

ศาลองค์ มฤตยู



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Torquere Press
www.torquerepress.com

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First published in www.torquerepress.com, 2007

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Chapter 1

Before leaving my apartment that night, I lit bundles of white sage at the altars of my Gods and offered up a pathetic plea that unlike every other time Joey and Brett dragged me out to a club, Marcus wouldn't stop me from meeting someone. Out there was a man who wanted to dominate a short, slim, farmboy gone bad. I needed to meet him.

And could the Gods make this dream guy someone who could easily overpower me in a naked wrestling match? Well hung, naturally. Don't forget the incredible bod.

My usual approach to sex was like a commando raid. Hit him up; get it on; get the hell out. Yet as I prayed, I was overwhelmed by the need for something more. I wanted hot sex, but craved a deep, spiritual bond. More than anything at that moment, I wished for a chance at Love.

Then my little lizard brain went right back to basics.

Someone who wouldn't take shit from me. Oh, yeah. A tall, muscular man with big hands. That fantasy worked, so I grabbed my dick. Spit, grasp, tug. A guy who could silence my mouth. Groan. A stern poppa who knew how to keep his boy under control. A leather-daddy who would tear at my untamable, black curls while he forced me to swallow his cock.

I sucked air between my clenched teeth.

A badass sadist who knew Japanese rope bondage. Oh, fuck!

Something broke free from my soul and shot hard into the night. For a second, everything was hushed, and then the noise of my blood pounding through my veins rushed into my ears like a thunderclap. I could feel the backdraft of power wash over my skin.

Raw magic shoved me back on my butt.

It was coming.

I was coming.

I got such a nasty mental picture of my ass reddening under Mr. Perfect Leather-Daddy's whip that I left an additional offering in four sticky, white shots across the Goddess of

Traffic's chromed altar. Angelena was a vegan. I figured the extra protein would do her good.

My 1920s vintage Moroccan fantasy apartment building was several blocks off Broadway in downtown Long Beach. Sometimes I could smell the ocean. Three days of rain had given L.A. the pissy look of a doused Persian cat. Mountain ranges stood in purplish silhouettes from Malibu to Riverside. The last orange-red steak of sunlight was a sliver over the bulky hill of San Pedro. A fog bank hovered over Long Beach harbor, waiting for nightfall to send tendrils inland like the Angel of Death creeping through Egypt in the movie *Ten Commandments*.

My downstairs neighbor, Angelena, worked on a Ducati rebuild on the tiny square of lawn outside her first story apartment door. The tips of Angelena's spiky, asphalt-black hair showed over the seat of the bike. She smelled of grease and hot metal.

Neighbors who lived in the apartment two doors down nodded hello to us as they returned from Christmas shopping. It amazed me that they could see Angelena, but didn't recognize her as a Goddess. Her power seemed so obvious, but they acted as if they only saw a tall, heavysset, motorcycle cop.

"Kind of dark to see what you're doing," I said.

Angelena worked her fingers around the engine. "Sometimes eyes are a hindrance, Sam. Seeing with the inner eye is more enlightening."

After checking that it was dry, I sat on the bottom step of the stairs leading up to my door. "What's the history on this one?" Every bike she rebuilt had a story. I liked to feed her the straight line and let her ride with it. Sometimes the tale would ramble on for hours, following the topography of her thoughts like a two-lane rural highway.

I pulled long blades of grass out of the crack in the sidewalk and twirled them between my hands.

Angelena rested back on the heels of her thick biker boots. She wiped grease from her hands with a faded rag. "Aren't you going dancing with Joey and Brett? Or did you figure your evening was complete after you shot your wad?"

I gave her my best "aw shucks ma'am" Oklahoma farmboy apology smile. She wasn't falling for it, so I did my big blue eyes thing, going for a look somewhere between angelic and mournful. "I have work. Lots of films screened this week. I have to submit my reviews to my editors."

Like Brett and Joey, Angelena didn't fall for that either. I tried another excuse. "Joey and Brett will have more fun without me. Last time, Brett gave me a pity blowjob by the dumpsters. They're just being polite."

Angelena's concrete gray eyes bored into me. She seemed in no mood to cut me slack. I pointed to the bike she worked on. "Are you planning to keep this one when you're finished?"

She sighed forever. I smelled other people's dinners from the apartments around mine: curry, Chinese take out, carnitas. My stomach rumbled. The blue-white light from televisions glowed through the curtains of the other apartments.

"Quit signaling and change lanes already, Sam. It's time. No more stalling."

There was no use going out if I'd be alone there, too. Besides, my apartment didn't have a cover charge or a two-drink minimum.

"Deal and I will drive you over there ourselves if we have to," Angelena warned. "And Deal won't be happy that you forced her to intervene."

Maybe other people disobeyed their Gods, but I wasn't raised that way, so I surrendered. "Yes, Goddess. I'm going." Besides, I didn't want to have to face Deal, the frosty, Nordic-combined, she-bitch, Goddess of Negotiation.

As I stood though, I swore I caught Marcus' scent. Slipping into panic, I glanced up and down the street, expecting to see his cold eyes. There was a solid line of parked cars, and people driving by. He could be anywhere. My Gods promised I was safe in my apartment. They swore he couldn't find me, but I could smell him.

His scent was like burning tires. Did I ever think he smelled good? His kick-ass, muscular bod and the Harley he rode made up for it, though. The way he could take me to dangerous edges and leave me hungry for more was what kept me hooked. Adrenaline. He fed me overdoses of it. Knowing I was going to come down bad from the sex, I still couldn't help jumping on the mattress when he came at me, because I was so pumped for it.

Fear squeezed my lungs. "I can't," I gasped. "I'm sorry."

I tried to run back up the stairs, but Angelena took a pitiless hold on my arm.

"Please, Goddess, mercy."

"Sam, you unleashed some very powerful magic. You can't run away from it now."

"I didn't mean to."

Oh, the look she gave me. "A witch like you knows how much power is focused in prayer, a strong will, and spilled bodily fluids. Don't fuck around with chaos magic."

Heat climbed up my neck. "Sorry about that." I loved it when thick come shot onto my face, but I guess she didn't. "Marcus..." I whimpered. Angelena was the only one who knew how bad it got at the end. Brett and Joey could only guess.

"Don't let Fear dick you around, and don't you ever evoke a spell you don't mean to see through. Got it?" She finally let go of my arm.

Fighting off my panic attack, I wiped the sweat from my face.

She shook her head. "It drives me crazy to see you like this, Sweet-tart. You were a cocky little shit, but you were so damn fun."

"I'm doing okay."

"You haven't been okay for months, Sam, and you know it."

"Everything's fine."

She rolled her eyes. "I can see that we're going to have to do this the hard way. Just remember, you brought this on yourself. You summoned it on yourself."

That didn't sound good. "Summoned what?"

"You're going to run into a God who won't let you get away with this. Someone is going to stop you from fleeing and make you face your true Self. He's coming for you."

Did I imagine the hairs on my arms lifting?

"Some of us have a life, Sam, so get your ass in gear." Deal phased in next to me and I jumped back. That "now you see me, now you don't" God magic made me twitchy.

She wore sparkly gold come-fuck-me heels and a champagne raw silk dress that hugged her bony frame. "I can't believe I'm here," she muttered. "I didn't sign on for this. Protection, yes. Hand holding? No. Traffic and I have better things to do with our time, Sam."

"Are you two going somewhere together?" I knew Angelena would do Deal, but I didn't know if Deal was into girls. I mean, I knew that Deal screwed everyone she met, just not in the carnal sense.

Deal's ice-blue eyes fixed on me as if she knew my thoughts. I gulped.

Angelena stepped between us. "Go meet Brett and Joey like you promised, Sam, or we'll escort you there ourselves."

"Okay. I'm going, I'm going."

"About time." Deal crossed her arms, one long finger tapping on the face of her wristwatch.

"Sam—you brought this on yourself. I hope it's what you really want." Angelena seemed to want to say something else, or more, but settled for, "Godspeed."

I gave them a friendly wave as I unlocked my piece-of-shit car. When one of my Goddesses gave me her benediction, I knew better than to sass back. Much.

* * * *

The thumpa-thumpa of house music could be heard down the block from the club. While I waited for the new bouncer to decide my ID was real, I concentrated on keeping my shirt on and my feet still. Surrounding me with hot men, dance music, and the scent of sweat was like shoving an alcoholic into a swimming pool filled with gin. Eventually, I'd lose my will to keep my head out of it.

I wanted to leave then, wanted it bad, even though Joey and Brett were waiting for me. Unless I could feel a solid wall at my back, there was no way I could relax. But the older guys owned the walls, and boys like us stayed in the center of the main room. My shoulder blades itched. It was too soon. Everything was too close and loud. There wasn't any air.

Brett and Joey would be pissed off if I left, but they couldn't do anything about it. However, Angelena, the Goddess of Traffic, and Deal, the Goddess of Negotiation, could. My Gods had threatened to boot my ass across the threshold of the club that night if I wouldn't go on my own. Deal would have enjoyed it, too, even if it meant mussing up her new pair of Prada shoes.

Near to the elevated dance floor, I spotted Joey's electric orange hair—a new color for a new week. I had expected him to go red and green for Christmas, but that wouldn't have made him stand out as much. In the darkness between flashing lights, I surged past men who turned towards me. I felt them reach for my tousle of black curls, wistful touches, or bolder grabs at my ass. As I dodged through the crowd, I looked slightly above heads or past shoulders. Eye contact was deadly. Not that I didn't want to meet someone, but I knew it was useless.

"Finally," Joey shouted over the tall bar table. "I was beginning to think you'd never leave your bedroom." He knew way too much about me.

"I've been busy."

Brett moved closer to me. He frowned. He was always frowning at me. "Busy or unconscious? You didn't take anything, did you?"

Old sins had long lives. "That was an accident."

"More like half a bottle of accidents."

Joey gave Brett a hard shove. "Back off. Sam's fine now. Aren't you?"

"Fine." I forced a smile.

"See?" Joey bounced away from the table. By the time he climbed up on a small dance platform, a bleached blond surfer dude was grinding against him.

Brett's melancholy eyes fixed on me. He twisted his fingers around a bottle cap and spun it. "Let me buy you a drink."

I pretended to study the label on the empty beer bottle on the table. "I got it."

"By the way, I sent in our registration for the spring rugby league."

"What do I owe you?"

Brett shook his head. "Don't worry about it. I covered it. No big deal."

Yes, Brett, we all know that you're the one with the good paying job.

Gods, I wanted to go home. It was too late for prayers, though. Prayer was what made me leave my apartment and go out with Brett and Joey. See, to the Gods, most prayer was like the buzz of a hungry mosquito in a dark room late at night. They couldn't swat it away, but they were tempted to clutch pillows to their ears to block out the irritating whine of petty human pleas.

Knowing that, I worshipped my Gods, but rarely prayed for anything. When I knelt before their altars and offered sacrifices, selfless adoration flowed off my soul much the same as when I gave my body to a Master. It was an incredible high to bow that low.

Boundless faith, bottomless misery, and sheer desperation—the holy trinity of prayer.

I cast glances anywhere but at Brett. Men tried to catch my eye. One waved, as if I knew him. I didn't. "Where's a waiter? They're usually all over us the minute we walk in the door."

Brett sent another bottle cap spinning across the table. "No, Sam, they're all over you. We mere mortals have to hunt them down or go to the bar."

Things were still strange between us from the last time we went out. I shouldn't have let it happen, but my guard was down. What I should have said was, "You knew what a lightweight I was, but you kept buying shots and insisting I down them. When you helped me stagger into the alley, I thought we were going to your car. Next thing I knew, you were sucking my dick," but I didn't want Brett to think about the unrestrained shockwave that exploded off me when I came. Maybe he didn't notice that everyone in Long Beach was having sex they'd regret later by the time I passed out in his car, but I sure as hell felt it.

Going out with them used to be so fun, but not lately. Therapy, they called it. Torture was a better word.

* * * *

My friends and Gods conspired against me that night. As long as I was there anyway, I decided to try to relax. I tried to catch the eye of anyone who would serve me a drink. Then, across the dance floor, reflected in the bar mirror, I saw Marcus towering over a baby-faced boy.

He always knew. He always found me. What human stood a chance against a God? My stomach squeezed. I backed away from the table. Marcus turned real slow, looked right at me, and gave me that look, the one that said he wasn't done with me yet, not by a long shot. Then he turned back to his prey. There was nowhere dark enough, no place low enough, I could escape to.

"Where are you going?" Brett tried to grab me. "You just got here."

"Bathroom." I bolted through the crowd. A solid wall of bodies blocked the back of the bar. I glanced over my shoulder. Brett was pissed. Joey was lost to the music. Marcus grinned at me.

Another wave of nausea hit. I shoved the heavy fire door out of my way and ran. Someone grasped my arm and yanked back, hard. For a second, I was scared that big hand belonged to Marcus.

I heard a loud noise, felt heat, saw a jumbled rush of dark inches from my face.

A black Hummer raced down the street so close to the curb that it kicked up cigarette butts and dust. By the time it registered that I'd almost run in front of it, all I could see were the taillights. If someone hadn't grabbed my arm, there would have been nothing left of me but a smear of red on the asphalt and some meat stuck between the teeth of the Hummer's front grill.

The fog gave the scene a grainy texture, almost noir. I was too distracted to think of the director who could have captured it on film. Okay, Borowczyk or Hitchcock, but that wasn't the definitive list. Oh Gods, I was babbling inside my head.

I watched the Hummer disappear. My feet hung over the edge of the curb, inches from sure death. I shook.

"You're okay now," a deep voice promised. His grip eased. And then—oh, it was too absolutely fucking perfect, the stuff wank fantasies were made of—with his other hand, he smacked my ass. "You sat on something dusty."

Instant hard-on. I forgot about Fear. The guy stopped spanking too soon. I groaned.

"Did you say something?" The rumble of his voice traveled along shivery nerves and landed in my groin.

Keep spanking me. Put me over your knee. I wanted to say it, but didn't. "Th-th-thank you, Sir." Oh, that was smooth.

He chuckled. His hand stayed on my arm and I wanted it there. Those rough hands felt so good on my bare skin.

My humbly lowered gaze made a quick three-stage trip up his body: cock—respectable basket, but in fairness, it was chilly out; arms—developed; face—Hello, Daddy!

The expensive dress pants and fine wool sweater that clung to his carefully maintained muscles didn't fool me. My trained eyes saw through his urban-professional camouflage down into his leather-daddy soul. He probably knew what I was about at first sight, too. Unlike him, though, I put it out there, because blatant saved a lot of time and uncomfortable talk.

I guessed he was a damn sexy mid-forties, maybe older. He had the weathered look of someone who worked outside. The brown of his skin didn't come from a tan, though. Maybe Caribbean or South American, probably Mexican. Nice crinkles around his brown eyes made his smile more personal, as if he'd been saving that one just for me. I was struck speechless by his hard body. He wasn't overly muscled, but solid. Everyone was taller than I was, but I could have rubbed my forehead against his pecs.

I knew the look on his face. He wanted to drag me somewhere. Marcus, Joey, Brett—they didn't matter. Come on, Sir, something quick and nasty. No names, no words, no tomorrows.

I was about to drop on my knees before him right there on the sidewalk when a frosty entity slammed into my mind, shoved my Self aside, and took over.

Deal! Why did the Goddess of Negotiation seize control of my body? She never did that before. None of my Gods had ever possessed me.

"No! No! Oh Gods, no," I screamed, but I had no control over my mouth.

My Self watched in horror as my body oozed Deal's cool composure. She took out my wallet and expertly pulled out my business card with a flip of the fingers. "I'm going home, alone. If you're interested, Daddy, call me. We can meet somewhere neutral for negotiations over lunch or coffee any day except Tuesday," Deal used my voice to tell him.

She was my mouthpiece, but not for that sort of thing. I swore that she would never, ever, get another offering from me.

I pounded on the barrier between realities, screaming at Deal not to make a complete ass out of me, but she pretended she couldn't hear. Still controlling my body, she turned me around and walked away from him. Shit, she made me look like such a damn twink!

"At least get his phone number!"

When Deal gave back control of my body at a red light on Cherry, I was still howling.

Chapter 2

The leather daddy had me, and I didn't even know his name. How to describe his skin? Caramel? Oh, yeah. Sweet, with milky undertones. Bronze? Hard and hammered. That worked, too. While I sprawled across my couch and tugged on my dick, I pictured his thumb stroking over my lips and then his hand going to the back of my neck to pull me to his cock.

The phone rang. I let the machine pick it up while I fantasized.

"I travel on business. Back in eight days. You will meet with me then." No name, no number. Just a command.

As soon as I recognized his voice I bolted for the phone, but I was too late.

I stared at the phone for one, two minutes. Gods—that voice. It sounded like silk over gravel. I played back the message while I jerked off.

* * * *

When he called the second time, he told me to meet him on a Tuesday. Of course he picked the only day Deal told him I wasn't free. Apologizing, I swore I had a press junket I had to go to—a screening followed by mob interviewing, my least favorite part of the job. He hung up without another word. I paced for hours, mind-fucking myself for that. Almost three weeks had passed since we met.

His number was blocked on my caller ID, so I couldn't chase him. I ran downstairs and pleaded with Angelena to give me his name. She turned the hose on me.

Two weeks after that, on a rainy Tuesday, he called again. I was given a seven-minute window to get my ass to an eclectic café on Broadway. He knew how to yank my leash. Sensing it was my last chance, I obeyed. The game was on.

Muttering more than a few prayers to the Goddess of Traffic got me through pink-tinged traffic lights. As usual, there was no parking on Broadway, so I had to circle the blocks until I found a spot. Time was ticking away.

As I locked my car, I prayed hard to the Goddess of First Dates. "This is really important to me. Help me get through the next hour, please," I muttered. Amen.

I jogged past a sex-toy shop, an antique dealer, and a heavily barred drugstore, to the coffeehouse. No one sat at the four small, wrought iron café tables on the sidewalk. A fat drop of chilly water rolled off the awning onto my neck as I ducked into the door. Late afternoon, the place was almost empty. The plum and teal walls gave the café the feel of permanent twilight even in the middle of the day. Comfortable, wing-backed chairs clustered around small tables in both cozy storefront rooms.

He stood near the large, wood counter, between the glass cases of baked goods. My memory hadn't done him justice. Power flowed off him. Black, buzz cut hair, brown eyes, brown skin. Perfect.

He turned his wrist to look at his watch. I didn't think I took over seven minutes, but when he checked the time, my stomach sank.

"I'm late?"

His brown eyes crinkled at me in warm approval. I wanted to crawl to his feet.

"You made good time."

He grasped my hand as if I was at a job interview. I've never had a guy do that before. Then again, Deal started it with the whole business card thing. Damn interfering Goddesses.

"Hector Garza," he introduced himself.

Finally, a name. Then, warning bells sounded in my brain. Hector Garza. He was legend in Long Beach BDSM circles. What an idiot I was that I didn't guess. Maybe it was because I thought if I ever saw him, he would be in head-to-toe leather, not wool pants and Italian loafers.

His gaze traveled every inch of me twice. I saw tension in his shoulders. Even though his eyes smiled, a frown was on his mouth and the confused signals sent me into panic mode. Sweat beaded on my upper lip.

"I already ordered. Why don't you get something and bring it over to a table so that we can talk, Sam." He was gently nice. That made it worse. He reached for his wallet. I gave a quick, sharp shake of my head and went to the counter, thankful for a chance to turn my back to him.

Muffins on a tray near the register sure looked good compared to the ramen noodles I'd been eating all week. They wanted three bucks for the chocolate chip one. I checked the damp bills wadded in my jeans pocket.

"Would you like something to eat?" Hector asked.

I flinched. I didn't expect him to follow me back to the counter. He probably caught me drooling at the food. A curl fell into my eyes as I shook my head.

"Coffee, extra large," I mumbled my order to the woman behind the counter.

Hector sauntered to a small table in the second room. I waited for our orders up at the register even though the woman assured me twice that she'd bring them to our table. Anything to prolong the sweet agony. Between the moment that I picked up our drinks and when I sat down at the table, there were infinite possibilities ahead. The second we talked, though, the future would rush into a narrow focus and we'd careen toward an inevitably bad end.

A good shiver passed down to my toes. Imagine. The leather god called me.

We sat at a small table near the bookcase of used autobiographies. Two minutes later, a harassed woman shoved her child's stroller to the table next to ours. It figured. The place was almost empty, but she had to get so close that we couldn't talk privately.

Hector put his hand out. "Driver's license."

What the fuck?

"I don't date high schoolers."

"I'm not —."

"I met you outside a club, not inside. You're free in the middle of the day. And then there's the way you dress."

Miserably aware of my faded, thrift shop T-shirt and wet hair, I slumped in my seat. My pant legs were soaked from jogging through deep puddles. He gave me only seven minutes to make a ten minute drive. What did he expect?

Hector snapped his fingers. I handed my license to him. After inspecting it like a suspicious bouncer, he gave it back. "If it's a fake, it's a good one." He relaxed, though. "I hoped for at least twenty. This is much better."

I shoved my license back into my wallet and tried not to get annoyed. It was nothing personal. I got carded all the time for drinks, but it was a first for sex.

"You travel on business?" I asked. What a great opening line, numbnuts. Of course he travels on business. He told you that when he left that message on your machine.

Hector's presence filled the room, as if he belonged anywhere he went. He settled comfortably into his chair. "I sell oil drilling supplies. My territory is West Coast, not including Alaska."

There had to be a reply to that to help the conversation lurch forward. I would have been happy to stare at the way the sleeve of his heather sweater pulled halfway up his forearm, showing ropey veins and thick, black hair. I only wanted to listen to him talk, his voice was so hot, but he leaned forward and waited patiently for me to say something.

The door of the café slammed open, letting in a gust of air that chilled my legs.

Beads of water skidded down the arm of my jacket to puddle under my shoes. Cars hissed across wet streets outside, a sound that melded with the gurgling and fizzing of the espresso machines. Chocolate laced the hot java aroma.

I finally thought of something to say. "Not much call for oil drilling in L.A."

"Signal Hill." Hector pointed inland. "It's an island floating on a sea of oil. Ever been over La Cienega and Stocker in L.A.? Oil fields. La Brea tar pits? What do you think makes tar pits? Los Angeles is an oil town. It's just hidden."

He didn't say it that way, but I felt like the slow student in the classroom. I shrunk down a little more and filled my mouth with the bitter sweetness of my coffee.

Visions of him coming back from the oil fields covered in sweat and grit made me want to dive under the table and bury my nose in his groin.

"Los Angeles is like sedimentary rock—layers applied over each other and compressed together. One layer is entertainment industry, another is agriculture, oil, aerospace, fashion, meat packaging—name the industry and it's here somewhere you've driven past a million times and never noticed." He held out his hand, palm out, flat, and pushed the other on top of it.

The words "meat packaging" did strange things to my mind. So did that hand sandwich. Huddling behind my extra-tall cup of coffee, I compared him to the drink: his eyes were warm, brown, sweet. It was hot like him, too. Holding on too long might burn me, but what a way to go. He'd make a good blanket, warm and fuzzy against the winter day, spread on top of me in bed while I absorbed the comfort of being wanted.

Oops—my turn to talk. I opened my mouth and stupidity tumbled out. "I always thought of Los Angeles as a large Japanese tea house."

Shut up, shut up, shut up, Sam! No one wants to hear your weirdness.

"More than one reality coexists in the same space, divided into chambers of being by sliding panels. Each reality is only marginally aware of the other, as if we live in the extremes of someone else's peripheral vision, on the edges of other people's Los Angeles, or their universes. We're separated by the thinnest of barriers, but those boundaries connect us, too, like walls of rooms. Every person we meet is an intersection. Sometimes we live side by side, or intertwine, and then veer off in separate directions. There's the gay community here in Long Beach, a goth community, Renaissance Faire types, and the Vietnamese, the Blacks, the Mexicans, the punks, and even the white hetero population. None of us live entirely in one sphere, though. We hold intersections of different worlds inside us, and we're the bridge points where others can enter those universes. We are the keys to the doors. Those connections are the supporting columns of community, but the spaces between are where we define who we are."

Fuck. Was I still talking? I couldn't seem to shut up. I remembered that prayer I sent out to the Goddess of First Dates. She probably thought she was helping me. Turn it off! Turn it off! For the love of humanity, stop my mouth. Please!

"My Dad's big into Japanese culture." As lame excuses went, that was ... lame.

We sipped our drinks.

The woman at the next table pulled out her mobile phone and angrily tapped in a number. Her poor kid stared out at the world with defeated eyes.

"Sam, if you didn't get tossed out of that club for being under age, what made you come flying out of there so fast that you almost got yourself run over?"

I didn't want to think about that.

"So, how's the oil business nowadays?" I tried to look deeply interested.

"Good." He assessed me. "Where's the accent from? Alabama? Texas?"

"Oklahoma. South Eastern. Yours?"

He leaned back, casually crossing his legs. "Do I have an accent?"

Oh, shit. Yes he did, an urban-Mexican rhythm, but refined. "A little. To my ears. Maybe I'm wrong." Maybe I'm a fucking moron. I couldn't look at him any longer, so I plucked a loose thread from the arm of my chair. Babble, babble, babble. My mouth lost its footing and I was on the slippery slope down to, "It was nice meeting you, but sorry, this won't work." Great. Just fucking great. There went my plan to act like a normal human just long enough to get some sex.

"What were you running from, Sam?"

I took another sip of my coffee.

Hector wouldn't be sidetracked. He was smart. I should have known that from his eyes. Smart was good, better than I hoped for. I was willing to settle for a hard-hat fantasy.

His voice took on an edge. "What happened inside that club the night that we met?"

I twisted the hem of my shirt around my finger. Why did he care? What did it matter? It had nothing to do with him.

Please, please, please, something make him stop staring at me.

"Why were you running?"

More sweat beaded above my lips. Please distract him!

The toddler's shoe dropped on the tile floor.

Hector picked up the shoe and put it back on the tiny foot. Thrilled to have someone paying attention to him, the toddler flirted. The mom blah blah blahed on her mobile, oblivious. Hector's eyes crinkled in a genuine smile as he played a quick game of peek-a-boo with the kid. With him distracted, I ran in frantic mental circles and tried to collect my scattered wits.

The mom snapped her phone closed, gave us a nasty look as if we were miserable excuses for human beings, and wheeled her kid away.

Leaning back in his chair again, Hector rubbed his chin like a chess master getting a new perspective on the board. If it had been possible to melt into the puddle of rain under my chair, I would have.

Time to go into full retreat. My hands had to move, so I wiped the sugar crystals from the tabletop. "It was nice meeting you, Sir —."

"Sit."

I dropped back down into the chair.

"What do you do, Sam?"

"Movie critic, several small papers, e-zines, and a print magazine."

"It's nothing, really." I don't tell him my proudest achievement—that I'd wormed my way into studio publicists' non-existent hearts so that I got on the list for screenings. I wasn't raised to brag. Besides, saying it aloud sounded self-important, queeny, Hollywood bitchy to me. "I'm sorry, but today is a deadline for almost all my editors. I had to meet you, but I have to get back to work," I told him in a rush as I collected my trash. I was great at quick retreats.

"You didn't finish your work first, boy?"

Even if I hadn't heard all those rumors about him from other submissives, if I ever questioned whether he was a top, I knew for sure right then—how he said it, and how I reacted.

I hung my head. "No, Sir." Let's play.

"I guess I'll have to see that you get it done."

Hector Garza wanted to follow me home. Could I keep him?

* * * *

I was still stunned when I opened the door of my apartment. No one ever came home with me. Ever. I hoped he thought shabby was cute. My furniture was clean, but very used. A quick glance around the small front room reassured me that it was okay to have company. No wanking magazines opened to sticky pages; no dirty laundry stuffed between couch cushions.

"Make yourself at home." I pointed to the couch, then tossed my keys onto my computer desk.

He shook water off his shoulders before he stepped inside. One quick glance around pretty much gave him the complete tour—TV on the same wall as my computer desk, coffee table, couch. There wasn't room for anything else, except the altars on the wall behind the couch. Straight ahead was a doorway to a kitchen so small that, as my Dad would say, you couldn't cuss at a cat without getting fur in your mouth.

Hector pulled out the chair in front of my computer and patted the seat. "Finish your work."

"I have to go piss. Large coffee."

"Sit."

I sat. I turned on the computer. He hovered over me as I wrote. I hated that. I almost hit the send button when he rumbled a terse command to proofread it first. I was turned on, caffeinated, and in dire need of a piss, but I obeyed.

When the e-mails went, I started to rise, but he pushed me back down.

"You didn't ask for permission, boy."

Instant hard-on. We were playing.

My foot tapped in crazy rhythms as the need to go got worse. The sound of the water passing through the gutters of my apartment building didn't help.

"May I piss?"

Hector walked around the room inspecting the photos on my walls. I had pictures of family everywhere.

"No pictures of you? Are you the photographer?"

"No. Please, may I go to the bathroom?"

Hector ignored me. He spent a long time looking at the altars that hung on the wall behind my couch, but he didn't touch anything. I liked that. Poking fingers into candles, smudge pots, flowers, and bottles of booze that sat on the small shelves was disrespectful to me and the Gods I worshipped, but people did it anyway. Sometimes guys even flung open the cabinet doors to peer inside the altars.

"Please, I need to piss." Bouncing in the seat was a mistake. "I really have to go."

He went back to the couch, flipped through a magazine, and tormented me with his neglect. The worst part had to be that he knew it turned me on.

"I'm going to piss my pants."

His eyebrow rose a bit, but he didn't turn his attention from the magazine.

Are you into that, Sir?

"Sir. Please may I piss?" Eyes down, head bowed, I sat as still as I could.

He grunted satisfaction and set aside the magazine.

Hector led me to the bathroom, stood behind me, and unbuttoned my fly. My dick was a rock by time he touched the third button. Stealing a little bit of something for myself, I snuggled back against his chest. His hand delved into my pants to scoop out cock and balls. I felt his chin dig into my shoulder as he peered down to check out what he was holding.

He gave my dick a moment of silent respect.

"You can go now, boy," his voice rumbled into the nape of my neck.

There wasn't a chance in hell. "I can't. You've got me too hard."

He stroked my dick, using both of those big hands.

"That won't help," I snapped.

Hector ran water in the sink. With the plumbing in my apartment, it could take years to get hot water out of the tap. When the sink was half-full of tepid water, he plunged my hand into it. Once I was used to the warmth, he pulled my hand out, turned on the cold, and stuck my hand back under the flow.

I closed my eyes and concentrated.

"Obey me." His thumb pressed on some magic spot and suddenly I was shooting a torrent of golden piss into the bowl. He held my dick. It felt good.

"Thank you, Sir." I twisted a bit to check if he was hard. Oh, yeah.

"Good boy." He put me back in my pants and buttoned my fly.

Damn. I'd never, ever, had a guy get a look at what I was packing and then ignore it. Were we playing or not? I followed him back out to the couch.

"What's with this stuff?" He pointed at the altars.

Wanting to come across as serious, I sat on the couch with him instead of kneeling at his feet. "These are altars where I worship my Gods."

Something in my tone must have warned him that I wasn't kidding.

"Did you convert after moving out here?"

"I didn't have to convert. The Dewey Clan held true. We're long-time witches, seers, healers. I was raised in the faith."

"Strange catechism."

My temper tweaked. "No more than any other religion."

He turned back to the altars. "Different ones for different Gods?"

I pointed to the sleek new altars. "The one with the Thai inspired design is for Crash, the God of Computers. The one with inlaid wood beside his is for Deal, the Goddess of Negotiation, who handles both professional and personal matters."

Sometimes a little too hands on.

"What does it mean when you've taken one off the wall?" Hector pointed to an altar that I'd stuck in the corner and covered with my spare pillowcase.

"I'm trying not to worship that one anymore. He's an ex."

"Ex-god?"

"Ex-Master." I turned my gaze away from Hector and took a deep breath. "Gods aren't immortal. They don't live much longer than humans do. Every time a God spirit is reborn in the cycle, the Dewey Clan stands ready to worship the new deity. That doesn't mean we have to, though, except that Mom would scalp me if I didn't worship the family Gods. So I have altars for the God of Agriculture, the God of Weather, and of course, Mama Fertility, even though I don't farm. My main deity is the Goddess of Traffic." I pointed to the chromed altar. The cabinet doors were open, revealing Harley stickers and a picture of a nasty Italian girl draped over a wicked red racing bike. A bottle of breathtakingly expensive tequila sat on the shelf below the cabinet

"Traffic?"

