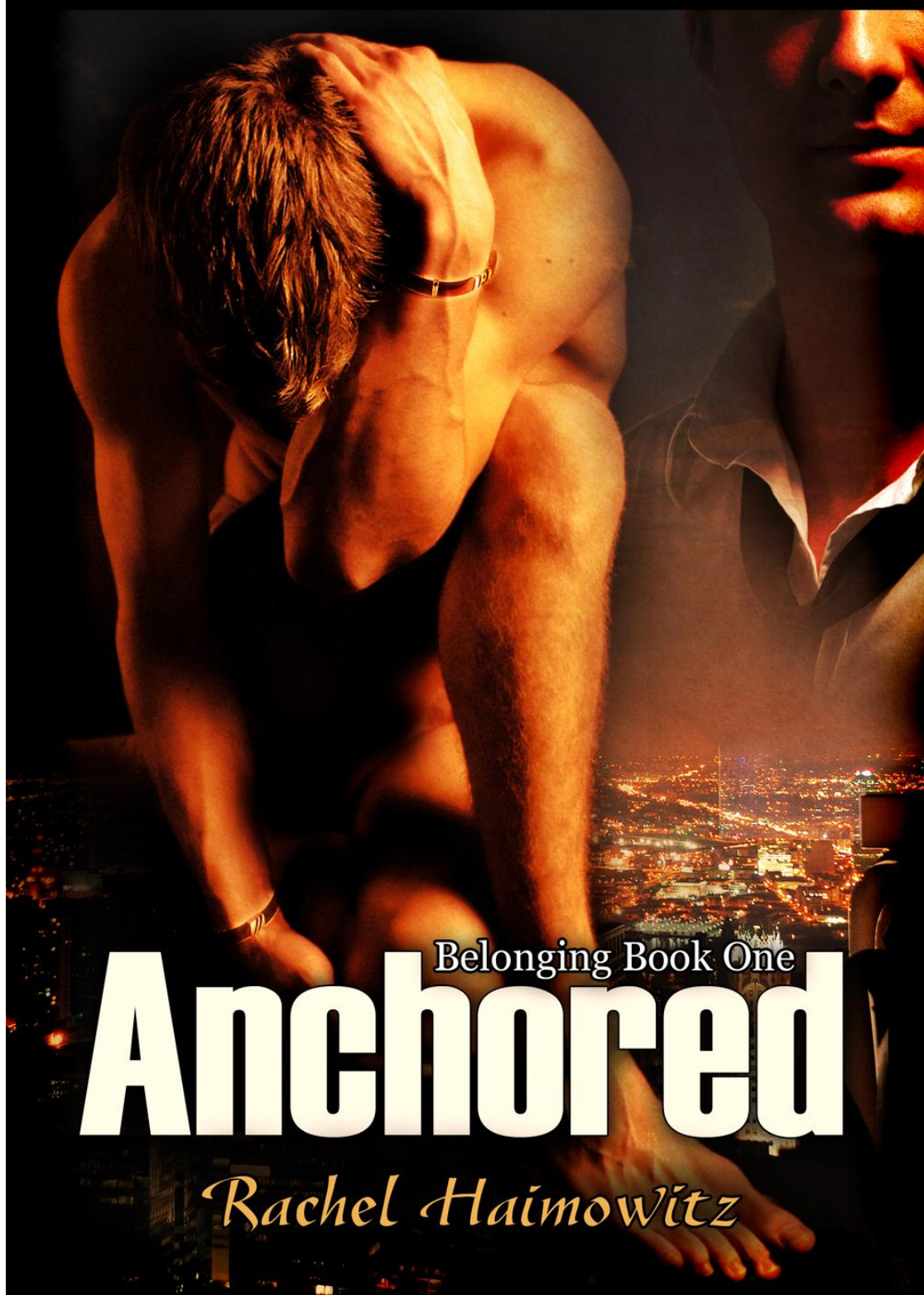


Noble Erotic Romance



Belonging Book One

Anchored

Rachel Haimowitz

www.nobleromance.com

Belong Book One: Anchored

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Dedication

To Bill O'Reilly, for the loafah.

Book Blurb

Network news anchor Daniel Halstrom is at the top of his field, but being at the bottom of the social ladder--being a slave--makes that hard to enjoy. Especially when NewWorld Media, the company who's owned him since childhood, decides to lease him on evenings and weekends to boost their flagging profits.

Daniel's not stupid; he knows there's only one reason a man would pay so much for what little free time he has, and it's got nothing to do with his knowledge of current events. But he's never been made to serve like that before, and he fears he won't survive the experience with his sanity intact.

He finds himself in the home of Carl Whitman, a talk show host whose words fail him time and again when it comes to ordering Daniel to bed. Daniel knows what Carl wants, but it seems as if Carl isn't willing to take it, and Daniel's not willing to give it freely. His recalcitrance costs him dearly, but with patience and some hard-won

understanding, love just might flourish where once there'd been only fear and pain. Can Carl become the anchor in Daniel's turbulent life, or will he end up the weight that sinks his slave for good?

Chapter One

"Daniel, you're late." Tim threw a warning glance at his watch and added, "News is live, you know."

"Sorry – coming." Daniel snatched his jacket and tie and followed his producer out of his office, wondering if Tim would let his tardiness slip or if he'd be paying for it later. No time to worry about that now, though; Tim left for the control booth, and Daniel made a dash for the stairs, unwilling to wait for the elevator to take him the three floors to the studio. There wouldn't be time for proper makeup or sound checks if he wasn't there in the next minute or so, and he didn't want to get Sara or Mike in trouble.

He trotted into the studio a couple minutes past check-in, breathless and still tying the knot on his tie. Mike handed him his IFB, and the moment he popped the little speaker in his ear, he heard Tim complaining that he looked flushed. Sara must have heard it too, because she came at him with a makeup brush a moment later.

"Sound check, Daniel." Tim again, sounding through his IFB. Daniel spun around to find Mike standing patiently behind him, waiting to run the wire up the back of his jacket. He flashed an apologetic wince at the camera and stood so Mike could do his thing, winced again when Tim scolded him through the IFB. Daniel liked Tim – liked him a lot, in fact – but Tim had bosses to answer to, and if Daniel screwed up anymore tonight, Tim would have to report him.

Get it together, Daniel. Right now.

Yeah, right. Easier said than done. It seemed not even the fear of discipline could turn his thoughts from the issue that had gnawed at him all week: his new part-time owner-to-be, and the new leasing program the company had arranged with so many of its desirable slaves. Daniel had been living in the West Side men's dorm since NewWorld Media had bought him, but starting tonight . . . Tonight, he'd be sleeping somewhere else. In someone else's home. Calling someone master or mistress again for the first time in over twenty years. And he wasn't some ignorant child anymore; he

knew there was just one reason why a person would shell out six figures a month for evenings and weekends with him. He'd never once been made to serve someone in that capacity at InfoGlobe — there were plenty of others less relevant to the company's bottom line to fulfill those needs — but things were clearly changing with NewWorld's debts piling up and share prices —

"...iel! Damn it, Daniel!"

Shit. Tim. Daniel tried not to look guilty as he turned to camera 1, cleared his throat, and checked the prompter against the script an intern had dropped on his desk. "Yeah, Tim. I'm uh, I'm sorry, I was — " He cut himself off before any bullshit excuses could fall from his lips and compound the problem. "I'm set. Prompter's set."

"Live in thirty," Tim said, a little stern, a little sad, a lot frustrated. Though he didn't say, "Wait for me in your office after the show," Daniel heard the command anyway.

Great, one more thing to worry about.

Even if he had seen it coming.

He wrenched his mind back to the here and now, but still said, "Good evening, my name is Daniel Halstrom, and you're watching Round the Globe with InfoGlobe," a whole three seconds after they went live.

* * * * *

"Look, buddy," Tim said after the show, with entirely more compassion than Daniel knew what to do with. Daniel stripped off and discarded his suit coat, tie, and dress shirt in short, furious, little jerks that would have left his first mistress fainting with horror. "I know you're freaked about tonight, but that's no excuse for what happened in that studio."

"I know." He sighed, stuffing his cufflinks in the pocket of his pants before yanking them down and kicking them off.

Tim watched his angry strip show impassively, Daniel's jeans waiting in his outstretched hand.

When Daniel finally managed to work his pants past his shoes, he snatched the jeans from Tim with a short, prickly, "Thanks."

"But . . . ?" Tim asked, holding out Daniel's T-shirt.

"But what? But nothing. I know better than to make excuses." Daniel snatched his shirt, turning away from Tim and staying that way as he popped his arms through the sleeves. His hands were trembling; he didn't want Tim to see. "I know you have to tell them. I understand. I'll go downstairs first thing tomorrow, okay? They won't even have to restrain me; I'll be good. Ten hours should be plenty of time to recov —"

Tim touched his shoulder, and he flinched, muscles tense.

"Hey," Tim said softly. "Hey. This is really bothering you, isn't it?"

Not daring to turn around lest he look a freeman in the face as he challenged him, he said, "Which part? The imminent torture thing, or the whole being-rented-to-a-stranger-after-twenty-five-years-of-faithful-service thing?" When Tim didn't dignify that with an answer, he tried, "Wouldn't it bother *you*?"

"That's different. I'm not a slave."

Daniel resisted the very strong urge to roll his eyes, and instead said (most definitely not raising his voice), "Think about it! Being leased off to some total stranger who wants god knows what from you — or worse, god knows *exactly* what. Like I don't do enough for the company already? They've got to strip me of the few moments of peace I ever have? The few moments of free time I'm allowed? They really —"

— expect me to pretend to want this guy?

Tim squeezed Daniel's shoulder but said nothing. He was rarely speechless, and he respected Daniel enough — slave or no — that maybe he really was listening to what Daniel had to say.

"You're luckier than most, you know," Tim finally said, but it sounded pretty flat to Daniel.

"I know." Daniel nodded. He really *was* lucky. "I just What if he — ?"

"NewWorld screened the potential lessees very carefully. Especially those who expressed an interest in their most valuable property, of which you most assuredly are. They wouldn't send you to someone who'd mistreat you."

Tim's hand was still on Daniel's shoulder; Daniel shrugged it off and turned to face the man. "You mean they wouldn't send me to someone who would mark me in a way that would show on camera," he said, slowly and purposefully blunt. Gratuitous cruelty wasn't the norm, Daniel knew, but nor was it by any means forbidden. And he'd had plenty of personal experience with the bad shit in his years before InfoGlobe. He also knew damn well that slaves like him — the ones cursed with good looks, the successful ones who'd accomplished more than most freemen — were magnets for bad shit.

Tim grasped Daniel's bare forearms just above the slave bracelets — thin platinum cables bound with rectangular gold links, slim and stunning and masculine without a single ring for binding — and squeezed gently. Daniel looked down at Tim's hands, at his own, at the bracelets so different from the functional iron bands he'd worn twenty-five years ago. Tim was right; NewWorld Media *had* been good to him. They'd rescued him and his mother from cruel oblivion and given him the world. If this was what they wanted from him in return, well . . . then what kind of ungrateful, spoiled little slat would he be to balk? He deserved the beating he had coming tomorrow.

"Okay?" Tim asked, hands still on his arms, studying him closely. "Good?"

Daniel nodded. "Promise you'll pick me up in the morning?"

Tim laughed, grabbed Daniel's coat, and tossed it to him. "Ten on the dot. Don't make the driver come get you."

Chapter Two

Daniel's driver was the same one he'd had for years, except instead of taking him to the dorm by the docks on the West Side, he headed off toward the Upper East, to a pre-war brownstone overlooking Central Park. The doorman there wore bronze slave

bracelets that matched the cufflinks on his uniform, and he gave Daniel an abbreviated bow when he opened the door for him. "This way, sir," he said, and didn't that just pull Daniel up short, because he was as much a slave as the doorman no matter the metal his bands were made of. But Daniel followed him into the lobby, and the doorman deposited him in the elevator, turned a private key, and pushed the button for the north penthouse. "I'll let him know you're on your way, sir," was the last thing Daniel heard for the next five floors.

He didn't know what to expect when the doors opened, but it *certainly* wasn't the talk show host who shared his timeslot on InfoGlobe's biggest rival network.

Daniel froze, suddenly forgetting how to walk, how to breathe. Even forgetting to turn his gaze to the floor, not to look a freeman in the eye. Was this some kind of joke? Or was fucking him in the ratings alone not enough for UBC?

Carl Whitman, the charismatic face of UBC's *Whitman Live* — and what a *big* face it was in person, atop an equally big body — smiled down at Daniel. Daniel was expecting a greeting, or maybe a scolding for making eye contact, but instead, Carl said, "You're sweating." And then, shit-eating smirk firmly in place, added, "Come on, before you end up back in the lobby. Lord knows I paid enough for every single second of your time."

Daniel had no memory of walking into Carl's — his *master's* — living room, but there he was, staring obediently at a small patch of ultra-plush off-white carpeting despite the nearly overpowering urge to observe his new surroundings. He could feel Carl's gaze, long and appraising, but Carl kept his distance.

"I saw your show tonight," Carl said, settling down on a black leather couch with an ease and comfort that Daniel knew he'd never feel here. Carl hadn't asked a question or given Daniel permission to speak, so Daniel remained silent. "You looked like a deer caught in headlights all night." Carl chuckled, added, "Still do, actually."

Another pause, where maybe Carl was waiting for him to say something, as if the man didn't know the laws, didn't know how slaves had to behave. Or maybe he just

thought of Daniel as different somehow. "You had three seconds of dead air before the lead on your opening block." Pause. "Will they punish you for that?"

"Yes, master," Daniel said to his feet, trying to keep his voice strong, to take ownership of his mistake and make it clear that such lapses were neither commonplace nor acceptable in his eyes.

"Take your shirt off. What will they do to you?"

The two statements were so disparate that it took Daniel a moment to parse them. He swallowed hard and lifted his T-shirt over his head, hunched in on himself a little when it was gone. He didn't know what to do with it, didn't dare throw it on the floor, so he fisted it in both hands, wringing the fabric nervously. "I don't know, master."

Carl sprang from his chair and crossed the room in two large steps. He tugged the T-shirt from Daniel's hands and tossed it on the couch, ducked his head quite conspicuously to look into Daniel's downturned face, and demanded, "How can you not know?"

"I don't know how angry they'll be, sir. Twenty with the strap, maybe; I need to be able to sit through the broadcast tomorrow night."

One giant hand — easily the size of Daniel's whole face — reached out to cup his chin. Carl's thumb traced the line of Daniel's cheekbone from his ear to his nose, and then settled across his lips. "Is that as painful as it sounds?"

Daniel nodded, feeling his skin flush beneath the man's touch.

"Pants," Carl said, dropping his hand and stepping away. Again, the change of subject was so abrupt it took Daniel a moment to process, but then he was peeling his jeans off, wondering at the purpose of all this talk of punishment.

"Put them on the couch," Carl said. "Socks, underwear, all of it."

Daniel complied with shaking hands, blushing tip to toe and trembling in the cool air. His hands made a move for pockets that were no longer there, and lest his master think he was trying to hide himself, he clasped them tightly behind his back.

Carl hovered a few feet away, his expression indecipherable – at least what Daniel could see of it through his downturned gaze. The silence stretched, stretched some more. Neither man moved.

At last, Daniel could bear it no longer and chanced a single word. "Master?"

"Hmm?"

"Should I—I mean, do you . . . do you want me to . . . ?"

Daniel had no idea how to finish that sentence, but Carl rescued him from it with another, "Hmm," more an amused observation this time than a question.

"Shower's down the hall on the left," Carl said. "Soap and shampoo in the stall. Fresh towels on the rack. I want you *squeaky* clean, understand?"

"Yes, master," Daniel said. *That*, at least, he understood. He understood perfectly well.

* * * * *

The bathroom was exquisite, all marble counters and heated marble floor tiles and a marble bench in the three-headed marble shower. It was also huge: larger than the entire private dorm room he'd earned as a platinum slave at NewWorld.

Daniel washed quickly but thoroughly, even running a soap-slicked finger down the crack of his ass in case his master wanted . . . well, he was trying very hard not to think about that, but better to be prepared than to disappoint the man. The hot spray eased some of the tension from his muscles, and though he longed to stay and enjoy it, stay where he wouldn't yet have to face his new owner's demands, he didn't dare indulge for long. His time was not his own to spend, after all, and his body not his own to please.

He toweled off and opened the bathroom door, realizing only then that his master hadn't told him where to go when he was done. He was saved by an, "In here, Daniel," drifting in from the adjacent room – Carl's bedroom, he assumed.

Even though he'd been called, he knocked when he approached the open door. Carl waved him in.

The man was sitting up in bed against the headboard, fully (and blessedly) clothed. His appraising stare was back, a little hungrier than last time, openly approving. Daniel felt himself flush again, again tried to stuff his hands into pockets that didn't exist.

"Come here, Daniel." Carl patted the bed.

Daniel approached slowly, trepidation in every step. He stiffened when Carl grabbed his wrist and pulled him close, but dared offer no resistance as Carl studied his fingers, his palm, the slave cuff he wore.

"Stunning," Carl said, one blunt finger tracing lines across his wrist. Daniel couldn't tell if the man was referring to his hand or the bracelet until a grin spread across Carl's face and he said, "You know, I could buy another whole slave with the hardware you're wearing. Think NewWorld would miss them?"

Daniel hesitantly allowed himself to smile back. "I think they'd notice, master."

"Hmm," Carl grunted again. He patted the bed beside him, and Daniel sat down on the edge, fiercely aware of the press of his master's hip against his own. "Hungry?" Carl asked.

"No, sir." Daniel was far too wired, far too worried to eat.

Carl shrugged. "Suit yourself. And help yourself, too, if you change your mind later. Don't mind the weirdness; I'm allergic to gluten, or in other words, anything with flavor or texture. I'm afraid you'll have to suffer along with me."

"That's . . . that's okay, master," Daniel said, because he had no idea how else to respond. Things were starting to feel a bit surreal. Why all the dancing around? Why wasn't Carl just taking what he'd paid for? Getting it over with and letting him sleep?

As if reading his thoughts, Carl said, "You must be tired."

He was. It was almost midnight, and the car would be here in ten hours to pick him up. "Well then." Carl shifted over to the other side of the bed and pulled Daniel into the space he'd just vacated. He kicked his pants off (but left on his boxers and

undershirt, much to Daniel's confusion) and crawled under the covers. "Good night, Daniel," he said. "Jane will wake us in the morning."

Good night? Jane?

Really?

Carl snapped the light off, rolled over away from Daniel, and promptly began to snore.

Oh, how Daniel envied him.

Chapter Three

Daniel slept poorly. Many long minutes passed before he could even bring himself to lie down beside Carl, and many more still before the tension in his body began to uncoil, before he was able to convince himself nothing would happen tonight and he should really get some sleep lest he space out again at work. Which led, inevitably, to thoughts of the waiting discipline, which made sleep even more elusive than before. They'd have gotten it over with last night if not for this new arrangement, which he was starting to feel rather bitter about again; if not for Carl, he wouldn't be lying here sleepless with nerves, wouldn't have to worry about making it through the broadcast tomorrow. Ten hours wasn't much time to get his shit together if they really hurt him. And they'd damn well expect him to smile for the camera when eight o'clock rolled around.

His stomach rumbled in the darkness, and he contemplated the freedom Carl had given him to help himself to food. But he didn't know how deep a sleeper the man was, and was frankly terrified of waking him. Better, he decided, to go hungry.

Finally, he closed his eyes and drifted into a fitful sleep.

He awoke in the morning in a minor panic, lying in an unfamiliar bed and staring at an unfamiliar ceiling. He couldn't remember where he was, or why there was an arm draped over his naked waist and a large erection pressed up against his hip.

Instinct told him to bolt, but long, painful years of training told him to lie the fuck still and maybe, if he was lucky, successfully pretend he was still sleeping.

But then the hand tightened around his waist and the erection dug hard into his hip, and a deep voice rumbled, "Good morning," by his ear in a little puff of moist warmth.

Carl. New master.

Daniel stiffened, trembling just enough that he worried Carl would feel it. It wasn't good to show fear. People used fear against you.

"I know you're awake," Carl — *no, master; don't forget again* — said, sleepy but in seemingly good humor.

"Yes, master," Daniel said, opening his eyes but not twitching a single muscle. He was afraid to find out what the master would do if he tried to sit up, pull away, what the master would do if he accidentally pressed back against that cock still digging into his hip.

But the master just flopped onto his back, scratched at his belly and yawned. "Well," he said, tossing back the covers and lumbering to his feet. "I gotta piss. Breakfast's in" He squinted at the clock until Daniel, still half-paralyzed with nerves and confusion but trained well enough to function beyond them, handed the man his glasses.

"Thank you," the master said, popping them on and yawning again. "In eighteen minutes. Go find Jane; she'll show you where your bathroom is. But I'm gonna shower, so don't run the hot water yet."

The master disappeared into his bathroom before Daniel could reply or ask questions, like *who's Jane*, or *what am I doing here*.

But he needed no such answers to do as he'd been told. With a pang of regret, he hauled himself out of bed. The mattress was much more luxurious than his own — some sort of memory foam, he figured, with a down comforter and what had to be at least thousand-count sheets. He was so damn tired, not at all looking forward to his day. He was also buck naked, and didn't see any way to remedy that. Perhaps his master

wanted him that way. He had no illusions about his body, or the way it made others react. Neither did NewWorld, who oversaw his fitness regimen as surely as they did his work schedule.

He heard the shower turn on, and, figuring he'd have at least a few minutes alone, permitted himself a moment of study, taking in the bedroom with a practiced eye. Everything was shades of navy and beige, the furniture modern and sleek. His master had a scattering of photographs on the dresser, some framed football cards on the wall, an autographed ball on his desk. The room was so clean it practically sparkled, but Daniel was fairly certain that wasn't the master's doing. He obviously owned at least one more slave.

Great. How many people would see his pasty white ass this morning? Or maybe not so white—he was blushing full force when he stepped into the hall, where the smell of breakfast cooking hit him square in the nose. His stomach rumbled, but he was used to being hungry—had spent a good half his childhood that way—and gave it no more thought.

When he came into the kitchen, he saw a pretty little woman about his age, busy at the stove with what looked like eggs and (presumably gluten-free) pancakes. Lovely bracelets of spun gold sparkled on both her wrists.

"Jane?"

She turned and smiled at him, went back to the food for half a second, then whipped her head around again, her smile widening. "My my," she said, eyeing him downright lewdly, but with a glimmer of amusement that smoothed Daniel's hackles. "This is more of you than I usually see on the evenin' news."

Daniel chuckled nervously and put the kitchen table between him and her. "Yeah, I uh, I don't know what happened to my clothes."

"You should forget them; think of the *ratings*."

Daniel bit his lip and ducked his head, and finally Jane took mercy on him. "Right there, darlin'," she said through a grin that looked ready to break with laughter. She pointed with her spatula at a neatly folded pile on the far counter. Daniel nodded,

but made no move to take them. "You can put them on, you know. Master never said a thing about you streakin' through the apartment all mornin'."

"Uh, thanks."

"Our bathroom's just through there." She pointed with the spatula again to a hallway off the kitchen opposite the one that led to the master's room. "You have the red toothbrush. Don't know what kind of razor you like, but Dave's got an electric and a few different disposables, so take your pick. Breakfast in five, okay?"

Daniel nodded, wondering who Dave was and whether this morning could get any stranger. He somehow managed to brush his teeth and shave and get dressed in the time allotted. His clothes, apparently, had been laundered while he'd slept.

When he came back into the kitchen, a male slave was setting the table with two plates, two glasses, two sets of silverware. "Dave?" he guessed.

The man turned around and offered a smile and a handshake. "Yup."

Daniel hesitated, but he supposed this was a private place, and they could touch if the master allowed it—and presumably Dave wouldn't have offered if the master didn't. Dave's handshake was firm, and Daniel's eyes were drawn to the gold bracelets around his wrists, a more masculine styling of the ones Jane wore. He was a handsome man, deeply tanned, bigger than Daniel by significant degrees—easily as tall as the master and twice as strong. The kind of man Daniel might go for if NewWorld didn't keep such a tight lock on that sort of behavior.

"Welcome to the family, Daniel. Please, sit." Dave pulled out a chair and gestured toward it. "The master wants you to eat with him this morning."

Daniel did as he was told, watching Dave and Jane and wondering if he looked as lost as he felt. Maybe he really did, because Dave clapped him on the shoulder and said, "Don't worry. Master Whitman's a good man. Just try to relax and be yourself." Then he turned to Jane, kissed her on the lips, and said, "I'll see you tonight, babe," before leaving the apartment for Daniel couldn't even imagine where.

"It's true," Jane said, sliding omelets and a stack of pancakes onto each plate. "The master didn't have any use for Dave, but he bought him anyway. Didn't want to break

up a couple, he said. Rents him out now for construction work, but he's all mine in the evenings."

"And I just might make my money back before he's eighty," the master called from the entranceway. His hair was still damp, and he was suppressing a smile as he slid into the seat next to Daniel. "Morning, Jane."

She greeted him back and poured him a glass of juice, then disappeared.

The master attacked his breakfast, downing half his omelet without sparing Daniel a single glance. When at last he did look, he saw that Daniel hadn't yet touched his food and frowned. "What? You don't like eggs?"

"No, sir, I . . . I mean, of course I like eggs. It's just, you didn't —"

"*Oh*," the master said, theatrically loud, drawing out the single word into at least four syllables. "Right. You need *permission*, don't you?" Daniel nodded, and the master shrugged, waved at his plate. "Well, go on then. Eat." He took another bite of his own breakfast, then mumbled around a mouthful of pancake, "Everyone trains 'em different; I never know how to handle you people."

