute the statement aloud.

"I'll give ye a choice, boy," Evan offered. "Suck my cock like I asked ye and I'll leave yer cock be. Refuse and I won't stop 'til I've covered every inch with wax. Even the poor, leaking tip."

Slowly and with feigned reluctance, Patrick opened his mouth. Evan grabbed his head with one hand, holding the sub in place while he thrust into the waiting orifice. When he was buried deep, he tipped his wrist and let another drop of wax land on Patrick's cock. He heard the sub's shout of protest even with his cock down his throat. Afraid he'd misread Patrick's reactions, he paused, meeting the sub's eyes.

Patrick smiled up at him around the cock in his mouth, giving Evan the reassurance he needed. "Ye didn't think I was tellin' the truth, did ye?" he drawled, beginning to fuck Patrick's face in earnest. He blew out the candle for safety's sake, not trusting his control and not wanting to do his lover a serious injury.

As aroused as Evan was by the entire scenario and by Patrick's reactions to the wax, it didn't take him long to come, pouring his seed down Patrick's throat. The sub swallowed rapidly, not letting a single drop escape. "Now," Evan purred when his climax had eased, "let's see what I can do to reward you."

He picked up the candle again, lighting it and returning his attention to Patrick's cock. "No, please," Patrick begged, even as his hips lifted in invitation.

“Did something give ye the idea that ye had any say in what happens t’ye now?” Evan asked, dripping wax slowly onto Patrick’s cock. The sub writhed and squirmed and fought his bonds, but a glance at his face revealed features contorted in pleasure, his eyes closed, his mouth lax as he breathed through each little bite of pain.

The sight was enough to start Evan’s cock stirring again. He tugged on the weights attached to Patrick’s balls, appreciating the way Patrick’s moans changed pitch at the additional pressure. The green eyes opened, hazy with lust. “Please, no more,” he said, his voice throbbing with desire. “Fuck me and get it over with if that’s your plan. Otherwise, put me out of my misery.”

“So it’s a fuckin’ ye be wantin’, is it?” Evan asked, blowing out the candle and reaching for the knots that bound Patrick to the chair. “Don’t think t’get away by fightin’ me. I’ll flay yer skin from yer back if ye do.”

“I won’t fight,” Patrick promised, and he seemed intent on keeping his word as Evan released him from the chair and led him to the spanking bench, pushing him down on it and attaching the restraints to his wrists and ankles.

“The perfect height for a good, long fuck,” Evan observed, running his hand over the upturned curve of Patrick’s ass. “Or a good long whipping.”

“But you said—”

“I said I’d fuck ye,” Evan interrupted. “I didn’t say I’d do it right away.”

Glancing over to check on Rhys and Takoda, Evan smiled to see Takoda’s ass in the air much like Patrick’s was. He grinned at Rhys as he grabbed a cane from the closet, intending to leave Patrick with marks to show off tomorrow night at the club. He offered one to Rhys, who shook his head. “He’s got a pretty bum,” Evan said aloud. “Make sure ye mark it up good before ye fuck him. Ye wouldn’t want anyone thinkin’ he wasn’t well claimed.”

Takoda moaned, lifting his butt higher in the air.

“Yers is awful pretty as well,” Rhys observed as he joined Evan, taking his time before selecting the same tawse he’d used on Takoda in the last session. “And that cane will make him sing so sweet.”

“Not as sweet as my cock up his ass,” Evan promised, swishing the cane through the air ominously. “Why don’t ye turn yer boy around so he can watch his friend take a real punishment while ye chastise him for not taking good care of ye?”

Rhys nodded and repositioned Takoda on the floor so the sub had a clear view of Evan and Patrick. Evan made sure to stand on the opposite side

of the bench so his body didn't block Takoda's line of sight. "Count them for me, minx," he ordered, bringing the cane down with stinging force across Patrick's backside.

"One, Sir. Thank you, Sir," Patrick gasped, all trace of the role-play gone as Evan had suspected would be the case. He preferred it that way now. Takoda would probably have a hard enough time watching Patrick be caned without the added layer of feigned reluctance.

Evan struck again, beneath the previous stripe. "Two, Sir. Thank you, Sir."

Glancing up, he watched the tawse land hard on Takoda's butt. The darker sub cried out, but he didn't make any attempt to pull away as Rhys lifted his arm and struck again. Smiling, Evan returned his attention to Patrick, laying four more stripes across his ass. Patrick thanked him for each one.

"How many more can you take?" Evan asked, stroking the welted skin.

"Four more, Sir," Patrick requested. "Make it an even ten."

Takoda looked like he was about to protest, but Evan caught his eye and shook his head. Takoda subsided as Rhys landed one more blow across his ass. Evan focused back on Patrick, wanting to space the blows so they wouldn't cross existing welts. He could manage three, but the last one.... "To give you ten without hitting the same place twice, the last one is going to have to go on the crease at the top of your thighs," he warned Patrick. "I'll do the other three and save that one for last."

"Yes, Sir," Patrick replied, his head dropping as he braced himself for the remaining strikes.