That one threw everyone, even my family. I often recognized Gods long before anyone else in my clan did.

"From Simi Valley to south of Tijuana is a solid band of humanity, probably 20 million people, and every single soul, no matter what religion they think they follow, prays to the Goddess every time they hit the road. That's an impressive power base. I mean, think about it. There's only one true sin in L.A., fucking up traffic."

He let out the laugh he'd been trying to stifle. "I can guess which altar is for weather, agriculture, and fertility, but who is the little red lacquered altar for?" Hector was being polite, but I sensed that he truly wanted to understand.

"The minor deities share. I'm never sure if those nameless ones are old gods clinging to life, or new gods without much of a power base: the God of Exact Change; Goddess of Please Let My Period Start ... Think of how many prayers rise from human lips in the average day. People didn't mind asking for help, but then they refuse to believe in their own Gods. It's sad. A lot of minor deities end up in therapy. No amount of hand patting and 'it's them, not you' can give a God the strength to go on. Only worship, faith, and the occasional bottle of Stoli can do that."

"Or Don Padroné."

I glanced at the bottle I knew was there. "The Goddess of Traffic is a unique entity."

"The Goddess of Negotiation got a miniature bottle of it."

Despite my grumbling, I gave Deal a percentage of the gross offering the night I met Hector. After all, she did hand him my card. I wouldn't have dared.

"She, um, helped me with something lately. She hasn't touched the bottle, though, so I think she's holding out for something better." I shrugged. "That's her nature. I have a feeling I'm going to hate to see the price tag. She's not one of the more personable Gods."

His eyebrow rose. "You know them?"

"Of course I have a personal relationship with my Gods. Doesn't everyone?"

Hector slid his hands across his thighs. "No, Sam."

I didn't believe him. "But I hear those Christian guys on TV say that they were talking to God —."

"They were talking at God. That doesn't mean God was listening, or answering them." His fingers crept across my threadbare couch cushions until he had my hand. "You do understand that people lie, don't you?"

"I'm not stupid."

Hector's smile reached all the way up to his eyes. "Of course not. You're just very young."

My brow furrowed as I tried to figure out if there was an insult hidden in that. He saw my frown and made a gentle sound of sympathy to let me know he wasn't being mean, but I still had the feeling that he was teasing me.

"If I lied about something the Goddess of Traffic said to me, she'd kick my ass."

"What does she say to you?"

Oh man, I was going freak boy on him again. There was no way I'd tell him what my gods said to me.

"She told me to change lanes already."

"What does that mean?" he asked.

No matter how far away I pulled, he followed me. Retreat wasn't working, so I got a little attitude going. "You know those people who drive forever with their blinker on, but they never move over? They drive her insane."

His expression changed from nice to hardass in a flicker. "Watch that tone, boy. I don't like sarcasm. Understand?"

"Yes, Sir."

I understood perfectly. That was how the game went. Me, bad boy in need of discipline. You, strict dominant who has had enough of my attitude. The stage was set; we knew our roles. Action!

Hector rubbed his thumb over the back of my hand as we sat there doing nothing. That wasn't how it was supposed to happen. I wondered if I misread him. I chewed on my bottom lip. It was as if we were on different pages of a script. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get the scene right.

I stared at our hands. With my pale skin, and his rich brown coloring, we'd contrast well tangled together in the sheets, like Antonio Banderas and Brad Pitt in the movie *Interview with the Vampire*. Wait—maybe I only fantasized that scene. Should have been one. They at least should have kissed. Banged fang. Shared blood. I bet the European cut of the movie had a scene like that.

"What are you looking for, Sam?"

I'd settle for anyone who wasn't Marcus. Everything else was a bonus. What I admitted was, "Someone I can hang out with, who likes the same stuff I do."

"You were looking for someone like that in a club?"

I didn't know if he was scolding or teasing. He still held my hand.

"I don't cruise." Liar. "Much." Ooh, smooth recovery there. "My friends, Joey and Brett, wanted to go out. They were trying to hook up. I was in their way."

"I can imagine." He spoke under his breath, but I heard him.

Hector squinted a bit as he looked me over again, as if he couldn't see me clearly. "A boy like you, I bet you're out every night. Do you like to go out dancing?"

"Strange things happen when I dance, so I avoid clubs."

Something about the smile that curved the corners of his lips made me think he liked what I said.

"What do you like to do?"

I got my hand away from him and turned to the kitchen. "Would you like something to drink?"

"I asked you a question."

He was relentless. Panic chills tightened across my chest so I went to get a bottle of water from the refrigerator. When I came back, I curled into the far corner of the couch with my feet up under me. I had no clue what he wanted. Did he want to know about sex? My job? Sports? I picked at the piping along the rim of the cushion.

Was he going to make me fill out an application to suck his cock?

Hector leaned down across the couch until he was almost lying on it. He peered up at me so that I couldn't escape with a lowered gaze. How could anyone be that interested? It was just a damn blowjob.

"I play basketball. Soccer. Rugby."

"Rugby? You?"

I nodded.

He laughed. "You're going to get yourself killed."

"Bruises aren't a problem. I like them." Anything to get his mind back on track.

"So I've heard, but that's not what I want to know. What do you do to relax?"

My mind went blank. I stalled by sucking down half my bottle of water, but he didn't seem to notice. I couldn't shrink back any more into the cushions and if I kept picking at the couch, it would have a new hole.

The God of Misery crept across the back of the couch. An invisible silvery snake, she slithered across my shoulders, weighing them down. Her tail wrapped around my mouth. If I didn't move, didn't get away from Hector, I'd suffocate.

"I'm a pretty good c-c-cook," I blurted.

"Are you?" He didn't seem to notice the stammer. I liked the quiet way he smiled.

Relief poured over me and words came easier. "Yeah. I don't get to do it much, because it's only me, but I enjoy it. Respecting your food is important to my family. Food alchemy."

"What's that?"

I waved my hand towards the photos on the wall. "That's what my sister Linda calls it. You take pure ingredients like homegrown heirloom tomatoes, fresh basil, organic olive oil, and fresh mozzarella, and put them together. The dish transcends the individual elements, but doesn't overpower or alter them."

"So you prefer Italian food?"

I leaned forward. Talking was okay, but I was sure that he followed me home for sex, not cooking tips. He was obviously hard. I couldn't miss that package. "Doesn't have to be. I like taking something that's the best and present it simply so that the natural qualities shine. I like it as raw as I can get it."

His chest swelled with a deep inhale, as if the air in my apartment was heavy. He watched my mouth. "That doesn't sound like cooking."

It wasn't supposed to.

I slipped my hand oh-so-casually under my shirt and played with my nipples while I stared at his package. My tongue practically dangled out. Hint, hint.

"You live alone?"

I nodded.

"You belong to someone?"

I shook my head.

There was a subtle shift around his eyes, and his tone changed with it. "If I find out you're wearing someone's collar, you're going to regret the lie. I'll give you another chance. Are you owned?"

"No, Sir."

"Who are you dating?"

"No one."

He didn't seem to believe me. "How long ago did you break up with someone?"

"What does it —?"

"Answer me."

"I haven't seen anyone for a while. Over five months." Not since Marcus. "I don't get many calls."

"You don't get many calls." He looked angry. "When was your last date?"

What was it with him and the endless questions? "I don't date. I suck cock."

He smacked me across my mouth. "I warned you about that tone, boy."

What a rush. All the rumors about him were true. So fucking hot.

"I asked you a question."

"I tried to hook up with a guy I met in a chat room." Found out the hard way that online, Marcus could have as many identities as I did. "Wasn't who I expected." I knocked at room 6 of the Sea Sprite Motel. Instead of a bear named Dennis, Marcus was there. I was so shocked to see him that I froze. He dragged me into the room and made me kneel on the gritty carpet. I got away with a black eye and a cut lip that night, and was damn grateful that all he wanted was tears and blood. Next time, he warned me, he'd have my ass. "Haven't dared it since." You can't say I don't learn from my mistakes.

Remembering it made me weary. My shoulders drooped. "I haven't been able —. I mean, I try to go out..." I couldn't get Marcus out of my mind. I tugged at the neck of my T-shirt. Could some God just strike me dead and spare me this? With my hands over my eyes, I could keep talking a bit more, and maybe that would be enough. "I haven't met anyone for almost half a year, okay? I don't see anyone. I don't talk to anyone. I don't dance. I don't date. I don't go out if I can avoid it."

When I took my hands away, he was there, close. I tried to back away, but there was nowhere to go. He raised his hands. I expected another slap. Instead, he cupped my face between his palms and kissed me with the lightest touch.

"Are you okay now?"

I wasn't sure what he meant, but I nodded.

"Good."

He shoved me backwards and yanked my T-shirt up to my armpits.

My nipples were big cones of flesh. Every nerve in my body connected through that pale pink skin. Hector sucked on them until they were hard nubs and I was about to shoot inside my pants.

The buckle of Hector's belt dug into my stomach. His weight bound me to the sagging cushions of my couch and I felt the rapid beat of his heart under his ribs, or was that my pulse?

He traced my lips with his fingers. I panted by the time his thumbnail completed the loop. My mouth pressed to his hand. He gently turned me to face him, and then he tasted me.

Never, never, never had I kissed with a guy like that. Oh, sure, one hungry mouth-invading, tonsil swab before the real sex, but nothing like Hector's carnal kisses. He brutally attacked my lips and fucked my mouth with his tongue.

Hector shifted, jabbing his hard-on into my thigh. I ground against him.

"No. Just kiss," he scolded.

It felt so good to have a body pressed close. Fear tried tapping on my forehead to get my attention, but I was too into Hector to stop. I lost myself in his mouth. My hands slid past the nape of his neck as my fingers tried to grasp at his crew-cut, black hair.

Hector pulled away from my lips. I lifted up, chasing him, but he nuzzled into my neck and exhaled moist air into the wisps of hair behind my ear. One hand crept over mine and intertwined our fingers. Time slipped. Whatever he wanted, I was along for the ride.

I didn't know what thoughts Hector collected at the nape of my neck, but when he turned back to me, he teased my mouth with his, brushing past my lips and then away, never giving me what I craved.

I groaned.

He released my hand and wrapped an arm around my head. As he descended to my parted lips, I wondered what flavor of lonely he tasted in me. Desperate or sad?

Sex could be isolating, but kissing, ah, I wished I had known about kissing before. Unlike my sister Linda, I never had boys over to neck on the couch in the front room of my parents' house. I didn't dare hunt for sex until I was away at college, and by then kissing was passé. Everything centered on cock.

Hector taught me how to kiss as if it was the highest form of sex.

He pulled back once again and brushed his lips over mine. He bit along my neck, at first light nips, and then so hard I could feel the bruises blossoming under the edges of his teeth. I tipped my chin, surrendering my throat to him.

Against the harsh overhead lights, my eyes closed to heavy lidded slits and I couldn't quite breathe. He slowly pinched one of my nipples so that it went from pleasure to pain to pleasure again. Even though he released my arms, I kept them over my head. I winced as the intensity of his pinch grew. Before I could cry out, he put a finger to my mouth. I bit down on my bottom lip to stop the yelp.

He peered closely at me as his fingernails cut into my nipple.

A tear of pain rolled down the side of my face. My back arched off the cushions and I thrashed against him until he released my nipple. At first, it was wonderful, but then the blood rushed back in and I was in new agony. He let me buck against him, riding out the waves of pain. A fine sheen of sweat covered my skin.

My voice shaky, I begged him for more pain. If he touched me right, I'd probably come without stroking. My arm wrapped around his neck. I begged him to kiss me. The addiction was complete. I already had the shakes from withdrawal.

Hector gently made me let go. He stood and adjusted his package, obviously hard. "I have to go now."

Was he insane? He could have anything from me. I propped up on my elbows and tried like hell to look irresistibly fuckable.

"Not today, Sam, but go ahead and beg for it." There was so much laughter around his eyes. He handed me his business card. "If you need to get a hold of me, call my mobile."

Not his home number? Was I something on the side? Made sense. How could someone like him be alone? He was a legend. The boys I knew would line up for a chance to feel his whip.

Trying to be cool didn't work, so I slipped to the floor and kneeled between his legs. His pants were soft as I rubbed my face into his groin. I put my mouth over the outline of his cock and exhaled.

Hector cupped his hand under my jaw. "I didn't say you could have that, boy." He shoved me back on my ass, hard.

I stayed down. We were playing, all right, but it was his game, not mine.

Chapter 3

After mind-fucking myself for a couple days over Hector, I needed a reality check. Back when I could go to bars and S&M clubs, men watched with open interest and made their moves. A few words would be exchanged and within seconds I'd be on my knees. With Hector, those seconds were turning into weeks and the uncertainty drove me nuts. It was time to call in an expert.

"Okay, Joey, interpret this one for me. A guy was in my apartment —."

"You had a real guy over? Because I hate it when I get into these stories and it turns out that it was a dream."

I flopped down on my dark blue corduroy bedspread. "This really hot guy was on my couch. Cross between poppa bear and leather daddy. Raging hard-on."

"How big?" Joey's voice was sticky.

"You're such a size queen."

"You've ruined me for all other men." He pretended to sob.

If I had known we were going to end up friends, I never would have let that happen. At least he didn't make me feel weird about it like Brett did. "Anyway, oh my gods, we made out and it was totally hot. Like unbelievable. But he wouldn't let me give him a bj, and I was begging for it."

"Straight."

Say it ain't so, Joe. "No fucking way." I rolled onto my back and stared up at the peacock rainbows on my ceiling. "Is it me? You always tell me I'm weird."

He chewed nosily. "Guys care about weird afterwards, not before. Trust me, if you're on your knees, you've got the job. Besides, your weirdness is part of the whole otherworldly, untouchable, unobtainable Sex God thing you've got going on."

I rolled my eyes.

"Did he get a look at yours?" Joey asked.

"Yeah."

"There's no way in hell a guy turned you down, Sam. Not if you flashed him. Doesn't happen. It's impossible. You made it up." Joey slurped something.

"What are you eating?" I hoped the answer wasn't cock, but I wouldn't put it past him.

"In-N-Out shake. Vanilla. Double-double. Fries." Joey watched his weight more carefully than I watched mine. He hardly ever ate like that unless he was depressed. Before I could ask, he blurted, "All that time Brett was playing the part of Mr. Conservative Accountant, but it turns out he's a slut in blue pinstripes. He bogarted my surfer dude! Just because he paid for my drinks didn't mean I was his advance scout. That whore!"

I wanted to talk about my problem, not Joey's, but we were friends. "Complete whore," I agreed. That was all it took to set Joey off on a rant. I settled in for the long haul and murmured the occasional word to let him know I was still awake.

* * * *

Two hours later, I was still clueless about Hector. I trooped down my stairs in search of enlightenment. Angelena wasn't home, so I knocked on Crash's door. Crash was the Computer God and one of the protective deities who shielded me from Marcus. He was from Thailand, and hot, hot, hot, but terminally straight.

My eyes closed tight as I prayed, "Someone be home."

In the split second before the door opened, I realized I shouldn't have gone to Crash, but there was no way I was going to play ding-dong-ditch with one of my Gods.

Deal opened the door. We were both startled. "Sam." She didn't invite me inside, but she peered around as if extremely surprised to see that she was in Long Beach.

"Is Crash home?"

"Apparently not." She pressed the door close to her body so that I couldn't see past her. Deal was in a pale pink silk wrap. I heard soft music from inside the apartment.

"Okay. Thanks." I stepped back.

Deal groaned, but quietly. "What do you need, Sam?"

"Nothing. It's fine. Everything's fine." I was trapped. I couldn't turn my back on a Goddess. "Sorry to bother you."

"You obviously wanted to talk to someone, or I wouldn't be here." Deal leaned against the doorframe and crossed her thin legs at the ankles. Gold rings glinted from several toes. Her toenails were painted the same frosty pink as her fingernails.

I didn't know what to say.

Deal scowled. "Angelena told me to be sure to tell you this. You were my first client, Sam. I was fresh out of law school, looking for work as an agent, so I decided to do some pro-bono work at the writer's workshop in Hollywood in the hopes that I'd get a chance to represent the next big name. At the very least I thought I'd make connections that I could use to network my way up the food chain."

The day we met in the office in a North Hollywood storefront, Deal ordered me to sit and demanded to see the folder in my hand. Her aura was a borealis of agitated energy. Brusque didn't begin to describe her manner.

"Even though your contract wasn't big, it got me started in the business. More importantly, your unshakable belief made me." From the look on Deal's face, that was hard for her to admit. She ran her fingers through her short hair. "So spill it already. I don't have all day."

She so wasn't the person to talk to about my sex life, but she was a Goddess. I couldn't refuse. "I had a guy over. Hector. The one you got for me. Thank you, by the way." I already made my offering, but personal thanks were in order, too.

For that, she cracked a small smile. "I only gave Hector your phone number. The rest was all you. However, since you want to be grateful, Angelena likes tequila, but I expect Maker's Mark."

"Noted." I dared a quick glance into her icy blue eyes. "Hector was over at my place, and he was turned on, but he gave me his business card and left without um..." I did not talk to ladies about sex. I was a slut, but I was raised to be a gentleman. "Well, we didn't..."

"Ink the bottom line?"

I nodded, grateful for the euphemism. "I thought I made it clear that I was a sure thing, but he left without getting any."

"Maybe Hector's holding out for a better deal, Sam."

That never occurred to me. "Negotiating?"

"You negotiated with all your other dominants. You call it power exchange. Use your power."

I ducked my head. "I don't have any power."

"Then what the hell are you exchanging?"

She was no help.

A strangled groan came from Deal's throat. "Of all the Gods, you know that I appreciate power. You give it away, Sam. You have no clue how much you could demand in return.

Until you admit that you're a God and claim your power, all you can do is send out those little lust tsunamis and occasionally conjure up a little chaos magic. Figure this out on your own. I don't have time to babysit you." She slammed the door closed.

Halfway up the stairs to my door, I smacked my hand against the white stucco railing. Typical fucking Deal. She got a two hundred dollar bottle of booze out of our conversation and I got nothing.

Since I met most of them before they became aware of their inner divinity, I knew the true names of most of my Gods. Some, like Angelena, didn't mind me using that name. Others, like Deal and Crash, had a strong superstition that their true name held power, so they insisted that I call them by God names. Deal's real name was Ilsa. One day, I was going to use it against her.

Chapter 4

Hector called that evening. He ordered me to make dinner for him. "Eight o'clock, sharp."

I panicked and called my sister Linda for advice. "Doug didn't marry you for your personality, so you must have trapped him with food. What bait did you use?"

"Sammy's got a date," Linda mocked me in singsong.

"Linda. Please."

"You should have started off with 'please,' you little smartass." She made me grovel a couple minutes before she said, "Pot roast. Don't forget the gravy."

As soon as we got off the phone, Linda must have called Mom to tell her that I had a capital D date. Mom phoned me to ask, in her subtle way, whether I wanted sex or companionship out of the evening. The herbs were different.

At the market, I bought herbs for both potions because I wasn't sure what I was after. It wasn't something I thought about. Sure, I always hoped for sex, but I never tried to magic it before.

As I cooked, I tossed in a hefty pinch of the spell for sex, then panicked and evened it out for companionship.

Linda called me at seven o'clock to remind me I could go for option C, her infamous "Fuck Me the Second You Step in the Door" spell.

"Maybe I should," I admitted. I wasn't getting anywhere with Hector on my own.

"Oh, but your date will be there in less than an hour, and that potion takes about six hours to brew," Linda said with faked regret. Laughing hysterically, like that was the funniest joke ever, she made kissy noises into the phone. "Have a fun evening, lover boy."

* * * *

Hector showed up exactly at eight. There was a moment between his footsteps hitting the top step and his knock. I waited with my hand on the doorknob, wondering if I should open the door.

The first thing he did when he saw me was frown. Next time, I was going to have that mindless lust potion ready.

"Do you own anything other than T-shirts and jeans?"

"Yeah. Shorts."

He took my jaw in one hand and smacked my cheek with the other. The second strike was much harder. "Don't talk back to me like that, boy."

"Sorry, Sir. Thank you, Sir." I was so fucking turned on.

Hector warned me, "This is how it's going to be. I'm strict, I discipline harshly, and I don't put up with backtalk. If you don't want this, tell me now."

Little pain piggy that I was, I was flush with lust for him. "I want it, Sir." Bad. You're exactly what this boy's been craving. Fuck dinner. Let's play some more.

Hector claimed his territory on my sagging couch, sitting in the middle and spreading his arms across the back. I stayed where he left me.

He gave my clothes another sour glance. "I'll take you shopping."

I winced.

"Problem, boy?"

"No, Sir. If you pick out what you want me to wear, I'll buy it."

He tilted his head as if I'd said something odd.

I remembered my manners. "Would Sir like a drink?"

"Dinner. I eat at eight fifteen every night. Remember that."

"Do you eat beef?" If his answer was no, I was in big trouble.

He sniffed at the air. "Smells good."

"Pot roast." And some sex and companionship.

I saw his ghost of a smile and sent a prayer of thanks winging to Linda. "I gotta check it." I nodded toward the kitchen. My face was still warm from his hand and I loved the edge that put on the evening.

* * * *

Hector sat at the tiny round table in my kitchen. The roast was done, but I lifted the lid and let steam laced with possibilities rise into the room. I ran to set the table, and got the plates down, but then had to check on the veggies. While I was doing that, I remembered the napkins, so I darted over to grab some. Every movement seemed centered through my dick and my nerves were hyperaware of Hector at all times, as if they reached across the room to feel him.

"While you're doing that, Sam, I think I'll have a look around."

I followed him through my apartment because I wanted to be on the spot to blabber a weak excuse for anything he found that he didn't like. He opened my closet, sighed at my clothes, frowned at my Arsenal and Juventus posters, and checked the back of my bedroom door.

Clean sheets! Notice the clean sheets on the bed!

He went into my bathroom. He'd been in there before, so I didn't know what he expected would be different. Strange tour, but he had such a satisfied smirk on his face that I knew he must have found something.

We went back to the kitchen to eat. I had everything on the table with two minutes to spare.

When I set his dinner in front of him, Hector pushed the plate away. "No."

"You said you eat beef."

"The food is fine. The presentation is terrible. Try again."

Three attempts later, the food was getting cold and he still wasn't happy.

"If you tell me what you want..."

He put his elbows on the table and rested his chin on his hand. "I want you to concentrate on every step. You have so much energy that you ricochet around without thinking about what you're doing. Shut out the noise. Focus."

I got a new plate out for him, but didn't immediately put food on it. One thing I already liked about Hector was that he gave me space to work things through. Most masters liked to see quick obedience without thought.

It took me a minute or so, but I figured out what he was after. Presentation mattered. I made sure that each slice of the beef was uniform, the gravy flowed in an artistic line, and the vegetables showed their colors. I didn't stop there, though. I concentrated on how I brought it to him, and how I set the plate down.

"Much better. I want to see you put that much focus into everything. Do it right, do it once."

I was so relieved, and happy. "Yes, Sir."

"Now fix your plate and come eat."

I slipped onto the chair opposite him carefully, wary of stupid mistakes.

"I talked to some people about you."

My temper flashed, but I hid it with downcast eyes. There was no reason to talk about me. It was just sex.

"I spoke to Keith, Serge, Manny, and Ophir."

An achy, hollow feeling spread through my gut. He knew the entire timeline of my life in Long Beach, except Marcus. Thank the Gods he didn't know about Marcus. The food in my mouth was like ashes. "How did you know?"

"Sam," Hector chided me with a sad smile. "I've been hearing stories about you for over two years."

Why would anyone talk about me?

"Honestly, I thought you were more rumor than reality. How could any boy be that hot and have such a bottomless appetite for pain?"

As long as he understood that meant the good kind of pain.

"No mirrors. I didn't believe it. They were right. I didn't notice that you painted over the mirror last time I was in your bathroom. How do you shave?" He reached across the table to run his fingers up my cheek.

He was one of those guys who had to touch all the time. That was going to be a problem, because if I wasn't sucking his cock, I wanted lots of space.

"How is it that everyone knows you except me, Sam?"

I shrugged. I wondered that myself.

He wanted something more than sex from me, something which I didn't think I could deliver. Maybe he didn't even want sex from me. How fucking depressing was that?

"Dinner was good."

"Thank you, Sir." I sounded as miserable as I felt.

"Tell me about yourself." Hector leaned back in his chair.

I thought we'd already done that. I couldn't think of anything to add.

Hector took a sip of his drink. "I can see that this is going to be like pulling teeth. We're going to play a little game. I'm going to ask you a question. You're going to answer."

I didn't like his games.

It started out painless enough, about my parents and my sister and brothers, stuff I could handle. Pictures on my walls prompted his questions. Then, once I was comfortable enough, he grilled me about my past relationships. Hector wrung me dry of words, but every time I tried to retreat into silence, he demanded more.

"Manny, Keith, and Serge said they didn't know anything about you except that you played deep. They'd have a couple of incredible months with you, but then you'd disappear. When they ran into you later, you'd refuse to talk it over. So what's the story?"

My foot twisted in the rungs of my chair. I felt like I held a lit joint inside my mouth and the sheriff was leaning down by the window of my car.

"Sam, nothing is going to happen between us until you open up."

I cleared his plate from the table and poured soap into the sink under the running water. I scraped food into the trash and then plunged my hands into the soapy water.

Smart man equaled dangerous for me. I had to remind myself about that, because I was getting way too distracted by the cleft in his chin, his hands, and the male aura that radiated from him.

Too much companionship in the gravy. I dosed myself.

Carefully setting the first plate aside, I reached for the next one.

Hector walked up behind me. His arms went around my waist and he teased my earlobe with his lips. From my calves to my scalp, every muscle was drawn down into body armor. Don't touch. Don't touch. Don't touch.

"You flinch every time I touch you. You don't want me to?"

I wanted his hands all over me. I just wish he'd get down to business.

"Finish the dishes later."

I was done talking.

"Boy, I told you to finish later." Hector hooked his finger through the belt loop on my jeans and dragged me into the living room. Somewhere between the sink and the couch, I went from being angry to wanting to suck his cock. Domination lit me up like nothing else.

He left me standing by the coffee table while he plopped down on the couch. "Unbutton your jeans." He stopped me before I got to the last button. "Spread it open more."

My jeans slid down. Only my rising hard-on was keeping them on.

"Take off your shirt."

I tossed it down. He scolded me for that, made me pick it up, turn it right side out, and fold it.

"Play with your nipples." He unzipped his pants and stroked his cock. "Pinch them hard, boy. Twist them."

I pouted. I wanted him to do that. He seemed to read my mind, because he smirked. "You don't want me to touch you, so you have to do it for yourself."

But I did want his hands on me. Seeing him on the couch, propped up on an elbow, jerking off slow like he didn't care if he ever came, it got me worked up. So I showed him how I wanted him to torture my nipples. I was off in my little fantasy world, thinking of his hands guiding mine, maybe even pushing them aside.

"Slide your hands down your chest. Slower."

My fingertips were in my pubes before he told me to stop. Damn. My dick was so close I could almost touch it. I was breathing hard.

"Put your hands on your hips and slowly slide your jeans off, Baby. Slow. Take your time."

Oh man, did I work it. When I jerked off, I usually fantasized guys ripping my clothes, but for him, I was thinking how nice it would be if he made me agonize over every inch as he slowly pulled my clothes off. My nerves were hyper, aching for the heat of his hand, and maybe his mouth.

We were staring at each other as I put my folded jeans by my shirt. I liked how he was looking at me, like he wanted to drag me down to the floor, but he didn't move. I couldn't stand the tension any more. I stepped closer to him.

"Stop."

He had to know how crazy he was making me.

"Slide your hands up your chest until your hands are clasped behind your neck."

I went as slow as I could even though I was dying to get there fast. My dick pointed at him. My hands lingered over my nipples again. One slid up the side of my neck as I closed my eyes. The other hand slid up my torso until my hands met at the base of my skull. I was shivery and hot and my mouth was dry. I opened my eyes.

"My god you're beautiful, Sam."

I backed away.

"Boy!"

I knew my face was red.

"Get those hands behind your neck right now."

My arms felt like heavy, like they didn't want to lift. I did as I was told, but I couldn't look at him.

"Turn around." He groaned quietly. "I'm not going to touch you," he reminded me when I tensed up.

My ears were completely tuned to his sounds. When he didn't get off the couch, I relaxed a bit. The second he moved, though, I tightened into defensive mode again. We did that, me tensing and then relaxing, so many times that my muscles grew fatigued. I started to take calming breaths.

"Face me again." He left me standing like that for about five minutes. I stared down at my hard-on. My hands were beginning to throb at the nape of my neck. "Okay, Baby. Put your clothes back on."

What was that? He didn't come. I didn't come. What the hell?

Too much damned companionship. Next time I was going to brew the fuck me at the door potion and let dinner burn. After I pulled on my jeans, I crawled over to him and rubbed my face into his groin. He smelled so good. My nose pushed against his balls.

"Please, Sir, may I suck your cock?"

"I don't do casual sex," Hector warned.

There was nothing casual about my artistic cocksucking. He strained against his pants. I got my teeth on the tab of his zipper. He smacked my face until I backed off.

"I'm sure that you're good at it, but I expect my boy to be a great cocksucker. Before you earn that privilege, you have to be mine. Completely mine. I'm in no rush, Sam. Until I make my decision, you're only going to get to dream about this." He stroked his cock with such languid ease that I knew he wasn't kidding about being able to wait. I was about to explode, though.

Maybe I was a little too eager. My body damn near vibrated with lust. Playing it a little cooler than I felt, I rose off the floor in a fluid motion that I hoped showed him that once upon a time another Master thought I was worth training. "Thank you so much for coming over." And leaving me frustrated, again.

He leaned against the wall. "What are you going to do after I leave?"

"Take care of this." I pointed to my dick because grabbing it would have been the end of me.

He took my chin between his thumb and forefinger. He almost smiled, but his brown eyes were dead serious. "Don't touch yourself before our next date."

Fine. When's our next date? I'm free now.

He gave a light jerk to my chin. "Boy."

"Yes, Sir." Defeated and obedient. My Gods, we were dating. Dating.

"I'll be out of town the next couple weeks."

Information that would have been more helpful before I promised not to jerk off!

"I'll call you when I get back." He cupped the back of my head in his hand, swept me to his mouth, and kissed me until I hung onto the door for support.

Please, Sir. Please. I need to worship you. Take pity on me.

More than anything, I wanted him to give in a little. Yes, I wanted a strong, strict man who wouldn't let me get away with anything, but I also needed a guy who believed in mercy. I needed him so bad.

The hunger flooded through me and burst out in a supernova of mental groveling. Change your mind, please. I pushed all my will at him.

Hector's hand rested on top of my head. He added a bit more pressure. No mistaking that signal.

"Thank you, Sir. Thank you," I let him hear true gratitude as I went to my knees.

Uncut! Oh Gods. It was beautiful. Veined, hard, almost angry purple under his brown skin. Nice big balls, too. Thick patch of black hair. He was an answer to this boy's prayers.

He held my face to his groin, nearly suffocating me, but I was in heaven. My best trick, holding him in my mouth while also lapping at his balls, got an appreciative grunt.

I stopped thinking and lost myself to the pure joy of servicing him.

There was something so powerful about being on my knees before him. Even though he fucked my mouth in harsh bursts, I was the one taking him to the edge of the spiritual plane. Because of me, for a fleeting moment his soul was weightless. Nothing else mattered. He'd touch perfect, holy bliss.

That's what I lived for. I got my hands on his cock and pumped hard. I worked my lips around the head while lightly squeezing his balls.

"If you're going to do that, boy, make me feel it."

I squeezed for real.

He thrust so hard into me that I had to brace to keep from falling back. I could feel euphoria rising through his body. It was like sunlight sparkling on waves. I knew he was close. I eased off a little to keep him at the edge. When he drifted, I brought him back. I lost track of how long he let me do that.

Then he took control. He smacked my face with his wet cock and made me beg to have it back in my mouth. I strained forward, mouth open, eyes only for that thick cock, as he held me back. When I was crazy for it, he shoved it all into my mouth, catching the back of my throat.

Hector's thigh muscles went hard and he pushed my face down to the base of his cock. Heat flooded my mouth as he came. A couple more thrusts and he released my head. I settled down into a proper kneeling position, butt resting on the bottoms of my feet, and gazed up at him.

Nectar of the gods.

