



Carnal Passions Presents

Reconstructing Meredith

By

Lauren Gallagher



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Other Books by Lauren Gallagher

Between Brothers

The Next Move

Until It's Over

Light Switch

A Note From The Author

This book contains references to traumatic physical and sexual abuse, including rape and imprisonment, and the psychological effects thereof. While the abuse is not shown, it is discussed and may be upsetting to some readers. Please use your discretion.

- L. Gallagher

Dedication

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

One

King. Queen. Jack. Ten. Nine. All spades.

Only a well-practiced poker face kept me from grinning. With a king-high straight flush in my hand, the only thing that could save any of my opponents was a royal flush.

Kristen, one of my girlfriends, eyed me from across the table, undoubtedly inspecting my expression for anything that might betray the hand I held. I just looked back at her, laid my cards facedown on the table, and folded my hands over them.

She laughed quietly. Why she still tried to read me, I didn't know. My poker face was as rock solid as her own.

I looked to my left. Steve, tonight's host, scowled at his cards. His visible frustration was too intense to be a bluff. He was probably thinking his shitty hand meant he was fucked. Which I supposed was true, but it was really my hand, not his, that meant he was fucked.

And it was about damned time, too. I was already down almost fifty bucks tonight, and most of that was in the pile of chips in front of Kristen. It was high time I got some of that back.

Matt, Kristen's other boyfriend, tapped a five-dollar chip on the table. "Kris, you're opening."

She didn't hesitate, picking up two fivers and tossing them into the center of the table. "Ten."

Steve's scowl intensified. He chewed his lip for a second, then threw in two chips. "Call."

I did the same, minus the display of frustration. "Call."

Matt raised the bet to fifteen. Kristen and Steve both raised their eyebrows. His five-dollar raise could have been cockiness or a bluff, knowing him. Still, I wasn't worried.

Matt tapped the deck with two fingers. "Kristen, how many?"

She pulled two cards out of her hand and slid them across the table. Matt dealt two and sent them her way.

He raised his eyebrows. "Steve?"

"Four," Steve muttered. They exchanged cards.

“Scott?”

I started to speak, but my cell phone vibrated in my pocket, startling me. As I pulled it out, I said, “None for me.”

I looked at my caller ID. The number was unrecognized, so it was probably a wrong number. I debated kicking it over to voicemail, but since they were calling at past nine on a weeknight, there was always the possibility it wasn’t a wrong number and was important. Keeping my voice as quiet as I could, I answered.

“Hello?”

“Scott?”

The woman’s voice raised the hairs on the back of my neck. It couldn’t be. Not after all this time.

I cleared my throat. “Yes, this is Scott.”

“Oh, thank God.” She was almost whispering. “It’s...”

My heart pounded. “Meredith?”

Kristen met my eyes from across the table, eyebrows up.

“Yeah,” Meredith said softly. “It’s me.”

I nodded. Kristen’s eyes widened.

To Meredith, I said, “This is... unexpected.”

Matt and Kristen’s voices murmured in the background, behind the blood pounding in my ears and the tense silence on the line.

“...someone you know?”

“...his ex-girlfriend...”

Meredith took a breath. “Listen, I know I’m probably the last person you expected to hear from, and...” She dropped her voice a little lower. “Scott, I need your help.”

If there were five words in the English language that could make me abandon a king-high straight flush when I was fifty in the hole, those were the ones.

“Hold on a second.” I pushed my chair back. To the other players, I said, “I need to take this. I’m out.”

Kristen shot me an inquisitive look, but didn’t say anything.

I ducked into the kitchen so I could speak to Meredith privately and not disturb the other players. “So, what’s going on?”

“It’s a long story. There’s—” She exhaled. “A lot’s happened in the last few years.”

Something cold wrapped itself around the base of my spine. Her voice was different somehow. I couldn’t decide if she sounded exhausted or on the brink of tears. Or both.

“Meredith, are you okay?”

She took another breath, and the raggedness of it only tightened that chill coiling around my spine.

“Meredith—”

“I’d rather discuss it in person,” she said quietly.

I swallowed. "When?"

"Whenever. The sooner the better, but it's not a dire emergency."

That allowed me a little bit of relief. Not much, though. I wouldn't rest easy until I had the full story.

"What about now?" I asked.

"On such short notice? Scott, I don't want you to drop—"

"Where are you? I can leave now, just tell me where you are."

"It's not an emergency," she said. "I don't want you to drop everything."

"Do you need my help?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then let me help you," I said. "Tell me where to be and when to be there."

The breath she released was pure relief. I wondered if she'd worried I'd turn her away. I hoped she knew me better than that; whatever was in our past, I would never leave her high and dry.

"Can you meet me at my apartment?" she asked.

"Text me the address," I said. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

She said nothing for a moment, then whispered, "Thank you, Scott."

After we'd hung up, I chewed my lip and stared at my now dormant phone. I looked up just as Kristen stepped into the kitchen.

"Everything okay?" she asked.

"Yeah. I have to go, though."

"What's wrong?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. Meredith says she needs my help, but fuck if I know what that means."

She put her hands on my hips. "You think she's in some kind of trouble?"

"No idea." I slid my phone back into my pocket. "Hopefully it's nothing serious, but if she's calling me after all this time..."

"Think it has to do with her husband?"

That cold something wound itself a little tighter. I nodded slowly. "I'd be willing to bet it does." I hoped it didn't. I hoped I'd been wrong about him from the beginning, but I doubted it.

Matt appeared in the doorway. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, I think so, but I have to go." I grinned and ran my fingers through Kristen's hair. To Matt, I said, "Guess you'll have to take care of her on your own tonight."

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

"Didn't think it would be." I looked at Kristen. "I'll make it up to you, I promise."

"Damn right you will."

I raised an eyebrow. "Don't get mouthy with me, woman."

"What are you going to do about it?"

I laughed. “I’m going to—” I paused when I put my hands on her waist. I squeezed gently, noting the stiff, thick fabric beneath her unassuming sweatshirt. Then I released a long breath through my nose. “You’re wearing the black corset tonight, aren’t you?”

She batted her eyes. “Maybe I am.”

“Vile temptress,” I growled, and leaned in to kiss her. My phone buzzed, probably signaling that Meredith’s text message had come through. “And on that note, I have to run.”

“Okay.” Kristen stood up on her toes to kiss me one more time. “Give her a hug for me.”

“Will do.”

“Love you.”

“Love you, too.” We parted with one last brief kiss. Then I shook Matt’s hand, cashed out my chips, said goodbye to everyone else, and left.

Steve’s apartment was on the second floor, and I was thankful we’d had poker night at his place this week. Several of the other players were on some of the higher floors, and the elevators in this place were painfully slow. At least from here, I could just take the stairs instead of losing my mind waiting for the elevator.

On the way down the stairs and out to the parking lot, my thoughts went back to my short, cryptic conversation with Meredith. What was going on? Why me? Why now?

I hoped against all hope it wasn’t what I thought it was.

We’d parted *almost* amicably after living together for a couple of years, and things were strained for a while after that. Time eased the resentment, though, and eventually our friendship had flourished. In the back of my mind, I’d held onto the hope that we might get back together, but I was content with friendship if that was the best thing for us.

Then she met Rich.

I gritted my teeth at the very thought of him. I punched Meredith’s address into my car’s GPS, then turned out of the parking lot and followed the directions.

Rich had sent up all kinds of red flags from the very beginning. I never actually met the son of a bitch, but when Meredith abruptly cut off contact with me after seeing him for two weeks, alarm bells went off in my head. She stopped returning my calls and blocked my e-mail address. Within a month, she’d stopped communicating with any of our mutual friends, and before the second month was up, she’d quit her job and moved out of state with him.

Last I’d heard, they’d married about six months later. That was five years ago, and to my knowledge, no one in our social circle had heard from her again.

I’d thought about her often since then. I alternated between being hurt and angry to worrying myself sick. For five years, I hoped she’d call,

reappear, send a smoke signal to me, someone, anyone, but she didn't.

Not until tonight, anyway. I white-knuckled the steering wheel. The bitter taste of resentment tried to work its way in, but I forced it back. Meredith was a proud woman. If she was willing to admit she needed help and she was willing to come to me for that help, then this was no time to bring up the past. And if Rich was the asshole I'd long suspected him to be, then I had no business holding any of this against her.

The clock on the dash showed a few minutes 'til ten when I pulled into an unfamiliar apartment complex on the other side of town.

"You have arrived at your destination," the unemotional voice of the GPS announced, and my heart beat faster.

I locked my car and pocketed the keys as I looked up at the building and wondered what waited for me inside. On the way across the parking lot, I glanced around, and icy dread tingled beneath my skin. Aside from my own, there wasn't a car in this lot that had been manufactured in the last five years. Maybe even ten. On every window of the aging brick building were black bars. Across the street, a rundown convenience store was backed up against a tavern with dark windows and bright neon signs. The place looked crowded for a Wednesday night, and it looked like one of the places that frequently appeared on the evening news with blue and red flashing lights in the background.

All of that added up to a place where one wouldn't expect to find a surgeon living with his wife, which led me—and the knot in my gut—to believe she lived here alone. I hoped that had nothing to do with why I was here, but I was almost certain it was exactly why.

At the entrance to the building, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Then I buzzed her apartment number. A second later, the lock on the door clicked open. Inside, I pulled the heavy metal door shut behind me, the clang echoing up and down the deserted stairwell. I started up the stairs under the weak light of the only sconce whose bulb hadn't burned out.

The hallway was somewhat better lit. At least enough for me to make out the weathered, faux brass numbers on each door.

Twenty-one. Twenty-two. Twenty-three where a three used to be.

Twenty-four. I steeled myself against whatever conversation awaited, and knocked.

My heart kept time with the muffled footsteps on the other side.

"No, no, get—" Her voice raised my pulse a few more notches. "Would you get out of the way?"

The chain on the door scratched, then rattled. The deadbolt ground, then clicked. I couldn't breathe. I sent up one last prayer that this wasn't what I thought it would be, and the door opened.

My heart dropped into my feet.

Meeting my eyes across the threshold, one hand on the doorknob and the other arm restraining an irritated orange tabby, was a shadow of the

woman I'd once known. Her face was gaunt, shoulders poised as if she was ready to shrink back or recoil at any second. She smiled, but that didn't mask the darkness under—or the worry in—her eyes.

“Wow,” she said softly. “I can't believe how long it's been.”

Forcing a smile, I said, “Neither can I.”

“Come in, come in.” She stood aside. The cat squirmed under her arm.

I stepped past her, glancing at the cat and chuckling. “Opinionated little creature?”

She groaned. “Oh, God, you have no idea.”

“Trust me, I do.” I scratched the cat's ears. “I have one that drives me crazy.”

“Guess they're good for that, aren't they?”

“Sometimes I think that's all they're good for.”

She laughed, then set the cat down. It trotted out of the room, leaving us in awkward silence without our easy conversation piece. Meredith kept her eyes down, and as she folded her arms across her chest, her shoulders were bunched with tension. She chewed her lower lip, something unspoken furrowing her brow.

I opened my mouth to speak, but she suddenly gestured down the hall.

“Sorry, I'm being rude,” she said quickly. “Let's go in the living room so we can sit. Do you want some coffee?”

“No, thank you.” Caffeine was the last thing I needed tonight.

I followed her down the hall into the small, spartan living room. She'd always had elegant taste, but what little she had in this room—a couch, a couple of chairs, an old television on an older makeshift TV stand—was probably all secondhand. The kind of furnishing of someone who'd had nothing to her name and probably not a lot of money, and just needed a few things to get by for the time being.

At her invitation, I took a seat on the couch. She sat on the other end, keeping a cushion between us. Completely at a loss for how to break the ice, I watched her hug her knees to her chest and look anywhere but right at me. Conversation had come so easily for us back then, but we were strangers now. I searched her face and body language for signs of the woman I once knew. A hint of her unshakable boldness, her wry sense of humor, something.

Nothing. I found nothing.

What's happened to you, Meredith?

She finally managed to look at me. “Thank you for coming over. On such short notice and all of that.”

“No problem. You said you needed help, so...”

She bit her lip again, dropping her gaze to watch her fingers pluck away a phantom piece of lint from her pant leg.

Pulling my knee up onto the cushion between us, I turned toward her. “What do you need?”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Then she faced me. “I need your help finding a Dom.”

“You—” I blinked. Of all the things I thought she might ask me tonight, that hadn’t even crossed my mind. “*What?*”

“I mean, assuming you’re still involved with the lifestyle?”

“I am, yes.” I eyed her uncertainly. “I didn’t think you were. But—” I shook my head. “That’s why you called me over here out of the blue after all this time? So I could help you find a Dom?” Anger surged to the surface, but I shoved it back. There had to be more to this. “What’s going on, Meredith?”

Shrinking away from me slightly, she ran a hand through her hair, and the hint of a tremor gave me chills. I wanted so badly to move closer to her, to put a hand on her knee or an arm around her shoulders, but something deep down told me she’d draw away. Not from me per se, but from any advance. Like a beaten dog flinching from the hand that tries to pet it.

“Meredith—”

She suddenly met my eyes, and amidst the fatigue and worry in hers, there was a spark of fierce determination. Finally, a piece of the woman I once knew.

She moistened her lips. “It’s a long story.”

“I know, you mentioned that on the phone.” I inclined my head slightly. “I have nothing but time.”

Swallowing hard, she dropped her gaze. “You probably heard I got married.”

“I did, yes.”

“Rich wasn’t just my husband. He was a...” She swallowed again. When she met my eyes once more, the faint shimmer of tears took my breath away. “Rich was my Dom. My... Master.”

A tremendous weight forced what little breath I had left out of my lungs. My shoulders fell. Short of telling me he was a mass murderer, there wasn’t much she could have told me that could have turned my stomach more violently.

I found just enough breath to whisper, “What did he do to you?”

She blinked a few times. Sniffed sharply. Fixed her gaze on her wringing hands. “I’d been thinking about being a submissive for a while. It intrigued me for a long time, but I wasn’t sure how to go about it, what it entailed, that sort of thing.”

Inwardly, I cringed. Jesus, if I had known, I could have guided her into it. Shown her the ropes like I’d done with Kristen.

Meredith went on. “Rich saw that in me. He saw that I was inexperienced, but wanted to be a sub. Even though I hadn’t said anything, he knew.”

I winced, not even caring if she saw it. I'd seen the sub in her too, but she hadn't been interested in BDSM while we were dating. Either uninterested or simply not ready.

"So he..." She trailed off, closing her eyes as she chewed her thumbnail. "Long story short, he *made* me his sub. His slave, actually."

"He forced you into submission," I breathed.

She nodded. "It was hell, Scott. Every day, for two and a half years, it was hell."

Rich, so help me God, if I ever get my hands on you...

"I assume you're divorced now?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "I left a couple of years ago. I've only been back here for a little while, but the divorce has been final for almost eighteen months. Rich is out of the picture."

"Good," I said. "What I don't understand, though, is why you want a Dom now."

"Because he was right about one thing," she said. "I am a submissive. I wasn't ready to become one yet, I certainly wasn't ready to be his, but I am a sub."

"But, after everything he put you through—"

"I need someone who will help me pick up the pieces," she said quietly. "I want to know what it's like to enjoy being a sub."

I swallowed hard. I knew what it was like to be a damaged sub. I'd been one years ago, albeit to a lesser degree, after a traumatic experience with a Domme before I became a Dom myself. But two and a half years of twenty-four/seven slavery with an abusive Master? How the hell did anyone pick up those pieces?

"Do you understand what it is I'm looking for?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said. "But are you sure? I would think you'd need to spend some time with a therapist before—"

"I have." She gestured sharply and shook her head. "I've been to four. They've all helped me grieve my so-called marriage and move past the abuse, but when it comes to the sex and the kink..." She shook her head again.

I sat up and moved a little closer to her, barely resisting the urge to put a comforting hand on her arm. "What do they say about it?"

"They all think I need to just focus on relationships, try to get back into a 'normal' sex life, that kind of thing." She looked at me, and there were more tears in her eyes now. "Rich ruined enough things for me, Scott. He took away a few years of my life. He beat me, he raped me, he let other people—"

I flinched, sucking in a breath. "Fucking hell."

"They think I should focus on dealing with the abuse instead of exploring kink, but they don't understand that part of letting him go is taking back my sexuality and making it mine instead of his. I need to take this back

from him.” Meredith put her hand over mine. The cool dampness of her palm raised goose bumps along my arm. “It’s a part of who I am, Scott, even if I never got the chance to explore it before him.” She sniffed, then cleared her throat. “You were the only one I could think of who’d understand, and you’re the only one I trust enough to help me find someone who won’t hurt me like he did.”

I turned my hand over underneath hers, lacing our fingers together. “What if I told you I know a therapist who understands kink?”

She blinked. “You do?”

I nodded. “She’s involved in the lifestyle herself, and she’s helped a lot of traumatized subs.” Squeezing her hand gently, I said, “If I give you her number, will you call her?”

“Will you—” She hesitated. “Will you go with me to see her?”

“If that’s what you want, yes.”

“It is.”

“Set up the appointment, then. I’ll be there.”

She smiled. “Thank you.”

I returned the smile, pretending this wasn’t all killing me from the inside out.

“What about the rest?” she said. “About helping me find a Dom? Will you?”

I said nothing for a moment, nor did I look at her.

She ran her thumb along the side of my hand. “Scott?”

“There’s only one Dom I’d let anywhere near you right now,” I said. “And that’s me.”

Meredith’s spine straightened and her hand twitched in mine. “Scott, we’re—”

“Do you trust me?”

She gulped. “Yes, of course. That’s why I called you.”

“Then let me help you.”

“But what about our—” She bit her lip, twin creases appearing between her eyebrows as a grimace threatened. “Our past?”

“It’s in the past,” I said. “I’ve never given you a reason not to trust me, though, have I?”

She shook her head.

“Which puts us well ahead of the game versus if I paired you with a Dom you’d never met.” I slid my other hand under hers.

“I can’t ask you to do this,” she said, dropping her gaze.

I lifted her chin. “I want to. I don’t care what happened between us before, I want to help you now.”

She closed her eyes, pressing her lips tightly together as if struggling to keep her emotions in check.

“If you’re not comfortable with me,” I said, “I can find you someone else. But I’ve guided inexperienced and traumatized subs before. And I’ve

been there, you know that.”

“I know.” She opened her eyes. “And I do trust you. I’m just...” She bit her lip, looking away once again.

“You what?”

She blinked a few times, and a tear slid down her cheek. She reached up to wipe it away, but I beat her to it, brushing it away with my thumb.

I caressed her cheek. “Talk to me, Meredith.”

“There are...” She met my eyes. “There are scars.”

Sweet Jesus, what did that bastard do to you? “What kind of scars?”

“Ugly ones,” she whispered.

I moved a little closer to her and stroked her hair. “Do you really think I’d be repulsed by some scars? I’m not that kind of man, Meredith, you know that.”

She looked me in the eye, and when she spoke, her voice shook. “You haven’t seen them.”

“Doesn’t matter.” I touched her face again, then gently pulled her to me and kissed her forehead. “That son of a bitch hurt you, and I’m not about to let a few scars keep me from helping you pick up the pieces.”

She managed a slight but genuine smile. “Thank you, Scott.”

“You’re welcome.”

Ages-old habit took over, and before I realized what I was doing, I leaned in and kissed her lightly. It was only when my lips had been against hers for a few long seconds that panic swept through me. I pulled back, thankful I hadn’t gotten completely carried away and deepened the kiss like I’d *very* nearly done.

“Sorry, sorry,” I whispered. “I didn’t mean—”

“Don’t be.” She put her arms around my neck. When she spoke again, her voice shook more than before. “Do you know how long it’s been since someone’s kissed me like that?”

I shook my head.

She drew me closer. “Way too long.”

I wrapped my arms around her. “Do you want me to do it again?”

She nodded, and when she wetted her lips, a shiver ran down my spine.

I moved in slowly this time, certain with every inch I gained that she’d come to her senses and pull back. As the nearness of her breath warmed my lips, my heart beat faster.

Just before our lips met, she stopped me with a gentle hand on my chest. Another cool rush of panic surged through my veins.

“What? What is it?” I started to pull away, but she held me to her.

“It’s been a long time, Scott,” she whispered. “A long, long time.”

I ran an unsteady hand through her hair. “I know. If you want me to stop, I—”

“No, it’s not that.” She moistened her lips again. “I just want you to

know that if you kiss me again, there's a good chance I won't want you to stop." She swallowed hard. "At all."

"So you're saying," I said, my heart pounding so hard I was surprised it didn't add a vibrato to my voice, "that if I kiss you again, you won't want to stop at just a kiss?"

"No, I won't."

I slid my hand around the back of her neck and drew her to me. "Thanks for the warning."

Two

Meredith had never been a timid kisser. I'd always loved the way she combed her fingers through my hair and explored my mouth with her tongue like it was the first time every time. She'd had no reservations about shoving me up against a wall and getting the passionate, full-body-experience kiss she wanted. Though she was a natural sub and I a natural Dom, the assertive and sometimes aggressive way she'd kissed had always turned me on.

Those days were gone.

I couldn't tell if she held the front of my shirt so she could push me away if she needed to, or if it was so I couldn't back away. Maybe she just needed something to anchor herself. Her lips moved slowly, almost apologetically against mine, and I didn't miss the heartbeat's worth of resistance before she let my tongue part her lips.

A submissive kisser was one thing. Submission aroused me, but this timid, tentativeness broke my heart. Her ex may as well have punched her, thrown her down the stairs, and sent her to work with sunglasses and extra concealer. He was no less a monster than a run-of-the-mill wife beater. Her spirit was just as broken, her body just as abused.

I stroked her hair and held her closer. Sighing into my kiss, she melted against me, molding her body to mine as much as our current position would allow.

One hand released my shirt. A moment later, it came to rest on my thigh. As her hand slowly drifted higher, my pulse soared. This was a small advance, but an advance nonetheless. A flicker of confidence. The further her hand moved, the more passionate her kiss became, and the hand on my shirt pulled me a little closer.

Then, just shy of my cock, her hand stopped. For a few seconds, it lingered there. Her touch was lighter now, less certain, as if she might lift it away at any moment. The tentativeness returned to her kiss, and she loosened her grasp on my shirt.

I put my hand over hers on my leg. I didn't hold on enough to force her to continue, but gave a firm enough squeeze to ask her not to retreat any further. I broke the kiss, but stayed close to her.

“Do you want to stop?” I asked.

“No. No, I don’t want to stop.” Her voice still shook.

“I don’t want to push you, Meredith,” I whispered, touching her face. “You’re calling the shots tonight, not me.”

“But you’re the—”

“It’s just me tonight. No dominance, no submission. Anything you want from me, it’s yours.” I kissed her again. “All you have to do is ask.” Curling my fingers just slightly, I hoped to coax hers into resuming their dizzying path. Her hand rested more heavily on me now, no longer in danger of pulling away completely, but not yet moving.

“There is one thing I want.” She spoke so softly, I wouldn’t have heard her if I’d been even an inch further away.

“Tell me.”

She closed her eyes for a moment. Then she took a breath and looked at me. “I just want to feel...” She caught herself and her eyes darted away.

Running the backs of my fingers across her cheek, I said, “Tell me, Meredith. Whatever it is.”

When our eyes met again, there were tears in hers. I had a feeling I’d be seeing a lot of that in the coming days, and for the hundredth time, I wanted to strangle Rich.

“I need to remember—” Meredith swept the tip of her tongue across her lips. “I need to remember what it’s like to be touched by someone who doesn’t own me.”

Make that a hundred and one.

“He didn’t own you.” I struggled to keep my voice steady. “You were never his to own.”

The ghost of a smile flickered across her lips, there and gone before it could reach her eyes. “Maybe not, but I’ve forgotten what it feels like to be wanted as something other than a possession.”

I kissed her forehead. “How long has it been?”

Her cheeks colored “Before Rich.”

“Really?” I blinked. “You haven’t...since you left him...”

She shook her head and shrank back from me, avoiding my eyes. “After the divorce, I just didn’t want to meet anyone, and I—”

“Shh.” I caressed her face. “You don’t have to justify it.” I kissed her gently. “I was just curious.” Raising her chin and lowering my own, I looked into her eyes. “I was curious, and I want to make sure I’m not pushing you too far.”

She smiled. “You’re not.”

I started to speak, but her hand moved again, this time sliding over the front of my jeans. I closed my eyes, exhaling as she traced the outline of my very erect cock with the side of her thumb.

“Trust me,” she whispered against my lips, “you’re not pushing me. I want this.” With that, she pulled me to her, and I lost myself once again in

her kiss and her touch. Even when her hand left my lap and slid around my neck, my arousal didn't diminish at all. I held her tighter, kissed her, hoped to God this didn't stop any time soon.

"Your shirt," she murmured, struggling to untuck it from my jeans. "Get it... get it off."

There she was, the confident woman I remembered. I grinned to myself and pulled my shirt off. I was accustomed to being the Dom, and in time I would be hers, but that would come later. Tonight, if she was willing to inch out of the shell into which she'd been forced, I was hardly going to make a move to put her back into it.

Before my shirt had even hit the floor, we were in each other's arms again. Her kiss, more assertive now, sent shivers down my spine.

When she looked at me again, she said, "I think we should go someplace more comfortable."

"Wherever you want."

We released each other and stood. She took me by the hand and led me down the short hall to her bedroom. There, she flicked on the lamp beside the bed. The cat was on the bed, so she evicted him and closed the door, cutting off the brighter light from the hallway and leaving us with only heavy shadows and the bedside lamp's dim, warm light.

Alone with Meredith and near darkness, I wrapped my arms around her and kissed her again. She put her hands on my hips and came forward, nudging me back a step. Then another. Closer and closer to her bed, and my heart pounded. I was as nervous as I was aroused. Any of my past or present subs would have offered sworn statements that I didn't even know how to get nervous, but I did.

And in a situation like this, did I ever. My God, I wanted her, but there were so many ways this could go wrong.

She gently drew her nails down my back, grinning into my kiss when I shivered. When she did it again, I broke the kiss and let my head fall back as goose bumps prickled every inch of my skin. I gasped at the softness of her warm lips on the side of my neck. She trailed kisses up to, then along, the underside of my jaw. I sucked in a hiss of breath when she nipped my earlobe.

"Like that?" she whispered.

"Oh, yeah."

She shifted her weight to one side, then the other, and her height dropped a half inch or so. When one of her shoes brushed my foot as she nudged them to the side, I realized she'd kicked them off. I did the same and toed my own shoes out of the way so we wouldn't trip over them.

She raised her head and met my lips in a hungry kiss. She pressed against me, urging me to take another step back. This time, my calf brushed the bed frame.

My God, we're really doing this.

Breaking the kiss, I looked down at her, searching her eyes for any reason to believe we shouldn't go any farther. I found none, though. All I found was an unmistakable desire that mirrored my own, and that was enough for me to cautiously proceed.

I reached for the first button of her blouse, and she recoiled slightly, but when I tried to lift my hand away, she stopped me.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"No, go ahead, I'm sorry, I..."

"Don't apologize, Meredith." I moved my hand from her blouse to her face, hoping she didn't notice my unsteadiness. "Tell me what you want me to do."

"I want..." She hesitated, eyes meeting mine, then darting away, then meeting them again. Finally, she closed her fingers around my wrist and guided my hand back down to the top button. "Please."

I watched her eyes as I opened that first button. Then the second. Then the third. No uncertainty, no hesitation. Nerves, yes, but I had those too, and she gave me nothing to tell me to stop or slow down.

Another button.

Still another.

She helped me untuck her blouse from her slacks, then watched my fingers undo the last button. With her shirt completely open, I ran my fingertip along her collarbone, then down the ribbon of exposed skin between her lapels. She bit her lip and shivered, closing her eyes as her spine straightened. My finger grazed her breast before snagging momentarily on her bra, and she whimpered softly.

I reached up to push her blouse over her shoulders, but when her breath caught this time, I froze.

"Wait," she said. She stepped back and shrugged her blouse off. When it was gone, though, she didn't reach for me. She unclasped her bra, letting it fall away as well. Then she hugged herself, her shoulders bunching as they had when I first came through the door. It wasn't modesty as far as I could tell, especially since she didn't try to cover her breasts. If anything, she tried to hide from a phantom chill, one that seeped slowly into my veins as I watched her past try to drag her away from me.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

Meredith swallowed hard. "The scars I mentioned, they're—" Her cheeks colored.

"What about them?"

"They're..." With a sigh of resignation, she closed her eyes and gathered her hair, pulling it over one slumped shoulder.

"They're on your back?"

Eyes still closed, she nodded.

A sick feeling rose in the back of my throat. "May I look?"

She hesitated, drawing a long, deep breath through her nose before

she nodded again.

My heart jumped into my throat and my stomach coiled into knots. She turned around slowly, and I held my breath, bracing myself for whatever that son of a bitch had done to her.

As she turned, heavy shadows slipped off her body until her skin was finally visible in the low, warm light. I pulled in a sharp breath.

God damn you, Rich. Damn you straight to fucking hell with that shriveled piece of shit that passes for your heart.

I knew the pattern the moment I saw it. The parallel lines of different lengths and varying distances apart, but roughly the same thickness, were unmistakable. To the unknowing eye, it looked like an animal had clawed the hell out of her.

To someone more familiar, it was the pattern of a goddamned cat o' nine tails, just like the one that had marked my own shoulder one distant, dark day in my past. I cringed. A cat o' nine was for flogging, for raising a few welts and putting a sub into subspace. Not... not *this*. Not fucking *scourging* someone.

The scars went right across her spine, as if he'd hit her with no regard whatsoever for damaging skin or nerves by striking so close to bone. He probably hadn't concerned himself with protecting her kidneys, either.

In spite of the urge to turn away from how badly he'd mutilated her, I looked closer. Some of the lines were scalloped along the edges.

"Meredith," I breathed. "These were sutured?"

"A few of them, yes."

"How did," I shook my head, blinking in disbelief before looking again and seeing that, yes, the scars were still there. "The emergency room didn't report it?"

"Emergency room?" She laughed bitterly. "He was a surgeon, Scott. He stitched them himself."

My stomach lurched. "What ever happened to 'first do no harm'?" I muttered.

Another humorless laugh. "Apparently he missed that lesson in medical school."

I couldn't look at the scars anymore. I put my arms around her waist and held her to me. "I am so, so sorry he did this to you."

"It's not your fault."

"I know, but I can't believe someone would do this." I kissed her shoulder.

"Believe it," she whispered. "Someone did."

"So he did." I kissed the side of her neck. "I promise you, I won't."

"I know you won't. I was just afraid of..." She swallowed. "Once you saw them... if you..."

"Meredith." I nuzzled her neck and held her closer to me. "You know me better than that. Did you really think I'd push you away because of

some scars?”

She didn't speak.

“Baby, look at me.” I released her so she could turn around. Once she faced me again, I wrapped my arms around her. “Honestly. You know me better than that, don't you?”

Her cheeks darkened and she dropped her gaze. “Yes, I do. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to imply—”

“It's okay.” I kissed her. “You'll have to try harder than that if you want to repulse me. Like, getting a tattoo on your forehead that says ‘Scott Moore is a dick’.”

Meredith laughed, and that sound sent a rush of relief through me. She met my eyes. “Maybe I should cancel my tattoo appointment then.”

“Yeah, maybe you should. Now, come here.”

Tangled up in each other, we sank onto her bed. She was on top of me, giving my hands the freedom to explore her body while we alternated between lazy and passionate kissing.

Her every response was a battle between mind and body, between instinct and desire. One wanted to jerk away from my touch, one wanted to press against me and beg for more. Sometimes her kiss was hesitant, sometimes it was confident. I never knew if a caress would bring out a startled gasp or an aroused sigh. But still she didn't want to stop, so I didn't.

Together, we got her slacks unzipped and off, and to my surprise, she didn't even flinch when I slid her panties over her hips. She kicked them away, then eased her naked body down on top of me. Her kiss was desperate now, hungry and demanding, and I groaned as she pressed her hips against my cock through my jeans. The more I touched her, tasted her, breathed her in, the more I physically ached to be inside her, but not until she was ready.

We shifted positions so she was on her back, and when I circled her nipple with my tongue, she whimpered with pleasure even as the hand in my hair twitched and threatened to pull me away. I closed my lips around her nipple, holding it between my teeth and teasing it with my tongue. After a moment, her hand relaxed.

I kissed my way down her belly, but just as I'd passed her navel, the hand in my hair tightened with enough hesitation to make me pause.

I looked up. “What's wrong?”

“No,” she whispered. “Please... don't.”

I pushed myself up on my arms. “Don't what?”

“Don't go,” she hesitated, her cheeks flushing with uncharacteristic embarrassment. “Down. There.”

“Okay, I won't.” Promising myself I'd find out later what he'd done to her to make her ashamed and nervous of something she'd once lived for, I moved up to kiss her. “If you don't want me to, I won't.”

When I kissed her again, the breath she released was another sigh of relief, and it was all I could do not to ask her right then what had happened.

But I wouldn't do that to her, not now. She'd been through enough. For tonight, she needed some long overdue ecstasy.

I rested on one arm and let my hand drift down her side, pausing on her hip. "Is this okay?"

She nodded.

"Guide my hand," I said.

"What?"

"So I know what you're okay with," I whispered. "Guide my hand."

For a moment, she didn't move, and I thought she'd frozen, that what I'd asked was too much for her. Just before I came up with a Plan B, her fingers closed around my wrist. She moved my hand down over her hip, then to her inner thigh. Neither of us breathed as she parted her legs for both of our hands.

She guided me to her pussy, laying my fingers over her clit. I curled them slightly and made slow, gentle circles, all the while watching her eyes. She kept her hand on my wrist, but she didn't hold it now. She might not have even been aware of her own hand anymore. That, or she kept it there in case panic or pain suddenly took over and she needed to get away from my touch.

I circled her clit a little faster. She whimpered and her back arched, but she didn't try to push me away. After a while, her hand lifted off mine and, a second later, came to rest on the back of my neck, pulling me down into a kiss. At first, a gentle kiss. Then deeper, more passionate, more *confident*. Then shy, uncertain. With a little more time, the confidence came back.

The heat of her pussy against my fingertips made my head spin. I was already painfully hard, and now that I was this close to her, I *needed* to be inside her. Soon, I hoped, and until then, I let my hand mirror her assertiveness. When her lips moved with uncertainty, I kept my touch gentle and slow. As she pulled me closer and kissed me harder, I teased her pussy, sliding two fingers inside her, inching deeper as long as her body language welcomed me.

Her breathing came in sharp, shallow gasps now, cooling the side of my face as she kissed me. Her pussy tightened around my fingers. Anticipation tingled at the base of my spine. *Yes, baby, come for me. Don't hold back, don't—*

She broke the kiss. "Scott."

The single syllable of my name stopped my hand, my heart, my breathing. "What? Are you—"

"I want you." She panted against my lips. "I want you to fuck me."

Yes, yes, yes, you can have me. I swallowed. "Are you sure?" *Please say yes. Please say yes. Oh God, baby, please say yes.*

She nodded, pulling me down to kiss her again, and if her silent affirmative hadn't reassured me, her desperate, demanding kiss did. And if

that hadn't convinced me, I'd have deferred to her hand, which slid between us to unbuckle my belt.

I pushed myself up, and we both managed to get my belt unbuckled and my zipper down.

Meredith's hands stopped and she furrowed her brow. "Shit, I just realized I don't have any condoms."

"I, however, do." I reached into my back pocket and pulled out my wallet.

"Oh, thank God." Then she laughed. "Scott Moore, ever the prepared one."

"Damn right." I set my wallet on the nightstand and rolled onto my back so I could get out of my remaining clothes. Once they were off and the condom was on, I came back to her.

She rested her hands on my shoulders and parted her legs for me as I lowered myself to her, but alarm raised the hairs on the back of my neck when she screwed her eyes shut. The creases between her eyebrows reappeared. Every sharp, uneven breath she drew spelled out apprehension.

I leaned down and kissed her gently. "Are you sure about this?"

The creases deepened.

"Meredith?"

I started to back off, but stopped when she hooked her leg around mine.

Finally, she opened her eyes. "No. I want this."

"Are you sure?"

She hesitated, then nodded slowly as she put her arms around me. "Yes."

I kissed her again. Gently, just my lips against hers. "Do you want to get on top? So you can—"

"No. Just like this."

I didn't move yet. "I'll go slow. If I'm hurting you, or you want me to stop, just say so."

Taking a deep breath, she nodded again.

Resting my weight on one forearm, I guided myself to her with my free hand. I teased her pussy with the head of my cock, pushing in just a fraction of an inch before backing off. She tightened her jaw, screwed her eyes shut again, held her breath. Her fingers dug into my shoulders, holding on as if to still some trembling before it started.

I kissed her neck. "Relax, baby. I won't hurt you, I promise." Another gentle kiss just beneath her ear. "You're completely in control."

She released her breath. Her fingers loosened their grip on my shoulders.

"You okay?" I whispered.

She didn't speak, just nodded.

Biting my lip, I slid into her. I moved slowly, stopping whenever she

tensed. Gradually, she relaxed and took me deeper with no resistance. It was my turn to stop breathing, but it wasn't nerves or apprehension that lodged the air in my throat. I closed my eyes, lips parted for an exhalation that didn't come, and lost myself in her. The heat of her body against mine, her cool breaths on my shoulder, the soft, familiar smell of her skin and hair, all of that along with the dizzying, overwhelming sensation of being inside her.

I pushed myself up again and looked down at her. She held my gaze as I took long, smooth strokes, and for a moment, all the reasons we were here disappeared. The past, the pain, the scars, all of it was gone, and it was only us. She was the woman I'd made love to just like this hundreds of times before. We were here because we wanted to be. Because we wanted each other.

She reached up to touch my face and I kissed the inside of her wrist, shivering at the warmth of her skin against my lips.

"Come here," she whispered, and drew me down to kiss her.

We kissed, we moved, we melted against each other, and I didn't break that kiss until a breathtaking tremor rippled up my spine. Then Meredith shuddered, and her whole body shook against me, her pussy tightening with the first waves of the orgasm she couldn't quite release, and I'd be damned if I came before she did. Closing my eyes tight and clenching my jaw, I buried my face against her neck and thrust a little harder.

"You're almost there, aren't you?" I whispered in her ear.

She moaned softly.

"Come, baby." *You feel so good, baby, I'm losing it. I'm fucking losing it.* "Let yourself go, Meredith, let—" My voice caught. "Let me feel you come."

"Oh fuck, Scott," she whimpered. Her nails dug into my shoulders, and I gritted my teeth to keep that delicious pain from sending me over the edge. She arched her back. Trembled. Exhaled. Oh my God, she was right there, right there on the brink, so close, so close, and I was ready to go down with her.

As soon as her pussy tightened around me, I didn't stand a chance. She cried out, I groaned, and a shudder drove me deep inside her. My rhythm fell apart as I tried to keep thrusting, tried to keep breathing, tried to keep her orgasm going along with my own.

Then, as one, we exhaled and relaxed.

Another whimper escaped her lips. I kissed her cheek just as she pulled in a ragged breath, and my lips touched wet skin. Puzzled, I pushed myself up on my arms, and panic turned my veins to ice when I realized she was crying. She put her hand over her eyes, and little by little, fell to pieces.

"Meredith, baby, are you okay?" I touched her face, brushing away a tear. I'd seen women tear up after a powerful orgasm, but not like this. Never like this. "Baby, what's wrong? Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head, but neither spoke nor took her hand away from

her eyes.

My heart slammed into my ribcage as I caressed her face with a shaking hand. “Talk to me, please...”

Through her tears, she finally murmured, “Thank you.”

Three

Careful not to jar her more than I had to, I pulled out slowly. Then I shifted onto my side and held her close, stroking her face and hair while she cried.

"I'm sorry," she whispered after a few minutes. "I didn't... this..."

"Shh." I kissed her gently. "Nothing to be sorry about."

She sniffed, wiping her eyes. "I just feel so stupid."

"What? Because you're in bed with me?"

She laughed. "Yeah, that's it. Of course."

I smiled. "I won't tell if you won't."

"You're a dork."

"I've been called worse things."

"Oh really? Such—" She paused, then gestured past me. "Can you get those for me?"

I picked up the box of tissues from the nightstand and handed it to her.

"Thanks." She pulled one out and dabbed at her eyes.

"No problem." I kissed her forehead, then sat up. "I'm going to go get rid of this and be right back." I kissed her one more time, then got up and went into the bathroom to take care of the condom. As I washed my hands, I caught my reflection in the mirror and paused. Even after—*especially* after—having sex with Meredith, the unsettled feeling lingered in my gut. I still couldn't get my head around what she'd been through, and something told me I didn't know the half of it yet.

Looking into my own eyes, I wondered. *Am I cut out for this? Am I capable of helping her pick up these pieces? What the hell am I getting myself into?*

I turned the water off. Still looking in the mirror for answers, I dried my hands and sighed. Time would tell if I was the right person to help her through this. Between now and that time, I'd do whatever I could for her, and resist the urge to hunt down that worthless piece of shit to show him the meaning of the word "punishment."

For the moment, she was here, I was here, and I wasn't about to let

her see that this had already gotten under my skin.

I flicked off the bathroom light and went back into the bedroom. Sliding into bed beside her, I started pulled the covers up over both of us, but she stopped me, furrowing her brow as she looked at me.

She ran her fingertips down my side. "When did you get these tattoos?"

I glanced down. "Not quite three years ago."

"What do they mean?"

"They're Chinese," I said. "The characters on my left side mean strength and wisdom." I gestured at my back. "The four down my back are power and trust. On my right side, peace and passion."

She looked at me, eyebrows raised. "I never thought of you as particularly spiritual."

"I don't know if I'd call it spiritual," I said. "Those are just things that are important to me. And yes, I made sure they were all correctly translated and the calligraphy was done right."

"I don't doubt that." She ran her fingertips along one of the characters. "These are really, really cool, though." She laughed softly. "Maybe you're not as much of a dork as I thought."

I rolled my eyes, chuckling as I pulled the blanket over us and settled in beside her.

"So tell me," she said with a playful smile, "what worse things have you been called?"

"Worse than dork?" I grinned. "Well, one of my girlfriends insists I'm a manwhore."

Meredith laughed. "If the shoe fits..."

"Hey!"

"Scott, you can't exactly protest being called a manwhore when you preface it with 'one of my girlfriends', you know?"

I shrugged. "Okay, point taken."

"So you're still into polyamory, then?"

"I am," I said. "I have a couple of girlfriends right now."

She laughed again. "Only you could say that so nonchalantly, Scott."

I chuckled. "Just doesn't seem like that big of a deal to me anymore. I mean, I've been doing it for so long, it's pretty normal for me."

"For some reason, that doesn't surprise me at all. So who's in your harem these days?"

"You remember Kristen Locke, don't you?"

"You're kidding me." She blinked. "You're—I didn't even think she was into kink."

I shrugged. "She is now."

"Do I know the other one?"

I furrowed my brow, trying to think back. "No, I don't think you ever met Amy."

“Hmm, doesn’t ring a bell.”

“Didn’t think so. Anyway, besides them, I had a couple of subs for a while. Tara and I still play every once in a blue moon, but we’re both so busy, we don’t see each other much anymore.” I rolled onto my back and she rested her head on my shoulder as I went on. “I was training Kasey to be a slave so she could find a Master, and now that she has...” I shrugged with my other shoulder.

Meredith shuddered. “I hope she’s found a good one.”

I trailed my fingers up and down her arm. “She has. I know him. He’s a good guy.”

“Good.” She laid her arm across my chest. “So, you had two other subs, but they’ve both moved on.”

“More or less.” I gave a quiet laugh. “Probably just as well. Amy and Krissy keep me plenty busy.”

She looked up at me. “This isn’t going to take away from them, is it? What you’re doing with me, I mean.”

“No, don’t you worry about that.” I smoothed her hair. “They’ll understand what I’m doing with you, and besides, Amy has her husband and Kristen has her other boyfriend, so I know they’ll be well taken care of.”

Meredith clicked her tongue and rolled her eyes. “Your world is a strange place, Scott.”

“Yeah, it is.” I ran my fingers through her hair. “And it looks like you’re part of it again.”

“I guess I am.” She nestled her head under my chin, probably to avoid my eyes. “When I called tonight, I honestly didn’t expect this.”

“That makes two of us, believe me.” I rested my hand on her arm. “Of all the things I expected when I came over tonight, winding up in bed with you wasn’t high on the list.” I touched her face. “It was a pleasant surprise though, in spite of the circumstances.”

She raised her head and, with some effort, met my eyes. After a moment, a hint of her smile returned. “Yeah, it was.” And once again, something darkened her expression. She reached up and ran her fingers through my hair. “Are you sure about this, Scott?”

“About being your Dom?”

She nodded.

The knots in my stomach tightened. “Of course,” I whispered. “I wouldn’t throw you to the wolves, you know that.”

“I know you wouldn’t.” Her fingertips drifted down the side of my face, their gentle warmth raising goose bumps on my back and neck. “But after everything... the past...”

I put my hand over hers. “It’s in the past, Meredith.” I kissed the heel of her hand, never taking my eyes off hers. “We agreed to be friends, and as your friend, I’m not going to turn you away when I can help you with something like this.” *Assuming I can. Fuck, I hope I can do this.*

“But after I,” she hesitated, dropping her gaze. “After I disappeared on you.” She took a breath. “I’m sorry about that. I really am.”

“Let me ask you this,” I said quietly. “Did you walk away from me back then because you wanted to? Or because he forced you to?”

She flinched. Swallowing hard, she closed her eyes.

“Talk to me, Meredith,” I whispered.

“He decided I didn’t need any other men in my life.” She opened her eyes, the haunted expression sending a chill down my spine. “First, my exes. Then my friends. Once I moved in with him—and I use that phrase very loosely—he decided I didn’t need anyone but him. So he cut me off from everyone.”

I cringed, sucking in a breath. “When you say you use that phrase loosely, what do you mean?” I wasn’t sure I wanted to know. In fact, I was damned certain I didn’t, but I asked anyway.

“It wasn’t so much that I moved in with him,” she said, her voice hollow. “I stayed one night, and he didn’t let me leave after that. Had me quit my job by phone, took me over to get a few things from my apartment, then had everything put into storage and broke my lease on the apartment.”

“And all of this was without your consent?” My own voice sounded distant.

“Yes. In fact, I’m still fighting with the fucking storage company to get my stuff back.”

“Are you serious?”

She nodded. “We’ve been playing the paperwork game for months. The unit was in his name, so I have prove that we were married, we’re now divorced, that I have any kind of right to stake a claim to the contents of the unit, whatever. It’s been a nightmare.”

I shook my head. “What a mess. I just can’t believe he thought it was his right to do that to you.”

She shrugged with one shoulder. “He told me it was what I needed, and what I wanted, and I would learn to accept it.”

I rubbed the bridge of my nose with my thumb and forefinger. “Fuck, this guy was a piece of work.”

“I know.” She sighed. “Apparently I just needed a Master to show me what it was like to be a sub, and—”

“And he wasn’t the one to do it,” I growled.

She laughed bitterly. “Maybe not, but he did.”

“No, he didn’t.” I turned onto my side to face her. “He showed you what it’s like to be imprisoned against your will and treated like an object that was his to own, rape, and beat.”

She flinched again, looking away from me. I raised her chin.

“I can’t undo what he did to you, babe,” I whispered. “If I could, I would, but all I can do is help you pick up the pieces, and there is nothing in our past that would make me hesitate for a second to do that.” I moved my

hand from beneath her chin to the side of her neck, then into her hair. “And if he’s the reason you cut off contact with me, then it wasn’t your choice, and therefore it isn’t yours to apologize for.”

Blinking away tears, she smiled. “I was sure you’d hate me for that.”

“I was angry and hurt, I’ll admit that.” I leaned in and kissed her. “But I didn’t know the whole story. Now I do.” I kissed her again, drawing it out for a moment.

Our eyes met again. There was so much in her eyes, so many answers to questions I was afraid to ask, so many stories I was scared to death to hear. Those would all come out in time, though. I still wondered if I was the right man for this task. I’d have done anything she asked me to do if it meant helping her heal from the things that son of a bitch had done to her, but what if I made a mistake? What if, even with the best of intentions, I made things worse?

Her fingers brushed my cheekbone, startling me out of my thoughts. She furrowed her brow. “What are you thinking about?”

I swallowed, then shook my head. “Nothing.”

“Sure about that?”

There are very few things I’m sure about right now, Meredith.
“Nothing important.”

“Well, I was thinking,” she whispered, trailing her fingertips up the back of my neck, laughing softly when I shivered, “that I rather enjoyed everything you did earlier.”

“Oh?” I shivered again when fingertips became nails. “Did you?”

“I did.” She drew me in to kiss her. “I was thinking I might want you to do it again.”

“Hmm.” I dipped my head to kiss her neck. “I think I could do that.”

She whimpered as I flicked my tongue just beneath her jaw. “You sure?”

I grinned against her skin. “I’m *definitely* sure about that.”

Four

Sitting in a semi-comfortable chair in the waiting room, I absently flipped through a copy of Popular Mechanics. I had this issue at home and had probably read it fifty times. At six months old, though, it was the most recent magazine on the rack that wasn't about parenting or cooking, neither of which interested me.

Not that I would have been reading it even if it was the newest issue. I was here with Meredith, and the clock on the wall said Dr. Reid would be calling us back any minute. I doubted I was anywhere near as nervous as she was, but I was indeed nervous.

She sat beside me, enthralled with a copy of Reader's Digest. Neither of us had spoken. It wasn't a hostile silence between us. I couldn't decide if it was nerves that kept us quiet, or if there were simply too many potentially prying ears nearby. Whatever the case, we didn't speak.

To anyone else in this room, we were a couple sitting quietly, waiting our turn. Perhaps we were here to save a troubled marriage or consult with someone about a difficult child. I doubted anyone suspected a thing about what had really brought us here, nor why we'd chosen one of the doctors at this particular practice. For all I knew, some of them were here for similar reasons.

The man with his face buried in an old, tattered National Geographic might have been a sub trying to reconcile his need for sexual humiliation with society's disdain for the same. Maybe the blonde staring sadly at the brightly colored tropical fish was embarrassed by her desire to tie up her boyfriend—no, fiancé, I realized when she ran her left hand through her hair—and flog him while he called her Mistress. And while I wouldn't have bet my life on it, I was *sure* the middle-aged couple ignoring each other beside the window had been to the BDSM club a few times in the past. I hadn't seen them there in a while. Maybe that had something to do with the frosty distance between them, including a joint armrest that they both carefully avoided using.

I always wondered what it would be like to be a fly on the wall in a therapist's office, particularly a therapist as sex-positive and open-minded as

the ones here. I only knew Dr. Reid personally, but as far as I knew, she'd carefully partnered with a few like-minded doctors. God only knew the things that were said within these walls.

Or the things that would be said today, I thought with a shudder.

Beside me, Meredith laughed quietly. I glanced at her, then the magazine in her hand, and realized she was on the Laughter is the Best Medicine page.

Best medicine or not, at least she was laughing.

The door opened, and in walked Dr. Reid. It was weird for me to see her like this, dressed in a perfectly tailored, conservative suit with her graying brown hair spilling over her shoulders. I normally didn't pay much attention to how people were dressed, but it caught my eye this time because it was so unlike how I usually saw her. Then again, she wasn't Dr. Reid in that world where our paths usually crossed. She was Leslie to me, Madam to her submissives. In that world, she wouldn't have been caught dead in plain tan clothes when black leather was so readily available. Her wire-framed glasses would be long gone and her hair would be tightly pulled back so it wouldn't get in her eyes while she flogged someone.

Therapist by day, Domme by night. If anyone could help Meredith, it was Leslie.

She looked around the room and caught my eye, then shifted her gaze to Meredith.

"Meredith Whitley?" she said.

Meredith put the Reader's Digest on the table beside her, and we both stood.

Leslie extended her hand. "Leslie Reid. It's nice to meet you in person."

"Nice to meet you too," Meredith said as they shook hands.

Leslie looked at me. "Scott, I hope you've been staying out of trouble."

"Nope, can't say I have."

She rolled her eyes. "Big surprise. Come on back." She started down the hall, and we followed her. On the way, Meredith slipped her hand into mine. Her fingers were cool, her palm damp with sweat.

"Doing okay?" I asked.

She smiled, but it was forced. "We haven't even started yet."

"I know, but are you nervous?"

She started to speak, probably ready with a sarcastic comeback, but then she just said, "Yes, I am."

"You'll be fine." I kissed her cheek just before we stepped into Leslie's office. "And I'm not going anywhere."

"I know." She squeezed my hand. "Thank you." We exchanged smiles—hers with considerably less enthusiasm than mine—as Leslie shut the door behind us.

There was a couch in Leslie's office, but it wasn't the stereotypical black leather affair from movies and such. It was about as plainly and conservatively appointed as she was.

Meredith and I took a seat on the couch while Leslie sat in her armchair.

"Thank you for seeing me on such short notice," Meredith said.

"You're welcome," Leslie said. "I normally try to see new patients as soon as possible, and given your circumstances, I didn't think this should wait."

Meredith exhaled, and I couldn't help noticing how relieved she sounded, especially when she said, "I appreciate it, believe me." Aside from the other night, I wondered how long it had been since her needs and emotions had been a priority for anyone.

Leslie laid the file folder on her lap and folded her hands across it. "Now, we discussed your situation over the phone, but why don't we start this session with what you hope to get out of this?"

Meredith glanced at me. I gave her a reassuring smile and squeezed her hand. She took a breath and turned to Dr. Reid. "Rich took everything I knew about sex and turned it into..." She trailed off, biting her lip for a moment. Then she shook her head. "I don't even know how to describe it. He took everything I ever enjoyed and made it hell."

I clenched my jaw. I'd heard of Doms and Masters like this, but I'd never been so close to the aftermath. I'd never been called upon to help pick up the pieces, and wondered for the millionth time if I was capable of doing so.

"Go on, Meredith," Leslie said softly.

"What I want out of this," Meredith whispered, "is my sexual identity back. I knew before I met Rich that I wanted to be a submissive, and I still want to. But on my terms this time."

Leslie gestured at me. "Which is where Scott comes into the equation, I assume?"

We both nodded.

"Before we go on," Leslie said, "are you concerned about your safety? Any possibility of your ex-husband threatening or harming you?"

Meredith shook her head. "I pressed charges against him when I left. His sentence isn't up for a few years yet, and he doesn't know where I live now."