Evan landed the three blows on Patrick's ass with relative ease, the sub counting and thanking him after each one. He could feel the tension in his lover's body, though, after the ninth one. Changing position slightly, Evan grabbed a handful of hard muscle, lifting it out of the way so he would have access to the smooth, unmarked lower curve of Patrick's butt. He felt Patrick inhale deeply and timed the blow for the moment he began to exhale. The sub's breath exploded out of him as the cane connected.

"Ten, Sir," Patrick gasped. "Ah, fuck."

"Your wish is my command," Evan replied, grabbing a condom and lube. He rolled the condom on and parted the striped cheeks. Patrick's hole glistened up at him, making Evan wonder if the sub had stretched and prepared his entrance in the shower. He nudged against the ring of muscle, watching it relax immediately, so he plunged in hard, the only way Patrick liked it at the end of a challenging session.

Looking over at Rhys and Takoda once more, Evan saw that Rhys had similarly engaged his lover, grunting with every thrust. Leaving his friend to his pleasure, Evan returned his focus to Patrick and ensuring his own lover's pleasure. His hands settled on the curve of Patrick's ass, massaging the abused muscles as he thrust full force into the willing body. Beneath him, Patrick undulated within the constraints of his bonds. Evan was tempted to release him, but that would mean stopping, and that was unacceptable even for a moment. He also wasn't sure Patrick would want to be released at this point. It was one thing to make love freely in bed, but part of the joy of a session for his lover was the restriction of movement that came from either bondage or bending to Evan's will.

As worked up as Patrick was from the session, he was soon begging for permission to come. Evan denied him temporarily, but his own need was too strong for him to wait for long. Reaching beneath Patrick, Evan unfastened the ball stretcher, letting it drop to the floor with a clatter. "Come," he ordered Patrick, his hips stuttering as he fought to wait for his partner's climax to begin before giving in to his own. The minute he felt Patrick's muscles clench around him, he relaxed his control, pounding erratically into the hot passage until his orgasm exploded out of him.

He collapsed forward for a moment, struggling to catch his breath. Eventually, he pulled himself to standing, tying off the condom and moving to kneel by Patrick's head. The other man's face turned blindly in his direction. "Session over," Evan said softly, aware that Rhys and Takoda had not yet finished and not wanting to disturb them.

Patrick nodded slowly, still clearly under. Evan smiled and leaned in to kiss his lover tenderly as he released Patrick's wrists. He wouldn't get the arnica or some water for Patrick to drink or any of the other myriad ways he helped center his lover again after a session until he could do so without interrupting Rhys and Takoda, so he simply stroked Patrick's silky hair softly, pressing light kisses all over the patrician features and murmuring words of praise quietly enough for only Patrick to hear.

A few minutes later, Rhys's shout of release drew Evan's attention. He watched silently as Rhys pulled Takoda into his arms, undoing the ropes that bound him. "Session over," he heard Rhys murmur.

As soon as the words were out of Rhys's mouth, Evan pulled Patrick into his arms as well, his lover warm and limp on his lap. He met Rhys's eyes across the room and returned the happy smile.

They'd go to Metamorphosis tomorrow night to watch Takoda show off his stripes, and then, Evan thought, he and Patrick could go home.

CHAPTER 35

EVAN lingered over the after care, kissing and cuddling and caressing as Patrick came down slowly from the sensual high. On the other side of the room, he could see Rhys doing the same, Takoda enfolded in a snug embrace as Rhys murmured in his ear.

Finally, Patrick started responding, kissing Evan back, moving beneath the caresses. “Do you want a drink of water?” Evan asked, not quite ready to release Patrick but wanting to offer nonetheless.

Patrick shook his head, clinging to Evan’s torso. “Don’t leave me.”

“I won’t,” Evan promised, “but there’s a fridge just across the room if you change your mind.”

Patrick’s arms tightened even as he nodded his comprehension.

Eventually, Rhys left Takoda’s side to get a bottle of water, tossing one to Evan when he lifted his hand in a silent request. Takoda practically climbed back into Rhys’s lap when he sat back down next to his lover. Evan smiled and unscrewed the cap, offering some to Patrick.

The brunet took it and drank thirstily. Evan held the bottle steady, letting Patrick take as much as he wanted. “Feeling better?” he asked when Patrick had finished the entire bottle.

Patrick nodded. “Sex always makes me thirsty and sex at the end of a session leaves me completely parched.”

Evan smiled. “I’ll make sure I always have a bottle of water nearby, then. Do you want to move this to the bed now so I can get some arnica on your welts?”

Patrick shook his head. “Leave them. We’re going out tomorrow night. I want the bruises.”

“Maybe some ice then?” Evan offered. “Something to ease the pain.”

“Evan,” Patrick said warningly. “Remember the mother hen conversation? You’ve asked. I’ve assured you I’m fine. You don’t have to keep asking. I’m feeling far too good to want to have a fight with you.”

“Sorry,” Evan murmured, leaning in to kiss Patrick again. “Will you at least let me hold you awhile longer?”

“I’ll never say no to that,” Patrick replied, snuggling deeper into Evan’s arms.