He smiled down at me, his eyes crinkling. He had no idea what that did for me. Energy fed into my body. I felt, for the first time since I met Marcus, a little bit like the old me.

"Be a good boy while I'm out of town, and maybe I'll bring you back something nice."

More of that would be just fine, Sir.

We were both humming along happily when he left. He took the staircase two steps at a time.

I shut my apartment door and ran to my Gods' altars, arms spread wide. As I leapt off the floor, I punched my fists into the air. "Yes!" I did a victory lap over my couch and into my bedroom. The box springs creaked as I jumped on my mattress. "Sex!" I crowed as I toppled down onto my bed. Marcus hadn't been able to stop me. He wasn't invincible.

Chapter 5

My balls were turning blue. I never realized before how often I jerked off: one to start the day; the occasional something when the mood struck; and another once or twice to help me fall asleep at night. Then there was my DVD collection, the porn magazines...

I was a functioning wankaholic.

My Dewey DNA was to blame, had to be. Any family that worshipped Fertility was bound to be oversexed.

* * * *

Hector called me Thursday even though he said he'd be too busy when he was out on the road.

I grinned at the phone. "You're back in town already?"

"Won't be home for a couple more days. Behaving yourself, boy?"

Hope was a lousy drug. The high was brief and the downside ugly as sin.

I got comfortable on the couch. Talking over the phone was so much easier for me than in person. "I was doing fine until I picked up the phone. Now I'm horny again. You know that RCA dog? What was that slogan? His Master's voice? Well, I'm not cocking my head to the side, but my cock..." I couldn't figure out how to finish. Somewhere in that was a clever thing to say, but I couldn't find the right combination of words.

Hector liked it anyway.

He told me, "I had to take a client out to dinner tonight. He wanted to go to a strip joint. I'm covered in cheap perfume and glitter."

I burst out laughing. "You in glitter? Hot."

Hector didn't say anything. "Sir?" I sat up. My mind careened over the last seconds of conversation. What did I say wrong?

"That's the first time I've heard you laugh."

My heart melted. How many guys would notice something like that?

We talked for a long time about books and films. There wasn't anyone, not even Joey, who talked to me about that stuff. The whole time, I kept thinking, 'this is a Master?', because he seemed to respect my opinion. He listened to me. I kept expecting him to tell me what to think or to put me down or tell me why I was wrong, but it never happened.

It felt like so much more was going on between us that I couldn't begin to figure out. Everything between Hector and me felt fluid, like looking through a turning kaleidoscope. Even though I wasn't sure what we were doing, I wanted to see what came next.

After Hector said goodnight, I set out rounds of the good stuff for every God and Goddess, threw on soulful music, and danced through my dark apartment.

Like ripples on the surface of a pond, my mood spread in concentric rings through the apartment building, encouraging lovers into sultry blues kisses.

Content as a cat in a patch of sunlight, I put my hand flat against my bare stomach and moved in sinuous waves. The music flowed through me. Madeleine Peyroux and Stevie Ray Vaughan. My bare feet on the chilly floor. Eyes closed, images of Hector flashing in my brain. The memory of his lips on mine...

Miles away, the wave of desire crashed against the hands of a young couple in line at the movies and dissipated into the warm Los Angeles night.

* * * *

The next time Hector called, it was so late that I barely woke before answering. "Hello?" I breathed into the phone. I rubbed my face as I tried to wake up. Orange light from the streetlamps filtered through my window. In the distance, I heard a helicopter turn tight circles over a police search.

"Sam?"

"I was asleep." Didn't I sound like I was asleep? I groped around the nightstand until I found the clock. It took awhile for the numbers to make sense. My brain finally kicked into gear and recognized the voice.

"Did you need something, Sir?" I yawned so hard my eyes watered.

Hector's voice sounded rough, as if he'd spent hours shouting over loud bar music. I could hear whiskey chasers in his careful enunciation. "Just checking up on you."

There was a long pause. I almost fell back asleep with the phone against my ear. I heard him exhale slowly. In the background, I could hear the wet smack of fist and lube. That was entirely unfair.

"Did you call just to wank in my ear, Sir?"

"Get an HIV test and give me the results when I get back in town." He hung up as soon as he came.

* * * *

We went out for dinner when Hector came back. The restaurant was an old Mexican joint with dim lighting and high-backed booths. The waiter wanted to discuss salad dressings and side dishes in detail. Talking to strangers, even waiters, always made me freeze up and turn pink. I sank a little more under the thick wooden table with each question until he went away.

I slid the results of my blood test across the table to Hector. He peered at it, grunted, and folded it away. When I asked for his, he chuckled and kept eating.

I was going to die from embarrassment. "Um. It only seems fair..."

His eyebrow rose.

My feet tapped against the floor.

Purely out of pity, Hector handed me his results without making me say it. I read his results by candlelight. Gee, wasn't modern romance swell?

"You're never going to be much of a talker, are you?" Hector asked as we finished dinner.

It was too much of an effort to speak when I didn't have anything important to say.

Resting his elbows on the table, he leaned over the bowl of salsa. "You live inside your head too much, Sam. What's going on in there?"

His thick forearms got my blood pumping. He must have seen a shift in my expression, because a frank expectation of sex showed on his face. Thank the Gods we were on the same page.

"You know what I'm thinking."

"Boy!"

I jerked upright, an automatic response to his tone of voice.

Casting a pointed glance at the kids in the booth near to ours, I said, "I'm thinking about being alone with you." I figured I'd start with the squeaky-clean version.

Hector leaned back into the brown vinyl padding of the booth with a smug grin on his face. He summoned the waiter. "The check."

I would have asked the waiter for a container for the leftovers on our plates, but I didn't want to look cheap. When I threw a wad of money on the table, Hector stared at it.

"Not enough? How much was my iced tea?"

"You're fine." But his gaze didn't leave the bills for a long time.

Maybe I didn't tip enough.

When we left, he followed me through the parking lot with that sexy saunter of his. My nerves were hyper alert. The casual touch of his hand on my arm while he unlocked the door of his pristine, vintage truck made my entire body buzz.

We drove along the beach, enjoying the evening and listening to music. People sat in sidewalk cafés, sharing the late winter night with us. Every time I glanced toward Hector, he had me in his sights. I couldn't read his expression. Sometimes I thought he smiled, but the rest of the time he squinted at me as if I wasn't in clear focus.

Hector turned on small residential streets until I was lost. We rolled to a stop in a narrow alleyway between a cinderblock wall and a brilliant red spill of bougainvillea. Before he even set the parking brake, he popped open the top button on his pants, so I didn't ask why we were there.

I kissed him while I heaved out his cock. He traced the outline of my lips with his thumb and then curled his hand around my neck and pulled me down to his groin.

"Keep an eye out for the cops." I nodded to the rear view mirror as a reminder, because he was way too wrapped up in watching me.

I grabbed his thigh for balance as the seat jerked backwards to make room for my head between his hard, flat stomach and the steering wheel. The smell of him was the right kind of ripe.

Uncut. I didn't know why I liked that so much, but I did. Maybe it was the way it left guys so sensitive to stimulation on their heads, or perhaps the way uncut cocks had to be teased into revealing the last of their secrets.

I grasped my dick through my jeans. "With permission, Sir?"

"Play with yourself." He pumped at the base of his cock while I worked my lips and tongue over the head. "Suck it." He hissed in breaths between his teeth.

I was in hog heaven. Behind garbage bins, in the bushes of a park, beside warehouses, I liked the edginess of outdoor sex. Like riding a roller coaster, it made my stomach tense and floppy at the same time.

"What color are the cop cars around here, Sam?"

"We're still in Long Beach, right? Why?" I tried to rise, but he held my head down. All I could see was the speedometer and the radio.

"I'm close Sam." No he wasn't. Not that close. Fuck! I tried to sit up, but he dug his fingers into my hair and pushed me back down. "Finish."

I abandoned my dick for his, trying to get him off as fast as possible. I was scared about getting caught, but turned on, too. Come now, come on, come NOW! I mentally pleaded with his dick. He didn't.

Oh man, I was going to lose my last virginity to a nightstick. Somehow, I doubted that cops used lube. I listened intently for the sound of a car pulling down the alley behind us as my head bobbed. Come on, Hector, shoot your load already!

"They always sit in the cruiser and run the plates before they get out," Hector said.

Fuck, fuck, fuck! Please come. Please! How long did it take to run a plate? Thirty seconds? Oh fuck.

Still listening for the threatening rumble of a cop car engine, I was surprised when the first spray of jizz hit my mouth. I choked on it. Hector's big hand went around his cock and pumped. Come, frothed by spit, oozed between his fingers.

I popped up and looked wildly around the alley. No cop car. "Where is he?"

"Who?"

"The cop!" I yelled. Who the fuck did Hector think I meant? My head swiveled like the kid in the Exorcist as I tried to spot the police cruiser.

"What cop, Sam?"

I'd been had. "You shit! I nearly had a heart attack."

Hector slapped me. "Don't ever call me a shit, boy." The air inside his truck seemed to plummet to sub-zero temperatures. He slid to the center of the seat and pulled me over his lap. He shoved my pants down. Oh man, I loved that part of the ritual of punishment.

At first, I smirked face down into the seat.

He knew where to strike me. The sound of his hand slapping my ass hard rang loud in my ears. He took his time. My butt got warm and then hot. I imagined the skin going from white to pink to flaming red in big patches. He said nothing, and the beat never faltered.

Then I worried that I bored him. If only I'd learn to quit sassing.

"I'm sorry, Sir."

Hector spat on my hot ass and spread it around. His fingers splayed and he followed through each spank to add more sting.

I squirmed. "Please, Sir. I'm sorry."

The biggest badass daddy in the world noticed me, and I had to act like an idiot. I called him a shit. What was I thinking?

"Sir? Please?"

He controlled me. He wouldn't take my attitude.

By then, I was aching under his hand. My snarky little smile was long gone. Every blow he landed got a small yelp out of me, no matter how hard I tried to hold it in.

"I promise I'll never talk back to you again. Please, Sir."

He kept spanking until I truly meant my tear-choked apologies. Somehow, he knew the difference.

Hector let me rest over his lap. A couple of shaky sobs passed through me. My butt throbbed with my heartbeat. I was flying and grounded at the same time.

My lips pressed reverently to Hector's hand. "Thank you, Sir."

Hector stroked my back. "You want to obey me."

I nodded.

"That's a start."

On the outside, I didn't move, but in my mind, I walked through my Japanese teahouse and rediscovered alcoves of Self I'd forgotten about; bold me, happy me, normal me. I didn't know how I had lost track of who I was. It was amazing how much of my Self Marcus beat out of me. Or maybe he didn't beat it out. Maybe he stole it, piece by piece, while he distracted me with sex and violence.

* * * *

Hector liked pushing me; I liked being pushed. The next couple of days, he demanded risky public sex all over town. Maybe he wanted to see if I'd disobey, but squatting in a public restroom in the park to suck his cock through a glory hole turned me on.

Late one night, as we came back from a play in North Hollywood, he shoved me out of his truck and told me to work the street with the other hustlers. I got a lot of hard looks from the boys in tight shorts. Before Hector could circle the block and pretend to pick me up, a family man in a huge SUV pulled to the curb beside me.

He leaned across his car seat and lowered the window. "Hop in."

I had no idea what to do. I turned helplessly to the other hustlers. They ignored me. I looked down the street and prayed for Hector to show up.

"Come on," the man snapped.

Hector's truck came gunning down the block. He drove up to the guy's rear bumper and got out. I didn't hear a word of the low, menacing exchange with the SUV driver, but the guy peeled out and almost ran a red light trying to get away. The rent boys thought it was hilarious.

Hector stood in the middle of the street. His hands balled into fists. The set of his mouth was so harsh that I shrank back into the shadowy alcove of a barred storefront.

Fuming, Hector came over to me, grabbed me by the arm, and threw me back into his truck. I scrunched down in the seat as he stomped around to the driver's side. We drove back to Long Beach without speaking.

He found a dark place to park and fucked my mouth with cruel thrusts.

"Jerk off."

So he wasn't mad at me.

I closed my eyes. My hand worked fast over the head of my cock. He hadn't let me come for weeks, so I knew I wouldn't last long. "Sir?"

"What do you need, boy?"

"May I come, Sir?" I opened my eyes. "Please, Sir." My shoulders dug into the door behind me as I arched up from the seat of his truck. "Please, Sir."

He reached into my shirt and dug his fingernails into the flesh around my nipple. "Stop."

I snorted quick breaths as I fought for control. My balls weren't having it; they tried to squeeze.

"Are you thinking about me?"

"Absolutely, Sir."

"Don't ever think about another man." His nails eased off my nipple. "Never." He was dead serious. "Not even porn, not even fantasies."

I nodded, my eyes wide. Somehow, I truly believed that he'd know if I fantasized about other men.

Hector started his truck. "Slide all the way over here so that you're against my leg."

He drove around Long Beach, leisurely stroking me to the brink of shooting and then backing off. I lost track of where we were. My entire attention was on the palm of his hand. I think we went past the Mine Shaft bar three times.

"Please let me come, Daddy." I tried to look sad and irresistible as I squirmed beside him.

Hector took a left turn and squinted out the window at the glass towers of downtown. "You ever call another man 'Daddy'?"

"Sure."

Hector's hand gripped the wheel and then flexed. "Don't call me 'Daddy'."

We drove past the whale mural on the side of the aquarium and the mall they built on the site of the old Pike Amusement Park. Crowds of people heading to the movie theaters and restaurants hurried through the crosswalk. I couldn't look at the faces passing inches from his front bumper as I sat there with my dick hanging out. Even if they had no idea, I knew.

He rolled down his window. A big truck was in the lane next to us, and I went ten shades of red as he grasped my dick and tugged on it. "Come for me."

"They can hear you," I whispered.

"Over that music? Not a chance."

"Please, Sir. I can't –." I turned from him and bit my bottom lip.

Jerking the wheel suddenly, Hector pulled into a parking spot at the curb. I was thrown against the passenger door. He rolled up his window and got right into my face. "Come."

I started to turn toward the windshield, but he forced me to look at him.

"I'm your entire world, boy. The rest of the universe is miles away. There's only me. Come."

With his face inches from mine, he was all I could see. His breath was on my face, smelling slightly of whiskey and cigars, like a daddy should smell. Hector's hand gripped my leg tight, like he was excited, too, but didn't want to show it. My mouth opened a little.

"Come." His thumbnail rubbed along the seam of my jeans. The vibration tickled my balls. He smacked my face. "I told you to come. Focus. Focus on me."

I could hear people walking past the truck.

"Do I have to put you over my knee and redden that ass of yours before you'll follow a simple order?"

Oh, man, that did it. I pulled up my T-shirt as my first shot splattered on my stomach. My knees drew up. "Oh, yes. Fuck, yeah. Uh...." "That was just the beginning of it. I begged him to tie me up, whip me, make me bleed.

Hector tilted his head and listened. He didn't interrupt, though, not until I shot my entire wad of words and come.

"Thank you, Sir."

He got into my face again. "No one else touches you. Ever. Got it?"

I nodded solemnly.

Starting his truck, he didn't wait for me to put on a seat belt before he pulled back out into traffic. We never played those games again.

Chapter 6

Hector's house was an old bungalow about three and a half miles from my apartment. The neighborhood was mostly Mexican, part queer, with Vietnamese and black families in the mix. His house had a big front porch and an ancient jacaranda shaded a wispy front lawn. On the first step to the porch there was a terra cotta pot filled with stinky, orange marigolds and deep purple flowers.

The house next door, hidden behind a spiky fence of cypress, was so dark that it seemed to absorb light. Yet I felt drawn to it. The mixture of repulsion and longing held me transfixed in Hector's driveway. The stench of burning rubber made me cough, and I saw an eye calmly gazing at me through a gap in the greenery. My stomach flipped. I hurried up the steps to the porch and knocked.

Hector invited me in.

The floors of the house were original wood, lovingly cared for but worn in traffic patterns nearly a hundred years old. Every wall was faced with bookshelves and a crocheted afghan was slung over the leather couch. It was a homey, personal space that smelled of Hector.

I caught a glimpse of a ghost across the room when I crossed his threshold. My witch vibes connected with the spirit. It strengthened its presence until my senses flooded. A relative. Female. It was her house. Grandmother, but called Nanny. She smiled when I thought her name.

"Nice place." I lifted my face to Hector, in case he wanted to kiss.

"Have a seat on the couch."

I pushed into the corner of his sofa and hugged a pillow to my chest. Why didn't he want me on my knees? Sitting on the same level with him meant serious stuff.

He sat in a big poppa chair at the end of the coffee table. "Tell me about Marcus, Sam."

Oh Gods. He found out.

"We've already talked my past to death. Nothing has changed."

"I've asked, you haven't answered." His feet were flat on the floor, elbows on the arm rests, fingers pressed together before his chest. We were in for a long discussion.

"How about we talk about your relationships instead, Sir?"

"Okay."

I didn't expect that.

He offered most of the information I forgot to ask about. He had three relationships, each lasting many years. Only one ended well. In eerily similar stories, Hector caught the other two cheating on him when he came home unexpectedly from business trips.

That explained the jealousy. After Marcus, I was wary of possessive types, though. Sure, it was sexy, but there was jealous and then there was off the deep end, and I wasn't sure where the line was between the two.

"Satisfied?" he asked.

I had no more questions for him. How could he put it all out in the open like that? "Sure."

"Your turn, Sam. No more evasions."

Panic, fear, and anger fought to be my dominant emotion. Pissed off won. "You have my goddamn HIV test results. What else do you want from me?" I sprang off the couch and paced across the throw rug. Why did people always have to know? The answers so rarely satisfied. "I'm sick of this shit." I walked a wide circle around Hector to the front door.

He seemed as weary of the torture as I was. "I'm just trying to find out, Sam. Who broke your heart so bad that you can't trust anyone? Marcus?"

My mouth dropped open. Why was it that everyone thought that my life was any of their business? And Marcus—I wasn't going to talk about that whole Marcus thing with anyone. Why was his name the one name Hector focused on?

I walked out, muttering about nosy men the whole way to my car. I would have been in heaven if I could have found a man who didn't have to dredge up the past. Didn't anyone just want someone to fuck?

* * * *

The shriek of metal grinding on metal warned me to back off the starter on my car. The cute Mexican boys hanging out on the porch across the street from Hector's house applauded.

As I drove home, I didn't notice at first that I stopped at two red lights in a row. At the third stoplight, I got vocal. "Quit fucking with me, Angelena!"

The light went green-yellow-red so quick that the cars in front of me never had a chance to go.

"Stop it!"

It took three cycles to get through that light. The next was just as bad. I turned up my radio and bitched non-stop at the Goddess of Traffic. People honked and swore, none more than me.

Half an hour later, I pulled onto my street. It took me forever to find parking near my apartment. After circling the block twice, I found a spot. My fists clenched at my sides. I was faithful, damn it, and deserved better treatment.

Hector was on my front stoop. "Fewer lights on Junipero."

I shot a dark look at Angelena's apartment. On my landing, I cautiously skirted past Hector to unlock my door.

Leave me the hell alone.

"Looks like your Gods are with me on this one." Hector blocked my door. "I won't let you get away with hiding, Sam. Why did you run when you want it so bad?" he asked in a voice so soft I almost gave in, but then I remembered I was pissed off.

My hand shook so hard I couldn't get the key to slide in the lock.

He stepped back to give me room.

"There are a million boys who fantasize about daddy paddling their asses and then fucking them senseless. When the first blow lands on their butt, they realize that a real spanking hurts. Most of them pull up their pants, run home, and never come out to play again. Some boys keep coming back even though they don't enjoy punishment, because they get off on the audience. There are more exhibitionists out there than real submissives. You, Sam, are the one. Aren't you? The one real masochistic submissive in the mob of pretenders."

Congratulations. You found me. Put a gold star in your book and go away.

"Even at the Library Café, you were so wary that I couldn't get you to admit that the sky was blue. The moment I got personal, you drew away from me, but you let me into your

apartment without a second thought. Do you have any idea how dangerous that could be?"

Yeah. I could let in some guy who would deprive me of sex for a couple months, and then he might scold me for talking to strangers.

"You keep doing the opposite of what I expect, boy. If this is some act, you've got me hooked. It's been a long time since anyone surprised me."

I turned the key.

"You made it clear I can have your body, but I want in here," Hector tapped my forehead, "more than I want this." He brushed my groin.

I flinched away. Don't fucking touch me.

"Staying ahead of you is a rush I haven't felt in a long time, but in this game I set the pace, not you. You control nothing."

I stepped inside my apartment and slammed the door in his face.

* * * *

My bedroom window had a view of the base of the stairs. I watched as Hector walked down the flight with a pensive expression, his steps heavy and slow.

"So you're to the door slamming phase with Sam." I heard Angelena's voice. I could have sworn she wasn't there when I went up the stairs.

Standing on my tiptoes, I saw Angelena and Hector on the tiny square of lawn outside her front door. Her tools spread over the sidewalk.

She extended her hand to Hector. "Angelena, concerned onlooker."

Hector nodded up the stairs. "He does this a lot?"

"Usually right after the intense sex cools off and the other guy starts talking relationship. Right Sweet-tart?" She looked up at the window. I ducked down. "He's listening," she told Hector.

Bitch.

She stretched with an exaggerated yawn and then scratched her scalp through her spiky, black hair. "Sam's kind of like a Moon Pie dipped in Tabasco sauce, isn't he? You know he's sweet as can be on the inside, but first you have to get past all that piss and vinegar."

"I don't have the patience for these games," Hector grumbled as he glanced up at my window.

"Don't let the angelic face and big blue eyes fool you. Sam was born under a kinky star. His horoscope sign is black leather and chains. Or do I mean rope?" She cupped her hand next to her face and stage whispered, "He didn't lock his door."

Maybe she was joking. I was usually careful to throw the lock.

"He'll take away all your privacy," a voice in my head warned me. "He'll strip you bare and expose you to the world. He doesn't understand how much you need to hide. Don't let him hurt you."

A shiver of fear went down my spine.

"But I want him," I whispered. The need welled up inside me and pushed out, willing Hector to give me another chance.

Angelena's voice drifted through my screen window. "If I were you, Hector, I'd go up those stairs and tell Sam to knock that shit off. He needs to hear it."

Hector looked up at my window. Through the screen, our gazes met and we bolted for my door at the same time. For some reason, my bedroom door stuck in the frame. It had never done that before. The building must have settled, or the Gods meddled. I had to tug hard several times before the bedroom door popped open, which cost me precious seconds in a race I should have easily won. When the front door swung open, I slid to a halt.

Oh fuck. I remembered this scene.

Hot and cold fear shot through my veins.

"Mmm," I thought I heard someone smack his lips.

Hector took a step toward me. I shuffled back three.

"Drop that gaze to the ground, boy. I didn't say you had permission to look at me." He walked toward me, moving in that badass walk of his. I scrambled all the way back to my bedroom.

Fuck. I should have ducked into the bathroom. I knew from experience that I could sit with my back against the cabinet to brace my feet against the bathroom door. That way, no matter how insane Marcus got, I'd be safe there until he gave up slamming his shoulder into the door. It usually took two days, but I had water, and organic mint toothpaste was sort of edible.

"Before I allow you to fall on your knees and serve me, you're going to beg me to break that willful streak of yours. Understand? Stand in the corner. Hands behind your neck, no touching the wall." Hector waited at the doorjamb until I adopted my stance in the corner of my bedroom. "I'll tell you when you can come out." He shut the door.

I heard the television.

There was no room under my bed, and the window was too small to crawl through. I crept to the phone and picked it up. The line was dead. I didn't want to believe it, so I hung up and tried dialing until my fingers were sore from pushing numbers.

Bad memories: Me, fumbling the dial for help. My hands shook too much and I pressed nine twice.

Me, realizing that the phone in the bedroom was a line extension of the one in the front room that Marcus had already ripped out of the wall.

Me, watching the frame around my bedroom door splinter to pieces under the force of Marcus' boot.

Those nights when I relived that scene with Marcus, sometimes I dreamed that I wove around him, ran into the bathroom, and locked the door. When it was only a dream, the bathroom door held up to his pounding. If it was a night terror, the door gave way and he got me.

"Hector's going to beat you," a voice said in my head.

Angelena wouldn't have sent Hector after me if she thought he'd hurt me, would she? I almost had myself convinced I'd be okay when dark thoughts crept into my brain.

"Is Hector the type to kick or punch? Will he save your face for last, or use it as a starting point?"

It didn't take much of a trip on that train of thought to reduce me to pure terror.

I had to retreat, but I had nowhere to go except into my mind.

Me, running down a hallway in my mental Japanese teahouse. Somewhere, I knew there was a place I could shove real Sam so that shell Sam would take the beating alone, but I couldn't find the place where I hid real Sam when Marcus beat me. I was running out of time. I had to do something.

Textured steel plates were under my feet. There was an eerie glow that came through the walls of cream rice paper framed in maple. Industrial pipes in glinting nickel were exposed overhead, looking like the intestines of the Tin Man.

Which director's vision? The shadows were masterfully Hitchcockian, but there was a Feuillade quality to the nightmarish visuals. Maybe Pabst. Maybe Tim Burton. I came to an unhappy medium: Ridley Scott on a small budget. Whoever—the cinematography was classic horror.

I tried to claw open the doors between alternate universes. They had to slide open far enough to let me slip Sam through, they just had to. One by one, I shook the frames of the realities, but none offered shelter. I drew back my hand to punch through the thin membrane between me and a safe reality when I heard heavy footsteps in the hallway. Shit. Shit. Shit. Too late.

"That's about long enough." Hector turned me around. He had a weird expression on his face. "Or maybe I left you too long."

I came out swinging, a complete mental case. In this corner, winner and still grand champion of the mind-fuck, flyweight division, Samuel Calhoun Dewey.

"Boy, no!"

All I could see was the bathroom door down the hall. I tried to bolt past Hector, but he grabbed me. I threw defensive punches, most making hard contact before he got my hands under control.

I cringed, expecting his blows to come next. He had my hands trapped and I couldn't grab hold of my jeans. If he released his grip, it would be a race to see who controlled my pants.

"Sam, you have to calm down. I'm not going to hurt you."

My skin got hot and slick as I squirmed to get free.

Hector kicked my feet out from under me and got me face down on the bed. He pulled my hands behind my back.

Here it comes. I went berserk.

He landed on me and used his arms and legs like a straight jacket. "Boy, I don't have restraints with me. If you need to be tied down, you have to wait for me to be prepared. All I have right now are my arms. I'm a lot stronger than you are, I outweigh you by at least sixty pounds, and I haven't been standing in the corner for two hours, so I'm going to win. Okay?"

Maybe so, but I wasn't about to trust him. If he were going to get in his blows, he would have to earn them. If he wanted my ass, I had nothing going for me except desperation and a fathomless well of fear.

"You're safe. I won't hurt you. Calm down."

I don't know how many times he repeated that to me. I don't think I heard him the first hour.

"Talk to me."

I couldn't even if I wanted to. That much stress evoked an ancient demon, my stutter, which robbed me of words. Animal noises, not human sounds, came from my throat.

He was fooled by a long stretch where I did nothing but stare at the wall. I almost got away that time.

"Boy! Stop now."

With his full weight pinning me down, I couldn't move. Even though he wouldn't let me go, he was incredibly careful how he touched me. Slow, deliberate, soothing strokes ran down my arms and across my forehead. His hands never went below my waist. There was nothing remotely sexual about his touch even though, in an odd way, it felt like he was making love to me.

"Shh, Baby. You're safe. I won't hurt you."

My bouts of fighting him grew shorter. I needed to rest longer. My skin was sticky with sweat under my clothes and my throat was dry. Every muscle shook with fatigue.

Exhausted, hours later I slipped into unconsciousness pinned under him.

Chapter 7

I woke when the phone rang. No one was on the line when I picked up the receiver, but there was a dial tone. Strange. The phone didn't work the night before. Gods? Or personal demons?

I was alone. Big surprise there. While Sam went insane, Hector quietly crept away.

Hector had taken off my shoes and covered me with a blanket before he left. The rest of my clothes were still on, down to my socks. There was something so kind about that. If only things were different, if only I could have held it together, we might have had a chance at a relationship. He thought he wanted to know more about me, but the truth was just ugly and hopeless. If only I could have faked it better, he might have thought I was worth his time.

Using my forearm, I protected my eyes from the bright band of sunlight glowing between the blue curtain and the windowsill. My clothes were stiff with dried sweat, but I pressed them to my nose until I smelled Bay Rum, whiskey, and a cigar. Traces of Hector.

I decided that I owed Hector an apology, no matter how embarrassing it would be, so I got dressed and drove over to his place.

When I knocked on his front door, there was no answer. I peered through the large front window to look in the living room. Nanny's ghost pointed to the backyard. Waving my thanks, I followed the sound of shoveling. Two long cement rows separated by a scraggly patch of grass ran alongside the house. That driveway led to a detached garage in his backyard.

I climbed up the side stairs of the covered back porch of his house and sat on the railing to watch Hector work.

Hector didn't lie. He didn't hurt me, but I was sore all over from struggling against him. A warm shower took care of most of my pain, but my muscles still had that tingly, powerless feeling they got in the last minutes of a heavy workout. He did that to my mind, too.

Hector didn't have his shirt on. He wasn't a Steroid Mary, but every muscle was cut. His short, dark hair stuck up in wet spikes.

Hector stabbed the shovel into the thick, clay soil with a deep grunt and stomped down. The thick muscles of his thighs pressed against the faded denim of his pants.

When he saw me, Hector didn't say anything. The outline of the rectangle he dug slowly took shape. He finally called out, "About last night –."

I stood. He was sending me away. Going to him was a mistake.

I can learn not to do that, Sir. I can push it further down and hide it if I really try. Give me a chance to prove that I can bury my emotions.

"Damn it!" He took off his work gloves and threw them on the ground. "Don't you dare move, boy." He went past me into the house, not even sparing me a glance.

"Run," a thought whispered through my mind. Sounded good to me. I turned, and bumped into Angelena. I flinched.

"Sweet-tart, you aren't going anywhere." Angelena sauntered to the far edge of the porch, dropped into a white wicker chair, and propped her booted feet on the porch railing.

Nanny's ghost phased in on the other chair.

"Goddess, I didn't know you were here."

"Have to save you from yourself." She picked up a green bean from the pile that appeared on her lap, snapped off both ends, and tossed it into a bowl that sat on the small table between her and Hector's Grandmother.

"You're too high strung," Nanny's ghost scolded as she waved a green bean at me.

"They call that high maintenance nowadays, and is he ever," Angelena confided. Snap, snap, snap, she broke the bean in pieces and let them tumble into the bowl.

"All I did was stand up!"

Angelena shook her head. "Running away, Sam."

"You're right, I'm high maintenance. Why would anyone put up with me?"

"If you dared to take a look at yourself, you'd know the answer to that."

I put my hands over my eyes. "I'm wasting Hector's time. He only wants a serious, long-term relationship, and I'm so not the one. I'm a disposable fuck toy." I used to be so proud of that. Suddenly, it made me feel like shit.

Angelena pelted me with green bean tips. "I warned you about evoking chaos magic. Once you've summoned enough power to thwart a God, you'd better see it through, or else he's going to get his revenge."

"I'm sorry."

She made a show of ignoring me.

Nanny scolded, "My Hector never raised his hand to anyone in anger. How dare you accuse him!"

Angelena softened. "Sam's had some bad breaks, Nanny. But if he doesn't wake up, he's headed for more." She turned to me. "Are you ready to go another round with Marcus?"

My piss ran cold.

"One day you'll be so lonely that it won't take much more than, 'Baby, I won't ever hurt you again,' to get you back under his control."

I clutched the porch railing.

"Look within for the power to resist him," Angelena pleaded.

Nanny's ghost glanced at the thick, dusty green Italian cypress hedge defining the property line between Hector's house and the creepy house next door. She shuddered.

"Can Hector see you?" I asked as I tried to see inside his house. Hector could come back out to the porch any second.

Angelena smirked. "Not right now, because you don't want him to, but he saw me at your apartment last night."

"Oh yeah, thanks for that, Goddess. I look like a total psycho case to him now."

"Talking to Gods and ghosts who aren't visible to anyone else is what makes you look like a psycho, Sam. Let Hector see me. Dare to show him your true Self."

Oh yeah, right. I was gonna let that happen.

Angelena chided me. "Sam, you have such an ability to find latent divine power. Can't you discover it in yourself?"

