



*Carnal Passions Presents*

# Light Switch

By

Lauren Gallagher



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*Other Books by Lauren Gallagher*

Between Brothers

The Next Move

Until It's Over

# ***Dedication***

To everyone who made this book possible,  
Especially Steve and Kathleen.  
I couldn't have done this without you.  
-L. Gallagher

# One

I knew my relationship was over when I wore the lacy purple lingerie for my neighbor, not my boyfriend.

Pulling a pair of jeans and a plain sweatshirt over the garter, panties, and bra, I knew. Truth and guilt sank deeper into the pit of my stomach with every passing minute. Tonight was the night.

I went into the bathroom to fix my hair and put on a little makeup. Why I bothered, God only knew, but at least it was a way to pass the time before my boyfriend arrived. The antiquated clock radio on the bathroom counter said it was nearly seven thirty. Alec would be here any minute. With any luck and a little courage on my part, he'd *finally* be gone not long after that.

He'd be gone, leaving me with Matt.

Not that I had any intention of touching Matt. I'd entertained a few fantasies of taking him to bed, but I'd been with Alec since before Matt and I met. Whatever problems we had, I wasn't about to fool around on Alec. No, I wasn't going to touch Matt tonight. We wouldn't even be in the same room.

In the two years that we'd been neighbors, Matt and I had never touched beyond the occasional handshake or hug. We'd become fast friends, but everything about our close friendship was strictly platonic.

When light and time cooperated, however, he watched me from his bedroom window, which was across the narrow alley from my own.

He looked at me. Alec didn't bother anymore.

It had started innocently enough. A window shade carelessly left open. A change of clothes. A well-timed glance.

Eye contact and startled gasps from both sides of the alley had ended the moment as quickly as it had begun. For days, we were shy and coy, passing on the sidewalk without looking at each other, the accidental voyeur and unintended exhibitionist who'd been caught in the act.

Beneath the embarrassment, though, there lurked a part of me that found a delicious thrill in that momentary exposure. Perhaps I'd imagined the look on his face in that fleeting second before we'd both turned away in a panic, but I was sure his eyes had widened and his lips had parted with more than just the startle of seeing a random topless woman. Wishful thinking or not, I let myself believe he'd looked because he liked seeing *me* like that. It had been too long since someone had done so, and right or wrong, I liked it.

Had he been some stranger, I'd have been creeped out and probably invested in blackout curtains.

He wasn't a stranger, though. He was Matt, and after a few days, I left the shade open again. It took almost a week for him to take me up on my unspoken invitation. One night, while I got ready for bed, surreptitious glances in the mirror revealed the ghost of a silhouette in his window, a dark profile against a darker background, and I knew he was there. He was there, and I wanted him to be. I wanted him to see.

I didn't look. I didn't even acknowledge him. But that night, and a handful of nights afterward, he was there.

Tonight, standing in my bathroom as I got ready to drop a long overdue bomb on Alec, I sighed. My shoulders fell, and when they did, the dark purple strap peeked out from beneath my reflection's shirt. I tucked it away, meeting my own eyes and averting them when my cheeks turned pink.

If Alec noticed what I'd worn beneath my casual clothes, he'd turn up his nose and call it trashy. He wouldn't see it, though. Even if I lost my nerve and let him stay like I had so many times in the last year, tonight would be like any other. In the best case scenario, we'd wordlessly undress

ourselves in the dark so we could have silent, passionless sex before going to sleep a thousand miles apart.

At least, if that happened, there would be just enough light spilling in from outside for Matt to see.

I sighed and looked myself in the eye again. This had to stop. Though Matt and I never touched, nor did we ever speak about this in our friendly, unassuming conversations, the guilt was getting to me. This window-to-window affair of glances wasn't right.

Holding my own gaze, I took and released a deep breath. Yes, I was going to do this. Tonight. Swallowing hard, I touched up a phantom smudge in my smoky eye shadow and fixed a strand of hair that was perfectly in place.

From down the hall, the crunch of a key and click of a deadbolt broke the silence. The front door opened.

I took another breath, shut off the bathroom light, and went out to meet Alec.

He was just shrugging his jacket off when I rounded the corner. With a quick, expressionless glance, he acknowledged my presence, then hung his jacket in the hall closet. "Sorry I'm late. Got held up at the office."

"Don't worry about it. Just gave me a little more time to get ready."

The next look he shot me was a quick down-up sweep with his eyes, followed by a lifted eyebrow that said nothing if not "*that is what you call 'ready?'*"

I shifted my weight, gritting my teeth. *Keep it up, sweetheart. You're making this easy for me.*

He put his hand on my waist and kissed me lightly. "So, what's the plan for tonight?" Another down-up glance scrutinized my appearance before he added, "I assume you want to stay in?"

I pursed my lips, resisting the urge to fold my arms across my chest. "Yes, actually."

"Sounds good." He smiled. "I think we still have a few DVDs to watch, don't we?"

"We do." I hesitated. "But first, I'd like to... talk."

His eyebrows jumped. "About?"

"Us."

"Us?" He shrugged with one shoulder. "Well, okay. Let's talk, then." He didn't sound alarmed.



"How about in the living room?" I gestured down the hall and started in that direction without giving him a chance to object. "Do you want something to drink?"

"I think I'm okay, thanks." He took a seat on the couch with his arm across the back of it, his usual invitation for me to sit beside him. The thought of that arm curling around my shoulders made my skin crawl.

Instead, I sat toward the middle, creating just enough distance to keep him from wrapping his arm around me. Turning to him, I pulled my knee up onto the cushion between us. His eyes darted to my knee, then met mine.

He cleared his throat. "So, um, what's going on?"

Wringing my hands, I avoided his eyes. "Just, I..." *Come on, Kristen, come on. You can do this.*

He put his hand on my thigh, dangerously close to the telltale edge of the hidden garter. "Is this about moving in together?"

"Well, no. I mean, not exactly. It's..." I wanted to scream with frustration. This wasn't the first time I'd tried to have this conversation with him, and it wasn't the first time I'd gotten tongue-tied.

Squeezing my leg gently, he said, "Look, if it's too much for you, it's okay. We don't have to do it right now." His tone teetered between empathizing and patronizing, and I couldn't tell which way it was intended.

Instead of looking at him, I stared at the subtle ridge my garter made beneath my jeans. "Listen, I don't think we should move in together. At all."

"You don't?" At last, a hint of alarm crept into his voice. "But, why not? I mean, after all this time, wouldn't it make sense?"

"It would, yes." I swallowed hard and forced myself to meet his eyes. "If we were planning to get married, or—"

He laughed. "Is that what this is about? Well, if you want to start thinking about getting married instead—"

"No, no, it's not that."

He cocked his head. "Then, what?"

Wetting my lips, I whispered, "I don't think we should move in together because I—" *Come on, come on, just do it. Get it out there.* "I don't think we should stay together."

Before he even had a chance to react, the weight of

the world slipped off my secretly lace-covered shoulders. *Finally.*

Alec blinked. "You, what?"

"I don't think this is working."

"You," he paused. "You want to end this?" He gestured at me, then at himself.

"Yes," I whispered.

"Well, I guess I can see now why you never wanted to move in together."

I couldn't blame him for the bitterness in his tone. We'd been discussing it for over a year, and I'd been sidestepping the issue because I'd been trying to work up the courage to tell him I wanted out. Without meeting his eyes, I nodded.

Alec abruptly stood. While I was relieved to have some breathing room, I was afraid he was going to storm out. As much as I wanted him to be gone, we needed to settle this here and now, not set ourselves up for a period of cooling down, followed by another conversation.

He didn't leave, though. Instead, he paced between the coffee table and the television, running his fingertips back and forth across his stubbled jaw. "I don't get it." He shook his head. "After four years, you just want to up and quit?"

"It's not exactly a conclusion I came to overnight."

"Oh really? So when were you planning to enlighten me?"

I sighed. "That's what I'm doing now. This isn't something I went into lightly."

"So what the hell is the problem?" he asked.

"I just don't think we're..." I trailed off, searching for the word. "Compatible."

"Of course we are. We wouldn't have lasted this long if we weren't."

*And we shouldn't have lasted this long.* "Look, Alec, I'm sorry. I'm not trying to hurt you, but I'm not happy with things. I'm not happy—"

"With me?"

I sighed again. "Yes. I'm not happy with the way things are with us, and I'm ready to move on."

"I don't see how you can be unhappy."

*Of course you don't. You would have to have paid attention to pick up on that.* "I am." I struggled to keep my voice gentle and calm. "We want different things out of life. Half the time when we're talking, we're fighting."

"We wouldn't fight if you didn't pick fights all the time."

I took a deep breath. "I don't pick fights because I enjoy it. If something's bothering me, I tell you."

He exhaled hard. "Yeah, and every damned thing bothers you, doesn't it?"

"No. Not everything. But enough." I wrung my hands. "I mean, look at our sex life."

"What? What about it? We have sex more than most couples that have been together this long."

"Yes, we do," I said. "But we never try anything new. There's no variety. It's just the same thing, over and over and over."

He set his jaw. "After this long, I think we've tried everything, don't you?"

"No, I absolutely don't think we have."

"What else is there?"

"Haven't you ever wanted to spice things up? Try something unusual? I've suggested a few things over the years, but you haven't wanted to try a damned thing."

He shrugged. "I'm perfectly happy with things the way they are."

"To put it bluntly, I'm not."

Alec blinked. He eyed me, shifting his weight. "So you're bored with me, then." It wasn't a question.

"I'm bored with our sex life."

"And that's enough to make you want to call things off?"

"There's plenty more to it than that, but that was my first clue that things weren't going so great. I want to try new things. You don't. So I'm bored to the point of being miserable."

"I can't believe you'd end a relationship like this because of sex." Alec shook his head. "Am I supposed to be some kinky porn star to keep you entertained?"

"Not at all." I fought to keep my temper in check. "But it would be nice if you at least looked at me once in a while

in the bedroom."

"In the dark?"

"You could turn on the light," I snapped. "And maybe when you're done with that, try doing the same to me." It was only when he stopped pacing that I realized I'd said the words out loud. My heart pounded. I hadn't intended to go there, but there was no taking it back now.

"You're unbelievable." He threw his hands up. "If there was something wrong with us in the bedroom, why didn't you bring it up a long time ago?"

"I've tried. Time and again. And quite frankly, I'm tired of it."

"Oh, you have?" He folded his arms and cocked his head. "When? How?"

"Maybe all the times I've told you I'd like to try new things? I haven't exactly kept a list of dates and times, but I've brought it up more than once." I paused. "You either don't want to talk about it, think I'm concerned about nothing, or turn up your nose at whatever I suggest."

"Like what?"

"Well, how about when we went to Cabo last year? I suggested fooling around on the beach, on our balcony, on—"

"I'm not going to fuck you in *public*." His lips contorted with disgust. "Jesus, Kristen."

I rolled my eyes. "And what about the handcuffs we bought two years ago, but have never used?"

"We don't need to use handcuffs," he said with a dismissive gesture.

"We don't need to do a lot of things, but I think it would be fun. That's the kind of stuff I want to try."

"So, what? Just having sex isn't enough for you? Now you have to try all that freaky, kinky shit?"

"Why is it freaky?" I shrugged. "Some of it could be fun."

"No, no, absolutely not." He glared at me. "I think you've been listening to too many stories from that friend of yours."

"Who? Scott?"

"The one who's into all that weird crap, yeah."

I scowled. "He's told me a few things, yes, but—"

"See? You've just been listening to him." Alec inclined his head, giving me that patronizing look I'd grown to despise. "Normal people don't *do* that shit, Kristen."

Fury coiled in my gut. "Then maybe I'm not normal."

"Or maybe you've just been around that freak too long. I've never liked you hanging around him any—"

"I *beg* your pardon?" I stood, mirroring his defensive stance. "Now you want to dictate who I spend my time with?"

He gave a flippant shrug. "I just don't like you hanging around that asshole."

"Why? Because he's into things you're not?"

"Or maybe I just don't like my girlfriend discussing sex with another man."

"Oh, I can understand that," I said through my teeth. "She might get 'ideas' in her pretty little head about how to fix a lackluster sex life, and she might even try to apply those 'ideas' to the relationship she's trying to save."

"Yeah, and—"

"Or, heaven forbid, she might just suddenly realize there's more to sex than a little quiet missionary style in the fucking dark."

He narrowed his eyes. "I don't think I'm the problem, then."

"Neither is Scott. I talk to him because he *listens* to me. Something you stopped doing a long, long time ago."

"Fine." He put his hands up. "You know, between that sick fuck and that friend of yours next door, I figured it was only a matter of time anyway."

My jaw fell open. "What?"

"You heard me."

"Are you suggesting that—"

"Are you denying it?" he snarled.

"I have *never* cheated on you." Guilt twisted in my stomach. It was true, I hadn't touched another man, but the temptation had been there. One of the first signs this relationship was in trouble was when I caught myself fantasizing not only about the wild things Scott told me, but Scott himself. Then came the voyeuristic tryst with Matt. Though I'd never touched either of them, the guilt was killing me just the same. I'd cheated in mind, if not in body, which

was why this needed to end.

"Never?" Alec broke the lengthy silence that had fallen. "Somehow I doubt that."

My face burned, no doubt making me look even guiltier than I was. "You don't trust me?"

"Should I?"

I clenched my jaw. His constant suspicion and distrust were among the countless nails we'd driven into this coffin. Thank God we were finally going to bury the fucking thing.

"Look, I may be frustrated," I said. "But I do love you, Alec. I wouldn't cheat on you."

"But you'll leave me?"

"Yes." The word came so easily, so unflinchingly. "Yes. I need to."

"You know what? Fine." He glared at me again. "I'll go, and you can have all the crazy, freakish sex you want. Mark my words, though. In a few months, after you've had a little fun and realize how sick it all is, you'll regret this."

"Somehow I doubt that." Our lackluster sex life was the wedge we'd used to finally cleave our relationship apart, but if it had failed to do so, we had plenty more that would have done the job.

"We'll see, won't we?" He shifted his weight. "I don't suppose you'll let me take my stuff before you kick me out?"

I nodded down the hall. "Go right ahead."

With a sharp huff, he stormed past me. I followed him into my bedroom.

Now that he was moving, now that he was doing something besides standing there talking to me, his fury escalated, just as it always did. He jerked open the closet door and went about ripping shirts and a coat off hangers and throwing them onto the bed he'd probably expected to share with me tonight.

"I can't believe you, Kristen," he said over his shoulder. "You're really willing to let all of this go because I won't be a freak like whatshisname."

"No. The sex is only part of it."

He slammed a pair of shoes down and kicked the closet door shut. "Really? So what else is there?"

"Well, this." I gestured at him. "Every time you get mad, you start throwing shit around, slamming doors, yelling

at me—”

“Oh, so now I’m not allowed to get angry?” he shouted, turning on his heel and facing me. “Am I just supposed to sit here like a good little boy and let you tell me I’ve just wasted four years of my fucking life?”

I drew back, folding my arms to keep my hands from shaking. “There’s a happy medium between that and flipping out at—”

“I’m *not* fucking flipping out at you, Kristen,” he snarled, closing the gap between us. “You can’t expect to say this kind of shit and—”

“And what?” I stepped toward him, and to my great satisfaction, he shrank back slightly. “Am I tied to you for the rest of my life? Am I not allowed to move on if I’m not happy anymore?”

“After all this time, the least you could do is put some effort into fixing it instead of running away.”

I flipped my hands out, palms up. “I’m not going to argue anymore, Alec. I want out, I want *you* out, so just get your stuff and leave.”

He said nothing, but the rage in his eyes almost made me step back myself. At the very edges of my peripheral vision, he clenched and unclenched his fists. For the first time in four years, I wondered if he might just raise a hand to me, and I could neither draw nor release a breath until he muttered a curse and turned back to gathering his belongings.

On his way out, he stopped at the hall closet to yank his jacket off the hanger and put it over his arm. Then he jerked his key off the ring and tossed it on the table by the door.

“Looks like that’s everything.” He opened the front door. “Unless you had anything else you needed to say?”

I shook my head.

He sneered at me. “Not even good-bye?”

“I think we’ve already said that, don’t you?”

Cursing under his breath, he left, slamming the door behind him. I turned the deadbolt and went back into my bedroom, dropping onto the bed and releasing a long breath. Uncomfortable though it was, that conversation had needed to happen for a long, long time. We’d both made our

mistakes over the last few years. We'd both caused our fair share of problems in this relationship. At least now, it was over. Thank God, it was *over*.

With another long exhalation, I looked at the clock. It was barely eight o'clock. Still plenty of time to go out and grab a drink, vent to a girlfriend, do something other than stay home in this silent apartment. With my newfound freedom came the long overdue ability to go out and take care of some of this sexual frustration. Maybe with someone who knew what he was doing. A one night stand had never been so tempting. I could go out. Or I could turn off the light and go to sleep.

I didn't go out.

I didn't turn off the light.

I didn't go to sleep.

I just took off my shirt and hoped Matt liked purple satin.



## Two

A few days after Alec and I broke up, I joined a group of friends at our usual Friday night watering hole. The music was blasting and the place was packed, but I sat at our booth, alone with my thoughts. I wasn't down or depressed, I wasn't regretting my decision to kick Alec to the curb, I was just... thinking.

The split had been long overdue, but it was enough upheaval to knock my world off its axis. I'd spent four years as half of "Alec and Kristen." Being just "Kristen" would take a little getting used to.

Did I stay single for a while? Go back on the prowl? See if that guy over by the jukebox was game for a one night stand? That option became more tempting with every passing minute. I was a free agent now. I was at liberty to find someone who didn't consider sex a substitute for a sleeping pill.

A flicker of movement from the corner of my eye was my only warning before Scott appeared and dropped into the booth beside me. The low light of the bar didn't do a thing to temper the intensity of his blue eyes, especially as he shot me a pointed look.

"You, my dear," he said in a *don't argue with me* tone, "are not your usual self tonight."

He sounded so serious, I couldn't help smiling. "Is it that obvious?"

"It is." He rested his arm on the back of the bench and faced me. "So what's going on? Dr. Moore is listening."

I snickered. "Something tells me a university wouldn't keep its accredited status long after awarding that particular degree."

He rubbed his eye with his middle finger. I laughed. If anyone was going to give me the third degree about my mood tonight, I was glad it was him. Scott was nothing if not easy to talk to. Always had been.

"Hey, space cadet." He elbowed me playfully. "What's up?"

Shaking my head, I sighed. "Just preoccupied, I guess."

"With?" Though he ribbed me as he always did, the lift of his eyebrows and the creases in his forehead spoke of genuine concern.

I took a breath. "Alec and I broke up."

Scott's posture stiffened slightly. "Really?"

"Really."

"About damned time."

I gave him a playful glare. "Gee, thanks."

"Come on, he's a dick." Scott shrugged. "I've been wondering for a long time when you were going to kick his sorry ass to the curb."

"Guess I can't get too offended, then, because I've been wondering the same thing." I sipped my drink. "Believe me, it's been a huge weight off my shoulders."

"I can imagine." He drummed his fingers on the table and watched me for a second. "So, since I assume you're not grieving about the monkey that's no longer on your back, what's bothering you? Just settling into being single, or what?"

"Pretty much, yeah." I eyed him. "And speaking of being single, what on earth are *you* doing out without adult supervision on a Friday night, anyway? All the girls busy?"

"Amy's out of town with her husband, Tara's at a party with another Dom, and Kasey has the flu." He sighed dramatically. "So, yes, I'm all alone tonight."

"Damn, Scott," I said. "Three women on the roster, and you still can't get laid tonight?"

He made a dismissive gesture. "Please. Just because I'm not with one of them tonight doesn't mean I won't get laid."

"Manwhore."

"Prude."

I laughed. He always was a breath of sexually liberated fresh air.

He opened his mouth to say something, but shrill feedback from a microphone made us both cringe. We turned to see the DJ setting up for karaoke.

"Oh, Jesus," I said. "Not karaoke."

"Ugh. Do you want to go outside and get some air?"

"Yes. Yes, I do."

"I thought as much."

We both stood. On the way to the stairwell, he didn't squeeze between people or elbow his way through the crowd in a serpentine path from booth to door. He walked and people moved. He'd offer a polite "pardon me" or turn enough to keep from bumping into someone, but for the most part, they got out of his way. They always did.

I wondered if it was such a good idea to go out on the terrace with him. As horny as I was tonight, being alone with him was probably hazardous to my health. I was newly single and he was almost six slender feet of temptation wrapped in a conservative black shirt and jeans. Narrow hips and broad shoulders. Cheekbones that could cut diamonds. A lightly stubbled and sharply angled jaw that I'd often imagined brushing that spot where the curve of my neck met my shoulder.

Scott had always been high on my "look, but don't touch" list. In fact, my attraction to him predated my relationship with Alec. He'd always been heavily into BDSM and he was polyamorous, neither of which appealed to me back then. While BDSM piqued my interest now, polyamory still wasn't for me. Territorial I was not, but I had enough problems maintaining monogamous relationships. Adding more players sounded like a recipe for disaster.

We climbed the stairs and went outside to the rooftop terrace. This was where the bar had its luaus and barbecues when the weather was warmer. It was barely spring, though, and a chilly wind blew in off the coast, so the terrace was mostly deserted. I zipped my jacket and nestled my chin into the collar.

Scott hoisted himself onto the concrete railing. "So,

how are you doing with all of this?"

"Not too bad, actually." I hugged myself to keep from shivering. "It's, you know, a bit of a change, but I'm glad it's over."

"I don't blame you. If you don't mind my asking, what was the final straw?"

"Nothing in particular," I said. "Well, it wasn't anything specific that made me decide to end it that night, but to be quite honest, our sex life was probably the biggest issue that came up."

Scott snorted. "Now that I believe."

"Oh?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, I'm no psychic, but I got the impression there wasn't too much going on between you two."

"How do you figure?"

"No chemistry. I've seen more sparks fly between dead fish than the two of you." He paused. "No offense."

I laughed. "None taken. Not too far from the truth, to be honest."

Scott clicked his tongue and shook his head. "I'm surprised that douche bag didn't bore you into a coma."

"A few more months, and he probably would have."

"Big shock." He rolled his eyes. "I mean, don't get me wrong, some people prefer vanilla sex, but—"

"Vanilla sex?"

He smiled. "You know, the kind that doesn't involve whips and chains."

"So, the kind you *don't* have?"

"I *beg* your pardon." He put a hand to his chest and feigned offense. "I have been known to engage in vanilla sex from time to time, you know."

"And do you enjoy it?"

He grinned. "Darling, if sex and Scott Moore are involved, rest assured, everyone present enjoys it."

*Of that, I have no doubt.* "Cocky bastard."

With a flippant shrug, he said, "Guilty as charged."

"But let me guess," I said, rolling my eyes, "you've earned the right to be so cocky?"

"Damn right, and I have witnesses who will give sworn statements."

I shook my head. "Well, you're right about Alec." My humor faded. "Hell, I wouldn't even call him vanilla."

"Really?"

"No. Vanilla is actually a flavor."

Scott laughed aloud. "Ouch."

"It's true." I sighed. "It's a relief, that's for sure. God only knows what the next guy will be like, but at least that particular routine is broken."

"So you're going to try to find someone a bit more adventurous this time around?"

I nodded. "Shouldn't be too hard. As long as he has a pulse, anyway."

Scott chuckled. "Remind me never to get on your bad side."

"Oh, please. You've been on my bad side since the day we met."

"Okay, but I haven't given you a reason to diss my sexual prowess, have I?"

"No, that's true, you haven't." I hugged myself a little tighter as a cold breeze blew by, though he didn't seem to notice it.

"What was his deal, anyway?" he asked. "Couldn't figure out how to get you off?"

"Couldn't be bothered is more like it," I muttered. "I don't know, I guess he just wasn't interested in trying new things." I shrugged. "He wasn't, I was, so I was bored."

"Bored, you say?"

"Quite."

He laughed softly, but then his brow creased and he fell silent.

"Penny for your thoughts?" I said.

He looked at me, his forehead still lined with heavy thought. "Let me ask you something."

"Go ahead."

"You say you wanted to try new things." He eyed me cautiously. "Have you ever thought about trying BDSM?"

I hesitated, then nodded. "I've thought about it, yeah. Especially lately."

"I'm not surprised." Something like triumph crinkled the corners of his eyes.

"Oh, really?"

"Just a hunch," he said. "You've never struck me as a strictly missionary-and-lights-off kind of girl."

"Yeah, well, that's all I've been for the last four years. And that's if I was lucky."

"So Alec was more of an idiot than I thought," he muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing. Anyway, I pegged you a long time ago for a woman who likes a little more spice in the bedroom."

"I wouldn't know, honestly. It's been forever since I've had anything I could call 'spice' in the bedroom."

"He was really that lame?" His eyebrows lifted. "Alec never wanted to try *anything*?"

I laughed. "Are you kidding?"

"Not even a little cuff play? Blindfolds? Anything?"

"Absolutely not. He wouldn't even try new positions, and as for BDSM, he doesn't think that's something 'normal' people do."

Scott clicked his tongue. "Heard that a few times in my life."

"He just assumed it was all freaky and disgusting." I rolled my eyes.

"So many people do. And half of them probably do some light BDSM play without even realizing it. They think we're all freaks in gimp masks and nipple clamps, and they look down their goddamned noses at us while they're tying their own partner's wrists with a pair of nylons." He laughed. "Not that it's a pet peeve of mine or anything."

"I can see that."

He shrugged. "Just annoys me when people judge me because I take things to a different extreme."

"Speaking of which, what kinds of things do you do with your—" I paused. "Partners?"

"Subs," he corrected. "I fuck all three, but besides that, I do different things with all of them."

"Such as?"

"Well, Amy likes being flogged, whipped, beaten, you name it. For her, sex isn't worth having if it doesn't hurt." He smiled, the expression full of the same warmth and fondness as his voice when he added, "That woman is a *total* pain slut."

I laughed. "That's an interesting way to put it."

"It's accurate. She gets off on pain. She thrives on it, and I'm happy to give it to her."

"And the others?"

"Tara likes to be restrained and teased. I can tie her up and keep an orgasm just out of her reach for ages. I tease her with hot and cold, pain and pleasure, whatever I see fit to dish out." He shifted a little, resting his hands on the railing on either side of him. "Kasey is training to be a slave, not just a sub. I don't do the Master/slave thing as a rule, but I'm easing her into being completely submissive before she finds a Master. Once she's comfortable with that, she'll pursue someone who will give her the total domination she really wants."

"Sounds like a lot of work for you."

"Keeping up with three women? Especially those three? You'd better believe it."

"So what do you get out of it? I mean, besides getting laid, of course."

"With Amy, I get all the same things you'd expect from a relationship, minus the monogamy." He ran a hand through his hair and paused to scratch the back of his neck. "With all three of them, I get power. They give up control, I gain that control. That, and I get off on watching them respond to everything I do or don't do. Their responses, whether it's getting frustrated or having an orgasm, drive me wild."

"Is that just a guy thing?" I asked. "Getting off on watching?"

"I've known plenty of women who are voyeurs, but yes, a lot of guys like to watch. Why do you think so many of us like porn?"

"Point taken."

"I happen to be both an exhibitionist and a voyeur, so this lifestyle suits me perfectly."

"You don't say," I murmured.

Scott cocked his head. "What?"

"Never mind. Tell me more."

He hesitated, then went on. "A lot of people think BDSM is about violence, abuse, and humiliation. That couldn't be farther from the truth. It's all about power, trust,

control, pushing boundaries, things like that."

"That's why it intrigues me so much these days."

"But you've never tried it."

"I wanted to. Alec didn't. I wanted to try it with him, and figured that would be a safe way to explore it since we had an established relationship." I paused. "And, I suppose you could call what we had 'trust'."

Scott pursed his lips. "Hmm. Maybe it's just as well you never tried it with him, then."

"What do you mean?"

"*Did* you trust him?"

"I, well, I guess I did."

He shook his head. "Unless you can answer 'yes' without a moment's hesitation, he was definitely not someone you wanted to play around with. If you don't trust each other, you don't want to go anywhere near the lifestyle."

"Good point." I watched my finger trace a crack in the concrete railing. "Though it makes a bit more sense than trying it with a stranger, you know?"

"True."

"So, I don't know, maybe for now I'll just stick to finding someone a little more adventurous, then see if I can't convince him to branch out a bit more."

"Probably not a bad idea," he said. "Though someone with more experience might be the better choice. Better than the blind leading the blind."

I shrugged. "Yeah, but I'm not going to jump into whips and chains with someone I've just met."

Scott was quiet for a long moment. His eyebrows knitted together as he stared at the terrace floor. Then, without looking up, he said, "Do you trust me?" His serious tone stopped a smartass retort of "as far as I can throw you" at the tip of my tongue.

I took a breath. "Of course I do."

He fell silent again, chewing his lip before turning to me. "What if I said I could introduce you to the lifestyle?"

"You mean..."

"Take you under my wing. Give you a safe environment, ease you into it, and help you figure out if BDSM is something you really want to do."



"Are you—" I paused. "Are you serious?"

"Absolutely." He wetted his lips and looked me in the eye. "Maybe I'm being a bit forward, but the fact is, I know my way around this lifestyle. I know you, and we trust each other. If anyone can guide you, you're looking at him."

I swallowed. I was dreaming. I had to be.

He cocked his head slightly. "Unless you're not comfortable—"

"No, no, it's not that." *Far from it, Mr. Moore.* "Just, you know, caught me by surprise."

He laughed softly. "You know me. Full of surprises." His expression turned more serious. "I mean it, Kristen. Really. Maybe it's the Dom in me wanting to be in control, but if you're going to get your feet wet with this, I'd rather be the one helping you. At least then I know someone else isn't fucking the experience up or taking advantage of you. Not that I think another Dom would fuck you over or hurt you. The vast majority wouldn't dream of such a thing." He paused. I thought he shuddered, but couldn't be sure. Then he added, barely whispering, "There are bad apples out there, though."

I raised an eyebrow. "Bad experience?"

"I've—" He cleared his throat. "I've known a few people who've had bad experiences, yes. And a bad experience with a Dom can be enough to scare someone out of the lifestyle completely."

"I can imagine."

"So, that's why I'm suggesting this. I don't want any of that happening to you. You need to have a safe, trustworthy partner, especially since this lifestyle is all about pushing boundaries." He smiled. "And if I may be so bold, I have a feeling *someone* has some boundaries that could use pushing."

"You would be right."

The smile turned to a grin that weakened my knees. "So, you in?"

"I don't know." I folded my arms across my chest. "I might need you to beg, plead, and give me puppy dog eyes first."

He released a sharp breath and eyed me. "I'm a Dom, sweetheart. If anyone's going to beg, plead, or give puppy

dog eyes, it's *you*."

I laughed. "You only go Dom, then?"

"Yes. If you're inclined, I can help you find a sub, but I do not switch."

"Is that common? To choose one or the other?"

"A lot of people prefer one or the other. Plenty of people switch, though. Being a sub just isn't my thing."

"I think I can handle starting out as a sub."

He grinned. "I have a feeling, if I know you as well as I do, you'll be a switch."

"How do you figure?"

"Call it a gut feeling."

I shot him a playful glare. "You seem to have a lot of gut feelings about me when it comes to this stuff."

The grin broadened. "Maybe I do."

"Which leads me to believe you've thought about this before."

"Maybe I have."

"Hmm, so now I have a gut feeling," I said, trying not to laugh, "that this arrangement wouldn't be entirely one-sided."

"Are you suggesting I'm offering because I think I have something to gain?"

"I am."

He gave a flippant shrug with one shoulder. "Would you be offended if I said I absolutely would be getting something out of it?"

"Not in the least." Then I dropped my gaze, searching for the words to one of the most awkward questions I'd ever thought to ask him.

"What's on your mind?" he asked.

I finally managed to meet his eyes. "So how far do we take this? You said yourself you have sexual relationships with all of your subs."

"Yes, I do." His cheeks flushed with just a hint of color. "If you're not comfortable taking it that far, we don't have to. There's still plenty we can do without ever having sex."

Ignoring the way my stomach fluttered with nerves, I said, "And if I *am* comfortable taking it that far?"

He sucked in a breath. "Well," he hesitated, "you

wouldn't have to twist my arm." He offered a cautious smile.

*Be still, my beating heart.* "The polyamoury thing isn't my cup of tea, though," I said. "I'm fine with something physical, but that..."

He made a dismissive gesture. "Don't worry about that. Polyamoury isn't for everyone. We can keep it just physical."

"I think I can live with that."

Scott gave me a cocky grin. "Do we have a deal, then?"

"You're very direct, you know that?"

"What do you expect?"

"I would expect no less." I rested my hip against the railing and faced him. "And yes, we have a deal."

"Good. Like I said, though, if you want to try being a Domme, I'll help you find someone. And I can teach you to top, it just won't be with me."

"Assuming I don't have my hands full with you."

"Which you will," he said matter-of-factly. "I should warn you up front, I am very, very slow when it comes to training a new sub or teaching someone about the lifestyle. I always err on the side of moving too slowly."

"I could think of worse things."

"Well, there's also the fact that I enjoy teasing my new subs." He winked. "Prepare to be very, very frustrated at first."

"Knowing you, that doesn't surprise me in the least."

"Just wait, my dear," he said. "You have yet to see my deepest depths of evil."

"I can't wait."

He grinned. Then something like shyness tempered the devilishness in his expression. "And I promise, this isn't just some cheap ploy to get you into bed."

"Well, even if it is, it's working."

Scott swallowed hard. I did the same, my own boldness catching me by surprise. We were both silent for a moment.

"So," I said quietly, "when do we start?"

"Do you have plans tomorrow night?"

"No, I don't." *We're really going to do this.* "Want to come over?"

"Hell, yeah." He smiled. "We'll go over some rules and things like that when I get there. Like I said, we're going to move very slowly, so don't expect the full-on, no holds barred BDSM experience the first night. Some Doms work that way. I don't."

"Bring it on." I smiled in spite of the tremor that went through me. *I'm going to do this. I'm going to fuck Scott. Oh God, yes, I'm going to fuck Scott Moore.*

He pushed himself off the railing and landed with catlike grace. Breathing suddenly got a hell of a lot more complicated. We'd stood this close and closer over the years, but never like this. Never after all but sealing a deal to fulfill some of my hottest fantasies.

"I suppose," he whispered, putting a hand on my waist, "we should start out slow."

"You're the Dom." My voice shook. "I'll follow your lead."

He grinned. "You're a fast learner." The hand on my waist moved to the small of my back, narrowing the space between us and raising goose bumps on my skin. "What I was thinking, though, is that it wouldn't be right to fuck you..." He tilted his head, slowly leaning in. "...when I've never even kissed you."

My knees trembled. "Maybe we should take care of that."

"Maybe we should." He stopped with his face just inches from mine. When he spoke again, the feather light touch of his breath to my skin nearly melted my spine. "I really want to kiss you right now, Kristen."

Words failed me. All I managed was a subtle nod, even as my mind screamed, *Yes, yes, kiss me.*

He ran the tip of his tongue across his lower lip. "Do you want me to kiss you?"

"Yes." The word barely escaped my throat. "Yes, I do."

"I thought so. And I will." All at once, he released me and stepped back, a sly grin curling his lips. "But not now."

"What?" I grabbed the railing for balance and stared at him, my lips tingling with the anticipation of the kiss that hadn't come. "Not now?"

He grinned. "Not now."

"When?"

"When I decide it's time." He winked. "Consider this your first lesson as a sub. I'm the Dom. I make the rules." Before I could protest, he gestured at the door. "Come on, everyone's probably wondering where the hell we are."

"You're an evil, evil man, Scott."

"And I'm going to teach you my evil, evil ways." Again he gestured at the door. "Ladies first."

## ***Three***

The next night, Scott arrived at a little past seven.

A million second thoughts ran through my head as I turned the deadbolt, but they evaporated as soon as the door was open. His eyes were intense as always, and tonight they burned with something I'd never seen before. At least, something I'd never seen directed at *me*. I'd always hoped he'd someday want me, and tonight, if his eyes were to be believed, he'd have me.

I stood aside to let him in. When the door was shut and locked, the air was taut with a sense of finality. We were here. Sealed in, confined, committed to venturing onto this untrod ground.

He shrugged his jacket off. "You haven't chickened out on me, have you?" His tone was playful, but the slightest crease between his eyebrows suggested he wasn't just teasing.

"Of course not." I glanced over my shoulder as I hung up his jacket. "Why? Have you?"

"Me?" He snorted. "Please. Besides, I'm here, aren't I?"

"You're here, but we're both still dressed." I grinned. "Still plenty of time for you to get cold feet."

One eyebrow rose. "Getting mouthy already, are we?"

"Maybe I am."

He came a little closer, invading just enough of my space to make a step back almost unavoidable. "Looks like I'm going to have my work cut out for me."

"Then maybe we should get started." I hoped my grin hid my nerves as I sidestepped him and started toward the kitchen. "Do you want something to drink first?"

"Sure, thanks." He followed me into the kitchen.

"Wine?"

"Please."

As I opened the bottle, he raised an eyebrow.

"You haven't had anything else to drink tonight, I hope?" he said.

"No, I haven't." I poured two small glasses of red wine. I handed one to him and added, "Before you ask, no, I'm not doing it to get up the nerve to go through with this."

He chuckled, swirling his glass but not taking a drink. Seriousness bordering on sternness lined his face. "A little alcohol is probably okay at this point. It's usually not recommended to drink at all. Not even a little." Then his expression relaxed. "But a little bit of wine won't hurt anything. Especially with as easy as we're starting out."

"So you're not going to try to get me drunk first?" I sipped my wine.

"Absolutely not." He still didn't drink.

I gestured at him with my glass. "I have to be honest, I thought you'd be dressed a bit differently."

He looked down at his plain white button down shirt and black jeans. "What were you expecting?"

"I don't know. Leather and chains, I guess. Something like that." I caught myself wondering, though, if his slick black leather belt served a dual purpose.

Scott laughed. "You expected me to be dressed like a Dom?"

"Basically."

"Well, as hot as my ass looks in leather pants," he said, chuckling, "they're uncomfortable as hell. I work up enough of a sweat doing this without being shrink-wrapped in leather."

A sweaty, leather clad Scott walked my mind, and I shivered.

Clearing my throat, I said, "So it's just an aversion to leather pants?"

"Oh, not really. They're not the most comfortable thing in the world, but more than that, I don't want to look

like a Dom."

"You don't?"

He shook his head. "No. I want you to submit to *me*, not the image of a Dom."

I didn't know just what to say to that. I did know, however, that the idea of submitting to Scott, in leather or not, made my mouth water.

He lifted his wine, but stopped it just shy of his lips and set it down again. "So let's talk rules." He ran a fingertip up and down the stem of the glass. "Do you have any hard limits? Anything that's absolutely out of the question for you?"

"Not that I can think of. I don't know enough about what we're doing to know what I absolutely wouldn't like."

"Just in general. Anything sexual that you don't like? Swallowing? Anal?"

"Anal," I said. "Definitely not my thing."

"Noted. Anything else? Do you have any issues with someone touching your feet or your neck, for example?"

"Not that I know of."

He nodded. "Okay, good. If you think of anything, don't hesitate to tell me. I'm all for pushing your limits, but I'm not in this to hurt you or scare you. Understood?"

"Understood."

"I do have one hard limit of my own," he said. "I won't choke you."

I laughed. "That's quite considerate of you."

He smiled and shrugged. "Well, you'd be surprised. I've had a few subs who wanted to be choked. Some to the point of unconsciousness." He shook his head and swirled his otherwise untouched wine again. "I might put a hand on your throat to restrain you, if you're comfortable with that, but anything that cuts off blood or air flow? No way."

"I don't think that'll be a problem."

"Now, the rest of the rules." The sharp clink of his glass on the counter made me jump for some reason. Maybe I was more nervous about this than I thought.

I swallowed. "Okay, the rest of the rules."

"Do you know how safe words work?"

I nodded.

"Good. Some people use one. I use two." He folded his



arms across his chest and rested his hip against the counter. "The word 'red' stops everything immediately. No questions asked. If something's getting to be too much, but you don't want to stop completely, say 'yellow' and I'll back off." His eyebrows lifted slightly. "Make sense?"

Another nod.

"I think that about covers it. Questions?"

"Not yet."

"Then why don't we go in the bedroom?" He smiled. "There are a few more rules, but I'll explain those as we go. Are you still comfortable with this?"

"I think so."

He cocked his head. "You think so?"

"I am, I am. Just, you know, a little nervous."

"Nothing to be nervous about tonight. Trust me, when I told you we're going to move slowly, I wasn't kidding." He picked up his wine glass. "Do you mind if I drink this in there?"

"No, of course not."

He followed me into the bedroom. When the door clicked shut behind him, a mixture of fear and lust surged through my veins. *We're really doing this.*

There was a chair beside my window, and Scott took a seat, casually crossing his legs and cradling his wine glass between his fingers. He gestured at the window. "Should we close the shade?"

"Leave it open."

His eyes flicked toward me.

I just grinned. "Don't worry about it."

Glancing out the window, he said, "Not concerned about your neighbor seeing this?"

"Nope." *In fact, I hope he does.*

When he looked at me again, he inclined his head, and I wondered if he saw through me.

With a nervous laugh, I said, "You don't mind someone seeing us, do you?"

"Not at all." He paused, wetting his lips. "I take it you don't mind either?" I shook my head. He glanced out the window again, murmuring something that may have been "duly noted."

"So," I said, "what do you want me to do?"

"Nothing yet." Scott sat back in the chair with one elbow on the armrest. "Stay right there for now." For the first time, he sipped his wine, then set the glass on the sill. My heart thundered in my chest as I waited for him to speak. His long fingers fascinated me as he unbuttoned the cuff of one sleeve and rolled it to just below his elbow. Then he did the same to the other sleeve. And still, he didn't speak.

He reached for his wine, raised it to his lips, and took another sip. When the glass clinked on the sill again, he looked at me, and something in his expression had changed. The temperature in the room dropped as our eyes met.

"From this point on," he said, "until I say otherwise or a safe word is spoken, I am your Master and you are my submissive." Every word had an edge, a terse sharpness, and this abrupt shift in his demeanor gave me goose bumps. "Every question is to be answered quickly and honestly. You will only speak when you are asked to do so, and whenever you do, you will refer to me as 'Master'. Am I understood?"

I swallowed. "Yes."

His eyebrow lifted.

I cleared my throat. "Yes, Master."

"Good." He laced his fingers together on top of his knee. "Nothing happens without my express permission or my order. You won't touch me, move, speak, anything, unless I allow or demand it. Clear?"

"Yes, Master."

He smiled. The half-nod that followed sent a warm rush of relief through me. Only seconds into this, and already his approval or lack thereof made me react physically.

"You won't touch me," he said. "But the same rule does not apply to me. As my submissive, you've given me permission to touch you any way I see fit. Have you consented to this?"

"Yes, Master." Already, those two words slipped so easily off my tongue.

Movement caught my attention and my eyes darted toward the window. Before I could see if Matt was there, Scott snapped his fingers. I jumped, and when our eyes met, his narrowed.

"Look at me, not out there," he growled. "Or I'll close the shade."

I nodded. "I'm sorry, Master."

"What are your safe words?"

"Red and yellow, Master."

"And what do they each mean?"

"Red if I want to stop completely, yellow if I want to back off." Another upward flick of his eyebrow prompted me to add, "Master."

"Good." He gave a slow nod. "Unbutton your shirt."

My heart raced. Excitement? Nerves? Both?

"Was I unclear?" he asked.

"No, Master."

"Then...?"

My face burned and my hands shook, but I did as he ordered. With every button, arousal and uncertainty fought for dominance. When the first button opened, my nerves tingled with anticipation. The second exposed the first hint of cleavage, and I wondered if I really was comfortable disrobing in front of Scott. The third let cool air touch between my breasts, and my nipples hardened. Oh yes, I wanted this.

When my shirt was completely unbuttoned, I started to shrug it off.

"Wait."

I froze and looked at him.

"Did I tell you to take it off?"

"No, Master." I tugged it back into place.

"What is the rule about moving or doing anything?"

"Not without your command or permission, Master."

"Good. Now take it off."

Once my shirt was off, I nearly set it on the bed to get it out of the way, but waited, remembering his orders.

"Put it on the bed."

I did as I was told, swallowing hard as the sense of exposure sank in. Matt had certainly seen this much and more but Scott hadn't. Assuming Matt was watching, I wondered what he thought about this, about me slowly undressing in front of someone sitting casually by the window.

The distance between Scott and me didn't help my nerves. Had he been close to me, running his hands all over my bare skin, his eyes closed as he occupied himself with a

long kiss, it would be different. But he was several feet away, fully dressed and looking at me. Under only his watchful eye and not his touch, I'd never been so exposed.

"Are you doing okay?" With the gentleness in his voice, the veil lifted and for a moment, he was just Scott.

"I'm okay, yes."

He cleared his throat. Master was back.

"I'm fine, Master," I said quickly.

"Good." He rose in one smooth, controlled motion, and started toward me. My heart beat faster as he approached. I willed myself to keep breathing while I waited for him to decide what happened next.

Without speaking, he walked around me, stopping just beyond the reach of my peripheral vision. I silently begged him to touch me. A fingertip on my skin, a hand on my waist, *something*, but he denied me.

"Take off your bra."

My shaking hands immediately obeyed in spite of the thoughts running through my mind. My heart pounded and my stomach fluttered with nerves. This vulnerability scared and thrilled me as much as his voice compelled me, and after a few seconds of struggling, my bra went slack.

"Turn around."

I did, keeping my eyes down as I faced him. My bra slid down my arms and I caught it with a crooked finger, but I didn't know if I should drop it or hold it. All I could do was await his command.

"Give it to me."

I extended my hand, all the while wondering where he was looking. At my breasts? At my downturned eyes? At the black satin and lace hanging off my outstretched fingers? When he reached for my bra, I held my breath, hoping he'd grant me just the slightest brush of skin on skin when he took it from my hand.

And once again, he denied me, taking the strap between two fingers and freeing it from my hand without touching me.

"You're doing well." His whispered approval sent another rush of relief through me.

"Thank you, Master."

He stepped a little closer. "Unbutton my shirt."

My eyes darted up to meet his. His expression invited neither debate nor resistance, only unquestioning obedience. Dropping my gaze, I reached for his shirt.

I watched my fingers fumble with the buttons. I'd never been so acutely aware of someone's body heat, my fingers and knuckles registering every fluctuation in temperature as they moved toward and away from him.

After I'd unfastened the button just above his belt, I paused.

"Keep going," he ordered.

"But it's—" I hesitated. "May I untuck your shirt, Master?"

"Yes."

I gulped. As I tugged his shirt free, I couldn't decide where to look. Intimidation kept me from meeting his eyes. The mouthwatering grooves beneath his tight undershirt kept me from looking straight ahead. The third option meant being unable to ignore the obvious ridge just below his belt. For the same three reasons, closing my eyes was out of the question.

Somehow, I managed to get his shirt untucked and completely unbuttoned. I let my hands fall to my sides, and waited for his next command.

"Take it off."

I barely kept myself from shivering again. The more he talked this way, the more I had visions of him throwing me down on the bed and fucking me. Pulling my hair, growling filth into my ear, giving—

"*Kristen*." The sharpness with which he said my name did nothing to lessen my arousal, but it did get my attention.

"Yes, Master. I'm sorry."

"My shirt. Take it off. *Now*."

I lifted my hands to do as he'd asked, but hesitated again.

"Is there a problem?"

Unable to meet his eyes, I whispered, "No, Master." I reached for his shirt.

"Wait."

My hands stopped in midair.

He gestured over his shoulder. "Go around behind me. Then take it off."

As ordered, I stepped behind him. Reaching around him, I hooked my fingers under the lapels and drew them back, sliding it over his shoulders and down his arms. The sleeves caught on his forearms, where he'd rolled them earlier, but with a gentle nudge, came loose.

"Put it on the bed."

"Yes, Master." I did as ordered, laying his shirt neatly beside my haphazardly piled clothes.

Still with his back to me, he said, "Now the other shirt."

My breath caught. There was no way to get that snug T-shirt off without touching his skin. He had to know that, so I whispered my already habitual affirmative and reached for his T-shirt.

I freed it from his belt. He didn't react when my fingertips grazed his hot skin, but my pulse certainly reacted, rising higher and higher as I pushed his shirt up. His body heat beneath my palms made my head spin. He raised his arms, then took over and pulled his shirt off.

*Oh God. Oh my God.* In all the years I'd known him, I'd never seen Scott without his shirt. I'd never seen just how sculpted and powerful his shoulders were. I'd certainly never seen the black Chinese characters, each about the size of my palm, tattooed along the length of his spine, nor their slightly smaller counterparts running down his sides. They must have hurt like hell, more so than my nails biting into my hands as I tried to keep myself from touching him.

There were lines on his back, faint red streaks in groups of four. On either side of his back, one set of those red streaks stood out from the rest, the lines darker and more pronounced. They looked raised enough that I'd have been able to feel them if I ran my fingers over them. I wondered which of his subs had left them, if it had been her orgasm that had driven her nails into his back, or if she'd done it to drive him over the edge.

On his right shoulder, several fine scars, each a few inches in length and running parallel to each other, caught the light. I couldn't quite place—

"*Kristen.*"

The sound of my name startled me.

"What? I mean, I'm sorry, Master."

He made a sharp gesture, indicating I was to come around and face him. I did, holding my breath and keeping my eyes down.

"I'm sorry, Master," I said again.

"It's okay, you're still learning." His voice was gentle now, enough to coax the held breath out of my lungs. At least until he added a terse, "Don't let it happen again."

"I won't, Master."

"Good." He put his hand on my waist. I pulled in a breath. Just a simple, still touch, and he couldn't have sent more lightning surging through my veins if he'd run his tongue around my clit.

He drew me to him. "Are you still comfortable with all of this?"

"Yes, Master." Those words still came so easily, rolling off my tongue at his command even when coherent speech otherwise eluded me. He was so close now. God, he was close. Heat radiated from his body, taunting me with his delicious, agonizing nearness.

His free hand touched the side of my neck, then drifted up into my hair. "I'm not moving too fast?"

"No, Master." *I want you to move faster. I want more. God, I want you.*

The hand on my waist pulled me closer, and that thick, hard ridge that had distracted me earlier now pressed against me. My erect nipples brushed his chest, and I had to bite my lip to keep from whimpering. It took every bit of restraint I had not to put my arms around him, to wait until he specifically allowed me to touch him. *Please order me to touch you, Master. Please, God, please.*

Second after second ticked by, and still the order didn't come.

"Am I frustrating you?" His breath warmed my lips.

It was a loaded question. It had to be.

"Answer me truthfully, Kristen." He ran his fingers through my hair. "Am I frustrating you?"

"Yes, Master. You are."

"Good." And with that, he pulled away, reaching for his shirt. He gestured at my clothes. "You can put that back on."

"What? But—"

A pointed look stopped me.

I swallowed. "Yes, Master." He pulled on his T-shirt as I reached for my bra. When he picked up his shirt and put it on, I wanted desperately to rip it right off. With every button he fastened, my frustration ratcheted up. I pulled my own shirt around my shoulders. The fabric had cooled in the minutes since I'd taken it off, but it was the absence of Scott's body against mine that made my knees shake. I'd wanted him for a long time, but never this badly. I'd never been so close, close enough I could almost taste the wine on his lips

"This is so we both know who is in control," he said as he buttoned the last button of his shirt. "But it's also for me to earn your trust. You can strip half-naked in front of me, at my command, and I'm not going to abuse my power and take advantage of you."

"Not even if I want you to take advantage of me?"

Momentary panic swept through me as I expected a stern look or sharp admonishment, but he laughed.

"No, not even if you want me to." He cupped my face in both hands. "Trust me on this. There's a method to my madness. This is as far as we're going tonight, but as long as you trust me and submit to me, it's nowhere near as far as we *will* be going." He planted a tender kiss on my forehead, that soft contact of his lips making my knees weaker. "We're done for tonight," he whispered. "I'm not your Master anymore until the next time."

With those words, my shoulders dropped and I released my breath. "You're a merciless tease, you know that?"

He chuckled. "You'll be calling me worse things in the near future, I think."

"I can't wait." I shot him a playful glare. "So, when's my next lesson?"

"Whenever you're ready."

"The sooner the better. Busy tomorrow night?"

"Not if it means spending the evening doing this." He ran the tip of his thumb along the underside of his jaw. "What do you have in the way of a robe?"

"Like a bathrobe?"

"That, or if you have something skimpier."



I went to my closet and flicked through the hangers before I found a blue satin robe I'd bought ages ago. I pulled it out and held it up. He picked up one end of the belt and ran his fingers along its surface, brow furrowed as he inspected it.

Letting go of the belt, he nodded once. "Perfect. Wear that tomorrow tonight."

"Anything under it?"

He shrugged. "Bra and panties, nothing too extravagant."

"I'm sure I can find something suitable."

"Good," he said. "So, same time tomorrow night?"

"I'll be here."

"So will I."

I showed Scott out and, after he was gone, returned to my bedroom. There, I closed the door and leaned against it. Though he'd teased and frustrated me, there was no denying he'd turned me on. I couldn't get the sound of his voice out of my mind. The sharp commands, the gentle praises, the soft whisper just before he'd *almost* kissed me. I'd physically ached for his touch, and with the denial of a kiss, he'd driven me out of my mind.

The last year or two of my life had been an exercise in sexual frustration, but none of that held a candle to this. I had to have more of him. Whatever he commanded, whatever he wanted, I'd give it to him, because I needed to know what his kiss tasted like.

I moved to my bed, and as I unbuttoned my shirt for the second time tonight, I hoped Matt had been watching since Scott arrived.

I hoped he was still watching.

## ***Four***

I didn't have to ask if Matt had seen everything last night.

Every Sunday morning, almost without fail, we jogged together. We always met on the sidewalk between our buildings, and it never took us long to fall into our usual easy banter. Like Scott, Matt was easy to talk to, more so than most of my female friends.

Lately, though, he sometimes had a hard time looking me in the eye or didn't seem to know quite what to say. There was a lot of throat-clearing and gaze-dropping before his shyness evaporated. It didn't take a genius to connect those mornings to the nights before.

So after a night like last night, it was no surprise when I came downstairs and he offered only a glance before returning his attention to using the vacant bike rack to stretch his quads.

"Morning," I said.

"Morning," he murmured, glancing up again just long enough to make eye contact. He focused on stretching, and neither of us spoke as I joined him. For a few minutes, I replayed everything I'd done within sight of his window last night. I could only imagine what it had looked like to him, especially when Scott and I had redressed and left without exchanging so much as a kiss, and a few minutes later, I'd returned to my bedroom alone. Alone and obviously needing to relieve some tension.

I bit my lip to keep from grinning. Scott had frustrated the hell out of me, but I knew there was plenty to come. Last

night was a sample, a hint and nothing more, and I was already coming unglued at the prospect of whatever he had up his sleeve for tonight.

Especially if Matt would be watching again. I cast a surreptitious glance at him, but he kept his attention on his stretches instead of looking right at me.

It was kind of cute, actually, the way he focused so hard on his stretches whenever he'd watched me the night before. I wasn't sure why he was so coy about it. The open window shade must have told him I not only knew he watched, but had given him my tacit blessing to continue. He knew I knew. He had to, even if we didn't talk about it.

Maybe, like me, he wasn't quite sure how to acknowledge our sordid, silent affair without screwing up our close friendship. Physically, we were as platonic as any friends. Visually, we'd stepped into far more intimate territory. There was a balance to be struck, and as long as we didn't discuss it, we could play stupid until such time as we knew how to address the elephant in the window.

Matt broke the silence and brought me back to the present. "So, up for some hills today?"

"I don't know." I glanced over my shoulder at him. "Can you keep up if we do?" I leaned down and grabbed my toes.

"Oh, shut up, of course I—" He paused. Cleared his throat. "Of course I can."

"Right, of course you can." I stood. "As long as it's just the little hills, right?"

"Woman, I'm going to leave you in the dirt on those hills."

"We'll see about that, shit talker."

"I will. Just watch."

"Pfft." I turned around and shot him a playful glare. "More like you'll be watching me."

Our eyes met and we both froze. Matt quickly dropped his gaze and muffled a cough. "Well, I guess we'll just have to see if you can keep up."

"Yeah, I guess we will."

He looked at me again, and we both cracked cautious smiles.

I nodded toward the road. "How about putting your

money where your mouth is?"

"Bring it on."

We headed out onto our customary path toward the park. As soon as we'd fallen into our usual, comfortable cadence, our conversation followed suit. Safe, mundane subjects were easy to hide behind, so hide behind them we did.

"So how's work?" he asked.

"My job is the reason 'work' is a four-letter word."

He laughed. "Shitty week?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Must be contagious. I've been ready to murder about half a dozen of my clients."

"I know the feeling." I clicked my tongue. "What kind of idiots were you dealing with this week?"

"All kinds. This one jackass came in on Friday afternoon. Ugh." Matt groaned. "He wanted this elaborate full-color three-fold brochure. First, all the photos he wanted us to use were copyrighted, so I told him we'd have to go with stock photos. Didn't compute in his tiny little brain."

"Sounds like a real winner."

"Oh, it gets better. They wanted *us* to write the content."

"He obviously doesn't know who he's dealing with, then." I tried unsuccessfully not to snicker. "I mean, he wants this to attract customers, right?"

"Shut up." Matt elbowed me playfully. "Anyway, on top of all of that, he insisted that the front of the brochure had to have a metallic hologram on it."

"A hologram of what?"

"Their logo, which was cheesy enough without being holographic. And it made absolutely no sense with the rest of the layout or the purpose of the brochure, but it was part of the douche bag's 'vision', so no matter what, it had to have this stupid hologram." He let out an exasperated sigh. "On top of all of *that*, he wants five hundred copies by noon tomorrow. And his budget? Two hundred bucks."

I released a cough of laughter. I didn't know the ins and outs of Matt's pricing matrix, but I'd seen enough to know that was ridiculously low-balled. "So what did you tell him?"

He shrugged, pausing to wipe some sweat from his forehead. "I very diplomatically instructed him to suck my cock."

"How exactly does one 'diplomatically instruct' someone to do that?"

He flashed me a grin. "I have my ways."

"I'm sure you do."

"Ah, well," he said. "At least I get a break pretty soon when I go to Denver for that trade show. A week and a half of letting my business partner deal with all the bullshit."

"Must be nice."

"Oh, it is." He grinned. "So, anyway, what kind of crap has been going on where you work?"

"I've got suppliers who suddenly don't think they need to keep their delivery dates. One of my biggest vendors called me last Tuesday and can't fathom why I'm upset that the massive shipment of brass that was due on Friday is going to be delayed almost a month."

"A month? Jesus, my clients would have my head."

"Believe me, I've got a few people after mine. Customer service, manufacturing, upper management, you name it, they're all coming down on me right now. If that damned brass doesn't show up by Friday, I won't be surprised to hear from the President, the Pope, and the Prime Minister of Iceland."

Matt laughed. "Does Iceland even have a Prime Minister?"

"I have no idea, but if it does, I'll probably hear from him."

He chuckled. "Sounds like we both needed the weekend to show up."

"And it wasn't a moment too soon when it finally did."

"Amen to that." He paused. "Speaking of not being at work, you coming to poker night this week?"

I pressed my lips together to keep from grinning. This had to be a subtle way of bringing up my now defunct relationship with Alec. Alec hated it when I went to the weekly poker games with various other tenants in Matt's building. Half the time, he persuaded—whined, manipulated, badgered—me into spending those evenings with him.

"I will absolutely be there," I said. "Think I'd miss an

opportunity to screw you out of some money?"

"Well, I didn't figure you would," he said, laughing softly. "I just figured..." He glanced at me.

"Figured Alec might throw a shit fit like he always does?"

Matt nodded.

I made a dismissive gesture. "He's out of the picture now."

"Really? I hadn't realized the two of you split up."

"Yeah, a few days ago." *As you already know, but you deserve an Oscar for pretending you don't.* "About damned time, too."

Matt snorted. He hadn't liked Alec any more than Scott had. In hindsight, the fact that my two best friends couldn't stand my boyfriend should have given me a big fat clue. Live and learn.

"So, I take it you're not terribly broken up over it?" Matt said.

"No, not at all." I hesitated to mention Scott, but since Matt already knew, there was no sense pretending I'd been alone since Alec left. "Hell, I started seeing one of my friends before the week was out."

Matt stumbled. His head snapped toward me as he regained his footing. Then he quickly said, "Oh. Really?" That wasn't an act. His surprise was genuine. Maybe he hadn't seen me with Scott last night after all. Maybe he'd only watched me while I was alone.

Clearing his throat again and casually wiping sweat from his brow, he said, "That's good, that's good. I mean, I'm glad to hear you're not holing up in your apartment being miserable."

"I spent enough time doing that while I was with Alec, thank you."

He laughed, but it was half-hearted. "Well, everyone will be thrilled to see he's not keeping our favorite player away from us anymore."

"Favorite player?" I eyed him. "I didn't think you all liked losing that much."

"Oh, whatever."

We went on chatting as we continued around the park a few blocks from our apartments. As the conversation

wandered, I couldn't help thinking I'd truly caught him off guard. From the moment I mentioned Scott, Matt seemed...off balance. Longer and longer pauses punctuated our half-hearted banter. Every smile was forced and every laugh was tentative. When we raced up a couple of hills, his usual competitiveness was tepid at best, even when he beat me to the top of one particular place where I usually won.

He'd known about Alec's and my split, that much I could tell, but Scott had come out of left field and thrown Matt off somehow. My revelation had caught him off guard, and his reaction had done the same to me. Were there lines here that I needed to read between?

On the way back to our buildings, he released a breath. "Man, it's good to get out of the house. My apartment's been closing in on me all weekend."

"You've been sitting at home?" I said. "No hot dates this weekend?"

He chuckled and shook his head. "Haven't been out on too many since Elaine left." He paused. "To be honest, it's been such a relief to have her gone, I've just been enjoying the peace and quiet in my apartment."

"Oh, *there's* a shock." I didn't even try to hide the sarcasm. There was less love lost between Elaine and me than there was between Matt or Scott and Alec. It might have been a tiny bit of jealousy on my part, since she'd snagged Matt. Or maybe it was because she was a territorial, screeching harpy who deserved to spend her life alone in a house full of cats instead of making my gorgeous, good-natured neighbor miserable.

Maybe just a *little* bit of jealousy.

"Anyway, I've been out a bit," he said. "Just, you know, a one nighter here and there."

*Lucky bitches.* "Can't blame you there. I'm starting to think relationships are entirely too much bullshit." We slowed to a walk as the buildings came into view.

"I thought you said you were seeing someone, though."

"I am, but it's just..." *How candid should I be here? The man has seen me naked. He's watched me masturbate, for God's sake.* I swallowed hard. "It's nothing serious, let's put it that way."

He chuckled. "I've heard that line before."

"No, I mean it," I said. "Really. He's, well, he's into some things that I'm not, so I don't think we'd be compatible for anything more than what we're doing now."

"What do you mean?"

"Polyamory, mostly."

"Oh really?"

I nodded. "Yeah. He's got a girlfriend and a couple of submissives—"

"*Submissives?*"

"Yeah." I grinned. "He's into BDSM."

"Oh. So I assume that's something else you're not into?"

"It's something I'm curious about. That's why we started seeing each other. He's showing me the ropes."

"Showing you the ropes? How apropos."

I laughed. "Yeah, something like that. So, anyway, the BDSM thing is fine, but I don't think I could be poly."

"I'm with you on that," he said. "To each theirs, but I just don't think I'm built for that kind of thing." He was quiet for a moment. "I never realized you were into BDSM."

My heart skipped. We'd never discussed our sex lives, let alone any kinks we might have had. I swallowed. "You never asked."

He glanced at me, a smile tugging at his lips beneath cheeks that may have been flushed from more than just our recently concluded run. I half-expected a smartass comment, but it didn't come. Matt had always been a little on the shy side, especially compared to one shameless Scott Moore, but not like this. Not with me, at least not since we'd gotten to know each other.

We said little until we were in front of my building. There, we stopped, both looking at the pavement and lingering, our unsaid goodbyes keeping our feet planted. This was where we usually parted ways with something quick and casual. For some reason, that didn't come and we didn't move.

Finally, he spoke as he shifted his weight and rubbed the back of his neck. "Listen, um, do you want to come by tonight? Grab a movie, maybe a couple of drinks?"

"I'd love to, but I've got plans tonight."



Our eyes met.

Yes, I wondered if he could see in my eyes, *those kinds of plans*.

He offered a shy smile. "Oh, okay, well, maybe another night."

"Let me know when you're free. I'm usually around."

"Will do."

We were both quiet for a moment, avoiding each other's eyes.

He shifted his weight again. "Well, I guess I'd better let you go."

"Okay," I said. "I, um, I'll see you on Wednesday."

He cocked his head. "Wednesday?"

"Poker night?"

"Right, right, of course." He laughed, his cheeks darkening. "How could I forget? I'll see you then, if not sooner." And a little *more* color emphasized his *fuck, did I really just say that?* grimace.

I pretended not to notice. "Sounds good."

The grimace turned to another shy smile. "Okay, well, have a good night." He cringed. "A good day. Have a good day."

I laughed. "You too."

With murmured goodbyes, we went our separate ways. As I walked into my building, I smiled to myself. He may not have been watching last night, but I had no doubt he would be tonight.

## ***Five***

When Scott arrived at a little past seven, I wore the blue satin robe as he'd ordered. Closing the front door behind him, he looked me up and down. He thumbed his chin as deep concentration lined his brow.