“I have to get the wax off you too,” Evan commented when his fingers brushed across a piece on Patrick’s chest.

“So join me in the shower later,” Patrick suggested. “You can scrub me clean.”

“Evan,” Rhys said softly, drawing Evan’s attention, “Takoda and I are going downstairs. He needs a nap.”

Evan nodded. “We’ll see you for lunch maybe?”

“Yeah,” Rhys agreed. “I imagine Takoda will have some questions.”

Evan smiled as his friend helped his lover out of the playroom and down the stairs.

“Are you ready for that shower?” Evan asked when they were alone.

“Yeah,” Patrick said slowly, “although you might have to give me a hand.”

Evan rose and pulled Patrick into his arms again. “A hand, an arm, whatever you need.”

“How about all of the above and more?” Patrick asked, leaning heavily on Evan.

Evan grinned all the way downstairs.

TAKODA was quiet for most of lunch as the other three men ate and chatted. They’d almost finished lunch when Rhys leaned over and kissed Takoda lightly. “You all right?”

“A little unsettled still,” Takoda admitted. “Parts of the session were amazing, but other parts were a little more... challenging.” He glanced at Patrick. “I don’t understand how you could let Evan do those things to you.”

“I didn’t ‘let’ him,” Patrick replied slowly. “I asked him to. Not today necessarily, but over the course of the various sessions. The only thing he did

today that he hadn't done before was the wax, but we talked about that this morning. You heard that discussion."

"It was Evan's idea," Takoda reminded him.

"And my consent," Patrick added. "And it was only his idea because I didn't think to ask for it first. I know your tastes are different, but I liked what he did to me. From ripping my shirt to the crop and the wax, to the caning and being fucked over the bench. It turned me inside out and sent me flying. And that's what a good session is supposed to do."

"Even the way he talked down to you?" Takoda asked.

Patrick chuckled. "If he talked that way to me outside of a session, I'd deck him, and it's not something I usually prefer in a normal session, but this was a role-play and given that I was struggling, I think it would've been more distracting if he hadn't talked to me that way. And it's not like he was all that degrading. I've heard far worse from Doms with far less provocation than I gave him today. And it's not like Rhys talked to you that way, at least not that I heard."

"No, he didn't," Takoda agreed.

"Then what's the problem?" Patrick asked seriously. "If you're going to go out with Rhys to any kind of leather club, his or someone else's, you're going to see and hear things that aren't part of your sessions with him. That's part of what this morning was about if I understand correctly. Rhys can't control what happens around you when there are other Doms and subs. You have to either get used to that outside stimulus or learn to ignore it. All either of you can control is what passes between you."

"You've been in other sessions with me," Evan added. "You know humiliation isn't one of my usual kinks. I'm more interested in how you felt about the scenario as a whole. The coercion aspect in particular."

"I didn't feel coerced," Takoda replied immediately. "Rhys—or Rhys's character—promised he wouldn't hurt me if I did what he told me. Everything he told me to do was sexual, and the only times he 'punished' me, I deliberately didn't do exactly as he said to see what he'd do."

"That's the fun of a ravishment scenario," Patrick agreed. "The point is to have sex. The rest comes because you—or I—refuse to cooperate. And we subs get to control how rough it gets by going along—or not—with what our ravishers demand. So what was your favorite part of the session? Besides Rhys fucking you at the end. That doesn't count because I know you liked that."

“The relative freedom,” Takoda said after a moment. “There wasn’t the ‘don’t speak until spoken to’ restriction so I could curse or beg or ask whatever I wanted to know. Even if Rhys didn’t answer, even if my comment resulted in a punishment, I didn’t have to remember to be quiet.”

“That’s a hard one for new subs,” Patrick agreed.

“And for some experienced ones,” Evan added.

Patrick smiled. “Or else they talk out of turn to get what they want.”

“What do you mean?” Takoda asked.

“Well, let’s say Evan’s using a fur mitt on me and what I really want is for him to use the cane,” Patrick postulated. “I don’t tell him that, of course, but I talk when I’m not supposed to, even if it’s just to tell him that it feels good. He’s going to punish me for speaking without permission. It may not be the cane, but it’ll probably be painful, and I’ve gotten what I wanted.”

“Unless I don’t let you come because of it,” Evan warned. “Or stick a ball gag in your mouth.”

“It’s a calculated risk,” Patrick amended for Takoda’s sake, “but it’s one you can choose to take. The choice is always yours, whether to provoke, accept, or safeword out.”

“What was your favorite part?” Takoda asked curiously.

“All of it,” Patrick grinned. “Evan pushed all my buttons. But especially the wax. It’s a different kind of pain, a slower, more prolonged experience than a whipping or caning, and Evan didn’t do nearly as much as he could have if the only item on the agenda had been covering me in wax. He didn’t put any on my back or legs and not all that much on the rest of me. He didn’t layer it, or play with different colors, which can affect the temperature.”

Takoda sighed. “I still have so much to learn.”

“And I’ll enjoy teaching you every bit of it,” Rhys promised. “Every sub has a first time. The cure for inexperience is time and willingness and you’ve shown your willingness, even when nobody would’ve blamed you for running in the opposite direction.”