I chewed on my bottom lip. "Could you make Hector give me a second chance? A third chance?" What chance was I up to by then?

Angelena snapped more beans. "You have to have more faith in yourself. You know as well as I do that you can make things happen if you want them enough."

I rolled my eyes. "Chaos magic."

"You don't even have to evoke that. Sam, divinity lies within."

Ignoring her, I squinted at the backyard in the bright sun. There was a gnarled grapefruit tree beside the detached garage. Forgotten fruit lay around the base in wispy, pale green grass.

The door opened behind me. Every nerve in my body reached beyond my skin to sense Hector's emotions.

Hector said, "I thought we were playing. You run, I chase. That's been the pattern so far. When you couldn't get the keys into the lock on your door, it struck me as a little odd, but when I got to the bottom of the stairs I saw you waiting for me, so I changed my mind and went back up."

"You left the door unlocked. Game on. I walk in and you're white as a sheet and trembling like a deer caught in the headlights and I think 'he really gets into it', but you go into the corner as docile as can be. Still playing the scene as far as I know." He raised his hand to scratch his cheek and grimaced as I drew back. "The look on your face when I came for you—I realized that you weren't playing."

Do we have to talk about it?

"Sam, I parked you in the corner because you were running so far ahead of me that I had to cool you down. I don't let submissives control the scene. But now you understand why it's important for me to know your mental limits as well as your physical ones."

Here's a fine line for you, Hector. I want to be spanked, tied up, paddled, whipped, bound, gagged, pierced, waxed, bit, hog-tied, choked, flogged, pinched, and chained, but I don't ever want to be beaten again.

"Looking back, I realize I misread every signal you sent out. For the past couple of months, I've been crazy jealous of some mysterious guy. The way I saw it, you weren't over a past lover. I figured it was one hell of a romance, and a whopper of a betrayal, to make you so scared to let me in, but something didn't add up with the history you gave me. So I decided that you were holding out a name on me, or I was missing something. I was, wasn't I? Who's the sick bastard that hurt you?"

I cautiously backed away from him until I bumped against the railing. Movement in the cypress hedge along the property line drew my attention. The lower half of a male face pushed through a gap in the fine-needed foliage. A finger pressed to a serene smile.

Yes. Silence was best.

"I won't lie, Sam. I'm a physical guy. My punishments are harsh, and I guarantee you pain. My reputation as a sadist isn't exaggerated. I don't run a democracy, I don't put up with manipulative submissives, my expectations are high, and if you don't meet them, you're out. But as long as you obey me, and while we're not in scene, you can expect to be cherished, because you'll have earned it."

His stance changed. A length of laundered white cotton rope was in his hand. "You can stay if you agree to my rules. Rule number one—you aren't dismissed until I say so. That means no running away, no slamming doors, no turning your back to me." The rope spilled from his hands as he measured off a length.

Angelena smirked at my rising hard-on. Normal people had fetishes about leather, feet, enemas. Me? White rope.

My focus was on the spilling coils.

"Run," a voice in my head screamed, but my hard-on wanted to stick around a little longer.

I slid my hand into my front pocket and pulled out my car keys. "It's taking everything I have just to stand here," I admitted. I set my keys on the railing. "Maybe you should keep those."

"You either obey or you don't. I won't force you to do anything."

Black curls of hair matted to Hector's chest. On his arm, a dark swipe of earth clung to his brown skin. "If you want me to tie you up, you're going to have to beg for it." He must have seen the hunger on my face. "Say the words, Sam, and you get what you want."

Hector drew the end of the rope across my wrist. My pulse jumped at the friction.

He spoke softly, watching me watch the rope. "The problem with many domination and submission stories is that they have miraculous mind-reading dominants who know exactly what the submissive wants, and how much the sub can take. I don't read minds. I can guess a little, but I have to hear it from you. You're safe with me. If you say the safe word Red, everything stops. And if you say please, especially if you beg in that sexy little accent of yours, I'll give you what you want."

Hector pulled the rope tight between his hands and rubbed it across my nipples. Even through my T-shirt, the sensation sent shivers down my body. My dick swelled. I licked my lips and wondered if I said it aloud, would the universe come to a crashing end? Would it be like the movies when a sacred object passed a seal, or when someone spoke the true name of a God, and all chaos broke loose?

I thought he'd dump me, but Hector offered me everything. I didn't understand. Whenever I thought I was on solid ground, the game shifted.

If I asked very, very, very nicely, would he kiss me again?

"You can whisper it to me." He turned so that his ear was near my mouth.

Could I get away with asking for something I wanted?

I waded ankle-deep into trust, just to test the waters. "Please tie me up, Sir."

I felt a ripple move through the realities.

Angelena flashed thumbs up as she and Nanny went inside the house.

* * * *

At his order, I turned my back to Hector and stretched my hands out behind me. The first loop of rope tightened around my forearm. It had been a long time since I felt the caress of bondage like that.

"Okay?" Hector checked.

I sighed into the restriction. "Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir." I said it like I meant it, because I did.

The backyard of his house was peaceful. It gave off a home and hearth vibe. I let the calming aura flow over me.

With speed and skill that showed a lot of practice, Hector bound my arms behind me. The coils went up to my elbows. Reaching overhead, he pushed the end of rope through an eyhook in the roof over the porch. He walked around me, slapping my butt and thighs to get me into the right position.

"Think about how you hold yourself. Presentation, Sam. I want to see the line of your calf muscles. If you have the right posture, you'll breathe right, too. Good. I ought to take a picture."

"No pictures." It came out of my mouth before I could hold it back. I was okay until then, but suddenly I had to get out of the restraints. Refusing Marcus always meant the bad kind of pain.

"Easy." Hector caressed my cheek.

Pushing the panic down inside meant I'd to pay for it later, but I didn't want to lose my grip in front of him again.

Hector's hands rested on my shoulders. "Only stupid submissives don't understand their limits. You can say no. I'll respect that." He teased my lips apart with his tongue. I fell forward chasing his lips for more kisses.

He shoved on my shoulder. "Get back into that position, boy."

Hector ran his hands up my calves and thighs, and from my hipbones to my ribs. The heat of his palms melted me. While he clapped his hands on the aching muscles across my shoulders, I closed my eyes and slowly opened them again.

"Rule two—I ask a question, you give me the full truth. Any smart-mouthing will earn harsh punishment."

A thrill ran down my spine and plunged into my groin. He waited for me to nod agreement.

"Who beat you?"

So unfair! I never would have agreed if I'd known he'd ask shit like that.

A creepy, colorless eye watched us from the hedge next door. It moved away from the small gap between the cypresses to be replaced by the lips again. That silent mouth pleaded with me to keep my secrets. I agreed. I'd said too much already. If I told Hector all of the truth, he'd send me away. I couldn't risk losing what I already had.

Hector yanked the rope. Pain seared down between my shoulder blades. He moved so that he was in my line of sight, blocking out the face.

"Answer me."

If I told him, he'd be disgusted.

"He already knows, Sam," Angelena's voice vibrated in my ear.

Seeing her flickering presence beside me, the face in the hedge pulled back.

"Hector knows, but he's still hot for you. He sees how much you're into this and that excites him. Right now he's thinking about how great you're going to be under his whip." She sure knew which of my two brains to appeal to.

"Give me his name now," Hector demanded.

Years of intensive speech therapy to correct my stutter and thousands of my parents' dollars—whoosh—flushed down the toilet.

I stomped when I couldn't get past the first sound. I felt like hitting something. Stuttering wasn't sweet. It wasn't cute. It was a goddamn, pain in the ass, learned pattern that took years of frustrating work to unlearn and I wasn't about to start that cycle again.

My face burned from the humiliation. If I hadn't been tied up, I would have run until I found a hole to crawl into.

I tried another two times, because I wanted to obey Hector, but only got as far as the first syllable before my eyes rolled up from the effort. Concentrating hard on the rope, my pain, and the exercises I was taught to get on top of my words, I finally powered through the fucking name. "Marcus Olafson."

Hector's tongue swept inside my mouth to push aside the sour taste Marcus' name left behind. The grip he had on my hair as he tipped my head back, and the harsh edge of his teeth—it wasn't enough. I wanted to feel the weight of his body while we kissed.

"Why did Marcus decide to beat you?"

I was losing my grip on my words again. "'C-c-cause I—."

"Because he," Hector corrected me with a soft kiss.

It was always the same. I had to use the politically correct words. If people wanted me to talk so much, why did they keep interrupting? It wasn't about how I felt; it was always about how they thought I should feel.

I got on top of my words again. "Marcus accused me of sleeping with Brett and Joey. He told me I had to quit playing basketball with them. He said I couldn't talk to them ever again." That only started the fight, but Hector didn't need to know all the ugly details.

"How bad did he beat you?"

"Marcus hit me lots of times out of scene, but he only beat me once. That was enough." I couldn't bear the humiliation of Hector thinking I was some kind of victim, though. "I'm fine now. Everything healed. I got over it."

His eyes opened wide. "Baby, last night wasn't the reaction of someone who's 'over it.' You were terrified. The only time you'll let me close enough to touch you is for sex, and you want it over with as soon as possible so that you can get away. You aren't 'over it' by a long shot."

I closed my eyes. "Please, I don't want to talk about it anymore."

"Violence has a long half-life, like nuclear waste."

"Please. It doesn't matter." Thinking about it made my stomach ache.

"It matters a lot. I want to be able to touch you without making you flinch. Who knows what else I might do that could trigger another meltdown. I won't risk doing that to you again. I have to know."

I stared at Hector's yard, squinting at the bright sunlight.

The face at the hedge tried to get my attention. It signaled frantically for me to keep my secrets.

Hector bumped into my groin. "Come on, Baby." His thumb stroked my neck under my ear. "Please, Baby. Let me close."

No one ever talked to me that way. I never heard a Dom say 'please' before.

"Why are you being so mean and pushing me away?"

I was being mean? I didn't even realize it. "I'm not like that."

"Then you're just teasing me?"

"No! I'm sorry. I try not to. I want to be with you. I do. Please believe me. It's just hard to relax."

Hector knew exactly where to press his lips to my neck.

"You're so hot, boy. You're all I think about."

I drank down Hector's words, mesmerized. I'd been picked up a million times. I'd never been seduced. He saw it, too, how his spellbinding patter got under my skin. Ten minutes of Baby, Baby, and the feel of his body slowly grinding against mine, and I was his. How could I refuse a man who said, "Baby, I want to make love to you so bad, but we can't until you tell me. Please, Baby. I'm dying here. Can't you feel how much I want you?"

I heard myself saying, "Marcus was good at it, in a way. No compound fractures, just internal bleeding, hairline fractures, and big ugly bruises that went deep into my muscles. Violence as art, like a Kenneth Anger film."

Hector's hands were everywhere on me. The more I talked, the closer his hands got to my dick. Without thinking about what I was saying, I let the whole terrible thing out, blow, by blow, by blow.

"Marcus punched me until he had to rest, gasping, before pulling his arm back again. Bloody spit foamed on my lips and dripped onto his prized boots. Marcus made me clean the leather with my tongue. The vomit came out my nose when I tried to hold it back."

"I was lucky, though," I told Hector. "Marcus decided to take a break. Seeing him standing over me, calmly drinking his beer while thinking of new ways to hurt me, made me shake so hard that it looked like convulsions. I was too exhausted to blink. Suddenly, the shaking stopped. I held my breath when Marcus put his hand near my nose. He set down the beer and slowly backed out of my apartment, as if he was afraid of me."

Hector winced.

"About two hours later, I decided that Marcus wasn't coming back and I was allowed to move. I meant to crawl to the couch, but I only made it as far as the altars. Those boots he wore.... I prayed for someone to help me, someone who wouldn't judge or lecture. I heard steps at my door and I was terrified that it was Marcus again. My door creaked open. Angelena strode in. She squatted down next to me and burst into tears, which was funny, because crying was the one thing I hadn't done."

"Angelena washed the snot and vomit off my face, gave me a bath, and put me in bed. She mopped up the puddle of blood, puke, and piss I left on the floor.

"My Gods moved me to a new apartment that night and they took the units around it so that they could ward me from Marcus. Crash moved all the way from Thailand.

"I had met Angelena in person before that, only briefly, but she spent every minute beside me, letting the rest of L.A. go to hell, until I could get out of bed on my own and the bruises on my face were light enough that I could risk going outside in daylight. It took over a month."

I couldn't remember ever speaking that many words strung together in my life, not about something so personal. Maybe I was waiting for the right person to listen.

Hector touched my face lightly as he tried to decide if caressing me was the right or wrong thing to do. Concern weighed down the corners of his eyes.

I hated pity.

"Did you report him to the police?"

Was Hector insane? The police probably would have thought I was a faggot who got what I deserved.

"I prayed."

Hector mused for along time with his head down. He rubbed the side of his nose. "Tell you what. Rule three—if you feel uncomfortable, even a little, you tell me immediately. It's my job to make sure you don't get overwhelmed. The second something feels wrong, you have to use your safe word. We both know how quickly those little things explode into big problems, so the idea is to step back while it's still manageable. We're going to take it slow and be careful until we know exactly where we are. Does that sound okay?"

All of that and he didn't send me away. Nothing terrible happened. The lips in the hedge were wrong. I could talk about it.

"Boy, do we have an understanding?"

"Yes, Sir."

There was a change in his posture again as he went from concerned daddy to 'Sir'.

Pulling the rope that was threaded through the overhead eyehook, he yanked up my arms behind me. Hector lifted my chin. That sent agonies shooting through my neck and shoulder muscles. Seeing that I was calm, he took the end of the rope and walked out into the sunshine.

He tied the end of the rope to the grapefruit tree. Hector picked up his shovel and went back to digging up the lawn. Occasionally he'd pluck the rope stretched across the backyard and the vibration would run through the line. It was combination leash and lifeline, every jiggle a reminder that he was there for me.

I submitted to his control and withdrew to my mind. Concentrating, I followed meandering hallways through my internal teahouse. The steel plates on the floor were covered with mats. The light was like warm honey. A small, low table sat in the center of the room off the path. A golden ginkgo leaf and three smooth brown stones of different sizes were arraigned artistically on the table. I stood by the door and admired the Zen aesthetic of the scene. It was tranquil. I'd never seen that room before.

Sweat drops staggered down my spine. Pangs shot through my shoulders, neck, and arms, but I was comfortable for about ten minutes of the most intense meditative peace I'd had in a long, long time.

"Sir?"

Hector stopped digging.

"My hands are getting numb."

My skin felt exposed when he took the ropes away. Hector stood apart from me. Wasn't he supposed to surge into the gulf between us?

"I can't—." I can't believe you're standing so far away.

He didn't move.

"I can't—." I can't take this isolation anymore. It's only one damn step, Hector. Won't you give that to me?

"What can't you do?"

Even though it was a hot day, I shivered. I was mad and scared and each of those emotions fueled the other. I felt too exposed, too raw.

He said, "Don't think about what you can't do. Concentrate on what you can do."

It was too much for me. I couldn't admit that I needed him to hold me, but I didn't think I could live another second alone.

"What can you do?"

"Breathe," I snapped. I was afraid I was going to cry and that pissed me off.

"Then simply breathe."

So I did. I drew smog and salt air into my lungs and exhaled about seven months worth of corrosive tension. Something inside me broke free. I reached for Hector just a bit, then let my arms drop. He didn't come closer, but he spread those big daddy arms to invite me over. My arms went up around his neck and I rubbed my face into his hairy chest.

"Good boy," Hector murmured as he kissed the top of my head.

The feel of his skin against mine was so intense that all I could do was stand there clinging to him. He rocked me. Even though there wasn't music, we slow danced together.

"Everything is all right, Baby."

It was. Just like he promised. Everything in that moment was all right.

A couple minutes passed before I could step away from him. He let me move back, but he kept his hands on me. There was something different between us. We'd moved from one reality to another.

* * * *

Nanny and Angelena were playing a card game on the kitchen table when Hector sent me in to grab a couple of beers. As Angelena turned to wink at me, Nanny traded cards in her hand for better ones in the deck.

"You two are awfully quiet out there, but, ooh, the vibes you're emitting are going to send a heat wave all the way to San Diego."

My eyebrows wriggled roguishly. "Don't feel like you have to stick around, Goddess. I think I've got it from here."

"Your area of expertise," Angelena admitted. "Sam in his element." She set her cards down. "I saw you stacking your hand, old woman," she snapped at Nanny's ghost.

I left them to their game.

* * * *

Outside, I handed Hector his beer and kneeled at his feet. My shirt was drenched with sweat, so I took it off. I rubbed the beads of condensation from my beer bottle onto my chest and rolled the cold glass across my nipples. Hector groaned with hushed sympathy. Moving the brown bottle lower, I smeared sweat from my ribs all the way down to the base of my cock. Hector watched my little show like a wolf eyeing a lamb. I lifted the bottle to my lips and drank it down in profile. If he knew I was working it, he was too turned on to care.

He patted his thigh. "Rest your head."

He seemed as content as I was to sit there in silence and enjoy the quiet of the backyard. I refused to look toward the hedge.

A thought niggled at my mind as I looked at the big area of lawn he dug up. "Wait. If you're traveling all the time, Sir, how are you going to take care of the garden you're digging?"

"The garden isn't for me. It's for you, Sam. Call it part of your training. I think you need something to anchor you in the real world."

For me? He saw what I was like the night before, and his first thought was to make a gift for me?

"What should I grow, Sir?"

"That's up to you. Make it happen."

Real tomatoes sounded good, not those imposters they sold in the grocery store, but heirloom beefsteaks that were so fragrant when ripened on the vine.

Oh, man, fresh herbs! Definitely basil. Hector already had rosemary growing on the side of the house, so I didn't need to plant more. Maybe some cilantro, and Italian parsley. White sage for purification rituals. Tarragon. Oh, yeah. My spells would be so much more potent if I could pick the ingredients seconds before using them.

A pinch of this, a sprig of that, a few incantations muttered over a bubbling pot, and Hector would soon have a randy twinkle in his eye. A little lift in his libido wouldn't hurt. I mean, he admitted that he could go three whole days without sex.

I'd have to ask Linda for a copy of her spell book. She had potent lust spells scrawled in the margins. Maybe something a bit more subtle than her Fuck Me the Second You Walk in the Door potion, although I wouldn't mind having that on hand.

Hector tugged on a curly lock of my hair. "This is what I'm talking about, Sam. You're wriggling like a puppy, so I know something is going on in that brain of yours."

"I was thinking about food alchemy."

"You get that excited over a garden?"

I knew he was teasing me. "This is the best gift anyone has ever given me, Sir. I don't know if that's the farmboy in me or the witch, but I can't wait to plunge my hands into the soil."

Hector seemed genuinely touched that I was so happy about a twelve-foot long, five-foot wide rectangle of chewed-up lawn. I could see what it was going to be, though, not what it was. The garden was perfect for me. Not just any boy. Me.

"What are your plans for the rest of the yard, Sir?"

"I'd like to put in a brick patio right over there," he pointed opposite the garden. "I need a new grill. I like to barbeque at my parties."

Grilling. How butch was that?

I bowed before him. When I reached for his zipper, he moved my hand away. Rejection pangs knifed through my chest.

"Let's go inside." He motioned for me to follow him.

I crawled up the wooden stairs and across the porch. When we got inside the kitchen, I rubbed my face against him.

Let me be your sex toy. My hands went to his zipper.

"Let's go to the bedroom."

Sure. Whatever. Let's do this.

* * * *

"Strip for me."

We still hadn't gone shopping, so I was in my usual easy fuck outfit—no socks, no underwear, and no shirt. My pants were still open the way he left them, and my dick was hard. I teased my pants down slowly to build the buzz. From the hitch in his breath, he appreciated the view.

When Hector allowed it, I pulled off his clothes. I kneeled before him, my mouth at the right place. I sniffed the dark nest of hairs surrounding his cock.

"No." He patted the mattress. "Up here."

He let me kiss him, suck on those dark brown nipples of his, and lick the sweat off his chest, but he wouldn't let me go below his waist. The frustration had me insane.

Finally, I realized that I had to beg for his cock. "Please, Sir, let me suck you."

He kissed down my stomach. I could picture the smile in his eyes as he tormented me. "Please, Sir. Let me have your cock." He kneaded my ass.

I slid off his bed and went into a deep submissive bow with my chest, face, and knees pressed to the floor. My butt rested on my upturned soles. I didn't expose my balls yet.

"Much better. If you beg nicely, I might let you suck my dick."

Yes!

"Do you screw around?"

"No, Sir."

"You've been honest with me? I know every name, every Master?"

"Yes, Sir."

"My boy doesn't look at other men. My boy's body is for me alone, and that includes his mouth and hands. This is non-negotiable, Sam. One affair and you're history; look at another guy, and I'll boot your ass out the door."

Unforgiving and uncompromising. I could live with that.

"May I be your boy, Sir?" His boy. That was so fucking hot.

Hector got off the bed and prowled around me.

My back arched until my butt lifted off the bottoms of my feet and my forehead rested against the blue braided rug on his bedroom floor. Trust was the hardest part.

Was I slim enough? Hung enough? Okay, that one I was confident about. But did he like my ass? Every little defect I knew of loomed large in my mind and I was sure he saw all of them.

His hands ran down the backs of my thighs and over my balls, too incredibly intense for words. I nearly shot my load when he stroked me. "You know the posture, but I want you to arch more." He lightly kicked my knees apart until my balls almost dragged on the floor. Rather than having my hands grasp my ass or placed palm-down on the floor by my head, he had me reach between my knees to hold my ankles. Unique, and extremely sexy. I was completely exposed.

"Sir, may I—?"

He shoved his boxers in my mouth.

Let me come. My cock is throbbing. Your underwear is in my mouth and against my nose and the scent of you clinging to them drives me insane.

The light drag of his fingertips over my back, ass, and thighs had me groaning.

He pressed his foot to my balls until they tried to pop from my ballsack. Oh, yes, oh, fucking yes! I snorted through my nose. He yanked his boxers out of my mouth. "Did you have a question for me, boy?"

"Sir, may I please suck your cock? Please?" My voice had a desperate edge.

He got on the bed, propped his head and shoulders on plumped pillows, and spread his legs. "I want my balls licked clean, boy."

"Yes, Sir!" I hurried to obey. Gods—the smell of him! Strong and musky. My tongue flicked across his balls, finding wet pockets of sweat to taste. I slurped and lapped his deep brown scrotum, enjoying the rasp of razor cut hairs. Licking with the grain made his skin feel slippery. Upstrokes felt like grooming a cactus.

Hector lightly slapped my face with his cock. "Suck it."

Like a snake, I swallowed him whole, plunging that fat cock of his into the heat and wet of my mouth.

While my lips tightened around the base, my tongue swirled across the head. He liked that.

I haven't even started, Sir.

I dragged my tongue from his hipbone to the base of his dick. Nibbling kisses touched the inside of his thigh. Long licks ran from the base of his cock to the head and down again. I was so into it. The tip of my tongue probed the fold of his foreskin.

He whispered praise.

We were at that point already? He was more turned on that I thought. I pressed the front edges of my teeth against his taint before sucking it into my mouth as if I was giving him a hickey.

We rolled together. He pinned my arms to the mattress under his knees while he fucked my mouth. Grasping a handful of my hair, he brought my head up to his cock. I sucked him hard. Then he pulled out of my mouth and jerked the last couple of strokes. His fist encircled the brown head. His eyes squeezed shut and I saw the ripple of contraction

move through his body. Opening my mouth, I waited for the shot. Hot, heavy loads sprayed against my cheek and across my lips.

He grinned down at me as he smacked his cock against my come-covered face.

A small blast of lust shot out from me. Maybe Deal thought it was a pathetic use of the limited powers I had, but it was my little gift to the world.

* * * *

Hector was big into the cuddle thing. We were belly to belly on the bed. The room smelled like sex and men.

"What am I going to do about you, Sam?"

What did I do wrong?

"I have to leave town tomorrow. Why don't you come with me? It's only five days."

I raked the hair on his chest with my fingers. After a guy came, I had no problem with a little cuddling, meaning about two minutes. After that, I was done. Problem was, Hector wasn't done, and he wouldn't let go.

"I have two screenings this week."

I noticed that Hector felt I was worth fresh sheets, too.

"I hate to leave you alone, Sam."

I couldn't help it; I got a little pissy. "I'm not one of those guys who can't function without a Dominant around. I've lived this long on my own and I'm fine."

"Is Marcus still around?"

I drew to the far edge of the bed. I so didn't want to talk about that.

"I can see how tense you are, Sam, but you will answer me."

Burying my face in the pillow, I said, "Yes. He lives nearby."

Hector spooned against me, the hairs on his thighs tickling my legs. "That's one reason why I want you with me. The main reason is that I don't want to give you time to run for cover. It's taken me too long to get past all those defenses you've built up. I don't want to start from the beginning again."

The heat of his breath on my neck gave me chills. He ran his hand down my back to the curve of my ass. Please slap. Please. He gave me a goose instead of the spanking I ached for.

Slow. He said we'd take it slow. I didn't want to wait, but he was in charge, so I didn't have a say.

Chapter 8

Those days before Hector left on his trip were intense. Slow didn't mean easy. He moved right into training.

We were in my apartment. He was on the couch; I kneeled on the floor. My skin was gooseflesh from the cold air seeping under my front door.

He reached down to smack my ass. "Concentrate."

I tried. We worked on his rules for hours. I could recite them backwards and forwards. I held difficult poses as my muscles trembled. I did anything he demanded, and usually got it right, but I couldn't seem to kneel properly at his feet.

"Boy!"

My tongue pressed against my teeth. I wanted to shout at him. I was at my limit.

Hector rubbed his fingertips across his forehead. "Okay. We'll stop for tonight. It's your bedtime anyway. Boys need their sleep."

Oh. We were playing. Cool. I could get into that. I scowled. "The other boys get to stay up later."

"You have a stricter Papi." From the way his eyes lit up, I could tell he enjoyed the game as much as I did. It was nice to know we were both into a bit of age play. Some guys got creeped out by it. I thought it was hot.

"Besides, Sam, those boys are bigger than you. Older."

I smirked a bit. Once he knew my real age, Hector didn't mind me passing for jailbait. Even with my ID, some restaurants refused to serve me beer. He let me steal sips off his drink when the waiter wasn't looking. It was our daddy-boy secret, like holding hands under the table.

He led me to my bedroom. "This is your bedtime ritual from now on." He went through the routine as I got into bed. "Unless I keep you up, by 10:20 you're under the covers. I sleep on the left, so get used to the right side."

I pouted. "Can't I stay up a little longer?" Let's play some more.

"My rules aren't for discussion, boy." He tucked the blue corduroy bedspread around my chest and kissed my forehead. "Go to sleep. You have more training tomorrow."

"Yes, Sir."

He turned off the light and closed the door part way. I stretched out, not the least bit tired despite all the punishment pushups and the intense drills.

I could hear the pages of his book turn as he read in the front room.

An hour later, he crept back into my room to check to see if I was asleep. I thought I faked it pretty well. He fondled me under the covers until I quit pretending.

He rolled me on my side and gave my ass a hard smack. "When your Sir tells you to go to sleep, you fall asleep. We're not going to get into deep play until I think you're ready, but that doesn't mean I won't punish you."

A smack on my ass? That was foreplay.

"Lie face down in the middle of the mattress." Hector sat on the edge of the bed and kicked off his shoes. By the time he stripped down and knelt between my thighs, I was primed for sex. Naked together on the bed was good, very good.

He didn't say a word. He simply watched my reactions as he caressed my shoulders. Long, swirling strokes of his fingers made my skin hypersensitive. Hector drove me crazy with his touch. At first his hands and little kisses felt good. Tension leached out of my muscles. I hadn't been so relaxed around another guy in over a year.

By the time he massaged my ass and kissed the small of my back, though, I was in agony. It was nothing but a tease. When he turned me over, I almost didn't want him to touch me anymore. It was torture to be that turned on. He kissed my stomach and sucked on my nipples as he ground against my thigh.

I needed to come. It wasn't just want to anymore, it was had to. Something seriously bad was going to happen if I didn't shoot, like my dick would never work again. Every time he pressed his lips to my body, I whimpered.

A cock that hard had no dignity. I begged him for permission to come.

"It's past your bedtime."

The head of my dick jerked back from the friction of my rough sheets, and the weight of the blankets seemed to settle on my hot balls when he pulled the covers over me again.

"Please, Sir! I'll do anything!"

"Except obey me."

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'll be good. Please let me come." I pouted as cute as I could. For that, I got a little sound of pity, but he was just humoring me.

Hector wagged a finger at me from the door of my bedroom. "You're being punished. No coming until you're forgiven. Go to sleep. You've had a long day and tomorrow will be worse. Be at my house at 6 am."

Every nerve under my skin was exposed, raw, and hungry. Go to sleep? No way.

He was going to kill me with lust. My death would be slow and agonizing, and I wanted it more than anything I'd ever wanted in my life.

* * * *

Early the next morning, I headed over to Hector's with a perfect plan. I'd show him how obedient I could be, and then maybe he'd reward me with sex. Punctuality mattered, so I got to his place half an hour early and waited outside in my car.

Watching the sun rise in his quiet neighborhood got old fast. I drummed my fingers against the steering wheel, finished my coffee, and ate a mint. Hector's house was quiet and dark. I flicked through my iPod, listening to a couple of seconds of each song before moving to the next one.

Twenty to six, I figured it wouldn't hurt to be a little early, so I got out of the car and jogged up the steps to his front door.

He opened the door, said, "I told you six," and shut it again.

Oh, man. Blew it already. I should have waited. As I paced his front porch, I realized that I should have worn a jacket. It was too chilly for just a T-shirt.

At six exactly, by my watch, I knocked again. Hector was dressed, shaved, and not nearly as grumpy that time.

"Come in." He moved aside so that I could walk into the living room.

He didn't say anything as he shut the door. Then he sat on the big chair, unfolded the newspaper, and started to read.

It was warmer inside his house, but it was worse than being outside. I wasn't sure what I should do, so I just stood there, and stood, and stood, while I tried to figure out where my hands were supposed to go, and if I was allowed to move.

"I'm sorry I was early," I told him. An apology couldn't hurt, right?

He didn't look up from the paper, but said, "I didn't say you could talk."

Hector must have read every article in the first section of the paper. When he finished the last page and folded it, I grinned. Then he reached for the next section. I must have made a noise, because he slowly lowered the paper until I could see his face. He didn't look happy. His eyebrow rose a little. In relief, I closed my eyes when he went back to reading.

I was dying. My feet burned from standing in one place too long. If he'd given me a sign, some sort of cue, I would have known what to do. It seemed so stupid to just stand there in his living room watching him read the morning paper.

Bored, I looked around the room and read the titles of the books on his shelves.

"Boy!" Hector leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. "I thought you were trained."

Thinking that a little show of submission might make him happy, I got on my knees and crawled over to him.

"Why did you do that?" he asked. "I didn't tell you to." Hector grabbed a handful of my hair and pulled back until I was looking up at him. "If I tell you that you may talk, you may talk. Otherwise, you're quiet. If I tell you to come to me, you do it. Otherwise, you stay where I left you and wait for a command. You don't get to make any decisions. All you have to do is obey. Do you understand me?"

I almost said, "Yes, Sir," but managed to hold it back as I nodded.

Hector let go of my hair. "Try to remember that."

The rest of the morning didn't go much better. It wasn't that I forgot he was in charge, but I wanted to show him I could do more. Every time I did, though, he said, "Boy!" and I knew I'd screwed up again. It was so frustrating. I got angry with myself, and that made me tense, so I'd do something else wrong.

Hector saw how stressed I was, so he took me to the park to toss around a football. Running non-stop for an hour burned off most of my pent-up energy. When we got back to the house, I was ready to work again.

I kneeled at his feet in front of his couch. An old mantel clock sat on one of the bookshelves near the kitchen door. I listened to it tick.

"Quiet your mind," Hector reminded me.

Not thinking was a lot harder than it seemed. My shoulder blade itched. Thoughts zinged around my brain and movement vibrated under my skin. I figured that he wouldn't notice a small twitch. I had to move. Had to.

Smack!

His crop hit my bare ass. It stung.

"If you let your thoughts go, it will be easier for you to stay still."

The effort not to move made me sweat. I felt the trickle down my temple. It tickled.

Smack!

"Focus, boy."

My hands balled into fists. The next time his crop hit me, I yelped.

Hector caught me trying to dance away from another blow. "Come up here." He made me drape over his knees while he checked out the red marks across my upper thighs and ass. "I think you've had enough for now."