"Good, good." Leslie wrote something in the folder in her lap. "What was he charged with?"

"Multiple counts of sexual assault, assault and battery, aggravated sexual battery, unlawful imprisonment." She paused. "I got lucky. The district attorney had an ax to grind over both sexual assault and domestic violence, and so did the judge. The D.A. even tried to nail Rich for attempted murder, but that didn't fly."

“Wait,” I broke in, “Attempted murder?”

Meredith nodded, but didn’t look at either of us. “He thought Rich’s rather enthusiastic attempt at erotic asphyxiation qualified as attempted murder.”

I clenched my teeth, trying really, really hard not to get sick. Choking was one of the few things I absolutely refused to do, even if a sub wanted it, and if that motherfucker had taken it far enough to warrant charges...

“When you say ‘rather enthusiastic’,” Leslie said, “what do you mean?”

I held my breath, certain I did *not* want to hear the answer to that question.

Meredith reached up to brush a stray strand of hair away from her neck, but even that casual pantomime didn’t hide the way she gingerly rubbed the side of her throat. “I blacked out. Which wasn’t unusual. I guess he kept going for a while after that, I don’t know. When I came to, he’d already come, and he punished me for...” She paused, then shook her head and let her hand fall back into her lap. “Hell, I don’t remember. Anyway, he left for work, and a few hours later, my throat started swelling. I was locked in the house, just like I always was whenever he was gone, but I knew I needed help. So I...” Her cheeks darkened and she pressed her lips together in a thin line.

I put my hand on hers again, running my thumb back and forth along the inside of her wrist.

“Go on, Meredith,” Leslie said.

Sniffing sharply, Meredith ran her free hand through her hair, brushed a tear from her cheek, and finally spoke again. “I broke a window to get out. I went to a neighbor’s house, they called the paramedics, and at least until my throat closed to the point I couldn’t speak anymore...” She took and released a deep breath. “All I could do the entire time was beg them to help me get the window fixed before Rich found it.”

I winced. So did Leslie.

“Did you leave him after that?” she asked.

“Not right away. Well, I mean, I didn’t file for divorce right away, but I didn’t go home to him. I guess the paramedics and the ER staff got suspicious, and the doctor came up with some bullshit reason for me to be admitted. They brought in a counselor, a detective, and...” She sighed. “I fought them like crazy, demanded to see Rich, defended him left and right. They called it—”

“Stockholm Syndrome,” Leslie and I said in unison.

Meredith nodded. “I’d just been with him so long, I’d gotten used to the way he treated me. As strange as it sounds, I’d forgotten what anything else was like.”

I cringed. I also didn’t feel the least bit guilty for hoping Rich was

now cellmates with some big, burly guy who'd long since made that fucker his cock-sucking bitch. Some big, burly guy with a lot of friends in the same cellblock. I wasn't usually one to wish things like that on anyone, but as far as I was concerned, Rich needed to take a massive, unlubricated dose of karma right up the ass. Repeatedly.

"I know this is difficult for you, Meredith," Leslie said, drawing me back to the present, "but let's talk about some of the things he did to you throughout your captivity."

Meredith flinched at the last word. I squeezed her hand, and we exchanged glances. Watching our joined hands, she said, "One of his favorite things in the world was to go down on me. He knew it was easy to make me come that way, so he'd tell me I wasn't allowed to come, then he'd..." She made a frustrated gesture and sniffed. "When I came, he'd punish me."

I was going to be sick. I knew it. Swallowing hard, I forced myself not to. Not in front of Meredith; she'd hold back from me if she knew this affected me so deeply.

"How did he punish you, Meredith?" Leslie asked, her voice gentle. "In general, not just for that."

"It depended more on his mood than what I did." Meredith watched her thumb run back and forth along the side of my hand. "Sometimes he'd put me in my room, which was in his basement, and leave me there. Sometimes he bound me, sometimes he didn't, but he'd leave me for... a long time. There were no windows or clocks, so I couldn't really tell." She focused hard on our hands for a long, silent moment. "The first few times, I'd scream that I was sorry, that I wouldn't do it again, that kind of thing. Then I started just sitting quietly and waiting for him to come back. When I'd break down crying and apologize and promise not to do it again, he'd tell me I was a good girl and let me out. So that's what I would do. I'd just sit quietly. After a while, all he had to do was walk through the door, and I'd fall apart, even when I *hadn't* done anything wrong."

I put my elbow on the armrest and made a casual gesture of resting my chin on my thumb and my finger across my lips. It was all I could do not to sink my teeth into my second knuckle. *Don't get sick. Don't fucking get sick.*

"What else did he do?" Leslie asked. Part of me wanted to scream at her to stop asking questions, but she needed to know and Meredith needed to get it out of her system, regardless of what it did to my gut or my heart.

Meredith looked at me. I offered what I hoped was a reassuring smile. It must have done well enough, because she turned to Leslie and went on.

"He could turn almost anything into a punishment. Sex, oral sex, flogging, fingering, you name it, he could make it a punishment." She put her free hand to her mouth for a moment, then drew a ragged breath and continued, her voice shaking as she whispered, "The worst part was what

he'd say while he was punishing me."

Oh Jesus. I held her hand tighter, bracing myself for what I didn't want to hear.

She glanced at me, and the tears in her eyes nearly brought tears to mine. "He'd say things like, 'this is why you're with me, because no one else would want to bother with this shit.' Or 'this hurts me more than it hurts you, why do you hurt me like this?' The whole time he was punishing me, he'd say things like that. He'd tell me he loved me, and that I should treasure that because no one else in their right mind would love me."

Even Leslie couldn't hide the disgusted grimace. Our eyes met briefly, and I wondered if she was having as difficult a time as I was not reaching for the empty wastebasket a few feet away.

Meredith wasn't finished, though. "He liked to turn other Doms loose on me. He liked to watch." She closed her eyes and swallowed hard. "So he'd bring them over, or we'd go out to a club, and he'd let them do what they wanted to. Sometimes he'd participate, sometimes he just watched. Sometimes it would just be one other guy, sometimes two or three. And the worst part..." She put her hand to her mouth again, not quite masking the way her chin trembled.

"You okay, babe?" I whispered through clenched teeth.

She nodded. "He'd tell me this was what I existed for. This was all I was good for." Her voice cracked as she added, barely whispering, "He'd tell me how much of a whore I was."

I closed my eyes and exhaled through my nose. The other Doms probably thought it was just part of the scene, part of her role as a slave. It wasn't unusual for us to call our subs dirty whores, filthy sluts, things like that, but only when they'd made it clear they were not only okay with it, they were aroused by it. Humiliation and degradation were part of some Doms' bags of tricks because some subs and slaves loved it. An emotionally intact Meredith would have. She would have loved listening to a Dom growl in her ear that she was a filthy whore while he fucked her or flogged her, but Rich had taken that away from her. He'd broken her down, beaten her into nothing, and used something that could be such a turn-on as a way to shatter her even further.

Leslie cleared her throat and shifted in her chair. "I must say, I'm very sorry to hear this. He had no right to do this to you, and you've got a long road of recovery ahead of you."

"I know," Meredith said. "That's why I'm here."

Leslie smiled. "You've come to the right place." She shuffled some notes around. "Now, in spite of all of this, you still have an interest in BDSM?"

"Yes." Meredith took a deep breath. "The thing is, he also did things I was already curious about and wanted to try, but he made them traumatic. I wanted to try a threesome. I wanted to try bondage, flogging, anal. But not

like that. And I want to separate what he did from those things.”

“So, you still want to try all of those things, but on your terms and in a safe environment?” Leslie gestured at me. “With Scott?”

“Yes,” Meredith whispered.

I gulped. *No pressure, Scott.*

Leslie gestured at the two of us. “Have the two of you been intimate at this point?”

“Once.” Meredith glanced at me. “The other night, when I got back in touch with him.” She paused. “We dated several years ago, though, so this is... nothing new.”

“Oh, I see. Was kink part of your sex life back then?”

“No,” I said.

“Scott was into it then,” Meredith said. “But I wasn’t sure about it. I wasn’t ready, I guess.”

“Was your ex-husband your first Dom?”

Meredith nodded.

The subtle twist of Leslie’s lips told me she had the same reaction I’d had the other night. A monster like Rich introducing someone to kink was like a rapist introducing a virgin to making love.

“How did you and your ex get involved with kink?” she asked through her teeth. I imagined she usually kept her distaste hidden behind a mask of professionalism, but evidently even she had her limits.

Meredith swallowed. “We started dating, and I guess he saw the sub in me. We’d slept together right from the start, and everything was fine. But then one night he told me things were going to be different.” She ran a shaking hand through her hair. “He took me into his basement. The dungeon, he called it.”

I flinched. I had such a place in my own house. Something told me we used them for very, very different purposes.

“He locked me in it, told me this was my home now.” Meredith shuddered. “It was just handcuffs and a flogger at first, and it scared the hell out of me. I didn’t know him well enough for something like this, and I certainly didn’t consent to it.”

“Did you use your safe word?” Leslie asked. She glanced at me, probably as certain as I was what the answer would be.

“There *wasn’t* a safe word,” Meredith whispered.

Rich, so help me God...

She sighed. “After a while, I stopped protesting. The less I protested, the less he punished me, and I convinced myself he was right. That I really did want it, that I really liked it.” She shivered. “And on some level, I did. I mean, I didn’t like what... it wasn’t...” She released a sharp breath. “Once in a while, something felt good. Or it might have turned me on if I wasn’t so damned scared, or in pain, or anything like that. But, I feel like I’m saying I enjoyed what he did, and I didn’t. It’s just that sometimes—”

"I understand," Leslie said. "Some women have been known to have orgasms even while being forcibly raped. That doesn't mean they enjoyed it."

"Exactly."

"And there's nothing wrong with taking something he did to you and making it your own," Leslie said. "With sufficient time and healing, and understanding, patient partners, rape survivors can still enjoy healthy sex lives. And that's exactly what you are, Meredith. You're a rape survivor. I can see, from talking to you now and our previous conversation on the telephone, that you're a strong woman, you've come to terms with a great deal of what you've been through, and you can, with time, move past this."

A slight smile tugged at Meredith's lips, and thank God, it made it to her eyes. "Thank you."

Leslie looked at her notes, pursing her lips and frowning her brow. Then she looked at us. "Normally, I'd be wary of endorsing what you've asked Scott to do after everything that's happened, at least until we've spent more time discussing your past." She took her glasses off and set them on top of the notes. "That said, I believe you've come a long way in terms of healing from what your ex-husband did to you. You're in good hands with Scott, and with all of that in mind, I agree that you're ready to start reclaiming your sexuality on your terms."

Meredith exhaled hard. She said nothing for a long moment, then finally looked at Leslie. "Thank you. You just don't realize how long I've been wanting to hear that. My last few therapists, they..."

"They didn't agree?"

Meredith shook her head. "Like I told Scott, they all wanted me to focus on getting over my 'marriage' and explore 'normal' sexual relationships."

Leslie released a sharp breath. "Yes, unfortunately the prevailing view of some in my profession is that kink is a pathology, not a positive, healthy thing." She sighed. "There are still those who would view kink as the root of what your ex-husband did to you, not the weapon he used. As far as I'm concerned, that would be like telling you not to speak after you've been verbally abused. I see no reason to tell you that you can't or shouldn't have a healthy, fulfilling sex life involving kink just because someone chose to abuse you with it."

The sigh of relief this time was mine. If ever I'd known someone who should've been put up for sainthood, it was Dr. Leslie Reid.

"My recommendation," she went on, "would be for Scott to continue attending sessions with you. Not every session, but perhaps every other. Would you be comfortable with that?"

"Of course."

Leslie looked at me. "And you?"

I nodded. "Yeah, sure. Whatever I can do to help."

“I would suggest that the two of you move very, very slowly,” she said. “We can discuss your progress during your sessions, but I strongly recommend the two of you discuss it often on your own.” She paused. “I also need to know if I have your permission to discuss this arrangement with Scott. Not what you and I talk about in our private sessions, but for the sake of his emotional wellbeing through this, I do think it would be necessary for me to be able to speak candidly about it with him.”

Cool water rushed through my veins. Something about her acknowledgment that I had an emotional stake in this, that I wasn’t just an unfeeling bystander, unnerved me. As if I’d somehow believed I could make it through this unscathed.

Right. And that explains why I’ve been eyeballing that wastebasket for the last half hour.

“Do you have any objections to me speaking to Scott about this?” Leslie asked.

“No, none at all.”

“Good. I’ll have a form for you to sign when we’re through today, just to make sure we’re all on the same page.” To me, she said, “This is going to have an emotional impact on you, Scott. I urge you to call me or come in and see me if you need to. Clear?”

“Yeah,” I said in spite of my dry mouth.

“Excellent. Now, for the time being, I’d like the two of you to focus on simply getting reacquainted with each other and getting Meredith reacquainted with physical intimacy. Leave the kink out of it for now. Even basic dominance and submission. If something comes naturally, and you’re both comfortable with it, let it, but don’t push it yet. There needs to be a firm foundation of trust and intimacy before the two of you start taking this to the next level.”

“We do trust each other,” Meredith said.

“I know. But you’re going to be asking a lot of each other in the coming weeks and months. I want you to spend some time strengthening that trust and deepening that intimacy.”

We both nodded.

“Let me ask you this, Meredith,” Leslie said. “You mentioned earlier that your ex-husband made oral sex a traumatic experience, am I correct?”

Meredith nodded.

“Is it something you enjoyed before him?”

“Yes,” Meredith whispered. “Very much so.”

Did she ever. Few women gave blowjobs with the enthusiasm she did, and there was a time when she’d have been more than content to let me go down on her until my tongue went numb. I barely kept myself from shivering.

Leslie looked at her notes, then at Meredith. “Is oral sex something you’d be comfortable re-exploring with Scott this early on?”

Meredith hesitated, then nodded. "Yes, I think I could handle it." She glanced at me. "If we, you know, take it slowly."

"Of course." I squeezed her hand gently. She returned it, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

"That will give you a starting point, then," Leslie said. "And I'd recommend using it as an opportunity to introduce Meredith to the practice of safe words."

"I can do that," I said.

Leslie glanced at the clock on the wall. "I think that's enough for one session."

Another relieved sigh escaped my lips. I wasn't sure how much more of this I could take today, and thankfully, it was over.

Before we left, we made appointments for future visits. One with Meredith alone, one with both of us. She signed a form allowing Leslie and me to discuss limited details of the situation. Then we headed out of her office and back to the waiting room full of outdated magazines and semi-comfortable chairs.

On the way, Meredith stopped. "I'm going to use the restroom before we go."

"Okay," I said, "I'll meet you in the waiting room."

As Meredith walked toward the restroom, Leslie put her hand on my arm. Speaking in a hushed voice, she said, "Be very careful with her, Scott."

I nodded. "I know, I will."

"And I'm completely serious about seeing me one-on-one if you need to. You're strong, and you're stubborn, but this *will* take its toll on you."

I tried not to shudder. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Good." Her eyes darted down the hall where Meredith had gone. Then she looked at me again. "I know you've dealt with some damaged subs before, but she's going to need a lot of time and patience. Expect plenty of speed-bumps and setbacks, and try not to get discouraged."

Gulping, I glanced down the empty hall. "Do you think I can do this?"

"More than any other Dom I can think of, yes." She looked at me over her glasses. "I have the utmost faith in you, but it's going to be a long, long road."

I nodded again.

"And with any luck," she added, her voice almost a growl, "prison gives that son of a bitch gets what he deserves in this life, and he rots in the deepest, darkest part of hell in the next."

I laughed humorlessly. "My sentiments exactly, Les."

Five

With Meredith against me between my sheets, lost in a deep kiss without a stitch of clothing to separate us, I could almost forget all the reasons she'd come back into my life. Except for a few fleeting moments here and there, we were the lovers we'd been back then. She molded her body to mine. We held each other close, held each other tight, and I ached to be inside her just as I always had years ago.

But all it took to bring reality screaming back to the surface was the occasional tense catch of her breath. Or when she'd draw away from my touch, if only for a second. Or the simple act of running a hand down her back, letting my fingertips drift over the scars that scored her skin. I kept my frustration beneath the surface, but it was there. My God, was it ever there. The artist who'd tattooed my back and sides hadn't marked me as indelibly as Rich had marked Meredith.

She broke the kiss and looked at me, searching my eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Hmm?"

"You tensed up."

So much for keeping it under the surface. I smiled and brushed the pad of my thumb across her cheekbone. "I'm fine." I kissed her again, and she must have taken my word for it because she wrapped her arms around me and pulled me with her as she rolled onto her back.

Her kiss held most of my attention, but the deliberate, if uncertain, path of warm fingertips drifting down my back didn't escape my notice. Her hand paused on my lower back, its light contact tentative, then more assertive, then barely-there, barely-sure again. Her fingers broke and released contact in an uneven dance, a Morse code of *I want to, but I'm not sure, but I want to*.

When her palm lifted all the way off my skin, my heart sank, certain she'd second-guessed herself, but she didn't draw it back up to the safety of arms and shoulders. Instead, her fingertips trailed across my lower back, then along my side.

Without thinking, only doing, I lifted my hips so her hand could slide

between us. We both exhaled as she wrapped her fingers around my cock. Just as it had done on my back, her hand silently betrayed all the uncertainty she tried to mask with her kiss. She couldn't decide between a loose grasp or a tight one, a fast pace or a slow one, and if the sharpness of her breath was any indication, it wasn't a game. She wasn't trying to wind me up, she was trying to work up the nerve to continue what she'd already begun.

Resting my weight on one arm, I reached between us and closed my hand over hers. She let me guide her into just the right rhythm, and when my breath caught, when I shuddered, she took over, squeezing a little harder and moving a little faster.

That's right. That's the woman I know. Oh, fucking hell...

"God, yes, just like that," I breathed.

"Like that?"

Closing my eyes, I moaned something that hopefully came across as a "yes."

Our lips were nearly touching, and I felt more than heard her murmur, "Get on your back."

Though I loved what she was doing, hell if I was going to argue with that request. Together we rolled over, and I shivered when she pinned my arms to the bed. She kissed me hard, her tongue demanding access to my mouth. I opened and closed my fists, but she kept me pinned down. We both knew I could have overpowered her and freed my arms if I'd wanted to, but I didn't. I wouldn't.

After a moment, she pushed herself up and looked down at me, wetting her lips. "I want—" She stopped abruptly.

"Tell me," I whispered.

She bit her lip, wavering between bold and tentative. Then she took a breath, looked me in the eye, and blurted out, "I want to suck your cock." As soon as the words were out, she looked away and her cheeks colored.

"Is that really what you want?" I asked.

Still avoiding my eyes, she nodded.

"Look at me, Meredith," I said softly.

With much effort, she did, concerned creases forming between her eyebrows. I wondered what she thought I would do or say. If she was worried because she'd expressed her own desire to do something, or if she was just embarrassed at having said it. *What's going on in that haunted mind of yours, baby?*

I pulled one arm free and reached for her face. I half-expected her to flinch away from my touch, but when she didn't, I gently drew her down to me.

"If that's what you want," I said, my lips brushing hers, "I'm not going to stop you."

To my great relief, she laughed. So did I, and the tension melted away.

“Well,” she said, “I suppose I’ve never known you to turn down a blowjob.”

I grinned. “Did you think I’d start now?”

“Absolutely not.” She sat up. Then she swallowed hard. “This may sound weird, but while I’m...” Her gaze darted toward my cock, then met my eyes again. “Would you mind keeping your hands up here? Like, on the headboard?”

I glanced up at the headboard slats, then looked at her with raised eyebrows. “If that’s what you want, yeah, I can do that.”

She nodded. “Thank you.”

“Can I ask why?”

“Do I have to explain it?”

I swallowed. I could read between the lines well enough, and asking me to keep my hands on the headboard wasn’t exactly the strangest thing anyone had ever asked me to do.

I smiled and reached up to grab onto the headboard slats. “You don’t have to explain anything.”

She bit her lip, sending an uncertain look toward my hands. “You won’t let go?”

“Do you trust me?”

“Of course.” Another glance at my hands.

“Would you be more comfortable if I let you cuff me to the bed?”

She laughed quietly. “Are you serious?”

I shrugged. “Whatever makes you comfortable, babe.”

Her laughter faded. “I don’t think cuffs will be necessary.”

“You trust me, then?”

She looked me in the eye. “Yes, I do.” She kissed me, trailing her fingertips along the underside of my erection.

I shivered. “If you’re going to touch me like that, I am *all* yours.”

Something flickered across her expression, something there and gone too quickly for me to be sure it was ever there at all. Before I could ask, she shot me a devilish grin, kissed me quickly, then moved down by my hips. No long trail of kisses until she got to my cock, she was going straight for it.

Oh, hell yes. I closed my eyes. Anticipation made breathing damn near impossible as I waited for that first delicious contact with her mouth.

Still stroking me slowly, she said, “There’s one more thing I need to ask first.”

You want me to think while you’re touching me like that? I looked down at her, licking my dry lips. “Go ahead.”

“Don’t move. At all.”

Another puzzling request, but one I wouldn’t ask her to explain this minute, not while she had the boldness to even make this move. All I knew was if her mouth was still as talented as it had been a lifetime ago, her request would be one tall order.

“Scott?”

I nodded. “I won’t move. I promise.”

She cast one last wary glance at my hands. Evidently certain they were bound, if only by my word and not a pair of cuffs, she came up and kissed me, then bent to kiss my neck.

Now she started the path I thought she’d skipped earlier. She kissed her way down, teasing every inch of my chest, my abs, my sides with the feather light touch of her lips. Whether she was doing it to turn me on or to work up her own nerve, the effect was the same. I struggled to stay still, my abs contracting and my back trying to arch every time her breath or lips brushed my skin.

Stay still. Stay still. Stay— oh God...

A moan escaped my lips as my cock slipped between hers. I closed my eyes and held onto the headboard slats. I barely breathed, both because I didn’t want to move and because I just... couldn’t. Not when she squeezed just right with her lips, or fluttered her tongue all along the shaft each time she came up. Even when uncertainty crept in and made her hesitate, her mouth was fucking amazing.

She lowered her head slowly, taking my cock a little deeper. The next time, she came down a little further, paused for a moment, then went a fraction of an inch more before she rose again.

She was challenging her gag reflex. That had to be it. That was why she didn’t want me to move. Whatever the case, she was more than welcome to use me for as long as it took to get herself comfortable, because, Jesus Christ, that woman knew how to suck cock.

My knuckles must have been completely white by then, and when she made slow, intoxicating circles with her tongue, my eyes watered. What I wouldn’t have given to have run my fingers through her hair just then, and more than once, I very nearly reached for her. *No, no*, I told myself through the delirium her mouth sent me into. *Don’t let go. Don’t move. Don’t. Fucking. Move.*

Oblivion was more and more difficult to ignore, though, and the electricity surging up my spine with every sweep of her tongue wasn’t going to let me hold still much longer.

When I spoke, my voice was little more than a breathless moan. “Oh fuck, baby, you’re gonna make me come.”

She backed off slowly, then looked up at me and grinned. “We can’t have that yet, can we?”

“Tease.” I groaned, not sure if I was frustrated that she’d let me come back to earth, or even more turned on because this wasn’t over yet.

“I’m not a tease.” She came back up to kiss me. “If I was a tease, I’d get on top of you so you were that close to my pussy, but still couldn’t fuck me.”

“And I wouldn’t put that past you at all,” I growled as she got on top.

I put my hands on her sides, exhaling as she straddled me and pressed her pussy against my cock. I couldn't wait to be her Dom, but I'd have been lying if I'd said I didn't enjoy this. Every little bit of boldness and brazenness drew her out of her shell, loosened the past's grip on her, and the Dom in me wasn't going to argue.

"See?" She grinned down at me. "*This* is what a tease does."

"Which is why I called you a tease." I laughed. "This, and because I really, really liked what you were doing with your mouth."

"Why thank you."

I teased her nipple with my thumb and forefinger. "Now the question is, do you want me to return the favor?"

She tensed. Dropping her gaze, she swallowed hard. "Scott, I don't know if—"

"If you don't want me to, it's okay," I whispered. "But if you do, you know I'm perfectly willing."

A quiet laugh relieved some of the tension in her posture. "You always have liked that, haven't you?"

"Damn right I do." I drew a light circle around her nipple with my fingertips. "If you want me to stop, all you have to do is say the word."

She bit her lip, avoiding my eyes.

"Do you trust me?" I whispered.

"Yes, yes, of course," she said. "It's just... it's been so long since..."

"Since someone's gone down on you with your pleasure in mind?"

Her cheeks colored a little, and she nodded.

I drew her down to me and teased her lips apart with my tongue. When I broke the kiss, I whispered, "You know the only thing I have in mind is your pleasure, right?"

Another slow nod. She looked me in the eye, and three grooves appeared on her forehead as she said, "I don't know if I can... if I can come that way, though."

"We'll work up to that." I smiled and kissed her gently. "Are you afraid I'll punish you somehow if you come?"

She swallowed. "No, but it's what I've been used to for so long."

"We'll work up to it," I said. "There's no pressure."

"The thing is, I've been..." She cleared her throat. "I've been punished for coming this way before."

"I know you have. And let me reassure you," I whispered against her lips, "the only thing that'll happen if you come tonight is I'll be that much harder..." I dragged my lower lip across hers. "I'll want you that much more..." I kissed her. "...and I'll just have fuck you until you come *again*." I didn't give her a chance to respond before I kissed her once more, but the shudder that rippled through her told me she'd gotten the message.

Once she'd relaxed a little, I looked into her eyes again. "Do you know how safe words work?"

“Not from personal experience, but yes, I know how they work.”

I released a breath through clenched teeth. “Have I mentioned lately that I think there’s a special place in hell for your ex?”

She laughed dryly. “You’ve mentioned it, yes.”

“Good.” I touched her face and kissed her lightly. “I use two safe words with all of my subs. Say the word ‘red,’ everything stops. Immediately, no questions asked. ‘Yellow,’ and I’ll back off with whatever I’m doing. Clear?”

She nodded.

“You okay with going on?”

Another nod. I eased her onto her back. Her body stiffened again, then relaxed against the bed. I trailed light kisses down her neck, pausing at her collarbone, then the hollow of her throat, before continuing down her chest. She ran her fingers through my hair, a hint of a tremor letting me know the apprehension wasn’t yet gone.

I closed my lips around her nipple and teased it with the same circles, flutters, and arcs I intended to use on her clit. I moved to her other nipple and did the same. She moaned, squirming beneath me, and I couldn’t decide if there was more arousal or uncertainty in her voice.

“Do you want me to stop?” I asked.

“No.” But she didn’t sound so sure.

“Tell me if you want me to keep going.”

“I want...” Her voice shook when she spoke again. “What if I can’t come that way?”

I dropped a light kiss between her breasts and looked up at her. “Then I’ll make you come a different way.” Another kiss, a half an inch or so lower. “I meant what I said, baby. I’m not asking you to perform.” Still another, still lower. “I’m doing this for you, not for me.”

At that, she relaxed a little more.

“Tell me your safe words.”

She took a breath. “Red to stop, yellow to slow down.”

“Good. Do you want me to keep going?”

Almost inaudibly, she said, “Yes.”

I continued, kissing my way down her belly. “I don’t know if I ever told you,” I said, pausing to kiss her warm skin, “how much I love the way your pussy tastes.”

She shivered.

“And when you come...” I pressed my lips just above her navel. “...Jesus, baby, the way you taste when you come...” Another light kiss, and her muscles quivered beneath my lips. I looked up at her. “Are you sure you want me to do this?”

The silence lingered long enough I was certain she’d had second thoughts. My blood turned cold when she finally whispered, “No.”

I raised my head.

“I’m not sure if I am.” Her cheeks colored when she looked down at me. “But I’m not ready for you to stop.”

“Then I won’t.” I dipped my head and let my lip touch her inner thigh when I spoke. “I won’t stop until you tell me to.” I kissed her inner thigh again, this time just a breath away from her pussy, and the light scent of her made my mouth water. “Do you want me to do this?”

Please say yes, baby. Please, please say yes.

“Yes,” she whispered. Then she cleared her throat and said it again, louder and with more confidence this time, “Yes.”

That first taste nearly drove me out of my mind. Oh my God, the way she tasted. Tangy, sweet, so intoxicating I forgot where I was for a few seconds. I teased her pussy lips apart with the tip of my tongue, and the way she moaned and squirmed made me as lightheaded as the way she tasted. I was rock hard, my entire body aching with the need to fuck her, but I could have done this all night.

I worked my way up to her clit, and she gasped when I circled it with my tongue. She moaned again when I slipped two fingers inside her. Curling them just slightly, I beckoned. A little more, a little more, until—

“Oh, *fuck*,” she whimpered, clawing at the sheets as her back arched beneath her.

There.

I made slow, gentle circles on her G-spot with my fingertips, moving them in time with my tongue on her clit. Every breath she took was sharper and shallower than the last, and I had to lay my other arm across her hips just to keep her from pulling away from me.

Her breath caught and her pussy tightened around my fingers. I could barely breathe myself, my heart pounding faster and faster as she neared the edge. A distant memory wandered through my consciousness, taking me back to those nights when I would make her come just like this, then fuck her absolutely senseless. Neither of us ever came as hard as we did like that, when her orgasm followed so closely on the heels of another, and her pussy was so, so wet, so—

“Wait.” Her voice jarred my wandering mind back into the present. “Scott, stop.”

Before the first word was off her lips, I’d stopped. Ignoring the disappointment tugging at my gut, I pushed myself onto my arms and came back up to her. “What’s wrong?”

“I—” She paused, then shook her head as she wrapped her arms around my neck. “I just can’t. I’m not ready for this yet.”

“Then I won’t push you.” I kissed her, shivering as she slipped her tongue between my lips. She’d always loved kissing me after I’d gone down on her, and at least that much hadn’t changed.

“Fuck me,” she murmured into my kiss. “Please, fuck me.”

“That, I can do.” I made quick work of getting a condom out and on,

and as soon as I was on top of her again, she pulled me down into a deep, passionate kiss.

A gasp from both of us broke that kiss when I thrust into her. My eyes rolled back and a low growl emerged from the back of my throat. Just like going down on her, I could have done this all night. All damned night.

"You feel amazing," I groaned. "Jesus Christ..."

"So do you," she whispered, but something about the way she said it turned my blood cold.

I looked down at her. She met my eyes, but something was... off. Even as I fucked her, just as she'd asked me to do, she didn't relax. Something in her eyes and the furrow of her brow spoke of lingering frustration.

"Do you like that?" I asked, testing the water.

She closed her eyes. "Yeah." On just that single syllable, her voice cracked. Almost imperceptibly, but it definitely cracked.

Shit.

I slowed my strokes and bent to kiss her. Physically, she enjoyed this, but in her mind, she'd lost. She'd tried to get past an obstacle, and though she'd made headway, it wasn't enough for her. She was too proud, too strong, to accept that kind of defeat.

"Let me taste you again," I whispered.

She looked at me with wide eyes. "But I..."

"I want to taste your pussy again." I leaned down to kiss her neck. Then I whispered in her ear, "You just don't know how much that turns me on."

She shivered, but she was still tense.

"If you want me to stop again, I promise I will." I raised my head again. "You know I'll stop if you ask me to."

She held my gaze.

I swallowed hard. *Give me another chance to help you get past this.*

Finally, she gave a single, slow nod.

Relief and arousal alike rushed through me. "Just say the word," I said. "All you have to do is say stop. You remember your safe words?"

"Red to stop, yellow to back off."

"Good." I kissed her again and withdrew. She shivered, but didn't protest while I trailed soft kisses down her neck and chest. I continued down, down, down, moving slowly enough to keep from unsettling her, giving her time to get used to me, to voice second thoughts if they came to her.

If they came to her, she didn't make them known. I kissed her hipbone, then her inner thigh, glancing up at her in case there was any apprehension on her face, and there was. Worry creased her forehead. Her eyes were screwed shut, her lips pressed together in a thin, pale line.

"Do you want me to stop?" I asked.

"No," she breathed, and the creases in her forehead diminished

slightly. “No, I don’t want you to stop.”

Without another word—but with a silent prayer that I could help her over, past, *through* this wall—I went down on her again.

Even the faint hint of bitterness from the condom couldn’t take away from the sweetness of her pussy, and before long, even that was gone, leaving me with only the sweet, heady taste of *her*. The tension in her body language wasn’t so quick to melt away, but after a few minutes, melt away it did. She relaxed enough to let my fingers slide easily in and out of her. Her own fingers alternately combed through my hair and clawed at the bed sheets. Her breathing eased into an uneven rhythm of gasps and sighs.

Her back arched and I laid my arm across her hips again to hold her steady. Minute by minute, she gave in a little more. Closer and closer, letting herself go a little at a time. Her hips squirmed beneath my arm and her spine lifted off the bed. The whimper that escaped her lips was strained. Choked. Her pussy tightened. Her breathing quickened.

My heart pounded. *Yes, baby, come. Let yourself go.*

She exhaled hard and her body relaxed suddenly. The breath she released this time was a hiss of frustration, of defeat. She’d let herself get right to the edge, then pulled back. Fear, apprehension, something had drawn her away from it.

I didn’t relent with mouth or fingers, though. I had all the time in the world to coax her back to the brink, and if she didn’t want to give up, neither did I.

She fought me—no, the demons of her past, not me—every step of the way. One moment, she pressed her pussy against me, silently demanding more. The next, she drew back just slightly. More, less, more, less. Her breathing would become rapid and shallow, coming in sharp gasps as she squeezed my fingers and inched that. Much. Closer.

Then she’d relax again. A sigh would escape her lips, and we’d begin that climb, that dance, once again. My jaw was tired and my neck ached, but I refused to stop until she told me to or she came, whichever happened first.

“Oh my God, Scott,” she moaned. The hand in my hair twitched and trembled. Every stroke with my fingers was more difficult than the last as she squeezed them harder, and her hips tried to buck against my arm, but I held her still, held her steady, and kept teasing her clit and G-spot.

She shuddered.

Gasped.

Held her breath.

Then she exhaled hard, and once again, her orgasm faded before it had begun.

She still didn’t ask me to stop. I still didn’t stop. The demons Rich had left in her head would win this one over my dead body.

Just as we had so many times, we made the climb again. Shallower

breathing. Crescendoing moans. Trembling, squeezing, shuddering, *come on, baby, let yourself go.*

She teetered there, right there, balancing on that fine line between giving in and pulling back, and I encouraged her to inch toward giving in, toward crossing over to that point of no return. I kept fluttering my tongue on and around her clit, kept stroking her G-spot with two fingers, kept going, kept going, a little faster, kept going, kept—

With a breathless moan, she surrendered. Even with my arm across them, her hips lifted off the bed. Her body writhed against me, and her pussy tightened almost enough to prevent my fingers from moving at all. She gasped and trembled, rocking her hips in time with my hand, fucking my fingers as her own hand gripped my hair.

I backed off. My fingers moved slower now, and with my tongue, I made gentle, languid circles around her clit without actually touching it. I let her just begin to catch her breath, then carefully moved in on her clit again, keeping my touch light so she wouldn't get painfully sensitive.

And just as I'd hoped, that first orgasm crumbled whatever had kept her from letting go, and it took mere moments to make her come a second time. When she did, I didn't even have time to mentally thumb my nose in her bastard ex's direction, because my own need for release—my need to fuck her until neither of us could take anymore—overwhelmed me.

The instant her body relaxed and she released a long sigh, I withdrew my fingers. Moved up. Over her. Above her. Inside her. Deep inside her. Oh, fuck, so damned tight. Her legs around my waist. Her breath on my face. Her mouth against mine. Nails on my back. Oh my God, rocking her hips. Pulling me deeper. Tighter. *Tighter*. So. Fucking. Tight.

With a throaty cry, she arched her back beneath me and came a third time, hauling me right to and beyond that brink with her. I thrust a few more times, as many times as this delirium would allow, then shuddered so violently it was almost painful before I collapsed over her. The entire universe went white, went silver, went to fucking pieces all around me and in me and had I been able to release my breath at all, I'd have roared with the sheer intensity of it all.

It was probably less than a minute, but it felt like hours before I stopped shaking enough to lift myself up onto my forearms.

"I forgot how much I love what you do with your mouth," she said, panting.

I grinned. "Any time you want me to remind you," I slurred, "just say the word."

She laughed. Then she reached up and brushed her thumb just below my eye. "I didn't make you cry this time, did I?"

"What?" I reached up, and sure enough, my eyes were wet. I chuckled. "No, you didn't make me cry."

"So you just have something in your eye?"

“Very funny,” I growled, leaning down to kiss her. “Like your eyes have never watered when you’ve had an intense orgasm.”

She grinned. “But there’s so much more to brag about if I get to say I made Scott fucking Moore cry during sex.”

I laughed. “You *would* brag about that, wouldn’t you?”

“You’d better believe it.”

“Bitch,” I muttered.

“Pussy.” She giggled when I rolled my eyes.

I tried not to grin. “Why do I get the feeling you’re going to be a bratty sub?”

She showed her palms. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Uh-huh.” I gave her the sternest look I could muster, but it didn’t last, and we both laughed. Then I pulled out slowly, sat up, and got out of bed to take care of the condom. As I did, I couldn’t decide what shook more: my hands or my knees. In spite of that unsteadiness, though, I managed to get rid of the condom and get back into bed without incident.

Lying on our sides, we didn’t speak for a while. Fingers trailed over skin, long looks passed between longer kisses, but there were no words.

Eventually, after we’d both caught our breath, I broke the silence. “You doing okay?”

She gave a quiet laugh. “Scott, you just gave me three orgasms in a row. Of course I am.”

“You know what I mean.” I ran my fingers through her hair. “Since this was something you weren’t sure about...” I raised my eyebrows.

Meredith smiled and raised her head to kiss me. “Guess I was worried about nothing.”

“I wouldn’t say that. It obviously bothered you.”

“I don’t think it’ll be a problem in the future.”

“You never know.” I brushed a strand of hair out of her face. “But if it does bother you in the future, we’ll just take it slow, the same way we did tonight.”

She blew out a breath. “I’d hate to see how I’ll handle everything else if I’m still hung up on something this... simple.”

“There’s nothing simple about any of it, babe. You’ve been through hell and back. Some things will come easy, some won’t, and there may be some setbacks. This isn’t going to happen overnight.”

“I wish it would,” she muttered. “I hate feeling this way about sex, and I hate dragging you into something that’s going to take—”

“I’m in no hurry, Meredith,” I whispered. “This will take as long as it takes. You’re calling the shots. This is going to be at your speed.”

“So how do we balance me calling the shots with you being the Dom?”

“When we get to that point? Easily.” I shrugged. “Because the sub is the one who’s in control.”

She blinked. “Really?”

I sighed. “You have a lot to learn about BDSM, my dear.” I kissed her gently. “But yes, the sub is always in control. Your limits dictate how far I go. Sure, I’ll tell you to kneel, or strip, or suck my cock, but you have the power to stop everything with a single word.”

“Right, there’s the safe word,” she said. “But if I’m your sub, aren’t you the one in control?”

I shrugged again. “On the surface, yes.”

She raised an eyebrow. “And below the surface?”

I pulled her a little closer, laying my arm across her waist. “Here’s how submission works, babe. It’s a power exchange. Yes, you’re giving me power, but what you’re saying is you trust me enough that you’re willing to surrender control to me. We will have discussed your limits, and you’ll know I’m going to respect them. You’re saying you have no doubt that, on that incredibly off chance you need to use your safe word, I’ll honor it without question or hesitation.” I kissed her gently and caressed her face. “When you’re my sub, you’re not giving me license to do whatever the hell I want with no regard for you. Quite the opposite. You get to lie back and enjoy the ride I have planned for you, without worry, because you trust that I’ve planned it all out with your needs in mind. Yeah, I’m technically the one in charge, but by letting me take charge like that, *you’re* saying, ‘now do with me as I wish to have done.’”

Her eyes lost focus for a moment. “I never thought of it that way.” Then she smiled and met my eyes. “But I’m definitely glad I came to you for this.”

“Of course you are,” I said, chuckling softly. “I just gave you three orgasms in a row.”

She laughed. “And I made you cry.”

“Hey, you didn’t make me cry.”

“Then what was—”

“I was *not* crying.”

“Sure you weren’t, Scott.” She laughed again, but as her humor faded, something darker settled into her expression. “It’s kind of hard to think of the submissive being the one in control when my only experience has involved being locked in a dungeon and—” She paused. “Well, being treated the way Rich treated me.”

I cursed under my breath and rolled my eyes. “Obviously he took the term ‘dungeon’ and applied it a bit too literally. I can promise you no one has ever been held in mine against her will, and any woman who’s ever been tied to my Saint Andrew’s Cross has done so because she wanted to.”

“Wow,” she breathed.

“And yet you still wanted to do this?” I said. “Without knowing what I just told you, and only having your experiences with him?”

She nodded. “I knew I wanted to be a submissive, even if I didn’t

understand it as well as you do. I knew what I went through with Rich wasn't the same thing you were involved in. It couldn't be." Our eyes met. "There was no way someone like you would do to people what he did to me, so I knew it had to be different." A faint smile curled the corners of her lips as she reached for my face. "And I was right."

I put my hand over hers on my cheek. "You absolutely were." We held each other's gazes for a moment. Then she raised her head, drew me to her, and kissed me.

When we looked at each other again, she said, "So, tell me about this 'dungeon' of yours."

I grinned. "Why tell you when I could show you?" I gestured at the bedroom door. "It's right across the hall."

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“You sure you want to see this?”

Meredith laughed nervously. “It’s just a room. I can handle it.”

I kept my hand on the doorknob, but made no move to turn it. I’d offered to show her this place, but in the few minutes it had taken for us to get up and throw some clothes on, some second thoughts crept in.

“We can just keep things in the bedroom for now,” I said. “There’s no need to take it into the dungeon yet.”

“We’re not taking anything in there,” she said with a slight smile. “You’re just showing it to me.” I didn’t move. She sighed. “I’ll be fine, Scott. Are you just worried I’ll notice how unkempt it is?”

“Unkempt?” I scoffed. “There isn’t a room in this house that qualifies as unkempt.”

She nodded toward the door. “Prove it.”

“Nice try.” My humor faded. “Look, a place like this isn’t a big deal to me, but with what you’ve been through...”

She smiled. “I appreciate the concern. I can handle it, though, I promise.”

I let go of the doorknob and turned around, leaning against the closed door. “I know this isn’t something you probably want to think about, but before we go in there... Tell me about Rich’s dungeon. What was it... what did it look like?”

Meredith grimaced. “Do we really have to go there?”

“We don’t have to,” I said. “But I’d like to know ahead of time if I’m about to bring you into someplace that’s going to take you back there.”

“So you’re taking me back there yourself?”

“In a way, yeah, I guess I am.” I inclined my head. “But if what’s behind this door is the same thing that you lived with before, I’d like a chance to warn you about it.”

She hugged herself and shivered. “I’d rather take my chances with this. Somehow I doubt what you have is anything like what he did.”

I chewed my lip. “It’s your call.”

I turned the knob and pushed the door open with my back, watching

her eyes the entire time. I flicked the switch beside the door, and the half dozen sunken lights in the ceiling came to life.

“This is it,” I said. “My dungeon.” I gestured for her to go in, and as she did, I didn’t close the door. Leaving it open meant my cat could get in here, something the little shit quickly took full advantage of, but it also meant the safety of somewhere else was close by for Meredith while she took in her surroundings. How familiar they were, I didn’t know, but I still worried it would be unnervingly close to the environment she’d lived and breathed for far too long.

She looked around. The hardwood floors creaked under our feet, and though I’d never considered the sound terribly eerie, it had that effect when Meredith shuddered. I’d painted the walls and ceiling black, and with only the dim sunken lights and what little light spilled in from the hallway, the place was dark.

Malia scurried across the floor, a black streak sweeping through shadows, and attacked one leg of my Saint Andrew’s Cross.

“Hey, hey, I don’t think so.” I grabbed her, popping her claws out of the wooden beam before tucking her squirming carcass under my arm. “You can be in here, but no scratching.” I shook my finger at her like she was a misbehaving child, and she took a swipe at me.

Meredith laughed. “She really does keep you on your toes, doesn’t she?”

“You have no idea.”

“You’ve seen the one I deal with.” Even as she spoke, her gaze tracked around the room, and she hugged herself as if the place was twenty degrees colder than it was. She eyed the Saint Andrew’s Cross. Looked over the rack of whips, floggers, and canes. A nervous ripple ran down the front of her throat and she recoiled slightly, probably at the sight of the three cat o’ nine tails hanging on one end of the rack.

My chest ached with both anger and sadness. I’d seen new subs respond to the sight of a dungeon with nerves and apprehension. I’d watched their instinctive responses to something intimidating and unknown. The deep-seated fear etched into Meredith’s face and body language shouldn’t have been. This was a place to push limits, challenge senses, mix pleasure and pain. Not terrorize.

I hoped it was nothing like the one she’d endured under Rich’s control. I hadn’t exactly designed it to be a cheery environment, but I hadn’t had a traumatized sub in mind either.

She shifted her attention back to the Saint Andrew’s Cross. I watched her look over the vertical “X” formed by thick twin beams. She furrowed her brow as she checked out the ankle and wrist restraints at the ends.

When she looked over her shoulder at me, she grinned and nodded toward the Cross. “I’m guessing you built it?”

“But of course.” I returned the grin as I set Malia down and herded her out of the room. “Why would I buy what I can build with my own two hands?”

She laughed. “You always did like building things.” Her smile faded, and she looked at the Cross again. “That and... fixing things.”

I cocked my head. “Meaning?”

She shrugged. Smiled. Glanced at me. Then she shook her head. “Nothing.”

I stepped behind her and slid my arms around her waist. “You don’t think I’m doing this just because I like fixing things, do you?”

“You *do* like a project,” she whispered.

I sighed and gently turned her around to face me. Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, I said, “Baby, you know me better than that.”

Dropping her gaze, she nodded. “I know. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to imply...” She trailed off and sighed. Finally, she looked at me again. “You don’t really have to do this, Scott.”

“You came to me for help.”

“I know, but I didn’t think you’d... we’d...”

I touched her face and kissed her lightly. “You know I would never turn my back on you. I want to help you, and that’s why you’re here.

Meredith looked away.

I pulled her into my arms. “After everything we’ve done so far, after everything I heard you tell Leslie today, do you really think I’m going to walk away?”

She rested her head under my chin and put her arms around my waist. “No. I know you wouldn’t. You’re not that kind of person.”

“Then why are you still doubting me?”

She released a long breath. “It’s not that I doubt you. It’s just, I spent so fucking long with... well, you know what I went through.” She loosened her grasp and lifted her head to look me in the eye. “I know you, Scott. I trust you. But I’m not used to being able to lean on someone like I’m asking to lean on you.”

I touched her face and held her closer. “Get used to it. I’m not going anywhere.”

After a moment’s hesitation, she sank into my embrace again. We stood in silence for a long moment, completely still except my fingers running through her hair. I wondered if she caught on to the irony of seeking comfort in my arms in this room, in something that may have been eerily similar to another place she’d known too well. Whether she did or not, I didn’t point it out. I just held her.

“Do you have to work tomorrow?” I asked after a while.

“No, do you?”

“On a Saturday?” I snorted. “I’m an engineer, darling. They’re lucky they get me to work at all.”

She laughed.

I wrapped a tendril of her hair around my finger, then unwrapped it. “Do you want to stay here tonight?”

She looked up. “Your other girlfriends won’t mind?”

“Not at all.” I tucked the lock of hair behind her ear. “And I’ll be seeing both of them this weekend, so I’ll let them know I’ll be spending some time with you for a while. I don’t imagine it’ll be an issue, especially once they know what’s going on.”

Meredith pursed her lips. “What *is* going on, anyway?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I guess, what are we?” She paused, biting her lip. “Are we still just friends, or...”

“What should we be?”

Meredith sighed. “I’ll be honest, Scott, I’m not ready for more than a friendship. I can’t even remember what a normal relationship is, and I don’t think I can juggle figuring that out on top of what we’re already doing.”

“Then we’ll keep it the way it is,” I said. “Besides, we both know what happens when we try to make a relationship work.”

She shrugged, laughing softly. “I don’t know, I didn’t think we did too badly.”

“Maybe not, but it didn’t work out.”

“Most relationships don’t.”

“True. So maybe we should skip all of that.” I grinned. “We’ll just have the part of our relationship we always got right, and leave the rest in the past where it belongs.”

“So, all the sex, none of the bullshit?”

“Exactly.”

“Are you sure it’s not easier said than done?”

I put a hand to my chest, feigning offense. “Are you saying sex with me is a difficult thing?”

Meredith burst out laughing. “Yes, Scott. Sex with you is a terribly difficult thing.”

“Good thing you like a challenge, then, isn’t it?”

“Damn right I do.”

“That’s what I thought.” I kissed her neck, sliding my hand under the back of her shirt. “So, you think it’s too difficult and challenging to handle twice in one night?”

“Hmm.” She tilted her head back to expose more of her neck to my lips. “I think I can handle a little more.”

I nudged her back a step, inching her toward the door while I nibbled the side of her neck. “You *think* you can?”

She wriggled free of my embrace and grabbed my shirt. “I *know* I can. Now come here.”

Seven

Physical exhaustion is no match for a restless mind, and by around two in the morning, I'd given up on falling asleep. I stared up at the ceiling in the darkness. If nothing else, that meant my tossing and turning wouldn't disturb Meredith.

I glanced at her, my eyes tracing the vague outline of her body, a shadow against darker shadows, and smiled to myself. At least one of us could sleep. She was on her side with her back to me, her slow, even breaths the only sound in the otherwise still, silent room.

I turned my attention back to the blank, black slate that was the ceiling. Maybe she was just used to all the demons in her head. She'd had a few years to get acquainted with them. I'd only had a couple of days to try to fit it all in my mind, and just a few hours had passed since I'd listened in Leslie's office.

In light of everything I'd seen and heard so far, I had to admit I admired Meredith even more than I had back in the day. She'd always been a strong, resilient woman, and though she'd cried about this enough times to embarrass her, she'd come through her experience more intact than most would. My own experience with a horrible Domme had scared me away from all things kink for a long, long time, and I hadn't been held captive like Meredith had. Terrorized, yes. Scarred, yes, though nowhere near as extensively as she was. To this day I was nervous about using hot wax, and I had to be willing to trust a woman with my life before I'd submit to her on the rare occasion I even wanted to play the submissive.

Meredith, on the other hand, was willing—eager, even—to submit. To hand over power that had been forcibly taken from her in the past. While she saw weakness in every tear and every hesitation, my hat was off to her for having the strength to walk down this road at all.

And somehow, God only knew how, she slept.

I blew out a breath and rubbed my eyes, then resumed staring at the ceiling.

Beside me, Meredith stirred. She whimpered in her sleep, then shifted again. She jerked suddenly, thrashing beneath the sheets, and the

strangled, panicked sound that escaped her lips sent a chill up my spine.

“Meredith,” I whispered, moving closer to her. “Wake up, babe, you’re okay, you’re—” I put my hand on her arm, and she thrashed even more violently. Something—her elbow, I guessed—hit my face, and the darkness turned white, then red, then black again.

It only stunned me for a second, though. Ignoring the intense pain, I threw my arm over her, holding her to me to keep her still. “Hey, hey, easy, baby. Shh, I’m here. Wake up.”

She gasped, stiffened, then relaxed. Her entire body trembled against mine. For a moment, I couldn’t tell if she was panting or sobbing, maybe a little of both.

I stroked the side of her face. “Meredith?”

She took and released a deep breath. “Fuck, I’m sorry, that—”

“Don’t. Apologize.” I ran my fingers through her hair. “You don’t have to keep apologizing for this shit, baby. You were probably just having a nightmare.”

“Yeah, you could say that.” She shuddered. When she started to sit up, I released her and sat up as well. As I did, something warm on my upper lip caught my attention. I touched it, and my fingers came away wet.

“Crap,” I muttered.

“What’s wrong?”

I swung my legs over the side of the bed, keeping my hand cupped under my chin. “My nose is bleeding.”

“What? How did—”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said over my shoulder. “I’ll be right back.” I hated to leave her while she was still calming down, but the last thing either of us needed was blood all over the place.

I flicked on the bathroom light, squinting while my eyes adjusted. The bleeding wasn’t enough to warrant medical attention, but it was pretty enthusiastic. I grabbed a dark blue wash cloth out of a drawer, ran cold water over it, wrung it out, and pinched my nose with it. It was just painful enough to make my eyes water, so I closed them as I tilted my head back.

“You might have better luck if you lean forward, not back,” Meredith said quietly.

I opened my eyes. She stood in the doorway, arms folded below her bare breasts, her forehead creased with concern as she watched me.

“Really?” I said.

“Unless you want it going down the back of your throat.”

I grimaced and did as she suggested. “I’m not going to ask how you know that.”

She shifted her weight. “I think you know.”

“That’s why I’m not asking.”

Neither of us spoke. Then she whispered, “I hit you, didn’t I?”

I sighed. No sense denying it. “You just caught me with your elbow.”

It's not that bad."

Silence fell again. The pain, while not terrible, held my attention for a moment. I closed my eyes, breathing slowly through my mouth as my nose throbbed beneath the rag and my tight grasp.

Meredith broke the silence. "I guess I should have warned you."

Eyes still closed, I said, "Does it happen often?"

"Almost every night."

I pulled the rag away and looked in the mirror. The bleeding had slowed, but hadn't yet stopped, so I pressed the rag against my nose again. "This didn't happen the other night, did it?"

"It did. I just didn't wake you up that time."

"You didn't wake me up this time, either."

"Oh?"

I shook my head. "Couldn't sleep."

A question furrowed her brow, but then enlightenment smoothed it away, and embarrassment colored her cheeks as she dropped her gaze again. "Sorry."

"It's okay. Really." I looked in the mirror again. The bleeding had more or less stopped, so I wiped away what little blood remained, then rinsed the washcloth. As I did, I scrutinized my reflection. The bridge of my nose was red and just slightly puffy. It would probably bruise, but not terribly. Maybe a little discoloration, maybe slightly darker-than-usual circles under my eyes. By Monday, it would either be gone or I'd look like I hadn't slept all weekend. My co-workers wouldn't ask. I'd never shown up hung over—well, not that they knew of—but they could usually tell when I'd had an exciting weekend.

"Still bleeding?" she asked.

"No, looks like it's stopped." I turned to her. "Come on, why don't we go back to bed and try to get some sleep?"