“He’s right, Takoda,” Patrick chimed in. “You’ve obviously found a steady Dom already, of course, but I’ve never known a Dom who would turn down the chance to teach a new sub a thing or two.”

“Nobody touches Takoda but me,” Rhys growled.

“That would be obvious to a blind man,” Patrick laughed. “I was just trying to assure Takoda that his inexperience isn’t a liability. What was your favorite part of the session, Rhys?”

Rhys looked surprised. Evan figured his friend wasn’t used to being asked that question, especially by a sub. “The same as it always is,” Rhys replied after a minute. “Watching my sub go under and get to that place where all that matters is the next sensation.”

“What about you, Evan?”

That was an easy one. “The minute you stopped playing a role and simply became Patrick again. Roles are fun, but there always comes a point when I want *my* sub back. That was one of the reasons I reached for the cane instead of continuing with the wax or something else. I hoped it would break you out of the role. And it did.”

“All I could think of when the cane first hit was what beautiful bruises I’d have to show off tomorrow night.”

“You’re assuming I want to share those marks with anyone else,” Evan joked, though he couldn’t stop the very real surge of possessiveness at the thought of anyone else ogling Patrick’s ass, even if it bore his marks. “Besides, tomorrow is Takoda’s night. I don’t know what Rhys has picked out for him to wear, but it wouldn’t be fair for you to show him up.”

“Then Rhys will have to show us what he’s planned so I know how to dress,” Patrick riposted. “I didn’t bring much with me. If I need to get something new, I need to know so I have time to find it. There is a shop here where I can get some gear if what I brought isn’t appropriate, isn’t there?”

“Of course,” Rhys replied, “but I’m sure what you’ve brought is fine.”

“Oh, no,” Patrick said. “You don’t get out of showing us that easily.”

“It was supposed to be a surprise for Takoda,” Rhys grumbled.

“So surprise him now,” Patrick retorted. “That way he has a chance to get used to the idea and you have the chance to make changes if you need to.”

“Fine,” Rhys said, getting up from the table. “It’s in my room. I’ll bring it down.”

Takoda’s face took on that nervous expression again, dampening Evan’s amusement at Rhys’s frazzled reaction to Patrick’s brashness. Still, it would do Takoda good to see that a sub didn’t have to be deferential all the time. Rhys might be frazzled, but he wasn’t angry.

“Relax,” Evan insisted. “You know he won’t do anything too crazy, and even if he does, all you have to do is tell him.”

“Don’t decide too rashly, though,” Patrick urged. “Think how you’ll be the envy of every sub in the room tomorrow night because the alpha Dom is your Dom. And every Dom in the room will be wishing he had a sub as gorgeous as you.”

Rhys’s return forestalled Takoda’s reply. The blond carried two strips of leather, one in each hand.

Takoda’s eyes widened.

“Very nice,” Patrick cooed. “The jock will keep you ‘decent’ while still showing off the marks from the tawse, and the chest harness gives the illusion of your being bound while still leaving you free to move and for Rhys to decorate you if he wants to put clamps on you. And of course your collar.”

“I... I don’t have a collar,” Takoda said softly.

Seeing the panic on Rhys’s face at the sadness in Takoda’s voice, Evan stood up. “Yes, you do. Rhys was going to give it to you tomorrow night along with the rest of your outfit. We hid it in my room so you wouldn’t find it. Come on, Rhys. You can give it to him now instead of tomorrow.”

Rhys followed Evan obediently into the guest bedroom. “Thank you,” he murmured when the door shut behind him. “I hadn’t had a chance to go buy a collar yet. I was going to try to get away this afternoon.”

Evan smiled as he dug in the bottom of his suitcase and drew out the soft leather collar in deep royal blue. “No need. I brought this one thinking I’d need it for Takoda. Then I realized you were in love with him and that *I* wouldn’t need it at all. I got it because I liked the color, but it’s appropriate that he should have a collar that matches your eyes.”

Rhys gave Evan a quick but heartfelt hug. “You’re the best.”

“Now I just have to convince Patrick of that.”

“He seemed pretty convinced to me,” Rhys teased.

“We’ll talk about it later. Takoda’s probably climbing the walls out there waiting for us to come back out.”

They went back into the kitchen. Evan caught Patrick’s eye and gestured for him to join Evan by the door, leaving Rhys and Takoda alone in the kitchen. Evan knew he should go completely into the other room to give them their privacy, but he couldn’t resist staying close enough to watch as Rhys showed Takoda the collar and then lifted his hair aside to fasten the leather around Takoda’s neck.

“They’re a real love match, aren’t they?” Patrick murmured at Evan’s side as Rhys leaned in and gave Takoda a tender kiss.

“Yes,” Evan nodded. A month ago, he’d have resisted the thought of having a collared sub as too confining, but now, watching Rhys and Takoda together, knowing Patrick was there with him, the idea didn’t seem nearly as unpleasant as he’d once thought. “They belong together. I’m just sorry it took Takoda being kidnapped for Rhys to realize it. Let’s give them some privacy. If Rhys doesn’t take Takoda upstairs and make love to him after that, I’ll put him over his own spanking bench.”