I wanted to stay there, face down, over his knee. "I'm fine."

"You don't make decisions." He gave my ass cheek a long, firm squeeze. "Go make dinner."

Under the arched entrance to his kitchen, I smiled back at him. Hector rubbed his forehead and stared out the window. My heart sank.

* * * *

After dinner, he went back out to the couch while I cleaned up. When I was done, I had no idea what I was supposed to do, so I leaned against the kitchen door and waited for instructions. He read. After a while, he nodded to me and pointed to the floor next to his feet. I gladly kneeled at his feet—and rested my head on his thigh.

His leg was warm and the texture of his pants was rough against my cheek. My eyes flitted around the room. The poppa chair sat facing the front door. Hector only sat there

when he had guests or when he had to have a serious discussion with me. Otherwise, he sat on the leather couch. The television set wasn't huge or new, but Hector wasn't into watching. His true passion was books. Every wall in the living room and down the hallway to the bedrooms was solid bookshelves. Behind the television, the dark wood shelves reached the ceiling, but most of them were chest high. Above the shelves, Hector hung prints of photographs he'd taken on a long ago trip to the Mediterranean.

I wasn't thinking about anything. I simply felt comfortable and at ease.

Hector caressed my hair, stroking from my forehead down to the nape of my neck. His hand moved slowly. The house got real quiet. From outside, the sound of the neighbors talking reached me. I listened to the rhythm of their voices because I couldn't make out the words. Time slipped.

I didn't know why I thought of it, but I remembered driving back home to my parents' farm after a visit to my Cousin Jenny's house. I was probably eight or nine. It was late summer. The drive from New Orleans back to Oklahoma took forever. We were only in the low hills of western Arkansas when the shadows began to lengthen. I wanted to stay awake, because the closer we got to my parents' farm, the more homesick I felt.

Mile after mile of trees and two-lane rural highways lulled everyone in the back of the minivan to sleep. I tried to count the telephone poles that we passed, but they blurred together and weighted down my eyelids. I was so angry because I wanted to be awake to see the black mansard roof of the farmhouse above the cottonwoods.

I heard the tires on the gravel driveway. Someone helped me up the stairs. I tried to tell them that I was awake, but they laughed that way adults did when they knew better. Then I was on my bed and I only wanted to curl up under the blankets. Someone yanked my T-shirt over my head and pulled off my shoes and pants. Finally, they put the covers over me and let me turn on my side. Grown-ups murmured over me, kissed my forehead, and caressed my hair. Even though I was asleep, I knew I was home, so I submitted to oblivion.

* * * *

I awoke pinned to a mattress. I saw closet doors painted in cream gloss enamel. From the art photos of hot, young fetish models on the wall, I knew I was in Hector's bedroom.

Hector's bicep was my pillow. His other arm wrapped over my ribs and his hand was near my face. Every time he exhaled, the hairs on top of my head ruffled. His morning hard-on jammed against the back of my thigh.

Only moving my index finger, I touched his thumb and felt the calluses. Being a salesman must be a lot more physical than I imagined. I traced around his nail and then dared to

touch the back of his hand. Bolder, I ran my hand along his forearm, letting my fingers comb his thick, dark hairs as they followed the meandering lines of his ropy veins. I lost myself in touching him.

Hector made morning noises as he stretched against me. His arm traveled to my waist and he pressed his lips to my bare shoulder. "Good morning, Baby." His voice was growly.

I didn't say anything.

"I know that you're awake."

I nodded.

"What's the matter?" His voice was sharp.

I didn't want him to be mad at me. If I could have hidden away from him, I would have, but I knew that would ruin everything between us, so I manned up and rolled over to face him. He waited for me to work up to talking.

"I never woke up with anyone before," I admitted. It shouldn't have mattered, but as I told him, it did matter, a lot. "I'm being stupid."

His gaze absorbed me. "It's not stupid." He touched the side of my face and the way he looked at me made me glad for once that I said what was in my heart.

I felt his aura wash over mine. Protected. Safe. Cherished. Everything he promised me was there. There was deep, satisfying peace inside me.

Even before he kissed me, before he hugged me closer, before I surrendered to his cuddling, I realized that I was in the presence of Love.

Chapter 9

Brett drove me home after our Saturday morning basketball game. We stopped in traffic in front of a neighborhood bar, its brown door propped open by a metal barstool. Ranchero music played from the shadowed depths of the beige cinderblock building. Hector liked Led Zeppelin and AC/DC, but the Spanish lyrics made me think of him.

Brett handed me a towel. "Don't drip sweat on my seats."

Must not forget the Brett car rules. No drinks, no food, no fucking with his resale value. I was surprised he didn't saran wrap the interior before he let Joey or me ride with him. Instead of giving him shit about being so anal, I took the towel.

"Who is it? You're off in la-la land over someone," Brett snapped.

Hector's rules—I had to talk when people spoke to me, and not a monosyllabic answer. "Hector." Hah, two syllables!

"Still? He's the reason for that dopey grin?"

"We talked on the phone last night, and got into a conversation about Gabriel Garcia Marquez's books. It was nearly one before I got to sleep."

"Books. Who knew you read? All you ever talk about is sports when I'm around."

"Okay. What do you read?"

Brett rolled his eyes. "Out. Men. Stuff with pictures of hot guys."

"I'm not allowed to look at porn anymore."

Brett smacked his steering wheel. "Why the fuck do you put up with that? What's so special about this guy?"

"He's—" A slow smile spread across my face as I tried to think of words worthy of Hector. "He's a solid Top. Hot, so damn hot. Bubble butt, warm brown skin, sculpted arms, nice eyes, pecs like you wouldn't believe. He's strict." Even as I was saying it, I realized that description wouldn't appeal to Brett. Good.

"That's what you like?" Brett gnawed at his fingernail. "You're into that? You'd think that you'd learn by now, Sam. After that whole bad break-up with Marcus..."

"Marcus and Hector are nothing alike."

I stared out the passenger window, watching the shops along Cherry as traffic crept. The small *mercado* with a curtain of yellow links hanging in the open doorway advertised *fruitas fresca*, carne, and prepaid calling cards for Mexico. Drifts of trash sat in the gutters.

"If you play kinky games you've got to expect bad shit will happen to you."

I prayed to Angelena to get me home as soon as possible. Traffic suddenly cleared in the lanes ahead.

When Brett stopped in front of my apartment, he reached over me to hold the door shut. "Wait. What happens if you break one of Hector's rules?"

"No sex."

"That's it? What's such a turn on about that? You're getting no sex from me. Does that make me your daddy, too?" Brett couldn't do sarcasm. It came out bitter.

I peered out the windshield to the uneven sidewalk. Brett's small car felt more compact every second. The velour seat scratched the back of my legs. "No sex is a real punishment for me. You don't have any idea how much I need it."

"I could give it to you right now."

Brett hung onto the door. His face was close to mine. I could smell the mints he chewed non-stop on his breath. I couldn't look into his melancholy, gray eyes, so I stared above his waxed eyebrows.

"With a cock like yours, how can you be a bottom? You need sex? We can go upstairs right now and I'll let you ride me bareback."

"What are you on?" I smacked his hand away.

Brett leaned back and laughed. "Kidding. Just kidding, Sam. So, what are Hector's rules?"

"No chat rooms anymore, no cruising, no masturbating, and no talking back. A lot of it is about my attitude, and the way I do things. He decides how I stand, sit, kneel, or speak to him, what I'm allowed to do without permission, and what I have to get his approval for. He confiscated all my porn DVD's, magazines, even my Juventus and Arsenal team posters. Everything I do has to be done the exact right way."

"That sounds like a pain in the ass. Why does it matter how you do something? I mean, as long as you get it done."

"The point is doing things the way Hector wants them done. There's ritual now for everything I do. Details I have to follow."

"That's stupid."

"No, Brett, it isn't stupid. I feel grounded when I'm completely dominated. Having so many rules is actually liberating, because every movement becomes so ingrained that I don't have to waste time thinking about it."

It was suddenly so clear to me. All those drills were Hector's way of teaching me to control my body so that I could free my mind. Every detail of my chores was a meditation—like an initiate at a temple would perform. Hector truly was my Master, not only in a physical sense, but also like a guru or a priest.

"It's really kind of Zen, now that I think about it," I told Brett.

The elation was like light spilling into my soul. I wanted to be with Hector and share the moment. I mentally reached out and, sensing his presence around me, hugged my arms close and was content. It was so cool.

If only I could get away from Brett. He was noise I didn't want right then.

"Yeah. Sure. Zen. Whatever." Brett didn't hear my meaning. "Does he hit you?"

Brett probably couldn't tell the difference between discipline and abuse, so I answered the question I thought he was asking. "He's not that kind of guy. He doesn't have to threaten. I want to obey."

"I could spank you, Sam, if that's what you want." Brett's hand crept onto my thigh.

Don't laugh. Whatever you do, don't laugh at him. I bit my bottom lip until the pain sobered me. "It wouldn't ever work, Brett. I'm sorry."

"If that's what it takes to get you off, I can do it. If you want your ass slapped, I can play that game, too."

"I'm sorry." Let me out of the car.

"Why wouldn't it work?" He got angrier.

There was no explaining the color blue to a blind man.

"You kneeled down to me."

Brett kissed me. He tried harsh, demanding, but in the end, it was a guy making a desperate last-ditch effort to save something that never was. He broke it off finally. "It's good to see you happy, I guess." He opened the car door. I couldn't climb out fast enough. "Sam, lovers come and go —."

"Lovers come, assholes go," I quipped.

He shook his head, not willing to give me a smile.

Chapter 10

Hector had been traveling for his work for over a week and even the nightly phone calls weren't enough anymore. When he got back into town, waiting for him to come over was hell. I swung between being hideously sappy and rampantly horny.

When he finally showed up, I was ready to jump him. He didn't make it two steps inside my apartment before I was on my knees, rubbing my face in his groin.

"Boy." All it took was that soft warning to bring me back in line.

I licked his boots to show how I felt to be with him again. I had no idea if he smiled or frowned, but he had to see that his boy put his heart into proper worship. When I finished, my tongue felt like dust. I placed my hands on either side of his foot and touched my forehead to his toe while I waited for his word.

Energy coursed through my body. It took all my control to stop from squirming with lust. The touch of his hand on my back made me jump.

"Let's go to the mall."

Clothes shopping. I would have rather been tossed into a bathtub full of ice cubes.

* * * *

Hector's version of shopping didn't come close to mine. If I went to a mall, I went with a specific mission and carried it out in twenty minutes, maximum. Efficient, direct, painless.

Hector shopped. He went into stores I never knew existed. He spoke to the sales clerks, insisted I try things on, and demanded I come out to show him how it looked. I didn't care if pants were pleated in front or if the shirt was European cut, but Hector and the clerks conferred over every damn thing I tried on like red carpet reporters at a televised awards show.

"Turn around, Sam. Show me the back."

The clerk brought another pile of clothes. "That color looks great on you, sir. May I suggest this tie?" When he saw that I wasn't interested, he turned to Hector. "The legs are cut too full for his slim build. May I suggest something more tailored?"

Oh, Gods – it never fucking ended.

"Last stop, Sam," Hector promised as he dragged me into a high-end boutique.

The dressing room was the size of my kitchen. Soft lighting diffused an apricot glow on the carpet and classical music played through overhead speakers. I groaned at the price tag on the pants and sank into the plush chair. Maybe I couldn't afford to date Hector. How could one pair of pants cost so much?

We could have lots of fun without dressing me up, like that night in his truck when he spanked me. My dick got hard as I remember that scene. I unzipped my pants and released myself from boxer brief purgatory. One long, firm stroke. I'd treat myself, I decided.

Someone knocked on the dressing room door.

I pictured Hector realizing he didn't have me completely under his thumb like he thought he did. Time to top your boy, Sir. Another stroke. Damn that felt good. A paddle? A whip? Fuck yeah. Tie me up and punish me until I scream my apologies.

There was another knock at the door. I ignored it. One more stroke. Maybe another. Ah, screw it – full on hand job. I spat into my palm.

The doorknob to the dressing room jiggled. "Sam?"

I was going to get caught. That edge of danger was like mainlining pure adrenaline.

"Open this door immediately, boy."

I almost shot my wad right then. He knew. I was going to open the door and he was going to be furious with me. Big, hulking, angry daddy. Hot? Oh, yeah.

I opened the door. He wasn't as angry as I expected. Looking him right in the eye, I grabbed my dick and stroked.

Black anger shot through his eyes. "Put that back in your pants and come out here. Right. Now." His voice was so hushed that I felt it more than I heard it.

My balls tightened. I hid a grin as I tucked myself back into my pants.

"Is everything all right?" The salesclerk asked. She couldn't see around Hector.

If he was as angry as he seemed, everything was going to get very good, very fast. Hector turned to her. "I'm sorry. I lost track of the time. Something's come up that I need to take care of. May I have your card?"

"Certainly. Let me go get one. Did those pants fit?"

I slipped past Hector, rubbing against him far more than was necessary to pass in the hallway outside the dressing rooms. "Perfect," I assured her.

From the moment we left the store until we got to his truck, Hector walked with his hand on the back of my neck. The weight of it sent my thoughts perving. Such big hands. I was gonna be sore for days.

He followed me up the stairs to my apartment and shut the door quietly behind him. "First, you will undress and hang up your clothes properly. Then, you will crawl back out here. You will not touch yourself. Go." He tugged at the crisp pleat on the front of his pants and sat in the center of the couch.

I rushed to obey.

He was reading when I crawled out to him. My cock bobbed as I moved across the wood floor. He didn't say anything or even acknowledge me, so I kneeled at his feet and rested my cheek on his foot.

The crisp slide of paper let me know when he turned a page on the book. Traffic sounds filtered in through the window. The room got darker. He turned on the lamp over the couch.

Maybe he was letting his temper simmer down. That was good. It showed how much control he had.

I lost track of the number of pages he read as the first hour elapsed. His temper had to be pure ice. Unless he simply didn't care. No, he made me crawl. He was angry when we were in the store.

It seemed like a good idea at the time. Push him into reacting. But what if his reaction was to leave me?

My cheek pressed to his shoe. The animal scent of the leather was barely noticeable over the scent of polish.

He cared about appearances. If I expected to be seen with him, I had to rise to his level. Instead, I played little games because I wanted attention. Why did he put up with me? Yeah, sure, there was the sex, but any guy would be happy to blow Hector. Such a hot

daddy. He could be having a good time with someone who wasn't such an idiot, someone who would bend over for him.

Oh, shit. He was going to dump me for some ass slut.

He snapped the book shut. Hector stretched, yawned, and then turned on more lights around the room. I paused in mid-mind-fuck. He stood in front of me. I didn't move. The silence was brittle.

I knew what I had to say. I drew in a breath. The stench of Fear gagged me. He took a step back. My face went hot. He took another step back. Humiliation yanked me around by the short hairs. I slammed my fist against the floor and hid my burning face with the other hand. I knew how to get past my stutter. If I could just calm down I could do it, but he was close to the door. Between the pressure of time, and the horrible ache of knowing that everything was shattering because I couldn't talk, it was impossible for me to get my control back.

He was only two steps from the door. I'd never be able to speak before he left. I was blowing it.

"Please don't leave me," I finally forced out through my clenched jaw. A drop fell from my temple to the floor. I brushed my hand across the tile to wipe it away before he saw it.

Hector squatted near my head. His fingers slid down my sweaty spine. Peeling away my hand, he exposed my red cheek. I tried to turn my face down to the floor to hide, but he wouldn't allow it. "Baby," he said with so much compassion I trembled. As he sat back on the couch, he asked me, "Why do you make yourself so miserable?"

I tried to answer, but could only manage a shaky inhale.

Angelena, Deal, Crash, somebody, please! Take me back in time. I swear I won't mess up again. Please. Anything you want. Any sacrifice. Take me back to that damn dressing room and let me start over. Please! Mercy.

"Come up here." Hector pulled off his shirt so I could be against his skin. I wrapped my arms around his neck and burrowed into the muscles of his shoulders. He stroked my back until the hiccups stopped ripping through my chest. I hated it when I got so emotional. The humiliation made it worse.

"Let me guess. You've decided we're over." Hector pressed his lips to my forehead, tasting my sweat.

We were so close together. Everywhere our skin touched, my nerves were hyperaware of his heat.

"Punish me, Sir." Come on. Let's play.

"Boy, you have some strange ideas about who is in charge here. Don't ever order me to do something."

"You can't let me get away with that." Please don't forgive me without punishment. If you do, it's over.

"If I let you push me into doing what you want, then I'm not strong enough for you. Nice try, by the way. I give you points for style, but I know every sub trick in the book, and I don't fall for any of them. You aren't ready to plunge back into a full Dom/sub life yet."

Why did he treat me like I was fragile? It pissed me off. It wasn't too soon. "I'm ready. I can handle it."

"Every time you get too stressed you stutter."

"Once! I stuttered once." I didn't know why I talked back. I knew better. But he was wrong about me. I was fine. I could take it. I wanted it.

"You broke out in a cold sweat trying to talk less than five minutes ago."

Damn it! Did he miss anything?

His hands slid down my back. "So what's the story?"

"No story."

Hector yanked my hands behind me and held my wrists tight. "Talk."

Pangs shot across my shoulders and I had to arch my back to keep my balance. He leaned forward and bit down on my nipple until I snorted through my nose. Fuck, yeah! Bring me to heel. Set me under your thumb. His teeth clamped down hard. Squirming from the pain, I almost fell out of his lap. Pure lust seared through me. Burned me up.

The arc of his teeth made red marks around my nipple and his saliva shone on my skin when he let go. "Talk."

So damn hot. He pinned my arms at the elbows until I yelped out, "I don't do anal."

He laughed. "You?"

"I know. Biggest slut in the world, but as soon as someone pressures me —"

"You run."

"So if that's what you want, you might as well leave now. I'm just not ready for it."

"Yet." A big smile was waiting to spread over his mouth.

"I can't relax when someone is that close to me. It's a hard limit, Sir. I won't."

"Yet."

He thought he knew so much. "Don't laugh at me! I'm serious."

"I can see that."

When I scowled at him, he said, "Back down on the floor. We're going to work on your obedience. Don't move for ten minutes. I know that's hard for you. You have so much energy that you're always in motion. Give me ten minutes of absolute stillness."

I slid to my knees, put my head on his thigh, and got set to endure the excruciating test of control. At first, I held my muscles tight, but that made it harder to stay still. So I concentrated on releasing the tension while breathing slowly. I'd almost have it, then I'd remember how angry Marcus got when I told him I wouldn't let him fuck me. My jaw clenched and I tightened up again. I pushed Marcus out of my thoughts. There was only one Master that mattered – Hector – and he wasn't angry.

Hector stroked my hair. His hand went to the back of my neck and rested there for a moment before he forced me to look up at him. "Good boy," he said quietly. He nodded slightly.

That was all I needed. I realized I could have stayed like that, perfectly still at his feet, for another hour.

* * * *

After brunch with Larry and David, friends of Hector's, we went to the farmers' market and picked out herbs for the garden behind his house. Hector was so gruff with me that some people gave him sour glances. They didn't hear the grunt of approval he gave me when I had a long conversation with the herb seller. That was enough to keep me flying for a couple hours.

I insisted on cooking dinner at my apartment. Three nights in a row, Hector bitched about having to make the drive back to his place after my bedtime, but he didn't order me to use his kitchen.

"Baby, you're going to make me fat," Hector groaned, and rubbed his flat belly. He could pack away the food, which was fine, but he scraped the last of the lasagna onto his plate. There went my lunch and dinner the next day. "I have good news. I'm not leaving town tomorrow. I'll be here through Friday."

My panic showed, and he didn't like it.

The legs of the chair banged on the floor as he lurched over the table to grab my chin. "What's this? What's the matter?"

"Nothing, Sir."

"Did I ruin your plans? Were you going to meet someone tomorrow night?"

"No!"

His jaw clenched. Oh, so quietly, he asked, "Then what's the problem?"

I chewed on my bottom lip. "I hope you like ramen noodles."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I promise, Sir, I have checks coming, but money is a little tight right now." My checkbook was balancing on a high wire. I'd blown my food budget on nice dinners for him. That was my fault for showing off.

He jumped up so quick that he almost knocked over my little table. Hector threw open every cabinet in the kitchen. He even looked in the refrigerator. I winced. Pretty pathetic. I didn't even have bread.

He stared at the empty shelves. "Why didn't you say something?"

"You were going out of town. I have enough to get by."

He reached for his wallet. It was too fucking humiliating, so I left the kitchen. Hector caught hold of me. "You can't afford to be so proud." Then he laughed at me. Laughed. Yeah, my life was a big joke. The smirk melted from his face. "Oh."

"Don't pity me. Just—Don't. Okay?"

"This isn't pity." Hector put his hands on my shoulders and nuzzled into my ear. "This is me, taking control like I should have from the start. I let you get away with too much."

Maybe I didn't melt for soft words, but hot breath on my neck did me in every time. Next thing I knew, we were on the couch. I straddled his legs. His hands were everywhere; my fingers frantically tugged on his fly.

"You're so damn stubborn," Hector scolded me between hard kisses.

People told me that all the time. I tried to kiss him again, but he stopped me.

"Did I do something wrong, Sir?" If there was one thing Marcus pounded into my skull, it was that if I made him unhappy, or I made him angry, I had to fix it. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you that I was broke. I'll get a check again soon. I promise."

"I don't expect you to pay for our dates, Sam. In fact, I expected to pay for everything. That's the way it is."

I fucking hated money. I just wished I had more of it to hate.

I climbed off his lap and tried to tug him along. "Let's go wrestle on the bed."

He pulled me back down on the couch. "Let's talk about this first. Did you let Keith or Manny pay when you went out with them?"

Did Dominants and submissives do vanilla date nights? Maybe that was the ultimate kink. "I didn't date them."

"You were with Keith, what, five months? You don't call that dating?"

"Keith never took me out. It was strictly about sex. Manny, too. And Serge."

I could see Hector's jaw get tight. The heat between us went stone cold.

"What happened after a scene?"

He asked weird questions. "I left."

"Who took care of you?" His voice rose.

I couldn't hold still.

"Who held you or soothed your bruises? Who praised you?"

I thought I saw something, a flicker of Angelena whispering into his ear, but she was gone so quick that I decided that I imagined it. The more I squirmed, the harder Hector held onto me.

"Did you ever go cruising on your own afterward and let strangers lead you into the dark?"

My mouth dropped open. How did he know about that? Damn that Angelena—telling him my secrets.

"They let you walk out in a vulnerable, submissive state, and the predators took advantage of that."

He knew everything about me. The room behind him flickered in strange leaps of time that disturbed me. The altars on the wall behind Hector seemed to glow from within. Then I blinked and everything was back to normal. Well, normal for my apartment.

"Manny, Serge, and Keith didn't kick me out, Sir. It just seemed like they were done with me, and it made everything less awkward if I got the hell out of their way as fast as possible." Slut courtesy. No one could complain about my manners. "I made the decision to leave, Sir."

"That shouldn't have been your decision to make. I will never let you take control like that. It was lazy of them. Sloppy."

We were as close to a real argument as I ever wanted to get. He was steamed at my former Masters, but it didn't seem fair to blame them because I made things easy at the end of the night. "I liked it. The men. Being a sex toy. It turned me on. I'm not a saint. I'm not innocent." I wanted him to think of me as nasty. Good boys got petted and paraded. Dirty boys got tied up and punished.

"I didn't ask if it turned you on. I know you have a taste for extremes. But Baby, you weren't brought down right. Any Dominant worthy of you would have given you what you needed within the controlled space of a scene."

"No one can make it edgy enough in scene."

Hector raised an eyebrow. "You want to bet?"

Maybe Hector could take me to the brink and not let me fall.

"I wish I could make you believe that you deserve to be treated right, Sam."

I couldn't take being talked to like that.

Hector must have seen it, because he changed the subject. "Do you miss your family?" He pointed to the pictures on my walls, and then moved his finger to touch the tip of my

nose. "You're going to give me a long answer. If you stop talking before two minutes pass, I'm leaving." He made a big show of timing me.

"We're close. Mom especially didn't want me to move away, but I figured that if I stayed in our little town I had to be celibate or risk the villagers holding a torchlight parade in my honor. I wasn't about to pretend I wasn't all about sex. Because of our religion, my family had enough enemies already. Waving a rainbow flag for the natives to rally against would have only made it worse. Mom pleaded with me to stay and Dad even got into it with me, but I got stubborn. Big surprise there. I packed my stuff in my car and drove west."

Hector checked his watch, so I barreled through saying something I had wanted to tell someone for a long time. "If I had stayed home like I was told to, I never would have met Marcus, and it wouldn't have happened. If I had just paid close enough attention to Marcus' body language, I would have known better than to talk back to him that day. He was in a bad mood, hung over, and I could see it. He wanted a fight; I gave it to him. I pushed him to it. I should have shut up. I should have bowed down and said yes to every demand. He didn't ever let me say no. I knew that, but I said no anyway, and no matter how hard he hit me, I still wouldn't let him fuck me. If I had just apologized, he would have stopped. But I was too stubborn. The worse it hurt, the more I bled, the more stubborn I got about it. All I had to do was give in, but I wouldn't."

No one ever let me explain why Marcus was my fault. I hadn't poured that much about myself to anyone. Ever. Only Hector knew. Only Hector listened.

"But I'm over that now."

"Not until I say so. And you owe me another minute."

Plan B then.

"One of my favorite fantasies about you, Sir, we're in the barn at my parent's farm. I'm in a cowboy hat, brown leather chaps, and rope. You bind my wrists together and hoist my arms above my head by a big hook that hangs from the ceiling."

He seemed interested.

"You know that big, black leather flail you showed me? The buffalo hide? Well, you used that across my shoulders and ass." Something like that would leave me with dark stripes across my pale skin.

I waited. Hector finally said, "Go on."

"You lower me from the hook and bend me over a bale of hay."

I closed my eyes, getting into the fantasy. "The hay scratches against my bare chest. I'm so hard. Dust clings to my sweaty skin, and the barn smells faintly of old horse manure. Across the barnyard, there's a campfire with a branding iron in it. You pick up the iron and show me the glowing, red-hot capital H. I can feel the heat radiating on my face and eyeballs. You press the branding iron to my ass. The sick-sweet smell of cooking flesh makes me want to puke. I cry and scream, but you hold me tight and tell me that you're proud of me. Then you jerk off and rub your come in like a salve on the burn and slowly the pain goes away. The pink scar shows the world that you own me."

A long silence traveled back and forth between us.

"I would never destroy your body like that, boy."

"It's only a fantasy, Sir." One he didn't like. I'd have to figure out what turned him on.

"You'll have to show me that barn. I liked the cowboy hat and chaps part. I bet you look cute in a cowboy hat." As quickly as it came, the tension between us was gone. "Do you have a pair of chaps?" he asked.

"Wrong part of Oklahoma. We're real close to the Arkansas border. Tree farming is the main crop. Not a lot of cattle, so not many cowboys. If you want to play cowboys and cattle prods, though, I'm your boy."

His eyes were heavy-lidded with lust.

Rising from his thighs, I took his hand off my waist and placed it on my ass. If not punishment, how about some Sir/boy bonding? Put me over your lap and take me where I need to go. He said I lived inside my head too much, but where else could I go? He took all my porn away from me. All he left me was my imagination, and man-oh-man, was it in overdrive.

He slowly exhaled. "Baby, you are out to tempt me tonight." Tilting his wrist, he checked his watch. "Four minutes. Good boy. Come into the bedroom."

Oh, yeah. I trotted behind him to my room.

He reclined on my bed and patted the mattress. "Present."

I started to peel off my shorts.

"Stop!"

I had no idea what I was supposed to do. When he ordered me to present, he usually meant nude. He had me so far off balance that I was lost.

"Why am I waiting?" Hector snapped.

I scrambled onto the bed and spread my thighs as far as I could. I grasped my ankles. My shoulders dug into the bedspread. I arched until the small of my back ached.

I felt the mattress depress behind me. Hector rubbed his crotch against my ass. I felt the rough creases in his pants. He slid his hard-on against my nylon basketball shorts.

He pressed his chest to my back. "I won't hurt you, Baby."

When he started with his Baby, Baby, Baby routine, I turned into a Kool-Aid drinking, barefoot pilgrim, believing everything, nodding a stupefied yes to anything he asked of me. It was a spell, all voice and promise of sex, and I let it bind me.

"You have such an incredible ass."

Even though I was turned on, I tensed up. I couldn't help it. Once I let someone that close to me, inside me, how could I protect my soul from him?

"Don't you trust me?" He sounded hurt. Hector stroked my dick. "Don't you like this? Let me slide your shorts down so you can feel it better."

My mind screamed, "No, No, NO!", but my dick groaned, "Oh, Gods, yes," so I went with that answer. I still had one layer of protection. He was only stripping away one.

I waded knee deep into the trust pool. "You can pull down the shorts."

"Call me Papi, Baby."

Oh, man, his voice dropped an octave. He sounded breathless, like he was excited. I was so fucking hot for him. Energy zinged through my blood, burning me up from the inside like cayenne pepper and curry. "Please pull down my pants, Papi." He was taking it too slow. "Pull them down, Papi." I was just about crazy under him, wanting to grab the shorts from his hands and yank them down.

"Can I keep going? Say no and I'll stop, but Baby, you've got me so turned on. You don't mind, do you lover? Are you going to send me away like this?"

Suddenly I was flying like Icarus toward something so hot it had to burn me. I was willing to crash. No matter how far the fall, the high was worth it.

He ground against my ass cheeks as I snorted and bucked under him. I was fucking losing my mind, but what a way to go. My dick rubbed raw against the tight underwear. I heard his zipper. He thrust a couple times with his boxers on, but then I knew he pressed the

soft skin of his cockhead against my ass, with only the thin layer of my white boxer briefs between us.

He rammed into me hard. I braced to keep from being shoved off the bed. A few times he hit the bullseye, and my hole puckered hard against the assault. It felt kind of good.

I let go of my ankles and grabbed my ass cheeks under the waistband of my underwear. "Come on my ass. Please, Papi."

Hector let out a long groan. I heard him jerking off. I felt the shot of spunk on the cotton wadded over my hole. I fucked air like a rabbit—all haunches, no style. Even though it didn't get me off, the motion felt great.

He chuckled as he rolled down onto the bed. "Damn! I haven't done that in years!" He grabbed me close for a kiss.

I rolled over so that he could see how hard I was. I tried looking mournful. I was getting used to being taken to the brink and yanked back like that. I totally dug being that turned on; I loved being under his control.

"You're still being punished for that stunt in the dressing room, so don't even think about begging me to let you come." Hector fluffed the pillows before sitting back against them.

"My dick is throbbing hard. I can feel my heartbeat in it. It hurts." I didn't have to fake how pitiful I felt.

He seemed annoyed that I pushed it. I crawled up to him and nudged my face against his arm until he lifted it and let me lick his armpit.

"I hate your bed, Sam. You should come over and sleep at my house. I like sleeping next to you. I thought you liked it, too."

I sat up and traced the texture of my bedspread with my fingertips. "I did."

"I know there's an excuse coming. You always have an excuse to shut me out."

What was one more confession on top of so many? "I have bad dreams, Hector. I wake up screaming in the middle of the night like a total idiot. It's embarrassing."

He drew me against him.

I couldn't even look at him; I was blushing so hard. What a twink!

"From now on, when I'm in town, we sleep at my place." He nipped at my shoulders. "I made room for your stuff in the closet in the guest bedroom. When you have nightmares, I'll help you get through them."

Damn, he was good at that. He got under my skin.

I knew his reputation. He was a sadist. He liked to make boys bleed. He played rough. I was all for that, but I liked his hidden sweet side, too. It was another one of our daddy-boy secrets. No one would guess.

Chapter 11

Hector created a tight schedule for me to follow when he was out of town so that he'd know exactly where I was supposed to be every minute of the day. After my morning jog, I had to call him and do pushups over the phone so that he could hear me count off. He had me working out with the weights in his guest bedroom, too.

Nanny's ghost kept me company while I did chores around Hector's house. She loved to talk about him and I was a damn good listener. For such a tiny woman she was bossy as hell. I played nice because she promised to teach me how to make pozole from scratch. She apparently took her super-secret recipe to her grave.

After I finished my chores at Hector's I went back to my apartment. It felt empty there, as if I belonged at Hector's and not in my own rooms. I tried to concentrate on work, but couldn't shake off the weird mood.