* * * * *

They spent the rest of the morning in a strange, semi-tense silence. Daniel was practically vibrating on the couch as the master, lounging in his recliner with the sports pages, wordlessly passed him sections of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Daniel had heard that Companions sat naked on the floor at their master's feet, but his master had asked no such thing of him. His master hadn't even touched him, really, except this morning in his sleep. Maybe that wasn't his intent after all; maybe he really had bought him for something different: to discuss ideas, or talk about the news, or . . . Daniel chuffed quietly. *Yeah, right.*

Jane flitted in the background, dusting and straightening and washing. At 9:50 a.m., she leaned over Daniel's shoulder and whispered, "Your car will be here in ten minutes," then went back to her work. Daniel glanced up at the master, who was buried

waist deep in little teepee'd stacks of newspaper sections and scribbling on a notepad, and cleared his throat. He needed permission to leave but didn't dare to speak out of turn.

His master either didn't hear him or chose to ignore him, so he tried again, a little more deliberately this time. The master flipped the page with a loud rustle and a sigh and said, "Yes, Daniel? What is it? Speak."

"I, uh, it's almost ten, master."

"Yes, yes." Carl shooed him away without even glancing up from his paper. "Go. I'll see you tonight."

Chapter Four

The moment Daniel stepped onto the news floor, he began to think that maybe he'd rather have stayed in his new master's awkward company. A grim-faced Tim cut him off halfway to his office.

"Don't even bother," Tim said, steering him away from the office and back toward the hallway. "They're pissed. Don't be late."

Daniel's feet froze up for a moment, and Tim gave his arm a harsh jerk, pulling him along. "You said you'd be good," Tim snapped, then said, "Sorry, sorry," when Daniel let his hurt show on his face. "It's just, like I said, they're pissed, and I worry about you."

"I know."

"Look," Tim said, pushing the down button on the elevator and waiting for the car to arrive, "do you want me to —?"

"No." Daniel shook his head. Bad enough Tim would see the aftermath; he didn't want to put him through the main event.

"I can come down there after, if you want. Come and get you."

The elevator dinged, and Daniel stepped inside. "I'm a big boy, Tim. I'll be fine."

Tim didn't look convinced, but then the door closed, and what Tim thought ceased to matter.

* * * * *

At 10:27 a.m., Daniel found himself in a plain little room in the basement of NewWorld Media's US headquarters, empty but for two pairs of leather shackles bolted to the top and bottom of a pole near one wall, and four chairs lined up against the opposite wall. Soundproof paneling lined every surface. After all, it wouldn't do to upset the freemen upstairs with all that unseemly screaming.

Today, three of the four chairs were occupied. Daniel was an important slave, so he was unsurprised to see some important people: Ben Cheng, Chief of US Programming, looking sad, angry, and disappointed all at once; Eric Foster, the HR boss who'd replaced Daniel's savior over a decade ago; and his own chief executive producer, Maxwell Epstein, looking about as unhappy as Ben. The fourth seat was reserved for Daniel's handler, but Tim wasn't obliged to watch, and Daniel was grateful he wasn't here.

Daniel stripped off his clothes without a word and knelt at their feet, head bowed.

"Do you know what you've done wrong, Daniel?" Ben asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Look at me."

Daniel took a deep breath and dragged his gaze up from the floor to Ben's stern face.

"Tell me." Ben's tone was no more yielding than his expression.

"I, uh" Daniel swallowed hard, and his eyes drifted to the leather strap on Mr. Foster's lap, then back to Ben. "I let myself get distracted. I was late to call yesterday. I missed my cue to open the show. I stumbled pretty badly a few times. And I might have zoned a little during the panel talk."

"A *little*?" Maxwell said.

"And it wasn't just yesterday, was it?" Ben said. "All week you've been doing this. What's gotten into you?"

"I—"

"Haven't we been good to you?" Mr. Foster asked.

"Of course! I just" Daniel swallowed again, shook his head. "I'm sorry, sirs. I won't try to make excuses." His gaze was drawn to the strap again, and he added softly, "And I won't struggle. I promise."

Maxwell sighed and said, "No. Not good enough."

Daniel's head snapped up. "Sir?"

"I need you to be on your game, Daniel. Tell me we're not going to discipline you now and just have to drag you back here tomorrow."

"We know you were nervous about the leasing program," Mr. Foster chimed in before Daniel could reply. "But the anticipation's over now, right? Your first night's done, you're here, you're fine, your world is still in one piece, yes?"

"Yes, sir," Daniel agreed, but in truth he wasn't so sure.

"The leasing program is just as important to the company right now as your show is," Ben said. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know how much of our revenue this year will come from the leases?" When Daniel shook his head, Cheng said, "Six percent, Daniel. *Six percent*."

"Look." Mr. Foster again. "Maybe we've spoiled you. Maybe we've been too soft. Or maybe you've just forgotten what you are. I can't imagine why else you'd find it acceptable to sulk and stumble your way through an entire week of work over this. But you need to get your shit together, Daniel. We need you present and focused in that newsroom, and we need you gracious and obedient in your master's home. If he so much as *thinks* a single upsetting thought about you, you're going to end up right back in here, you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Daniel said, his voice shaking only a little.

"I mean it, Daniel. Don't make the mistake of thinking you're special. Don't think that being on camera will protect you."

"I don't, sir."

"Get up."

Daniel flinched a little at the tone but did as he was told, trying to hold himself tall as he approached the pole. He fisted it tightly in both hands, but Mr. Foster said, "No," and pulled Daniel's hands away, then began to buckle his wrists into the restraints.

Daniel didn't fight him, but his hands started shaking hard enough to make Mr. Foster's task a challenge.

Maxwell grimaced and snapped, "For God's sake, Eric, *talk* to him. Can't you see he's scared?"

Mr. Foster gave Daniel's left wrist a hard tug to check the buckle and then started strapping in the other one. "I know you *think* you'll hold still," he said, "but we have a point to drive home today, and we're going to make damn well sure you learn your lesson."

That was supposed to be *comforting*? Daniel couldn't stop himself; he opened his mouth and stuttered, "H-How . . . how many?"

"Eighty: twenty for each day this week you dropped the ball."

Nor could he stop himself from blurting a breathy, astonished, "*What?*" He realized he'd begun to tug against the restraints and forced himself still, but his eyes, no doubt revealing the depths of his panic, sought reassurance from Maxwell.

Maxwell shook his head. "We're all in agreement, Daniel. I'm sorry."

"Please don't do this," Daniel whispered.

"Daniel — "

"But I have to go on air toni — "

"Stop talking, Daniel," Maxwell said, calm but unarguable, at the same time Mr. Foster said, "See, this is exactly what we're talking about. You *have* been spoiled."

Then he stepped back and struck him.

The first blow landed high across the shoulders, hard enough to knock him off balance but more heat and sound than pain. The heat became a burn at the second blow, and all-out fire at the third. The fourth was agony; he didn't bother trying to stay quiet.

Mr. Foster laid orderly stripes, working down from Daniel's shoulders. By the time the strap reached the small of his back, the whole of his existence had been swallowed by a single, blazing supernova of heat and pain, ebbing slightly through each short pause and swelling tenfold when the next strike hit.

When the strap carved a line into the upper curve of his ass, he couldn't even hear Mr. Foster counting anymore over the rushing in his ears and the sound of his own cries.

Slowly, slowly, reality began to creep back into his awareness — the cold pole, the white walls, his harsh, ragged breathing, a roiling nausea creeping up his throat and pain, *God . . .* The pain was so bad he couldn't think beyond it, didn't even realize for several moments that the beating had stopped and he was slumped against the pole, dangling by his wrists, stray tears leaking from his eyes. "m I . . ." He panted, wanting to ask if it was over but unable to convince his lips and tongue to function.

"No," Maxwell said, stepping up to his right shoulder and looking a little green himself. He was holding a trash can in his hands. "You looked like you were gonna —"

And that was as far as Maxwell got before Daniel turned his head and heaved his gluten-free breakfast into the receptacle. There was a bottle of water at his lips when he was done, and a gentle hand in his sweat-soaked hair, and he swished and spat and took a long swallow, but that little bit of moisture had no hope at all of dousing the flame still curling straight through to his bones.

"All right, that's enough. On your feet."

Mr. Foster. Better listen to the man with the strap. Daniel's hands clenched around the restraints, and he pulled for all he was worth, growl rising to a scream as shredded skin and muscle were forced into motion. But finally, he was standing on shaky legs, panting hard, cheek pressed to the cool metal of the pole. He felt the whisper of air before the next blow landed like a strip of razor wire across his ass, heard

Mr. Foster say, "Fifty-eight," and buried his face in his arm to hold back a sob. Two strikes later, when the strap bit into the crease between his buttocks and thighs, there was no more holding back anything.

Agony in his shoulders, his back, his ass, bleeding into his thighs and calves. He didn't remember them chaining his ankles, but obviously they had because he couldn't get away, couldn't escape it, though he struggled and fought and begged and made promises he knew he couldn't keep.

Then the noise fell away, and the flame slowly cooled from white to blue to red, and he heard someone say, ". . . now, Daniel, it's over. Easy, buddy. Easy."

The words bled through his haze, and he realized there were hands on his wrists and ankles undoing his bonds, a shoulder under his arm to stop him from falling. He turned slowly and blinked up at Maxwell, lifted a numb, trembling hand to wipe tears from his face. "'s done?" he asked, the words barely more than a soft, moaning breath he doubted Maxwell had heard.

Maxwell eased him to the floor and propped him against his chest, saying, "Yeah. All done."

Daniel closed his eyes and let his head fall against Maxwell's shoulder, struggling to rein in his frantic breaths, to push the agony back far enough to function through. His fingers clenched tight in Maxwell's shirt and he mumbled, "'msorry," then said it again, a little stronger, just to make sure he'd been heard.

"I know," Maxwell said, his hand smoothing across Daniel's hair.

"'m I bleeding?"

"A little. Just a few cuts; some band-aids will do the trick."

That was hard to believe given the way he felt, but Daniel knew his boss wouldn't lie to him. He was still panting into Maxwell's shoulder, fighting to pull himself together, when Maxwell asked, "You going to be sick again?"

Unable to speak anymore, Daniel just shook his head. He heard someone say, "Better go get Tim," and then nothing else for a while.

Chapter Five

Daniel woke up face-down on the couch in his office, pulled from sleep by an insistent, throbbing burn from his calves to his shoulders. He made the mistake of trying to sit up and groaned, fisting hands into the cushions and panting until the spots faded from his eyes.

"Here." A hand moved into his peripheral vision holding three Tylenol and a bottle of water. He had to sit up to swallow them, and the hand helped him with that too. The world grayed out for a second, and when it came back, he was leaning shoulder to shoulder with Tim, carefully keeping the pressure off most of the welts on his back.

"Fuck," he said softly after swallowing the pills.

"Yeah." Tim agreed.

Daniel took a long pull on his water and asked, a hint of accusation in his tone, "Did you know it was going to be that bad?"

Tim shook his head, a silent apology stamped on his face that they both knew Daniel didn't deserve.

"Did I—I think I fought them."

"A little toward the end there, Maxwell said. You must've been out of your head by then, though. Nobody blames you." Tim smiled wanly and added, "That's why God made restraints, right?"

Another swig, and the bottle was empty. Tim magically produced another one, and Daniel chugged half of that down, too. He felt like he'd sweated out gallons of water. "How'd I get here?"

"Walked. I came and got you. Don't you remember?"

He closed his eyes, probed gently backward. His post-punishment memories were empty of all but agony and a vague recollection of Maxwell stroking his hair.

"How long was I out?"

"About half an hour. It's time to get back to work now, I'm afraid."

Daniel frowned but nodded. "Can I do it from the couch?"

"Sure. I'll go get your laptop."

* * * * *

Daniel spent his afternoon working on his belly, his entire back half covered with chemical ice packs courtesy of Tim. Focus shot, he accomplished little, but he trusted in his staff to pick up the slack. Though he didn't remember it happening, they all must have seen him stumbling back from the elevator, clinging to Tim, tears staining his face; he knew most of them would put their hearts into making his life a little easier this afternoon. Maxwell never hired anyone who had issues "working for" a slave, and certainly plenty enough of them were slaves themselves, well familiar with the pain of a hard strapping. Tim wasn't pushing him at all, and even Maxwell admitted that after a punishment that severe, he'd expected to have to call in a sub for tonight's broadcast. Daniel was adamant that he could do it himself, though. He didn't think Mr. Foster would be as understanding as Maxwell, and it wasn't like he'd get to go home to his little cubbyhole anyway.

Really, all he wanted to do was crawl off and be alone, lick his wounds in private, but he had a new master now, and what he wanted had never mattered very much. He shuddered at the thought of his master making him strip again, studying him like a fucking bug.

Maybe, he told himself, it wouldn't be so bad. Maybe the master would ignore him.

Sure, yeah. And maybe he'd sprout wings and fly to Sweden. Because the only other way he was getting out of his obligations was in a fucking wooden box.

* * * * *

Tim returned a few hours later with three more Tylenol, two fresh ice packs, and a sandwich that was most definitely not from the slaves' cafeteria.

"Thank you," Daniel said, happily swallowing the pills and sitting on the ice packs, but eying the sandwich warily. He was still hurting just enough to be queasy and didn't much feel like puking again.

"Non-optional," Tim said, plunking it in his lap. "Eat. Maxwell told me you tossed your breakfast, and the pills will upset your stomach if it's empty. On a different note, there's a production meeting in twenty minutes — think you can make it?"

Daniel took a bite of sandwich — BLT on whole wheat, just how he liked it: lightly toasted, no mayo, extra tomato — and shrugged. It was a stupid thing to do; abused nerves fired from his shoulder to his tailbone, and he hissed, swallowed a piece of lettuce the wrong way and spent the next thirty seconds trying to cough up the food and half his lung.

"Just not your day, is it?" Tim said when Daniel could breathe again, half teasing, half deadly serious. He hovered close, but when it was clear that Daniel wouldn't cough again, he pointed a finger at the sandwich, said, "Eat," one more time, and left Daniel's office, closing the door behind him.

Blissfully alone, if only for the moment, Daniel did as he was told. Surprisingly, he felt a bit better after eating. He even managed to drag his sorry ass to the production meeting, and while it wasn't one of his shining moments, at least he got through it. When he fell asleep for an hour on his couch afterward, nobody seemed to notice. If they did, they held their tongues.

Tim returned again at six with more food, two Percocet, and a large espresso. Daniel raised his eyebrows at the combination.

"The consensus is that a sleepy you is better than a sweating you," Tim said. "These ought to let you grit through the broadcast without drooping too much if you drink the espresso."

"Thanks," Daniel said, and not just to be polite. It wasn't often that a slave got nursed through discipline on painkillers of any sort, let alone narcotics. He didn't like

espresso, but he knew the drugs would knock him cold without the caffeine, so he took a sip anyway.

"And I gotta tell ya, this whole waiting hand and foot on a slave thing is mighty inconvenient. So next time you're thinking about doing something stupid and getting your ass beat, could you maybe, you know, *not*? Or at least do it on a Friday?"

The apology was already passing through Daniel's lips when he looked up and saw Tim's smile. He smiled back, touched his fingers to Tim's arm, and looked him straight in the eye. "Really, Tim, I mean it. Thanks."

* * * * *

The broadcast was its own special level of hell, but they'd arranged the night's rundown without any panels or long interviews, minimizing his camera time. He stood through all the pre-taped packages and sat on ice packs during the intros and extros, careful not to lean back against his chair. His skin still felt too tight, terribly oversensitized, burning like he'd been dipped in menthol, and he'd been unable to suppress more than one wince when he'd moved a little too much or too fast. But at least the pain kept him alert, actually helped him to focus — if for no other reason than it served as a constant reminder of what would happen if he screwed up again.

They let him go at 9:05, after taping a quick look-live for the morning. Tim was waiting for him in his office, and Daniel's heart double-timed it when he saw him; had he done something wrong again?

"Easy," Tim said, as if reading his mind, or perhaps just the fear on his face. "You were fine. I just came to give you these for the road." Two more Percocet were sitting in Tim's upturned hand. "Our secret, okay?"

Daniel took them with a weary nod, stuck them in his pocket. The two men stood silently then, Tim focused on Daniel, Daniel too tired to focus on much of anything at all.

"You should change," Tim finally said. "You're on borrowed time now, remember?"

Daniel nodded, started fumbling at his tie with clumsy fingers. After a few failed attempts at loosening the knot, Tim nudged Daniel's hands away and untied it for him.

"I can't wear the suit out just this once?" Daniel asked. Just the *thought* of pulling his form-fitting jeans over the welts on his calves, thighs, and ass made him grimace.

Tim shook his head. "You know the rules, Daniel. Come on, I'll help you."

Tim started making work of the buttons on Daniel's shirt, and with a heavy sigh, Daniel pulled the pills from his pocket and swallowed them dry.

Chapter Six

Daniel fell asleep on the short ride to his master's house, sprawled on his belly across the back seat of the sedan. He awoke with a gasp when the doorman opened the door and gave his shoulder a shake. The man snatched his hand back with a hasty apology, but then leaned in again, helping to extricate a sweating, swearing Daniel from the car.

"Didn't think they did this to guys like you," the doorman said as he walked Daniel to the elevator, and it was all Daniel could do not to snap back, *What the fuck does that mean?* Guys like *him*? He was a slave, just like the doorman. Just a damn slave.

And he was reminded of that fact quite firmly when his master led him to the center of the living room without so much as a greeting and said, "Strip."

It must have taken him five minutes to wriggle out of his clothes, but his master didn't seem to be in any particular hurry. He was lounging on the couch, arms stretched across the back cushions, the ankle of one leg resting on the opposite knee. His eyes were intent on Daniel, but his face was completely neutral. What was he thinking? What did he *want*?

Under the master's watchful eye, Daniel peeled off his left sock and placed it neatly atop the rest of his clothes on the couch. Naked at last, he stood as straight as he could manage, feeling flush and fighting back a yawn and the urge to fidget.

"Turn around," the master said, in a voice more soft and even than seemed possible from such a large man.

Normally, Daniel would have been relieved to obey, to hide his nudity, but today presented a whole new world of vulnerabilities. He'd caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror in his office as Tim had helped him change, seen the head-to-toe bruising, the red welts that were no longer swollen but still stood out bright against pale skin, the dozen or so cuts across his right shoulder blade and hip where the tip of the strap had landed too hard too close to bone. There was an intimacy to letting someone see those things that went beyond nudity: a weakness, a failure, a helplessness painted on his skin for this stranger to see.

But who was he kidding; he wasn't "*letting*." There were no choices here. Not for him.

He turned around.

Silence, save a rustling behind him, a single footstep on the carpeted floor, and then curious fingers traced blazing paths down his back that made him gasp and flinch. The fingers pulled away, and then so did his master, leaving him alone in the middle of the living room, wondering what the hell he was supposed to do now.

The master came back a minute later with a yawning Jane trailing behind, dressed in pajamas, hair tousled. She took one look at Daniel hunched and shivering by the coffee table and said, "Oh, *darlin'*."

"Fix him, would you?" the master said, casually gruff, as if he'd handed her a shirt to mend or a broken heel to repair, and then ambled off to his bedroom.

Jane touched a hand to Daniel's arm and gently turned him to face her. It was strange how unselfconscious he suddenly felt; maybe he was just too weary to be bothered with such things, or maybe too confused. Jane was looking at him like his

mother used to after his old mistress got a hold of him, and it made him warm in a way that had nothing to do with pain or shame.

"Sorry to wake you," he mumbled as she led him the two steps to the couch, laid him down like he was made of glass and ran a hand across his hair.

"Don't be silly," she chided. "You just rest. I'll be right back."

She came back with cool washcloths and hydrogen peroxide and a cold, sweet-smelling cream that numbed his skin as she rubbed it into his legs and back. "Was this because of yesterday?" she asked as she worked. Daniel nodded, already feeling better than he had all day. "I saw you tonight, knew what happened right away. Don't tell him I told you, but the master looked quite upset."

He did? Daniel wanted to press her about that, but said instead, "I thought I was careful."

Jane smeared some cream into his shoulder. "I don't think most people noticed. Master just knew what to look for."

"And you?"

Her hand froze momentarily on his shoulder blade. She didn't reply, but Daniel could read the truth in her face—a dark history there to match his own—and he let it go.

"All right darlin'," she said, clearing her throat and wiping her hands on a washcloth, "that's as good as I can make it. Off you go now. Master's waitin'."

* * * * *

Daniel paced toward the master's bedroom, telling himself over and over that he could sleep soon, that in a few moments this day would be over and he could close his eyes and put it all behind him.

The alternatives did not bear considering.

Still uncertain of the rules, he knocked on the open door. His master, propped against the headboard, looked up from his book—*The Post American World*, Daniel

noticed with approval – and patted the empty space beside him. When Daniel hesitated at the bedside, not wanting to sit lest he smear cream on the sheets (never mind how much it would hurt), his master said, "It's okay. You can lie down if you want to."

He wanted to very much, so he eased onto his belly, tucking his arms beneath the pillow and facing his master's hip. His eyes drifted closed, but the sound of a flipping page pulled him from the beginnings of sleep. A moment later, he felt a hand on his head, heavy and warm, still but for two fingers making short, tentative strokes through the hair at his nape.

He stiffened and squeezed his eyes closed, focusing on controlling his shuddering breaths. What was *wrong* with him? When Jane had done the same thing just minutes before, he'd taken pleasure from her touch. Why could he not find pleasure in the same touch when the hand belonged to his master?

Want, he decided. It was a matter of want. And maybe choice as well; Jane wasn't expecting to buy his desire. He could tell her no.

The hand disappeared just long enough to flip another page, then returned again, bolder this time. Fingers traced the shell of his ear, the line of his jaw. A thumb brushed across his lips, pushing a little; Daniel unclenched his jaw just enough to allow the thumb the entrance it demanded. It explored the inside of his lower lip, touched his teeth, then pulled away to turn another page.

Daniel fisted both hands in his pillow and prayed those fingers would stay gone. He was breathing like he'd run a race, achingly tired but losing his grip on sleep so thoroughly he feared he might not reclaim it at all tonight.

The master's hand came back, and Daniel bit his tongue to keep in a whimper. For one horrifying moment, he thought he might cry. All he wanted to do was sleep, go back to his cubbyhole on the West Side and –

The hand stroked across his hip and derailed his train of thought. Probably for the best, anyway; wishing on things you could never have brought nothing but trouble. He held his breath, dreading where the exploring fingers might go next. When they skimmed down his ass, he couldn't help it – that damn whimper escaped his throat.

The master's hand froze, lifted away. "Did I hurt you?" he asked in that same soft, even tone from before.

A pause, and then, "Yes, master." This was true, but in the larger scope of things, the pain had been minor, and certainly not the real cause of his distress.

Still, this time when the hand disappeared, it didn't come back.

Chapter Seven

When Daniel awoke in the morning, the sun was already high in the sky, and Jane was standing over him, smiling bright.

"Good mornin', darlin'."

"Mmph," was about all Daniel could think to reply. He felt logy, drugged, pain thrumming deep and hot enough to discourage him from waking fully.

"Come on, then. Breakfast's waitin'. Your car'll be here in forty-five minutes."

"*What?*" Daniel pushed up in a panic, grunted, and fell back to the bed. He realized the other half was empty; his master was gone. "It's 9:15?"

"Master left early today. He thought you could use the sleep."

"Oh." Daniel blinked, sat up more carefully this time. It wasn't *too* bad – not nearly as bad as last night, at least – and he actually felt rested. Plus, he hadn't woken to a cock digging into his hip. Maybe things were looking up.

"Here," Jane said, stuffing a bundle of cloth into his hands once he was vertical. He shook it out to reveal a pair of navy track pants with a white stripe down each leg. They were new; the tag was still on.

"What's this?"

"Gift from the master. He thought your jeans would hurt."

"Oh," he said again, rather stupidly, he thought. "That was . . . Really?"

Jane nodded, grinning wide, clearly as proud of the man as if she were his master and not the other way around.

"Wow, I've never . . . I mean, we're not allowed to own things at NewWorld. Causes fights, they say."

"Well then you just bring them back tonight, is all." She plucked the pants from his slack fingers and folded them on the dresser, then pulled the little jar of numbing cream from her apron pocket. "Now lie back down and I'll fix you up, and we'll get you on your way."

* * * * *

Breakfast was fresh fruit salad and some sort of dense, home-baked, rice-flour blueberry muffins he felt certain he could eat for the rest of his life and never grow tired of. Jane hustled him through his new morning routine and deposited him in the waiting car herself at three minutes to ten. "Be good," she said as she closed the door, but what Daniel really heard was, "be careful," or maybe, "stay safe."

The day was long. Tim hovered, bringing him food and Tylenol and making excuses to check in, and Maxwell watched him closely enough to make him nervous. He'd lost almost two hours this morning sleeping – time normally spent reading the day's papers – but worked furiously to catch up, taking the lead at the afternoon production meeting and hitting the show out of the park. It was easier to bury himself in work than to think about that finger on his lips, that hand on his ass. It was easier than thinking about the track pants he changed into to go home – or, at least, what passed for home now. He missed his cubbyhole. He missed his friends back in the dorm. He missed playing chess and listening in on sports conversations he knew nothing about and stealing quick, rough, fear-laced handjobs in the bathroom with that hot Latino line producer who slept in the bunkroom down the hall while supervisors with shock prods tucked into their belts prowled the floor.