"You going to be able to sleep?"

"Are you?"

"Guess we'll find out." She bit her lip. "What about you?"

I put my arms around her and kissed her gently. "Don't worry about me."

"I *am* worried about you," she said. "I don't want all this shit with me keeping you from sleeping."

I smoothed her hair. "It's going to, and there's nothing either of us can do about that. But after everything you've gone through, I think I can live with a little bit of lost sleep."

She kept her eyes down and said nothing.

"Come here." I drew her into a long, gentle kiss. It took a moment for my lips to coax hers into motion, but she finally wrapped her arms around me and returned my kiss. There was nothing sexual about this, even while we stood skin to skin. It was just affection. Reassurance, maybe. Of what and

for whom, I couldn't be sure.

After a moment, I touched my forehead to hers and took a breath to speak, but bit my tongue. This was when, in another life, I'd have whispered, "I love you." And I did. If only as a friend, I still loved her, but that had the potential to spark a conversation that would ensure neither of us slept any time soon. Too many questions, too many lines drawn back then that may or may not have applied now.

So I just said, "We should get some sleep."

She nodded and kissed me again. Then we went back into the bedroom.

Together, we climbed into bed. She rolled onto her side and I draped my arm over her waist, gently holding her to me. She must have been tired as hell, because her breathing soon fell into the slow, steady cadence of sleep. If she dreamed again, I didn't know about it. At some point, physical exhaustion got the best of my restless mind, and I drifted off to sleep myself.

Meredith may or may not have dreamed again that night, but I certainly did.

Eight

On my way into my living room, glass of cabernet sauvignon in one hand, I glanced at the watch on the other. It was a little after six, which meant Kristen was on her way over. I set my untouched wine on the coffee table and kicked back on the couch, propping my feet up next to the glass.

Malia hopped up next to me and crawled into my lap. I scratched her ears as I rested my head on the back of the couch and closed my eyes. I debated calling Krissy and canceling. Or at least changing plans. I just wasn't in the mood tonight, which was a rare thing indeed for me. I wondered if she would take exception to a last second switch to something platonic tonight. Dinner and a movie. Shooting pool. Something.

I sighed. She'd be game, I was sure. Disappointed, maybe, but she wouldn't protest if I said I wasn't in the mood. I just hated to let her down when I'd also be telling her we wouldn't be seeing as much of each other in the coming weeks. Possibly the coming months.

Malia, evidently unsatisfied with the attention she wasn't getting, suddenly wrapped around my hand and bit my wrist.

"Hey, hey, no biting, you little attention whore." I pried her off, then scratched her belly until she attacked me again. This time, I got my hand out of the way in time. I gently tugged at her tail, which she hated, and she damn near did a somersault trying to get my hand. I laughed half-heartedly. Feline antics were always good for bringing some humor to the surface.

"You have no dignity at all, you know that?" I said when she almost fell off the couch trying to attack me again. I ran my finger under one of the pillows, moving it out of the way a split second before she pounced. She pinned her ears and mauled the pillow, kicking and biting it, probably furious she hadn't gotten my hand instead. In her fury, she flipped onto her back, rolled toward the edge, and toppled onto the floor. She landed on her feet of course, and promptly sat up, licking her paw with all the casual nonchalance she could muster.

"Let me guess," I said. "You meant to do that?"

She glared up at me, narrowing her eyes as if to say, "I did. What of it?" I laughed and reached down to pet her, but she swiped at my hand before

stalking off.

A moment later, the doorbell rang, and my good humor faded. As I rose, I hoped one last time Krissy didn't mind if I changed our plans. She was usually game and understood that even I didn't always feel like playing, but—

I opened the door, and “not in the mood” no longer applied.

It might have been the knowing grin on her face, or the mouthwatering hint of cleavage showing above her blouse. It might have been my libido catching up and saying *are you fucking nuts? You're not turning away sex with this woman.* Or maybe, just maybe, it was because a night with her was my key to some scorching hot sex that didn't include a head full of ghosts and a past full of hell for anyone involved. I was only human. I needed a break for the sake of my own sanity, and Kristen's grin promised exactly that.

Change of plans, my ass.

As soon as she was inside, I kicked the door shut and slipped my arms around her waist. Before she could even speak, I kissed her. Not a gentle kiss, not a “hello, I missed you today” kiss; this was a deep, full-on, hands-in-the-hair, *yes, I am that hard* kiss.

Afterward, she stared up at me, eyes wide and lips apart as she caught her breath. “Hello to you, too.”

I shrugged. “What can I say? I'm horny.”

“Oh, *that's* news.”

“No, I mean I'm really horny tonight.” I kissed her again with no less passion than I had before. She stumbled back a step. Recovered. Leaned into me.

I shoved her up against the door, pinning her arms beside her, and she moaned into my kiss. When I dipped my head to kiss her neck, she squirmed against me, gasping each time my lips brushed her neck. Since her arms were no use to her, she settled for hooking her leg around mine and pulling me against her. I pressed my erection into her hip and shivered when she moaned.

Holding onto her wrists, I stood upright and took a step back, guiding her with me.

Breathing hard, she licked her lips. “I don't know what's gotten into you tonight, but—” Kristen cocked her head and squinted. “Scott, what did you do to your face?”

“Hmm?” I released her wrist and absently reached for my face, but fortunately remembered before I touched my still-tender nose. “Oh, right.”

“Someone get a bit rough with you?” she asked with a mischievous grin.

Meredith in the throes of her nightmare flickered through my mind. I suppressed a shiver. “Yeah, you could say that.”

Her grin evaporated. “Scott, are—”

I held up my hand and shook my head. "Don't worry about it."

"You know that won't make me not worry, right?"

"Stubborn wench," I said, chuckling.

She shot me a playful glare. "Come on. Talk. What happened?"

I slid my hand into her hair and gripped it just tight enough to make her close her eyes and bite her lip. "I don't think," I whispered, making sure my lips brushed hers, "that you came here to listen to me talk, did you?"

"No," she whimpered.

"That's what I thought." I released her hair. "Shall we?"

"Absolutely."

I picked up my glass off the coffee table. I swirled the wine slowly, and she watched it.

"So, now that you're here..." *And I can't believe I thought I didn't want this tonight.* I lifted my glass, swirling it again. "...are you in the mood for a flogger?"

She didn't respond, instead silently watching my glass. She knew as well as I did I wouldn't take a drink until we were in the dungeon, but I kept drawing her attention to it. Over and over, with subtle gestures and absent swirling, I kept reminding her it existed. Its presence drove her crazy with anticipation, and I so loved toying with her mind.

"Krissy?"

My voice made her jump. She cleared her throat. "Scott, I am always in the mood for a flogger, you know that."

"Good."

She followed me down the hall. I opened the door to the dungeon and gestured for her to go in.

Closing the door behind me, I watched her. The dungeon was a familiar place for her now. A comfortable, even pleasant place. She walked through the door without flinching at her daunting surroundings like she had when I'd first brought her in here. It had intimidated her then, it was foreign and alien, but she was never afraid of it. Not the way Meredith was. Krissy had no reason to fear this place, and she'd be given a reason over my dead body.

I rested my hip against the table below the rack of floggers. "Ready?"

She faced me. "Of course."

Without a word, I raised my glass. Before the wine had even touched my tongue, Kristen bit her lip. When I set the glass down, she pulled in a breath, licking her lips as she watched me unbutton the cuff of my left sleeve. I rolled the sleeve to my elbow, watching her fidget with anticipation. She knew this routine well. Just a few simple gestures, a few simple motions, and automatically, eagerly, she slipped into submission. As I rolled my other sleeve, I thought she whimpered softly, but I couldn't be sure. When I sipped my wine again, watching her over the glass, she did release a quiet sound

just before she dropped her gaze.

The glass clinked on the table.

She exhaled, her shoulders falling as she stared at the floor between us.

When I spoke, I kept my voice low and even. "Tell me your safe words."

"Red if I want to stop, yellow to slow down, Master."

"Good girl." I paused. "Clothes off."

I never could decide what turned me on more when Kristen undressed in front of me: her unquestioning obedience, or just the fact that she was so fucking sexy when she stripped. Shrugging off a blouse to reveal whatever piece of lingerie she'd worn—a red lace bra this time—before that too fell to the floor. The subtle shimmy as she slid her tight jeans over those beautiful hips. Long hair spilling over bare shoulders that would be pink and sweaty in no time at all.

She pushed her clothes aside with her foot and waited for my next command. Still, silent, eyes down, she waited.

I walked toward her, then around her. The slight tilt of her head shifted as I moved, subtly signaling she was tracking me, tuning all her senses to where I was, how close I was, what my next move might be.

She gasped when I ran my fingers across the tattoo on her lower back. She'd just gotten it a few months ago, and the colors—green, blue, black, red—were still bright and sharp. It was the first of many, of that I was certain. I smiled to myself. *Ah, my little pain slut.*

Trailing my fingers up her back—her beautiful, unscarred back—I grinned as goose bumps rose on her skin. I swept her hair over her shoulder and kissed the back of her neck.

"Do you want me to flog you on your knees or the Saint Andrew's Cross?" I whispered into her hair.

"Whichever you prefer, Master," she murmured.

"Good girl." I took my hand off her shoulder and took a step back. "Stand facing the cross."

She did so without hesitation. In her early days as a sub, she was apprehensive about bondage, but that apprehension was long gone. She surrendered one hand, then the other, passively allowing me to bring them up and fasten them into the leather restraints. No held breath, no straightening of her spine, no stiffness in her wrists. Nothing but total, relaxed surrender.

Once her hands were bound, she flexed her fingers and wrists, fidgeting a little as she got comfortable.

"Is anything too tight?" I asked.

"No, Master."

I knelt beside her, running my hand down her thigh, over her knee, and along her calf. She pulled in a breath as I wound the thick leather restraint around her ankle. Holding it together, not yet buckling it, I looked

up at her. She'd closed her eyes, though not tightly, and curled her fingers into loose fists. It had been a long time since she'd panicked from being bound, but I was cautious nonetheless.

"Doing okay?"

"Yes, Master." The hint of a slur in her voice brought a grin to my lips. I hadn't even brought out the flogger, and she was already slipping into the very earliest stages of subspace. The endorphins from the pain would drive her all the way there, but she'd done this so many times, her mind and body were conditioned to react just to this routine of undressing and being bound.

Resting my hands on her hips, I dropped a light kiss on her back, just above her tattoo. She gasped. Another kiss, another gasp. I trailed feather-light kisses up the length of her spine, my own breath threatening to catch whenever hers did. By the time I reached her neck, she squirmed against her restraints, but her immobility didn't make her panic. Good. Very good.

I warmed her up with a soft flogger. All thud, no sting, just to get her started. When her skin had just begun to turn a faint shade of pink, I switched to her favorite flogger. This one had shorter, thinner tails than the other, and I could give her that perfect balance between thud and sting, just the way she liked it.

I swung it in a steady figure-eight pattern, bringing the tails down on her right side, then her left, then right again. The rhythmic movements and percussive strikes mesmerized me as much as her soft moans aroused me. The first few hits made her jump a little. Something resembling a flinch, but it was merely an instinctive response. Once mind and body got used to my rhythm, she barely moved except swaying to either side as if dancing to the beat of leather on skin.

After a few minutes, I stopped and tucked the flogger under my arm as I stepped toward her. I reached up and touched one hand, then the other. Her fingers were still warm, so her circulation was still okay.

"How are you doing?" I asked.

She didn't even open her eyes. She licked her lips, then murmured, "I'm fine, Master."

I kissed between her shoulder blades, grinning when she shivered. "Do you want me to continue?"

"If that's what you want, Master."

"Good girl."

I stepped back and started again. As I flogged her, she shifted a little, and leather creaked in protest. I continued with my steady strokes; she hadn't panicked, she was only adjusting her position as much as the bindings allowed. I watched for signs of even the slightest hesitation or an impending freak-out, but those signs didn't come.

There was a time when this scared her. Panic had once driven her to her knees in tears at the foot of the Saint Andrew's Cross. With time, though,

she'd faced the Cross again and overcome the claustrophobia that tried to stand between her and bliss. And now here she was.

I stopped again, reaching up to feel her hands. Still warm. "Doing okay?"

"Yes, Master." Oh, I knew that voice well. On the edge, not of panic but of bliss. Just deep enough into subspace for ecstasy to take over.

I ran my hand over her hip and between her legs, then trailed them up to her pussy, and every shallow, rapid breath she drew turned me on even more. I closed my eyes and sucked in a breath when, just as I'd suspected they would, my fingers slipped easily inside her.

"You're nice and wet for me, Kristen," I whispered, sliding my fingers back out. "Does this turn you on, my little fucking slut?"

She whimpered, squirming against me as much as her restraints would let her. "Yes, Master."

"As wet as you are, I don't think it would take much at all to make you come." I teased her clit, waiting for her to moan again before I added, "Would it?"

"No, Master."

"Don't come yet, Kristen." I kissed her neck. "You'll wait until I tell you, won't you?"

"Yes... yes, Master."

"Of course you will." I slipped my fingers inside her again and kissed just behind her ear. "Your orgasms are under my control, aren't they, my filthy fucking *whore*?"

"Yes, Master, yes, I..." Her breath caught, and when she shivered, her pussy squeezed my fingers. Sucking in a breath, she squirmed as I continued teasing her. The Saint Andrew's Cross creaked and the leather restraints protested. With every stroke of my fingers, sliding slowly in and out, her pussy grew wetter. Every time I slipped them free and teased her clit, she fell apart a little more, moaning and struggling to stay in control. I kept her going like this until she held her breath, squeezed my fingers, trembled, until she was a breath away from letting go, and there I held her, forcing her to teeter on that brink until I was damned good and ready to let her come.

"Like that?" I growled.

"Yes, Master." She was breathless now, gasping and writhing with every circle I drew around her clit.

I kissed the side of her neck and slid my fingers back inside her, pressing my palm against her clit. "Do you want me to let you come?"

She held her breath as a tremor worked its way up her spine. When it had passed, she whispered, "Please, Master."

"Come, Kristen."

She let go of a long, spine-tingling cry. Her pussy tightened around my fingers while the rest of her body melted, and every tremor and whimper made me want to be inside her that much more.

Soon. I'd fuck her soon enough, but we weren't finished yet.

I unfastened her ankles. Then I stood and, with one arm securely around her waist, freed her wrist. Her arm fell to her side. When I released the other hand, I laid her arm around my shoulders and let her body sink against mine.

"Good girl," I whispered, stroking her hair. "You've done well."

"Thank you, Master."

I held her to me and kissed her. As she regained her footing, as her trembling knees steadied, she returned my kiss. I loved the way she kissed when she was in this state. Assertive, never demanding. Following my lead, but not just passively letting me have my way with her mouth without responding at all. She fucked the same way when she submitted, moving in ways that complemented—never dictated—how I moved inside her. She'd learned fast, she'd learned well, and her beautiful surrender drove me wild every damned time.

I guided her hand to my erection, trying not to gasp at the warmth of her palm through thick denim. Her fingers twitched, probably struggling to resist the temptation to give a playful squeeze. She wouldn't, though. She didn't have permission.

I slid one hand up her back and into her hair. She gasped, not quite breaking the kiss, when my fingers tangled in her hair. She knew what was coming.

But a Dom is nothing if not a tease, and when I loosened my grasp, she sucked in a breath that was made of frustration. After a moment, I tightened my fingers, grinning when her breath caught and her spine straightened. Then I loosened my grasp again.

She couldn't hide her frustration. It revealed itself in the creases between her eyebrows and the way her lips tightened into a thin, bleached line.

Frustrated, yes, but not defiant. Perfect.

I gripped her hair and twisted it, forcing her to her knees at my feet. She gasped, then moaned.

"Do you want to suck my cock, Kristen?" I growled.

She licked her lips. "If that's what you want, Master."

Oh, you're damn right it is.

"Good girl," I breathed.

Still holding her hair on my other hand, I unzipped my jeans with the other. She watched intently, wetting her lips and barely breathing while I stroked myself just a few inches from her face. Though she licked her lips again, she didn't move. She knew better. If she closed the distance between her mouth and my cock by even a fraction of an inch, I'd deny her, a lesson she'd long ago learned.

I loosened my grip. She still didn't move.

"Good girl," I whispered, and when she looked up at me, she smiled.

I smiled back, inclining my head in the slightest parody of a nod.

I curled my fingers against the back of her head and nudged her forward. She didn't hesitate, taking my cock into her mouth eagerly, hungrily, *obediently*. I still held her hair, though not as tightly; enough to feel every motion, not enough to interfere unless I wanted to, which I most certainly did not.

"Use your hands," I said.

That was the command she'd been waiting for, of that I had no doubt, and as soon as I gave the order, both hands were on my cock. Squeezing, stroking, adding just enough of a twist to make my knees shake. A shiver ran down my spine, leaving goose bumps in its wake.

"Yes, that's a good girl, just like that," I breathed. My balance wavered. With my free hand, I grabbed the Saint Andrew's Cross for balance, struggling to stay on my feet as she fucked me with her mouth. "That's it, baby, make me come." As soon as the words were off my tongue, she doubled her efforts, just as I knew she would, and I closed my eyes.

God, yes. I couldn't help moving my hips in time with her movement. Couldn't think, couldn't breathe, couldn't fucking wait.

I held the Cross and her hair tighter, and with a deep groan, I came. She kept right on going until I couldn't take anymore and whispered for her to stop. When she did, I took a few breaths, giving the world a moment to right itself.

Then I looked down at her and, trying not to slur, said, "Stand up." When she rose, I put my arms around her and kissed her. "Your mouth is, as always, fucking amazing."

"Thank you, Master."

I kissed her again. "No, thank you." I ran my fingers through her hair. "I'm not your Master anymore tonight."

She let out a breath, rolling her shoulders as if to relieve some tension.

"Water?" I asked.

"Yes, please."

I handed her one of the bottles I'd brought in before she arrived and took the other for myself.

After we'd both drunk a little and caught our breath, I said, "Come on, let's go in the bedroom and get some lotion on your back."

I led her into the bedroom. Once we'd kicked Malia out and closed the door, Kristen got into bed, lying facedown with her arms folded beneath the pillow. I pulled the covers up to her waist and sat beside her with a bottle of lotion. Before putting any lotion on her, I did a quick check for cuts. I hadn't used a terribly brutal flogger tonight, but I checked anyway out of habit.

There wasn't a cut to be found, so I poured some lotion into my hand. She groaned softly as I smoothed it onto her shoulders, up and down

her back, anywhere the tails had colored her skin. For the longest time, neither of us spoke. Sometimes she fell asleep while I rubbed her back after a flogging, sometimes she just closed her eyes and enjoyed it.

Evidently she hadn't fallen asleep, because after a while, she said, "You never did tell me what happened to your face."

Without thinking, I reached up and brushed my fingertips across the bridge of my nose. It wasn't terribly painful anymore, just slightly swollen and a little bruised.

"Nothing serious. I just put my face where someone else was trying to put her elbow," I said, chuckling in spite of the memory.

"Looks like she tried to put it there with quite a bit of force." She grinned over her shoulder. "Or you were trying to put your face there with a lot of force."

"Very funny." I shot her a playful glare. "No, it was just one of those clumsy moments that would have won us some money had we caught it on tape."

"Pity you didn't have a camera, then."

I laughed, pretending not to feel the chill crawling up my spine. "Yeah, that could have been... interesting."

"I'm sure." She was quiet for a moment. "Oh, I meant to ask. What happened with Meredith the other night?"

I sighed. "I can't really discuss everything, but it involves her ex-husband."

"Probably a good thing he's now an ex, then?"

"Yeah. It's a long story, though." *A long, twisted, fucked up story.*

"Is she okay?"

"She's all right," I said quietly. "But she wants me to be her Dom."

"Really? I didn't realize she was into kink."

"She's had... some experience." *If you could call it that.*

"So you're showing another newbie the ropes, as it were?"

"You could say that." I exhaled. "And now we have this sort of complicated sex-but-not-a-relationship relationship."

She looked over her shoulder at me. "Need I remind you how well that worked when we did it?" She paused, then quickly added, "Keeping it to friends with benefits, I mean. I'm certainly not complaining about how it worked out."

"Okay, I'll give you that." I chuckled, but then turned serious again. "You and I didn't have the history I have with her, though."

"Do you still love her?"

My hand stopped in the middle of her back. Of all the questions I'd eluded since Meredith called me that first night, I'd avoided that one in particular like the plague. *Did I still love her?* Not just as a friend, but as something more?

"Scott?"

I shrugged and started rubbing her back again. “I don’t know what I feel for her anymore, to be honest. Right now, I just need to help her sort out some shit in her world.”

“Are you sure you won’t get emotionally tangled up with her?” She glanced at me. “I’m not trying to pry, you know that, I just don’t want to see you get hurt again.”

I swallowed hard. Kristen had been there when Meredith and I broke up. Yeah, we stayed friends, but it was hard, and Kristen knew as well as anyone how much it hurt me.

“I’ll be okay, babe.”

“You sure?”

No. “I’ll be fine.” I watched my fingers draw slow, gentle circles on her shoulders. “What this does mean, though, is that it’s going to be taking up a lot of my time and energy for a while.” I trailed my fingers down the middle of her back. “Are you okay with that? I mean—”

“Scott, if she needs you, of course I’m okay with it.” She rolled onto her back and looked up at me. “If it’s as bad as it sounds, I’d honestly be questioning what kind of guy you were if you *didn’t* help her. I’m not about to get all possessive.”

I smiled. “Thanks for understanding. And I’ll still be around. I promise we’ll still spend time together.”

“We’d better.”

A startled cough of laughter burst out of me. “Oh, *really*?”

“Yes. Or I might hurt Matt. And you, when you do come around.”

“Hmm, that doesn’t sound too bad, actually.”

“Oh, shut up.” She grabbed my shirt and hauled me down to kiss her.

I pulled back, grasping her jaw in one hand. “Do I need to put my sub back in her place now?”

She rolled her eyes and laughed. “Shut up and fuck me, Scott.”

“I *beg* your pardon?”

“Okay, okay.” She took a deep breath, putting on her most sarcastically repentant expression. “Shut up and fuck me, *Master*.”

“Mouthy wench,” I growled, leaning down to kiss her again.

“What ever will you do with me?”

“Normally I’d punish you and make you beg,” I whispered. “But since I already told you I’m not your Master anymore tonight, and, well...” I pressed my hard-on against her hip. “I think I’ll just shut up and fuck you.”

Nine

After a couple of weeks and with Leslie's blessing, Meredith was ready to take another step forward. No more just getting reacquainted with physical intimacy, it was time to move into some BDSM. Light BDSM, nothing overly hardcore yet, but not just vanilla sex with safe words.

To say I was nervous was a fucking understatement.

I walked through Meredith's front door at a little past eight, and as soon as that door closed behind me, a chill ran down my spine. *I'm here. We're really doing this.* And even out here in the hallway, both fully dressed and making small talk like the once-lovers, near-strangers we were, I couldn't shake the feeling of stepping into a minefield.

"Anything to drink?" She glanced over her shoulder on the way into her kitchen, gesturing with the glass of water she'd been drinking when she came to the door.

"No, I'm okay. Thanks."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

She drained the water glass, then set it in the sink. The small talk ground to a halt and Meredith didn't look at me. Awkward silence descended. We both knew why I was here. Someone just needed to say the word and we'd be in her bedroom, and if I thought walking down the hall and into her kitchen was a minefield, the bedroom could only be worse.

Might as well jump right in.

"Before we go in the other room," I said, resting my hip against the counter, "let's talk rules."

She shifted her weight. "Rules?"

I nodded. "In a consensual Dom/sub scenario, rules are established upfront. To make sure everyone knows what they're getting into and everyone's safety and well-being are taken into consideration."

She gave a single sharp sniff of bitter laughter. "What a concept."

"Welcome to safe, sane, and consensual."

"Okay, so these... rules." She raised her eyebrows. "What kinds of rules?"

“Well, things either of us won’t do, for example.” I hooked my thumbs in the belt loops of my jeans. “There are hard limits and soft limits. Hard limits would be the things you absolutely won’t do, soft would be those you might consider under the right circumstances. Make sense?”

“Yeah.”

“My one non-negotiable hard limit is choking,” I said. “I absolutely will not choke you.”

She shuddered. “I don’t think that’ll be an issue.”

“I know, I didn’t figure it would be something you’d want. But I wanted to put it out on the table so you know where I stand. Now, are you okay with me touching your neck at all? Or would you prefer I didn’t?”

Probably not even realizing what she was doing, she raised one hand and rubbed the sides of her throat. “I’m fine with you kissing my neck, but nothing else.”

I nodded. “Kissing, nothing else. Noted. What about bondage and restraints?”

A shudder straightened her spine. “I can handle being bound, just...” She trailed off.

“Just what?”

She took a deep breath. “Just don’t leave me when I’m bound.”

I cringed. “Fucking hell.” I shook my head. “Baby, I would never, ever leave a sub alone while she was tied. I promise you, if I’ve tied you, cuffed you, restrained you, or in any way immobilized you, I will *always* be in the same room. Always.”

Another breath, and this time her shoulders slowly fell. She rolled them, loosening some tension. “That’s all I ask.”

“Trust me, you don’t even have to ask. But I’m glad you mentioned it anyway.” I paused. “Are you okay with flogging? I mean, does it irritate your scars or anything like that?”

“No, no, it’s fine,” she said. “Though they’ll sometimes itch if I work up a sweat and don’t put any lotion or anything on them.”

I nodded. “Not to worry. I always put lotion on a sub after I flog her.”

“It shouldn’t be a problem, then.”

“They don’t cause you any pain?”

She shook her head.

“Good.” I chewed my lip. “Okay, I don’t want to bring him into this any more than I have to, but I need to know: did Rich make you call him by any title? Master, anything like that?”

“Sir.” She spat out the word. Through her teeth, she added, “He made me call him Sir.”

“Did he ever have you call him or anyone else Master?”

“No.”

Thank God for that. At least he left something unscathed. “Then

that's what you'll call me." I thumbed my chin. "Are you okay with that?"

She nodded.

"Tell me your safe words."

She wetted her lips. "Red to stop, yellow to back off."

"Good. And since we're moving into a little bit of kink now, one thing I can't emphasize enough is to always err on the side of caution with your safe words. I will never, ever punish you or give you a hard time if you use one. Anything we've stopped can always be started again, and using a safe word is never a form of disobedience. Understood?"

Another nod.

"You sure you're ready for this?"

A fleeting second of hesitation preceded the whispered, "Yes."

I took a step toward her, resting my hand on her waist. Touching her face with my other, I said, "Do you trust me?"

"Yes," she said quickly. "You know I do."

"Let's do this, then."

Meredith took a deep breath, then led me down the hall to her bedroom. There, we kicked her cat out, much to his great disgust, and closed the door.

Enclosed in her room, she turned to me. She looked me in the eye and squared her shoulders, but couldn't quite hide her nerves. Her breathing was deliberately slow; the long, deep breaths of someone trying to counter a thundering heartbeat. Her hands were at her sides, opening and closing as if she was a second away from wringing them.

Nerves were to be expected. Every novice sub had them to a degree. So far, she was nervous, but not scared. Good.

I regarded her silently for a moment. I conditioned most of my subs to submit after a series of subtle gestures. Kristen instantly slipped into a submissive mindset when I took a sip of wine, rolled each of my sleeves in turn, and took a second sip. Amy responded the same way to a different routine.

I moved closer to Meredith. With my right hand, I ran the backs of my fingers down first her left cheek, then her right.

"From here on out," I said in a low, even tone, "I am in control. My commands are to be followed, and you will address me as Master. Understood?"

"Yes... Master." The hitch in her speech wasn't hesitation, just lack of familiarity. Trying it out, learning the words.

I touched her face with the backs of my fingers again. Left cheek, right. "This will continue until a safe word is spoken or I relinquish control. Clear?"

She nodded.

I raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, Master," she corrected.

“Good girl.” Left cheek, right. “Do you trust me to do this without abusing my authority?”

Another affirmative, this time with no hesitation.

“Are you afraid of me?”

“No, Master.”

“Do you understand that as my submissive, you are completely safe and will not be harmed?”

She swallowed. “Yes, Master.”

“Good girl.” Left cheek, right. “For tonight, I’m just going to have you go through a few basic tasks. This is to get you accustomed to obeying me. There won’t be any bondage or pain play this time. Understood?”

“Yes, Master.”

“Good girl.” Left cheek, right.

I walked around her slowly, keeping about a foot between us as I circled her. She kept her eyes down, but I had no doubt they tracked my movement just as all her senses likely did. By now, she was probably hyperaware of me, tuning all her senses to my presence, my movement.

I stopped, facing her. She kept her eyes down. Her breathing was slow, but uneven. Her lips were pressed into a thin line, and her shoulders were bunched with tension.

Left cheek, right. “You’re doing fine, Meredith,” I whispered. “Just relax.”

She closed her eyes and swallowed, but the tension remained.

“Breathe, baby.” Left cheek, right. “You can stop this at any time.”

Finally, she exhaled, and her posture lost some of its stiffness.

“You all right?”

“Yes, Master.” She kept her eyes down.

“Good girl.” I touched her face once more. “Unbutton your shirt.”

She took a deep breath and raised her hands to do as I’d ordered.

I’d taken similar steps with Kristen when I first introduced her to BDSM. Simple commands and tasks. Progressively more demanding, progressively less flexible. When she and I had started, we’d never been intimate before at all. Though I’d been intimate with Meredith plenty of times in both the recent and distant past, she’d been abused, so I took small, careful steps as if I’d never touched her at all. Before we could proceed, she had to learn to submit to me because she wanted to, not because she felt she had no choice. She had to respect me, not fear me.

When her shirt was unbuttoned, she dropped her hands to her sides and waited.

“Take it off,” I said.

She shrugged once and let her shirt slide down her arms until it fluttered to the floor at her feet.

“Unclasp your bra.”

She reached back and did as I ordered. Once it was loose, she started

to pull it down her arms.

“Wait.”

Her eyes flicked up and met mine.

I raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t tell you to take it off.”

Cheeks darkening, she immediately dropped her gaze. “I’m sorry, Master, I’m—”

“It’s okay.” I touched her face—right hand, backs of fingers, left cheek, then right—and said, “You’re learning. I’m not angry, just correcting you.”

Her eyes flicked up to meet mine. We exchanged smiles, and she rolled some tension out of her shoulders before looking down at the floor again.

“Take it off.”

She did, but before letting it drop, she held it on her crooked finger. She looked up at me, an unspoken request for permission in her eyes.

I nodded.

The bra fell to the floor without a sound.

“Unbutton my shirt.”

With another deep breath, this time released slowly through parted lips, she reached for my top button.

In my mind’s eye, I saw us doing this in another time and place. Her hands weren’t so timid then. Submission wasn’t on her mind, nor was it on mine. Buttons weren’t so carefully undone, and neither of us could have cared less if we’d just ripped them off in the process. Once enough of the damned things were out of the way, we’d both hauled my shirt over my head so we could finally touch. No fear, no reservations, no ghosts.

Something jarred me back into the present.

Her fingers had stopped, that was it, and now hovered tentatively above my belt.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Your shirt,” she whispered, nodding toward my waist. “May I untuck it, Master?”

“Yes.”

She closed her eyes and gulped, then reached for my shirt again. She freed it from my jeans and unbuttoned the last two buttons before dropping her hands to her sides once more.

“Take it off.”

She slid my shirt over my shoulders and down my arms, and I fought to keep my breath steady and even. Never an easy task with a woman’s fingertips brushing my skin this way, but as I always did when I played these games, I managed.

I managed, even as I said, “Unbuckle my belt and take it off.”

The unusually emphatic rattle of the buckle revealed the unsteadiness she probably didn’t want me to notice. She slid my belt free of the loops and

held it until I gestured for her to put it aside.

"Take everything else off," I said. I did the same, getting out of my jeans and boxers while she let her skirt and panties fall to the floor.

Naked and facing me, though with her eyes down, she shifted her weight once, twice, again. Her bare shoulders bunched slightly, and she moistened her lips a couple of times.

"Doing okay?" I asked.

She nodded.

I cleared my throat.

"Yes, Master," she corrected.

"Good girl." Left cheek, right. Some of the tension disappeared. More when I did it again. Nerves, then. Not fear. Just as I'd hoped.

"Go to the bedside table and get a condom out."

"Yes, Master," she murmured. She turned and started toward the bedside table. With her back to me, I winced at the sight of her scars, the pale reminders of the delicate psyche with which I worked. I looked away, gritting my teeth and wishing all manner of foul things on Rich.

She took the condom out, closed the drawer, and just as I looked up, she started back toward me.

I put a hand up. "What was my command?"

She gulped. "Get a condom out of the drawer."

"I didn't say to come back to me yet, did I?"

"Sorry, Master." She dropped her gaze and shrank back slightly.

I went to her and put my hands on her hips. "Like I said before," I whispered, lifting her chin, "you're learning. It's okay." Left cheek, right. When she chanced a look at me, I smiled, and with some effort, she returned it.

"Thank you, Master," she whispered.

Still holding her chin up with two fingers, I kissed her. "I want you to put the condom on me."

Then she tore the wrapper with her teeth. I'd done a similar lesson with Kristen early on. Meredith was more accustomed to touching me, if only because of our past intimacy, but her hands still shook when she rolled it on. Nerves or fear of displeasing me, I couldn't tell.

Once the condom was in place, I touched her face as I'd done several times already, and she closed her eyes, releasing a relieved sigh. Whether the gesture had calmed her nerves or her need to please me, the effect was the same.

"Still doing okay?"

"Yes, Master."

"Do you want to continue?"

Our eyes met, and I'll be damned if there wasn't a glint of excitement in hers and a playful grin on her lips. "Yes, Master. I do."

I couldn't help grinning myself. *That's my girl.*

I lay back on her bed. “I want you to get on top.”

She did as I ordered, joining me on the bed and straddling me. With one hand on her hip, I kept her from coming all the way down. Still holding her steady, I teased her pussy with two fingers. Oh yes, she was wet. It wouldn’t take much at all to slide inside her. I suppressed a shudder of anticipation, at least enough to keep it out of her sight.

“You’ll only take as much as I allow.” I fought to keep my voice even. “When you feel my hand, you’ll stop. Understood?”

“Yes, Master.”

I guided her down until my cock pressed against her pussy. Even the layer of latex between us couldn’t keep the heat of her body from reaching my nerve endings. My heart thundered in my chest, but I stayed in control as she lowered herself onto my cock. I barely gave her an inch before stopping her and making her rise again. She screwed her eyes shut and dug her teeth into her lip, probably biting back a frustrated string of profanity. The next time, I let her have a little more. Each time, a fraction of an inch more, and all the while, my eyes flicked back and forth from her face to my cock slipping just a little deeper inside her. This little game, one I’d played with numerous subs, always drove me almost as crazy as it did the sub. I wanted to fuck her—deep, hard, fast—but we’d get there.

Her hips trembled in my hands as I let her have a little more. Finally, just as I started getting deep enough to relieve some of her—our—frustration, I made her rise completely and stop. I held her there, with only the head of my cock inside her now.

“Look at me,” I said.

She blinked a few times, then did as I asked.

“I want you to remember one thing,” I said. “No matter what...” I suddenly pulled her hips down, thrusting my cock all the way inside her.

She gasped, falling forward on trembling arms. My own vision clouded over for a split second, but I didn’t let it show. I slid my hand around the back of her neck and drew her down to me.

Nearly touching her lips with mine, I whispered, “Always remember, Meredith, even when you’re on top, I am *always* in control. Do you understand?”

She shivered, nodding slowly.

“I said, do you understand?”

“Yes, Master.”

“Good girl.” Left cheek, right, and she relaxed, exhaling against my lips. I went on. “You’ll move exactly as fast as I tell you. No faster, no slower. Understood?”

“Yes, Master.”

“And you’re not to come until I allow it.”

“I won’t, Master.”

“Now tell me,” I said softly, “Do you want it fast or slow?”

She closed her eyes, quite possibly to avoid looking right at me, and wetted her lips. "However you prefer, Master."

I wasn't sure whether to be impressed she knew the correct response on the first try, or furious because her spirit was too broken to even try expressing her own desires. I wanted her to surrender control to me, but it had to be of her own free will. Conscious submission, not passive surrender.

She looked at me, eyebrows raised. "Master?"

Shit. I hadn't realized how long it had been since I'd gone quiet, and if the furrow of her brow was any indication, she thought she'd done wrong.

"Good answer." I forced a smile. "And I want it slow, so slow it is." I nudged her up with my hips and, with hips and hands, guided her to just the right speed. As she moved, I put my thumb over her clit, putting just enough pressure against it to make her breath catch, circling at precisely the same slow, languid speed of her body rising and falling above me. Whenever she adapted to one speed, I changed it. Fast and hard. Slower. Faster. Almost completely still. Faster again.

I fucked her and teased her clit until the first tremors of an impending orgasm caught her breath and tightened her pussy around my cock. She kept her eyes shut tight, held her breath, struggled to maintain whatever speed I chose in a given moment, and she couldn't hide how close she was to the brink.

And she didn't make a sound. Didn't say a word. Not a moan, not a plea.

It was my turn to get frustrated, and it wasn't with her. Any other submissive would have broken down and begged for an orgasm by this point. Assuming, of course, she didn't have reason to believe she'd be punished for voicing such a request.

I reached up and touched her face. Left cheek, right. She released her breath, relaxed just slightly, but kept her eyes closed.

"Do you want me to let you come, Meredith?"

She closed her eyes tighter. She might have even winced, though it came and went before I could be sure.

"Answer me." I kept my voice firm but gentle enough not to scare her.

Her rhythm faltered. The wince was there this time, I knew it was. Her body relaxed a little more, and not the way I'd hoped. She slid back from the edge. Her orgasm receded from her reach, from mine.

I encouraged her to move faster, and did the same with my thumb on her clit. She fought me, but I coaxed her back, waiting for her breath to catch again before I whispered, "Do you want me to let you come?"

She flinched.

Come on, baby, I know you can do this. "Answer me," I whispered. "Answer me unless you want me to stop." I moved a little faster, teased her clit a little more. "Do you want me to let you come?"

She licked her lips. "Yes, Master, I do."

"Ask."

She looked down at me, blinking a couple of times.

"If you want to come," I said, "you have to ask permission."

Her cheeks darkened.

"Ask for what you want, Meredith." I reached for her face with my free hand. Left cheek, right. "I'll decide whether or not to give it to you, but don't be ashamed of asking."

She didn't speak.

"All you have to do is ask." *Which is asking you to move a mountain now, but I know you can do it. I know it's there. Talk to me, baby.*

Once again, her orgasm started to slip out of our reach, but she dug her teeth into her lower lip and fucked me harder, pressing her clit against my thumb. Against the rules, yes, but she'd picked her battle, and I wasn't letting her lose this one.

"Just ask, baby," I said. "All you have to do is ask."

She gasped, throwing her head back. Nearly sobbing, she said, "Please, Master..."

I rubbed her clit a little faster. "Please what?"

"Please, may—" Her breath caught. Arousal and shame vied for dominance in her expression, in the tightness of her lips and the creases between her eyebrows.

"Ask for what you want, Meredith." I struggled to keep my own voice even. There was no way in hell I'd let myself come before she did, but I was so close, so damned close. "Say it, baby. Whatever you want."

She gasped. Licked her lips. Then, she screwed her eyes shut and whispered, "Please, may I come, Master?"

"Yes."

She didn't make a sound. In slow motion, one vertebra at a time, her spine straightened while a silent breath slipped through her parted lips. Her pussy squeezed my cock—oh God, she was so tight, so fucking tight—and I grabbed her hips and fucked her as hard as I could from below until I couldn't hold back anymore.

I groaned and held her hips against me until I was sure every last aftershock had passed. I relaxed. She relaxed. With a soft whimper, she collapsed over me, panting and shaking. I wrapped my arms around her, closing my eyes and stroking her hair while I fought to catch my breath.

When she pushed herself up onto her shaking arms, I reached up and touched her face with the backs of my fingers. Left cheek, right. She closed her eyes and smiled, pressing her cheek against my hand like a cat.

"You've done very well," I whispered. When our eyes met, I grinned. "You're going to be a fun submissive, Meredith."

She smiled, her already flushed cheeks darkening a little more.

"Doing okay?" I asked.

She looked at me with heavy-lidded eyes. "Very much so, Master."

"Good." Left cheek, right. "I'm not your Master anymore tonight. Now come here." I kissed her gently and ran my fingers through her hair.

After a few minutes, she lifted herself off me so I could get up and take care of the condom. Once it was gone, we got into bed together and she rested her head on my shoulder.

"I'm not used to such a gentle Dom," she said.

You're not used to anything that can be called a Dom. I kissed her forehead. "I'll get rougher as time goes on, when I'm sure you can handle it. Assuming you want me to, of course."

"Funny you should mention that, actually."

"Why's that?"

"Leslie and I talked a little about pain play the other day."

"Oh?"

She shrugged. "Just starting to get into the subject. I'm still not quite sure what I want there, or when I'll be ready, but I'd like to try flogging again at some point."

"Is that something you'd want to try sooner than later? I mean, given what he did to scar your back..."

"That's exactly why I want to try it," she said. "Because of what he did. But, like I said, I'm not sure when. Eventually."

"Just let me know." I kissed her forehead again. "But there's no need to rush. I'm not going anywhere."

"I know you're not." She looked up at me. "And thank you. For everything."

I smiled. "You're welcome, babe."

Ten

After a couple of sessions of very basic training like that, Meredith was ready for more. She expressed some interest in the dungeon, but I preferred to stick to safer, more comfortable ground until she was accustomed to having her boundaries pushed. Every time we did this, we risked stirring up the hornet's nest of demons in her mind. Everything had gone smoothly thus far, but anything could happen.

So when I pulled the deerskin training flogger out of my backpack, we were in the safe, familiar confines of her bedroom.

"This is probably the gentlest one I own." I held it out to her. "Here. Feel it."

Chewing her lip, she reached for it. She held her breath as she closed her fingers around the leather-wrapped handle. She swallowed and ran her fingers through the tails of the flogger. They were thick, made of soft deerskin, designed for thud with almost no sting. I could leave welts with it if a sub wanted me to, but I wouldn't tear up her back like a cat o' nine tails once had.

She handed it back to me.

"Are you comfortable with this?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yes, I think so."

"You think so?"

"I am." She eyed the flogger warily, then looked at me. "Just, go slow."

"I will."

She took a breath. "How do you want me?"

I looked around the room, trying to decide on a place to flog her. Holding the sides of the doorway? Hands on the footboard? Palms to the wall?

"Are you comfortable kneeling?" I asked.

She nodded.

"That's what we'll do, then." I stepped closer to her. "You ready for this?"

Another nod.

With the backs of my fingers, I caressed her face. Left cheek, then right. Her shoulders dropped slightly, and a second later, so did her gaze. When I did it again—left, then right—she closed her eyes and exhaled.

“Look at me.” When she did, I said, “Tell me your safe words.”

“Red if I want to stop,” she whispered. “Yellow if I want you to back off, Master.”

“Good girl.” Left cheek, right. I ordered her to strip. In a voice that was firm, but gentle enough to avoid unsettling her, I said, “Kneel.”

She did, keeping her knees apart and heels together for balance. Though I hadn’t prompted her to, she clasped her hands loosely over the small of her back. Maybe it was a habit, maybe it was simply more comfortable for her, maybe she was instinctively protecting her kidneys. Whatever the case, I chose not to correct her for taking that step when I hadn’t commanded or allowed it.

I gathered her hair and laid it over her shoulder, exposing her back. She took a few slow, deep breaths.

I knelt in front of her, touching her face again—left, cheek right—and whispered, “Are you all right?”

She nodded. “Just nervous.”

“You know you can stop this at any time, right?”

Another nod. “Safe words. I know.”

“Tell me again what they are.”

“Red to stop, yellow to back off.”

“Do you want me to continue?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

I cleared my throat.

“Yes, Master,” she corrected.

“Good girl.” Left cheek, right. I kissed her forehead, then rose and I walked around her, watching her posture and muscles for any sign that she was more than just a little nervous. Tension occasionally rippled beneath her scarred skin, but her breathing was slow and even. When she clasped and unclasped her hands over her lower back, they were steady. No trembling, no white-knuckled fists. So far, so good.

I raised the flogger, then brought the tails down on my own palm.

The instant leather cracked against my skin, Meredith released a cry that stopped my heart. Her hands went to her face, and she slumped forward, shoulders bunching and her entire body trembling violently.

I threw the flogger on the bed and dropped to my knees beside her.

“No, no, please don’t, I’m sorry,” she sobbed into her hands when I touched her shoulders. “Please, don’t, I won’t, I’m, I’m—”

“Shh.” I put my arms around her. “Just breathe, baby, I’m right here.” My heart pounded, my stomach turned, and I willed my hand not to shake while I stroked her hair.

Though she tried to shrink away, she didn’t fight me. It was a safe

bet she was afraid of me. Not *me*, but the man her damaged psyche had superimposed in my place, the one she *thought* I was just then. Fear paralyzed her, kept her from flying or fighting, and all she could do was beg me not to hurt her.

“Shh, I won’t hurt you, baby. I’d never hurt you.” I continued stroking her hair. “You’ve done nothing wrong, Meredith, you’re not being punished.”

“Thank you, Sir,” she whispered. I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth at the sound of that fucking title. Just as I’d feared, she heard my voice, but she wasn’t here. She wasn’t in this time and place. All I could do was continue to soothe her until she came back to me.

“I’m sorry, Sir, I’m sorry, I won’t... please, Sir... I’m sorry...” Every time she said that title, the one he’d demanded in spite of never earning the right to do so, my heart sank deeper and my blood boiled hotter.

“You’ve done nothing wrong, Meredith.” I kissed the top of her head, fighting to keep my emotions in check, to stay calm and even-keeled for her. “You’re not being punished. Everything has stopped. I won’t do anything until you tell me you’re ready.”

Finally, she took her hands away from her face and lifted her head. As soon as I saw the opportunity, I took it, caressing both sides of her face in turn with the backs of my fingers. The effect was almost immediate. Her breathing slowed and she melted against me, clutching my shirt in a death grip as I held her gently.

“Just breathe, baby,” I said. “I’m right here. I won’t hurt you.”

Taking and releasing a deep breath, she sat back. Then she looked down at herself. At her violently shaking hands. Around the room. And finally, at me. She blinked. Swallowed. I couldn’t recall ever seeing her look so lost.

I touched her face again. Left cheek, right. “You okay?”

She closed her eyes and exhaled as the backs of my fingers caressed her wet cheek again. Slowly, she nodded. “I’m okay.” She twisted a crick out of her back. “I need to move, though.”

I put my arm around her waist and we both stood. She was still shaking, and while I couldn’t tell if it was adrenaline or cold, I took no chances. Her bathrobe hung on one of the bedposts, so I grabbed it and wrapped it around her shoulders.

Together, we sat on the edge of the bed.

She wiped her eyes and sighed. “I feel really, really stupid right now.”

“No need to feel stupid, baby.” I kissed her cheek. “But, what happened?”

“That sound...” She shuddered.

I ran my fingers through her hair. “When I hit the flogger on my hand?”

She nodded. "I didn't know that would happen, I..." She paused. "Rich used to punish me this way. On my knees, with the cat o' nine tails. And he'd hit his hand a few times first. Just like you did."

I swallowed the bile rising in my throat. "Why didn't you tell me?"

She shook her head. "I didn't think it would have that effect on me. Jesus, that was crazy. I was doing fine, and then I heard it hit your hand, and I was... *there*."

"But, you knew being on your knees like that, and having me hit my hand with the flogger, that was something he did?"

"I didn't know you'd hit your hand."

"Still, baby, you have to tell me this stuff. I went through a similar thing with—" I paused. "With another sub."

"What happened?"

"She knew she was claustrophobic, but thought she could handle the Saint Andrew's Cross. That, and she was embarrassed to tell me."

"So what happened?"

I shuddered at the memory of Krissy's collapse into panic. It wasn't nearly as bad as Meredith's, and I'd calmed her in short order, but it had left us both shaken. Whether she ever knew it or not, I think I was as nervous as she was when we attempted the Cross again a while later.

I moistened my lips. "She panicked."

"This badly?"

"No, not this badly. But she didn't have a past trauma to trigger." I ran my hand up and down her arm. "Phobias aren't pleasant, but what you're dealing with is getting into PTSD territory."

"So some of my therapists have said," she muttered.

"Have you had flashbacks before?"

"Yes."

"What triggers them?"

"It varies," she whispered. "The first six months after I left Rich, the smell of leather or a certain kind of coffee could send me into a panic attack. Usually, once I figure out what's set me off, I can work towards getting used to it again."

I glanced at the flogger beside me. "I assume leather doesn't bother you anymore?"

She laughed. "No. I'm not quite ready for a car with leather interior, but it's getting better."

"And coffee?"

"Is fine."

"When I started, did you have any concerns it might trigger something like this?"

"No, I didn't make the connection. I thought being with you, it would be different, but when I was on my knees and heard it again, it was..." She shuddered.

“Too close to home?”

“Way too close.”

I trailed my hand up and down her back. “I know we’ll be retracing some of the steps you took with Rich, but I need to know when we do. Even if you don’t think it’ll trigger anything, please, talk to me.”

“Okay.”

I kissed her forehead. “He conditioned you to be afraid of him. Even after all this time, your mind still connects being on your knees and hearing that sound with a frightening, brutal beating.” I ran my fingers through her hair. “There may be other things like this. Just tell me if anything connects with him. Anything at all, no matter how ridiculous you might think it is.”

“I will,” she whispered almost inaudibly.

“And with time, I’ll condition you too,” I said. “To submit to me without fear.”

“I’m not afraid of you, Scott. You know that.”

“No, but we’ll eventually condition the fear reaction out of you.” I lifted her chin and kissed her lightly. “I don’t want you to be afraid at all while you’re submitting to me, whether it’s me you’re afraid of or someone else.”

She was quiet for a moment. Then she looked at me, her reddened eyes filled with the kind of stubborn determination they’d often had in the past. “I want to do it again.”

“We will.”

“No, I mean now.”

I blinked. “Right now?”

“Yes.”

“Meredith, we—”

She put her hand on my knee. “I need to get him out from under my skin.”

“I know, but we should take this slow.”

“I understand, but now that I know he still has this hold on me, it’s like...” She bit her lip while she searched for the words. “It’s like having a coat of slime all over my skin, and I need to get it *off*.”

I chewed the inside of my cheek. I knew her. She had the kind of fierce—and stubborn—determination to force herself through anything. There was no doubt in my mind she wouldn’t be able to rest easy until we’d pushed through to the end of this. She was hell-bent on getting back on the horse that had thrown her, but it was up to me to decide if she was more likely to break her neck or finish the ride.

Hello, rock and hard place.

I cradled her face in both hands and kissed her gently. “I don’t want to make you panic like that again.”

“I won’t.” She swallowed hard. “You’re here.”

“I was here before.” Lowering my voice, I added, “I’m here, but so is

he.”

She set her jaw. “Then we need to get rid of him.”

I exhaled slowly. “Are you absolutely sure you’re ready for this?”

“Yes,” she said.

I searched her eyes for the hesitation that was absent from her voice. When I found none, I took a deep breath. After hemming and hawing over it for a long moment, I rose. “Okay. We will. Just tell me if you want to stop.” I inclined my head. “And if I suspect a problem, I may put a stop to things myself. Understood?”

She nodded, but said nothing.

I held out my hand. She took it and stood. Once she was on her feet, she started to shrug off the bathrobe.

“Wait.”

She stopped, looking at me.

“Did I say to take that off yet?”

She looked down and pulled the robe back on. “Sorry, Master.”

Master, not Sir. Thank God.

“Good girl.” As I reached for her face, she watched my hand, then closed her eyes and shivered when the backs of my fingers made gentle contact. Left cheek, right.

The sides of her neck, just before disappearing beneath her thick robe, were rigid with tension, and the front of her throat barely moved enough to accommodate her nervous swallow.

Left cheek, right.

Some of the tension dissipated, her shoulders sinking almost imperceptibly.

Left cheek, right.

She exhaled. Her shoulders dropped a little more.

“Take the robe off,” I said softly. “Set it on the bed.”

She shrugged it off, caught it before it fell all the way to the floor, and put it on the bed as I asked.

“Good girl.” Left cheek, right. “Are you cold?”

“No, Master.”

I put my hand on the small of her back and, responding to the gentlest pressure from my fingertips, she took a couple of steps forward. Then I turned her so there was room for me to get behind her and swing the flogger without striking the bed or knocking the bedside lamp over.

“Get on your knees.”

She inhaled deeply and squared her shoulders. Then she did as I asked, and once again, she was on her knees at my feet, hands loosely clasped at the small of her back.

“I’m going to hit my hand again,” I said. “You’re going to hear that sound a few times before I hit you. Is that okay?”

“Yes, Master.”

Holding my breath and watching her, I raised the flogger and brought it down on my palm again. Lightly, so the sound was less pronounced than before. She tensed, cringing like a dog expecting to be struck. I set the flogger on the bed and knelt in front of her.

"I'm not going to hurt you." Left, cheek right. "Are you afraid of me?"

"No, Master."

Left, cheek right. "Do you still want to continue?"

"Yes, Master."

Three times, we did this. Flogger on the palm. Kneeling in front of her. Touching her face. Assuring her I wouldn't hurt her. Asking if she was afraid of me, if she still wanted to continue. Each "Yes, Master" was less timid than the one before. Three times, and each time, she reacted less to the sound of the flogger and more to the touch of my hand.

The fourth time, I hit my hand once again. She didn't respond at all. Not a flinch, not a start.

I raised the flogger, sent up a silent prayer that she'd stay with me in the here and now, then laid the tails across her left shoulder with all the force of a jacket falling onto carpet. Her spine straightened and she gasped, but after a few slow, deep breaths, she relaxed.

I brought the flogger down on her right shoulder. Another gasp, then slow, easy breathing.

"Are you okay, Meredith?" I asked.

She nodded.

I cleared my throat.

"Yes, Master," she said quickly.

"Good girl."

I hit her harder now. She recoiled, and the whimper she released could have gone either way: pleasure or panic.

I smacked the tails onto my palm. She flinched again, anticipating the strike, but then relaxed and released a sharp, frustrated breath. The kind of breath that, had we been on level ground, would have preceded a demand to stop fucking teasing her. I grinned. Pleasure, then. And probably more than a little relief, maybe even triumph, because she was unafraid.