When Hector called later, though, I was glad to hear his voice. I guess I was lonely.

"I'm coming home today. Be ready at eight. I'll pick you up at your place. We're going out," he told me.

* * * *

That evening, at a quarter 'til, I started down my stairs only to see Hector walking by Angelena's door. I flashed a look at my watch and hurried down the rest of the flight. "Is my clock wrong? I'm sorry. I didn't mean to keep you waiting."

He put his hands on my shoulders. "I'm running a little early and thought I'd come up to get you. You're okay." Then he smiled that real nice way that crinkled the corners of his eyes. He ran his finger down the front of my new black cashmere sweater. "Sam, I wanted to buy these clothes for you."

He made that clear while we were out shopping, just as I made it clear I wouldn't accept the expensive gift. I liked the way he looked at me when I tried it on, though, so I went back to buy it.

Since Hector didn't reach for me first, I playfully grabbed the front of his jacket and pulled him down for a kiss. My fingers curled deep into the soft leather. His mouth tasted of peppermint candy.

I meant for my kiss to be a quick, 'Hello.' Hector turned it into a conversation.

Stupid men driving by shouted curses at Hector for his pinche gringo, his white boy-pussy. I pretended I didn't understand their Spanish; Hector pretended not to hear.

When I climbed into his truck, Hector checked the tight cut of my new pants. "Now you look like my boy," he told me.

The credit card company owned my soul, but for that, it was worth it.

Hector pulled away from the curb. I couldn't stop staring at him. His plum shirt set off his brown skin and eyes. A cigar was in his pocket, which meant we weren't going to a bar. I snatched the cigar and ran it under my nose, inhaling deeply. It smelled of barns, raisins, and autumn.

"Can I take a puff when you light it?" I always asked.

Hector chuckled as he took it away from me. "Cigars are for men, not boys." He always said no.

There was something comforting about our rituals, even the stupid ones.

* * * *

By the time we turned off Second Street in Belmont Shore, I knew we were going to Ophir's house.

Like Hector, Ophir was legend in our tight-knit BDSM community. He was a college professor, teaching Farsi and middle-eastern politics. Some people said he was Syrian, but others claimed he was an Israeli. He was small and intense. The only thing I knew for sure was that he was rich enough to keep three boys as full time slaves and that he intimidated the hell out of me.

Serge and Keith took me to parties at Ophir's two-story beach house when I was with them. While they might have commanded attention in the clubs, I soon realized that they were merely B list players. The real hard-core men rarely bothered with sex clubs. I'd been lucky enough to be borrowed for scenes in Ophir's upstairs dungeon by a few of the A listers. They must have been pleased, because I always was invited again. Serge and Keith were happy to loan me out; I doubted that Hector would.

The neighborhood around Ophir's house was crowded, eclectic, and pricey. We passed by people out walking their dogs. They said hello. We said it back. Hector held my hand. Everyone smiled. That was one of the things I liked about Belmont Shores. Unlike most of LA, it felt like a real community.

* * * *

Instead of going through the front door, Hector led me through a garden of potted orange trees, tiled waterfalls, and Moorish lanterns. In a dark alcove of the cerulean blue stucco walls, I heard the quiet murmur of male voices followed by erotic silence.

We stepped through sliding glass doors into a big living room. The furniture was heavy, in dark woods and black leather, probably Spanish antiques. Wrought iron and earth tones punctuated by bright blues and rich golds gave the house an exotic, southern Mediterranean feel, but understated enough to be classy.

Two of Ophir's slaves moved among the guests, emptying ashtrays and collecting used glasses. Another one carried a tray up the narrow stairs to the top floor. The three boys wore identical black silk coolie suits. To me, Ophir's slaves were the epitome of the total immersion lifestyle.

"Sam!" Manny called out from the grand piano dominating the far corner of the room.

Everyone turned to look at us.

Men I'd forgotten I knew swarmed. I guess Hector hadn't been to Ophir's for some time. Gentle welcome kisses overwhelmed me. It was too much noise and touching. I drew closer to Hector.

The submissives in the room hung back, but some of the hardcore boys were already posing for Hector. When I realized where we were going that evening, I steeled myself to having to wait outside the dungeon while Hector worked a scene. He had to be craving one as much as I was. Instead, he kept his hold on me and walked past every cute, hot boy on our way through the house.

I was so not that type, but I almost got emotional about it. For that moment, my heart floated in a state of perfect happiness.

The elite Masters always hung out in Ophir's kitchen. I'd never seen that room. It was strictly for the A list. Like the rest of the house, the kitchen was straight out of a magazine, with the latest in wood and granite surfaces. Even the bowl of fruit on the island seemed more like a still life oil painting than real food. The room was bigger than my entire apartment, and the huge Viking range on the back wall probably cost more than my car did when it was new.

Older men, mostly couples, leaned against cherry cabinets or sat at the massive table near the window. David nodded hello from across the way. Larry seemed in a trance, as if still coming down from an intense session. He leaned against David and watched the world with sleepy eyes.

I was so damn jealous.

Ophir hugged Hector in a hearty embrace, and then acknowledged me with a brief nod. He dressed like Hector did – classic, understated, expensive. He always smelled of spices, something exotic that I couldn't quite place because it was too faint.

I didn't know if I was up for approval, being shown off, or if Hector was simply hanging with his friends. Hector's arm stayed across my shoulders. I silently stared at the floor. I wasn't bored, though. Listening to the Masters of my universe chat so casually about stocks, motorcycles, baseball, politics, and submissives was like seeing my world from an oblique angle, like glancing into a parallel alcove of my internal teahouse.

* * * *

After two hours of top gossip, Hector ambled away from the kitchen. I trotted after him. He sat on a black leather couch in the living room. I knelt at his feet and put my head on his thigh. Under my knees was a pale red Persian rug with slightly worn patches. It was probably a museum piece.

One, Ophir's senior servant, brought Hector a scotch without being asked, then floated away in serene silence. I had to learn how to walk like that.

"Samuel." A deep voice boomed across the room and broke through my meditation. Unless I was in deep shit with Mom and Dad, there was only one person who called me that.

"Keith." Hector didn't sound pleased to see my former master. "I thought you weren't coming."

Keith remained standing so that Hector would have to look up at him. "How could I resist the chance to catch up with old friends?" Keith finally sat down opposite us. "Don't I deserve some sort of a greeting, Samuel?"

"Say hello to Keith, Sam." Hector's jaw was clenched.

Keith was an awesome, powerful presence. His dark brown skin glowed with almost purple undertones. The gap in his front teeth showed when he grinned down at me. I used to like to trace that space with the tip of my tongue.

What was the etiquette for greeting a former Top? I wasn't sure. "Hello Keith, Sir." I almost said Master Keith, but that would have sent Hector through the roof.

"Hector, you don't mind if I speak to Samuel privately, do you?"

"Anything you have to say to him can be said in front of me." Hector's muscles twitched.

It was so not politically correct of me, but I got off on how territorial Hector was.

Keith put a gloved hand on my chin and forced me to look at him. He had a wicked gleam in his eye. With an expression of concern, he said, "Hector told me all about what Marcus did to you. I'm so, so sorry, Samuel."

I remembered how many times Keith's gloved hands smacked my ass in punishment and reward, but that time he sucker punched me with words. When he wanted to make trouble, he brought it on with a capital T.

I sprang to my feet and stalked away. Hector didn't let me get more than a few steps before putting his hand on the back of my neck. I tried to shrug him away, so he grabbed my arm and twisted it behind me as he steered me up the staircase. I fought him every step.

"Phone if you need me, pet, that's what former Tops are for," Keith called out.

Hector shoved me through the upstairs hallway. All the other doors were shut, so he forced me inside a black marble bathroom.

I didn't wait to hear what he had to say. "I trusted you! You fucking bastard, you betrayed me! If I had known you'd blab to everyone about what Marcus did to me, I never would have told you. No one was supposed to know. No one." I was so humiliated.

Hector pushed my face down to the lavatory. I flailed and almost got my arm free, but he yanked so hard that I howled.

He shoved a bar of soap into my mouth. Bitter chemical flavors coated my tongue. I tried to spit it out, but he kept steady pressure on the bar until I was afraid he'd shove it down my throat unless I stopped fighting him. When I stopped resisting, he leisurely fucked my mouth with the bar.

"Don't you dare use that language on me."

He released me. I stayed bent over the counter, soap in my mouth, legs spread.

Hector lowered the toilet seat and sat down to light his cigar.

"People got worried when you disappeared from the clubs, boy. Bet you never knew about that. When you came back to the life, people saw that you spooked easily. They wanted to help, but you kept everyone so far away that they couldn't reach you. When I asked if anyone knew Marcus, they put it together. These men aren't stupid."

Hector exhaled thick, white smoke.

"From the moment we met, you made it clear that your pain is private, and I've respected that. It cost you something to give me Marcus' name. Do you think I would tell anyone else when you could barely open up to me?"

Fucking Keith.

Hector took another puff on his cigar and blew the smoke into my face.

"Baby, it fascinates me to watch you float through life oblivious to everything around you. I hope you never lose that wide-eyed wonder of yours, but I worry about you out there in that big, bad world with all its sharp edges. That's why you need me. I'll make sure no one bursts your bubble. I'll protect you, but only if you obey me. Marcus is the tip of the iceberg. There are thousands of guys like him out there looking to get their claws into someone like you. I'm the only person standing between you and them."

Thousands of guys like Marcus? I couldn't even handle the one I knew.

Sir, I'm so sorry. Please let me beg your forgiveness.

From his expression to the way he held his body, Hector was being the Master I craved. He controlled everything. I wasn't frightened of the aura of domination around him, though. It was sexy on him. It was my first glimpse of the man I'd eventually get to face in a dungeon. He was the complete Master.

Soap coated the inside of my mouth. It tasted terrible, but oh, it was working for me. What else could a boy expect when he cussed his Papi?

He pulled the bar of soap out of my mouth and tossed it into the sink. "From now on, I expect you to watch your mouth. Unless you like the taste of soap?"

I shook my head hard.

Someone knocked on the bathroom door.

"You can rinse your mouth, and then you may apologize." He picked up his cigar again and took another deep draw on it.

I brought handfuls of water to my mouth, swished it around, and spat it out into the sink until the horrible flavor was gone. Then I sank down on my knees and crawled over to Hector's feet so that I could lick his shoes.

The doorknob jiggled.

Ashes Hector flicked fell around my face. If they got on his shoes, I licked them away before they could burn the leather. "Good boy."

He opened the bathroom door. I didn't know who passed me. All I saw was black boots and leather pants as I crawled down the hall behind my master.

* * * *

We left Ophir's in a hurry. We were both high from that power struggle and wanted to be alone to work out the rest of it.

Hector unlocked his front door, he told me, "Brush your teeth and then get into position."

I was still hard from that whole scene in the bathroom when I grasped my ankles and put my ass in the air.

Hector found fault with everything about my posture, even the way I grasped my ankles. "You have to concentrate, boy. Focus."

Clearing my mind, I started from the beginning and reset my pose. He finally grunted approval and slid his hands down my thighs. "If you ever show me that much disrespect again, you won't be able to sit for a week." He smacked my ass, hard.

Finally! I want to play. I want to feel the sting of your curses as well as your whips. I want to worship you, break for you, bleed for you.

He went to his closet and went through his collection of paddles, whips, and floggers.

"Hold still." He tapped my hard-on with a crop. As swollen as it was, even the light touch set my teeth on edge.

"Uh!" Delicious pain seared through my balls. Every touch was agony.

Hector made me bend over the bed. I looked over my shoulder and watched him raise a small, black leather paddle. It hit my butt with a solid thwack that stung. He gave me time to think about what was coming before he raised it again. I tried every trick—little yelps, groans, tear-filled eyes. His expression never changed.

I gasped. "It hurts." The blows came faster. "Please," I whispered, "Please. It hurts." Hector paddled me hard. Hot tears flowed fast down my cheeks. My butt throbbed. I couldn't stop trembling and my legs felt like they'd give out. As I felt my control slipping, the knot of stubborn anger in the pit of my stomach unraveled and I stopped resisting him. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry I talked back. I'm sorry I listened to Keith. I'm sorry I yelled at you." I sobbed. "I promise I won't do it again!" I couldn't apologize fast enough. My

words jumbled together between heavy sobs, but he must have understood what I meant because he dropped the paddle, leaned over me, and kissed me hard.

I could barely lift myself off the bed, but I stood up and held tight to him. He hugged me back.

"Good boy."

While he pressed his lips to the top of my head, I rubbed my face against his chest.

"Do you need help getting onto the bed?" he asked.

I nodded. He eased me onto the mattress.

When he stepped away, I panicked. "Don't leave me."

"Don't worry, Baby. I'm not going anywhere. I'm right here." He opened a drawer in his nightstand and took out a tube. Then he crawled on the bed beside me. "I'm right here. You're not alone," he said as he cuddled close. "Okay?"

Since I could feel him next to me, I nodded.

Then the best part, he took care of me. I didn't have to do anything while he spread cool gel across my tender skin. He thoroughly pampered me and I was in such a submissive state that I wanted to give in to it.

"I have a present for you, Baby." Hector showed me rope. "Put your hands together over your head."

When I was bound wrist to wrist, he made me squat on the floor. My winces made him chuckle. I rubbed my face against the front of his pants.

"Do you want something, boy?"

"May I suck your cock, Sir?"

He pretended to think about it. I threw myself into groveling. When he decided I sounded sincere enough he let me pull down his zipper with my teeth.

The head of his cock pushed out at me. Thick, heavily veined, it was exactly what I'd been hungering for. My first lick went from base to head. He tasted so good. I held his dick in my throat until I couldn't breathe. When I pulled back from him, gasping for air, he was slick with my saliva.

My thighs and butt burned as I tried to keep my balance squatting down. Even my knees ached. I sucked along the underside of his cock until I reached that spot half an inch under his slit. Every dick was different, but that spot was sensitive on everyone. I planned to spend some time on his balls, but he cupped the back of my head in his palm. I set my lips in a tight ring and pushed them over the head. He filled my mouth and kept pushing in. Hard, slick skin slid down my tongue.

I wanted to grasp his thighs or hold onto him somewhere. With my hands bound, I was completely at his mercy. Fuck my face, Sir. Yeah. Give it to me, make me take it. Scrape my tonsils. Use me.

Both his hands grasped my skull. I relaxed my throat and took him in again. I bobbed my head, working his length while he counterthrust. Drops of pre-come seeped onto the back of my tongue. He took over the pace. I kept my mouth tight and wet for him. I felt the shot traveling down his cock seconds before it hit the back of my throat. I tried not to gag as come gushed into me.

"Suck it down, Baby. You want more?" Another spurt hit my tongue.

Fuck, yeah. Fill me with your come.

He milked the rest into my mouth. "Taste better than soap?"

I nodded as I lapped the last sticky strand from his cock.

Petting my hair, he told me to get up on the bed. Rising from that squat without hands wasn't easy. My ass was still sore, but at least the heat was fading.

Hector crawled up the bed until he was over me on all fours. My bound wrists ended up tied to the metal rungs on the headboard. After teasing me with bites down my neck, he sank down on top of me and traced my lips with his finger.

Sultry and slow, his mouth lingered at the pulse in my neck until the humidity between our bodies rose. I swore blue arcs of electricity crackled in the small space between our skins. His hands brought me to the edge of my control.

"Easy," he commanded when I chased his mouth for more kisses.

Easy? Easy was listening to the blues alone in my bedroom. Easy was watching a movie I'd seen a hundred times. Cooling down when there was so much heat between us was about as hard as it got.

His hand worked down my stomach to my dick. By then I was used to being taken to the edge of frustration and dropped off, so I enjoyed the handjob, but didn't expect it to go anywhere.

I wanted to wrap my arms around him and pull closer to him. When I fought at the bindings, he focused on my face and searched for signs of panic. "What's the matter?"

"I want free."

His body relaxed. "I bet you do."

"No, not for anything bad. I just want to touch you. Please?"

He stroked my dick.

"Hector, you're getting me too close," I warned, stepping out of scene. He only had to raise an eyebrow for me to remember myself. "Sir, please," I tried to squirm away from his touch. I was too hyped up to keep myself under control. "Please, you have to stop now! Please, Sir!"

"Why?"

"I'm gonna come. I swear." Every muscle in my body was bunched and ready to throw its support behind a climax. I panted so hard I thought I'd hyperventilate.

He traced teasing touches across my groin. "I didn't tell Keith what Marcus did to you, but I did ask him if he knew Marcus. Keith keeps close tabs on you. He knew I was seeing you before I told him. I figured that if anyone had information, it would be Keith. I only told him that I wanted a word with Marcus, though, nothing more. A crazy guy like Marcus endangers all the submissives, and in this community, we protect our own."

I never considered that Marcus might hurt other boys, too.

"Keith likes his mind games, Sam, and you played right into his hands."

"I'm sorry." I was so fucking turned on. Hector held me right at the edge of arousal. It was like a blade edge, painful and exhilarating.

"Keith may know your buttons to push, and he might know mine too, but he doesn't know us, Baby. As long as we're solid, he won't be able to drive a wedge between us."

Us. As if we were Hector and Sam, names to be mentioned in one breath. I didn't consider us together yet. Everything felt like preliminary negotiations and trial phases that I kept failing.

He kissed me as if he was drinking from the well of my soul, and switched into that voice of his that turned me into putty. "I'm the only one that treats you right, Baby. I'm good to you. You like this, don't you?"

I nodded because I didn't want to get my mouth washed out with soap again and I wasn't sure I could answer him without swearing.

"Baby, I'll keep you safe." He kissed down my stomach. "Only I know where to touch you and how to make you feel good."

Oh, man. A little too good.

"Don't ever call Keith. If you need something, you come to me."

"Yes, Sir. Only you, Sir." Oh, man, I was going nuts. His hands were everywhere and all I could do was twitch under him.

Hector put his mouth over my cock. Plunged into humid heat like a bayou night, I fought the urge to thrust. Man, his tongue! And what a mistake to glance down and see his lips wrapped around the head. Even worse to see him swallow me whole. My cock had never been in a man's mouth down to the base. Few men dared try.

"No!" It wasn't fair. How did he expect me to hold back?

Shit, shit, shit. My muscles were primed to spasm. It felt so damn good. The heat of his mouth was too fucking incredible. I bucked under him. "Please, Sir, I'm gonna come. Please! I can't stop!"

Holy shit! His tongue rasped across my balls. He grabbed my cock with a rough hand and pumped hard. I felt his thumb press on the underside of my cock, right at that point, right in the right spot.

My toes curled and sweat slicked the backs of my knees.

"Come for me, Baby."

At least I hoped that's what he said, because the next stroke put me over the edge.

Only my shoulders, head, and feet were on the mattress as I spewed into his mouth. Pain and pleasure played good cop-bad cop with my balls. Gods, it felt good to shoot that hard. My body slammed between extremes of ecstasy and agony. I curled on my side, my bound hands high over my head, until the highs and lows flat-lined.

Unable to control the intense, raw power, I let a wall of adrenaline-laced lust blast into the night. Women shoved their men down to the mattress and mounted them. Lovers split lips in frantic kisses. An orgy spilled out of the foam pit of a NoHo club.

"I will never forget you made me feel this way, Sir." I couldn't believe I said that to him. It was one thing to think corny stuff like that, another to say it. My mouth opened again and I snapped it shut.

Hector smiled down at me. "You're thinking something else."

No. No. No. Never right after sex. Never before he said it.

I knew all the guy rules. "I love you."

But I said it anyway.

He nodded, satisfied.

* * * *

I fell asleep wrapped in Hector's protective hold and dreamed that I walked down the stairs of my apartment with my hand cupped over my eyes like an actor slinking out of rehab.

Deal, Angelena, and Crash sat on the small patch of grass at the bottom of the stairs in cheap lawn chairs. Deal took a long drag from a cigarette and winked. Her charm bracelet jangled as she used that familiar two-finger flip to raise a scorecard. A solid ten was marked in black.

"Thanks, I think," I said to Deal.

"No, Sammy. Thank you."

Crash bogarted his smoke, couldn't quite make eye contact, but also flashed a perfect score.

"I'm only giving you a 9.9 on technical, but you get a solid ten for artistic merit," Angelena called out. She smiled fat and saucy at me. "Welcome back to the land of the laid, Sweet-tart."

Chapter 12

A sleek, fluorescent yellow street bike rode into Hector's driveway. The engine rumbled as the rider pulled up to the detached garage. When he lifted the visor, I saw Crash's golden face.

He'd get too embarrassed if I mentioned it, but Crash could have modeled. His face was hard planes and chiseled angles. No ass to speak of, though, which was too bad, because the rest of his body was pumped.

"Visiting?" I wiped garden dirt from my hands. I got a whiff of the strident scent of tomato leaves from my hands.

He unbuckled the collar of his leather jacket. "Angelena said meet her here."

The back door of Hector's house slammed open. Deal picked her Ferragamo-shod way across the new brick patio. How did she get inside the house? She probably stormed through the front door when I didn't answer the bell.

"Why can't we ever do this on the West Side?" she snapped.

"Do what?" I asked. No one ever told me anything.

Angelena came out of the house with beers in hand. "Have a seat." She towered over Deal as we stood on the patio. Deal wasn't much taller than I was. More vicious, certainly, but not bigger.

Nanny took her usual seat at the end of the porch, but the Gods ignored her.

Crash took a beer and sank onto the porch. "What's up?"

I hadn't had them over for dinner in a while. I shot Angelena a worried glance.

She patted my shoulder. "Don't worry, we're covered."

"Blue." Deal hinted.

"Come on! Mercy! What is that? A couple hundred bucks a bottle?"

"Maker's Mark is fine."

As if she was settling. Ungrateful Goddess.

"Sam, any thoughts you have about me, I can hear," Deal warned.

"I called you here for a reason." Angelena then took a long sip of her beer so that she couldn't explain.

Deal fumed. "Make it snappy, Traffic."

Angelena smiled around the beer bottle at her mouth. She slowed down her intake just to make Deal steam. Deal tapped her iced pink fingernail on the crystal of her trendy watch.

"The strength of Sam's faith puts more power behind his worship than a million other believers combined," Angelena reminded Deal. "You didn't agree to protect him out of the goodness of your heart. I don't care about your power fetish, but I expect you to keep your word."

"And that means..."

"Welcome to our new neighborhood."

With a magician's wave of her hand, Angelena made a new house muscle between the Hector's house and the white clapboard house next door. Of all the Gods I knew, Angelena was the only one who had enough imagination to do flashy miracles.

Crash was pissed, I was pissed, and Deal—Deal was livid. Vegetables and fruits withered on the vine in my garden as the shockwave of her indignation passed through the atmosphere. "Long Beach? You expect me to move to Long Beach?" Deal shouted at Angelena.

"All of us, yeah." Angelena winked at me. "This is gonna get good."

"Is this going to be like having a motorcycle gang next door?" I whispered.

Angelena took a long draft off her bottle. "Nah. That would be too quiet. We're entertaining."

Yeah, like the movie *Saving Private Ryan*. I set down my beer. "Don't worry, Deal, I'm not moving here. Hector's been pressuring me, but I'm not going to."

Hell had no fury like Deal on the losing end of a bargain. She quaked like a volcano about to blow. "Traffic, how could you let it get this far without finding out from him first?"

"He'll move in," Angelena reassured her.

"No. I won't."

Deal started towards me, but Angelena held up her hand. "We'll see about that, Sweet-tart." She gave Deal and Crash a drop-dead stare. "I'm not asking you two. I'm telling. Even if Sam here thinks he's not going to move in, he will. We've sworn to protect him, so that means we move, too."

Deal's lips parted, but Angelena interrupted her. "Your other worshippers abandon you as soon as they get what they want. Has anyone ever thanked you in an acceptance speech? No. But it doesn't matter, does it Deal? As long as Sam worships us, we have it made, all of us. At least we share. Can you imagine what would happen if a God figures out how to horde all that worship for himself?"

I expected Deal to say something, but her ice-blue eyes flicked to the cypress hedge marking the other property line.

Crash moved so that he stood between Deal and the hedge. He touched her shoulder. "I'm in. How do we do the house thing?"

Angelena snapped her fingers and another house sprouted between the one she conjured for herself and the white clapboard house. I could tell she meant it for Crash, because the roofline and the colors were subtly Thai inspired.

The people who used to live right next door to Hector were two doors down. I wondered if the mortals noticed, or if they simply ignored such miracles.

Deal snapped her fingers, but I didn't see anything happen. "I'm across the street," she explained. "I refuse to live next door to that."

At first, I thought she meant me, but Deal shot a glance at the cypress hedge and shivered. That house gave me the creeps, too, but it was so out of character for her to be unnerved by something.

"Proximity is an illusion, and so is distance," Angelena intoned.

"Then why do we need to be so close to Sam?" Deal demanded.

"Because I said so. Now shut the fuck up and leave us alone. I haven't had a chance to chat with Sam in weeks."

Deal and Crash huddled in the driveway in front of Hector's garage, negotiating their new living arrangements, no doubt. Poor Crash. Screwed from the start.

"So, Sam, how's it going with Hector?" Angelena's change of subject didn't fool me one bit. Why were the Gods worried?

"What's going on Goddess?"

Angelena downed the rest of her beer. She carefully patted the spiked tips of her hair. "You're popular with the Gods, Sam. Some of them—one of them—would like to force you to worship only one god."

"But I know that there's more than one God."

"He could make you forget everything you believe in."

I hugged my knees to my chest. "I don't want to think about that."

"Okay. For now, we'll talk about something else. Do you remember the beginning?" Angelena sounded wistful.

I couldn't figure out what beginning she meant.

"The first time you believed me into existence?"

"I remember the first time I saw you, if that's what you mean."

The director of an independent film invited me to his screening when I met him at a party in the hills. He was cool, in a nerdy film geek way, so we got along pretty well. If he was hitting on me, it was so subtle that I didn't feel it. I was kind of surprised when he followed up to make sure I'd come, though. That was the first bona fide press screening I ever went to. After that, I got on lists. Publicity people called me instead of making me go through the humiliation of begging them for access. I wasn't stupid. I knew why. Luster has a hierarchy, though, so when I explained that sure, I was up for fooling around, but as a professional, I couldn't then in good conscious review their movie, they always opted for the exposure over sex. I didn't blame them for trying. It was almost a subconscious tic of power, nothing personal about it.

The day of that screening, traffic on the 110 was miserable through downtown. Asphalt fumes oozed out of a truck two lanes over and made the air painful to breathe. Bored, I looked in my side mirror, back at the line of cars behind mine, and wondered what the universe they lived in was like.

I told Angelena, "I heard your bike before I saw it. You crept between the lanes on that big old Harley and I thought—."

"You worshipped."

"—Goddess of Traffic. That was a nice ride."

"You believed in me, so I—."

"How could I not believe when you were the only one there smart enough to conquer L.A. traffic? I recognized you for what you were."

"I became aware, Sam. I became because of your faith."

Over by the garage, Crash gripped his hair in both hands as if he'd rip his skull in two. I often felt like that after talking to Deal, so I could sympathize. He turned his bike in the driveway and zoomed away. I heard the high whine of his engine all the way down the street.

Deal and Angelena disappeared, too. I was alone, but felt watched. I looked around for Nanny's ghost, but didn't see her.

The hedge next door moved. I didn't feel a breeze, so I backed away, keeping my eyes on it. Chills ran down my spine. I raked up cuttings from the mower, careful to keep the hedge in sight at all times. The smell of something unclean filled my nose. Then I saw a nearly colorless eye watching me from behind the hedge, and I knew it belonged to the same thing that warned me not to share my secrets with Hector.

Cold dread seized my heart. That was what the Gods feared, and it looked right at me. Frightened, I ran inside and barricaded myself in Hector's bathroom.

Chapter 13

By the end of March, rainy season was over for L.A., Hector didn't notice that while he was out of town the house to the left of his got pushed aside and another two houses squeezed between. He seemed to believe the two-story, turreted, Italianate mini-mansion across the street was there all along, and Angelena, Crash, and Deal were always his neighbors, never mine.

Hector constantly pressured me to move in with him. "This kitchen must be easier for you to work in than that tiny space in your apartment," he said as I put glasses into the cabinet near the sink. He already gave me complete control over that part of his house. We never ate at my place anymore, and Hector made it clear that he didn't want to see me there.

"Why don't you just move in?"

I didn't feel like turning him down again, so I changed the subject. "Are you using your new grill for your party next month? What are you planning to serve?"

"Chips, dip, and barbecued hot dogs are good enough for our guests."

Growing up so close to Texas and Kansas City, I knew there was a world of difference between grilling and barbecuing, and at some point, I was going to introduce Hector to the pleasures of hot, spicy meat that fell apart in the mouth.

"I think I'll serve those cocktail wieners wrapped in processed cheese and tell everyone it's your idea," he teased.

I wasn't about to take the bait. "Yes, Sir."

"Nothing says a good time like spray cheese from a can."

I wasn't going to give him anything. No attitude, no expression, nothing.

"I was kidding, Sam."

"I know, Sir. But if you want pseudo-food for your friends, I'll serve it."

His voice was warm with laughter. "You've been good this week." He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me close. "No sass, no broken rules. I'm proud of you."

My smile couldn't stay hidden long. When he praised me, a million stars seemed to light the sky.

"I think you've earned a reward."

It was so hard to stay in control. Adrenaline surged through me and I wanted to shout, "Yes!" but I forced myself to be still.

"I've been holding back until you could handle it, but I was thinking of doing a little scene." His hand slid inside my shirt. "Take your clothes off and come to the living room." His fingernails dug into my nipple.

I huffed. "Yes, Sir." When he let go, I stripped quickly and then crawled behind him out of the kitchen.

He walked along his bookshelves in the living room, fingering spines, until he found what he wanted. After he settled onto the couch, he let me sit next to him, a rare treat.

He wagged a stern finger at me. "Don't choose until you've seen the entire book. As soon as you say which one you want, you can't change your mind."

The cover of the Japanese rope bondage book had me hard. The photo was of a woman laced into a web of ropes. Too damn hot. I was aware of the heat of Hector's leg against mine. His scent, the light Bay Rum and the personal flavor underneath, was becoming home to me. I leaned against him so that I could see the book in his lap. He put his arm around my shoulder.

The photos were incredible. He let me turn the pages. I studied each photo and the instructions as if I was cramming for a test. On my third pass through, he ruffled my hair. "What's going on in that head of yours?"

"I want them all," I admitted.

He flipped back several pages. "I'd like to see you like that."

I sucked in a breath. I'd been leaning towards the complicated design. "The only problem with that one is that the knots are mostly down the back, and I would like to see them."

"I could take a picture," he offered cautiously. Funny that there were subjects he approached so carefully with me. Hector probably didn't want me to slip into a panic attack over having my picture taken and ruin the afternoon for us. "Digital camera. I don't even have to download it."

I stared at the book. I let him take my picture several times before. I knew he printed out some to keep in his suitcase, just as I printed some to use in the altar I stashed away in his second bedroom. I still hated those glimpses of myself, but when the pictures were close up, not capturing all of me, I could almost stand to look at them.

"You'd look so hot like that, Baby. Let me tie you up and take your picture, to show you how you look." He stroked my arm. "Did I mention that I bought a new gag?"

"No." I was mesmerized by the photo.

"The rope is in my closet. If you want it, you better start crawling."

I nodded and slipped off the couch. My cock slapped up against my stomach with every move. He stopped me when I got to the rug on his bedroom floor.

"Stay in a kneeling position."

Over at his closet, I could hear Hector going through his things. "Where is my cane?" he asked.

"I, um—" When he was out of town, sometimes I crept into his closet to touch his tools. The smell of leather turned me on. I'd strip down and drape floggers, whips, and cats across my skin. At first, the slick, heavy leather would be cold, but then it warmed. His stiff leather belt went around my neck, forcing my chin up. I tightened it as far as I could force it. My dick poked through the soft suede lashes of the heavy black flogger and it took every ounce of willpower I had not to jerk off. Panting from the effort, I'd reach my hands far over my head, stretch, and fantasize about being tied up. Then I'd turn my head to look at the coils of white rope hanging from a nail on the wall. There were times I could come just from that. I never touched myself, though, and I always confessed.

"Have you been playing with my toys again?"

"Yes."

He stood in a wide stance, his arms crossed over his chest, but he was so close to laughing that I knew it was okay.

"What happened to my cane?"