"Just as I figured," he said with a slow nod, "it looks even better on you than it did on the hanger."

"So you approve?"

The corner of his mouth curled up as he looked at me through his lashes. "Oh, yes, I approve."

I smiled. We hadn't yet moved back into dominant/submissive mode, but his approval or lack thereof still controlled the tightness of the knot in my stomach.

"Wine?" I asked.

"Yes, please."

"Red or white?"

"Red, of course."

In the kitchen, I poured one glass. As I handed it to him, he cocked his head.

"You're not having any?"

"Not tonight, no."

He swirled his glass and grinned. "A lot of people are inclined to drink when they're nervous. Yourself included."

"You're assuming I'm nervous."

"I'm not assuming." Without taking a sip, he set the glass down. "I know you're nervous."

"Do you?"

"I do."

"And how do you know this?"

"Aside from the fact that you're venturing onto the kind of unfamiliar ground that would make any sane person nervous?" He raised an eyebrow. "And you have no idea what I have planned for tonight?"

I swallowed. "Yes, aside from that."

"Your arms are folded so tight, you're digging your fingers into your upper arms." He gestured at me. "You don't want to do that too long, or you're going to leave marks. And the only one who's allowed to leave marks tonight is me."

I looked down. He was right. I uncrossed my arms and rested my hands on the counter.

"Very observant," I said.

"I have to be in tune to you. If you're nervous, uncomfortable, upset. That's part of being a Dom."

"Is it?"

"Absolutely. I can't be a mind reader, but I have no business asking you to submit to me if I can't pick up enough on how you're doing to keep you from freaking out."

I swallowed again, this time with more effort. "Is that something that happens a lot?"

"Not with my subs, it doesn't." He paused. "I mean, it can, and it has, but I owe it to my subs—*all* of my subs—to do everything I can to keep things from getting to that point."

"Good to know."

He picked up the glass and swirled the wine again, watching the untouched red liquid for a moment before looking at me. "So, I know you're nervous, but are you still comfortable with this?"

"Yes," I said without hesitation. "It's new, but it's not making me uncomfortable. I trust you."

Scott smiled. "Good. Well, with that in mind," he said, gesturing down the hall with his glass, "shall we?"

I said nothing, just nodded and started toward the bedroom. In the mirror in the hallway, I caught him looking at my legs. The robe fell just far enough down the backs of my thighs to skirt the very limits of modesty, leaving little to the imagination. I didn't say a word, though. I just smiled to myself and kept walking.

He closed the bedroom door behind him. "I assume you're still okay with the window shade being up?"

I glanced over my shoulder at the window. Matt's lights were off. Maybe he was there, maybe he wasn't. If he was, all he had to do was look.

I turned back to Scott. "The shade's fine."

There was a question in his eyes, in the way they flicked toward the window and back to me, but he didn't give voice to it. Instead, he sipped his wine and set the glass on the nightstand. He unbuttoned his left sleeve and rolled it to his elbow. Once it was neatly in place and he was apparently satisfied with it, he moved to the right. With both sleeves rolled, he reached for his wine again.

He watched me over the rim of the glass as he took a sip. The glass clinked on the nightstand again, and when Scott looked up, his expression had shifted. His lips formed a tight, thin line, and his eyes narrowed just enough to make my heart jump. From friend to Master in seconds.

I held my breath, waiting for his command.

"You remember your safe words?" His tone was flat, devoid of the warm friendliness with which he'd spoken earlier.

"Yes."

He raised his eyebrow.

"Yes, Master," I corrected.

"Tell me what they are."

"Red if I want to stop completely," I said. "Yellow if I want to slow down, Master."

A single nod told me he was pleased with my answer. Looking me up and down, he walked toward me. Then past me. Around me. Goose bumps rose beneath the thin layer of satin. I wanted to shy away from his scrutiny. I wanted to seek out his approval. I could do nothing but stay still and silent.

He walked around me again. Behind me, he stopped.

"Untie your robe."

With unsteady hands, I obeyed. When the knot was undone, I let the loose ends of the belt drop to my sides. The front of the robe fell open, and cool air met the ribbon of exposed skin.

A single fingertip trailed down the center of my spine until it hooked on the back of the robe's belt. Slowly, he pulled it back. Satin hissed across satin as the twin ends rose

beside my hips before slipping out of the loops. The robe fell further apart. If Matt looked now, he'd be able to see the thin strips of black lace that passed for my bra and panties. My mouth watered. *Look, Matt, please look.*

Scott's voice brought me back to the present. "Tonight, I'm controlling everything you see, everything you feel."

"You control the horizontal and the vertical?" The joke was out before I realized I was speaking, and when Scott cleared his throat, a chill ran right through me. "I'm sorry, Master."

He was quiet for a long, nerve-wracking moment. Panic coiled itself around my spine. I wanted to apologize again, but his silence didn't invite me to speak.

Finally, he went on. "I'm controlling all of your senses tonight. Starting with your sight." There was movement behind me, and a second later, he lowered the blue satin belt over my eyes. He wrapped it around and tied it snugly. Flecks of light still peeked through the bottom of it, but I was, for all intents and purposes, blind.

"Is that too tight?" he asked.

"No, Master."

"Face me."

I did. For the longest time, he was still and silent. I waited. I was not permitted to move or speak, to seek him out or draw away from him, so I simply waited.

Warm, gentle contact with my cheek made me jump and suck in a breath. His hand didn't move.

"Did I startle you?" he asked.

I hesitated.

"Answer me quickly and truthfully, Kristen. Did I startle you?"

"Yes, Master."

"Am I making you nervous?"

I released a breath. "No, Master."

"You've given up your sight to me." His fingers traced the edge of my jaw before continuing down the side of my neck. "Do you trust me not to take advantage of that?"

"Yes, Master."

His thumb extended across the front of my throat, a gesture that would have doubled my pulse had it been

anyone else. I swallowed hard, the subtle ripple against his hand making me even more aware of his gentle hold on my neck.

*"I won't choke you," he'd said last night. "I might put a hand on your throat to restrain you, if you're comfortable with that, but anything that cuts off blood or air flow? No way."*

Even without those words seared in my memory, I knew he wouldn't tighten his grasp. There would be no more pressure than was needed to let me know his hand was there. It was a touch, not a threat.

In a low, gentle voice, he said, "Do you trust me not to harm you?"

"Yes, Master," I said without a second thought.

"Good. I demand respect and submission, not fear. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Master."

His hand moved down until his fingertips paused at the hollow of my throat. They followed the ridges of my collarbone, hooking on my robe and pushing it aside until it slid off my shoulder and partway down my arm. Then he did the same to the other side, and I held my breath as he let my robe fall into a pool of cool, discarded fabric around my bare feet.

I shivered. The room was warm, but the exposure created a chill beneath my skin. Thrilling, but unnerving.

"Take everything else off."

I did so without question. My panties landed on top of my robe. A second later, my bra. Between the cool air touching my skin and the exhilaration flooding my veins within, my nipples hardened almost instantly.

"Unbutton my shirt," he said.

I raised my hand and reached for his shirt, then realized I didn't know how close he was. I didn't think he'd like me pawing at him until I found a seam to guide me to the buttons, so I withdrew my hands.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I—" I hesitated, drawing an unsteady breath. I wasn't sure if I should ask. If I'd be out of line.

"Kristen?"

*Well, if I'm going to push boundaries and make*

*mistakes, might as well do it now while he's still patient.*  
"Will you guide my hands, Master?"

He said nothing. His fingers closed around my wrists, and warm relief rushed through me when he laid my hands on his lapels.

"Thank you, Master," I whispered. I started on the first button.

Without my sight, this simple task took on a whole different sensory dimension. The almost imperceptible hiss of my fingers across fabric. The near silent *pop* when a particularly stubborn button finally cooperated. The slow, steady rhythm of his quiet breathing, a rhythm I caught myself mirroring.

As I untucked his shirt from his jeans, I wondered if he was hard like he'd been last night when I'd done this very thing. There wasn't quite enough space under my blindfold to sneak a look, and though it was tempting, I dared not brush my hand over the front of his jeans.

I pushed his shirt over his shoulders just as he'd done with my robe, and my fingers encountered hot skin. No T-shirt underneath this time, no other layer of fabric to keep me from touching him. Imagining his bare torso in front of me, I tried—not very successfully—to breathe. In my mind's eye, I saw the tattoos running down his sides. I couldn't remember exactly what each character looked like, but I filled in the memory as best I could, curling my fingers into loose fists as I fought the temptation to touch him.

"Take a step back," he ordered. When I did, he followed and repeated the order. We kept moving like this—my steps at his command—until my calf bumped my bed.

"Sit, then swing your legs up on to the bed."

I did, feeling around to make sure I wasn't too close to the edge.

He ran his fingers through my hair, his hand stopping at the back of my neck. "Lie back." He kept his hand there as I obeyed his order, the gentle support guiding me down until my head landed softly on the pillow, assuring me I would neither fall nor hit anything.

"I'm going to move away from you for a minute," he said. "I'm not leaving you, I won't leave the room, but I'll be out of your reach. Are you okay with that?"

I gave him my affirmative, and his hand slipped out from under my neck. Though his footsteps were nearly silent and my vision was still obscured by blue satin, I had no trouble following his movements. Around the foot of the bed. To the other side of the bed. The mattress accommodating weight as he joined me on the bed.

Then he was beside me. Lying on his side, I guessed. Hot skin brushed my arm and denim brushed my bare thigh, the contradiction of flesh and fabric emphasizing that he was still partly dressed, but partly *undressed* as well. His abs, his shoulders, and his tattoos, they were all uncovered beside me, visible to anyone not blinded as I was. I wanted to beg him to restore my sight, if only so I could see his body.

"Are you comfortable?" he asked.

"Yes, Master."

"Good. Because we're going to be like this for a while." He shifted slightly. "Now, a lot of people think BDSM is all about pain. And pain is fun, but it's not the only sensation we can play with. It can be ticklish..." He trailed a barely there fingertip up my side, laughing softly when I squirmed. "...it can be hot or cold..." He blew a cool breath across my nipple. "...or, it can be nothing at all." He broke all contact and went completely quiet.

Long seconds ticked by.

He was so still and silent, I didn't even think he was breathing.

More seconds. More heartbeats. More silence.

At last, he let out a breath, the rush of air warming my skin. In the same moment, I released the breath I'd been holding the whole time, having waited for his implicit permission to exhale.

"So there are sensations I can give and deny you as I see fit," he said. "Then there's restraint. I can bind you with ropes, chains, cuffs, even my hands. Physically bend you to my will." The backs of his fingers caressed my face, and I shivered. Such a tender touch even as he spoke of force and bondage. He went on. "Or I can let your submission be your restraint. Order you not to move, not to speak..." His thumb traced my lower lip. "...not to come."

A tingle worked its way up my spine. Every word he spoke disturbed the air above my lips, so I knew his mouth



was close. Not close enough for me to feel his breath, but close enough for me to catch the light scent of his aftershave. He was teasing me again, I was sure of it. Taunting me with the promise of a kiss which would be pulled back a split second before a point of no return.

"By controlling what you feel," he said, "by extension, I control your orgasms. And what I can't control by giving or denying stimulation, I will control through your submission. I decide when you come and when you don't. No matter how I touch you, you will not come until and unless I explicitly allow it. Am I clear?"

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, Master."

"Good." When he spoke again, a subtle lilt added some sly humor to his tone. "Of course, I've chosen not to make it easy for you to obey me tonight. After all, when I control your senses as I do now, denying you any stimulus except what I expressly allow, then even the slightest touch is more intense." He made a light circle around my nipple with his fingertip. "Isn't it?"

My back arched off the bed. "Yes, Master."

"So you can imagine the intensity," he whispered, moving close enough now that his breath touched my lips. "when it's *more* than just a slight touch, can't you?"

"Yes, Master, I can."

The warm breath of laughter made me shiver. "No, I assure you, you can't."

With that, he kissed me. In the space of a heartbeat, the world was reduced to where his lips and mine made gentle, unmoving contact. It became the focal point of my entire universe, drawing every last fragment of my awareness to it.

Abruptly, he broke the kiss as he snatched my wrist and pinned it to the bed. My mind swirled with confusion and panic.

"Did I give you permission for that?" His low growl told me I'd misstepped, but how? My heart pounded. I hadn't had a conscious thought or performed a conscious action since before he kissed me. What had I done?

"Answer me." His hand tightened around my wrist. A

piece fell into place: when he'd grabbed me, I'd been reaching for him. Touching him, if the vague tingling in my fingertips was to be believed. With neither realization on my part nor permission on his, I'd reached up to touch him while he kissed me.

"I'm sorry, Master."

"You're still learning." His voice softened and allowed me to release my breath. "I won't punish you this time."

I exhaled hard, not caring in the least if he saw or heard how much relief I drew from this amnesty.

"After all," he said, "I'm not making this easy for you, am I?"

"No, Master," I whispered.

Still holding my wrist, he kissed me again. At first, his lips didn't move at all. They were simply against mine, gentle *yes, I'm touching you* contact like his hand across my throat earlier. Then, his lips parted and the tip of his tongue coaxed my lips apart. I wasn't sure how passive I was required to be, if I was expected or forbidden to return his kiss. Testing the water, I let my tongue graze his. When he didn't pull away, I tried to deepen the kiss even more, but this time he broke contact.

For a moment, we were still again. The warmth of his skin and breath were still close to my lips, but he remained out of my reach. He came back down to me and met my lips with the same unmoving *here I am* touch as before. Again, he parted his lips. Again, he parted mine with the tip of his tongue. Again I met his tongue with mine, but this time left it to him to decide how deep and how long this kiss would be. Evidently satisfied I knew my place, he kissed me more passionately, more aggressively. I returned it in kind, but followed his lead.

He released my wrist and ran his hand along the top of my leg, fingertips drifting between my thighs as he worked his way down to my knee. Once there, he hooked his fingers under my knee and drew it up and toward him. With my leg resting against him, his erection was undeniable and left no doubt at all that he was as aroused as I was.

He broke the kiss and shifted, probably resting on his side.

"Touch yourself." The terse order broke the silence

and sent a shock of panic and uncertainty through me.

"What?" I hesitated, then quickly added, "Master?"

"Show me what you do for yourself when you're alone."

My face burned. He was so matter-of-fact and straightforward about it, almost flippant in his assumption that not only did I masturbate like everyone else, but I would do so for him.

And he was right on both counts. The former because it was true, the latter because my obedient fingers were on my pussy before I'd even thought my embarrassment through. He was, after all, my Master.

I'd never touched myself in the presence of a man before, least of all at his command. Matt had certainly seen me do it more than a few times, but he was across the alley. He wasn't right here beside me, and I never knew for sure if he was there, if he saw.

Scott was here. He saw. He knew.

The mattress shifted beside me, as did his presence. He must have been getting comfortable or adjusting his position somehow. I'd never been so acutely aware of someone. I couldn't see him, I heard him only when he allowed me to, but he was undeniably *there*. My exposure and his scrutiny were almost unbearable, especially as I tried to figure out where he was looking. Was he watching my fingers? My face? Did he catch the way my lips parted with a ragged breath, or was his gaze so fixed on my hand that he caught the way it trembled just then? Was he grinning, or did he frown as the tip of his tongue ran slowly across his bottom lip while he considered his next move?

"You slowed down," he said.

My cheeks burned again. I'd been distracted, forgotten what I was doing. "I'm sorry, Master." I circled faster with my fingers. Just knowing he was watching, that he was paying close enough attention to notice a change in speed, turned me on even more. Waves of cool fire radiated from my clit, intensifying with every sweep of my fingers. I chewed my lip, whimpering softly as my pussy tightened and the world around me slowly fell to pieces.

"Remember the rules," he said. "You're not to come until I allow it."

I bit back a frustrated sound and took a few breaths as I slowed my fingers down, nearly bringing them to a stop as I let myself return to earth. Once I was certain I was again in control, I picked up speed, desperately trying to strike a balance between pleasing him and keeping myself from coming. In mere moments, I was at the brink once more, and slowed down.

"Keep going."

"I'll come, Master," I moaned. "If I don't, I'll—"

"No, you won't. I haven't given you permission to come, so you won't. Will you?"

"No, Master," I said through clenched teeth.

"Then don't stop or slow down."

I took a deep breath. I moved my fingers per his command, but my touch was lighter now, the one concession I could make to keep my orgasm back without Scott noticing.

His fingertips drifted down my forearm to my wrist, then onto the back of my hand. His touch was light, just enough to make contact without hindering my motions. Not enough to hinder, but *just* enough to distract me.

"Don't stop what you're doing." The whispered command was sharp, offering no choice but immediate, unquestioning obedience.

I found my rhythm again, moaning with both frustration and arousal as my orgasm built quickly, threatening release with every turn of my fingers. Applying less pressure didn't even help much at this point.

His fingers slid across my hand and followed the length of my middle and third fingers until his hand completely covered mine. Molded against mine. His nearness to my pussy, with only my own fingers dividing him from my clit, turned me on more than the slow circles I made. There was something deliciously erotic about his first time touching me like this being through my own hand. About him being so, so close to my clit when I was so, so close to a climax.

Then his fingers continued down mine until they slid along my slick pussy lips. My back lifted off the bed, and the blindfold became moot because my eyes were screwed shut anyway.

I gasped as two fingers slipped inside me. As they did, his palm rested on top of my fingers, pressing them just a

little harder against my clit. Another moan escaped my lips.

"You're not coming yet, are you, Kristen?"

"No, Master." My teeth chattered and I nearly choked on the simple, automatic phrase.

"Good girl. You'll come when I say you'll come, and not a moment sooner." His fingers moved faster, the heel of his hand pushing my own fingers against my clit. "Am I understood?"

"Yes, M—" The words fell to a moan. I wondered when he'd taken over the rhythm, when he'd gone from harmonizing with my motions to dictating both speed and intensity. He'd subtly removed my ability to control how much pressure I applied, and in doing so, he'd taken the last safeguard I had against an orgasm. I had only his command and my sheer willpower to keep me from coming now.

He cleared his throat, reminding me of the unanswered question.

My voice trembled as I said, "Yes, Master."

"I know you're close," he murmured in my ear. "I know you want me to give you permission. You don't think you can hold back a moment longer, do you?"

"No, Master." The words came out as little more than a rush of breath.

"You can," he said, pressing a little harder against my G-spot. "You can, and you will, because you want to obey me, don't you?"

"Yes... Master..."

Madness was a breath away. The faster our hands moved, the higher he sent me, the closer my inevitable orgasm came, and the less I could hold back. Every inch of my body tingled and trembled, every nerve ending pulsing with pent up energy that threatened to make me shatter. I'd never been so close to such a powerful release, been simultaneously given and denied so much.

"Kristen."

I was vaguely aware of the sound of my name, of the implicit demand for acknowledgment, but his hand, his fingers, my clit—

"Kristen."

I licked my lips, struggling to stay in the present, struggling to keep from coming.

*"Kristen."*

I managed a breathless whimper of, "Yes, Master?"

"Come."

## ***Six***

The last shockwaves of my orgasm dissipated into the ether. With a long sigh, my body relaxed, my arched back sinking down to the bed as my fingers loosened their vise grip on Scott's shoulder. I had no idea when I'd grabbed him, had no recollection of ever reaching for him.

My other hand was still under his, still pressed against my clit as his fingers withdrew slowly. When his lifted off mine, I took my fingers off my clit, and I could finally breathe.

Scott gently grasped my wrist and took my other hand off his shoulder. "I may have to tie your hands next time." His tone was stern, but there was just enough humor around the edges to let me know my misstep hadn't been severe.

"Sorry, Master," I slurred.

He kissed me. "I'll let it go this time. Just don't let it happen again."

"I won't, Master."

He pushed the blindfold up and I lifted my head so he could tug it free. I blinked a few times until my vision came back into focus.

"Aside from that, you did well tonight." He kissed my forehead. "You're learning quickly."

"Thank you, Master."

"I'm not your Master anymore tonight," he whispered. "Just Scott now." He rolled onto his side and propped himself up on one arm. Then he glanced at the window. "You like having that shade open, don't you?"

"It doesn't bother me," I said with a casual shrug.

"Doesn't bother you if someone sees us?" He raised an eyebrow, and the corner of his mouth lifted in a subtle smirk.

If the heat in my cheeks was any indication, there was no point in trying to convince him it was just an innocent oversight. "Not at all."

He trailed his fingers up my arm. "So you're a bit of an exhibitionist, then," he said with a grin. "My kind of woman."

"I guess I am." I laughed. "I didn't even know I was until a few weeks ago."

"Is that so?"

I nodded and gestured at the window. "We caught each other's eye one night while I was getting undressed. And after I got over being embarrassed about it, I realized it turned me on. So I opened the shade again."

"So now he watches you? When you're with someone?"

"And when I'm alone, sometimes."

Scott glanced at the window, then chuckled when he looked at me again. "That lucky, lucky bastard."

I laughed. "What are you talking about? He only gets to watch. You get to do quite a bit more than that."

"Good point." He kissed me lightly. "Anyway, like I said, you did well tonight."

"Well, we'll see what happens when you start beating me."

He chuckled. "You'd be surprised. You might just like that."

"I don't know. Still not sure if pain is my thing."

"You might like it, you might not." He smoothed my hair. "This isn't one hundred percent about pain, anyway. It's just pushing your limits with stimulation, fucking with your senses. I talk about pain sluts, I really mean subs—and even Doms—who like having their senses overwhelmed, be it with pain or anything else." He paused. "I mean, Amy is really and truly a pain slut. That woman *loves* pain. But sometimes it's a misnomer. It usually refers to someone who is a stimulus junkie."

"But Amy likes pain?"

"More than anything. Which works out perfectly, since her husband doesn't particularly like inflicting pain, and I'm a bit of a sadist."



I laughed and rolled my eyes. "I hadn't noticed."

"Oh, please. You don't even know the half of it yet."

"I'm sure you'll enlighten me sooner or later," I said. "So, what else is there?"

"Sky's the limit. I know one Domme who has an extremely ticklish sub. She can torture him for hours with a feather the way I can beat Amy with a cane, and with similar results. It's just about teasing the senses. Some people like to play with hot and cold, too." He shuddered. "Cold is probably my Achilles' heel."

"How so?"

"Because it's fucking *cold*!" He laughed. "Okay, seriously, it's kind of like pain play. It's an intense sensation, one that would be unpleasant under other circumstances. It's incredible, it's a turn-on, but make no mistake: it still hurts. You don't get to play with endorphins without experiencing some pain. And cold is kind of the same. It's erotic and torture at the same time."

"Okay, so what about heat?"

"Heat can be fun. I'm admittedly a little iffy about playing with candle wax," he said. "If a sub really wants me to, I will, but it makes me nervous. It's just so easy to burn someone. If something's going to go wrong, it can happen so, so quickly."

"Have you ever known a sub who was burned playing with wax?"

"Yes, I have." He ran his fingers through his hair and I thought he might have shuddered again. "Really, it's easy to keep the temperature controlled enough to prevent injury. Intellectually, I know I'm not going to hurt her, but it's still something that makes me nervous. If a sub trusts me enough to do it, I'm not going to say no to her as long as she knows the risks. Tara likes it from time to time. Amy does too, but I'm *really* hesitant to do it with her."

"Why's that?"

"Because she likes pain. A *lot*. Rational or not, I worry it'll cross the line into actual injury before it hurts her enough to put a stop to it. Sometimes she gets so far into subspace, I—"

"Subspace?"

He nodded. "The endorphins take over sometimes and

a sub will almost go into a trance. She'll pretty much be unaware of anything except what I'm doing to her."

"So, that's a bad thing?"

"No, no, not at all," he said. "But it means I have to be extra careful to keep an eye on her and make sure I don't hurt her. With a flogger, I can control how hard I'm hitting her, and I won't let it get out of hand. With something like candle wax or any other heat play, if I were to burn her, she might not respond until it's gone from a mild sting to a more serious burn. And even though I can keep the temperature well below any level that would cause a problem, I'm not comfortable with it. Amy gets so far into subspace, there are times I could probably saw off a limb and she wouldn't protest."

I laughed. "Wow, she really does like pain, doesn't she?"

He smiled. "God, yes. More than any other sub I've ever had." His smile faded a little. "Which just, as I said, means I have to be careful so I don't *really* hurt her."

"Have you ever injured one of your subs?"

"No, fortunately." He turned onto his stomach and pushed himself up on his forearms. "Not seriously, anyway. I've bruised a few, broken skin with a flogger, that sort of thing. But I've never scarred someone or anything like that."

"That's good to know."

He raised an eyebrow. "Are you afraid I'll hurt you?"

"No. Well, not that you'd be careless or anything, but I admit, some of the 'pain play' as you call it makes me a bit nervous."

"Understandable. But I promise you, when we get to that point, I'm always very, very careful with pain. With any sensation play, actually. It's easy to overwhelm someone with any intense sensation, whether it's pain or not. I don't want to hurt you any more than I want to over stimulate or upset you to the point you won't let me near you."

I smiled. "I don't see that happening any time soon."

"I'll do everything in my power to keep it from happening, believe me." He winked. "After all, I want you to let me near you again."

"I doubt that'll be a problem."

"Good." He paused. "Actually, I was thinking, we could

try a little pain play one of these nights. If you're comfortable with that, of course."

I swallowed. The thought both excited and unnerved me. "What exactly did you have in mind?"

"Maybe a flogger?"

I chewed my lip. "How much does something like that hurt?"

Scott grinned. "As much as I want it to."

"Oh, that's encouraging."

He chuckled. "Actually, that's the God's honest truth. It depends on the material and construct of the flogger, but it also depends on who's flogging you. I can do it so lightly it feels like your hair falling on your back, or I can do it hard enough to draw blood."

"I'll pass on the drawing blood, thank you."

"Most people do, early on." He shifted onto one elbow and, with his free hand, trailed his fingertips down my arm. "But you never know until you try it. You might like just a little bit of thud, or you might get off on a lot of sting."

"Thud? Sting?"

"Exactly what they sound like. One is just a dull percussion, the other has a bit more bite. And really, flogging doesn't even have to be pain play. It just depends on what the sub wants and what the Dom wants to dish out." He paused, then pushed himself up. "Roll onto your stomach."

"What? Why?"

"I'm just going to give you a little sample of what it feels like."

"You're not going to whip the hell out of me, are you?"

"Only if you ask me to."

I turned onto my stomach, resting my head on my folded arms.

Behind me, he sat up, and the familiar metallic jingle gave me goose bumps. The hiss of leather across denim made every muscle in my back and shoulders tense.

His palm touched my lower back and drew a barely-there line up my spine. "I'm going to start out light and easy, okay?"

I nodded.

His hand paused at the base of my neck, then started down my spine again. "Relax. You'll feel it, but it won't

hurt. Just relax and don't forget to breathe." Muscle by muscle, his soft touch and whispered command loosened the tension, calming my nerves until I let out a long, serene breath.

He lifted his hand off my skin, and some of the tautness returned to my back. It wasn't apprehension about what he was going to do next, just my body seeking his now absent touch.

The belt hit just below my shoulder blade, the dull impact registering as a light tap. Then the leather slid over my skin before lifting away and coming down again. And again. And again.

"That doesn't hurt, does it?" he asked, his voice as gentle as the belt's strokes.

"Not at all."

"I'm going to do it a little harder this time, okay?"

I nodded.

He struck harder. Still, the sensation didn't even remotely resemble pain. As he continued this way, it became more like a massage than anything. A light, percussive massage. The slow, steady rhythm became like a second heartbeat, lulling me into a calm, relaxed state I'd never before associated with someone striking me.

His voice sounded miles away when he spoke. "Do you want me to try it a little harder?"

I murmured something in the neighborhood of "yes".

The next impact was harder, resonating deeper within me. There was still no pain, just a thud followed by a vibration that radiated through me like the last wave of a waning orgasm.

"It might sting a little this time," he said. "Just tell me if it gets to be too much."

The belt struck harder, and it was the sharp sound of leather on skin that startled me before the vague sting made itself known. Before I'd even processed the fact that there was pain, he hit me again, and that, too, hurt. It reminded me a little of a bee sting. No, the *memory* of a bee sting, pain so faint and faraway it might not have truly existed in the present.

Eventually, he stopped. He dropped his belt off the side of the bed and lay beside me again. He didn't speak for

a long time, just ran a gentle hand up and down my back, laying a soft touch over skin that had become accustomed to the belt.

"Mmm, that feels nice," I murmured, closing my eyes.

"How did the belt feel?"

"Different."

"Different?"

"Mm-hmm. Not what I expected."

"What did you expect?"

I opened my eyes and met his. "I thought it would hurt more. And that I wouldn't like it."

He grinned. "But you do, don't you?"

"Very much so, yes."

"So, what do you think? Want to give flogging a try?"

"Well, I love what you were doing." I smiled as I turned onto my side. "But you're the Master, so it's your decision."

He touched my face. "I knew you'd be a fast learner." And he kissed me again. I didn't know where that man learned to kiss, but he'd learned it well. He knew just how to tease my lips apart with the tip of his tongue, how to raise goose bumps over every inch of my skin with only the slightest brush of his lip across mine.

When he broke the kiss, I said, "I still have one question."

He raised his eyebrows. "Go ahead."

I fought to keep from grinning. "At what point do you stop teasing me and finally fuck me?"

He laughed and touched my face before kissing me lightly. "As with everything," he whispered, "it'll happen when your Master is damned good and ready to fuck you, and not a moment sooner."

"You're a relentless tease, you know that?"

He grinned against my lips. "Darling, you haven't seen 'relentless tease' yet."

## **Seven**

Poker night was a sacred tradition among the tenants of Matt's building. I was the only player who didn't live in that complex, but since I knew the game and brought beer, they'd long ago welcomed me.

Tonight, for the first time, I joined them with a clear conscience and no fear of annoyed text or voice messages on my silenced phone. Ah, the sweet taste of the single life.

"Okay, ante up," Steve said as he shuffled the deck. He paused to throw a five dollar chip into the pile, and Lou, Ramona, and I all followed suit.

"You know, one of these days, we should try that game I keep seeing on television," Ramona said.

"You mean Texas Hold 'Em?" I said.

"Yeah, that's the one."

"Oh, come on, now." Lou rolled his eyes and reached for his beer. "Texas Hold 'Em is just a fad."

"It is not a fad," Steve said. "There's a lot of money to be made at Hold 'Em."

"And a lot to be lost," I said.

Steve shrugged. "Well, if you play like Matt or Lou, yeah."

"Hey!" Matt glared at Steve over his shoulder from the other table. "I heard that."

"Whatever, Sommers," Steve said. "You turn around and mind your own cards."

"Watch it, Preston," Matt said. "Or next, game you're going to find out why we don't play strip poker with you."

"We don't play strip poker because ain't nobody in this room wants to see *your* birthday suit."

I chewed the inside of my cheek. *I wouldn't say nobody in this room wants to see that.*

"Okay, here we go," Steve said. He dealt five cards to everyone. I picked up my hand, but didn't look at my cards immediately. Instead, I surreptitiously scanned my three opponents.

Ramona's lips tightened into a scowl and her brow furrowed over narrowed eyes. Lou pursed his lips. Steve's expression remained neutral.

With their responses noted, I looked at my cards. Two queens and a two, which was wild under house rules. Three of a kind. Definitely a good start.

"I'll bet five," Lou said. His usual cockiness was absent.

Ramona concentrated on her cards for a moment, tapping a fiver on the table. *Just bet already*, I wanted to say. She wasn't the fastest player in the world, but at least she wasn't like Lynette, who currently sat at Matt's table. IRS audits and root canals didn't take as long as it took for Lynette to decide between a five or ten dollar bet.

Finally, Ramona tossed a five in. "Call."

I picked up two chips and threw them in the pile. "I'll raise it five." In unison, both Lou's and Ramona's eyebrows jumped.

Steve eyed me, then nodded and threw ten in. "Lou, how many cards do you want?"

"Four." Lou slid the cards across the table.

Steve gave him four. "Ramona?"

"Three."

"Kristen?"

"Two." I handed him the cards and took my replacements. Another two gave me a four of a kind. The only way anyone was going to beat me was with a straight flush or a royal flush. *Fat chance, fuckers*, I wanted to say, but I carefully kept my expression one hundred percent neutral.

While I waited for my opponents to scowl or gloat over their hands, I exchanged glances with Matt. He smiled, and heat rushed straight through me. My face must have been as

bright as the hearts on the cards in my hand just then. I quickly went for my nearly empty Coke, desperate for something to cool me down.

He had to have seen everything Scott and I did the other night. If not that, then what I'd done alone last night and the night before when my desperate need for everything Scott still denied me had gotten the best of me. Scott had me horny beyond rational thought. The more Matt saw, whether it was me alone or me with Scott, the more *he* turned me on, too.

"Kristen?"

I looked up and realized all three of my opponents were watching me. My face burned even hotter. "Sorry, sorry. What's the bet?"

"I put in five, Ramona put in ten," Lou said.

I gave my cards one more look, then three chips in. "Fifteen."

Steve's eyes widened. He shook his head and laid his cards down. "Fold."

Ramona showed a full house, which beat Lou's straight, but was no match for my four of a kind.

After I'd collected my winnings, I picked up my empty glass and stood. "I need a refill. Anyone else?" A murmur of "no, I'm good" and "no, thanks" rippled through the room.

"You want me to wait to deal until you come back?" Steve held up the deck he'd been shuffling.

"Well, unless someone's going to take her place," Jim said. "Go on, Kristen, we'll wait."

"I'll be quick." I slipped out of the living room and into the kitchen. Alone in the kitchen, I dug a can of Coke out of the fridge.

"Hey, Kristen." Ramona joined me. "How are things, hon?"

I smiled as I pulled some ice cubes out of an ice tray. "Things are great. You?"

"Oh, good, good." She picked up one of the half-empty bottles of white wine. "You sure everything's all right?"

"Everything's fine." I forced the smile in spite of my grinding teeth. She was one of the neighborhood busybodies. When she wasn't keeping an eye on everyone who came and went, she was trying to play matchmaker between single



tenants. By now, she probably knew Alec and I had split, and she'd probably seen Scott around.

"Glad to hear it." There was an unmistakable note of skepticism in her voice. "I haven't seen Alec lately. Is he away on business again?"

The smile became even harder to force. "Yeah, he's been away a bit." I didn't feel the need to elaborate. Even when my private life was bland and boring, I'd always made a point of keeping it to myself. That was both a blessing and a curse when it came to Ramona. We'd chatted a bit after I'd first moved in, and apparently since I neglected to mention the man—well, Alec—in my life, she'd assumed I was single. This made for a rather awkward moment when she decided to introduce me to her attractive, single neighbor.

On the bright side, though, that neighbor and I had hit it off and become close friends. Friends whose bedroom windows were directly across the alley from each other.

After I'd poured my drink, I gestured with my glass. "Better get back in there now that I've got my refill." I laughed. "The boys sound like they're getting impatient."

She nodded, giving me a tight-lipped smile, but didn't press. I made a quick escape and took my seat.

After a few more games, players started cashing out and trickling out the door. By ten thirty, we were down to one table. A little before eleven, Steve and Lynette cashed out, said their goodbyes, and left.

And with the click of the front door, Matt and I were alone.

"Do you need help cleaning up?" I asked.

He gestured dismissively. "No, no, don't worry about it."

"Are you sure? I hate to leave after we've all trashed your house."

"It's not trashed. Won't take but a few minutes." He looked at me and held my gaze for a second before clearing his throat and shifting his eyes away. "But, I mean, if you want, I could always use an extra pair of hands."

We went about collecting bowls containing the remnants of various munchies, empty glasses, and chip and pretzel bags.

"Someone didn't finish their beer," I said, clicking my

tongue as I picked up a bottle with about an inch left at the bottom.

Matt craned his neck. "Oh, no, that's Steve's. It's not beer."

My eyes flicked back and forth between him and the bottle. Then enlightenment came and I wrinkled my nose. I held the bottle between two fingers, keeping it at arm's length as I said, "Jesus, can he get through one evening without chewing that shit?"

"He can chew it all he wants," Matt said. "I just hate the constant spitting in a bottle."

"And the smell." I set the bottle down. "Ugh. How does Lynette put up with that?"

He shook his head and chuckled. "No idea."

"I'll tell you one thing: there isn't enough money in the world to make me kiss someone with tobacco in his mouth."

"I hear that. Fortunately, most women don't chew. It was bad enough that Elaine smoked."

"She did?"

He nodded. "Mostly when she was stressed. So for about the last six months we were together, she was pretty much chain-smoking." He made a face. "By the time she left, I'd almost forgotten what it was like to kiss a mouth that didn't taste like smoke."

"Been reacquainted with a smoke-free mouth since then?"

"I have, but not nearly as much as I'd like." He looked up, and as soon as we made eye contact, the devilish grin faded and his cheeks darkened. He muffled a cough. "Anyway, yeah, smoking is a deal-breaker for me now."

"Can't blame you there."

We fell silent for a moment. I searched for something to say just to keep the conversation going, but he beat me to it.

"So how did you make out tonight?" he asked.

I shrugged as I rolled the top of a half-empty bag of Doritos. "Broke even, I think. Maybe five or ten ahead. You?"

"About twenty in the hole."

"Sucks to be you," I laughed.

"Hey, watch it." He shot me a playful glare before

picking up a few bags and bowls and starting for the kitchen. "I seem to recall someone was almost seventy-five in the hole last time."

I followed him into the kitchen. "Do I need to remind you how badly I massacred you and Steve back in—"

"No, you don't, smartass. Especially not after—"

"Oh, shut *up*," I laughed, rolling my eyes.

"Well, if you're going to massacre anyone, could you maybe go after Lynette? Like, in the literal sense? I swear, that woman exists only to test my patience."

I laughed again. "Believe me, every time she spends half an eternity trying to figure out a bet, it's all I can do not to kick her granny ass."

He chuckled. "Now *that* is something I'd like to watch."

"Yeah, I'll just bet you would."

He turned around, and we both stopped. Less than an arm's length apart, eyes locked on each other, we stopped.

Did I just put that topic on the table? I swallowed hard. So did he.

Then he cleared his throat and stepped away, occupying himself with putting chips in the pantry.

With everything put away and the living and dining rooms restored to their more or less organized states, we hung out in the dining room. I leaned against the table, gripping the edge to keep from drumming my fingers nervously. Matt rested his folded forearms on the back of one of the chairs, standing just close enough to fuck with my blood pressure.

*Do you have any idea how much I want to touch you?*

"So," he said, "you'll be here next week, right? Or, well, at Lou and Ramona's?"

"With my only reason *not* to be here out of the picture? Absolutely."

He smiled. "Sweet. I'm glad you showed up tonight. It's always more fun with you here."

"Even if you're out twenty bucks?"

He laughed softly. "I guess someone has to keep me from getting too cocky, right?"

"Exactly. So it might as well be me."

"Yeah, might as well."

Our eyes met, and the look lingered again. Matt made

a slow, subtle gesture of moistening his lips. Without thinking about it, I did the same. Still he held my gaze, and I managed to hold his in spite of the way my heart pounded and my stomach fluttered. I wanted him to reach for me, and when he shifted his weight slightly, he was a little closer to me. Every inch of my skin tingled, every nerve on high alert, wondering if he'd touch me and where.

Then he dropped his gaze and shifted again, adding the most minute distance to the gap between us. We both released our breath, studying the floor as the silence held fast.

Finally, he muffled a cough. "Anyway, I'm glad you came. At least then I had someone to commiserate with about Lynette."

I managed a laugh in spite of how tightly my stomach coiled itself. "Glad to help."

Our eyes met again.

This time, I was the one to break eye contact. "Well, I guess I should get going."

"Yeah, I should let you go."

I pushed myself away from the table with my hip. We both hesitated, exchanging and dropping a few glances before he made an *after you* gesture. I picked up my purse and we walked in silence to the door.

He opened it, resting his forearm against it at about shoulder-level.

"Well," I said, "good night."

His smile was more than a little shy. He took a breath like he was about to say something, but released it. Another breath. Held it. Finally, he murmured, "Yeah, good night."

Another lingering look. I finally convinced myself to walk out his door, and when it clicked shut behind me, I muttered a few choice curses. Why was I such a damned chicken when it came to talking to him? We were as close as any friends, and the chemistry was visible from space. One of us just needed to make a move already.

On the way down the hall, I walked as slowly as I could, listening for any sound that might indicate he was coming after me. At the elevator, my hand hovered over the down button for several long seconds.

No doors opened or closed behind me. No footsteps

fell into stride with my pounding heart. Sighing, I pressed the button.

The elevator took its sweet time as it always did. This building had the slowest elevators in the history of technology, but tonight, that bought me a few more moments of listening to the stillness behind me.

The elevator arrived.

Matt didn't.

I stepped in and leaned against the wall, staring down the vacant hall and hoping.

When the doors closed with a hiss and a dull thud, I closed my eyes and let my head fall back against the wood paneling. Frustration and relief vied for dominance, one tightening the knot in my gut while the other tried to untie it. It was probably just as well Matt hadn't followed me, that we hadn't given into temptation.

I didn't want to ruin the sexy façade of secrecy we kept over our odd relationship. I didn't want to ruin our friendship.

But damn if I didn't want Matt so bad I could taste him.

## ***Eight***

Scott set his wine glass on the window sill and adjusted one of his freshly rolled sleeves. Leaning back in the chair beside my window, he looked up at me. I immediately dropped my gaze, focusing on the expanse of carpet between us.

"Tell me your safe words," he said sharply.

"Red if I want to stop, yellow if I want to back off, Master."

"Good." He paused, regarding me silently for a long moment. I still didn't look directly at him, nor did he invite me to do so. When he finally spoke, the three words were terse and non-negotiable: "Take everything off."

I swallowed. "Yes, Master." My hands were unsteady as I unbuttoned my blouse. I had no idea what he had planned for tonight. I'd long since given up trying to anticipate because he would stay one step ahead of me anyway. If I expected him to zig, he'd zag. That much I'd learned in the few times we'd played thus far.

As I undressed, I kept my gaze fixed on the floor. I didn't look at him, and I didn't dare look out the window for fear Scott would close the shade. Or I'd meet Matt's eyes and spook him enough that he'd back away. I wanted him to watch, so I didn't acknowledge him.

I dropped my blouse on the floor beside me. Then my bra. Skirt. Panties. I kicked my shoes out of the way.

And I waited.

For a long, unnerving moment, Scott didn't move. Though I kept my eyes down, I knew he was looking at me. Looking right at me. Scrutinizing. Searching. Maybe for signs

of resistance. Some indication that I hadn't completely submitted to him. Or maybe he just did it to unsettle me. If that was the case, it was working.

The chair creaked as he pushed himself to his feet. He didn't speak as he came toward me. I held my breath.

He walked around me, circled me, and I struggled to keep from trembling.

Behind me, he stopped. I jumped when he put his hands on my shoulders. Again when he pulled me back against him. The buttons of his shirt were like cold, solid rivets, and the fabric of his clothes brushing over my naked skin served to remind me just how exposed I was compared to him. I sucked in a breath as his hands drifted down my arms.

His lips touched my ear as he whispered, "You're under my control now." Grasping my hips gently, he pulled me closer to him, and I whimpered as the unmistakable ridge of his thick erection pressed against me. "Everything that happens tonight is under my control. Everything. Understood?"

"Yes, Master," I breathed.

He kissed the side of my neck and let his hands trail up my sides. One stopped to cup my breast and tease my nipple while the other continued upward. His fingers wrapped around the front of my throat, just above my collarbones.

"Are you nervous, Kristen?"

I swallowed hard. "No, Master."

"Don't lie to me," he whispered directly into my ear. His thumb ran up and down the side of my neck. "I can feel your heart beating faster and I can hear the way you're breathing. Answer me truthfully. Are you nervous?"

"Yes, Master."

"Am I scaring you?"

"No, Master."

"Good." He kissed just below my ear. "I'm not in this for your fear, only your..."

"Submission, Master."

"Good girl." The hand on my breast moved down, his fingertips tracing a ticklish path over my abdomen. I couldn't breathe as they continued over my hip and between my thighs. When his fingers found my clit, I sent up a silent

prayer of thanks that Scott's body was still against me because it was the only thing keeping my trembling knees from abandoning me to gravity.

Electricity surged from my pussy every time his fingers moved. He circled a few times in one direction, then made a single, slow arc in the other, then back the first way, daring me to even try to get used to one rhythm before he'd change it again. *Jesus, where did he learn to do that?*

He kissed my neck. "Whatever I say tonight, you'll do." His fingers continued teasing my clit as he spoke. "Whatever I do, you'll accept. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Master." My voice shook as badly as my knees.

"And, just like last time," he murmured, letting his lips touch my neck, "you're not to come until I allow it." Circle. Circle. Arc. Circle.

I gulped. "Yes, Master."

"Good girl." After a few more maddening arcs and circles, his fingers left my clit. His hand drifted away from my pussy, then lifted off my body altogether. The hand on my throat released me. When he stepped back, my knees nearly buckled, but I kept myself upright. Barely.

Scott walked around me again, and when he stopped, he faced me.

"Take my shirt off."

I quickly did as I was told: unbuttoned it, pushed it over his shoulders, tugged the rolled-up sleeves free before drawing them down his arms. When his shirt had fallen to the floor beside my clothes, I dropped my arms to my sides and waited for his next order.

"There's a condom in the back left pocket of my jeans. Get it out."

My heart pounded. Willing my hand to be steady, I reached around him and slid my hand into his back pocket. Body heat teased my fingers through denim. Had he been any other man, I'd have taken the opportunity to cop a feel on that gorgeous ass and given him a playful squeeze. Under these circumstances, I didn't dare.

My fingertips grazed the edge of the foil square, and this was real. We were really going to do this. He was going to fuck me tonight. A nervous shudder caught my breath in my throat.



I brought my hand back, letting it hover between us with my fingers wrapped loosely around the condom.

Scott extended his hand, holding it palm up just inches from mine. "Give it to me."

Biting my lip, I chanced a look at his face. At his eyes. His steely expression echoed his simple command, and when I dropped my gaze again, his outstretched hand still awaited my obedience.

Drawing a deep breath, I laid the condom in his hand.

Oh yes, we were really doing this. *Tonight.*

Scott turned away and set the condom on the nightstand, keeping it within reach. He faced me again, and we were back to this unsettling quiet. As always, I had no idea what he was going to do next. All I could do was wait, knowing nothing beyond the fact that whatever he did come up with, I would obey.

And, as always, he did the last thing I expected: he gently cupped both sides of my face, kissed my forehead, and stroked my hair. I closed my eyes. The tenderness of his touch was an illusion, something to throw me off and make me drop my guard. It had to be.

Then he kissed me. A long, tender kiss. A lover's kiss. One minute, his lips formed stern demands, the next they softly moved with mine. The gentle sensuality of his kiss, of him, made my head spin. The warmth of his body against mine. A subtle hint of cologne. The heady sweetness of wine on his tongue. I desperately wanted to run my fingers through his hair and pull him closer, but I didn't dare touch him unless he bid me to do so.

He broke the kiss. Our eyes met, but I quickly dropped my gaze. We fell into silent stillness again, no sound in the room except our slow, soft breathing and the whisper of his fingers tangling in my hair.

He was planning something. Or he'd already planned it. Something was about to happen, but only Scott knew what. I stared at the floor between us, willing myself to stay standing and keep breathing. Every muscle in my body tensed, bracing for whatever his next move might be.

*Just relax,* I told myself. I trusted him. He expected me to submit and surrender, and as long as I was wound up like this, I was doing neither.

Taking and releasing a deep breath, I relaxed.

The instant I let my guard down, he tightened his fist in my hair, twisted it, and forced me to my knees. I yelped, as much from surprise as pain, and a cool rush of adrenaline mixed with hot arousal in my blood. The abrasive carpet stung my knees and the tops of my feet, the vague burn reminding me of coarse stubble grazing my neck. His unforgiving grip smarted, and I bit back a moan at the thought of him holding my hair like that while he fucked me.

He didn't allow me to turn or lower my head. All I could do was look straight ahead, which meant staring at the front of his jeans. It took every bit of restraint I had not to reach up and trace the outline of his erection, but the hand in my hair warned me against doing so. Trying to keep myself calm, I looked at his abs instead, but the sparse line of dark hair below his navel drew my attention right back down.

I expected him to order me to unbuckle his belt. Hoped he would. *Prayed* he would.

He didn't. Still holding my hair with one hand, he unbuckled his belt with the other. The clang of metal and the hiss of leather made my mouth water. As his belt slipped free of the loops on his jeans, I wondered if he intended to use it for anything tonight.

If he had any intention of using it, though, it would be later on, because he dropped it on the floor with a muffled jingle-thud.

"Don't move." He released my hair and stepped back to take off his jeans and boxers. My mouth watered and my heart pounded as he stripped down to nothing. The more I saw of him, the more I wanted him, especially now that I could see *all* of him.

He wasn't like one of those porn stars with a cock so big it looked like it would break me in half, but he wasn't lacking at all. Big enough to make it hurt if he wanted it to, and my God, I hoped he wanted it to. Just the thought of having him inside me made my pussy tingle with anticipation. I was on my knees, at his mercy, and in that moment, there was nothing I wouldn't have done if it meant he'd fuck me.

He gripped my hair again, and with his other hand,

stroked himself slowly, just inches from my face. I couldn't help but lick my lips. Never in my life had I wanted so badly to taste a man's cock.

"Do you want to suck my cock, Kristen?" he asked.

*Yes. God, yes. Please, Master.* The slow motion of his hand—all the way to the base, up to the head, back down to the base—mesmerized me, kept speech at bay as I thought of the one and only thing my mouth wanted to do right then.

The hand in my hair tightened. "I expect an answer when I ask you a question."

"I'm sorry, Master."

"Now tell me, do you want to suck my cock?"

"Yes, Master," I whispered.

"If I gave you a choice," he said, his voice low and his tone even, "would you rather have my cock in your mouth, or your pussy?"

I closed my eyes as a tremor rippled up my spine. There was no doubt in my mind which option he'd decided upon. He had me on my knees and he was stroking himself inches from my mouth. The decision was made. He wasn't asking for my choice, but my compliance. Fortunately, I was as eager to accept that option as the other.

"My," I paused, licking my lips as I fought to form the words. "My mouth, Master."

He gave a quiet laugh. Then the hand in my hair pulled up, rendering moot his growled command of, "Stand up."

Confusion made my heart race the same way arousal made my knees shake. It had been the wrong answer. Somehow, some way, he'd expected me to answer differently. Or maybe there was no right answer. This was all part of the game, part of his plan.

"I think I'd rather fuck you." He picked up the condom and handed it to me. "Put it on."

*Oh, sweet Jesus, yes.*

I managed to get the wrapper open without much trouble, but it came as no surprise that my hands were shaking almost too violently to maneuver the condom into place. Nerves, excitement, and the overwhelming reality that my hands were on Scott's cock all conspired to reduce my manual dexterity to almost nothing. I'd have had less trouble

if I'd been wearing oven mitts. After a moment of struggling and resisting the urge to curse at my own clumsiness, it was on. *Finally.*

I dropped my hands to my sides and waited for his next command.

"Are you nervous?" he asked.

"Yes, Master," I said quickly.

He reached up and stroked my hair. "Good girl. Quick and truthful, exactly what I want." Then he nodded toward the bed. "Pull the covers back and get on the bed."

I did as ordered. My heart pounded so hard, it wouldn't have surprised me if Scott had heard it.

Scott joined me in bed. He rolled onto his back and beckoned to me. "You're going to be on top."

I blinked. "I'm—"

"Now."

Puzzled, I obeyed. I moved on top of him, straddling him and sitting on my trembling knees. The nearness of his hard cock to my pussy made every nerve ending below my waist tingle. My pussy wasn't touching him yet—he stopped me with a hand on my hip before I'd lowered myself completely—but we were so close, so damned close. The condom was on. It was only a matter of time.

It occurred to me that Scott had been nothing if not a relentless tease since the beginning. I doubted it was below him to get us both this close, then back off and call it a night just to show me how controlled—and evil—he was.

He squeezed my hip gently. "Lift up a little." His other hand moved between us, and my heart jumped into my throat. *Yes, yes, please, Master.*

Without a word, he guided me down with one hand, and I took in a sharp breath when his cock touched my pussy. I expected him to keep drawing me down, or to thrust upward and fuck me, but he stopped me. With the hand on my hip, he kept me still. With the other, he slid the head of his cock back and forth between my pussy lips. No man had ever teased me this way, keeping himself this close but just out of my reach. They were usually in such a hurry to get in and get what they wanted, they never bothered. But Scott was in no hurry at all. And the more he did this, the more he kept his cock from me, the more restraint it took to keep

from dropping my hips and forcing every last inch inside me.

"Like that?" he asked.

I murmured my automatic affirmative.

"I'm going to give you more," he said. "But you'll take only as much as I allow. When you feel my hand, you'll go no further. Understood?"

"Yes, Master."

He guided me down, and I gasped as the first inch or so of him slid into me. His other hand, holding his cock just below the head, stopped me. I rose at his command, then came down again when he allowed me to do so. Each time, he gave me a fraction of an inch more. Just enough to drive me out of my mind, but still not nearly enough. I wanted his entire cock inside me.

I was so turned on I was shaking. The only resistance he met was my pussy accommodating the thickness of his cock; I was beyond wet enough to negate any concerns about friction.

When I came down this time, he let me take more, and he was *almost* to my G-spot when his hand stopped me. I gritted my teeth with frustration, then released a relieved breath when he permitted me to come down again.

The further I lowered myself, the slower I moved, anticipating his hand at any second. I moaned when he made contact with my G-spot, and that moan became a whimper as he slid deeper, as he let me have more. The earliest quivers of an orgasm were there, just beyond my reach, building with quiet intensity during the unending *age* it took for the head of his cock to move over and past my G-spot.

His hand stopped me. When he nudged me to indicate I was to rise again, I obeyed without hesitation, biting my tongue to keep from begging him to let me have all of him, every last inch of him.

He stopped me again when I'd risen enough that he was barely inside me, and there he made me stay. For a long, torturous moment, he kept me there. He'd let me have more, and now denied me. Holding my breath, I waited for that subtle curl of his fingers, that gentle pressure that gave me permission to take him inside me once again.

"Another lesson for my submissive," he whispered, his

voice far too steady and even for a man in his position. "You may be on top. But don't ever forget one thing..."

All at once, he pulled me down and thrust upward, driving his cock all the way inside me. A cry escaped my lips as I fell forward and caught myself on shaking arms.

He put his hand on the back of my neck and pulled me down to him until our lips were a breath apart. "Don't ever forget," he said, "that no matter what position, no matter *what*, I am in control."

"Yes, Master." I nearly choked on my own voice.

He gave me a nudge to indicate I was to rise again. That simple, controlled movement was suddenly far more complicated than it had been all along. Trembling arms and legs barely responded to a mind that could think of nothing but his cock inside me.

"Are you disobeying me?" he growled.

"N-no, Master," I murmured. Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to comply, rising slowly off his cock.

As he let me back down, he said, "Do you want it fast or slow?"

I gritted my teeth. Another trick question? Another right answer I couldn't possibly guess? *What do you want from me, Master?* Finally, I slurred, "Fast, Master."

Scott clicked his tongue. "Slow it is, then."

*You son of a bitch.* Not that I could complain about how he felt sliding in and out of my pussy as I moved according to his commands, but I wanted to please him. I needed to please him. The only thing that superseded my need to fuck him until we both came was my desperation for his approval.

He raised his hips to meet mine every time I came down, our agonizingly slow rhythm ensuring I felt every last inch of him. And still, as every stroke made my head spin a little more, he stayed in control. In absolute, unwavering control. Though his breathing was deeper and faster now, it was as even as the rhythmic rising and falling of his hips.

Then he spoke again: "Do you want it fast or slow?"

*Fuck the games,* I wanted to say. *Fuck me as hard and fast as you can.* Maybe reverse psychology would work this time.

"Slow, Master."

He chuckled. "I think I like it slow, too."

*Bastard.*

We continued in this maddening, exasperating, infuriating slow motion.

Just when my sanity was nearing a breaking point, as I had to fight the urge to take over and fuck the hell out of him regardless of the consequences, he asked a third time: "Do you want it fast or slow?"

I resisted the temptation to release a sharp, frustrated breath. Whatever it was he was trying to get out of me, an attitude probably wasn't it. God only knew what consequences *that* would bring.

Keeping my aggravation out of my voice as best I could, I said, "However you want it, Master."

He put his hand on the back of my neck and drew me down to him. "Good girl," he murmured. Then he kissed me, and relief flooded my veins. When he broke the kiss, he whispered, "Turn around and get on your hands and knees." He nodded past me. "Facing that way."

I did as I was told, and as soon as I'd turned around, Scott grabbed my hips and slammed into me, knocking a yelp and my breath out of me. My arms shook too much to hold me up, so I dropped to my elbows. He dug his fingers into my hips and fucked me exactly the way I wanted, so hard it bordered on violent, and my moans were lost in the bed's creaking and protesting.

All the while, Matt's window was directly in my line of sight. The lights were off, and I couldn't see any movement or shadows to give away his presence, but I knew he was there. I was sure of it. He was watching me from the cover of darkness, watching Scott fuck me.

I threw my head back and moaned.

"You're not going to come, are you, Kristen?" He sounded so calm, so controlled.

My voice was far less steady when I replied, "No, Master."

"Good girl." His violent thrusts and sharp breaths punctuated his speech. "Now touch yourself. Just like you did the other night."

With a trembling hand, I obeyed, circling my clit with two fingers.

"Don't come yet, Kristen." He sounded like he was speaking through clenched teeth, and his incredible rhythm didn't relent at all as he continued to drive me toward my forbidden orgasm. "You know the rules. Don't come yet."

I dug my teeth into my lower lip and slowed the circles on my clit.

"I didn't tell you to slow down," he growled. "Do it right, or I'll stop." As if to emphasize his threat, he thrust into me and stopped. Then he pulled out slowly. "Do it right, Kristen."

Chewing my lip so hard I was sure I'd draw blood, I obeyed. My pussy tightened around him, and he released a hiss of breath.

"*That's it,*" he whispered. He trailed light fingertips up and down my back. "I love the way your pussy feels when you do that." The slightest tremor worked its way into his voice, and I bit my lip even harder, struggling to stay in control. I let my head fall forward, screwing my eyes shut as everything became too intense.

"Please, let me come, Master," I moaned, clawing at the bedclothes with my free hand. "Please, please, let me come."

"Not yet." But he fucked me harder.

The need for release was almost painful, and not in the delicious, intoxicating way his hard thrusts were. I teetered right on the edge, at my breaking point, every tremor and ripple and cry waiting in suspended animation for him to give the word. It was one thing to have an orgasm out of my reach, just beyond my grasp. This was completely different. It was there, right there, right on the tip of my tongue and at the tingling, fraying ends of my nerves, and there it would stay until Scott was damned good and ready to let me have it.

"Master, please..." The near-sobbing sound of my own voice startled me, as did the hot tear that slid down my cheek. "Please, let—"

"Come, Kristen."

I shattered.

My mouth formed words that tasted like "Master" and "thank you" and "please don't stop", but I heard none of it over the wave upon wave of pleasure crashing over me with



every thrust and heartbeat. This was like no orgasm I'd ever experienced. It was pain. It was pleasure. It was *how the hell does he do that* and I couldn't take any more and *more, more, please, more.*

Before my climax had even subsided, Scott pulled out and threw me onto my back. I gasped when I hit the bed, and once more when he drove his cock into me again. He slid his hands under my shoulders and gripped them, using them for leverage as he fucked me so hard I saw white. It was rough and brutal and painful, and had I still been able to speak, I'd have begged him not to stop, never to stop, *oh, God, please don't stop.*

I buried my face against his neck, inhaling the musky mix of sweat and cologne. My second orgasm surged to the surface, and I fought to hold it back.

"Let me come again," I moaned. "Please, Master, let me...let..." Obedience be damned, there was no stopping it.

"Yes," he whispered, and whatever he said after that was lost in my breathless cries. I couldn't even hear myself, had no idea what the hell I said if anything at all, because the universe ceased to exist except as the pulses radiating from my pussy with every thrust, every breath, every heartbeat.

Just as the intensity started to wane, Scott let his head fall beside mine and groaned. His fingers dug into my shoulders as shudder after shudder forced him just a *little* deeper inside me.

Finally, he exhaled and relaxed.

After a moment, he pushed himself up on his forearms and met my lips with a long, lazy kiss. "Good girl," he whispered, caressing my face. "I know some of my commands aren't easy to obey, but you've done well."

"Thank you, Master."

He smiled and kissed me again. Then he pulled out slowly and got up to get rid of the condom. When he came back, we faced each other on our sides.

"You okay?" he asked, his voice gentle. I exhaled. We were back on level ground now. Scott and Kristen, not Dom and sub.

I nodded. "That was..." I tried to speak but couldn't find the words. I didn't think there was a word to describe it.

The English language simply didn't have what it took to accommodate what I felt just then. I'd had orgasms before, but those were Fourth of July firecrackers compared to what he did to me. Others had given me firecrackers; Scott gave me a fucking supernova.

"I hope you're not looking for a way to describe how bad it was." He grinned, that classic Scott Moore grin I'd known for years. Framed by flushed, sweaty skin and disheveled hair, it looked cockier than ever, and my every twinge and tingle reminded me he'd more than earned the right to be such a cocky bastard.

"Do I even have to glorify that with a response?" I laughed.

He kissed me again. "Are you mouthing off to your master, young lady?"

"Oh, fuck off." I ran my fingers through his damp hair. "I don't think I'm ever going to be able to have vanilla sex again."

Scott smiled. "Oh, you never know. There's a time and a place for it."

"When? On the nights when you're too sore for anything else?"

He chuckled. "Well, there's that. Or simply when the mood strikes."

We lay in silence for a while, his fingers absently lacing and unlacing between mine. He shifted so easily from an iron fist to a gentle hand, from commanding to tender. He was simply so...*controlled*. Even when he'd held me down and fucked me violently, as he approached his own orgasm, he was always in control. Of me, of himself, of everything.

"You've gone quiet again," he said.

"So did you."

"Okay, you're right. But I get the feeling you've got something on your mind."

"Nothing in particular. Just thinking."

"About how much you want to hurt me for keeping you from coming for so long?"

"Oh, that crossed my mind."

He grinned. "And to think, I only made you hold off for a few minutes. You haven't seen anything yet."

My eyes widened, and he laughed.

"You know, I have to say," I said, "when you said we'd be moving slowly, this isn't what I expected."

He chuckled. "Well, what did you have in mind? Did you think I'd tie you down and beat you the very first night?"

"No, not quite. I guess it's just not what I expected in terms of BDSM. I guess I expected it to be more..."

"Brutal?"

I laughed and offered a half shrug. "Yeah, I guess that's the word."

"It can be. Just depends on what you want out of it." He smiled and stroked my hair. "We've barely scratched the surface anyway. All of this has just been for you to learn to trust me and submit to me."

"I already trusted you. You know that."

"The rules change when the clothes come off. You trust me, but I believe in earning that trust all over again in the bedroom. Especially if I'm asking you to submit to me."

"Do you do this with all of your subs?"

He scratched back of his neck and shrugged with one shoulder. "Depends on their experience level. With you, I'm introducing you to the lifestyle. With, say, Amy, she had years of experience. She had a few Doms before me, so, it was just a matter of laying the ground rules and establishing my dominance."

"Funny, I never thought about Doms having to establish dominance."

"Unfortunately, neither do some Doms." He rolled his eyes. "They don't last long, believe me. I've seen one or two who go up to subs and assume that sub will obey them and call them 'Master' at the drop of a hat."

I raised my eyebrows. "How do most subs respond to that?"

"Usually with something like 'go fuck yourself.' Submissives aren't wimps. In fact, most subs I know are incredibly strong, independent people, and they're not about to bow down to anyone who hasn't earned the right to command them."

"So does that mean I can make you beg for the right to command me?"

He laughed. "I'll earn the right to dominate you, but I'll be damned if I'll beg for it." The fingers in my hair

tightened, pulling hard and making me gasp. Against my lips, he whispered, "Like I said the other night, if anyone is going to beg, plead, or give puppy dog eyes, it's you." He kissed me gently, the tenderness of his lips emphasizing the iron fist that held me still.

When he broke the kiss, his grip softened as well and he went back to stroking my hair. "We're reaching a point now, I think, where you understand what it means to submit." He grinned. "Which means now we can really start pushing some boundaries."

I gulped. "Such as?"

"Well, you've tasted what a power exchange is like," he said. "The more we play, the more control I'll demand from you. We'll try some pain play, some bondage, things like that."

Ice worked its way along my nerve endings. Pain play intrigued me. Bondage, I wasn't so sure.

"Are you okay with that?" he asked. "We don't have to do everything, you know."

"I do want to try it." That much was definitely true. Curiosity trumped nerves, and I'd face my fears head-on if it meant more of the things he did to me.

"You sure?"

I nodded. "Absolutely."

He kissed me again. "And, now that you've gotten your feet wet, the rules are going to get stricter. Disobey me or don't respond when I ask you to, there will be consequences."

"Haven't there been consequences already?"

He shrugged. "Sure, but there will be more."

"Such as?"

"You'll find out when we get there."

## ***Nine***

Before Scott showed up the next night, I made a run to the grocery store for a few things, especially since I was out of the red wine that seemed to be his custom. Of course, as it always did, a trip for a few things turned into a trip for every damned thing in the store.

*I really need to go shopping more often*, I thought as I struggled to get as many bags out of the trunk and onto my arm as possible. Living on the eighth floor, the fewer trips I had to make, the better.

"Need a hand?" Matt's voice startled me.