“Ooh, that sounds fun,” Patrick teased, but he let Evan lead him out to the pool, giving the other two men all the privacy they desired.

CHAPTER 36

“STOP twitching,” Patrick ordered Takoda, though his best attempt at a Dom voice had little effect on the nervous sub. “You look amazing, and you’re about to make the man you love incredibly proud of you.”

Evan thought Patrick was right. Takoda did look amazing. The jock strap he wore was generous enough in the front to cover him even if he swelled to full size, something Evan expected to happen, given that Takoda was already half-hard and the party hadn’t even started, and the rear strap parted the bruised cheeks of his ass, setting them off to perfection. As Patrick had predicted, the chest harness completed the look perfectly. All that was missing was Takoda’s collar. It was sitting on the desk in Rhys’s office where they had gathered, but neither Patrick nor Evan would put it on Takoda. That was Rhys’s job, just as soon as he finished changing.

“I’m not used to waiting,” Takoda admitted, “or to doing nothing. Usually, I’d be behind the bar, going crazy trying to keep up with the drink orders.”

“And you’ll get back to that,” Evan assured him, “but not tonight. Tonight, we celebrate your recovery, your new role as co-owner of Metamorphosis, and your first public appearance as Rhys’s sub. Focus on that, not on what’s going on behind the bar. Besides, the club doesn’t even open for another half an hour.”

“So I’d be behind the bar trying to make sure everything was stocked for the night,” Takoda said. “I’m trying to stay focused, but I need something to do.”

Patrick snickered. “Evan and I can go wait out front if you want to do Rhys before opening time.” He paused for a moment before adding, “It’s not a half-bad idea, you know. It might take some of the edge off your nerves if you’re walking around in a post-orgasmic daze.”

“What’s this about a post-orgasmic daze?” Rhys asked, walking into his office in full Dom regalia, the black leather pants adhering to every curve of

his body and the lace-up vest tied loosely enough to show off the lines of his chest.

“Patrick was suggesting that Takoda might be less nervous if he went to the party in a post-orgasmic daze,” Evan explained. “Although you’d have to suck him off so you wouldn’t make a mess in his pretty pouch.”

Takoda’s eyes glazed over slightly, and he whimpered. Evan and Patrick smirked at each other. “We’ll wait for you down on the floor,” Evan said. “So you can have some privacy.”

As soon as they were in the hallway outside Rhys’s office, Evan smacked Patrick’s bare butt lightly. “Naughty minx,” he scolded. “I ought to tan your hide for that.”

“Be my guest,” Patrick replied, wiggling his ass in Evan’s direction.

Evan had to admit the “shorts” Patrick had found at the leather store that morning were inspired. From the front, they looked like any other pair of club shorts, albeit with lacing on the side, but from the back, they were as revealing as any thong or jock strap would’ve been, leaving the stripes on Patrick’s ass visible to anyone who cared to look and giving Evan easy access all night if he wanted to spank or fondle or finger his sub. He figured he’d probably do all three—and possibly even fuck him—before the night was done.

The open vest he wore covered his back but did little to hide the bounty of his chest. Evan decided he wanted his claim a little clearer, though. “Come here, minx,” he ordered when they reached the main room of the club, empty except for a few employees preparing for the evening. “I have a treat for you.”

“A treat, Sir?” Patrick asked, eyes widening.

Evan pulled out a set of nipple clamps joined by a thin, silver chain. “Since you don’t have a collar on to proclaim you as mine, this will have to do instead.” He pinched Patrick’s nipples to full hardness before attaching the clamps and giving a slight tug to the long chain. “If I lead you around this way all night, the other Doms will get the message.”

“Yes, Sir,” Patrick replied breathlessly, body tilting forward as Evan tugged a little harder. When Patrick was close enough, Evan leaned in for a kiss.

“I won’t be able to do much of that once the club fills up,” he said regretfully. “I’ll have to settle for smacking your sweet little butt or tugging on your poor abused nipples instead.”

“And I’ll feel every one as a kiss,” Patrick promised.

“Do you want a drink before the club opens and the rush hits the bar?” Evan asked. “The only session we’re doing tonight is our presence here at the club, so I think we can overlook the no drinking rule. The clamps would come off before I tugged hard enough for them to do any damage and at worst, I’ll smack your butt with my hand. You might be a little pink, but not enough to bruise even.”

“Do they make a good martini?” Patrick wondered aloud.

“I’d bet they do,” Evan replied. “Takoda ran the bar for five years. I don’t see him being the type to stand for not mixing a good anything.”

Patrick smiled. “Yeah, he does seem the type to pay attention to detail. He’ll make a good partner for Rhys, in the club and outside it.”

Evan grabbed the chain again and led Patrick across the club to the bar, enjoying the way his sub hissed each time the chain pulled taut. He noticed it did that quite often.

“What can I get you?” the bartender asked.

“Two vodka martinis, house vodka’s fine,” Evan requested. “We’ll start a tab, if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind,” the bartender replied, “but the boss already told us your drinks—and Takoda’s—were on the house tonight. Have you seen Takoda? Is he all right?”