He would have slept in tomorrow, gotten up at noon, and spent the day jogging in the park, reading the new issue of the *Economist*, watching old movies in the little lounge at the end of his hall. He would have eaten dinner in the mess with his friends

and had those cookies for dessert that the slave baker in the InfoGlobe café always snuck back for the floor, and then he'd have found an excuse — meeting a contact, or doing background research, perhaps — to lounge at the Strand or the Barnes & Noble or maybe see some live music in one of the few West Side clubs that allowed unattended slaves.

Instead, he'd be spending his weekend doing . . . well, he wasn't sure what, exactly, but he doubted he'd get to keep his new track pants on.

"Daniel?"

Tim. Daniel dropped the dress shirt he'd been holding and turned his gaze from the city lights out his office window to his handler.

"It's almost ten."

Shit, he'd been daydreaming for a long time.

"You have to go." Tim touched a hand to his back — *ow*, fuck, *not cool, Tim* — and guided him away from the view of Central Park, shrouded in what passed for darkness in this city. "You should have left half an hour ago."

"Sorry," he mumbled, scraping his teeth over his lower lip and staring at his sneakered feet as they carried him from his office.

"Please don't make me come in here again on Monday."

Tim's voice was soft, but the warning was clear, so Daniel said, "I won't."

Tim sighed and drew Daniel to a stop in the near-empty newsroom, looked him in the eye. For a moment, Daniel thought he might scold him, but instead he just shook his head and said, "I'm sorry you're unhappy."

Daniel waited for the rest — *But buck up, do your duty, your happiness has no role here* — but Tim just said goodnight and sent him on his way.

Chapter Eight

The doorman told Daniel the penthouse door was unlocked and to let himself in. Daniel was perfectly happy not to be led off the elevator by his master, but once he was

standing in the apartment, he had no idea what to do. He had no place here yet, no rules or boundaries. He didn't know what was okay to touch, or if he was allowed to sit, or if the offer to use the kitchen still stood. He wanted to shower, wash the makeup off his face, let the heat unclench the muscles in his back, but he didn't know if that was allowed either.

At a loss, Daniel tiptoed toward the slave suite. The light was on in the bathroom, but not the bedroom, and he could hear Dave snoring softly through the cracked-open door. There were lights on in the large, open kitchen/living room, but none down the hallway toward the guest room or his master's bedroom. Everyone was asleep.

He eyed the kitchen table and counters, the coffee table in the living room, looking for a note or directions or . . . *something*, his jaw cracking with a yawn as he walked a circuit around the room. He found nothing, but then, he hadn't expected to. His master obviously expected him to know what to do. Maybe, in his belligerence or his pain, he'd simply not heard whatever instructions his master had given. Or maybe Tim had told him, and he hadn't paid attention. He knew Companions warmed their masters' beds, but was that . . . was he . . . ?

What if he accidentally woke the master? What if he went in there and his master didn't want him? The man would be angry; he would punish him. He would tell Mr. Foster.

Better not risk it. He'd sleep on the couch.

Except, he didn't know if he was allowed to do *that*, either. His first mistress *never* let him on the furniture.

Fuck it. He'd sleep on the floor.

* * * * *

Thank god for carpeting. The floor was hard and chilly, but at least not unbearably so. He fell asleep on his belly but woke up sometime in the middle of the

night, curled on his side, shivering cold and with a crick in his neck. Misery prompted a moment's contemplation about crawling into his master's warm bed, but in the end, he simply pulled his arms into the sleeves of his T-shirt and propped a sneaker under his head in lieu of a pillow.

When next he awoke, it was morning, and his pajama-clad master was standing over him, arms crossed, hair ruffled, looking decidedly unhappy.

"I woke up and my bed was cold."

Daniel popped his arms from his sleeves and bolted to his knees, fear smothering his stiffness and pain. "I'm sorry, master," he blurted, "I came home and everyone was sleeping and I didn't know what to —"

The master cut him off with an uncoordinated wave, then rubbed one eye with the hand he'd just flopped at Daniel. "I need caffeine before I can listen to this. What time is it? *Jane!*" The sudden shouting wasn't unexpected, but it took Daniel a moment to realize it wasn't directed at him. The master squinted at the kitchen, back at Daniel. "Where's Jane?"

"I, I don't —"

"No," he sighed, this time rubbing his other eye. "Of course you don't. You just woke up too."

"I'm sor —"

"Yes yes, you're sorry, I get it, now please stop apologizing; it's fine." The master turned his squint on Daniel and asked, "Are you cold? You're shaking."

"Y-yes, master, the floor is —"

He was cut off this time by Jane bustling through the front door with a brown paper bag tucked under one arm and a large cup of something steaming in the other. She paused in the entranceway when she saw them, eyeing them both, but then stepped forward and held out the cup. "You're up early, master. Grande soy latte, extra sugar."

The master snatched the cup from her hand and took a long swig. "Yeah, well, I woke up *alone* and got worried."

"And grumpy, too," she said with a wink. From his place on the floor, Daniel felt his jaw drop. Had she *really* just spoken to her master like that? "But cheer up, master – the bakery had those gluten-free bagels you love. Still hot and everything."

The master grunted, but fell in line behind Jane, following her to the kitchen table and plopping down in a chair. She smeared some jelly on a bagel and gave it to him, then handed him two morning papers.

The master took a bite of his bagel, grunted in what appeared to be satisfaction, and flipped to the sports section of the *Times*. He looked pretty engrossed. Daniel considered getting off his knees, but he wasn't sure the master was done with him yet, and if the man had forgotten about him, he didn't want to do anything to re-draw his attention.

Another bite, another little grunt-hum. Then the master put his bagel back on his plate, dropped the paper, and turned Daniel's way.

Daniel braced himself for whatever the master was about to demand or say.

The master raised his eyebrows and asked, "Well? Do you want breakfast or not?"

For a moment, Daniel just looked at him, speechless, until he remembered he was making eye contact with a freeman and dropped his chin. He'd screwed up, and the man wanted to *feed* him? Not exactly the reaction he'd been expecting, but he got himself together enough to nod, stutter out, "Y-yes, master, thank you," and drag himself to his feet. God, he was *sore*. Sleeping on the floor sure hadn't helped.

The master tracked him with his eyes as he walked around the couch and the counter that divided the kitchen from the living room. When Daniel reached the table, the master nudged the chair catty-corner to his with his foot. Daniel wasn't accustomed to eating with his betters, let alone right next to them; he hesitated, wincing as a spark of pain flared from his tailbone to his neck.

"Wait," the master said before Daniel could sit.

Shit. Had he blown it by hesitating? The master stood up from the table and Daniel flinched, waiting for the blow, but the man stepped right past him and snatched

a throw pillow from the couch, then placed it on Daniel's chair. "There," he said, waving once toward the chair before turning his attention back to his bagel and his paper.

Daniel eyed him, then eyed the chair (which looked significantly more comfortable to his black-and-blue ass than it had just moments ago), and then his master again. The man was paying him no more mind.

"Sit, dear," Jane said, placing a bagel and a glass of juice in front of the cushioned chair, "and eat your breakfast before it gets cold."

Daniel obeyed, feeling a little . . . he didn't even know what. He was sitting in *Carl fucking Whitman's* kitchen, eating gluten-free bagels on a cushioned chair at the same table as his master while wearing the first piece of clothing he'd ever actually owned.

When he tossed a longing glance at the *Washington Post*, still folded on the table, his master pushed it over to him without taking his eyes off the sports pages. "You don't ever have to ask," the master said. "Just put it back when you're done."

"Thank you, master." The words were rote, but colored with stark surprise. On the news floor, he could take whatever reading material he wanted, but that was different. That was a *job*. This was . . . well, he supposed this was a job too. He just hadn't figured out his duties yet.

Daniel was halfway through A-4 when his master turned to him, nose wrinkled, and said, "You need a shower."

He folded the paper carefully, put it back exactly where he'd found it, and said, "Yes, master." He almost added, *I'd like that very much*, but what did the master care what he did or didn't like?

The master's eyebrows climbed a little. "Now?" he said, and Daniel realized his master's words had been the order, not just a statement preceding it.

"Sorry, master." He stood up from the table and headed toward the slave bathroom, but his master stopped him with a hand around his wrist (and oh, how even that simple touch sent his heart pounding so hard his breath hitched).

"Use the guest shower. Three people sharing one bathroom is a bit much, don't you think?"

He muttered another surprised "Thank you" — surely, he was breaking some kind of record here — then changed course for the marble bathroom down the hall. Once inside, he stripped behind the privacy of a closed door and stepped beneath the spray.

The soaps in this shower were expensive, boutique — the kind of thing you'd buy in a little shop in the East Village for fifteen dollars a bar — and he wondered if his master had such fine tastes, or if this was Jane's hand he was seeing. He decided he didn't care as he turned into the three-headed spray and let it run down his face, his back, the heat melting the soreness from his muscles. He moaned and curled his toes into the heated tile.

"Jesus," someone choked out.

Daniel whipped around to see his master standing naked just outside the stall glass, staring with his mouth open, his cock so hard it was bobbing against his belly.

The master met Daniel's eyes, slid the glass door open, and stepped in next to him.

Daniel swallowed hard, closed his eyes, and held his breath. Only the thought of the strapping he'd so recently endured stopped him from bolting. A hand came to rest over his heart, and he startled violently, gasping his fear.

"Relax, Daniel," his master said. "My god, you're like one of those shivery little wet dogs ridiculous women carry in their purses."

Daniel coughed out a frightened laugh at that — the image was remarkably astute. The master pulled his hand away, and Daniel sucked in a breath. A second later, the hand returned, complete with soaped-up loofah, and began to stroke across his chest.

"You keep up all this tension" — *stroke* — "you're gonna sprain something."

Yeah, maybe so. All those knotted muscles weren't doing his welted skin any favors, and god, he'd been so tired all the time lately. The loofah moved lower, brushed

over both nipples. Daniel sucked in another shuddering breath and tried to make his fists unclench.

"Hey." *Stroke.* "Hey."

The loofah left his skin, and two soapy fingers tilted his chin up toward his master's face. Daniel pried his eyes open and made himself look, shocked to see — *concern?* — in those brown eyes.

"I'm not going to hurt you, you know."

The fingers disappeared, and Daniel dropped his chin again, suspecting that he and his master had two very different definitions of the word "hurt." He wanted to believe him, but then the loofah returned, low on his belly, and his eyes were drawn like magnets to his master's erection, much larger than Daniel's own would be if his nuts weren't trying to crawl into his throat. All he could think of was why his master had bought him, what he wanted, and how long it would be before the man lost his patience and simply took what he'd paid for.

The loofah brushed over his genitals, no faster or slower than it had over his torso, pushing no harder or softer. It was almost . . . clinical, Daniel thought, spreading his legs obediently (but with a quiet little whimper that he prayed the sound of the water would hide) when his master's hand nudged the inside of his thigh. The man squatted in front of him, his rock-hard cock bumping against Daniel's tense calf, his hands and eyes intent on the leg he was washing.

His master started on the other leg, leaning in close to reach across Daniel, that hard cock no longer just brushing but actually pressing against Daniel's calf. The master moaned at the same time Daniel did, but Daniel bit it back lest his master mistake the sound for desire. Of course, his master might not care one way or the other. He had no reason to.

No reason at all.

The master stood and said, "Turn around," his voice low and rough and as thick as the cock straining between his legs.

So this is it, then. It'll happen now.

Daniel swallowed hard, breathed even harder. If he hyperventilated, maybe he'd pass out and

No. No such luck. His body turned of its own accord, so accustomed to obeying orders that it didn't even check with his brain before moving. He braced his palms against the back wall of the stall, clenched his jaw. He would *not* allow himself to beg, *not* ask his master to stop, no matter how awful it was. Yet thoughts of Jaime, his old mistress's other boy who serviced her best clients, filled his head: *Even when they aren't mean*, he'd said, *it hurts something fierce*. And no wonder; there was no way that giant cock could possibly fit where his master planned to put it. Would he tear? Bleed? Would he be able to hold himself still?

His master stepped close, so near that Daniel felt the heat of him, even through the steam. Then a hand fell on his shoulder, and a soft, "Shh," tickled his ear. Daniel wanted to believe the sound was meant to comfort, but maybe, like his first mistress, the master just didn't want to hear his fear.

The loofah made a single stroke down Daniel's bruised left shoulder, painful but bearable, and a trail of soap bubbles tickled down his back. Another stroke, toward the middle, then over the welts and cuts on his right shoulder. He hissed, shoulder jumping and fingers flexing against the tile, and the loofah instantly withdrew. His master's bare hands took its place, soap-slicked and so, so gentle, working carefully around the worst and brushing feather touches over the rest.

Those enormous hands trailed down his battered back, to his equally battered waist and hips. Daniel let his head drop between his arms, panted hard through clenched teeth. He believed his master didn't mean to hurt him, but it hurt anyway, and his mind flashed back to Jaime again:

Even when they aren't mean, it hurts something fierce.

The loofah stroked down to his ass — and Jesus, how long did it take to wash someone? How much longer would his master make him stand here, trembling beneath those hands, before the man took what he'd come for? For a moment, he wondered if the suspense wasn't worse than the actual deed would be — he'd heard rumor of men

enjoying penetration, though he found that hard to believe — but then his master's cock bumped his hip and it felt like a steel fucking rod — unbending, unyielding, cruel.

The master stepped away and adjusted the spray until the water washed the soap from Daniel's back. Every second that passed without skin against his skin, with hot water streaming in its place, Daniel unclenched a little more, but it was all undone a moment later when a large hand cupped his elbow and turned him around.

"You know," his master began, and from his blown pupils, flushed lips, and raging hard-on, Daniel was certain he was about to be scolded, berated, ordered to his knees. "Not to belabor the point, Daniel, but you really do need to calm down." And then he left, calling, "Stay in there as long as you like," as he toweled off and closed the door behind him.

Daniel stared at the suddenly empty bathroom, muscles locked and frozen, hot water streaming into his open mouth.

Chapter Nine

Daniel hid in the shower for a long time. There was no clock in there (there was, however, an in-shower radio, tuned to NPR when Daniel flipped it on), but it must have been half an hour, he figured, before the water went suddenly cold. He lunged for the tap with a curse and a flare of panic — he hadn't meant to lose so much time, hadn't meant to use all the hot water. What if the master wanted some?

His fingers had pruned. He dried off with a Turkish cotton towel four times the size of the ones in the dorms. His red toothbrush and a shaving kit were sitting on the sink, tagged with a little yellow sticky-note that said simply, *Daniel*. The clothes waiting for him on the vanity also looked new — distressed jeans and a gently fitted black button-down shirt, navy watchplaid boxers and a pair of socks. He wondered who had snuck in here to drop these things off, but what the hell, it felt like the whole damn world had seen him naked this week already. That he hadn't noticed someone come in

was perhaps of slightly larger concern, but he couldn't quite bring himself to worry; he was tired and stressed and in pain, that was all.

Daniel groomed and dressed slowly, half of him content to hide in here all day, the other half just *waiting* for the master to storm in, strike him, scold him for loafing. The shaving cream smelled fantastic. The clothes were soft and loose enough to be almost comfortable against his healing skin.

Finally, he ran out of excuses to stay inside his little marble cocoon. He wished he could find a reason to go to work today; he didn't know what having a heart attack felt like, but the morning had barely passed and already his throat felt tight and his chest hurt. However would he make it through a whole damn weekend of this?

Assuming the master would desire his presence (for decoration at the very least; though he'd yet to assign Daniel any tasks, it was clear the man wanted him close), Daniel headed toward the living room. He found the master there, lounging on the couch, watching football on a huge TV.

The master didn't acknowledge or direct him. Not knowing what else to do, Daniel stood off to one side, against the wall where he could watch the game (not that he had any idea what was happening), and where his master, if he so chose, could watch him.

The master turned his head, gave Daniel a slow, appreciative once-over, and went back to the game. Eight minutes into the first quarter. He'd probably be watching for a while.

At the two-minute warning, Jane and Dave came out of the slave suite, hand in hand. Dave said, "Back at three, master."

The master waved them off with barely a glance. Was this a regular Saturday routine, then? Daniel ached to go with them, somewhere, anywhere that wasn't *here*. But they were gone before he could even think about working up the courage to so much as toss them a longing look, so with a sigh, he rocked back on his heels and resigned himself to an afternoon of sports.

How boring. *Epic* boring. He'd never been much good at doing nothing — not a lot of practice, after all. He stuffed his hands in his pockets, pulled them out to cross his arms, put them in his pockets again. Started writing questions in his head for the interview on Wednesday with that tea party asshat. On TV, another sack, still no score. God, didn't anything ever *happen* in this game? He was tired of standing, wanted some Tylenol. He shifted his weight from foot to foot.

"For God's sake, would you *sit*?"

The words cracked like a leather strap, and Daniel startled hard, apology spilling from his lips before the offense had even registered in his brain.

But his master didn't look particularly angry. Irritated, yes, but not angry. "You're not a dog, you know," the man added, sliding from irritated to . . . bemused? "I won't shoo you off the furniture. But God help me, I may swat you on the nose with a rolled-up paper if you fidget even one more time."

Daniel believed him.

The couches formed an L around the coffee table, and he approached the unoccupied leg, sitting stiffly on the edge of the middle cushion. The master followed him with his eyes, frowning slightly. Had he wanted Daniel to sit next to him? For a moment, the master looked like he might say something, but he only sighed and turned back to the game.

The new issue of the *Economist* lay on the coffee table. Did the master's never-have-to-ask rule apply to that as well, or only to the newspaper? It seemed absurd to Daniel that the intention would be so narrow, so he reached for the magazine. Except . . . His hand froze, hovering over the coffee table. If the master had meant that he could read whatever he wanted, wouldn't he have said so? What if he was possessive about his copy? A producer had punished him just last month for borrowing hers without asking. He drew his hand back.

Really though, he was probably being ridiculous. His master seemed reasonable, maybe even kind. He wasn't some bitch with a chip on her shoulder and a shock prod she used behind Maxwell's back. Plus, the master had no reason to be jealous of

Daniel — his ratings were three times higher, and he spent his broadcasts rubbing shoulders with A-list movie stars and influential politicians, not the unknown academics and policy wonks who made up Daniel's guest roster. Besides, Carl clearly wasn't using the magazine right now. No harm done if he read it carefully. He leaned forward, reached for it again —

Unless, of course, his master saw fit to correct him for taking what wasn't his.

"God!" Another whip-crack exclamation from his master, another hard startle from Daniel. "What did I say about the fidgeting?"

The master rocketed up from the couch, snatched the *Economist*, and rolled it into a tight tube. In two short, angry steps, he was in front of Daniel, magazine hand drawn back to his ear. The time for apologies was past; Daniel squeezed his eyes closed and hunched his shoulders, waiting for the blows. At least they shouldn't hurt too much.

Or at all, apparently. Daniel popped his eyes open, surprised, when the magazine plopped into his lap. His master looked oddly apologetic.

"Hey," the master said, touching fingertips to Daniel's cheek and tilting his head up. "I told you, you don't have to ask, remember? I meant it. Books, papers, the TV, the bathroom, the kitchen, whatever; you live here now too. The only things off limits are my laptop and the last slice of pie, okay?"

Daniel nodded, a hesitant smile creeping up his lips to match his master's own. That was more than okay, that was . . . "Thank you, Master, I— That's— I mean, that's very kind of you. Thank you."

"Yeah, well, don't go saying that too loud," the master grouched, grabbing his laptop off the coffee table and settling back on the couch. "You'll ruin my reputation."

* * * * *

The football game moved into the fourth quarter. Jane had returned about an hour ago with two canvas shopping bags and no partner ("The foreman called Dave in

to work," she'd said to the master's raised eyebrow). She was puttering around in the kitchen now, baking something that made Daniel's mouth water.

Daniel was perhaps halfway through the *Economist*, starting to get restless with so much sitting around. His feet were jiggling. His ass was still sore, and he shifted his weight for perhaps the tenth time in as many minutes, seeking relief.

"Who's that guy?"

The master looked up at him expectantly, as if he thought Daniel should be able to read his mind. Daniel put down the magazine and asked, "Master?"

"You know," the master said, eyes traveling between his computer screen and Daniel, one hand on his keyboard and the other twirling short, impatient circles in the air. "The MDC leader in Zimbabwe. Mbeki brokered that power-sharing deal between him and Mugabe a while back. That guy."

"Morgan Tsvangirai?"

The master turned to smile at Daniel. "Yes, thank you." He held the smile, as if waiting for a reply, so Daniel offered a tentative, "You're welcome?", and the master went back to his laptop. He typed furiously for a few moments, then stopped and looked at Daniel again.

"You think that's gonna work out?"

"Master?"

The master regarded him with open curiosity. "You know, the riots there this week. Do you think it'll de-escalate, or do you think Mugabe will just strong-arm" The master waved his hand in circles again, then raised his eyebrows at Daniel, so Daniel repeated, "Tsvangirai," fairly confident with the safety of reminding him.

"Yes. Will strong-arm Tsvangirai's people and end up with a massacre?"

Daniel thought a massacre quite likely, and had even opened his mouth to say so before Tim's words about this arrangement popped into his head. "*There's always a potential for corporate espionage, Daniel. It's possible your master will simply want to talk to you sometimes. That's fine, but remember, you have an obligation to protect the intellectual*

property of this company and its standing in the rankings. I know it can be a sticky situation, and I'm sorry, but you'll just have to work around it if it comes up."

"I, I'm sorry, master, but I can't— I mean, my handler says I'm not allowed to talk to you about anything that might . . . well, anything that might help you compete with them."

The master's eyebrows slowly knitted, and his hands tightened on his laptop casing. When he spoke, it was with audibly forced calm. "It's not like I'm going to torture you for company secrets, Daniel. I just thought it might be interesting to talk politics."

Daniel pinched his lips together and turned his eyes to his lap. He wondered if Tim had known who Daniel was being leased to, and for a moment, he actually hated NewWorld for subjecting him to something so patently obvious and unfair. "I know, master, and I really would love to, but they wo—"

"Fine," the master said, and though he spoke softly, tightly, that single word reverberated like the harshest shout. "I get it. God knows what I'm paying for then, but fine. It's fine. Why don't you . . . ?" The master tossed his hands up, clearly exasperated. Though he was a patient man on *Whitman Live*, he was also a passionate and occasionally vociferous one, not afraid to call a spade a spade or a lie a lie; Daniel was surprised the man had kept his anger reined in for as long as he had, or really that he'd bothered to at all. "I dunno. Do some"—more angry hand-waving—"pushups or something. You look like the kind of guy who'd enjoy that. Whatever, just . . . *stop fidgeting*."

Eyeing the master warily, Daniel slid off the couch and to the floor beside the coffee table. Plenty of men and women watched him in the gym, sometimes quite openly, so it came as no surprise that his master might take pleasure from that too. He did one pushup, then another, grunting at the pain that rippled through his right shoulder blade. But it was better than the alternative, and if the master's demeanor was any indication—Daniel could practically *smell* his irritation—the alternative was just one more slip-up away.

He heard a loud sigh in the middle of the fourth pushup. "I didn't mean *right here*," the master said.

Daniel scrambled to his feet and sat back down. "I'm sorry, master, I thought —"

"Doesn't that hurt with your back all cut up like that?"

Daniel blushed, realized he was tapping his fingers, and forced his hands to his sides. Answering a direct question wouldn't be seen as complaining, would it? Of course, even if it were, not answering would be worse. "Yes, master."

Another loud sigh from his master. Daniel chanced a sideways look at the man and saw his head tilted back, a grimace on his broad face.

"Jesus," the master said, shoving his computer off his lap and dropping his head into his hands. "I need a neck rub." He leaned back on the couch, put his feet up on the coffee table. Glared at the football game (it'd gone into overtime), then at Daniel. Daniel could see the exact moment when his master realized he had someone he could order to do that now. He sat up a little straighter and said, "Daniel, get over here."

Daniel bit back the sigh that so very much wanted to escape, replaced it with a neutral expression, and walked around the couch behind his master. He laid tentative hands on the man's broad shoulders — almost as tight as his own felt, he noted with surprise — and the master leaned back into the touch.

Daniel began to knead, reflecting bitterly that there was nobody now who would do this for him, that the few men who might have were relaxing in the InfoGlobe dorm half a city away, possibly never to be seen again —

"Ow, not so hard!" The master jerked away, then leaned back into Daniel's hands again. Daniel realized he'd been squeezing. Furious. Trying to hurt.

"I'm sorry, master," he said, entirely sincere. He really did mean it, if not for the right reason; he simply didn't want to be hurt back.

The master reached up to lay his own right hand atop Daniel's. "That's okay," he said. His fingers felt along Daniel's, tracing like a blind man's. "God, your hands are huge for a little guy."

The master let his hand fall back to his lap, and Daniel began to knead again, paying more care. He hit a particularly tight knot, and the master moaned, let his head loll against Daniel's forearm. "Strong, too," the master breathed out. "Mmm, oh yeah, right there, Daniel, right— Yeah"

Daniel grimaced, but did as he was told. A quick look over the master's shoulder revealed just how much the man was enjoying this massage. Not good, not good How long would the master stay satisfied with Daniel's hands where they were? Especially since Daniel's fingers were starting to cramp. He wouldn't be able to keep this up for much longer, and then the master would —

The master turned his head and pressed a lingering, closed-mouthed kiss to Daniel's right index finger.

Daniel froze, afraid to as much as twitch lest he lead the master to think he wanted this.

The master's lips lifted a fraction, pressed down again. A low moan vibrated up from his throat and straight through to Daniel's finger. Daniel felt his chest seize, fought to force air into his frozen lungs.