I stopped teasing her, and when leather smacked skin, she moaned. It was unmistakably pleasure this time, and I had to will my own breathing to stay even and controlled.

Her head fell forward as I hit her again and again. Her skin turned pink, getting progressively darker the longer I flogged her. The scars stayed pale, silvery strips standing out against her flushed skin, refusing to submit to the percussion of the leather tails.

All I need is a little more time, Rich, and those marks will be all that's left of you here.

After several minutes, I stopped. I set the flogger on the bed and

went around in front of her again. I knelt and lifted her chin so she looked into my eyes. Hers were red, some fresh tears mingling with the old. One tear slid down her flushed cheek, and I brushed it away.

“Are you all right, Meredith?” Left cheek, right.

For a second, she wavered between smiling and breaking down in tears. Before I could repeat my question, she grabbed the front of my shirt and pulled me into a kiss.

When I broke the kiss, our eyes met. Hers suddenly widened as the submissive remembered her place, and she dropped her gaze.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, smoothing my shirt, trying to manually erase the evidence of her misstep. “I shouldn’t have—”

I kissed her, sliding my hand around the back of her neck. “All’s forgiven. You’re still learning.” I teased her nipple with my other thumb, and she moaned against my lips. “Still learning, and evidently still horny.”

“Mm-hmm.”

I closed my fingers around her wrist and laid her hand across my lap. “You’re not the only one.”

Her eyes met mine, then quickly darted away. She pursed her lips, her cheeks turning a shade of pink almost as deep as her back and shoulders.

“What’s wrong?” I raised her chin so she had to either look at me or close her eyes.

She gulped. “May I do something for you, Master?” Her shy boldness startled me.

I swept the tip of my tongue across my lower lip. “What did you have in mind?”

“I want... may I...” She closed her eyes, letting out a sigh of resignation as boldness receded in favor of shyness.

I tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “There’s nothing to be ashamed of, Meredith. Whatever it is, just ask.”

With considerable effort, she looked me in the eye. “May... may I suck your cock, Master?” As soon as the words were out, she shut her eyes tight, her cheeks darkening with embarrassment.

Only years of perfecting the calm, cool Dom exterior kept me from visibly shivering. Instead, I touched her face—left cheek, right—and leaned in to kiss her. Just before our lips met, I whispered, “Yes, you may.”

Her relieved exhalation cooled my cheek. Of course there were few horny men in their right mind who would turn down such a request, especially from a woman who was already on her knees and naked. But then, someone as beaten down as the woman kneeling before me would cringe asking a man if he wanted a suitcase full of money, certain she’d be punished for speaking, for breathing, for some undefined offense.

I broke the kiss and stood. She’d been on her knees for quite some time, so I took her by the hand and brought her to her feet. At my command, she got into bed while I got out of my clothes. Then I joined her.

Arms around her, I rolled onto my back, pulling her on top of me. We kissed deeply, desperately, hot skin against hot skin while I ran my fingers through her hair. When the heat of her body against my erection became more than I could take for even another damned second, I guided her hand between us.

She didn't hesitate at all. She wrapped her fingers around my cock and stroked slowly, gently, drawing a sharp hiss of breath from my lips.

Somehow, I found the ability to form a coherent thought *and* speak it without too much difficulty. "Do you want me to hold onto the headboard again?"

Meredith glanced up at it, then looked at me and shook her head. "No. Not this time." She trailed kisses down my chest and stomach. My abs contracted with every light touch of her lips, not sure if she was teasing me or trying to work up the nerve to see this through. Closing my eyes, I held my breath as every single kiss ratcheted up my anticipation.

That breath left my lungs in a single whoosh as the tip of her tongue drew a meandering path up the underside of my cock. Before my tingling nerves could even recover from that, her lips were around my cock, and so was her hand, and her other hand, and everything else in the world could have disappeared for all I fucking cared.

I put my hand over my eyes, reacting as if the light had become too bright. Not that I'd have noticed with my eyes so tightly shut, but I covered them anyway, forbidding even a glimmer of light from distracting me. Nothing would pull my attention away from what she did to me, and oh God, oh God, she did it so well. On and on, more and more, making me dizzier, sending me higher. With a flutter of her tongue, she sent a violent tremor up my spine. With a cool breath on moist skin, she rendered my lungs useless. And with one more stroke, one more flutter *right there*, she drove me out of my fucking mind.

My back arched and the only thing keeping me anchored was my tight grip on the headboard slats—when did I put my hands up here?—as she kept stroking, kept sucking.

"Oh God, Meredith," I heard myself groan. "Oh my *God*..."

A heartbeat later, I came so hard I saw stars. Before I'd even returned to earth, Meredith's mouth, salty with semen, was against mine. I released the headboard and tangled my fingers in her hair, kissing her breathlessly.

She pushed herself up and looked at me. "Thank you, Master."

I smiled, touching her face—left cheek, right—as I said, "No, thank *you*. Your mouth is incredible." I kissed her lightly. "You've done well. I'm not your Master anymore tonight."

She let out a breath, then reached for one of the water bottles on the bedside table. "Now I see why you thought to bring these in here. Want one?"

“No, I’m okay.”

She shifted onto her side next to me and unscrewed the cap. She downed almost half the bottle before capping it again and setting it back on the table. “I didn’t even think I did that much,” she said. “But I’m fucking exhausted.”

I smiled, trailing my hands up and down her upper arms. “You did more than you think. Just being flogged is enough to dehydrate someone. And speaking of which...” I sat up and gestured at the bed. “Lie on your stomach. I want to put some lotion on your back.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Where I flogged you.” I leaned over the edge of the bed to get the bottle of lotion out of my backpack. “It’ll keep your skin from getting irritated.”

“I’m not going to argue if you’re going to rub my back,” she said, laughing softly.

“I didn’t figure you would.”

She turned onto her stomach and I pulled the blanket up to her waist. Then I poured some of the lotion into my hand, and for a long time, I just rubbed her back, smoothing lotion onto her pink skin. This step wasn’t *as* critical after such a mild flogging, but I always included it as part of the routine afterward to help a sub wind down.

While I rubbed her back, my mind wandered back to her earlier panic. What other demons lurked beneath her skin, deep in her scarred psyche, waiting for us to exorcise? This wouldn’t be the last speed bump. My biggest fear was it also wouldn’t be the worst.

“Mmm, that feels good,” she murmured.

“Still have a layer of slime all over your skin?”

She laughed. “No, just whatever that crap is you’re putting on my back.”

“It’s called lotion, darling, remember?”

“Well, whatever it is, I like it.”

“Good.” I kept rubbing her skin, smoothing the lotion onto the faint welts I’d raised. After a while, I capped the lotion and set it next to her water bottle. I joined her in bed and pulled the blanket up over both of us.

“I could totally fall asleep like this,” she murmured, struggling to keep her eyes open.

“Then go to sleep.” I draped my arm over her waist and kissed the side of her neck. “I’m not going anywhere.”

In minutes, she drifted off to sleep in my arms, and I wasn’t far behind her.

Eleven

Meredith was unusually quiet in the waiting room. Not that we usually spoke much out here, in this limboland between the rest of the world and the place where she stared down her demons. Still, she barely looked at me when I arrived today. She offered me a quick glance and a hesitant smile, but by the time I'd taken my seat beside her, she'd fixed her gaze on the fish tank.

I put my hand on her knee, squeezing gently. She looked at me, *almost* smiling, then turned back to the fish tank. She laid her hand over mine, though, so at least that was something.

We both watched the fish. A black and yellow one wove a meandering path back and forth around the tank, looping between fake coral and strands of seaweed. I followed it with my eyes, if only to avoid watching Meredith avoid looking at me.

I thought about striking up a conversation about the fish. Hell if I knew what any of them were called. My knowledge of marine biology didn't extend beyond whatever I'd picked up watching *Finding Nemo*, and I'd been drunk both times. They were something to look at, though.

After a few silent minutes, about the time the fish was starting to make me seasick, Leslie appeared and called us back. We followed her into her office, where Meredith and I settled onto the couch that was becoming all too familiar. Leslie took her usual seat, and as the appointment began, I tried to tell myself the lingering queasiness was from watching the fish. It had nothing to do with Meredith's silence or what this visit might be about. Nothing at all to do with dreading what dark, haunted corridors we'd be going down today.

"Now, last time we spoke alone," Leslie said. "Meredith brought up a few things that she was interested in addressing and, if and when you're comfortable, exploring ways of overcoming."

And we're off.

I glanced at Meredith, then at Leslie, eyebrows raised. "Okay..."

Leslie gestured at her. "Go ahead, Meredith."

Meredith took a breath. Setting her shoulders back, probably steeling

herself, she turned to me. “Besides flogging, there were a few things Rich did that I’d never done before with anyone else. And I know they can be enjoyable with someone who’s not a complete dick.”

I gulped. “Such as?”

“Anal, for one thing.” Her gaze dropped and her cheeks colored.

I grimaced, but not because of what she’d said. Rather, her sudden shyness. Another reminder that this once bold, adventurous woman was now embarrassed of her sexual desires. Just one more reason to choke Rich if I ever had the chance.

She took a breath, composed herself, and went on. “The thing is, when Rich did it, it was always a punishment. It was always violent, and even if he used enough lube, it always hurt.”

Leslie folded her hands on top of the folder in her lap. “Meredith and I discussed last time that anal sex is something that can be very enjoyable, and shouldn’t be painful as long as generous amounts of lubrication and patience are applied.”

“Right, of course,” I said. “I’ve been with quite a few women who enjoy it with no pain.”

“Which is how I want to experience it,” Meredith said, almost whispering. “The thing is, sometimes it hurt... less.” She closed her eyes. “There was one night when I just didn’t have it in me to fight anymore. I guess I was just so tired and broken down, I completely relaxed. And the guy Rich had turned loose on me that night... I don’t know, I guess between me relaxing and him starting out slow, it didn’t hurt as badly.” She ran a hand through her hair and sighed. “It made me wonder if, had I known him or trusted him, and had I consented to this whole thing, maybe I could have enjoyed it. The same thing happened with a few of the Doms after that. When I was too exhausted to be tense, it wasn’t pleasant, but it didn’t hurt as much.”

I took a deep breath. *Just seasick. That’s all it is.* I wondered if those Doms ever knew they were playing a part in raping and nearly destroying this woman. Unless they were slimebags like him, he probably set up the scene as a sub who enjoyed rape fantasies, one who would take anything they dished out as long as she didn’t use her safe word. What they didn’t know was that she didn’t know the safe word, and there was no escape for her. What was painted for them as a fantasy was a nightmare from which she wasn’t permitted to wake up.

I shuddered. This was exactly why I didn’t play with subs unless I knew their Doms well enough to be certain I took no part in such a crime.

“Scott?” Leslie’s voice startled me.

“Sorry,” I said. “Just trying to process all of this.”

“Understandable,” she said. “I can’t imagine this is easy for you to hear.”

“No, it’s not.” I looked at Meredith. “So, do want to try anal, then?”

"I'm not sure yet." She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "I've been thinking about it, I'm just not sure yet."

I put my hand over hers. "If you want to, all you have to do is ask."

She offered a weak smile and put her other hand on top of mine.

"Meredith, there was something else you wanted to ask him about, am I correct?" Leslie said.

Meredith's smile disappeared and she looked at our hands. "Yeah. I..." Her brow furrowed. I said nothing, waiting for her to find the words. Finally, she took a deep breath. "Like I've mentioned before, Rich liked to bring in... others."

I gritted my teeth. That queasy feeling had nothing to do with the damned fish.

"Sometimes I knew them, or I'd been with them before," she said. "But usually, they were total strangers to me. I assume he knew them, but I have no idea." She looked at me, her expression pulling into a preemptive grimace as she whispered, "I'd wanted to try a threesome for a long time. Just... not like that."

Oh, shit... I chewed the inside of my cheek as my eyes flicked back and forth between Meredith and Leslie.

Meredith watched me for a moment, then went on. "The first night you flogged me, I panicked because something reminded me of Rich. Once I figured out what it was, I asked you to do it again so I could break that association. And it worked."

"Yeah, it did." Tentativeness worked its way into my voice, but it couldn't be helped. I had an inkling of where this was going, and my heart pounded harder as that inkling inched toward certainty.

"I want to do the same thing with this," she said. "The threesome. With a stranger."

Fuck. Sometimes I hate being right. "You do?"

She nodded slowly, dropping her gaze as her cheeks colored. "It was probably one of the most frightening and degrading things he did to me. He'd bring men in I didn't know and let them do whatever they wanted, even if it hurt me. I had to do whatever they told me and take whatever they dished out, or he'd punish me. And there was nothing I could do about any of it."

I flinched. "But you, you want to do it again?"

"On my terms." She took another deep breath. "With you and someone you know and trust. In a scenario where I can do something about it if I need to."

I looked at the floor for a moment, then at her. "You really want me to bring in someone you've never met, and have a threesome with you and him?"

"Actually, I want you to watch me with him."

I shot Leslie an incredulous look, then sent the same look Meredith's way. "You're serious." I blinked. "You want me to watch you have sex with

a stranger?"

"A stranger *to me*," she said. "He would be someone you know and trust."

I said nothing.

"Meredith, why don't we discuss how these scenarios played out with your ex-husband?" Leslie said.

I held my breath.

"It always started the same," Meredith whispered. "He'd sit off to the side and tell me to undress. Then he'd have me kneel in front of the door, and he'd call the Dom in. When the Dom came in, Rich would say, 'she's all yours.' And then he'd watch."

I shuddered. It wasn't unusual for me or Matt to trade off sitting to the side and watching the other with Kristen. It was hot, it was arousing beyond belief, and like a twisted version of King Midas, Rich had made it sleazy and creepy just like anything else he fucking touched.

"Did he only watch?" Leslie asked. I had no doubt she already knew the answers, and was simply guiding Meredith into repeating them for my benefit.

"No," Meredith whispered. "Sometimes he joined in. Usually he waited until the other Dom was finished, then he'd take over."

"And from our previous discussions," Leslie said, "how would you like Scott to proceed with such an arrangement?"

My mouth went dry.

Drier still when Meredith turned to me. "I want to play it out the same way."

I tried to moisten my lips, but it didn't do any good. "So, if I'm understanding this correctly, you want me to have you strip, kneel in front of the door and wait for me to call in a Dom you've never met. Then, once he's in the room, I'm supposed to hand you off to him, watch you, and join in if I feel like it?"

She nodded.

I was suddenly half-tempted to ask Leslie to turn down the air conditioning in the room. As the silence went on, the background devoid of the white noise of air coming through a vent, I realized the air conditioning wasn't on at all. Evidently the chill I couldn't escape came from under my clothes.

By hitting the palm of my hand with a flogger while she'd knelt in front of me, I'd triggered a flashback that sent Meredith into what I could only describe as a panic attack. We'd overcome that, and it didn't cause such a violent reaction anymore. But what about a scenario like this? Even if she knew this was something she directly associated with Rich, God only knew what would happen when the stimulus was applied and the synapses fired. A position and a sound could give her flashbacks. Handing her off to a total stranger while going through the same motions that had preceded countless

horrific experiences? She wasn't asking me to let her smell some too-familiar coffee. She was asking me to throw the cup in her face and hope to God it didn't burn her.

"Scott?" Leslie said.

I closed my eyes and rubbed my forehead. After a moment, I looked up. "Listen, I don't want to make this about me, but I'm just not sure I'm comfortable with this."

Meredith bit her lip.

Guilt tugged at my gut, but this was necessary. Whether I ultimately agreed to this or not, Leslie and Meredith both needed to be aware of my reservations. "I've done this kind of thing before, don't get me wrong. Rape fantasies, threesomes with a Dom the sub doesn't know, things like that." I paused, glancing back and forth between them. "But never after the kind of trauma you've been through."

"Though, bear in mind, Scott," Leslie said, "Meredith has had time to process her trauma and deal with it to a considerable extent. She and I have discussed this scenario, and I do believe she's reached a point where the risk-benefit ratio is in her favor."

"Still," I said. "You're asking me to put her in the hands of someone she's never met. Not that I'm opposed to it on principle, but how do I know this won't trigger another flashback?" I looked at Meredith and slipped my hand into hers. "I want to help you, babe, but I don't want to make things worse."

She dropped her gaze. The knot of guilt twisted and turned in my gut. It was a Herculean effort for her to even express her desires, and it killed me to dig my heels in, but what could I do?

"Is there any kind of compromise that would make this more comfortable for you?" Leslie asked.

"What if it was with someone she knew first?" I said. "I can introduce her to someone, make sure they're both comfortable with each other, and go from there. Even if they just meet a time or two, enough to be on a first name basis." I exhaled. "If that goes well, and Meredith still wants it, I can bring someone else in." After a second, I added, "A...stranger."

"I can handle that," Meredith said.

"Scott, do you know any Doms you'd trust for the stranger scenario?" Leslie asked. Our eyes met briefly, and I had no doubt she knew the answer.

"I do, yes." If I could convince him—and myself—to go through with this, I knew just who to ask. But I'd deal with that another day.

After the appointment was over, Meredith and I walked down to the parking garage. Neither of us spoke, but it wasn't the uncertain, fish-watching silence that had hung over us in the waiting room. Now it was loaded, filled with inevitable questions and answers. When we reached her car, we stopped.

It was Meredith who finally broke the silence. "You really don't want to do this, do you?"

"It's not that. I'll do whatever it takes to help you through this, but I'm..." I shook my head, unsure how to explain it.

"If you don't want to do something, just say so." She slid her arm around my waist. "Being able to put a stop to this goes both ways, and I don't want to make you uncomfortable."

"I'm going to hear and probably do a lot of things that make me uncomfortable before this is over, and I've accepted that from the beginning. It's just..." I dropped my gaze, unsure if I could articulate my concerns.

"Tell me, Scott."

I chewed the inside of my cheek, searching for the words. "Look, sometimes, even with a sub who hasn't been through what you have, there are setbacks. When you push boundaries, sometimes they push back. And with you, we've already hit one big speed bump, and we'll probably hit a few more."

"Which we both knew would happen eventually."

I nodded. "I know. I'm just concerned about... conditioning."

She cocked her head. "What do you mean?"

"Conditioning is a powerful thing." I spoke so softly my voice didn't echo at all in the cavernous garage. "You said yourself even the smell of coffee or leather has given you flashbacks."

"At one time, yes." She furrowed her brow. "But what does that have to do with this?"

"I don't want to condition you..." I bit my lip, then took a breath. "I don't want to condition you to associate me with the fear or panic or pain he caused."

Meredith blinked. "That's not possible, Scott."

"Isn't it?" I rested my hand on her waist. "What if I push you too hard, too fast? If I start giving you more flashbacks, more panic? How long before you start associating those with me?"

She put her arms around me. "I know we've only been doing this for a little while, but I've never once thought to connect you to what he's doing. Even when I panicked on my bedroom floor after that thing with the flogger, I never connected you to it."

"Not consciously, maybe." I kissed her forehead. "But if it happens enough times, under enough different circumstances, I'll be the common thread."

"So what do you suggest? I don't trust anyone else to do this."

"I'm not saying to have someone else do it," I whispered. "That's why I took this on in the first place. I'm not digging my heels in or backing out. I absolutely want to help you get past your trauma and give you a chance to experience your fantasies." I ran my fingers through her hair. "What I'm suggesting is we take smaller steps. Move a little slower. That way, if

negative things happen, there are more positive steps in between.”

“Do you want to forget the whole threesome thing, then?”

“No, I’m not suggesting that.” I touched her face. “I’m just suggesting we take it slow. Smaller steps, nothing more.” I swallowed hard. “Can you trust my judgment on that?”

“Of course I trust your judgment.” She smiled and stood up on her toes to kiss me. “I trust you, Scott. I wouldn’t be your sub if I didn’t.”

Twelve

After months of paperwork and bullshit, Meredith finally obtained access to her storage unit. Rich had kept the unit in his name, and the storage company wasn't about to hand it over to his ex-wife. She'd at least convinced them to let her keep paying for it rather than letting it default, which would have resulted in her possessions being auctioned off or discarded. It had taken an endless stream of phone calls, letters, faxes, affidavits, statements, and aspirin, but at long last, her things were hers again.

I parked the U-Haul in front of the unit.

Meredith stared at the metal drop door and took a breath. "Guess now I get to see how much of my stuff he destroyed." Unbuckling her seatbelt, she turned to me. "You brought the cutters, right?"

I pulled the bolt cutters out from under the seat. Since there was no key for the lock, we'd gotten permission to just cut it off and be done with it.

It was a good thing, too, because the lock was rusted shut. The cheap, piece-of-shit lock was probably the absolute bare minimum Rich could get away with while complying with the storage company's safety regulations. Fortunately, it was also easy to cut, unlike some of the more expensive types on the market, and with minimal effort on my part, the corroded padlock clattered onto the pavement at our feet.

Meredith bent and grabbed the handle on the bottom of the door. "Here we go," she muttered, probably more to herself than me. She pulled the handle, and with a deafening rumble, the door rolled up.

Sunlight illuminated the haphazard stacks of boxes for the first time in years. The smell of mold and mildew immediately made me wince, both from the strong odor and the sinking feeling as I considered what kind of damage it might have done to her things. Furniture and boxes alike were shoved wherever they'd fit, most likely with no regard for how well they'd bear weight or if any finishes would be damaged. What moisture hadn't damaged, force and physics probably had.

Meredith stood, but otherwise didn't move. For a moment, she just stared at everything, her hands clasped beneath her chin. It must have been overwhelming for her. Overwhelming and intimidating. Where to start?

I rested my hand on the small of her back. “Ready to empty this thing?”

Without taking her eyes off the boxes, she nodded slowly.

“You okay?”

Another nod. Finally, she looked at me. “Just having a hard time getting my head around this.”

“I don’t doubt that for a second.”

She threw a sad look toward the boxes, then dropped her gaze. “I wonder if it might be a good idea to go through everything here. I mean, there’s no sense hauling everything home and up to my apartment, only to find out things are busted to pieces.”

My stomach twisted into knots. I could only imagine why she was so certain he’d destroyed enough of her things to warrant going through it all here. Then again, looking at the jumbled heap of all her worldly possessions, there was no way everything had survived unscathed. *Did you bother leaving anything in her world intact, you cocksucker?*

I cleared my throat. “It’s up to you. We have the truck until tomorrow night, and I have all weekend to help.”

She smiled. “I appreciate it.” Her smile fell and she looked at the boxes. “Guess we should get started. We can just open stuff, take a quick look, and if everything looks reasonably intact, put it in the truck.” She handed me a pair of gloves. After five years, God only knew what creatures had moved in here.

We shoved boxes out of the way until we got to the furniture. Most of that was pretty well trashed. What wasn’t broken was badly damaged from moisture and mold. Anything with upholstery or stuffing was beyond saving. Fortunately, she wasn’t terribly attached to any of that. A trunk given to her by her grandmother and most of the antique bedroom set were fine, though, and those were important to her. They had a few scratches and such, but nothing that couldn’t be either fixed or covered up.

A gouge out of her dining room table was almost dead center, so a well-placed centerpiece would keep it out of sight. Two of the chairs were destroyed, but the other four were intact, so she still had a decent dining set.

“You can always find a matched pair for the head chairs,” I said. “Even if they don’t match the other four exactly.”

She nodded. “Good idea. Not that I’ve ever needed to use six chairs.”

“Always good to have them in case you need them, though.”

“True.” She looked around. “I think that’s it for the big stuff.” She picked up a box cutter and looked around. None of the boxes were marked, so there was no indication of what was in them or where they should go in her apartment. A few were torn, split, or chewed, revealing hints of their contents. Some dishes peeked out of a gaping hole that had been punched into a small computer box. A rodent or something had gnawed its way into another, and continued right into the spines of the books within. What looked

like a computer tower was visible in the split-apart side of a half-crushed box.

I shook my head and picked up the other cutter. "With as carefully as he packed all of this, I'm honestly surprised he bothered paying for the storage unit all this time."

She laughed bitterly. "Oh, that was just one of his little games."

"What do you mean?" I sliced apart some dusty tape and opened a box.

"He used it to keep me in line. He'd show me the statements so I could see that he was dutifully keeping all of my stuff here, but if I upset him somehow, he'd threaten to stop paying the bill or just close the unit." She shoved a box aside with her foot.

"Figures he'd find a way to use it against you."

"Trust me," she said, picking up a relatively undamaged box. "He could use anything against me."

"I can imagine." I rifled through the box in front of me, checking to make sure its contents were salvageable. Aside from a couple of cracked glasses and a bowl that may or may not have been chipped before it was packed, everything looked fine. I pulled out the damaged pieces, dropped them into a box we'd designated as a trash box, and took the rest out to the truck.

When I came back, I cut open another and started sifting through it. "What was Rich like, anyway? I mean, when you first met him. Before he, you know..."

"Before Mr. Hyde showed up?"

"Yeah."

"He was a really nice guy, to be honest with you." She set a box down and toed it toward the door. "And truth be told, even after we got married, he *could* be a sweet guy."

"Really?"

She nodded. "I never would have guessed what he was really like. Honestly. He was sweet, charming, the kind of guy I could talk to for hours." She blew out a breath and rolled her eyes. "Had everyone fooled, actually. Everyone in the community was completely horrified when they found out what happened to me, and a lot of people thought I was just trying to ruin his reputation." She paused, cutting the tape on a box before sliding the box cutter into her back pocket. "Honestly, if the D.A. and judge hadn't been so hell-bent on making an example out of him, he probably would have gone free just like most abusers do. And he would have gone right on convincing everyone what a fucking saint he was."

"Amazing how well people can hide sides like that," I said through my teeth.

"You're telling me." Something ceramic clattered and clanked. Paper rustled. Then she closed the box and pushed it off to the side before reaching

for another. “We put on a pretty good show for them. Both of us. Especially at all those black-tie events we’d go to. You know, the things rich people are always invited to? Oh, man, we could pull off the happily married couple image like nobody’s business.” She gave a snort of sarcastic laughter, but then paused. When I glanced at her, her expression was sad. Almost nostalgic.

“What’s wrong?” I asked over a box of water-damaged-beyond-repair paperbacks.

She sighed and met my eyes. “He even had me convinced every once in a while.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’d go through... phases.” She shook herself back to life and reached in to sort through the box while she continued speaking. “He was always absolutely domineering in the bedroom, but sometimes he almost fooled me into believing we were a real couple. We’d go out, we’d talk, we’d even sit on the couch and watch a movie once in a while.” She pulled a rat’s nest of tangled—and chewed—cables and cords out of the box and tossed them into the rapidly growing trash pile. “Of course, we’d be back to the usual shit before long, but those were the times he almost convinced me he really loved me.”

I ground my teeth. I didn’t know what made me hate him more: treating her like shit, or pretending he was the loving husband in spite of everything he’d done to her. Either way, I loathed the ground he walked on.

“I’ll never understand that asshole,” I said. “I just don’t get what kind of person would do that. Any of it. Shoving everything you own into storage, cutting you off from everyone, and taking you to another state, not to mention how he treated you sexually? It blows my mind.”

“I don’t know.” She paused, her shoulders dropping a little. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, keeping her eyes down, but not focusing on anything that I could see.

“What?” I asked.

Taking a breath, she looked at me. “Sometimes I’ve caught myself wondering if I... had it coming.”

The box cutter in my hand clattered onto the concrete. I stooped to pick it up, all the while staring at her with wide eyes. “Had it coming? What are you talking about?”

Even in the dim light, the way her cheeks changed color was obvious. “I had this... fantasy...”

“What kind of fantasy?”

Swallowing hard, she shifted her weight. “It’s sick.”

“Try me.”

She opened a box and concentrated on sorting through its contents while she spoke. “It was about having someone... I mean, it...” She sighed and rested her hands on the sides of the box. “To be perfectly blunt, it

involved having someone kidnap me and..." Trailing off, she shook her head again. "It's messed up, I—"

"A kidnap and rape fantasy?"

Meeting my eyes, she nodded.

"They're more common than you might think, babe," I said. "There's nothing sick about the fantasy, but there is something sick about someone taking it upon himself to force you into that fantasy on his terms."

She exhaled and dropped her gaze.

"I've played out rape fantasies with women before," I said.

Her head snapped up. "You have?"

"Yeah. Under their control, with safe words in place, yes."

"I guess I just started wondering if I'd somehow brought this on myself. Like the universe was saying 'okay, this is what you wanted, have fun.'"

"No, not even close," I said, almost growling. "Even if you'd told Rich that fantasy, he had no right to force you into that. The whole point of playing out a fantasy like that is to do it under *your* control with *your* rules. So it's safe."

She blew out a breath, but didn't respond.

I went on. "Even if you did have a fantasy about someone really coming in and kidnapping you, truly hurting you, raping you, whatever, that doesn't give anyone the right to take it upon themselves to play it out with you." I swallowed hard, struggling to keep my fury at her ex-husband in check. "And Meredith, even if you had decided you really liked what he was doing, it doesn't make it any less a crime because he didn't have your consent in the beginning."

Nodding slowly, she ran a hand through her hair. "I know. I guess I just..." She trailed off, then shook her head again. "Fuck, I don't know. Deep down, I know he had no right, I just can't help feeling a little—" She gulped. "—guilty."

"So do a lot of rape survivors," I said. "That doesn't mean you actually did anything wrong or deserved it."

She wetted her lips. "I guess that's just one more thing that will hopefully get better in time."

"It will." We exchanged smiles.

I cut open another box. This one was full of framed photos, each separated from the others by a single layer of newspaper. They'd actually been placed into the box fairly carefully, even if they weren't wrapped in much, so I guessed Meredith had packed them.

I pulled a few out and carefully unwrapped them to see if they'd survived well enough to save. Family portrait, graduation photo, parents on some trip or another, and—

My heart skipped.

Us.

We stood in front of the lodge at Whistler Mountain, arms around each other and smiling, bundled up with snowboards in hand. It must have been the second day of that three-day trip, since we both already had a little sunburn on our faces and still looked pretty energetic, like we hadn't worn ourselves out yet that day. In fact, I was pretty sure that was right before the run during which I—while showing off and attempting something well above my own skill level—broke my ankle. Aside from that little mishap, though, the trip was a blast. That was the weekend I learned that even a freshly fractured ankle and some painkillers couldn't keep me from appreciating Meredith's oral talents.

I couldn't help smiling at the memory, but that smile faded when the light caught the jagged edge of the frame's broken glass. Most of the glass was gone, and what was left was splintered. The picture had a few scratches that vaguely mimicked a spiderweb, and none of the missing pieces of glass were inside the cocoon of newspaper. Whatever happened to it happened before the photo was packed.

I didn't ask. I rewrapped it and slid it back into the box. I closed the cardboard flaps, taped them into place, and carried the pictures out to the truck. There, I wedged it between a couple of other boxes. Not enough to crush it, just enough to keep it from being jarred loose while the truck was in motion.

As I walked back into the storage unit, Meredith pulled a large cobalt vase out of a box and held it up, eyeing it.

"Wow, I'm surprised this ended up in here," she said. It was intricate, in one piece and looked *very* expensive.

"Looks like it survived, though," I said.

"Yep. It did." She pursed her lips, still eyeing the vase. "Not a single crack or scratch or anything." After a second, she let it go, not even flinching when it shattered on the concrete. She looked down at the debris, then at me, and shrugged. "Oops."

I blinked. "Did you just..."

"Rich gave it to me."

"Oh. Never mind, then."

She laughed. "He bought me all kinds of expensive shit when we first started dating." She kicked a piece of glass and watched it skitter across the floor into the side of a box. "I guess I should sweep this up before one of us gets cut. I'll be right back." She stepped around some boxes. A piece of glass crunched beneath her shoe. She looked down, lifting her foot to reveal a large shard that had broken into smaller pieces. She put her foot down again, ground her heel into it, and went out to the truck to get the broom we'd found earlier, leaving a pile of dust and tiny fragments where that piece had been.

I stared at the shattered blue glass. Grinning to myself, I started going through another box of books. I hoped that vase was even more expensive than it looked.

After a couple of hours, Meredith twisted a crick out of her back and looked around at the remaining boxes. "This should be enough for now." She took her gloves off and tossed them on top of a box. "We need to get everything that's already in the truck up to my apartment before dark. Trust me, we don't want to be unloading in that neighborhood after dark."

"I don't doubt that." I took my own gloves off.

We loaded a few more boxes into the truck. Then I pulled the door down and she put a brand new lock on it, one to which she had the key. After making sure everything in the truck was secure, we closed it and headed back to her apartment.

Meredith was right about the timing. By the time everything was upstairs, it was just starting to get dark.

Though we were both exhausted at this point, Meredith looked at everything we'd stacked in her living room and hallway. "I need to get this shit unpacked. Can't stand having boxes all over the place."

"Need a hand?"

"You don't mind?"

"Of course not."

"Well, let me at least get you a beer first," she said. "In fact, I could use one myself."

"Hey, if there's beer involved, I'll definitely stick around."

She laughed. "Why does that not surprise me?"

We cracked open a pair of beers, returned to the living room, and got started. Just as we'd done all day long, we took out box cutters, sliced through tape, opened boxes, and pulled out the pieces of her past. Newspaper, bubble wrap, and cardboard accumulated on the floor. Every surface was quickly covered with knickknacks, dishes, and whatever else had survived. We stacked books beside bookcases and on tables, to be sorted and shelved later.

At one point, I sat on the couch and pulled books out of a box, stacking them on the coffee table. The covers of two caught my attention as I brought them out. To my surprise, it was a pair of engineering textbooks from my grad school days.

I held them up. "How the hell did these get in here?"

She shrugged. "Well, I never knew when I might need a doorstop or a boat anchor."

"Don't blame you." I flipped through the pages of one. "That's about all these two are good for."

"You're more than welcome to take them back."

"Oh, no, I'll pass. I haven't missed them, and I don't need them."

"No, I insist."

"Possession is nine-tenths of the law." I dropped them onto the table. "All yours, darling."

"Fucker," she muttered. "I'm going to leave them at your—" She

paused, then laughed. “Oh my God, remember this thing?” She pulled a tiny, ancient television out of a box.

I chuckled. “Jesus, I thought we got rid of that at a yard sale or something.”

“Apparently not. I wonder if it even still works. Looks like some moisture got to it.” She gestured at one side, and it definitely looked like water had gotten into it.

“Might as well chuck it,” I said. “The electronics are probably toast anyway.”

“Yeah, and it’s not like I need it.” She set it down, shaking her head and laughing to herself. She turned to go through the rest of the box.

“I don’t think it even worked back then, did—” I stopped when her expression abruptly changed. Looking into the open box, her lips parted and her eyes widened, but I couldn’t tell if it was disbelief, horror, or both. “What’s wrong?”

“That son of a bitch,” she whispered, but there was no venom behind the words. Just pain. She reached into the box, and my heart beat faster as I rose and stepped toward her.

“Meredith?”

When she brought her hands out, my heart sank.

A few years before he died, her father had made her a music box. He was a master woodworker, and the box was stunning. Dark cherry wood with a lighter wood inlaid on top, spelling out “Meri,” which was his nickname for her. It played “White Christmas,” her favorite Christmas song. I’d never forgotten the day I came home from work to find her crying on the couch with it clutched to her chest. To this day, I still associated that song with her father’s death.

If there was anything among her possessions that meant the world to her, it was that little box, and it hadn’t fared well. Not in those moist conditions and under the weight of the television. It was mostly intact, but one of the legs had snapped off and the lid sat at an odd angle. Meredith worked the lid until it finally opened enough to see inside, which resulted in one of the bent, corroded hinges snapping off on one side. Inside the box, the velvet lining was stained with mildew, and the little mirror was splintered into dozens of pieces. No music played when the box opened, so it was a safe bet the music box itself was damaged too.

Sniffing sharply, Meredith unceremoniously shoved it aside. “Guess I should be happy at least some things made it through in one piece.” She reached into the box to see what else was in it. Without looking up, she said, “Could you put that thing in one of the trash bags?”

I swallowed hard. She wasn’t nearly as stoic about it as she tried to sound. I had no doubt it broke her heart to see that music box destroyed. But what could I say?

Without a word, I picked it up and took it across the room to the

trash bags. I carefully slipped it into a bag that was mostly ripped-up newspaper and pieces of bubble wrap.

“I’m going to run a few of these down to the dumpster,” I said.

She looked up and offered a weak smile. “Okay, thanks.”

“Be right back.” I picked up the bag of newspaper along with two others, and headed downstairs.

At the dumpster, I threw two of the bags in, but not the third. I set it on the ground and opened it, rifling around in the newspaper and bubble wrap until I found the music box.

Turning it in my hands, I furrowed my brow and inspected the damage. The music box itself was, as I’d suspected, corroded beyond repair. One leg was cracked, a second missing. There was some damage to the inlay of her name on the lid, and the finish was dulled and scratched. The dovetailing was fine, thank God, but one wall of the box was badly rotted. I’d have to cut that area out and put another in its place.

All in all, the music box was in bad shape, but it could have been a lot worse.

I didn’t want to get Meredith’s hopes up that it was salvageable, but with a little TLC, it was possible. Maybe.

I freed a piece of newspaper, carefully wrapped it around the box, threw the rest in the dumpster, and went to my car. I tucked the music box behind the seat, then shut and locked the car.

I wasn’t the master woodworker her late father had been, but I could hold my own. Hopefully I could fix this thing, even if I couldn’t restore it to quite what it had been before. It meant the world to her, and Rich had broken it. Both of those things made fixing it worth a try.

I gave the unassuming ball of newspaper one last look, then turned and headed back upstairs.

Thirteen

The clock on the microwave read a little past seven. Amy would be here soon, and though I was excited to see her, I couldn't ignore the nagging feeling that what I really wanted to do was call her, cancel, and just sleep for a few hours.

But I didn't. It was the same feeling I'd had before Kristen showed up one night not long ago, so I reminded myself—repeatedly—that once Amy arrived, my mood would change just like it did with Kristen.

I closed my eyes and tried to work some stiffness out of my neck and shoulders with my fingers. I hadn't slept for shit lately, and it was taking its toll. The deeper I got into this situation with Meredith, the more I learned about the two and a half of years she'd spent in hell, the more it gnawed at me. When I'd agreed to this, I hadn't realized just how much it would consume me. Between worrying about her and simply being haunted by everything I learned about what happened to her, it did just that. When I managed to sleep, I dreamed about it all. Whenever Meredith slept beside me, I expected every sound or movement to be the start of a violent awakening from a nightmare, and more often than not, it was.

Sighing, I went into the living room and dropped onto the couch, very nearly tripping over Malia when she darted past me. I'd given her some catnip earlier, so she was completely cracked out and losing her mind. She attacked the kitty condo, sprinted around the living room, smacked into shit. She disappeared into the kitchen, and though I could no longer see her, the *slide-crash* filled me in. A moment later she returned, looking around as nonchalantly as she could before a toy caught her eye. She tore across the carpet, pounced on the hapless toy, missed and somersaulted into the wall.

And I couldn't even bring myself to laugh at her antics. Or pick up the laser pointer off the coffee table and tease her with it, which was usually more than enough to lighten my mood. Something told me it was going to take a hell of a lot more to lighten this mood than making my cat chase a red dot up the wall.

Rubbing my forehead, I exhaled hard. Amy would be here soon. Once she was here, I'd be fine.

About fifteen minutes later, the doorbell rang. Malia startled as if someone had crashed a car into the house. Eyes wide, claws out, hackles up, she looked like she was about to jump out of her skin.

"It's just Amy, stupid." I managed a quiet laugh on my way to answer the door. As I reached for the doorknob, Malia took off into another room, and I chuckled to myself. Apparently humans aren't the only creatures that get paranoid when they're stoned.

When I opened the door, Amy was there with a devilish grin and a low-cut blouse, looking for all the world like a woman who had every intention of sending me to sleep with a smile on my face tonight. In the mood for a brutal flogging, knowing her, and ready to be fucked out of her mind.

As soon as the door was closed behind us, I put my arms around her and kissed her, taking in a long breath of her familiar perfume as I gently parted her lips with my tongue. She dragged her nails down the back of my shirt while I twisted her hair in my hand and pulled her head back so I could kiss her neck.

And I felt... nothing.

Nothing but a sinking feeling in my chest.

Amy broke the kiss and looked up at me. Brushing the pad of her thumb over my cheekbone, she said, "You look exhausted. Are you okay?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just haven't been sleeping well."

"Worrying about your ex?"

I *almost* shuddered. "Basically."

"How is she doing, anyway?"

"Getting better by the day." I forced a smile. *Not so sure the same can be said about me.*

"Good to hear." She furrowed her brow. "You sure you're okay?"

There was no point in lying to her. She wasn't responsible for my mood, and I obviously wasn't going to get it past her anyway.

I let out a breath. "Just exhausted."

A half-playful, half-cautious smile pulled at her lips. "You're not in the mood tonight, are you?"

Avoiding her eyes, I sighed. "Would you be offended if I said I wasn't?"

"With everything you're dealing with right now? Not in the least."

I held her close to me again and kissed her gently. "I'll make it up to you."

"I know you will. For tonight, do you want me to just rub your back?"

That woke up some nerves. No one on the planet gave back massages like she did, and my knotted muscles needed some of the magic from her hands. I smiled and played with her hair. "You're an angel, Amy."

In my bedroom, she had me take off my shirt and lie facedown on the bed. I closed my eyes and sighed, resting my head on my arms while she

got a bottle of massage oil out of the bedside table. I swore my body had a Pavlovian response to the very suggestion of a massage from her; just the anticipation of her hands eased some of the tension.

She sat over me, straddling my hips. The bottle clicked once, then again, and she leaned to the side to set it beside us. She rubbed her hands together, the soft hiss of oiled skin on skin raising goose bumps all over me.

Her weight shifted forward slightly. Then she pressed the heels of her hands into my lower back on either side of my spine. Groaning, I closed my eyes and lost myself in the hypnotic circles she made all the way up and down my back.

“Jesus, Scott.” She pressed her hand in even harder just below my left shoulder blade. “You are tense.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“No, I mean *really* tense.” She dug her knuckle in.

I winced. “Fuck...”

“Sorry. Only way to get the knots out.”

“I know.” I gritted my teeth and forced myself to keep breathing while she worked the stiffness out. After a moment that felt like a goddamned hour, the tension released. She rubbed it gently with her palm, and I exhaled as the pain diminished.

I couldn’t say how much time passed. I almost fell asleep a few times, but right about the time I’d start to drift off, she’d find another knot. Then she’d knead the back of my neck, or my shoulders, or even my upper arms, and I’d relax once more. By the time she was finished, I simultaneously ached all over and felt like a million bucks.

“Have I ever mentioned how much I love your hands?” I murmured.

“You’ve mentioned it a time or two.” She moved off me and set the oil bottle on the nightstand. “Feel better?”

“Much.” I rolled onto my back. She leaned down to kiss me, then laid beside me with her head on my chest. I wrapped my arms around her. She nestled her head beneath my chin, and I stroked her hair.

“I’ve missed you lately,” she said.

“I’ve missed you too.” I nudged her to raise her head, and when she did, I kissed her forehead. I had missed her. My God, had I ever. I even had to stop and think to figure out exactly how long it had been since I last saw her, and cringed when I realized the time had to be measured in weeks, not days. We’d spoken on the phone, sent e-mails and texts back and forth, but this was the first time we’d been in the same room, let alone the same bed, in almost a month.

I wished I could say it was the situation with Meredith that had kept us apart. While that situation occupied a lot of my time and energy lately, it was just another splash of water on this already dying fire. Over the last six months or so, Amy and I had spent progressively less time together. It wasn’t by design, or because of any negative feelings, it was just life. Our other

relationships—her marriage to Ryan, my relationship with Krissy—had their own implicit demands that we'd always worked around.

But now, Amy was up to her neck in finishing her master's degree while she and Ryan dove into the long, stressful process of having their new house built. My employer had had the audacity to cut into my play time with demands of overtime. Life happened, and we had, for some time now, been two ships who could barely find the time to pass in the night.

Though I would never have held it against Meredith, nor did I regret agreeing to help her, I couldn't deny her re-emergence from my past had happened at the worst possible time where Amy and I were concerned.

I ran my fingers through Amy's hair. "I'm sorry I haven't been around much."

"It's okay." She lifted her head to look at me. "I've just missed you."

"It's mutual, believe me."

She touched my face, and her smile fell a little. "Are you doing okay? I mean, everything you've been dealing with..."

I closed my hand around hers and kissed her palm. "I'm fine. Don't worry about me."

"I do worry about you."

I chuckled. "You and Krissy both worry about me too much."

"Well, why shouldn't we? I mean, when you're left without adult supervision, and—"

"Hey, is that any way to talk to your Master?"

"You're not my Master right now."

"Okay, good point. But don't let it become a habit." I gave her the sternest look I could muster, which wasn't much because her grin made me laugh.

Then her expression turned serious. "So, everything that's going on, you're doing okay with it?"

At the reminder of everything that existed in the rest of my life, that sinking feeling came back, but I nodded anyway. "I told you, I'm doing fine. It's just been time-consuming." I caressed her face with the backs of my fingers. "I hate neglecting you in the process, though."

She smiled. "Just means Ryan's had his hands full."

"I'm sure he has." I laughed. "Have you taught him to flog you yet?"

She rolled her eyes. "Come on. He'd sooner cut his own throat than hit me."

"Yeah, true. Sorry I wasn't game for it tonight, I—"

"Scott." She raised her chin and kissed me lightly. "You've got a lot on your mind. I'm not going to get upset about that." She eyed me. "And don't try to tell me you don't have a lot on your mind, because the knots in your back told a very different story."

Sighing, I nodded. "Okay, yeah, I do have a lot on my mind these days."

“Everything all right?” She touched my face. “I mean, you said you were helping your ex with some problems, but...”

“Nothing I can really talk about,” I said. “Except to say I’m helping the most traumatized, brutalized sub I’ve ever seen.”

Her eyes widened. “My God, what happened to her?”

“What happened to her,” I growled through clenched teeth, “was a son of a bitch who called himself a Dom, but was nothing more than a sadistic wife beater.”

“Wow.” She exhaled. “I can’t even begin to imagine.” She draped her arm over me and rested her head on my shoulder again. Maybe it was my imagination, but I swore she held me a little closer, a little tighter.

I stroked her hair. “It’s a nightmare, honestly. So, I’ve been worried about that lately. A lot.”

“I don’t blame you. At least she’s in good hands.”

“God, I hope so.”

Amy looked up. “I’m serious. I couldn’t think of anyone better to help someone in her position.”

I managed a half-hearted smile. “You have more faith in me than I do sometimes.”

Her smile was more enthusiastic than mine. “I have faith in you because I know what you’re like as a Dom.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“I mean it, Scott,” she said. “If I were in her shoes, I couldn’t think of anyone else I’d turn to.”

“Thanks, babe.” For a moment, I just looked at her, taking her in and caressing her face. My God, it *had* been too long. Way too long.

“What are you thinking about?” she whispered.

“You.” I slid my hand into her hair and kissed her. Touching my forehead to hers, I whispered, “I love you.”

“I love you too.” She drew me closer as the kiss deepened, her shirt brushing my bare chest. I let my hand drift down her side, then under her shirt. Warm contact between her skin and my fingertips made us both inhale and pull each other closer.

I lifted my head and looked at her again. A shiver ran down my spine. Whatever I hadn’t felt when she arrived, it came to me now. I wanted her. Naked, bound, taking whatever I chose to give her, whether I fucked her or flogged her. Holy hell, I needed her.

When I bent to kiss her neck, she arched her back, pressing her breasts against my chest, but there was still too much clothing between us.

“Hmm,” I murmured against her neck, “any chance of a happy ending to that massage?”

She laughed. “I thought you weren’t in the mood.”

“I wasn’t.” With a quick motion of my fingers, I unsnapped her bra. “But I am now.”

~ * ~

Amy squirmed and cried out.

The Saint Andrew's Cross groaned and the restraints clanked and creaked as she struggled.

I raised the cat o' nine tails and shivered when her cry fell to a whimper. She was always enthusiastic, but never like this. By now, she'd usually drifted into subspace, quietly moaning and murmuring while I laid knotted leather tails across her back. Tonight, she screamed. Something I couldn't understand, words that didn't quite make it to my arousal-fogged mind, but her voice drove me, the shrill sound that started anew every time I hit her. Strike after strike across her back, and with each crack of leather on flesh, she screamed louder.

My mouth watered. I was hard, so hard, and if I didn't fuck her soon, I'd go out of my mind. But just a few more hits with the cat o' nine tails. Just a few more.

Whoosh. Crack.

Whoosh. Crack.

Whoosh. Crack.

She screamed. I barely kept myself from groaning.

Her screams suddenly made sense. They weren't slurred, murmured nonsense or profanity or pleas for more. How had I missed it? How had I not understood?

"Red! Red!" she sobbed, her voice hoarse, strained. "Red, Scott, *red!*"

Had she been screaming that all along? God, yes, she had. Why hadn't I understood?

And why was I still hitting her?

"Red! Red! Red!"

The safe word ran down her back in rivers, smearing with each strike of the cat o' nine tails, covering her skin with streaks of red, red, red...

Scott, what are you doing?

"Red! Scott, please, stop..."

Whoosh. Crack. More red.

Whoosh. Crack. Rivers of red.

Whoosh. Crack. The word, the color, the sound, the blood...

"Scott, *please...*"

~ * ~

My eyes flew open.

The room was dark and still, completely silent except for my thundering heart and sharp gasps for breath. Goose bumps prickled under a layer of icy sweat, and I shivered even beneath the covers. Beneath the covers, and with the warmth of Amy's body beside me.

I turned toward her, squinting to make out her shape in the darkness.

She was on her stomach, the covers draped over her up to her shoulder blades. Nausea rose in the back of my throat as I remembered her back sliced to bloody cross-hatched ribbons while she screamed and *screamed*. Milky light from the street illuminated her skin just enough for me to see that she was unscathed and unharmed, and cool relief washed over me.

I sat up, rubbing my eyes and feeling like a goddamned idiot. Of course she was all right. It was a dream. I'd never ignore a safe word. If Amy couldn't get into subspace, couldn't relax, or—God forbid—screamed like that, everything would have stopped long before I'd taken nearly enough strokes to do that kind of damage. Nor would I ever hit her that hard to begin with. I'd never do what I'd done in the dream, but it was unsettling nonetheless to be in the mind, if only for one dream, of someone who would.

My skin crawling and my stomach turning, I got out of bed. I moved as stealthily as I could, stepping carefully in case Malia was on the floor somewhere. When I got to the bathroom, I closed the door before I turned on the light.

Leaning on the sink, I stared at my own reflection.

Of course it was only a dream. Amy was uninjured, sleeping peacefully in my bed. But it was so fucking *real*.

Was I insane? Christ, I'd had some fucked up dreams involving subs and other Doms, especially lately, but this... what the fuck was this? I closed my eyes and let my head fall forward, swallowing hard while I tried to get my mind around the fact that some crazy neuron deep in my subconscious had actually thought of getting turned on while I bloodied a screaming submissive. While I ignored a safe word. While I hurt Amy.

I shuddered, just barely keeping myself from getting physically ill.

It was just a dream. Just my subconscious doing some fucked up mental gymnastics with all the shit I'd dealt with recently. Nothing more.

I hadn't hurt Amy. I wouldn't hurt Amy. I couldn't hurt Amy. I couldn't hurt any of my submissives if my life depended on it. They knew it. I knew it.

"Fuck," I muttered. I ran some cold water and cupped my hands beneath the faucet. I splashed it on my face a few times, then turned off the water and reached for a hand towel. I gave myself one last look in the mirror.

I still couldn't shake this unsettled feeling. It was like trying to go to sleep after a particularly bad horror movie. I knew it wasn't real, that it couldn't happen in a million lifetimes, but it had crawled beneath my skin and into my veins nonetheless. The cold slime of horror and disgust didn't care how intellectually certain I was that I hadn't really beaten Amy into a bloody, screaming mess. I'd seen it, I'd experienced it, and that was enough.

"Red! Red! Red!"

I shuddered. So much for a good night's sleep.

"Just a damned dream," I whispered to my reflection, and flicked off the light.

I slipped through the silence to my bed. Amy hadn't moved, but Malia had parked herself on my side of the bed. I picked her up and set her aside so I could get under the covers. Being the defiant little shit she was, she immediately went back to where she'd been and laid down again.

"Malia, move," I whispered. I picked her up again, this time setting her on the floor.

Undeterred, she jumped back on the bed, this time trotting across to the other side, which meant running right over Amy. Amy stirred, murmuring something as I got into bed beside her.

She lifted her head and looked at me in the darkness. "Where did you go?"

"Bathroom. Didn't mean to wake you up."

"It's okay," she murmured. She rolled over and cuddled up next to me. I wrapped my arm around her and she rested her head on my shoulder. In minutes, she'd fallen back to sleep, oblivious to the ice in my veins. I lay awake for a long, long time, running my fingers up and down her back just to remind myself that no, those cuts weren't real, and yes, it was just a dream.

A dream, Scott.

Just a sick, twisted, fucked up dream.

Fourteen

“Ready to try a little bondage?”

Meredith glanced down the hall toward the dungeon.

“If you’re not,” I said, “just say so.”

“I’ll be fine.” Her voice was hollow, not completely steady, but her eyes were determined. Nervous but wanting and, she probably hoped, ready.

I led her down the hall to the dungeon. We’d been at this for a couple of months now, but we’d moved slowly. Slow enough to keep from triggering more than the rare flashback, but also slow enough to frustrate her. Though she hadn’t out and said it, I had no doubt she was getting impatient. I had yet to bind or even cuff her, which aggravated her to no end. I’d flogged her on the Saint Andrew’s Cross, but she’d only held the restraints rather than being bound to them.

Tonight, though, she was ready for some bondage.

I opened the dungeon door. Meredith stepped past me and I closed it before my cat could make her usual run for the Saint Andrew’s Cross.

I regarded Meredith silently for a moment. She looked over the rack of various floggers and the Cross. As she did, the nerves she tried to hide made themselves known in her shifting weight, creased forehead, and the way her shoulders rose and fell when she took a deep, ragged breath.

“You sure you want to do this in here?” I asked. “We can go—”

“No, this is fine.” She offered a reassuring smile. “I can handle it.”

I wondered if she knew I could see the goose bumps on her arm.

We’d stick to our usual slow steps today, then. Definitely slow steps.

“How comfortable are you with being tied to the Saint Andrew’s Cross?”