"I put an altar in the closet in the guest bedroom, and I borrowed your cane for it. I'm sorry. I should have asked."

"Stay."

I heard him walk down the hallway to the guest bedroom, open the door, and pull open the closet doors. I sent up a quick prayer that his cane was in perfect condition.

Hector carried the entire altar into his room. The cabinet was awkward in his arms. When he set it down on his antique chest of drawers, he ran his hand along the dark stained wood. Under the closed doors and the shelf, two arms jutted out. A thin groove was cut into both, a perfect fit for his cane so that an earthquake wouldn't jar it loose. "Sam, this is amazing. Did you do the woodwork?"

"I designed it, but my uncle made it for me."

He touched the cane as if to take it down, but he rethought it. "Nice. Very nice. It looks like it belongs." He stepped back to look at it. "But something is falling out of the cabinet." He pulled it open and my little secrets cascaded onto the floor.

"What's this? Ticket stubs from that fundraiser I took you to? A napkin from the ice cream parlor? A cup from the Library Coffee Shop? Sam, you're a closeted romantic." He chuckled as he looked through the mementos of our dates.

It so wasn't like that. See, we'd end up at his house after a night out, and when I undressed, I'd find ticket stubs and crap in my pockets. There wasn't a trashcan in the guest room, so I put things into the altar's cabinet. I guess I had a big collection going, but it wasn't intentional or anything.

He was a bad influence on me.

I didn't used to be like that.

Hector peered closer at the inside of the altar's cabinet. "Those are the photos I took of you."

"Who else would I trust to take my picture?"

"I didn't know you printed any of them. That's quite a powerful collection."

I picked the pictures he took of my eyes, the ones that clearly showed how I felt about him. Singly, each picture gave off a vibe of adoration. Amassed, it left no doubt how much I worshipped him.

He closed the cabinet doors. "I want you to feel comfortable practicing your religion here. The altar stays where I put it."

Sometimes it was so easy to love him. "That means a lot to me. Thank you."

Hector picked up the coil of white rope from his closet. "Focus."

* * * *

My arms were pinned tightly behind me as I kneeled on the blue, braided rug on his bedroom floor. From forearm to wrist, each arm was wrapped in cord, and then the two were bound together at the wrist behind my back. To counterbalance, I thrust my groin forward.

Carefully, so as not to cut my circulation, Hector tied knots and loops across my bare chest, leaving my nipples and most of my belly exposed. Every tug to secure a knot pulled the rope against my sweat-slicked skin.

White cotton rope. He knew what I liked. From the moment he unwound the coil my body responded. Every muscle contracted. My balls moved in a lava lamp undulation. When the pattern was complete, he walked an inspection circle and ran his hands over his work.

He showed me a new gag he'd bought. It was shaped like the head of a cock, but bigger around than a soda can. It stank of plastic and tasted worse. The huge girth forced my jaws wide open and pressed my tongue down. I pulled in air though my flaring nostrils.

Hector took a thinner rope and wrapped my hard cock in a snug cocoon. Noises I couldn't control came from deep in my throat. "Are you okay, Baby?" He checked my eyes. There was no way to give my safe word, but I could signal him if I needed to by holding my muscles rigid. I nodded yes. I was more than okay.

Trailing laces from the wrap around my dick went around the base of my sac. I grunted as the rope forced my balls apart. It was fucking fantastic to be so confined. Safe. Happy. Protected. Loved.

I relaxed my thighs. Lines of rope across my chest tightened. It wasn't dangerous, just uncomfortable, so I shifted my weight back to my thighs. The carefully constructed web made me concentrate on how I held my body.

Hector warmed up my ass with a paddle after he bent me over the bed. The sharp little smacks didn't hurt much.

"Your ass is getting pink." His hands slid over my butt. "I can tell you've been working on your control. That's what I like to see."

Pride flowed through me. Such intense moments built bonds between men. Sacrifice, pain, and sweat made it sacred. There was clarity in my focus, and I owed it all to him.

"Are you ready for more?" he asked.

I nodded hard.

He set aside the paddle and went to choose another toy. "I'm here, Boy."

My kneecaps, pressed to the braided rug, ached. There were so many other things to feel, like the rope against my skin, the pressure of the knots, and the air moving across my exposed flesh. Everything, from the chemical flavor of the gag to the texture of the rope and the trickle of sweat at the crook of my knees came into sharp, detailed focus.

Mentally walking through my internal Japanese teahouse, I was able to see into all of the realities at the same time yet keep them separate and still understand them. The heavy, industrial, horror house atmosphere was gone. No more exposed overhead pipes.

Windows that were never there before appeared on the walls of each room I passed. Curious, I looked through a window and saw the meticulous form of a Zen garden. The sun filtering through the window was warm, but not too hot, like the touch of Hector's skin. I concentrated on the lines of stones that were raked to resemble the movement of water. Each tiny, light-gray stone was aligned just so to make the pattern. It was still, flawless perfection. Frozen time.

I'd been close to that part of my mind before, but never been able to glimpse what lay beyond my reach. I still wasn't inside, but for the time being, I was satisfied. Hector brought me to a good place, and one day he would unlock the final door to get me inside that tranquility.

I was centered, but I was also so fucking turned on. Leaving the view of the Zen garden behind, I sank back into my body and immersed into pure, raw arousal. Damn, that was good, too. The intense, physical world Hector created for me was as incredible as the mental space he led me to.

Sir, how can I ever thank you enough for this? You bring me everything. What can I give you in return?

Hector helped me off the bed and back onto my knees on the floor. He left me alone for only a minute. When he came back, he had a glass of iced tea. He sat on the edge of his bed and swirled the drink so that the ice clinked from side to side, measuring out time like a metronome.

His long fingers fished out an ice cube. He sucked it, rolling it over his tongue.

I drooled. Couldn't help it. Gags that big made it impossible to swallow. Warm spit hit the rope then dripped down on my bared stomach.

He kneeled in front of me and pressed his cold mouth over my nipple. I shuddered under him, but couldn't get away. He took the cube out of his mouth and pressed it to my other nipple. I yelled into the gag. Fighting the ropes was useless, but I tried. It was too intense.

My mummified cock rammed against his thigh every time he leaned close. He pinched and twisted my nipples, slapped my cock, toyed with me. Behind the safety of the gag, I called him every name in the book, begged permission to come, pleaded, and finally whimpered.

He backed away. I drew quick, shallow breaths in through my nose.

Hector brought out the camera and tilted the lampshade to put more light on me. Another stream of drool ran out the other side of my mouth and he clicked pictures. I felt the splash on my kneecap as the stream of saliva hit the wooden floor.

I think he saw my brow beginning to furrow, because he turned the lens to the wall as he reassured me.

"Baby, we can erase these, make them go away forever, but let me capture you." He bent down to take close-ups of my bound scrotum and then kissed the wet sides of my mouth. "You're so hot. Do you want to see what the knots down your back look like?"

I nodded carefully, because movement pulled the rope. He put the screen near my face so I could see the pictures. Too damn hot. He did nice work. The uniform knots were aligned in a neat row down my spine. He made my body into art.

More importantly, he tried not to take pictures that showed my whole self. He seemed to know how much I hated that. Body parts were fine, because they could be from anyone. It was the sum total that I couldn't face.

There was no way to thank him except by worship. I hoped my eyes were expressive enough. He must have thought so, because he took pictures.

Hector warned me, "You're never allowed to look at another man like this. Only me."

I blinked slow agreement. Only him.

He helped me to my feet and bent me over the mattress. My hands were numb, but I didn't care. Standing behind me, Hector ran his fingernails along the back of my thighs.

"I'm going to give you pain. Would you like that?"

I nodded as hard as I could.

"I want to hear you howl." He pulled the gag out of my mouth and kissed my spit-smeared lips. His hands went to his belt. He unhooked the buckle. I heard the leather of his belt slip through the loops. He knew how much that sound turned me on.

The belt smacked my ass.

I liked it; I liked it too much. The scene was right out of my fantasies. Hector worked my ass over. I howled and begged him to stop, and I really wanted him to, because I was so turned on.

Adrenaline pumped into my blood, but instead of fight or flight, my body picked option three—hump the mattress like there's no tomorrow.

"Bad boy. You think that mattress is your Master's leg?"

Blood surged into my groin and my body went into fuck or die mode. "No," I moaned. Struggling to rise, I made it to my feet, but it was too late.

I knew I was turned on, man I was turned on, but I didn't realize how much until he used that belt like a bullwhip against my ass. The crack split the air. The second and third strikes sliced my skin, sending my blood oozing down my butt. An unstoppable chain of muscle contractions went through my groin.

I came hard. Splat! On the chenille. Slam! On the exposed wood floor.

Gravity pulled a sticky rope of come down to puddle underneath me. I didn't have his permission for that.

"I tried to stop, Sir. Really. I couldn't. I tried," I babbled immediate apologies.

He silently untied my arms. I sank down into a proper posture and begged for his understanding. I groveled, but still received no sign of forgiveness.

"Lick your mess up," he told me tersely.

I lapped my come off the wooden floor and sucked it off the bedspread. When only wet spots remained, he dragged me to the guest bedroom by my hair.

He shackled my ankle to the frame of the cot.

On the cot, there were no sheets or pillows. The thin, hard pad was bound in blue and white striped cotton that was heavily stained. I smelled other boys, their urine, their sweat, their sex, permeating the mattress.

"If you have to piss, there's a can in the corner, but you better get my permission before you use it. I don't put up with spoiled boys who come whenever they're horny. I expect you to start acting like a submissive that knows how to serve his Dominant instead of a little punk who only reads about the life. Your body is mine. If you come, it's a gift from me. You don't make decisions."

He straightened and snorted disgust at me. "You're too willful. I'm going to break you of that." He wiped the blood from my ass and dabbed stinging antiseptic into the cuts, but his care was as terse as his voice. As he left, he turned off the light.

I got hiccups. I listened to traffic slow as the hours passed and wondered why people were out driving at that time of night. I wondered if they knew what I'd done, as if my shame draped black crepe over Hector's door. Distant ambulances rushed across the city. Hard sobs shook me.

Alone in the dark. Sleep? Never.

* * * *

After mind-fucking myself all night, I was worn down. When Hector unlocked the cuff around my ankle in the morning I didn't move. He seemed exhausted, too.

"Make my breakfast."

He went back to his bathroom to shower.

When he came into the kitchen, I bowed at his feet and didn't even try to look at his face. Every scrape of his fork on the plate as he ate his eggs was like fingernails on a chalkboard.

"Aren't you eating?"

I shook my head.

"Did you sleep at all last night?"

"No, Sir." But neither did you. Outside the door, in the middle of the night, I heard the scuff of your shoes dragging across the wooden floor. You spent the night standing guard over me rather than sleep in the comfort of your bed.

I was exhausted and miserable. Everything was going so well until I messed up.

Hector forced me to look up at him. "Baby, you bring this on yourself."

I nodded.

"I mean that you punish yourself too harshly. Punishment is my duty. I decide how you should suffer. You keep making my punishments into torture. You're not allowed to do that anymore. You're the submissive. Stop trying to be your own Dominant."

He gave me a pitying glance. "I thought you understood that I'm in charge."

"I do, Sir."

He put his finger to my swollen lips. His expression was stern but loving. "You lied to me. You told me that you could function on your own. That's not true, is it? You need me to take control, put your life in order, and keep on top of you every minute. Right?"

"Yes, Sir." I was too tired to think. What was I agreeing to?

"Then you understand why you need to move in with me."

He played me so well. At the time, I was so stunned and grateful that he didn't send me away forever that I nodded yes.

"Use words, Sam."

"Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir." I sniffled. The only answer was yes, but the tired synapses in my brain fired off warning shots the moment I spoke. I tried to muddle through what he meant, but my mind wasn't grasping thoughts. The sleep deprivation worked. My mind struggled to push aside the wool, but my mouth was on automatic pilot: agree with the Dominant; please the top; don't give him a reason to stop wanting you.

"I know that you feel bad, but that doesn't mean you won't be punished. We'll talk about that when I get back. I don't have time to blister your ass right now."

What could I do but accept it?

"Be moved in by the time I get back from my trip."

I raised my chin. "I won't be kept."

"You're not kept. You're owned, boy. Give me your next credit card bill and I'll pay off the clothes."

"No."

He wiped his mouth and turned to me so slowly that I quaked. "That wasn't a request. It was an order."

My brain finally kicked into overdrive and caught up with real time. I stared up at him, realizing what he'd done to me, but powerless to take it back. He hid a satisfied smile behind his coffee cup.

I'd been manipulated by a Master.

Chapter 14

Hector walked into his house holding flowers. He saw my desk in his living room and grinned. I wasn't sure what to do; he was stepping into his home, not my apartment. Figuring that a show of submission was never wrong, I knelt down to kiss his feet.

He pulled me off the floor and squeezed me in his arms. A six-hour drive through Central Valley heat gave him a strong scent that went straight from my nose to my dick. It was better than sniffing the dirty clothes in his hamper.

"Did you behave yourself while I was gone, boy?"

Usually, I had something to confess, but not this time.

The stern expression disappeared and the crinkles around his eyes made his smile warm. "These short trips don't give you time to get into trouble. Maybe I'll change my schedule so that I come back home every couple of days or so. Keep you in line. By the way, I bought a new flogger."

Instead of ripping off my clothes and running for the bedroom, I snuggled closer. "Do you want me to rub your feet? Get you a drink? Suck your cock?"

He put the flowers in my hands and gave me a gentle push toward the kitchen. "These are for you. There's a vase for them under the sink."

* * * *

Two hours later, he had me chained to the wrought iron frame of his bed. I stood with my arms and legs stretched. Using his new flogger, he worked across my shoulders and then warmed my butt. The flogger seemed way too soft for my taste. Changing his pattern, his upstrokes caught the underside of my ass cheeks. At first, each was a light touch, but my skin got raw as he put more power into each stroke.

"Thank you, Sir." I closed my eyes and hung my head. The leather shackles binding my wrists and ankles had a patina from use. His soft assurances helped me to stay relaxed when he picked up a braided cat. I wouldn't say that it felt good, but it felt familiar, and the pain across my shoulders was a welcome return to ritual.

We were being our true selves. The emotional exposure was intense, which was why I hated doing scenes in clubs where people could watch. Spiritually, I could feel a

connection with the voyeurs on the fringes in a club. The intimacy got lost when spread among so many. There in Hector's bedroom, the bond between us was undiluted. Dominant and submissive. Sadist and masochist. We were partners in the moment.

Hector set the flogger aside. He kissed me. Hungry for him, I sucked on his tongue while he dragged his fingernails down my back. With his clothes pressed against me, I felt the sheen of sweat on my skin. Adrenaline surged through me and gave me the shakes.

Was he pleased? "Thank you, Sir."

Releasing my hands, Hector bent me down over the mattress so I could rest. "Good boy," he crooned to me. His hands slid over my butt. "Good boy." Cold gel pooled on my ass and I heard his pants unzip. "I won't hurt you."

He worked so hard not to overwhelm me, and because of that, he got more out of me than anyone ever had. In scene, he didn't demand anything except obedience. When he wanted to push, he praised me, and I followed him beyond my limitations.

It seemed trite, and the word too small to encompass the size of my feelings, but I loved him. I adored him. I worshipped him.

More lube poured down my crack.

Squeezing my ass cheeks together with both hands, Hector slid his hard cock between them. He sucked air through his teeth and muttered, "You need it, Baby, and one of these days I'm going to give it to you hard."

When?

Shocked at my thought, for a moment I ignored the slam of my balls against the mattress and the friction burn on the head of my dick. I felt his cock, ridged, sliding over my hole.

"I love your ass; so hot, so pink. Your skin is burning under my hands."

He slammed against me, shoving me hard. In the mirror above his dresser, I could watch his muscular thighs adding power to his thrusts, his defined ass clenching and relaxing as his cock shoved into the groove between my ass cheeks.

I could still taste his kiss in my mouth. Coffee, a cigar, and the bite of spice from the salsa he put on his eggs. I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to see his face when he came. Reaching back, I tried to spread my ass for him, to invite him in, but he pushed my cheeks into a tight valley for his cock to fuck. My hands were on top of his, powerless to change their rough grip.

I tried to rise off the bed and watch him without pulling my hole away from him. All those years of adamantly refusing to even think of anal sex, and there I was, crazy for his cock. Sir, if you want it, take it. Give in to the rut. Dominate me. Forget my limits and think only about yourself. Force me to submit. Take me rough; make me cry.

Hot come sprayed up my back. He gushed the rest of his load against my hole. A heavy drop oozed down to my balls. I groaned as I fought coming.

I tried to think of things to say that would let him know how I felt, but even that kept changing. It was so complex, as if love wasn't one emotion but many, like the infinite shadings of a twilight sky. The physical part between us was like the fiery orange of sunset and the moments where he dominated me were as encompassing as the peaceful black of night, but the areas between were beyond my ability to describe. Never good at talking, I knew I couldn't explain it to him. Caught up in an intense moment of feeling, I clutched the bedspread tight.

He released my ankles from the shackles.

I wanted to show him how well I could serve him. If he thought I was obedient before, I'd really impress him. I'd be the best damn submissive anyone ever saw. The only role models I had of perfection were Ophir's boys, so I imitated them, trying to feel every nuance of the role.

"Baby, that wasn't discipline."

"Yes, Sir."

The box springs creaked under his weight. "Come here."

I went to him.

"What's the matter? You're not sulking, are you?"

"No, Sir. Not sulking." I was being a good submissive, or at least I thought I was. Ophir's boys were unemotional about everything, accepting every order without any reaction. If I was going to be the best for Hector, I had to learn to be that way, too.

He made a face. "It was too much, too soon."

"No, Sir. No. It was great. I'm fine." I wanted to show him how I felt, but perfect slaves didn't ever look their masters in the eye, so I kept my gaze down.

Hector leaned down until he could look up into my eyes. A flicker of something went across his face. He wasn't happy. He pulled me between his thighs and stroked my arms. "Hey," he said softly. "I thought you liked to play."

A slow smile stole across my face. That's where I always failed with the slave thing. I didn't bury my emotions deep enough. I stood between his legs and melted against him. His come dripped down my ass.

"That's much better." His thumb traced my bottom lip and slid down my throat. I lifted my chin. He pressed against my jugular with slow, steady pressure. My eyes closed to sleepy slits as my pulse beat harder and harder under the crush of his thumb. I licked my lips as they began to burn.

Hector let go.

I tumbled onto the bed with him.

Chapter 15

Since I'd been taking care of it, the rectangular garden Hector dug up for me had become an herb patch any practicing witch would admire. The lawn in the backyard was lush, deep green. We threw out his ratty old outdoor furniture and bought nice Adirondack chairs and a big table with an umbrella.

Hector came out to the back yard where I was weeding the garden beds.

"Get your shoes on. We're going to the market. You'll need a pad of paper and a pen to take notes, because I only want to have to tell you this stuff once. One: I have an account at the wine shop on Ocean Boulevard. You go in there and tell them what you're serving for dinner. They'll pick wine from my list."

I ran into the house to get paper.

He followed me inside. "Two: it's your job to make sure my cellar is stocked. If I run out, you're going over my knee."

The pad of paper hid my smirk. Some big threat there.

We were to item sixteen on the list when he stopped the car. "When we have guests over, Ophir's steaks are always two inches thick, cooked rare, but seared on the outside. Next: Larry is vegan, and David pretends to be, but get a thin steak, cook it until its leather, and set it aside. David will find a way to eat it without getting caught."

He talked fast, so I wrote quickly to keep up, my focus never leaving my list. When he stopped talking, I looked up and saw where we were. "Not here!"

"What's wrong with this market?" Hector pulled into a parking spot anyway.

I shrank down in my seat. "The grocery store over on Broadway is better."

"I always shop here. I know where stuff is."

"Please." I got my head below the window. My heartbeat so loud he probably heard it over the radio.

"Are you having another panic attack?"

Yes. "No."

He didn't believe me. "Over a grocery store?" he asked as he got out of the truck. The list of triggers never seemed to end. He yanked open the passenger side door and gave me a stern frown. "We shopped here a week ago and you were fine. What happened?"

"Marcus followed me around the store when I came here for eggs."

Hector slammed his hand against his truck. I flinched. "What were you thinking? You're keeping secrets from me?"

Hector snorted like a bull about to charge. Violence colored his aura in a dark wash. "Are you seeing Marcus behind my back?"

Whoa. What alternate universe did we slide into? I should have been scared, but righteous anger took over. "You total fuck." I climbed out of the truck through the driver's side and hiked across the parking lot toward the street.

Hector grabbed my arm, his fingers digging in. "You're not allowed to talk to me like that."

I peeled his fingers off, yanking away fast so that his fingernails left long scrapes on my skin. I was beyond mad. How dare he accuse me of cheating?

"Boy." He followed me down the rows of cars.

"Go away. Go very, very far away." I turned stone-cold eyes to him.

That seemed to snap him out of it. "You're mad, Sam?"

I got angry all the time; I didn't dare show it.

He tried to snake an arm around my waist.

"Don't fucking touch me." I shouldered past him and went to the sidewalk. I had no idea where I was going. I jabbed my finger on the crosswalk button at the light, tapping out Morse Code for, "Get me the hell out of here."

Hector prowled behind me. Why did he follow me? Couldn't he see that I wanted to get away from him? My hands shook.

"Wait." Hector stepped in front of me as the walk light came on. "Easy, Baby. It's just a fight, not the end of the world."

"You accused me of cheating. Your rules, Hector. If I cheat, I'm out. No second chances."

Where the hell could I go? Joey would take me in. Man, I hated his pet birds.

"Come on, Baby. Just a little mix up, that's all. A misunderstanding."

"I understood you perfectly."

Hector tilted his chin and showed me a calculated smile. "Trust me. This is nothing. A little fight, that's all."

I tried to get around him, but he held onto my arm.

"I thought you were a jock, not some pissy little queen."

When Joey called me a drama queen, it didn't mean anything, but from Hector? I totally wasn't like that.

He let go of me. "Go ahead. Have your little temper tantrum. Get the drama out of your system."

I started to say something, but he lifted his eyebrow and I swore he was going to laugh at me. Anything I said, no matter what it was, he would twist until it was my fault. Nothing devastating came to mind, no good comebacks, no withering words. All I could do was glare at him.

"Does Marcus show up a lot?"

The question threw me. Hector was talking like nothing happened, like I wasn't ready to punch him. He was calm, and it took all the wind out of my pissy sails. "Uh, more than he used to, I guess."

"While you're playing basketball in the park?"

"Never when I'm with someone."

Marcus wouldn't dare show up when Hector was with me. The way Hector walked translated into "don't fuck with me, punk," in every human language. He had that streetwise badass thing going on. Sexy. So damn hot that the sidewalk sizzled under his feet.

"That does it. I'm getting you a mobile phone. Don't start with me, boy." Hector pointed a warning finger at my face before I said anything. "Marcus is stalking you. Next time you see him, I want you to call me."

"What if you're out of town?" I was losing my grip on my anger. I knew I should stay mad at Hector, but I was such a sucker for that gruff voice he used when he was being protective.

"Why don't I take you on your outside errands while I'm in town? That way, when I'm gone, you can stay home."

"What about screenings? And my sports leagues?"

"Just call me when you leave the house, check in with me when you get where you're going, and then let me know when you get home safe."

"You're gonna get sick of me calling."

"I like knowing where you are, and who you're with. Don't worry about it."

It seemed reasonable. Something in my mind resisted the idea, though.

"You won't put as many miles on your car."

I nodded. But still...

* * * *

Marcus was after me. I wasn't in my old apartment. I was in Hector's house. I was in the bathroom and there Marcus was, standing in the bathtub, pulling the shower curtain back. I ran, but like most dreams, it was like running through syrup. No matter how fast I ran, I didn't move. Marcus caught me. He had his hands on me. He punched my face like he did that time in the hotel room. My eye swelled and blood poured out of my nose. I was choking on my blood. He yanked down my pants. I fought, but couldn't get away. He threw me down. I held my thighs together, but his strong hands parted my tightly clenched buttocks and he shoved his cock into me.

I jolted awake, howling. My skin was covered in sweat. I had no idea where I was. It was dark, I was being held down, a hard-on was pressed to my ass, and Marcus had me. My fists slammed into the darkness.

"Baby, Baby, easy."

I was in bed with Hector. I remembered that, but I was still snorting, primed to run or fight.

"It's me."

It was getting worse. I should have been getting over it, but I was back to a couple of night terrors a week and I kept waking up screaming. There was no fixing me.

"Easy. You're safe."

Feeling like a total loser, I rolled over and punched the mattress. "I hate this shit."

My head felt like something was trying to knife its way out of my skull from the inside. It didn't usually hurt like that unless ... Oh, fuck. Was that a nightmare or a vision?

Hector pressed his lips to the nape of my neck. "Maybe I shouldn't leave town for a couple weeks."

"I'll be fine."

"Sam —"

"I'm fine." I curled up in a tight ball.

Hector knew reasoning was useless. "I have to travel again right after our party. Will you come with me?"

"I don't need a babysitter."

He cuddled closer, but it still felt as if Marcus had crept into bed between us. "Sam, there's a domestic violence support group at the gay and lesbian community center —"

"Pro or anti domestic violence?" I quipped.

"That's a lot of mouth from someone who cries in his sleep."

So he knew about that, too.

"Go to a couple sessions."

"Is that an order, Sir?"

"I'm asking."

All I wanted to do was go back to sleep and never dream again. "I'm so sick of this. I'm tired of being scared of Marcus. It's wearing me out."

"I agree. Go to the support group." Hector squeezed my arm. "Please go talk to them."

"I'll think about it." It wasn't a promise, but it was the best he'd get out of me. He could punish me for saying no, but he couldn't make me say yes.

Maybe, I thought, maybe when Hector went out of town the following week I'd go to that support group. If I didn't tell Hector that I went, and I didn't like it, then I wouldn't have to admit that I quit going. If the group helped, then I'd tell him.

"If you need me, you call. Don't worry if it's the middle of the night."

"Sure." I forced a smile even though the room was too dark for him to see. "I'm fine."

* * * *

I sat in my car in the parking lot of the Gay and Lesbian Community Center, my forehead against the steering wheel. No one knew I was there. I could drive away.

I forced myself to get out of the car.

In the hallway outside the support group's room, I pretended to read yellow flyers advertising same-sex parenting classes and a pink one about yoga. A man saw me before I could duck away. His wiry, gray hair was pulled back in a ponytail. He smiled warmly as he pushed up the sleeve of his denim shirt to his elbow. "Coming in?"

I choked my empty coffee cup.

He stepped into the hall, into my breathing space. I shuffled back a couple steps.

The corners of his eyes dropped with sadness. "I think that you need to come inside."

I stared at the hunk of turquoise on his bolo tie.

"I'll move a chair near the door. When you're ready, you can come in and sit there, okay?" he told me gently as he swept a lock of frizzled, gray hair from his face.

I turned to the wall. There was a staple in the corkboard near my head. I dug at it with my fingernail. He went into the room, but left the door ajar.

I went home.

* * * *

The next session I didn't even get out of my car.

* * * *

The third time I went early. It was easier to go inside the room when no one was there. There were white boards on the walls, covered with AIDS notices in Spanish. The place looked like a converted classroom.

I moved a burnt orange plastic chair beside the back door. The leader saw me and smiled faintly, but he didn't try to make eye contact. I plucked at the seam of my jeans.

I so did not want to be there, but I was tired of the nightmares. I was doing it for Hector. If the sessions didn't help, at least they wouldn't hurt, and if they did help, Hector would get to believe that he got me past it, as long as I kept my attendance secret.

Listening to the other people talk once the session started, I felt as if I had no business being at their meeting. They sat there with fresh bruises and talked about the horror that was their last Friday night. My marks were healed—the abuse bruises at least. The sex bruises were still wonderfully fresh. My situation was nowhere as bad as theirs. My problem was an ex-boyfriend, not the current one.

There was one man, a hulking bear, who could have squashed a boy like me under his huge hand without even trying. I wondered how he got up enough courage to admit someone his size was on the losing end of violence. It couldn't have been easy.

Feeling more and more like an imposter, I decided I had to leave. I was out of that loop. I didn't belong.

A woman with beautiful red hair sat with her back to me as she talked about her girlfriend. "She's been so nice to me, really sweet. We walked through the mall holding hands and it was so nice, and perfect."

People nodded, weary, not truly caring. Only the leader listened intently.

"Then she said some woman was checking me out and she got jealous, and when we got home, my god, the sex! It was so intense."

"Okay, Geri, let's talk about what happens after the sex," the leader urged.

"She's really sorry. We're doing great," Geri assured him.

"Let's talk about the power dynamic," the leader said as he tried to tame his cloud of gray hair back into its ponytail.

I caught Geri's eye when she turned in her seat and had an instant connection to her. Oh yeah, I remembered the sex during the fights. My pulse revved up. It was addictive, that edge. I could see her jonesing for the dangerous taste, too.

The counselor talked about honeymoons. I had no idea what he meant. It was a waste of time. I didn't belong there.

Geri's blue eyes twinkled impish glee and her pale pink lips quirked into a smile in profile. She made a jerk-off motion with her hand that only I saw.

I snickered. That was exactly what I was thinking. Time to leave the wankers. There was a soccer game on TV that was way more important to me.

Geri looked like she was going to get up, too. We clicked along on matching wavelengths. We could have been twins.

Geri bent down to pick up her purse, and I saw her black eye.

The bottom dropped out of my mood. The leader gave me a stern glance over the rim of his reading glasses and suddenly he didn't seem so clueless anymore. Geri headed for the door. She watched me for a moment, wondering if I'd go with her. I knew where she was headed—back to the girlfriend, back to the beatings. I sank back down into my uncomfortable chair.

I knew I was looking at me.

Chapter 16

The entire afternoon leading up to his party, Hector played a running game of brink with me. It was his favorite way to keep me obsessively obedient. Every time he passed by me, he kissed, fondled, and stroked until I was on the brink of shooting. Then he walked away, leaving me panting.

To get a little of my own back, I pulled on a pair of come-fuck-me shorts. I was falling out of the inseam. If I sat down, the world would see everything. To make sure Hector noticed, when we were in the bedroom, I bent way over the bed to straighten pillows that didn't need it.

"Stop."

My heart pounded as I stood up.

Hector crossed the floor, not with the heavy stomp of anger, but with that prowling move of his. "I. Don't. Remember. These. Shorts."

"I found them when I packed."

Hector slid a hand from my neck to my groin. From the way his chest rose and fell, the shorts were powerful magic. Testing the fit, he rubbed his hands over my ass.

I tried to kiss him, but he cupped my jaw in his big palm. He slapped me lightly. Then he caught my other cheek. Using the palm of his hand, he buffeted my face until my cheeks burned.

"A reminder to behave yourself."

"Yes, Sir."

Screw the guests, Sir. Come on, let's play. Make me howl. Bare my soul, scour my flesh, and pour hot, heavy ropes of spunk down on me.

"Your panic attacks aren't gone, but you're doing better. I'm proud of you."

I would have walked across hot coals or broken glass to hear him say that to me.

"Maybe when I take my vacation next month we'll get in a little dungeon time. Are you ready to bleed for me?"

I nodded.

"Want to scream and sweat?"

"Yes, Sir."

"It's been a long, hard wait."

"Yes Sir, it has."

"I don't know if I should let you wear these slutty shorts in front of my friends. You're practically falling out."

I twisted so that I could pretend to check them out. Pouting just a touch, I asked, "Do they look that bad? I can't tell." I worked it by dragging my butt slowly past his hardening cock.

He shoved me face first into the mattress and slammed his groin against my ass.

A new surge of lust hit my blood. That rough handling turned me on like nothing else. I pushed back and ground into his groin. Our fuck dance started discordant, but found harmony.

"Baby, you know what I want." His voice took on that syncopated street rhythm that made me want to give him the moon and stars. "One day you'll trust me enough to let me make love to you. I'll make you feel so good. Don't you want me to treat you nice?"

Baby, Baby, Baby. Man, did he know how to talk to me, and he knew it. Hector's hands stroked, teased, and caressed me in so many places that my brain overloaded.

The scrape of his teeth on my skin set my nerves tingling. I wanted my skin to burst under the pressure of his jaw and flood his mouth with my blood. If he drank from me, my body would always be part of him. Nothing was more sacred than blood between lovers. Nothing else carried the promise of life and the threat of death, tangled together like lovers' legs, lovers' tongues, lovers' souls. I wanted to bleed for him. I wanted to carry his mark.