The master's mouth opened, lips parting to suck in the tip of Daniel's finger, tongue brushing over the nail, the skin, teeth nibbling gently. For one horrible moment, Daniel was certain he'd cave in to the urge to pull his hand away — or worse, cave in to the signals his hand was trying so hard to send to the rest of him — but as if sensing this, the master's own fingers curled around his wrist and held him in place. The grip was almost painfully gentle; Daniel would have preferred a roughness, a forcing, over this imploring touch that asked-demanded he stay of his own accord.

"Don't stop," the master moaned between wet little kisses, curling his fingers more possessively around Daniel's right wrist and tasting all the fingers he could reach.

Daniel swallowed hard and started to knead the master's shoulder again with his left hand, digging in to stop it from shaking. The master moaned, louder this time, and sucked Daniel's right index finger down to the first knuckle, in and out and in and out

with shuddering, deliberate slowness. The fingers resting on Daniel's wrist began to stroke, and the master's left hand crept toward his lap.

Daniel panted, teeth clenched, willing his hands and feet to stay rooted with every ounce of stubborn strength he'd ever been accused of possessing, willing the rest of his body to ignore what was happening to his finger. Even if his master didn't want . . . Even if Daniel weren't so afraid of that, he couldn't—*wouldn't*—just smile and pretend he was happy. Not about this.

Fucking stupid, Daniel. Dangerous. You know that.

Sure. But knowing didn't change a thing.

The master released Daniel's finger, but only to lick a long stripe up the side of his hand.

Their eyes met. Both men froze. Though Daniel had thrown up his mask of indifference quickly—indifference was the best he could manage; eagerness was impossible—it hadn't been nearly quick enough.

Daniel dropped his gaze with an apologetic grimace, and the master slowly, slowly uncurled his fingers from Daniel's wrist and pulled away from him. He was still staring at Daniel—Daniel could feel it, though he could no longer see it, fixed to the floor as his eyes were. After several long, empty moments, the master announced to no one in particular, "I'll be in my room."

Daniel wiped his right hand on his pants when the master left, gripped the couch tightly with shaking fingers, and wondered how five little words could taste so strongly of venom and sadness all at the same time.

Chapter Ten

Daniel had no idea how long he stood there, clutching at the back of the couch, trying to catch his breath as two talking heads discussed post-game on TV. He was pretty sure what the master had gone off to do. The big question, though, was what he'd do *afterward*, and how badly it would hurt.

A hand brushed his arm, and he jerked, stumbling back a step before forcing himself still; if the master meant to punish him, he'd be a fool not to face it.

"Easy, darlin'."

Just Jane. Daniel blew out the breath he'd sucked in and gave himself a little shake. The master was right – he was wound *way* too tight.

"Don't you worry none; he's just blowin' off a little steam."

Jane's fingers curled around his, peeling them gently from the couch cushion and holding his hand. It was . . . nice.

"I hurt his feelings."

Jane pursed her lips, nodded slightly. Her face was serious, a little stern, but Daniel couldn't read it – was she upset with him? Upset with the situation? Merely concerned?

"Will he . . . ?" Daniel swallowed hard, and Jane's fingers tightened around his.

"Hurt you back?"

He nodded; Jane sighed.

"Come on, darlin'. Come make yourself useful." She tugged him into the kitchen, and even though she hadn't answered him, he went without resistance – with relief, even, eager for a distraction. When she sat him at the kitchen table and handed him a bag of apples and a peeler, his hands set to the monotonous work. He fought to untether his mind so that it might follow.

He was only halfway through the first apple when Jane, measuring and stirring at the counter behind him, asked, "You ever been in love, Daniel?"

"Yeah," Daniel said, voice carefully flat lest he unleash something he couldn't contain. His hands finished with the first apple, picked up the next one. "Once."

Jane handed him a paring knife and plate and said, "Core them. What happened?"

Daniel shrugged. "We got caught." He finished peeling the second apple, picked up the knife, and cored and sliced it in silence. But he could feel Jane's eyes boring into the back of his head, seeking more, and couldn't bring himself to ignore her.

"NewWorld Media has a pretty strict policy about sexual relations. You can apply for permission to breed, and if both parties are healthy, they'll probably say yes. But anything else? Forget it." He almost sliced open the tip of his finger, put down the knife, went back to peeling instead. "Spreads the *four D's*, they say: distraction, dissention, disappointment, and disease."

Behind him, Jane snorted.

"His name was Victor. We lived together in the InfoGlobe dorm on the West Side, same bunkroom. It was 2006; I was still a field reporter. He was a sound tech. We used to sneak off into the bathroom, fool around. You only get three, maybe four minutes before the supervisors start getting suspicious, and even when you're quick, you've got to be careful; there are always people who will rat you out to get ahead, you know?"

Daniel paused, and Jane hummed an affirmation into the silence. There was something distant about the sound, something personal, and he felt certain that if he turned around and looked, he'd see bitterness, maybe even pain on her face. Instead he plucked another apple from the pile.

"We'd been going maybe eight, ten months, frantic handjobs in a toilet stall, that sort of thing. We knew some people were jealous of me. I don't know if someone reported us or if we just got careless, but it's not as if that mattered in the end, now did it."

Beside him, the pile of peeled apples had grown. His hands were still working, working of their own accord. Jane's hand came to rest on his shoulder, squeezing gently. "What happened?"

Daniel grabbed another apple. He couldn't believe he was telling her this, hadn't told anyone but his mother. It wasn't safe to talk about at InfoGlobe, and it hurt just to think about, even still. Maybe it really was true that slaves didn't feel like freemen did, but from where Daniel was sitting, that hardly seemed to matter now.

"Public beating. Whole dorm was there. Fifty strikes apiece, side by side. Next day they sent me off to cover some shit story, couple of hikers lost up in the Rockies.

Twelve hours a day doing stand-ups in the snow, pretending like I wasn't in too much pain to think straight. They found the bodies on day three. I fly home so cold I'm still shaking when the plane lands. Victor was gone. Never saw him again." He picked up the knife in a white-knuckled grip and mutilated the apple he'd just peeled. "Last memory I have of him is him screaming his throat raw as they beat him, begging them to stop hurting me. *Me*."

Another mutilated apple. Jane stilled his wrist with one hand, divested him of the knife with the other. Her eyes were soft, damp with understanding. He didn't have the stomach for her compassion, not with this, so he dropped his gaze back to his sticky hands. "Anyway, I heard a couple years back that he's been working in LA for a while now."

Jane squeezed his wrist again, and he could see in her face that none of this was surprising or new to her. He wondered who she'd left behind, if she had children, if she knew her parents.

"I'm sorry," she said, and for a moment it looked as if she'd offer something more — some kindness or sympathy — so it came as a surprise when she said instead, "But at least you *enjoy* bedding men. Imagine how much harder this would be if you didn't."

Daniel blinked at her, realized his mouth was open and closed it. Cold comfort, he supposed, was better than no comfort at all. Besides, this couldn't be easy for her *or* Dave; when the master was unhappy, so was everybody else, and that was nobody's fault but his.

"Look, darlin'," Jane said, her expression softening but still nowhere near soft. "The master may not be pushin' you now, but if you keep givin' him the cold shoulder, he's gonna up and bust one day. And that man has a temper; you *don't* want to see it pointed at you."

And just what, exactly, did *that* mean? "But I thought . . . I mean, has he — ?"

"No, course not. Master never laid a hand on either of us the whole five years we've been here. But then" — she gave Daniel another hard, appraising look — "he didn't buy *us* for layin' on hands, now did he."

Daniel winced. He'd taken Jane for softer, not capable of such brutal honesty, yet she'd just ambushed him twice in as many minutes. She was trying to help, he knew, but that didn't make him feel any better. Nor did it solve his problem; he couldn't bring himself to offer up freely what the master wanted, and apparently the master couldn't bring himself to take it. Or maybe he just didn't *want* to take it; maybe he wanted to be wanted in return. But that was never going to happen. Where, then, did that leave them?

"Anyway," she said, full once again of the sunny cheer with which Daniel had come to associate her, "that's just my advice. You can take it or leave it, of course." She turned back to the counter, and Daniel heard the clink of silverware against a plate. "I do, however, think you'd regret not takin' this."

Before he could ask what "this" was, she'd traded a fresh-baked brownie for his half-sliced apples, ruffled his hair, and began to core the apples herself.

* * * * *

They sat in silent companionship for some time, Jane cooking a variety of the master's favorite foods for dinner ("He's an easy one to placate; you just gotta know which buttons to push"), Daniel reading the paper and helping her when she asked.

Dave came home around 5:30, too sweaty and grimy for the hug he wanted; Jane sent him straight to the shower and, with a put-out sigh, cleaned up the muddy trail he'd left behind.

The master joined them at six, just as Jane was putting plates to the table. He smiled at everyone, said, "Smells great!" and waved Daniel to the chair beside him.

Daniel sat warily, studying the master for clues: He was smiling on the outside, but it looked like it hurt him a little. His body was loose, but his eyes were tense.

Putting on a friendly face, Daniel thought, to cover his frustration. Trying to pretend the last few days hadn't happened. Trying to start again.

Well, Daniel could certainly play that game. If the master was willing to grant him such a kindness, he'd be a fool not to take it.

Jane served them, and the master attacked his steak, grunting in approval. Daniel, however, found himself without an appetite, despite the richness of the food. He made a volcano of his mashed potatoes, filled it with gravy, carved runnels into its side with his fork. Cut the heads off his asparagus and arranged them into a neat rows by size.

"Don't you like it?" the master asked.

Daniel looked up, startled. Somehow, he'd half forgotten he wasn't alone with his food.

"I spoiled his appetite with brownies," Jane said from where she'd been hovering by the counter, waiting to see if the master needed anything. Daniel wondered when she got to eat, where Dave was, if they would have the privilege of enjoying the food he was taking so entirely for granted.

The master's ears perked and he smiled. "You made brownies?"

Safely out of the master's eye, Daniel picked up his knife and cut a bite of steak. It was easier to eat than to come up with words that wouldn't upset the man. Plus, he had to admit the food was damn good – he hadn't had steak since that lunch interview at Michael's with the writer from *GQ*. And that whole meal had been seasoned with contempt, with hard stares from patrons and slights and sneers from the waiters – both free and not free – at the presence of a slave in such a fine establishment.

There was no contempt now, but tension, expectation, and disappointment tasted just as bitter. The master was not good at hiding his feelings or starting over. In fact, as he turned his attention back to Daniel and his brownie-induced smile faded to a scowl, it seemed as if he'd even forgotten his intention to try. Daniel took another bite of steak and tried to look as grateful as he knew he should be.

"So," the master tried again, "you can't talk politics, you can't talk news. What *can* you talk about?"

Daniel knocked in the rim of his volcano with his fork, and streams of lava-gravy overtook all his little asparagus people. He speared one and ate it, shrugging so cautiously it felt like a cringe. Admittedly, it might have been; he knew the master would not be pleased with his silence, but he could think of nothing better.

The master dropped his fork to his plate with a clatter. "You *can* talk?"

"Of course, master," Daniel said, carving new lines into his mashed potatoes, scooping up some to eat when the master glared at him.

"No, that wasn't—" the master said, voice raised in clear frustration, maybe even anger. "I mean, you can *talk*. Anytime you want. About anything. God knows you don't seem to be good for much else."

Daniel froze with his fork halfway to his mouth. So much for starting fresh.

"And while we're clearing things up," the master added, his voice a low rumble, "your place, at night, is in my bed."

Daniel barely managed to contain his grimace at the master's bluntness. He didn't like to think himself a Companion, but there it was, laid out as naked as he'd surely be in a few hours.

"I don't care what time you get home, I don't care if I'm already asleep; if I *ever* wake up and find you on the floor again—"

Daniel dared a glance at the master. Beneath all the bluster, he thought he saw hurt, and confusion, and maybe even an apology, but of course such things could never be voiced. Daniel couldn't imagine what the master would have to be sorry for, anyway; he was being much more patient than Daniel had any right to expect.

"I understand, master," Daniel finally said.

The master nodded, but kept his eyes fixed on Daniel's face. Waiting for him to say something, no doubt, to take advantage of his newly-explained freedom.

But Daniel's mind was blank. For God's sake, he talked for a living—why couldn't he think of anything to say now?

"You know what?" the master said, voice as tight as his grip on his silverware. "Just—eat your food."

Having given up on Daniel, the master turned to Jane and conversed with her instead. Their discussion was perfectly cordial, but the tension around the master's eyes had seeped into the rest of his large frame, and despite what Jane had said earlier, Daniel couldn't help but wonder if things might go very, very south once the master got him alone tonight.

The master perked up quite a bit when Jane broke out the brownies—*easy to placate, indeed*, Daniel thought with a fleeting smile. He had to admit they were pretty damn good; Daniel had a second one, and by the time the master had polished off his third, he was looking like he might be ready to try starting again, well, *again*.

"All right," the master said, standing up from the table and rubbing his belly, which was rounding just a little with middle age and triple-brownie desserts. He smiled at Daniel, a gesture so surprising it startled Daniel into smiling back. The master walked past him, brushing Daniel's side on the way, and started rooting around in the cabinet beneath the television. "How about a little *Holy Grail*?"

According to the master's raised eyebrows, this was not a rhetorical question. Too bad Daniel had no idea what he was talking about. "A little what, master?"

Those raised eyebrows knitted tight. "*Monty Python and the Holy Grail*?" Daniel shook his head, and the master's face knitted up even tighter. "Cult classic? Only the funniest spoof of all time?"

"I'm sorry, master, I don't get to watch many movies."

"Well, Jesus," the master said mildly, popping in the DVD and plopping on the couch. "Get your skinny ass over here and enjoy the show."

The master held his arm out, and Daniel blanked his face before settling on the cushion next to him. This close, the man made Daniel feel tiny, fragile, even though he was no such thing. At least the master kept his arm to himself, laid across the back of the couch several inches from Daniel's shoulders.

When the master smiled at him and said, "Lean back, relax," Daniel was actually glad to have the beating as an excuse to *keep* that arm several inches away: "It hurts my back," he said, and the master seemed to accept that at face value.

The movie was . . . well, *stupid*, frankly, though the master seemed to find it side-splittingly hilarious, and even Daniel was willing to admit that maybe he was just too tense for this level of silliness. Unfortunately, the damn thing got even less funny when, some endless stretch later, the master dropped his arm onto Daniel's shoulders in the middle of a particularly loud guffaw and yanked him close.

"This just never. Gets. Old!" the master said between laughs, squeezing hard enough to make Daniel squeak and not stopping until they were practically snuggling, Daniel curled in toward the man, his head smushed against master's shoulder and his face nearly turned into the master's neck. Then the vise let up and his master's arm curled gently around his head, petting his hair and tracing his earlobe with a finger. "Having a good time, Daniel?" he asked, nuzzling his nose against Daniel's scalp.

"Yeah," Daniel lied, the sound muffled by the master's shirt. He felt a little shiver run through the master when his breath puffed against the man's neck, and then the master's other hand crept onto his thigh, began to stroke back and forth, coming a little closer to his groin on each pass. Daniel didn't dare pull away, but nor did he open up to him.

"I thought you'd appreciate the bit about the coconuts," the master said, his voice dropping in a way that might have been coldly dangerous or hotly sensual. Daniel thought it was the second, but he knew how easily it might become the first, especially since he had no idea what the master was talking about.

"Uh, yeah," he said again, hoping it would be enough.

The master's hands stilled on his body, the one around his head fisting in his hair and tugging until Daniel looked the master in the eye. The man wasn't smiling anymore. Not even close. But it wasn't anger Daniel saw in its place — no, it was that same strange mixture of bluster, hurt, and confusion he'd seen at dinner, that he was so ill equipped to deal with in any way.

"You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you," the master said, flat and accusatory and even, Daniel thought, wounded. Daniel tried to drop his gaze, but the master's fist tightened in his hair until Daniel winced (and then loosened, he noticed, immediately), holding him still.

"No, master," he sighed. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to lie. I'll just" He slid out from under the master's arm, off the couch and to his knees, and started to unbutton his shirt. Lying was never less than five with the strap at NewWorld, sometimes as much as twenty if the lie was particularly egregious. Given the shape he was currently in, even one would set him screaming, but he deserved this. Deserved this and more, the way he'd been —

"What are you *doing*?"

Daniel's fingers stilled on a button. The rest of him froze, too; even his breath caught in his lungs.

"I lied, master," Daniel said softly.

"Yes, and?"

"And" God, he could barely bring himself to say it. If the master hadn't planned to beat him, he certainly didn't want to give the man any ideas. But the master was waiting, impatient for an answer, and Daniel would *not* lie a second time. "And I assumed you'd wish to punish me, master."

A loud sigh behind him, then a foot nudging his hip. "Get up. Turn around, look at me."

And there it was, that same expression all over again — except worse this time, with outrage and horror piled atop the rest.

"And for God's sake, button your damn shirt. I'm not — I don't — " The master pulled off his glasses, scrubbed his face with both hands, put them back on. Picked up the remote to stop the movie, then tossed it on the couch as if he were mad at *it* and not Daniel. "You know what?" He stood, clearly angry, and Daniel couldn't help it, he took a single step back. "I've seen this movie a thousand times. The end is stupid. I'm going to bed."

Daniel watched him leave, mouth open, the metallic taste of adrenaline strong on the back of his tongue. The master's bedroom door slammed so hard the clock fell off the wall. Daniel hung it up again with shaking fingers. It was only 8:15.

Chapter Eleven

For a while, Daniel was able to pretend all was well. He retrieved the remote from where the master had thrown it, flipped through the channels until he came across some terrible reality show about a deaf couple with three not-deaf kids who walked all over them like they were slaves instead of parents. The little brats didn't even know sign language. It wasn't long before the whole thing grew unbearable, and he shut it off, picked up the *Economist* instead, and started reading where he'd left off.

But his mind kept turning back to the master, to the closed door at the end of the hall. What would happen when he went through it tonight? Could he wait until the master was asleep and then tiptoe in? Would he get away that easily, or was the master a light sleeper? Or worse, was the master *waiting* for him? Should he just go, get it over with? When did Japan get a new prime minister? He really *hadn't* been paying attention this week, had he?

"You should go to him."

Daniel looked up, startled, to see Jane returning the DVD to its case and putting it back in the cabinet. How long had she been standing there?

"He can't possibly want me around," Daniel said into his magazine. "He thinks I hate him."

"Well then," Jane said, stepping close and plucking the magazine from Daniel's unresisting fingers. "It's time to go disabuse him of that notion, don't you think?"

She was right. He knew she was. If the master meant to punish him, it would be foolish to try to delay it. And if the master meant to use him, making the man wait would only lead to more anger, frustration, alienation, and hurt. He was abusing the master's kindness, stretching the master's patience too thin; rather than rejoicing in his

master's clear desire to arouse and interest Daniel, he was taking advantage of it, being deliberately obtuse, closing his eyes and — like a child — thinking that would somehow make the world go away.

But that didn't work when I was ten, and it sure as hell isn't going to work now.

When Jane pulled out a vacuum cleaner and started banging his feet with it, he took the hint and left for the master's bedroom.

Uneasy with barging in, he knocked first, only opening the door when the master shouted, "For God's sake, stop knocking and just get in here!"

Daniel's hands were shaking, so he stuffed them in his pockets, stood shuffling in the doorway, and peeked up at the master through lowered eyes.

The master was in pajamas that would have made Daniel laugh if he weren't so tense — green flannel covered in footballs, helmets, goalposts and yard lines — sitting against the headboard and reading Fareed Zakaria.

"Hey," the master said, his voice light but strained, just as it had been at dinner. "So I leased this slave, guy named Daniel Halstrom? Brilliant, funny, a little flirty, sharp tongue, quick on his feet. You seen him? Maybe you could go get him for me."

"I — " Daniel realized he had no idea how to finish that sentence and shut his mouth before he got himself into even more trouble. He took a hesitant step forward, closed the door behind him; if things got ugly, he didn't want Jane to have to hear it.

The master marked his place and put his book on the nightstand, never taking his eyes off Daniel. "You're not going to tell me that man's all an act, are you? Because I don't believe it, I can't believe that's all some . . . *front*."

Daniel shook his head, worked up the courage to take a few more steps toward the bed. "No master, that's, that's me. I mean, when I'm — " *Relaxed. Unafraid. In my element*. But he couldn't say any of that, of course, and didn't know what he could possibly say in its place.

"Come here."

The master patted the bed. Daniel sat stiffly, staring at his hands. He could feel the master's eyes on him — face, shoulder, hips, hair.

"You gonna sleep in your new clothes?"

"No, master," Daniel said, understanding that wasn't a question. He stood, stripped quickly before he lost his nerve, folded the clothes on a nearby chair, and slid back into bed. He mirrored the master, sitting up against the headboard, covers pulled up to his waist. He was grateful for the blanket, felt a little less exposed that way, but still sat as close to the edge as he could without falling off.

The master sighed, clearly aggrieved, then stood to strip himself. Daniel fixed his eyes on the blanket as the master pulled off his top.

No," the master said. "Look at me."

Inside, Daniel hedged, but his head turned by itself. His eyes trailed up the master's broad chest, thick with hair just starting to gray, then down, following the master's hands as they pulled off pants and boxers in one motion to reveal that formidable erection. Formidable *everything*—nothing about the master was small or delicate or weak.

Though reluctant to admit it, even to himself, Daniel suspected he'd have found that attractive under different circumstances. He knew he should get up, touch the man, maybe drop to his knees and swallow him down. Maybe if he was good enough, he could get the master off before the man could even think about fucking him.

But what if he wasn't good enough? In fact, he almost certainly wasn't. He'd always viewed such pleasures as a gift, an act borne of—well, if not love, then at least deep affection. Could he perform without such feelings? If ordered, perhaps, but to *offer*? No. Besides, he had little experience and no formal training. The master would tire of his clumsiness, turn him over and

And hurt me, and expect me to like it anyway.

The master left his clothes in a heap and climbed back into bed, pushing the covers away and leaving Daniel as exposed as he was. He lay back against two pillows, half reclined, much closer to Daniel than he'd been before. His body angled toward Daniel ever so slightly, cock jutting toward Daniel's hip.

Daniel couldn't help but stare at it.

The master stared back.

"You seem a little slow," the master said at length, then went silent again.

Daniel didn't think that was some kind of hidden question, but it might have been a complaint, so he ventured, "I'm sorry, master."

The master just snorted and wrapped one giant hand around his giant dick.

Daniel's eyes, wide and hot, raced back to his own lap.

"No," the master growled. "No, damn it, look at me!"

Daniel swallowed audibly, trying to force his heart back down his throat. The master was pumping himself: long, slow strokes with a tightly fisted hand. If he felt any pleasure, his face did not reflect it. He was glaring at Daniel, just as he had at dinner, as he had during the movie. But this time, overtop the anger, the frustration, the confusion, Daniel saw incredulity as well.

"I'm confused," the master said mildly, his fist still moving over his cock. "Do you *want* me to hit you? Would that make you feel better?"

"N-no, master, of course not!"

"Do you not understand anatomy, then?" The question was sharper, angrier than the one before it, and the master's hand sped up to match. Daniel winced; there was violence in that fist, straining to break free. Maybe it already had. "Do you get how this" — the master thrust his hips at Daniel, face bent into a grimace, wrist twisting hard over his cock — "works?"

"Y-yes," Daniel said, reaching out with one hand to do what the master so clearly wanted before the man beat him senseless. *It's just a handjob, Daniel, just a handjob; it doesn't have to mean something.*

"Yes, master, I—"

The master smacked his hand away with a growl and went back to jacking himself. The sound of fist against flesh grew louder, the smell of anger and arousal filling the room. Daniel knew that scent, knew it well.

"Because I *thought* you had a working one of your own," the master said, "and that maybe" — *jerk* — "just *maybe*" — *jerk* — "you'd be smart enough to figure it out!"

Daniel inched his hand ever so slightly back toward the master's lap, offering his service again. "I – "

"God!" the master shouted, his fist nearly a blur over his cock, his face twisted with bitterness, with empty, unsatisfying pleasure. "Stop talking! There's no staff here to write your witty repartee, and oh, my bad, I seem to have left my teleprompter in the other room! Lord knows you can't seem to string three words together without it – No, no! Look at me. *Look at me!*"

Daniel realized he'd pulled into a huddle, his face tucked into the cradle of his arms. He forced himself to unclench, to turn his eyes back to the master's cock, to the white-knuckled hand jerking short and furious near the head. Any second now, that hand would be turned on him, he was sure of it.

"Because apparently," the master snapped, picking up right where he'd left off, as if he weren't jacking off so hard he'd probably leave bruises, as if his cock weren't connected to the rest of him in any way, "that mouth really *is* too pretty for intelligent discourse. No wonder I beat you in the ratings every day; all you do is stutter! And Ben Cheng is too busy daydreaming about burying his cock up your ass – which, no doubt, you have magically somehow *never realized* – to figure out there's obviously *nothing there* beneath that shiny blond head of yours! But *oh*, that doesn't matter, because all you have to do is *sit there* and everyone falls all over you! And *you*, all 'look at me in my custom-tailored suits that show off my perfect ass and bring out the blue in my oh-so-bright eyes,' hiding your bracelets in jackets worth more than most schmucks make in a month because they aren't *good* enough for you, they can look but never touch, oh no, because you're *above* us mere mortals, you're – "

The master's orgasm strangled his next words, turned them into a grunt that sounded almost painful. It seemed to catch him by surprise, and he looked pissed at it, pissed that even a fleeting moment's pleasure had dared to interrupt his tirade. It caught Daniel by surprise too – how could such a thing bloom from such roughness, such fury? – splattering the sheets and his shaking hip. And with both the master's

hands free, would that roughness, that fury, be unleashed on him through something more bruising than words?