I looked up. "Oh, hey. No, I think I've got it."

He smiled. "You sure?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine." I set the bags down and leaned against the trunk, rubbing my wrist gingerly. "Remind me to get an apartment on the ground floor next time I move."

"Tell me about it." He chuckled. "At least the elevators in your building don't take forever to move."

"That's true. But then, we can't all live in modern, state-of-the-art buildings, so you get to suffer."

"Whatever." He laughed and rolled his eyes. Then he gestured at my grocery bags. "Are you sure you don't need a hand with all of that?"

"Nah, I'll be fine. I suppose I could use the exercise, especially—" I paused, looking over Matt's shoulder as another car pulled into the lot. "Actually, it looks like my company just got here anyway."

He glanced back as Scott pulled into a visitor spot and parked. Our eyes met again, then his quickly shifted away.

Scott got out of his car and slung a small backpack over his shoulder. He strolled toward us, offering a curious glance at Matt.

When he stopped beside me, I gestured from one man to the other. "Scott, Matt. Matt, Scott."

As they shook hands, something flickered across Matt's face, deepening the crevices between his eyebrows and tightening his lips into a look I couldn't quite read. At first, I thought it was some thinly-veiled jealousy. It took a moment to realize it wasn't jealousy or anything of the sort. It was recognition.

I had to fight to keep from grinning. *Yes, Matt. That's him. And yes, that's why he's here tonight.*

Scott gestured at the bags of groceries. "Need a hand?"

I glanced at Matt. To Scott, I said, "Well, since you're coming up with me anyway, you might as well be useful."

He glared at me, shook his head, then looked at Matt. "Do you hear that? Invites me over for an evening, and puts me to work. What the hell?"

"Oh, shut up and grab a few bags," I said.

Matt laughed, offering an apologetic shrug to Scott. "Looks like you've got your hands full."

I pursed my lips. "I could make you carry a few if you want."

"No, no, that's fine." He put his hands up and backed away. "Looks like you've got it covered." He winked and turned to go. "I'll see you on Sunday. Nice meeting you, Scott."

"Same to you," Scott said, glancing up from getting a few bags out of the trunk.

Matt and I exchanged one last look before he left. His eyes darted back and forth between Scott and me, then he turned to go.

My heart pounded. He'd be watching tonight.

With all the grocery bags in hand, Scott and I walked into my building. We waited in silence for the elevator which, being much faster than those in Matt's building, arrived in fairly short order. We stepped inside and I elbowed the button for the eighth floor.

As the doors slid closed, Scott said, "His window is

right across from yours, isn't it?"

I raised an eyebrow. "How did you know?"

He shrugged. "Lucky guess."

"Uh huh, I'm sure." We exchanged grins. "So it wouldn't bother you if he's watched us before?"

"Not at all. I told you, I'm as much an exhibitionist as I am a voyeur. As long as it doesn't bother you, I certainly don't mind it." He lowered his voice and, with a seductive grin, added, "Call it a gut feeling, but I think you *enjoy* having him watch you."

I didn't need a mirror to know my cheeks were bright red just then.

He chuckled. Neither of us spoke as the elevator stopped and the doors opened.

In the kitchen, Scott dropped his backpack on a chair and helped me put the groceries away.

I held up the bottle of red wine. "I assume you want me to keep this out?"

"You assume right."

I clicked my tongue and sighed theatrically. "Scott Moore, you're getting so predictable."

He eyed me. "Oh, *am* I?"

"Yes, you are."

"We'll just see about that, won't we?" He nodded toward the backpack he'd brought in. When I gulped, he grinned. "Predictable, eh?"

"Okay, maybe not."

"That's what I thought."

I cleared my throat. "Why don't I pour you some wine and we'll go back into the bedroom?"

His grin broadened. "Sounds like a plan." He paused, then added, "Grab a couple of bottles of water too."

Moments later, Scott picked up his backpack and, glass in hand, followed me into the bedroom.

I put the bottles of water on the nightstand and he set his glass on the window sill. When he dropped the backpack on the chair beside the window, I recognized the muffled clang of handcuffs. The bag landed with a heavy enough impact, though, that it obviously contained more than just the familiar-sounding restraints.

Scott unzipped it and pulled out something that

resembled a whip. The handle was maybe a foot long, and a dozen or so wide, black tails hung off one end. It appeared to be some sort of leather.

When he hit it against his palm, my eyes widened.

"Ever seen one of these?" he asked.

"Not up close and personal, no."

"It's a flogger. This one is a softer leather than some of my others, and the tails are thicker, so it'll be more thud and less sting."

"Will it still sting?"

"If I decide it will, yes." He set the flogger down and pulled a similar implement out of the bag. This one had much longer, thinner tails, and they were knotted at the ends. The leather was visibly stiffer, especially as he ran his fingers between the tails.

"This is a cat o' nine tails, and no, I'm not going to use it on you tonight," he said. "The material isn't nearly as forgiving, and the knots as well as the length mean it could tear your skin up royally if someone overdoes it." He fingered the tails, and I thought he might have shuddered.

"So, if they make something like that," I said, gesturing at the cat o' nine tails, "I'm assuming some people like having their skin torn up?"

"Those who are heavily into pain, yes."

I eyed it, then looked at him. "I can't imagine how that would be enjoyable."

"You'd be surprised. For some, intense pain—or the resulting endorphins—can be quite enjoyable. And erotic."

"I've experienced intense pain before," I said dryly. "Getting off on it was the last thing on my mind."

Scott chuckled. "Not all pain is created equal, darling. Whip me, bite me, claw my back until it's a map of Manhattan, but just watch what happens if I get a paper cut."

I laughed, and some of the nerves in my gut unwound. Part of me wanted to ask how he went about being whipped if he was exclusively a Dom, but I let the thought go for now.

"Anyway," he said, "I happened to have that one with me, so I thought I'd show you something different. You ready to do this?"



"Ready as I'll ever be."

"Good." He set the flogger down and picked up his wine glass. "Safe words?" He swirled his wine, mesmerizing me.

I licked my lips. "Red to stop, yellow to back off."

He stopped swirling the wine and raised it to his lips. As he took a sip, my heart rate jumped. When he set the glass down again and went for his left sleeve, my nipples hardened. My blood turned to molten anticipation, sizzling in my veins while I watched him roll up one sleeve, then the other.

He picked up his wine. I held my breath when he took a sip, and my heart skipped when the glass clinked on my nightstand.

His eyes met mine.

Goodbye, Scott. Hello, Master.

"Strip. Leave your bra on, though."

I obeyed, all the while avoiding the temptation to steal a glance across the alley to see if Matt was watching.

Once I was down to my bra, I stood with my eyes down, waiting for Scott's next command. He picked up the flogger again, the tails whispering almost inaudibly against each other like rustling fabric.

"Now, I can't have you moving around while I'm flogging you," he said. "And since I don't have the Saint Andrew's Cross here, I'll just have to improvise."

I looked at him and raised my eyebrows, asking him to elaborate.

He gestured at the window with the flogger handle. "Stand in front of the window. Facing out."

I hesitated. "The—"

"The window." Another gesture, sharper this time, coupled with a look that said *this isn't up for discussion*.

I turned toward the window. Matt's bedroom was directly in my line of sight, but I closed my eyes. I was afraid he wasn't there. I was afraid he *was* there. I'd never been so brazen in showing myself to him, and I couldn't decide if I was excited or embarrassed.

Scott's fingertips drew a path of goose bumps up the center of my spine, stopping at my bra strap. With a flick of his fingers, my bra went slack. He hooked a finger under it

and slid it down my arms. It landed on my bare foot, and I closed my eyes tighter and swallowed hard.

He took my wrist and guided my hand up to the molding around the window. "Hold on to that. Do not let go until I tell you."

I gripped the molding as he ordered. "I won't, Master."

Then he brought my other hand up and did the same thing. With one shoe, he tapped my foot. "Put your feet a bit further apart. Shoulder width."

Once had me where he wanted me, he stepped back. I held my breath, waiting for...I didn't know what I was waiting for. Pain? A sharp slap? A dull thud?

The first time the flogger hit me, I jumped and flinched. My entire body reacted as if it had hurt, but as the seconds passed, I realized it hadn't hurt at all. It was startling, nothing more. When I relaxed, he brought the tails down on the other side of my back. Again and again, alternating between my left side and my right.

He flogged me with a steady rhythm, the tails landing on my back with percussive impacts that sounded sharper than they felt. This was a different animal altogether from the belt. Instead of just one point of impact, the tails fanned out to cover more surface area and awaken inexperienced nerve endings. Every stroke left a different tingling pattern.

Then he stopped, and a moment later, his fingertips trailed down my back. His soft, almost ticklish touch made me gasp.

"Are you doing okay?"

"Yes, Master," I murmured.

"Can you handle more, or is this enough?"

I hesitated, wondering if this was a trick question, but he wasn't asking what I wanted, he was asking what I could handle. I licked my lips and whispered, "I can handle more, Master."

"You know what to do if it gets to be too much."

The flogger hit me again. Then again. It came down progressively harder, each strike reverberating through my bones and shaking dormant nerves to life.

Tails struck skin again, but I felt nothing. My eyes flew open and my body tensed, nerve endings searching for the contact I hadn't felt. *How could...what did...where...*

Another slap of leather on skin. Nothing but sound.  
His hand. He was hitting his own hand. That had to be it.

*Fucking tease*, I wanted to scream. *Hit me*. I didn't dare, though. He was in charge. I had to be patient, or I'd be punished.

When the flogger came down again, a hundred beestings rewarded my patience. My eyes stung almost as much as my skin, and it was all I could do not to beg him to do it again. Harder. *More*.

I didn't have to beg.

As he hit me again, I realized it had begun to sting earlier, but I hadn't noticed, so lulled was I into a trance that the pain didn't make it into my consciousness. On some level, I was aware of it, but I was more aware of the rush that consumed me each time the flogger left a fresh pattern of stingers.

"Can you handle more than this?" he asked.

"Yes, Master," I slurred. My own desire for more surprised me. I'd expected it all to be too much, but it wasn't enough. I wanted more. I needed more. I was drunk off the thrill, the pain, the endorphins.

The tails struck harder. *Harder*. My head spun faster. The pain—there, but not—faded into the background.

"Don't let go of the molding," Scott said.

I swam out of the sea of endorphins long enough to remember what my hands were supposed to be doing. I adjusted my grip, making sure I didn't inadvertently disobey him.

With another strike, the endorphins pulled me away from the world again. Familiar, electric ripples sizzled through my veins. If this went on long enough, I was sure this beautiful oblivion would lead me right into another level of delirium. I'd never thought it was possible to come without touching my pussy, but now I wasn't so sure.

The percussive rhythm stopped. My muscles tensed and my nerves thrummed beneath my skin in search of the next strike.

Fingertips touched my shoulders and trailed down my back. His touch was gentle, barely making contact with my skin, but my whole body reacted as if he'd raked his nails

across my flesh. My back arched and I bit my lip to suppress a cry. Of frustration? Arousal? Confusion? I had no idea.

His hands paused on my hips before he wrapped his arms around me.

"Do you want me to fuck you?" he whispered in my ear.

My pussy tightened at the thought of having him inside me. *Yes, yes, please, yes.* I wetted my lips. "If that's what you want, Master."

"Good girl." He kissed the back of my shoulder. "And it *is* what I want, so don't move."

He stepped away. Behind me, fabric rustled. His belt buckle jingled. I screwed my eyes shut as clothes whispered over skin before falling almost silently to the floor. The sound of the condom wrapper opening was almost enough to knock my knees out from under me.

I held my breath when he stood behind me again, unsure what his next move would be.

Without a word, he laid a hand on my back. After a moment, his hand went from my back to my ass, then between my thighs. I moaned when his fingers teased my pussy lips apart and slipped inside me. As they slid deeper, he paused to kiss just beneath my ear before he spoke.

"Oh, I think someone's a little turned on." His lips curved into a grin against my neck. "I love a woman who gets this wet just from being flogged." He nipped my earlobe, and I shivered. His fingers moved in and out in a slow, steady rhythm, but his voice hardened. "The same rules apply as before. You will not come without my permission. Is that clear?"

I sucked in a breath. It was clear, all right. Obeying was going to be easier said than done, though.

"Is that *clear*, Kristen?"

"Yes, Master."

He nudged my feet a little further apart. Then he guided his cock to me, teasing my pussy but not pushing in.

"Do you think he's watching?" Scott whispered in my ear.

"Yes, Master, I do," I moaned.

"If he is, just imagine what he can see. He probably wishes he was here now." The head of his cock slipped inside

me. "He probably wishes he was the one who's about to fuck you."

I bit my lip and whimpered, gripping the molding even tighter.

"I feel for the guy," he said. "I can't even imagine how frustrated he is, seeing you naked and horny like this." A sharp breath cooled the side of my neck. "Watching you right now, he'd probably sell his soul to be able to do *this*."

He thrust into me. My balance wavered and my vision went white for a split second. He didn't give me a chance to recover before he pulled out and thrust in again. I gripped the molding, struggling to stay standing as he fucked me.

*Don't come*, I ordered myself.

Scott wasn't about to make it easy for me though. "Any red-blooded male would be hard as a rock if he saw what Matt sees right now," he said, panting in my ear. "A hot, naked woman being flogged. A woman who's enough of a filthy whore to be flogged, then fucked just like this for all the world to see." He groaned as he thrust a little harder. "Do you want him to see what a filthy whore you are, Kristen?"

"Yes, Master," I moaned. "Yes, I do."

"Tell me."

"Yes, Master, yes."

"Then tell me." He grabbed my hair and pulled my head back, sending ripples of pain and pleasure through me just like he did every time. Growling in my ear, he said, "Tell me what you want him to see."

"Show him—" I gasped as his hand tightened in my hair. "Show him what a dirty whore I am, Master."

"Whose dirty whore?"

"Yours," I whimpered. "Show him I'm your filthy whore, Master."

"Oh, yes," he hissed. "Yes, you're my dirty fucking slut." He released my hair, grabbed my hips, and drove his cock into me even harder. My whole body trembled, and I fought to let neither his words nor his powerful thrusts make me come.

*Don't come*, I pleaded with myself.

"He's seen you come before, hasn't he?" Scott said.

*Keep doing what you're doing, and he'll see it again*

very soon. "Yes, Master."

"He's probably waiting for you to come right now. Holding himself back, waiting for you, just like he would if he were fucking you."

I moaned, my knees shaking beneath me. The fucking bastard knew just how to drive me insane. Just what to say, just how to move.

"Do you want to come for him, Kristen?" he whispered. "Do you want to come for both of us?"

"Yes, Master, yes." I braced myself for the inevitable denial, the long, torturous denial, the—

"Come."

My body instantly responded—no, *obeyed*—and I came, my legs and spine liquefying as wave upon wave rushed through me. I gripped the molding, Scott held my hips, and somehow I stayed upright as he kept fucking me, as I kept coming, as the world kept whirling around me in a blur of white sparks.

My orgasm finally tapered, and I could breathe again.

Then Scott groaned and his rhythm changed just slightly. I couldn't tell if he sped up or slowed down, if he thrust harder or backed off, but something was different. Just different enough, in fact, to reignite all the nerve endings that were still dimming after my orgasm, and before I could stop myself, I came again.

An instant later, he buried his face against my neck and released a sharp breath. Then another. With a deep groan, he dug his fingers into my hips and came.

After his orgasm had come and gone, he was still, holding me to him and panting into my hair. Then he lifted his head.

"I didn't say you could come *twice*," he growled.

I closed my eyes. "I'm sorry, Master."

He said nothing. Steadying me with an arm around my waist, he pulled out slowly.

"Let go of the molding," he said. I did, my aching arms falling to my sides as my body melted against him.

He guided me to the bed and kept his hand on my shoulder until I'd laid back. Then he took care of the condom and joined me.

"Here." He handed me a bottle of water. "You need to

drink something."

I didn't argue. Up until that moment, I hadn't even thought about needing something to drink, but now my mouth was dry, and my shaking hands couldn't get the bottle cap off fast enough.

"Are you cold?" he asked, running his fingers through my hair. "Or is this okay, without a blanket?"

"This is fine," I murmured. Maybe I was cold. Hell, I didn't even know what cold felt like anymore. The water was more or less room temperature. My back and shoulders were still hot from the flogger, and Scott's body radiated heat beside me as the aftershocks of my orgasm radiated more beneath my skin.

Scott touched my arm with the backs of his fingers, then my face, then the side of my neck. "Hmm. Your skin's a bit cool. Would it be too hot if I pulled a sheet up?"

"A sheet would be okay."

I set my mostly empty water bottle on the nightstand. We rearranged the bedcovers, then settled in again, this time with a single sheet draped over us. The longer we laid there, the more thankful I was he'd thought to cover us. As I came back down to earth, the warmth dropped out from under me. Room temperature was suddenly too cold, and as a chill tried to seep into my skin, I pulled the sheet up to my shoulders and moved closer to Scott.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Just a little cold."

"Need another blanket?"

"No, I'm fine."

"You sure?"

"I'll just let you warm me up." Without warning, I slid my foot under his calf.

"Jesus Christ!" He jerked away.

I laughed. "What? I needed help warming up my feet."

"You women and your frozen feet," he muttered.

"You mean you don't want to help me warm them up?" I batted my eyes.

"Fuck no." He turned onto his side and shot me a playful glare. "You're not getting mouthy with me, are you?"

I tried to look innocent. "Maybe."

He kissed me gently. When he looked at me again, his

expression was more serious. "Now, speaking of being mouthy," he said, "you disobeyed me earlier. I said you could come, I didn't say you could have *two* orgasms."

My cheeks burned as I avoided his disapproving look. I cringed, wondering what the punishment would be.

"So," he said, "before I leave tonight, I'm giving you an order that applies to all the time between now and when you see me again. Sunday, isn't that when we're planning to get together again?"

"Yes, Master."

"Good. No orgasms between now and then. At all."

My lips parted. His thinned into a rigid line.

"Am I understood?" he said.

I nodded. "Yes, Master."

"When you come to my place on Sunday, I'm going to ask you if you obeyed me. And you will answer me honestly." He trailed a fingertip down the side of my face. "As for this evening, we're done for the night. Come here." He pulled me to him and let me rest my head on his shoulder.

Four days without an orgasm.

How hard could *that* be?



## ***Ten***

On Saturday night, our friends were getting together at the usual bar, but I opted not to go. Instead, I spent a much-needed evening at home doing some long overdue relaxing. I would be spending a few hours with Scott tomorrow, and mind and body both needed a little down time before being in that man's hands.

That, and going out usually meant flirting, dancing, or even just checking out the local eye candy. Obeying Scott's "no orgasms" rule had been difficult enough for the last few days. No sense handing myself a reason to break that rule.

So I stayed home. Around eleven, I couldn't sleep, so I sat in bed with a book propped up on my knees.

My mind couldn't quite make sense of the words on the page. All I could think of was tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow. God only knew what Scott had up his sleeve, and the anticipation had me on pins and needles. The only thing I would have bet money on was that he'd torment me by keeping my much-needed orgasm just out of reach.

*You're an evil, evil man, Scott.*

A light caught my eye and I looked up. Matt's bedroom light had come on. He was home.

And he wasn't alone.

They shuffled toward the bed, lost in a passionate kiss. His fingers combed through her long, dark hair and his other hand rested on the small of her back, his skin contrasting sharply with her black dress.

He made no move to turn off the lights or close his window shade.

I marked my page, set the book on the nightstand, and flicked off the light. I crept toward the window, tiptoeing as if they'd see me in spite of the darkness or hear me in spite of the distance. I stayed in the shadows so the light from his window wouldn't give me away.

Oblivious to me, Matt swept her hair over her shoulder and drew the zipper down the back of her short, form-fitting dress. I bit my lip, the phantom vibration of a separating zipper making my heart beat faster. He pushed one strap over her shoulder. Then the other. The dress slid off, disappearing from my line of sight, and Matt's hands were all over her newly bared skin. I sucked in a breath, every inch of my skin cool with the absence of his hands. Oh God, I wanted him to touch me that way.

She had a tattoo on the small of her back. I couldn't make out exactly what it was, only that there was a curving band of color that seemed to cradle Matt's hand as he held her to him.

His other hand drifted into her hair, and he pulled her head back before bending to kiss her neck. I couldn't breathe, my temperature soaring at the thought of his lips on the side of my throat, of his fingers in my hair, of his—

He looked at me.

Even from this far away, there was no mistaking the deliberate shift of his eyes toward me. Whether or not he could see me, he was looking right at me, and he didn't look away as he nipped the side of her neck.

He raised his head to kiss her again, and our momentary eye contact was broken, but the damage was done. My heart pounded beneath far too many clothes.

They turned and he guided her toward his bed, still holding her to him and kissing her with each slow, shuffling step. They paused occasionally to exchange a few words before grinning into another kiss. I wondered what kinds of dirty things he said to her. If he whispered all the things he intended to do to her, or asked her what she wanted him to do, or if he released growled curses when she told him how good his hot skin felt against hers. I wished I could, but across the alley and through two sets of double-paned windows, I didn't stand a chance of hearing their voices.

My nipples brushed the inside of my T-shirt, sending a

tingle straight down to the place Scott had forbidden me to touch. I dug my teeth into my lower lip. He'd ordered me not to come again until I was with him. When I'd agreed to it, I hadn't expected this view from my window.

*Look away*, I ordered myself. If I didn't, I was going to break Scott's rule. There was no doubt in my mind. I couldn't watch this and still obey him.

But I couldn't look away.

Not when Matt dipped his head to kiss her neck like that.

Not when she lifted his shirt off, revealing his toned back and shoulders.

Not when I caught myself wishing to God it was my bra that had just fluttered to Matt's bedroom floor.

From this vantage point, I couldn't tell if he gently cupped her breast or teased her nipple with a fingertip or pinched it enough to make her moan, but the slow motions of his elbow and the way she squirmed against him were enough to make my own nipples ache.

She started to unbuckle his belt, but he grabbed her wrists. He held her hands up, grinning as he said something to her. She spoke and he laughed.

Then, he shoved her down onto the bed. She reached for him, but instead of joining her, he dropped to his knees. She pushed herself up on her elbows and looked down at him, saying something.

He looked up. Said something. Shrugged. Then he hooked his fingers under her barely-there thong and slid it off as she lifted her hips for him. He drew the thong down her long legs and over her ankles, but didn't release her foot. Cradling it in one hand, he kissed the inside of her ankle. His other hand drifted up her calf, his lips following one lingering kiss at a time. When he reached the inside of her thigh, she fell back onto the bed, biting her lip as he continued upward.

Her back arched and my own spine tingled. His tongue must have been on her clit, and if the way her eyes widened and her body writhed were any indication, he knew what he was doing.

I wondered if she moaned or if she cried out. Maybe she loosed a long string of profanity, or maybe he reduced her to sharp gasps and sighs.

A whimper escaped my own lips as I pressed my thighs together tighter. The temptation to slide my fingers between them was almost too much to resist.

Scott's ban on orgasms hovered in the back of my mind.

*Look away, Kristen.*

The brunette grabbed handfuls of blanket, her entire body shaking and squirming except for her hips, which Matt held down with one arm.

*Look away, Kristen.*

His other shoulder moved in a slow, rhythmic pattern. It didn't take a genius to figure out where his hand was.

*Look away? Not a chance.*

She closed her eyes. The telltale flush of pink, visible even from here, spread over her face, neck, and chest as her body trembled. When she came, she came hard. The breaking tension was written all over her face and the way her torso lifted off the bed, and though I couldn't hear her cry out, I swore the air around me crackled with the force of her release.

Her body relaxed, and so did mine. I released a lungful of air. My head spun as I struggled to catch my breath, but I probably wasn't nearly as breathless as that panting, trembling brunette on Matt's bed.

He pushed himself up on his arms and kissed her. For the longest time, he laid over her, kissing her as she ran her fingers through his hair.

They spoke, exchanging flirty smiles in between kisses.

Then he got up. He was out of my sight for a moment. When he returned, he had what I guessed was a condom in his hand. Not that I cared what was in his hand; for the first time, I got a look at his cock, and I wasn't disappointed in the least. Like Scott, he wasn't freakishly huge, but he wasn't lacking in length or thickness.

*I licked my lips. I have to have you, Matt Sommers.*

He tore the condom wrapper with his teeth, and the ache in my nipples and between my legs approached unbearable. *God, yes, fuck her. Let me see you fuck her.*

The brunette got up off the bed and said something to him as he started to put the condom on. He grinned and

raised his hands, the condom still between his thumb and forefinger.

She knelt in front of him. His grin evaporated and his lips parted as he combed his fingers through her hair. His brow furrowed and he closed his eyes, letting his head fall back. When he spoke, he must have been telling her how good it felt, or just cursing into the air. The words were probably slurred, maybe coming out as little more than a breathless whisper as she enthusiastically sucked his cock.

My mouth watered. That was one lucky, *lucky* woman.

He said something to her and she stood. With hands that were much less steady than they'd been a moment ago, he rolled the condom on. She put her arms around him, and as they kissed, they sank onto the bed together. He reached between them, his shoulder dipped once, and when his hips took that first long, slow stroke, my pussy tightened as if his cock were sliding into me.

I couldn't take any more. I'd deal with Scott tomorrow. If I didn't do something about this tension, someone was going to get hurt.

The first gentle contact of my fingertips on my clit was so intense, I cursed aloud, quickly clapping my other hand over my mouth as if someone was going to hear me.

Across the alley, Matt and the brunette didn't react. His muscles rippled with exertion as he fucked her slowly, and I drew circles around my clit at the exact same speed. My breath caught when he reached back and hooked his arm under her knee, drawing her leg up. He must have been hitting her in all the right places now, driving her absolutely mad, and just as I expected, she grabbed his shoulders. Electricity radiated from my own G-spot at the thought of his cock sliding over it at that perfect angle, and I fingered my clit even faster.

Guilt crept into the outer edges of my consciousness, reminding me of Scott's order, but I couldn't look away. I just couldn't. I couldn't look away, and how could I *not* touch myself while watching this scene unfolding in front of me? Watching the man I desperately wanted to fuck into the ground? It was either come now or come the second Scott touched me tomorrow, and waiting that long simply wasn't going to happen.

Matt stopped. For a moment, they were still. Speaking, by the looks of it. Then he let her leg down. She released his shoulders.

He withdrew and sat up, offering her his hand. She took it and let him pull her upright. He gestured at the foot of the bed, and she turned, getting on her hands and knees and gripping the footboard just like—

My heart skipped.

Just like the first night Scott fucked me.

Matt took her with a hard, violent thrust, and her face left nothing to the imagination about how amazing he felt. Her lips were apart, her eyebrows up, and her eyes wide with disbelief. Oh God, I wanted to feel him. I wanted to be there. In that moment, I wanted to be *her*.

Matt held her hair in one hand and her shoulder in the other, and he fucked her, grimacing with exertion as he slammed his cock into her pussy. I fingered my clit even faster. Blood pounded in my ears and I could only catch sharp, shallow gasps of breath.

He threw his head back, and I imagined the throaty groan, the helpless sound of surrender as he got closer. His face flushed, his arms tensed, his lips tightened.

Then he looked at me.

Looked *right* at me.

He couldn't possibly have seen me, but the second our eyes met through the shadows, he screwed his shut, took one last thrust, and came.

In the next instant, so did I.

## ***Eleven***

When I met Matt down by the bike racks the next morning, it was my turn to have trouble making eye contact or conversation.

"Morning," he said with a sleepy smile.

"Morning." I avoided his eyes as I started stretching.

Since he was out here and ready for a run, I assumed the brunette was gone, though I had no idea if she'd slept over or left in the wee hours of the night. Matt certainly didn't look like he'd slept recently. The dark circles under his eyes made me envy that woman; what I wouldn't have given for the chance to keep him up all night. Especially now that I'd seen what he was capable of.

I shivered, but tried to mask it by focusing extra hard on my stretches.

"Up for some hills?" I asked to make conversation.

He groaned as he stood up from a stretch, rolling his shoulders gingerly. "I think I'm game for an easy run today."

It was all I could do not to laugh. "Getting too old for anything strenuous, are we?"

"Oh, shut up." He chuckled. He twisted a crick out of his back with a crunch-crunch-crunch that made me cringe.

"Well, you're the one who's creaking and crackling," I said. "Could just be old age catching up with you."

"Uh-huh." He glared at me. "If that's the case, Father Time will be after you in pretty short order too."

"I'll just outrun him like I outrun you."

"Bitch," he said, rolling his eyes and laughing.

"Come on, let's go." I nodded toward the road. "Then we can get back in time for you to watch *Matlock*."

"Hey, now!"

"What?" I showed my palms and shrugged. "Come on, old man."

He tried to scowl, but his grin wouldn't be denied. "You know, just for that, I think I do want to do some hills today."

"Sure you can handle it?"

"Absolutely."

We headed out, starting with our usual slow, easy pace. In spite of his obvious fatigue, he had no trouble with the first few hills. The fourth was always brutal, though, and by the time we reached the top, he'd lost some speed. He swore under his breath and winced once or twice even as the path leveled out.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," he muttered. "Man, I should know better than to stay up late the night before a run." He wiped his forehead.

"You mean you actually got out of the house last night?"

He eyed me, a grin threatening to spread across his lips. Yep, he knew. Running his hands through his sweaty hair, he said, "Yes, I finally got my pathetic carcass out of the house."

"And? How did it go?"

"Well, she showed me her tattoos."

When I glanced at him, he met my eyes with a knowing look.

"Tattoos?" I said. "How many does she have?"

"Three."

I remembered seeing one. Possibly two. I wondered where she'd hidden the third. "A wild woman, is she?"

He chuckled. "Oh, you could say that."

*Lucky whore*. "So, are you going to see her again?"

He shook his head. "Doubt it."

"Really?"

"Nice gal, smoking hot, but..." He trailed off.

"But?"

"A little too recently divorced, and believe me, it shows."



"Baggage?"

"Big time." He shrugged. "I'm okay with some baggage. Everyone has it. But it needs to fit in the overhead compartment, you know?"

I laughed. "Yeah, believe me, I know."

"So I'm—" He muttered something under his breath. "Fuck, another hill."

"Yeah, they just put that one in the other day."

"Uh-huh." He shot me a playful glare. "Up for a race to the top?"

"I'm not the one who was whining and aching at the top of the other one. You tell me."

"See you at the top." With that, he took off.

"Cheater!" I called after him.

He just barely beat me to the top. "Now who's getting too old for this?"

"Fuck you," I said, struggling to catch my breath. "At least I'm not limping after a little hill."

"I'm not limping."

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm— *fuck*." He abruptly slowed to a walk, trying and failing not to favor his left leg.

I slowed to match his halting pace. "You okay?"

He nodded, but grimaced. "I'm fine, but do you mind walking back?"

"Not at all." Alarm and amusement mingled in my chest. The only other time I'd seen him give in and slow down on a run was after he'd recovered from a badly sprained knee. The very knee he favored now. He'd sprinted up hills just days after a car accident, run a 5K in spite of a back injury, and jogged in the dead of winter with a chest cold. A wimp he was not.

I suppressed a grin. *Christ, what did that woman do to you?*

"So, as I was saying before," he said. "The chick last night. She's a nice girl, and we had a good time." His eyes darted toward me. Quickly looking away, he cleared his throat. "I just don't see it going any further than that."

"Well, at least it got you out of the house." *And right back into the house.*

"Yeah." He laughed. "I guess it did."

We continued with our jog—now walk—bantering about this and that, but we didn't revisit what he'd done and I'd seen last night. It was there, though, hanging between us.

The conversation eventually dwindled to nothing. This late in a run, I could usually attribute our lack of discussion to being out of breath, but not today. Not only had we given up and decided to walk, but last night had changed things. I couldn't shake the feeling we'd taken our bizarre little relationship to another level, having switched the roles of voyeur and exhibitionist. As if he'd deliberately fucked her where I could see them to silently tell me, "This is what I see. This is why I watch you."

*Loud and clear, Matt. Loud and clear.*

Half a block from our buildings, he broke the silence. "Did you hear they finally opened a club in the building where McCabe's used to be?"

"Yeah, Club Nine, isn't it?"

"I think so, yeah."

"I hear it's supposed to be pretty nice." I'd been through the building's doors when it was in its previous incarnations—a seventies and eighties themed dance club, a seedy place that was a pole or two short of a strip club, a country bar complete with a mechanical bull—but I hadn't been there since Club Nine opened. Rumor had it Club Nine was velvet rope posh with bartenders and deejays who actually knew what the hell they were doing.

Matt was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "I don't suppose you'd want to go check it out, would you?" He gulped. "With me, maybe?"

I inclined my head slightly. "Matt Sommers, are you asking me out?"

He bit his lip and avoided my eyes for a second. Then he met them, this time with almost enough boldness to mask his nerves. "Yes. Yes, I am." His shyness quickly came to the surface, though. He muffled a cough. "I mean, if you're—"

"I'd love to."

He blinked. "You would?"

I smiled. "Hell, yeah."

Relief replaced shyness. "Great. Maybe, Friday? Um, eight or so?"

"I'll be there."

## **Twelve**

That afternoon, I went to Scott's rather than having him at my apartment. He had something up his sleeve, that much was obvious, but he also wanted to show me what he called his "dungeon".

"So you really have a dungeon in your house?" I asked when I arrived.

"With all the trimmings." He flashed me a grin that was half boyish, half maniacal.

"Now this I can't wait to see."

He gestured for me to follow him down the hall. "It took a long time to get it just the way I wanted it, but—" He paused, stopping in his tracks in the living room. "Malia, get down." He snapped his fingers at the sleek black cat who had parked herself on the coffee table. "Get. *Down*." The cat just stared at him, flipping her tail and narrowing her eyes with something that could only be smugness.

Scott sighed and picked her up. "I said, get down." He set her on the floor, nudging her away from the table with his foot. Malia eyed him, then trotted to the three-level kitty condo in the corner. She bounded to the top and glared at us from her perch.

I laughed. "Defiant little creature, isn't she?"

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. "She's the perfect cat for a Dom, really. Keeps me from getting *too* full of my damned self."

I snickered. "Too late for that."

"Hey, fuck you."

"Please do."

"Anyway," he said, eyeing me, "the dungeon. Let me grab a glass of wine, and I'll show you. Do you want anything to drink?"

"No, thanks." I followed him toward the kitchen. "So what exactly is a dungeon?"

"A slightly less disturbing term for a torture chamber," he threw over his shoulder.

I folded my arms across my chest and leaned against the kitchen doorway. "You know, if you were anyone else, I'd think you were kidding."

"I am." He reached for a bottle of red wine. "Well, sort of."

"Uh-huh. Okay, come on, what's this dungeon all about?"

He chuckled. "It's just a term for a room that's set up for BDSM activities. Usually has floggers, various things to tie people with." He poured his wine, then shrugged when he set the bottle down. "And depending on whose dungeon it is, it's usually decorated to have that dungeon ambiance."

I laughed. "Dungeon ambiance? I'm not sure I've ever heard those two words together."

He swirled his wine, but didn't drink it. "Well, a place wouldn't exactly feel like a dungeon if it was painted in pastels with Disney characters all over the place, would it?" He paused, frowning and stroking his chin with his thumb and forefinger. "Though you know, that could work. You could really fuck with someone—"

"Scott, you are one twisted soul, you know that?"

"Why thank you." Raising his glass in a mock toast, he winked. "That's the nicest thing anyone's said to me all day."

I rolled my eyes. "Just show me the dungeon."

"Oh, fine." He sighed dramatically. "To the dungeon." With that, he led me out of the kitchen.

I'd been to his house countless times, and I'd just assumed the last door on the left, which was always closed, led to a spare bedroom. Maybe a storage room, a guest room, something like that.

I was wrong.

The walls were painted black and the hardwood floors creaked beneath our feet. Along one wall was a rack of floggers, whips, canes, and a few things I didn't recognize.

Beside that was a large "X" made out of two thick, sturdy beams and supported by a couple of braces behind it. Sunken lights in the ceiling cast a dim glow over everything, and there were several wrought iron candelabras around the room.

Dungeon ambiance indeed.

Something brushed past my legs. I looked down just in time to see Malia dart across the room and attack the bottom of the "X".

"Fucking cat," Scott muttered. He picked her up, popping her claws out of the wood before tucking her under his arm. "This is a no kitty zone, you little shit." He set her down in the hallway and shut the door. A second later, a black paw with claws extended reached under the door, sweeping around as if in search of one of our legs.

"I'm surprised you haven't put a kitty condo for her in here," I said.

He glared at me. "This is my room, not hers."

I glanced at the paw under the door. "Does she know that?"

"Yes, she just likes to conveniently forget." He nudged her paw with his foot, narrowly avoiding the resulting swipe with her claws.

I laughed. "Spoiled little thing."

"She is *not* spoiled."

"Uh-huh."

He shot me another glare, then rolled his eyes. "Anyway." He gestured at the rack of floggers with his wine glass. "This is where I keep my toys."

"Christ, how many do you have?"

"A lot. Different subs like different types. And, what can I say? I just like having a lot of toys."

"So I see."

He led me to the wooden "X". "This is why I brought you over here today, since I can't exactly move it." He tapped one of the beams with his knuckle. "It's called a Saint Andrew's Cross." It was a strange device, but it didn't take a genius to at least get the gist of its purpose. Not when leather cuffs hung from each corner by sturdy-looking metal attachments.

I looked it up and down. "That thing is... interesting."

"Mine's a little different from what you'll see at a lot of the local clubs and dungeons."

"How so?"

"I rigged it so every binding can be operated on its own," he said, gesturing at the cuffs on each corner, "just like any other. The difference..." He reached behind it. Something clicked, and all four cuffs fell, hitting the floor with thuds and clinks. He grinned like a kid showing off a science fair project. "Emergency quick-release."

I laughed. "I guess that answers my next question."

"Which was?"

"Did you build it or buy it?"

With an indignant sniff, he said, "I'll have you know I designed this fucker from the ground up. Well, okay, it wasn't exactly a new design, but the quick-release? At least this version? Mine."

"Impressive."

He shrugged. "Just a combination of being incredibly paranoid about safety and being a techno-geek."

"Wouldn't it be easier to just have quick-releases on the cuffs themselves?"

"Come on, now. That wouldn't be nearly as much fun for an engineer." He picked up one of the cuffs. "Actually, this set does have Velcro straps for that very purpose. But if I get to playing with things like ropes, chains, crap like that? I need to have a way to get her down quick if things go south." He tapped the cuff against the cross's frame. "Might be a bit of overkill, but the handful of times I've had to use it, no one complained."

"When have you had to use it?"

"Kasey had a panic attack once. Took a long time before she was willing to try it again, but she loves it now." He absently watched his fingers trace the edge of one beam. "A couple of subs ended up using their safe words with other Doms, though I don't know exactly what happened those times. And Tara almost passed out once."

I blinked. "Seriously?"

"Turned out she hadn't eaten for a few hours and her blood sugar was crashing," he said. "She didn't tell me she was feeling dizzy already. Fortunately, I caught on and got her down before she completely passed out. That wasn't a

pleasant experience."

"You don't say." I swallowed. If there was anything relating to BDSM that made me nervous, it was the bondage aspect. Pain, I handled better than I'd ever expected. Submission, I loved. But I was somewhat claustrophobic, and I wondered how well that would translate into being bound, especially if I was completely unable to move.

"So, want to try it?"

My heart sped up. Forcing back my nerves, I nodded.

"Yeah, I'll try it."

Scott raised an eyebrow. "You sure?"

"I can't promise I'll like it, but I'll try it."

"Fair enough." He shrugged. "And we'll start with just your hands, today. Some people get a little nervous having both hands and feet bound, so I prefer to do one scene with just hands before we go any further."

Faster still, my heart pounded. "Sounds like a plan."

"And if at any time, you want me to let you go, you know what to do."

"Safe word."

"Exactly." He swirled his wine and raised it almost to his lips. "So, you ready?"

I took a breath. "Yeah, I'm ready."

When he took the first sip, excitement joined nervousness and sizzled through my veins. My mouth watered as he set the glass down. He rolled first one sleeve, then the other, all the while sending my pulse up, up, up. He picked up his glass again and watched me with narrowed eyes as he took the second sip.

The glass clinked on the table. Goose bumps prickled up my spine. This methodic transformation never ceased to amaze me. Just a few simple movements, and my friend was my Master once again.

He folded his arms across his chest. "Strip."

Blood pounded in my ears as I took off my shirt. I was accustomed to being naked in front of him now. The sense of exposure and vulnerability was still there, but had mostly faded into the background.

What unnerved me now was taking off my clothes in front of that large, wooden inanimate object to which I'd soon be bound. Every inch of newly exposed skin was a nod



of surrender, an acknowledgment that I would soon be at my Master's mercy on the Saint Andrew's Cross.

Bound. Tied. Immobile.

My panties landed on the pile of haphazardly folded clothes beneath the rack of floggers.

*Here we go.*

"Ready?" he asked.

*As I'll ever be.* "Yes, Master."

"Stand with your back to the cross."

The crossed beams were smooth and cool against my skin, but it was the warmth of Scott's hand encircling my wrist that made me shiver. He brought my arm up and closed the leather cuff around my wrist. The cuff was more comfortable than I expected. The leather was hard, but it was lined with a softer material, and the rounded edges didn't bite into my flesh.

*Like it's designed to be worn for a long time,* I thought, the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end.

He fastened my other hand into place. I glanced up at my bound wrists, tugging at the restraints. The metal attachments jingled, but didn't give. I was definitely not going anywhere.

To my surprise, I didn't get that heart-stopping sense of panic when I tested my restraints. *This isn't so bad.* I wasn't completely immobilized. My feet could still move. I could still see, still speak. I knew Scott would release me if I asked him to.

Maybe I could handle this after all.

"You okay?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Good. Now, just to show you how quickly I can get you down if there's a problem..." With a metallic clank, my hands were free. The cuffs were still around my wrists, but I was no longer restrained.

"Just say the word," he said, "and I'll bring you down. Understood?"

"Understood."

He cleared his throat.

"Understood, Master."

"Good girl. Give me your hands." He brought my hands up and hooked them to the cross again. "Is anything

too tight?" He touched my left hand, then my right. "They're not tingling or anything, are they?"

I shook my head.

Scott cleared his throat again.

"No, Master," I quickly corrected.

"If anything starts tingling or goes numb, or if you get lightheaded, tell me immediately. Understood?"

"Yes, Master."

I closed my eyes as his hand came to rest on my side. It didn't move. For a long moment, that point of light contact was the focal point of all my senses. It wasn't even what he was doing now that occupied my thoughts, but what he would do next. I had no idea. No clue where the hand would go, where his other hand was, what went on in that mind of his.

After an age had passed, he finally moved. I pulled in a long breath as he slid his hand down my waist, over my hip, then between my thighs.

"Look at me, Kristen."

I met his eyes, drawing back slightly from the intense scrutiny in his expression.

"When we were together last time, you disobeyed me, so as punishment, I gave you a specific order." His fingers teased my pussy. "Do you remember what that order was?"

I swallowed hard, trying to speak in spite of what he did with his hand. Something was definitely tingling, but I didn't want that to stop.

"Answer me."

"I wasn't to come until tonight, Master."

His middle finger slipped into me, then back out. As he pushed it in again, he whispered, "And did you obey that order?"

Before I could will myself not to, I dropped my gaze.

I gasped when he abruptly pulled his hand away. He gripped my jaw and raised my head so I had no choice but to look him in the eye.

His tone was cold when he spoke again. "Did you, or did you not, obey my order?"

"No, Master. I didn't."

He scowled. "How many times."

"Once. Last night."

"I see."

Silence. Long, icy silence, with nowhere to look but right into his disapproving eyes.

"I'm disappointed, Kristen," he finally said.

"I'm sorry, Master."

"However," he said, caressing my face as he spoke in a gentler tone now, "you were truthful and didn't try to lie to me about it, even though you knew there would be consequences for additional disobedience. That tells me you're not afraid of me." He smiled and kissed me lightly. "Because of that, I won't punish you *this* time."

My shoulders slumped with relief. "Thank you, Master," I whispered.

He knelt in front of me, tracing his hands over my waist and hips. One hand stopped on the side of my thigh while the other continued, running past my knee and down my calf before wrapping around my ankle.

"Now, since you still came when I wasn't around, I need to teach you some discipline." He pushed my ankles apart. "Isn't that right?"

"Yes, Master."

"I made it easy for you before." His fingers trailed up the inside of my leg. "All you had to do was not touch yourself. Not come." He crested my trembling knee and started up my thigh. "That wasn't a difficult request, was it?"

"No, Master."

"So, tonight..." He paused to kiss my hipbone. "I'm going to make it much harder for you. I want you to remember..." With slow, lazy strokes, his fingertip teased my pussy lips. "...that when you're my submissive, it's always..." One finger slipped into me. "...*always*..." Two fingers. "...easier to obey the first time than to create a second time."

I inhaled sharply as his fingers slid deeper and found my G-spot.

"You will obey me tonight," he said, his voice vibrating against my skin, "won't you, Kristen?"

"Y-yes, Master." I gripped the straps on my restraints as my knees shook violently.

"Good girl," he whispered. "Then that means that no matter what I do..." He gently pushed my legs further apart with his other hand. "...you won't come unless I allow it."

I sucked in a breath as he leaned closer to me. Warm breath drifted over my clit, my only warning before his lips closed around it.

Holy fucking hell.

Some men were good at this. Some were amazing. The things Scott did with his mouth transcended "amazing" or any other pedestrian description.

His tongue made slow, gentle circles around my clit, effortlessly finding every deliciously sensitive spot as if he'd put them there himself. My knees trembled. My eyes rolled back. Breathing was no longer a priority, but at least the gasps and moans he caused kept some air flowing.

*Don't come*, I begged myself. If ever I'd thought it was frustrating when a man tried in vain to get me off, that was nothing compared to the torture of keeping myself from coming while Scott Moore's mouth demanded an orgasm from my clit. I held my breath, gripped my restraints, dug my teeth into my lip, but nothing could distract me from the perfect circles and flutters of his tongue.

His fingers slipped easily in and out of my pussy, and I cringed each time they neared, then brushed, my G-spot. When they pressed against it, beckoning at the same speed his tongue moved across my clit, I couldn't hold back.

With a moan that was equal parts ecstasy and defeat, I came, my knees buckling as my spine tried to do the same.

Scott withdrew his fingers and released my clit before my orgasm had completely run its course, but there was still no stopping it. Even without the constant stimulation, the damage was done, and wave after wave of delicious ecstasy rippled through me.

I managed to get my knees under me again a second before the quick release clanged and my hands fell to my sides. I was free, but the cuffs still encircled my wrists. Unbound, but still bound.

Scott looked at me with narrowed eyes, his lips thinning into a straight line. Inwardly I cringed, knowing I'd misstepped once again. More than any bondage or pain, I feared his disapproval, and his disapproval I had just earned.

With a sharp nod, he indicated the floor. "Get on your knees."

I did, holding my breath as I awaited admonishment.

He was silent. I knew he was looking at me, but he neither spoke nor moved for what seemed like days.

"That's twice you've disobeyed me," he said eventually. "I've demanded control of your orgasms, and you've *twice* refused to surrender that control."

"I'm sorry, Master."

"I could have let it slide once, especially since you were alone." He came down to my level, resting his elbows on his knees and looking me right in the eye. "But twice? And so brazenly in my presence?" He clicked his tongue and shook his head.

I dropped my gaze and murmured another apology.

"That puts a crimp in my plans for this evening." He stood again. Walking a slow, tight circle around me, he added, "I'd planned to fuck you tonight, but now I have to come up with a punishment instead."

Anticipating punishment and knowing I wouldn't have him inside me tonight were nothing compared to the gut-turning shame. I'd disobeyed him, earned his disapproval when I so ached for the opposite.

He stopped in front of me. "I *could* fuck you good and hard, but then you might come even though I've ordered you not to." He grabbed my hair and pulled my head back. "And if I gave you the opportunity to disobey me a third time, I'd only have myself to blame, now wouldn't I?"

Shame made me cringe more than the pain made me flinch. "I won't disobey you, Master."

"So you've said." He raised my chin, forcing me to look up at him. "I don't believe you."

I screwed my eyes shut to avoid his disapproving glare.

"Next time," he said, "as long as you've been a good girl, I'm going to fuck you. But for now, since you haven't..." He trailed off as he unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans. My mouth watered. I desperately wanted his cock inside me, but if sucking him off was punishment for that earth-shattering orgasm or the ones last night, then so be it.

Just inches from my face, he stroked himself slowly. "You want me to fuck you, don't you?"

"Yes, Master," I whimpered. "Yes, I do." I quickly caught myself. "If that's what you want. Master."

"And if I allowed it, you'd suck my cock, wouldn't you?" His hand moved faster now.

"Yes, Master. Anything you want."

He laughed. "So cooperative and obedient now that what you want is out of reach."

"I won't disobey you anymore, Master. I'll do whatever you ask."

"The thing is, I can't decide what I want you to do." He added a slight twist to the motion of his hand, just as I'd have done if my hand were in its place. "As I said, were I to fuck you, you might come in spite of my orders to the contrary, and—"

"No, no, I—"

"Don't interrupt me," he snapped.

"I'm sorry, Master." My hands opened and closed at my sides, aching with the need to stroke him the way he stroked himself.

"If I fuck you, you might come without my permission. So I could let you suck me off, couldn't I?"

*Please, please, yes, please.* "Yes, Master, if you—"

"But you enjoy that. I know you do. Don't you?"

I exhaled through clenched teeth. "Yes, Master, I do."

"Then that leaves me no choice, really, but to punish you by making you watch me come without letting you help." He stroked faster.

I whimpered with frustration. His cock was so close I could taste it, so deliciously close my pussy tightened at the mere thought of him throwing me down and fucking me, but he wouldn't let me touch him. He wasn't *going* to let me touch him because I hadn't earned the right.

"Master, please. I won't disappoint you again."

"I know you won't." He pulled my head back a little, that minute increase in distance between my lips and his cock driving me insane. "But since you *did*, this is all you get tonight." A second later, a low groan emerged from the back of his throat. I whimpered again as hot semen hit my chest and neck.

Tightening his grasp on my hair, he forced me to look him in the eye again. Though he was a little out of breath and his face and neck had some extra color, his expression didn't betray even the slightest loss of control. Seconds after

an orgasm, and he was just as calm and controlled as he'd been all night.

"We're going to try this again," he growled. "For the next week, your orgasms are mine. You will only come when you're with me, and when I give you permission. Understood?"

"Yes, Master."

He let go of my hair and stepped away to get a towel out of the cabinet. He held it out to me.

"We're done for tonight," he said coldly. "Get dressed."

I couldn't look him in the eye as I took the towel from him. "Thank you, Master," I murmured. Shame and frustration tangled in my chest.

After I'd dressed, Scott led me out of the dungeon and back into his living room. We sat on the couch with his arm slung over my shoulders. With his other hand, he lifted my chin.

"We're done now," he said, his tone gentler. "I'm not your Master anymore." He kissed me and stroked my hair. As I returned his kiss, the lingering tension in my shoulders melted away. His gentle affection assured me he wasn't kidding; punishment and disobedience stayed in the dungeon. Out here, all was forgiven, and we were back on level ground. I pulled him closer and combed my fingers through his hair.

Malia bounded onto the couch and onto our laps, startling both of us.

"Little attention whore." Scott chuckled as he scratched her ears. "You just have to be right in the middle of everything, don't you?" She flopped down across our laps, rolling onto her back and purring as we petted her.

"She does keep you in line, doesn't she?" I laughed.

He rolled his eyes. "Please. She just reminds me that not every female on the planet obeys my every command."

"No, we definitely don't."

He raised an eyebrow, then laughed. "Great, so my cat's been a bad influence on you."

I looked at Malia, then at him. "Or I might be a bad influence on her."

"Just what I need."

"You said yourself, she keeps you from getting too full of yourself." I grinned. "I would just be doing my part to keep you humble."

"Uh-huh." He picked Malia up and set her on the other side of the couch. With her out of the way, he moved a little closer, raising goose bumps on my skin as he tangled his fingers in my hair. "Do I have to put you back on the cross and put you in your place?"

"Hmm, I don't know."

He kissed me, tightening his fingers in my hair. "Maybe I will, then. Just to keep you good and disciplined."

"Promise?"

He laughed softly. "Oh, I'll put you on it again. Just not tonight."

"When?"

"As with everything, darling." He paused for another kiss. "When I'm damned good and ready."



## ***Thirteen***

On Friday night, Matt was waiting for me in front of my building when I came downstairs. His back was to me, but when I pushed the door open, he turned around.

And we both stopped.

God only knew how many times we'd met out here before our morning jogs, dressed in shorts and T-shirts, using the bike rack and planters to stretch, with no expectations beyond a run and conversation. Even after all this time, my heart fluttered whenever I saw him, especially since he'd started watching me.

But seeing him like *this* took my breath away.

Under a black leather jacket, he wore a dark red shirt. He'd casually left the top two buttons open to reveal a simple silver chain resting on his collarbones. His hair had that carefully disheveled look, spiked and perfectly arranged to *look* messy.

I'd seen him dressed for a night out, but it had never been for a night out *with me*, and it was all I could do not to suggest we skip the night out in favor of a night *in*.

I bit my tongue, though.

"You look great," he whispered.

I smiled. "So do you."

He returned my smile, and we both fell silent. Then he came to life with a muffled cough. "Cab's on its way. Shouldn't be more than a few minutes."

"I'm in no hurry." I ran my fingers through my hair, just to give a restless hand something to do. That must have

caught Matt's eye, because he followed the slow, simple gesture.

Then he furrowed his brow and cocked his head. "What happened to your wrist?"

"What?" I lifted my hand again. A couple of silver bangle bracelets did a crappy job of hiding the faint red semi-circle below my hand. "Oh, that." I laughed, tugging the bracelets over it. "Just..." Our eyes met. If the grin—half-shy, half-mischievous—pulling up one side of his mouth was any indication, he had a pretty good idea where that mark had come from.

Shyness won over both of us, and we broke eye contact, letting the subject drop with our gazes.

Mercifully, our taxi pulled up. Matt opened the door and gestured for me to get in. I offered another smile and a murmured "thank you" when he gave me his hand to help me get in. Once I was situated, he closed the door and went around to the other side.

"Club Nine, please," he said to the driver.

As the driver followed Matt's instructions, I tried to get comfortable. I'd dressed for standing and dancing, not sitting in a cramped backseat. I tugged at my skirt, my cheeks burning as I realized just how much of my thigh the black fabric revealed. I glanced at Matt, and he quickly looked away, a hint of color lighting up his face.

I fought to keep from laughing at the ridiculousness of the situation. We were two grown adults who could talk about anything and everything, but the minute we stepped inside the bounds of flirtation, we were reduced to a pair of blushing school kids.

I wondered if he was as uncertain about this as I was. There was no denying the tension between us, nor could I deny I wanted him *badly*, but I was afraid of ruining our friendship. Or spoiling the fun of our sordid window-to-window affair.

I just hoped we could get past this awkward shyness and either agree to stay friends or acknowledge this chemistry and *do something about it*.

Twenty minutes or so after picking us up, the cab let us out in front of Club Nine. It was still early, so there wasn't much of a line, and before long, we'd paid the cover,

checked our coats, and been turned loose among the rest of the club goers.

As I took in my surroundings, it was clear this was no country bar, seedy club, or wannabe disco.

Club Nine had plush booths, dim lights, and dark corners. Black lights made psychedelic patterns out of colorful drinks and wild clothes. Necklines dipped and hemlines rose to the very edges of modesty, and I forgot whatever asinine concerns I'd had about my skirt being too short. If anything, it might have been a bit long for this place.

The music was loud with a pulsing tempo, a hypnotic heartbeat, and like charmed snakes, people moved and writhed together in a dressed rehearsal of what they would no doubt be doing later tonight. Hands ran over barely covered waists and hips. Lips met necks or whispered secrets in ears. Secrets that disappeared into the blaring music, but were betrayed by startled gasps and bitten lips. Couples had eyes only for each other, while those on the prowl were unmistakably searching for one thing and one thing only.

The air here was charged with sex, and I couldn't decide if that meant it was a huge mistake or a damned good idea for us to come here together.

*Only one way to find out.*

We went to the bar and shouted our drink orders over the music. With bottles in hand, we found a booth near the dance floor. Neither of us spoke. It wasn't the awkwardness that muted us now, but the music. How the hell was I supposed to break the ice when he'd barely be able to hear a word I said?

Watching the other people on the dance floor, I rolled my beer around in my mouth for a moment, trying to decide if I should ask him. *Well, if actions speak louder than words, maybe that's how I can get him to hear me over this music.*

I turned to him and shouted, "Want to dance?"

Matt shook his head and put a hand up. "Not much of a dancer. But, if you want to..." He gestured at the dance floor and winked. "Be my guest."

I laughed. "You just prefer to watch?" The words were out before I'd realized what I was saying.

His eyes widened with a hint of panic. He gulped, then

nodded. "Yeah, I just like to watch."

I took another sip of beer. "You sure you don't want to join me?"

Both hands went up this time. "No, no, dancing and I don't get along."

I shrugged. "Suit yourself." With most guys, I might have been annoyed or even offended at the suggestion of dancing alone, but the idea of dancing while Matt watched seemed like a natural—and incredibly sexy—extension of what we'd already done.

So I drained my beer, rose, and went out to the floor. I hadn't danced like this in years, but in no time flat, my body remembered.

Hands appeared on my waist, followed a second later by someone's body pressed against mine. I glanced over my shoulder. I had no idea who he was, but I danced with him anyway. He held my body close to his, every movement letting me know he was more than a little turned on. That didn't surprise me. Every man on the dance floor was probably hard; if they weren't aroused by the women they were dancing with, then they likely were by the women dancing nearby. There was too little clothing and too much heat for any other response.

From across the floor, I met Matt's eyes. His lips were parted, and he shifted in his seat before going for his beer. Even as he took a drink, his eyes never left mine, as if I mesmerized him as much as he did me. When he set the bottle down and absently licked his lips, my nipples hardened, and the brush of fabric over them every time I moved threatened to send me out of my mind.

The songs changed and so did my dance partners. Sometimes I faced them, sometimes my back was to them. I danced with men, I danced with women, I danced alone, and all the while, Matt watched. Out in the open, with no shadows to hide him from me, he watched. The veil was lifted, the façade was gone, and we held each other's gazes. Neither of us shied away from this silent confession of what we'd done, of what we both knew. There were no more secrets. Just as we'd done for weeks, I danced and Matt watched.

As more and more people crammed onto the floor, my

heart raced, and it wasn't just arousal. A crowded dance floor and a claustrophobic don't mix well, and as the breathing room around me shrank inside this thickening crowd, panic tried to work itself into my already rapid pulse.

I took a few deep breaths. The edge of the dance floor was only a few feet away. If I needed to, I could get away from this. All I'd have to do is shoulder my way through a thin wall of people, and I'd be home free. There was no need to panic.

Deep breath. *I'm okay.* As long as I knew I could get out, I'd be fine. Another deep breath. With a glance, I double-checked that I still had an easy escape if I needed it. I did, and the panic slowly receded.

Another song ended, another unseen dance partner released me, melting away into the crowd. In seconds, hands materialized on my waist again. The music guided us into a smooth rhythm, his body molding against mine as we dipped and twisted and undulated together. Hot breath cooled the sheen of perspiration on my neck. His hands rested on my hips, and his thumbs made slow arcs on my lower back, moving in time with the music.

And just like the last few men with whom I'd danced, he was definitely aroused. His erection brushed over my ass, and I closed my eyes, shivering at the cool electricity meandering up the length of my spine. My dance partners weren't the only ones on this floor who were this turned on. Someone was touching me, someone was watching me, and by this point, my panties must have been soaked through.

I opened my eyes, searching through the crowd for my unabashed voyeur. When I finally found our table, though, he was gone.

Lips brushed the side of my neck. "You are sexy as hell when you dance, you know that?" His voice raised goose bumps over every inch of my skin.

I turned around in his arms. Matt grinned and pulled me closer, pressing his erection against me as our bodies moved together.

"I thought—" My mouth was suddenly dry. I swallowed hard. "I thought you just liked to watch."

"Sometimes I do." He lowered his voice and the words were nearly lost in the music when he added, "But

sometimes I get tired of watching and want to play too."

My breath caught. If my pussy wasn't wet before, it was now.

I slid my arms around his neck, and we danced. I pressed against him again, electricity coursing through my body with each rhythmic movement we made together. He pushed back, and I barely stifled a soft gasp. There was no denying he was turned on, and judging by the hand on the small of my back, keeping our bodies close together, he wasn't interested in denying it.

He leaned forward. I thought he was going to kiss me, but he just said, "Turn around." When I did, he pulled me against him again, one hand on my hip, one across my stomach. It was the same way I'd danced with countless others all night, but it was different now. This wasn't a stranger, this was Matt. Matt's body against mine. An alleyway of distance reduced to a sliver of heat and clothing.

We moved in total unison now, crossing line after platonic line with every sensuous motion of hips and torsos. Even more than his erection against my ass, his hot, sharp breaths against my neck let me know just how turned on he was, just how turned on I was, just how much I wanted nothing but a layer of latex between us. I don't even know if we were moving with the music anymore or if we'd found some tempo that belonged only to us.

Like cold water rushing over me, Scott's order echoed through my mind. I should have known tonight would make that order impossible to obey. Guilt tugged at my gut; I didn't want to disobey my Master, but if this night continued in the direction I thought it was going, I only hoped he'd understand.

Matt's face was beside mine, his clean-shaven jaw just coarse enough against my cheek to send a shiver through me. I raised my arm and slid it around to the back of his neck as I rested my head on his shoulder.

His lips touched my neck. I shivered again, and he laughed, the hiss of breath brushing across my skin. He kissed his way up my neck. Then along my jaw. Then my cheek.

I turned my head toward him. When our eyes met, our bodies stopped moving. My breath stopped moving.

Everything else disappeared. We didn't bother dancing anymore, and I couldn't feel the heat of bodies moving around us, couldn't hear the music over the thundering of his heartbeat behind my shoulder. All that existed were the places we made contact and the places we had yet to make contact.

Holding my gaze, he turned me back around, sliding an arm around my waist as his other hand touched my face. I put my arms around his neck and raised my chin as he tilted his head and leaned closer. His gaze flicked back and forth between my eyes and my lips, and he swallowed hard.

Our eyes met again, and uncertainty pulled his eyebrows together. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but hesitated. We both leaned in closer, fingers snaking through each other's hair as his lips neared mine.

He paused and drew back slightly. His fingers twitched in my hair, neither pushing me away nor letting me get closer. A ragged breath escaped his lips and whispered across mine, driving me to the brink of madness.

"Matt, I—"

He kissed me.

Full on, no holding back, from unsure to desperate in the space of milliseconds, he kissed me. His fingers alternately ran through and tightly grasped my hair. Legs that had, dance after dance, refused to fail me suddenly turned to liquid, and my entire body melted against his. Even breathing wasn't a good enough excuse to break this kiss, and when I inhaled deeply through my nose, a suggestion of musky cologne taunted my senses.

Whatever shyness or reluctance we'd brought into the club evaporated. We'd held back far too long, and there would be no more holding back. This was the kind of demanding, unrelenting kiss that promised nothing less than a night of naked, sweaty skin between tangled sheets.

Someone bumped into me, nearly knocking both of us off balance, but we caught ourselves.

"Maybe we should take this someplace else," Matt said.

Struggling to catch my breath, I said, "I hope 'someplace else' involves a cab and a house key."

He exhaled hard. "It does now." Without another

word, he took my hand and led me off the dance floor. We wove a quick path through the crowd to the coat check, stopping just long enough to get our jackets and my purse before hurrying outside.

The first breath of fresh air was a shock after the thick mugginess of the club, but I was far from cold. If anything, it was just enough to cool me down and keep me from bursting into flames before Matt and I could get someplace private.

A group of college-aged girls had just pulled up in a taxi, so Matt quickly hailed the driver before they'd even gotten out. Once they were gone, he held the door for me just as he had earlier, but there was no shy tentativeness this time, especially not when he squeezed my ass as I got in. I shot him a startled look and he winked just before he closed the door. A second later, he slid in on the other side of the backseat.

He wrapped his arm around my shoulders and gave the driver the address of his apartment building. With all the logistical crap taken care of and the cab aimed toward home, he pulled me to him and kissed me again.

After a moment, he broke the kiss and looked at me. "You have," he said in a hoarse whisper, pausing to run the tip of his tongue across the inside of his lip. "You have the *sexiest* kiss." He didn't give me a chance to respond before his mouth was over mine again.

His hand rested on my knee for a moment, then began a slow path up the inside of my thigh. As his fingers drifted under my short, short skirt, he murmured against my lips, "I've been dying to touch you, Kristen."

How he was still capable of speaking, I didn't know. Between his kiss and his touch, I was lucky I could breathe.

His fingertip teased me through my panties.

"Jesus," he breathed, pushing the thin fabric aside, "your pussy is soaked."

All I could do was moan. Glancing up, I caught the driver's eye in the rearview, but he quickly returned his attention to the road. Let him see. Let the whole damned world see.

Matt's fingers slipped easily inside me. When his palm pressed against my clit, even that light contact was so intense, I jumped. Had he not been kissing me just then, I



probably would have yelped in surprise.

"You okay?" he asked, gently rubbing both my clit and G-spot.

I nodded.

"I'll bet I can make you come before we get to my place," he whispered. "What do you think?"