“He’s doing much better finally,” Evan replied. “He’ll be here tonight, obviously, so you can see for yourself.”

“We don’t get to see much back here,” the bartender explained. “Too much else to think about. I’m glad to hear he’s doing better. He’s really well-liked. Very professional, very easy to work with, although he’ll tear you a new one if you screw up an order. But that’s why the boss kept him on. He was good. We’ll miss him behind the bar.”

Evan smiled, not wanting to spoil Rhys’s surprise. Then the bartender handed them their drinks. “Thanks,” Evan said, tipping the glass in the bartender’s direction. “Come on, minx. It’s almost time for the club to open. Let’s get a booth while there’s still one available.”

“Is the club that popular?” Patrick asked.

“It’s the only one of its kind in Vegas, first of all,” Evan said, taking a seat in one of the booths. Patrick paused, waiting for either an invitation or instructions. “Sit down. The doors haven’t opened yet. I suppose once they have, you’ll have to kneel on the floor by the booth, but for now, you may as well be comfortable.” Patrick slid onto the padded bench, sliding close to Evan, head tilted for another kiss.

“Careful, minx,” Evan teased, bestowing a soft kiss on the upturned lips. “I’m going to start thinking you prefer sweet kisses to having your ass caned.”

“Can’t I have both?” Patrick pouted playfully.

Evan laughed and scooted their drinks out of the way so he could tip Patrick’s chest onto the table, lifting his ass to the perfect height for a spanking. Mindful of the bruises already there, Evan limited himself to two blows to each cheek, enough to raise some color without being too painful. “Of course you can,” Evan replied, releasing his grip on Patrick’s back so he could sit up. “Now, as I was saying, Metamorphosis is the only gay leather club in Vegas so it already has that in its favor, but Rhys announced that he was throwing a party tonight for his new sub. The regulars will be lining up outside to see who won Rhys’s favor.”

“He seems like a pretty popular guy.”

“He is,” Evan agreed. “All the unattached subs, and there are plenty of them, have been vying for his favor since he broke up with his last sub about eighteen months ago. It’s been driving him crazy. That collar around Takoda’s neck will protect him as much as it will Takoda.”

“Do you think they’ll have much opportunity to join us at the booth tonight or will they be in too much demand?” Patrick asked.

“I don’t really know,” Evan replied, “but I think Rhys will keep a close eye on Takoda. If he starts to get overwhelmed, we’ll see them for sure. You know, I don’t think I want you to kneel next to the booth after all. If you do, then Takoda would have to as well, and I don’t want to do that to him tonight. Rhys can decide another time if he wants to ask that kind of submission from Takoda.”

“My knees thank you,” Patrick joked, “although my ass might have other things to say about it.”

“We’ll walk around often so you can show off your bruises,” Evan teased. “Or I can send you for drinks.”

The outside doors opened before Patrick could reply, and patrons started trickling in, some of them admitted automatically because the bouncers knew them already, others more slowly as the bouncers stopped them to ask for identification. The noise level increased exponentially as the DJ cranked up the music and people’s voices increased in volume to be heard over the pulsing beat.

“Play time, minx,” Evan murmured in Patrick’s ear.

“Yes, Sir,” Patrick replied eagerly.

Evan waited a few minutes for the club to fill up somewhat before he nudged Patrick out of his seat. "Let's go get another drink," he proposed, tugging on the nipple chain. He'd establish his claim on Patrick now so that later, he could send his sub anywhere in the room without worrying about him being accosted.

They got quite a few appraising—and approving—looks as they walked over to the bar. "Another round?" the bartender asked.

"Yes, same as before," Evan replied, turning to lean on the bar, his hand firmly on Patrick's chain as he watched the Doms check out his lover's ass. He leaned a little closer to Patrick and murmured, "When we get back to the table, minx, set your drink down, but don't sit down right away. Your color's fading a little. I want to warm you back up again. And I don't want anyone doubting that the absence of a collar means an absence of my claim."

"Yes, Sir," Patrick replied dutifully, never raising his eyes, but Evan thought he heard eagerness in his lover's voice.

Evan led Patrick back to the table and waited while his sub followed his directions, setting the glass on the table, then leaning forward and bracing his hands. Evan spanked him hard, three times on each cheek, and then nudged him into the booth again.

"That would be a lot more effective if you'd leave him where people could see his rosy ass," Rhys teased, appearing at the table as soon as they were seated.

"Maybe," Evan agreed, "but then Takoda would have to mimic him and I didn't figure he was ready for that. Speaking of Takoda, where is he? Did you leave him in your office in a post-orgasmic daze?"

"He's backstage waiting for me," Rhys replied, the grin on his face enough to leave Evan pretty certain the two had indulged in reciprocal blowjobs. "I wanted to get a feel for the crowd before I introduced him. I see a lot of familiar faces already. Did you see Matt?"

"No," Evan answered. "Is he here?"

Rhys looked around the club. "I don't see him now, but he was here earlier. He may be in the restroom or he may have already hooked up with someone. He was definitely on the prowl."