"Oh, look," the master drawled, no longer shouting but each word still dripping with venom. "Do you like my shot?" The master drew a finger through the line of cum on Daniel's hip, wiped it on Daniel's stomach. "What, no charming comments, Halstrom? No banal proclamations disguised as wit and wisdom?"

Daniel had no idea how to answer. He didn't really think the master wanted an answer anyway, which was good, because he thought he might be trembling too hard to speak, so far past frightened that he'd moved right on to numb. He dared a look at the master's face, and the master glared back, hard and steady.

Then all at once the man seemed to deflate, to unclench, to actually become *less* somehow.

"Well," the master said, all the anger leached out of his voice, leaving only weariness and perhaps a hint of . . . wry amusement? "How about a washcloth, at least."

Daniel was out of bed so fast he thought he made a draft.

He took perhaps a little longer in the bathroom than he should have, washing the sweat from his face while he waited for the water to run hot. When he returned to the bedroom, the master—much to Daniel's relief—reached for the washcloth, leaving Daniel with no confusion about whether he should clean the man himself.

When the master was done, he tossed the washcloth on the floor without a second glance. Daniel remained standing by the side of the bed, hopped up on adrenaline that he ached to spend five or six miles jogging off, worried that the master would burn it off for him with a strap, or worse, those enormous fists.

The master settled back against his pillows, pulling up the covers and patting the empty spot beside him. "Well, come on," he said, reaching up to turn out the light, and though every last cell in Daniel's body screamed at him to run, to hide, to *get away*, he obediently climbed beneath the blankets. He did, however, curl up on his side away from the master, counting that as a win.

Until the master rolled over and spooned up next to him, pressing skin to skin from ankle to neck and wrapping a tight arm around his middle. Daniel yelped, but he made no struggle.

"Oh, for fuck's sake." The master sighed into the back of Daniel's neck, pressing his lips there with what seemed like affection – and wasn't *that* just too weird for Daniel to even begin to get his head around (as was the little shiver that ran down his spine in a not-at-all unpleasant way when soft lips touched his nape). "I'm a forty-two-year-old man who just came in his own hand. I assure you your virtue is safe for the night. Now go to sleep."

Sleep. Yeah, right. The hand at his stomach slid up to the jointure of his shoulder and neck, kneaded with gentle force, then resettled against his belly. Soon after, he heard soft little almost-snores, and managed a first, hesitant attempt to unknot his body – so hard to do with the hot, heavy reminder pressed to his back, draped over his side, breathing softly against his neck. But sometime near dawn, he managed to convince himself that the danger – for that moment, at least – had finally passed, and he slipped into a fitful sleep.

* * * * *

Daniel awoke perhaps an hour later, sweaty and sore, the master plastered to him like a sheet of hot, heavy cellophane. He stretched carefully, trying to ease his way out from under the arm and leg wrapped over him without waking the master, or at least to roll onto his back and kick the covers off, but it seemed the master was too light a sleeper.

"What'd I say about fidgeting," the master half grumbled, half slurred. His arm tightened around Daniel's middle.

Daniel tensed, ventured a careful, "Sorry, master. I was hot."

The arm disappeared just long enough to flip back the bit of blanket covering Daniel, then returned. "*Now* can you hold still and let me sleep?"

"Yes, master," he said, even as his legs shuffled beneath the master's much heavier one, cramped from the weight and too much time spent in the same position.

He felt an angry sigh puff across the back of his neck. "What, you gotta piss or something?"

The master sounded more fully awake now, and also quite irritated. The hostility made Daniel wonder if he hadn't simply imagined that brief moment of affection last night after . . . well, after whatever the hell exactly that was. Sarcastic tirade? Angry masturbation session? Either way, he figured himself lucky to have come out of it without any new bruises. Unless the ones to his ego counted; if the master really felt that way about him, why'd he bother to lease him?

The fingers resting on his stomach clenched, curling in with warning force. "You plan on answering me sometime before the end of the year?"

Shit. He'd forgotten the question. "I" He hedged, thinking furiously back. What the hell was wrong with him? Sure it'd been a long night, a fucking *eternal* weekend, but that was no excuse for — Oh. Bathroom. Right. "Sorry, yes," he lied, seeking escape, however brief, from the clutches of the prickly man behind him.

The master let loose another sigh, and Daniel swore he could *hear* the accompanying eye roll. But the arm and leg atop him disappeared, and then a hand between his shoulder blades gave him a not-so-gentle nudge that re-awoke the pain of fading bruises. "Hurry up. Goddamn half-million-dollar cuddle, I damn well plan to enjoy it."

It didn't seem to Daniel that the master was enjoying much of anything just now — in fact, a quick glimpse of the master's face in the early light revealed not just irritation but also, he thought, *disgust*. Obviously, the man was furious with him. The "half-million-dollar cuddle" felt possessive and greedy, and also deliberately punitive, even a little cruel, as if the master knew it was the last thing Daniel wanted. It was equally possible, of course, that the master couldn't give a damn what Daniel wanted and simply meant to take at least a little of what he'd paid so much for, angry or not.

Whatever the case, Daniel was glad to be away from it, even if only for a few moments. He didn't have to piss, but he forced himself anyway, just in case the master was listening, then washed his hands and face, shivering slightly as sweat dried on his skin in the cool air. He wanted to stretch, shower, maybe go for a run, come back and sleep for twelve solid hours. But none of that was an option anymore, and the master was waiting none too patiently for Daniel's return. He didn't dare dawdle.

Daniel left the bathroom and climbed back into bed. Before he'd even had a chance to settle, the master tugged him into his arms, pressed his chest to Daniel's back and wove his legs between Daniel's own. Despite the man's earlier assertion that he was too old to come twice in one night, proof against it pressed hard along the crack of Daniel's ass. Not forcing, not even asking — but still very much *there*.

Worse, it reminded Daniel of sneaking embraces with Victor in the bathrooms of the InfoGlobe dorm, of Victor sneaking up behind him and wrapping arms around his chest. Feeling Victor's lips at his nape, Victor's cock nudged up against him, begging for attention from his hands or mouth. And surely it was only those memories making his skin hum, bringing the blood to his cock as he lay in another man's arms.

"Better?" the master asked, but it sounded a lot more like a demand than a question. So even though Daniel was hot and uncomfortable again — in more ways than one — and the master's tight, skin-to-skin press was painful against healing welts, and *god*, he didn't even know where to begin with how freaked out he was with that erection trying to worm between his asscheeks (or with his own erection, stubbornly refusing to fade), he thought it prudent not to argue. "Yes, master."

"Then for God's sake, stop squirming and go back to sleep. There's only one good reason for you to keep me up at night, and this sure as fuck ain't it."

Daniel took a breath to apologize again, but the master cut him off with a tight squeeze around his middle. "Just *be quiet*," the master snapped. "Not another word. I'm sick of hearing you, and I'm sure as fuck not gonna fall for your little *endearing stutter* routine anymore. So just . . . Sleep. Now. Before you *really* piss me off."

Daniel felt certain it was much too late for that, but nevertheless, he did as he was told.

Chapter Twelve

When next Daniel awoke, he was blissfully alone. He didn't remember falling back to sleep, though obviously he had. He'd also somehow managed to sprawl across the entire bed. He peered at the clock and nearly panicked. 2:37 *p.m.*? Jesus! He hadn't slept that late since . . . since . . . Well, the last time he had, he'd probably been too sick to remember it. And even though he knew he had no real place here, nothing to do, nobody who needed him, he still couldn't shake the feeling he'd overslept, shirked some duty, and would be in trouble for it.

But nobody came in shouting or wielding shock prods. In fact, nothing happened at all. He heard no sounds from outside the closed door, and actually suspected he might be alone in the apartment. A strange thought, vaguely frightening, yet also quietly liberating; if ever he'd been alone — truly alone — even once in his lifetime, it predated his earliest memories.

He climbed out of bed in a strange slow motion, tiptoed to the door, and cracked it open, absurdly afraid that even the slightest noise might break the spell.

The hallway was empty. So were the guest bed and bath, and the living room, and the kitchen. The slave quarters were abandoned, too.

Back in the kitchen, he spun a slow circle and thought, *I can do anything.*

He entertained the idea of running away for about 0.6 seconds, but of course, the damn locator chip buried behind his left collarbone would make that impossible. Not to mention that even just a ghost of the memory of what he'd endured the one and only time he'd tried, on a trip to Denmark a few months after they'd taken Victor away, left him nauseous and shaking. He'd make them kill him before he'd ever suffer through that again. Besides, where would he hide in the States, even if he could somehow ditch the chip? Everyone knew his face here.

Forcing such thoughts from his head, he grabbed a brownie, idly opening cabinets and drawers as he ate. Silverware. Cookwear. Plates and glasses. Little kitchen hand tools — corkscrew, can opener, measuring spoons, one of those plastic grippy things for opening stubborn lids. A drawer full of pens, paper, rubber bands, dozens of restaurant matchbooks . . . a Hotwheels car? His first mistress's son had played with those, would sometimes make Daniel watch but never let him play too. This one was bright red, no longer than his thumb. He pulled it out and backed it up along the counter, released it, and watched it fly. Again, and again, until it rolled right off the counter and clacked to the floor.

Daniel retrieved the car with a startled curse, terrified for a moment that he'd broken it. But the toy looked just the same as before. He put it back where he'd found it, between the paperclip chain and the hot pink Koosh Ball.

Still hungry, he opened the fridge, reeling at the sheer magnitude of choices within. He realized maybe a minute later that he was just standing there staring with the door open, and also that he was cold — he hadn't bothered to put clothes on, though for once, he had no reason to be self-conscious about that. He grabbed the milk. Took a shifty-eyed look around the apartment and, confirming it still empty, drank straight from the carton.

God, that felt *good*.

Thirst slaked, he found ice cream in the freezer, whipped cream in the fridge, sprinkles and fudge sauce in the pantry. He crumbled another brownie overtop all that and ate his sundae sprawled naked on the couch as he scrolled through the master's TiVo.

He discovered about halfway through his sundae and an old episode of the *Simpsons* in which his master had guest-starred that his eyes were significantly bigger than his stomach, at least when it came to something as sweet and rich as brownie-covered ice cream. He wasn't accustomed to having more food than he could finish, and so found himself with the curious dilemma of what to do with his leftovers. In the end, worry at being punished for wasting food overshadowed worry at eating ice cream for

breakfast (the master had, after all, said more than once that he could help himself to anything at any time), so he put his leftovers back in the freezer.

Sticky with dried sweat *and* chocolate sauce, he decided on a shower. The bathroom was more extravagant than he remembered it being, the water more relaxing. He sat on the heated marble bench inside the stall, three adjustable heads pounding him with water, and nearly let himself drift to sleep. What a difference it made to make the *choice* to shower, and to know the master wouldn't be barging in to join him.

He stayed in the shower a long time, careful only not to let the water run cold. His track pants and a T-shirt, socks and underwear sat clean and folded on the master's dresser. He put them on, then wandered back into the kitchen to finish his leftover sundae.

And that was how Jane and Dave found him, sitting at the kitchen table, reading the *Sunday Times* and licking melted ice cream off the side of his hand.

"Glad to see you're settlin' in," Jane said around a chuckle and an armful of groceries. "Though God knows how you keep that body eatin' so much junk."

Jane put her packages down on the counter, gestured Dave to do the same, and then shooed the man off to their bedroom with a silent glance and a peck on the cheek. Once he was gone, she turned her full attention back to Daniel, sitting down next to him and giving him a careful, serious once-over.

"What," he asked flatly, weirded out by how hard she was studying him and unfairly angry that she'd ended his time alone. But then it clicked: surely, she'd heard all that shouting last night. "I'm fine," he said, scraping the last of his ice cream from the bowl. "He didn't hurt me, if that's what you're worried about."

"Good," she said, her bright smile returning. "Good."

He stood to rinse his bowl in the sink, but Jane snatched it from his fingers and did it for him. "Sit, darlin'," she said, flashing another bright smile.

He wanted to tell her she didn't have to wait on him, but surely she already knew that, and she might even find it insulting. Instead, he asked, "Where's the master?" not really sure he wanted to know.

Jane shrugged, washed his bowl, put it in the drain board and wiped her hands on a dish towel. "He left before noon wearin' a great big frown that screamed *don't talk to me*. I thought it best to listen. Maybe he went to the office. Maybe to a friend's. Wouldn't be surprised if he was out gettin' drunk; he don't do it often, but"

But I pissed him off, and now he can't even stand to look at me.

"Anyway," she said, "I thought I'd make dinner just in case he comes home, and then Dave and I are goin' to a movie; master bought us tickets. I'd ask him if you could come along, but somehow I think he's not so happy with you just now."

"Yeah," Daniel said. "A movie? Really?"

Jane's smile somehow grew wider. "Yep. Popcorn 'n everything. Third movie we've seen this year."

And that, apparently, was all the conversation there was time for; it was already after five, and the master liked dinner at six. Jane handed Daniel his paper and banished him to the living room, where he sat reading in silence until Dave poked his head out of his bedroom and called teasingly, "Is it safe?" When Jane nodded, he plopped down on the couch near Daniel and flipped on some home improvement show.

Daniel really did want to get to know Dave better, but right now he wasn't feeling very social, and he was grateful Dave seemed to understand that.

The master walked in at 6:02 with a shopping bag in one hand. He went past Daniel without so much as a glance, but greeted Dave and Jane warmly. Still, Daniel detected strain beneath the smiles; the whole attitude was an act, just like yesterday.

"Got you guys something," the master said, passing his bag over to Jane.

Dave got up to join her, and Daniel looked on in wonder, surprised anew by the master's generosity. Not so surprised he'd been deliberately slighted, but that only hurt a little. He'd been very, very bad, after all. He deserved the master's scorn.

Jane reached into the bag and pulled out a bottle of wine. "For after the movie," the master said. "I made you two reservations down at the Terrace on 53rd and Madison, and it's BYOB. They know me; they'll let you in by yourselves."

"Oh, *thank you*, master!" Jane threw her arms around his neck, stood on her tiptoes and planted a kiss on his cheek.

He looked a bit chagrined, but smiled and hugged her back. Dave just grinned and nodded; Daniel was starting to think he didn't talk much.

Jane disentangled from the master, looking as if she'd surprised even herself by her actions. "Dinner's waitin' now," she said, smoothing both hands down the front of her apron. "Come, sit down."

Daniel stood, but hovered between the couch and the counter, wondering if he should sit too. Jane had set two places — he'd shared every one of the master's meals so far, after all — but he suspected the man might be too busy pretending Daniel didn't exist to invite him to the table tonight.

The master confirmed that suspicion when he looked up at Jane and said, "Just one tonight." She frowned — right at the master, and he let her! — but cleared the second place setting without pause.

Well, Daniel wasn't really hungry anyway.

The master finished his meal and retired to his bedroom, wishing Jane and Dave a wonderful evening while ignoring Daniel like a world-class expert.

Jane approached Daniel after the master's door had closed, leaned down, and whispered familiar words: "Don't you mind him none." She gave his shoulder an affectionate squeeze and added, "Your supper's on the table. I'll be gettin' back late, so be a dear and wash your dishes for me. And remember, tomorrow you get to go back to work, and you'll both get a little space from each other; the master'll cool down and you'll unwind and everything'll work out just fine."

"Yeah." Daniel reached up to his shoulder to cover her hand with his. "I'm sure it will," he added, even though he'd been trained from his earliest years to never, ever lie.

Jane and Dave left soon after, leaving Daniel alone again but for the heavy press of the master's silent anger down the hall. He could feel it even through the closed bedroom door, like a second presence in the room, stripping him of the pleasure of his solitude and the fine meal awaiting him. He pulled the middle from a piece of gluten-

free garlic bread but tossed the crust, ate the tomatoes out of his salad but left the lettuce, and didn't even touch his lasagna. When he tried to finish the *Times*, it was as if his master were standing over his shoulder, glaring down his disapproval; he gave up after reading the same sentence for the fifth time. He was afraid to turn the TV on lest he disturb the master with the noise. Not knowing what else to do, he sat on the carpet and tried some yoga, but he still hurt, and he couldn't shed his anxiety long enough to focus anyway.

Finally, though it was barely 9 o'clock, he decided to call it an evening. He didn't think the master would bother him tonight, or want anything of him. He didn't even count on the master being willing to share his bed.

Daniel padded down the hall and sucked in a deep, steady breath before entering the dragon's lair. Ready as he'd ever be, he reached out and turned the knob.

It was locked.

Fear swallowed his initial rush of relief. He'd thought he was in the shitter before, but this was bad. This was very, very bad.

Daniel backed away from the door, backed all the way down the hall, trying not to think of what might happen when the master finally decided to notice him again. Trying not to think of what would happen if the master told Tim or Mr. Foster how bad he'd been. He wondered if knocking on the door, dropping to his knees, and begging for the chance to please the master would make a damn bit of difference. He wondered if the master would even let him.

No, he thought; the answer was probably no. So he turned his back to the master's door, flipped out the lights with shaking fingers, and curled up on the couch, resigning himself to another cold and sleepless night.

Chapter Thirteen

Daniel awoke with the sun, stiff and groggy and unsure of where he was. Nothing new in that, though – when you traveled to disaster areas, war zones, and

uncharted backwaters as much as he did, you got used to sleeping on foreign floors and waking up confused. Except he smelled coffee, which wasn't the sort of thing you'd expect in disaster areas, war zones, or uncharted backwaters . . . at which point he remembered he'd crashed on the master's couch because the man had locked him out of his room in a fit of justifiable anger.

And apparently, someone had draped a blanket over him.

He heard quiet talking, the sounds of breakfast being made. Dave must be getting ready for work. He rolled onto his back and full-body stretched, trying and failing to work the kinks out, then curled onto his other side facing the cushions.

"You awake, darlin'?" The soft question drifted in from the kitchen, quiet enough to ignore. And though he was still tired – positively wrecked, in fact – he mumbled out an honest reply. He closed his eyes, and next thing he knew, Jane was leaning over him.

"We're gonna be makin' some noise the next half hour or so. Why don't you go sleep in our bed where it's nice and quiet and comfortable."

Daniel rolled onto his back again and blinked up at her, completely unprepared for that offer. It seemed intrusive just to go into their room, let alone to lie in their bed where they lay together every night, where they talked and slept and made love. He didn't know how to respond.

Fortunately, Jane had it covered. "Come on now, darlin'; the sheets are clean, I just changed 'em. Up you go."

She peeled back the blanket she'd presumably covered him with earlier, took him by the arm, and pulled him from the couch. He shuffled along, passive and mute, let her deposit him into their freshly-made bed. It was no less decadent than the master's, he noted with surprise. Just as large, covered in sheets just as fine and a down quilt just as thick. She pulled the bedding up to his chin and patted him on the chest.

"There now, isn't that better than the couch?"

Too sleepy to answer her clearly rhetorical question, he smiled and let his eyes drift shut. He heard Jane wind the blinds closed, but never heard her leave; he was asleep again before she'd closed the door.

He woke up to her again some time later, which cut down significantly on the strange-bed disorientation, though it still took a moment for things to slot into place. She was smiling patiently, holding a pile of folded clothes. "It's nine," she said.

Daniel frowned, wondering why the master had let him sleep so late, wondering if the next hour would be filled with last night's silent, jagged tension.

Jane, as if reading his mind, said, "Don't worry, darlin', master's off to work already." She put his clothes on the nightstand and slipped from the room, adding at the door, "I'm makin' breakfast."

Daniel mumbled a groggy thanks and followed her out, heading straight for the shower. As the hot water worked the couch-related kinks from his body, he realized, amazed, that he'd slept for over thirteen hours. He felt pretty damn good, though; even the cuts and bruises from the strapping only hurt if he leaned on them. Even better, he'd be back at work — his passion, his haven — in an hour, away from this place and focused on what he did best. Set to tasks about which there was no question, serving where his place was clear and valued. He rinsed off, shaved, dressed, and brushed his teeth quickly. He couldn't wait to get out of here.

But really, there was no point to rushing. His car wouldn't be here until ten. Still, he couldn't help himself. He slid into a chair at the kitchen table at exactly 9:20. Leg jiggling compulsively, he read the paper and ate ridiculously amazing homemade fruit crepes that made him wonder who had owned Jane before. The way she was feeding him, he'd have to spend some extra time in the gym burning off the calories, but that was just fine with him. He enjoyed the solitude and the soothing, empty-minded focus of a long workout, the sense of effortless strength and the satisfying exhaustion that followed. Pain had kept him from those pleasures for four long days, and he was as eager to return to them as he was to the newsroom.

He greeted his driver warmly, smiled at the guard as he carded through the security gates at NewWorld Media, nodded cheerfully at two slave production assistants he passed in the hallway. He was still smiling as he strode across the newsroom floor, but his happiness faded as he approached his office and saw the door

open, then disappeared altogether when he stepped inside and saw Tim, working at Daniel's desk and looking the kind of deadly serious that could only mean trouble.

Before he could even open his mouth to ask, Tim said, "Mr. Foster wants you downstairs. Now."

Daniel's knees nearly unhinged, and he clutched at the door jam to steady himself. He couldn't It was too soon after the last time, too —

"He didn't tell me why," Tim said, perhaps sensing Daniel's looming panic. "Maybe it's not"

Except Tim didn't bother to finish that sentence, because there was *never* a happy reason for Mr. Foster to pull a slave from work. Which meant it had to be about his new master. The man must have called, complained. And didn't *that* just piss Daniel off, because if the master wanted him punished, he should have been man enough to do it himself. What kind of weak, weaselly, pathetic little man was Carl to do this, to *play* at master but shun the responsibilities of the title, to pass him off like some . . . some fucking unwanted *dog* he couldn't be bothered to train, let alone discipline, as if he worried Daniel might try to bite back, or maybe just have the audacity to bleed when he struck him. The master obviously had no stomach for it, thought buying lives was some kind of game; or maybe he was just some bastion of bullshit left-wing liberal guilt who couldn't bear to do his own dirty work but had no questions of conscience when it happened out of sight.

Jesus *fuck*, he was furious.

Tim must have mistaken Daniel's rage-induced shaking for fear, for he cupped Daniel's biceps in a steadying grip and said, "I'm sure it'll be okay. I'll come with you, okay? I won't leave you alone."

Daniel barked out a strained laugh that deepened the worry lines on Tim's face. At least *one* person in his life was willing to own up to who and what he was.

Anyway, maybe he was jumping to conclusions. Maybe Mr. Foster just wanted to talk, to warn him with words instead of the strap. Such mercy had been much more common under Mr. Foster's predecessor, but still, it wasn't unheard of.

Daniel held on to that hope, and to his fury – it was easier to be angry than afraid – until they crossed the newsroom, and he saw Harper Bailey working at the guest desk near the hall. His knees failed and his mind blanked of all but terror at the sight; the guiding hand on his arm had to dig in to keep him upright. They'd brought in a substitute. A fucking *substitute*.

Harper gave Daniel a knowing look – a wash of sick, distant sympathy – and turned back to his work.

Chapter Fourteen

"Breathe," Tim said, propping Daniel up against the elevator wall and pushing the *B* button. Daniel thought that a remarkably wise suggestion, and even tried it for a while, but then he was breathing too fast and started feeling dizzy on top of everything else. So he went back to holding his breath again, watching the indicator lights as the elevator descended.

Five. Four.

"I didn't know," said Tim.

Three. Daniel turned his head toward his handler but said nothing.

"About Harper. They didn't tell me they were bringing in a sub for the broadcast tonight. I would've told you. I didn't know."

Two. One. Daniel nodded once, silently absolving Tim of whatever guilt he was carrying. None of this was Tim's fault, and at least he had the guts to stand with Daniel when things got ugly.

The doors opened, and Tim had to physically remove Daniel from the back wall, where somehow, he seemed to have gotten stuck.

Daniel slowed as they neared the room where he usually went, but Tim pulled him past the door, shaking his head. Daniel couldn't tell if that was a good sign or a bad one, didn't know if there were other rooms down here with soundproof walls and

whipping posts or if that was the only one. Didn't know if there were rooms even more sinister, rooms that held even darker fates.

God, he thought, a wan smile finding its way to his face, you're getting downright melodramatic.

Tim steered him into an over-air conditioned room four doors farther down, where Mr. Foster sat at a conference table, glaring as they walked in. Behind Mr. Foster stood two supervisors Daniel recognized from the edit bays. The room contained no whipping post, no chains that he could see; when he sank to his knees in front of Mr. Foster, it was at least as much from jelly-legged relief as it was from training.

"Please," Mr. Foster said over Daniel's head – to Tim, Daniel assumed. "Sit."

Tim pulled a chair from the table and sat with the same look of loose-limbed relief that Daniel felt. But also like Daniel, his shoulders were tense; he was wary, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"This isn't a friendly chat, Daniel," Mr. Foster snapped. "Take your clothes off."

Well that shoe dropped awfully fast, didn't it?

He stood on shaky legs and stripped quickly, anxious to avoid agitating Mr. Foster further. Yet he saw no strap, no crop, no paddle. Only the shock prods on the supervisors' belts, which had no need of direct skin contact. Maybe Mr. Foster was just trying to throw him off balance, embarrass and humiliate him. Or maybe he intended to set the supervisors on him with fists and feet, or to lock him down here, freezing and hungry and sleepless for days. Rarely did NewWorld damage their property like that, but they had brought in a sub, after all – clearly, they planned to incapacitate him.