His brazenness made me tremble as much as his hand did. From shy to... to this. *What other surprises do you have in store for me tonight, Mr. Sommers?*

"I don't think it'll take much, will it?" He spoke so softly I barely heard him. "You're already so wet, and I know you're as turned on as I am. All I have to do is..." His fingers beckoned against my G-spot. "And maybe this..." His palm circled my clit, turning the edges of my vision white and blurring the rest of it with tears.

"Jesus, Matt..." My voice was even quieter than his. It wasn't for the driver's benefit or out of a need for discretion. It was simply the most I could manage as Matt teased the earliest tremors of an orgasm out of my pussy. My fingers dug into his shoulders. "Oh God..."

"We're almost there, baby," he whispered in my ear, "but I want you to get there first."

And as soon as the words rolled off his tongue, I was there.

## ***Fourteen***

I came back down to earth seconds before the cab slowed to a stop in front of Matt's apartment. We quickly got out, the pavement shifting under my wobbly legs.

With an arm around my waist to keep me steady, Matt handed the driver a few bills. "Keep the change."

"Thanks, man, have a good night."

"Will do," he threw over his shoulder as he led me toward the front door.

I was vaguely aware of the cab's tires squealing behind us. I thought there was a cool breeze when we left the club, but I didn't notice anything now, not over the heat of my still waning orgasm or Matt's body beside me.

There may have been people milling around on the sidewalk or in the lobby as we made a beeline for the elevator. The place could have been deserted or Times-Square-on-New-Year's crowded. I didn't notice. Every one of my senses was focused entirely on Matt.

It wasn't until we got into the elevator that I became aware of whether or not there were people around us. Specifically, as the doors slid slowly shut, I realized we were alone.

As soon as we were sealed inside the tiny box, Matt's mouth was against mine. His shirt bunched in my hands and he pushed me up against the wall, pressing his hard-on against my hip as we kissed like this was our one and only chance to ever do so. Hands blindly searched fabric for skin,

tasting each other's bodies the way our mouths tasted each other's kiss.

The elevator stopped, the doors opened and only then did we come up for air. We separated, but not for long. We each had time for a few rapid, gulps of air before we pulled each other into another kiss. My God, I wanted to get into his apartment and get him behind closed doors where we could get these clothes off, but I couldn't get enough of his kiss. I wanted another orgasm like the one he'd given me in the cab, I wanted to drag him down to the floor and fuck him, I wanted—

He suddenly pulled away and grabbed one of the closing doors.

He took my hand. "Let's get out of here."

Calling on my last few fraying strands of self-control, I resisted the temptation to pull him down to the floor. Instead, I followed him out of the elevator. On the way down the hall to his apartment, I realized another button or two of my blouse had come open. Whether he'd unbuttoned them or I had, I had no idea. Not that it mattered. I was a couple of buttons closer to being naked, so I wasn't going to complain.

"Finally," he muttered when we made it to his apartment. He shoved me up against his door, his hard cock digging into my hip as he kissed me frantically, furiously, just as he'd done in the elevator.

"I can't promise," he whispered breathlessly against my lips, "that we'll make it into the bedroom before I—"

"I don't care." I grasped his hair and kissed him. Keys jingled. One of us moaned. Then the door opened, and we nearly tumbled into his apartment. Somehow, probably owing to judicious use of walls and furniture, we kept each other upright.

He kicked the door shut. My purse hit the carpet. His jacket followed. My bracelets slipped off and clanged on the floor. We stumbled down the hall, shedding clothes with every shuffling step. He kissed my neck and panted against my skin. I clawed at his shirt, desperate for his skin against my fingers. A low growl emerged from the back of his throat and vibrated against my neck.

Then he grabbed my hair, raised his head, and kissed

me as he forced me backwards. My hip hit something solid. Before the dull impact even registered, Matt spun me around and bent me over his dining room table. One hand stayed on my lower back, forbidding me from moving. Then his belt buckle jingled, and I tried in vain to dig my fingers into the table's smooth surface, searching for something to hold on to.

At the sound of his zipper, I bit my lower lip, struggling to stay in control. *He's going to. Oh God, yes, he's going to.* When he pushed my skirt up over my hips, my bones turned to liquid.

"Christ, I just can't wait." His voice was unsteady, the words slurred.

Foil tore. Blood thundered in my ears. I closed my eyes and bit my lip as he pulled my panties aside.

"I don't usually rush like this," he said, "but I... fuck... I..."

"Fuck me," I pleaded. "Please, Matt—"

With one hard thrust, he was all the way inside me, and he fucked me. Dear God, he fucked me. From the very first stroke, he gave me everything he had, slamming his cock deep inside me. A string of profanity rolled off my tongue, but I couldn't hear my own voice or his over the table's creaks and protests. More than once, I thought it would buckle beneath us. If it had, we probably wouldn't have missed a beat, and he would have just kept fucking me right on top of the rubble.

One hand left my hip, and a second later, he grabbed my hair again, tightening his fist and pulling back hard enough to make me whimper.

"You like that, don't you?" he said, panting.

"Yes," I moaned. "Yes, I love it."

He gripped my hair tighter and fucked me so hard the pain was *almost* more than I could take. The edge of the table bit into my hips, but I just didn't care, not while he sent me careening toward another orgasm.

"Oh... God..." He released my hair and grabbed my hips, pulling me back against him in the same moment he drove his cock as deep as he could into my pussy. There he held me, releasing a long, throaty groan as his cock twitched inside me. The almost-there pulses of my own orgasm

receded, but I had no doubt he'd have me near and over that edge again before the night was over.

He gathered my hair in one hand and swept it over my shoulder. Then he leaned down and kissed the exposed side of my neck.

"That has been one of my fantasies ever since the first time you played poker here," he whispered, his stubble grazing my skin as he spoke. "Every time we've played cards here, I've wanted to throw you over this table and fuck you. Just like this."

I closed my eyes and moaned as he pulled out slowly. Then I pushed myself up and turned around to face him. For all the times I'd seen him blush or seen his color change with the exertion of a hard run, the flush of pink across his cheeks now made my knees tremble. I cupped his face in both hands, inhaling sharply as the feverish heat of his skin met my palms, and kissed him.

"Let's go in the bedroom," he slurred.

Our trek from the dining room to the bedroom mirrored the one from the front door to the table, but in slow motion. We still relied on walls and each other for balance, still tripped over each other's feet and the clothing we struggled to discard, we just didn't move as quickly now. Satisfaction reined back the frantic desperation that had nearly had us fucking in the backseat of the cab. Our movements were slower, but there was enough fervor behind every kiss and tremble in every touch to tell me in no uncertain terms that we weren't done yet.

In the bedroom, my bra fell to the floor, and the only thing that remained on either of us was Matt's boxers. We separated long enough for him to step out of them, and I bit my lip as he did. I'd seen him naked before, from a distance, and now he was close enough to touch. Now he *invited* me to touch. What I'd secretly watched from the shadows was now mine to have, and as my heart raced and my clit tingled, I wondered if having me like this gave him the same thrill.

Our eyes met, and there was no doubt in my mind. The hunger in his narrowed eyes was unmistakable, especially when he absently licked his lips.

A heartbeat later, we were tangled up in each other again, kissing with the same desperation and need as when

we'd stumbled into his apartment. We'd both come already, but that hadn't even begun to take the edge off.

He took a step forward, forcing me back. Then another. We continued this close-quarters, shuffling dance until I bumped into his bed.

"Jesus, I've been wanting you forever," he whispered, grasping my hair to keep me from pulling away. "I could fuck you all night."

I started to speak, but he suddenly released my hair, grabbed my shoulders, and threw me down on his bed. A violent tremor drove a whimper out of me.

Instead of joining me on the bed as I'd anticipated, he knelt beside it and pushed my knees apart. In an instant, his mouth was on my pussy and my back was off the bed. His tongue was dangerously close to my clit, maddeningly close, but didn't touch it. He drew slow, delicious arcs just close enough to take my breath away. Teasing. Tantalizing. This wasn't a man who couldn't find my clit. After all, he'd found it earlier. No, he knew exactly where it was, and he knew exactly what he was doing.

His fingers slipped into me in the exact moment that he closed his lips around my clit and circled it with his tongue. My back arched and I gasped, my toes curling as my fingers clawed at the bedding beside me.

"You taste incredible," he whispered hoarsely, his breath teasing my clit and sending electric shocks through me. "Your pussy is..." He paused, as if he couldn't find the words, then dipped his head to taste me again.

I reached down to grasp his hair, but hesitated for a split second. *Am I allowed to—*

*It's Matt. Not Scott.*

I combed my fingers through his hair, mowing over the carefully arranged mess of spikes and not giving a damn because his mouth was driving me insane.

"That's amazing," I moaned. "Oh my God, Matt, that's..."

He responded with a gentle murmur, his mouth never leaving me, the vibration of his voice rippling against my clit. I grasped his hair and my hips pushed against his mouth and hand. I'd never experienced anything like this. He touched me like he knew my own pussy better than I did. He knew

places within me that I didn't, and he ignited sensations I'd never before felt.

I squeezed his fingers and moaned, my body writhing against him, but he didn't let me come yet. How long it went on, I didn't know. I lost all sense of time and I didn't care because nothing existed but his mouth and fingers and anything they touched.

He withdrew his fingers and paused. I whimpered as he pushed three in this time and his rhythm increased, faster and faster, his fingers bent and his tongue circling my clit as if it was the most delicious thing he'd ever tasted.

When I came, I couldn't cry out. I couldn't moan. I couldn't *breathe*. My back arched and my entire body was on fire the way my clit was against his tongue. And still he went on, releasing wave upon unbearable wave of electricity until I could take no more and gently pushed his head away. He rose and watched me, grinning as his fingers kept moving just enough to keep my orgasm going.

At last I took in a breath and released it in a soft moan of surrender. I tried to speak, couldn't make my mouth cooperate. He leaned over me and kissed me, his tongue sweet from my pussy. Slowly he withdrew his fingers and I could finally breathe again.

He licked his lips. "I've been wanting to do that forever."

*You're not the only one*, I couldn't quite say. Fuck speech. I couldn't get enough of *him*. I reached between us and wrapped my fingers around his cock, teasing him with long, even strokes.

"Fuck," he whispered, resting his forehead against mine.

"Get on your back." I pushed his shoulder gently.

He closed his hand around my wrist and pinned it to the bed. "No, stay just like that."

"But I want—"

"There will be time for that later. But if I don't fuck you in the next thirty seconds, I'm—" He cut himself off by kissing me, and the palpable need in his kiss finished the sentence.

He leaned to one side. The nightstand drawer rattled. Something rustled. And still he kissed me, right up until he

had the condom in his hand. Then and only then did he sit up, tearing the wrapper with his teeth and tossing it in the vicinity of the nightstand. With trembling hands and a long streak of muttered curses, he got the condom on. As he came back down to me, I grabbed the back of his neck and pulled him down, kissing him desperately, frantically.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, and—thank God, yes, *finally*—he was inside me again. There was nothing slow or gentle about the way he moved. My pussy was wet enough to accommodate him with ease, and he took full advantage of it, fucking me so hard I was sure the bed was going to rattle to pieces beneath us.

"Fuck, baby, you're amazing," he growled. "You..." A sharp breath whispered just beneath my ear. "I swear to God your pussy was made for my cock."

My body fell into his rhythm, my hips rolling in time with his thrusts and pulling him deeper.

"Oh God," I moaned. "That's..." There existed no words with the capacity to tell him how incredible he felt, how much I wanted him to keep doing exactly that all night, and how close he already had me to coming again.

"I can't tell you," he said, panting against my neck, "how long I've wanted to fuck you, and you're..." He trailed off, a tremor breaking his rhythm for a split second. "...you're even better than I imagined."

*Likewise, Matt.* I swore his cock was getting thicker with each stroke, but realized it was my own pussy tightening around him, pulling him in, pulling him deeper as he pushed me closer to another orgasm. He groaned softly and changed his rhythm just a little. Then he lifted himself up and looked down.

"Now *that* is fucking beautiful," he growled, almost purring as he watched himself move in and out of me.

"You like watching yourself, don't you?" I asked, somehow managing to articulate it clearly enough to be heard.

Our eyes met.

"I like watching *you*," he said. "Especially now that *I'm* the one fucking you." And just for good measure, he fucked me harder. I gripped his shoulders and moaned. His muscles rippled under my fingers with every deep, powerful thrust.



"You know I've watched you," he said. "You know, don't you?"

"Yes," I whimpered.

"And it turns you on, doesn't it?" He thrust a little harder. "That's why you leave the window shade open now, isn't it?"

The way he moved inside me reduced me to another wordless moan, but I managed a nod. He slid his hands under my back and came down to kiss me. Thrusting only from the hips now, his body pressed against my clit as his cock hit my G-spot again and again.

"Oh God, baby," he breathed, gripping my shoulders and knocking the air out of my lungs with every thrust. "Every time I've watched you come..." He shivered. "...I've wanted to be the one *making* you come."

I clawed his back, my own spine arching off the bed as his cock and his confession drove me right into the stratosphere.

"This is the way I've wanted to see you all along." He pushed himself back up on his arms. "Just like this, *just* like this, and..." He looked down, watching his cock moving in and out of my pussy. "Oh God, oh God, just. Like. *That*." With one last, hard thrust, he threw his head back, and came.

Then he collapsed over me, and we held each other in breathless silence. After a while, he lifted himself off me again.

"I wasn't kidding," he whispered, "I've been wanting to do this for a long, long time."

"You're not the only one."

He smiled and kissed me. "I hope I didn't disappoint."

"Not in the least."

"Good." He dropped a quick kiss on my forehead, then got up to get rid of the condom. Our bodies were much too hot to get under the covers, so we lay on our sides on top of the rumped comforter.

I brushed a drop of sweat off his temple. "So you *have* been watching me."

His cheeks colored and he avoided my eyes. "I figured you knew, I just, you know, felt kind of weird about it." Scratching the back of his neck, he looked at me again. "I

didn't want to creep you out or anything."

"If it bothered me, I'd have closed the shade."

"I know. But..." He trailed off for a moment. "You know what I mean."

"I do." I kissed him lightly. "How long? I mean, before you knew I saw you?"

"I'd caught a glimpse of you a few times before the night you saw me, but I never watched you. Not until you left the shade open. I assumed that meant you didn't mind."

I smiled. "You assumed right."

"I've always been a voyeur by nature, but never like that. I'm not the guy who'd go creeping around someone's windows late at night. But, I do like to watch, and that first night I saw you..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "Jesus, Kris, I just couldn't take my eyes off you."

My cheeks burned now. I avoided his eyes for a second, then met them again. "I have to be perfectly honest. The whole thing, you watching me, was part of why Alec and I split."

His eyes widened. "What? He knew?"

"No, no, he never knew." I chewed the inside of my cheek. "It was just the fact..." I sighed.

He ran the pad of his thumb across my cheekbone. "What?"

I swallowed. "You were looking at me. And..." I hesitated. "This is going to sound really stupid."

"Somehow I doubt that."

"Okay. But don't say I didn't warn you." I laughed in spite of myself. "I liked it, when you watched me. Mostly because I'd forgotten what it was like to have someone look at me like that."

"He didn't?"

"Not for a long time, no."

He caressed my face. "Have I ever told you what an idiot Alec is? Because he's an even bigger one than I thought."

I smiled half-heartedly. "He's out of the picture now, so..." I trailed off and shrugged.

Matt ran his fingers through my hair and kissed me. "Well, his loss is my gain, isn't it?" After one more kiss, he sank back onto the pillow. He fell quiet for a moment, and

when he looked at me again, some of his earlier shyness crept into the creases between his eyebrows. "So, where exactly do we go from here?"

I pursed my lips and shook my head. "I have no idea." I hesitated. "Honestly, I'm not ready for another relationship. I can do this, I just..." I paused, shaking my head. "It's so soon after Alec, and there's also Scott—"

"I know," he whispered, touching the underside of my jaw with the backs of his fingers. "I'm not asking for anything more than this."

"So what is 'this'?" I asked. "I mean..." I exhaled hard. "I don't even know where to start."

"I guess we start here and see where we end up." He smiled, if shyly. "Because I rather like where we're starting."

"Me too."

"And besides," he said, "I'm going to be out of town for that trade show next week. So at least this way..." He trailed a finger up the center of my back. "...I know you're in good hands while I'm gone."

"True." I leaned in to kiss him. "But I'm in good hands right now, too."

His hand drifted into my hair and, just before our lips met, he whispered, "You're damn right you are."

I could do this.

Hot sex with Matt in between hot sex with Scott?

Oh yes, I could do this.

I hoped.

## ***Fifteen***

Instead of spending the evening in the bedroom or dungeon, Scott surprised me by suggesting we go out for dinner on Saturday night. Not just a casual dinner like we'd done a million times before, but the kind of place that necessitated a skirt for me and a tie for him.

Whatever type of restaurant it was, one thing was for sure: it wasn't somewhere I could beg him to make me come. And that would have been extra frustrating, I thought with a pang of guilt, had Matt not given me so many orgasms last night.

Conversation was sparse over dinner. Our friendly banter was absent, as was our shameless flirtation, and it wasn't any fault of his. If anything, it was a result of my conscience, which kept reminding me that I'd disobeyed him. Repeatedly. I'd been too caught up in the moment to worry about it at the time, but every time I met Scott's eyes, the guilt burned a little hotter.

He folded his arms on the table behind his empty plate. "You're awfully quiet tonight. It doesn't bother you to be seen in public with me, does it?"

I laughed. "I've been seen in public with you plenty of times."

"Yeah, but we're actually someplace respectable."

"Hmm, good point. I hadn't thought of that."

He eyed me. "Then that isn't why you'd gone quiet, is it?"

"No. No, it isn't." I chewed my lip. When I met his eyes again, his eyebrows were raised, his expression

somewhere between inquisitive and alarmed. I sighed. "I have to confess something."

The scales tipped in favor of 'alarmed.' He cleared his throat. "Okay, go ahead."

"I, um, didn't quite follow your rule for the last few days."

"Oh, *really*? Again?" Scott clicked his tongue and shook his head. Though his tone was made of disapproval, he couldn't hide the relief in his eyes and the way he set his shoulders. Whatever he'd expected me to say, this confession wasn't nearly as serious. Scolding though he might have been, he looked like he'd dodged a bullet. "Kristen, what ever am I going to do with you?"

I laughed, my face burning. "Well, I tried this time, I really did. But I..." I dropped my gaze for a moment, certain my face was redder than the rose in the vase between us. "Let's just say I didn't act alone."

He chuckled and shrugged. "I guess I can't hold it against you, then. I didn't exactly take into consideration you might have an accomplice."

"You don't mind, though?" I chewed my lip. "I mean, I guess this might have been something to clear up before we got started, but, since you have your other subs, I assume it's not against the rules for me to see other people?"

"Of course not." He put his hand over mine on the table. "You're right, we should have established that up front. I assumed it was clear."

"So did I," I said. "It just occurred to me, um, after the fact..."

Scott grinned. "Neighbor?"

I blinked. "How did you know?"

"Come on, now," he said. "Give me a little credit. He's been watching us fuck, and a blind man could see the chemistry between the two of you. To be honest, I'm surprised it took this long."

"Really?"

"Hell, yeah. And I'm glad you've got something going with him now."

I cocked my head. "What do you mean?"

He ran the tip of his thumb along the inside of my wrist and grinned. "Krissy, you've just spent four years

enduring a degree of sexual frustration that would have driven me batshit. With all the sexual karma you're cashing in right now, I say, the more the merrier."

The waiter suddenly materialized, and judging by the wide-eyed look he gave Scott, he'd caught at least part of the conversation. My cheeks burned a little, but Scott didn't appear fazed in the slightest. Typical Scott.

The waiter cleared his throat. "Could I, um, interest you in anything off the dessert menu?"

"Not for me, thanks," I said.

"And for you, sir?"

Scott shook his head. "No, but I would like a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon, please."

"Cabernet Sauvignon," the waiter said with a nod. Then he made a quick escape. I could only imagine what was going through his mind. High-brow or not, I had no doubt plenty of odd conversations happened in this place, but ours had evidently caught him off guard.

"Anyway," Scott said with a dismissive gesture in our waiter's direction. "So I suppose I don't have to ask if your neighbor knows about what's going on with us?"

"Yeah, he knows," I laughed.

"Doesn't weird him out?"

I shrugged. "Evidently not. I didn't get a chance to ask in between all the orgasms."

Scott's eyebrows jumped. "He gave you a few, I take it?"

"More than a few."

He grinned. "Oh, well *done*, that man." The grin faded to a more serious expression. With seriousness came discretion, apparently, and when he spoke again, he kept his voice down, almost whispering. "And speaking of what's going on with us, how are *you* doing with, well, with what we're doing?"

"It's... new."

"But are you still comfortable with it? Still enjoying it?"

"Scott Moore, don't ask stupid questions." I sipped my drink and rolled my eyes. "If I wasn't enjoying it, I'd have told you by now."

"So I'm not frustrating you to the point you want to claw my eyes out?"

"I didn't say that."

He smiled. "Okay, so you're still comfortable with all of this, then. Anything new you want to try?"

"I'm still getting the hang of everything you've thrown at me," I said. "Haven't come up with anything to add."

"Have you thought about switching?"

I tapped my fingers on the side of my glass. "Yeah, a little."

"And?"

"I like being a sub, but I'm curious about being a Domme, too."

He laughed. "I *knew* you were a switch."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." I rolled my eyes again. "You were right, as always."

"You're learning." He winked.

"Okay, so how do I go about finding a sub?"

"Well, you can look online," he said. "There are a lot of sites that cater to this lifestyle. I'd be happy to help if you wanted to try contacting a few." He shrugged. "Or we can go to a BDSM club."

"Wait, they have BDSM *clubs*?"

"Indeed they do."

"Do I even want to know?"

He winked. "Probably."

"Do tell."

"Oh, where to start..." He took a breath. "This place actually started out years ago as a swinger club. A lot of the swingers that went to that particular club were into BDSM, and it just kind of evolved into a BDSM club."

I cast a self-conscious glance around the room, certain the other restaurant patrons would hear even though he was practically whispering. Turning back toward him, I said as quietly as I could, "So everyone there now is into BDSM?"

"Mostly, yes. Some are still just swingers that are into more vanilla stuff, or who prefer to watch, but it's mostly Doms and subs."

"What exactly do they do at this club?"

He rested his forearms on the table. "Well, it's basically a place where Doms and subs get together to play. Some people just chit chat, others get involved in some pretty complicated, crazy scenes. I sometimes just watch,

sometimes share one of my subs with another Dom, things like that." He grinned. "If you think my dungeon is crazy, you should see the ones at this place. Saint Andrew's Crosses, racks, you name it, they have it."

"Wow." I shook my head. "Sounds like a completely different world."

"Compared to the vanilla world?" He laughed. "Oh yeah, you could say that." Thumbing his chin, he inclined his head a little and looked at me with total seriousness in his eyes. "I was planning to go next Saturday. Do you want to go?"

Nerves twisted my stomach into knots. "I, um..."

"You don't have to."

"Actually, I want to," I said. "Sounds like it could be... interesting."

He chuckled. "Yeah, you could say that."

Before I could speak, the waiter appeared again.

He set the glass of red wine in front of Scott. "Cabernet Sauvignon."

Scott glanced up and smiled. "Thank you."

Once the waiter had gone, Scott picked up the glass and slowly swirled it. "We'll talk more about the club between now and Saturday. For now, I'm just glad to hear you're still okay with this. And still interested in trying new things."

"What can I say? You've piqued my curiosity."

His eyes narrowed slightly as he grinned. "So I have."

He sipped his wine. Then, his eyes never leaving mine, he set the glass down. When he unbuttoned the cuff of his left sleeve, my heart fluttered. As he rolled his sleeve to just below his elbow, a prickle of déjà vu inched its through me. I sucked in a breath when he went for his other wrist, my entire body tingling as he unbuttoned and carefully rolled his right sleeve just like he had the left. With both sleeves in place, he reached for his glass again, and I squeezed my thighs together, squirming in my seat as he took another sip.

"Comfortable?" he asked, and just as I knew it would, his voice had that edge to it. That sharpness that marked the change from friend to Dom.

"Yes, Master." The two words automatically slipped off my tongue before I snapped my mouth shut.



"Good."

He was probably smirking. Or looking at me with that familiar icy look. I didn't know, though, because I kept my eyes down.

*Scott Moore, you son of a bitch.* With nothing more than a series of benign, simple motions, he'd changed us. At his whim, he flipped the switch and we became Dom and sub.

Resting his forearms on the table, he leaned toward me and lowered his voice. "Did you think domination ended in the bedroom, Kristen?" He laid his hand on the table between us, palm up, and beckoned. Automatically, I put my hand over his. He closed his fingers around my wrist, his grasp firm but not uncomfortable.

"Answer me," he said sharply.

"I hadn't thought about it, Master," I whispered.

His hand slid from my wrist to my fingers. "Tell me, Kristen," he said, his voice low, "Being around all these people, out in public..." He raised my hand to his lips and pressed a gentle kiss onto the backs of my fingers. "...knowing you've surrendered complete control to me, that even in a place like this, I *am* your Master..." He blew a soft, cool breath onto my kiss-moistened skin. "...it turns you on, doesn't it?"

"Yes, Master." There was no point in denying it. If he hadn't already known, the goose bumps on my arm would have given me away.

He lowered my hand, but didn't let it go. Drawing light circles on my wrist with his fingertip, he whispered, "To anyone else in this room, we're just a couple of lovers. Look around."

I did. Dozens of people sat in pairs and groups, absorbed in their own conversations or exchanging dreamy gazes, completely oblivious to the power exchange going on a table or two away.

"Yet here we are," Scott went on, "in the middle of a respectable restaurant, surrounded by respectable people, and not one of them knows what I've done to you." He leaned a little closer and spoke even softer. "They don't know what I've done to you, what I'm doing to you, or what I *will* do to you."

I pressed my lips together and tried not to visibly shudder.

The waiter appeared. "Can I get you anything else?"

Scott brushed his thumb across the backs of my fingers, pretending to be completely oblivious to my shiver as he turned to the waiter. "Check, please." As soon as the waiter left, Scott trailed a finger along the inside of my wrist. "Our own dirty little secret, right out in plain sight, and no one knows but us." His fingertip made a barely-there circle on my skin. "Does that bother you, Kristen? Being my submissive out here like this?"

"No, Master." It had caught me off guard, but it certainly didn't bother me. The only thing bothering me now was this maddening need to get out of my clothes, on my knees, and under his command in every way possible.

More than ever I understood why he didn't wear leather, why he insisted I submit to him and him alone rather than the image of a Dom. He could flip a switch and make me submit to him anywhere, any time, and no one else would ever know. All he had to do was ring a metaphorical bell, and like one of Pavlov's dogs, my mouth watered.

I shifted in my seat again. My mouth wasn't the only thing getting wetter at his command.

"Your check, sir." The waiter's voice sounded miles away. Not distant, per se, but irrelevant. He wasn't Scott, so he wasn't important.

"Thank you," Scott said to the irrelevant waiter, his demeanor instantly shifting from Dom to gentleman. He slipped his card into the leather folder and handed it back. When we were alone again—alone in the middle of this crowded room—he lowered his voice and was my Master once again. "I think it's time we got out of here."

"I agree, Master."

He laughed softly. "Of course you do."

With the check paid, we stood. I hadn't realized how much my knees shook until I tried to rely on them for stability, and twice I had to pause while putting on my jacket to casually hold the back of my chair for balance.

On the way out, Scott offered me his elbow. When I slid my hand over it, he put his other hand on top of mine.

An affectionate, gentlemanly gesture to anyone who cared to look. To strangers we passed on the sidewalk, we were a couple so enraptured with each other, we just couldn't go a step without touching.

I grinned to myself as I imagined what they'd think if they knew the truth. They'd be as horrified as I was aroused.

We walked in silence for a block or so. The car was parked a few blocks down one cross street, but when we reached that street, Scott didn't turn. On any other night, I'd have ribbed him that he'd forgotten where he parked, but the subtle ridge of his rolled-up sleeve reminded me I was forbidden from doing so. Whether he had another destination in mind, or he really had forgotten where he'd parked, it was no longer my place to question him.

We continued for another block, then into a large park. There, we followed the winding cement path past the deserted playgrounds toward the baseball fields. Stadium lights illuminated one field and its crowded stands, but the rest of the park was dark except where occasional dim lights glowed along the path. Baseballs cracked against bats, people clapped and yelled, feet clanged on the metal bleachers.

In our tiny universe, though, the only sounds were our footsteps on the path and my blood pounding in my ears. As the path wound away from the baseball field, the lights and noise faded behind us, leaving me to my own heartbeat and the synchronized tap of shoes on pavement.

I wasn't sure what to make of his silence. Was this a game? Was he planning something? Was he already a dozen steps ahead of me, or was he improvising?

*What is going on in that head of yours, Master?*

I barely suppressed a shiver. Even in my mind, I addressed him that way.

My feet halted in the same instant his did. The path was shrouded in darkness here, shielded from moonlight and streetlights by a thick canopy of trees.

He didn't speak. Instead, he turned to me, and when I mirrored him, he cupped my face in gentle hands and kissed me. His tongue parted my lips, the sweetness of his wine still lingering faintly in his mouth. Goose bumps followed his hand up my neck and into my hair, prickling my scalp

alongside the warmth of his fingertips.

With his body weight, he nudged me backwards. One step. Then two. The cement ended, and my third step was on softer ground, as was my fourth. He kept us going until his shoes no longer scuffed on concrete.

He broke the kiss and exhaled against my lips. He kissed me again, then released my hair.

Like wind through brittle branches, his low, growling whisper broke the silence and made me shiver again: "Get on your knees."

With neither question nor hesitation, I obeyed, dropping to my knees on the cool grass. Every nerve ending tingled with excitement and apprehension, and my eyes darted from side to side in search of the shadow of anyone who might intrude. Anyone who might, I thought with a tingle of excitement in the pit of my stomach, see us.

He stroked my hair gently, but when he spoke, there was an edge to his otherwise flat tone. "You disobeyed me last night, didn't you?"

In the darkness, my cheeks burned, no doubt turning bright red. "Yes, Master. I'm sorry."

"Tell me how you disobeyed me."

I bit back a whimper. "I wasn't supposed to come until tonight, Master."

"Why weren't you supposed to come until last night?"

Guilt twisted in my chest and I closed my eyes. "Because I came without your permission before."

"I'm disappointed," he said. "But, as I said in the restaurant, I can't exactly blame you."

Relief washed over me.

"And in spite of being punished last time, you were honest with me again."

Still more relief.

Leather hissed across leather. "So I'm of two minds." A buckle jingled. "Do I punish the disobedience?" At the sound of his zipper, I opened my eyes. He went on, "Or do I reward the honesty?"

I hoped it was a rhetorical question, but the silence demanded an answer. I swallowed hard. "Whichever you think is more suitable, Master."

He caressed my cheek with his free hand. "Good girl."

I wetted my lips, my mouth watering as he pulled his hard cock out just inches from my face.

He suddenly gripped my hair, holding it so tight he brought tears to my eyes, a yelp to the tip of my tongue, and an intense tingle to every nerve ending in my pussy. With his other hand, he stroked his cock, and though I could barely see his hand in the darkness, it mesmerized me with its slow, rhythmic motions.

"Are you going to disobey me again?" Upstroke. Down.

"No, Master."

"Are you sure?" Downstroke. Up.

"Yes, Master. I'm sure."

"Good girl." The hand in my hair loosened slightly. "Because you disobeyed me, I don't think I should take you home and fuck you like I'd originally planned. However, because you didn't lie to me..." He pulled my head a little closer.

As soon as my lips were around him, my spine threatened to turn to jelly. My hands trembled as I held him steady and ran my tongue around the head of his cock. I was always enthusiastic when I went down on a man, but the privilege of pleasing him now was my reward for being honest with him, and I made sure with every sweep of my tongue and stroke of my hands that he knew just how grateful I was for it.

"Just like that," he whispered, stroking my hair. "That's perfect, Kristen, just like that."

I couldn't keep myself from moaning softly. I ached for his approval like I was sure he ached for release. Telltale saltiness signaled he was getting close, and heat radiated from my clit. Dear God, I hoped he didn't tell me I couldn't have an orgasm for another week again. I wouldn't disobey him a third time, but now, sliding my lips up and down the thick, hard shaft of his cock, I couldn't imagine surviving another *hour* without coming.

"Yes, that's perfect, that's perfect," he murmured. There was only the subtlest hint of a tremor in his voice. I couldn't fathom how he always stayed in control, but stay in control he did, even as I nearly deep-throated him.

I stroked him with both hands, circling and fluttering my tongue around the head of his cock. His hand shook in

my hair, and I felt more than heard him release a low groan. Then another. A second later, his cock twitched against my lips and tongue, and, with a soft moan, he came.

I kept going until he tightened his hand in my hair to stop me. As he fixed his clothes, I sat back on my heels, wiping the corner of my mouth with the back of my hand.

"Stand up," he whispered.

I did so slowly. My knees had been shaking since he'd flipped the switch at the restaurant, and I couldn't be sure they'd hold me up now. By some miracle, they stayed under me.

Scott put his arms around my waist and kissed me.

"You have an *amazing* mouth," he murmured.

I smiled against his lips. "Thank you, Master."

"Now, I suppose I could deny you orgasms for another week, couldn't I?"

My heart sank. *Please, God, no.* "Yes, Master. You could."

"After all, you have to learn to obey me." He caressed my face. "But, asking you not to come would hardly be fair if you've got another lover, would it?" He kissed me before I could answer. After a moment, he touched his forehead to mine. "So, you're not allowed to masturbate, but you may have as many orgasms as he or I see fit to give you. Understood?"

"Understood, Master."

"Good girl. Now let's go back to my place and get a head start on all those orgasms I see fit to give you."

## ***Sixteen***

A few nights after our walk in the park, Scott set his wine glass on the table beside the rack of floggers. He folded his arms across his chest, pausing to tug at one of his freshly-rolled sleeves.

For a moment, he watched me silently. Even when I lowered my gaze, I had to resist the urge to fidget under the weight of his emotionless stare. No matter how many times we'd played this little game, it still unnerved me.

"Take everything off."

Avoiding his eyes, I obeyed. Sometimes he made every article of clothing, even individual buttons, into their own orders, verbally undressing me one piece at a time. Then there were times like this when he gave a single command. That usually meant he wanted to get to the next step, rather than spend an inordinate amount of time with this part.

My bra, the last piece to go, landed on top of the rest of my clothes. Then I let my arms fall to my sides and waited.

I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth as he walked around me. Another of his unsettling little games, another way to remind me of my exposure and vulnerability. I was used to being naked in front of him, but he knew just how to reignite those feelings and make my heart race.

He stopped in front of me. "You've surrendered your sight to me before," he said. "You've surrendered control of your orgasms. Tonight, your mobility."

I shivered, and it wasn't entirely from excitement. *I can do this. I can handle this.*

"Your mobility," he said, "and your ability to speak." He turned and lifted something off the rack below the whips and floggers. When he held it up, my throat tightened around my breath. The sight of the gag made my skin crawl.

*I can do this. I can handle this.*

"Since this is your first time, I won't use a ball gag," he said. "It can tire your jaw out, and some people feel like they're choking with something like that."

I swallowed. *You don't say.*

With the gag in his hand, he led me to the Saint Andrew's Cross and had me face it. He intended to flog me, then, and that thought sent a ripple of anticipation through me. If I could keep it together until he started flogging me, then the pain and endorphins would carry me through the fear of being bound.

I hoped.

"Stay right there." Without another word, he went back to the rack of whips and floggers, and from that rack, selected a short crop whip. To my surprise, he handed it to me.

"With the gag, you won't be able to speak," he said. "So this will be your safe gesture. If it's getting to be too much, if you find yourself wanting to say your safe word, just drop the whip. Understood?"

"Yes, Master."

"Good. Now give me your hand."

Cool fear and warm arousal vied for dominance, flooding my veins and coiling around my spine. Scott fastened my wrist into a leather cuff at the top of the Saint Andrew's Cross. Then my other wrist on the opposite side. When he went for my ankle, I drew in a long breath through my nose. I rubbed my thumb against the handle of the crop, reminding myself over and over of the purpose it served. *Just drop it if this gets to be too much. I can do this. I can handle this.*

The last cuff closed around my other ankle, and I was bound. Completely immobile.

I thumbed the crop's handle a little harder.

"Any pain? Anything tingling?"

*Oh, something's tingling all right.* I swallowed. "No, Master."



"Good. Open your mouth."

I licked my lips, then did as he'd ordered. He slid the gag into my mouth. The rubber wasn't hard enough to bang against my teeth or cause any pain, fortunately, but it was strange to say the least. I tried to concentrate on its odd taste or the smooth texture against my tongue, anything to distract me from what it was or why it was there.

As he fastened the strap around the back of my head, the gag pulled against the corners of my mouth. I dug my teeth into it, breathing slowly and evenly as I reminded myself that he was in control. My Master was in control. There was nothing to be afraid of.

*I can do this. I can handle this.*

"Are you okay?" he asked.

I nodded. The crop's handle was damp with sweat as my thumb tried to burrow into it. Closing my eyes, I willed myself to focus on anything but my immobility or the gag in my mouth. Instead, I listened to Scott moving around nearby.

He was at the flogger rack. Then he was beside me. He checked my bindings. Moved again. Stopped.

And he was still. For a long, silent moment, he was still, and my worries started to creep back into my consciousness.

The smack of leather on skin drew my attention away from everything that made me nervous. From *everything*. Goose bumps prickled my skin in anticipation of the flogger hitting my back instead of his palm.

He hit his hand again. I dug my teeth into the gag, silently pleading with him to hit me, hit me, please, hit me.

The first stroke was gentle, just enough for the leather to tap my skin and draw my attention to the anticipation of the next stroke. And the next. And the next. The rhythmic thud of the flogger's tails occupied my senses. I closed my eyes, letting my head fall forward as the percussive massage consumed me. With time, he struck harder, the tails biting with each sharp crack of leather on flesh. I was distantly aware of a moan of pleasure escaping around and vibrating against the gag.

With every stroke, the world around me faded a little more. I lived and breathed for the split second of impact and

the myriad sensations that followed each strike. I wasn't numb to the pain, just detached from it. Removed. On a different plane where all that mattered was the head-spinning, knee-trembling oblivion that swallowed me a little at a time.

A vague cramp in my hip nudged its way into my consciousness and prompted me to fidget, but the bindings held me solidly in place. An inkling of fear trickled down my spine like a drop of cold sweat, piercing the cloud of endorphins that had fogged my mind. I couldn't move. I knew I couldn't move. I was okay. I'd consented to this.

*I can do this.*

*I can't move, I can't move, I can't—*

*I can handle this.*

My Master knew what he was doing. I was safe. I had a safe word.

Another icy drop of panic. The tacit security of the safe word was lost in the gag that kept me from speaking if I needed to.

Every muscle in my body twitched with the sudden violent need to get free, to fight or fly.

Couldn't fight. Couldn't fly.

I couldn't get enough air.

My heart pounded.

*Oh God.*

Panic surged through my veins and when I clenched my fists, I suddenly remembered the crop in my hand. A split second before I released it, Scott's arm was around my waist and the tension on my bindings went slack. As the crop clattered to the floor, the strap around my head loosened and he pulled the gag free.

I gasped for air, keeping my eyes tightly shut as the room whirled around me. My legs collapsed, and Scott guided me to my knees.

"Breathe," he whispered. He knelt beside me, holding me against his chest and stroking my hair. "Just breathe, baby. Just breathe. I'm right here."

I found and clung to the front of his shirt and tried to catch my breath. "I'm sorry, Master, I'm—"

"Shh. It happens. You've done nothing wrong." He kissed my forehead and continued stroking my hair. His

hand's gentle motion lulled me into calm like the flogger's rhythm had lulled me into subspace. My heart rate came down. Breathing came easier. The trembling stilled.

After a moment, he sat back, raising my chin to make eye contact. "You okay?"

"Yes, Mast—"

"Don't worry about that. I'm asking as Scott, not your Master." His thumb brushed my cheekbone. "Are you okay?"

I exhaled hard, my shoulders dropping with the release of my breath. "Yeah. I'm fine."

"Can you stand?"

My legs still trembled, but I nodded.

"Come on. Let's get you out of here and go in the other room." He helped me to my feet, pausing to make sure my feet would stay under me before he picked up a couple of water bottles off the table and led me out of the dungeon. My legs were steadier than I expected, and I could walk on my own, but he kept one arm securely around my waist until we were in his bedroom. There, he pulled the covers back and made an *after you* gesture.

When we were in bed, he drew the sheet up over us, but otherwise left the blankets off. He pulled me close to him and caressed my back while we both drank in silence.

After I'd finished my water, he took our empty bottles and set them beside the bed.

"You sure you're okay?" he asked.

"Yeah." I ran a hand through my hair and sighed. "I feel kind of stupid now, to be honest."

"There's nothing to feel stupid about, Krissy. Sometimes when you push boundaries, they push back."

"I guess. I just feel like an idiot for freaking out that much."

He kissed my forehead. "Trust me, you're not. When you start playing around with this kind of thing, you just never know what can happen. What doesn't bother one person might trigger some really deep, primal response in someone else."

I sighed. "I thought I could handle it. I shouldn't have done it."

"Sometimes you don't know until you get into it."

"But I should have known. I mean, I'm claustrophobic

any—”

“Wait, *what?*” Scott propped himself up on his arm and cocked his head.

“I’m claustrophobic. Always have been.” I looked away, watching my fingers trace a crease on his shirt. “So I was a bit concerned about this.” I paused. “Okay, I was really nervous about it.”

He raised my chin and frowned as he looked in my eyes. “Krissey, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I thought, you know, once we got into it, I’d be okay. Like I’ve been with everything else.”

“Baby, you have to tell me,” he said. “If anything bothers you, if anything makes you nervous at all, even if you think it’s just a silly thing. If something doesn’t feel right, it probably isn’t, and I need to know that *before* it gets to this point.”

I nodded, avoiding his eyes. “I will.”

He pulled me to him and smoothed my hair. “Trust is a two-way street with this sort of thing. I’m trusting you to tell me where the lines are. If you’re not sure, or if you have even the faintest concern about something, I need to know so I can be careful.”

“I’m sorry.” My face burned. First I’d freaked out, then I’d fucked up in not telling him I was worried to begin with. Christ, this night was off to a *splendid* start. I sighed again. “I’m sorry, Scott, I—”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about.” He kissed my forehead again. “You’re learning, and I should have been clearer about it when we started out. In the future, though, if you’re even a little bit nervous, tell me. I wouldn’t even *think* of punishing you or giving you a hard time for that.” He again lifted my chin and looked me in the eye. “Remember what I said before: I’m in this for your submission, not fear.”

“I know. I don’t know why I didn’t tell you.”

“Embarrassed, maybe?”

“A little, yeah.”

“It’s okay.” He smiled and kissed me gently. “I promise, you’re not the only one who’s gone through this. No one enjoys admitting something scares them.” He draped his arm over my waist, resting his hand against the small of my back. “Maybe we should skip the bondage for a while. Until

you're absolutely sure you're comfortable with it."

"You don't mind?"

"Of course not. If you decide you're ready to try it again, we will." He pulled me a little closer. "But I won't push you, I promise."

"Thank you," I whispered. We both fell silent for a moment.

He caressed my cheek. "You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah." I exhaled and rolled my eyes. "I just feel like an idiot."

"No reason for that." His hand drifted into my hair. "These things happen."

"A bit of a mood killer though, isn't it?"

He laughed. "We can take care of that. Come here." He drew me into a gentle kiss.

That kiss went on.

Went on and deepened.

I combed my fingers through his hair. He didn't push my hands away or pin me down, didn't forbid me to touch him. His hands were too busy memorizing the curve of my spine, my waist, the swell of my hip.

His jeans brushed my thighs, and when he pressed his hips against mine, there was no mistaking how turned on he was. Relief and arousal swept through me; on some level, I'd been certain he'd back away. That he would push me away. It didn't matter if it made sense. Rational or not, my fear of his rejection or disapproval was as real as my panic on the Saint Andrew's Cross.

I had no idea if it was a need for security or if I was just turned on being this close to Scott, but I had to have him. Right now.

I went for the first button of his shirt. He didn't protest or make any effort to stop me. Instead, he untucked his shirt and helped my trembling fingers with the buttons. Without breaking the kiss, we managed to get his shirt unbuttoned and over his shoulders. He put his arms around me and rolled me onto my back, alternately kissing my mouth and neck as his bare skin heated mine to a nearly feverish temperature.

And still it wasn't enough.

I reached between us to unbuckle his belt. He raised

his hips, granting my hands more access. When his belt and zipper were undone, we both pushed his jeans and boxers over his hips. Our bodies came together again, separated this time by nothing but breathtaking heat.

"Tell me what you want." His voice thrummed against my lips.

"I want..." I lost my train of thought when he bent to kiss my neck.

"Tell me," he whispered. "This isn't a game. I'm not your Master." He kissed just below my ear. "Tell me what you want, because I want to give it to you."

I moaned, my back arching as his stubble brushed my neck. "I want you," I finally murmured.

"Then that," he said, pausing to kiss my mouth, "is what you will have." He leaned away for a moment, and the rattle of the nightstand drawer made my breath catch. Lying on his back, he tore the wrapper and rolled the condom on.

Once it was in place, we came together once more, kissing and holding each other as he guided me onto my back. My hands trembled as they combed through his hair. He released slow, steady breaths against the side of my face, every exhalation underscoring his complete and total control. He was in control, so I was free to *lose* control.

"Why don't you get on top?" His lips brushed mine. "The sheets might be too rough on your back right now."

As one, we rolled over, and I straddled him. I raised my hips and he guided his cock to me. Then he eased me down, and we sighed against each other's lips as he slipped into me. His hand gently grasped my hair, the other my hip, and he held me closer as I took him deeper. When he was all the way inside me, I stopped. Our mouths moved together, but for an eternity, our bodies were still.

His lips left mine and he gently pulled my head back so he could look up at me. "No matter what," he said, "no matter how much I command you, or punish you, or push your limits..." He lifted his hips, urging me to rise as he went on. "No matter what, I never want you to be afraid of me." He looked into my eyes as he guided me back down onto him. "And I will never, *never* hurt you."

Just before I kissed him, I whispered, "I know."

We went from unmoving to barely moving to a

smooth, fluid rhythm, and the lingering echoes of my earlier panic faded with every gentle stroke. Verbally, he'd tried to soothe my nerves and my worries, but it was this tender, intimate sex that said everything words couldn't: I'd done nothing wrong. He still wanted me. All was as it needed to be.

We'd never had sex before except when he was my Master. In spite of his assurances that this was no longer a game, I didn't know if I was permitted to come, if he still demanded that control. Not that it mattered; with the way he moved inside me now, not coming was simply not an option.

I buried my face against his neck. "Oh God, Scott," I murmured.

"Don't hold back, baby." He kissed me and caressed my face. "Let go. I want to feel you come."

In the instant I surrendered, time slowed down. Each stroke was long and languid, what seemed like hours passing between each shuddering gasp and every thundering heartbeat.

And all the while, he whispered in my ear, "You feel amazing when you come, Kristen, absolutely fucking amazing." Still steady, still in control, still moving just right to draw out the icy-hot ripples coursing through me like shockwaves in slow motion.

My orgasm peaked and fell, but his deep, fluid strokes kept it from subsiding completely.

Scott exhaled sharply, his breath cooling the side of my face. Something profane slipped off his lips as he closed his eyes, and when his hands trembled on my hips, I knew he was close. I rolled my hips back, biting my lip when he rewarded me with a gasp. He arched his back and whispered something—I thought it was my name, but it could have been anything—and looked up at me one last time before he closed his eyes again, groaned, and came.

We were still for a long time, just holding onto each other while his orgasm came and went. Even as it all subsided, the air was still energized around and between us. I was surprised our skin didn't sizzle wherever we touched.

When I was sure I could move without collapsing, I lifted myself off him and lay beside him. He got up long

enough to take care of the condom, then joined me under the covers again. I rested my head on his shoulder.

As we both caught our breath, something tightened in my gut. The ghost of my earlier panic fluttered to the surface, tingling just beneath my skin as I came down from the heat of the moment.

Something was different.

Something had changed.

As he held me close and trailed his fingers up and down my arm, I couldn't decide what unsettled me more: my earlier freak-out over being bound, or the fact that Scott and I had just made love.



## ***Seventeen***

The usual watering hole was as crowded as it always was on Friday and Saturday nights. Light and sound throbbed against the base of my skull as my sleep-deprived mind tried to keep up with my overwhelming surroundings. I was vaguely aware of conversations going on around me at the booth I shared with my friends, but the words melted into the cacophony of pulsing music and clinking glasses.

*What the hell am I doing here? I should be home sleeping.* I'd spent the last few nights staring at my bedroom ceiling, alone with thoughts I needed to—but was unable to—sort out.

Matt had been out of town all week and would be for a couple more days yet. Pity, because he was just the kind of distraction I needed right now.

I tapped my fingers on the side of my untouched drink. It was my second since I'd arrived an hour or two before. The first hadn't done a damned bit of good, and now I wondered why I'd bothered ordering the second. Sighing, I closed my eyes and rubbed the bridge of my nose.

The front door opened for the umpteenth time tonight, and something in the air shifted. An uncomfortable knot twisted in my gut. Even after the door closed, the air remained changed, and I didn't have to turn around to know who'd just walked in.

Without looking up for confirmation, I slipped out of the booth and into the crowd, clinging to my unwanted drink like a life preserver. I found a couple of girls I hadn't caught up with in a while over by the pool tables. We chatted for a

few minutes, then I bowed out and let myself get lost in the crowd once more. I watched some friends play darts, meandered toward the bar, and more than once considered making an escape to the terrace. Or the exit.

Wherever I went, short of leaving, I figured I could only avoid him for so long. The crowd was thick and the lights were down, but I had no doubt he could home in on me just as I'd homed in on him since the moment he walked through the door.

So it was no surprise when the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end a second before a hand rested on my elbow. Chewing the inside of my cheek, I turned.

"Hey, you." Scott inclined his head slightly. "You okay?"

I forced a smile. "Yeah, I'm fine."

The lift of his eyebrow called my bluff. He pursed his lips. "I could go for some fresh air. How about you?"

I nodded, but said nothing. He led the way, and the knot in my stomach twisted tighter with every step.

Up on the terrace, he leaned against the railing, hooking his thumbs in the pockets of his jeans. "So, what's up?"

I shrugged as casually as my tense muscles would allow. "It's..." I looked out at the city. Where to start? I hadn't even sorted it enough in my head to put it into words, let alone expect him to understand.

The other night had scared me. That much he knew, but he didn't know how deep my fear ran. It went beyond the claustrophobia and immobility. It was everything that had happened *after* the bindings came off that had left me unnerved and on the verge of panicking.

Had he simply been trying to comfort me with a gentle touch? Was it just to calm me down and reconnect, or did we really make love? Was it a fluke or a natural progression of feelings we weren't supposed to have?

"Have I done something wrong?" he asked.

My head snapped up. "No, no, you haven't."

"Are you sure?"

"No. I mean, yes, I'm sure. You haven't done anything wrong." *Maybe I did. Maybe we both did. Maybe it's not wrong at all. Maybe—*

"Krissey, you haven't said a word to me since you left the other night, and you've been avoiding me since I walked in this evening." He cocked his head and raised his eyebrows. "If it's not something I did, then what's wrong?"

I shifted my gaze back out to the city. My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth as the words refused to come. I released a frustrated breath. I'd come here tonight hoping to talk to him about this. Then, like I'd done all week, I'd avoided him like the plague because I was afraid to talk to him. And now that he was unavoidably here, I hadn't the faintest idea what to say to him.

I didn't realize he'd moved from his place against the railing until he set a tentative hand on my waist from behind. For a moment, he was still, probably waiting to see if I'd recoil. When I didn't, he put his arms around me and kissed the side of my neck.

"Talk to me, Krissey," he whispered. "Whatever's bothering you..."

I sighed, putting my hands over his. "It's... everything that happened the other night." *And I do mean everything.*

He slid his hands out from under mine, then gently turned me around. When I tried to drop my gaze, he lifted my chin with his finger.

"You're not the first sub who's freaked out, baby." He paused. "Do you still trust me?"

My heart skipped. Of all the things I'd questioned in the last few days, it had never even occurred to me to question my trust in Scott.

"Yes, absolutely. Probably even more now after the other night." I chewed the inside of my cheek. "You figured out I was panicking before I even had a chance to drop the whip."

"So you know I'll do everything I can to keep you safe and keep you from getting scared."

I nodded.

"Like I told you the other night, when you push boundaries, sometimes they push back." He smoothed my hair. "Sometimes they push back hard. But I promise you, as long as you're my submissive, I will always be ready to catch you if that happens."

"I know you will." I stood up on my toes and kissed

him lightly. "And it's nothing you did or didn't do. I guess I just didn't realize how much it freaked me out."

"Maybe bondage just isn't your thing, then."

"Doesn't that kind of defeat the purpose of being into BDSM?"

Scott laughed. "It's not all or nothing, you know. You obviously enjoy the dominance and submission aspects. If I'm not mistaken, you're becoming quite the little pain slut." A cautious smile crinkled the corners of his eyes, and I couldn't help returning it.

"Okay, you've got me there."

"So, just because being bound isn't your thing doesn't mean BDSM isn't your thing."

"Fair enough," I said quietly.

"There are so many facets of this lifestyle," he said. "Some people do everything, some people do one or two things."

"Is there anything you don't do?" I paused. "I mean, besides choking?"

"I'm not into humiliation," he said. "Giving or receiving. For some Doms, that's an effective way to establish and maintain dominance. For some, it's just what they enjoy. It's never appealed to me, though. Ditto with puppy play, pony play, things like that."

My eyebrows jumped. "Something tells me I might regret this, but puppy and pony play?"

He chuckled. "Exactly what it sounds like. The sub is dehumanized, treated like a dog or a horse. It goes beyond just collars, which a lot of subs and slaves wear. Kennels, crawling on hands and knees, butt plug tails—"

"I, um, I think I'll pass on that part."

"I'm with you. Degradation and humiliation are fine for those who enjoy it, it's just not my thing." He trailed his fingertips down the side of my face. "So, there's no reason to give up BDSM as a whole if one thing or another isn't your thing." He squeezed my hand. "You still enjoy the rest of it, don't you?"

"Yes, very much so."

He shrugged. "Then why stop? It's not like you'll have your sub card revoked if you don't let me tie you up and gag you."

"That's good to know," I laughed.

He smiled. "I'm serious, though. If you enjoy other aspects of BDSM, there's no reason you should feel obligated to do another aspect that you don't enjoy." He ran his fingers through my hair. "Bondage aside, are you still interested in continuing with this?"

"Yeah, yeah, definitely." A few knots loosened. A few, but not all.

He smiled. "Good, because I was really hoping you would."

I managed a smile in spite of my pounding heart. "Enjoying it, then?"

"Of course I am." He kissed me lightly. "If you only knew how long I'd been hoping for a chance to have you as a sub."

"Oh? How long?"

He laughed. "Years."

Before I could speak, he pulled me into a deep but tender kiss that didn't do a damned thing to settle my other concerns.

God knew I'd wanted him since the day we met, but I never imagined we'd be doing this. More than that, I never imagined I'd feel this way about him. And what *did* I feel? Was this love? Whatever the hell it was, did I dare let it continue in case it got any deeper than it already was? Even now, as we stood in a gentle embrace after speaking at too intimate a distance for the friends with benefits we were supposed to be, I couldn't decide if this was right or wrong.

But what about Amy? What about his other subs? What about Matt? I couldn't fall in love with Scott. Not when they were in the picture. I just couldn't.

Maybe this wasn't anything like that at all anyway. We were crossing lines and pushing boundaries together, so was this intimacy just a side effect of being able to trust someone as deeply as I had to trust him as my Dom?

Yes. Yes, that had to be it.

Not love, just intimacy. Trust.

That was all it was.

Scott's voice brought me out of my thoughts. "Are you still comfortable going to the club tomorrow night?"

My stomach fluttered. I'd forgotten all about that.

"That's, it's tomorrow night?"

He nodded. "We don't have to go unless you're comfortable."

"I think I am."

"You think you are?"

"I'm just not sure what to expect, I guess."

He smiled. "Well, it's nothing like this place."

"God, I hope not," I laughed. "This place doesn't exactly set the mood, you know?"

"Hey! Need I remind you that we started our sexual shenanigans in this very place?"

"My point exactly."

"Bitch," he muttered, but he couldn't keep from chuckling. Then his laughter faded and he touched my arm. "Are you sure you're comfortable going? I mean, there will probably be some culture shock."

"Culture shock? That's an interesting way to put it."

He shrugged. "Best way I can think of to describe it. They don't call this a lifestyle for nothing. Some of the people there live and breathe BDSM, and while they're inside the walls of the club, almost everyone lives and breathes it. You'll see and hear things that are completely alien to you."

"Sounds like a fun place to people watch, if nothing else."

He laughed. "Yeah, you could say that. But you're still gaining confidence with all of this, and so far, you've only had me in the room. Tomorrow night, there will be a *lot* of people around."

I swallowed. The only person who I was concerned about was standing right in front of me. It wasn't that I distrusted him, or he unnerved me. Quite the opposite. *That* was what unnerved me.

He raised my chin with two fingers. "Krissy?"

"I think I can handle it."

"I don't want to drag you there, though," he said, almost whispering. "If you're not comfortable—"

"No, I want to go."

"You sure? It can be a bit overwhelming the first time."

I shrugged with one shoulder and smiled. "You'll be there." Those three words sent my pulse skyrocketing. He'd

be there. I couldn't tell if that thought turned me on or unsettled me.

"Okay, well, if you're still comfortable with it, we'll go," he said. "If you want to leave at any time, though, for any reason, just say so."

I nodded. "I will."

His brow furrowed for a second, then his expression relaxed and he leaned forward to kiss my forehead. "I think it'll be fun. I just don't want you getting overwhelmed."

"Can't promise anything there. Not quite as confident with all of this as you are."

A breath of laughter cooled my forehead before he met my eyes. Stroking my cheek with the pad of his thumb, he said, "No one's expecting you to be one hundred percent certain about all of this at this point. Everyone has to start somewhere."

"Let me ask you something."

"Go ahead."

"I know you've got years of experience, but you don't seem to bat an eye at anything. Were you, when you first got involved with all of this..."

"Was I nervous and clueless?"

"Yes, exactly."

He looked out at the city as he put an arm around my waist. "Oh, Krissy, I could tell you some stories, believe me. I've always been curious to a fault, and I did my time as a bumbling idiot."

"Oh? Do tell."

"Shit, where to begin." His eyes lost focus for a moment. Then he shook his head and chuckled. "Took me a long, long time to get confident with a flogger. I had a couple of subs who got really annoyed with me because I wouldn't hit them hard enough."

"Really? *You?*"

"I'm a sadist, but I was terrified of actually injuring someone. That was one long, frustrating road, let me tell you."

"Obviously you got over that."

"Oh, I'm still conscientious about it," he said, "but I've learned the lines and limits. I know my own strength, I know what my subs can handle, I know what different implements

can do. It just took a while." His lips pulled into a grin. "It took a while, and a couple of very aggravated subs."

"I guess you could do worse than erring on the side of caution, though, right?"

"Yeah, but I took it to a bit of an extreme." His eyes lost focus again, and the humor evaporated from his expression. Barely whispering, he said, "Once bitten..."

"Meaning?"

He swallowed, then shook his head. "Nothing." Caressing my cheek, he said, "Anyway, is that all that was on your mind?"

*No. Not even close.* I looked into his eyes, and an electric shiver worked its way down my spine. My confusing melee of emotions still existed in the back of my mind, but it could wait. I'd sort it out in time, and we could address it then. For now, we were back on the same page enough for me to exhale, and if one thing was absolutely undeniable, it was my physical reaction to him. All he had to do was meet my eyes, and my knees trembled. A light fingertip on the side of my face, and I was at his mercy. A kiss, and I was wet enough for him to fuck me without another moment's foreplay.

His eyebrow lifted slightly and his hand drifted into my hair. The breath he drew was nothing if not a prelude to a repeat of his question, but I spoke first:

"Yeah, that was it."

"You sure?"

I nodded. Then I glanced at the door. "Think we should go back and be social before everyone starts wondering where we are?"

"No." He didn't give me a chance to react to his simple declaration before his fingers curled in my hair and he pulled me into a gentle kiss. After only a second's hesitation, I wrapped my arms around him.

By the time we separated, we were both breathless.

"I think we should get out of here," he whispered, and even his soft tone didn't invite negotiation. I nodded as much as I could with his hand in my hair. His grip tightened and his eyes narrowed. I whimpered as my friend transformed into my Master before my eyes. "Tomorrow, we'll go to the club, maybe play with another Dom or sub, or in front of



them. But tonight?"

I wetted my lips. "Yes, Master?"

He smiled, the silent approval in his expression giving me permission to release my held breath. Just before he kissed me again, he growled three simple words that turned my bones to liquid:

"Tonight, you're *mine*."

## ***Eighteen***

"Sure about this?"

I looked at Scott as I buckled my seatbelt. "I'm here, aren't I?"

"Yeah, but there's still time for second thoughts." He shifted the car into reverse and glanced at me in the low light. "I'm serious. Are you sure about doing this?"

I took a breath. "Is it okay if I say I'm nervous, but still want to do it?"

He smiled. "Absolutely." He backed out of the parking space and pulled out onto the main drag. "Let's talk ground rules. This is a bit different than what you're used to."

"How so?"

"More people involved, mostly." He glanced at me. "There will be a lot of people there, and it's not uncommon for Doms and Masters to swap subs and slaves. Another Dom may want to 'borrow' you as a sub, or a Master might want to watch you with his slave."

I gulped. "Okay..."

"Are you comfortable with that?" Another glance. "I'm not asking for blanket consent to anyone who asks, but are you comfortable with the whole idea?"

I chewed my lip. "I guess I won't know until the situation presents itself."

"Fair enough. But if you're opposed to it, if it really makes you uncomfortable just thinking about it, tell me now." He looked at me again, eyebrows raised.

"Would it be in front of a whole group? Out in the open?"

He shrugged. "It could be. Or it could be in a private room."

"If I went into a private room with another Dom, would you be there?"

"If you want me to be, yes."

"I do."

He glanced at me again. "You'd rather not be alone with another Dom?"

"Is that okay?"

He squeezed my leg gently. "Of course it is. I just want to know where the boundaries are." He smiled at me, then returned his attention to the road. "You might find yourself in some unusual situations tonight. It would be next to impossible for me to tell you everything that could happen, but I'm telling you right now, you don't have to do anything. You have your safe words, and any Dom who values his membership—or the ability to chew his food—will honor them without a second's hesitation."

"Scott, are you suggesting you'd resort to physical violence to defend my honor?"

"Honor?" He snorted. "Woman, you're with me. *What* honor?"

"Point taken."

"You weren't supposed to agree with that."

"Too late."

"Bitch." He shot me a playful glare. "Anyway, in all seriousness, it wouldn't come down to that. He'd be booted out of the club before I could even ball a fist."

"But if it did come down to that, would—"

"In a heartbeat." His voice was completely devoid of humor, and his protectiveness made my stomach flutter. There was nothing territorial or possessive about him, just the assurance that he wasn't about to let me get hurt.

He squeezed my leg once again, then returned his hand to the wheel. "So, you're okay with the idea of playing with another Dom or sub if the opportunity presents itself?"

"I'm not opposed to it."

He shot me a grin. "Good. Just remember, you can always say no or use one of your safe words."

About an hour after he picked me up, we pulled up to the club.

The “club” wasn’t a club at all, but a house. A mansion, to be specific. It was a massive place, situated in the middle of a huge chunk of forested acreage. Secluded. Private. Perfect.

Scott parked in a gravel lot between a half-rusted Chevy pickup and a glossy black Mercedes Benz. There weren’t a lot of other cars yet, but he’d told me on the way that we’d be getting there early to attend the newcomers’ orientation. Apparently it was mandatory for first time visitors to the club, and although Scott was hardly a newcomer, he went with me.

Inside, we joined a few other casually dressed people around a massive table in what I assumed was, in a previous life, a dining room.

Like all orientations, it was boring as hell. All it needed was a Death-by-PowerPoint presentation and everyone in the room would’ve likely slipped into a collective coma. Most of the information I’d already gained from Scott: “no” means “no”, safe words are sacred, misconduct wouldn’t be tolerated, blah, blah, blah. Valuable information to have, of course, but presented in a bland, boring package.

When it was finally over, we were dismissed to join the more experienced members, who were slowly arriving and congregating in the rest of the house.

There were locker rooms across the hall from the orientation. Since most of us had arrived in street clothes, we went into the locker rooms to change into whatever we’d brought for the night’s fun and frivolity.

In the mostly empty women’s locker room, I changed into the outfit Scott had selected.

Glancing in the full length mirror, I bit my lip as nerves tightened my chest. My skirt was made of shiny black leather, just like the straps on my stiletto heels and probably covering about as much skin. It was one thing to wear something like this for Scott or Matt. It was another to walk out into a room full of people I didn’t know.

I liked the corset, though. It was burgundy with black laces in the front, and gave me a little extra cleavage. I smiled to myself. After owning it for almost three years, I finally got to wear it. I’d known someone would appreciate the damned thing eventually, and if Scott’s expression was

any indication when I'd tried it on last night, appreciate it he did.

Still, I wasn't quite sure about parading myself around like this in front of a bunch of strangers. Second thoughts pulled my chest and stomach even tighter than the laces on my corset.

Meeting my own eyes in the mirror again, I took a deep breath. I fussed with the laces, my skirt, my hair. Finally, I steeled myself against my uncertainty and stepped out of the locker room.