She looked at it and shuddered. Still, she turned back to me. “I think I can handle it.”

I glanced at the cross, then at her. “I’m going to just bind your hands this time.”

“I think I’m okay with my ankles, too,” she said.

I shook my head. “Not until I know you can handle wrists only.”

“Scott, I can handle it.” The temperature of my blood dropped a few

degrees. Her tone was laced with an all too familiar edge of irritation, the same tone I recognized from whenever she'd picked a fight years ago.

I kept my voice calm. "Most likely, yes. I just want to be sure."

She glared at me. "I freaked out once. It doesn't mean I'm going to do it again."

"I'm not going to encourage it to happen again," I said. "I'm not saying 'absolutely not,' Meredith. This is just to make sure you're okay, then we'll move on to total bondage."

Exhaling sharply, she ran a hand through her hair and shifted her weight. "Well, in that case, maybe you should just tie one hand for now. And if I can handle that, in six months or so, we'll add the other hand."

I gritted my teeth. "We're taking small steps, babe, we're—"

"There's a difference between taking small steps and dragging your goddamned feet," she snapped, her anger sending me back a step.

"I don't want to rush this, Meredith, I've—"

"That's easy for you to say," she said through clenched teeth. "You're not the one who has to live with all this shit in your head. Taking it slow and easy might be comfortable for you, but it just means that much longer I have to let this fucking control me."

"And moving too fast could make things worse. A lot worse. You know that."

"Or we could take baby steps with every little thing, which means we'll be at this for years."

"If that's what it takes, then that's what we'll do," I said.

"What happened to pushing limits?" She narrowed her eyes. "You said my limits dictate where this goes and what we do. What happened to the submissive being the one in control?"

"Look, your limits dictate how far I *can* push you, so—" I stopped abruptly. One of us speaking without thinking and being completely irrational was more than enough. I took a deep breath and forced my tone to be gentle and even. "That doesn't mean I'm going to push you all the way to those limits every time. It's at my discretion. You came to me looking for a Dom, and part of being a sub is deferring to my judgment to make sure every scene is pleasurable for you as well as safe. Emotionally and physically."

"Don't pretend you're not getting anything out this, Scott," she snarled. "You wouldn't be a Dom if you didn't like control."

"Yes, I like control. I won't deny that." I fought to stay cool. "I'm a Dom because I like power, control, whatever, but I'm not going to put that ahead of your well-being. That, and do you really think I have all the control here? You've had the power from the beginning to stop—"

"To stop things, yes." She squared her shoulders and spoke through gritted teeth. "I can apply the brakes all I want, but I can't exactly push on the gas pedal, can I?"

I couldn't tell if she was pissed at me or the demons who'd driven

her into my arms in the first place, but the last thing this conversation needed to do was escalate. I took a deep breath before I continued. “If I thought you were ready for more, I’d give you more. You asked me to be your Dom, and that’s what I’m doing. That means using my judgment about—”

“I don’t *need* you to decide what I can fucking handle,” she growled.

“So you don’t trust my judgment?” I snapped, letting fury get the best of me. “Then what the fuck are we doing?”

“You tell me, Scott. You seem perfectly content moving at a snail’s pace, so—”

“What am I supposed to do? Am I going too slow because I didn’t agree to bring in a goddamned stranger a week after a flogger on *my hand* freaked you out? I know you want to get through this, but it’s simply not going to happen overnight.”

She snorted. “Yeah, that’s apparent.” She glared at me. “I’ve spent enough of my life letting someone else make those decisions for me in recent years, thank you.”

My heart stopped. I stared at her in disbelief, and several seconds ticked by before I could finally speak. “Don’t you fucking dare compare me to him, Meredith.”

She set her jaw. “How is what you’re doing any different?”

“You mean besides the part where I’m doing it out of concern for your safety and well-being?”

“So it’s for my own good?” Her sarcasm set my teeth on edge.

I nearly lashed out, but bit my tongue. *Easy, Scott. Defuse it, don’t make it worse.* I took a deep breath. “Meredith, don’t do this. You know full well I am nothing like him, and my motivations have everything to do with keeping you safe.”

She exhaled hard and put her hands up. “Fine, fine, just wrists then. Let’s do this.”

I looked at the flogger, which was still in my tightly clenched fist. Sighing, I shook my head. “No. Not now.” I set the flogger down.

“What?”

“Not after we’ve argued.” I stepped toward her, reaching for her waist, but she jerked back from me.

“So you’re punishing me now? The submissive defies her Master, so she gets nothing?”

I closed my eyes and released a frustrated breath. “No, I am not punishing you.” I looked at her. “I won’t flog a sub—you or anyone else—when I’m angry, and we both need to cool down.”

Closing her eyes, she pinched the bridge of her nose and exhaled sharply. Then she threw her hands up. “You know what? Fine. Take all the time you want to cool off.” She started for the door.

“Meredith, wait, let’s—”

The dungeon door slammed. I closed my eyes, gritting my teeth as

her footsteps faded down the hall. A moment later, the front door banged shut.

I could have gone after her, but it would have been pointless. I knew her well enough to know she was beyond reason right now. A little time, a little space, then we could talk.

Sighing, I walked out of the dungeon and down the empty hallway to the living room. Sinking onto the sofa, I kicked my feet up onto the coffee table, letting my head fall back. I stared up at the ceiling with unfocused eyes.

As soon as my feet were up, Malia stepped on my ankle and used my legs as a bridge from the coffee table to my lap. I winced when her balance wavered and her claws dug in, but for the most part, I just didn't care. I might have noticed if she'd tried to use my leg as a scratching post again, but even that was debatable.

She curled up on my lap, purring and rubbing on my hand. Absently I scratched her ears and petted her. The purring grew louder, and her claws poked through my jeans as she kneaded my leg.

I looked down at her. "Well, at least someone in my life isn't pissed at me."

And I'm crazy, because I'm having a conversation with my damned cat. Again.

I sighed and set her on the cushion beside me. Then I stood and headed into the kitchen for a drink. Malia trotted beside me, and when I reached into the refrigerator for a bottle of Coke, she squawked at me. I looked over my shoulder, and she sat beside her food dish. Sitting perfectly straight, looking as regal and dignified as a statue of Bast herself, she swept her tail back and forth in indignant arcs, informing me I was needed to remedy her lack of food.

I chuckled and rolled my eyes. "Should've known you wanted something, you little witch."

I picked up her dish and filled it while she meowed and wound figure-eights around my legs. Then I set it down, and while she ate, I scratched her back. Her tail snapped back and forth. Evidently my services were no longer required.

"At least I know what I'm supposed to do for you," I muttered.

I poured my drink and went back into the living room. Lounging on the couch, I let my mind wander back to another time and place. Sitting on a different couch, alone in a cramped apartment, with the slamming door echoing in my mind just like it did now. Who knew what we'd fought about that time? I'd probably neglected to wash the dishes when it was my turn. Or she might have parked too close to my car again, making it a pain in the ass for me to get in and out.

Whatever it was, it was a scapegoat. Something we could yell and nitpick and bitch about, eventually resulting in her storming out and leaving

us both to cool off. What we were probably really fighting about was the fact that she didn't think I wanted to discuss feelings or I didn't want to discuss the feelings she wanted to talk about. Money or lack thereof. Commitment or lack thereof. Nothing that had a damned thing to do with dishes or car doors.

We fought. She left. I waited. She returned. Same shit, different day.

In my memory, the apartment's front door opened and I looked up as she closed it behind her. Neither of us spoke when she crossed the narrow distance from the door to our hand-me-down sofa. Long seconds ticked by while we avoided eye contact. Avoided *any* contact.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

No one moved.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

She sat beside me.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

I put my arm around her. She leaned against me and I released my breath. Her skin was hot, so she must have walked around the block a few times to clear her head.

Eventually, one of us sighed and apologized. "I'm sorry." "Me too." We settled the dishes or car doors or whatever the fuck it wasn't about. It was no wonder we didn't work out. We sucked at fighting. Well, that wasn't true. We were damned good at fighting. It was the communicating and meeting halfway afterward that didn't quite happen the way it should have.

In the present, I rubbed the back of my neck and sighed. Obviously some things hadn't changed. She was still the type who had to go cool off alone. I could still simultaneously be relieved that she'd ended the fight by leaving and be worried she wouldn't come back.

Maybe I *was* being too cautious, moving too slowly. More than once, I'd been accused of being a frustratingly cautious Dom, and I didn't deny it. But what was I supposed to do in this situation? It didn't take a genius to choose between frustrating her and traumatizing her.

Her determination to get through this encouraged me, but it unnerved me a little too. She was hell-bent on breaking free from her past, and her desperate need to make as many leaps and bounds as possible had some potential to backfire on her. Like an injured runner returning to the track, she had to be careful not to overdo it and set herself back even further.

Of course, that left me in the position of the running coach who had to gently remind her from time to time not to push herself too far. When she pushed too hard and her past pushed back, what better place to hide from it than behind *our* past? Duck into that old smokescreen of screaming and slamming doors, because at least then we didn't have to talk about the real problem.

This wasn't about us. It wasn't about anything I did or didn't do. Deep down, she had to know why I was doing things the way I did, and I had no doubt that was what pissed her off. The *reasons* I went so slow with her,

not the fact that I did so.

Whatever was really on her mind, whatever had really set her off, we had to get past this. Arguing about car doors or ankle cuffs when the problem was something much bigger and deeper would get us no further now than it did back then. If we couldn't communicate without falling back into our old, volatile ways, we couldn't operate as a Dom and sub any more than we could operate as a couple.

I sighed.

I could have called her. Could have texted her. Maybe gotten in the car and gone to her apartment, assuming that was where she'd gone. I didn't, though. If I knew one thing about her, it was her need for space while she calmed down. Making contact now would just mean more fighting. As much as it went against every shred of my personality—the need for control, the desire to fix—I could do nothing now but wait.

The next move had to be hers.

Fifteen

Around three the following afternoon, my cell phone vibrated, sending cool water through my veins and jarring me out of my mental haze. I was in my office, up to my ass in schematics, numbly processing numbers in between responding to the usual bullshit via e-mail. Fortunately, I knew my job inside and out, so running on autopilot was doable. Even after a sleepless night and trying to think with a wandering mind, I could still function at work. I'd certainly done it before.

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I needed neither caller ID nor clairvoyance to know before I picked it up who was calling. When I looked at the screen, I wasn't sure if I was more unnerved or relieved to be right.

Meredith.

My heart pounded. I flipped my phone open. "Hey."

"Hey." She was quiet for a moment. "Can we talk? About last night?"

I glanced at my watch, cursing under my breath. "I'm just about to go into a meeting, babe, but I'll be home around six tonight if you want to meet me at my place. Or I can come to your place, it's up to you."

"Yours is fine."

"I'll see you then."

We hung up, and I went back to my schematics and numbers. I couldn't even run on autopilot now; my apprehension created the kind of distraction that scrambled figures on a page and kept my fingers from typing a coherent sentence. I leaned back in my chair and rubbed my eyes with the heels of my hands. How the hell I was going to stay focused in the meeting, I had no idea, but I also didn't have much choice.

Come on, get it together. I glared at the letters, numbers, and diagrams that refused to make sense. Somehow or another, I had to think about specs and functionality for the next couple of hours. Not Meredith, not arguing, not that cretin who'd traumatized her.

I can do this. I've gotten through less with more on my mind.

I did get through it. With a little luck and my God-given ability to bullshit my way through anything, I made it through the meeting without so

much as raising my boss's eyebrow. What the boss and client didn't notice wouldn't hurt me.

Eventually, five o'clock rolled around, and I slipped out under the radar of anyone who might have thought to suggest overtime or some other such nonsense I didn't need tonight. I was of no use to anyone here this evening, so there was no point in getting roped into sticking around.

The knot in my stomach tightened with every milepost I passed on the freeway. Tighter still when I reached my exit and coasted down the off-ramp. By the time I turned onto my street, I didn't think that knot could get any tighter.

I'd barely put my car in park in the driveway when movement in the rearview caught my eye. I glanced up as Meredith pulled in beside me. That knot that couldn't have possibly gotten any tighter tightened anyway.

Taking a deep breath, I killed the engine and got out. Her car door closed, sending my blood pressure a few notches higher.

"Hey," I said over the roof of my car.

"Hey."

We looked at each other in silence for a moment. I had no idea what to say, but whatever one of us finally said, it didn't need to be said out here.

I nodded toward the house. We both locked our cars. The sharp click of my dress shoes and the dull tap of her rubber soles emphasized the silence on the way from car doors to front door. My keys jingled. Crunched in the lock. Grind-click.

In the house, I shrugged my jacket off and draped it haphazardly over the back of a chair. Then we moved to the couch, and still neither of us spoke. We stayed a comfortably uncomfortable distance apart; far enough away to keep from accidentally touching, far enough to preclude putting an arm around her shoulders, but still too close while the air between us was this tense.

Just to give my hands something to do besides wring, I loosened my tie. I was about to start drumming my fingers on the armrest when Malia bounded up onto the couch between us. I thought about shooing her away, but as Meredith scratched the cat's ears, she smiled a little. I decided Malia could stay.

My cat rolled onto her back, and Meredith and I both went to scratch her belly. Our fingers brushed. Neither of us recoiled. That was something, I supposed. Testing the water, I slid my hand over hers. She stopped scratching the cat and just let her hand be still beneath mine. Our eyes met briefly. Cautiously. Then we both shifted our attention back to our hands, which still rested gently on the cat. I ran my thumb along the side of Meredith's hand. She did the same to mine.

Malia, however, was not so impressed by this, and kicked at our hands with her back feet.

Meredith laughed and jerked her hand away to avoid the claws.

“Someone has to be the center of attention, I see?”

“God, yes. You know how they are.” I grabbed one of Malia’s paws, let it go, grabbed it again. She flattened her ears and swatted at my hand.

Meredith laughed again. “You’re just asking to get scratched, you know that?”

“Nah, she’s not quite quick enough— ow, damn it.” I pulled my hand back and shook it, grimacing at the sting along the back of my index finger.

“Not quick enough, eh?”

Malia glared at me, daring me to either try it again or make another claim that she was too slow. Since neither Meredith nor I were terribly forthcoming with belly rubs at that point while the claws were out, Malia got tired of being ignored and stormed off.

Alone again, Meredith and I looked at each other, but quickly dropped our gazes.

Meredith took a deep breath. “Scott, I’m sorry about yesterday. I shouldn’t have flipped out at you like that.”

I chewed my lip. “Why did you?” I instantly regretted the choice of words, especially when her glare confirmed they came out more snidely than I’d intended. I put a hand up. “I’m not asking to be a dick, babe. What I mean is, what was really bothering you?”

The well-deserved hostility in her expression faded. She sighed and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I’m just, I’m frustrated.”

“With me?”

“No, it’s not you.” She wetted her lips. “I mean, in a way it is, but it’s not.”

I cocked my head. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m frustrated that you’re having me move so slowly, but I...” She paused, and after a moment, met my eyes.

“Do you really think I’m holding you back to control you?”

“No.” She sighed, her shoulders slumping. “I’m sorry, Scott. I know why you’re doing what you’re doing.”

“Then why...?” I raised my eyebrows.

She swallowed. “Because I’m tired of the hold Rich has on me. Every step of the way, I trip over him and what he did, and I just...” She ran a shaking hand through her hair. “I get angry whenever I run into a wall that he put up.”

I put my hand on her knee. “I know it’s frustrating, babe.”

She dropped her gaze. “I get why you’re doing it. I do, but the whole process, this whole thing, it’s... it’s hell for me, Scott.”

I forced myself not to cringe visibly. Squeezing her hand, I whispered, “I know it is.”

“Every flashback and every nightmare just reminds me of how much of an impact Rich had on my life. So whenever we take a step back, or a *tiny*

step forward, all I can think of is how much I hate him for what he did to me.” She blinked a few times before she went on. “It wasn’t you I was angry with yesterday, it was him. The thing is, every time we let my past keep us from moving forward, I feel like he’s won. Again.”

I slid my other hand under hers. “And the way I see it, every time we get through a scene without you panicking, we win. Baby, this is a slow process. I wish it wasn’t, but it has to be. It’s going to take some time to undo two and a half years’ worth of damage.”

She said nothing.

“I know you’re frustrated, babe,” I said. “I know you want to be at the end of this overnight, but I promise, I’m not holding back because I want to control you or dictate—”

“I know.” She avoided my eyes. “I just hate the fact that he still has this much control over me.”

“Every time we do this, though, every little step we take, the less control he has over you.” I reached up and ran my fingers through her hair. “Look how far you’ve come already.

She wiped away a tear I didn’t see. “Maybe I’m just being a pessimist, but all I see is how much further we still have to go.”

“And maybe I am going slower than necessary,” I whispered. “But I’d rather do that than go too fast. I’ve always gone slow with new subs, but with everything you’ve been through, I’m scared to death of pushing you too hard and making things worse.”

She shook her head. “You’re not going too slow, Scott. You’re the last one I should be angry with through any of this.” She dropped her gaze, watching her fingers stroke the back of my hand for a long moment. “And I was completely out of line when I compared you to Rich. I didn’t... it... Jesus, Scott, I am *so* sorry.”

I moved a little closer to her and lifted her chin so she looked me in the eye. “I know you didn’t mean it, babe. I knew it as soon as you said it.” I leaned in and let my lips barely brush hers. When she made no attempt to pull away, I kissed her, wrapping my arms around her. When she returned my kiss, relief flooded my veins. Breath released. Knots unwound. Tension melted.

She broke the kiss and met my eyes. “Do you know what I kept thinking about last night? After I left?”

I shook my head.

“What you said,” she whispered, “that you wouldn’t flog me in anger.”

I didn’t speak, just cradled the side of her neck in one hand and pretended not to notice the chill inching its way up my spine.

She licked her lips. “As soon as you said that, I think I was angrier with myself for getting angry with you.” She trailed her fingertips down the side of my face. “You’ve been everything I needed from the beginning, and I

was lashing out at you. When you said that, it..." She took a deep breath. "Before you, the majority of my experiences with a flogger *were* in anger. Scott, I've never been with someone who only hit me or flogged me for my own pleasure. Not until you."

Gritting my teeth, I sent up a silent request for some serious divine retribution for that asshole. I kept my fury under the surface though, out of her sight, and instead ran the backs of my fingers along her jaw. "That's the only reason anyone should ever lay a hand or a flogger on you."

"Exactly. Which got me thinking, and I realized you're the first one in years who's made me feel..." Her eyes lost focus while she searched for the word. She opened her mouth to speak, then bit her lip. Took a breath. Hesitated again. As her eyes flicked back and forth between my eyes and lips, she abandoned whatever she'd intended to say and pulled me into another kiss instead. She initiated it, but let me take the lead. Her lips parted for my tongue. At the gentle insistence of my hand on her back, she moved in closer. When I wrapped my arms around her, she did the same.

Still in my arms, she looked up at me again. "What I was trying to say," she whispered, "is you're the first one in years who's made me feel safe."

I held her tighter and kissed her forehead. "You're always safe with me, babe."

She said nothing, just lifted her chin for another kiss.

I broke that kiss, but only long enough to whisper, "Come here."

She moved to her knees and onto my lap, straddling me while we let the conversation fade away in lieu of a long, deep kiss. Now a whole different kind of tension made itself known. A deliciously familiar one, especially when she pressed her hips against mine to let me know she knew she was turning me on.

"So do we still have to move slowly?" She grinned against my lips.

I cupped her breast through her shirt. "Slowly, yes, but I've been thinking a little about moving things forward a bit."

She looked at me, eyebrows raised.

Teasing her nipple with my thumb, I said, "What do you think you're up for?"

She thought for a moment. "Maybe we could pick up where we left off last night?"

I kissed her again. "Feel like being flogged?"

"Mm-hmm."

"To the dungeon, then," I said with a smirk.

She laughed and stood.

Once I was on my feet, I gestured at my work clothes. "Let me change out of this first."

"Don't like flogging someone when you're dressed like a respectable gentleman?"

I snorted. "Something like that."

"Hmm, I don't know, though." She tugged my already-loosened tie a little looser. "Seems like it has some convenient things built right in." She pulled the tie free. "Ever use these for 'non-dressing' purposes?"

"When nothing else is available." I grinned as she wound it around her hands. "However, something else *is* available, so we'll just save this for another night."

"Good. I'll look forward to it." She handed me my tie. We exchanged grins and a brief kiss. I went into the kitchen, grabbed a couple of bottles of water for later, and led her down the hall.

In the bedroom I changed into a pair of jeans, but didn't bother with a shirt or shoes. It would all be coming off soon anyway.

In the dungeon, I gestured at the rack of floggers. "Which one do you want to use?"

She looked over the rack. We'd mostly used soft, relatively gentle implements up to this point, so I was more than a little surprised when she reached for a cat o' nine tails. It wasn't the most brutal one I owned—the knotted tails weren't as stiff and unforgiving as several of the others—but it would certainly sting.

"You sure about that one?" I asked.

"Yes."

I took the cat o' nine tails, but also pulled a softer flogger off the wall. "We'll start out with this one, so—" I stopped when she raised an eyebrow. Chuckling, I said, "I do that with all of my subs, babe. It's just to warm up your skin." I held up the cat o' nine tails. "Trust me, you're getting this tonight."

"Good." Her eyes flicked toward the Saint Andrew's Cross. "What about restraints?"

"Just your wrists to start with, but I may add your ankles as we go. That work?"

She nodded.

I gestured with the flogger. "Ready?"

Another nod.

I tucked the cat o' nine tails under my arm and touched her face. Left cheek, right. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. Left cheek, right. She released her breath, almost moaning.

I took a step back. "Strip."

Without a heartbeat of hesitation, she obeyed. Once she was naked, I gestured at the Saint Andrew's Cross.

"Stand in front of the Cross and hold the restraints, just like you've done before."

She stood in front of it as ordered and reached for the restraints, loosely wrapping her fingers around the thick leather cuffs.

I stood behind her. "You remember how the quick release works,

right?”

“Yes, Master.”

As I’d demonstrated to Meredith before, all four restraints could be released with the flip of a single switch. Still around her wrists and ankles, but unattached to the Cross so she would no longer be immobile. All she had to do was say the word.

I closed the leather restraints around her wrists. “This okay? Not too tight?”

“It’s fine.”

I muffled a cough.

“Master. It’s fine, Master.”

“Good girl.” I kissed her cheek. “If anything gets cold or starts tingling, tell me.”

“I will, Master.”

I gathered her hair and laid it over her shoulder, leaving her back completely exposed. Then I put my hands on her waist and stood close enough for my chest to brush the hot skin of her back. Sliding my hands up her sides, then around to her breasts, I whispered in her ear, “Are you sure this is what you want?”

“Yes, Master.”

I teased her nipples with my thumbs. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes, Master.”

“Tell me your safe words.”

She shivered when I pinched her nipples. “Red to—” Her breath caught.

“Answer me, Meredith.”

“R-red to stop, yellow to back off. Master.” She sounded like her teeth were chattering.

“Good girl,” I said in a low growl. “Are you worried I’ll hurt you?”

“No, Master, I—” She sucked in a breath.

I teased her nipples a little harder. “You what?”

Turning her head toward me as much as she could, she said, “I’m not worried you’ll hurt me, Master.” She wetted her lips. “*I know* you will.”

It was my turn to shiver. “Is that what you want?” I forced my voice to stay steady and not betray how much she’d turned me on.

“Yes, Master,” she whispered.

I drew one hand back and slapped her ass. She stiffened, gasped, then went limp, the restraints creaking as they kept her from sinking to the floor.

“Like that?” I growled.

“Yes, Master. *Yes.*”

I did it again. She moaned.

I fucking loved pain sluts. True, honest to God, pain sluts, those who didn’t just get off on intense stimulation, but *pain*. I must have rescued a

saint from drowning or something in a past life to have earned the privilege of having three of these incredible women in my life.

I picked up the softer flogger. Standing a few steps behind her, I scrutinized her body language as I slapped the tails across my palm. The panic and flashbacks that sound had triggered in the beginning were a distant memory now; as soon as leather struck flesh, she gasped and squirmed. Though I couldn't see her face, I had no doubt her eyes were tightly shut, her lips pressed together as she silently begged me to hit her.

And after a few more slaps to tease her, I did hit her. I struck lightly at first, progressively putting more force behind it. In minutes, her back blushed everywhere except down the center of her spine and wherever the silvery scars crisscrossed her skin. Once I was satisfied she was warmed up enough to handle something more, I laid the flogger down.

"I'm going to change to the cat o' nine tails," I said. "Are you comfortable with that?"

"Yes, Master," she slurred.

I quickly checked her fingers to make sure her hands weren't cold, then picked up the implement she'd selected. Meredith sucked in a breath when the stiff tails hissed and rattled against each other. Her shoulders tensed and she adjusted her stance so her feet were a little further apart. Bracing herself, most likely.

Once I was sure she was comfortably positioned and balanced, I raised the cat o' nine tails. The knotted ends struck the back of shoulder, and she yelped, jerking away as much as her restraints allowed.

"Is that too much?" I asked.

"No, Master." From the taut, strained voice, I guessed she grimaced when she spoke. She took a few slow, deep breaths. "It's fine."

I hit her again. Once more, she cried out and recoiled, but the reaction wasn't as violent. Each time I hit her, her response diminished. The flinch diminished, at least. As the cat o' nine tails raised welts on her flushed skin and she dipped deeper into subspace, sounds of pain became moans of delirious pleasure. Instead of recoiling, she squirmed and twisted and arched her back.

Her fingers flexed. Curled into loose fists. Flexed again. I stopped and tucked the cat o' nine tails under my arm so I could check her hands. They were still warm.

"Hands feel okay?" I asked.

Her head lolled to one side and she didn't open her eyes as she murmured, "Yes, Master." She spoke in a breathless whisper, as if on the point of an orgasm. I grinned to myself. I fucking *loved* pain sluts.

Though I was tempted to bind her ankles, she was so far into subspace, I didn't want to jar her out of it. Ankle bindings could wait. She loved this, and I wasn't interrupting it.

So I left her bound only by the wrists, stepped back and raised the cat

o' nine tails again.

After a while, I decided her skin had probably had enough. Even if it hadn't, I couldn't take much more. My arm was getting tired, but more than that, I needed to fuck her.

I laid the cat o' nine tails beside the flogger. Before I moved in to let her down, I took off my jeans and boxers. With my clothes out of the way, I put my hands on her hips and kissed her neck, pulling her ass against my cock. She whimpered, her body wriggling against mine.

"I think it's time to move this into the other room, don't you?" I growled.

"Yes, Master."

I wrapped my arm around her and reached up to release one of the restraints. Her hand fell limply to her side. When her other hand was free, I turned her around so she could drape her arm around my neck.

I kissed her, then touched her face. "You've done well. Good girl." Left cheek, right. "How do you feel?"

She looked at me through heavy-lidded eyes and smiled. "Good." She licked her lips. "Master."

"Good girl." Left cheek, right.

With my arm still around her, I led her across the hall to the bedroom, moving slowly in case she was lightheaded or her trembling knees gave out. Once we were there, I shoved her up against the bed and bent her over it. She gasped, catching herself on her shaking arms.

"You okay?" I kissed the back of her shoulder and pressed my hard-on against her again.

"Yes, M-Master."

"Don't move."

"I won't, Master." Of that I had no doubt. Even if she was tempted to disobey me, which would have surprised the hell out of me, her arms and legs could barely hold her up. She wasn't going anywhere.

I got a condom out of the drawer and made quick work of putting it on—as quick as I could with hands no steadier than hers. As soon as it was on, I stood behind her and grabbed her hips. When I thrust into her tight, wet pussy, she cried out, a visible shudder running up her spine, and she whimpered and moaned while I fucked her hard and fast. I closed my eyes, forcing myself to stay in control while every stroke sent me further out of my mind.

Taking a deep breath and willing myself not to lose it, I looked down at her. "Touch yourself," I said, panting as I thrust into her.

She shifted, lowering herself onto one forearm. Then her other shoulder rose, fell, and I closed my eyes when her pussy tightened around my cock.

"Slap my ass again," she said suddenly.

"What?"

“Hit me.” She rocked back against me. “Hard. Like you did... earlier...”

I slammed into her and tightened my grip on her hips, holding her to me and refusing to let her move. I slid one hand up her back and into her hair. Twisting her hair around my hand, I pulled her head back and growled, “I think you’re forgetting your place.”

“I’m sorry, Master. I’m sorry, I’m... please, Master, will you—” She paused, tensing for a moment. She swallowed hard, then whispered, “Will you hit my ass while you fuck me, Master? Please?”

I loosened my grasp on her hair. “Good girl. Remember, if you want something, ask for it, but only I make the demands.”

“Yes, Master,” she murmured. I let go of her hair, drew back, and pushed back into her slowly. After a few slow strokes just to tease her, I picked up speed, fucking her until she whimpered and moaned with every thrust. Then, and only then, I raised my hand and slapped her ass.

The second my palm made contact, I damn near came. She instantly went from tight to *oh, my God, so fucking tight*, catching me off guard and throwing off my rhythm for a heartbeat. Gripping her hip with one hand, I slapped her ass again with the other. She cried out and bucked against me as she squeezed my cock, taking my breath away. I hit her again. Her pussy tightened around me again, and she whimpered when a shiver rippled through both of us.

“You like that?” I asked through gritted teeth.

“Yes, Master,” she moaned.

I did it again, this time hard enough to make my hand sting, and she gasped.

“I’m... you’re gonna...” Her shoulders bunched and she struggled to keep herself up on one arm while the other played with her clit. “Master, please, may...” Her spine arched. “May I come?”

Closing my eyes, I pulled in a breath. I was too close to the edge myself, much too close, to keep teasing her.

“Yes, baby, come.”

In a heartbeat, her entire body seized with the power of her orgasm. I clenched my teeth, trying like hell not to come until I’d drawn hers out as long as I could. She shuddered one last time, and that shudder continued right through me. I closed my eyes, held my breath, and came.

We stayed still until the last aftershocks had come and gone. When they had, I pulled out slowly. I handed her one of the bottles of water I’d brought in earlier. While I took care of the condom, she took a long drink, finishing off better than three quarters of the bottle before I came back to bed.

She handed it back to me. I set it on the bedside table, then cupped her face in both hands and kissed her gently.

“You’ve done well tonight,” I said. “I’m not your Master anymore.”

Your back needs some attention, though, so why don't you lie on your stomach?"

With a blissfully exhausted sigh, she did, folding her arms beneath the pillow and resting her head on top. I pulled the blanket up to her waist. I sat on the bed beside her with a bottle of lotion. Rows of welts scored either side of her back, but I hadn't drawn blood. Cat o' nine tails were prone to doing that on occasion, but I hadn't hit her as hard as I would have Amy or Krissy, so I wasn't surprised.

Carefully, trying not to make her raw skin sting more than necessary, I rubbed lotion onto her back. As subs often did, she closed her eyes and breathed slowly, deeply. Maybe she fell asleep for a while, maybe she didn't, but she was nothing if not relaxed.

"That should be enough." I capped the lotion bottle. Meredith rolled onto her side and I faced her on mine as I pulled the sheet over both of us.

Caressing her face, I said, "Feel okay?"

"Mm-hmm."

"So are we back on the same page?" I raised my eyebrows. "About everything?"

"Yes, very much so." She shot me a playful glare. "But I thought you were going to tie my ankles."

I laughed. "I would have, but you were so far into subspace, I didn't want to pull you out of it. Next time, though, I will."

"Maybe tomorrow night?"

"Actually, I'll be out and about tomorrow night." I paused. "But maybe I could talk you into coming with me."

"Where to?"

"Same place the old group has been hanging out for years."

Her gaze shifted away from mine. "I'll pass."

With one finger under her chin, I turned her face back toward me. "What's wrong?"

She pursed her lips. "Scott, I disappeared on these people five years ago. Cut off contact with every last one of them with no warning or explanation."

"And you think they wouldn't welcome you back with open arms once they know why?"

"I'd rather they didn't know why."

"Even still, people weren't angry with you when you left, babe." I caressed her cheek. "We were all worried about you. Everyone wondered what happened to you, but no one was angry."

"You said you were angry."

My cheeks burned and I nodded. "I was. I took it personally. But I have never heard any of our friends say anything negative about you." I touched her face and kissed her. "Just give it a try. Come with me tomorrow night, and if you don't feel comfortable, all you have to do is say the word

and we'll leave. No questions asked."

She laughed. "A date with a safe word?"

Chuckling, I shrugged. "Yeah, something like that. So, you in?"

Her eyes lost focus for a long moment. Finally, she sighed and nodded. "Okay, I'll go. As long as we can leave if I decide I'm tired of getting the evil eye from everyone."

"You're not going to get the evil eye from anyone. But yes, we'll leave the minute you decide you don't want to stay anymore." I leaned forward and nuzzled her neck. "And then when we're done at the club, whether we leave early or not, we can come back here and..." I flicked my tongue just below her ear.

A shiver pushed her body closer to mine. "Now I'm definitely sold on this plan."

I laughed and kissed her neck again.

"Mmm, you tease."

"Who's teasing?" I raised my head and grinned against her lips. "You didn't think we were done yet, did you?"

"I certainly hoped we weren't."

I said nothing and slid my hand between her legs.

Sixteen

A few blocks from where I'd parked, Meredith and I turned down a side street. Up ahead, the familiar arrangement of neon signs came into view. Meredith slowed down, eyeing the glowing Budweiser and Miller Genuine Draft logos.

I put my hand on the small of her back. "You're not backing out on me now, are you?"

"Is it too late?"

"No, but I think you should at least go in and give it a try first."

She stopped and turned to face me. "I'm really not sure about this."

"Trust me, babe, you're worrying about nothing."

She shot me a skeptical look. "Says the man who's never cut ties with everyone he knows overnight."

"Maybe not, but after you did, I was still here, and a lot of people were concerned about you."

Glancing at the bar, then looking at me again, she blew out a breath. "Okay. I'll see what happens."

I kissed her lightly. "Just give it five or ten minutes. If you want to leave, say the word, and we're gone."

"Five minutes."

I nodded. "Five minutes." I gestured at the bar. "Clock starts *after* we actually get through the door, though."

"Damn you." We exchanged looks and laughed as we walked across the street.

At the door, I put my arm around her waist, as much to encourage her as to keep her from suddenly backing away. Together, we went inside.

I stopped, searching for the usual group of friends. When I found them, I gestured toward the corner at the opposite end of the bar. "Looks like everyone's congregating over by the pool tables."

"Lead the way," she muttered.

We worked our way through the thickening crowd to the pool tables. Two of our friends, Kelly and Irene, stood beside a booth, and Kelly noticed us first. She turned around, gesturing at me with her drink.

“Hey, look who actually showed—” She stopped abruptly, eyes widening. “*Meredith?*”

Meredith halted, shrinking against me, but with a gentle hand on her back, I kept her from retreating completely.

A grin spread across Kelly’s face. “Oh my God, I can’t believe it’s you!” She trotted over to us, as much as she could in such precarious shoes, and threw her arms around Meredith, nearly dumping her drink on me in the process. Then, without releasing Meredith, she looked over her shoulder and called to the rest of the group, “Hey guys, you’re not going to believe who’s here.”

Heads turned. Eyes widened. In seconds, two pool games and no less than half a dozen drinks were abandoned. I took a step back, giving everyone room to get in and say hello.

“Where have you been?”

“When did you get back in town?”

“It’s so good to see you!”

I flagged down a waitress and got a couple of beers. I held one for Meredith and sipped the other while I watched her get reacquainted with everyone.

Someone nudged my arm. I looked up to see Jason, beer bottle in one hand, pool cue in the other. “Is that who I think it is?” He gestured toward her with his drink. “Meredith Whitley?”

I nodded. “The one and only.”

“Where’d you find her? I thought she dropped off the face of the earth.”

I gave a casual shrug. “We got back in touch a while ago.”

He watched her for a moment, then lowered his voice. “Are you two back together?”

I shook my head, rolling a sip of beer around in my mouth.

“She seeing anyone?”

The sip of beer barely fit down my throat, and I resisted the urge to glare at him. “You’d have to ask her,” I said dryly.

He grinned. “Noted.”

I gritted my teeth, but said nothing.

After everyone had said their hellos and introduced Meredith to those who’d joined the group in the last five years, people migrated back to their drinks and games. When I could finally get close enough to her, I handed her the untouched beer. As she took a drink, I put my arm around her shoulders and made an exaggerated display of checking my watch.

“It’s been five minutes, so I guess we should—”

“We’re not leaving.”

I laughed. “Didn’t think so.” I gestured at the others with my drink. “See? I told you they hadn’t forgotten you.”

“I didn’t think they’d forgotten me.” She shifted her gaze toward

them, then looked at me again. "I was afraid they hadn't, actually."

I touched her arm. "I hope you were pleasantly surprised, then."

"Very much so." She put her arms around my waist and hugged me.

"Thank you for bringing me here."

"Glad you're having fun." I raised my beer bottle to my lips, but movement out of the corner of my eye caught my attention. "Oh, hey, look who just showed up." I tilted my bottle in the direction of the door. Meredith turned just as Krissy stepped in with Matt's hand on her waist. From across the room, Krissy spotted me, and I knew the instant she saw Meredith because her eyes lit up. She said something to Matt, then sprinted across the floor as much as the thick crowd would allow.

"Oh my God, I can't believe it's you!" she squealed, throwing her arms around Meredith. "Jesus Christ, how long has it been?"

"Way too long," Meredith said. When they separated, she added, "It's good to see you."

Krissy smiled. "You too."

I put my hands up. "What am I? Invisible."

She clicked her tongue and rolled her eyes, waving me away. "Yeah, yeah, whatever."

"Get over here, you." I put an arm around her and she laughed, pretending to try to squirm away when I went to hug her. Then she relented and returned my embrace. No one in our social circle knew she and I were dating, so we kept it platonic around them. Well, as platonic as we could when she grabbed my ass like that.

I kissed her cheek. "Behave yourself, woman."

"Or what?"

"Or I won't spank you."

She batted her eyes. "Okay, I'm sorry."

"That's what I thought."

Matt finally made it through the crowd and joined us. He and I shook hands, then I gestured at Meredith.

"Matt, this is Meredith. Meredith, Krissy's other man, Matt."

"Wait," Matt said. "I thought you were the other man."

I shrugged. "You thought wrong."

He laughed and shook Meredith's hand. "Nice to meet you."

She smiled. "Likewise."

Like we'd all been friends for eons without any missing years in between, the four of us made easy small talk. After a few minutes, Kristen gestured at me as she said to Meredith, "Do you mind if I borrow him for a few minutes?"

"No, not at all."

Kristen looked at me. "Terrace?"

My heart jumped into my throat. That was code for "we need to talk in private."

I kissed Meredith's cheek. "I'll be back."

"Take your time," she said.

Kristen kissed Matt, then looked at Meredith. "You mind babysitting him for a few minutes?"

Meredith grinned. "I think I'll manage."

I followed Kristen to the stairwell and up to the terrace. It was a warm night, so there were a few people outside, mostly lost in their own little worlds. Voices murmured, cans and glasses clinked on tables and the concrete railing. We found a quiet, deserted corner, and as soon as we were as alone as we could be, we stopped.

Pretending my stomach hadn't twisted itself into nervous knots on the way up here, I said, "So, what's up?"

"Nothing." Without another word, she wrapped her arms around me and kissed me. It took my mind a second to catch up, and by the time it had, my body had already pulled her to me. I matched her kiss for desperate kiss, holding onto her like I hadn't touched her in way too long. Because, I realized with a sinking feeling in my gut, I *hadn't* touched her in way too long. A week or two, if that, but I wasn't used to going more than a few days without her.

I broke the kiss, but didn't let her go. I pulled her closer and just hugged her, closing my eyes as I took in her scent. Guilt tugged at my gut. Though she and Amy both understood how much this situation with Meredith consumed my time, I couldn't deny it was taking its toll on my relationships with them. I didn't hold it against Meredith by any means, I simply realized now, with Kristen in my arms for the first time in too many days, how thin I'd been spread.

"I've missed you," I whispered.

"I've missed you too." She raised her chin to kiss me. The gentle touch of her lips was almost more than my conscience could handle.

I rested my forehead against hers. "I'm sorry, babe, I'm—"

"Don't apologize." She ran her thumb along my lower lip. "I'm not upset, I've just missed you."

I resisted the urge to release a guilt-saturated sigh. Just like Amy, Krissy understood, and damn it, that made me feel that much worse for all but ignoring her.

"Well, I'm here now." I kissed her again, drawing it out and not giving a damn if any of our friends came out on the terrace just then. When I finally broke away, I still didn't let her go. Running the backs of my fingers down her cheek, I said, "We need to get together again. Soon."

"I know," she whispered against my lips. "Very soon. You coming to poker night this week?"

I blew out a breath. "God, I hope so. I need it, believe me."

She pulled back enough to look me in the eye. "You okay?"

“Yeah, just...” I paused, sighing. “I could just use a night of cards and beer, believe me.”

She combed her fingers through my hair. “I can imagine.” With a grin that tried to be more devilish than sad, she added, “Maybe if you come to poker night, we could go to my place afterward.”

“In that case, I will definitely try to be there.” I kissed her lightly. “I assume Matt has been taking good care of you?”

“Of course. Though much more of having me all to himself might kill him.”

“Funny,” I said, chuckling, “Amy said the same thing about Ryan.”

She grinned. “Well, we’re both used to you. That leaves a lot for the other boys to live up to.”

I laughed in spite of the pang of guilt in my gut. “Oh, I’m sure he can handle it.”

“Maybe he can. But there are certain things you do that he doesn’t.”

I slid my hand up into her hair. “Is that right?”

She closed her eyes, gulping when I slowly closed my fingers around her hair. “Yes, it is.”

“I get the feeling my little pain slut needs to be flogged in the near future.” I twisted her hair, just enough to make her gasp. “Would I be right?”

“God, yes,” she whispered.

I laughed, releasing her hair.

“Fucking tease,” she muttered, trying and failing not to grin.

“You know I’ll make it up to you.” I kissed her lightly. “Soon, I promise.”

“I’m going to hold you to that.”

I smoothed her hair. “Good. As for tonight, should we go see if Matt and Meredith are getting into trouble?”

“I suppose we should, but first...” She stood up on her toes and kissed me. We wrapped our arms around each other again and drew it out for another long, long moment. When we separated, she sucked her lower lip into her mouth as if for one more taste of my kiss.

“That should hold me over for a little while,” she said.

More guilt tugged at my gut. “Well, just to be sure...” I kissed her once more. God knew when we’d see each other again, so I’d take every taste of her I could get right now.

But sooner or later, we had to rejoin the rest of the world, so we reluctantly separated and headed back downstairs. It didn’t take long to find Matt and Meredith, especially since they were lost in a conversation of their own. In fact, they didn’t even notice us until we were just a few feet away.

“Well, well, well,” Kristen said. “Looks like you two are getting along nicely.” She shot him a playful glare. “Matthew Sommers, what have I told you about flirting with Scott’s other women?”

“To do so as often as possible,” he said.

Meredith laughed and shook her head. “Oh, come on, he wasn’t flirting, he—”

“Yes, I was,” Matt said matter-of-factly.

“Trust me, sweetheart,” Kristen said, putting her arm around Matt’s waist. “If his mouth was moving, he was flirting.”

Meredith raised an eyebrow at Matt over the rim of her drink. “I stand corrected, then.”

“I suppose I should have warned you about him,” Kristen said.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Meredith said. “It wasn’t an unpleasant surprise.”

Matt grinned at her, then put his arm around Kristen. “Want to go get something to drink?”

“I could definitely use something cold.” She shot me a surreptitious wink. Then the two of them disappeared into the crowd.

Watching them go, Meredith said, “She’s one lucky woman.”

“Why’s that?”

Meredith grinned. “She’s got you and Matt on her roster. What more could a woman want?”

I gave a quiet laugh. “She seems to enjoy it.”

“I believe that.” She glanced at Matt and Kristen again. “You two must keep her busy.”

There it was again, that pang of guilt. “I’d say she keeps us busy,” I said, just loud enough for her to hear me over the music and noise. “But, we keep her out of trouble.”

Meredith laughed. “Somehow I doubt *you* of all people keep anyone out of trouble.”

“Okay, so she keeps me out of trouble.”

“Yeah, right.” She looked their way again. “Well, like I said, she’s a lucky woman. How does that work, anyway? With your...relationships?”

I shrugged. “Not much different from a monogamous relationship except, well, the monogamy. They have their relationship, she and I have ours, and—”

“Don’t you and he have one?” She gave me a mischievous look.

I rolled my eyes. “No, we do not. And we do play with her together sometimes, but those nights, it’s all about her.”

“Sounds like a perfect evening for her.” The note of sadness in her voice gave me pause. Then I remembered our discussions with Leslie about threesomes. Sometimes it was still hard to believe she’d been the object of abuse in what amounted to tag team rape. When Kristen was with Matt and me—

My train of thought screeched to a halt.

I watched Kristen and Matt for a moment. He wasn’t a Dom, but he was someone I trusted. He was comfortable with threesomes, with another man in the room. With another man...watching. Chewing the inside of my

cheek, I wondered. Before tonight, I hadn't considered asking him, but he'd obviously hit it off with Meredith, if only in this casual, platonic environment. They'd only had one conversation, had only gotten to know each other in the vaguest sense. Enough to qualify as a prelude to a one night stand if they were both single and so inclined.

For all intents and purposes, they were still strangers. Strangers on a first name basis. Perhaps that was exactly the right balance between what she wanted and I insisted upon.

I put hand on the small of Meredith's back and dropped my voice. "What would you think of him as a...candidate?"

"Matt?" She eyed me. "You mean for..."

"What we discussed with Leslie."

"Really?"

I nodded.

She looked at him again. "Think he'd go for it?" She turned back to me. "And do you think *she'd* be okay with it?"

I grinned. "Oh, she might let me borrow him for a night. As for him, it's hard to say. I know I wouldn't have to twist his arm about a threesome, but he might hesitate because of the circumstances."

She said nothing.

"I won't tell him everything." I ran my hand up and down her back. "But I won't lie to him about what we're doing. It's only fair for him to know."

"I understand," she whispered.

"Do you want me to talk to him? See if he's game?"

She didn't answer for a moment. When she spoke, I could barely hear her. "If you think he'll go for it, yeah."

Just to be sure, I said, "You really think he's someone you'd be comfortable with?"

Grinning at me, she said, "Oh, I do believe I could force myself."

I laughed. "That's not what I meant."

"I know, and yes, I think I'd be comfortable with him."

"In that case," I said, gesturing with my now empty beer bottle, "let me get another drink, and then I'll see what I can work out." I left Meredith to get reacquainted with old friends while I went to the bar. With a fresh beer in hand, I went looking for Kristen and Matt.

I found her alone, feeding quarters into the jukebox.

I rested my arm on top of it. "Can I ask you something?"

She looked up and shrugged. "Of course."

"Would you be opposed to me—" I paused, biting my lip. "Borrowing Matt for a night?"

Her eyebrows jumped. "I'm, um, not sure if *he'd* be down with—"

"That's not what I meant."

She snickered, turning her attention back to the display on the jukebox. "No, that's fine, he's all yours. Give him back to me in one piece, though, if you don't mind."

"Darling, if he's still in one piece after everything you've done to him, I don't think you'll have to worry."

"Good." She gestured over her shoulder toward the dartboards. "He's playing cricket with Greg and Nadine if you want to talk to him."

"Thanks."

As I walked past her, she reached back and casually grabbed my ass again. I stopped and eyed her.

"You're cruisin' for a bruise, babe."

She winked. "Then my plan is working perfectly."

I laughed, then went to find Matt. As she'd predicted, he was by the dartboards. I waited until his game was over before I pulled him aside.

"What's up?" he asked.

I played with the edge of the label on my beer bottle. "I need to ask a favor."

Matt glanced at me. "Sure, what do you need?"

"Well, it's not so much what I need." I nodded toward the pool tables, where Meredith had started a game of pool against Sarah. "It's more about what she needs."

He looked at her, then at me, his head cocked slightly. "Okay..."

"It's going to sound really strange. Just, bear with me."

He chuckled, raising his beer bottle to his lips. "I'm used to that from you, Scott."

"This is a bit unusual even by my standards."

Watching me, he sipped his beer, then set the bottle down. "So what is it?"

I swallowed hard. "Would you be game for a threesome with Meredith?"

Matt's eyes widened. "Are you serious?"

I nodded.

He looked at her, then back at me. "She doesn't even know me."

"I know," I said. "That's... kind of the idea."

"I beg your pardon?"

I sighed. "It's a long story. She was with a Dom before me who terrorized her in every way you can imagine and a few ways you probably can't. One of the things he liked to do was bring in strangers to fuck her."

His eyes grew wider still. "Which leads me to believe this is the last woman in the world who should be doing this."

"You'd be surprised." I watched Meredith take a shot before I looked at Matt. "She's come a long way and dealt with a lot of this shit. One of the things she wants is to take some of the bad experiences and play them out in

a way that puts her in control.” I took a long drink. “And one of those experiences is a threesome with her Dom and a total stranger.”

“I see.” He pursed his lips. “Do I still qualify as a total stranger? I know she’s only just met me, but we’ve, well, met.”

“This is sort of a baby step toward that,” I said. “If things work out with you, someone she’s met but barely knows, then we’ll move on to someone only I know.”

“What happens if things don’t work out, though?” He lowered his voice as if he thought she might hear us. “I mean, this could really blow up in her face, couldn’t it?”

I nodded slowly. “It could, yes. But she trusts me. She knows I trust you. As long as we keep an eye on her signals, back off when she needs us to, and don’t push her too hard, I think we’ll be okay.”

“And this whole scenario doesn’t qualify as pushing her too hard?”

“Not if it’s what she wants.” I tapped my fingers on my beer bottle. “That, and she’ll be in control. We’ll discuss rules beforehand, there will be safe words, and she can put a stop to anything and everything any time she wants.”

“Assuming she doesn’t have a panic attack or something like that.”

“It can happen.”

“Has it happened?”

I nodded. “She’s come a long way, though. There’s no way to know for sure until we’re there, but I think she’s ready for this.”

Matt was quiet for a moment, lips pursed and eyes fixed on something across the room. “What exactly would this entail? Just a run-of-the-mill threesome, or is this going to be ice and hot wax like we did with Kris?”

“No, I want to keep it as vanilla as possible for the moment. More than likely, I’ll be sitting back and watching you with her, though I may join in.”

He sipped his beer, rolling it around in his mouth and no doubt rolling my proposition around in his mind. At least I knew the idea of me watching wouldn’t put him off. We’d done this enough times with Krissy, each of us watching the other fuck her more times than I could count, for him to be comfortable with my presence.

At last, he spoke again. “Well, you know more about this kind of thing than I do, and you know her situation better than I do.” He shrugged. “If you think it’s a good idea and won’t make things worse for her, then yeah, I’m game.”

“You sure?”

We both watched Meredith lean down to take a shot. Then Matt turned to me and grinned. “Are you fucking kidding me? She’s smoking hot.”

“I won’t argue with that,” I said into my beer bottle.

He cleared his throat. "Seriously, though. Yeah, I'll do it. Of course, I'll have to run it by Kris first."

I gestured dismissively. "Don't worry about that."

"What?"

"I took the liberty of asking her. She's cool with it."

Matt laughed and shook his head. "You know, with most guys, I might be a little weirded out about you going to my girlfriend to check before propositioning me for a threesome with someone else."

"Yeah, but since she's my girlfriend too..." I shrugged, chuckling.

He grinned. "Think one of us could ever talk the two of them into a different kind of threesome?"

"The two of them with one of us?"

He nodded.

I raised my beer. "God, I hope so."

"Is she curious?" He gestured toward Meredith. "About women?"

I shook my head. "Don't know. Right now, we're just trying to sort all the shit with men. But, if she's ever game, I certainly wouldn't object."

"Neither would I."

"Think Krissy would?"

"I'd be willing to bet money that she wouldn't object." He sipped his drink. "I think she's curious."

I nodded. "Oh, she's definitely curious. I *know* she is."

"God bless open-minded women," he said with a wistful sigh.

At that moment, Meredith looked over her shoulder at me. Her eyes darted toward Matt, then back to me, and she grinned just before she turned back to her game.

I lifted my beer to my lips. *God bless them, indeed.*

Seventeen

Matt showed up first. I let him in and we exchanged our usual handshake greeting.

“Meredith should be here soon,” I said. “Probably just stuck in traffic.”

He shrugged. “Eh, I’m a little early.”

He declined an offer of a drink, and the two of us lounged in the living room while we waited for her to arrive. As we often did, we passed the time talking about our respective jobs and the latest asinine hijinx of clients and co-workers alike. Our careers were about as different as they could be—I was a mechanical engineer, Matt worked as a graphic designer—but there were plenty of similarities between the bullshit we both had to put up with. Corporate bigwigs who were visionaries without a clue. Clients who wanted the most expensive, complex products for nothing. Those who didn’t see any problem compromising functionality in favor of aesthetics.

Work could only hold our attention for so long on a Saturday night, though, especially with the reason we were here.

“So, you don’t think she’ll get cold feet?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No. She’s been pretty determined to do this ever since she first brought it up.”

He said nothing for a moment. Then, “Are you really sure this is a good idea? I mean, with her circumstances?”

“Her therapist is on board with it,” I said. “I’m not a hundred percent sure it’ll help, but if her therapist doesn’t think it’ll cause more harm...”

Matt blew out a breath and scratched the back of his neck. “Just seems like a hell of a leap for someone who’s been through so much.”

“Preaching to the choir, believe me.”

He raised an eyebrow. “But here we are.”

“Like I said, we’ve discussed it with her therapist.” I paused. “It’s not too late to back out. If you’re not sure, just say so.”

“No, I’m okay with it.” He chewed his lip. “As long as you think it’ll do her some good, I’m in.”

“As long as it goes well, I think it will be good for her.”

Matt thumbed his chin. "And if it doesn't?"

I swallowed. "Then she and I take a step back, work our way back up to this, and try it again, as long as she still wants it."

He shifted in his chair, but didn't say anything.

"One more thing," I said quietly.

His eyebrows jumped.

"When the clothes come off," I said, "she has some scars on her back. From her ex."

Eyes widening again, he said, "What did he do to her?"

"You don't want to know, trust me. But she's very, very self-conscious of them."

"With a naked woman in front of me, I probably won't even notice."