Matt wasn't the only one, Evan noticed. There were at least as many people looking for partners as there were people there with partners. "Do we need to go back and keep Takoda company?" Patrick asked. "He was pretty nervous earlier."

"I think he's calmed down fairly well," Rhys said with a self-satisfied smile, "but it's going to be a few more minutes. I want to wait until the line outside has gone down before I bring him out so as many people as possible will hear the actual introduction."

"We'll go back," Evan decided. "Will you save the booth for us?"

Rhys nodded and set a card marked "reserved" on the table. Evan led Patrick through the door to the wings of the stage. "We'll pause the session while we're backstage so you can talk to Takoda freely," Evan told Patrick.

They found the other sub exactly where Rhys had said he'd be, standing in the wings so he could peek out at the rapidly filling club.

"There's nothing out there you didn't see every time you came to work," Evan reminded Takoda.

"I know," Takoda replied, "but when I was working, I had on a few more clothes and I had a bar between me and them."

Patrick laughed. "You have a far more effective barrier between you and them now than the bar ever could be," he told Takoda.

Takoda looked at him oddly. "What barrier?"

Patrick reached up and touched the collar. "That," he said. "That little strip of leather is like a wall built around you. They can look, and they will. They can make comments. And they will. But no one in this entire club will do more than that. The collar—Rhys's collar—protects you from every advance, every insult. Any Dom's collar would do that to a large extent, but Rhys's collar is an iron-clad guarantee because no one in that room wants to alienate the owner of a club like this. Where would they go if they couldn't come here?"

"And Rhys doesn't even have to be the one offended," Evan reminded Takoda. "You're part owner of the club now too, a fact I'm sure Rhys will make clear. That makes it doubly important not to offend you because you could ban them as easily as he could."

"I hadn't thought about that," Takoda admitted. "Everything's changing so fast. For the better, and I want all the changes, but it's still overwhelming."

"Think about it this way," Evan proposed. "After tonight, you'll have passed all the big milestones. Then it's simply a question of enjoying them."

The music faded at the end of the song and the lights came up on the stage. "Gentlemen," Rhys's voice boomed through the speakers, "welcome to Metamorphosis. We're having a party tonight, an open one, so our usual club rules apply, but as part of the celebration, drinks are discounted, as are the

prices on private rooms, so keep that in mind. Now, I'm sure you're all wondering why we're celebrating."

"Do we need a reason?" one of the Doms shouted.

"Maybe not," Rhys agreed with a laugh, "but tonight we have one. I have a very special introduction to make tonight. Metamorphosis will be undergoing some renovations over the next few months made possible by an investment from my new partner, in business and in life. I think most of you will recognize him, which only makes my triumph sweeter. So without further ado, let me introduce my new partner and sub, Takoda Cordier."

Rhys stretched out his arm in Takoda's direction as the spotlight moved toward the wings.

"Go on," Evan urged. "Focus on Rhys and walk out there and take his hand."

Takoda took a deep breath and then did as Evan said, walking out onto the stage, head held high as he joined Rhys. Rhys's arm went around Takoda's waist, pulling him close as he leaned in and kissed his lover.

"That'll put them all on notice," Patrick murmured at Evan's side, barely loud enough to be heard over the thunder of applause. "He has no idea how thick that barrier is after Rhys's display."

Evan smiled. "No, all he knows is that Rhys is kissing him. And that's the way it should be. Think I can make you forget everything but the fact that I'm kissing you?"

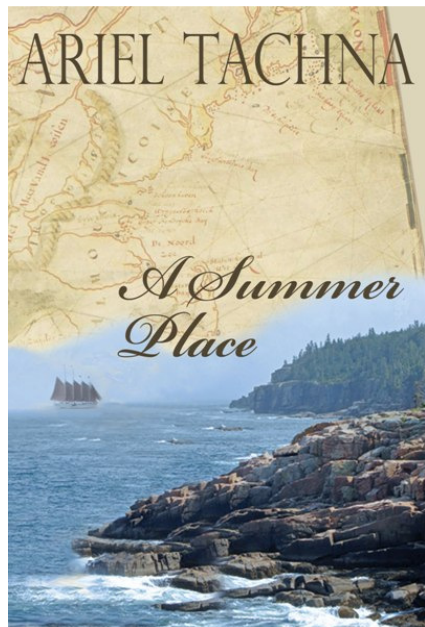
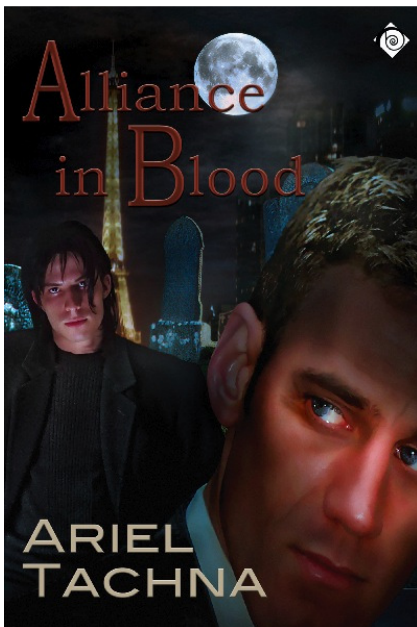
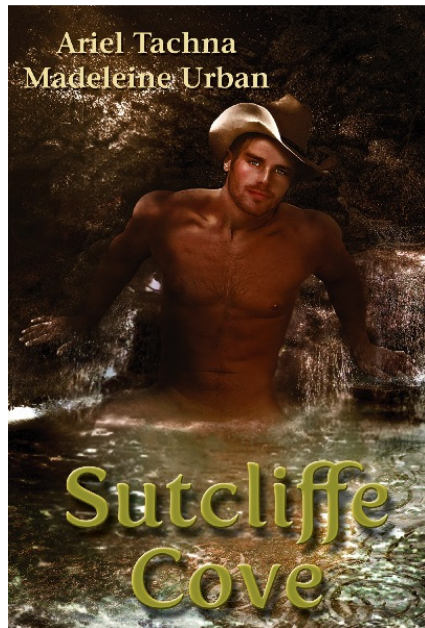
"I'm quite sure you can," Patrick said with a laugh.