The hallway was empty and quiet. Beyond a pair of ornate double doors, there was muffled activity: murmuring voices, shuffling and clicking footsteps, clinking glasses and chains. My nervous mind tried to picture the sources of all the sounds, but I had a feeling this wasn't just a run-of-the-mill dinner party. I had no idea what to expect.

A door opened behind me, and I turned just as Scott came out of the locker room. My body temperature soared. For the first time since we'd started this little arrangement, he not only played the part of a Dom, he *looked* the part. From the waist down, he wore black leather, right down to his boots. From the waist up, nothing but familiar black ink.

"You look," he said, pausing as he looked me up and down, "fucking amazing."

"So do you."

He grinned and nodded toward the door. "Ready?"

"I think so."

He raised an eyebrow. "You think so?"

"I'm nervous," I said. "But, ready."

"You'll be fine." He gave me a reassuring smile and kissed me lightly, sliding his hand up into my hair. "Just remember your safe words."

"I will."

He kissed me again. "Then what are we waiting for?" Before I could speak, he twisted my hair into his fist and forced me to my knees. "You'll obey every command I give you tonight, am I understood?"

"Yes, Master." My hands and voice shook. The more I played the submissive, the more I realized that nothing in the world turned me on more than being at Scott's mercy.

A couple of women came out of the locker room and

strolled past us without so much as a backwards glance. The noise in the other room crescendoed momentarily, then dropped back down to a muted murmur with the thud of the door, leaving me with nothing but my thundering pulse and Scott's low, calm voice.

"Just like any other night, I am your Master," he said. "You are my submissive. Disobey me and there will be consequences. Am I clear?"

"Yes, Master."

"If I put another Dom in command, you will obey him or her as well. Disobeying them is the same as disobeying me. Understood?"

"Yes, Master."

He released my hair. "Get up."

I scrambled to my feet, wobbling slightly on shaking knees and stiletto heels.

With a single nod, he indicated the double doors. I took one of the elaborate handles and pulled the door open, holding it for Scott to walk past. Once he'd entered the room, I followed, letting the door shut behind me with a heavy thud.

As I looked around, my heart pounded beneath the burgundy corset. I was in a completely alien world. Just like I had when I'd walked into Club Nine with Matt, I suddenly felt ridiculous for having been concerned about being dressed like this in front of a group of strangers. If anything, I was a bit overdressed.

The room was huge, like a banquet hall or a ballroom. Elaborate crystal chandeliers bathed everything in warm amber light while the reflections of flickering candles danced and played on chains and skintight black leather.

Doms and Masters lounged on the many sofas and chaises arranged throughout the room. Some of the subs and slaves sat silently beside them, eyes and shoulders down. Others sat on the floor. One rested her head on her Master's leg, another lay at his feet like a dog. One Domme propped her feet up on the back of her sub, who was on his hands and knees.

A Domme strode by with a crop whip resting across her shoulder and a leash wound around her other fist. At the other end of the short leash, a broad-shouldered man, easily

twice her size, crawled on all fours in a leather mask and ladies' underwear. By the fireplace, a pair of Dommess took turns spanking the bare ass of a kneeling sub while she sucked another Dom's cock. Just a few feet away, a couple of Doms carried on a casual conversation as if there was nothing out of the ordinary.

Scott and I mingled like we were at an everyday party, not surrounded by people in leather and chains. He knew quite a few people, and introduced me around. Clarissa, the Domme with whom he often shared female subs. Jennifer, one of his former subs who'd gone on to become a slave to a Master named David.

Tara, one of Scott's current subs, had come alone. She was on her way out of the ballroom with a red-haired, leather clad Domme, but the Domme let her stop to say hello to us for a moment. Then, with a snap of her fingers and a sharp nod, the Domme ordered Tara to follow her.

"Where are they going?" I asked.

"To one of the private rooms." He gestured down the hall. "The ones they mentioned in the orientation, remember? Where people go to play if they don't want to do so in front of God and everyone, or if they need equipment that's not available out here."

"Any chance we'll end up in one of those rooms tonight?"

Scott grinned at me. "It's possible. As long as you do as you're told."

I opened my mouth to speak, but was interrupted when a male voice preceded a sudden presence beside me.

"Oh, now *this* is someone I haven't seen before." He was a Dom, that much was instantly obvious from the redhead cowering beside him and the arrogant, almost confrontational way he squared his shoulders.

He reached for my waist, but Scott casually stepped between us and caught his hand in a firm handshake instead.

"Victor, good to see you," he said, and I thought he spoke through clenched teeth.

"I see you've brought us a new face," Victor said. "Does she have a name?"

Scott gestured at me with his free hand, but kept a shoulder between us. "Kristen, say hello to Victor."

"Hello, Victor," I said quietly. Though I kept my eyes down and didn't look at him directly, his presence triggered an unpleasant prickle of gooseflesh.

He gestured toward the young woman cowering beside him. "Slut, say hello to Scott and Kristen."

"Hello," came the meek whisper.

"Is that a proper greeting for your new friends, *Slut*?" he snarled. Even with Scott between us, I still drew back a little. I knew plenty of Doms and Masters used such names for their slaves and subs, but the way he said it oozed sleaze and slime.

"Hello, Scott and Kristen," she said, a little louder this time.

"We'll talk about this later," Victor growled at her. Then, to Scott, he said, "This new sub of yours, she's a beautiful one. I hope you'll be bringing her here often."

"If she's comfortable, I might bring her back," Scott growled. "But she's new to the lifestyle, so I'd rather not overwhelm her." For a long moment, neither of them spoke nor did they look away from each other, but the air between them was taut and icy. I held my breath, wondering how the tension between them would finally break.

"Well," Victor said finally, clapping Scott on the shoulder before taking a step back. "Good to see you, Scott. And nice to meet you, Kristen."

"Likewise," I murmured.

Scott said nothing. They looked at each other for a few chilly seconds, then Victor turned and strode away, the one called Slut scurrying to keep up with him.

"Fucking dirtbag," Scott muttered as the other Dom disappeared into the crowd.

"What's wrong with him?"

He said nothing for a moment, just glaring in the direction Victor had gone. Then his posture relaxed and he released his breath. "He's just a slimeball. Thinks he's God's gift to all things BDSM, but he treats his slaves and subs like shit."

"So I noticed." I thought of Slut and the way she'd stood with her head and shoulders down. They were the same signs of submission every sub in the room demonstrated, myself included, but she was somehow



different. "Why do they still let him in here?"

"He's never done enough to get himself booted out," Scott said under his breath, "Not here at the club, anyway. All I know is, I wouldn't let that fucker touch one of my subs for anything." He slipped his arm around my waist and we kept walking.

The knot in my gut unwound a little more. I'd never suspected Scott would throw me to the wolves and let just any Dom touch me, but his protectiveness reassured me I would be in good hands no matter what happened tonight.

"Scott, good to see you." That bold voice had an entirely different effect on me than Victor's. He was a Dom, of that I had no doubt, and habit kept me from looking directly at him.

"Byron, hey," Scott said. "Haven't seen you around lately." They shook hands, and my down-turned eyes gave me the perfect view of his long fingers and chiseled forearm.

"Well, you know how it is. Life and all its bullshit sometimes keeps me away."

"I know how that goes, definitely."

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end as Byron shifted his attention to me. Though I couldn't see his face, I knew he was looking at me now. Unlike Victor's, his scrutiny—no, curiosity—didn't make me uncomfortable. I was simply hyperaware of the fact that I was in his sights now.

"A new sub, I see," Byron said. "May I?"

"Go right ahead," Scott said.

Byron grasped my jaw just enough to keep me from pulling away were I so inclined, and raised my chin, forcing me to look him in the eye.

In an instant, everything about him took my breath away. His very presence was, like Scott's, commanding, from the way he set his broad shoulders to the tightness of his lips and the narrowness of his dark eyes. His every nuance spoke of boldness bordering on arrogance, but it wasn't off-putting in the slightest. It suited him, and in spite of our unorthodox introduction, I was neither alarmed nor nervous.

"What's your name?" It was more a demand than a question.

My eyes darted toward Scott, seeking permission to speak. He gave a slow nod.

"Kristen," I whispered.

Those tight lips pulled into a thin, asymmetrical smile. He looked at Scott. "Moore, where *do* you find these gorgeous women?"

My face burned. Scott just smiled.

"Why don't you two join us?" Byron gestured toward a nearby couch.

"Don't mind if we do," Scott said.

I sat on the couch beside Scott. Byron took a seat near the end beside a collared, leather clad blonde kneeling on the floor. Once he'd taken his seat, she scooted closer, resting her head on his thigh. He ran his fingers through her long hair, and her eyes flicked up just long enough to acknowledge both Scott and me.

Scott and Byron fell into a casual conversation. As they talked, I kept my head down, but surreptitiously watched them. I simply couldn't look away from Byron. His long fingers mesmerized me as they absently stroked his sub's hair. When I managed to look away from his fingers, I drank in the dusting of stubble across his sharply angled jaw and the way the corners of his eyes crinkled when he laughed. He was probably in his late thirties or early forties, judging by the lines on his face and hint of gray in his dark hair. Jesus, he was gorgeous. Maybe it was because he was a Dom and we were at a BDSM club, maybe it was simply his quiet, intense presence, but I had no doubt the man had a filthy side a mile wide.

And just as I stole glances at Byron, I realized his sub was doing the same with Scott.

Evidently I wasn't the only one who noticed, because Byron suddenly grabbed her collar and barked her name.

"Charlotte."

She jumped. "Yes, Master?"

He leaned down and pulled her head back so he could speak right into her ear, "Were you looking at him, you little slut?"

"Yes, Master." She swallowed hard, whimpering softly before she whispered, "I'm sorry, Master."

He pulled her head back a little more. "You want him again, don't you?"

Another whimper. "Yes, Master."

"Well, I think he enjoyed what you did before." Byron glanced at Scott. Then he shoved Charlotte toward him. "Go on."

She didn't hesitate. She crawled across the floor to Scott and knelt in front of him. Without making eye contact, she whispered, "May I?"

Scott ran his fingers through her hair, then lifted her chin with two fingers. "May you, what?"

She licked her lips. Her cheeks flushed. "May I," she hesitated, glancing over her shoulder at Byron. He nodded. To Scott, she whispered, "May I suck your cock, Sir?"

"Yes."

I watched in disbelief as Charlotte unbuckled Scott's belt and unzipped his pants. Out in the middle of the room, surrounded by dozens of people, and neither seemed to notice or care if anyone saw them.

She stroked his cock a few times. When she leaned forward, she hesitated, glancing up at him. Scott responded with a single, slow nod, and her hesitation was gone. I couldn't breathe when she ran her tongue around the head of his cock once, twice, three times before she took far more of him into her mouth than I thought her jaw could accommodate.

Scott looked past me, something unreadable in his expression. After a second, he nodded. To Byron, I assumed. Then Charlotte deep-throated him, and Scott closed his eyes, exhaling through parted lips.

A hand on my thigh made me jump. When I turned, I met Byron's intense, dark eyes. I quickly dropped my gaze, but he raised my chin and made me look him in the eye.

"Do I make you nervous?" he asked.

I moistened my lips. No sense being dishonest with him. "A little, yes." I closed my eyes and shivered as he trailed his fingertips along the side of my jaw.

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No."

"Look at me."

I opened my eyes, resisting the urge to look away again. Never before had I seen eyes more intense than Scott's, but now I was looking directly into them at very, very close range.

He inclined his head slightly, twin creases forming between his eyebrows. "Do you want me to stop?" he asked again.

I swallowed. "No."

The frown faded, replaced by a devilish, asymmetrical smirk. "Somehow, I didn't think you would." With that, he leaned forward and kissed me. He was a complete stranger, someone with whom I'd exchanged no more than a handful of words, but his lips met mine with all the bold familiarity of a longtime lover. His kiss was neither hesitant nor passive, and it certainly wasn't gentle or tender, but at the same time, it wasn't overbearing or demanding. *This is how I'm going to kiss you*, his lips and tongue said, *and you will like it*.

And I *did* like it.

When we separated, he watched my eyes as he ran the tip of his tongue along the inside of his lip. Then he glanced down at his fingertips trailing along my forearm, and when our eyes met again, the smirk was back. Amusement crinkled the corners of his eyes as he touched the goose bumps he'd created on my skin. He was responsible for every last one of them and he *knew* it.

Even with his cocky amusement and his unapologetic kiss, one thing was undeniable: he was completely in control. Just like Scott, he was in control no matter how turned on he was, and everything he did was a deliberate, calculated method of conveying that message.

He leaned in again, this time dipping his head to kiss my neck. Closing my eyes, I tilted my head to the side to grant him better access, feeling oddly like I was offering up my throat to a vampire. He didn't sink his teeth in, though. His lips found all those deliciously sensitive places—just above my collarbone, right below my ear, the underside of my jaw—that made my nipples harden beneath my corset.

I looked at Scott.

Our eyes met. I squirmed in my seat. Byron's lips and stubble against my skin made me tremble, watching Charlotte go down on Scott made my mouth water, but it was that look in my Master's eyes, that horny, hungry look, that drove me wild. I licked my lips. A grin flickered across his face.

Then his expression hardened and he nodded toward Byron. "Suck his cock."

My heart skipped. "Master?"

"You heard me."

In another lifetime, on some other long-forgotten plane of existence, this would have struck me as absurd. It would have horrified me, being ordered to go down on a stranger in a room full of people.

That wasn't the case in *this* lifetime. As soon as Scott confirmed what he'd commanded, I was off the couch, on my knees, and unzipping Byron's pants.

*Oh God. Oh my God.*

No wonder Charlotte had no trouble accommodating Scott.

I *had* to have this cock inside me before this night was over.

Just as Charlotte had with Scott, I stroked Byron's cock a few times, then looked to him for permission to go further. Instead of a nod, he rested his hand in my hair and put just enough pressure on the back of my head to allow—no, command—me to go down on him.

He wasn't much thicker than Scott, but since Scott pushed the very limits of what my jaw could handle, Byron gave me a run for my money. I had to take him slowly, pausing constantly to tease the head of his cock with my lips and tongue when the strain on my jaw became too much.

"Jesus, yes, that's perfect," he whispered, still gently grasping my hair. His approval sent a rush of warm relief through me just like Scott's always did.

Eager to please him, I doubled my efforts. In seconds, I was rewarded with a deep groan. Then, his hand tightened in my hair and he stopped me.

"Not yet," he said. "Assuming I have your Master's consent, I'm not done with you yet."

"In that case," Scott said. "Shall we take this into one of the private rooms?" His implicit consent to let Byron have his way with me made me shiver. *Yes, yes, please, yes.*

Byron stroked my hair, and when he spoke, he almost purred, "Yes, I think so." As one, the four of us stood and the men straightened their clothing. Before we went anywhere, though, Byron said to Scott, "Rules?"

Scott gestured at me. "She doesn't like to be tied. And no anal. Otherwise, pretty much anything is fair game." He looked at me. "Am I missing anything?"

"No, Master."

"Noted." Byron nodded. Gesturing at Charlotte, he said, "She's been rather disobedient lately, so she's just going to watch. Isn't that right?"

She didn't lift her gaze to meet theirs or mine. "Yes, Master."

"Pity." Scott grinned and trailed his fingers down the side of her neck. "Maybe next time."

She closed her eyes and bit her lip. I couldn't even begin to imagine her frustration. Scott had denied me plenty of times, but I'd never had to watch him with another woman. And he'd certainly never withheld anything while Byron was there. Byron with that beautiful, mouthwatering cock that I wanted any way he'd give it to me.

The frustration must have been killing her more than the anticipation was killing me.

With rules established and my heart in my throat, we left the ballroom.

## ***Nineteen***

Charlotte and Byron walked ahead of us. On the way down the hall, rational thought squeezed past arousal and elbowed its way to the front of my mind. The reality of what we were doing started to sink in. Was I really going to surrender to not one, but two men? One of whom was, regardless of the fact that I'd been sucking his cock moments ago, a stranger?

But I wanted this.

Didn't I?

A sharp *crack* came from another room, followed by a delirious moan. My stomach flipped.

I touched Scott's arm. "I'm a little nervous about this."

He put his arm around my waist. "Are you too uncomfortable to keep going? You can stop this at any time."

"No. I just wanted you to know."

"Good girl." He kissed my cheek. "You know what to do if it gets to be too much."

Charlotte opened the door to one of the side rooms and held it while the three of us walked past. The room reminded me of Scott's dungeon, minus the Saint Andrew's Cross and the bratty cat. Floggers, whips, and canes were arranged along one wall, and in the middle of the room was a black leather table that resembled a massage table. Eyebolts stuck out of the ceiling beams and a few places on the walls, presumably for securing those who were into bondage. Ropes and chains were coiled and hung neatly below the floggers, and there was a small chest of drawers in one corner.

Byron picked up a length of rope, and I sucked in a breath.

Scott's hand warmed the small of my back. "It's not for you," he whispered.

I released my breath. Byron looped the rope through a couple of eyebolts and gestured for Charlotte to come to him. He put her on her knees and went about tying her hands behind her back.

While Byron secured Charlotte, Scott had me pull a sheet out of the chest of drawers and put it over the table. While I did, my eyes shifted back and forth between the two men, and my heart pounded. They all had experience with this. I trusted Scott, and if Scott trusted Byron, then so did I. Along with that trust-by-proxy, Byron had assured me with his touch and kiss that he was in control. He wasn't, I hoped, a loose cannon who'd go overboard once I was in a position of powerlessness.

Still, this was all new to me. A stranger. A strange place. Two Doms instead of one.

*I can do this.*

With Charlotte tied and the table prepared, both men turned to me.

Byron leaned casually against the table and folded his arms across his chest. He exchanged glances with Scott, then looked at me and said, "Strip."

The room was silent except for the whirl of my corset's laces sliding through the metal eyelets. When it was completely unlaced, I pulled the corset off and dropped it to the side. Then I went for my skirt.

This sense of exposure that had intimidated me in the beginning, in those earliest nervous nights in my bedroom with Scott, returned, but now thrilled me. It was exhilarating, stripping down to nothing in front of two men. Two men and a woman, even.

I reached for the strap on one of my stiletto heels.

"Wait," Byron said.

At that, I looked up.

A grin played at his lips. "Leave the shoes on."

As I stood, Byron pushed himself off the table with his hip and came to me. Just as Scott had done so many times in the beginning, he walked around me and looked me up



and down. I chewed the inside of my cheek and kept my eyes focused on the floor in front of me. Scott neither moved nor spoke, but I had no doubt he was watching me. Watching us.

I jumped when Byron's hand touched the small of my back. He gave a soft huff of laughter, but otherwise didn't react. He kept circling me, letting his hand slide around to my side, my arm, my hip, across my belly, to my other hip. There, it stopped. He stood behind me now, and when he put his other hand on the side of my neck, he pulled me to him. Cool leather and hot skin touched my naked body, but it was the brush of his stubble and the softness of his lips beneath my jaw that made me tremble.

"We're both your Masters tonight." His voice vibrated against my throat. "Whatever we say goes. Is that understood?"

I looked at Scott. With no expression on his face, he nodded.

I swallowed. "Yes, Master."

"And no matter what we do to you," he whispered, his hand drifting up my side and cupping my breast as he paused to kiss my neck again. "You will not come until one of us tells you to. Understood?"

I looked at Scott again. The blank expression was gone. I knew that grin, and I knew it well. *Oh God, they're going to kill me.*

"Kristen," Byron snapped. "Answer me."

I licked my lips. "Yes, Master. I understand."

He stepped back. "Sit on the end of the table."

I did as ordered, hoisting myself onto the end of the table and letting my legs hang. As soon as I was situated, both men's hands were on me: Scott grabbed my shoulders and pulled me down onto the table. Byron forced my knees apart. Neither man was gentle, and their combined roughness made my heart pound with excitement.

As Byron trailed sizzling kisses up my inner thigh, Scott sat behind me on the table and said, "Give me your hands."

I raised my arms over my head. He closed his hands around my wrists, just tightly enough to let me know I wasn't getting them back any time soon.

"Are you okay with this?" he asked.

I nodded. For all intents and purposes, my hands were bound, but I had complete faith that he'd release them the second he sensed any reluctance on my part.

"Good." He leaned down and kissed me. His lips crushed mine as his tongue demanded access to my mouth. Still in absolute control, but showing absolutely no mercy.

I gasped into his kiss when Byron's lips closed around my clit. I desperately wanted to run my fingers through Byron's hair, but Scott held my wrists tighter.

"Remember the rules," he said, panting against my lips. My toes curled. His breathlessness turned me on almost as much as the slow, smooth figure-eights Byron's tongue made on my clit. "You're not to come, Kristen."

Scott's mouth warned me not to come. Byron's *dared* me not to.

Byron's finger teased my pussy, then slid into me, and my back lifted off the table. My pulse raced, my thundering heart driven by equal parts desperate need for release and the icy panic that I wouldn't be able to hold back.

"I'm going to let you come," Scott said, "but only when I get to one."

Confusion furrowed my brow. "One, Master?"

"Yes. One." He adjusted his grasp so he held both of my wrists in one hand, one finger dividing them. With his free hand, he cupped my breast, then pinched my nipple hard enough to make me yelp. He did it again, then again, the pain-pleasure combining with everything Byron did and sending me even higher.

Scott kissed my neck again. "Five."

I suddenly understood what "one" meant, and I bit back a moan. Byron's fingers beckoned against my G-spot and his mouth—oh, sweet Jesus, that mouth—continued teasing my clit.

"Four."

My heart pounded.

Byron slipped another finger inside me.

"Three."

Scott pinched my nipple harder, and coupled with the low thrum of Byron's voice against my clit, the delicious pain made my head spin. From the other side of the room,

Charlotte moaned and her restraints creaked.

Struggling to hold back, I held my breath. I tried to pretend violent tremors weren't already coursing through me, or that Byron hadn't found that perfect combination with his fingers and tongue, or that Scott's warm breath on my neck wasn't raising goose bumps all over me.

"Two."

A cry escaped my lips, a cry that was almost a sob, and I willed myself to hold back. To wait for my Master's command. My impending orgasm took on a life of its own and tried to wrest itself free as the last few threads of my self-control started to fray. A few more seconds, and everyone in this club would know about my release.

*No. I can hold back.*

Mind over matter kept me in check, but for how long?

*No. I will hold back.*

"One."

In an instant, the world around me ceased to exist. Maybe I cried out, maybe I didn't. All that mattered was this pleasure so intense it was painful, and I loved it, and I wanted more, and I couldn't take any more, and damn it I needed more.

Before I'd even caught my breath, Scott whispered in my ear, "Do you want him to fuck you?"

I moaned, struggling to find the answer to that trick question, the answer that wouldn't keep me from the thing I wanted the most just then. Simple answers were complicated enough with Scott teasing me and Byron's mouth doing those perfect, magic things to my pussy through the powerful aftershocks of that orgasm.

Taking a deep breath, I said, "If that would please you, Master."

He kissed the inside of my elbow. "Good girl."

Byron rose, meeting my eyes as he ran the back of his hand across his lower lip. He grinned at me, then went for his belt, and my heartbeat suddenly sounded a lot like "fuck me, fuck me, fuck me."

*Oh, I intend to,* his eyes said as the corner of his mouth pulled up a little higher.

"Don't forget the rules," Scott said, letting his breath and lips brush the inside of my wrist as he spoke. "No

orgasms until we say so."

"Yes, Master," I breathed, forcing myself not to watch Byron get undressed. The anticipation was already killing me even when I wasn't looking at him. I'd already been up close and personal with his cock. I knew precisely what he was about to give me. The only thing I didn't know was how long I'd be able to take it before not coming was no longer an option.

A condom wrapper tore. I gulped. The very thought of Byron's cock inside me sent pulses from my clit straight up my spine, and that thought was about to become reality.

Scott's fingers tightened around my wrists. A hand rested on my hip. Another gently pulled my leg up. I obediently hooked it around Byron's waist, drawing a deep, unsteady breath as I did.

Byron thrust into me so hard the table shifted, the feet grinding on the floor. Panic swept through me, but Byron didn't seem to notice, and the table stayed under us as he fucked me.

I heard a soft whimper, and for a moment, thought it was my own voice. Byron's eyes darted to my left, and when I looked in the same direction, I realized it was Charlotte. She pulled against her restraints, squirming and biting her lip as she watched us. There was no doubt in my mind that, had her hands been free, she'd have been touching herself.

The next whimper was mine. One man fucked me, one restrained me, and Charlotte watched me. If this moment got any hotter, I wasn't sure I'd survive it.

"Don't come yet," Scott whispered. "No one has said you can come, have they?"

My voice shook as I replied, "No, Master."

"Don't you dare come." His whisper dropped to a growl. "I know you want to, but you won't, will you?"

Before I could speak, Byron slowed his thrusts and slipped his hand under my knee. He drew my leg up, resting my ankle on his shoulder, and paused to run his fingertips along the leather straps of my shoes. Our eyes met, and the asymmetrical grin turned my insides to liquid. He kissed the inside of my ankle, then brought my other leg up onto his other shoulder.

He picked up his earlier rhythm as if he'd never

missed a beat, and I let out a breathless cry of ecstasy. He fucked me hard, so hard, so goddamned hard it should have hurt but it didn't because he hit my G-spot just right, just right, just like—

"Kristen," Scott said sharply. "Answer my question."

"I—" Couldn't remember the question.

Byron thrust into my pussy. Scott pinched my nipple. I couldn't think. I couldn't even breathe. Something inside me was on the verge of collapsing, exploding, melting, shattering.

"If you come," Scott snarled, "you'll be disobeying both of your Masters, and there *will* be consequences."

I sucked in a breath and tried to stay in control. My body begged for release, my mind screamed for the orgasm that threatened with every stroke of Byron's cock across my G-spot. Only my fear of punishment and my desperate need for their approval kept me from careening over the edge into sweet, sweet oblivion.

"Think we should let her come?" Byron said, panting.

"I don't know." Scott trailed his fingertips around my nipple. "Has she been cooperative enough?"

"Please, Masters," I moaned, my voice inching toward a sob. "Please, let me come."

"I think I like the sound of her begging," Byron said.

"Beg for it, Kristen," Scott ordered.

"Please, let me come, Masters." I was breathless, on the verge of tears from both delicious pleasure and agonizing frustration. "Please, please, let me come."

"Keep begging," Byron said, groaning as he thrust even harder.

I screwed my eyes shut, squeezing out a hot tear that rolled down the side of my face as I teetered on the brink of simply not giving a fuck and coming, regardless of the consequences. Everything conspired to send me out of my mind as I struggled to hold back. Byron's sharp breaths and powerful thrusts. Scott's hands on my skin. The cooling tear on my face. The white-hot ice that was ready to flood my veins at any moment. Madness. A breath away from complete and total madness.

But I would obey. They'd forbidden me from coming. I wouldn't. I *couldn't*. Not until they gave me the word, no

matter how much my body fought their denial. I'd held back before. I'd waited to come until Scott gave the word.

But I hadn't had the aftershocks of a previous orgasm taunting my senses, trying to tease me into disobedience.

From some deep reserve of sanity, I found the will to give a pitiful whisper of, "Please..."

In the same instant Byron's lips touched the inside of my ankle, Scott's breath fluttered across my ear as he whispered, "Kristen, come."

My world exploded into tear-blurred sparks of white light. Contained for so long, my orgasm threatened to shake my body into a million trembling, sizzling fragments, and neither Scott nor Byron relented as it went on, and on, and on. From somewhere outside my consciousness came a whimper that wasn't my own, and I remembered that Charlotte was watching, and though I'd long since passed my breaking point, I fell apart just a little more.

Before I'd even returned to earth, Scott said, "Byron, why don't you have her get on top?"

Byron slowed down, then stopped. He looked past me, something silent passing between the two of them before he nodded and pulled out. He offered his hand and helped me sit up. As soon as I was upright, the world spun even faster, and I grabbed the edge of the table for balance.

"You okay?" he asked, stroking my hair with his free hand.

I nodded. "Dizzy."

"Good." He held the back of my neck and leaned in to kiss me. His kiss didn't help, and by the time his lips left mine, my spine was as good as melted.

"You sure you're okay?" Scott asked.

"I'm fine." Keeping one hand on the table and holding Byron's arm with the other, I stood on shaking legs. How the hell I was going to get on top, I had no idea, but my Masters had spoken. Whatever laws of physics had to be broken to do it, their commands would be obeyed.

Byron took my place on the massage table, and I sat over him. My knees were precariously close to the edges, but his hands on my hips assured me I was going nowhere, whether on my own volition or gravity's. He guided me down

onto him, grinning at the pitiful moan I released when his cock made contact with my G-spot.

He must have known how badly I wanted to ride him hard and fast, because he forced me to do the exact opposite, just as Scott had done the first time. I bit my lip, suppressing a whimper as he eased me down onto his cock. Every ridge and contour made its presence known inside me, sliding agonizingly slowly in and out, taunting me with a mere taste of all the sensations his cock would give me if he'd let me fuck him hard.

"Keep going just like that," he ordered. "Do not change your speed unless I allow it. Understood?"

I nodded.

"Understood?" he growled.

"Yes, Master," I said quickly

He lifted his hands off my hips, resting them on my thighs. His hands were close enough now to catch me were I to fall, but they no longer hindered my movement. I gritted my teeth. Without his restrictive grasp, I had nothing but his command to keep me in control. My body begged for the pleasure that would come if I—

*Slap.* The distinctive sound of leather hitting skin stopped my breath in my throat.

*Slap.* Harder this time.

*Slap.* My muscles quivered and my skin sought the flogger's tails, silently begging for the next contact to be with my back instead of Scott's palm.

"What did I say about your speed?" Byron's sharp voice brought me back to the present. I hadn't realized I'd gained speed, but the intensifying tingling in my pussy told me I had done just that.

"I'm sorry, Master," I whispered. My legs trembled beneath me as I struggled to maintain the slowness he demanded. My senses searched the air around and behind me for the leather tails, seeking their touch, wishing for only a moment's telepathy so I could plead with Scott to hit me.

A soft whoosh put the entire world in suspended animation.

I waited.

Wanted.

Anticipated.

And half a heartbeat later, I was rewarded with the gentle percussion of leather on the back of my shoulder. The tails hit my skin and stayed there for a split second before sliding down and away. I bit my lip and whimpered, hoping for more.

*Whoosh. Slap.* I moaned and closed my eyes.

*Whoosh. Slap.* Harder this time, just enough to sting the way he knew I loved it.

*Whoosh. Slap.* Half sting. Half thud. Fucking perfect.

The universe faded around us as the three of us fell into a delicious, slow rhythm. With every upstroke, the flogger hit my left side. With every downstroke, my right. Byron's cock slid over my G-spot as the tails slid down my back, and when Scott gave me permission to come, everything—my body, my awareness—liquefied. Every stroke of leather heated my skin while every stroke of Byron's cock sent cool, electric pulses straight through me.

My orgasm rose and fell, and though I was certain I couldn't take another second, neither Scott nor Byron relented. One fucked me, one flogged me, and they demanded orgasm after orgasm from me until I could hold myself up no longer. I collapsed over Byron, gasping for breath and trembling, without a clue where my climaxes ended and the endorphins began.

He grabbed my hips and kept driving himself into me, thrusting upward until he groaned against my neck and came.

Scott's flogger stopped.

Byron's thrusts stopped.

And I just breathed.



## ***Twenty***

After Charlotte and Byron left, and I'd drunk a bottle of water at Scott's insistence, he had me lie facedown on the table. He rubbed my shoulders gently and leaned down to kiss my cheek.

"I'm going to get some lotion," he said. "I'll be right back."

I nodded, murmuring something like "okay." He probably didn't go far, just to the chest of drawers in the corner, but my universe didn't extend beyond the sea of endorphins in which I was swimming, so he may as well have left the planet. I didn't even realize he'd come back until he draped a soft blanket over me.

He folded it back to leave my shoulders and upper back exposed to the cooling air in the room. His leather pants creaked and the table shifted slightly as he sat beside me.

A bottle clicked. For a moment, the only sound in the room was the whisper of Scott's hands rubbing together. Then he put his palms on my back and gently kneaded my shoulders.

"You did well tonight," he said. "I'm proud of you."

"Thank you, Master." My heart fluttered. While Byron's praise had driven me and encouraged me, it was Scott's approval that meant the difference between breathing easily and not.

Tonight had been an interesting step. I'd submitted to someone else. I'd participated not only in a threesome, but one with two Doms. Submitting to Byron at Scott's command

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had been one thing. But what about one-on-one? Could I wholly submit to another like I did to Scott? I supposed it was possible. Lying here, though, with Scott's hands and voice soothing me and bringing me back to earth, I didn't want to. I may have surrendered temporarily to Byron, submitted mind and body to his will, but Scott was undeniably my Master.

"How are you feeling?" Scott's gentle voice brought me out of my thoughts.

"Tired, Master," I whispered.

He leaned down and kissed my cheek. "I'm not your Master anymore tonight." He ran his fingers lightly up and down either side of my back. "You don't have to address me as Master for the rest of the night." My muscles relaxed beneath his hands as he verbally relinquished control.

As I wound down beneath Scott's soothing, gentle touch, my mind reeled at everything I'd just experienced. Beyond just the threesome and submitting to two Doms, there was also the fourth person in the room. I'd known for a while that I was an exhibitionist, but this was something entirely new. Being watched from a window was thrilling, but having someone in the same room? Charlotte's whimpers and moans had driven me almost as much as all the things Scott and Byron had done to my body.

Having a voyeur right there, up close and personal, was hot. What if, the next time Scott and I were in my bedroom, Matt wasn't watching from across the alley? What if he was right there in the same room?

*Oh, if I could talk him into that...*

A violent shiver ran up my spine.

"You okay?" Scott asked.

I nodded.

Still rubbing my back, he said, "Keeping up with two Masters isn't easy, but you did well. Byron was pleased, as am I." His lotion-slickened hands drew smooth, gentle circles on my skin, the steady motions lulling me almost to sleep. "Would you be interested in playing with him again?"

*Oh God, would I ever.* "Mm-hmm," I murmured.

"I had a feeling you would. Maybe we'll have to invite him over one night."

"Charlotte, too?"

"If you want her there, then I'm sure that can be arranged." He trailed a fingertip between my shoulder blades. "You're not getting curious about women, too, are you?"

"It's not that," I slurred. "I just liked having her watch."

"Ah, that's right," he said. "My little exhibitionist."

"Like you don't enjoy it."

"I absolutely do." His lips touched the back of my shoulder. "But the fact that you get off on it turns me on too. It takes a woman who's incredibly comfortable in her own skin to be that confident getting naked and getting fucked in front of people."

"Or a woman who's too turned on to remember whether or not she's comfortable in her own skin."

He laughed, his breath cooling my skin. "You have no reason not to be, Krissy."

"Well, I don't know about that," I said. "But I do know that I like being watched. Having her tied and forced to watch was definitely hot."

"Oh, yeah, you could say that."

I craned my neck slightly, trying to shoot him a playful glare. "So, if Charlotte had been at your disposal tonight, would you have fucked her?"

"Probably." The heels of his hands slid slowly up the sides of my back. "Byron and I have shared her before."

"How would that have worked, then?" I asked. "If you were with her, then would I have been alone with him?"

"If you were comfortable with it." His hands started back down. "I wouldn't have been out of the room, of course. Not unless you specifically told me you were okay being completely alone with him." He kept one hand on the small of my back and, with the other, caressed my face. "There are a million things we can do with four people, but we wouldn't have done anything you weren't comfortable with, I promise you that."

"Good to know."

The hand on my back went to my arm. "Do you think I'd put you in a situation without knowing—"

"No, no, not at all." I looked at him over my shoulder. "I didn't mean to imply that. It's just, you know, this is all so

new."

He smiled. "Just need some reassurance?"

"I guess, yeah."

"That's a smart thing, actually." He smoothed my hair. "Better to get reassurance than to assume." He patted my shoulder gently. "Sit up." I did, swinging my legs over the edge of the table, and he sat beside me. He pulled the blanket around my shoulders. With one hand, he kept the blanket in place.

"Whatever we do," he said, "I want you to trust me, but if you ever have doubts, I'm encouraging you to question me."

"But, you're the Dom—"

"Yes, I am, but I'm not a dictator. Yes, I expect you to submit to me and obey me, but not if I'm pushing you too far. If something scares you, or you're afraid I'm going to hurt you or put you in a situation you're not comfortable with, I fully expect you to call me on it." He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. "That way, something like what happened the other night won't happen again." Caressing my cheek, he said, "Tonight, were you uncomfortable coming in here with Byron and Charlotte?"

"No. I would have said something if I was."

"That's all I ask." He kissed me lightly. "Like I've told you from the beginning, I'm in this for your trust and your submission, not fear." Before I could respond, he kissed me again, drawing it out. For the longest time, we kissed lazily.

He wanted my trust and submission, and he had them. From the beginning, he'd had them, and that only deepened every time we played together. The more we did this, the further he pushed my boundaries past the confines of vanilla sex, the more I trusted him. The more I surrendered to him. I'd gone into this expecting whips, chains, and hot sex, but there was so much more now. With the deepening trust came a degree of intimacy I hadn't expected. We were closer than we'd ever been before, and the closer we got, the more I wanted him.

He jumped when I slid my hand over the front of his tight leather pants.

"What's wrong?" I asked, grinning into his kiss.

"Just caught me by surprise," he laughed. "I figured

you'd be exhausted by now."

"No one's done anything for you tonight, though."

He smiled into another kiss. When our lips separated again, he whispered, "You've done plenty for me, baby, trust me."

"You haven't come yet."

Grinning, he pulled away enough to look me in the eye. "I suppose you could always help me with that, couldn't you?"

"I guess I could, couldn't I?"

He leaned in to kiss me again. "Don't let me stop you."

"I'm not sure how much more my pussy can take tonight, though," I laughed.

Running his thumb across my lower lip, he whispered, "Doesn't have to be your pussy, does it?"

"No, it certainly doesn't." I dropped my gaze.

He lifted my chin. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong." I swallowed hard. "But, what if..." Nerves held the words back.

Scott touched my face with the backs of his fingers. "What if, what?"

I chewed my lip and finally managed to look him in the eye. "What if I said I wanted to try something, um, new?"

He cocked his head. "Such as?" Then his eyebrows jumped. "Wait, you mean," he paused. "Do you mean anal?"

In spite of my nerves, I nodded.

He blinked. "Are you sure? I thought that was something you absolutely didn't like."

"I've never done it. Never wanted to."

"And you want to now?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure that won't be too much tonight?" he asked, running his fingers through my hair. "I mean, with everything else you've had thrown your way..."

"I guess it's piqued my sense of adventure."

He grinned. "And I do love your sense of adventure." His expression turned more serious. "Are you really sure you want to try this?"

"I assume, like everything else, we'll stop if I don't like it?"

"Absolutely," he said quickly. "That applies to anything

and everything. Always."

"Is this going to," I hesitated. "You know, does it—"

"Does it hurt?"

"Yeah."

"If it does, then I'm doing something wrong."

"Then what are we waiting for?" *Because if we wait much longer, I'll lose my nerve.*

He laughed and kissed me again before he stood. "It's a damned good thing they keep these rooms well-stocked with lube, because I don't have any with me."

"What luck," I murmured.

He got some lube out of the chest of drawers and a condom from his pocket. He set the condom on the table, keeping the lube in his hand.

"I'm going to start with just my fingers," he said. "That'll help you get used to it and relax before we go any further."

*Relax. That's going to happen.* I said nothing, just nodded.

"It would be easier in bed, but this will do." He gestured at the table. "Lean over it, on your forearms. If your back or legs start getting uncomfortable, just let me know."

I swallowed hard, then turned to do as he said. His hand caught my arm.

"Are you absolutely sure about this?" he whispered.

"Yes, I am." *I think. I think I am. Maybe.*

He cocked his head, and I was sure he saw right through me. But he released my arm. "Okay. But if you're not, you can use your safe words, tell me to stop, whatever you need to do."

"I know." I leaned over the table, closing my eyes as his hand drifted down my back.

My breath caught when he picked up the lube bottle. The top clicked. Then he set it down beside me again. *Oh God, we're really doing this.*

He rested his hand on my hip, though one finger was noticeably absent. I had no doubt I'd feel that one soon enough.

His hand moved from my hip to my lower back, then continued down. He cupped my ass with his palm, caressing

me with his thumb, but his gentle touch couldn't quite distract me from the one finger that wasn't touching me.

"This might be a little cold," he said. "I just don't want it to startle you."

"I think I'll be okay," I said through gritted teeth.

"Don't forget to breathe, babe. The more relaxed you are, the more comfortable it'll be." My mind immediately read between the lines: *The more tense you are, the more likely it is to hurt.*

Somehow, that didn't help me relax.

"You're not breathing." There was a playful lilt in his voice. "When I say to relax, I don't mean you should pass out."

I laughed, and that gave me an excuse to release my breath.

"Good girl." His hand moved between my buttocks, and it took everything I had to keep breathing just then.

In spite of his warning, the coolness of the lube startled me. I gasped, but when I exhaled, the tension slowly melted away. Knowing he was that close, that we were this close to putting this in the present tense instead of future, was surprisingly calming. With his finger pressing against me, moving forward was inevitable, and I surrendered.

"When I push in," he said, "push back a little." He did. I did. And his fingertip was inside me. Moving slowly, gently. Sliding in, withdrawing, sliding in a little further.

A slight twinge made me flinch. It wasn't painful, just uncomfortable. It wasn't even uncomfortable, just...different. I tensed, expecting it to get worse.

Scott's hand stopped moving. "Relax," he whispered, running his other hand up and down my side. "Just relax, baby, you're doing fine."

I exhaled and listened to his voice repeating those words in my mind. With every breath, I convinced myself to relax a little more.

"Think you can handle two fingers?" he asked.

I nodded. As he withdrew his finger slowly, I closed my eyes, wondering how much more intense it would be now.

The lube bottle clicked again.

A second fingertip pressed against me, meeting

marginally more resistance than the first had.

Scott's other hand squeezed my shoulder. "Breathe, Krissy."

I released the breath I'd been holding. As I did, my entire body relaxed, and his fingers slid into me much more easily. He made a few slow, gentle strokes, then stopped.

"Does this feel okay?" he asked. "Any pain or anything?"

I shook my head.

After a moment, his fingers started moving again, withdrawing slowly before sliding back in. The more he did it, the more accustomed I became to the unusual sensation. With every stroke, it was less uncomfortable. What began as an intense, alien feeling became a feeling that was simply intense. It wasn't like having his fingers in my pussy, but it was arousing in its own right.

"Are you okay?" His voice was low and soothing.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Does this hurt at all?"

"No."

"Is it uncomfortable?"

It was still alien, that was for sure. Something new, something different. But it had long since left the realms of uncomfortable "No, it's not."

"Do you want me to keep doing this, or should I put the condom on?" His tone was gentle, the question genuine. This wasn't a game.

I took a breath. Was I ready for this? Hell, I'd come this far. *Do it now before you lose your nerve.*

"Krissy?"

"I—" The words were there. Somewhere. Probably lost amidst the neurons that were trying to process all the intense, new sensations.

He started to withdraw his fingers. "Krissy, talk to me."

I grabbed the condom off the table and held it over my shoulder for him. He hesitated, then took it from me. He withdrew his fingers, and for the second time tonight, the sharp sound of tearing foil made me shiver with anticipation. With every heartbeat, excitement pushed the fear aside. I wanted this. Yes, I wanted this. Before tonight, I'd never had



any desire to try it. Every thought I'd ever had of anal sex was one of either fear or disgust, if not both, but if Scott didn't get that condom on in the next few seconds, I was going to come unglued.

The lube bottle clicked once, then again. When he set it on the table a few inches away from me, my heart pounded. *This is it. I'm doing this.* He put some lube on me with his fingers, sliding them in and out a few times to make sure there was enough.

"Just remember," he whispered as he pressed his cock against me, "if you want to stop, just say the word."

With that, he pressed the head of his cock a little harder. As I had with his fingers, I pushed back, and a second later, he slid into me. He gave me no more than an inch, if that, but the sensations were overwhelming. I fought just to breathe as my body tried to comprehend if it hurt, if it was simply strange, if it was pleasure.

He pulled out, then pushed in again, further this time. With every stroke, he moved a little deeper.

I completely lost myself in his smooth, even strokes. Some time probably passed. I didn't know. All I knew was how Scott moved inside me and how this felt progressively less strange and more pleasurable. Pain—or the fear thereof—was a distant memory.

Eventually, he stopped, pulling out partway as he reached for the lube. The bottle clicked, then again, and he dropped it beside us. When he pushed in this time, his cock slid easily into me.

"How does that feel?" he asked.

"Good," was all I could manage. The word didn't even begin to describe it. Even if I couldn't come this way—and I doubted I would—it was incredible. Beyond the physical sensations, it was the thrill of confronting something that had always made me nervous, of trusting Scott enough to do this.

"Is this speed okay?" he asked. "Or do you want me to go faster?"

"A little faster."

His hand gently ran up and down my waist. "Are you sure?"

I nodded. He took a breath and gave me a little more.

Then a little more. He was nowhere near as fast and violent as he was when he fucked my pussy, but it took my breath away just the same.

"You all right?" he asked.

Another nod, the only response I could manage.

"Tell me if I'm going too fast. Is this okay?"

Again, words failed me, so again, I simply nodded.

"Fuck, baby, that's perfect," he breathed, almost groaning. "Oh God, you're..." His hands tightened on my hips. "You feel amazing, Kristen." He faltered, breaking his rhythm for a second before picking up speed again. "Just tell me if it's too much."

It *was* too much. Just like every time he fucked me, every time he drove me to the edge and held me there until I was a breath away from insanity, it was too much, and still I couldn't get enough.

Gripping the side of the table, I pushed back, meeting his thrusts, and his throaty groan made my breath catch.

"Oh fuck, oh *fuck*, I—" He pulled my hips against him and shuddered, releasing sharp, uneven breaths. When his orgasm had passed, he exhaled and slumped over me. He caught himself with one hand on the massage table and rested his forehead on my shoulder.

Eventually, he lifted his head and kissed the side of my neck. "You okay?"

"Mm-hmm."

Nuzzling my neck, he whispered, "That was fucking incredible. I can honestly say this is not what I expected tonight."

"That makes two of us."

He gasped as he pulled out slowly. As he stepped away to take care of the condom, I turned around and leaned on the table, pulling the blanket around my shoulders again.

He came back and sat beside me. "What changed your mind about it, anyway?"

I shrugged. "Like I said, everything tonight piqued my sense of adventure."

"Fair enough. It caught me by surprise, I'll tell you that."

"You're not the only one." I touched his face, running

the pad of my thumb across his cheekbone. It had caught me by surprise. Before tonight, I'd never wanted to try it at all. But before tonight, I'd never trusted anyone as much I trusted Scott. Now, it seemed absurd to put any limits on the things I'd do with him.

And *that*, more than a threesome with a pair of Doms or anal sex, scared me.

He pulled me closer and kissed my forehead. "Think this is something you'd want to do again?"

"I don't know," I said. "It's different."

"In a good way or a bad way?"

"Neither, really. Just...different. I don't know if I'd try it—" I hesitated, the words "with anyone but you" stopping at the tip of my tongue. Maybe it was simply because it was so new, but I couldn't imagine trying it, let alone initiating it, with anyone other than Scott.

"Krissy?"

I shrugged again. "I guess we'll have to see. But I might be willing to try it again."

"Well, if you find yourself willing to try it again in the future, *do* let me know."

"I will."

He smiled. "What do you say we grab a shower and head back out into civilization?"

"Sounds good to me."

## ***Twenty One***

"Full house, fuckers." Jim laid his cards on the table. "Read 'em and weep."

"Son of a bitch." Steve shook his head and threw his hand down, revealing two pair. Sighing, he looked at me. "What about you, Locke?"

"Oh. I—" I looked at my cards, blinking a few times. Until Jim had put his hand down, I'd forgotten I was even part of the game. It took me a second to run the cards through my mind and figure out what hand I had. Finally, I laid them down. "Two pair." The guys and I looked at Matt, who absently tapped his fingers on the edge of the table.

"Sommers?" Steve waved his hand in front of Matt's face.

Matt jumped. "What? Sorry." He cleared his throat and looked at his hand.

Jim grinned. "Got anything that beats a full house?"

Matt fanned his cards, staring at them with a look that mirrored my own momentary lack of comprehension. Was his mind wandering like mine had been? And had it wandered to the same place? I squirmed in my chair.

Then he came to life, gloating as he dropped his cards on top of Jim's. "Four of a kind, bitch. Pay up."

"Oh, goddammit," Jim muttered.

Matt laughed and pulled the pile of chips to his side of the table. Our eyes met briefly, and my face burned. I'd thought—hoped—his mind was in the same place as mine, but evidently it was just a different poker face than usual.

Whatever was on his mind, there was only one thing on mine. He'd returned from his trip sometime last night, but I'd been out, and we hadn't yet had the opportunity to get into bed. I needed him. Fucking hell, I needed him.

"Ante up," Steve said, "and let's see if we can keep some of the chips from heading toward Sommers, okay?"

"You guys didn't let him win again, did you?" Kevin asked, craning his neck from the other table.

"Let me win?" Matt snorted. "Please. Not my fault these guys don't have my mad skills."

"Yeah, right." Jim shot him a good-natured glare. "How about we check your sleeves for cards?"

"Whatever," Matt said. "Okay, who's dealing the next hand?"

"You are, cheater." Steve set the deck in front of Matt. Matt cut the deck and shuffled it.

"Ante up," Jim said, tossing a five-dollar chip into the center of the table. Steve, Matt, and I did the same. Then Matt dealt the cards.

I picked up my hand. Two kings and an ace, the latter of which was wild. Definitely a good start. I laid my cards facedown on the table and watched my opponents' faces. The subtle furrow of Jim's brow told me he wasn't happy with his hand. Steve had a rock solid poker face, not a single twitch or flicker to give anything away.

I looked at Matt. He looked right back at me. I couldn't even remember what game we were playing.

I absently licked my lips, and he pulled in a sharp breath before clearing his throat and focusing on his cards again.

"I bet five," Steve said, tossing a five-dollar chip into the pot.

"I'll—" I paused. What was my hand again? I looked at my cards. Two kings and an ace. Right. "Call." I put another five in the pot.

Jim scowled, then pursed his lips, then scowled again. After a moment, he shook his head and laid his cards down. "Fold."

Matt looked at his own hand and chewed his lip. He drummed his fingers on the table. Finally, he put five in the pot with a muttered "Call." He turned to Steve. "How many?"

"Two." Steve slid two cards to Matt, who dealt two off the top of the deck and handed them to him.

Matt looked at me. "What do you want, Kristen?"

My mouth went dry when our eyes met. *You know exactly what I want, Matt.*

He muffled a cough. "How many cards?"

"Oh. Right." I shook my head. "Two, please." I took two from my hand and slid them across to him. When he handed me two in return, his finger brushed the side of mine. Our eyes met again. The playful lift of the corner of his mouth told me that, oh yes, it *was* deliberate.

Trying to focus on the game, as opposed to how badly I wanted Matt to put me over the table and fuck me, I picked up my cards. Three kings, a three, and a ten. I blinked. Where the hell was my ace?

*Shit.* In my moment of distraction, I'd traded in the ace instead of the three. I let out a breath, hoping my frustration wasn't evident to anyone else. I would have had four of a kind if I'd been paying attention. Now I was stuck with a three of a kind.

I looked at Matt. The playful grin had turned into a scowl. He muttered something under his breath, and when our eyes met, his cheeks colored.

"I'm out." Steve put his hand down.

I chewed my lip and tried to gauge Matt's reaction. He usually had a hell of a poker face, but he could bluff like no one else. Frustrated grumbling could indicate a pair of fours as easily as it could mask a royal flush.

"I'll put in another five." I dropped the chip into the middle of the table.

Matt did the same. "Show 'em."

I laid my hand on the table. "We three kings of Orient are—"

"No match for my full house." He tossed the cards down, face-up.

"You bastard." I laughed.

"Who the hell gave you permission to win again, Sommers?" Kevin said. "You three are really letting me down over there."

Matt just laughed and passed the deck to Jim before collecting his winnings.

"Well, before I get my ass handed to me again," I said. "I could use a refill." I rose, picking up my empty glass. "Anyone else?"

"Bring me another Coors, would you?" Steve said.

"Bring me another Coors, *please*, Neanderthal." Lynette glared over her shoulder at him.

Steve made a flippant gesture. "Yeah, yeah, yeah."

"Watch it, Preston, or I'll bring you a Corona," I said.

"Okay, okay!" He put his hands up. "Please bring me another Coors."

I laughed and went into the kitchen. As soon as I cleared the doorway, I paused to take a breath. While it was true I needed another drink, I also came in here to get away from Matt for a moment.

It had only been a little over a week. And it wasn't like I'd been lacking when it came to sex. I'd been with Scott all but one of the last few nights, plus two nights with him and Byron. Between the two of them, it was a miracle I could walk.

And still, I ached for Matt. For everything Scott could do to me, the one thing he couldn't satisfy was my need for Matt, and vice versa.

I pulled an ice tray out of the freezer. As I twisted it, the cracking ice was almost loud enough to muffle the footsteps behind me. I took a breath and hoped to God it was Ramona coming to give me the third degree about something. I hoped it was her, but I knew from the prickling in my nerve endings that it wasn't.

"Whatever you're drinking," Matt's voice made me shiver. "Make it two."

"I was just having another Coke." The words trembled, as did my hands. As I dropped a few ice cubes into my glass, he put his hands on my waist.

"I don't know about you," he whispered, putting his arms around me, "but I am just not in the mood for cards tonight."

"So what are you in the mood for?"

"You." He turned me around and kissed me. My knees buckled, and I grabbed the counter for support as his tongue found mine. None of our poker buddies knew about us, but anyone in the world could have walked in just then and I

wouldn't have cared.

Matt broke the kiss, panting against my lips for a moment. "I've been dying to fuck you again," he breathed, dipping his head to kiss my neck, "and ever since you walked in tonight, I've been too goddamned horny to think straight."

I licked my lips. "Doesn't seem to be affecting your game."

He laughed, the warm rush of breath slipping under my collar. "I've gotten lucky."

"I think you're *trying* to get lucky."

"Is it working?"

"You'd better believe it."

He raised his head. "Why don't we get out of here, then?"

"What about them?" I gestured at the hallway leading back into the living room.

"What *about* them?"

I shrugged. "We should at least be discreet. I don't care if they know we're sleeping together, but I'd just as soon not advertise that's why we're leaving."

He laughed softly. "In that case, I'll go first. You stay for another hand, then meet me at my place."

"And you honestly think I can concentrate enough to get through a hand when I know you're upstairs waiting for me?"

He ran his thumb across my lower lip. "You mean as much as I've been able to concentrate all evening with you sitting across from me?"

"Bullshit."

He tilted his head and leaned closer. "Trust me, darlin'," he murmured, letting his lip brush mine. "It was all luck, because I haven't been able to—"

"Hey! I don't hear any beer-fetching in there," Jim called. Matt and I quickly separated, and a moment later, Jim appeared in the doorway. "Come on, we're ready to deal."

"Sorry, sorry," I said. "I was trying to show Matt how to work the ice trays."

Matt's jaw dropped. "What? You—"

"Well, I can see why you were taking so long, then." Jim chuckled. "A bit complicated for someone like him, I



think."

"Whatever," Matt said. "You're just jealous because I keep winning."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Jim said. "Now hurry up. We're all waiting on you two."

Matt pulled up his sleeve and glanced at his watch. "Actually, I'd better bail."

"What's wrong?" Jim asked. "Did all that winning just take too much out of you?"

"Damn right." Matt feigned a yawn. "And if I win much more, all the money will be too heavy to haul upstairs."

"Oh, shut up." I elbowed him.

"Well, whatever," Jim said. "Come on, Sommers, I'll cash you out. Kristen, we're about ready to deal."

"Be there in a second." I opened a can of Coke.

As I poured my drink, Matt followed Jim out of the kitchen. Before he disappeared down the hall, he gave me one last glance over his shoulder and winked. I *almost* dropped the Coke can.

After Matt left, a few people shifted around, and Lynette joined Steve, Jim, and me at our table. Ante was laid, cards were dealt, and I tapped my foot against my chair leg as I struggled to focus on the game.

By now, Matt was probably in his apartment. I imagined him pacing in his living room, watching the clock. Or maybe he was naked and hard in bed already. Or grabbing a cold shower to keep from burning the place down while he waited.

I took a deep breath. *It's just one game. I can handle this.*

Lynette looked at her cards. She lifted two five-dollar chips. Then put one back. Then picked it up again. Civilizations rose and fell in the time it took her to decide on bets, but her hemming and hawing didn't usually stand between me and some sweaty, desperate, sheet-tearing, neighbor-waking sex.

My pussy tingled with anticipation, and if this went on much longer, I wasn't going to make it to Matt's apartment before I had to relieve some of this maddening tension. It wouldn't have surprised me if he had to do the same. If, while I sat here waiting for Lynette to decide whether to

wager five or ten dollars, Matt was slowly stroking his hard cock and—

*God, I need him. I need him right now. Fuck this game.*

I resisted the urge to sigh impatiently, and it was all I could do not to fidget. Or reach across the table and strangle the indecisive old bat. *Just bet, woman. Now!*

"Five," she said at last, throwing a chip into the pot.

"Call," I said quickly, adding my own bet.

Steve thumbed his chin and eyed his cards. *Don't you dare. Don't you dare be indecisive. Come on, Steve, don't let me down.* Eventually, he added five to the pot, as did Jim. We turned discards in to Jim and took our fresh cards. At least my distraction didn't lead to screwing up my hand this time. In fact, I stood a pretty good chance of winning.

Not that I cared. The only hand I gave a rat's ass about right then was probably wrapped around the cock I desperately needed inside me.

I chewed my lip, suppressing a frustrated whimper. *Soon. Just a few more minutes. I'll make it.*

Lynette picked up and put down chips, wavering between five and ten dollars.

Somewhere, a snail completed a marathon.

Someone made it from the end of the line to the front counter at the DMV.

A sun burned out.

And finally, fucking *finally*, Lynette threw two chips into the pot.

"I'll see your ten and raise you five." I dropped three chips.

"Ballsy." Steve eyed Lynette and me. "I think I'll pass. Fold." He put his cards down.

"No sense raising when I'm just going to get my money back anyway," Jim said. "I'll call." Three more chips clattered onto the pile. "Lynette, you show first."

She put her cards down. "Two pair."

With a smug grin, Jim said, "Which is no match for my straight flush. Pay up, ladies." He put his cards down, revealing the seven of hearts up to the jack of hearts.

"Not so fast, Gramps." I fanned my cards on the table. "Straight flush, *queen high*."

"Oh for God's sake." Jim rolled his eyes.

"What are the odds of that?" Steve shook his head and pushed the money toward me. "I think Mr. Sommers' mojo rubbed off on you, Kris."

I laughed, hoping my face wasn't as red as it felt. "Well, with him out of here, *someone* had to win." I looked at my watch. "And speaking of 'out of here,' I should get going myself."

"Aww, you can't leave yet," Lynette said.

"I have to," I said. "Got a few things to take care of before I go to bed tonight." *One thing in particular, anyway.* I tried not to shiver again. "Jim, could you cash me out?"

Once I'd turned in my chips, I shoved the cash into my purse, not even bothering to put it in my wallet or keep it neat. I said the fastest goodbyes I could while still being polite, then got the hell out of there.

"Finally," I said under my breath. I hurried down the hallway toward the elevators, all the while tempted to break into a run. In fact, the only thing keeping me from sprinting down the hall was the fact that my legs had been unsteady since Matt kissed me in the kitchen.

So I walked as quickly as I could. I'd be off my feet soon enough.

A few paces before the elevator, there was an alcove that led to one of the stairwells. When I passed that alcove, a hand shot out and grabbed my arm, and in the next instant, I was up against the wall with Matt's lips crushing mine and his erection pressing into my hip. Lust trumped surprise, and I barely missed a beat before I grabbed his hair with both hands and held him to me, forbidding him from pulling away. His kiss was violent and desperate and unrelenting and I'd never needed him as badly as I did just then.

He slid his hand under my skirt, trailing his fingers up my inner thigh. He slipped one fingertip under my panties and broke the kiss with a shuddering breath.

"Your pussy is so fucking wet," he whispered. "I could fuck you right... right here."

"You're—" Whatever I'd intended to say was lost when one, then two fingers pushed into me. All I could do was tremble and seek his mouth again.

"I could... I want..." His breath caught, and in between kisses, he finally murmured, "Let's go. I don't want... I can't wait."

I nodded and went for one last kiss. Then another. Still another. Finally, he managed to pull away, and with as badly as my knees trembled, I thanked God Matt kept his arm around me on our way to the elevator.

He pushed the button several times, cursing at the machinery that moved agonizingly slowly behind the closed doors.

"I thought you'd be upstairs," I said.

"That was my plan." He pushed the button a few more times, as if that would get the elevator to us faster. "But then I'd have to wait that much longer. And I'm really not in the mood to wait tonight."

"At least you weren't the one stuck waiting for Lynette to place a bet."

Matt grimaced. "No wonder you took so damned long."

"Sorry," I said with a grin.

He kissed me. "Don't worry, we'll make up for lost time."

A moment later, the elevator dinged. Taking their sweet damned time, the doors slid open. My heart pounded as we stepped inside and Matt pushed the button for the eighth floor. Before the doors had even closed, I grabbed the front of his shirt and hauled him to me, my back slamming into the wall in the same instant his mouth met mine. It probably hurt, but I didn't care because we were in each other's arms, kissing just as frantically as we had in the alcove. Our hands were all over each other, his cock was against my hip, and with every breath—his *and* mine—I went a little further out of my mind.

Breaking the kiss, he glanced up at the numbers above the door. When I looked, I cursed with frustration. Still three floors to go.

"Fuck it, I can't wait." He hit the emergency stop, and the elevator jerked to a halt.

"Matt, what—"

He turned me around and forced me up against the wall. Coarse stubble brushed the side of my neck. "I want you right fucking now. I just can't wait." His shoulder moved

and fabric rustled. A second later, the sound of his zipper raised goose bumps all along my spine.

My heart pounded. "What if we get caught?"

"Then we get caught." Foil ripped. "But I don't care because I'll be inside you."

I had to bite my lip to keep from whimpering. I didn't know what was hotter: the possibility of getting caught, or the desperation in his trembling hands when he pushed my skirt up to my hips and parted my legs with his knee. He hooked a finger under my panties and pulled them aside.

"My God, I want you so bad," he whispered.

I gasped when he pressed the head of his cock against me. The ache became unbearable. I had to have him inside me, all the way inside me. Now. *Right now.*

In the same instant he thrust in, I pushed back, and his cock was deep inside my pussy.

We both stopped, sucking in startled breaths.

"Oh, God," I moaned.

"Jesus, baby." He kissed the side of my neck and pulled out slowly before sliding back in at the same speed. "Jesus Christ, you feel so damned good."

"Fuck me," I pleaded. "Hard. Please, Matt..."

"With pleasure." He dug his fingers into my hips and fucked me just the way I wanted. He could only go so deep like this, but the angle was perfect, and his cock hit my G-spot again and again and again.

In no time at all, the first delicious pulses of an orgasm radiated from my pussy. Desperate for release, I reached down and circled my clit with my fingers, gasping as the twin sensations of my fingers and his cock sent me right to the brink.

"Oh God..." His voice was strained, the desperate vibrato of a man pushed as close to the edge as I was. I rocked my hips back, meeting him thrust for thrust, driving him deeper, squeezing him harder. He released a breath that was almost a whimper just before he whispered, "Oh, fuck, baby your pussy is so tight, so fucking tight, you're..."

I clawed at the wall with my free hand, desperate for something to hold on to as I lost my grasp on reality and sanity.

Then Matt spoke again. "Can you imagine if someone

saw us right now?" He panted in my ear. "Can you, baby?"

The very thought sent electricity up my spine and back down, right to my clit, and I swore I was going to come completely undone. I couldn't speak, couldn't even think clearly enough to form words, but Matt went on.

"Let someone catch us," he whispered. "Just let someone come through that door and..." He groaned, burying his face against my neck. "...and see me..." He shuddered. "...see me fucking you."

As soon as the words rolled off his tongue, I came, and after a few more deep, hard thrusts, so did he.

We both slumped against the wall, panting and trembling. I don't know how long we stood like that, depending on the wall and each other to stay upright, but it must have been a while. Long enough to catch our breath. Long enough to be sure our legs would hold us up. Easily long enough for Lynette to place a bet at one of the poker tables Matt and I had abandoned.

He was the first to move, bracing himself with one arm against the wall as he pulled out. I turned around and fixed my clothes while he took the condom off. He shoved it into the trashcan in the corner and released the emergency stop. Then, he rested a hand on the back of my neck and drew me into a gentle kiss while the elevator lurched into motion.

"You know," he said, touching his forehead to mine, "maybe next time, we should fuck *before* we go to poker night."

"Or we could just skip poker night altogether."

He laughed. "I think I like the sound of that."

~ \* ~

Matt collapsed onto the bed beside me. The elevator had been just the beginning, and it took another long, violent fuck in his bed to finally satisfy us both.

"We're either going to have to start doing this more regularly," he said, wiping sweat from his brow, "or we're going to end up having sex right out in plain sight. Assuming we don't kill each other after we've gone a few days without."

I ran my fingers through my damp hair. "I wouldn't be opposed to doing this more regularly."

He chuckled. "I figured you wouldn't be."