I laughed half-heartedly. "Trust me, you'll notice them. And I know you wouldn't say anything about them, but if she should tense up while her back is to you, it may be because she's worried you're looking at them."

"Duly noted," he said quietly. After a moment, he opened his mouth to speak again, but the ringing doorbell turned both of our heads.

"And that would be the guest of honor herself." I rose and started for the door.

"Looks like I won't be backing out now," Matt said with an uncertain laugh.

I stopped halfway to the door and looked over my shoulder. "You can back out at any time, Matt. Even after we've gotten started."

He didn't respond.

I greeted Meredith with a quick kiss. As I closed the door, I said, "I assume you two remember each other?"

They exchanged grins and down-up glances. Then both nodded.

"Why don't we talk rules?" I said.

We went over the usual rules. They were both familiar with my customary safe words, but we addressed it anyway so she knew he understood them and vice versa. We discussed their limits. Most of his boundaries pertained to me, and didn't warrant discussing, since he and I had done this a number of times and neither of us had any interest in playing with each other. For her, no putting any pressure on her head while she went down on either of us, no gags, and nothing around her neck. Not that I suspected there would be much of that anyway. Beyond the occasional blindfolds, ice cubes, or handcuffs, Matt wasn't into BDSM. His kinks involved voyeurism and exhibitionism, so he didn't need the leather or metal.

While we talked rules, I watched all of their signs and tells, those that gave away nerves and apprehension. Eyes darting toward each other before quickly looking away. Shifting weight. Pursing lips. Wringing hands. Matt chewing his thumbnail, Meredith running unsteady fingers through her hair. Definitely nerves from both sides.

"Before we go in there," I said, eyes flicking back and forth between

them, “does anyone have any last minute concerns?”

They both shook their heads.

“Anyone can call this off at any time,” I said, “but if either of you are hesitant or unsure at all, say so.” I raised my eyebrows, a silent “speak now or for the moment hold your peace.”

They looked at each other, then at me. Both shook their heads again.

I grinned, hoping to mask my own nerves. “Let’s do this, then.” I started down the hall and they followed me.

“Does he make you do this often?” Meredith asked Matt.

“What? Drag me into threesomes with beautiful women?”

She laughed. “Something like that.”

“He doesn’t twist my arm, let’s put it that way.”

“Well, knowing him...”

“Trust me, sweetheart, I can live with him throwing his women at me from time to time.”

“Well, depending on how well you handle it, maybe he’ll make you do it again.” Her brazenness allowed me to release some of my breath.

“Is that right?” Matt chuckled. “Guess I’d better make an impression, then, hadn’t I?” Clothing rustled. Someone’s breath caught. Hand on the bedroom doorknob, I turned just in time to see Matt push Meredith up against the wall and kiss her. He cupped her face in both hands, kissing her passionately. She didn’t miss a beat before wrapping her arms around him and returning it.

“All right, you two,” I said, laughing. “Get a room.” I opened the bedroom door and gestured for them to go in.

As soon as we were in the bedroom, their playful, flirtatious moods abruptly shifted.

Meredith went quiet and tense.

Matt leaned against the door, thumbs hooked in the pockets of his jeans. His eyes flicked toward me, and the front of his throat rippled with a nervous swallow. One second, he’d boldly pinned her to the wall and kissed her. The next, he wasn’t so sure. But then, we were on different ground now. Out there, it was just playful flirting, breaking the ice, testing the water.

In here? Now there was pressure. Perhaps not performance anxiety—Matt probably didn’t know the meaning of the phrase—but pressure to protect a fragile psyche under unusual and possibly incendiary circumstances. A kiss out in the hallway wasn’t quite the minefield that awaited him in the bedroom.

“Everyone still okay with this?” I asked.

They both nodded. They’d come this far; the longer we stood here questioning it, the more likely someone was to panic and bail out. Might as well jump in with both—well, all six—feet and see what happened.

“Okay, let’s get started.” I turned to Meredith and ran the backs of my fingers down her cheek. Left cheek, right. She closed her eyes and took a

breath. When she opened her eyes again, she kept them down.

"From here on out," I said. "I am in control. My commands are to be followed, and you will address me as Master. Understood?"

"Yes, Master."

"You'll obey any command he gives you, just as you'll obey any command I give you. Clear?"

"Yes, Master."

"You're not to come until I allow it or he does. Understood?"

Another affirmative.

"Good girl." Left cheek, right. "What are your safe words?"

"Red to stop, yellow to back off, Master."

"Good girl." Left cheek, right. I took a step back. Then another. Without looking away from her, I sat in the chair against the wall. "Face him." When she did, I said, "Kneel."

Meredith went to her knees. Once she was there, I gave her a chance to draw that deep, nervous breath. A moment later, that breath came and went.

"Are you okay, Meredith?"

Turning her head just slightly, but not quite looking at me over her shoulder, she said, "Yes, Master."

I swallowed hard, thankful she couldn't see me, just in case any of my uncertainty showed. "She's all yours, Matt."

Meredith's shoulders bunched and every muscle in her back tensed, but finally, she exhaled. Matt glanced at me, then at her. The slight furrow of his brow hinted at the uncertainty he tried to hide.

"Unbuckle his belt," I said.

Matt glanced at me again, eyebrows raised. Then he closed his eyes when Meredith reached for his belt. The buckle jingled.

"Now take it off and unzip his pants," I said.

Matt opened his eyes, but he didn't look at me this time. He watched her, his lips parted as she did exactly what I'd ordered. This wasn't the exact script Meredith had asked us to play by, but it would break the ice.

"Suck his cock, Meredith."

"Yes, Master," she murmured, and a second later, Matt closed his eyes and pulled in a sharp breath.

"She's all yours, Matt."

This time he took the cue, and we were back on the agreed upon script.

"Just like that," he said softly, looking down at her. "Good girl, just like that." He reached for her, presumably to rest his hand in her hair, but lifted it away before he'd touched her. Before he'd accidentally put pressure on her. *Good, Matt. Good.*

He let her go down on him for a few minutes before, in a gentle but firm if unsteady tone, he said, "Stand up."

Meredith rocked back on her heels. With one hand on the bed for balance, she rose, keeping her head inclined slightly so her eyes were down.

“Good girl,” he said.

She lifted her head for a second, and he smiled at her.

“Take off your shirt,” he said.

Setting her shoulders back, she took a breath and did as he ordered. She dropped her shirt to the floor, dropped her gaze, and waited for his next command.

“Take off your bra.”

Again, she obeyed. One by one, he verbally removed every article of her clothing. When she was completely naked in front of him, his gaze shifted toward me, eyebrows lifted in an unspoken, *what do I do next?* I gestured at the buttons of my shirt, then pointed at him, then at her. He gave a slight nod.

To Meredith, he said, “Unbutton my shirt.”

“Yes, Master,” she said, almost whispering. Her fingers trembled while she opened the first button of his shirt. He watched her face, she watched his hands, and I couldn’t tell who was more nervous.

Then he put his hands over hers and stopped her fingers. She looked up at him, probably wondering if she’d done something wrong. Instead of speaking, he released her hands, cupped the sides of her face, and kissed her.

At first, she stiffened, as if she wasn’t sure what to make of this. Then she relaxed, putting her arms around his neck. I’d have pointed out that I hadn’t given her permission to put her arms around me, but he was calling the shots, and if he didn’t object, neither did I.

He grinned at her, whispering something as he stroked her hair. When he kissed her again, she melted against him. I couldn’t help releasing a relieved breath. Nerves calmed, ice broken. *Good, Matt. Good.*

With much steadier hands, she finished unbuttoning his shirt. At his command, she slid it over his shoulders. Once it was gone, he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her once more.

He broke the kiss and nodded toward the bed. “Sit on the edge.”

She did as she was told.

Watching them silently, I willed myself to breathe slowly, evenly, to keep any display of nerves to myself. On the outside, I probably appeared calm, cool, and collected. Thankfully, neither Matt nor Meredith could hear the way my heart pounded. I took a deep breath and held onto the armrests. *I’m putting my faith and this woman in your hands, Matt.*

Sitting back and watching like this wasn’t, in and of itself, unusual for me. Kristen, my little exhibitionist, often enjoyed having me watch her with Matt or Byron, just as she sometimes had Matt watch her with me. Once in a while, I watched her with a sub if she felt like playing the Domme.

But the Dom in me didn’t like sitting still right now. No matter how much I trusted Matt, I was worried. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust him or

thought he'd do wrong by her. I never would have let him near her if I had even the slightest reason to distrust him. No, it was my near-obsessive need to be right there to keep something from happening. The need to protect her, to fix any problems before they arose.

They were both nervous enough without having reason to believe I had any apprehension. As it was, they both fed off each other. A silent "I can do this if you can" passed in every look they exchanged. One second they were as sure as if they'd been lovers for years. Then, as awkward as a pair of teenagers fumbling through their first time. The next, one's confidence eased the other's uncertainty.

And in spite of his apparent nerves, he quickly got the hang of being in control and asking her to do what he wanted. He had her lie back while he knelt between her legs. As he nudged her knees apart and kissed her inner thigh, I gulped. Into another potential minefield we went. Kiss by kiss, he worked his way higher. Just before he reached her pussy, Meredith gasped. After a second, she released her breath, and that breath was ragged. Nervous.

My heart beat faster.

Matt looked up at Meredith. "Are you okay?"

She nodded, swallowing hard.

He ran his hand along the top of her leg. "You sure?"

"Yes."

I cleared my throat.

"Yes, Master," she corrected quickly, eyes darting toward me, then Matt.

Matt hesitated, then lowered his head to kiss her inner thigh again. He inched higher, and she chewed her lip, her eyebrows pulling together above tightly closed eyes. I couldn't see exactly where his mouth was now, but he was close to her pussy. Very close. Getting closer.

I knew the instant his lips made contact. Her back arched so suddenly her shoulder blades lifted off the bed for a split second, and she gasped again, the comforter bunching in her hands.

But something wasn't right.

Her lips pulled into something like a grimace. Her breath caught. Again.

Oh, shit.

She drew a deeper breath, a deliberate intake preceding speech, and by the time she spoke, Matt had lifted his head and I was halfway out of my chair:

"Yellow."

Matt flew back, palms upraised, and I was on my feet.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

I sat beside her, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Meredith, what's wrong?"

She covered her eyes with a shaking hand and took a few deep

breaths.

“Meredith?” I said again.

Matt looked at me, hands still hovering in midair, uncertainty etched into his expression. I gestured for him to relax. He lowered his hands, but didn’t touch her, and his expression didn’t change.

I stroked Meredith’s hair. “Are you okay, baby?”

She finally nodded and sat up slowly. “I’m sorry, I’m fine, I—”

“Don’t apologize,” Matt said softly. “This is about you. I want you to be comfortable. Did I do something wrong?”

“No.” She ran a hand through her hair. “I just... it felt... familiar.” Her eyes met mine, and I shuddered, wondering just how close she’d been to the brink of a flashback before she’d used the safe word.

I put my hand on her shoulder. “Do you want to stop?”

“No.” She looked at Matt. “Just... go slow.”

“Of course,” he said. “Was I moving too fast before?”

“No, not really.”

“I’ll go a little slower anyway, okay?”

A timid smile spread across her lips. “Thank you.”

He reached for her face, hesitating for a second. When she didn’t recoil, he rested his hand on the back of her neck and drew her into a kiss. Sinking against him, she wrapped her arms around him. When he broke the kiss, they looked at each other again, and this time her smile was anything but timid. Matt released her and sat back on his heels.

“Are you sure you want to keep going?” I asked Meredith.

She grinned. “I definitely do.”

“Just say so if you want to stop.” I kissed her lightly. Then I touched her face. Left cheek, right. Her gaze shifted downward, the lingering tension melting from her shoulders, and she exhaled. Once more—left cheek, right—and I whispered, “You’re under my command now. You’ll obey anything Matt or I tell you. Understood?”

“Yes, Master,” she murmured.

Left cheek, right. Then I stood and, for the third time this evening, said, “She’s all yours, Matt.”

As he took over, laying her back on the bed and parting her legs once more, I took my seat again. Watching them, I rested my elbow on the armrest and thumbed my chin. In the back of my mind, I had a feeling it wasn’t just the near panic that had driven her to use the safe word. The panic was there, of that I had no doubt, but I wondered if she’d also been testing the waters. She needed to know this situation truly was under her control. Now that she’d proven it was, that she could bring everything to an instantaneous halt with the power of a single word, she could relax. It wasn’t something I encouraged my subs to do—as far as I was concerned, if a safe word was used, I’d fucked up royally as a Dom—but she was venturing into previously troubled waters. She could be forgiven for proceeding with more caution

than most.

And just as I suspected she would, she *did* relax.

As Matt inched his way up her inner thigh, glancing up at her between kisses, she moaned and squirmed, but there was no resistance. She gasped when his mouth met her pussy. He looked up, pausing for a moment as if to gauge her reaction. Evidently satisfied she was aroused, not alarmed, he went down on her again.

Whatever he did with his lips and tongue, she fucking loved it. Her entire body responded, from her tightly shut eyes to her curling toes.

“Oh God, that’s amazing,” she breathed.

He raised his head just long enough to murmur, “I want you to play with your nipples.”

Her breath caught. Her eyes darted toward me, and a flicker of uncertainty crossed her face, but before I could jump the gun and suggest rescinding that order, she obeyed it. Her every response intensified now. Her hips twisted and squirmed beneath his arm, her back arched, and every gasp and moan was louder than the last.

Playing with her nipples makes her crazy. I grinned behind my hand. I’ll have to remember that.

Matt moved his head from side to side, then circled just slightly, probably mirroring what his tongue did to her clit. My mouth watered at the phantom sweetness of her pussy on my tongue, and I dug my fingers into the armrest. When his hand left her hip and his shoulder dropped, Meredith whimpered and I swore I could feel her pussy tightening around his fingers.

“Oh God...” She sounded near tears, almost choking on the words. “Oh God, that’s amazing, fuck...”

“Don’t come yet, Meredith.” Somehow I kept my tone calm and even.

Writhing and moaning, she reached down and combed her fingers through his hair.

“He didn’t say to stop playing with your nipples,” I said sharply.

She whimpered again, this time with frustration and put her hand back on her breast. As soon as she pinched her nipple again, her back arched and her body squirmed beneath his arm. I could only imagine what he did with his mouth, but whatever it was, he didn’t relent. She writhed and trembled and gasped, and he didn’t quit, even when a violent shudder nearly levitated her off the bed.

“Please, Master, let me come... please...” She screwed her eyes shut. “Oh, God, oh... *please*, Master...”

“Not yet.”

Matt’s arm moved a little faster. I had no doubt he was fucking her with his fingers, moving faster now to make her orgasm that much less avoidable. I had to resist chuckling to myself. Evil bastard. This was exactly why we worked so well together like this. She couldn’t come until I allowed

it, and he knew just how to make that order as difficult as possible to obey.

Meredith gasped and shuddered. "May— oh fuck, Master, please..." She sucked in a breath and bit her lip. "Please, Master, may I come?"

In a calm, low voice, I said, "Come."

She let go.

I shifted in my chair. *Fuck*, I was hard, and watching her come undone like this was almost unbearable. *As soon as Matt's done with you, baby, you are mine. All mine.*

He kept going until she gently pushed his head away. Lifting himself up on his arms, he came up to kiss her, but before he got to her, she grabbed the sides of his neck and dragged him down into a kiss. Deeply, passionately, borderline violently, she sought the taste of her pussy on his tongue just as she always did with me. The goose bumps on his back and arm were visible even from here, and I got a few myself.

They exchanged a few words I couldn't hear. Her forehead creased and she bit her lip. Matt stroked her hair, murmuring something. She nodded, and when her eyes met his, she smiled. He kissed her quickly, then stood to get rid of the rest of his clothes. He took a condom from his back pocket, then tossed his jeans on the floor beside the other discarded clothes. He tore the wrapper with his teeth.

"Should I move over there?" She pointed toward the pillows.

Matt shook his head. "Stay just like that." He rolled the condom on, then stood beside the bed and pulled her hips to the edge. She wrapped her legs around his waist while he guided himself to her. Resting his weight on his arms, he moved his hips forward slowly. I had no doubt she was wet enough to take him in one deep thrust, but he was cautious. Careful. Exactly the kind of man she needed for this, when her confidence or comfort could suddenly collapse.

"Is this okay?" he murmured.

She nodded, saying something I didn't hear. Then she combed her fingers through his hair and drew him down to her. He dipped his head to kiss her neck, and as he did, he thrust all the way inside her, driving a cry of pure ecstasy from her lips. Her hands clawed at his back and her toes curled.

"Don't come yet," he whispered to her, just loud enough for me to hear.

Her nails left pink streaks down his back, and the helpless, almost delirious sounds she released would have made me painfully hard if I hadn't been already.

There was no way in hell I was just watching. While he fucked her, growling denial after denial in response to her pleas for release, I got up and quickly got out of my clothes. My hand shook when I picked up a condom, and I didn't even care if one of them noticed.

I had just gotten the condom rolled on when he must have given her the word. She cried out, gasped, damn near broke down sobbing, and he just

kept right on fucking her. He threw his head back and groaned. I shivered. How the hell he'd kept it together while she came like that, I didn't know, but he wasn't done with her yet.

I watched them, every nerve ending in my body tingling with anticipation of being inside her. The sight of another guy didn't do anything for me per se, but I was, like Matt, a voyeur by nature. Watching two people fuck was hot, there were no two ways about it. And knowing what he felt just then drove me insane. Her skin, her breath, her tight, hot pussy, the way she rolled her hips *just* right.

Meredith whimpered something. Words, but they didn't quite reach me. It didn't take long to figure it out, though, because as soon as Matt said "yes," she came.

I couldn't tell what was louder—Meredith or the bed frame—but both her cries and its groans disappeared when Matt roared. He thrust into her a few more times, then shuddered and slumped over her. I breathed slowly and deeply, willing myself to be patient. Let the man get his equilibrium back, let him catch his breath, let—

Come on, Matt, come on, you're killing me here.

As soon as he got up and stepped aside, I was over her. She blinked, lips parted in surprise as if she'd forgotten I was even in the room.

I grinned and leaned down to let my lips barely touch hers. "Had enough?"

"No, Master," she said, panting.

"Good." I thrust into her, muffling her cry with a deep kiss, and the instant my tongue met hers, the vague sweetness of her own pussy damn near drove me insane. God *damn* it, this woman's body was amazing.

While I fucked her, a chair creaked somewhere at the edge of my awareness.

"He's watching you now," I whispered. "Does that turn you on?"

She glanced in Matt's direction. A shiver tightened her grasp on my shoulders and her pussy around my cock.

"Do you like being watched, baby?" I thrust harder.

She bit her lip and moaned, digging her nails into my shoulders.

"Answer me, Meredith," I growled. "Do you like being watched while I fuck your cunt like this?"

Almost sobbing now, she gasped for breath and moved her hips in time with my thrusts.

I slammed into her and stopped. "Answer me, Meredith."

"It—" She licked her lips, frustration furrowing her brow while her hips tried in vain to coax mine back into motion. "Yes, Master, it does."

"I thought so," I growled, and started again, thrusting deep, thrusting hard. I clenched my jaw, trying to keep my orgasm at bay for a few minutes, even a few seconds. Every time she rocked her hips or gasped or raked her nails across my shoulders, though, I inched closer to losing it.

“Oh my God,” she moaned, the near-sobbing hunger in her voice driving me that much closer to crazy. “Let— May, may I come again, Master?”

Somehow I found my voice and whispered, “Yes, baby, come.”

God knew which of us let go first, but less than a heartbeat after I spoke, we both came. She clawed my shoulders, her pussy squeezed my cock, I thrust as deep inside her as I could, and we both shuddered.

Once I’d gotten rid of the condom, all three of us collapsed on the bed. With our combined body heat, it was too hot for the blanket, but we kept the sheet over us. Matt rested a hand on her shoulder. I rested mine on her thigh. She closed her eyes, and a few times, I wondered if she’d drifted off to sleep.

“You guys are incredible,” she slurred after a long while.

Matt and I both laughed.

“I’m certainly not complaining about you.” Matt turned her face toward him and kissed her.

“Be careful,” she said.

He grinned. “And why should I be careful?”

She put her hand on the back of his neck. “Because if you do that too much, you might get this started all over again.”

“Good to know,” he growled, and kissed her again. It started as a light kiss. His jaw moved a little. Then hers did. When his cheek hollowed, I bit my lip, envying him because he was deepening that kiss, tasting her mouth, breathing her in.

While he kissed her, I trailed my fingertips down the center of her spine. Her back arched, pushing her body against his.

He lifted her hand off his shoulder and guided it between them. He said something to her, something that came out in a low, hoarse whisper, then groaned as her arm moved slowly, rhythmically.

I swept her hair out of the way and kissed the back of her neck. She squirmed between us, and when I pressed my hardening cock against her ass, she whimpered into his kiss.

“Hmm, I guess you’re right about getting this started again,” he said.

“Told you.”

I nipped her shoulder. “Matt, I think she might kill us both.”

“Bring it on.” To Meredith, he said, “In fact, turn on your other side.” He nodded toward me. “Facing him.”

Meredith hesitated, glancing uncertainly at me. The scars, I guessed. She was afraid of him seeing them.

“Come here,” I whispered, gently drawing her to me. “You’ll be fine. Trust me.” She cast one last glance at Matt, then rolled onto her side. I slid my hand into her hair and kissed her, teasing her lips apart with my tongue.

Matt reached for the bedside table where he knew I kept plenty of condoms. At the sound of the drawer opening, Meredith’s kiss intensified.

When the wrapper tore, she reached between us and stroked my cock.

I opened my eyes when the mattress shifted, signaling Matt's return. He paused, doing a double take at her back, his eyes widening as he, I assumed, saw the scars for the first time. He didn't pause for long, though. He kissed between her shoulder blades, then worked his way up to her neck while she shivered and deepened our kiss.

She moaned softly, digging her nails into the back of my neck. I guessed from the fluid, back and forth motion of her body against mine that he was inside her, fucking her slowly from behind while she kissed me. The more we kissed, the more turned on I was, and the more he fucked her, the more passionately she kissed me. I vaguely remembered that I'd been worried about this whole situation for some reason, but hell if I could remember why. She loved it, loved every—

She tensed.

My blood turned cold.

Matt looked at her. "What's wrong?"

She winced. "My hip."

"Getting a cramp?" I asked.

She nodded. Matt stopped, and Meredith exhaled when they separated. She rubbed her hip gingerly. "Just a weird position, I guess."

He kissed the back of her shoulder. "Think you can handle being on your hands and knees?"

Meredith grinned. "Definitely."

We shifted positions. I masked my sigh of relief; a little discomfort from an awkward position could be remedied easily, unlike other problems that could have—but hadn't—cropped up.

Matt knelt behind her, I knelt in front of her, and she gasped when he thrust into her again. She closed first her hand, then her lips, around my cock, and the harder he fucked her, the more enthusiastic she was.

I looked at Matt and mouthed, "Slap her ass."

He blinked.

I nodded. "Trust me."

He raised his hand, hesitated, then brought it down on her ass with a satisfying *crack*. Instantly, his lips parted with a startled breath, and I didn't have to ask if he understood why I'd suggested it.

"Fuck," he groaned, blinking a few times before he hit her again, harder this time. She moaned, her voice vibrating against my cock.

"You like that, Meredith?" I tangled my fingers in her hair. "When he hits you like that?"

She moaned again, the closest to an affirmative she could muster just then. Matt slapped her again. Then again. He gasped, no doubt reeling from the way her pussy tightened whenever he hit her, and all the while, she stroked and sucked me with renewed enthusiasm.

The world spun faster and faster around me. Gently grasping her

hair, I closed my eyes, let my head fall back, and surrendered. My orgasm peaked and fell, and once I could move without collapsing, I sat back to catch my breath, watching through heavy-lidded eyes as Matt fucked her, as he *railed* her.

Closing her eyes, Meredith licked her lips and clawed at the bedspread. Fucking hell, she looked amazing like this, halfway to an orgasm herself while still tasting mine.

I grabbed her hair and kissed her. Her tongue was salty with semen, and every violent thrust he took inside her knocked a sharp, hot breath out of her and onto my skin.

“Come, baby,” I whispered between kisses. “Let him feel you come again.” With a soft whimper, she shuddered, exhaling against my lips.

Behind her, Matt groaned, then roared, cursing and saying her name and fucking her just a little harder, a little harder, a little harder.

In moments, it was over, and we were all still. Panting, touching, neither speaking nor moving. Meredith’s lips brushed mine but we didn’t kiss. Just breathed.

After a while, Matt got up to get rid of the condom. As soon as he moved, I gently guided Meredith back to the pillows.

She brushed a few strands of hair out of her face. “Oh my God, that was insane.”

“In a good way, I hope?”

She nodded, then raised her head to kiss me. “In a *very* good way.”

With a groan, Matt dropped onto his back beside her. “Jesus Christ,” he said, wiping sweat from his forehead.

Rolling onto my back, I exhaled hard. “I hear that, man, believe me.”

Meredith sat up and looked at me, then him. “You boys aren’t tired yet, are you?”

Matt and I exchanged incredulous looks.

“She’s not kidding, is she?” Matt asked.

I shook my head.

He looked at her and grinned, then glanced at me. “You do have some Red Bull lying around, don’t you?”

“Plenty of it.”

Meredith licked her lips. “Good. Because you’re both going to need it.”

Eighteen

The day after the threesome, my body ached all over. Whatever nerves or reservations Meredith had had in the beginning, she made up for them in spades, keeping Matt and me busy until well into the night. After Matt took off—joking that Kristen would probably finish off anything Meredith had left—Meredith and I had fucked one last time for good measure.

I was sore, I was exhausted, and I was relieved beyond belief that it had gone well. A few rough spots in the beginning, a safe word used once, but after she'd relaxed and Matt had found his stride, all had gone well. Very, very well, though my quads and hamstrings might have had something to say about that.

By mid-afternoon, most of the soreness had at least begun to ease, and not a moment too soon. I kept glancing at my watch throughout the day, counting down the minutes, because after entirely too long, Amy and I had finally managed to carve out some time together. Physically exhausted or not, I looked forward to an evening in the dungeon with her. Hell, an evening with her at all, whether in the dungeon or not.

First things first, though, I was taking her out to dinner, and around six, her husband dropped her at the restaurant where we'd agreed to meet. When she walked in, my heart jumped into overdrive. I kissed her, then pulled her into my arms just to give my senses a chance to comprehend that she was *here*.

"Good to see you," I whispered into her hair, holding her close.

"You too," she said, and her grasp on me was just as tight.

"It's been too long."

"Way too long."

I kissed her again. "There's a bit of a wait tonight. Maybe ten or fifteen minutes."

She shrugged. "I'm in no hurry."

We exchanged smiles, but for a long moment, neither of us spoke. Considering it had been a while since we'd seen each other, I was surprised I couldn't think of a damned thing to say. Probably just so many things to

catch up on, I didn't know where to start. That had to be it.

I cleared my throat. "So how goes the master's thesis?"

She groaned. "I'm starting to wonder what the hell I was thinking, let's put it that way."

I laughed. "Yeah, I remember that feeling. It'll be worth it when you're done, though."

"I'll believe that when I see it," she muttered. "Same goes with the house."

"That I don't doubt in the slightest," I said. "I wondered why you two didn't wait to start building it until after you were done with your degree, though."

"Gluttons for punishment, I guess."

I chuckled. "Well, I always knew *you* enjoyed pain, but I didn't think he did."

We both laughed, then fell silent again.

After a moment, she said, "How's Kristen?"

"Good. Juggling the pair of clowns she calls boyfriends, but she manages."

Amy laughed. "I can only imagine. How are things going with Meredith?"

"They're going. It's a slow process."

"I believe it."

And we were back to silence. About ten quiet minutes after Amy arrived, the hostess appeared with a pair of leather-bound menus.

"Moore, party of two?"

"Right here."

"This way, please." She took us to our table. Once we were alone, Amy and I spent a few minutes focused on the menus we both knew by heart. Neither of us spoke except to make a benign comment here or there about the long since memorized wine list or the various entrees we'd tried dozens of times before. Since when was making conversation with Amy like getting blood from a stone? E-mails, texts, and phone calls had been a little short and sparse lately, but I'd chalked that up to simply being busy.

A waiter materialized and took our orders. He also took our sheltering menus, leaving us to face each other and fill this foreign silence.

"So," I said, "how's Ryan doing?" That struck me as an ironic icebreaker with a girlfriend. Talking about her husband. Only in my world, I supposed. And hell, we'd already talked about Meredith and Kristen, so why not?

Amy sipped her water and set the glass down. "He's okay. Mostly just stressed about the house."

"Is he still planning on doing most of it himself?"

"Just the cosmetic stuff." She laughed. "I think I'm finally getting through to him that he is not Bob Vila."

“Good, good. At least that should preclude having him anywhere near a nail gun.”

She grimaced. “One can only hope.”

We laughed. Met eyes. And fell quiet again.

A full minute ticked by.

She muffled a cough behind her hand. “Are you still thinking of selling your place?”

I shook my head. “It seemed like a good idea when I first thought about it, but just the amount of work it would take to remodel the dungeon to make the place marketable—”

Right then, the waiter showed up, and he looked at me with raised eyebrows. I could practically hear “Dungeon? Marketable?” bouncing around in his head. He didn’t comment, though, just laid our plates on the table.

“Can I get you anything else?”

“I’m fine, thanks.” To Amy, I said, “What about you?”

“No, I’m fine. Thank you.”

The waiter made a quick escape, probably wondering who the hell he was serving.

“Anyway,” I said as I laid my napkin on my lap, “I do like the place, and since it’s just me and Malia...” I trailed off and shrugged.

“If you don’t have a reason to move, I wouldn’t bother. At this point, if we didn’t have so many deposits paid and plans in place, I’d bag the whole thing and just stay where we are.”

“Good point.”

Silence. Again.

Now that we had our food, it was even easier to avoid talking. These uncertain silences were too frequent. Too awkward. Too long. This wasn’t like us. Even when we’d spent time apart in the past, we usually picked up right where we left off without missing a beat. Lately, that hadn’t been the case. It had started before Meredith came back into the picture, and continued right through this dinner together.

After we’d eaten, I paid and we walked in silence out to my car. In the parking lot, I went around to the passenger side, but after I’d opened her door, I paused.

She looked at me, tilting her head slightly. “What’s wrong?”

I chewed the inside of my cheek. “I was going to ask you the same thing, actually.”

Dropping her gaze, she exhaled. So I wasn’t imagining it. Damn it. She turned to set her purse on the passenger seat, but when she stood up again, she didn’t face me. After a heartbeat’s worth of hesitation, I put my hands on her shoulders. She sank back against me and I wrapped my arms around her.

“Talk to me,” I whispered. “What’s wrong?”

She took a deep breath and let it out. “Do you think we should keep

doing this?"

I closed my eyes. Exactly what I was afraid of. "What do you think?" Shaking her head, she put her hands over mine. "I don't know."

I loosened my embrace and she turned around to face me.

"Do you *want* to keep doing this?" I gently grasped her upper arms, making slow, down-up arcs with my thumbs.

Amy sighed and avoided my eyes. "I do, but with everything we both have going on, it's like pulling teeth for us to find time for each other." She took a deep breath before meeting my eyes again. "If I'm not stressed over trying to balance this with everything else, I feel guilty for not putting you first, or Ryan first, or... well, not knowing who or what to put first. And it shouldn't be like that."

My heart sank. "No, it shouldn't."

"I've barely even been able to put the time and effort that I need to into my marriage," she whispered. "And I know this whole thing is bothering you too. With everything you're doing for Meredith right now, you don't need this. Neither of us needs this."

How could I argue with that? I loved her too much to put her last, and there was too much going on in either of our worlds to put each other first. Well, closer to first. We'd both known from the beginning that her marriage took precedence over our relationship, and I was fine with that. But there were other things in both of our lives that kept nudging each other further and further down the list. We both deserved to be a higher priority than being tucked somewhere between changing the oil and replacing smoke detector batteries.

I smoothed her hair. "Why don't we take the pressure off, then? There's no shame in walking away from this."

"I know." She blinked a few times, but couldn't hide the extra shimmer in her eyes. "There's no shame, but it's not easy."

"No one ever said it would be." Pulling her to me, I stroked her hair, closing my eyes and swallowing hard as she wrapped her arms around my waist.

"I still love you, Scott," she whispered.

"I still love you too. Nothing is going to change that." I hugged her close, swallowing the lump that rose in my throat. On some level, I knew this was right, but it hurt. Jesus, it hurt.

She drew back and our eyes met again. A smile that wavered between unsure and unabashed spread across her lips. "Does this mean we have to stop playing?"

Ah, relief. At least she wasn't completely gone. As much as I didn't want to let her go, this was still something. Maybe not enough, but something.

"I don't see why it should." I grinned, trailing my fingertips down her cheek. "Do you still want me to beat the hell out of you and then fuck

you?”

She shivered. “You have to ask?”

“No, but I thought I’d check to be sure.” I dipped my head and nuzzled her neck. “Still in the mood to go back to my place to play tonight?”

“Mmm, I will be if you keep doing that.”

“Doing what?” I murmured, kissing my way up to her ear.

“That.”

“This?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Good to know.”

Nineteen

Adjusting to life after Amy was strange. It wasn't difficult because we'd barely spent time together lately anyway and our relationship had become a source of unnecessary stress and guilt. It wasn't easy because I couldn't shake the feeling I'd failed her somehow, that I should have put more effort into saving something into which we'd invested four good years. Nothing had changed, everything had changed. This was right, this was wrong. It was inevitable, it was a shock.

And as guilty as it made me feel to acknowledge it, it was a relief.

"Scott?"

I jumped at the sound of my name and looked up. Matt, Lynette, and Steve watched me, eyebrows raised inquisitively. Cards in their hands, chips on the table, and with another startle, I remembered where I was and what I was doing.

"Sorry, sorry." I cleared my throat and looked at my cards. Jack. Nine. Seven. Seven. A two, which was wild. Three of a kind. Not a bad start, but not good enough to take any huge risks. I threw five dollars in. "Call."

Lynette stared at her cards, pursing her lips and tapping a couple of five-dollar chips together. I watched Matt's impatience unfolding in his expression, and in spite of my mood, I had to bite my tongue to keep from laughing. The longer she hemmed and hawed over her hand, the less he could resist rolling his eyes. It probably would have annoyed me just as much, but his barely-contained irritation amused me. Kristen had the same reaction whenever she played against Lynette, grinding her teeth and glaring over her cards as if trying to telepathically order Lynette to hurry the fuck up.

Lynette finally threw in ten. That gave me pause. She wasn't a high-risk player at all. Not even a medium-risk player. She must have had something decent in her hand.

We traded cards in to Steve and looked at our new hands. A ten and a three didn't do me any good; I was still stuck with a three of a kind. Unless I could bluff everyone into folding, I was pretty well fucked.

Steve threw in ten. Matt raised it and put in fifteen.

I shook my head and laid my cards down. "Fold."

After much consideration on her part and teeth-grinding on Matt's, Lynette put in fifteen.

"Okay, show 'em," Matt said.

Steve laid down a three of a kind. All eights, so he would have beaten me. Matt produced a nine-high straight. Lynette grinned and fanned a Jack-high straight onto the table.

"Damn it, I was sure I had that one," Matt muttered. "Guess it's a good thing we're not playing strip poker."

Lynette giggled. "Oh, I don't know. At a table full of men, I wouldn't—"

"*Lynette.*" Steve rolled his eyes.

Matt put his hands up. "Hey, if the woman wants to—"

"Shut up, Sommers."

I gestured at my pitiful stacks of chips. "Matt, before you suggest turning this into a game of strip poker, might I draw your attention to how badly I'm doing right now?"

Matt grimaced. "Never mind, then. The last thing we need is Moore getting naked."

I laughed behind my beer bottle. "Yeah, God forbid. You might go blind."

He chuckled and shuffled the cards. *Oh, if the people in this room only knew.*

"Are you guys talking about strip poker over there again?" Kristen looked at us from the other table.

"Maybe," I said. "Any chance we could talk—"

"I am *not* playing strip poker with you two."

"Wimp," Matt said.

Kristen flipped him the bird over her shoulder.

He laughed. "All right, ante up, everyone."

I pushed my chair back. "I think I'm sitting this one out, actually."

"Getting tired of losing, Moore?" Steve asked.

"My wallet is screaming for mercy. That, and my beer is empty."

Matt smirked. "Maybe if you slowed down on the beer, you wouldn't—"

"Fuck you, Sommers. I've had one beer, and that hasn't done a damned thing to change the cards *you're* dealing me."

"Excuses, excuses, you fucking drunk."

I laughed and went into the kitchen. After I'd gotten a beer out of refrigerator, I leaned against the counter, closing my eyes and pressing the cold bottle against my forehead. Now that I was alone, the cards and banter couldn't distract me anymore, and all my other thoughts closed in. Amy. Meredith. Confusion. Chaos. Christ, my life was crazy these days.

Light footsteps approached, moving from the crush of carpet to the tap of rubber soles on linoleum. I didn't have to look up to know who it was.

"Hey you," Krissy said.

I set my beer down and looked up, forcing a smile. "Hey."

"You're awfully quiet tonight."

"You know how it is," I said with an equally forced laugh. "Focusing extra hard on the game."

She didn't buy it. "Uh-huh."

I picked up my beer again, tapping the bottle against the counter and staring at the floor while I searched for something to say.

"How did the other night go?" she asked.

"Matt didn't tell you?"

"He did, but I'm asking you."

I cocked my head. "You don't trust his judgment?"

"It's not that," she said. "You just seem... you're... quiet tonight. Distant, maybe that's the word."

Running a hand through my hair, I sighed. "Preoccupied, I guess."

"Everything okay?" Her eyebrows rose slightly. "Matt said everything went fine the other night, but—"

"The other night went fine. Don't worry about that." I smiled half-heartedly. "Better than I expected, actually. In fact, Meredith may ask you to share him again in the future."

She laughed. "I don't have a problem with that. Especially since that would mean I get to keep you busy."

"Any chance you girls might—"

"Oh, Jesus, not you too." She rolled her eyes.

I chuckled. "What?"

"Matt had the same idea." She shot me a playful glare. "Have you been putting filthy thoughts into his head?"

"Me? Pfft. What man doesn't have that fantasy?" I gave her the best innocent look I could muster. "So would you consider indulging us?"

She pursed her lips, then shrugged. "Maybe. If you're both good."

I grinned. "I'll keep that in mind."

She rolled her eyes again. Then she looked at me, and her eyebrows pulled together. "Okay, to be serious, I'm concerned about you. And not just tonight. You haven't been yourself lately."

I shifted my weight. "How so?"

"When we play, you're hesitant. When we talk, you're distracted."

I sighed. "I'm sorry, baby, I'm honestly not trying to ignore you."

"No, no, it's not that. I'm not upset. I know you have a lot on your mind. It just worries me because I've never seen you like this."

Cradling her neck in both hands, I kissed her forehead. "I'll be okay, Krissy. Don't worry about me."

"You know I will."

I nodded. "I know. But there's nothing for you to worry about. I'm fine."

She eyed me. She knew me too well to buy it.

Sighing again, I rested my hip against the counter and didn't look her in the eye. "I'm doing okay, but I'm still getting used to not being with Amy anymore."

"What?" She stared at me. "When did you guys break up?"

"A few days ago." I made a gesture that was probably not nearly as dismissive as it was intended to be. "It's, it was amicable, and probably a long time coming. It's..." I looked at her. "You know how it is. It's... an adjustment."

"So, are you okay with it?"

I shrugged. "It needed to happen."

Kristen rolled her eyes and released an exasperated sigh. "Damn it, Scott, stop being such a *guy* about it."

Grinning, I said, "You are aware that I am a guy, right?"

She didn't laugh. "Yes, I know you are, but you know what I mean. I've never seen you bottle stuff up like this." She inclined her head. "I'm not asking if it needed to happen, I'm asking how you're dealing with it. Root canals need to happen, but they still hurt."

I swallowed. "Yeah, and so does this."

Krissy grimaced. "I'm sorry to hear it."

"Like I said, it probably needed to happen."

"Yeah, and you probably didn't need it on top of everything with Meredith."

I flinched.

"Which I assume you're also having a hard time with?" she said softly.

Chewing the inside of my cheek, I didn't say anything.

"Scott, you can talk to me, you know. It's—"

"Look, it's not that I'm bottling it up, babe," I said. "It's hard, yes, but I don't want to break Meredith's confidence about everything that's going on."

"So are you talking to her about it?"

"No. She's got enough on her mind, so—"

"Then who *are* you talking to about it?"

I said nothing.

"That's what I thought," she said. "Just promise me something, Scott."

I raised my eyebrows.

"If you *need* to talk, you'll call me."

Swallowing hard, I nodded. "Okay. I promise."

"Good." She gestured toward the kitchen doorway. "I guess we should get back to the tables."

"Guess we should." I grinned at her. "So, there's no chance at all of talking you into a game of strip poker?"

She rolled her eyes and laughed. "Not with this crowd."

"But if Matt and I assembled a different crowd, then—"

"You know, I think he's been a bad influence on you."

"Sure it's not the other way around?"

She eyed me. "Now that you mention it..."

I laughed. Glancing past her toward the kitchen doorway to make doubly sure we were still alone, I put my hand on her waist and kissed her lightly. "So, any chance of doing a little 'playing' tonight?"

Shrugging, she batted her eyes. "Maybe if you play your cards right."

"Oh?" I grinned. "So you *are* down for some strip poker."

She smacked me playfully. "No, not strip poker." Standing up on her toes to kiss me again, she added, "But if you want to come by my apartment after we're done here..."

"Hmm," I said. "You know, I'm not having much luck tonight. I think I may cash out."

"Go ahead, but I'm still winning, so you'll still have to wait."

"Vile temptress." I cast another glance at the doorway, then whispered, "Just remember, the longer you make me wait, the longer I'll make *you* wait."

She gulped. I grinned. We both knew just how long I could—and would—keep an orgasm out of her reach.

"I think we understand each other," I said.

She wetted her lips. "Maybe just one more hand, and then we'll call it a night?"

"I knew you'd see things my way."

Twenty

After calling around and scouring the internet, not to mention checking every hardware, craft, woodworking, and cabinetry store in town, I finally had everything to work on the broken music box. I took everything into the garage and laid the parts out on my workbench.

Somehow, having all the pieces in front of me made this project a little more daunting. It wasn't all that complex. Just a bunch of small, delicate tasks to restore it to some semblance of its previous appearance. I'd built, repaired, and modified complicated machinery, and made my living dealing with the same, but there was more pressure for this one. Mostly self-induced, of course, since Meredith didn't even know I had it, but pressure nonetheless.

I took a seat and looked everything over.

Thankfully, the box itself was in decent shape. The lid and legs had taken the brunt of the television's weight, so the intricate dovetailing was still intact. I'd already replaced the rotted section on one side, so I just needed to do some sanding and filling before I finished it. As for the rest of the wood, there wasn't much I could do about the gouges in the finish except fill them, smooth them over as best I could, and try to match the color. They would probably always be visible, but I could camouflage them to a degree.

Corrosion had left the brass hinges brittle and immobile, but they'd be fairly easy to replace. Finding the exact style and size took some work, and the holes in the wood were partly rotted. With some filler and the pair of hinges I'd picked up at the woodworking shop, it could be done.

The interior was a disaster. The velvet had been red at one time, but when I got it home, it was green, black, and white. I'd long since ripped all of that out and gotten rid of it, which also took care of the rather overpowering smell of mildew. Fortunately, I'd found a secondhand jewelry box that had the same interior dimensions, and the insert was more or less the same layout.

The inlay of "Meri" on the lid would be easier than I thought. The "M" was badly scratched and a chunk of the "e" was missing, but I'd found a light-colored wood filler that would blend fairly well. That would be much

less of a headache than trying to cut and shape pieces to fit, and at least the wood he'd used for the inlay was such a fine grain, the lack of grain in the filler wouldn't be terribly obvious. I didn't want to cut corners, but inlays were definitely not my forte, so I figured this was the best route that wouldn't result in making things worse.

I'd made two new legs the other night to replace the one that was missing and the other that was badly splintered. I compared one of the new legs to an old one. The stain I'd used was, now that it was dry, slightly darker than the original, but not noticeably so unless I held them up to a light like I did now. Once they were fastened in place, they'd blend almost perfectly.

While I fastened the new legs onto the box, my mind wandered back to earlier this afternoon when Meredith and I had gone to see Leslie. Meredith had some plans with family for the evening, so we'd grabbed a quick bite to eat after the appointment before going in separate directions.

Truth be told, I was a little relieved to have a night to myself after that visit. Not that I was tired of her, I just needed a break.

Sex with Meredith was easier now than it had been in the beginning. Flogging, bondage, tease and denial; it all went smoother every time.

The same, however, could not be said for these appointments. That wasn't to say they weren't helping. Quite the contrary. Leslie had been tremendously helpful for Meredith, and she'd helped her through a hell of a lot by this point.

But the more we went, the more I heard about what had gone on in the few years we were apart, and the further under my skin it all went until it cut right to the fucking bone. Meredith opened up about everything she'd gone through, which was exactly what she needed to do, and it was only by some miracle that I hadn't gotten physically ill in Leslie's office yet. Afterward a time or two, yes, but I hadn't yet had to lunge for that wastebasket.

I blew out a breath and reached for a tube of wood glue. I turned the box over and glued four round felt pads to the bottoms of each leg. Once those were in place, I set it aside to let the glue dry while I took the interior out of the secondhand box. It didn't want to come out easily, but I worked at it while my mind continued wandering.

It wasn't just the things I heard during the therapy sessions that bothered me. Not those horrors alone. Between our respective bedrooms and Leslie's office, time and intimacy had brought Meredith and me closer together. It had been seven years since we split up, five since we'd been a part of each other's lives, and while we'd been damn near strangers the night she called me, that wasn't the case anymore. Everything Rich had done to her wasn't just something that had happened to a stranger, an acquaintance, a friend of a friend. It was her. Meredith. My lover and ex-girlfriend. It would have hit no closer to home if I'd discovered someone did the same thing to Krissy while I wasn't looking.

That thought raised my hackles. I was fiercely protective of both of them as well as Amy, and if it ever came down to it, I'd have gladly gone to jail for doing whatever it took to keep any of them safe.

The insert finally came out. I thought about throwing the secondhand box away now that I'd removed the insert, but I set it aside. The hinges were similar to the ones I needed to replace, and on the off chance the new hinges didn't fit, I could try these. I hadn't paid a lot for it, but I certainly wouldn't be heartbroken if I managed to swipe a few more parts off it.

I slipped the new insert into the music box, and just as I'd hoped, it fit perfectly with plenty of room for the actual music box, which was still in its package waiting to replace the old one I hadn't yet removed.

I set the insert aside. With a jeweler's screwdriver, I loosened the screws on the old music box. Three of the screws were more or less intact and came out with minimal effort. The fourth was as corroded as the hinges and took more work. With a little patience and elbow grease, it would come out, and I had all damned night.

Today, Meredith had gotten into the night Rich tore her back to shreds. My stomach was in a perpetual state of near-reverse through the entire visit. Even now, my skin crawled at the thought of the shame in her eyes when she spoke of displeasing him. What exactly she'd done, I couldn't recall. Something minor, something for which I'd have punished a sub with little more than a look or refusal to let her come, something that barely registered in my mind when she continued describing what had happened afterward.

The beating. The fear. The pain. The way he calmly, quietly told her what a whore she was while he laid waste to her back. When that part was over, the long period—an hour? Two hours? She couldn't remember—sitting at their kitchen table while he sutured the worst of the wounds. And all the while, he'd explained to her how he hated having to do this, how this was for her own good, that she'd forced him to do this through her disobedience.

I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath as the nausea returned. There was but cold comfort in the knowledge he'd at least had enough of a heart to use a local anesthetic while he stitched her. Apparently the surgeon in him still had a conscience, even if the so-called "Dom" in him was nothing less than a fucking psychopath.

With the music box finally removed, I pulled the new one out of its packaging and installed it. Once it was in place, I closed the lid, then opened it again so the music would start. Just as I'd hoped, it sounded exactly like the original. It caught me off guard, as a matter of fact. The first few notes were enough to lodge my breath in my throat and send me right back to the day Meredith's father died.

I quickly snapped the box shut. That part could wait. All that was left on the interior was fastening the insert in anyway. For now, the exterior needed some attention.

Dampening a piece of sandpaper, I carefully sanded a seam where I'd replaced a rotted piece of wood on one side of the box a few days ago. The grain wasn't an exact match, and the seam would never be completely invisible, but it was the closest I could get it. It probably wouldn't even be noticeable from more than a few inches away. In the back of my mind, I couldn't help sending a silent "fuck you" in Rich's direction. One more repair to smooth over the damage he'd done.

I wondered how the fucker liked prison. I wondered if he'd ever found himself in solitary confinement for any reason. If he had, then I considered that a nice heaping dose of well-deserved karma. Especially after today.

Today, Meredith had told us about being left by herself in Rich's dungeon. Bound, gagged, alone with the sounds of her heart and breathing. Sometimes as punishment, sometimes for no reason at all.

I cringed at the very thought. There were those who thought Doms did that sort of thing on a regular basis, that part of being dominating or, as many of us were, sadistic, meant doing shit like that. Sure, I was a sadist. I liked causing my subs pain. I liked pushing their limits. I wasn't cruel, though. Everything I did was within an agreed upon set of boundaries. Not only did my subs consent to it, they sought it. Wanted it. *Begged* for it.

Never mind the fact that it was dangerous, leaving a bound sub alone was a damned good way to shatter any trust that existed. No sub should ever develop abandonment issues where her Dom is concerned. If he called himself her Dom, he should have been her anchor. Her rock. Something to hold onto so she could safely let go of everything else. I put a great deal of effort into being exactly that for my subs, whether it was a one-time scene with someone new or one of my girls.

Now that I thought about it, it struck me as ironic that Kristen had become *my* rock lately. As things intensified with Meredith and faded away with Amy, they stayed solidly the same with Kristen. A constant when everything else was in chaos, even if we didn't see each other nearly as often as we wanted to. Though I didn't talk to her about the details of Meredith's situation, knowing she was there, that she was concerned about my well-being, offered some comfort. And when we managed to find the time, she offered an escape. For the duration of a scene with her, nothing existed outside the bedroom or dungeon, and without that occasional escape, I'd have lost my mind by now.

I was more than a little thankful she had Matt, too. I missed her like crazy when we went long periods without seeing each other, but at least his presence tempered some of the guilt. She knew what I was doing with Meredith, she understood, and thanks to Matt, she still had someone to share her bed. The fact that she wasn't alone offered my guilty conscience some consolation, at least.

I smoothed some filler into the inlay where a chunk of the "e" was

missing. It wouldn't be seamless, but it looked a hell of a lot better than the gaping hole. Once it was dry, I'd put a clear finish over the whole lid so it would be smooth and uniform.

While I filled the inlay, "White Christmas" still played in my head along with all the memories those few notes had resurrected. That was a hell of a time for her. For both of us, if I was honest with myself. Her father's death had been sudden and more than a little unexpected, and Meredith was devastated. Up until recently, I'd have said I'd never in my life felt as helpless as I had then, when I desperately wanted to do something for her, but knew full well I couldn't.

These days, powerless didn't even begin to describe it. Even now, when I knew I'd helped her, that together we'd made more progress than I thought we would, I still questioned my ability to really help her.

Fix a music box? That I could do.

Help a sub face down a phobia involving bondage or pain? Easy.

Heal damage this extensive by taking on the role of the very thing that had broken her? Maybe. Maybe not.

I wouldn't give up on her, that much was damned certain. I'd do whatever I could within my own abilities, and I hoped to God that was enough.

Not everything that was broken could be fixed, though. Like the vase she'd dropped in the storage unit, some things were beyond repair. If not beyond repair, then beyond my ability to repair them.

I just hoped, when it came to Meredith, I was working with a damaged music box, not a shattered vase.

Twenty One

Byron St. Clair was a Dom I respected as much as Leslie. Though his wife Charlotte was his only regular sub, he wasn't averse to partaking in scenes with others. We'd shared Charlotte more than a few times, we'd shared Amy and Kristen, and once in a while, other Doms and Dommes sought the two of us out at the club.

I trusted no other Dom on the planet more than I trusted Byron, particularly with a sub as fragile as Meredith. For the scenario she had in mind, Byron had immediately come to mind.

He and I rarely saw each other outside the local BDSM club or each other's home dungeons, but since our offices weren't too far apart, we occasionally grabbed lunch during the week. Without letting on about why, I'd e-mailed him this morning to see if he was free, and he was.

Over lunch, we caught up and made small talk while I tried to work up the nerve to mention my situation with Meredith.

"How's Charlotte?" I asked.

"She's great," he said. "Working herself into the ground these days, but what else is new?"

"Hasn't she heard what they say about all work and no play?"

Byron smirked. "Who said anything about no play?"

I laughed.

"How are the girls?" he asked.

I didn't feel the need to bring up the fact that Amy and I had split. That would just give us another reason not to get to what I needed to discuss with him, and I was doing a fine job avoiding it myself, so I didn't go there.

"They're both great. Busy as hell, of course. Amy's been up to her ass in finishing her master's thesis, and Kristen's working on getting a promotion that will be a really good move for her."

Byron smiled. "Good for them. When does Amy graduate?"

"I think she's figuring on being done in December."

"That'll be a load off her mind," he said, reaching for his drink.

Another load off her mind, yes. "No shit. You still planning on going back for yours?"

“Maybe. At this point, I don’t know if the time and money will be worth it for what a master’s would do for my career.” He shrugged. “We’ll see.”

“Can’t blame you.” I pushed my empty plate aside and sipped my drink. “I just finished paying for mine a couple of years ago. Glad I did it, but fuck if it didn’t hurt writing those checks.” I glanced at my watch. Still thirty minutes before I had to be back, but there was no sense putting it off any longer. I folded my hands on the table. “Listen, I need to ask a favor.”

His eyebrows jumped. “Sure, go ahead.”

I cleared my throat. “I have a new sub. My ex-girlfriend, actually.”

“Seriously?”

I nodded and made a dismissive gesture. “That part’s a long story. But as a sub, she has, to say the very least, been through hell and back.”

Byron’s posture stiffened. “In what way?”

“Two and a half years of forced submission, imprisonment, physical and emotional abuse, rape, gang rape, and some Stockholm Syndrome to go along with it.”