He shuddered at the thought and sank back to his bare knees at Mr. Foster's feet. The floor was hard. He stared at a clean white line of grout in the groove between two tiles and wondered if Mr. Foster would make him bleed, if it would flow along the floor to stain cold, white squares in bright, hot red.

The toe of Mr. Foster's dress shoe butted into Daniel's stomach, less than a kick but more than a nudge.

"I suppose you're wondering what you're doing here," he said. Before Daniel could reply, the sole of that shoe slid down a few inches, pressed against his groin. "Think very carefully about the next words out of your mouth, Daniel."

Daniel hitched in a shuddering breath and said simply, "Yes, sir." He wasn't going to volunteer anything on the off chance he'd been called down for a different reason. Besides, he hadn't technically done anything wrong, and he was pretty sure Mr. Foster would hurt him no matter what he said.

The shoe dug in, and Daniel gasped, curled his hands into fists and willed himself not to flinch away.

"Let me try to put this into terms you'll understand, Daniel."

The condescension grated; he'd bet his freedom, if such a thing were attainable, that he was both smarter and better-educated than Mr. Foster could ever hope to be.

"A couple months ago," Mr. Foster said, "A Mr. Carl Whitman decided to buy a shiny new fuck toy. He shopped around, did his homework, compared hundreds, maybe even thousands of Companions, and decided, for some unfathomable reason, on *you*. So imagine his surprise, his *disappointment*, when the expensive new toy he waited months to get his hands on showed up *defective*. It's like his toaster not making toast, or his DVD player not playing DVDs."

Mr. Foster shifted, leaned back in his chair, and stretched his legs; the foot pressing into Daniel's groin went from uncomfortable to sweat-inducing, but Daniel just clamped his jaw shut and took it like he knew he was supposed to.

"See, here's the thing, Daniel. He shouldn't have to *ask* his DVD player to play DVDs. He just jams one in there and hits play, and it fucking *entertains him*. It doesn't matter if his DVD player doesn't *want* to play DVDs. It doesn't matter if it would rather make toast, because that's not what it was bought to do, and good working appliances *always* do what they're bought to do. He shouldn't have to *ask* it to please play his goddamn movie. He shouldn't have to order it, or force it. He shouldn't have to feel like his fucking *appliance* is judging him, or resenting him, or hating him for asking it to do what it's goddamn meant to do! And he *certainly* shouldn't have to try pressing a

million different buttons, or jiggling the remote, or whatever other *bullshit* you've put him through to get his fucking movie to play!"

The foot in Daniel's crotch jerked forward, punctuating Mr. Foster's point. Daniel hunched over with a grunt, then wrestled himself vertical again.

"So what does Mr. Whitman do? Why, he calls the store and says the merchandise is defective; he wants to return it."

What?

Another sharp kick in the crotch, and this time when Daniel hunched, panting and nauseous, he couldn't get back up. *Return* him? How had he not seen this coming? How had he gone on thinking he could slight the master over and over and still believe the man would keep him?

Easy: I didn't want him to keep me.

Mr. Foster grabbed him by the hair and yanked him upright, his foot still mashing Daniel's genitals. "So I say, look, I'll take care of it. Nothing wrong here that can't be fixed. Just a little programming glitch is all. And you know what he said? You want to know how goddamn fucking *lucky* you are to be leased to a man like him? He said, 'Don't strap him, Eric. Not again.' He was quite insistent, in fact. Wouldn't agree to give you another chance until I agreed not to stripe your sorry ass."

He *what*? Daniel's eyes darted from the floor to Mr. Foster's face and back. The man looked disgusted, *pissed*. He shook Daniel by the hair and gave his nuts another little kick, as if he were personally offended by the master's imposition.

"What Mr. Whitman doesn't seem to understand is just how *above* it all you clearly think you are. How *spoiled*. How Mr. Look at Me I'm an Anchor thinks he's too fucking *good* to get down on his knees and suck some fucking cock! Well, I've got news for you, *slave*: I could sell your ass ten times a night down in Times fucking Square and you'd suck it up like a good little boy and pretend you fucking love it. Because all this?" Another jab to his nuts that made Daniel's eyes water, made it hard for him to see Mr. Foster waving in a way that clearly encompassed Daniel's entire life. "All of *this* is at my pleasure, boy, you got that? And I will take it away and sell you each night like the

fucking piece of meat you are if you do not" — *jab* — "get" — *jab* — "your fucking shit together" — *jab* — "right fucking now! *Do you understand me?*"

Daniel nodded frantically, unable to force even a simple *yes* around the pain bubbling up his throat. He believed Mr. Foster — believed every word. Oh, they wouldn't pull him off a successful broadcast, but that didn't mean they wouldn't pimp him out every night after the show.

"Good," Mr. Foster drawled, perfectly civil again, his fury evaporating like so much smoke. "Good." He took his foot from Daniel's crotch at last — thank god — stood up, and smoothed his hands down the front of his shirt. "But just to be sure, what say we have a little practice session."

Just inches from Daniel's face, Mr. Foster unzipped his pants and pulled his half-hard cock out through the fly. "Go ahead," he said. "Beg me to suck my cock. Tell me you want it."

"Eric"

Tim. Daniel had actually forgotten he was here, and his relief at the reminder was so powerful that every thought but one fled his mind: Tim would stop this, Tim would —

"I said beg me, slave."

"Come on, Eric, don't —"

"Damn it, Tim, I don't tell you how to do *your* job, do I? So kindly be quiet or wait outside!"

Mr. Foster turned back to Daniel and slapped him hard across the side of the head. "Let's go, prettyboy. Convince me you want it. Convince me you'll behave."

He wanted to, *god*, he wanted to. He wanted to make Mr. Foster happy, he wanted to please his master, he wanted this basement hell to be over and done with, and yet he just . . . *couldn't*. If Mr. Foster were to grab Daniel's head, force his dick down Daniel's throat . . . well then, fine, Daniel would take it, find a way to endure it. But to give away freely his desire — the one single thing he could actually control — to hand over his last and only power and pretend to *enjoy* it? No He hadn't been able to do

that for his master and he couldn't make himself do it now, either. Maybe Mr. Foster was right; maybe he was too proud for his own go —

A shock prod jolt ripped the rest of that thought away, pain searing from his toes to the tips of his fucking *hair*. He screamed out his anger and his helplessness and his shame, and when the world came back, he was slumped between the two supervisors, still at Mr. Foster's feet, the business end of the shock prod still jammed warningly into his flank.

Mr. Foster grabbed his chin and jerked his head up. "Say it," he demanded, his cock brushing feather-soft across Daniel's clenched lips.

Daniel could smell him — soap and musk and expensive cologne and the faint scent of wool. And he knew then, with a sad and terrifying clarity, that Mr. Foster would have to break him before he'd give this last little part of himself away.

Another mind-ripping jolt of pain, and for a moment, he hated himself almost as much as he hated Mr. Foster — for not rolling over, for not giving in to the inevitable without suffering so damn fucking much.

Mr. Foster's hand squeezed his chin again, and the man's cock, fully erect, slapped against his cheek. "I said beg for it, Daniel."

Daniel tried. He *thought* the words, *pictured* them in his mind. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out. Only a whispered, "Please," a wet, watery sound full of terror and regret. And then he was screaming again, screaming, and even through the agony of the prod he was aware of another pain, the supervisors' steel-trap grips on his arms, holding him in place so sickeningly tight that the bruises wouldn't fade for weeks.

"*God*," he choked out when it ended, and then, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," because really he was, and not just because it hurt so damn bad, even now, even after the shock had faded.

Mr. Foster took a prod from a supervisor's hand and touched it to Daniel's cheek. Daniel whimpered and jerked, but couldn't escape the touch. When the agony he was expecting didn't come, he released his sucked-in breath and said again, "Please . . ."

"You bring this on yourself," Mr. Foster said – and yes, all true, but knowing that didn't solve Daniel's problem. Mr. Foster ran the tip of the prod down Daniel's jaw, his neck, along the curve of his shoulder. "All you have to do is ask. Tell me you want me. Tell me you want to lick my dick like a fucking lollypop and I will stop" – *zap!* – "hurting you."

When Daniel stopped screaming this time, he was shaking, choking back tears, desperate to give Mr. Foster what he wanted but still wholly unable to capitulate.

The prod dropped to his nuts and he closed his eyes in weary, horrified resignation, wondering just how stubborn he really would turn out to be.

Chapter Sixteen

Daniel was a deeply focused person, well accustomed to reducing his world to a single issue, a single set of facts, a solitary, quiet existence where a problem or puzzle drowned out all else for hours. This time pain swallowed his mind instead of logic, roaring noise instead of quiet – Mr. Foster's demands, his own screams fading to moans and whimpers, and the endless stream of desperate, teary words spilling from his lips: *please* and *I'm sorry* and *stop, god, stop* – but the focus was the same. That familiar, unbreakable intensity he was known for, or maybe cursed with. The prod went off again, and he thought, *God, what I wouldn't give to be someone else right now. Anyone else. Anyone at all.*

"Come on, Daniel," Mr. Foster snapped. "I'm not asking you to eat puppies or fuck your mother; all I want is for you to do what you were bought for. That's not so unreasonable, is it?"

Maybe it's not, he thought. Maybe *he* was the one being unreasonable.

"Sit him up."

He'd slumped over, ass beside his heels, chin to his chest. The supervisors hauled him back to his knees, fingers digging into pressure points in his biceps and armpits, and it *hurt*, fuck it hurt, and he wanted it – *needed* it – to end.

"Aren't you tired, Daniel?" Mr. Foster asked, eminently reasonable, his dick — long gone soft — still hanging out of his pants.

"Yes," Daniel whispered, because he had no voice left for proper speech, and because Mr. Foster had asked him a question and not answering would mean more pain.

"There's a nice, soft bed waiting for you back at your master's apartment, you know. You can have it, you can sleep the whole day if you want — but first you have to prove to me you deserve it. That you'll be a good little appliance and do what you're supposed to do. That this foolish, unwarranted *pride*" — Mr. Foster grabbed his chin again, jerked his head up — "that somehow seeped into your little slave head has disappeared and will not come back. Just a few simple words, Daniel. Tell me you want me."

"I"

"That's it, Daniel." The hand on his chin slid to his cheek, his temple, stroked once through his sweat-damp hair. "You've almost got it."

"I . . . I want —"

I want out of here. I want the pain to end. I want never to lay eyes on you again. I want to hold on to the one tiny scrap of control I have left.

Mr. Foster frowned, nodded at the supervisor with the prod, and Daniel wailed, "Wait! Please! Wait, don't! I"

Mr. Foster was standing very, very close, his cock hardening as Daniel watched.

"Please," he choked out, but only just barely, the words like acid on his tongue. "I . . . I want you."

"You want me what," Mr. Foster asked, his hand returning to Daniel's hair.

God, speaking those three words had been hard enough. Mr. Foster was going to force him into details? The hand in his hair tightened in warning, and even that little tug, that little pain, sent blistering shockwaves through his overtaxed nerves. "I want . . . to suck your cock," Daniel said through clenched teeth.

"Say it like you mean it, slave."

"Please," Daniel managed to add.

Another nod to the supervisors, and for one terrifying moment, Daniel felt betrayed, cried, "No! I did what you wa—" But the men just let go of him, and he dropped hard to his hands and knees, panting with relief.

"Go ahead," Mr. Foster said. "Impress me."

Daniel reached up with shaking hands and placed them on Mr. Foster's hips. His muscles protested even that small motion after spending God knew how long clenched and spasming beneath the prod, and already there were stark red welts around his wrists, on his forearms, where the supervisors had held him. Too exhausted and uncoordinated to shuffle forward, he tugged gently on Mr. Foster's hips, inviting him closer.

"That's it," Mr. Foster said, stepping close. "Act like you want it. Say it again. Tell me you want to suck my cock."

"I want to suck your cock." The words came easier that time. In fact, Daniel was fairly certain he'd say anything at all that Mr. Foster asked him to. They were just words, after all. Just words.

He leaned in, closing the distance between them, and rubbed his mouth across Mr. Foster's erection. The man's scent this close was strong, but unpleasant only by association. He could do this. He *had* to do this. He parted his lips and wet them, touched them to the underside of Mr. Foster's cock, let his tongue brush the hot skin. It tasted like it smelled, soap and musk and a hint of salt, and when Mr. Foster breathed out, "That's it, Daniel, keep going," Daniel screwed his eyes shut and plunged, taking the entire head into his mouth.

Mr. Foster moaned and thrust forward, and it was frankly one of life's small miracles that Daniel didn't vomit all over him when Mr. Foster's cock bumped the back of his throat. Daniel reared back and quickly shifted one hand from Mr. Foster's hip to the base of his cock, leaving only a couple inches with which the man could thrust.

Daniel did his best to give proper attention to those couple inches. He even tried to look like he was enjoying it, though it seemed impossible to keep the revulsion off his

face or hold in those little choking noises every time Mr. Foster dripped pre-cum onto his tongue. Not to mention he was so exhausted he could barely hold himself upright, let alone attend someone properly. And he really, really didn't like the way the supervisors were watching him, waiting, he supposed, for *their* turns.

Mr. Foster thwapped Daniel on the head and said, "My God. I think we finally found something you're bad at."

Daniel freed his mouth just long enough to say, "I'm sorry, sir; I haven't—"

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Foster, cutting him off by pushing Daniel's face into his crotch again. "I know. Practice will make perfect, no doubt. Besides, Mr. Whitman seems quite smitten with you; I'm sure he won't care how inept you are."

Daniel focused harder, though he didn't really know what he could do to improve. He'd not done this often, except for his Victor, an ex-Companion who even at twenty-nine was years past his prime but more than made up for that with skill. Victor had never minded Daniel's inexperience, though Daniel liked to think he'd made up for it with enthusiasm. Now, however, he felt nothing but disgust—with Mr. Foster, and even with himself for capitulating.

Mr. Foster sighed, yanked Daniel back by the hair. "Enough," he said, and then to the supervisors, "Get him up."

They scooped him off the floor without a fight and threw him into the conference table hard enough to wind him. He clung there, afraid of what they'd do to him if he fell, and realized with a slow, stunning sense of betrayal that Tim's seat was empty. The man had *left him here alone*. So much for having the guts to stand with him when things got bad.

But he didn't have the energy to be angry with Tim, didn't have the space in his brain to give it, not when he was so busy worrying about making it out of this room in one piece. He wanted to hope Mr. Foster was finished with him, but the man still had a raging hard-on, and Daniel didn't think he'd be leaving without taking care of that first.

"One more time, Daniel," Mr. Foster said, advancing a single step.

The supervisors' vise-grips on his biceps were back, and one had a prod shoved into Daniel's belly.

"Tell me you want me."

"I want you," Daniel said, acutely aware of the implement of torture pressed to his middle. The words practically rolled off his tongue this time, less robotic than before. He even reached a hand out as far as the supervisor holding his arm would let him, showing Mr. Foster he'd pick up where he left off if given the chance.

"Tell me you want me to fuck you."

"I want you to—" Daniel froze, body and voice, when he realized what he'd almost just said. What *Mr. Foster* had just said, and what he'd very clearly meant by it. "No," he whispered, too quiet to hear, but he knew the denial was etched into his face, into the tension of his aching body.

Agony then, and though he barely had the voice to scream anymore, he certainly tried. His body crumpled, but the supervisors kept him on his feet through the jolt.

Mr. Foster tossed him a slightly peeved, slightly pitying, very bored look and said, "We're not really going to go through all *this* again, are we, Daniel?"

Daniel sniffed back looming tears, wishing he knew how to give Mr. Foster the answer he wanted.

His silence was met with another shock.

"I do have other things to do today, you know," Mr. Foster said when it ended.

Daniel barely heard him over his panting and the ringing in his ears, but the next words—"Beg me for it, tell me you're desperate to feel my cock up your ass"—cut deep through his fog of pain.

Mr. Foster barely gave him a breath's worth of time to reply before the supervisor shocked him again. The scream it ripped from his throat formed into a single word: "*Please.*"

"Please what?" Mr. Foster said.

Daniel didn't think *please stop* would cut it, but he couldn't, *couldn't* go through that again. Not again. "Will it—?" Timidity and a cramp that ripped through his middle

like another damn jolt cut him short. When the spasm ended, he tried again. "Will it hurt?"

Mr. Foster took the prod, pressed it firmly to the root of Daniel's cock and said, "Not *nearly* as much as this will," and *God*, Daniel didn't think it possible – when thought finally became possible again – that anything could ever hurt more than that.

"The longer you wait," Mr. Foster said, sliding the tip of the prod behind Daniel's cock, between his balls, "the more painful I'll make it. I could've made this nice for you if you'd just been a good little appliance right from the start and done as you were told."

Mr. Foster pressed himself flush to Daniel's sweaty body, legs to legs and chest to chest. He was several inches taller, and his cock dug into Daniel's belly like a hot steel pole. Daniel knew it wouldn't be pretty, but it couldn't possibly be worse than this, and at least it would be over quick.

"Now tell me you want me, Daniel. Buried balls deep in your ass. *Convince* me."

For one terrifying moment, Daniel feared he wouldn't be able to make the words come out, but then Mr. Foster stepped back and brought up the prod again, and Daniel blurted, "Please, I want you! Please!" nearly melting with relief in the supervisors' grips.

"You want me what," Mr. Foster said, and Jesus, Daniel should have seen that coming by now, but the act of forcing the words – so very like the other act of forcing he knew was soon to come – still somehow took him by surprise.

"I want you to fuck me," he mumbled, feeling his cheeks flush even through the strain of the last many minutes.

"You want to feel me buried balls deep in your ass."

"Yes."

"Say it, slave."

Daniel swallowed hard, lifted his gaze from the floor, and stared directly into Mr. Foster's eyes. "I want to feel you buried balls deep in my ass," he said, slow and clear. *To end this. Anything to end this.*

"Let him go," Mr. Foster said to the supervisors. And then to Daniel, "Turn around, show me that pretty ass."

Daniel slumped against the table, laying his chest down flat across it and clutching hard to the edges. He knew he'd fall if he let go, not just to the floor but right down through it, spinning off into a place from which he doubted he'd ever return.

Mr. Foster slapped him hard across the ass, more heat than pain compared to all he'd endured already; he barely flinched. When a hand settled on each cheek and spread him wide, his fingers curled numb around the table and he whimpered once, soft and sharp, before he could stop himself, remind himself that he was supposed to be pretending to like this.

"Say it again," Mr. Foster said, the blunt tip of his cock nudging at Daniel's hole. "All this trembling makes me not believe how much you want me."

"I want you," Daniel said, but he could not strip the frightened child tone from his words.

He got what he "wanted" anyway. Mr. Foster rammed forward, and Daniel screamed again, digging his teeth into the polished wood tabletop hard enough to make dents. It was agony, torture, like a strapping on the *inside*.

He didn't realize he was struggling, but he must have been, because the supervisors were grabbing his arms again, pinning his elbows and shoulders in pressure-point grips that made him cry, "I'm sorry" and "Please" and "Stop!" in a long and desperate string.

Mr. Foster ignored it all, thrusting furiously behind him, driving him hard into the table edge with every ripping stroke, splitting him in two, in ten, in thousands.

Despite his previous fears, Daniel had never imagined it could be this awful. How could he ever bring himself to submit to this again?

As the minutes passed, that terrible, cleaving pain eased just a little, and Daniel lost both the strength and the will to keep struggling. When it was clear he'd no longer fight them, the supervisors released their punishing grips on his arms. One of them used his newly freed hands to rub his crotch through his pants. Daniel turned his head the other way and closed his eyes.

Mr. Foster never let up his frantic pace, his fingers digging into Daniel's hips with rough possession, yanking them back to meet each stroke.

At last he climaxed with a loud shout, pulled out abruptly, and pressed a hand between Daniel's shoulder blades to keep him in place.

"Look at me," Mr. Foster said, and Daniel realized the man had walked around the table, to the side Daniel was facing. He opened his eyes and saw blood — *his* blood — smeared across Mr. Foster's crotch. "Now be a good little appliance and tell me how much you liked it. Tell me it felt great and you can't wait until I deign to fuck you again."

The words came out flat and scratchy-soft, but they came easy. After what he'd just given Mr. Foster, words were nothing. Meaningless.

Mr. Foster smiled and said, "Thank me."

That came out easy too. Dead. Toneless. But easy. Mr. Foster didn't seem to care. Daniel actually suspected he *looked* dead, slumped unmoving over a table, covered in blood, too tired even to blink. He wanted to ask if he could go home, but home was his little cubbyhole on the top floor of the InfoGlobe dorm, and he knew he might never see that again.

"What do you think, gentlemen?" Mr. Foster asked as he cleaned himself with a wet wipe, and it actually took Daniel a moment to realize that he was talking to the supervisors and not him. "You think he learned how to be a good little Companion?"

"I think he was struggling an awful lot. Very unseemly," one of them said.

"I think you're right," said Mr. Foster. The hand on Daniel's back pressed down harder. "All right Daniel, let's try this again. This gentleman's name is Mr. Kreuner. Why don't you explain to him just how eager a cock-hungry little Companion you are, and if you really, *really* enjoy yourself, then maybe you won't need to seek further satisfaction with Mr. Dalton here afterward."

Daniel's eyes closed in resignation, blinking away tears. "Please," he whispered to Mr. Kreuner, following orders and begging mercy all at once. "Please."

Mr. Kreuner bent down and licked Daniel's neck, and though all the words Mr. Foster wanted fell softly from Daniel's lips, he couldn't hear a single one of them over the screaming in his head.

Chapter Seventeen

Daniel lay slumped on the floor beside the table, exactly where the men had dropped him, curled in on himself for protection and warmth and because he just couldn't seem to manage anything else. Mr. Foster had tossed a handful of wet wipe packets on him, and though he knew he was filthy, he hadn't been able to make himself take them. It seemed he had no control over his body at all – and wasn't that, he supposed, exactly what Mr. Foster had intended.

He was only alone for moments. Mr. Foster and the supervisors left, and seconds later, a frantic Tim came rushing in. He dropped to his knees beside Daniel with a startled exclamation, laid a hand on Daniel's shoulder.

Daniel didn't move, didn't flinch, didn't even bother to lift his head as he rasped, "Don't touch me."

"Jesus, Daniel, you –"

He hunched his shoulder in tighter, shaking off Tim's hand. "I said, *don't touch me*." He hated the way the words came out, soft and weak from screaming, but Tim pulled his hand back anyway.

"You need help, Daniel. Let me h –"

"You left me," he spat, and he could see that his poison went straight to the heart. Tim flinched, hung his head.

"I had no power to stop him," Tim said, "and I didn't think you'd want me to watch them force –"

"You left me *alone* with them!" Daniel cried, shoving at the hand creeping back toward his shoulder. It was easier to be pissed than afraid, easier to be pissed than break down and cry. "How could you *do* that?"

The pain on Tim's face looked as stark as Daniel's felt. Tim pulled his hand back again and whispered, "I'm sorry, Daniel. I'm really . . . I'm *sorry*."

Tim inched closer, and in his shock, Daniel let him; he literally could not remember the last time one freeman had apologized to him for the actions of another. Maybe years. Maybe never. "Please let me help you," Tim said – no, *begged*, and that was a first too.

He said nothing as Tim crawled around behind him, picked up a wet wipe, and ripped it open. It sounded exactly like the condom had when Mr. Kreuner had pulled it from its package. Daniel squeezed his eyes closed, held his breath.

"Shh," Tim said, no doubt reacting to the tension in Daniel's body – the clenched muscles, the rapid breaths. "You know I'm not going to hurt you, Daniel."

People had been saying that a lot lately. Shame it never seemed to be true.

The wipe, cold and damp, came down on the back of Daniel's thigh. He twitched, then stilled. Tim kept up a steady stream of meaningless chatter – random words meant to soothe, to keep Daniel grounded – as he worked steadily toward the damage his colleagues had done. By the time a fresh wet wipe touched torn flesh, Daniel had almost, *almost* managed to unclench. The jolt of pain shocked him out of his stupor and he hissed, curled up his legs.

"Easy," Tim said. "I have to . . . I mean, I could take you to the infirmary instead, if you –"

"No," Daniel said, feeling a blush creep up his face. He forced his legs apart again so Tim could work. "Please, don't." It was bad enough that Tim was seeing him like this, so raw and exposed, so roughly used; he couldn't bear the thought of a stranger looking at him, *touching* him, even though he knew he'd bled, could still feel it dribbling down his balls, the backs of his legs. He wondered if he'd need stitches, how the fuck he was supposed to go to the bathroom for the next week, how the master – a man seemingly so kind and gentle – could ever possibly wish to do something so terrible to him not just once but every single day. He wondered how they expected him to function each night,

to sit at his desk and read the news and interview guests and pretend he could still remember what it felt like to be happy.

"You know," Tim said on an uneasy laugh, "this is so not a part of my job description."

Daniel almost snapped, *Yeah, well being gang-raped isn't a part of mine, either*, but Tim sounded so helpless and uncomfortable that Daniel didn't have the heart to make things any worse. Besides, he was just a slave, and slaves *couldn't* be raped, now could they.

"God, I'm sorry," Tim said, "I just . . . I don't even know what I'm saying. Just, just ignore me, okay?"

Tim touched a wet wipe to rent flesh, and for a moment, the sting was so bad Daniel thought he would cry. It was absurd to fall to that, after all he'd been through today, and yet

A hand smoothed up and down his spine, warm and gentle, trying to ease the hurt the other hand was causing. Daniel buried his face in his arms and held his breath. There was pain, sick and oily, hot and sharp like the shock prods. Then nothing.