"At least we made it into the elevator." I laughed. "Though *that* could have been a little awkward if someone had gotten on that elevator."

Matt shrugged. "With the emergency stop pulled, no one was getting on. We were between floors somewhere."

"True." I grinned. "But if someone had walked in..."

He returned the grin and pulled me a little closer. "Then they would have seen us, wouldn't they?"

"And something tells me that wouldn't have bothered you in the slightest."

"Absolutely not." Just before he kissed me, he whispered, "When I said just let someone walk in right then, I wasn't kidding at all." The kiss deepened and lingered, and I couldn't help wondering what it would be like to have someone watching us. I'd watched him with another woman, he'd watched me alone and with Scott, but what about the two of us together?

The thought of Scott watching me with Matt turned me on like nothing else. Having them both in the same room. At the same time. My evenings with Scott and Byron had been sizzling hot, but Scott and Matt? I shivered.

Matt broke the kiss. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." I wetted my lips.

"You sure?" His eyebrows flicked up.

How to bring it up? I already knew Scott had no reservations about having another man in the room. Matt, I couldn't be so sure. But if there was a way to ease him into the idea...

"Kris?"

I looked at Matt. "Sorry. I was just... thinking."

He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. "About?"

"I have a bit of an odd question."

He smiled. "Try me."

"Since you like," I paused, "watching..."

His eyebrows jumped. "Mm-hmm?"

I pursed my lips, hesitating.

"What is it?"

Finally, I said, "Would you be opposed to watching from..." Another pause. "...to being a bit closer to the action?"

His eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, if I had Scott over, how would you feel about

being in the same room?"

"Seriously?"

I nodded.

"Like, just watching?" he asked. "Or... more?"

"Either way. Whatever you'd be comfortable with."

Matt blew out a breath and his eyes lost focus.

I touched his arm. "If you're not, it's okay. It was just a thought."

"I've never done anything like that before," he said softly. "I'm not opposed to it. In fact, it sounds fucking hot. But..." He wetted his lips and met my eyes. "I won't lie: the idea makes me a little nervous."

"Understandable. It's not exactly an everyday thing."

"No, certainly not." He ran his fingers through my hair. "How does Scott feel about this?"

"I haven't asked him yet, but I doubt he'll object." I squeezed his arm gently. "And you'd be able to decide how far you go. You could just watch, join in, whatever you're comfortable with."

"I assume it would just be us doing things to you?" he said. "As opposed to, you know, him and me..."

"Of course. In fact, Scott and I did this the other night, and—"

"My, my, you *are* adventurous, aren't you?"

"Yes," I said. "And if you're not opposed to it, I want to drag you along on some of my adventures."

Matt laughed. "Oh, you won't have to drag me, darlin'."

"So you want to do this?"

He chewed his lip for a second, then nodded. "Just watching to start with, but tell me the time and place and I'll be there."



## ***Twenty Two***

"You're quiet today." Scott raised his eyebrows. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah." I drummed my fingers on his kitchen counter. "Thinking."

"About?"

"Well, after the other night," I said, "I've kind of been thinking about some other things I want to try."

He cocked his head. "Such as?"

"I know it's not high on your list, but I think I'd like to try playing around with some hot wax."

Scott grimaced. "You really want to try that?"

"Yes, I do." I paused. "And the fact that you're so cautious about it is exactly why I want to try it with you."

He blinked. "What do you mean?"

"I know you'll err on the side of caution."

"Of course," he said. "But there's always going to be some risk of burning your skin. I'm very careful with regulating the temperature, but..."

"Will you do it, though?"

He hesitated, then nodded. "If you want to do it, then, yeah. I will."

I smiled. "You really don't mind?"

He came around the kitchen island and put his hands on my waist. "I'm your Dom, Krissy. I live to give you what you want."

"I thought the sub lived to please her Dom."

He laughed softly and wrapped his arms around me.

"It's a mutual thing. And if you trust me enough to let me push that limit, then I will."

"I do, and for that same reason..." I trailed off, hesitating to go there.

He touched my face. "What?"

I swallowed hard, my eyes losing focus for a moment. Then I looked at him. "I want to try the Saint Andrew's Cross again."

His eyes widened. "You do?"

I nodded. "Yes. I do."

For a moment, he was quiet. He stroked my hair and looked me in the eye. "All right, if that's what you want. But before we go in there," he said, gesturing down the hall toward the dungeon with his other hand, "I need to know. What is it about the cross that makes you so nervous?"

"Well, like I said, I'm a bit claustrophobic. Always have been. So, being confined is..." I let the shudder finish my thought.

"Understandable." He kissed me lightly. When he broke the kiss, I dropped my gaze. "Look at me, Kristen." I did, and he went on, his tone completely serious. "I know it's a phobia, so it's not entirely rational, but I want to make sure you know I won't ever push you too far. You're only confined until I release you, and the instant I suspect you're panicking, I will."

"I know. After last time, I know."

"I'd do that again in a heartbeat. And I promise, I will never be more than a few feet away. I won't leave the room, and you won't be by yourself. Ever. I'll always be right there, and all you have to do is say the word."

"Scott, I trust you."

"I know you do." He kissed me gently. "And I don't want to break that trust. Just tell me if it gets to be too much, okay?"

I nodded. "One thing, though."

His eyebrows lifted. "Hmm?"

"This time," I paused to moisten my lips, self-consciously avoiding his eyes. "No gag this time."

"No gag this time," he said. "Would you be okay with a blindfold, or is that too much?"

"I can live with the blindfold."

"Good." He grinned, then turned serious once again. "As far as the bindings go, let's just start with your hands. If you're doing okay with that, I'll bind your ankles, too."

My mouth was dry, so I just nodded.

"You sure you're ready for this?"

"No, but I'm sure I'm ready to *try* it."

He smiled and kissed me. "Good girl. You know what to do if it gets to be too much."

"Red or yellow."

"Precisely. And speaking of red, why don't I get a glass of wine so we can get started?"

~ \* ~

Scott's wine glass clinked on the table beside my half-empty ice water. I closed my eyes as a shudder of delicious anticipation rippled down my spine, leaving goose bumps in its wake.

"Unbutton the top button your shirt."

My fingers obeyed automatically, and one article at a time, one *button* at a time, he verbally stripped me. My shirt. Bra. Belt. Jeans. Panties. Each falling away and taking with them layers of resistance. Not that I resisted Scott or his commands, but with each stitch of clothing that hit the floor, I slid deeper into the familiar, intoxicating mindset of complete submission.

Moments later, naked and ready, I looked at the floor between us and awaited his next command.

"Stand facing the cross."

I did so with neither thought nor hesitation. Staring down the cross upon which I'd collapsed in panic last time, I forced back the uncertainty. I would do this. Scott had already proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that I was safe with him, that even when I was bound, I wasn't trapped. This inanimate object had bested me once. It wouldn't do it again.

"Put your left arm up."

Closing my eyes, I exhaled slowly through my nose and did as he ordered.

Fingers wrapped around my wrist. Metal jingled and rattled. The restraint encircled my wrist. Leather hissed across leather. When Scott released my arm, the rigid cuff held fast.

"Right arm."

Jingle. Rattle. Hiss.

And I was tied.

Scott came a little closer, and now he stood right behind me. His clothes brushed my bare skin as he put his hands on my hips. He kissed my neck, laughing softly when I shivered.

"There are few things in this world," he whispered, trailing a finger up my side and along my upraised arm, "that are sexier than a woman bound. Complete surrender, complete trust, complete willingness to be at my mercy." He ran his hands up and down my sides, tracing the curve of my waist and the swell of my hip. "Do you like being at my mercy, Kristen?"

"Yes, Master," I breathed.

"Good." Stubble brushed the side of my neck. "Because I intend to keep you this way for quite some time."

I bit my lip and closed my eyes. With anyone else, the words might have come across as a threat, but with him, every syllable was a whispered promise, a fate to which I gladly surrendered. Nervousness still existed, tingling at the outermost edges of my senses, but I laid my trust in the gentle hands now resting on my hips.

"Do you want me to let you go?" he asked.

"Only if that's what you want, Master."

"Good girl." He kissed the back of my shoulder. "There are so, so many things I could do to you now." One hand drifted up to cup my breast. "I could flog you. Tease you without letting you come." Another kiss, this time just behind my ear. "There's almost no limit to what I could do. And you'd let me, wouldn't you?"

"Yes... yes, Master." When had I lost my breath?

He pinched my nipple between his thumb and forefinger, bringing a breathless whimper to my lips just before he nipped my earlobe. "I could fuck you like this. Just like I did up against your bedroom window. Would you like that?"

*Oh, God, yes.* The metal rings on my cuffs jingled in time with my trembling hands. "Yes, Master."

His hands moved back to my hips, and he pulled me against him, letting me feel how hard he was. My head spun

and my pussy tightened as I remembered the way his cock had hit my G-spot when he'd fucked me at this angle against the window.

"I could fuck you," he growled, "and you'd have no choice but to take it. Right here, without moving, as fast or slow as I saw fit to give it to you, until I let you go."

Nervousness grazed my senses at the reminder that I was bound and immobile, but it faded behind my heartbeat, which thundered at the promise in Scott's words and the warm hardness of his clothed cock against me.

"Kristen, are you doing okay?"

"Yes, Master."

"Do you want me to bind your ankles?"

Goose bumps prickled my back, and Scott ran his fingers across them.

"You can say no." His voice was as gentle as the hand that squeezed my shoulder. "I'm not going to push you further than you can handle. Do you want me to bind your ankles?"

I gulped. I was here to push limits that had already pushed me back and won. Being completely tied scared me, but I wasn't backing down this time.

"Yes, Master, I do."

Fingertips drifted up and down the side of my neck. "Does it make you nervous?"

"Yes, but I want to." I licked my lips before quickly adding, "Master."

He said nothing. The near silent rustle of fabric suggested movement, and as his hand slid down my side, my hip, my thigh, and continued down to my ankle, I guessed he was kneeling.

Jingle. Rattle. *Oh God*. Cool leather.

My throat tightened around my breath as the cuff tightened around my ankle. Closing my eyes, I took a long, deep breath, then let it out slowly.

Scott's hand warmed my other ankle. "I'm going to cuff this one, too." He did nothing for a long moment. He held my leg, his grasp firm but more forgiving than the leather strap around my other.

Evidently certain I had no objections, he put the second cuff on.

Ice water slithered through my veins. I took a few more long, deep breaths, focusing hard on the cross's quick release, which was just visible out of the corner of my eye. I was immobile, but I was not trapped. I couldn't move, but I was only a word and a click away from freedom.

*I can do this. I can handle this.*

Warm hands drifted up the sides of my legs. "Are you okay?"

I nodded slowly.

"I'm going to step away for a second," he whispered, rising behind me. "I'll only be a few feet away. Are you okay with that?"

Another nod.

Scott cleared his throat.

"Yes, Master."

"Good girl." He kissed the base of my neck. A second later, cool air touched my skin, silently announcing that the space behind me was vacant. I closed my eyes, listening to Scott's footsteps on the hard floor. He was off to my left, by the rack of floggers. Something rustled. Something opened, then clicked shut.

I listened for the subtle sounds of a flogger coming down off the rack—the handle brushing its hook, the tails whispering against each other or sliding across Scott's palm—but those sounds didn't come.

Ice clinked against glass.

My posture straightened and I sucked in a breath.

Footstep. Footstep. Footstep.

Something solid clicked on the floor behind me. The glass, I guessed, if the quiet clinking was anything to go by.

He was behind me again. Even if I hadn't tracked the sound of his movements from there to here, there was no mistaking his presence. Though he didn't touch me, the layer of coolness against my skin had warmed almost imperceptibly. Warmed and electrified.

"I'm going to put the blindfold on now." He waited a moment, probably looking for signs of resistance or concern. Then he reached around and slid the blindfold over my already closed eyes.

And it was done. I was bound. Blind. Completely and totally at my Master's mercy, and unsure if it was

exhilarating or terrifying. Or both.

*I can do this. I can handle this.*

Movement behind me again. His knee or ankle cracked, so I guessed he was kneeling. Ice clinked. Another joint cracked. I kept my eyes tightly shut behind the blindfold.

My senses went on even higher alert now, searching for anything that would betray his next move. I had no idea whether to anticipate the soft warmth of his hand or the breathtaking shock of ice against my skin. I kept my eyes closed and waited.

Deep breath.

Heartbeat.

Bindings rattling.

Waiting.

Deep breath.

Heartbeat.

Contact.

Holy. *Fuck.*

The first sensations were so overwhelming, it took me a moment to process what he'd done, how he'd touched me, even where he'd touched me or with what. I sucked in a breath, my entire body tensing, and it was a few seconds before I could comprehend that he'd laid a warm, dry palm on my left side, and an ice cube on my right.

I exhaled hard as both hand and ice moved, sliding up my sides, leaving tingling trails of hot and cold. With the ice for contrast, the warmth of his hand may as well have been fire. As he drew both hands toward the center of my spine, my back arched, and I had no idea if I was trying to get away from the intense sensations or move toward them.

His hand lifted off my skin, and there was only ice now. A single, freezing point of contact, surrounded by the vague warmth of my Master's equally intense presence.

The ice was never still. He kept it constantly moving across my skin, constantly finding and stimulating unsuspecting nerve endings. Cold and blindness weren't nearly as intense as pain, but the blindness intensified the cold, and together they sent an intoxicating rush of endorphins through me. Every place ice touched may as well have been directly connected to my clit. Every chill and

shock and tremor surged across every nerve, straight down to the base of my spine and right to my pussy. Nothing existed beyond wherever ice met skin and where the resulting sensations lingered.

When the ice cube slid beneath my breast, it was more intense than I expected, and I jumped. My restraints rattled. Rattled, and held me firmly in place. My entire body remained still in spite of my instinctive—and futile—effort to move.

In an instant, fight or flight shoved blissful delirium aside. I clenched my fists and bit my lip, taking slow, deep breaths as my heart went into overdrive. My knees shook. My head spun. Cold water surged through my veins, and it had nothing to do with the ice on my skin.

Scott's arm was suddenly around my waist, his body against mine, and though I couldn't see him, I could tell by the way he leaned that he was reaching for the quick release.

"Wait."

He froze. "What?"

"Don't." I swallowed. "Don't let me go."

"Are you sure?"

I took a breath and nodded. "Yeah. I'm okay."

His posture relaxed slightly. Then he put his other arm around my waist and kissed the back of my shoulder. "Krissey, if you're scared—"

"I'm okay." I exhaled. "I just needed to remind myself I can still get out. I'll be fine."

Scott didn't speak for a moment. Then he stepped back, hesitantly releasing my waist. His hands weren't far away, probably still hovering an inch or two away from my skin. I could neither see nor feel them, but I knew they were there.

"Okay," he said finally, though he didn't sound completely convinced. "If you're sure."

"I am."

His hands lingered for another moment or two. Then he pulled away. He checked my hands, squeezing them gently and feeling my fingers.

"Are your hands cold? Tingling?"

"No, Master."



He released my hand and rested his on the side of my neck. "Your heart is still going a mile a minute. I can release your ankles if it'll help you come down. We can always bind them again."

"No." I wetted my lips. "No, I don't want you to."

The hand on my neck slid to my shoulder and he squeezed gently. "Tell me your safe words again."

"Red and yellow, Master."

He was silent again, neither moving nor speaking. Then he released my shoulder. Clothes rustled again. Ice clinked. I drew in a breath and waited.

I expected the sudden shock of cold contact, but I didn't expect it on the inside of my calf. Instinctively, I tried to bend my knee and jerk away, but the cuff held me in place. The chain clanked and I went nowhere. My heart raced, my body tensed, and panic threatened to shatter the confidence I'd gained in overcoming my fear a moment ago.

*Breathe.*

I took a deep breath. Held it. Released it.

"Are you okay?" Scott asked, his voice gentle.

"Yes." And I was. I was okay. I could do this.

"Do you want me to continue?"

"Yes, Master."

The ice continued its cold path up to the back of my knee. The startling chill on sensitive skin made my leg jerk again, but I was expecting the resistance this time, and when the cuff held me in place, I didn't worry. I hadn't really been trying to escape. It was simply a response to the cold.

There was no panic. No panic at all. At that realization, a rush of something like elation swept through me.

*Yes, I can do this. I can handle this.*

Scott continued drawing the ice up my leg, this time along the inside of my thigh. The higher it moved, the less I could breathe.

Something changed. Nerves searched for an explanation, for a way to comprehend this alien...*something*. A new sensation. A foreign sensation. The absence of a sensation.

Absence. That was it: the ice no longer touched me. My skin tingled and my nerves sought cold. Or warmth. Or skin. Anything. Sudden cold was nothing compared to the

jarring absence of it.

When the ice made contact again, it was with the cleft between my pussy lips. My whole body tensed and I gasped, but I was bound too securely to either pull away or press harder against the cold, and I didn't know which I wanted to do more. I wanted it away from me. I wanted more of it. I wanted to breathe, but couldn't remember how to exhale. I shivered, and it was as much from the cold on my skin as the heat beneath it.

The ice moved back and forth along my pussy lips, cooling my skin and melting my insides. He didn't keep it in one place long enough to make anything go numb, and every motion was nearly as intense as the last. Every time he neared my clit, I gasped, and every time he drew away, I whimpered with frustration. Occasionally, he drew it down my thigh, pulling all the stimulation away from my pussy just long enough for me to catch my breath before he brought it back up.

Eventually, the ice melted, and all that remained was his hand. As his cold fingers slipped inside me, his warm breath and lips touched the side of my neck. In that instant, the bindings that had once terrified me became the only things keeping me from collapsing. With their support, I did the only thing I could do: stand there, completely bound, and let him slide his fingers deeper into my pussy.

His shirt brushed my back as he wrapped his other arm around me. "If I didn't know any better," he whispered. "I would think you were turned on by being tied and teased like this." He slowly withdrew his fingers as he added, "Do you want me to fuck you, Kristen?"

*Yes, yes, a thousand times yes.* I'd have given up the privilege of breathing just then if it meant my Master would fuck me. I opened my mouth to try to tell him so, but couldn't, not while he subtly bent and flexed his fingers inside me. *You expect me to speak when you do that?*

"I asked you a question." He withdrew his fingers, then slid them back in as he said, "Do you want me to fuck you, Kristen?"

"Yes." The word came out as a choked sob, the only thing I could get past the madness that tied my tongue in knots. *Wrong answer*, something in the back of my mind

screamed. My fear of displeasing him convinced my mouth to work, and I managed, "Yes, if that's...if that's what you want, Master."

He kissed my neck. "Good girl." His fingers withdrew and his arm lifted off my waist. He moved behind me, presumably kneeling. Then he tugged at one of my ankle restraints.

Hiss. Rattle. Jingle. One ankle was free.

Hiss. Rattle. Jingle. The other.

Relief washed over me. I'd made it to the other side of this. No real panic, no freaking out, and now I was almost free.

*I did it. I handled it.*

When he released my hand from its cuff, I let it drop to my side. I opened and closed my other hand, expecting it to be freed at any moment as well, but then a metallic creak caught my attention.

Scott brought my free hand to rest on the small of my back. "You've done well, Kristen. Very well."

"Thank you, Master," I whispered.

"But we're not done yet." Cold metal encircled my wrist. As the cuff closed, the vibration reverberated through me. He released my other hand, then cuffed it as well. He held the chain between the bracelets and pulled back slightly.

"Step back."

I did, and like a prisoner, he led me out of the dungeon and across the hall. I guessed, from the distance and direction, we were going into the bedroom. He confirmed that guess when he guided me to the bed and had me sit.

He released one of the cuffs. "Lie back and put your hands up by the headboard." Once I'd done as he ordered, he secured my hands to the headboard. "Is that too tight?"

"No, Master."

Without a word, he moved again. His clothes rustled and landed on the floor with muffled thuds. Then the sounds of getting, opening, and putting on a condom made my breath catch. My pulse soared when he got on top of me. Rose even higher as his hips warmed my inner thighs and he guided himself to me. When the head of his cock slipped between my pussy lips, I bit my lip to suppress a moan. He

wasn't even inside me yet, and I was about to lose my damned mind.

"Remember," he said as he teased me with just the head of his cock, "you're not to come until I allow it."

As always, that was going to be nigh on impossible to obey. Just having him this close to me was enough to make my G-spot pulse as if he were already fucking me. Not having an orgasm in his presence was like not breaking a sweat while running a marathon. Obey him I would, though. Come hell, high water, or an eternity without an orgasm, my Master *would* be obeyed.

He pulled back a little, breaking contact with my pussy. "You understand, don't you?" he growled.

"Yes, Master."

"Good girl."

I bit my lip as he slid into me. With the blindfold on, I had no choice but to be completely aware of every place he touched me, of every inch of his thick cock, especially with as slowly as he moved.

Like no other man I'd ever known, Scott was capable of staying in control at *any* speed. He could fuck me so fast and hard it hurt, or he could take glacial strokes and draw it out for ages. Tonight, it was the latter, and I couldn't even begin to imagine where he found that kind of control. I couldn't comprehend that such slow, fluid movement existed in the same universe as the madness which consumed me a little more with every stroke.

Exist it did, though, and he made every stroke last an eternity. A blissful, torturous, perfect, agonizing eternity. In some other lifetime, I might have begged him not to stop in between pleading with him to fuck me harder and faster, but that wasn't my place now. Not with him. I was at his mercy, under his command, and I would take whatever he saw fit to give me.

He pushed all the way into me and stopped.

"I'm going to release your hands," he said. "And I want you to claw my back."

I swallowed hard. "Master?"

"Am I unclear?"

"No, Master."

"Good." He reached up to free my hands. First one cuff

fell open, then the other. I flexed my hands and wrists a few times before putting my arms around him. His skin was hot to my fingertips. Hot and soft, inviting a gentle touch, not the nails he'd demanded.

But my Master had spoken.

I dragged my nails down his back, probably hard enough to leave faint white trails, but no more. He pulled out, then thrust back in, fucking me faster as I scratched him again. I bit my lip. I was hellbent on obeying his order not to come, but I could barely focus on even that simple task with the way he fucked me, the way he slammed his cock deep inside me, because it just felt too. Damned. Good.

"Scratch harder," he said.

I dug my nails in a little more, applying just enough pressure to, I guessed, turn those white trails red.

"Harder," he growled. "I said 'claw,' not tickle."

"I'm—" I hesitated.

"What's the problem?"

"I'm afraid of hurting you, Master."

"I'm ordering you to hurt me."

"Master, I—"

"Fucking *hurt me*, Kristen," he snarled.

Obedience trumped fear, and I did as he ordered, raking my nails down either side of his back. He sucked in a hiss of breath, and like a cat, he arched his back and pushed against my nails, barely breaking his rhythm as he continued thrusting into me. When a deep, throaty growl emerged from him, my fingers curled in response. The harder I scratched him, the harder he fucked me. The harder he fucked me, the harder I scratched him.

"Yes, just like that," he whispered breathlessly. "That's perfect."

There was no holding back the helpless cry that escaped my lips. His sharp breaths, his violent thrusts, his whispered praise; it all conspired to drive me toward that sweet abyss of forbidden delirium.

"Don't come yet," he said, panting against my neck. "I know you want to, but you're not allowed to yet."

I screwed my eyes shut behind the blindfold, digging my teeth into my lip as I dug my nails into his back and shoulders. The low groan he released did nothing to help me

hold back.

"Master, please let me come," I moaned. "Please, Master, you feel—" I cut myself off, both because speech was too complicated and because I wasn't sure if I was at liberty to speak that way.

"Tell me," he breathed.

"You..." I gasped for air. "You feel too good *not* to make me come."

He kissed my neck and thrust harder. "All I have to do is give you the word, then?"

"Yes, Master. *Please*, Master."

"Oh, I would," he whispered. "But the second you come, I'm going to come too."

"Please..." I could barely speak through chattering teeth. My eyes rolled back as my orgasm tried to take over. Knowing he was so close, that he'd come the moment I did, I was a breath away from falling apart.

"Is that what you want, Kristen?" He was panting hard now, his skin slick with sweat and his arms shaking from exertion. "Do you want to come so you'll make me come?"

"Yes, Master, oh God, yes."

"Come."

In the split second it took for him to breathe that syllable against my neck, I was over the edge, into that abyss, and he was right there with me. He groaned, the sound reverberating through my trembling, arching, writhing body like an echo of the shudders radiating from my pussy. His muscles twitched and quivered beneath my nails as the force of his orgasm drove him deeper inside me. I couldn't tell his pleasure from mine, couldn't tell whose shudders sent me further into sweet oblivion, couldn't breathe until his mouth was over mine and drawing the air right out of my lungs.

As one, we came down. Our bodies relaxed. We both exhaled. I no longer dug my nails into his back; now I simply held his shoulders to still my shaking hands. Only our mouths moved, his tongue and mine lazily intertwining as we kissed in between trying to catch our breath. Without breaking the kiss, he rested his weight on one arm and reached up to push the blindfold off. Cool air touched my face now that the satin cover was gone, but I was too lost in

his kiss to bother opening my eyes. It was only when he raised his head that I finally looked at him.

He smiled down at me. "You handled everything well. I have to admit, I wasn't sure if you'd be okay on the cross."

"That makes two of us."

He kissed me lightly before pulling out and pushing himself up. "So, any chance I'll be able to talk you into doing it again?"

"I don't think you'll have to twist my arm." Our eyes met and we both grinned. Then he got up to take the condom off. When he turned away, I gasped at the bright red stripes crisscrossing his back. It looked like I'd even drawn blood in a few places.

He eyed me. "What's wrong?"

"Your back. It's..."

He turned his back to the mirror above the dresser and looked over his shoulder. "Oh, *that's* going to sting in the shower." Then he winked at me. "Nicely done."

## ***Twenty Three***

We lay in silence for a long time, just breathing and returning to earth. I rested my head on his chest and listened to his heartbeat while his fingers absently ran through my hair. The endorphins were slowly wearing off, as was the adrenaline that came from returning to the scene of a previous panic.

Lying beside him, it occurred to me that none of this had been what I'd had in mind when BDSM first piqued my interest. I'd thought of it as whips, chains, leather, pain. It hadn't even crossed my mind that it could be some of the most deeply satisfying and intimate sex of my life.

Then again, I'd never imagined I'd ever have a lover like Scott, whether in a BDSM or vanilla situation.

"You're awfully quiet," he said.

"Just catching my breath."

He laughed softly. "You stopped breathing hard a few minutes ago."

I craned my neck to look up at him. "Nothing gets past you, does it?"

"Not a thing." He kissed my forehead. "I figured you were either thinking or falling asleep, and since you're fairly wide awake..." That inquisitive, *I see right through you* eyebrow lift. "So, what's on your mind?" Concern creased his forehead. "You did fine on the cross, but is anything bothering you about that?"

"No, not at all." I turned onto my side. "I was just thinking about what we're doing. All of this. It's weird, I



guess. I keep thinking about this versus what I was doing with Alec."

He propped himself up on one elbow. "How so?"

"Well, it seems like," I paused, trying to find the words. "Like, he wasn't a Dom, yet he had more control over my sex life than you do."

"To be fair, he was also the only player." Scott winked.

I laughed. "Touché. But, in all seriousness, Alec was completely in control of our sex life. And with you, it's..." I chewed my lip. "It's different."

"Of course it is," he said with a half shrug.

"How so?"

"He took control. You *gave* me control."

"I know. Still, it's almost surreal, looking at the differences," I said. "You're in charge. You're the Dom. You decide everything from whether or not I can see to what I wear, but he..." I shook my head, releasing a frustrated breath as I struggled to articulate it. "He controlled when we had sex, where we had sex." Through my teeth, I added, "*If* we had sex."

Scott ran his hand up and down my arm. "The difference is that he was a selfish bastard. I may be the one calling the shots, I may demand you call me 'Master' and punish you when you disobey me, but every time we do this, my ultimate goal..." He made a gentle, spine-tingling circle on the inside of my elbow. "... is *your* pleasure. From what you've said about Alec, he just wanted to come and be done with it. I want to give you more than just an orgasm. It's supposed to be..." He pursed his lips, his eyes losing focus for a moment before he met mine again. "... an experience."

"Which it has been."

"Good." He kissed me lightly. "That's what it's all about. Anyway, yes, I'm a Dom, but all I take from you are your trust and submission. And what I take from you, I take so that I can give you even more in return." He shrugged with one shoulder. "What he gave or took, he did so with only himself in mind."

"That would be Alec in a nutshell," I muttered.

"And that," he said, draping his arm over my waist, "is why you're in my bed right now instead of his."

I gave him a pointed look. "Scott Moore, you're not

*gloating, are you?"*

"I just tied you to a Saint Andrew's Cross, teased you with ice, fucked the hell out of you, and then you told me how he basically pissed you away." He shrugged again. "You're damn right I'm gloating."

Laughing, I said, "Cocky bastard."

"I don't deny it."

"I didn't think you would."

"What can I say?" Another casual, one-shouldered shrug. "He was an idiot. And quite honestly, from everything you've said, and from how you reacted to being tied the first time, I'd say it's a damned good thing you never tried BDSM with him."

"Now that you mention it, you're right."

"Of course I am."

I smacked him playfully. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. You were right about him. Christ, I can only imagine what he'd have done had he tied me the way you did the first time."

Scott's expression turned serious. He touched my face as he said, "If he's as oblivious and self-centered as I think he is, I would hope it never got to that point with him. I can pretty well guarantee he wouldn't have caught on as quickly that you needed to come down."

I shuddered. For all the times I'd tried to persuade Alec to try something, I was suddenly glad he'd never agreed to it.

"He'd never done any of this before, had he?" Scott asked.

I shook my head.

"Putting a flogger in his hands probably would have been a bad idea, then," he said. "He wasn't just inexperienced, he was stupid, clueless, and selfish. You'd have been asking to get hurt."

I couldn't argue with that.

"But," Scott went on, "that asshole is gone, and you're stuck with me and all of my experience."

"You're gloating again."

"Still not denying it."

"You're terrible." I laughed. "Okay, so, since you have all this experience, can I ask you something?"

"Didn't leave me much choice, did you?"

"Shut up, smartass." I rolled my eyes. "You know what I mean."

He snickered. "Of course. Go ahead."

"This may sound ridiculous, but given how little experience I have with all of this, bear with me." I moistened my lips. "How does someone learn how to flog?"

"A lot of practice."

"I figured, but I don't imagine too many people are willing to help a novice with target practice."

"You'd be surprised." He turned onto this stomach and rested on his forearms. "But it usually helps to practice on something inanimate at first. Pillows, stuffed animals, your boss, whatever you can find. Some people throw a little flour on them so they can see where the tails are hitting." He paused. "I can also teach you using one of my subs."

"Really?"

"Sure. Obviously I'll have you practice a bit on your own, but sooner or later, you need a human target."

"One of your subs won't mind being on the receiving end of a flogging from a novice like me?"

"Amy will jump at the opportunity." He chuckled. "Trust me, it won't take much to persuade her. Just tell her she's going to be tied up and beaten, she'll be there."

"I can see why you and she get along so well." I laughed. Then I said, "While I'm asking you strange things, I have another question for you."

He shrugged. "Okay, shoot."

"You know I have this thing going with my neighbor, right?"

"Which part?" He grinned. "Watching each other, or fucking each other?"

"Both, now that you mention it."

"Okay, what about it?"

I swallowed. "You said you're an exhibitionist, right?"

"I am. As are you."

"Exactly. And he's obviously a voyeur." I thumbed my chin. "Would you be opposed to me bringing him in one night? With us?"

Scott cocked his head. And there it was, that patented Scott Moore smirk. "Hmm, I think *someone's* been enjoying her threesomes."

I tried—and failed—not to laugh. “Maybe I have been.”

“Maybe, my ass.”

“Okay, you got me.” I smiled. “So, are you down with it? He mostly wants to watch, but he might join in. Depending on how comfortable he is.”

“Sure, I don’t see why not.” He grinned again. “A voyeur is the perfect thing to add to a couple of exhibitionists, after all.”

“I guess I don’t need to ask if it bothers you to have another man in the room.”

Scott laughed. “I’ve flogged you while another man fucked you. I think I can live with someone watching or joining in.” He kissed me. “Sounds like fun. Just tell me when and where.”

I put my arms around him. “How about my place, as soon as possible?”

He pulled me to him and rolled me onto my back.

“I’ll be there,” he murmured against my lips, and when he kissed me again, the conversation was over.

## ***Twenty Four***

"You sure about this?" I asked when I greeted Matt at the door.

"Getting to see you up close and personal instead of across the alley?" He kissed me. "You're damn right I am."

I smiled. "But on any other night, you get to *have* me—"

"But watching you is..." He trailed off, biting his lip as his eyes lost focus for a second. Then he looked at me. "Watching you is so fucking hot."

"Dirty man."

"Damn right." He kissed me again.

I slipped my hand into his. "Come on, then. Let's get this thing started." I led him into the kitchen, where Scott waited. "You remember Scott, right?"

Matt nodded and extended his hand.

As they shook hands, I said, "Wine?"

"Please," Scott said.

"Matt?"

"No, thanks."

While I went about pouring the wine, Scott said, "So, while we're all still dressed, I suppose some ground rules are in order." He looked at Matt. "You're mostly in this to watch, right?"

Matt nodded.

"Are you opposed to participating?"

Matt grinned at me before looking at Scott again. "Probably not." He paused, then quickly added, "I mean, playing with *her*."

Scott chuckled. "Of course. Now, since she's my

submissive, she takes orders from me." He glanced at me, then back at Matt. "If I order her to do something to you, are you comfortable with that?"

Matt shifted his weight, drumming his fingers on the counter. I imagined Scott's straightforwardness caught him off guard. After a moment, he looked at Scott. "Define 'something'."

Scott shrugged. "Kiss you, fuck you, suck you off."

Matt stiffened, his cheeks coloring slightly. He glanced at me. I smiled and offered a shrug that was more apologetic than Scott's. Matt was quiet for a long moment, then finally nodded.

"Yeah, I'm fine with that."

"And I assume you're okay with that too, Krissy?"

"Of course."

I handed the glass to Scott. He grinned as he took it, and my nipples instantly hardened. Just the sight of him with a glass of red wine was enough now. He didn't even have to take that first sip, but he would, and by the time he did, I'd be wet and desperate for his mouth, his cock, and his approval. Once his sleeves were rolled, I'd be putty in his hands.

For now, though, he taunted me with the untouched wine and sleeves still buttoned to the wrists.

"Well," he said, "unless anyone else has any limits, rules, questions, whatever..." He gestured down the hall with his glass. "Shall we?"

No one had any limits, rules, questions, or whatever, so they followed me into the bedroom. There, Matt took a seat in the chair beside the window. Scott set his backpack down and leaned against the bed.

I looked at the bag, then at him. "I assume you already have an evil plan in mind?"

"But of course."

After he'd sipped his wine and rolled his sleeves, Scott grinned, pulled a blindfold out of his bag, and handed it to me. I started to put it on, but he stopped me with a hand on my arm.

"No." He nodded toward Matt. "It's for him."

Matt and I exchanged puzzled looks. When I met Scott's eyes again, the lift of his eyebrows and the tautness

of his lips asked if I was going to obey or if I wanted him to punish me.

I turned to Matt. He swallowed hard, glancing at the blindfold in my hand before giving me just the slightest nod. Though I was puzzled about Scott's intentions, there must have been a method to his madness. Not that I was in a position to question either his madness or his method.

Once the blindfold was on, I stepped back and waited for the next command.

Scott stayed still and silent. I did the same. Matt drummed his fingers on the armrest. Tapped his heel on the floor. Took a few deep breaths. If this all caught me by surprise, I could only imagine what it was doing to him. He'd come to watch, and now he was blind. He didn't know what either of us would do, and for several long moments, we did nothing.

Evidently my mind wasn't the only one with which Scott could play games.

My Master's voice made me jump. "Unbutton your blouse and take it off."

Matt shifted in his chair. I wondered if he could hear my fingers opening each button. Blindness had a funny way of making other senses incredibly acute. Whether or not he could hear it, I had little doubt he was picturing it, and he licked his lips when my blouse landed on the floor in a whisper of falling fabric.

"Take off your bra," Scott said.

Matt drew in a long breath through his nose. The more clothing Scott ordered off me, the more Matt fidgeted. More murmured curses rolled off his tongue. By the time I was completely naked, his knuckles were white from gripping the armrests.

"Put your hands on the armrests," Scott said. "Bend over him, but don't touch him."

Matt moved his arms out of the way. First he folded them across his chest. Then he put them his hands in his lap. Chest. Lap.

I did as Scott ordered, and Matt's posture stiffened as I leaned over him. God only knew what Scott had up his sleeve, but—

*Slap.*

Matt jumped. I bit my lip.

*Slap.*

*Oh God.* Leather on skin. I knew that sound only too well, and goose bumps instantly prickled all the way down my spine. I tightened my grip on the armrests and closed my eyes. Waiting. Waiting. *Wanting.* The third strike would be to his own palm again, that much I—

The tails thudded just below my right shoulder blade, catching me off guard. Before I'd completely recovered, he hit the same spot on my left side. I whimpered, and Matt whispered something that may have been, "oh my God."

As he always did, Scott started out with gentle strokes to wake up the nerve endings and get my skin accustomed to the flogger. With time, though, he brought it down harder, until the thud resonated through my bones and drove moans of ecstasy from my lips. I was barely even aware of the burning fatigue in my shaking arms as I struggled to hold myself upright.

And all the while, Matt squirmed and fidgeted in front of me. Every time leather struck flesh, he jumped as if the tails had hit him. The more I whimpered and moaned, the deeper and more ragged his breaths became.

"Jesus Christ," he breathed.

A downward glance confirmed what I already knew: He was *definitely* hard, his thick erection straining the front of his jeans. My mouth watered. I wanted his cock. In my mouth, in my pussy, in my hands, I didn't care. I *needed* him. Or Scott. One of them. Either of them. Both of them. *Now.*

The flogger hit my back one more time, then stopped. A second later, Scott grabbed my hair and pulled my head back. "Is this turning you on, Kristen?" he growled in my ear.

"Yes, Master," I said breathlessly.

"You want one of us to make you come, don't you?"

"If that's—" I paused, willing my tongue to form the words as I watched Matt squirm. Finally I closed my eyes. "If that's what you want, Master."

"Good girl." He released my hair. "Turn around." I let go of the chair and stood upright, facing him but keeping my eyes down. "Get the condom out of my back pocket."

I bit my lip. Behind me, Matt sucked in a breath. The



chair creaked as he shifted his weight. He must have been going out of his mind, wondering what was going on, what would happen next, what—

Scott cleared his throat.

With a shaking hand, I reached behind him and slid my hand into his back pocket. Anticipation tingled at the base of my spine when the foil's edge met my fingertips. I pulled it free and brought my hand back around between us.

I kept my eyes down as I held the condom out to Scott, but he put his hand up.

"It isn't for me."

My eyes flicked up, and he gestured past me with his chin. Gestured at Matt.

My heart pounded. With what, I wasn't sure. Excitement? Nerves? The certainty that I was going to wake up from this dream at any moment?

Scott's eyebrow rose. "Is there a problem?"

"No. No, not at all."

I turned to Matt and took a deep breath. Then I went to him and grasped his hand.

"Stand up," I said.

Hesitating, he licked his lips. He rose, pushing himself up with his free hand rather than pulling on mine. His Adam's apple bobbed once.

He sucked in a sharp hiss of breath when I slid my hand over the front of his jeans. My mouth instantly watered; I'd had no doubt his cock was rock hard, but feeling was believing. Oh God, I wanted him.

When I started to draw his zipper down, he tensed.

"Are you okay with this?" I whispered.

"Oh, yeah."

I unzipped his jeans. As I wrapped my fingers around his cock, we both gasped. He let his head fall back, exhaling through parted lips as I stroked him gently.

"Put the condom on," Scott ordered.

I tore the wrapper. Matt bit his lip, and the furrow of his brow was visible even with the blindfold. We both took long, deep breaths while I rolled the condom into place.

The condom was on. My body screamed at me to drag him down to the floor or to the bed or *anywhere* and get him inside me as soon as possible, but I waited. Torture though

it was, I waited. I had to.

Matt took short, shallow breaths. His unsteady hands opened and closed at his sides. Impatience was written all over the tension in his neck and the way his cheek rippled as he clenched and unclenched his jaw.

Finally, Scott made a move. He gathered my hair and swept it aside, and his voice thrummed against my neck as he said, "Once his blindfold is off, he can do whatever he wants to you." Matt exhaled hard. Scott kissed my neck. "But what is the rule?"

*Oh, you bastard. I gulped. You sadistic, teasing bastard.*

"What is the rule, Kristen?" he growled.

"I'm not allowed to come."

"Not until...?"

Another gulp. "Until you command or allow it."

"Good girl." One more kiss, this time just beneath my ear. Then he stepped back. "Take the blindfold off."

I did, and as soon as it was gone, Matt grabbed the sides of my neck and kissed me. Breathlessly, desperately, the kind of passionate kiss that melted my spine and turned my knees to water.

Thankfully, I didn't need to rely on those knees to hold me up any longer, because Matt shoved me up against the bed and bent me over it. My hands had barely hit the bedspread before he was inside me, gripping my hips and thrusting into me so hard it brought tears to my eyes. The bed squeaked and groaned beneath us as he slammed his cock deep inside me, and I fought to keep from coming.

Even over the bed's protests, Matt's breaths, and my moans, I heard the muffled creak of the chair. Blinking back tears, I glanced over my shoulder.

Scott had taken Matt's place. He sat with one elbow on the armrest, his legs crossed at the knees, and a deliciously sexy grin on his face.

And he watched.

The voyeur became the exhibitionist. The exhibitionist, the voyeur.

And between the two of them, I was in nothing less than perfect, mind-blowing ecstasy. I closed my eyes and let my head fall forward, gripping the bedspread as Scott

watched Matt fuck me.

Matt grabbed my hair and pulled my head back. He kissed the side of my neck, his stubble abrasive against my skin, and I moaned, my arms trembling beneath me.

"Don't come yet, Kristen." Scott's calm, even voice only emphasized the sharp, desperate breaths Matt released against my neck. "You're not to come until I give the word."

Matt stopped abruptly. He pulled out and whispered, "Get on your back." Though my skin was tender from the flogger, it wasn't painfully raw. Even if it was, a little pain wasn't going to deter me from letting Matt have me the way he wanted me.

I turned onto my back and wrapped my legs around his waist as he pulled his shirt off and threw it aside. Then he thrust into me, and I immediately saw stars; from this angle, he had more leverage, and he hit every perfect place inside me. Both my clit and G-spot must have been placed specifically for Matt Sommers to fuck me just. Like. This.

"Kristen." Scott's voice once again pulled me out of the delirium Matt's cock sent me into.

I gripped Matt's shoulders and closed my eyes as obedience and orgasm vied for control. Matt fucked me even harder. Whether he was deliberately trying to make obedience more difficult, or if he was simply losing control, I didn't know, but every thrust drove me closer to that tempting precipice.

"Oh, fuck," Matt moaned. "Jesus, baby, you feel incredible."

I clawed at his back, trying to hold onto something, anything.

"You will not come yet." Scott's voice was flat and terse. The faint clink of his glass on the window sill made my heart beat faster. I swore he grew calmer and more controlled as Matt came apart in my arms. His cool intensified Matt's desperation. The stillness of one emphasized the violent movement of the other, and they both conspired to drive me out of my mind.

I whimpered, my entire body trembling as Matt continued to fuck me.

"I haven't given you permission yet," Scott said. I moaned again, this time out of aggravation. Scott's denial

fueled my frustration. My frustration dug my nails into Matt's back. My nails in his back made Matt fuck me faster and harder. His violent thrusts held me right on the brink of an earth shattering orgasm. An orgasm which Scott continued to deny me.

"Master, please," I begged, almost sobbing with arousal and frustration and insanity. "Please, let me come, please..."

"Yes."

With that simple, calm affirmative, I was gone.

"Oh, fuck, oh my God..." Matt's trembling whisper penetrated my white-hot oblivion. He slammed his cock into me, hard enough to drive out my breath had I been able to draw any to begin with, and groaned.

For a long, breathless moment, we just held each other, our bodies unmoving except for the uncontrollable quivering that shook us both from head to toe. His forehead rested against mine, the sweat on his brow cooling my feverish skin.

He exhaled. I exhaled. His shoulders relaxed. One by one, my fingers loosened their hold on him. We both shivered as he pulled out.

He kissed me again. "That was amazing," he breathed. I must have said something, responded with a slurred murmur, because I was aware of my own voice vibrating in my throat, but God only knew what I actually said.

As Matt got up to get rid of the condom, I met Scott's eyes. Matt and I were sweaty and disheveled, but he was still fully dressed, neither a drop of sweat nor a hair out of place. Still just as calm and composed as he'd been all evening.

He gestured at the floor and, with a voice that echoed that omnipresent control, said, "Get on your knees."

I scrambled to my feet and dropped to my trembling knees in front of him. My mouth watered as he unbuckled his belt.

"You've done well tonight," he whispered.

"Thank you, Master."

"You're not done yet, though." The sound of his zipper almost drew a whimper out of me. "After all, Matt came to watch, didn't he?"

"Yes, Master." I glanced at Matt, whose eyes widened. He wetted his lips, and without thinking, I did the same.

"Look at me, Kristen," Scott said.

I looked up at him, resisting the urge to let my eyes dart toward his hand as he stroked his hard cock. He ran his free hand through my hair.

"Do you want to suck my cock, Kristen?" he asked, almost whispering. He nodded toward Matt, but didn't break eye contact with me. "Do you want him to watch you suck my cock?"

A desperate plea of "yes, yes, please, let me, Master" made it to the tip of my tongue, but I bit my lip. That was the wrong answer.

"If that's what you want, Master," I whispered.

"Good girl." He grinned. His fingers tightened in my hair. "And that *is* what I want."

~ \* ~

After Scott had gone, Matt and I sat on my sofa, his arm slung around my shoulders as we both returned to a world beyond blindfolds and floggers.

They'd taken turns all evening, switching back and forth between voyeur and exhibitionist. Both of them had more stamina than two men in their thirties had any right to have, and they'd capitalized on it. By the end of the night, Scott had come twice. Matt, three times. Me? Heaven knew.

*"Krissy, you've just spent four years enduring a degree of sexual frustration that would have driven me batshit,"* Scott had said once. *"With all the sexual karma you're cashing in right now, I say, the more the merrier."*

The more the merrier indeed.

Matt closed his eyes and let out a long breath, resting his head against the back of the couch.

I put my hand on his leg. "You okay?"

He smiled, but didn't open his eyes. "Oh, I'm just fine."

"We didn't hurt you? Wear you out?"

"You wore me out all right." He looked at me with heavy-lidded eyes. "But I'm not complaining at all."

"Good." I squeezed his leg. "I honestly had no idea he was going to blindfold you."

"Well, that does kind of defeat the purpose of

watching, so..." He shrugged, chuckling. "Actually I didn't mind. It was kind of cool."

"Really?"

He nodded, closing his eyes again. "When I've watched you from across the alley—" He paused, swallowing hard. His cheeks darkened as he cast me a cautious look. Then he closed his eyes and went on. "When I've watched you, the only part that sucks is that I can only see you. I can't hear you, I can't feel you. But this..." He went quiet for a moment.

"This...?"

He opened his eyes and sat up, putting his hand over mine as he faced me. "This time, it still would have been hot if I could have seen you, but since I couldn't, it was like I had no choice but to focus on all the other little things."

I wetted my lips. "Such as?"

"Such as, the sounds you make," he said. "Especially when he was flogging you. I swear to God, you sounded just like you were on the verge of an orgasm. And..." He dropped his gaze, his cheeks coloring a little more. "Okay, this is going to sound really stupid."

"Try me."

He took a breath. "When he was making you undress, I could hear your clothes moving across your skin. I've never paid attention to that before, but it..." He watched his fingertips making light circles on the back of my hand for a moment. "It was like I couldn't just hear it, I could *feel* it."

I shivered, imagining his fingers following the feather light paths my clothes had made as they'd fallen away.

"So," he said, "for the first threesome I've ever experienced? I'd give it a ten."

"Glad you enjoyed it." I smiled. "Think this will be your only threesome? Or just your first?"

"Oh, I think I could be talked into another one." He reached for my face and tilted his head. His lips barely brushed mine as he said, "What about you?"

I put my arms around his neck. "I think I could be persuaded."

"Hmm," he whispered between gentle kisses, "I hope that doesn't mean you're bored with twosomes."

"Not in the least."

"Good."

## ***Twenty Five***

Nerves coiled in my gut as I pulled into Scott's driveway beside another car. Amy's, I assumed. I took a deep breath. She was here. We were really doing this.

When Scott came to the door, he had Malia draped over his arm with one paw dangling and her tail curled around his elbow. He reminded me of some spy movie villain, plotting and scheming while he stroked the equally diabolical cat on his arm.

"Didn't chicken out, I see?" he said with a grin.

"No, I did not." I laughed. Glancing over my shoulder, I added, "I assume Amy hasn't either?"

"Nope. She's here. And I'm glad you're here, because I think this will be fun." Turning so we didn't squish the cat, he kissed me quickly. When he started to pull away, Malia reached up and grabbed my shirt, hooking her claws in so we couldn't separate.

"Um, Scott, your cat is trying to feel me up."

"What can I say?" he said as he pried her claws free. "She has good taste."

"She obviously didn't pick you, then."

"Shut up."

Once he'd persuaded Malia to unhand me, Scott led me into his living room where Ryan, Amy's husband, sat on the sofa.

"Ryan, you remember Kristen, right?" Scott said. "She'll be beating the hell out of your wife today."

"Yeah, I remember her." Ryan laughed as he got up to shake my hand. "You're letting this yoyo train you?"

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"Well, I take everything he says with a grain of salt," I said. "Always have."

"Smart woman," Ryan said with a nod.

"Okay, that's enough out of both of you." Scott rolled his eyes. To me, he said, "Amy just went into the spare bedroom to change clothes. She'll be out momentarily."

As if on cue, Amy stepped into the room, and both men's eyes lit up. She wore a simple T-shirt and track pants, obviously going for comfort and practicality. I could only imagine the things she wore on other occasions; her lithe body was made for the leather ensembles I'd seen at the club.

Her long blonde hair was gathered into a ponytail and slung over one shoulder. Out of the way and exposing her back, I realized with a half-excited, half-nervous flutter in my stomach.

"Ready?" Scott asked.

She smiled, first at me, then at him. "Always."

"So when should I be back?" Ryan asked.

"Maybe an hour?" Scott said. "We might not be done yet, but I'd rather have you here earlier than not."

"Noted." Ryan kissed Amy's forehead. "I'll be back in an hour or so. Have fun."

She smiled. "I will." They exchanged a brief look and a tender kiss, then Ryan made his exit. Once he was gone, we headed down the hall toward the dungeon.

I looked at Amy. "You really don't mind doing this?"

"Not at all."

"Even if I've never picked up a flogger in my life?"

She grinned and shrugged. "Practice makes perfect."

"And I can think of few women more willing to be used for target practice," Scott said, holding the dungeon door open for us. Amy and I went in first. Scott backed in, leaning down and trying to keep the cat out on his way in.

"Out, out, out," he said, nudging her back as she tried to push past him. She hissed, and he muttered, "Hey, don't backtalk me, Princess." Finally he got the door shut, and the cat expressed her irritation by way of a paw swiping at his feet.

"Poor Scott." Amy sighed and shook her head. "That little kitty is never going to listen to you, is she?"

"Maybe he should take her to obedience school," I said. We exchanged mischievous looks and laughed behind our hands.

Scott folded his arms across his chest and glared at us. "Amy, keep it up, and you won't get flogged today."

Amy cleared her throat. "Sorry." She pressed her lips together, trying not to laugh. When I snickered, she snorted, and Scott let out a sharp huff of breath.

"So my cat runs the house," he said, rolling his eyes again. "I told you, she keeps me from getting too full of myself."

"Yeah," Amy muttered, flashing me a grin. "*That'll* be the day."

Scott swatted her playfully on the rear as he walked by. "Quiet, you. Now get ready so we can do this."

Without another word, Amy took her shirt and bra off. She didn't seem at all fazed by the idea of stripping to the waist in front of another woman. But then, something like this was probably tame compared to the things she and Scott did on a regular basis.

Once her shirt was off, Scott handed her a thick leather belt. It reminded me of the belts weightlifters wore to keep from damaging their lower backs.

"That's to protect her kidneys," Scott said as she put it on. "You won't be hitting her as hard as I usually do, but better safe than sorry until you've practiced enough to be sure of your aim."

"She can hit me as hard as she wants," Amy said over her shoulder.

"She'll hit you as hard as I say she'll hit you."

I bit back a laugh, wondering how many other women got the opportunity to tie up and beat the other woman with whom her man slept.

"Ground rules are pretty straightforward for this," Scott said, adopting a more serious tone. "This is flogging and nothing more. Krissy, you're not acting as my sub for this scene, but anything I say goes with regards to Amy." His eyes shifted back and forth between us. "Any questions?"

"No," we said in unison.

He looked at Amy. "Ready?"

"Absolutely."

"Krissy?"

I nodded.

"Well, then what are we waiting for?" He stood in front of her and looked her in the eye. Then he kissed her lightly. After he broke the kiss, he ran the backs of his fingers down the side of her neck. She swallowed hard. When he stroked her hair with his other hand, her gaze dropped, and when he kissed her forehead, her shoulders did as well.

Cued into instant submission through a series of simple gestures. Just like he'd done to me in the restaurant, he could do this to her in front of a million people, and no one would be the wiser. To anyone else, she was a woman in love, melting into her lover's tender gestures. To the trained eye—and mine was trained enough now to see it—it was much, much more.

"What are your safe words?" he asked.

"Red to stop," she murmured. "Yellow to slow down, Master."

"Good." He stroked her cheek. "Do you understand that both Kristen and I will honor your safe words?"

"Yes, Master."

"Look at me."

She raised her eyes, though she kept her chin inclined.

With a sharp nod, Scott indicated the rack of whips and floggers. Amy went to the rack and selected a flogger. She carried it horizontally across her outstretched palms like a holy relic, keeping her eyes down as she returned to us. In front of Scott, she knelt and raised the flogger, presenting it to him.

Scott took it from her, stroking her hair once. Holding the handle in one hand, he slapped the tails against his opposite palm. The air ruffled Amy's bangs, and a shiver ran up her spine.

"Stand up," he said.

When she was on her feet, he pointed at the Saint Andrew's Cross with the handle of the flogger. She obediently went to the cross and stood in front of it, head bowed, waiting for his next command.

He handed me the flogger. "Hang on to that for a

second." Now that his hands were free, he went about binding Amy.

As he secured her left hand, he paused. "You left your ring on, baby. Do you want it off?" Amy nodded and straightened her fingers so he could slip her wedding ring off. He put it in his back pocket, then resumed fastening the cuff. Once her hands were bound, he knelt to secure her ankles.

My heart raced for her, but she didn't seem in the least bit concerned by her restraints. I envied her ability to be so calm and relaxed while totally immobile.

She was calm and relaxed, and Scott, true to form, got right down to business.

"First things first," he said. "Start off light. Even when you and your sub are experienced, it doesn't hurt to go easy at first. It'll give your arm a warm-up and it gives her skin a chance to get used to it." He gestured at her with the flogger. "Avoid the belt. Get used to avoiding the entire general area. If you hear the tails hitting leather, adjust your stroke until you're not hitting it anymore."

He hit her a few times, alternating from her left side to her right.

"See how it's getting nice and pink across her upper back?" He gestured at her. "That's where you want to stay. Now, you also want to make sure you know where your tails are going to land. Watch and see where they hit." He struck her again. "Notice how none of the tails wrapped around her side. That wrap effect hurts like hell. While Amy here doesn't mind that sort of thing, get in the habit of avoiding it."

I had to laugh. Scott spoke completely matter-of-factly, explaining every technical aspect like the engineer he was, and he was either oblivious to or ignoring Amy's moans and whimpers.

He went on. "Keep it in a figure-eight pattern. It'll put you in a nice, steady rhythm." He stopped and handed me the flogger. "Here, you try it."

I chewed my lip, eyeing the implement in my hand and Amy's pinked-up back warily. Smacking a pillow was one thing. No one flinched or yelped if I missed, or hit somewhere I wasn't supposed to, or did it too hard.

"Go on." Scott gestured toward her. "You'll be fine,

just start out easy, and avoid the belt and her spine."

Swallowing hard, I raised the flogger. When I brought it down, I flinched, but Amy barely reacted. I tried it just a little harder, and this time was rewarded with the slightest twitch of her muscles. On the third strike, the tails smacked the belt.

"Aim higher," Scott said. "You don't want to hit her that low."

"I know. This thing's tricky to aim. I was used to the one you sent me home with the other night."

"Yeah, every flogger's different. Just keep practicing. Don't worry, you're doing fine." After a few more hits, he said, "Try hitting her harder."

"How much harder?"

He shrugged. "A little harder than what you're doing."

I hesitated. "But, how hard is *too* hard?"

"Only one way to find out."

"Scott, I don't want to hurt her."

He chuckled and held out his hand. I handed him the flogger. He raised it, let fly, and I jumped when the tails slapped her back so hard it almost stung *my* skin.

Amy whimpered, the shackles on her wrists rattling as her knees went slack.

"Amy, was that too hard?" Scott asked.

She whimpered again, managing to form something in the vicinity of a "no." If anything, she sounded on the verge of an orgasm. With the way she trembled, I wondered if she was.

Scott grinned at me. "See? You're not going to hurt her." He raised it again, but just before he brought it down, something in another room shattered. Alarmed, I looked at Scott. He closed his eyes, clenched his jaw, and released a long breath through his nose.

"What was that?" I asked.

"Fucking cat," he muttered through his teeth.

"Do you need to go take care of that?"

He shook his head. "I will when we're done. I don't want to leave—"

"It's okay, Scott," Amy said. "I'll be fine."

"Are you sure, baby?" he asked.

She nodded.

He chewed his lip for a moment, then handed the flogger back to me. "Keep doing what you were doing. Keep it light if you're not comfortable without me here. Amy, I'm stepping out. You're sure you're okay with this?"

Another nod.

Scott cleared his throat.

"Yes, Master," she corrected.

"Good girl." To me, he said, "I'll just be a minute. Keep doing what I showed you. Figure-eights, careful of her spine."

I nodded.

A moment later, the dungeon door clicked shut behind him, muffling his voice as he shouted, "Malia, I'm going to kill you, you fucking cat!"

I looked at the flogger, then at Amy. "Are you sure you don't mind me doing this without him?"

"You're doing fine, trust me." She paused. Her restraints creaked as she twisted enough to look at me over her shoulder. "One thing, though."

I raised my eyebrows. "Yes?"

"Harder."

I gulped. I cast another wary look at the flogger, took a deep breath, and raised it. I followed the pattern of slow, steady figure-eights, and with every few strokes, I put more force behind it. Amy's moans and whimpers gave me pause a few times, but it didn't take long to realize every sound was made of pure, delirious pleasure.

The repetitive rhythm was strangely relaxing, lulling me into almost a trance as the flogger's tails swished through the air, slapped against her skin, then surrendered to gravity and slid down her back. Whoosh. Slap. Slide. Whoosh. Slap. Slide. Amy's body was limp, her head hanging as she moaned with every stroke.

After a few minutes, I stopped and tucked the flogger under my arm so I could check her hands. They were still warm, and her nail beds still had color.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Mm-hmm." Her eyes were closed and her head lolled to one side. Had it not been for the restraints, I thought she'd melt to the floor in a puddle.

I stepped back and raised the flogger once more.

The door opened. I glanced up to see Scott stepping into the dungeon, but Amy didn't even seem to notice that he'd joined us again.

I lowered the flogger as he went to her. He checked her hands, then put a finger under her chin and raised her head to face him.

"You doing okay?"

She simply moaned, but the way the corners of his lips curled told me he recognized the sound as one that was anything but distress.

He looked at me. "That, my dear, is the voice of subspace. Nicely done." He lowered his hand to let her head bow again. When he came to me, he said, "How are you doing?"

"My arm is getting a little tired."

He laughed. "Yeah, that'll happen. It's—" He paused. "Wait, the way you're holding it is going to tire your hands and wrists out way faster." He adjusted my grip. "Try it now."

As always, Scott was right. The way I held it now was much less strenuous.

By the time we were done, Amy and I were drenched with sweat. My arm and shoulder ached. Her back was bright pink and her body was as limp as the flogger's tails. More than once, her cries and moans made me wonder if she was going to come just from being flogged, and she moaned in protest when Scott said we were done.

"That's enough for one day." He kissed her cheek. "I don't want to overdo it."

She murmured something I didn't understand.

He laughed softly and knelt to unfasten her ankle restraints. Then he stood right behind her and put his arm around her waist. With his free hand, he reached up to unfasten the cuffs. Once her hands were free, her knees buckled and she melted into him. He draped her arm around his shoulders and let her head rest against him.

"Good girl," he whispered, stroking her hair. "You were perfect, baby." He looked at me and gestured at a blanket folded on the table. I handed it to him, and he wrapped it around her. Nodding toward the door, he said to me, "Could you go see if Ryan's back yet?"

I went out to the living room. Ryan was there, kicked back with a magazine. I didn't even have to speak; as soon as he saw me, he was on his feet.

"Have a good time?" he asked on the way down the hall.

"Definitely. It was certainly...educational."

He laughed. "Yeah, I'm sure."

As we stepped into the dungeon, Amy didn't look up. She rested her head on Scott's shoulder, and he still stroked her hair and spoke softly to her.

"So how much damage did she do?" Ryan asked.

Scott lowered the blanket a little, showing him some of the welts and pink I'd left. Ryan whistled.

"Impressive. Guess I don't have to ask if she enjoyed herself, then." He looked over his shoulder and winked at me. To Scott, he said, "You're done with her?"

Scott nodded. "I left some water in the other room. You know where to look if you need more."

"Got it," Ryan said.

"Oh, and this." Scott reached into his back pocket and pulled out Amy's wedding ring. Ryan took it, tucking it into his own pocket. Then they carefully moved Amy from Scott's arms to Ryan's. Whispering softly to her, Ryan led her out of the dungeon.

"They'll be in the spare bedroom." Scott said. "They'll probably be there for a while. Do you want something to drink?"

"Yes, please."

I followed him into the kitchen, rubbing the fatigue out of my right arm as I walked.

"Just ice—" he paused, raising an eyebrow at my arm. "You okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. Arm's just a little tired."

He smiled and turned to pull a glass down from the cabinet. "It happens. The more you do it, the less it'll happen, as long as you mind your grip and your swing."

"Duly noted." I glanced back down the hall. "So is this how you and Amy usually play? You flog her, then give her back to Ryan?"

He shook his head. "Normally, I do the aftercare with my subs. It's a chance to make sure we're still on the same



page, things like that. But..." He gestured back down the hall. "Once in a while, and especially if I'm doing something like this, Ryan likes to do it."

"He doesn't mind?"

"Does he mind?" Scott laughed as he handed me a glass of ice water. "Hardly. I flog his woman into subspace, then give her back to him primed and ready for an orgasm or twelve."

"Sounds like quite the arrangement."

"It suits everyone involved." He reached for something beside the kitchen island. "And now he's got her taken care of, which leaves me no other option..." He set a wine bottle on the counter. "...than to have a glass of wine and take care of *you*."

## ***Twenty Six***

After a couple of sessions with Amy, a handful with Charlotte, and more than a few involving some unfortunate pillows, I had a pretty good grasp on flogging. I wasn't quite ready to wield a flogger without Scott's close and constant supervision, but as long as he stayed in the room, I wanted to try it on someone else.

As much as I loved submitting to Scott, I also loved the power I had when I picked up a flogger. The more I learned the technique, the more I enjoyed that power. With every passing session, my inner Domme woke up a little more.

The search for a "worthy victim"—as Scott so eloquently called it—drew us back to the BDSM club.

Scott walked out of the locker room in his usual leather pants, boots, and nothing else. How the hell I was supposed to find someone *e/se* to play with when I couldn't take my eyes off him, God only knew.

"Ready for this?" he asked.

"Absolutely."

He put his arm around my waist and kissed my cheek. "Let's go find you a sub, then."

We'd barely crossed the threshold into the ballroom when a guy I'd never met approached.

"Hey, Scott," he said.

"Oh, hey, John, how's it going?" Scott shook his hand, then gestured at me. "This is Kristen. Kristen, John."

We shook hands and exchanged pleasantries. With

introductions out of the way, John turned to Scott. "Listen, you know the rack in the big dungeon?"

I blinked and glanced at Scott.

He made a dismissive gesture. "I'll tell you about it later." To John, he said, "What about it?"

"Something's wrong with the cranks. Would you mind having a look at it?"

Scott groaned. "Right now?"

"You know I normally wouldn't pull you aside like this," John said. "But we've got a couple of guests who came specifically to use it, and you're the only engineer in the building right now who isn't currently occupied by a ball gag and a butt plug."

I snorted with laughter, as did Scott. John eyed both of us.

"She's new to the lifestyle," Scott said with a laugh. "This is all a bit new to her. Anyway, the rack. What exactly is it doing?"

"That's just it," John said. "It's not. Won't move."

Scott sighed. "Sure, I'll have a look." He turned to me. "Are you okay by yourself for a few minutes?"

"I'll be fine."

"Shouldn't be too long." He kissed my cheek. "Behave yourself."

"Do I have to?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Yes, you do."

I folded my arms across my chest. "Oh, do I, *Master*?"

He tried to glare at me, but a grin tugged at his lips. John's eyes flicked back and forth between us.