His eyes widened and he swallowed hard. “You’re kidding me.”

I shook my head. “Wish I was.”

“Fuck,” he breathed, shaking his head. “I’ve heard of some bad Doms, but I always hoped guys like *that* were an urban legend.”

“They’re not,” I said. “Not if the scars on her back are any indication.”

His lips parted. “What the fuck did he do to her?”

“Cat o’ nine tails.”

Byron flinched. “Fuck. Is this guy local?”

“Another state. Specifically, another state penitentiary.”

“Thank God for that.” He raised his glass. “So now you’ve taken her on as a sub? After all of that?”

“At her request, yes.” I drummed my fingers on the table. “She got away from him a couple of years ago, and has had time to come to terms with everything. Now that she has, she wants her sexuality back.”

“Has she been to a counselor?”

I nodded. “She went to a few before who helped her deal with the abuse, and now I’m going with her to see Leslie on a regular basis.”

Byron blew out a breath. “Thank fuck for that. I was just about to suggest sending her to Les. Has that been helping?”

“Very much so. In fact, I’ve already discussed this particular favor with her, and it has her blessing.”

One eyebrow rose, and skepticism saturated his tone when he spoke. “That’s a... plus. So, what exactly do you need me to do?”

I took a breath. “Meredith’s ex had a thing for... watching.” I paused, swallowing hard. “He liked to bring strangers in and force her to submit to them.”

Byron inclined his head, a silent *go on* written in his eyes.

"It was a terrifying thing for her, especially the powerlessness." I drummed my fingers on the table. "And she wants to face down that fear and powerlessness in a controlled, safe environment."

His eyes widened again. "Scott, you're not suggesting I join you, are you?"

I nodded slowly. "This is what she wants. It scared the living hell out of her before, but she's always had fantasies about threesomes, exhibitionism, things like that."

"So, is this like a rape fantasy?"

"Not exactly. I mean, she doesn't want us to play it out like a rape scenario." I steepled my fingers under my chin. "She isn't interested in playing around with coercion or non-consent, but she does want to experience a threesome, with a stranger, on her terms. Under her control."

He steepled his own fingers in front of his lips. "So she can put a stop to it at any time."

"Precisely."

For a long moment, he said nothing. He furrowed his brow and focused on turning his wedding ring between his fingers, spinning it around his third finger. Finally, he folded his hands behind his glass and looked at me. "I'm not going to pretend I don't have reservations about this, Scott. You know her, she trusts you, but she doesn't know me from Adam. I've topped plenty of women who didn't know me, and I've played out kidnap and rape fantasies, but I'm not sure about playing the stranger in a scene with an actual rape victim."

"I know, I understand. And I wasn't so sure about it myself. To be honest, I don't know for sure how it'll go, I just know it's something she wants to overcome. She wants to enjoy threesomes, and she wants to break the fear he put into her."

Byron took a breath. "I don't know, having some fear relating to being fucked against her will by a total stranger seems healthy to me."

"She's not looking to be unafraid if some stranger really did to try to rape her again," I said. "It's just..." I paused, pursing my lips as I searched for the words. "Let's put it this way. We both know it's a scenario that can, under consensual, controlled circumstances, be incredibly pleasurable for a sub, right?"

He nodded.

"Her ex-husband took away her right to find that pleasure," I said. "She wants to take it back."

Sighing, he reached up and rubbed the back of his neck. "How has she been with other types of kink? I mean, what else have you done with her?"

"We've been moving slowly," I said. "Some flogging, tease and denial, some bondage."

“How has that been going?”

“We’ve had a few... setbacks.” I paused. “Early on, something as simple as a familiar position or sound could trigger a flashback and a panic attack. But, with time, she’s gotten past that. She still has difficult moments, and she’s gotten scared a few times, but not like that.” I took a drink. “To be quite honest, she’s done much better than I expected.”

“Do you really think this will help her?”

I blew out a breath. “I know it’s what she wants. It could blow up in our faces, or it could be exactly what she needs.”

“And you’re willing to risk traumatizing her more if it does blow up in our faces?”

“She understands the risks. She’s understood them from the beginning. We’ve had a few steps forward and a few steps back.” I absently ran my finger around the rim of my glass. “Honestly, I don’t think there’s a great risk of traumatizing her with it. She trusts me. I trust you. She knows if she uses her safe words, we’ll both back off immediately. Which is exactly why she wants to do this. She wants to know what it’s like to be with two men who have her well-being in mind, and she wants to know she’s in control even when she’s playing the part of someone who’s given up that control.”

He played with the edge of his coaster. “I understand, I’m just concerned. She’s obviously been through a lot.” He looked at me. “I absolutely want to help in any way I can as long as I’m truly helping and not hindering.”

I smiled. “I know. That’s why I came to you. There are very few other Doms I’d trust with a scene like this involving a sub like this.”

His eyes lost focus for a moment, probably while he processed everything I’d thrown at him. “So, I assume I’ll meet her before we go through with this?”

I chewed my lip and shook my head.

He blinked. “Scott...”

“I’d have you meet her first, except part of the idea is that it has to be a stranger.”

Byron blew out a breath and rubbed his forehead. “Jesus, Scott. This whole thing...”

“Believe me, I know.”

He rested his elbow on the edge of the table and his chin on a loosely balled fist. “Are you sure this is a good idea? What about a threesome with someone she knows first?”

“We’ve done that.” I tapped the side of my glass with two fingers. “Matt, Kristen’s other boyfriend.”

“How did it go?”

“Pretty well,” I said. “Better than I thought it would, which is why I’m willing to consider this now. She used a safe word at one point, but I’m

not sure if that was *entirely* panic or if she was testing the waters. After that, she was fine, and when it was all said and done, she loved it.”

“And you think she’s ready for a three-way with a stranger?”

I nodded. “A stranger to her, but not to me. She trusts my judgment, and she trusts me not to put her in the position her ex did. I trust you not to hurt her, so by extension, she does too.”

He took a breath. “So how do she and I communicate rules? Limits? That kind of thing.”

“Through me.” I sat up, resting my forearms on the table. “I know her limits and boundaries.”

Byron said nothing.

“If you’re not comfortable with this, then say no,” I said. “I know I’m asking a lot, and I wouldn’t strong-arm you into it any more than I would a sub or another Dom.”

He was quiet for a long moment. “I still have reservations about this. I’m not going to lie. That said, I trust your judgment and Leslie’s, and if you want me to help you with this, I will.”

“Thank you.” My own relief surprised me. “I’ll owe you big time.”

He chuckled. “I’m sure we can work something out.”

“Fair warning, she does top from the bottom sometimes.”

Byron laughed. “You sure she’s a sub?”

“Yeah, she’s definitely a sub. Maybe a switch at times, but I’d say her default setting is sub.” I took a drink, then went on. “She’s been known to suddenly get bold and either ask for something or just make a move. Honestly, in her case, I just run with it right now. I don’t know what the hell he did to her when she expressed any desire to try something or change things up, but she’s embarrassed as hell about asking for anything in bed. So, when she works up the courage to do it, I run with it.”

“That makes sense,” he said with a nod.

“It’s usually only when she suddenly gets up the nerve and wants to try something new, or if we’re dealing with something that’s scared her in the past. Quite frankly, I’d rather lose a little ground as a Dom than lose a *lot* of ground with getting her past this crap.”

“Can’t blame you there.” He pulled his sleeve back and checked his watch, then folded his hands on the table. “I still have a little time before I need to be back. Why don’t we talk rules?”

Twenty Two

I sat back in the chair in the corner of my bedroom. I regarded Meredith silently. Over and over, she'd assured me she wasn't nervous. Not *that* nervous. Just a little nervous. Okay, nervous as hell.

Still, she wanted to go through with this, and she trusted me enough to do it. So here we were. I'd already put her into her submissive mode—left cheek, right—and now it was just a matter of getting started.

I licked my dry lips. "Strip."

She swallowed hard and went for the first button of her blouse.

My heart pounded. This was what she wanted, I reminded myself, casting a couple of uncertain glance at the closed bedroom door. This was how it had played out in her past, and she wanted me to follow at least this part of the script.

Her panties landed on top of the rest of her clothes and her hands dropped to her sides. Not speaking, not moving, probably barely even breathing, she waited for my next command.

"Get on your knees." I forced my own nerves out of my voice. "Facing the door."

She took a deep breath, set her shoulders back, and did as I ordered. From where I sat, she was visible in profile, and I didn't miss the ripple of a nervous swallow running down the front of her throat. I craned my neck to make sure she'd positioned herself far enough away to keep the door from hitting her when it opened. Satisfied she had, I sat back.

"Byron," I called out. "Come in."

The bedroom door opened. Byron stepped in, stopping a foot or so in front of her. He closed the door behind him, the quiet click echoing through the otherwise silent room. Meredith's shoulders rose and fell as she took long, deep breaths.

For a woman in her position and with her history, he must have cut an intimidating figure. Unlike Matt in his unassuming jeans and plain shirt, Byron was dressed as a Dom. Tight black leather pants, high black boots, and no shirt; the look that made the women at the BDSM club wet.

Meredith shivered. Some of the color drained from her face.

Blood pounded in my ears. I licked my lips and said, "She's all yours, Byron."

He glanced at me, eyebrows lifted slightly. I nodded once. He returned it. Then he focused his attention on her. He ran his fingers through her hair and she closed her eyes, shivering. With two fingers, he lifted her chin, forcing her to look up at him.

"Stand up," he said.

She rose. So did my heart rate.

Once she was on her feet, he walked around her, just as I often did. She flinched when he moved around behind her, where he could see her scars. Byron put his hands on her shoulders and kissed the side of her neck.

"Are you all right?" he asked, his voice gentle.

She nodded slowly.

"I asked you a question," he said with a little more force this time.

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

"Good girl."

He ran his fingers through her hair. Once. Twice. The third time, he grabbed her hair and pulled her head back. Sliding his other hand over her hip, he drew her back against him.

"Am I making you nervous?" Even in the way he growled the question, there was gentleness and genuine concern.

"No, Master." Her voice trembled.

He kissed the side of her neck. "Do you want me to continue?"

"Yes, Master."

"Good girl."

Meredith exhaled and her shoulders fell. Some of the apprehension in her brow faded. She probably wondered what he had up his sleeve. Truth be told, so did I. Byron was easily a more sadistic Dom than I was. He was the one who'd helped me gain confidence with a cat o' nine tails back when I was overly wary of hurting a sub. Hot wax, erotic asphyxiation, *brutal* floggings; if a sub wanted it, Byron would. While we were both definitely on the kinky end of the spectrum, he was further from vanilla than I was.

But in this scene, he'd hold back on the kink. That much I knew from our conversations leading up to this. His very presence like this was plenty of kink alone, and he was a conscientious enough Dom not to overwhelm her with whips, bindings, and blindfolds.

What *did* he have planned? Her guess was as good as mine.

With his hands on her hips, he turned her and pushed her back up against the door. Not hard, not violently by any means, but still she gasped and her eyes widened slightly as she looked at him.

A second ticked by, and like a delayed reaction, her eyes widened even more, and there was nothing but panic in her face, in her too-paralyzed-to-fight-or-fly stance. When she tried to shrink back against the door, I was on my feet and—

Byron touched her face—left cheek, right—and her shoulders dropped. Left cheek, right. She released her breath. He did it again, whispering to her the whole time, and her taut expression relaxed. The door that had blocked her attempt to escape now held her upright as Byron melted the tension, calmed her down, brought her back from whatever dark place her mind had tried to go.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She wetted her lips. “Yes, Master.”

Byron’s eyes flicked toward me. I nodded once and he returned it. Turning his attention back to her, he spoke again, though I couldn’t hear what he said. Her knees shook. So did my hands. Something had connected in her head, some familiar series of stimuli that had been just the right combination to trigger a flashback, and he’d quickly, calmly, intuitively caught on and brought her back before she crossed that point of no return. Before panic had taken over and we would have had to ride it out until she came back.

“Do you want to stop?”

She gulped, then shook her head.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Beat. “Master.”

Left cheek, right. She relaxed a little more. Nodded in response to... something. The longer he spoke to her and touched her, the less tense she was. Her breathing slowed. The color returned to her cheeks. Easing myself back into my chair, it was my turn to release my breath. I knew Byron was the perfect Dom for this, and I was right. Intuitive enough to catch and calm such a panic before it started.

His hand drifted down her side, then between her legs.

“Like that?” he asked.

“Yes, Master.” She closed her eyes. Her back arched off the door as his hand made smooth, subtle motions on her pussy. Circling her clit with his fingertips, I guessed. Teasing her, turning her on, and it worked because now her knees shook as badly as her voice, as did the hand grasping his shoulder.

“You won’t come until I tell you to, will you?” he said.

“No, Master.”

His shoulder dipped slightly and his hand moved, sliding further between her legs. If her whimper was any indication, he’d slipped his fingers into her pussy.

He spoke in her other ear, so I could neither hear the words nor read his lips, but I’d heard the way he spoke to subs when he teased them. Telling her how hot and tight her pussy was, detailing exactly how he planned to fuck her, and all the while reminding her that she wasn’t to come without his permission. As Meredith gasped and trembled, it was a safe bet he was saying such things to her right then. Whatever had set her off minutes ago was a distant memory where her body language was concerned. There was

no fear, no panic; he'd calmed her completely, and now he wound her up the way he wanted to.

"Oh God..." She let her head fall back against the door. Her hips moved with his hand, mirroring the slow, circular motions.

He raised his head and looked at her. "Don't come yet, Meredith," he growled. "I know you want to, but you won't. Will you?"

"N-no, Master." She gasped again, shaking as if his fingers sent currents of electricity right down to her toes.

"And when I *do* allow it," he said so softly I was surprised I could hear from where I sat, "will you come?"

"Yes, Master. Yes. Please, yes."

He leaned in as if to kiss her, but just before their lips touched, his formed a single, barely audible word: "*Come.*"

Her palms hit the door and her back lifted off it. Eyes closed, body trembling violently, she cried out between desperate gasps for breath, and his hand continued teasing her pussy until, with one last shudder, she relaxed. She grabbed his shoulders, panting and shaking while her orgasm rose, peaked, and faded.

Byron withdrew his fingers and brought his hand up. He brushed his fingertip across her lower lip. "I want you to taste yourself," he murmured.

She held his wrist and slowly took his fingers into her mouth, releasing a soft moan as she did. While she sucked his fingers, he leaned in and whispered something in her ear. She whimpered, closing her eyes, but didn't speak.

He gently pulled his fingers free and rested his hand on her waist. "I asked you a question, Meredith."

She stiffened, eyes widening as she sucked in a breath. "I'm sorry, Master, I—"

Left cheek, right. "Relax," he whispered. "Just answer my question."

She swallowed hard. "Yes, Master. I do."

"You want me to fuck you?"

"Yes, Master. Please."

Left cheek, right. "Good girl."

She released her breath.

At his command, she lay on her back in such a way that I could see still see her in profile. With a mixture of arousal and nervousness in her expression, she watched him kick off his black boots and strip out of his leather pants. Her breathing quickened when he held up a condom between two fingers. While he opened it and rolled it on, her fingers curled around handfuls of the comforter.

With the condom on, he joined her, pinning her wrists to the bed. She parted her legs for him, whimpering softly as he kissed her neck.

She said something to him. Whatever it was, it caught Byron's attention. He froze and raised his head, furrowing his brow as he asked her to

repeat it. When she did, I still couldn't hear her, but his eyebrows jumped. He stared down at her, and surprise was written all over his face, from his parted lips to his wide eyes.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

She dropped her gaze and nodded. "Please, Master."

He lifted her chin so she had to look him in the eye. He said something I couldn't hear. She murmured something else. They exchanged a few quiet words. A nod, a gesture, another nod. He blinked, then offered a half shrug. Curiosity and protectiveness wanted me to ask, but I kept my mouth shut.

Byron cradled the back of her neck in one hand and kissed her. Then they separated, and he offered his hand as they both stood up.

He looked at me and mouthed, "Lube?"

My heart skipped. She wasn't really...

I cleared my throat and gestured at the nightstand. While he reached for the drawer, Meredith got on her hands and knees. She and I made eye contact. She grinned, and I'll be damned if she didn't wink at me. I tried not to laugh, both from amusement and the cool rush of relief flooding through me. This wasn't the direction I'd anticipated, but I'd run with it.

As would Byron, apparently. He sat on his knees behind her and poured some lube on his hand, then set the bottle on the bed where it would be within easy reach.

When he rested his other hand on her hip, she tensed. Suddenly she didn't look so bold or confident. What looked good on paper wasn't just on paper anymore.

"Relax," Byron said softly. "It'll just be a finger at first. I won't hurt you."

She nodded, slowly releasing her breath.

"Ready?"

"Yes, Master," she breathed.

His arm moved as he, presumably, slid a lubed finger into her ass. She barely made a sound, but her face said it all. Apprehension and fear made deep creases between her eyebrows. She chewed her lower lip, screwing her eyes shut.

"Just relax," Byron said softly, running his other hand up and down her back. "I'll go slow, I promise."

Some of the tension in her expression eased. She exhaled through parted lips, and the crevices between her eyebrows weren't quite so deep now.

After a couple of minutes, he said, "Can you handle two fingers?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Answer me, Meredith."

"Yes, Master, I can."

"Good girl."

She jumped and that tension returned. The sheets bunched in her hands. Byron spoke quietly to her, the words not quite reaching me, but again calming her. As he continued moving his fingers in and out of her, she relaxed. She eased her grip on the sheets. There was no fear left now, none that I could see. A little apprehension, a hint of discomfort, but no fear.

“Do you want... more?” he asked.

Gulping, she nodded.

He cleared his throat.

“Yes, Master,” she said quickly.

“Good girl.” He slid his fingers free, then picked up the lube. When the bottle clicked, Meredith glanced back at him. He smiled at her while he poured some lube in his hand.

Resting his hand on her hip again, he guided his cock to her. She held her breath and grimaced.

“Just relax, Meredith,” he said, almost whispering. “Breathe. If it’s uncomfortable or painful, just say so and I’ll stop. I promise.”

She exhaled, and as she did, he pushed against her. Her eyes widened. Her lips parted. She swallowed hard, then closed her eyes and forced herself to take a long, deep breath. He pulled back. Pushed forward. Slow, smooth motions, each a little longer and probably deeper than the last.

“My God, you feel good,” he growled. “Does this feel okay?”

She nodded, then whispered, “Yes, Master.”

All the way inside her, he held her hips for a moment, then withdrew as slowly as he’d pushed in. He kept doing this—in and out, slowly, so slowly—for a long time, giving her a chance to completely relax. And relax she did; with every stroke, the apprehension and discomfort in her face melted away. He stopped to put on some more lube, and when he started moving again, she closed her eyes and rocked back against him. She bit her lip, moaning softly.

Together, they moved faster. He groaned, thrusting a little harder. She gasped for breath between moans that bordered on sobs. Clawing at the sheets, she kept rocking back against him, harder, faster, meeting his thrusts without flinching, without any outward signs of anything but pure delirious ecstasy.

Forget watching. Just as I had done with Matt, I had to have her when he was done with her. I stood. The jingle of my belt buckle turned Meredith’s head, and when our eyes met, she whimpered and bit her lip again.

Oh, fuck, I wanted her.

I stripped as quickly as I could and got a condom out and on. I went around in front of her. While Byron fucked her, making her breath catch every time he thrust into her ass, I kissed her. She moaned into my kiss. The harder he fucked her, the more desperately she kissed me, and the more I ached to be inside her.

Not a moment too soon, Byron groaned. He thrust deep inside her, and they both shuddered.

After he'd caught his breath, he pulled out slowly. Playfully smacking her ass, he said, "She's all yours."

"You hear that?" I growled, gripping her hair while I kissed her again. "You're all mine."

She whimpered softly.

"Tell me what you want," I said.

"Fuck me," she said, panting. "Please."

I cleared my throat.

"Please fuck me, *Master*."

"Good girl." Left cheek, right. "Get on your back."

She put a hand on my chest. "No, wait."

I froze. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said. "I want you to fuck me like... he did."

I grinned. "You like anal now, don't you?"

Her cheeks colored a little and she shrugged. "Maybe I do."

"I think you do." I kissed her lightly. "Give me a second." I leaned toward the bedside table.

With condom and lube in place, I knelt behind her. Byron was bigger than me, so there was no need for me to prep her. I kept one hand on her lower back and with the other, guided my cock to her. I met a little resistance at first, but after a moment, she relaxed. She took me easily, moaning as I slid deeper inside her.

I moved slowly at first, but she rocked back against me as she had with Byron, trying to coax me into fucking her faster. I grabbed her hair and twisted it until she yelped.

"I think you're forgetting who's in charge again, Meredith," I growled.

"I'm sorry, Master."

"Do you want me to fuck you harder?"

"Yes, Master." Beat. "If that's what you want, Master."

"Good girl." I loosened my grip on her hair. Steadying her hips with my other hand, I thrust into her. She whimpered, her shoulders quivering and arms shaking as she struggled to hold herself up.

I slowed, stopped, and withdrew. "Get on your back."

She tensed. "Master?"

"On your back."

After only a second of hesitation, she moved as quickly as her trembling arms and legs would allow. Once she was on her back, renewed apprehension furrowed her brow.

"You all right?" I asked.

"Yes, Master, but are you—" She caught herself, her cheeks darkening.

“What?” I leaned down and kissed her. “I’m just giving your arms a rest. It’s no more likely to hurt in this position than the other.”

She blinked. “Oh. I thought...”

I raised an eyebrow. “You thought...?”

She laughed. “Never mind.”

“No, I wasn’t going to fuck your pussy after fucking you anally.” I kissed her again. “Nothing to worry about there.” I sat up and slid my hand down her leg. I brought one ankle up to my shoulder, then the other. As I pushed my cock into her ass again, I kissed the inside of her ankle, and she shivered.

“Touch yourself,” I said, withdrawing slowly.

She reached between us. As soon as her fingers touched her clit, she gasped, screwing her eyes shut.

“Like that?” I asked.

“Yes, Master,” she moaned.

I moved slowly at first, giving her more than enough time to get used to me fucking her this way before I picked up speed. When I did move faster, she loved it. I slammed into her again. Again. Again. God damn it, she felt incredible. And the sounds she made, Jesus, those breathless, whimpering moans alone were almost enough to drive me out of my mind. I closed my eyes, thrusting as fast and hard as I could, my rhythm falling apart a little more with every stroke as my orgasm closed in and closed in fast.

“Let me come, Master,” she begged. “Please let me come.”

Through gritted teeth, I whispered, “Yes.”

Meredith came, crying out as her body bucked and squirmed beneath mine, and I kept fucking her until I couldn’t hold back anymore either. I groaned, screwing my eyes shut and thrusting as deep and hard as I could until I couldn’t move anymore at all.

We both released our breath. I eased her ankles off my shoulders, then slumped over her, alternating between kissing her gently and trying to catch my breath. When I could finally trust both my limbs and spine not to collapse under me, I pulled out and got up.

Once the condom was taken care of, the three of us fell into bed together. Meredith was between us, just as she’d been when we did this with Matt, and the blissful smile on her face told me everything I needed to know right now.

I kissed her cheek. “I didn’t realize you were going to want to do anal tonight.”

She shrugged. “Two birds, one stone.”

Byron chuckled. “Guess that’s better than two girls, one cup.”

Meredith wrinkled her nose. “Eww.” Then she looked at him. “By the way, I’m Meredith.” She extended her hand.

He laughed and shook it. “Byron.”

“I really appreciate this,” she said. “Thank you.”

“Pleasure’s all mine, sweetheart.” He cocked his head. “Out of curiosity, when I had you up against the door...” He raised his eyebrows, letting the inquisitive expression finish the question.

Meredith’s cheeks colored and she exhaled, closing her eyes as she ran her fingers through her hair. “I get... once in a while... flashbacks...”

Byron nodded. “Right, Scott mentioned that.”

She wetted her lips. “Something about being up against the wall, and having your hands on my shoulders like that, it just...” She swallowed. “It set something off in my head. It’s hard to explain, and I feel stupid for—”

“There’s nothing to feel stupid about,” Byron and I both said.

She laughed. “You two really do think alike, don’t you?”

I shrugged. “Well, we do work well together in these scenarios.”

“I won’t argue with that.” She grinned.

“Helps when we’ve got someone like you to work with,” Byron said. He bent and kissed her. After a brief kiss, he went back for more, and she combed her fingers through his hair while he trailed his fingertips down the side of her neck.

She grinned at him. “Mmm, Scott, you didn’t tell me he’d be such a good kisser.”

“I didn’t tell you anything about him, remember?”

Byron smirked. “That, and I’m pretty sure Scott isn’t completely up to speed on my kissing prowess.”

“He’s got a point, Meredith.” I shrugged. “Though I guess I could have asked Amy or Krissy.”

“Or Charlotte,” he said.

“Is she one to kiss and tell?” I asked.

“She can be persuaded.”

Meredith laughed. “Either way, I found out for myself.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him again, drawing it out for a long moment. I grinned to myself at the goose bumps rising on her arms. Something told me we’d be playing with Byron again in the future.

~ * ~

By the time Byron left, all three of us were exhausted. Physically, anyway. Neither Meredith nor I were ready to sleep yet, so we lounged in my bed with a couple of bottles of water.

She set her drink on the nightstand and laid back on the pillows. “I think that was one of the hottest things I’ve ever experienced.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, you looked like you were having a good time.”

“Mm-hmm.” She closed her eyes. “Better than I expected.”

“You did well.” I caressed her face. “You caught both of us by surprise, though, that’s for sure. I had no idea you’d want to go for anal.”

She laughed, opening her eyes. “Seemed like a good idea.”

“No complaints from me. The whole thing went better than I expected, too.” I smoothed her hair. “So, what about you? Do you think this

was a step in the right direction?”

“Definitely.” She turned onto her stomach and propped herself up on her forearms. “I have to admit, though, it’s kind of a relief that it’s over.”

“What do you mean?”

“Not that it wasn’t fun. Quite the opposite. I mean I’ve been... anxious about it.”

I played with a lock of her hair. “I don’t doubt it, babe. That’s why I’ve been a little hesitant about going forward with it until I was sure you were ready.”

“I know.” She smiled. “I can’t even begin to tell you how much this means to me, Scott. Helping me with all of this. Thank you. Really. I am—”

“You don’t have to thank me, babe,” I said. “If there’s something I can do to help you through something like this, you know I will. I just wish I could do more.”

“You’ve done plenty,” she whispered. “Probably more than you can imagine.” A devilish grin spread across her face. “And I’m hoping you’re willing to do even more.”

I laughed. “Trust me, I am.”

“Good. I definitely want to do this again.”

“The threesome, or anal?”

She grinned. “Both. In fact, maybe next time we could take it a little further.”

“In what way?”

She shrugged. “Maybe some flogging? Bondage?”

“We can do that,” I said. “With a stranger? Or with Byron again?”

She grinned. “Either or.”

“It’s funny, I never have to twist a sub’s arm to play with Byron again.” I threw my hands up. “Can’t figure it out.”

Meredith laughed. “It might take a little persuading, but I think you could talk me into playing with him again.”

“A little persuading?” I snorted. “Something tells me ‘go suck his cock’ would suffice.”

She shivered. “Yep, works for me.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. In addition to thinking up new things to try, of course.”

“Bring it on, Scott.”

I chuckled and leaned in to kiss her.

God bless open-minded women.

Twenty Three

After a leisurely dinner one evening, Meredith and I went back to my place to relax with a bottle of wine. I had no doubt where we'd end up before the night was through, but there was no need to hurry, so I set the bottle on the coffee table and kicked back on the couch beside her.

All night long—in the car, during dinner, on the way back—we'd talked. Jobs, families, life in general, and like it always had years ago, conversation came easily.

But now, sitting on my couch with a couple of glasses of wine between us, we didn't speak.

I laid my arm across the back of the couch and played with her hair. "What are you thinking about?"

"Just..." She stared into her glass for a moment. Finally, she met my eyes and smiled. "Just thinking how much I used to love doing this. You know, back then."

"Yeah, I've missed this." *More than you know, babe.* I ran my fingers through her hair. "Though I'm surprised we don't have company this time." I craned my neck, looking around for the little black piranha that lurked in my house.

"She must be sleeping somewhere."

"Not when there's red wine for her to knock over." Then I shrugged. "Oh well, I'm sure she'll be along."

"I have no doubt." She laughed. "Mine likes to dump drinks over, too."

"Mine only does if it's expensive or it'll stain." I clicked my tongue and rolled my eyes. "If it's a glass of water, she won't go near it." I gestured with my glass. "Some finely aged cognac or a nice dark wine on light upholstery? She'll usually come out of nowhere just to kick it over."

Meredith laughed. "Little brat."

"No shit." I looked around again. "She's probably off pouting somewhere. Amy was here last night, and Malia was none too happy about being kicked out of the dungeon."

"Seems like she'd make a good decoration in there. A diabolical

black cat really complements the ambiance, don't you think?"

"Aside from the part where she keeps trying to use the Saint Andrew's Cross as a damned scratching post."

"Well, maybe you need to provide her with some proper kitty toys."

I raised my eyebrows. "Provide her with proper kitty toys? Have you *looked* at my living room?"

She sat up and looked around. Half-disemboweled toy mice littered the floor near the mantle beside a box of similar playthings. A few feet away, a three-tiered kitty condo towered above my entertainment center, firmly bolted to the wall for those times when she used it as a launch pad.

Laughing, Meredith sat back. "Okay, so maybe she does have enough toys. I guess she's just evil, then."

"Damn right she is."

"Like owner, like—"

"Hey, watch it."

She snickered and raised her glass to her lips. Before she took a drink, she gestured at the kitty condo. "That does answer the question of where she is, though."

I looked at the condo, and sure enough, the tip of Malia's tail drooped over the edge of the top tier. I laughed and shook my head. "Lazy creature."

With the cat accounted for, Meredith and I settled back into the world that didn't exist beyond the couch and coffee table. Like it had so often been years ago, it was just us and a bottle of wine. And like it always did, the conversation wandered.

"Do you remember that trip we took to Lake Tahoe?" she said at one point.

"For Randy's wedding?" I rolled my eyes. "I've tried to forget that trip." There was only so much nostalgia a man could muster for a seventy-two hour period during which he broke up two drunken fistfights, lost his wallet, and wound up with the mother of all—no, the supreme overlord of all—hangovers.

"No, no, not that one." She absently swirled her wine. "I mean when we went snowboarding."

"Oh, yeah, I remember that." I chuckled. "Wasn't that the time you shoved a snowball down the back of my shirt?"

She batted her eyes. "Me? I would never do anything like that."

"Uh-huh."

"Okay, so I would."

I grinned and raised my wine glass to my lips. "But I got you back, so we're even."

She smacked me playfully. "The hell we are!"

I choked on my wine and put my hand over my mouth to keep from spitting it on her. Once I'd recovered, I said, "What?"

“Even?” She glared at me. “That punishment was a bit excessive for the crime, don’t you think?”

“Well, I didn’t think so,” I said, chuckling.

“Scott, all I did was put a snowball down the back of your jacket.”

I shrugged. “And all I did was put a snowball on your back.”

“Yeah, uh-huh,” she said. “While I was sleeping.”

I tried—if not very hard—not to laugh. “That’s what you get for letting your guard down.”

“Bastard,” she muttered into her glass.

“Hey, I warmed you up afterward.”

She drained her wine and grinned. “I’ll give you that. You definitely did.”

I refilled our glasses. For a few minutes, we drank in silence. I wondered if she was thinking back to that night at Tahoe. She knew how much I hated cold shit on my skin, and I’d sworn up and down the whole weekend that I’d get her back. So, around three in the morning, I slipped outside, made a decent-sized snowball, pulled the covers back, and set it right on the small of her naked back. That scream probably woke everyone in the lodge.

She was pissed at me for a few minutes, but finally laughed. Then we got back in bed, and I made sure she wasn’t cold anymore. We were both afraid of waking the whole place up again, though, so we stayed extra quiet, and no sex is more intense than quiet sex.

She must have been thinking along the same lines because she laughed softly and said, “Remember when we stayed with my grandmother?”

“Oh, Jesus, how could I forget?” I laughed. “I think she’s the only one who ever thought it would do a damned bit of good to make us sleep in separate rooms.”

“Yeah, well, I wasn’t about to tell her we already lived together. She’d have had heart failure.” Meredith grinned. “You know, I think she believed right up until the day she died that you were a ‘nice young man.’”

“Are you suggesting I wasn’t?”

She snorted. “You were a filthy young man taking advantage of her sweet, virginal granddaughter in the middle of the night.”

“Virginal, my ass,” I muttered. I sipped my wine. “Which is why, when I snuck up to your room, *you* were on your way toward *my* room.”

“How do you know I wasn’t on my way to the bathroom?”

“Because both bathrooms were the other way.”

“It was dark.” She shrugged. “That, and I hadn’t been there in a while.”

“Which also explains why you grabbed my shirt and dragged me into your room.”

She gestured dismissively. “Details.”

“I still can’t believe she actually thought putting us in separate rooms

would help. About the only way I was going to stay away from you is if she handcuffed me to the bed.”

“Which you would have liked.”

“Only if she spanked me and called me—”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Scott.” She wrinkled her nose. “This is my grandmother we’re talking about.”

I shrugged. “I don’t discriminate.”

“I did not need that mental image, just so you know.”

I laughed and took another drink. “Actually, if she’d cuffed me to the bed, I’d have expected *you* to come take advantage of me.” I paused. “Then again, if she’d had enough of a clue to restrain me, she probably would have cuffed you to your bed, too.”

Meredith made another dismissive gesture. “No, Granny was sure I was a pure and innocent virgin. I’d sure has hell never engage in fornication, let alone in her house.”

“Right,” I said. “You would never fornicate, least of all in any place where you shouldn’t be fornicating.”

“No, I wouldn’t.”

“So she could sleep at night knowing you’d never let a man fuck you in the dressing room at the mall.”

“Oh, no, never.”

“Nor would you ever suck him off in a movie theatre.”

“Or the back of a limo.”

I cocked my head. “Wait, you never sucked me off in the back of a limo.”

“I didn’t?” She furrowed her brow. “I could swear I—” She snapped her fingers. “Right, I was thinking about the train. It was a hand job in the back of the limo, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. I never did talk you into that blowjob in the back of a cab, though.”

She laughed. “Yeah, keep dreaming. That’s a bit too out in the open for me.”

“Chickenshit.”

“Whatever.” She elbowed me. “We certainly did have a knack for fucking where we weren’t supposed to.”

“Damn right.” I raised my glass in a mock toast. “Hey, what can I say? When I’m horny and I’ve got a hot woman with me, why wait?”

She grinned. “And you’re always horny, so...”

I shrugged. “So I am.”

“Yeah, you are.” She rolled her eyes. “I can’t think of any other man who doesn’t find joining the Mile High Club satisfying.”

“What are you talking about? Of course it was satisfying.”

“Uh-huh.” She laughed. “So that’s why once wasn’t good enough?”

I shrugged. “Hey, if it was fun once, it had to be fun the second time

too, right? That, and I wanted to, you know, to make sure we really *were* members.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Except it was only a two-hour flight.”

“You didn’t get bored on that flight, did you?”

“No. No, I can’t say I did.”

I laughed and put my arm around her. “We were crazy, weren’t we?”

“Yeah, we were.”

“Remember Lacey and Greg’s wedding?”

Meredith laughed. “Oh my God, yes.”

I grinned over my wine glass. “And to think, you said I shouldn’t bother bringing a condom with me.”

Rolling her eyes, she shook her head. “Well, most people aren’t exactly prone to wandering off from something like that for a quick fuck.” She eyed me and grinned. “Then again, you’re not exactly most people, are you?”

“What did I tell you before we left that morning?”

She laughed. “That if I left the house in that dress, there was a good chance you’d forget about social protocols.” She eyed me. “Not that you know a damned thing about social protocols.”

“Hey, I resemble that.” I gestured at her empty glass with my own. “More?”

“No, thanks.” She handed me her glass and I leaned forward to set both of them on the coffee table. As I did, she said, “You know, I think I still have that dress somewhere.”

Sitting back, I raised my eyebrows. “Do you, now?”

“I just might.” She grinned. “If I find it, and it still fits, would you want me to—”

“Oh, fuck yes.” I ran a fingertip along the lapel of her blouse, not *quite* touching her skin. “Just be aware that it might need some repairs by the time I’m done.”

She bit her lip as I trailed my finger up the side of her neck. “It almost needed some repairs last time.”

“So did the table,” I growled, sliding my hand into her hair and moving closer to her. “Think anyone ever figured out where we went?”

“I doubt they— *ooh*.” She sucked in a breath when I kissed her neck. “Mmm, I doubt they even knew we were gone.”

I laughed against her neck. “I suppose we weren’t gone all that long, were we?” My hand slid back down to her blouse and cupped her breast. “You just had me too turned on to last.”

“I wasn’t complaining.” She moaned softly when I teased her nipple through her clothes.

“I should hope not,” I murmured just below her ear. “Pity I only had one condom with me that night.”

“We did just fine with one.”

I raised my head and grinned at her. "Good thing we had more at home."

She licked her lips. "Which begs the question, how many do you have *here*?"

"More than enough." I leaned in and kissed her. Her nails grazed the back of my neck and up onto my scalp, sending chills down my spine as I held her tighter. The kiss tasted like wine and her, and I couldn't tell which made me dizzier.

"Where are they?" she whispered.

"What?"

"Condoms."

"Bedroom."

"Maybe that's where we should be, then."

"I love the way you think."

In minutes, our clothes were scattered on the floor in the hall and my bedroom doorway. The back of my hand met the pillow, my palm cradling Meredith's head as we sank together onto the bed. The mattress and frame creaked, the only sounds in the room besides sharp breaths and the whispers of skin across skin and sheets.

I slipped my hand between her thighs, my heart beating faster as my fingertips met her wet pussy. She exhaled hard, pressing against my hand and moaning as I teased her clit.

I bent and kissed her neck. "I want you to do something for me." I paused to nibble her earlobe while I slid two fingers inside her. "I don't want you to make a sound."

She squirmed against me. "That's easier said than done with the things you do."

I kissed below her ear. "But you can do it. I know you can." Pushing myself up onto my arms, I looked down at her. "Just like we did that night at your grandmother's."

Meredith bit her lip. "Scott, when you—"

"I know," I whispered, letting my lip brush hers. "It's hard. But will you do it for me?"

She nodded. "I'll try."

"You'll try?"

"Okay, I will."

"That's what I thought." I grinned against her lips. "That was hot that night, wasn't it?" I kissed her neck and started downward, whispering between kisses. "When we had to have each other...so fucking bad... couldn't wait... couldn't make a sound..." I flicked my tongue across her nipple. "And I almost made you scream anyway."

Closing her eyes, she wriggled beneath me, struggling to breathe with any kind of regularity while I inched my way down.

“Remember that?” I kissed just above her navel. “How you almost lost it?”

She whimpered something like a “yes.”

“You won’t do that tonight, will you, Meredith?” I paused, lips pressed against her hipbone. “There’s no one to hear you but me, but you won’t make a sound, will you?”

“No,” she breathed.

“Good girl.”

She mostly succeeded. When I kissed the inside of her thigh, she sucked in a sharp breath. A finger sliding into her pussy made her force that breath back out of her lungs in a single, ragged whoosh. When I closed my lips around her clit, she moaned, but quickly clapped a hand over her mouth, muffling the sound as I teased her with my tongue.

The tanginess of her pussy did more to make my head spin than the glasses of wine I’d had earlier, and as I explored her with my lips and tongue, I couldn’t help the low groan that emerged from the back of my throat. She sucked in another sharp breath, her hips twitching and trembling beneath my arm. I did it again, on purpose this time, and she responded the same way. She inched closer to release, and each time she neared the brink, I slowed down enough to let her calm down. Once she had, I’d bring her right back to the edge again.

I was in no hurry at all tonight. It didn’t matter how hard I was, or how badly I wanted to be inside her, there was no way in hell I’d rush this. Just like that night when we couldn’t make a sound, when we were so desperate for each other we almost let it all out anyway. The need for stealth had only intensified things; that was the night I learned that an orgasm that *must* be contained in silence was the most difficult kind to restrain.

I slipped two fingers inside her. Deeper, a little deeper, beckoning just slightly until she gasped and shivered, signaling I’d found her G-spot. I kept my fingertips right there, making slow, gentle circles as my tongue did the same on her clit.

In a hoarse, unsteady whisper, she said, “Oh my God, Scott, don’t stop, please, don’t...” She shuddered, squeezing my fingers so hard I could *barely* move them. She held her breath, probably trying to keep from crying out, and forcing herself into silence only intensified her building orgasm. What I couldn’t hear I could feel in every tremor, every shiver, every time she pushed her clit against my tongue, and when she came, I swore her release rippled through the air and down my own spine.

I kept going until she begged me to stop, then pushed myself up onto my arms to come back up to her. Gasping and shaking, she gripped the back of my neck with both hands and kissed me, forcing my lips apart with her tongue in search of the taste of herself on mine. The hungry desperation in her kiss drove me wild, and I could barely stand it another moment. I had to be inside her. *Now*.

I broke the kiss and whispered, “Do you want me to fuck you?”

“Yes,” she murmured. “Please.”

“Same rule still applies.” I put my finger over her lips. “Not a sound.”

She closed her eyes, drawing a deep breath through her nose, and when she shivered, I knew she’d caught the scent of herself on me.

“Not a sound,” I whispered again, then took my finger away and kissed her lips. “Promise?”

She nodded.

After one more kiss, I leaned away to get a condom. Once it was on, I settled on top of her again. She wrapped her arms around me and kissed me as I guided my cock to her. I could have teased her just then, waiting until we were both on the brink of madness before giving her what she wanted, but... fuck it. I couldn’t wait.

Closing my eyes, I let my head fall beside hers while I slid into her slowly. Just that first stroke damn near did me in; I wasn’t quick to come, but Jesus Christ, her pussy was so wet and tight, I was so, *so* fucking turned on, and we both struggled to stay quiet. It was probably the first time in my life I was thankful for a condom and all it did to keep me from truly feeling her, or this would have been over much too soon.

I withdrew slowly. Pushed back in just as slowly. Every place our skin made contact—her thighs and my hips, my cheek beside hers, my cock deep inside her—may as well have sizzled. Forget all the games of trying to stay quiet for the sake of being quiet. I couldn’t have made a sound if I wanted to.

Meredith, though, managed to find her voice. “I—” She paused, pulling in a ragged breath. “I want to see you.”

I rose up on my arms. Our eyes met, and we held each other’s gazes. We moved together, slowly and gently, and it was no less intense than if I’d been fucking her hard enough to knock the plaster off the walls.

She overwhelmed me. There were no two ways about it. Looking up at me with nothing but lust in her eyes, holding onto me, rolling her hips to draw me just a little deeper, her face still flushed from her orgasm, forcing herself to be near-silent as if we might wake someone in another room.

And somehow, I finally remembered how to speak.

Barely whispering, I said, “You are so fucking beautiful, Meredith.” I sank down to her and kissed her again.

I slid my hands under her and held onto her shoulders. She wrapped her arms around me and hooked her ankles together against the small of my back. Our bodies could barely move at all now, but we touched. Everywhere, we touched. Her breasts against my chest, her shoulders in my hands. Soft lips and hot breath against each other’s necks. Her thighs squeezing my hips, her pussy squeezing my cock.

And still I could move *just* enough to take slow, smooth strokes inside her, pushing myself a little deeper as I closed my eyes and breathed in the heady mix of sex, sweat, and her, her, *her*. Every sound she made—every near-silent, breathless sound—sent shivers down my spine. Every motion of our hips sent more shivers right back up.

A shudder rippled through her and she tried not to moan, but a soft whimper slipped past her lips, and it was different from all the other muted sounds she'd made. Not just a gasp or a blissful sigh, but the kind of choked, barely-contained sound that signaled an ascent into more, and so I gave her more. As much as I could with the way we held each other, I moved faster, thrust harder. The bed shifted beneath us, not *quite* squeaking, but nearly there.

Sharp, delicious pain seared itself into my consciousness, and I sucked in a breath when she raked her nails up my back. She shuddered again. Her nails dug deeper. I thrust harder. Shudder. Deeper. Harder.

"Oh God," she whispered. With one last shallow gasp, she came, and in the next instant, so did I. Not a sound, not a breath, just the quiet intensity of a release too powerful for gasps or moans.

We didn't move for a while, simply holding onto each other and letting every last shockwave crash through us before dissipating into nothingness. I pulled out and lifted myself up to look down at her. She brushed her fingertips across my cheekbone, her gentle touch making every hypersensitive nerve ending in my body tingle.

"That was," I paused, wetting my lips, "intense."

She grinned. "It always is with you."

"I'll take that as a compliment." I came down to kiss her.

When I could finally pull myself away from her lazy, gentle kisses, I got up to get rid of the condom. Then we got under the covers, and within minutes, the post-orgasmic bliss and the shared bottle of wine caught up with us.

"I can't even keep my eyes open," she said.

"That makes two of us." I kissed forehead. "Want to just call it a night?"

"I don't think we have much choice."

"No point in fighting it then." I killed the light and we settled into bed. She rolled onto her side, her back to me, and I put my arm over her waist. She slipped her hand into mine, loosely lacing our fingers together just below her breasts.

"Good night," she said.

"Good night." I nuzzled the side of her neck. Drowsiness took over. Her breathing slowed. So did mine.

Of all the things I'd missed when we went our separate ways, holding her like this was easily in the top ten. Sometimes we'd talk, sometimes we'd lie in silence until one or both of us fell asleep. But it was

always perfect. Just like this.

God, I missed you, Meredith.

Lying with her now, it occurred to me that all evening long, it had been us. Only us. We'd spent most of dinner just talking, spent the whole time on the couch reminiscing, and for once the conversation wasn't dominated by all the reasons we were back in each other's lives. For just a couple of hours, we'd never gone our separate ways and her soulless bastard of an ex-husband didn't exist. Nor did the physical scars, which were now hidden between us in the darkness.

It was simply... us. And whether or not I had any right to, I couldn't help wondering if this was how it should be.

Something in my gut sank. Deep down, I knew we couldn't go down that road again. Even if we didn't have our own problems that had ultimately pushed us apart, there were still the reasons she was here in my arms to begin with.

I'd help her reclaim what was never Rich's to own, and when we were done, then...

I didn't know. Where *did* we go after this? Return to being platonic friends? Go our separate ways again? Flip a damned switch, draw a line in the sand, and decide that this neither could nor should continue?

No fucking clue.

I had no idea, and I was too tired to think anymore tonight anyway, so I gave up, surrendered to fatigue, and let the darkness carry my mind away.

As I drifted off, Meredith slurred, "Love you."

"Love you too," I murmured without thought or hesitation, and before I had a chance to wonder if we'd said it out of habit or because we meant it, I fell asleep.

Twenty Four

In the harsh light of day, all the thoughts I'd been too tired to think about came crashing back to the surface. A vague throb in my temples reminded me of last night's wine, but I didn't need physical reminders of anything else. Long after Meredith left, long after the ache in my head had dissipated, long after I'd gone off to drown in a sea of specs and schematics, my mind still reeled.

We'd spent time on my couch, walking through our past, but in the bedroom, we'd lived that past again. We were *there*. But should we have gone there? Did we have any business going there? And where the hell did we go now?

Resting my elbows on my desk, I rubbed my forehead. I'd slept for once, and it was a blissfully dreamless sleep, but I was nowhere near rested. So many thoughts ricocheted off the insides of my skull—Meredith, our past, her past, everything I'd heard in Leslie's office, Amy, Krissy—and I couldn't shut them up. Any of them. I couldn't get away. More than my body was after weeks of restless sleep, my mind was exhausted.

Exhausted. Buckling. Caving in.

And after a blissfully intimate, sensual night with the woman I'd lost and someone else had broken, it was worse.

I needed a break. An escape, temporary or not, and a chance to mentally regroup.

I considered breaking off my planned evening with Krissy tonight, but the more I thought about it, the more I decided she was exactly what I needed. Increasingly, she had become my anchor, and more than ever, I needed her.

I did want to make a small change to our plans, though, so on the way home, I called her.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey." I paused. "Listen, about tonight..."

"Need to cancel?" Preemptive disappointment laced her tone.

"No, no, definitely not. I just wondered if we could change things up a little."

“How so?”

“In the mood for some flogging tonight?”

She laughed. “Scott, I am always in the mood for flogging. You know that.”

“No, I mean, are you in the mood to swing a flogger tonight?”

She didn’t respond right away. “For who?”

I swallowed. “Me.”

“Oh. I. Yeah, of course.” She paused. “Are you okay, Scott?”

Not even close. “I’m fine. I just feel like switching for once.”

She was quiet for a moment. Though she probably saw right through me, when she did at last speak, she just said, “You remember the rules when I’m in charge, right?”

“Yes, I do.”

“See you at six.”

~ * ~

While I waited for her, I mentally dodged all the crap my brain tried to throw at me. Perhaps in a last ditch effort to drive me insane before I found some relief, my mind had gone into hyper drive, pulling up every dream, every worry, every unsettling conversation from the past several weeks.

I met my own eyes in the mirror while I rolled my sleeves. Taking a deep breath, I promised myself I’d find a better, perhaps more useful outlet later. Tonight, I just didn’t want to think anymore, so it was either drink myself into oblivion—something I didn’t do anymore—or this.

Shortly after six, my escape arrived with the ringing of the doorbell.

I opened the door and invited her in. Standing in my living room, we faced each other. The height difference between us was less pronounced now. I was, as ordered, barefoot. She wore three-inch heels. Another inch or two beneath her feet and we would have been eye to eye.

“You sure this is what you want tonight?” she asked.

“Absolutely.”

Concern creased her brow, but she didn’t question me any further. She nodded down the hall. I led, she followed, and a moment later, nerves coiled in my gut when the dungeon door clicked shut behind us. I trusted her completely, and I wanted this, but playing the sub always made me nervous. Surrender didn’t come easily for me.

“Ready?” she asked.

I nodded.

She folded her arms across her chest. “Unroll your sleeves.”

Just as I’d done with her and all of my other subs, Kristen had developed a routine for putting me into submission. It was the opposite of my sleeve-rolling routine, the one that had the same effect on her.

I chewed the inside of my cheek and did as she ordered. By the time the first cuff hung loosely around my wrist, that familiar—if rarely visited—

submissive mindset was closing in. Willing myself not to fight that mindset, I unrolled my other sleeve, then released my breath and let my hands fall to my sides.

“Pick a flogger.” She gestured at the rack.

I took down the stiffest, least forgiving cat o’ nine tails I owned. The rattle of the knotted tails against each other made me shiver. If this thing couldn’t make me forget at least for a little while, nothing could.

“Give it to me.” Her voice was sharp, stern, as unforgiving as the implement in my hand.

Taking a deep breath, I held it out to her. She took one end of the handle. I still held the other. Our eyes met. I wasn’t just giving her the cat o’ nine tails. Power, control, surrender, *me*.

Swallowing hard, I let go.

Kristen tucked the handle under her arm, regarding me silently for a moment. Then she nodded toward the Saint Andrew’s Cross. “On your knees. Facing it.”

I wetted my lips, if only to give myself something to do besides grit my teeth. I wanted this. I’d asked her to do this.

So I knelt, closing my eyes as my knees came down on the hard floor. The cacophony of my thoughts tried to distract me, but by this point, I was so attuned to the sound of her voice and the anticipation thereof, my own thoughts faded into dull, white background noise.

“Unbutton your shirt.”

Buttons always became more complicated when I knelt before my Saint Andrew’s Cross. I muttered a few frustrated curses and willed my fingers to get each button apart. Behind me, Kristen tapped her foot. The sharp, rhythmic sound fucked my concentration all to hell, just as it always did. It didn’t help that every tap sent a gentle vibration across the floor to my knees, and that vibration unraveled my nerves a little at a time.

The last button finally gave. I rested my hands on my knees and waited.

“Take it off.”

I put my arms back and shrugged, letting my shirt slide down. I brushed it off so it would fall behind me.

She stepped closer, her heels creating an even more unnerving vibration.

“Hands on your lower back.”

I did as she ordered. The first few times we’d done this, she’d been unsure of her aim and used my hands and shirt to protect my kidneys. These days, even though she didn’t play Domme very often with me or anyone else, she could probably extinguish a candle with a bullwhip if she wanted to, but she still had me put my hands across my lower back. And just as she’d done that first time, she bound my wrists together with my shirt.

I closed my eyes and tried not to hold my breath. This position was

eerily similar to the night I put Meredith on her knees. The night when a soft flogger across the palm of my hand had conjured Rich out of her past and sent her into—

No. Not tonight. I need to forget that for tonight.

Kristen moved, walking toward the rack of floggers, and her movements gave me something to cling to between now and when she gave me what I truly wanted. Every step took me closer to leather on flesh.

Then she was behind me again. As always, she started with a softer flogger. I barely felt the rhythmic thud of the tails on my skin. My nerve endings already sought the more brutal bite of the cat o' nine tails, and only registered the absence of that pain I craved. With every stroke, my frustration grew. This was a necessary step, yes, but it was aggravating nonetheless. Each dull, toothless smack only made me clench my jaw harder.

Make it hurt, Krissy. I need it to hurt.

The strokes stopped. Her footsteps vibrated against my nerve endings once more, and anticipation rippled up my spine. I didn't have to open my eyes to know what she was doing. Something tapped, presumably the softer flogger on the table. Something else rustled. Stiff, knotted tails scratched against each other, and when Kristen's high heels clicked on the hardwood floor, my heart slammed into the inside of my ribcage. My mind's eye saw what my own eyes didn't: the cat o' nine tails in one hand, the tails draped over the other, her long legs in that short skirt taking slow, taunting steps in those porn star shoes. Every click was a little louder than the last. She was coming. So was the pain. So was the cloud of endorphins I desperately craved.

Stillness. Silence.

Come on, baby. Come on. I need this. Please.

Tails hit flesh with a *crack* that echoed through my bones, but didn't register on my skin. I closed my eyes tighter. Balled my fists inside my tied shirt. Held my breath.

Crack. I clenched my jaw.

Crack. Confused nerves.

Crack. Frustrated mind.

Please, baby. Oh God, please...

The first strike drove a grunt out of me. I gritted my teeth and released a breath as every bee sting on my back made itself known. I managed to draw half a breath before she hit me again, and that air left my lungs just as quickly. With blow after blow, she lit more nerve endings on fire until tears burned my eyes.