"All set," Tim said, patting Daniel on the back of one trembling thigh before rising and offering him a hand. "Can you stand?"

If you pull the right strings, he thought, a little hysterically, as he took Tim's proffered hand. Between the two of them, he got vertical, but Tim had to prop him against the table to keep him that way. It took only a few hits with a shock prod to make your muscles weak and your nerves misfire for half an hour; Daniel had *dozens* of little contact marks, tinged pink like sunburn, scattered all across his body.

"You know, maybe we should get you checked out," Tim said, eyeing him close. The man's gaze fell on half a dozen marks clustered just below Daniel's navel, slid to another cluster a few inches lower, then to the ones hidden by a thatch of reddish-blond pubic hair. Daniel hated the scrutiny, but he lacked the energy even to cover himself with his hands.

"I'm fine," he said, despite the sheer, mindboggling absurdity of those words.

Tim, God bless him, nodded once and let the matter drop, turning his focus instead to getting Daniel dressed. Daniel slumped half against Tim, half against the table, barely able to work his arms through his sleeves by himself. Everything hurt in ways he'd long since forgotten were possible. He craved sleep like he craved air, and when Tim said, "Car's waiting to take you back to Carl's," he thought only of a house full of comfortable beds, of Jane and her painkilling salve, and of the master still at work for many, many hours to come. He simply would not allow himself to think beyond that.

Tim led him from the room, toward the elevator, supporting most of his weight as Daniel stumbled along.

"I asked them if you could stay a while," Tim said as he hauled Daniel down the corridor, "but they claimed you'd be more comfortable in a bed than on your office couch. Frankly, I'd feel better if —"

If you weren't sending me off to be brutalized again?

"If you were somewhere I could keep an eye on you. But they were quite insistent."

Daniel said nothing. He was too tired to walk and talk at the same time, and anyway his throat hurt, and he didn't know what he could possibly say. He wasn't willing to lie for the sake of Tim's feelings, not after Tim had left him alone, no matter how good the man's reasons.

The quiet of the elevator ride was short-lived, and then Tim was dragging him through the NewWorld lobby, toward a waiting car. The lobby wasn't crowded, but Daniel was still the subject of far too many stares: some curious, some pitying, some self-righteous or downright mean. Every single one of them felt like fingers on his skin, like hot breath and fresh bruises and blood. He shrugged out of Tim's supporting grip and made his feet go faster, stumbled through the front door, and nearly collapsed into the backseat of the sedan. Tim rushed behind him, hand outstretched, but his support was far too late to be of use.

"So, um," Tim began, hand on the car door, feet shuffling as Daniel fumbled with his seatbelt. "You, uh . . ."

It wasn't like Tim to be lost for words. Daniel blinked at him, impatient, anxious to shower and sleep and uninterested in whatever platitudes Tim might try to offer.

But in the end, all Tim said was, "I'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

He closed the door before Daniel could reply.

Chapter Eighteen

Daniel fell asleep—or maybe passed out—on the short ride to the master's apartment. He woke up with a startled shout, huddled and cringing from the doorman's hand. Slaves weren't supposed to touch in public, but Daniel obviously needed help to stand.

The doorman was looking at him like he'd sprouted a third eye, probably wondering at the harshness of NewWorld Media, or maybe at Daniel's unexpected willfulness. After all, he'd needed help inside twice in the short time he'd been here.

Daniel somehow made it off the elevator and down the hallway by himself, and Jane met him at the apartment door with thinly disguised panic and a helping hand.

"What happened," she asked, ducking beneath his arm and pulling it round her shoulder, wrapping her free arm around his waist. "What are you doin' home so early?"

She walked him to the couch and plunked him down—he was much too big and heavy for someone her size to support for long—then gave him a careful once-over. Daniel looked down to where her gaze lingered on his hands. Finger-shaped bruises had formed at his wrists and up his arms where the supervisors had pinned him, and his left pinkie was discolored and swollen, though he couldn't remember how that'd happened.

He blinked up at her, tired and mute. He didn't want her to know. He wanted to be alone, wasn't sure how to send her off without hurting her feelings.

"I need a shower," he said, though he hadn't meant to. Added, "I'm okay," and then, in direct contradiction and much to his embarrassment, "Help me up?"

She held out both hands, moving slow like she was worried he'd freak, and waited for him to take them. "That looks painful," she said, eying the darkening bruises circling his wrists when he locked his hands in hers. He nodded, but said nothing.

She helped him to his feet, steadied him when he nearly fell. "Prod?" she asked.

He nodded again, feeling his cheeks heat. If she knew that, what else might she — ?

"Better use the bench, then. Don't want you slippin' and bangin' your head." She smiled, a sad and gentle thing, painful to look at, and covered one of his hands with both of hers.

Whatever else she might have said then, she swallowed it when she met his eyes. He nodded once — gratitude for her silence — and let her prop him against her side and lead him to the guest bathroom.

He stripped without bothering to fold his clothes, stumbled into the shower, and curled up on the bench, staying there until the water ran cold. He lacked the energy for anything more than a perfunctory pass of soap over skin, barely enough to wash the stench of those three men away. His muscles were weak, twitchy and sore, locking on occasion into teeth-gritting cramps.

He shut off the water and stood, but his legs still felt disconnected from his brain, and he fell to his hands and knees. There he remained for far too long, gasping for breath and longing — for the first time in ten years at least — for the false security of his mother's arms.

But she's not here, and better for it. She shouldn't have to see you like this.

He grabbed the edge of the vanity and dragged himself to his feet. It seemed that Jane had collected his old clothes and left a clean cotton T-shirt and track pants in their place. He had to sit on the toilet to pull them on, but he was slowly regaining fine muscle control. The shower had helped.

His side cramped as he bent to put his sock on. He clutched at himself, hunched and panting until it passed, then finished dressing and headed back to the living room. He walked with one shoulder pressed to the wall, using it as a crutch until the hallway ended, then managed the last several feet on his own before collapsing onto the couch.

Jane appeared with a brownie and a mug of hot tea. "Not much that chocolate won't solve," she said, smiling that same sad, soft smile. "And the tea will help your throat."

"Thanks," Daniel said, voice stripped to scratchy whisper. He sipped at the tea, nibbled desultorily at his brownie.

Jane watched him for a moment, then sat down on the coffee table and turned her attention to her hands, clutched together in her lap. "I have two sons I've never met," she said.

Daniel's head jerked up, seeking her eyes. Her gaze was sad but steady; it was an old pain, long endured.

"My first master owned a culinary school in Georgia. I grew up on the campus. It was big; I barely even knew him. He didn't let his slaves teach officially, but I was handy in the kitchen, and the instructors liked me around. I was happy there."

She went silent for a long moment, but Daniel sensed that was not the time for him to speak. He broke off a piece of brownie and chewed it slowly, leaving no room in his mouth for questions.

"Master's wife was barren," Jane said. "They were both pushin' forty. Wanted babies 'fore they got too old. I was sixteen. Mistress hand-picked me."

Another long silence. Jane reached for Daniel's plate and broke off a piece of brownie for herself. He offered her his tea to chase it down with, and she accepted with a nod. "Deal was he'd have me as much as he could handle durin' my most fertile week each month. But he wasn't never happy with just a week; his wife was over twice my age, and he couldn't do any ol' thing he pleased with her like he could with me. He wasn't a gentle man."

Brownie break number two. Daniel wasn't hungry anyway; he handed her his plate.

"I had a son when I was seventeen, another when I was nineteen. Never even laid eyes on 'em. Wet nurse came and cut the cord and took 'em away."

"I'm sorry," Daniel said, even though he'd meant to stay quiet, let her finish.

Jane shook her head. "I'm not. They don't know their momma's a slave. They'll never know what it's like to *be* a slave. What more could a mother want?"

To see her boys, Daniel thought. He had an older sister he could barely remember, sold away when he was three and she was seven. On the rare occasions his mother had spoken of her lost child, he'd felt her sorrow like a sickness, a wound never healed.

"Worked out good for me too, in the end. Mistress found the master stealin' away with me long after the baby-makin' was done. Sold me off to one of my old students, who set me to cookin' for his restaurant in the East Village. He was a good man, and I met my Dave there. And then Mr. Whitman got sick of payin' to eat my cookin' and bought us up."

She smiled again, patted Daniel on the knee, and pushed his plate back into his hands. "Finish your brownie, darlin'," she said, then stood to walk away.

"Jane?"

She stopped, looked back, kind and patient as ever. He wondered how she possibly could have known, though clearly she did. He wondered why he didn't mind that. But then it occurred to him: his pants. She did his laundry, and he'd bled.

"You're probably wonderin' why I told you all that, eh?"

He was, but he thought it rude to say so, so he just shrugged.

"Because it gets easier. You get past it, and it gets easier. I wanted to make sure you knew that."

"I" There was so much Daniel wanted to tell her: that he was honored she'd shared her story with him, touched she'd relived her own pain to help him ease his own, grateful she'd understood his need more clearly than he'd understood it himself. But in the end, he simply said, "Thank you."

When she smiled at him, he knew that was enough.

"Get some rest, darlin'. You want to use our bed?"

The thought of that soft mattress and those smooth sheets was wonderfully appealing, but the thought of dragging his sorry ass the thirty-odd feet necessary to enjoy them was most definitely not. In the end, it wasn't worth it; the couch was comfortable enough. "No thanks," he said, sensing that Jane understood his reasoning.

He curled up on the couch, and Jane brought him a blanket. A vicious cramp seized his thigh as she covered him, and she gently peeled his hands away and massaged the muscle with a strength he'd never have guessed she possessed.

He supposed that was true of more than just her hands.

"I have some salve for the burns," she said, "and for the, uh"

Well, wasn't that unlike Jane, to be flustered speechless?

"But I'm afraid I've got nothin' to help with the cramps."

"S'okay," Daniel said. "I just need some sleep." Well, sleep was a good start, anyway. The cramps would fade with time, mellowing in an hour or two, disappearing altogether by morning. They were just damn miserable in the meantime, but it was better than before, better than —

Whoa. No going there. He was trembling bodily, clutching at the blanket like a shield, and Jane gave him that *look* again.

"Really," he said. "Just tired."

And then, as if to prove his point, he fell dead asleep.

The nightmares were bad, and he woke up with a jerk so hard he fell off the couch. He felt like he'd barely slept at all; a quick glance at the clock confirmed that it was just a little after four.

The apartment was silent and felt empty. "Running errands," said a note on the coffee table. "Be back around 5. —J" Beside the note was a chemical ice pack with its own note ("For your finger"), and her jar of salve. Daniel's legs seemed to be working again, so he took the jar into the bathroom and dabbed it over the contact burns he

could reach, the blossoming bruises at his biceps and hips, forearms and wrists, the bite mark on his shoulder. The salve was cold, numbing relief on the surface, though pain still burned beneath. His hands shook when he glopped some on his finger to smear on his ass, and he remained just levelheaded enough to marvel at Mr. Foster's power, at the man's capacity to make even Daniel's *own* touch revolting. That it was breathtakingly painful didn't help, but the salve worked fast, numbing the sharpest edges away.

He rummaged through the medicine cabinet with only the slightest shiver of apprehension at touching the master's things, came up with a roll of medical tape, and buddy-splinted his left pinkie to his left ring finger. It didn't seem misaligned, but it hurt enough to be broken. He'd have to get it looked at tomorrow.

Left with nothing else to distract himself from his thoughts or his exhaustion, he returned to the couch and conceded to sleep again.

Some hours later, he was back on the floor, jerked from a nightmare by his own scream. The sun was down and the room was dark, the clock not visible through the gloom. He smelled chicken cooking, or maybe turkey – strong and unappetizing in his current state – and heard soft sounds drifting through the closed door of the slave quarters. Dave and Jane, hopefully enjoying some downtime together. He was grateful she'd left him alone.

He crawled back onto the couch, retrieved the blanket from the floor and the remote from the coffee table. Though he knew it was illogical, downright absurd, he felt better stuffed into the corner, his back to the armrest and his knees to his chest. Even though there was nothing to hide from here.

Not yet, anyway.

He turned on the TV, skimming through the channels, not really processing what he was seeing. He settled on something colorful and bright, some Japanese cartoon that would probably induce seizures if you watched it too long, and muted the sound in deference to a budding headache. The show made for a lousy distraction; his mind kept turning back to this morning, to what would happen when the master came home this evening. To what he'd need to do if he didn't want to end up at Mr. Foster's feet again,

begging for mercy that wouldn't come. Not even his anchor chair would save him if the master decided to return him for good. He couldn't let that happen.

He stared at the television screen, half watching the battling robots, half watching a whole different kind of violence playing in his head. He hugged his knees tighter to his chest and rested his chin atop them, pulled the blanket closer around his shoulders to ward off a core-deep chill.

And that, sometime later, was how the master found him, huddled in the dark, staring right through the muted TV.

Chapter Nineteen

Daniel was jerked from sleep by a sudden flash of light. He blinked against it, pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes, pulled them cautiously away. Not a flash; the room was still bright. Master's living room. Overhead lights. Someone had turned them on. Probably the same someone calling his name.

"Daniel!"

Shit. The master. His tone suggested he'd been repeating himself for some time already and wasn't at all happy about it. Daniel snapped from his stupor, unfolding quickly – too quickly, with a sharp hiss – to stand in his master's presence, but the man was already towering over him, both hands gripping Daniel's shoulders, holding him in place.

"What happened?" the master said. "Why aren't you at work?"

His voice was hard, stern. It had every right to be; Daniel had screwed up again, of course he had, or he wouldn't be here now. And of course the master would be angry; his expensive little appliance had done nothing but malfunction from the moment he'd brought it home.

No more, though. He couldn't afford to fuck up again, couldn't bear another correction at Mr. Foster's hand. He'd convince the master to keep him no matter what it took. He'd make the master *happy*.

"I'm here to please you, master," he forced himself to say, passably convincing.

The master's hands tightened on his shoulders, and Daniel leaned in close, lifted fingers to the master's belt buckle and began to undo it.

"What are you — ?" The master pushed his hands away. "Stop that. Wait. What are you doing? What happened?"

Daniel shook his head, brought his hands back up to his master's waist. He could see a bulge forming already in the man's pants, knew he was turning him on, so why was the master shoving him away? Fuck, couldn't he do *anything* right?

"I'm sorry, master," he said, attacking the buckle again and again getting thwarted by the master's hands. He slid to his knees at the master's feet instead, pressed his cheek to the master's hip, his lips a hair's breadth from the erection tenting the man's pants. "I'm sorry," he said again, "I— "

One of the master's hands touched his head, and though he dreaded the condescending intimacy of being petted like some child, some *creature*, he wished for it more than anything when instead the master's fingers came to rest on his forehead and pushed him back. If he were rebuffed . . .

"What the hell's gotten into you, Daniel? What are you — ?"

"Please, master. *Please*, I want to . . . let me make you feel good." Daniel rubbed his hands up the master's thighs, but he didn't dare touch the man's cock without permission. "It's just, you've been so kind to me, so generous all this time, and I've been so bad, so ungrateful for everything." Back to the belt now, and this time the master didn't stop him. He could feel the intensity of the master's stare on the top of his head, hear the master's quickening breaths, but whether from anger or arousal, he didn't know. Both, he thought — things were very bad, but he could still fix them if he tried hard enough. "I've taken advantage of your patience, and I'm so sorry, master. I know I don't deserve another chance, but I— "

The master's huge hands caught Daniel's wrists, and Daniel gasped, pain sparking bright all the way past his elbows. His fumbling fingers stilled, their task

unfinished; he'd been so nervous, so afraid, so *inept* that he hadn't even managed to pull the master's belt prong from its hole yet.

"I said *stop*," the master said, loud and slow, tugging on Daniel's wrists until he'd lifted him off his knees and dumped his sore ass back on the couch. "Just . . . just *stop*, and tell me what the hell is going o — "

This time, the master cut *himself* off. His eyes had locked with Daniel's, and whatever he'd seen there had silenced him mid-word. Daniel sniffed, blinked hard. His eyes were watering, and though he tried to convince himself it was pain, just pain, the stark truth was he was terrified. The master didn't want him anymore; he couldn't even manage this one simple thing, and now he'd be sent back to Mr. Foster, to horrors he dared not even contemplate.

"What happened to your finger?" the master asked. His voice had dropped low and dangerous, and with the hand still around Daniel's wrist, he pulled Daniel's arm forward to look at the taped-up pinkie.

"I don't know," Daniel said.

The master's face clouded over, as if he didn't believe him.

"Honest, master," Daniel added, because Jesus, things were bad enough already, and the last thing he needed was for the master to think him a liar as well as incompetent and willful. It was getting harder and harder to blink the tears away, and even his voice shook as he added, "I really don't know, master, I'm sorry."

The anger in the master's face radiated outward to his shoulders, his hands, and his fingers tightened on Daniel's battered wrists. Daniel clenched his teeth on a cry and closed his eyes against the master's fury, wondering how badly the man might hurt him before he threw him back to Mr. Foster.

His only hope was to distract him, to change his mind.

"Please," Daniel said again, and though he was begging full out, throat tight and burning as fiercely as his cheeks and ears, he didn't care, didn't care about anything but pleasing this man, about never seeing the basement of NewWorld Media again. He slid

back to his knees, for though his hands were still not free, he had other tools with which to pleasure his master, as Mr. Foster had made so painfully clear.

But he'd just barely managed to press his open mouth to the master's cloth-covered, half-faded erection before he was jerked up and away again.

"No, damn it, stop!" The master hauled Daniel to his feet, and the hands that had been gripping his wrists moved to clutch at his upper arms, shaking him hard.

Daniel lowered his head so his master couldn't read the shame on his face, the humiliation or fear as he swiped at watering eyes with a trembling hand. "I'm sorry," he whispered, and then, "Please, master, *please*," though even he didn't really know what he was asking for.

"What's this?" the master asked, deceptively gentle, tilting Daniel's chin up with one hand. Daniel could feel his face burning, his lips quivering, and when a single tear ran down his cheek, the master caught it with his thumb. "Stay," he said, taking his hand away and holding it before Daniel's face in a universal "don't move" gesture. "Just . . . just hold still for a second, okay?"

Daniel pressed his lips together and nodded. Would the master call his handler to come take him back now? Did he really think Daniel would try to run away while he went to get the phone?

But the master took only a single step back, his hands dropping to his sides, his eyes never leaving Daniel. They traveled slowly down Daniel's neck, shoulder, arm, widened in alarm at the bruises peeking out beneath Daniel's shirtsleeve, as if noticing them for the first time.

"Goddamn it," the master growled, reaching out to brush fingers over Daniel's forearm, the heavier bruising around his wrist. "What the fuck is this?"

Daniel swallowed hard and resisted the very strong urge to cover himself, to hide this new shame from the master's prying eyes. "I struggled, master."

The master raised an eyebrow over a harsh scowl. "You *struggled*?" he said, as if he could hardly believe his recalcitrant slave would pile such an insult atop all the others that had led to his punishment in the first place.

"I'm sorry, master, I'm sorry! I know I shouldn't have; I was weak, I didn't mean to misbehave again, I really di —"

"Damn it!" the master spat, sharp enough to make Daniel jump. "He told me he wouldn't beat you! He promised!" The master turned his eyes up to Daniel's, and if Daniel hadn't known better, he'd have said the man was downright beseeching. "I made him promise!"

Well, that was . . . different. So much so that Daniel had no idea how to respond. The truth, he supposed. "He, uh" Daniel licked his lips, shook his head. "He didn't, master."

No. What'd he'd done was much, much worse.

The master's scowl grew deeper. Perhaps he didn't believe Daniel, or perhaps he did and simply wanted to exact a punishment himself, for he crossed his arms and said, "Take your shirt off."

The master's voice quivered, much like Daniel's had these last many minutes, though surely the cause in the master's case was rage instead of fear. What was he planning? If he'd wanted sex, surely he wouldn't have stopped Daniel's earlier attentions. Which meant . . . *oh God, please, no*. Daniel didn't think he could handle any more pain today. Not again.

Still, lest his punishment grow worse, he dared not keep the master waiting. He pulled his shirt over his head, wondering almost hysterically what the master's upper-crust neighbors would think of all the screaming coming from the north penthouse.

But the hands that fell upon Daniel's bare skin brought no pain. They were gentle, indecisive, tracing the bruises on his biceps, forearms, wrists, the smattering of contact burns on his stomach and chest, before spinning him around and repeating the process on his back. There were fewer marks there, but the master's fingers lingered long over a painful bite on Daniel's shoulder blade.

Those large hands turned Daniel around again, skimmed over his arms and chest like the hands of a blind man trying to map something unfathomably new. The touches burned with an intensity that infused the master's whole being — the master's hands

trembled as Daniel shook beneath them; the master's breathing grew fast and audible as Daniel's own chest heaved with fear.

Maybe the master didn't want to hurt him after all. Or maybe he'd planned to, but had changed his mind once he'd been able to see and touch; maybe now, he simply wanted to take what he'd paid for. That'd be no less painful than a beating, but at least it wouldn't leave Daniel to contend with Mr. Foster's wrath again.

Daniel closed his eyes and tried to will the shakes away, forcing himself not to recoil from the master's touch. He even faked a quiet moan — no hard feat, since pain and fear and pleasure all sounded alike. But the instant the sound left his lips, the master's hands left his skin.

They returned a moment later, though, brushing over a long, thin bruise that ran hip to hip just below his navel, where the edge of the table had bitten into him over and over with every one of Mr. Foster's thrusts. Daniel dared a glance at the master's face, all creased eyebrows and pressed lips, but couldn't read what he saw there.

And then his eyes raced back to the master's hands when thumbs hooked in the waistband of his pants and underwear and tugged.

Daniel sucked in air like a beached fish, trying and failing to contain his rising panic. It'd be his own damn fault if he couldn't swallow it down; he knew the master wanted the illusion of a willing partner, and Daniel was blowing his last chance to give him that.

No, not *was* blowing, *did* blow. The master's hands froze halfway down Daniel's hips, exposing a wide swath of skin but none of the parts that really mattered. Daniel swallowed back a sudden, vicious nausea, covered his face with shaking hands, and entertained, for a moment, the thought that it'd be okay to cry now.

After all, he had nothing left to lose.

Without a word, the master splayed his fingers across Daniel's bared hips, lining them up with one of the many sets of finger-shaped bruises that curved around from his ass to his pelvis. Daniel startled at the touch, reaching instinctively to push it away. He curled his hands into fists and forced them behind his back before they could

commit such a grievous sin, but it was too late. The master's narrowed eyes traveled from Daniel's bared skin to his face and locked there. If before there had been a storm brewing in the man's face, now it was a tornado, a *tsunami*.

Daniel trembled in its wake.

Slowly, so slowly, the master's hands left Daniel's hips and curled around his upper arms, applying pressure so slight that Daniel felt it only because he was exquisitely hyperaware. In this way, the master guided him back to the couch, deposited him there as if he were made of glass, and then spun around and kicked the coffee table — which *was* made of glass — hard enough to crack it.

"*Fuck!*" the master screamed.

Daniel wondered if it was because the master had just broken his furniture, or maybe his foot, or because he'd realized that Daniel had put out for NewWorld Media but not for him.

"God fucking *damn it!*" The master reached down, grabbed the television remote, and hurled it into the wall, where it shattered into a spray of plastic bits and batteries. Another shouted string of profanities, and the master reached for the couch cushions, flung them toward the hall, the kitchen, the window. Daniel huddled into himself, brought his arms up to his head, yet his gaze remained pinned on the storm raging through the living room.

"*Shit!*" The master lashed out with both hands, upending the now-cushionless couch, then kicking the underside hard enough to punch his foot through the fabric. He wrenched it out with another furious shout, stomped around the couch, and cleared the nearby kitchen countertop with a long and livid arm swipe. A basket of fruit splotted to the floor, a notepad, a knife block. The master scooped it up, and Daniel whimpered "I'm sorry!" just in case the man planned to start throwing the knives.

God, what had he done to cause this? Such fury over nothing made less sense than the master trashing his apartment instead of his slave.

I know the reason for that, at least: he's just warming up. I'll be next. Please God, help me, I can't

The master hurled the whole knife block into the fridge hard enough to dent the appliance door. Daniel cried, "I'm sorry!" again.

The master froze. Then his head whipped around, and Daniel reflected for an instant on how absurd this would all seem if he weren't so goddamn fucking *frightened*: the master was standing one foot in front of the other, his right arm drawn back behind his ear, his fist clutching a banana so hard the fruit was oozing through the burst seams of its skin. Like a baseball player, or a monkey, winding up for the pitch.

"What?" the master asked, sharp and breathless.

Daniel cringed, but forced his voice steady. Well, steady enough, anyway. "I said I'm sorry, master. Whatever I did wrong, I'm sorry."

The master's face went slack as suddenly as if he'd had a stroke. The oozing banana slipped from his fingers. He crossed the floor in three huge strides, dropped to his knees beside Daniel, and threw strong arms around Daniel's huddled shoulders. When Daniel stiffened, the master pulled him closer and whispered, "Shh, no, no Daniel, it's not you. Not you, I'm not mad at you, I swear."

What?

One of the master's arms unwrapped just far enough to snake up to Daniel's head, stroke through his hair. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to scare you. I'm so sorry."

What?

Surely Daniel was imagining the master's words. Hallucinating, cracking under the stress. But the master kept repeating himself, over and over, interspersing apologies and assurances with stroking hands and a soft press of lips to Daniel's forehead, cheek, the top of his head, the side of his neck. "It's not you." *Kiss*. "I'm sorry I scared you" *Kiss*. "I'm not mad at you, I promise." *Kiss*. "You've done nothing wrong." *Kiss*. And on and on and on.