Scott laughed. To John, he said, "She's trying out her *Domme* side tonight."

John chuckled. "Looks like it fits quite well."

"Yeah, a little too well, I think," Scott muttered. To me, he said, "You're sure you're okay by yourself?"

"I won't get into trouble, I promise."

"We'll see about that." He kissed my cheek. "I'll be back in a few."

He and John disappeared, and I was left alone in this world that was slowly becoming familiar. We'd been here a handful of times, and I didn't see the bizarre clothing as much anymore. My attention was drawn now to the way the

Doms and subs interacted. There was a time in my life when I thought there was a degree of cruelty to dominance and submission. What kind of person willingly surrendered to someone who hit them, punished them, even humiliated them?

But I saw this world through different eyes now. There was gentleness among the whips and collars. Tender caresses and fond looks, protective Doms and protected subs. More trust, communication, and affection existed between these people than there ever was in my socially accepted vanilla relationship with Alec.

I continued strolling through the sea of skin and black leather. This world wasn't just becoming familiar, I realized. It was becoming home.

Someone grabbed my upper arm, jarring me out of my thoughts, and I knew before I turned it was neither Scott nor Byron. On some visceral, instinctive level, I knew exactly who it was.

"Glad to see Scott brought you back to us." Victor's voice and grin raised the hairs on the back of my neck. He always managed to cross paths with me when we came here, and just my luck, he'd caught me alone tonight. Persistent fucker.

I jerked my arm free. "I came back, yes."

He gave a sarcastic laugh before his lips pulled into a sneer. "He hasn't taught you to show respect, has he?" He raised his chin, emphasizing the fact that he was looking down at me. I had no doubt he expected me to drop my gaze like a good little submissive.

"He has, actually." I raised an eyebrow. "He's taught me to respect those who've earned it."

Victor's eyes widened, then immediately narrowed. He stepped closer to me. "You're just the kind of sub who needs a good, experienced Dom to put her in her place."

"Fortunately, I have such a Dom, and I *know* my place."

He laughed coldly. "Which is why you're disrespecting a Dom?"

"You haven't given me a reason to respect you." I defiantly held his gaze. This wasn't the Domme talking. Though I'd come tonight to play the Domme, my default

setting was sub, and the sub in me was ready to kick this son of a bitch in the teeth.

"I'm a Dom, you—"

"You're not *my* Dom."

"Obviously not. Or you'd show some respect." Before I could speak, he snatched my arm again, gripping it hard enough to smart. "I could probably teach you a thing or two about submission if I could be bothered to put up with your attitude." A few nearby conversations fell silent. Leather creaked, and out of corner of my eye, I saw two very large Doms start toward us.

I wrenched my arm free again and took a step toward Victor. The two Doms—and several more conversations—halted when Victor took a step back.

"I don't respect every douche bag who struts in and calls himself a Dom," I snarled. "I submit to Scott because he's earned the right to command me to. You, on the other hand, can go fuck yourself." With that, I turned on my heel and walked away.

He sputtered something after me, but it was quickly lost in several sharp, angry voices.

A hand on my shoulder made me jump. I turned to see a tall, leather-clad woman with bright blue hair and several piercings. A Domme, if her unflinching eye contact was anything to go by.

"You okay, hon?" She nodded in the direction I'd just come. "Looked like he was giving you some trouble."

I shrugged. "I'm fine. He just needed a sub to put him in his place, I think."

She laughed. "He's needed that for some time."

Another voice, male this time, said, "What did he say to you? Do you two know each other?"

"Was he fucking with you?" Byron appeared beside me, his arm around Charlotte's waist.

"I'm fine." I smoothed the air with upraised hands. "It's taken care of."

His lip curled into that mouthwatering smirk. "What exactly did you say to him, anyway?"

"I let him know he could go fuck himself."

Byron laughed and clapped my shoulder gently. Charlotte and I made eye contact. She winked and silently

mouthed, "Nice one."

The blue-haired Domme gave a sniff of laughter. "I don't think he'll be a problem anymore."

I turned around to see Victor being led toward the door by several people.

The small crowd around me dispersed, but a moment later, someone touched me from behind for the hundredth time tonight, but I didn't flinch. I knew from the way he put his arm around my waist that it was Scott. He kissed my cheek. "I see you made some friends while I was gone."

"Yeah, after I got rid of one in particular," I muttered.

His eyes widened with alarm. "Meaning?"

I looked over my shoulder. Victor was in the midst of a very animated conversation with the two burly Doms and a Domme. He made sharp, defensive gestures as he spoke, and the Domme stabbed a finger in his direction as she backed him out the door.

When I turned back to Scott, he'd set his jaw and narrowed his eyes, glaring at Victor from across the room.

"What did he do?" he growled.

I put my hand on his chest. "It's taken care of."

"What's taken care of?" He looked at me, his expression shifting from angry to concerned as his eyebrows knitted together. He pulled me closer. "What happened?"

I gave a dismissive shrug. "He apparently thought you haven't taught me to show respect."

"What?"

I shrugged again, grinning this time. "I told him you have. I just don't respect every douche bag who comes along and calls himself a Dom."

A startled laugh burst out of him. "You said that to him?"

"Right before I told him to go fuck himself."

Scott beamed. "*That's* my girl." He kissed me, and his expression turned serious again. "You're okay, though, right?"

"I'm fine, Scott." I glanced in Victor's direction just in time to see him disappear through the double doors. To Scott, I said, "So, did you get the rack fixed?"

He feigned offense, putting a hand to his bare chest. "Did I get it fixed? Please. Every piece of machinery in this

building works because I'm here."

"Guess it's a good thing you weren't occupied by a ball gag and a butt plug, then."

"Not in this lifetime, darling," he said. "Now, what do you say we go find you a sub before someone comes along and asks me to fix something again?"

"Or before I have to put another dipshit in his place?"

He chuckled and kissed my cheek. "I would *pay* to see that."

~ \* ~

Scott and I stepped out of the dungeon.

I let out my breath and brushed a strand of sweaty hair out of my face. Damien, the sub, was in the hands of Grace, his Domme, and I'd quietly bowed out while she took over rubbing lotion onto his back.

Scott put his arm around my shoulders. "I had a feeling you'd be a natural Domme." He kissed me gently.

I smiled through the fatigue. "I didn't realize how much work it was."

He chuckled. "Not for the faint of heart, is it?"

"No, definitely not."

"Why don't I go grab us some water?" He kissed me again and released my shoulders.

"That sounds really good," I said. "Actually, I could use some air, too."

He gestured down the hall. "The veranda out by the pool is out that way. It's usually pretty quiet."

Quiet and deserted sounded almost as good as that water he'd promised. Though the scene with Damien was fun, my senses were overloaded. I needed to wind down.

Scott kissed my cheek. Gesturing over his shoulder at the room we'd just exited, he said, "I need to get some water for Damien, too, so I'll meet you out there."

We went separate directions, and just as he'd predicted, the veranda was empty. I rested my elbows on the railing. Rubbing the fatigue out of my right arm, I replayed my scene with Damien.

I got it now, the thrill of the power exchange. Though I'd practiced flogging on Amy and Charlotte, they'd never been *my* submissives. Volunteers for human target practice, but they were at the command of Scott and Byron.

Tonight, Grace had given Damien over to me and let me take command. He'd knelt before me. He'd taken whatever pain I'd inflicted. He'd kept his orgasm at bay until I'd given him the word. If only for an hour or so, he'd been mine.

And now it was over. My pulse was back to normal, and though I was horny as hell, the excitement and adrenaline of the scene had worn off.

But still, I couldn't find my footing.

Playing the Domme had been thrilling, that much I couldn't deny. Scott had pegged me for a switch, and he was absolutely right. In spite of the thrill, though, something had been missing. It was fun, it just wasn't the same.

Just like every time we'd played with Charlotte and Byron, I'd enjoyed myself, but I still gravitated toward Scott. With Byron, I figured my preference for Scott was simply habit. Scott was my Dom, my Master.

Tonight, I was no one's submissive, but still I'd had to struggle not to focus on my Dom as he watched from the sidelines. Damien had deserved my full attention, both for his pleasure and his safety, and I'd fought to give him that. I'd managed to keep myself from getting distracted, but I was always aware of Scott. Whenever he was around, the air was electrically charged, his presence thrumming just above my skin, never escaping my senses.

I'd come here tonight to try my hand at being a top, and while I could play the Domme, my scene with Damien had only made me realize what I truly was:

I was Scott's.

Blowing out a breath, I closed my eyes and rubbed my neck. This wasn't supposed to be anything but sex. I wasn't supposed to feel anything for him. What the hell *did* I feel for him? What was he doing to me? With a look, he could raise the hairs on the back of my neck. With a nod of approval, he could send a rush of warm relief through me. And simply by being in the room, half-naked and half in leather, he could make my clit tingle and my heart flutter like no one else.

Like *almost* no one else.

Every time I thought about my feelings for Scott, there was a pang of guilt in my conscience, and that pang of guilt was shaped like Matt. But why? I could play with Byron



or Damien and it didn't matter. But with them, it was just sex. There was no history, no longstanding friendship. Nothing at stake besides a few welts and orgasms, never mind...this. Whatever the hell this was.

I rubbed my eyes with my thumb and forefinger.

Goose bumps prickled my skin. I held my breath.

Leather creaked and a shoe scuffed behind me. "We've got to stop meeting like this."

I looked over my shoulder. The low light from a nearby window cast a soft glow to one side of Scott's face and his mischievous smile.

"We do keep ending up on out on decks and balconies, don't we?" I said.

"I guess we just gravitate toward them." He kissed me. "Maybe it's a sign we should fuck on one eventually."

I laughed. "Why does it not surprise me that your mind went there?"

"Can't imagine." He handed me a cold bottle of water.

"Thank you." I unscrewed the cap and took a long drink.

After a long silence, he put his hands on my hips. "You okay?"

I nodded. "Just thinking."

"Don't hurt yourself."

I smacked him playfully and laughed. "Shut up."

Chuckling, he put his arms around me and kissed me lightly. "Okay, so what are you thinking about?"

"Just," I paused. "Tonight."

"Anything in particular?"

*You.* "Not really."

He regarded me silently for a moment, probably searching my eyes for the unspoken thoughts I tried to hide. "So, how do you like being a Domme?"

The knot in my gut tightened, but I smiled in spite of it. "It was fun."

"You don't sound very enthusiastic." He touched my face. "Something wrong?"

*No. Yes. I don't know.* Swallowing hard, I dropped my gaze.

"Krissy?" He lifted my chin and inclined his head slightly.

I slid my hands up his abs and his chest, then onto the sides of his neck. "I liked being a Domme."

He raised an eyebrow. "But...?"

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I pulled him down to me. "But I think I like being your sub better." I kissed him. I exhaled through my nose as he put his arms around me. He held me closer, parting my lips with his tongue and deepening the kiss as my body melted against his.

"So you prefer being a sub?" he asked, breathing hard against my lips.

*Your sub.* "Yes, I do."

"Hmm." He brushed his thumb across my cheekbone. "In that case, what do you say we get the hell out of here?"

"You have something in mind, don't you?"

The corner of his mouth rose, bringing my heart rate and body temperature up with it. "I was thinking," he whispered, running his fingers through my hair, "that there's a Saint Andrew's Cross in my house..." He paused to kiss me lightly. "...with your name written all over it tonight."

I shivered.

## ***Twenty Seven***

"So, how was your night as a dominatrix?" Matt asked, hanging up his jacket as I closed the front door.

I grinned. "It was fun."

"Oh?" He stepped toward me. "Tell me about it."

"What do you want to know?"

Another step, his nearness combining with the intensity in his eyes and pushing me back.

He shrugged with one shoulder, a grin curling his lips. "Tell me everything. Since I couldn't be there to see it..." The wall stopped me, but Matt continued his approach. "...I want you to fill me in on all the details." He rested one hand on the wall beside me. "Tell me everything you did to him."

The undeniable hunger in his eyes made my knees weak, so I casually leaned against the wall. I slid my hands up the front of his shirt, not sure if I intended to push him away or drag him closer.

"I'll tell you about it later," I said. "For now, I'd—"

"No, no, I insist." He inclined his head. "I want to know all the filthy things you did to that man."

"How do you know it was a man?"

His eyebrows jumped. "Tell me it—"

"It was a man."

"Damn." He chuckled. "I still want to know." He leaned in, almost close enough to kiss me, and my knees shook even more when his breath warmed my lips. "I want every last detail."

"Kiss me first."

He shook his head. "I want to hear this first."

"But—"

He put a finger on my lips. "I want you right now," he whispered. "On your back, screaming my name, taking everything I want to give you..."

An electric shudder rippled from my clit right up my spine.

He grinned. "...but I know that as soon as we get started, we'll be at it all night." His fingertips trailed down the side of my neck. "All fucking night."

I tugged at the front of his shirt. "Then let's—"

"So if I don't get to hear about all this now," he said, his grin as infuriating as it was arousing, "then I might not get to hear about it at all."

"And if I say I won't tell you until you fuck me?"

He shrugged. "Then we'd be at an impasse, wouldn't we?"

"So it would just be a question of who was more stubborn."

Matt laughed. "Darlin', you don't want to try to out-stubborn me. I assure you, you will lose."

I slid my hand over the front of his jeans, gently squeezing his hard cock. When he gasped, I grinned. "Is that so?"

He closed his fingers around my hand. "Yes, it is so." He brought my hand up and kissed the inside of my wrist. "So, are you going to tell me?" He raised my arm as he trailed kisses up to my elbow, and there he paused to make a light circle with the tip of his tongue.

With a moan, I let my head fall back against the wall. There was no point in trying to argue with him. I wanted him, and if taking a few minutes to tell him about my night with Damien was the price, then so be it.

"Scott introduced us," I said.

Matt looked up from kissing the inside of my elbow. "At the BDSM club, right?"

I nodded. "Well, he introduced me to the Domme, Grace. Then she introduced me to Damien."

He let my arm go and rested his hand on my waist. "Damien was the submissive?"

"Yes. We all talked for a while, then we went into one of the private rooms."

"Could anyone see you there?"

"His Domme. And Scott. Scott was there."

"That lucky bastard," Matt whispered. "Tell me what he saw."

I wetted my lips. "I made him strip."

"Mm-hmm." Matt leaned forward, dipping his head to kiss my neck. "And?"

"Then I—" I sucked in a breath as his soft lips and coarse stubble brushed the front of my throat.

"Keep talking."

I closed my eyes and held onto his shoulders. How was I supposed to speak about last night when I wanted him right here, right now? "Matt, I—"

"Tell me more." He kissed my neck again. "I'm not kissing you properly until I've heard everything you did last night."

*Stubborn bastard.* I took a deep breath and somehow found the words. "I put him on his knees and—" I paused, swallowing hard. "I made him lick my pussy."

"And did he?"

I nodded.

"Did he do it right?"

I shivered at the memory of everything Damien had done with his mouth. His eagerness to please had been there in every rapid, gentle sweep of his tongue. Like never before, I'd understood just how much control Scott must have had, because it had taken every last iota of willpower for me to stay in control of myself, let alone Damien.

Matt laughed softly. "He was that good, was he?"

"Yes, he was." I bit my lip. "And I made him touch himself. At the same time. Without coming."

A low growl emerged from the back of Matt's throat and reverberated across my collarbone. "You are an evil, cruel woman." He kissed just beneath my jaw. "What else did you make him do?"

I bit my lip even harder. Reliving Damien's delicious submission with Matt's lips on my skin made speech nearly impossible. I swallowed hard and forced myself to continue. "I tied him... to the... to the Saint Andrew's..." Words became a whimper as Matt nipped my earlobe.

"Keep going," he whispered. The warm rush of breath

on my skin almost knocked my knees out from under me. "You tied him, and...?"

"I flogged him," I said quickly. "I flogged him, and—" I barely kept myself from whimpering at the memory. The crack of tails hitting skin. The way Damien had gasped and moaned and growled and trembled. The satisfying shade of pink that had darkened his broad, tattooed shoulders and back. The way Scott had absently moistened his lips when we'd made eye contact, a second before he gave me the single nod of approval that had aroused me almost to the point of madness.

Just like I was aroused now, with those memories in my head and Matt's breath on my skin.

Matt raised his head, looking in my eyes. Then he rested his forehead against mine, but still kept his lips just out of my reach.

"You flogged him, and...?"

*And what?* I couldn't remember what we were talking about.

"Tell me more, Kris. I want—"

"Matt."

"Hmm?"

"Kiss me."

"I would," he murmured, "but you can't talk to me while I'm kissing you."

"I'll tell you after. I need—"

"I will." His thumb teased my nipple through my shirt. "But first, tell me more."

I shoved him back, slammed him up against the opposite wall, and kissed him. Hungrily, desperately, and violently, just the way I needed it.

When I broke away, we stared at each other, both struggling to catch our breath. The front of his shirt was bunched in my fists. My hair was twisted and tangled in his hands.

Matt licked his lips. "So, it's going to be like *that* tonight, is it?"

"Yes. It is."

"Bring it on." He tightened his grasp on my hair and kissed me just as violently as I had him. He pushed me back against the other wall, pressing his hips against mine and

letting me feel every rock hard inch of his cock beneath his jeans.

A kiss wasn't enough now. We tore at each other's clothes with no regard for buttons or the threads that held them. Seams ripped, and I simply didn't give a damn, not when ripped fabric got me that much closer to the skin on skin contact I so desperately needed.

Stumbling down the hall, we shoved each other back and forth across the hall and pulled clothing off each other. A picture fell off the wall, landing on a discarded pair of jeans. Something crashed beside an end table. Something else clattered as Matt kicked aside his boxers, but I wasn't about to care about that now that he was naked.

At the sight of his cock, I couldn't hold back another second. I forced him up against the wall beside my bedroom door and dropped to my knees. The hand in my hair was probably intended to keep control over me, to keep me from besting him and putting him at my mercy this way, but as soon as my lips touched his cock, his hands hit the wall beside him.

"Fuck, baby, that's incredible," he moaned as I stroked and sucked him. "That's— Christ, that's too good. You're gonna—" He gasped. "You're gonna make me come if you keep going like that."

I ran my tongue along the underside of his cock one last time, then stood. "Well, we can't have that, can we?"

"Not when I haven't fucked you yet, we can't." He kissed me and slammed me up against the opposite wall. He pinned my arms above my head and gripped my wrists with one hand. With his free hand, he caressed my face. "I'm not coming until I'm inside you, and I'm not ready for that just yet."

"I want you to fuck me," I moaned and instantly regretted it. He had the upper hand now, and he knew it.

He laughed. "I know you do. And I fully intend to." His hand drifted down my face, my neck, my chest, and I bit back a whimper when he pushed my thighs apart. "But first, I want to tease you." One finger, then two slipped inside me, and he cupped my clit with his palm.

I bit my lip and closed my eyes, not sure if I was more turned on or frustrated.

"Like that?" he whispered.

"Mm-hmm." I didn't just like it. I'd been horny all afternoon, counting down the minutes until he got here, and his relentless teasing when he'd first arrived had me just this side of madness. His fingertips on my G-spot were almost too much, as was the way he pressed the heel of his hand into my clit.

"I love the way your pussy feels," he said, bending to kiss my neck. "You're so fucking hot and wet, especially when you come." He beckoned against my G-spot, but I suppressed the whimper that tried to escape. He laughed against my neck, then lifted his head and looked me in the eye. "You're close, Kris, I can feel it. I'm *going* to make you come."

I narrowed my eyes. "You can try."

He blinked. "Is that a challenge?"

"Yes, it is."

"Oh, you'd better believe I'm going to make you come." He kissed me deeply. "I'm going to make you come, and then I am going to fuck you so. Damned. Hard." A tremor—whose, I didn't know—made us both catch our breath. He exhaled hard and whispered, "Jesus, baby, your pussy is too wet *not* to fuck."

I moaned. My knees went slack, and only his body against mine kept me upright. "Oh God, Matt..."

"Come, baby," he half-whispered, half-growled, "Let me feel you come so I—" He kissed me, then panted against my lips and said, "I want to fuck you so bad right now, you're..."

I didn't hear the rest, because a powerful orgasm consumed me.

As my climax dissipated, Matt released my wrists and I slumped against him, letting my arms fall around his neck. He kept one arm around my waist and guided me into the bedroom. There, he lay me on the bed.

"Don't move," he said.

I wasn't going anywhere. Not a chance.

He got a condom out of the drawer and came back to bed. Before he'd even gotten the thing open, I grabbed his neck and pulled him to me, and we kissed just as breathlessly and violently as we had all the way down the



hall.

"Let me put this on," he breathed between kisses. "Baby, I have to get inside you, I—"

I let him go. He quickly sat up and tore the wrapper with his teeth. Unwrapping the condom and rolling it on was a simple task, but not for hands as desperate as his. I wasn't much better, but between the two of us, we got the little bastard to cooperate.

"Finally," Matt muttered.

With one hard thrust, he was all the way inside me. We both stopped, gasping for breath.

"Fuck me," I pleaded, digging my nails into his shoulders. "Fuck me hard."

He did. Good God, he did. He was always desperate and insatiable, and tonight I couldn't get enough. Desperate for more, I rocked my hips in time with his thrusts, trying to pull him even deeper.

"You're trying to make me come, aren't you?" He laughed, panting against my lips.

"Maybe I am."

"I'll come when I'm damned good and—oh, God..." He groaned as I rolled my hips back. Pressing my heels into the bed, I thrust up to meet him, taking over everything—rhythm, angle, depth. His head fell beside mine and a long, helpless moan escaped his lips. "Oh God, baby, that's perfect, keep—" He gasped. Shuddered. "Keep doing that."

I raked my nails down his back. A split second of icy panic surged through me as I remembered that was Scott's thing, not Matt's, but that panic vanished when Matt threw his head back and moaned. I scratched him again.

"Oh fuck, baby, just..." He shivered. "Like..." Again. "That..." And he shuddered against me, burying his face against my neck and shoulder as he came.

He collapsed over me.

"Good God," he whispered. "I just can't get enough of you."

"Likewise." I ran my fingers through his sweaty hair. Scott or Byron or Damien might have called the sex Matt and I had "vanilla." We didn't use floggers or handcuffs. I didn't call him "Master."

Vanilla it may have been, but it certainly wasn't

boring.

Matt wiped sweat from his brow. "I think I could use a shower."

"You're not the only one."

In spite of shaking legs and a light head, I made it to the bathroom without passing out or falling on my ass. Matt wasn't much steadier, but his arm around my waist certainly didn't hurt.

In the shower, as the hot water washed away the sweat, our desperation cooled. It was surreal to think we'd just been throwing each other into walls, tearing at clothes, fucking each other to the point of pain and begging for more. His hands were as gentle now as the water cascading down my back, his touch soft and tender.

He kissed me lightly. "I would've loved to have seen you last night."

"Watching me play Domme?"

"Just watching you with someone else." He grinned. "You know how much I love that."

"Yes, I definitely do." I put my arms around his neck. "Maybe I'll have to drag you to the club with us one night."

Matt's eyes widened. "I'm not quite sure I'm cut out for a BDSM club." He paused, furrowing his brow, then added, "But I wouldn't object to another threesome."

"With Scott?"

He shrugged. "Anyone, really."

"I don't think it would be too difficult to talk Scott into another one."

"Smart man."

"He's just a dirty bastard like you."

"Hey, I'm in the shower." He gestured emphatically at the falling water. "I'm as clean—"

"There isn't a shower hot enough to get *you* clean, Matt," I laughed.

"Whatever." He kissed me. "I don't imagine there's one hot enough to get you clean, either, so I guess we're even."

"Nonsense. I'm as pure as the driven—"

"Bullshit." He laughed and kissed me gently, his lips barely touching mine, but lingering a second longer than I expected. As he started to draw back, he paused. Instead of

making another comment, he tilted his head and came back for another kiss. Our lips met, both of us pausing for a long moment before moving slowly together. Whatever we'd been talking about slipped out of my mind like the water slipping down the drain, and all I cared about was Matt's gentle, sensual kiss.

His mouth left mine just enough for him to speak. "I know I've told you this before, but I fucking *love* the way you kiss."

I pulled him closer. "Then kiss me again."

## ***Twenty Eight***

Just as I'd predicted, it didn't take much to talk Scott into another threesome with Matt.

What I didn't predict was the phone call on my way home from work the night the three of us planned to meet at my apartment.

"You wouldn't happen to have a slow cooker, would you?" Scott asked.

"I do, yes."

"Okay, good. What about a candy thermometer?"

I laughed. "Scott, is someone leaving you unsupervised in the kitchen or something?"

"No, no, they're for tonight."

My eyes widened. "They're... what?"

He chuckled. "Just trust me on this. So do you have a candy thermometer?"

"I, um, yes."

"Good. Have those handy, along with a decent-sized towel that you don't really care about."

"Scott—"

"I'll see you in an hour or two."

"You're planning something, aren't you?"

"Always, darling."

After we hung up, I eyed my phone, but it had no answers, so I dropped it on the passenger seat. I gave it another wary glance, then shook my head and kept driving. Scott was nothing if not full of surprises.

When I got home, I didn't even have time to change

into my usual blue satin robe and lingerie before Matt was at my door.

"Hey you." He kissed me, sliding his hand under my T-shirt and grinning against my lips when I shivered. "What's wrong?"

I laughed and wriggled away from him. "Your hand is cold."

He shrugged. "So help me warm it up."

"I don't think so." I shot him a playful glare. "You're not touching me until you warm those hands up." I turned to walk into the kitchen, gesturing for him to follow me.

"You never said I had to have warm hands."

I glanced over my shoulder. "Come at me with cold hands, you'll be keeping them warm by yourself."

"That's cold, darlin'."

"No, your hands are cold."

He leaned against the counter and, with a theatrical sigh, stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "Fine. I'll warm them up."

"Damn right you will." I leaned down to look through a cabinet. "Now where the hell did— ah, here it is." I pulled the slow cooker out and set it on the counter.

Matt raised an eyebrow. "So you're cooking for us *and* fucking us tonight?"

"Yeah, that's it." I opened the drawer beside the stove and rifled through it. Once I'd found the candy thermometer, I set it on the counter beside the slow cooker.

"I'm not even going to ask," Matt said.

I shrugged and picked up my drink. "Just something Scott's got up his sleeve."

Matt gestured at the thermometer. "As long as he's not going to suggest I put this or anything else up—"

I choked on my drink. "Come on, he's not going to make you put a candy thermometer up your ass."

"Damn right he's not."

"Please. He's got much bigger toys for that."

"Fuck off. Fuck *right* off."

Just as I opened my mouth to come back with something snide, the doorbell rang. I set my glass down. "That would be the mad scientist himself. I'll be right back."

When I opened the door, Scott had his usual devious

grin on his face and his bag of tricks slung over his shoulder. He kissed me quickly, then I shut the door and we headed for the kitchen.

"Hey, Scott," Matt said as they shook hands.

"Hey, Matt, how's it going?"

"Not bad, not bad."

I rested both hands on the counter and leaned over them. "Okay, so what's the deal with the slow cooker, candy thermometer, and towel?"

"Quite simple, really." Scott dropped the backpack on the counter, unzipped it, and dug around in it. "You supply those, and I supply these." He pulled out three long, white candles, and I was instantly weak in the knees.

Matt's eyes flicked back and forth between us. "What am I missing here?"

"Hot wax." Scott gestured at me with the candles. "She told me a while ago she wanted to try it, so I thought tonight would be a good time. Assuming you're both okay with that?"

Matt shrugged. "As long as I'm not going to have it poured on me, I'm fine with it."

Scott looked at me. "You?"

"Like you have to ask."

He grinned. "That's what I thought. Now, why don't I go set all of this up and get the wax melting? Krissy, could I trouble you for a glass of wine?"

I shivered. "Absolutely."

He winked, picked up everything he needed, and disappeared down the hall. As I pulled out the bottle of wine and a glass, I had to laugh when I glanced at Matt, who still stared in the direction Scott had gone. His eyes were wide and his lips were apart.

"What?" I said, struggling to keep a somewhat straight face.

His eyes darted toward me. "Hot wax? Seriously?"

"Yep." I opened the wine bottle. "I've been after him for a while to try it."

"But doesn't that...hurt?"

"Of course." I looked up from pouring the wine. "That's the idea."

He blinked. "You're really into this pain thing, aren't

you?"

I shrugged. "Sometimes. I've never tried it with heat, so we'll see how this goes."

"And what happens if it's not your thing?"

"Then he stops and we move on to something else."

"Something equally unusual, I'm sure."

I winked at him. "But of course."

Chuckling, he cupped the sides of my neck and kissed me gently. "You really are crazy, you know that?"

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Absolutely not." He kissed me again, deeper this time. "We'd better get in there."

"What's your hurry?" I trailed my fingers up the back of his neck.

He bit his lip, almost suppressing a shiver. "I'm not in a hurry, but if we stay out here much longer, I'm going to have to bend you over the counter." He nodded down the hall. "Which might put a crimp in his plans."

It was my turn to shiver. "Then let's go."

With the wine poured and the bottle put away, Matt and I went into the bedroom to join him. There, Scott had the slow cooker set up on a chair beside the bed, and he slowly stirred the liquefied white wax.

"Just set that on the nightstand," he said, gesturing at the glass in my hand. As I did, he stopped stirring the wax and furrowed his brow, looking at the candy thermometer. Then he turned to us. "So, any changes to the ground rules from last time?"

I looked at Matt. He shook his head. Turning back to Scott, I said, "No, I think everything is pretty much the same."

"Good, good." To me, he said, "If you are even a tiny bit concerned that I'm truly burning your skin, say your safe word. Do *not* hesitate."

"I won't."

He looked at Matt, and his lips pulled into a grin. "Ever seen a woman go into subspace?"

"Subspace?"

"When she gets so high off endorphins, she pretty much spaces out."

"Can't say I have, since I was blindfolded last time."

Scott's grin broadened. "You're in for a treat tonight. It's fucking *hot*."

I folded my arms across my chest. "You're assuming you'll get me into subspace this way."

Scott narrowed his eyes slightly. "You should know by now, darling. If I want you to be in subspace, you will be." He reached for his wine glass. "Right?"

I gulped. "Right."

"That's what I thought." He sipped the wine, and my heart pounded just like it always did. I was vaguely aware of Matt watching us, his attention shifting back and forth from me to Scott, but for the most part, I was completely focused on Scott and his friend-to-Master ritual. With every roll of his sleeves up his forearms, my ability to resist—my *desire* to resist—melted away. By the time he went for that second sip of wine, I was completely under his control.

He set the glass down and picked up the towel. "Lay that across the bed."

I took the towel from him. "Which way?"

"Long way. Parallel to the headboard." Once the towel was in place, the edge hanging an inch or two off the side of the bed, Scott said, "Take off your shirt."

Excitement tingled at the base of my spine as I obeyed him. Stripping in front of the two of them, even at the same time, had long since ceased to make me nervous. Now, every inch of skin liberated of fabric exhilarated me. The two men who turned me on more than anyone in the world were here, in my bedroom, watching me disrobe, and I couldn't get naked fast enough.

Scott, of course, was in no hurry. "Now your belt."

Matt fidgeted, sucking in a breath when the buckle jingled. The hiss of leather escaping belt loops made both his hands and mine shake. Our eyes met for a fleeting second, just long enough for the hunger in his expression to register before Scott cleared his throat and drew my attention back.

Piece by piece, stitch by stitch, Scott verbally undressed me. My hands shook a little more with every article of clothing I removed, and Matt shifted his weight once, twice, again. His breathing had quickened, as had mine. All the while, Scott's tone never wavered from its flat, commanding terseness, and neither his posture nor his



breathing betrayed the slightest hint that he was losing control. Because he wasn't. He was Scott Moore. He didn't lose control.

The same couldn't be said for Matt or me. Just this simple act of undressing had the two of us coming unraveled while Scott remained calm and collected.

By the time I was naked, I couldn't hide the way my hands and knees trembled. Matt leaned casually against the doorframe, arms folded across his chest, but the way he bit his lip belied the façade of composure.

Scott held up a blindfold and looked at Matt. "Do you want to do the honors?"

Matt's eyes widened. He hesitated, gulped, then shouldered himself off the doorframe and took the blindfold. Standing in front of me, he looked in my eyes, raising his eyebrows and inclining his head slightly in an unmistakable look of *are you okay with this?*

I nodded. He raised the blindfold and slipped it on.

I was blind the instant he put the black fabric over my eyes, but it wasn't until his hands lifted off me that the darkness truly set in. Matt and Scott were still in the room, their presences still thrumming at the outskirts of my senses, but they could have been miles away for all I knew.

No one moved. No one spoke. If I knew Scott, he'd gestured for Matt to be still and silent. If I knew Matt, he watched me in between casting glances at Scott, waiting for my Master to stop fucking with my head as he so loved to do.

I breathed slowly and evenly, ignoring the way the universe tried to close in around me. Darkness is a funny thing. It's huge, infinite, without boundaries, and yet it can still be so confining. Constricting. Claustrophobic.

But I could handle it. I had safe words, and my hands were free if I was so inclined to take the blindfold off.

If I was so inclined, which I was not.

I took a deep breath and willed myself to relax, rolling my shoulders to relieve the tension that had crept in.

Near silent movement beside me caught my attention. My senses zeroed in on it, and warmth above my skin made my nerve endings tingle a second before someone's hand landed gently on my arm. Without speaking, he guided me

to the bed.

"Lie on your stomach." Scott. It was Scott. "Over the towel."

I did, folding my arms on the pillow and resting my head on them. The towel was coarse, almost gritty against my skin, but it was the absence of contact on my exposed skin that held my attention.

Scott said something to Matt, but I only heard enough to know he was speaking, not the actual words.

"Will do," Matt said, and he left the room.

"Where's he going?" I asked.

Scott ran a fingertip between my shoulders. "Are you questioning me?"

"No, Master."

"That's what I thought." His fingertip continued drifting up and down my back, touching just lightly enough to raise the minute hairs on my skin. Then he leaned down and blew a cool breath on the small of my back, that whisper of air gently awakening every nerve ending.

Muffled footsteps announced Matt's return. The door clicked shut behind him.

"Will this work?" he asked Scott.

"Perfect."

A familiar *crack-crunch-crack* caught my attention. It took a second to place it, and when I did, I sucked in a breath:

Ice cube tray.

One of them walked around to the other side of the bed and sat next to me. Matt, I assumed, since Scott needed to keep the wax within arm's reach.

"Should I wait until you start?" Matt asked, confirming he was the one on the bed with me.

"No, go ahead."

Ice made contact between my shoulder blades, and I gasped. Slowly, the intense cold presence slid down my back, following the curve of my spine, the chill electrifying my senses.

As Matt drew lazy patterns on the small of my back with the ice cube, I let my guard down. The cold occupied my awareness, my senses, and I nearly came up off the bed when the first scorching drop of wax fell directly between my

shoulder blades. Biting my lip, I pulled in a long breath as Scott carved meandering lines of fire across my upper back.

Matt slid the ice cube down my leg, teasing the back of my knee, my calf, and my ankle as Scott drizzled more stinging heat onto my skin. Hot and cold intensified each other, neither giving me the chance to get used to the other. In no time at all, the cloud of endorphins consumed me. Intoxicated me. Everything around me blurred into irrelevance, trumped by wave upon wave of pain-induced bliss.

Every now and then, Scott stopped and carefully scraped away the dried wax, exposing my skin to fresh liquid pain. At one point, he removed the dried wax, and I expected the stinging heat again, but it was skin this time. Fingertips. Trailing gently down my side, the cool, soft touch registering as intensely ticklish.

"Kristen, are you doing okay?" Scott's voice sounded miles away.

"Yes, Master," I murmured.

"I think she likes this," Matt said, chuckling.

"Oh, she does." Scott's fingers drifted up the center of my back. "Don't you, Kristen?"

"Yes, Master."

Matt closed his hand around my ankle. His grasp was firm, just firm enough to keep me from pulling free when he pressed the ice against the sole of my foot.

Something profane slipped off my tongue. Again when he traced the arch of my foot, once more when he drew the intense cold along the inside of my ankle.

Heat sizzled across one shoulder blade, then the other, then back. I might have whimpered or cried out or cursed, but hell if I heard any of it. Black fabric blinded me, intensity deafened me, and nothing existed beyond overwhelming hot-cold-hot-cold.

I was vaguely aware of them speaking to each other, but the words were just white noise. The heat stopped. The cold left my skin.

"Kristen." My name separated Scott's voice from the background. "Roll onto your back, but stay on the towel."

I hesitated. I understood his command, I just wasn't sure how to obey it. It involved my arms and legs, that much

I knew, but doing what? Moving, but how?

"Now."

Confusion evaporated. It didn't matter how complicated the command, it had to be obeyed, and I wasn't going to cross my Master.

I pushed myself up on shaking arms. My limbs were heavy, my bones made of liquid. With the blindfold on, I misjudged how close I was to the side of the bed, and my hand landed too close to the edge. I slipped, but Scott grabbed my arm and shoulder, steadying me.

"Careful." His tone was gentle now, and he kept a hand on me until I'd settled onto my back.

Ice rattled again. Wax stung between my breasts, the fine, hot line slowly extending toward, then around, my navel. It drizzled back and forth across my belly, stinging skin that was unaccustomed to the bite of leather, let alone melted wax. I squirmed, whimpering softly as more endorphins crashed through my veins. My own voice faded into the white noise. I probably moaned, gasped, maybe even screamed. Tears—tepid compared to the fire and ice on the rest of my skin—slid down my face. The towel beneath me was mildly abrasive against my stinging skin, but I didn't care. I just didn't care.

One of them gently parted my thighs with his hands. I sensed heat near my pussy and had a heartbeat to panic—*he's not putting wax down there, is he?*—before lips closed around my clit. I gasped, grabbing handfuls of the towel and comforter as his tongue teased my clit. Compared to the scorching wax, his mouth was cool, almost cold.

Hot wax dropped on my chest, and—

"Oh fuck!" I gasped again. My spine arched off the bed as Matt's tongue ran an ice cube around my clit. *Oh God, no wonder his mouth was cool.* He teased me with slow, irregular arcs and circles, and I couldn't tell if my shivers came from the heat of his tongue or the chill of the ice. Probably both.

Hot wax on my skin. Ice on my pussy. Matt's lips and tongue. Endorphins. Euphoria. Ecstasy. Scott's voice was the only thing keeping me from tumbling into sweet, sweet oblivion as he said, "Don't come, Kristen."

Don't come. With Matt's skilled mouth and Scott's

perfectly rationed pain. Don't come indeed.

I dug my teeth into my lip, but that didn't help. More pain meant more endorphins. More endorphins meant more...more...*fuck, Scott, I can't...*

"Don't. Come." The low growl made my entire body tense. My Master had spoken. It didn't matter how impossible it was, he'd given a command and I'd be damned if I'd disobey it. No matter how much Matt warmed and cooled my clit, no matter how Scott triggered wave upon wave of endorphins, no matter how Matt's fingertips teased my G-spot...

I whimpered with frustration, clawing at the sheets and towel.

With only one word, Scott would grant me release. Sooner or later, just as he always did, he'd say it, and my body would obey before my mind even knew he'd spoken.

But he stayed silent. The ice melted in Matt's mouth, and my spine melted a little more with every sweep of his tongue and drop of hot wax.

*Say it, Master, please*, I wanted to beg. I searched the silence for what he hadn't yet said, searched the air for that intake of breath that would precede the word, the word, the one goddamned word that would let me fucking shatter.

*Please, Master, please...*

The world exploded. Shaking, swirling, splintering into millions of tiny, electrified shards. It was pain and pleasure, tension and release, it was heaven, it was hell, it was perfect, and it just didn't stop.

Somewhere amidst the delirium, Scott's voice echoed through my mind: "*Come.*"

## ***Twenty Nine***

At some point that night, after the two of them had given me I didn't know how many orgasms, the world more or less stopped spinning. As much as it ever did when I was in my bed between Matt and Scott, anyway.

Scott had insisted on pulling the sheet up and having Matt get under it with me. "You're not cold yet," he'd said, "but give it a few minutes."

As always, he was right. The endorphins slowly wore off, and as they did, my body temperature fell. The cool water Scott brought for me didn't help. With Matt beside me and the sheet over us, I didn't get cold, but without them, I had no doubt I would have.

Once I'd had a drink and caught my breath, Scott lifted my chin with two fingers. "You did well tonight. As always." He smiled and I returned it, his approval sending a familiar rush of heat through my veins. He brushed a strand of hair out of my face and kissed me lightly. Then he looked at Matt. "I'm going to get the slow cooker out of here and cleaned out. I assume you don't mind keeping her warm?"

Matt chuckled. "You won't have to twist my arm."

Scott laughed. He kissed my forehead, pausing long enough for us to exchange a brief look. Then he got up, collected the slow cooker and my empty water bottle, and left, pulling the door closed behind him.

Once we were alone, Matt and I turned onto our sides and faced each other.

"Scott was right," he whispered. "You are fucking hot when you're in... what did he call it?"

"Subspace."

"Yes, that." He touched my face and leaned in to kiss me. "It's like watching you in a constant state of *almost* coming."

"That's about what it feels like," I slurred. My mind drifted back to everything they'd done to me this evening. The wax and ice had only been the beginning. I had no idea how much time had passed, only that I didn't think there had ever been that many orgasms—theirs *or* mine—in this room in one evening.

A pleasant tremor rippled through me.

Matt touched my face. "Cold?"

"No." I paused, then grinned at him. "But if I told you I was, would you keep me warm?"

He slid closer, draping an arm over me. "I will whether you're cold or not."

"Such a gentleman."

"The hell I am."

Whatever response I might have had disappeared with the gentle touch of his lips to mine. After a long night of passionate, desperate roughness, the softness of his kiss now melted every bone in my body. For someone who could be so deliciously violent in bed, he could also be so, so gentle, and now I let myself get completely lost in his embrace, in his tender kiss. We didn't come up for air until the opening door tuned both our heads.

I looked up as Scott came in. My heart fluttered when our eyes met. Matt trailed his fingertips along my upper arm, and between his touch and Scott's gaze, that familiar, insatiable tingle reignited at the base of my spine.

But we didn't get started again. Instead, Matt sat up. "As much as I'd love to stay, it's getting late, and I've got to work tomorrow."

"Yeah, me too." Scott sighed. "No rest for the sexually depraved."

Disappointment tugged at my gut, but I got up anyway. Like them, I had to show my face and be productive in the morning, so this couldn't go on. That was probably just as well; my blood still burned hotter than the melted wax, and my body ached from being on my knees, my back, my knees again, and every other way Matt and Scott had

had me. Any more of that tonight, and paramedics would be necessary.

So our evening drew to a close.

I pulled on my usual blue satin bathrobe and showed them to the door. Just stepping out of my bedroom and into my familiar hallway was surreal, like setting foot in an alien world. An alien world, or at the very least, a place I hadn't visited in a few lifetimes. As it always did when I was with one or both of these men, the universe outside my bedroom had ceased to be, and now, one wall and corner at a time, its existence resumed.

Scott left with a gentle kiss and a whispered "goodbye."

Once we were alone, Matt put his arms around me and kissed me.

"Did you enjoy tonight?" I asked.

He grinned. "As if you even need to ask."

"I told you he wouldn't try to put a candy therm—"

"Oh, shut up." He laughed, rolling his eyes. Then he drew his fingertips down the side of my face. "Sometimes, I swear I can't decide what's hotter: watching you with him, or fucking you myself."

"Which makes nights like tonight that much more fun," I said. "You get both."

A soft breath of laughter warmed my lips. "True enough, true enough." He paused, leaning in to kiss me lightly. Then he sighed. "I really should go."

My shoulders slumped a little. "Yeah, I should get some sleep. Duty calls."

He chuckled and kissed me one more time.

While he got his coat out of the hall closet, I looked in the mirror in the hall. The meaning of "just been fucked hair" had never been clearer, and inky trails of eye makeup marked all the places tears had run down my face. I tried to wipe some of the makeup away, but it didn't want to budge.

"Jesus, I look like hell," I muttered.

"Hmm?"

"Now that you two are done with me, I look like hell." I turned around, gesturing at my disheveled hair and makeup-stained face.

Matt took a breath that was no doubt intended to give



life to a smartass retort, but he stopped. In fact, he froze, his jacket still halfway onto his shoulders. The humor evaporated from his expression, leaving behind nothing but... intensity.

"Matt?"

He didn't speak. Instead, he shrugged his jacket off. It landed on the floor with a thud that echoed in my chest, and I swallowed hard as he came toward me, never breaking eye contact. When he was close enough, he cupped my face in both hands. He drew a breath and parted his lips as if he was about to speak, but hesitated.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"You're..." He slid his hands around to the back of my neck and drew me closer to him. "God, you're beautiful," he whispered, and kissed me.

Nothing about that kiss said "goodbye." Nothing about it said he'd be leaving any time soon, and no matter how sore and exhausted I was, I let my arms and lips tell him I'd take him up on it if he wanted to stay.

We were breathless again, just as we'd been when we'd all collapsed in bed earlier. His forehead, long since cooled, touched mine.

"I thought you had to go," I whispered.

"I do. But I..." He kissed me again.

"I should..." Another kiss.

"Me too..."

"But..."

He held my face in both hands, keeping us both from moving in for yet another kiss. "I know we both need to get some sleep," he said, "but I meant it when I said I couldn't get enough of you." He licked his lips. "It's your call. I can stay, or I can go." His eyebrows jumped.

I swallowed. I needed sleep, but I needed him more. *Oh, temptation. Sweet, sweet temptation.*

"Just say the word," he said, "and I'll stay."

I didn't need to say a thing.

I grabbed the front of his shirt.

I took a step back.

And he stayed.

## ***Thirty***

After another evening of beer and bad karaoke with our friends, Scott drove me back to my apartment. We barely spoke on the ride home. What little was said was mundane and forced, the kind of stilted small talk I didn't even think we were capable of having.

We'd been down this awkward road before, with lingering silence in place of our usually effortless conversation. Last time, though, I'd been the one keeping him at arm's length. Tonight, he avoided eye contact, avoided more than one or two word responses, and, when he could, avoided me. More than once I'd considered getting a cab home, but when it came time to leave, he asked if I was still coming with him.

That was something, I supposed. Still, the drive home was uncomfortably quiet. By the time we got to my apartment, my stomach was tangled up in knots.

He pulled into a guest spot and put the car in park. For a long moment, neither of us spoke. The configuration of the seats kept us an arm's length apart, and we made no move to reduce that distance, even after we both unbuckled our seatbelts. In the background, the idling engine hummed, keeping me well aware of the silence within the car. Awkwardness was an alien concept where we were concerned, but here we were.

Finally, I spoke.

"You've been awfully quiet tonight."

Scott exhaled. "Sorry about that." He glanced at me. "I hope you didn't think I was trying to cold-shoulder you."

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*Thank God.* "Hardly." I grinned in spite of my nerves. "You're way too much of an asshole to be that passive-aggressive."

He laughed. "Okay, you got me."

"So, what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," he said. "I've just been thinking about a few things lately. Especially tonight."

My heart pounded. *Here we go.* "A few things, like...?"

"Well," he paused. "Us, I guess. This. What we're doing."

Uncertainty turned my stomach. I waited for him to elaborate.

He killed the engine, and the unnerving quiet between us couldn't be ignored, especially as long seconds turned into a minute. Two minutes. Three.

"Scott?"

"Sorry," he whispered. He chewed his thumbnail for a moment, then shifted so he was facing me. He rested his elbow on the steering wheel, and though his body was turned toward me, he looked out the windshield. "I, uh, I haven't been completely honest with you."

I swallowed. "About?"

"The reasons I suggested this arrangement." He finally looked at me. "Why I wanted to guide you into the lifestyle myself."

I cocked my head. "Okay..."

He moistened his lips. "When I told you some people have bad experiences with Doms, and it's enough to scare them out of the lifestyle..."

My stomach flipped. "It happened to you?"

His slow nod gave me chills. "Obviously it wasn't enough to scare me completely out of the lifestyle," he said, managing a soft laugh. He cleared his throat and his expression was serious again. "But yes, I had a bad experience with a Domme."

I rested my hand on his knee. "What happened?"

He took a breath and laid his hand over mine. "When I was nineteen, I wanted to get involved in BDSM. Had no clue what it was all about, but it intrigued me, and I met this Domme." He paused. "Jeanette." He spat her name like it left a foul aftertaste on his tongue. Then he sighed, rubbing the

back of his neck as he went on. "I knew nothing, and she was exactly the kind of person I wanted to make sure you never encountered."

"Is she the reason you aren't a sub now?"

"No, no, I'm a Dom by nature." He sighed again, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. "But being the clueless kid I was, I thought everyone had to start out as a sub. That you worked your way up to being a Dom." He clicked his tongue and rolled his eyes. "I found her on the internet, and she agreed to teach me to be a sub."

"Something tells me the curriculum wasn't quite the same as what you've done with me."

He grimaced. "Not even close. She was one of those bad apples I mentioned. She was more interested in her own power than the wellbeing of her subs." He paused, his gaze distant. "A safe word wasn't a safety mechanism for her, it was a challenge. She'd do whatever it took to get me to say it."

"Oh, my God."

"Yeah. And she scared me a few times, I'm not going to lie. I thought I was just young and inexperienced, and I'd get used to the fear and pain. I mean, this had to be fun on some level, or people wouldn't do it, right?"

"Right." My mind reeled as I tried to make sense of what he was telling me. If there was one thing harder to imagine than Scott as a sub, it was Scott being afraid of anyone.

"Anyway, she got carried away one night. With a cat o' nine tails." His shoulder twitched, dropping slightly as if ducking a phantom whip.

My blood ran cold. "The scars on your shoulder," I breathed.

He nodded. "I never saw her again after that night, thank fuck, but the damage was done."

"I'm surprised you were still involved in BDSM after that."

"I wasn't for a good long time."

"Really?"

"God, yes. I ran like hell from all things BDSM after that, but I met a girl a few years later who liked to be dominated. Took a while, but she coaxed the Dom out of me."

And that's when everything fell into place. After that, I swore I'd never let one of my subs go through what I did." Our eyes met. "I was attracted to you anyway, Krissy. Have been for a long time. But the thought of another Dom putting you through that?" He shuddered.

"I'm glad I went through you, then."

He smiled. "Me too."

"Is that what's been bothering you tonight?" Relief wanted to untie the knots in my gut, but I had a feeling this discussion hadn't yet run its course. "Did you think I'd be upset that you didn't tell me about a bad experience?"

"No, it's not that." He swallowed hard. "But I had to tell you all of that before I said what I really need to say. So it would make sense."

"Oh?" No conversation in the history of my acquaintance with Scott had ever made me so nervous.

He took a deep breath, holding my gaze for a long moment. I wondered if he was searching my expression for something. I wondered if he found it. His eyes flicked toward the windshield, then to our hands on his knee. He ran his thumb along the side of my wrist.

"I told you in the beginning that I didn't," he whispered, still watching our hands, "but I do switch."

I blinked. "You do?"

He nodded. "Very, very rarely, but once in a blue moon, I sub." Our eyes met, and the intensity in his gaze made my heart skip. "For the right woman."

My mouth went dry. Of all the directions I'd thought this might go, I hadn't seen this coming. "Scott, are you..."

He squeezed my hand. "If you don't want to, I'll understand. But you're the first woman in a long time I've trusted enough to ask." The tip of his tongue darted across his lower lip and he looked out the windshield again. When he spoke, he spoke quickly, with uneasiness that was as unusual for him as what he was saying. "This isn't something every Dom does, just so you know. We're not all secretly subs just looking for the right Domme to top us. But we're all different, and this is just... me." He took a breath as he looked at me again. "I *do* have a submissive side. I'm a 'light' switch, I guess you could say, and under the right circumstances..." He trailed off.

"You're serious. You want me—" Disbelief held the words in my throat.

"I'm completely serious." He leaned across the console and touched my face. "Just for one night, I want to be your sub."

"But I've, I've only been a Domme once, and that was with you keeping an eye on me."

"I know. And you're damned good at it."

"Still, do you really want an inexperienced Domme?"

"I want you." He shrugged with one shoulder. "The rest doesn't matter."

"But, with your bad experience, and—"

He silenced me with a gentle kiss, then broke away just enough to speak. "I trust you, Krissy. That's more important to me than decades of experience."

"I just don't want to hurt you."

"You won't." He kissed me again. "Like I said, if you're not comfortable with it, I won't push you. But if you're afraid of hurting me, or of doing anything like that bitch did to me back then, I assure you, you have nothing to worry about."

"How can you be sure of that?"

"If I used a safe word, would you stop?"

"Of course. In a heartbeat."

He smiled, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. "Then, as I said, you have nothing to worry about."

I chewed my lip. "Have you done this with many women?"

"No. There are very few I'd ever dream of asking." He ran his fingers through my hair. "Very, very few that I could imagine trusting like I trust you, Krissy." Our eyes met. Then he drew me into a long, deep kiss. I put my arms around him, wondering when we'd become so comfortable in a lover's embrace instead of the platonic touch of friendship or the rough grip of domination.

After a moment, we looked at each other.

"So you'd trust me with a flogger and your delicate skin?" I said.

He laughed. "There's nothing delicate about me, you know that."

I grinned into his kiss. "But what if I make it hurt?"

"I'm counting on it," he growled, and drew me back to

him. As his tongue slipped between my lips, I imagined him bound to the St. Andrew's Cross, muscles rippling and sweaty skin turning red with every stroke of the flogger. The sounds he'd make, the way his eyes would glisten with tears of pain and pleasure, the way he'd flinch and grimace and beg for more.

I had to have him like that.

I tangled my fingers in his hair and kissed him hungrily. His hand moved up the back of my neck into my hair, grasping it just tight enough to smart. In a matter of seconds, our tender embrace had become a fight for dominance. He tried to force me against the passenger seat. I tried to shove him into the driver's seat. Ground was neither gained nor lost, and the kiss only became more desperate as we demanded the breath from each other's lungs.

When I broke the kiss, we were both panting.

"You want me to make it hurt, then?" I said in between gasps for air.

"Absolutely," he said. "I'm just as much of a pain slut as you are."

"I beg your pardon," I scoffed. "I am *not* a pain slut."

His hand tightened in my hair and he jerked my head back. When I yelped, he whispered, "Sure about that?"

I bit my lip as goose bumps prickled every inch of my skin. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Mm-hmm, I'm sure." He pulled my hair even harder and dipped his head. Stubble brushed the side of my neck as he said, "You're a dirty little pain slut and we both know it." Before I could reply, he bit the base of my neck, probably hard enough to leave a mark, and there was no denying that the moan I released was one of pure ecstasy.

"See?" He met my eyes. "So, do you want to?"

"Hmm," I said, grinning, "I might need a bit more persuasion than that."

He chuckled. "Oh, will you?"

"Yes. I might need you to beg, plead, and give me puppy dog eyes."

"I think I can offer you something better than that." He kissed me lightly.

"Such as?"

"Oh, I don't know." His lips moved to my jaw. "How about total, unquestioning, submission?" I bit my lip as he kissed his way down my neck. "Bind me, hit me, put me on my knees, whatever you want." He gently kissed the place he'd bitten a moment before. "I'm offering to put myself completely at your mercy and under your control." I shivered, and he raised his head. "So, do we have a deal?"

"You're damn right we do." I kissed him lightly. "I do have one question left, though."

"And that is?"

I smiled. "What do we do with the rest of tonight?"

He trailed his fingertips down the side of my face, still grinning as he said, "Well, I don't know about you, but I could go for a glass of red wine."



## ***Thirty One***

When I arrived at Scott's house, he'd dressed exactly as I'd ordered: Black jeans and a white button down with the sleeves rolled to his elbows. He was also barefoot, which brought him down a half inch or so. Not a tremendous decrease in height, but my three-inch stilettos raised me enough to put us close to eye level.

He let me in and closed the door. We were both quiet for a moment, neither moving nor looking at each other. With our roles reversed, I was thrown off balance. I knew his lines, but I wasn't so sure I knew mine. I wondered if this had the same effect on him.

Scott cleared his throat. "Do you want anything to drink?"

"Ice water, please."

I followed him into the kitchen. After he'd made my drink, he leaned against the counter and I stood beside the island. I held the glass, but didn't take a drink, and that didn't escape his notice. Every time I moved it, every time the ice hit the sides of the glass, he fidgeted. Shifted his weight.

"No wine tonight?" I asked.

A nervous grin tugged at his lips. "Only when I'm on top."

"Noted." I shook the glass a little, just enough to make the ice clink, and he shivered. "I guess we should go over some ground rules?"

Scott nodded, tapping the edge of the counter with his fingers and looking at the floor in between glancing at my

untouched drink. "My limits are pretty basic. No choking, no anal."

I clicked my tongue and shook my head. "Scott Moore, I figured you of all people would be adventurous enough to try anal."

He grinned, looking at me through his lashes. "I never said I haven't *tried* it."

"So you—"

"Don't change the subject." Our eyes met, and we both laughed.

"Okay, no choking, no anal. Anything else?"

He shrugged. "Not off hand. I mean, nothing that'll warrant stitches later, if you don't mind."

"Damn, there goes my plan for the evening."

"Uh huh." He rolled his eyes, chuckling. "And what should I call you tonight?"

"Isn't 'Mistress' the usual title?"

"Well, it doesn't have to be."

"Any other ideas?"

He thumbed his chin. "Madam?"

"That sounded sarcastic."

"Okay, how about 'Your Highness'?"

"Still sarcastic."

"Empress? Saint Hot Tits? High Priestess of Slut—"

"'Mistress' will suffice, thank you."

He let out a huff of breath. "Fine, *Mistress*."

I lifted an eyebrow. "Scott, if I didn't know any better, I'd think you were trying to misbehave before we even got started."

"No, no, not at all." He showed his palms and batted his eyes. "I would never do such a thing."

"You *won't* do any such thing if you know what's good for you." I swirled my drink as if it were wine, letting the ice clink inside the glass again. Scott swallowed hard. I set the glass down. "Same safe words as always?"

He nodded. "Red and yellow."

I chewed my lip and tried to think if there was anything else we needed to go over.

"How long has it been since you've been a sub?" I asked.

"A long time."

"Define a long time."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Are you asking how long it's been since I've played the submissive, or how long it's been since I've trusted someone like this?"

"Either or."

He leaned against the counter, his eyes losing focus for a moment as he drummed his fingers beside his hips. Then he said, "The last time I subbed was before you and I even met."

"Really? What about Amy?"

"Amy's one hundred percent sub," he said with a shrug. "She doesn't switch at all. Ever."

"And if she did?"

Scott pursed his lips. "If she did, yeah, I'd sub for her." He pushed himself away from the counter. "So, bedroom or dungeon?"

"Dungeon, of course."

"I should have known." He grinned, but he couldn't hide the nervousness in his eyes. Shifting his gaze away from me, he nodded toward the doorway.

I followed him down the hall. Outside the dungeon, he drew in a long breath, then released it through his nose as he reached for the door.

"Scott."

He looked at me, eyebrows raised and hand hovering above the doorknob.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

The smile that lifted the corners of his mouth was subtle, but unmistakable. "It's been a long time since I've been this sure of something." With that, he opened the door and gestured for me to go in.

I walked past him and looked around the room that would be my domain tonight.

"Oh, no you don't," he growled behind me.

I turned around just in time to see him scoop Malia up.

"We've been through this," he muttered, scratching the cat's ears as he carried her to the door. "You do not belong in here, you little shit." He set her down and nudged her out with his foot, then quickly shut the door. "Fucking cat."

With Malia evicted, Scott and I faced each other in silence. My stomach fluttered with habitual nervousness, even as I reminded myself that I was in charge tonight. He held my gaze, and I had to force myself to hold his. I was the Domme, and I'd be damned if I looked away first.

I took a drink. As I set my glass on the table by the rack of whips and floggers, I said, "Unroll your sleeves."

We held eye contact for a second longer. Then he dropped his gaze to his right sleeve, watching his fingers loosen the neat roll. He smoothed the fabric down to his wrist. He held the cuff together for a moment, as if he was about to button it, but then let it fall and went for his other sleeve.

With both sleeves unrolled, he looked at me again, silently awaiting my next commend.

I picked up my glass, keeping my eyes fixed on him as I took another drink. He still held my gaze, but with much more effort now.

I nodded toward the rack of floggers. "Pick one."

Taking a deep, ragged breath, he went to the rack. He was still for a moment, only his eyes moving as he scanned the various implements. I had no doubt he was familiar with every last one of his "toys", even if he was usually the wielder, not the receiver.

To my surprise, he chose one with longer, knotted tails. Both the length and the knots meant less thud and more sting. A *lot* more sting. If I hit him too hard, I could even break the skin.

In spite of my reservations, I held out my hand. He laid the handle across my palm. For a moment, I just looked at it, turning the cat o' nine tails in my hand.

I thought of the way his shoulder had dipped and a shudder had run through him when he'd told me about Jeanette. "*She got carried away one night,*" he'd said, "*with a cat o' nine tails.*"

"Scott, are you sure about this?" I didn't care if my Domme persona slipped momentarily. I had to know.

He looked me in the eye and nodded.

"But it's—"

"That's the kind I like." He smiled. "I trust you."

I chewed my lip for a moment before finally

whispering, "Okay." I gave the implement in my hand one last look, then met his eyes. "I assume you'll want me warming up with something a bit gentler?"

"Yes, please." Our eyes met for a split second. Then he dropped his gaze and added, "Mistress."

"Stand facing the cross." I gestured at the Saint Andrew's Cross with the handle of the cat o' nine tails.

He did as I ordered, swallowing hard as he stared down the device he'd built with his own hands. He took and released another deep breath. I neither spoke nor moved for a moment, letting the silence unnerve him. Judging by the occasional catch of his breath and the way he subtly shifted his weight, it worked.

"Get on your knees."

He glanced at me for confirmation, but quickly looked down again. As I'd commanded, he went to his knees.

"Keep your heels together," I said as I picked a softer flogger from the rack. "Knees apart so you don't lose your balance. And don't sit back on your heels. Stay all the way up."

He adjusted his position.

"Unbutton your shirt."

As he obeyed, his hands trembled, and he cursed under his breath as the buttons refused to cooperate.

I smacked the handle of the flogger across my palm. "Faster, Scott. You don't have all night."

"Yes, Mistress," he murmured, and his shaking hands hastened their efforts. A second later, the last button was apart.

"Take it off and let it fall behind you."

He shrugged it off. Thank God he couldn't see me just then, because the sight of his bare shoulders and tattooed back made me bite my lip to keep from whimpering. I'd seen him naked so many times now, and I still couldn't get over how fucking gorgeous he was. That, and there was something indescribably sexy about a barefoot man wearing nothing but jeans. On his knees, head bowed and waiting for my next command? Even more so.

I recovered quickly, though, and picked up his shirt.

"Put your hands behind your back."

He did, lacing his fingers over the small of his back. I

wrapped his shirt around his wrists and knotted it above his hands. Now he was bound, but having his hands where they were served another purpose. I still wasn't completely confident with my aim, especially with something like the cat o' nine tails he'd chosen, and putting his arms this way protected his kidneys while leaving the rest of his back exposed.

I ran my nails lightly across his shoulders, not even pressing hard enough to color his skin. "Tell me your safe words again."

He took a breath, his teeth chattering as he tilted his head in response to my nails on the side of his neck. "Red to stop. Yellow to back off." He paused, then quickly added, "Mistress."

"Good."

I spent about ten minutes with the softer flogger, warming up his skin and my arm. When his back had turned a satisfying shade of pink, I set the flogger down and picked up the cat o' nine tails.

The tails rattled against each other. Scott pulled in a sharp breath as I stepped behind him. While I stood silently, neither speaking nor moving, he waited. His breathing stayed even for the most part, but the occasional sharp inhalation or ragged exhalation betrayed his otherwise hidden nerves. When I slid the flogger's tails over my palm, he shuddered.

Again I was still. After a long silence, one that probably seemed a hundred times longer for him than for me, I raised the flogger and brought it down on my hand. The slap of leather on skin made him flinch. Every muscle in his back and shoulders quivered. When I hit my hand again, his startle was even more pronounced, as if he'd been absolutely certain I meant it that time.

Stillness. Silence. Before me, he tensed and relaxed, tensed and relaxed, those beautiful shoulders twitching and trembling as he anticipated my next move.

I raised the cat o' nine tails and, as lightly as I could brought it down just below his shoulder. Then the other. Not hard enough to mark his skin, but enough to warrant a sharp hiss of breath. It was caution more than the need to tease him; the silvery scars on his shoulder held me back, keeping

me from letting him have it.

I hit him harder, and he moaned. After a few strokes, harder. He grunted and flinched, but the next hit resulted in little more than a sharp exhalation. The pink in his skin deepened as I struck him again and again. With a little more force behind it, the cat o' nine tails began raising thin, faint welts.

I stopped. Waited. His shoulders bunched tighter, tighter, then dropped with the release of his breath. When he'd let his guard down, I hit him again, this time lighter than before.

A frustrated growl emerged from the back of his throat.

When I hit him again, I did it hard. He moaned and his balance wavered slightly. He adjusted his stance, putting his knees an inch or so further apart. With the next strike, he didn't budge except for the trembling of his shoulders.

After a few minutes, I stopped again. His quivering back and shoulders were flushed except down the center of his spine, the deepening pink scored by thin welts. Sweat curled the ends of his hair, and an occasional drop slid like a tear down his skin and over his tattoos.

I moved closer to him, my heels clicking on the hard floor. Though he kept his head bowed, he turned it slightly, probably listening to determine where I was.

I leaned down and blew a cool breath on the base of his neck. He gasped, his spine straightening. He shivered as I ran my fingertips down his back, and he groaned when I raked my nails up his sides.