I gritted my teeth against the pain. My head spun. I thought I groaned, maybe swore, maybe even pleaded with her for more, more, more. Hell if I knew. I was aware of nothing but the stingers assaulting my back every couple of seconds, of the rhythmic impacts followed by pain. Pain that was further and further away every time. Endorphins clouded my mind,

separated me from...everything. The pain, the cat o' nine tails, the hard floor beneath my knees. It was all there, but distant. Blurry.

It stopped. The cessation was jarring, unsettling. My senses searched, but didn't find. What was—

Click. A footstep on the hardwood behind me.

Click. Another, this time closer.

Click. Close enough for the vibration to run from my knees and bare feet to every tingling nerve ending.

Something soft and gentle touched between my shoulder blades, and I gasped, my spine straightening. The contact didn't end, and once I was still, it continued down my back.

Fingertips. That was it.

"You okay?"

I nodded, murmuring something that I hoped was "Yes, Mistress."

"I can't hear you, Scott."

"Yes," I said, my own voice penetrating the fog of delirium. "Yes, Mistress."

"Do you want me to continue?"

"If that's—" I wetted my lips, struggling to form the words. "If that's what you want, Mistress."

~ * ~

After a brutal flogging and two hard-won orgasms, I was exhausted. Completely spent. Lying on my stomach, arms folded beneath the pillow, I closed my eyes while Kristen rubbed lotion onto my back.

The lotion and her skin burned in a few places. Probably wherever she'd drawn blood. She'd mastered the cat o' nine tails and knew just how to hit me to raise welts, maybe break the skin a little, but not cause any real damage. She knew exactly where my limits were, and with time and confidence, she'd learned to push them. My pain threshold was high, but she could find that threshold. Find it, push it, and flood my system with endorphins. Subspace was never as good as it was when she put me there.

"Doing okay?" she asked.

"Mm-hmm." I took a deep breath and rolled my shoulders as much as I could in this position. "How does my back look?"

"Like lower Manhattan."

I laughed. "Nicely done."

She ran a finger along my shoulder. "Really broke the skin here," she said softly. "Sorry about that."

"How bad is it?"

"Not too bad." She dabbed it gently with a tissue, and I sucked in a hiss of breath when it stung. "It won't need stitches or anything."

"Is it still bleeding?"

"Not really." Another dab. "It'll be fine, I just didn't mean to get you quite that badly."

“It happens.”

“I know,” she whispered. “I just don’t want to, you know, maim you or something.”

A flash of Meredith’s scars flickered through my mind. I shuddered. “I don’t think that’ll be an issue.”

She squeezed my shoulder gently. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I pushed myself onto my arms, then sat up slowly, giving the lightheadedness a chance to pass before I swung my legs over the side of the bed.

Kristen sat behind me and touched my shoulder again. “Are you sure?”

It all flooded back into my mind. Everything I’d hoped to escape by disappearing into subspace for a while. I’d succeeded, I’d escaped, but when I returned to reality, it was all right here waiting.

Right here waiting, and with reinforcements. The dreams. The flashbacks. Thoughts of Meredith enduring what I’d just enjoyed, being whipped against her will, praying it would stop with all the fervor with which I’d begged for more. The scars commemorating a beating so brutal I couldn’t even begin to imagine.

Goose bumps prickled my skin and a sick feeling twisted in my gut. I’d been through some horrific flogging sessions years ago, but not like that. Not nearly as bad. And if I couldn’t escape it, God only knew how much it haunted her.

“What’s wrong?” Kristen put her arms around me and rested her head between my shoulders. “I’m worried about you, Scott.”

I laced our fingers together. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

“I don’t believe you.” She lifted her head and kissed the side of my neck. “You haven’t been yourself since Meredith called you that night.”

Exhaling slowly, I said nothing. I couldn’t argue. My world had been off-kilter ever since Meredith had walked back into it, so I wasn’t surprised Kristen had picked up on it from the beginning. I didn’t know if I wanted her or anyone else to see how badly I was straining under it, though.

“What’s going on?” she whispered.

“It’s nothing I can talk about,” I said just as quietly.

“Except it’s eating at you.” She ran her fingers through my hair. “I’m not asking you to break Meredith’s confidence, but I’m worried about you.” She kissed the side of my neck again and murmured, “I just want to make sure you’re okay. Get it off your chest.”

Another escape. An outlet. A chance to vent that which I hadn’t vented in entirely too long.

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees and rubbing my temples with my fingers. “I shouldn’t be talking about this.”

“You know I won’t repeat any of it.” She gently massaged my shoulders. “And you don’t have to tell me any of the really sensitive stuff, do

you?”

I exhaled hard. “It’s the only way I could even begin to explain it. Fuck, Krissy, this stuff has given *me* nightmares.”

Red! Red! Scott, please, red!

I shivered again, sucking in a hiss of breath.

“Scott, talk to me.” Kristen’s voice was unsteady.

I didn’t want to break Meredith’s confidence. She was okay with me talking to Leslie about it, but Kristen? I wasn’t so sure. Still, if I didn’t get some of this off my chest, out of my head...

In Kristen’s hands, my shoulders fell. Closing my eyes, I whispered, “None of this leaves this room.”

“Of course not.”

I took a deep breath. Did I dare open these floodgates? Whether I dared or not, before I could stop myself, I did. “Meredith’s ex-husband was a Dom. I mean, if you could call him that.”

Kristen squeezed my shoulders. “What did he do?”

I licked my dry lips. “Do you remember, back when we first started playing together, when I said I wanted to be your Dom?”

“Yes, of course.”

I sat up, putting my hands over hers on my shoulders. “And do you remember why?”

Beneath my hands, hers tensed slightly. “Because you didn’t want me having a bad experience. Like the one you had.”

I nodded. “Her ex was...” I swallowed hard, trying to keep the lump from rising in my throat, but when I continued, my voice still shook. “He was everything I wanted to protect you from and more.” I cleared my throat. “She spent two and a half years in a living hell with him.”

“Oh my God,” Kristen whispered.

“He beat her, he tied her and abandoned her, he choked her until he damn near killed her.” I swallowed again, and it didn’t do a damned bit of good. “Raping her himself wasn’t enough, so he brought in other Doms—” My voice caught, and the ache in my throat intensified. “Whatever he or any other Dom did to her, she just had to fucking take it.”

“The other Doms didn’t catch on that there was a problem?”

“Apparently not. My guess is, they all thought it was a rape fantasy. That it was her fantasy, and no one had to stop until she used a safe word.” My voice shook and I could barely whisper as I added, “They probably had no idea there *was* no safe word. There was nothing she could say or do except...”

Krissy didn’t speak, just made gentle arcs with her thumbs on my shoulders as a silent “I’m here.”

“All she could do was take it. Anything and everything.” I took a deep breath. “God, she was so confident and self-assured in bed when we were together, and he reduced her to nothing. He took everything away.

Scared her, hurt her, humiliated her, he..." I trailed off, pressing my lips together as I struggled to keep myself together. "He fucking... broke her."

Kristen combed her fingers through my hair. "That's... Jesus, I don't even know what to say."

"I don't either." *Come on, Scott, keep it together.* I let my face fall into my hand, covering my eyes as I fought to keep my composure. "The more I hear, the more—" My voice cracked. I gritted my teeth, but as the words came out, so too did the tears: "Who *does* that to another human being?"

"I don't know." Kristen wrapped her arms around me. "But thank God she has you now. And it makes me that much more thankful I've had you from the beginning."

A sick feeling twisted in my gut at the very thought of someone like Rich ever laying a hand on Krissy. I'd taken her on as my sub because my inner control freak and overprotective friend was afraid of her having an experience like the one I'd had. I'd never even imagined someone as bad as Rich, and oh God, why couldn't I have protected Meredith like I did Krissy?

I closed my eyes, and another tear slid down my face. "Fuck," I muttered, wiping it away and sniffing sharply. She held me tighter, which did nothing to help me regain my crumbling composure.

"God, I'm sorry, baby." I sniffed again. Cleared my throat. "This is... *fuck*..."

"Scott, I've seen you drunk," she said, a slightly playful lilt in her voice. "I'm hardly going to be horrified by seeing you cry."

I laughed, wiping my eyes again. "Okay, I guess I can't argue with that."

She rested her head on my shoulder. "I had no idea Meredith had been through so much."

"Up until recently, neither did I." I wetted my lips. "And to add a little insult to injury..." I swallowed hard. "I still have feelings for her."

"That doesn't surprise me at all," she said. "I didn't think you ever stopped having feelings for her."

"Yeah, I guess I didn't."

"Does she—"

"I haven't said anything to her about it."

"Do you think she feels the same way?"

I shook my head. "Even if she did, she's got more than enough on her mind right now."

"I would talk to her about it." Kristen drew gentle arcs with her thumb along the back of my hand like she had on my shoulders a moment ago.

I sighed. "I'll think about it. I just don't want to throw more at her than she can handle right now."

She let go of my hand and ran her fingers through my hair. "Talk to her. You might be pleasantly surprised."

"I guess we'll see." Then I chuckled half-heartedly. "Guess this is an odd thing to talk to a girlfriend about."

She laughed. "Oh, I don't think it's possible for anything to be too odd for us to discuss."

"So you're not jealous?"

"Please, Scott. I'm not jealous." She paused. "But if she gets territorial, I'll totally mud-wrestle her for you."

I turned around, eyebrows raised. "Oh, really?"

She shrugged, grinning. "Maybe."

"Does she have to get territorial for the two of you to—"

"Oh, Jesus." She rolled her eyes. "You and Matt, I swear..."

"Hey, we're guys. What do you expect?"

"Nothing less," she said with an exasperated sigh.

I laughed and put my arm around her, kissing her gently. "Thanks for letting me unload this on you."

"You know I'm always here for you," she said. "Any time you need to talk."

"Thank you." I kissed her again. "I love you, baby."

"I love you too."

I grinned. "Now, let's talk more about this mud-wrestling thing..."

Twenty Five

The same old, ragged issue of Popular Mechanics was in my hands, but just as it had the first time, it failed to hold my interest.

I thought about rifling through the untidy stack in search of that copy of Reader's Digest, the one that had gotten a quiet laugh out of Meredith the first time we were here. Laughter is the best medicine, after all.

But I didn't go looking for it. I wasn't sure I had the energy to muster a laugh. I couldn't even feign interest in an article about the latest innovations in wind turbine technology. Even if I had read it fifty million times at home, something like that could usually appeal to the geek in me enough to keep my attention for a few minutes.

I tossed the magazine onto the table beside me. I watched the fish tank for a while, letting my eyes follow a weird yellow and electric blue fish around a piece of fake coral.

Maybe that was what I needed at home. A tropical fish tank. Watching it would give Malia something to do anyway, and that might occupy her enough to extend the life of some of my furniture by a few months. Assuming she didn't fall in, that is.

Even that thought couldn't make me laugh.

I glanced at the clock. Fifteen more minutes. Why did I always have to be so damned early for things? Then again, being here early beat staying at the office longer than I had to. I could either stare at a tank full of bored fish or try to comprehend numbers and schematics that *usually* made sense to me. At least my boss didn't mind me taking off early. She'd let me out an hour early on half a day's notice, and Leslie had scheduled me in without hesitation. Either they were both incredibly flexible or they'd both caught on that I needed to be here more than I needed to be at work.

I sighed and rubbed my eyes. I hadn't slept more than a couple of hours in the last two days. Not since I broke down with Kristen.

Shifting my attention back to the fish tank, I noticed an odd black one that I hadn't seen before. And where was the yellow one that always swam in circles at the other end?

Christ, had I really been coming here so long I'd memorized the fish

and their routines? I closed my eyes and rubbed the back of my neck. Apparently I—we—had been coming here that long. Had it been enough? Week after week, appointment after appointment, and I felt worse than now than when we'd started. Meredith had come a long way, that much was undeniable, but why the hell did I feel like I was falling apart?

The familiar click of the door dividing the waiting room from the offices caught my attention, and I opened my eyes.

Leslie appeared in the doorway. "Scott?"

I stood and followed her back to her office. She closed the door behind us.

"Thanks for getting me in on short notice." I took a seat on the all too familiar couch.

"Given the situation you're dealing with," she said, easing herself into her chair, "I have no problem seeing either of you on short notice."

"Much appreciated."

She folded her hands on the file in her lap. "So, I assume something is bothering you?"

"A few things, actually."

"Well, we'll start with one and go from there."

"I'm just not sure where to start." I chewed my lip, then closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "I haven't been sleeping well. When I do, the dreams..." I shuddered.

"What kind of dreams?"

"They vary, but there was one," I whispered, suppressing a shiver, "I was flogging one of my girlfriends with a cat o' nine tails. And I remember being incredibly turned on, just like I always am when I flog her, except it was all... different." The vivid images from the dream flickered through my mind, and I couldn't keep that shiver away.

"Different in what way?"

I swallowed hard. "She was screaming. I couldn't understand her, but the fact that she was screaming turned me on."

"Does she usually scream when you flog her?"

I shook my head. "Never. She goes into subspace so fast, and usually just moans if she makes any sound at all. But in the dream..." My stomach flipped. I cast a cautious glance to one side, making sure I knew exactly where that wastebasket was. A few feet away. Good. Close enough. "She screamed in the dream, and after a while, I realized she was screaming..." I closed my eyes, cringing at the acrid taste of the yet unspoken words. "She was screaming the safe word. Over, and over, and over."

"And did you stop when you realized that's what she was saying?"

"No," I whispered. Dream or not, the shame and horror conspired to turn my stomach even harder. "No, I didn't. The more she said it, the more..." I swallowed again. "The more turned on I was. Especially when I realized how much I'd torn her back to shreds." I sat back, looking up at the

ceiling as I tried to collect my thoughts. "I woke up in a cold sweat, and I knew immediately it was a dream. I'd never do that to a sub, never in a million years, but Jesus, it got under my skin."

"How long ago was this?"

"That one was a few weeks ago." I looked at her. "But I've had plenty more like it, and they bug the hell out of me."

"As well they should," she said. "I'd be worried if something like that didn't bother you." She cocked her head. "Now, are you concerned you're having dreams like that because they reveal something about yourself?"

Swallowing hard, I nodded.

"Those dreams don't mean you're someone like Rich, if that's what you're wondering. Quite the opposite. You're terrified of hurting any of your subs. I've seen you in action, Scott. There's a reason you have a reputation for being a conscientious Dom. You've mentioned before that you were cautious to a fault in your early years, so maybe on some deep, subconscious level, you're afraid of becoming someone like Meredith's ex-husband." She shook her head. "Quite honestly, you and I both know you have a greater chance of sprouting wings."

I managed a quiet laugh. "Is that a roundabout way of saying it'll happen when pigs fly?"

Leslie laughed and shook her head. "Not exactly." She shifted in her chair. "Listen, dreams like this are simply a way for the subconscious to process information. You've probably had a difficult time processing the fact that someone could even do something like that to another person."

My blood turned cold and I sat up a little straighter.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"It just struck me," I said. "That's exactly what I said to Krissy. That I couldn't fathom how someone could do this to another human being."

"I'm not surprised. You can't comprehend it, and neither can your subconscious. Unfortunately, that can often result in dreams that are nearly as disturbing as the reality."

I shivered. "You're not lying there."

"That will probably continue for a while, I'm afraid," she said. "Someone like you isn't going to deal with something like this without being affected on some level."

I blew out a breath. "On every level, it seems."

"And, as miserable as it is for you, it's also exactly why you're an ideal Dom, Scott, especially for a submissive like her," she said softly. "People have this impression that Doms are truly sadistic, that we're heartless, that we're sociopaths. But you're a compassionate, empathetic human being, which is exactly what every sub should hope for. And you're precisely what Meredith needs to help her recover from what she's been

through.” She paused. “It also means that a situation like this is going to take its toll on you.”

“Yeah, it is.” I sighed. “So I’m either not sleeping, or I’m dreaming about all this shit. To be honest, it’s a wonder I still function at work.”

“I can suggest talking to your physician about a sleep aid, but that won’t help with the dreams.”

“I’ll pass,” I said. “And to make things a little harder to deal with, there’s also the small matter of our history together.” I paused. “I think we have a few loose ends we never tied up.”

She tilted her head to one side. “How so?”

“Long story short, it was her decision to end our relationship a few years ago, and it was one I never agreed with. I went along with it because it was what she wanted, and I agreed to stay friends with her because I’d rather have her in my life than not, but I didn’t want her to leave.”

“Why did she end things?”

I ran a hand through my hair. “We fought. All the damned time, about anything and everything. We’d been fine for a while, but the year or so before we broke up, it was nothing but fighting. I thought it was just a rough patch. Growing pains or something. She didn’t agree.” I laughed, and the sadness in my own voice tightened my chest. “Fuck, we couldn’t even agree about *that*.”

“And how did you feel when she left?”

“I was devastated. We were both sick of fighting, I won’t deny that, but I thought we could work it out. I hoped we would.” I sighed. “We got into a fight one day, she left like she always did when things got too heated, and when she came back, she—” I paused, closing my eyes and swallowing hard. “She said she’d just come back to get her things. And that was it. We stayed friends, but it killed me to lose her like that.”

“And how has this been affecting your current relationship with her?”

“Since we’re sleeping together again, the line between friends and more than friends isn’t quite as clear.” I looked at the floor between us with unfocused eyes. “And sometimes, it’s just like it was back then. *Just* like it was.” I shifted my gaze to my hands wringing in my lap. “Then afterward, I remember that we’re not what we were back then. I remember why we’re doing this in the first place.” I chewed my lip for a moment, then forced myself to look her in the eye. “And it fucking hurts like hell.”

“Have the two of you discussed this?”

“No.” I didn’t look up. “She mentioned early on that she’s not ready for another relationship, and she wants to keep this as a friendship. Or some really bizarre facsimile of a friendship, I guess.”

“But you feel differently.”

I blinked a few times, refusing to let myself fall apart like I had with Kristen. “Yes,” I whispered.

"Are you concerned you're developing stronger feelings for her than you should?"

I shook my head. "No. I'm just figuring out I never stopped having those feelings for her. I thought at first that I just wanted to help her. I just wanted to... fix her. To fix what he did to her."

"And that's not the case?"

"No." I paused. "I mean, I do want to help her, don't get me wrong, but..."

"How *do* you feel about her, Scott?" Her voice was gentle, and it coaxed the tears to my eyes, but I forced them back again.

"I still love her." The words took whatever breath I had right out of my chest. I rubbed the bridge of my nose, willing myself not to break down. Finally I whispered again, "I still love her."

"Do you know how she feels about you?"

"We haven't discussed it. As far as I know, to her, I'm still just a friend. Someone to help her deal with her past, someone to help her get the hang of being intimate again, but..." I took a deep breath. "This might make me a completely selfish bastard, given her circumstances, but I can't help feeling—" I took a deep breath to keep my emotions in check. "—Used." As soon as the word was off my tongue, I winced, and quickly added, "I don't want to make this about me. Les, I'd go to the ends of the earth to help her, but I can't change what I feel for her."

"No, of course you can't," she said. "And no one's asking you to. I'm just glad to see you're being honest with yourself about it. This whole situation has obviously been difficult for you, and accepting your own feelings is imperative."

"I know it is, but..." I exhaled hard. "The thing is, it hurt like hell in the beginning, seeing her the way she was, everything Rich had done to her. And I'm thrilled she's come so far in getting past all of that, glad I've been able to help her..." I closed my eyes against the guilt that rose with every word I said. "I'm not going to lie, I'm worried about what's going to happen when we reach the end of this."

"When she doesn't need your help any longer?"

Swallowing hard, I nodded.

"What do you want to happen at this point?" she asked.

"As far as the future with her?"

Leslie nodded.

"I don't know if what I want to happen and what should happen are the same thing."

"Tell me what it is you want to happen, Scott."

"What I want is to be with her again." My own words hit me in the chest. Hard. "I don't think there's a snowball's chance in hell of it happening, but that's what I want."

"I think you need to discuss this with her," Leslie said.

I raised an eyebrow. “Does she need this on her shoulders right now?”

“It will be difficult for her,” she said with a nod. “But she’s asked you to come down this road with her. Although she’s the one leaning on you, your feelings are *not* irrelevant, Scott.”

“Right, but this could... complicate things.”

“It might, yes.” She paused. “But she has a right to know how it’s all affecting you. And I believe she has a responsibility to be aware of and considerate of your emotional state.”

I sighed. “I feel like I’d be bitching about a paper cut to an amputee.”

“No, you’re not. If you’re going to be what she needs to get through this, you need to be on top of your emotional health and you need to be honest with her. It won’t do either of you any good if you crumble under your own weight.”

I said nothing.

Leslie went on. “Talking to me is the first step, and I commend you for your openness and honesty with me. None of these feelings are easy to deal with or discuss. Now that you’ve done this, I think you need to get a good, open dialogue going with her about it. It’s up to you whether you two discuss it on your own or here in my office, but for your sake, I encourage you to do so.”

I rubbed the back of my neck and sighed. “That will be a fun conversation.”

“No, probably not.” She tapped her fingers on the folder in her lap. “I can certainly see why all of this is taking its toll on you, Scott. The dreams, your feelings for Meredith, everything. There’s no shame in any of this. It would be emotionally taxing for anyone, but you’re maintaining two other romantic and sexual relationships on top of it.”

I laughed dryly. “Well, *one* other relationship.”

“Oh?” She cocked her head.

“Amy and I...” I shrugged. “We decided to call it quits.”

“Oh. I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah, me too.” I let out a breath. “It’s probably just as well, though. We’ve both had so much shit getting in the way of things for the last few months, and when things started with Meredith, I was lucky to find a few minutes to talk to Amy on the phone, never mind getting together.”

“How are you coping with that?” she asked. “With the end of that relationship?”

“What can I do? We’re still friends. She’s still my sub. I wouldn’t say it’s the most pleasant thing I’ve ever gone through, but it’s admittedly a...” I looked down at my hands.

“Relief?”

Guilt burned in my gut. “Yeah. It’s a relief.”

“There’s no shame in that,” she said. “Everyone has their limits,

even you. Maintaining two relationships on top of rehabilitating a submissive for whom you have strong feelings? Something has to give.”

“I know,” I whispered. “I just hate the fact that it had to be her.”

“Can you think of any other solution?”

I shook my head. “Not really. We’d been drifting apart for a while anyway, but I’d hoped to work things out. When all of this started with Meredith, though...” shook my head again.

“How is your relationship with Kristen? Are you concerned about this affecting that relationship?”

“Oh, I’m concerned about it, but I think she and I will be okay. I feel kind of guilty though, because I unloaded all of this on her the other night.” I rested my elbows on my knees and rubbed my forehead with my fingertips. “That’s why I’m here today. After the other night... I just... I couldn’t deal with it anymore.”

“What happened that night? When did you realize you’d reached your breaking point?”

I sat up. “Probably around the time I called Kristen that afternoon and asked if she wanted to top me.”

Leslie’s eyebrows jumped.

I laughed dryly. “Yes, I do submit once in a while. Krissy is the only one who tops me these days, and it’s rare.” I chewed my lip. “Usually only when I’m stressed out and need to let someone else take the reins for a while.”

“I can certainly see why you did so now, then.”

I nodded. “Anyway, I told her what Meredith went through. I hated to break her confidence, but I was just losing it. And then I broke down.”

“None of this is as surprising as you might think,” she said. “Even the part about you playing the bottom once in a while. In spite of the reputation Doms have for being heartless, you do have a heart. You’re human, just like any Dom.”

“Aside from one,” I growled.

“That was not a Dom,” she spat. “That creature has no business anywhere near a woman, whether she’s a submissive or not.”

“My sentiments exactly,” I muttered.

She closed her folder and set it aside. “Well, we’re at the end of our time here. Unless you need to talk further. I can ask my next patient to wait a few minutes if it’s—”

“No, no.” I put a hand up. “I’m fine. This was quite helpful. Thank you, Leslie.”

She smiled. “That’s what I’m here for.”

Twenty Six

Meredith was beautiful. There were no two ways about it. Standing in front of me in my dungeon with her eyes down and her clothes at her feet, she was simply beautiful.

It didn't matter how many times I'd seen her this way, I had to stop for a moment to take her in. Silently watching a sub was a very effective mind game, a way to put her off balance before giving her a command, but I just wanted to look at her this time.

Stripped. Surrendered. Completely calm and confident. Unafraid. It was hard to believe there was ever a time when she flinched from my touch. In fact, it was hard to believe there'd ever been a time when we didn't touch at all. If only for tonight, at least, the ghosts of her past and ours were gone.

But how much longer will I get to look at you like this?

Shaking my head, I banished that thought to the back of my mind and cleared my throat. "Stand with your back to the Cross."

Meredith looked up. "With my back to it, Master?"

I raised an eyebrow.

She quickly cleared her throat. "Yes, Master."

As I'd ordered, she stood in front of the Saint Andrew's Cross, facing me. Without a word, I took her hand and lifted it to my lips. I kissed her palm, then moved to the inside of her wrist, and she held her breath while I worked my way up her forearm.

"Do you trust me, Meredith?"

"Yes, Master," she whispered. She bit back a whimper when I drew a tiny circle with the tip of my tongue on the inside of her elbow. Goose bumps rose along her arm and my back.

Our eyes met. She licked her lips.

Without a word, I raised her arm and fastened the cuff around her wrist. Then I did the same with the other.

"I'm going to bind your ankles. Are you comfortable with that?"

She nodded.

I muffled a cough.

"Yes, Master."

“Good girl.” Left cheek, right. Then I knelt, trailing my hands down her legs, watching her squirm at my gentle touch. My fingertips drifted over her thighs, then around to the backs of her trembling knees. I drew light circles, just as I had on her elbow with my tongue, and the restraints creaked as she fidgeted.

My palm drifted down her calf to her ankle. Holding her ankle, I glanced up to make sure she wasn’t nervous or scared. Judging by the way she bit her lip when she met my eyes, I had nothing to worry about.

I secured one restraint, then the other. Once they were in place, I stood. “Anything too tight? Anything tingling or cold?”

“No, Master.”

“Tell me your safe words.”

She closed her eyes and took a breath. “Red to stop, yellow to back off, Master.”

“Good girl.” Left cheek, right. “I’m stepping away from you for a second, but I’m not leaving you, okay?”

She nodded. “Yes, Master.” I watched her for a second. Not a flinch, not even a flicker of fear.

Certain she was calm, I went to the table below the rack of floggers. I watched her face when I lifted the towel I’d laid on the table earlier. She’d eyed it a few times after she’d come into the dungeon, probably wondering what was under it, and now she knew.

It was nothing but a glass of ice. From the way her entire body stiffened, she knew exactly what I intended to do with it. She kept her gaze fixed on that glass as I picked it up and came back across the room to her. I let the ice rattle against the sides, and she gulped.

I knelt to set the glass on the floor, and before I stood, I pulled an ice cube out, ignoring the way it made me shiver. Cold against my skin was my Achilles Heel, even when it was just on my hands. Still, it would be worth it for the chance to tease her like this.

All the while watching her eyes, I put my arm around her, letting the heel of my hand brush her skin, but keeping the ice away. Now that my hand was out of sight, she shut her eyes tight, grimacing and holding her breath, flinching in anticipation of the intense cold.

“Am I making you nervous, Meredith?”

“No, Master.” She squirmed against her restraints, jumping every time my hand moved even though I hadn’t yet let her feel the ice.

“Don’t lie to me,” I said. “Does this make you nervous?”

The slight growl in my voice didn’t even make her jump. The briefest, lightest contact of ice in the small of her back, however, did. I let it graze her skin, just enough to startle her, before pulling it away.

“Answer me truthfully,” I whispered. “Am I making you nervous?”

“Yes.” She swallowed, glancing up at me. “Yes, Master.”

“Not uncomfortable, though?”

“No, Master.”

“Good girl.” Left cheek, right.

She relaxed, closing her eyes and releasing her breath.

I pressed the ice against the middle of her back. Her eyes flew open and she gasped, her back arching, but not enough to get away from the cold. Not with the cuffs holding her in place and my body in front of hers. I grinned, watching her gasp and try to wriggle away from the ice as I drew it up the center of her spine.

I took it away from her skin for a second, just long enough for her to pull in one deep, relieved breath, before I pressed it against the side of her neck. I slid it down to her collarbone. She shivered, wriggling as much as her restraints would allow. When I started up her neck, she let her head fall back, exposing her throat and whimpering as I took advantage of that.

I traced every curve of her torso with ice and fingertips. Her breathing quickened. Deepened. She squirmed like she couldn't decide between pulling away and pushing against. When I circled her nipple with the ice cube, she bit her lip. Oh yeah, this was well worth the torture of having something cold on my own skin.

The ice melted, so I picked up another. Two cubes this time, actually. She watched with wide eyes when I slipped one between my lips. I rolled it around on my tongue, trying not to grin as her eyebrows knitted together. She gulped.

When I put my hands—but no ice—on her hips and leaned in to kiss her neck, she exhaled through her nose, her entire body tensing. She jumped and sucked in a sharp breath when I kissed her neck. Again as the ice in my hand touched her skin. I drew that ice up and down her side while I trailed gentle kisses down to her breast, and she cursed under her breath as I teased her nipple with lips, ice, and tongue.

“Oh, God...” she moaned. I moved to the other nipple, and she cursed and gasped and went out of her damned mind.

I took my lips off her nipple and started up, moving gradually toward her neck while my hand moved down her side, over her hip, and between her legs.

I kissed her neck, occasionally pressing the ice against her skin with my tongue. She gasped when ice and cold fingers touched her pussy, and she shivered as I alternately tormented her with the ice and palmed the cube so I could circle her clit with my fingertips. All the while I switched between warming the skin of her neck with my lips before letting the ice in my mouth chill it once again. She writhed and whimpered, but the restraints kept her at my mercy.

After a while, the cube in my mouth had melted to the point it was too small to do much, so I kissed her neck, then bit down on the ice. She gasped again, her spine straightening and her entire body tensing at the sound of crunching ice. With the ice gone, I raised my head and kissed her full-on

as my fingers slid into her pussy. The ice in my hand didn't last much longer, but her moans stayed just as intense, responding to the gentle pressure of my palm on her clit as if the cold remained.

"Does this turn you on?" I murmured into her kiss.

"Yes, Master." She tried to kiss me again, but a shiver separated us. She let her head fall back, screwing her eyes shut as her pussy tightened and her body trembled.

"Don't you dare come yet," I whispered into her ear, beckoning against her G-spot. "I haven't given you permission, have I?"

"N-no, Master."

"And you won't, will you?"

"No, Master." She was breathless now. Shaking enough to make her cuffs creak and their chains jingle. She kept her eyes closed, digging her teeth into her lip.

"Look at me," I whispered.

She opened her eyes.

The second we made eye contact, my breath stopped in my throat.

I saw everything. Not just my lover right on the edge, *everything*. The broken woman who'd called me for help. The unbreakable woman I'd loved back then and still loved now. Years of wounds, weeks of healing. Her weakness, her strength. The only thing I couldn't find was the answer to the burning question on the tip of my tongue: *Do I have any right to hope you still love me?*

Once again, I shoved that thought to the back of my mind. Any time could be the last time, so I fully intended to make us both enjoy *every* time as much as humanly possible, not spend it worrying.

"Do you want me to let you come?" I pressed my hand a little harder against her clit.

She gasped. "Yes, Master, please."

"Not yet." I stopped my hand and withdrew my fingers. She closed her eyes, releasing a frustrated groan through clenched teeth.

When I stepped back, she opened her eyes, and the frustration in her expression melted away in favor of arousal as I pulled off my shirt. As I reached for my belt buckle, we held each other's gazes. Hers flicked downward a few times, but each time rose to meet mine.

Once I'd completely stripped, I came back and kissed her. I pressed one hand against the small of her back to keep our hips together, making sure she felt exactly how much she turned me on. The restraints creaked. When I glanced up, her hands curled into tight fists, flexed, then curled again.

"Am I frustrating you, Meredith?"

"Yes, Master," she said quickly.

"Good." I dipped my head to kiss her neck.

"Master, may—" She caught herself, pausing to take a deep breath.

Looking at her, I raised an eyebrow and inclined my head.

“Please, may I—” She swallowed hard, but didn’t look anywhere except right into my eyes. “May I suck your cock, Master?” Absent was the shame and embarrassment that would have accompanied such a question weeks ago. She held my gaze without flinching, and the only color in her cheeks was the flush of arousal. The same arousal that, I guessed, made it difficult for her to articulate her question.

I grinned. “Is that really what you want?”

“Yes, Master.” She nodded, wetting her lips. “Please, may I?”

“Absolutely.” I almost shivered. That was the woman I knew and loved. Desperate to please, confident enough to ask permission to do so.

I knelt, running my hands up and down her legs. I was eager to feel her hands and mouth on my cock, but I wasn’t in a hurry. First things first.

Glancing up at her, I kissed her thigh. Then a little higher. Leather creaked and metal jingled as I drew closer to her pussy. I flicked the tip of my tongue across her clit, and if her shaking knees were any indication, had it not been for the restraints holding her in place, she probably would have collapsed.

I slid two fingers inside her and teased her just like I had a moment ago, beckoning gently, this time in synch with my tongue’s slow arcs. She moaned, twisting against the cuffs while I teased her right back to the edge and held her there. And held her there. And held her there.

“Scott- *Master*, please,” she pleaded. “Please, let me come.”

I didn’t have to speak to deny her. She’d hold on until I specifically allowed her to let go, so I didn’t need to say a word to tell her that no, she could *not* come yet.

While I continued circling her clit with my tongue, I trailed one hand down the back of her leg and unbuckled the ankle restraint. Then I switched hands, sliding the other hand down to undo the other cuff as my other fingers slipped inside her, all the while letting the tangy sweetness of her pussy intoxicate me.

Once her ankles were free, I stood. She released a sigh that may have been equal parts relief and aggravation. The torment had stopped, but I hadn’t let her come yet.

I cupped her face in both hands and kissed her lightly. She parted her lips and tried to deepen the kiss, but I pulled back. Closing her eyes, she released a frustrated sound.

“Remember who’s in charge here, Meredith,” I whispered, running the pad of my thumb over her cheekbone. “You’ll get what I see fit to give you. Nothing more.”

“Yes, Master,” she whispered.

“Good girl.” Left cheek, right. Then I leaned in again, kissing her as gently as I could. I had no doubt she was desperate to taste herself on me, but I forced her to wait, to take only this slow, lips-only kiss. After a long moment, I parted her lips with my tongue and gave her a taste— just a

taste—before pulling back again.

Then I deepened the kiss again, and she released a soft moan against my lips when I finally let her taste what I tasted. While I kissed her, I ran my hand up her side, then her arm, all the way to her wrist, and unbuckled the cuff. She let her hand fall to her side. Her body shifted a little, and I guessed she was shaking some stiffness out of her arm. She rolled her shoulder a few times, then put her arm around my waist. When I unbuckled her other arm, she did the same thing.

I took a few steps back, drawing her with me.

“Do you still want to suck my cock, Meredith?” I growled, sliding my hand up the back of her neck.

“Yes, Master. Please.”

“That’s what I thought.” I twisted her hair around my hand and put her on her knees. Not hard enough to be unduly painful when she hit the floor, but with enough force to make it clear she *would* go down.

She half-yelped, half-whimpered, licking her lips as she waited for my next command. She made no advance. There was no fear in her posture or expression, no preemptive flinch or recoiling from an anticipated punishment. Simply surrender. She was unafraid, and patiently waited for me to wield the power she’d given me.

I loosened my grasp on her hair. She still didn’t move. Swallowing hard, she waited.

“Good girl,” I whispered, and her eyes flicked up to meet mine. I released her hair and gave a single nod.

That was all she needed. I forced myself to keep breathing slowly, evenly, while she stroked with both hands and alternately ran her tongue around the head of my cock and deep-throated as much as she could in that position. Her eyes flicked up to meet mine, and immediately took my breath away.

Hunger, the need to please, lust. Not a shred of fear, not a shadow of the ghosts of the past. She was fully here with me. Judging by the lust in her eyes and enthusiasm in her mouth and hands, there was nowhere she’d rather be.

Nor was there any place I’d rather be.

Except one place, that is, and if she kept doing what she was doing much longer, we’d never get there.

I grasped her hair and pulled back slightly. She immediately took my cue and stopped, sitting back on her heels and looking up at me.

“Stand up,” I said. When she did, I gestured at my clothes, which I’d left to one side of the Saint Andrew’s Cross. “There’s a condom in the back left pocket of my jeans. Get it and bring it back to me.”

“Yes, Master.”

When she returned, condom in hand, I said, “Put it on.”

“Yes, Master.” She had a little trouble opening the wrapper, but it

finally gave, and not a moment too soon. I gritted my teeth to keep from outwardly showing her how much her hands on my cock made me want to give in and lose control. I wouldn't, though.

I want you so fucking bad, baby, you don't even know...

With the condom in place, she let her hands fall to her sides again.

"Good girl." Left cheek, right. Then I nodded toward the door. "Bedroom."

She walked ahead of me, and she was no less beautiful now than when she faced me. Shoulders confidently set back. The gentle curve of her waist. The subtle swell of her hips that fucking begged me to grab hold and fuck her senseless.

She reached for the doorknob, but I reached past her and grabbed her wrist, then put an arm around her waist.

"I changed my mind about the bedroom." With that, I shoved her up against the door, and she whimpered softly. I nudged her ankles apart with my foot. "I think I want you just like this."

She moaned, clawing at the door as if her fingers might find some invisible handhold. She pressed back against me, and her ass against my cock was almost more than I could handle. God, I wanted her.

I pulled her hips back just enough to grant me better access to her pussy. When I guided my cock to her, she sucked in a breath, shuddering as I slid inside her. Her back and shoulders rippled as I took a few slow, smooth strokes, and when I thrust into her as deep as I could in this position, she cried out, her whole body tensing as if she'd just surrendered to a powerful orgasm.

Up against the dungeon door, I fucked her. Deep, hard, while she begged and pleaded for more, I fucked her.

"Like that?" I asked through gritted teeth.

"Yes, Master, yes, I love it."

"Touch yourself, Meredith." The words came out as a hoarse, uneven whisper.

She rested her forearm against the door and reached down with the other. In a heartbeat, her pussy was impossibly tight. I groaned, trying to thrust even deeper.

"May I come, Master?" Body and voice alike trembled.

"No." I gripped her hips tighter and fucked her harder. Her elbow thumped against the door every time my body forced hers forward. My eyes tried to roll back. The whole room spun around me and the floor lurched under me, everything moving faster and falling to pieces each time I thrust into. She overwhelmed me. Completely overwhelmed me. Her body, her pussy, her breathless moans.

I released a sharp breath, biting my tongue when that breath nearly came out in the form of *God, I love you*.

"Please, Master," she whimpered, oblivious to my near-confession.

“Please, may I come?”

“Not yet.” I shut my eyes tight, clenching my jaw and holding my breath. She tried to beg some more, to plead with me for the right to let go, but her voice failed her. Had I not been so close myself—*fuck, baby, do you realize what you do to me?*—I’d have denied her again. Instead, I drew the deepest breath I could, and whispered, “Come.”

Twenty Seven

Lying in bed afterward, we faced each other. I ran the backs of my fingers down her cheek. Not to cue submission, just to touch her.

We'd caught our breath. The aftershocks had passed, the trembling had stopped. For now, we just looked at each other.

When we first started this whole thing, I'd wondered if a night like this was possible, and yet, here we were. No panics. No flashbacks. Not a speed bump in sight except in the rearview. In the beginning, a lifetime ago, I'd questioned whether I could help her through this. Somehow, fumbling and stumbling together, here we were.

Some of the scars would always remain. She would never again be the Meredith that Rich had never touched, but she'd made it this far. I was thrilled. Relieved. I admired her, I was proud of her, and I knew it was only a matter of time now before she could continue on her own two feet. I wished nothing but the best for her, wanted her to heal enough and have strength enough to do just that, but I still wondered where that would leave us. Where it would leave me.

Meredith ran her thumb along my lower lip. "What are you thinking about?"

"You." I smiled, stroking her hair. "You've come a long way since we started doing this."

She returned the smile. "You brought me this far."

"No, the work was all yours, babe," I said. "I just gave you a safe place to do it." That sinking feeling in my gut refused to be ignored.

Meredith raised her eyebrows. "What's wrong?"

Avoiding her eyes, I chewed the inside of my cheek. Then I looked at her. "I have something for you. Out in the living room."

Her eyebrows flicked up. "Oh?"

I pushed myself up. "Come on. I'll show you."

Eyeing me warily, she sat up. "Scott—"

"Just trust me. Come on."

We made a quick detour into the dungeon to put on a few clothes—a shirt and panties for her, jeans for me—and went into the living room.

I gestured for her to have a seat on the couch, and I sat beside her. “Close your eyes.”

She blinked. “What?”

“You heard me.”

She rolled her eyes, then closed them. “I’m not sure I trust you with surprises.”

“I think you’ll like this.” I pulled out the paper bag I’d left on the shelf beneath the coffee table. Reaching inside it, I added, “In fact, I’d be willing to bet money you will.”

“Uh-huh. I’ll believe that when I see it.”

I carefully brought my hand out of the bag. “In that case, why don’t you take a look?”

She smirked, a smartass comment no doubt right on the tip of her tongue, and opened her eyes.

The smirk vanished.

Her lips parted.

With both hands, she took the music box from me, cradling it as if it might shatter if she jarred it. She turned the box in her hands, looking at it from all angles, disbelief etched into every line on her face.

“Scott...” She pulled in a breath, still staring at the box. “You... fixed it.” She traced her finger over the inlay of her nickname. With a trembling hand, she lifted the lid. As soon as the first notes played, her hand went to her mouth. “Oh my God...” A tear slid down her cheek and she quickly brushed it away. “I can’t believe it. I thought it was beyond repair.”

“Don’t you have faith in my ability to fix broken things?” I asked, grinning cautiously.

She laughed, wiping away another tear. “Honestly, I thought this was even beyond what you could put back together.”

“It looked a lot worse than it was.” I ran my fingers through her hair while she turned the box in her hands. “Just needed a little TLC.”

Meredith smiled, glancing at me. “It’s perfect.”

“I tried to get all the scratches and everything out, but—”

She put a hand up and shook her head. “It’s perfect, Scott. It’s... it’s perfect.” She set the box on the coffee table and put her arms around me. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, babe.” I kissed the top of her head and held her to me. I closed my eyes, breathing in her familiar scent. Even like this, with her arms around me and the taste of her kiss on my tongue, I couldn’t ignore the feeling she might, at any second, get up and tell me she didn’t need me anymore. And I’d be thrilled she didn’t need my help anymore, I just hoped to God she still *wanted* me even when she didn’t need me.

Everything I’d discussed with Leslie and Kristen bounced around in my head with a backbeat of their unanimous advice: *Talk to her. Talk to her. Talk to her.*

Swallowing hard, I sat back and looked at her. "I've been doing some thinking. About a few things."

"Oh? Such as?"

"The night you called me," I said quietly, "when you said you needed my help finding a Dom..." I had to search for the words.

She put her hand in mine and squeezed gently. "Yes?"

I wetted my lips. "What did you think I would say?"

She cocked her head. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, did you think I'd hook you up with another Dom?" I paused. "Or that I'd take this on myself?"

"I didn't know, honestly." She ran a hand through her slightly disheveled hair. "I was so worried about even getting in touch with you, I hadn't really thought about it. Why?"

I watched my thumb trace slow arcs across the back of her hand. "Just wondering."

"Something else on your mind?" She touched my arm.

Closing my eyes, I exhaled. *Just get it out on the table and get it over with. Say it. Just say it.* I moistened my lips and made myself look at her. "What happens when this is... done?"

"Done?"

"You wanted me to help you get through everything he did to you. And you've made leaps and bounds, so I assume there's going to come a point when we don't..." I cleared my throat. "When we don't need to do this anymore." *When you won't need me anymore.* "What then?"

It was her turn to look at our hands. "I guess I hadn't thought that far ahead." Meredith swallowed hard. "What do you think should happen?"

I shook my head. "I don't know."

"It'll probably be a while before we get to that point," she said softly. "You've brought me a long way, but there's still plenty more to go. So we don't have to worry about it now, do we?"

"I suppose we don't."

She looked at me for a moment before she spoke again. "It's still bothering you, though, isn't it?"

No sense pretending it wasn't. Sighing, I nodded. "Yeah, it is. I've been thinking about it a lot actually."

She squeezed my hand. "Why is it bothering you so much?"

I took a breath, then forced myself to look her in the eye when I whispered, "Because I still love you."

Her eyes widened and her lips parted, and she looked even more startled than she had when she saw the music box. Then she dropped her gaze.

I started to reach for her face, but pulled my hand back. Though I'd intended touch her just to make contact, that touch was too close to her submission cue to do during a conversation like this. I didn't want her to

think I'd ever use it to manipulate her. So I put my arm around her shoulders instead. She didn't recoil, thankfully, but there was just enough stiffness in her posture to keep her from sinking against me like she often did. She wasn't pulling away, but she wasn't coming any closer.

She took a deep breath. "Scott, I still love you too. I never stopped loving you. Never." She met my eyes, and there were tears in hers. "But that doesn't mean we can go back."

"Is there any reason we *can't* go back?"

"Scott, this is..." She chewed her lip. "Everything with Rich isn't over. He's still in my head. He still..." She screwed her eyes shut and took a deep breath before meeting my eyes again. "He still crosses my mind every time we touch."

I flinched. Exhaled sharply. Then I squeezed her hand. "Has that made me walk away yet? I've seen what he still does to you, babe, and I'm still here, aren't I?"

"You're here now. How many months or years are you willing to put up with this?"

"As long as it takes."

"It's not just Rich, though." She took a deep breath. "Yeah, he's fucked me up as far as relationships go, but it's also... us. We've been there, we've done that, and we can't do it again."

"Says who?"

She sighed. "Scott, think about it. Where would we be in a few months or a couple of years? Right back where we were when everything fell apart?"

"It's been a long time, Meredith. We've both changed, we've—"

"We've done this once before," she said, her voice wavering. "Look what happened."

I swallowed hard. "What happened was I had a few of the best years of my life with you."

Meredith flinched, dropping her gaze and quickly wiping away a tear I didn't see.

I slid my hand around the back of her neck and touched my forehead to hers. "Look at us, babe. Even if we haven't admitted to it, we've *been* almost everything we were back then." I ran my thumb back and forth along her jaw. "We can just take things a day at a time. We're different people than we were back then."

"Are we?"

"We've learned to communicate." I pulled back enough to look at her. "We've both done a hell of a lot of growing up."

She focused on our hands, but didn't speak.

"I'm not saying it would be perfect," I said. "No relationship is. But I've had seven very long years of not being with you, and imperfect or not, I think getting back what we had would be worth the effort. I would rather be

with you than not.”

Rubbing the back of her neck with her free hand, she closed her eyes and exhaled hard. “Don’t you remember how hard it was the last year or so?”

“That was then.” I kissed her forehead, then sat back and looked at her, struggling to keep myself together. “It’s only as difficult as we make it, babe, and one thing I learned real quick after you left was that making a relationship work is a hell of a lot easier than not having you.”

She pursed her lips. “Look, I don’t even know if I know how to *make* a relationship work anymore. With you or anyone else. In the last five years, the only relationship I’ve had is the one with Rich.” She sniffed sharply and wiped away the tear that slid down her cheek. “He’s all I’ve known for years, and since you and I have been doing this, all I’ve done is take from you.”

“You’ve taken what I’ve freely given, babe,” I said. “With everything you’ve had stolen from you, you deserve it.”

“But I don’t even remember how to give back anymore. And the thing is...” She looked down, cursing under her breath when another tear escaped.

I stroked her hair. “Tell me. What is it?”

Sniffing again, she met my eyes, and the pain in hers almost brought tears to mine. “Scott, I don’t even know what it’s like to be loved anymore.”

I cradled her face in both hands and drew her to me. Just before our lips met, I whispered, “Yes, you do.” I let the gentle, tender kiss linger for a long moment before I pulled back and looked into her eyes again. I ran my fingers through her hair. “Meredith, I love you.”

In a trembling, barely-whispering voice, she said, “I love you, too.” As soon as she spoke, she lost whatever composure she’d been struggling to maintain. She buried her face against my neck, holding onto me while she cried. It was all I could do to keep my own emotions in check as she let go of hers. I closed my eyes, stroked her hair, and tried to ignore the way my heart pounded.

When she finally sat up, wiping her eyes with a trembling hand, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to fall apart, this is just...”

“Don’t apologize,” I whispered, caressing her damp cheek. “I’m throwing a lot at you right now, so if it’s overwhelming...” I shrugged.

“Yeah, it’s a bit overwhelming.” She sniffed. Closed her eyes for a long moment. Took a deep breath. Finally looked at me again. “I’m not saying no. I’m saying... I’m saying I don’t know.”

“Babe, if you don’t want—”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” she said, shaking her head. “I just... don’t know. I know what I feel for you, I know what we’ve been through in the past, but... that’s it. That’s all I know.”

“Let me ask you this,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. “You still love me, right?”

“Yes, of course.”

“If we didn’t have a past together, and you didn’t have your past, but we were sitting here like this,” I paused, taking a breath. “If all you knew was the way we are right here, right now, would you want to stay or go?”

She was quiet for a long moment, neither speaking nor looking at me. My heart pounded as the silence lingered.

Finally, without meeting my eyes, speaking so softly I barely heard her at all, she said, “I’d want to stay.”

Relief swept through me. I reached for her face and gently lifted her chin so we had nowhere to look but at each other. I leaned in closer, drawing her to me, and just before our lips met, I whispered, “Then... stay.”

For a long moment, we were still. Just my lips against hers, neither of us moving, neither of us breathing. Blood pounded in my ears. With every heartbeat, I was sure she’d pull back. My stomach flipped as she shifted, but then I realized she’d turned toward me, not away. Feather-light fingertips brushed my jaw. Again, more assertively now, before drifting into my hair, and when I teased her lips with the tip of my tongue, she parted them without hesitation. We wrapped our arms around each other, and I swore I could have stayed like this all damned night.

Eventually, though, I broke the kiss and looked into her eyes. She smiled. So did I. When I pulled her to me again, the kiss lingered. Deepened. Intensified. Eventually, we left the music box on the coffee table and went back into the bedroom.

There would be more time to discuss this. We’d iron out all the details, figure everything out in time. We’d worry about just what it was we were doing and how the hell to do it.

For now, I simply loved her.

Epilogue

About a year later.

“Four of a kind, my friends.” Matt dropped his cards on the table, revealing three kings and a two, which was wild under house rules. “Looks like the boys win again.”

The girls groaned while Matt and I high-fived across the table.

“Surprise, surprise.” Rolling her eyes, Kristen stood and shimmied out of her skintight jeans.

Meredith rose, unbuttoning her own jeans. “I still think they’ve got cards up their sleeves.”

“*What* sleeves?” I gestured at myself, reminding them Matt and I had lost our shirts two hands ago.

“I’m sure the pair of you are cheating somehow,” Kristen muttered, dropping back into her chair in nothing but her bra and panties. “Who’s dealing this one?”

“You are.” Matt set the deck in front of her.

“You know, we could always change the rules up a bit,” Meredith said to Kristen. “Maybe make them put our clothes on whenever they lose.”

“I am not putting your clothes on,” Matt said.

“Pussy,” Kristen muttered.

Matt chuckled. “Shut up and deal.”

I laughed quietly and sipped my drink. Poker night had taken on a life of its own in the last few months. Matt, Krissy, and I still played for money with the neighbors, and Meredith joined in whenever there was an open seat, but we’d started playing by some very different rules at home. Sometimes I wondered why we even bothered with the game. Before long, regardless of who held what cards, all the clothes would be on the floor, and God only knew who’d be fucking who.

Poker night wasn’t the only thing that had taken on a life of its own over the past year. Krissy and I still loved each other, and our relationship was still strong. Matt and Meredith sometimes played together, though it was mostly physical between them. Over time, though, the four of us had evolved

into two distinct couples. Still polyamorous, still together, just... different. Kristen and Matt had moved in together a few months ago. After a few bumps in the road while we slowly sorted out our relationship, Meredith and I had hit our stride and worked things out. She was in the process of moving in with me, much to the disgust of both of our cats.

Of the four of us, Meredith was the only one who didn't know about the diamond solitaire I'd been carrying in the inside pocket of my jacket for the last two weeks. Unbeknownst to Krissy, Matt had one too. It had become almost a running joke between him and me, wondering who would have the balls to propose first.

Soon. It would definitely be soon. Especially if I expected to sleep again in the near future, since this whole thing had kept me up at night for days. Judging by the circles under Matt's eyes, I wasn't the only one.

Maybe tonight, I thought, stealing a glance at Meredith. A few more hands of cards, a few more articles of clothing off, then I'd see if I could talk her into putting on a ring. Maybe Matt would do the same with Krissy.

I grinned to myself. If we timed the weddings just right, this could be one *hell* of a honeymoon.

For now, though, I had a game to win and two nearly naked women to finish stripping.

As Kristen dealt the cards, Meredith looked down at herself and said, "Damn it, if we lose this hand, I've only got one more and I'm down to nothing."

Matt put his hand over his heart and sighed melodramatically. "Oh, what a shame."

"We can beat them," Kristen said. "They have to lose sometime."

"But are we really losing?" I said. "I mean, whoever takes the clothes off, I'd say we're all winning, you know?"

"Please." Meredith snorted. "It's the principle here. I want to win, damn it."

I winked. "And I rather want you to lose." She tried to glare at me, but laughed in spite of herself.

Kristen dealt the cards. "Here you go, boys. Those jeans are coming off this round, I can feel it."

"I don't fucking think so," Matt said.

"Amen," I said. "Because I have a sneaking suspicion it's those bras that are coming off."

"Yeah, right." Meredith looked at her cards. "We'll just see about that."

I picked up my hand, and only a well-practiced poker face kept me from grinning.

King. Queen. Jack. Ten. Nine. All spades.

About Lauren

Lauren Gallagher is an erotica writer who is said to be living in Okinawa, Japan, with her husband and two incredibly spoiled cats. There is some speculation she is currently on the run from the Polynesian Mafia in the mountains of Bhutan, but she's also been sighted recently in the jungles of Brazil, on a beach in Spain, and in a back alley in Detroit with some shifty-eyed toaster salesmen. Though her whereabouts are unknown, it is known that she also writes gay male erotic romance under the pseudonym L. A. Witt.

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