Evan grabbed the chain and pulled Patrick into an embrace, lowering his head and doing just that.

ARIEL TACHNA lives in southwestern Ohio with her husband, her daughter and son, and their cat. A native of the region, she has nonetheless lived all over the world, having fallen in love with both France, where she found her career and her husband, and India, where she dreams of retiring some day. She started writing when she was twelve and hasn't looked back since. A connoisseur of wine and horses, she's as comfortable on a farm as she is in the big cities of the world.

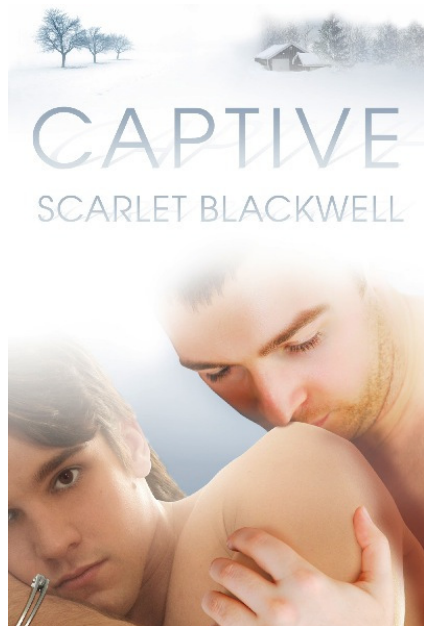
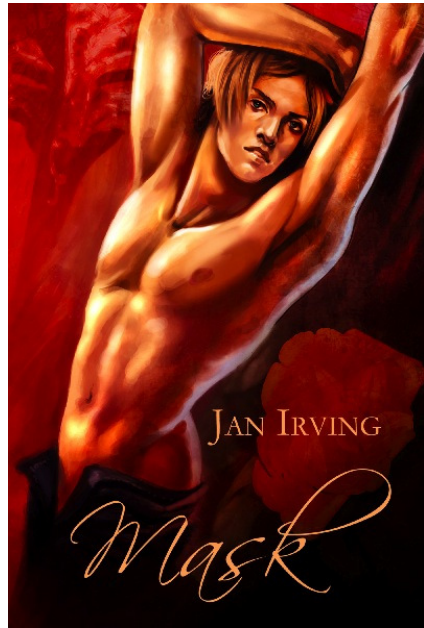
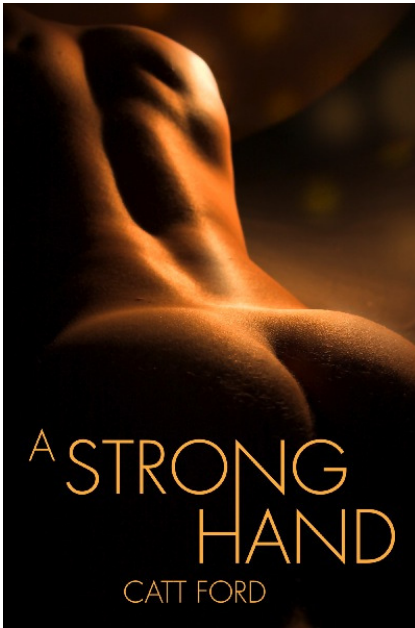
Visit Ariel's web site at <http://www.arieltachna.com/> and her blog at <http://arieltachna.livejournal.com/>.

Don't miss these Bestsellers
by ARIEL TACHNA



<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com>

Other BDSM/Kink titles from
DREAMSPINNER PRESS



<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com>

A black and white advertisement featuring a silhouette of two men in a romantic pose, nearly kissing. The background is dark, and the lighting highlights the contours of their faces and shoulders. In the upper left corner, there is a logo consisting of a diamond shape with a spiral inside. The text "dreamspinner Press" is written in a stylized, cursive font next to the logo.

dreamspinner
Press

For more of the
best M/M romance,
visit

Dreamspinner Press

www.dreamspinnerpress.com