I stepped back and resumed flogging him. My strokes were gentler now, barely slapping against his well-beaten skin. I thought he moaned, but then realized it was an aggravated growl. Grinning to myself, I laid a few more light strokes across his back.

"Do it harder, goddammit," he snarled. His posture instantly stiffened. What little I could see of his face tightened into a grimace. He probably knew he'd misstepped before the words were completely off his tongue, but I wasn't going to let him off easily.

I said nothing as I stepped up behind him. My footfalls sounded menacing as they echoed off the walls of the

otherwise silent room.

"I'm sorry, Mistress," he said quickly.

"But it did happen." I ran the handle of the cat o' nine tails down his back. "I think you're forgetting who's in charge here, Scott." I draped the tails in front of him and slowly drew them up his chest.

"It won't happen again, Mistress." He shuddered, tilting his head as the tails slithered over his shoulder.

I said nothing as I combed my fingers through his hair. The muscles in his neck and shoulders twitched, probably expecting me to grab his hair and yank his head back. The more I silently played with his hair, the more his body tensed.

"Are you going to be mouthy again?" I asked finally.

"No, Mistress."

"Are you sure about that?"

He swallowed. "Yes, Mistress. I'm sorry." The tremor in his voice sent a tremor through me. In spite of his momentary rebellion, he was under my control, at my mercy, and he knew it. Just as I had with Damien, I understood what he got out of playing the Dom. The trust and surrender of my submissive was as arousing as it was empowering.

I rested my hand on the back of his neck. "I'll let it go this time. But don't let it happen again."

His shoulders dropped. "I won't. Thank you, Mistress."

I stepped back and raised the cat o' nine tails again.

The longer I went on, falling into a rhythmic pattern of striking first his left side, then his right, the more his muscles relaxed. Each impact of the tails made his whole body waver as if his bones were liquefying. His head stayed bowed, and whenever he spoke at my command, his voice was slurred.

A dull ache crept into my elbow and shoulder. I didn't trust my aim enough to use my left hand, so it was time to change things around a little.

"Stand up."

He rose on shaking legs while I set the cat o' nine tails down and picked up my drink. I walked around him. The only sounds were his breathing, my sharp footsteps, and the clink of ice, the few cubes that hadn't yet melted, against the inside of my glass. He didn't look at me, didn't raise his



head, just tensed every time the ice rattled.

I stopped behind him. With my free hand, I untied the knot I'd made with his shirt. The shirt fell to the floor and his hands dropped to his sides. He rolled his shoulders and tilted his head to one side, then the other, probably getting rid of a crick or a cramp. He flexed and straightened his wrists, then did the same with his fingers.

I waited until he was still again. When he was, I pressed my glass against the small of his back. He released a choked, startled sound and his posture stiffened. When his startled reaction had passed, I drew my glass up his back, grinning as he shivered and tensed every time cold met new skin.

"Cold?" I asked.

"Yes, Mistress," he said through clenched teeth.

I lifted the glass off his skin. "Bedroom."

He didn't hesitate, turning and starting for the door. As I followed him across the hall, his gait was a little slower than usual. At first I thought he took every step gingerly, but as he made a similarly sluggish gesture out of running his hand through his hair, I realized it was lethargy. So I wasn't the only one who felt like the life had been sucked out of me after a flogging session. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling, just... odd.

Before I could get the bedroom door closed, the cat dashed past me. Scott followed her with glazed eyes, but no response registered on his face when she jumped up onto the bed.

"Weren't you told you don't belong in here?" I put her under my arm and heaved her out of the bedroom, closing the door behind her before she could give me the evil eye.

I faced Scott. He met my eyes for a split second, then quickly shifted his downward. I handed him my glass, and we stood in silence for a moment while he drained it.

"Thank you, Mistress," he whispered, handing the glass back.

"You're welcome," I said. "You're doing well, Scott."

He smiled, meeting my eyes for a second. "Thank you, Mistress."

I rattled the ice in the glass enough to make him shiver, then said, "Take everything off."

He stripped out of his remaining clothes. I bit my lip. If ever there was a view that never got old, it was an aroused, naked Scott. *Jesus, you're beautiful.*

My glass, which contained nothing but a few ice cubes now, clinked on the nightstand. With the same hand, I reached for his cock. His eyes widened and his lips parted as I stroked him gently with cold fingers.

"Do you like that?" I asked.

"Yes, Mistress," he said, again through gritted teeth.

"Even with the cold?"

He dug his teeth into his bottom lip. "Yes, Mistress." The coldness of my skin wore off the longer I stroked him. I didn't want him to get used to my touch, so I moved my hand a little faster to keep him off guard. He gasped, screwing his eyes shut.

"Unbutton my shirt," I said before he'd had a chance to recover.

His eyes flew open. *How the hell am I supposed to do that while you're touching me like that?* was etched into his slack jaw and furrowed brow.

I raised my eyebrows. *Was I unclear?*

His Adam's apple bobbed and, with shaking hands, he reached for the first button of my blouse. It came apart easily, as did the second, but when he went for the third, I squeezed his cock and stroked faster. He closed his eyes for a moment, hand faltering briefly. He quickly collected himself, though, and continued through the buttons.

I released him and shrugged out of my shirt, letting it fall to the floor.

"Bra," I said.

He hesitated for a moment, probably wondering if I was going to turn around to give him better access. When I didn't, he leaned forward and reached around me. He swallowed hard and closed his eyes as his fingers fought with the clasp.

"Look at me."

He did, and his fingers fumbled a little more. Finally, the clasp came apart, and I didn't miss the relieved breath he released when it did.

I took my bra off and dropped it on top of my shirt. With that out of the way, I turned to get a condom out of the nightstand.

I held it out to him. "Put that on."

His breath caught. With an unsteady hand, he took the condom, and as he obeyed, I got out of the rest of my clothes.

I thought about getting on top, but when I remembered the welts on his back, I thought better of it. He liked pain, but even the softest sheets might be unpleasantly abrasive against skin that raw.

I laid on my back and gestured for him to join me in bed. Again he hesitated, but as always, obeyed. At my command, he got on top, sucking in a breath as I guided his cock to my pussy. A low groan escaped his lips as he slid into me.

Once he was all the way in, I hooked one leg around him and held him there.

"You're going to fuck me. Slowly." I ran my nails down his sides, waiting for him to shiver and bite his lip before I went on. "You're going to fuck me, but if you come, Scott, this evening is over. Understood?"

He started to reply, but I tightened my pussy around him, and he could only close his eyes and exhale.

"Answer me, Scott."

"Yes, I understand, Mistress."

I slid my leg off his hip so he could move again. As he started to withdraw, I said, "Remember: slowly."

He nodded. His shoulders and abs quivered as he obeyed my command. Every stroke was smooth, controlled, and if the way his cheek rippled with the clenching of his jaw was any indication, torture. Perfect.

I reached for the glass on the nightstand. The ice cubes rattled and Scott gulped, his rhythm faltering for a split second before he recovered. He watched my hand warily, then grimaced when I held the small piece of ice a couple of inches above his back between his shoulder blades. With every passing second, he cringed a little more, his entire body tensing and trembling.

I knew the instant the first drop of cold water hit his back: he exhaled hard and a violent tremor surged through

him, driving him deeper inside me. A second drop made him pull in a sharp breath. A third made him shiver. When I pressed the ice cube against his skin, he whimpered and shuddered. I drew it up the back of his neck, then brought it around to the front, tracing the underside of his jaw before letting the ice slide down the front of his throat. He continued to fuck me slowly, cringing and grimacing from both exertion and cold.

When the piece in my hand had melted, I reached for more. He gasped and moaned as I ran the ice over his abs, his chest, along his collarbone, up the side of his neck. He closed his eyes, cursing under his breath and letting his head fall forward. Only when that piece of ice had melted did he relax.

"Sit up," I said.

He pushed himself up on shaking arms. I reached between us and circled my clit with two fingertips. Scott gasped and closed his eyes.

"Keep moving," I said sharply. "And don't close your eyes. I didn't say you could look away."

He opened his eyes. His faltering rhythm recovered. "I'm s—" He paused, wetting his lips. "I'm sorry, Mistress." His eyes flicked back and forth between my face and my fingers, probably trying to focus on whichever was less likely to hasten his orgasm.

"Look at *me*, Scott."

Our eyes met, and I could tell by the furrow of his brow that I'd picked the more frustrating option for him.

I circled faster. My pussy tightened around his cock, and he groaned. "Does that turn you on, Scott?"

He exhaled hard. "Yes, Mistress. It does."

"Good. Now fuck me faster."

In spite of the frustrated sound that escaped his lips, he obeyed, thrusting faster.

Breathing in short, shallow gasps, I whispered, "Yes, just like that, Scott."

He shuddered, biting his lip and groaning again.

"Don't come yet." I made no effort to mask how close I was to doing just that, though. My voice came out as a breathless moan that I was sure drove him insane, which

was precisely my plan. "Don't come yet, Scott, don't you dare."

I watched my own orgasm unfold in his expression: his breath catching when my pussy tightened around his cock, his eyes widening when I released that telltale, breathless moan, his lips pulling into a grimace when I dug my nails into his shoulders. I was coming, but he was falling apart, struggling to hold on while I let go.

As I came back to earth, he swore under his breath, his arms quivering beneath him. He was close, of that I had no doubt, but I kept it out of his reach.

"Don't come yet." I teased his nipples with my nails. "You're not going to come yet, are you, Scott?"

"No, Mistress," he said through his teeth.

Three times, I thought he'd given in and disobeyed me, thinking his throaty moan or the way he forced himself a little deeper signaled imminent loss of control, but each time, he recovered. More than once, he screwed his eyes shut, probably trying to keep himself together, and each time he opened them before I could order him to do so.

"Do you want to come, Scott?" I asked.

"Yes, Mistress," he whispered. "Please, yes, *please*."

"I can't hear you." I scratched my nails up his sides, suppressing a grin when he squirmed. "*Do* you want to come, Scott?"

A little louder this time, he said, "Yes, Mistress, I—"

"That doesn't sound very convincing. Do—"

"Yes, yes, Mistress, please." With every syllable, his voice crescendoed to a roar until a shudder made his breath falter and dropped that roar to a moan. "*Please*, Mistress..."

"Yes. Come, Scott."

He had time for one last, deep thrust before he collapsed beneath the force of his orgasm. He slumped over me, grabbing my shoulders and letting his head fall beside mine as his body trembled.

When it had tapered enough for him to draw a breath, he inhaled deeply, then murmured, "Thank you, Mistress."

## ***Thirty Two***

While Scott got rid of the condom, I got us both some water. Once he'd drunk some and caught his breath, I had him lie on his stomach. I pulled the sheet up to his waist while he folded his arms under the pillow and rested his head.

I rubbed lotion on his back and shoulders while the dust settled and the world returned to normal or something close to it. He closed his eyes and moaned softly, almost purring as his back rose and fell with slow, deep breaths. He didn't speak. A few times, I thought he'd fallen asleep, and he may very well have.

The smooth, repetitive motions of my palms on his slick skin nearly lulled me to sleep. I probably could have done it all night if fatigue hadn't crept into my joints.

I slowed to a stop, and his eyes fluttered open.

"How does your back feel?" I asked.

"Stings." He craned his neck to shoot me a grin over his shoulder. "Nicely done."

I laughed. "I didn't fuck you up too badly?"

"Not at all." He was quiet for a moment. "I didn't realize what a cruel tease you were."

I ran a light fingertip up the center of his spine, laughing when he shuddered. "I learned from the best."

"So you did." He chuckled. "The ice was a nice touch."

"You did mention it was your Achilles Heel."

"Yeah, and at the time, I didn't think telling you that would come back to bite me."

"You should have guessed I'd grab onto any weakness I could find and hold onto it until I had the opportunity to exploit it."

"Bitch," he muttered."

I laughed softly as I set the lotion on the nightstand and sat beside him. Neither of us spoke as I stroked his hair the way he often stroked mine. He closed his eyes again, and I thought he was drifting off to sleep again until he fidgeted, rolling his shoulders and sighing.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Tired."

"I wore you out?"

"Mm-hmm." He rolled onto his side and patted the bed. "Come here." He pulled the sheet back enough to let me get in next to him, then threw it over both of us.

An age passed while we just held each other and touched. Occasionally, a long, tender kiss carried us away, and more than once I thought I was going to fall asleep in his arms or vice versa.

After a while, he rested his head on the pillow and looked at me. "You've come a long way since we started this," he whispered, caressing my cheek with the backs of his fingers. "I had a feeling you and BDSM would get along."

"You were right."

He grinned. "Of course I was right. I'm always right."

"Cocky bastard."

"Damn right." He laughed softly. When his humor faded, he said nothing as he watched our fingers lace together between our chests.

"You've gone quiet," I said.

His eyes flicked up and met mine. The hint of color across his cheeks reminded me of the pink I'd beaten into his back earlier.

"Sorry," he said, "I was just thinking."

I moistened my lips. "About?"

He opened his mouth to speak, but paused. His gaze returned to our joined hands, and he frowned as he watched his thumb trace an arc back and forth across the back of mine.

"Scott?"

He looked up again. There was something unspoken in

his expression, something that sent cool water through my veins.

When he came to life this time, he didn't speak, he moved. Specifically, he moved closer to me, and when his lips parted, it wasn't for speech, but a gentle kiss. His lips moved so softly against mine, I thought I might have imagined it until his tongue met mine. Then, with a simultaneous inhalation, we pulled each other closer and deepened the kiss.

I ran my fingers down his back, but when I found the welts the cat o' nine tails had left, he flinched, so I cradled the sides of his face instead. His hand traced the curve of my spine to my lower back. When he pulled me to him, his erection brushed my hip, and I released a startled breath.

He rolled me onto my back, clasping my hand in his and laying it on the pillow beside us. Without breaking the kiss, he reached over me and opened the drawer. When he came back with a condom, I stared at him.

"You're not worn out?"

He tore the wrapper with his teeth. "I'm exhausted." He kissed me, drawing it out for a moment before whispering, "But I *need* to be inside you again."

Once the condom was on, I wrapped my legs around him. Releasing a soft groan, he slipped easily inside me.

Mind and body could barely comprehend that this was Scott. His soft hair between my fingers, his hands caressing my face, his warm breath on my cheek as he moved so deep inside me.

His skin quivered beneath my fingertips. Every now and then, he drew in a ragged breath and trembled at my touch. A shiver followed my fingers up the length of his back, and when I reached his neck, he moaned into my kiss. In my hands, his shoulders trembled with exertion as he took long, slow strokes inside me.

Anything beyond these walls was either soundless or irrelevant, and everything within created a near-silent narration of us. Skin whispered across skin and sheets hissed across sheets. The steady, barely audible groan of the bed frame's joinery marked our slow cadence. Unsteady breathing punctuated the gentle sounds of long kisses.

And all the while, he held me. He didn't restrain me,



he didn't use my hips or shoulders to gain leverage and drive himself deeper. He *held* me.

We'd made love before, crossed into intimacy that couldn't exist between the people we were supposed to be, but this was different.

I didn't have to tell him to look at me this time. I wasn't his Mistress anymore anyway, but with or without my command, he held my gaze just as I held his.

And I knew.

I could no more escape the truth than I could the intensity in his blue eyes.

It wasn't a fluke this time. It couldn't be. We'd accidentally made love after I panicked on the Saint Andrew's Cross. For comfort, I'd told myself. To get back on the same page, to calm me down with a gentle touch. Yet for all my rationalizing about how or why we'd done so then, here we were again, moving together not as friends, not as Dom and sub, but as the lovers we'd been all along.

I wrapped my arms around him and raised my head to kiss him. Our lips met, and we both sank down to the bed.

His lips and tongue moved with mine. Our hips fell into a slow, perfect rhythm. With every touch, from his fingers in my hair to his cock deep inside me, another piece of my epiphany fell into place.

The simple truth was I was falling for Scott.

No, it was even simpler than that: I *had* fallen for him. I'd trusted him, I'd surrendered to him, and somewhere amidst the bindings and fears and blindfolds and floggers, I'd fallen in love with him.

Our lips barely touched, as if we couldn't decide between breathing or kissing. Eventually, we settled on the latter.

He took slow, smooth strokes, moving only from the hips. How long we moved like that—kissing and breathing each other while he fucked me slowly—I couldn't say. It didn't matter. He was inside me, over me, touching me, kissing me, and nothing else mattered.

With a sharp gasp, he shuddered, pushing himself deeper. When he recovered, his rhythm was faster.

I was only distantly aware of his cock moving inside me, so distracted was I by his breath on my skin and the

sheer sight of him. His eyes screwed shut, the cords standing out from his neck, his lips parting with each uneven breath he couldn't *quite* release. I'd never seen him like this, never felt him like this. He wasn't just getting close to the edge, he was unraveling from the inside out.

"Oh...God..." he breathed. He could barely choke the words out, and had his eyes been open, I wouldn't have been surprised to see tears in them.

I rocked my hips back, taking him deeper. He gripped my shoulders tighter, and with a shudder and a breathless whimper, Scott—my Dom, my Master—shattered.

When he'd finally stopped shaking, he pushed himself up. He rested his weight on one elbow and, with his free hand, brushed a strand of hair out of my face. Our eyes met, and denial was no longer an option.

Especially not when he kissed me so gently, so tenderly.

Definitely not when he whispered against my lips, "I love you, Krissy."

"I love you, too."

He smiled, and for the first time since I'd known him, he looked shy. His cheeks colored a little, and he dropped his gaze. "I know this wasn't what we set out to do. I guess it just kind of..."

"Happened?"

His eyes flicked up again. "Yeah. It just happened."

My stomach fluttered, and it wasn't just the butterflies that came from looking into Scott's eyes. Had we gone too far tonight? Had we crossed a line we shouldn't have crossed when we put aside all the dominance and submission in exchange for level ground and lovemaking?

I combed my fingers through his hair. "So, where do we go from here?"

Some of his usual confidence and cockiness returned to the curl of his lips, almost masking the uncertainty that creased his brow. "Keep fucking and raising welts on each other's skin?"

"I suppose we could do that." I trailed my nail down the back of his neck, and he let his head fall forward to give me more access.

After a moment, he looked at me again. "We don't

have to figure it all out tonight."

"Thank God for that."

He smiled, then gasped as he pulled out slowly. "I guess we take it a day at a time from here. See what else...happens." He offered a cautious grin, and when I returned it, he kissed me gently before getting up to get rid of the condom.

*One day at a time, I thought. See what else happens.*

I swallowed hard as he came back to bed. Resting my head on his shoulder, I wondered if too much had happened already.

*Fuck.*

Fatigue quickly caught up with us and took over, so we didn't push the conversation. Scott didn't seem too unnerved by the whole thing, nor was he in a great rush to find answers for every question this new revelation had raised. Usually, his confidence and self-assuredness was contagious. The touch of his hand or the gentleness of his voice could quiet nearly any distress or alarm.

Not tonight.

As we settled into bed together, my stomach got more and more *unsettled*. I loved Scott, and that didn't diminish—nor was it diminished by—whatever it was I felt for Matt. More than that, my relationship with one was indelibly marked by my relationship with the other. The things I learned from Scott made sex with Matt hotter. Matt's voyeurism had added a whole different dimension of sexiness to my encounters with Scott. Having them at the same time had easily been two of the most intense, amazing experiences of my life.

But a choice would have to be made, and soon. I couldn't have them at the same time. Not like this. In bed, in smoking hot *ménage* situations, that we could do. Emotions were on the table now, though. Scott loved me, but he also loved Amy. There was no way he'd give her up to be with me, nor would I dream of asking him to.

Whatever Matt felt or me, he wouldn't ask me to give up Scott. Scott wouldn't ask me to give up Matt. Sooner or later, though, something had to give. Neither Matt nor I were wired for polyamory. It just wasn't something either of us could do, and even if I could do it, I couldn't ask Matt to

share me with Scott. They both deserved more than half of me.

I couldn't change how I felt about them, but I couldn't have both of them. One way or the other, I was going to lose. A choice had to be made, and someone was going to get hurt.

Scott clasped his hand in mine on his chest and kissed the top of my head. I closed my eyes.

For the first time, I regretted getting involved with the two of them. Every moment of it had been hot, and I'd finally had the opportunity to explore my sexuality, but had it been worth it? Had it been worth putting myself in a position of possibly having to hurt one of them, if not both?

Was it worth risking two of my most cherished friendships?

I stared at the ceiling and sighed.

*Now what the hell do I do?*

## ***Thirty Three***

I stared at the television screen, but neither saw nor heard the film. My thoughts were a million miles away while my senses were completely focused on something much closer than the TV. The warm, gentle weight of an arm around my shoulders. The subtle spiciness of cologne. Slow, near-silent breathing.

On some level, this should have felt wrong. With all the feelings I'd discovered I had for Scott, the last place I should have been was curled up on my couch in Matt's arms.

But there I was.

And it didn't feel wrong.

In fact, it felt right. Far more so than it should have, given my situation. This was the only place in the world where I didn't crave Scott, just as Scott's arms were the only place where I didn't ache for Matt.

Tonight, though, as right as I felt wrapped up in Matt's arms, I still couldn't shake the cold, unsettled feeling in my chest. I'd gotten involved with Scott to push some boundaries that needed it, but in pushing those boundaries, we'd crossed lines. What lines hadn't been crossed had blurred, and I no longer knew what we were. Friends with benefits? Teacher and student? All I knew was that I loved him and he loved me. Where to go from there, I had no clue.

And where did that leave Matt and me? Because whatever I felt for Scott, I'd have been lying to myself if I said I didn't feel the very same thing or Matt.

Was it really love, then? In Scott's arms, I'd had no doubt I was in love with him. But now, confusion prevailed,

because I felt the very same thing with and for Matt. I couldn't possibly be in love with both of them. Could I?

"Hey." Matt's voice startled me. When I looked up at him, he cocked his head. "Earth to Kris?"

"Sorry, sorry." I shook my head. "I was just spacing out a bit."

"So I noticed."

"How?"

He chuckled and gestured at the television with the remote. "Robert Downey, Jr. was on the screen without a shirt, and you didn't even bat an eye."

I laughed. "You know me too well."

He smiled, but it quickly faded. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Just, like I said, spacing out."

He clicked off the movie, and the room went dark except for the warm light from a dim lamp on the end table.

"You don't have to turn it off," I said.

"No point in leaving it on." He turned toward me. "I wasn't really paying attention to it, either."

"Not even with Robert Downey, Jr. on the screen?"

He gave a wistful sigh. "Not even with him, no." The backs of his fingers caressed my cheek, and goose bumps prickled beneath my shirt.

"So what were you paying attention to?"

"You mean besides the fact that you're sitting right next to me, and I've been dying to fuck you all day?"

I gulped. "Besides that."

"Not a damned thing." His hand drifted from my face into my hair. Just like the very first time he'd kissed me under Club Nine's flashing lights, his eyes flicked back and forth from mine to my lips as he drew me closer. Something in the back of my mind, deep in my conscience, tried to remind me of the knot in my stomach, but when Matt's lips brushed mine, neither rational nor irrational thought existed anymore.

He wrapped his arms around me. The kiss deepened, and he used the tip of his tongue to gently draw mine into his mouth. Fingers ran through hair. Warm breath mingled in the narrow space between us. Bodies moved closer together.

A lifetime came and went between the moments our lips made and eventually broke contact.

Matt looked at me in the low light. An innocent grin spread across his lips. "I swear, I came over here to watch a movie."

"Well, the road to hell is paved with good intentions."

"Mm-hmm." He slipped his hand under my shirt. "And in a minute, the hallway to your bedroom will be littered with clothing."

"Promise?" I murmured against his lips.

He said nothing. Instead, he rose, offering both of his hands. When I took them, he pulled me to my feet, and his lips met mine as we both fumbled with the buttons on each other's shirts. Kissing and undressing, we slowly moved toward the bedroom, leaving a trail of clothes behind us just as we had the first time we fucked after going to the dance club.

With every step, with every article of clothing shed, the hunger between us intensified. Kisses deepened, grasps tightened, breaths became shallower and more ragged. More than once, I wanted to pull him down to the floor and beg to have him right then and there, but I forced myself to get all the way into the bedroom.

He laid me down and pulled me to the edge of the bed before dropping to his knees beside it. Caressing my inner thighs with his hands and lips, he worked his way toward my aching pussy.

The instant his mouth reached my pussy, I was in orbit. His fingers slipped inside me and he gently licked and sucked my clit. I closed my eyes and moaned, my hands combing through his hair.

In spite of his unmistakable hunger, he was in no hurry at all: exploring me with his mouth and fingers, giving me breathtaking pleasure, but it was as if he was drawing it out, keeping me from climaxing until he was ready to let me go. Matt savored my pussy the way he savored my kiss.

The ache intensified with each stroke of his fingers and sweep of his tongue. I fought to breathe at all, let alone with any kind of steady rhythm, taking in a gasp of air whenever the lightning bolts rushing through me subsided enough, only to let it out in a shuddering moan a second later.

I pushed myself against his mouth, tried to beg him to let me come, but only a whimper came out. And still he

continued, his fingers and tongue orchestrating every sensation that rushed through me, deliberately letting it go on and on, until at last he brought me to the edge and sent me over it.

My entire body seized, and my cries of pleasure were almost sobs as the powerful sensations overwhelmed me.

He slowly withdrew his fingers. I closed my eyes, struggling to catch my breath, swallowing hard as I heard the nightstand drawer open, close.

He made quick work of getting the condom out and on. We moved all the way onto the bed, and he got on top of me. Propping himself up on one arm, he guided his cock to me, pushing in slightly, then withdrawing. After a few strokes like that, he pulled almost all the way out, then leaned down and kissed me. Just as our lips met, he thrust all the way inside me, his mouth capturing the breath I released.

"I love fucking you right after you've come," he said, sliding his arms under my back and grasping my shoulders for leverage. "Your pussy is so tight and—" His lips brushed mine, and instead of continuing with his thought, he kissed me.

So close on the heels of an orgasm, the way he thrust into me was perfect. Absolutely perfect. Fast, deep, hard, and right in the middle of a kiss like that. It may have been seconds, or maybe minutes, but it didn't take long at all for him to make me come a second time.

Before I'd even recovered from that trip into the stratosphere, Matt bent and whispered in my ear, "Get on your knees." It wasn't a command or an order; it was almost a breathy plea. I wasn't sure how the hell I was going to move with these molten bones and trembling muscles, but I'd be damned if I was going to deny him what he wanted just then. I nodded, and he pulled out and sat back, offering his hand as I rose.

"You okay?" he asked.

I slid my hand around the back of his neck. "Just fine."

He smiled. "You're fucking amazing, you know that?"

I grinned and kissed him. "You're not so bad yourself."

"I certainly hope not." He nodded toward the bed.

"Come on. On your knees before I go out of my mind."



I shivered and did as he asked. I'd barely settled onto my forearms before his hands were on my hips, and a mere heartbeat later, he was inside me again.

"*That* is beautiful." His voice was throaty and hoarse. "Watching myself—" He pulled out, then pushed back in. "Disappear into you. Oh God..." His hands trembled on my hips. "I wish you could see what I'm seeing," he said, his voice unsteady. "You just don't know how beautiful this is."

"Tell me," I said.

"You're—" He sucked in a breath and shuddered. His rhythm faltered slightly. "Everything about this... it's..." He groaned and gripped my hips tighter. "Watching you take every last...every last inch... and..." Another shudder drove him into me, and he fucked me faster, still struggling to speak as he did. "Christ, baby, I can't even..." He trailed off into a moan.

Then his hand left my hip and brushed my hair aside, over one shoulder. I sensed his body shifting and his hand came down beside mine as he braced himself on the bed. A rush of breath escaped my throat when his lips touched the back of my neck, then my shoulder. His hot skin was against my back now, his breath on my neck sending chills through me.

He thrust with just his hips now, moving inside me in ways I'd never felt. He kissed my neck and shifted his weight to one arm, never losing his rhythm as his other hand moved down my body to my clit. I moaned as he circled it with not one, but two fingers, moving at precisely the same speed his cock moved inside me.

"Do you like that?"

"I love it." My voice sounded like someone else's. A lightning bolt of pleasure went through me and I moaned when my pussy involuntarily tightened around him. He gasped and nearly broke his rhythm, faltered again when I tightened again.

"Fuck me harder," I begged, startled by the sound of my own voice, by my own need for more.

But he didn't. He stopped and pulled out in spite of my whimpered protests.

"I want to be able to see your face," he whispered. "I want to see you come."

I didn't hesitate. As I turned around, though, he caught the back of my neck with one hand and kissed me. I put my arms around his neck and together we sank down to the bed. With a slow, smooth motion of his hips, he was inside me, his lips never leaving mine as he took long, smooth strokes. I grasped his shoulders and hooked my ankles behind his back. We both gasped, the kiss breaking, and each time we tried to meet each other's mouths, we failed. Missed. Missed again. Eventually gave up. His lips went to my neck. I kissed his shoulder, digging my fingers into his back.

"Oh, God, Matt," I moaned.

He groaned softly, exhaling against my neck. His shoulder moved, then his entire torso shifted. A second later, his hand slid under my thigh. I unhooked my ankles, letting him slide his arm under my knee and bring my leg up toward my chest. A helpless cry escaped my lips as the new angle positioned his cock right against my G-spot.

"Jesus, you're so tight like this," he said. "Oh God, you feel fucking *perfect*."

Icy-hot lightning rippled through me and I arched my back.

"Let yourself go," he whispered, and in that same heartbeat, I did just that, a helpless cry coming from somewhere deep inside as I climaxed for the third time that night, the force of my orgasm almost driving me to tears as Matt kept fucking me, as he growled "that's right, baby, oh God, that's right," into my ear and rode my orgasm all the way to the end. He started to kiss me just as it tapered off, but a throaty roar escaped his lips, breaking the kiss before it had begun. He slammed himself as deep into me as he could go and shuddered with his own climax.

We held each other, trembling and sweating. I ran my fingers through his hair and when he lifted his head, I kissed him. I tasted him, breathed him, lost myself in this overwhelming closeness to him. I couldn't get enough of him.

Eventually, he got up to get rid of the condom. Then we sank back down to the bed together, and I rested my head on his shoulder, listening to his heart pound in time with mine.

It was only now, in the fading afterglow of such passionate sex, that all my earlier concerns came crawling back. Scott. What about Scott?

Matt hadn't just made me forget about Scott and all of my intense, intimidating feelings. This wasn't simple distraction or diversion. From the first time he'd kissed me in front of the movie to the last powerful thrust he'd taken inside me, he'd been the *object* of those intense, intimidating feelings.

Resting my head on his shoulder, I closed my eyes as the knot tightened in my gut.

Whatever all these feelings were, whatever all of this meant, one thing was becoming abundantly clear: I was firmly planted in the middle of a straight line, standing equidistant between two points. I wasn't sure if, with a gun to my head, I could have chosen between those two points.

Sex with one didn't diminish my need for the other.

Maybe I wasn't in love with Scott after all. With good—no, great—sex comes intimacy, and after four years with Alec, I'd been so long without that kind of intimacy, I supposed it was easy to confuse it with love. If I felt the same way for both Matt and Scott, that must have been it.

Matt shifted next to me, gently freeing his arm and turning onto his side. I mirrored him, and we faced each other in silence. He ran his fingers down my cheek, along my jaw, and around to the back of my neck. Fabric hissed across skin and the pillow whispered of shifting weight as he leaned forward to kiss me lightly. He drew back, paused, and came back for more.

My heart fluttered as his lips moved so gently, so tenderly against my own. Between my fingers, his hair was still cool and damp with sweat, a reminder of everything we'd just done. Everything that was *supposed* to be just physical. Just sex. As he kissed me the way only a lover would, I couldn't quite convince myself it was just sex anymore. If anything, it was just *us*. When we were in bed together, nothing existed beyond this room. Nothing except the one other man who could make me feel this way.

Matt's lips left mine and our eyes met. In the low light, I could barely see his face or my fingers trailing down his cheek, but I could see enough to know there was no other

place I wanted to look right then.

*Oh God. I am falling in love with him.*

I loved Scott.

I loved Matt.

*Fucking hell. This is going to get complicated.*

## ***Thirty Four***

We fell asleep that night without exchanging more than a few words. The next morning, our respective jobs took us in separate directions, and all day long, I couldn't shake the nagging feeling in my gut that we needed to talk. Like, *now*.

I desperately needed to talk to him, but I couldn't reach him. For days, my calls went unreturned and my e-mails unanswered. Each day that passed without contact unnerved me a little more.

The longer the silence went on, the more nervous I became. Was he avoiding me for the same reason I sought him out? We'd made love, of that I had no doubt, and I wondered if he regretted it. If he thought we'd gone too far down a road we'd never intended to travel. And maybe we had, but that night couldn't have been a mistake. It was too hot, too perfect. But was it too intimate?

On Saturday night, he finally e-mailed me, but only to say he wouldn't make our Sunday run. On Wednesday, he didn't show up to play poker. Throughout the week, his car came and went and the lights in his apartment darkened and glowed, but our paths didn't cross. Even when I was with Scott, or with Scott and Byron, I couldn't get Matt off my mind or my conscience.

It was Friday before we finally ran into each other on the sidewalk. I'd planned to go run some errands that evening, and carefully timed my exit to coincide with his return from work. Just as I'd hoped, right about the time I

came downstairs, his car turned into the communal parking lot behind our buildings.

When he got out of the car, I was a few feet away. There was no surprise in his expression when he looked at me, so he must have seen me in one of his mirrors.

He closed the car door and locked it. Then he faced me, but he didn't look me in the eye.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey."

Days of trying to reach him, and now that I'd found him, I was at a loss for what to say. "I, um, I haven't seen you around much."

"Yeah, I know," he said. "I've been around. Just, you know, had a few things going on."

"Oh." I shifted my weight. "Everything okay?"

His eyes flicked up and met mine for a fleeting second. Then he looked away and nodded, clearing his throat. "Yeah, everything's fine."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Which is why you're looking anywhere but right at me?"

With a somewhat sheepish expression, he met my eyes.

"You've been avoiding me." I cringed. The words had come out as more of an accusation than I'd intended. Gentler now, I said, "Matt, what's going on?"

His gaze dropped. His shoulders followed. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I've just had some shit to sort out in my head. And I..." He trailed off, cursing under his breath.

"Whatever it is," I said. "Just tell me, I—"

"I love you."

My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. "You—what?"

With what must have been a great deal of effort, he looked me in the eye, "I love you, Kris."

A mixture of both relief and renewed worry flooded through me. "Matt, I love—"

"Don't say it unless you mean it," he snapped, but the unsteadiness of his voice undermined whatever anger he'd tried to inject into it.

I winced. "What makes you think I don't?"

He set his jaw and exhaled sharply, but didn't respond.

"Is this why you've been avoiding me?"

His cheeks darkened. Then he nodded slowly.

"Matt..." I took a step toward him, but he stiffened, so I stopped. "You love me, but you're keeping me at arm's length?"

Rubbing the back of his neck, he shifted his weight. "I do. And yeah, I guess I am. This is just..." He released another sharp breath. "It's complicated."

*Oh, you're not wrong there.*

"Then let's talk it through," I said. "I do love you." He flinched, and my stomach turned with guilt and worry and the sickening pre-emptive grief that comes with knowing something—someone—was slipping through my fingers. "I mean it," I whispered, trying to keep my voice even. "I wouldn't say it if I didn't."

Matt sniffed sharply, then looked at me. "And what about Scott?"

My stomach turned even harder. Before I could speak, though, he went on.

"I thought I could handle what you were doing with him. And in the beginning, I could. It was fine. But, things have changed."

And oh, how right he was. Things *had* changed. I hadn't been looking for love, and now I was in love with two men. Two men who I could neither have nor choose between if my life depended on it.

I dropped my gaze. "I know. Things have changed. And I..." I shook my head. "I don't know what the answer is."

He chewed his lip. "Neither do I. I've been avoiding you for the last few days because I didn't know how to tell you. Or where to go from here."

"That makes two of us," I said softly.

He gave a resigned half-shrug, the gesture making him look not just upset and confused, but exhausted. Passing cars and the noise of the city almost drowned out his voice when at last he spoke.

"All I know is that I can't ask you to choose between us, Kristen." His voice cracked and he trailed off, staring at

the pavement. "I wouldn't even think of it, not with..."

"Not with what?"

He took a breath and finally looked at me. In the silvery glow of the streetlights, his eyes were just a little shinier. "Not with the way I've seen you look at him."

My heart fell into my feet. "Matt—"

"I can't ask you to choose between us, but I can't pretend I don't feel this way." The silence that followed was heavy with something yet unspoken. Matt swallowed hard. "So I'm making the choice."

With that, he turned to go.

It only took a few taps of his shoes on the pavement for the shock to wear off enough to make way for deep, gut-turning panic. No, no, I couldn't let him walk away.

"Matt, wait."

He stopped and looked over his shoulder, but didn't turn around.

"Please," I whispered. "I don't want you to go."

"Do you want *him* to go?"

I bit my lip. What was I supposed to say to that?

He nodded once, sharply. "That's what I thought."

When he walked away this time, I didn't stop him. I just watched him go, my mind silently screaming for him to come back. I wanted to run after him, but my legs wouldn't listen. Maybe they knew better than I did that it was futile.

Matt paused at the entrance to his building.

He didn't look back.

He didn't look at me.

And with a shimmer of streetlights on a glass door, he was gone.



## ***Thirty Five***

A week passed. I neither saw nor spoke to Matt. I didn't call Scott. By the end of the second week, he'd stopped calling me. Guilt and confusion consumed me. Day or night, I could think of nothing else, and at the end of that second week, I was no closer to figuring out what to do than I'd been the moment Matt walked away from me.

If I figured anything out during that time, it was the single biggest downside of getting involved with my two best friends: who the hell was I supposed to turn to for advice when things hit the skids? Had I been seeing Matt, I'd have gone to Scott. If I'd been with Scott, I'd have gone to Matt.

More than once, Alec's voice reverberated through my mind: *"I'll go, and you can have all the crazy, freakish sex you want. Mark my words, though. In a few months, after you've had a little fun and realize how sick it all is, you'll regret this."*

Oh, I didn't regret kicking him out, but I certainly had my regrets. Not for the sex, as he'd predicted, but the emotional aftermath of the same.

I needed some advice, and I needed it badly. I needed to talk to someone who didn't need to first get his or her head around the arrangement I'd had with Matt and Scott. Someone who understood what we'd been doing in the first place, never mind how to fix it after it had gone off the rails.

Fortunately, I knew just such a person, and I exhaled with more than a little relief when Byron walked into the café where I waited.

Out in public, he painted a completely different picture than he did at the club or in Scott's dungeon. He wore a plain

white T-shirt tucked into comfortable but form-fitting jeans, and the only leather to be found was his belt.

"Hey, you," he said, smiling as I stood to greet him. We exchanged a friendly hug and he kissed my cheek. Then we took our seats.

I tapped my thumb on the edge of the table. "Thanks for coming."

"No problem."

"Can I take your order?" The waitress appeared out of nowhere and set glasses of ice water in front of both of us.

Byron glanced at me. Then he looked at her. "Just a Coke for me, thanks."

"I'll have the same."

"Two Cokes." As quickly as she'd appeared, the waitress was gone.

"Anyway," Byron said. "You were saying?" He picked up his glass, and a gold band on his left hand caught my eye.

I gestured at the ring. "I didn't know you were married."

He took a drink, then nodded. "Charlotte and I have been married for almost nine years. I just don't wear my ring when we play."

A glimmer of hope flickered to life in my mind. "So, you're polyamorous, then?"

"No, no, not us." He smiled. "We'll play with other subs and Doms, but our relationship? It's just the two of us. I wouldn't have it any other way." Lines of concern creased his forehead. "So anyway, what's up? Something wrong?"

"Well, sort of, it's—"

"Two Cokes," the waitress announced.

When she was gone again, Byron sipped his Coke and looked at me. "You were saying?"

I let out a breath. "I don't even know where to start."

He steepled his fingers in front of his lips. "Well, would it be safe to assume it has something to do with Scott?"

"Yeah. Yeah, it does." I took a breath. "Here's the thing. Scott and I have been friends for years. When he found out I wanted to give BDSM a try, he offered to take me under his wing and introduce me to it."

"And you could definitely do worse than having him as

a Dom." He smiled. "I'm sure you know that already."

"You're not wrong there."

His smile fell. "So, what happened?"

"Well, things were fine for a while, but then I got involved with my *other* best friend. And I've been involved with both of them for a while now."

Byron's eyebrows lifted. "Is she—"

"He."

"Oh." A cautious smile played at his lips and he inclined his head. "You were the girl who preferred to go build tree forts with the boys rather than play dolls with the girls, weren't you?"

"How did you know?"

"Your two best friends are men and you're asking relationship advice from a man instead of a woman."

"Point taken. I've always been more comfortable with male friends. I don't know why." I paused. "That, and you're the only one I know besides Scott who wouldn't have to spend an hour just fitting my arrangement with Matt and Scott into your head before we got to the advice part."

Byron laughed. "Fair enough." He folded his hands and rested his forearms on the edge of the table. "Anyway, go on. You and your other friend...?"

I played with the coaster under my drink. "We had a casual thing going. Just like I had with Scott." I chewed my lip. "But, things haven't stayed very casual."

"With Scott or the other guy?"

"Both."

Byron's eyes widened slightly and he sat back. "I see."

"Matt told me the other night that he loved me." I swallowed hard. "Right before he walked away."

"Wait, wait, wait." Byron shook his head. "He told you he loved you, *then* he walked away?"

I nodded. "Because he didn't want to make me choose between him and Scott."

"Oh." He tapped his fingers on the side of his glass. "Did he think you'd choose Scott over him?"

"I think so." I sighed.

"Let me ask you this," he said. "If you had to choose between them, who would you pick?"

I shook my head. "I couldn't. I don't think I could if

my life depended on it." Rubbing the bridge of my nose with my thumb and forefinger, I sighed. "I don't want to hurt either of them, I don't want to lose either friendship, but..."

"I can see why you're confused. I don't envy you."

"So, what do I do?"

"Talk to them. That's about all you can do."

I blew out a breath and ran a hand through my hair. "Fuck, I wish I'd known from the beginning that things would get this complicated."

Byron sat up, resting his forearms on the table. "So, your other friend left, but what about Scott? What happened with him?"

"Nothing, really. I haven't talked to him." Shame twisted in my gut. "I feel like an ass, I just... I haven't been able to face him."

"Why?"

"Because I..." I hesitated. "Because my relationship with him is the reason Matt backed away, and..." I sketched a frustrated gesture with one hand before I shook my head and sighed.

Byron was silent for a moment, brow furrowed as he stared with unfocused eyes at the center of the table. At long last, his gaze rose to meet mine. "This whole thing with them," he said. "Getting involved with your friend, having Scott train you as a sub, everything." He inclined his head. "Do you regret it?"

I chewed my lip. Did I?

"Kristen?"

"Yes." I stared into my drink. "Yes, I do."

"Do you really?"

Sighing I let my head fall forward so I could rub the back of my neck. "It wasn't worth it. It was fun, it was hot, it got me out of the rut I was in with my ex-boyfriend, but if it's even damaged my friendships with them?" I looked up, shaking my head. "Then it just wasn't worth it."

Byron's eyebrows knitted together. "I'm sorry it turned out this way for you."

"So am I," I said. "It might have been okay if I'd only gotten emotionally involved with one of them, but that's a moot point. And now? I can't even begin to choose between them."

"Then maybe that's your choice."

"What? To have both of them?"

He nodded.

"Matt would never go for that. I don't even think I could handle it."

"But you can't change how you feel. And if the only honest choice for you is both of them, then," he paused, shrugging, "then that's your choice. That's what you should tell them."

"And I could lose both of them."

"That's out of your hands." He leaned forward, resting his arms on the table. "But it's what you feel. It's the truth. And it would be better to lose them both to honesty than win one of them through a lie."

"Good point."

"It's not going to be easy, but I can't imagine any solution to this that would be." He offered an apologetic shrug. "The only simple answer is that there *is* no simple answer to something like this."

"Damn it, Byron," I said, laughing in spite of myself. "You were supposed to have the magic, easy answer."

He chuckled. "Why do you think I stay relatively monogamous? Far too complicated for my taste." A grin crinkled the corners of his eyes. "Trust me, my hands are full enough with Charlotte."

"I can imagine." I managed another half-hearted laugh, then sat back, exhaling hard. "I just don't know how this will pan out. I don't want to hurt them, but I'm not sure if there's any way to solve this without *someone* getting hurt."

"There may not be a way to keep from hurting everyone involved." He steepled his fingers again. "My suggestion is to be completely straightforward with both of them. If you've been able to maintain this situation all this time, I'm assuming you can communicate with them pretty easily. Your best bet is to sit both of them down, lay it all out on the table, and go from there."

"I'm just afraid that'll blow up in my face."

"It already has, Kristen. Honesty and open communication are the only things that are going to fix it now."

I chewed my lip. "I don't know if those even stand a chance."

"Well, if anything can..."

"True."

He reached across the table and rested a hand on my arm. His voice low and gentle, he said, "I know you can get through this, Kristen. It's not going to be easy, and the end result might hurt, but you're a strong woman." He grinned. "If you can put Victor in his place, you can set things right with these two."

I smiled in spite of the knot in the pit of my stomach. I hoped he was right.

## ***Thirty Six***

I watched the ancient clock on the bathroom counter, holding my breath as the faded numbers seemed frozen at six fifty-nine. After an eternity, they flipped to seven o'clock.

I exhaled hard. My senses shifted toward the still, silent air around me, searching for any indication that someone was at my door.

Any minute. They'd be here any minute.

Just before I left the bathroom to go into the living room, I took one last look at my reflection. My shoulders slouched under the weight of the world, and lack of sleep darkened the skin beneath my eyes. I looked like hell and felt worse.

Clicking off the light, I went into the living room, sank into a chair, and waited.

I wondered who would get there first. Neither Matt nor Scott made a habit of being late, but if they hung back a little this time, if they weren't in a huge rush to get here, I couldn't blame them. I hadn't told them why I'd asked them over, only that I wanted to talk to them.

Neither knew the other was coming. I wondered if they'd run into each other in the elevator or hallway. If they did, would they agree this was a waste of time and leave before they made it to my front door?

I prayed they made it all the way here. I had no illusions that the subsequent conversation would be fun, but it needed to happen. Tonight. It couldn't wait. There was no simple, painless solution, but they needed to know. I owed them that much. I owed it to them to be honest. Holding

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onto Byron's advice for dear life, I promised myself I would be, but even his wisdom offered only so much comfort.

*It would be better to lose them both to honesty than win one of them through a lie.*

Closing my eyes, I rested my elbows on my knees and rubbed my forehead. Matt had already made his choice, but he'd done so thinking I couldn't love him like I loved Scott. Or *while* I loved Scott. Whether it swayed his decision or not, I needed him to know the truth. I needed both of them to know.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end.

I froze.

My front door muffled the scuff of footsteps on carpet. Footsteps that approached slowly, tentatively, and stopped.

I rose, staring at my door and listening over the deafening whisper of my own clothing rustling with my slow movement. I prayed for a knock. Prayed for retreating footsteps. Prayed for it to be Matt or Scott. Prayed for anyone but them.

Three knocks sent my heart rate through the roof.

I went to the door, and when I opened it, Matt's tired eyes met mine.

"Hey." I dropped my gaze and stood back to let him in.

"Hey." He hesitated, and for a moment, I was afraid he wouldn't follow me inside. He did, but he kept his distance.

"Thanks for coming."

"No problem."

"I just, I needed to talk to you." I swallowed. "To both of you."

Matt's posture stiffened. "Scott's here too?"

"Not yet."

His lips thinned. Looking at the floor between us, he shifted his weight and sighed.

My cramped, claustrophobic hallway was suddenly cavernous, echoing with the silence that hung in the miles of distance between Matt and me. He was little more than an arm's length away, but he was light years beyond my reach.

I hoped to God Scott showed up soon. The only conversation I could think to make just then was the one I



needed to have with both of them, and I wasn't sure how much uncomfortable silence Matt would take before he left.

Footsteps outside. My nerve endings prickled with the same fear and worry that made my heart beat dangerously fast. Matt's jaw tightened and his eyes flicked toward the door a second before the first knock.

"That would be Scott," I said, barely whispering.

When I opened the door, our eyes met. Scott's usual cockiness was completely absent, and in its place was uncertainty. He glanced over my shoulder and jumped as if he'd been shocked, most likely at the sight of Matt. Like Matt—like *me*—Scott didn't know how this evening would progress, nor how it would end, and he wore his apprehension on his sleeve.

I stood aside to let him past. After I'd shut the door, I paused, my back to both of them, and took a deep breath. No turning back now.

Behind me, denim rustled as Matt shifted his weight. They may have exchanged uncertain glances, but I didn't look at either of them. Even when I turned around, I kept my eyes down.

"Why don't we take this into the living room?" I didn't give either of them a chance to respond before I went ahead of them. After a second, someone fell into step with me. Then the other. We moved from the hallway into the living room, but none of us sat. I rested my hip against the sofa. Matt stood near the door to the kitchen, arms folded across his chest and gaze fixed on anything that wasn't Scott or me. Scott leaned against the wall on the other side of the room.

I took a deep breath. "Listen, I wanted to talk to both of you about..." I hesitated. "About what we are— *were* doing."

They both looked at me, eyebrows lifting slightly. Neither spoke.

"This was supposed to be just about sex," I said, my voice shaking, "it was just supposed to be fun. With both of you. And—"

"Krissy," Scott said, "you—"

"—I wasn't supposed to fall in love with either of you, let alone both of you."

They both took in sharp breaths. The words hung

between the three of us, the air tightening with unasked questions. I hadn't intended to blurt it out like that, but there it was.

My shoulders dropped as I exhaled hard. I ran a hand through my hair. "I wasn't supposed to fall in love with both of you. But I did."

They glanced at each other, then at me. When neither of them spoke, I went on.

"The thing is, you always hear about women wanting a man who's also her best friend." I hugged myself, trying desperately to keep from shaking. "And that's what I have in both of you. You're my best friends, you've both been my lovers, and I..." I wetted my lips, gulping back the lump that tried to rise in my throat. "I don't want to hurt either of you, but I don't know how to choose between you. Matt, I know you've already made a choice. I just can't help feeling like this isn't settled."

He tightened his lips and released a long breath through his nose. Scott didn't move, didn't speak.

Their silence did nothing to help me keep my composure, and my voice shook when I went on. "That's it. That's the honest truth. I don't know where to go from here, but..." I took a deep breath. "I needed you both to know." There. It was all out. Nothing left to say, nothing left to do except let the chips fall where they would.

Matt closed his eyes and released a sharp breath. He rubbed his forehead with his thumb and forefinger. Scott shifted his weight, eyes darting back and forth between Matt and me.

Finally, he broke the silence, "Who says you can't have both of us?"

"How the hell would that work?" Matt asked. Then he raised an eyebrow. "Wait, you're talking about that polyamoury thing, aren't you?"

"Yes."

Matt put his hands up and shook his head. "No way. No, I can't—"

"Why not?" Scott asked.

"I can't do it either," I said.

Scott sighed. "Krissy, we've been doing it all along."

"That's not how it started out," I said. "This was just a

sexual thing. It wasn't supposed to get..." I dropped my gaze for a moment. Finally I looked at Matt, then Scott. "It wasn't supposed to get to this point."

Scott nodded. "It wasn't supposed to—"

"But it did," Matt broke in.

"Yes, it did," Scott said. "So there's no sense dwelling on what was or wasn't supposed to happen. It did, here we are, and I think we'd all like to work it out as painlessly as possible."

"How the fuck is that even possible?" Matt snapped.

"A little open-mindedness could get us somewhere," Scott said through his teeth.

Matt scowled, but said nothing.

Scott's eyes darted back and forth between us. "This isn't how I would normally start a poly relationship, but, it kind of happened on its own." He looked at me. "Prior to the day one of us admitted to having feelings like this, had your relationship with me taken away at all from your relationship with him?"

"No. If anything—" I chewed my lip, glancing back and forth between them before I went on. "If anything, being with both of you has made things even better. Sexually, I mean."

"And has it detracted at all from the way things are emotionally? For either of you?"

Matt and I both shook our heads.

Scott put his hands up. "So how does—"

"It's the way she feels about *you*," Matt said. He looked at me. "You're all I've ever wanted in a woman, Kris, but how am I supposed to feel when you're basically telling me I'm not enough to make you happy?"

"That's not how it is at all," I said. "You're not inadequate, you're not lacking, you're—"

"I'm not Scott," he said through clenched teeth.

My shoulders dropped. "What do you want me to say, Matt?"

He sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. The silence went on, but eventually, he looked at me and said, "I don't know what there is to say. I love you, and I want to be with you, but this..." He made a sweeping gesture to encompass all three of us, and when he spoke again, his voice was

unsteady. "I just don't see how this could work."

My heart sank a little deeper. It was easier to hear him out when he was angry. Knowing how much this hurt him was killing me. I took a deep breath. "I don't know if it could or how it could, either. At the very least, I don't want to lose my friends." I chewed my thumbnail, eyes flicking back and forth between the two men I loved. "I just don't know how to move forward as friends now that we've been here."

"And I'd rather have you as a friend than not at all," Scott said. "But I won't pretend I'm not in love with you."

"Then what do we do?" Matt's voice was laced with irritation. "You make it sound so simple for us to operate as a triple, but—"

"I just don't see why anyone should have to get hurt over this," Scott said sharply. "Not when there's a solution that could avoid that."

"Who's to say none of us will get hurt in a poly arrangement?" Matt asked. "They don't always last forever, do they?"

"No, no, of course not." Scott shifted his weight. "But if we make her choose, or she prefers to do so, or if we both leave, then someone loses. Someone gets hurt." He wrung his hands, and his eyes shifted back and forth between us. "But we've been doing the poly thing all this time and it's worked just fine. Just because we've acknowledged it doesn't mean it's suddenly wrong or that it *won't* work. Quite frankly, I think it's worked just fine so far, so why change it?"

Scott was always so controlled, calm, and collected. Tonight, I couldn't help noticing the note of panic in his voice, as if he was unnerved by the fact that tonight's outcome was out of his hands.

I swallowed hard. "You two both deserve more than half a woman, though."

Scott shook his head. "Who says we'd only have half of you? I love Amy, but that doesn't change how I feel about you or how much of myself I'd give you." To Matt, he said, "And I wouldn't be taking anything from you."

Neither Matt nor I spoke.

It was Scott who finally broke the lingering silence.

"We only have a few options." He looked at Matt. "One, you and I draw straws and one of us walks out of here alone." He turned to me. "Two, we make you choose, and one of us walks out alone while you, if I know you as well as I think I do, get consumed by guilt. Three, Matt and I both walk out of here alone, and nobody wins." He paused. "Or four, we figure out how to function together, the same way we've been doing it all along." "

"Except it's not the same thing we've been doing it all along," Matt said.

"Isn't it?" Scott said. "No one's feelings magically changed when they came out and admitted them. Whether we've been doing this since the beginning or it gradually happened while no one was looking, the fact is—" He paused, quickly clearing his throat. "The fact is, it happened. Here we are."

"I just, I can't get my head around this." Matt ran a hand through his hair. "Sex is one thing, but..."

Scott swallowed. "Look, I know this is a weird concept for both of you. But really, as I've said, it's what we've been doing all along. Just because we're acknowledging the feelings doesn't mean they magically appeared overnight."

"I understand that," Matt said quietly. "But..."

"Maybe this is easy for me because I've been doing the polyamorous thing for so long," Scott said, "but Krissy, I'd rather share you than lose you."

I held his gaze for a moment, then looked at Matt. It was like having an angel and a devil on my shoulders. One pushing me forward, one pulling me back. And the more I thought about it, that was how it had been all along with Matt and Scott. Not that they'd been pulling me in different directions, but they'd been the polar opposites that brought me balance. My devil and my angel. Fire and ice. Calm and crazy.

Up until that moment, I'd thought I couldn't do polyamory. Facing the two of them like this, I couldn't imagine having one and not the other.

"Maybe Scott's right," I said.

Matt's eyebrows jumped. "Are you serious?"

"Well, why not?" I glanced back and forth between them again. "Look, right or wrong, complicated or not, I love

both of you." I swallowed. "If I chose between you, I'd have to lie to one of you, because there's no way I could honestly say I love one of you over the other."

Matt chewed his lip. "Then, what do you want to do?"

"I can't choose between you. I just, I can't. In fact—" I took a deep breath, forcing back the lump that rose in my throat. I'd never before had so much to lose as a result of one decision. Barely whispering, I said, "It's either both of you, or neither of you. All or nothing."

Matt exhaled hard and his shoulders dropped. Scott leaned against the wall, alternately watching Matt and me. Finally, he took a breath and looked at Matt.

"That means it's your call, then." He wetted his lips. "You know where I stand."

Matt eyed him. "No pressure, right?" he said dryly.

Scott shrugged apologetically. "It takes three 'yeses' to make something like this work, and only one 'no' to veto it."

"How does something like this even work, anyway?" Matt asked.

Scott shrugged. "It's no different from any relationship you've ever had, minus the monogamy. I've been with my other girlfriend for three years, and she's been married for almost ten. She's my girlfriend, she's his wife, and neither arrangement takes away from the other at all. Look, I'm not going to lie, polyamorous relationships do take more work. They are, by nature, more complex. But they can and do work, and quite honestly, it's worth the extra effort."

Matt's brow furrowed and he stared at the floor between us, his lips thinning into a bleached line. I wrung my hands. Scott was still, almost maintaining his usual calm, collected appearance except for the way his fingers drummed rapidly against the wall beside him. No one spoke.

Once again it was Scott who at last broke the silence.

"Matt, do you love her?"

The question sent my heart into my throat.

"Yes, absolutely," Matt said without hesitation.

"As do I." Scott folded his arms across his chest. If the way he fidgeted was any indication, it wasn't a defensive stance, just a way to occupy his hands. "Has the way I feel about her even remotely detracted from the way things are

between the two of you?"

Matt let out a breath. "No. No, I suppose it hasn't."

"I know she loves you. I don't want to interfere with that, I don't want to take her away from you. All I want from you—" He cut himself off, swallowing hard. His eyes darted to one side and he cleared his throat.

"Scott?" I whispered.

Drawing a breath, he looked at me, then at Matt. "I have no reservations at all about sharing her with you. Just—" He paused again. His voice dropped to a whisper as he said, "Just don't take her away from me."

Matt's breath caught. So did mine.

Scott cleared his throat again. "That's all I ask."

"You really think this could work?" Matt asked me.

"I don't know," I said. "I have no idea if it'll work or not. But, it's worth a try."

"The way we've been doing things now has worked all along," Scott said. "I see no reason to change it."

Matt ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "This could be fun to explain to the rest of the world."

Scott made a dismissive gesture. "Fuck the rest of the world."

"That's easy for you to say," Matt said. "Do people in your life know about it?"

"Some do, some don't. If they have a problem with it, they don't stay in my life," Scott said. "Though I have kept it from my mom."

"She wouldn't approve?" I asked.

"No, it's just easier to explain why she doesn't have grandkids yet when I tell her I'm single rather than saying I have a small harem of girlfriends."

I stared at him incredulously. His lip curled into a cautious, but devilish grin. Matt snorted, and I couldn't help myself either. The air rippled with releasing tension as we all gave in and laughed.

Then Matt cleared his throat. "Okay, I'll be honest," he said. "The whole concept still seems strange to me. I'm not even sure I can fit the whole idea in my brain." My heart sank, but he wasn't finished yet. "But we've been doing this all along. I want to be with you, Kris, and it's worked fine up to this point with all of us involved. I guess I'd be hard-

pressed to justify asking you to choose between us."

I stared at him. "So you're..." I bit my lip. "You're okay with this?"

He hesitated, then nodded slowly. "I'm willing to try it and see what happens." He stepped closer to me. Taking a deep breath, he cradled my face in both hands. He swallowed hard, and I held my breath, afraid any lingering reservations would overpower Scott's logic.

He kissed me.

With the gentle contact of his lips to mine, he quieted my worries and melted the tension in my neck and shoulders. I put my arms around him, sinking against him as my knees trembled beneath me.

He lifted his head and looked into my eyes. "I love you," he whispered.

"I love you, too."

He smiled, kissed me one more time, and let me go. After Matt stepped aside, Scott put his arms around me and kissed me.

"I love you," I said.

His trademark cockiness came back in the narrowness of his eyes and the curl of his lip. "Of course you do."

Rolling my eyes, I smacked him playfully. "Brat."

He laughed, then kissed me again, releasing my lips just long enough to murmur, "I love you, too."

When Scott broke the kiss, Matt looked at us with a grin and said, "So, I guess the question now is, what do we do with the rest of tonight?"

"Hmm." Scott stroked his chin with his thumb and forefinger. "I don't know." His eyes narrowed slightly and shifted toward me. A grin pulled at his lips. "But maybe a glass of red wine would help me think of something."



# ***Epilogue***

*About a Year Later*

"Four of a kind." I fanned four queens on the table. "Read 'em and weep, boys."

Matt, Steve, and Jim groaned in unison.

"I think someone needs to see if she's got cards up her sleeve," Jim said.

I tugged at my sweatshirt sleeves. "Nope, no cards. Guess I just have better poker skills than you do."

"Better luck is more like it," Matt said, eyeing me.

"Luck, skills." I shrugged and pulled the chips toward my side of the table. "Either way, I'm winning."

The doorbell rang. Ramona excused herself to answer it, and when she returned, Scott followed.

"Hey, Moore, it's about damned time." Matt rose to shake Scott's hand.

Scott shook his hand and clapped his shoulder. "Come on, now, some of us actually have to do more than just walk down the hall for this."

"Oh, excuses, excuses," Matt said with a theatrical sigh.

Scott rubbed his eye with his middle finger, then turned to kiss me on the cheek. A completely platonic, friendly peck to anyone who cared to look, and my sweatshirt masked the goose bumps his aftershave always gave me.

"Looks like you've all been doing just fine without me anyway," he said.

"Well, someone has," Jim muttered. He stood and gestured at his chair. "In fact, why don't you have a seat over here at the Kristen Locke Slaughterhouse?"

Scott laughed. "I think I can handle her."

"Good luck," Matt said. "The woman's on fire tonight."

Scott shot me a devilish grin. "Oh, I think I can put a stop to that."

"We'll just see about that." Steve put the deck in front of Matt. "Shuffle it, Sommers, and let's see if this guy can put his money where his mouth is."

"Kristen's been raking it in all night," Jim said. "I think that woman's been counting cards or something."

Matt laughed. "You don't count cards in poker, idiot. That's blackjack."

"Maybe we should play blackjack, then," Steve said. "I could count cards and—"

"Oh, come on," Jim said. "Everyone knows you can't count that high."

"Well, card-counting or not, I think it's time someone's reign of terror ended." Scott smirked. "Let me go get a drink first, but enjoy your chips, Locke. They'll be coming my way shortly."

"Arrogant bastard," I said.

"That's why you love me, darling." He deliberately bumped my chair with his hip as he walked by. Our eyes met and he winked before he disappeared into the kitchen.

Scott had joined our poker nights a few months ago after Larry moved out of the complex. He'd fit right in with the banter and shit-talking, and he played a damned good game of five-card draw. His cockiness was the perfect poker face: no one could ever tell if he was bluffing.

And as far as the three of us knew, no one else at the tables had any idea what was going on between us. The guys didn't seem to care anyway, and Lynette and Ramona had never gotten more than vague answers and denials out of me. Scott wasn't the only one who could put on a convincing poker face.

Scott returned, red wine in hand, and took a seat across from me, where Jim had been sitting. I eyed the glass, then him. Matt just snickered.

"Okay, let's deal this game," Steve said.

Matt picked up the deck. "Everyone ready."

"I am." Scott grinned, looking right at me as Matt started dealing. "How about you, Krissy?" He sipped his wine, and when he set the glass down, damn it, I knew that look.

I gulped. *Scott Moore, don't you dare unbutton your sleeve.*

"I'm ready," I said.

"Good." The grin broadened.

*Don't do it.*

*Don't...*

*Oh, you bastard.*

Matt hid a laugh behind his cards. I shot him a *don't encourage him* look, and he replied with a shrug and a wide-eyed expression of innocence. Of course he would encourage Scott. After all, he knew full well where the three of us would end up once Scott worked his evil magic on me. I had no doubt he was banking on it. God only knew I was, too.

By the time Scott finished rolling his sleeve and went for his wine glass, my knees were trembling under the table and I no longer knew—or cared—what game we were playing.

The cards and chips didn't matter. We went through the motions, we placed our bets, we called and raised and folded, but this was a different kind of game for us. They could take every last chip from my side of the table and another fifty from my purse for good measure. None of that mattered because after we left this table, Scott Moore and Matt Sommers were going to fuck the hell out of me.

And no one knew except the three of us.

They all wondered why I lost my touch that night, why Scott's arrival broke my winning streak, but they didn't need to know. Nor did they need to know about the black corset and garters I had on beneath my jeans and sweatshirt.

After all, I'd worn that for my boyfriends, not my neighbors.

## About Lauren

Lauren Gallagher is an erotica writer currently living in Okinawa, Japan, with her husband and two incredibly spoiled cats. When she's not snorkeling in the crystal clear waters around the island, trying to elude the Polynesian Mafia, or taking pictures of hermit crabs, she also writes gay male erotic romance under the pseudonym L. A. Witt. She is a direct descendant of Genghis Khan, Ulysses S. Grant, and the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl. This makes for the occasionally awkward family reunion.

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