Gradually, Daniel's shaking subsided, and he relaxed into the master's arms as the true import of the man's words sank in: If the master wasn't mad at *him*, then that left only those who had hurt him, only Mr. Foster and the supervisors and NewWorld Media. Which meant the master wasn't going to punish him, wasn't going to return

him, certainly wasn't going to tattle to Mr. Foster on him. Hadn't even meant for any of this to happen.

The master's arms tightened again, not hurting but clearly not letting go any time soon. He placed a fluttering kiss on the shell of Daniel's ear and said, voice tight and shaking, "I had no idea he would hurt you. You just seemed so unhappy, and I didn't want to force you to stay here if you were miserable, and . . . and I'm *so sorry*, but I swear to you, I will *never* let anyone hurt you like that again." *Kiss.* "I promise, do you understand?" *Kiss.* "*Never.*"

Another kiss to his ear, his temple, his cheek, and Daniel nodded.

"Yes, master," he said, breathless, voice shaking. He wanted desperately to believe it, but he'd learned long ago that nothing was ever so simple, so easy, given so freely. Besides . . . "You won't . . . I mean, don't you want me to—" He couldn't finish, afraid that saying it might somehow summon it, remind the master of why he'd bought him. Yet at the same time, he had to know.

The master coughed up a noise that might have been a laugh, pressed another kiss to the top of Daniel's head and rubbed his hands up and down Daniel's back. "Of course I *want* you, Daniel. I've wanted you for years. But it's not only about sex, and I'd *never* force you or hurt you. It doesn't have to be" He paused, puffed a hard sigh against Daniel's hair. "It's supposed to be *good*, Daniel, it's supposed to make you feel good. Whoever did this to you . . . They were cruel. They were *bastards*. It's not supposed to be like that; I won't ever make it be like that, I promise."

Another kiss to the crown of his head, and Daniel turned his face up to study the master's openly, to look into his eyes and read the truth he saw there. The fierce conviction. This man meant every word he'd said.

"I will *never, ever* hurt you, this way or any other. Do you understand me?"

Daniel held the master's gaze a moment longer. "Yes, master," he said. And this time, he really did believe it, his relief so profound that for a moment he couldn't even name it, couldn't identify the release of the tension he'd been carrying for so long, the panic and the fear. Only after the tears came and he didn't bother to stop them did he

understand: he'd endured a terrible thing, but it was over now, it was over, and there were strong arms around him and the safety of a man who cared, who wanted to protect him, like no one had since Victor, since his mother, and he wept into his master's shoulder without shame and soaked in the comfort the man offered.

The master pressed his face into Daniel's hair and breathed deep, stroked hands up and down his arms, his back, held him tight and peppered his head with kisses. Daniel tilted his wet face back and let those kisses fall on his forehead, his nose, his chin, took a deep breath and let the next one fall across his lips.

The master froze, panting slightly, soft breaths puffing across Daniel's mouth, and with the utmost care he placed another small, dry kiss upon Daniel's lips. He asked for nothing more, took nothing more. It didn't feel like being used, Daniel thought. It felt, shockingly enough, like being loved.

Chapter Twenty

Daniel awoke as he'd fallen asleep: cocooned in his master's arms, snug against a warm chest, two pillows, and three blankets. He hurt everywhere – except, he realized, the one place that mattered most.

He wasn't afraid.

"Are you okay?" the master murmured into the back of his head.

The fear returned in a flash; had he done something to wake the man? The sun had barely risen, he'd be angry –

"Daniel?"

No, not angry. Daniel's heart calmed, and he chided himself for succumbing to instinct. He wasn't an animal; he didn't have to let it rule him.

"Yes, master," he said. It might even have been the truth.

"Good." The master kissed the back of his head again. "But I'm calling us out sick today anyway."

Daniel hadn't even finished taking a breath for his protest before the master added, "Don't bother. There's no arguing with me about this."

God only knew why he'd thought to argue, anyway. If the master said he needed the time, not even Mr. Foster could fault him for it. Besides, he hurt to the point of distraction, would surely be useless at work. All he wanted to do was sleep.

Which apparently he did, because next he awoke, the sun was streaming bright through the blinds in the master's bedroom, and the master and another man – no, a slave; he wore a broad, gold mariner-link bracelet around each wrist – were standing over him, talking softly.

He drew the blankets tighter around his shoulders and waited for someone to tell him how to react.

"This man's a physician's assistant," the master said. "He's going to look you over, okay?"

Daniel nodded, wondering why the master had even bothered to ask.

He had to strip again, even his underwear, so the doctor could examine him. But the master held his hand, and Daniel clutched it without shame, those strong fingers squeezing out the worst of his fear.

The next minutes went by in a strangely dichotomous haze of pain and numbness, Daniel staring resolutely at the loose button on the doctor's shirt – he should fix that; the man's owner would be upset if it fell off – doing as the doctor asked and moving where the doctor put him. The master kept a hold of his hand throughout, radiating concern, looking like he wanted to help but not knowing how. Daniel wished he had the words to explain just how much the man was helping already.

When the examination ended, the doctor gave him a shot. Antibiotics, he said. I'll be back tomorrow, he said. Whatever he said after that was lost to a metallic taste in the back of Daniel's throat and the panicked realization, brief though it was in his last few conscious moments, that the doctor had put him to sleep.

* * * * *

Not sleep, the master said when Daniel woke again, half-surprised that he had at all. Just a painkiller. Daniel thought the drug might still be working, for he sat up with only minor complaints from his body. His trip to the bathroom, however, was torture, like shitting broken glass, or maybe a porcupine. His face was wet when it was over, his lip sore from where he'd bitten it. The master steered him back to bed with soft words and softer hands, laid him on his back, and brushed a kiss across his forehead.

"Do you trust me?" the master whispered.

"Yes," Daniel said, surprising even himself.

"I want to make you forget your pain; will you let me?"

"Yes," he heard himself say again.

Another brush of the master's lips against his forehead, his jaw, then his own lips, tentative and tender. Daniel opened his mouth just a little, felt the master's mouth curl soft and sweet around his lower lip. There the master lingered, sharing skin and breath as his hands crept beneath the hem of Daniel's shirt, shivered across his belly and flanks, then paused as if seeking — *surely not?* — Daniel's permission.

Daniel reached up to cup the master's biceps and touched the tip of his tongue to the smooth inside of the master's lip.

"Don't," the master said as Daniel's hands dipped south, seeking the master's pleasure. Daniel froze, but before the fear could even begin to settle, the master added, "Tonight is for you. All I want is for you to lie there and enjoy it."

Maybe it was the exhaustion, or maybe the drugs, that smoothed away the edges of his panic before they'd even formed, that let his hands fall back to his sides without the slightest sense of concern or obligation, that let him arch into his master's hands and mouth as they chased over every inch of him, leaving pleasure in their wake as he'd not known since —

No. Don't think of him here.

He came with a grunt into his master's mouth, wondering if there'd ever been a master in all of history who had brought his slave to orgasm and asked for nothing in return.

Chapter Twenty-One

As the bruises and the nightmares faded, as the master pleased him night after night without asking for – or taking – anything in return, Daniel found himself growing fond of the master. Coming to appreciate not just the things he did for and gave to Daniel, but also the man himself: his intelligence, his sharp wit, his unbridled generosity and the obvious joy he took from life. Even his large hands, his hair, his smiling eyes, his deceptively gruff exterior and the squishy bits inside it that Daniel suspected he let very few people see.

Life had settled back to normal at work, too. He'd not had to see Mr. Foster once since that last terrible day, and Tim had told him several times how pleased the master was with him, how pleased management was, how they all hoped to keep doing business together for many years to come.

Wrapped in the glow of this newfound peace, Daniel found himself wanting to show his gratitude, to do what the master so obviously desired. And so it was with only small trepidation that Daniel asked, exactly one week after the master had first given him such pleasures, if he might not be allowed to pleasure the master back.

In hindsight, it was a pretty silly question.

The master made no secret of the delights he found in Daniel's hands and mouth, but Daniel knew the man wanted more. Many nights he'd feel a hand snake around, a finger touch lightly where Mr. Foster had hurt him so. He'd stiffen, and the finger would go away, slide back to his balls or his cock, and not return for the next little while.

Daniel thought about what Mr. Foster had said: *I could've made this nice for you.* And the master, too: *It's supposed to be good, Daniel, it's supposed to make you feel good.*

They each had reasons to lie, but Daniel was coming to believe that perhaps they hadn't. The master had promised not to hurt him, after all, and he seemed to be a man of his word, so why would he keep trying unless he really believed . . .

Tonight, Daniel thought. Tonight, if the master tries again, I will try to let him.

* * * * *

Daniel came home late. Breaking news had left him chained to the anchor desk until almost eleven, and by the time the car pulled up to his master's house, his eyes felt hot and heavy. He longed for nothing more than a hot shower and a soft pillow, but when the master met him at the door and swept him up into a kiss, undressing him on the spot between licks, nips, and proclamations about how much he'd missed him, he had no choice but to concede to the master's wishes. Which wasn't to say the man didn't arouse him, even through his exhaustion, because of course he did, he *always* did – he knew just how to touch Daniel, just what to do and say to drive him crazy. Daniel supposed he could think of worse obligations to have.

The master pushed him toward the bedroom, and between kisses Daniel felt brave enough to ask, "Shower?"

The master growled into his neck but veered off into the bathroom. Daniel was already naked, and the master ripped his own clothes off, turned on the water, and shoved Daniel inside, up against the heated tile wall. Water pounded them both.

The master pressed a bar of soap into Daniel's hands. "Wash," he said, then dropped to his knees at Daniel's feet and swallowed Daniel's half-formed erection.

Wow, he really *had* missed him.

Daniel moaned, closed his eyes, and let his head tip back against the tile.

"You're not washing," the master mumbled around a mouthful of Daniel's cock.

Daniel gathered up the brainpower to stick one arm out and soap it up. Then the other arm, then his chest. It was awfully hard to do *anything* with his cock down the master's throat, but he squeezed his eyes tighter and imagined that his hands were

(Victor's) the master's hands, and suddenly it was easy, it was wonderful, and he ran soapy hands across his belly, his nipples, his face and neck. He was panting hard, knees threatening to unhinge, and when the master held one hand up and said, "Soap," the vibrations shot through Daniel's cock and tore a whimper from his throat. He had to drop one hand to the master's shoulder to stay upright.

The master took the bar and ran soapy hands up and down Daniel's thighs, calves, balls, ass. Fingers approached his crack, brushed along it, and though Daniel tensed momentarily, he remembered his resolution and forced himself to relax, to sink back into the pleasure the master was giving him. He let those fingers wash him, caress him, and as they circled across and around that tight ring of muscle, Daniel exploded into the master's mouth.

The master milked him until the tremors stopped, then stood. "I'm getting too old for this shit," he grumbled, but the satisfied smirk on his face belied the complaint. He moved Daniel under the spray, chased soapy trails with his fingers as the water washed them away.

Daniel wrapped a hand around the master's cock, which was so hard it must have hurt, but the master batted him away.

"Not here," he said, voice rough. He pulled Daniel from the shower, made hasty work of drying them both, and then tugged Daniel into the bedroom.

Daniel needed no prompting to climb into bed. Though his own arousal had been sated, he still had a job to do, and he took pleasure from doing it well. He straddled the master's chest backward and bent down to lave the master's erection with his tongue, cradled his balls with his hands. As expected, he felt the master's hands stroke up his back, squeeze his ass.

"Oh yeah," the master panted. "Just like that."

Daniel continued teasing, driving the master toward climax.

Too much teasing, it seemed, for the master moaned, "*Daniel . . .*" low and plaintive, and Daniel took that as his cue to deep-throat the master – a skill he'd not yet

mastered without gagging, but one he felt certain practice would make perfect. Besides, the master seemed to enjoy his practice an awful lot.

As if in confirmation, the master's hands tightened on his ass. Daniel lifted his hips off the master's chest, giving the man's eager hands access to his own cock and balls. He didn't think he could get hard again so soon, but he was at least no longer oversensitive, and he knew the master liked to play.

Daniel pulled back a little to catch his breath, wrapped his hand around the base of the master's cock, and pumped lightly while working the head with his tongue. He was so focused on his task he almost didn't notice the finger sneaking toward his crack again. But now he realized that both the master's hands were on his ass, that one thumb was parting his cheeks and the other was stroking gently over the sensitive skin of his anus. He sucked in a breath, ran his tongue across the master's slit to buy some time, and then, resolve set, freed his mouth and said, "Master?"

Behind him, the master grunted, lifted his head off the pillow, and planted a kiss on Daniel's left butt cheek.

"I uh" Daniel swallowed hard, felt his face flush. He was nervous, embarrassed, more than a little afraid, but he meant to see this through. "I thought maybe I mean, I know you want"

Warm hands stroked up his hips, kneaded his lower back. "What is it, Daniel? It's okay, you can ask me for anything. Tell me what you want."

The earnestness in his master's voice was unmistakable. Still, Daniel was glad they weren't face to face; he didn't think he could do this if he had to look at the man.

"That night, after — " He didn't have to specify; they both knew what "that night" was. "You said, um, you said it's supposed to feel good. Would you . . . ? I want to be able to do that for you, but I'm — "

Scared to fucking death.

The hands at his lower back moved to his hips and nudged him, urging him around. Reluctantly, he turned to face the master, who opened his arms and invited Daniel inside. The master's face was fond, endlessly patient, maybe even loving, and

Daniel pressed his chest to the master's, laid down beside him, and felt those large arms wrap around him.

The master pressed a kiss to his temple and said, "You don't have to do this for me, you know."

Daniel nodded, even though he wasn't so sure. How long before the master got tired of what he had? Daniel knew the master wanted more. And the master had been so good to him, so patient and kind and loving; Daniel wanted to give it to him. He trusted the master to show him how.

"I want to," he whispered. "Please."

The master kissed him again, this time on the lips, long and slow and sweet, then pulled back and said, "Okay."

The master stuck a pillow by Daniel's hip. "Roll over," he said.

Daniel hesitated, trembling.

"Trust me, I promise I'll make it good. I'm not going to — I'm just going to kiss you, okay?"

Daniel nodded. He could handle that.

He rolled onto his belly, situated the pillow beneath his hips, buried his face in his arms, and held his breath. When he felt the master nudge his thighs, he spread his legs, and the master settled between them.

Daniel bit down on his forearm, trying not to hyperventilate, when he felt a puff of warm air blow over his ass. The master pressed a kiss to one quivering buttock. He felt another kiss, lingering and wet, a touch of tongue, and large, firm hands rubbing up the backs of his thighs. Daniel relaxed a little, savoring the sensation.

The kisses moved slowly toward Daniel's center, the master's hands petting and kneading in the wake of his mouth. When his tongue slipped into Daniel's crack, Daniel gasped, shuddered at the strangeness of it, the remarkable intimacy. He was weirded out, maybe even a little grossed out, but he supposed he'd just washed, after all, and *damn*, but it felt good.

Good, Daniel realized, shocked anew — it felt *good*. Great. Amazing, even. The master made a hard little point of his tongue and pressed the tip inside him, and Daniel gasped again, squirmed beneath the master's hands, moaning his surprise and pleasure. But the tip of the tongue was a tiny thing, and his muscles were squeezing even that; he didn't see how anything more could fit inside without pain.

"Relax," the master muttered into his ass, breath and vibration trilling across his skin. "Just let go, let yourself enjoy it."

The master's tongue drove back inside him, in and out in short little thrusts that sent bright sparks of pleasure from Daniel's backside to his belly, tightening his balls and making him hard again, though he'd come not even thirty minutes before.

"See?" the master said, pride and pleasure in his tone, sliding one hand around Daniel's hips to grasp at his newly formed erection.

"Mmm," was all Daniel could manage, but he thrust his hips into the master's hand to punctuate the statement.

The master chuckled and put his tongue back to work in synch with his hand, reaching out blindly with his other hand for the drawer in the bedside table.

The hand around Daniel's cock disappeared, reappeared a moment later at his crack, cold and slick with lube. One finger circled lightly where the master's tongue had been just moments before, and this time, Daniel was too relaxed, felt too good to tense up. The tip of that finger slid easily inside him, and it was almost no different from the tongue, felt just as strange but just as amazing. Daniel let out his held breath on a shuddery moan.

"Okay?" the master asked.

Daniel nodded, and the finger slid in a little farther, and then a little farther still, until it was in all the way.

"Still okay?" the master asked, his free hand rubbing soothing circles on Daniel's back.

Daniel gave a hesitant nod. The finger in his ass felt so odd, a little uncomfortable in its foreignness, a bit unnervingly intrusive, but the spark of pleasure was most

assuredly still there, as if that ring of muscle and the flesh beyond it were nothing more than a bundle of nerve endings singing beneath the attention.

The master's finger slid out ever so slightly, then back in again, out and in, and then paused, crooked, and pressed gently toward Daniel's cock from the inside.

Daniel felt his balls tighten, and the words "Ohmygod, I'mgonna – " fell from his lips in a breathy rush.

"Not yet, you're not," the master said, withdrawing his finger and placing a kiss on the tight ring of muscle, flexing of its own accord. "Come on." The master sat up, propped some pillows against the headboard, and patted them invitingly. "Roll over and sit up. I want to see your face when I bring you to the most mind-blowing orgasm of your life."

Daniel rushed into position, aroused to distraction and burning with curiosity for what other new sensations the master might wring from him. Plus, the part of him still quivering with fear rather than pleasure, the part that couldn't shake the memory of what Mr. Foster and the supervisors had done, felt safer face to face with the master, more secure, a little more in control. Even though he knew he wasn't.

He leaned against the pillows, and the master put another one under his hips, gently pushed his bent legs wide and his ankles back as far as they'd go. Daniel blushed again, the heat in his lower belly rising all the way to the roots of his hair. He felt so exposed this way, so vulnerable and open.

The master must have sensed his discomfort, for he dropped his hands to Daniel's belly, massaged the tense muscles there until they relaxed. Daniel let his legs fall open a little wider, inviting the master's probing finger back.

The master chuckled and re-slicked his fingers, then pushed one in slowly, brushing over the same spot inside he'd hit before.

"Jesus," Daniel breathed, "what are you *doing*?"

The master smiled up at him and did it again. "You like that, eh?" Again, and Daniel moaned his reply, reached out to touch his aching cock but stopped himself when the master shook his head. "It's your prostate, Daniel. You really didn't know?"

"I must've — " Daniel gasped, eyes falling closed and fists curling into the sheets as the master rubbed harder on that magic spot. "I must've been absent from school the day they discussed the intricacies of gay sex."

The master thwapped his flank and snorted. "Smartass."

But Daniel was only half kidding. NewWorld Media schooled all their slaves destined for skilled work, and a Companion's work was no doubt more skilled than most.

But then the master rubbed his prostate again and all thoughts of school — sexual or otherwise — ran right out of his head.

The master's finger disappeared, and before Daniel could really begin to miss it, it came back with what he assumed was its neighbor. The stretch was just a touch uncomfortable; he clenched down, gasping.

The master pulled out immediately. "Did I hurt you?" he asked, so pitifully worried that Daniel was loath to confirm the man's fear.

"No," he said. "No, it's fine, it was just . . . Just a little surprising, that's all."

The master's slick hand slid from his ass to his cock and stroked him with agonizing slowness. "Because we can stop if you — "

"No," Daniel breathed. "Really, it's . . . Please. I want to fe — "

Strange, how hard it was to finish that sentence. Daniel flashed back to the basement of NewWorld, overcome with exhaustion and pain, repeating the words Mr. Foster had made him say. But the master was not Mr. Foster, and there was no pain now. Only pleasure.

"I want to feel you inside me," Daniel said.

The master studied his face for several seconds before nodding once and sliding those two fingers back to his ass, massaging briefly before pressing them inside. There was still a burn, but there was pleasure too, and when those fingers found his prostate again, the one feeling quickly overwhelmed the other until he was left with nothing but the need to stroke himself, to come and come and come until his fucking *ears* leaked.

But the master wouldn't let him touch his cock, and the sensation of teetering on the edge just kept going and going. He was vaguely aware of thrashing, moaning, begging beneath that touch, and when the master added a third finger there was no pain at all, only delirious fullness and a freshly amplified sense of impending-but-not-quite orgasm.

"Please," he heard himself saying. *"Please, master, I need . . . I need . . ."* *Need you to touch me. Need you to fill me. More, harder, faster.*

He felt a hand on his belly, his chest, cupping his cheek. "Open your eyes," the master said, his voice full of that strange, squishy gentleness wrapped in the hard edges of hunger, and it was only then that Daniel remembered the master hadn't come yet, had spent all this time paying attention to Daniel instead. "Look at me."

Daniel didn't recall closing his eyes, but clearly he had. He opened them to the master's smiling face, his moist, parted mouth, his brown eyes nearly black with desire.

"Eyes on mine, Daniel. Stay focused on me, okay?"

It wasn't a question really, but Daniel found the wherewithal to grunt out, "Yes, master," anyway. He thought he knew what was coming next, especially when the master hooked Daniel's ankles over his shoulders. Thought he should be afraid, but looking into the master's open face, reeling at the master's fingers working their magic inside him, there was no fear.

Until the fingers pulled away, and the hot, blunt tip of the master's cock replaced them.

"Wait," he breathed, suddenly nervous.

Way, way more than nervous.

The master froze, and the pressure against Daniel's hole disappeared. He could see the frustration, the impatience in his master's face, and added, "I'm sorry, I . . . I'm just —"

"It's okay," the master said, though the words were terribly strained. He teased Daniel with his fingers again, slow and sure, once again chasing the fear away with sharp bolts of pleasure. "Look at me, Daniel. Eyes on me. Good, now breathe."

Daniel realized he'd forgotten that. He sucked in a deep breath and stared hard into the master's eyes, seeking strength, seeking calm. Again, he felt the fingers replaced with the master's cockhead, poised and waiting, and after one more breath, he gave the master the slightest of nods and the master pushed slowly forward.

The head breached him with a minimum of fuss and that same mix of pleasure/pain he'd felt with the second finger. He focused on the one and ruthlessly pushed the other away.

"Look at me, Daniel," the master said. "At me."

Daniel opened his eyes again to look the master in the face. The intensity he saw there, the raw, restrained *need*, was almost frightening. And humbling, too, when he realized the master was holding back for *him*, waiting for *his* permission to continue.

"I'm okay," Daniel said, though he had to force the words out between heaving breaths. But he really was okay, better than okay, as long as he didn't let his mind wander back to darker times.

Which, *shit*, it just had, and he wanted off, wanted out, but he bit back the panic and stared into the master's eyes, begging him for the one thing he knew would anchor him in the present. "Master, please, I need you to — Please, move."

The master nodded, pushed forward another inch without ever taking his eyes off Daniel, who went tense and then slack with pleasure as the master's cock brushed his prostate.

"More," Daniel breathed, letting his eyes fall closed now that the two of them had connected in a better way, a more primal way, the pleasure of the act allowing no room for black thoughts. The master slid in another inch, then another.

"Touch me, please," Daniel whispered, and a tight, slick fist wrapped around his cock and stroked him deep and slow.

The master matched the rhythm of his hand with his hips, carrying Daniel right back to that razor-thin edge and holding him there, breathless, for so long it became a torture of its own; he couldn't bear it for another second.

"Please, master!" he cried, and the master thrust harder with hips and hand, so hard the bed slammed into the wall. In a single moment of coherent thought, Daniel marveled at the power of gentle care to take the very same action that had rent him in two with blood and pain and instead split him apart with such sublime bliss that he came in a writhing explosion of fireworks and shouts and clenched hands and curled toes and spots that grayed his vision until he could no longer see.

He heard the master's shout a few seconds later, or maybe a few minutes, as he was slowly swimming up from a sea of lethargy and boneless contentment (and maybe, he suspected, momentary unconsciousness), every last inch of him humming and tingling with bliss. He felt a slight soreness as the master pulled out, but if that was the price for the miracle he'd just experienced, he'd pay it gladly night after night.

The master dropped down beside him, panting and smiling, and pulled him into arms that somehow still had strength enough for the job. Daniel couldn't have fought the embrace if he'd wanted to, as limp and sated as he felt, and when the master leaned in for a kiss, Daniel poured the last of his reserves into kissing him back with all the wonder and joy the man had unleashed within him.

"Fuck," Daniel whispered when they pulled apart, still stunned inarticulate by what had just passed between them.

"Agreed," the master said, chuckling into Daniel's hair.

"No, really. *Fuck.*"

The master laughed harder and kissed Daniel again. When he pulled back, Daniel locked eyes with him and said, "Thank you, master. I mean it; that was *Thank you.*"

But the master didn't say, "You're welcome." He just smiled smugly, kissed Daniel on the tip of the nose, and said, "See?"

And Daniel nodded because he did, he really did see, and for once he could think of nothing he'd rather lay eyes on than the man who was right here in front of him.

~The End~

About the Author

Rachel is a M/M erotic romance author and a freelance writer and editor. Originally, she dipped her toes into cable news and book publishing, decided the water was cold and smelled kinda funny, and moved on to helping would-be authors polish and publish, writing for websites and magazines, and ghostwriting nonfiction. Her professional interests vary widely; she's a Contributing Editor to Construction Source Magazine, a political/media blogger at the Huffington Post (if she can still claim that after a year's worth of living under a rock, posting nothing for them), and a ghostwriter in the small business and motivational space.

Her first novel, Counterpoint: Book One of Song of the Fallen, released in August of 2010 with Guiltless Pleasure Publishing. Anchored is her second novel. Her third, the Counterpoint sequel, will release in the Fall of 2011.

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