I craned my neck so hard that it hurt, found his mouth, and kissed him as he humped against my ass. Every part of my body hummed as fuck hormones dumped into my blood. I couldn't get enough of the flavor of his mouth.

Struggling under him, I peeled down my shorts to offer him my ass.

Fuck me.

"Baby?"

I heard a rhythm that I didn't want to, someone knocking on the front door. Fuck! I ignored the sound as his arms held me captive against the mattress and his kisses – Gods! He ran his tongue over my shoulders. His hard-on rammed against my thighs.

The pounding on the front door got more insistent. I yelled to the people on the porch, "Go away."

Hector immediately stepped back, thinking that was meant for him. "Easy Baby, don't be scared. I won't hurt you."

"Can't we pretend we're not at home until they go away?"

Bewildered, Hector stared at me as if I spoke in a different language.

The doorbell sounded. "Gotta get the door, Sir." I gave him a quick kiss before calling out, "I'm coming. A little patience!" I tugged my shorts up while mumbling curses under my breath.

Regaining his senses, Hector followed me down the hall.

I scowled when I yanked open the front door. "I hate both of you."

Brett paused, thinking for a moment that I was serious. Joey came in anyway. Hector rubbed the back of his neck.

"Ooh, looks like we got here just in time." Joey eyes went to Hector's pants and then my shorts.

I realized that the head of my dick wasn't covered by the brief shorts, so I tugged a little on them as I asked, "Who arrives this early for dinner?" I told everyone seven o'clock. I thought we all understood that meant eight-thirty.

"Brett, the King of Punctuality. I tried to stall. Beer in the 'fridge?" Joey went to the kitchen.

Brett chased after Joey. "Wait a second, you're the designated driver!"

"One fucking beer."

With them safely absorbed in their fight, Hector turned a determined eye toward me. "Boy." Then he rethought his strategy. "Baby." He moved to me, all predatory grace and power.

I let him see that I was a total raving slut for him.

"Are you gonna be mean and leave me like this, Baby? I need relief."

I still buzzed. When his lips tugged at my earlobes, I melted into him.

"Brett and Joey won't mind if we slip back into the bedroom." Hector's breath was hot on my neck.

Joey's voice came from the kitchen. "Yes, we would. Knock it where we can see you. Oof!" Brett must have smacked Joey.

One glance at Joey's eager smile and Brett's sour frown, and Hector did the adult thing. He let it go. "It's all right. Another time."

I didn't want to do the adult thing. "No, it's okay. I can relax, even with Joey's ear pressed to the door."

"I'm not talking about a blowjob, Sam."

I knew that.

The doorbell rang. Next time the invitation was going to clearly state that the party didn't start until after Hector nailed me.

"I'll get this." Hector opened the door for Crash and Deal.

"Hey, Love." Deal kissed Hector's cheek and gave him a sunny smile. When did they get so chummy?

My hard-on finally realized there was no hope and slowly gave up.

I went into the kitchen to put out salsa and guacamole.

Joey rocked back the wooden kitchen chair so that it balanced on the back legs. "Um, Sam, get me another beer while you're in the fridge?"

I wasn't in the refrigerator, but in Hector's house, I was everyone's servant. I bent down to grab Joey a second beer. Behind me, I heard groans. When I handed the bottle to Joey, I saw that his first one was still full.

"I'd like another one, too," Brett said.

Whatever. I turned around and got a bottle for him.

"No, I want a really cold one." Brett refused the first one I grabbed.

"Reach far to the back of the fridge," Joey advised. They laughed. "Way back. Bend all the way down. Take your time."

I slammed down Brett's beer and tugged open a container of dip. "Okay, what's the joke?"

Brett looped his arm over the back of his chair and shrugged. "You're putting it out there when you bend down. It would be rude of us to ignore that ass."

"Those balls," Joey added.

"And, of course, the trouser python."

They'd both sucked my dick before, so I didn't understand the fascination.

"Sam?" Hector called from the living room.

"The Master summons his slave." Brett sneered.

"I'm a submissive, not a slave."

"As if there's a difference."

"There's a world of difference, Brett, if you have a fucking clue what you're talking about. I have hard limits. I can say no." I stirred the dip and tossed the spoon into the sink.

"Do you say no?"

I said no to you, didn't I?

* * * *

When I went into the living room, I was at first shaken, and then horrified, to see my Gods and Goddesses in the divine flesh.

"Awfully kind of you to open your house to us," Aggie stepped forward from the tightly packed group to talk to Hector. Aggie was a tall, thin whip of a man with a weathered face. To my family, he was the main God, so I wasn't surprised when he spoke for the

others. He gripped his John Deere baseball cap with his long, thin fingers. "We're much obliged."

For a powerful God, he had great manners.

"Hector, meet Aggie." The words "God of Agriculture" seemed to stick in my throat.

"We've done introductions. I didn't know you had family in the area, Sam."

"Family?" I didn't know what frightened me more—Hector thinking I held back something from him, or the Gods inviting themselves over.

"Don't deny you're one of us, Sammy," a curvaceous redhead with overblown sex-kitten movie-star looks blew a kiss to me. Mama Fertility perched happily on the arm of Hector's chair, her stockings and garters playing peek-a-boo with the hem of her tight skirt. "What a virile boyfriend you have, Sammy. Love, is it?" She shimmied across the room. Hector let her plant a full kiss on his lips.

Except the high holidays at my parents' house, I rarely saw any of the other Gods we worshipped.

"It's so good to see all of you." Keep smiling, Sam. "What brings you to Long Beach?"

"Your invitation, Sammy." Mama Fertility took my hand. "I'm jealous as hell," she admitted to Hector. "Sammy's my favorite Dewey. If he had been into women, I would have slapped a collar on him before he hit puberty." She ran her hand down my chest. "A collar and nothing else. Doesn't he have a delicious body?"

"Perfect," Hector agreed as I tried to hide my face.

Her hand lingered on my groin. If I could have backed away without insulting her, I would have. As it was, I had to endure the grope.

"Sam would have been a natural companion for me. How can anyone look at him and not immediately think: Sex?"

Oh man, did I ever want to change the subject. "I invited you to Hector's party?" Did my voice sound strained? Did my smile fade? "And you all came? How ... incredible. What a blessing on this house." My dimples ached as I forced my smile. I waited for Hector to ask what was happening, but he seemed to have a weirdness filter in his brain.

Angelena phased in at the kitchen door. "Psst, Sam!"

"Please excuse me, Sir." I hurried over to Angelena. "Help me, Goddess, in my time of need."

She waved away my quick prayer. "Never mind that shit, Sweet-tart."

I followed her into the kitchen and whispered, "Did I really invite all the Gods over?"

She made a 'so-so' hand gesture. "You repeated your invitation in front of the altars when you made your offerings this week. The others were looking for some excuse to bring themselves to your attention, so they co-opted the invite. Bunch of fucking mooches. If they so much as look at my altar ... Well, we'll burn that bridge if we come to it."

Through the window over the kitchen sink, I could see Joey and Brett kissing in the backyard. They wouldn't notice much of what was going on around them. A small blessing, thank the Gods.

"You're welcome, Sam," about seven Gods replied from the front room.

Great. I had to watch my mouth and my thoughts.

I pulled Angelena over to the far corner of the kitchen. "Why do the Gods want my attention?"

Her eyes gleamed as she scooped salsa onto a chip. "This is networking for them. Your faith is incredibly powerful, Sam. It's strong, and it's pure. All the Gods want you to worship them. Some don't want to share you."

We peered around the kitchen door into the living room. Major Gods and Goddesses chatted quietly.

The lesser Gods were full of peacock swagger. The foolish, the drunk, and the desperate usually uttered the prayers that brought those kinds of Gods into existence, and the Gods of last resort reflected it. Yet, no matter how slick haired, shiny suited, and sleazy they were, they were Gods.

In the middle of them, taller than any God except Aggie, and exuding more power, was Hector. "I should join him," I whispered to Angelena.

"I couldn't agree more, Sam." She gave me a small nudge that almost knocked me flat on my face.

Since he was being so nice about the unexpected guests, I wrapped myself around Hector. He loved it when I clung. "Your friends will be here soon. Why don't I move my, er, family, out to the backyard?"

No one moved as I tried to herd Gods out the back door. They weren't going to move until I conceded something. Through the huge window in the living room, I could see Larry and David parking their car. Out of desperation, I made an offer. "If you write up a list of everyone here, I swear I will pray directly to you at least once a month."

"You pray to the Goddess of Traffic every day," the Lotto God complained. "No one thinks of me until the pot reaches thirty million."

I was a worshipper, not a pushover. "I never prayed to you before. I could keep with that policy," I said, with sweetness that I clearly didn't mean.

"I could make it worth your while, eh, Sammy?" Lotto wriggled his eyebrows.

"He's got Love, idiot. And looks. What would he want with mere money?" A stunning woman in her late thirties, her golden hair coifed in a rich lady hair-do, shoved through the others and squeezed my hand with her heavily jeweled fingers. Her perfect smile and immaculately tailored clothes reminded me of the ads for real estate agents who sold only multi-million dollar houses. "Eternal Youth, and I'm very big in this town. Don't let looks fool you. I'm older than dirt. Name's Doreen Gray-De Leon." She winked, letting me know the name was a joke. "You don't realize it, but you've been tapping me for about six years now. You sure want to stay a boy. Glad to do it, of course. Comp. No charge. Professional courtesy, right? If I were you, though, honey, I'd let it go about another four or five years before turning to me again. When you finish growing up you're going to be breathtaking. On the cusp between handsome and cute. Underwear-model material." As she talked, she steered me toward the altars. "But a place of my own would make it easier for me to be on hand when you needed me, right, Peter Pan?"

The other Gods protested, "If she gets her own altar, we get ours!"

Larry and David crossed the front lawn.

I pleaded silently with Larry and David. Not with Gods everywhere! Stop. Please stop. Let me get this cleared away before you see my weirdness. They kept walking.

Please stop!

The jacaranda tree in the front yard showered them with light purple blossoms. Larry smiled at the unexpected benediction. David kissed him, at first lightly, and then, as the purple flowers continued to fall around them, with more passion.

That was close.

Hector rescued me from the clutching, desperate hands of the lesser Gods. "Sam made a suggestion that I think is fair. Back off my boy. He's doing his best for you. Beer is in

coolers in the backyard. Help yourselves." He gestured them away. They reluctantly filed out the back door, even Mama Fertility and Aggie.

I wondered what he thought I said to them, if he thought that they were family, or if maybe, just maybe, he caught on to the whole God thing and believed.

"They listened to you." I was in awe.

Hector let Larry and David in the house. "Drinks are out back," Hector told them.

David took the last flower out of Larry's hair. They held hands and moved through the house, still wrapped up in their private world.

Hector stood in front of me, his arms crossed, his feet planted wide. As long as people were around, he was gruff with me, but we were alone in the house, so he eased back into seduction mode.

"Hot boy. My friends are drooling over you."

So was he.

"Those shorts are too sexy, Baby."

"If you want to tear them off me, go ahead."

There was no one else in the world except the two of us. The energy between us crackled. We were both hungry and didn't bother to hide it.

Someone rang the doorbell. Damn it!

"Go wait on our guests in the backyard. I'll take care of the arrivals. No," he got stern with me as I humped his thigh. He pushed me back, but he was breathing awfully hard. "You're going outside. Right. Now."

* * * *

With tongs in one hand and a heaping plate of steaks on the other, Hector stood on the back porch and surveyed his domain with a satisfied nod. The gleam in his eye said it all. Fire good. Grunt. Very sexy, especially in that 'beater that showed off his sculpted arms and pecs, and damn he knew it, too. As I handed him an icy beer, he gave me a look that sent blood rushing to my dick.

After the meat was cooking, Hector touched a cold bottle of beer to my shoulder blades. "You need to work off some energy, Sam. Play some hoops. I like to watch you move, like to see you work up a sweat."

"Okay."

I talked a couple guys into playing basketball on the driveway in front of Hector's detached garage. My game was shit because I couldn't run, jump, or move without falling out of my shorts. When I could, I checked to see if Hector watched me. Tease that I was, I trailed my fingers down the line between my ribs to the waistband of my shorts and then sucked my sweat off my fingertips. Then I saw some of the Goddesses, a few Gods, and most of Hector's friends watching me like a pack of hyenas eyeing a newborn antelope, so I decided I'd better behave my slutty self.

Joey and Brett were busy with their own little game of tag. Joey broke off kisses and moved away; Brett followed. Boys in heat. Watching them make out was weird. Sexy, but weird. They weren't the only ones getting aggressive. Up on the porch, two guys were tongue-deep into their mouths. The tension between Hector and me seemed to infect everyone. I could feel the undercurrents of desire pulling across the yard. Wrapped up in the free-flowing lust, I missed the basketball when Larry passed it to me.

The ball hit the Italian cypress hedge on the property line, and then, like a stone sinking into a lake, it absorbed into the tightly packed trees and I swore I saw ripples move across the evergreen surface. I blinked. Too creepy.

I plunged my arms into the hedge anyway. Expecting it to be scratchy, I was surprised that it was hard and cool, like metal. I could see the ball sitting on the lawn behind the barricade. No big deal.

I was seized by curiosity so strong it overrode my normal caution. I never felt it like that before, like I had to look, or I'd crawl out of my skin. I was infected with it.

I'd never seen the house next door. I'd only seen the eye that sometimes watched me. The hole in the hedge was my chance to look.

I leaned forward to peer inside. The hole was much larger than it seemed at first glance.

"Sam!" The voices of the Gods sounded distant. They were all on their feet. Silly overreaction.

The smell of rancid roses gagged me. The hedge was like a vise slowly clamping down. There was no escape. I couldn't back out.

I tried to reach out to Angelena, Aggie, even Deal, but they were more frightened than I was. They had no power. That made me panic worse. Run, run, run! My mind begged me, but I couldn't move.

Oh, fuck. Where was all the oxygen? My lips burned. I was slowly suffocating, and no one could help me. Fuck. I wanted to breathe.

"Boy!" Hector's voice was clear, as if he stood by my ear.

I wanted to obey him more than anything. Deeply, truly, intensely, I wanted to submit to Hector. Suddenly, I jerked back and air rushed into my lungs. My lips and skin burned from the oxygen rushing to the starved cells of my body.

Hector stood at his barbeque, charred meat sending fragrant clouds around him. The Gods were on their feet, faces strained white as I knew mine must have been. I didn't care how it looked, I ran for Hector. Clutching his shirt, I rubbed my face against his chest.

"What's the matter, Sam? Are you having a panic attack?"

He didn't know.

"No, Sir. I'm trying to be good." My heart wasn't in it, but I humped against him, "or maybe I should try being bad."

Hector grinned and smacked my butt. "Nasty boy. The meat is done. Carry it into the kitchen for me."

Angelena followed me inside. "That was close Sam. Thanks be to chaos magic for breaking that spell."

"It was Hector's voice that freed me."

"Believe what you want to, Sweet-tart."

"It was killing me." I shook as I said it, because somehow hearing it aloud made it more real. "It happened, right? I didn't hallucinate it?"

"I think the intent was to frighten you, not to kill."

"It worked."

Deal came into the kitchen. She eyed the chips and dips and sighed at the bourgeois spread. "It's a power exchange relationship, Sam."

"I don't have any power," I reminded her, exasperated.

"Then what are you exchanging?"

Her smug smile made me want to hit something. I hated having that same conversation with her all the time. I yanked the refrigerator door open, grabbed out steak sauce, and slammed the door closed. "For once I wish you people would just tell me what's going on."

Deal pointed a frosty pink fingernail at my chest. "There's your problem right there, Sam. We're not people. We're Gods."

"All you have to do to gain complete understanding is to follow your true path," Angelena reminded me. "You could protect yourself against Fear if you would only accept the divinity within."

They didn't understand. They enjoyed being Gods. I wasn't like them. It was some sort of mistake that I had power. Gods were confident. Gods knew what they were doing. If I took that final step and accepted my power, I'd just mess it up. The power would control me, not the other way around. So I figured I'd keep ignoring it and eventually, magically, it would go away. Then I could just be a normal person.

* * * *

The sun was down by the time everyone finished eating. The evening was chilly, so I lit patio heaters around the backyard. The minor deities pulled into a circle as tight as a high school clique. Major Gods and Goddesses mingled with Hector's friends. I kept a wary ear on their conversations, but the humans seemed to gloss over strangeness as if they didn't hear it. The more uptight Gods seemed oblivious to the gay couples around them. Everyone saw what he or she wanted to, I supposed.

Angelena munched on her tofu burger and discussed the never-ending Ducati versus Suzuki street bike question with Keith, Manny, and Crash. They wandered over to the detached garage in Angelena's backyard to see her collection of vintage rebuilds. Angelena started up a big-ass Harley that rumbled like the voice of the Gods.

Hector sat on the steps behind me so that I could lean back between his legs. I broke loose from the moorings of the conversation and let my mind float along with the voices.

Everything was perfect.

The last moments of twilight the sky was myriad colors, from blues to oranges. Palm trees silhouetted against the sky. Friends and Gods chatted, everyone was well fed, and Hector's party was a success.

"I can't wait to rip those shorts off you, Baby," Hector whispered.

Content, I raised my head to check on the guests. As my gaze swept past the garden, Marcus peeked through the hedge between the houses. I saw his unmistakable blond buzzcut gleaming under the light. He looked straight at me.

Oh, fuck, oh, fuck, oh, fuck! I wanted to raise an alarm, but couldn't. My stutter halted every word at my lips. Breathe, Sam, breathe. Calm. Concentrate on speaking.

He blew a kiss to me and disappeared.

No one seemed to notice, not even the Gods. Without asking permission, because I couldn't, I stumbled away to the bathroom so that I could sink into a full-blown panic attack.

* * * *

After the guests left, I heard Hector moving through the house, cleaning up. That was my duty. I had no right to sit on the bathroom floor while he did my job, but I couldn't make myself leave the room.

Hector knocked gently on the bathroom door. "Sam?"

I couldn't answer.

"Baby, we'll talk in the morning if you can't right now, okay? Do you need a blanket?"

He gave up after half an hour. I saw the light go out on the other side of the door. I wanted to crawl into bed beside him. As I reached for the door, though, Marcus' scent drove me back.

Chapter 17

The next morning, I needed to think, so I went for my jog before Hector woke. A few miles of roadwork were usually far enough for me to reach some kind of conclusion, but it wasn't so easy that time. I felt like Marcus was the boogeyman of my Japanese teahouse. When the sliding doors moved I was never sure if he'd be there, waiting for me.

Marcus. The skin down my back tightened as if the mere thought of him could evoke his presence.

Run. My thought was like a voice in my head. He's right behind you.

Even though it was probably my imagination, I sensed him close. I didn't dare look over my shoulder. His hands were reaching for me. He was going to get me.

Run! The voice screamed.

Smelling faint whiffs of burned rubber, I bolted, running flat out at my top speed until my lungs seared with every breath. When I stopped to nurse a stitch in my side, I was in a neighborhood I didn't know. Weeds grew in cracks through the uneven sidewalks. Tight groups of men watched from behind security fences, silent and wary. Cars, long faded from their original paint jobs, lined the curbs. A pit bull marked bushes on a lawn.

The cell phone Hector bought for me was back at home on the kitchen table. I didn't even have money for a pay phone. There was no way to get home except to run. Taking my bearings from the towers of downtown Long Beach, I loped back.

As I worked my way through neighborhoods of old houses and small apartment buildings, I imagined the lecture I was going to get when I finally dragged my sorry ass into the house. That was the problem. A lecture. Another fucking lecture. I was sick to death of Hector babying me.

Hector couldn't seem to get past my little problems. I was over it. I appreciated that he wanted to be careful, but I hated those heart-to-heart Papi lectures. I didn't need to hear that he was disappointed in me. The few times he punished me weren't enough, and the light scenes we did were just plain cruel. He'd give me a taste, and then snatch it away before I got my fill.

I knew what I needed. Why didn't anyone trust my judgment?

I finally got into an area I knew. Hector was going to be disappointed, but was he going to be angry? How angry? Furious? We both had tempers. I hid mine; he controlled his, but what if I pushed the wrong button? What if I pushed him to the edge like I did Marcus?

"Of course he's furious with you," a voice reverberated near the base of my skull. "You stupid little twink. You embarrassed him in front of his friends. You ruined his reputation forever. Keith is laughing at him."

A spike of fear went through my chest. I swore I heard a contented sigh.

I trudged up to the front porch.

Hector spun around as I opened his front door. "Never mind. He just walked in," he told someone. He hung up the phone.

"Where have you been?" Hector touched his forehead to mine. His voice was tight, as if his vocal chords were pinched between relief and anger.

"I went for a jog."

He must have lost his sense of smell, because he didn't back away. Even I didn't want to smell me. "You've been gone over two hours. I woke; no Sam. You left your house keys and cell phone, and your car is gone. From where I'm standing, it looked like you ran away."

"Why would I run away?"

He gazed down into my eyes. "You know why."

"My car is down the street. I had to go out for more beer last night. I couldn't find nearby parking when I got back. I didn't take the cell phone on my jog because I don't have any way to carry it." See, everything has a logical explanation.

"Sam, you spent the night in the bathroom to avoid me. Just tell me no next time."

He had it all wrong.

"It's not like that. I was turned on, not scared. I wished we would have kept going."

"Until I pushed your limit."

"You didn't push anything. I couldn't bend over for you fast enough."

"So, I was rushing you."

Like talking to a fucking wall! It was as if we stood in separate realities.

The phone rang.

"Let the answering machine pick it up," I begged. I couldn't let that misunderstanding hang between us.

"I called a lot of people, Sam. I have to answer."

"No. I want to tell you —"

Hector turned his back to me. "False alarm. Well, he claims he lost his way on his morning jog."

* * * *

After my shower, I spent several minutes tying the towel around my waist just so—just so tight across my ass and just so low below my hips. To make it perfect, I made sure there was no way the towel could close around my dick.

Hector definitely noticed the effort. His watchful gaze reminded me of the night before. I walked toward the kitchen like a mouse skittering past a drowsy cat. Part of me wanted him to pounce. Who was I fooling? All of me wanted him to pounce.

"Where are you going?"

"I need water. My leg is cramping." I need an excuse to walk past you so you get a good look.

Hector gave off a weird vibe. He was relieved, but a darker emotion lurked under the surface of his aura, waiting to erupt. "I was ready to call hospitals." He rubbed the back of my neck with his thumb. "Were you really jogging?"

I knew a better use for my mouth than talking. My hands slid down his hard stomach. He grabbed them before they got anywhere interesting.

"No. Tell me what happened."

"Got lost."

"You jog the same damn route every morning, Sam. How could you get lost?"

"Thinking."

He slammed his palm against the counter so hard silverware rattled in the drawer underneath. I flinched.

"Don't you look at me like that. I ask you a question. I expect an answer."

It wasn't going to come out if he stood over me like that. What happened to our usual Sunday morning routine of reading the paper in bed, sex, brunch with friends, and more sex?

"You do talk. I know you can," he chided me.

"Everything I say comes out weird. People stare at me like I'm a freak."

He put his hands on the counter to either side of me and got right in my face. "They stare because they want to fuck you."

I didn't like his expression.

"People treat me like I'm stupid."

"That's because you're oblivious to half of what's going on around you. Just floating along in your little bubble, off in your own little world. Sometimes I think I should lock you away where no one else can touch you. Other times, I swear I want to shake you and make you face up to reality."

I felt bad enough already. He didn't need to say that. I set the water bottle down on the counter. "So you think I'm stupid, too." I didn't know why that hurt so much.

"Not stupid. You're simply not living on the same planet as the rest of us. It's that otherworldly something about you, as if your feet don't quite touch the ground. The world is zooming past you at a hundred miles an hour, and you're sitting in the middle lane of the freeway poking at roly-poly bugs."

I wrapped my arms around my waist.

"That wasn't meant as an insult."

How else was I supposed to take it?

"Don't shut me out, Baby. I don't like it when you sulk."

I wouldn't look at him.

"There's a difference between stupid and naïve. I don't put up with dumb submissives. I'm doing everything I can to protect you from harsh realities so that you can stay just the way you are."

He didn't seem to like me much right then.

"Don't pout, Sam. Playing the little martyr isn't going to change that." He backed away. "Nice towel." The knot didn't hold when he flicked it. "Now get down in a proper bow."

When I was down on the floor, I heard the whoosh before the crack, but I still yelped when he smacked my ass. Casting a glance over my shoulder, I saw that he used the wooden spoon with the hole in the center of it. That little sucker stung!

"You will keep the cell phone on you at all times."

Smack!

"You won't leave the house without my permission."

Whap!

How fucking humiliating. Something like a belt or a crop would have been hot, but a spoon? That damn thing was going to mysteriously disappear if I had anything to say about it.

Hector worked over every inch of my butt and thighs with short, harsh snaps until the accumulation seared. It was much worse than getting paddled.

"You won't be gone for more than ten minutes without telling me exactly where you will be, who you will be with, and when you will get back."

Smack!

There was a standard set for disobeying him, twenty strokes. I didn't usually count them out, but at a point it seemed I'd taken twenty already, so I kept track silently. When I got to thirty, I got a little worried.

"Sir?" Whap. "Sir?" Smack. He put more of a snap into it too. "Sir?" I bit my bottom lip. Whap. I danced to the side, but the next blow was right on target. Soon I was digging my nails into the linoleum floor. Ten minutes later, I had new respect for wooden spoons.

Hector dropped the spoon on the floor near my face. My ass throbbed.

"Jerk off for me. Right now."

I had a bad case of the trembling sobs that shook my upper body, but hey, I was going to get to come.

I spat in my hand and worked my dick. My eyes started to close, but his mouth got a mean set to it, so I forced my eyes to stay on his until I came. He nodded, satisfied, as if he was checking to see if it was possible for me. Thank the Gods I wasn't gone three hours. There would have been no convincing him then.

That was probably the only joyless orgasm I ever had. Not that there was such a thing as a bad one, but it felt clinical, like leaving a sample at the doctor's office. I simply pumped until I shot.

Hector yanked me to my feet. His tongue stabbed into my mouth and swept into every part of it as if searching for suspect tastes. He backed out of the kitchen, dragging me with him, keeping our mouths locked together. His kisses hurt. Good thing I was into that.

Angry sex was better than no sex.

I tried to pull his clothes off, but he tossed me on the bed and got over me on all fours. Menacing, but hot. His thigh shoved between my legs until his knee pressed uncomfortably against my balls.

"May I give you a backrub, Sir?"

Hector's expression softened around his eyes. He pulled his tight T-shirt over his head. Every rib showed at his sides, but disappeared under muscles on his hard, flat stomach. For a daddy, he didn't have the proper belly, but I didn't mind.

He fluffed up a pillow and rested on his stomach. At the small of his back was a thin patch of hair that I tugged on until he shot a hard look over his shoulder at me. Carefully, I pulled off his shorts.

Straddling his ass so that those rock-hard muscles bulged under my thighs, I reached forward to rub his neck. Since he had me working out with weights, he got back into a steady regime, too. Between jogging and weightlifting, we were both bulking up.

For a guy his age, Hector still had an amazing ass. Not an ounce of fat. Just hard packed meat that barely moved under my palms no matter how hard I pushed.

I leaned forward to taste him, running my tongue around the ridges of his solid neck muscles. Forgetting what I was supposed to be doing, I snuffled into his armpit to lick.

"That's nice, but it isn't a backrub."

"Sorry, Sir." One day I planned to take a class in massage, because I had no idea if what I did felt good to him. We rarely got past shoulders before he would turn over and push my head down to his cock. That morning he stayed face down and let me work my way to his lower back. When I kneaded his ass, he rose off the bed and spread his thighs. His balls were hanging there ready to be licked. My tongue flicked over them. He went up higher on his knees. It figured. A guy that into ass ... I checked to see if he was relaxed. His eyes were closed to half slits. Usually at that point, I rubbed his feet until he fell asleep. Instead, I pushed his ass cheeks apart and pressed my tongue to his hole.

The salted mineral flavor of his sweat covered my tongue first. Then the undiluted scent and flavor of man hit my nose and mouth. Total turn on. I plunged my tongue in deeper, figuring that if he wanted me to stop, one tight flex of those hard ass muscles would push me away. It was amazingly hot, like porn, only better because Hector was real. The inner flesh of his ass was slick against my tongue. My nose pressed hard into him as I pushed my tongue through the sphincter muscles.

Never rimmed a guy before. Liked it. A lot.

He flipped over. I expected a hard-on and a grin, but instead saw his temper teetering on the edge of control.

"Where did you learn that?"

Guys did that and more on our porn DVDs all the time.

"Didn't you like it?"

"Where. Did. You. Learn. Your. New. Little. Trick? Have you been seeing someone behind my back?"

"No!"

"I saw you talking with Keith last night. You were working it for him in those shorts, showing everyone your ass. Did you make plans to meet him this morning?"

That hurt, and I wanted to hurt him back, bad.

"No wonder why everyone cheats on you, Hector. You push them to it! You think I'm a whore? Fine. Just say it and shove me out the door."

"Boy!"

"What kind of sick fuck mental mind game are you playing this time? Make me break my lease, and then throw me out? Does it turn you on to think of me living out of my fucking car?"

Hector's jaw clenched tight. He's control was slipping, and I liked seeing that I could do that to him.

"I never, ever would have moved in with you if you hadn't tricked me into it. I knew this was a huge mistake. I never wanted this."

It was like biting into green fruit. I expected sweet victory, but instead got a mouthful of bitter. The more I saw of his expression the less I liked the aftertaste.

I couldn't stop the flow of spiteful words, though. I was on a roll. "Maybe your other lovers got bored waiting around to be Dominated. I know I sure as hell am. If we fucking cuddle through one more 'Baby, Papi's disappointed in you' lecture, I'm gonna puke. Are you a real sadist, or do you just talk the talk?"

He threw open the bedroom door. "I won't touch you when I'm this angry, so I guess you won't get an answer to that question."

He slammed the door as he left his house.

* * * *

The first hour he was gone, I was numb. I went through the motions of real life like a sleepwalker. When someone I worshipped was angry with me, the only thing I knew to do was make offerings. So even though I hated meatloaf, I made it for his dinner. I went through the house making sure that everything was exactly the way he liked it. His music went on the CD player. His drink sat waiting for him. Every little detail was perfect.

With his temper, I could imagine how crazy Hector was driving. What if he obsessed on something I said and ran a red light?

I kept trying to figure out why I said that shit to him. How could I come up with that? I never deliberately hurt another person in my life.

When I heard his truck pull back into his driveway hours later, I was so relieved he was back unharmed that I sent thanks winging to every God I worshipped.

He took his time getting out of the truck. I peered out long enough to make sure he was truly okay, and then bowed so that my forehead was to the wooden floor and waited for him to come in. He tossed his keys in the ashtray on the small table beside the couch, like always, and walked past me without a word.

Hector poked around the kitchen. I heard the refrigerator open and the rasp of the ceramic plate against the shelves as he took out the lunch I made for him. He ate in silence.

When he finished eating, he came into the living room and sank down into his poppa chair with an extended sigh. I knew I had to make the move, so I crawled toward him with my belly low to the ground. His shoe scraped the floor as he moved his leg. I stopped and cringed down. We stayed like that for a couple minutes until I dared to creep forward again.

He cleared his throat.

I shrank back several paces. I tried to shrink even smaller as I worked up the courage to slither the last three feet to him. I pressed my lips to the toe of his shoe and tentatively flicked my tongue across it. He didn't speak, so I put my whole heart into licking his shoes clean.

"I won't take mouth from any boy." Hector's voice was quiet, but I was so startled when he spoke that I jumped. "I'd tell you that I'm disappointed in you, but you don't want to hear that."

I couldn't deny that I said that. It didn't come from me, but I didn't think he'd believe or understand. Maybe one of my Gods possessed me the way Deal did the night I met Hector. But they all seemed to like him. Why would they ruin what we had going?

"Makes you want to puke."

I was miserable while he was out of the house, but at least I was in control of my emotions. As soon as he said that, a big fat sob kicked me in the ribs.

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Please let me crawl in your lap and beg forgiveness. I never used to like being touched and held. Right then, it was everything I wanted in the world, but I couldn't ask.

"Stutter?"

My nose pressed to the laces of his shoe, I shook my head. "Please forgive me." I didn't know what to say beyond that. I couldn't explain why I was so mean to him.

He leaned forward in his chair, the leather creaking with his movements. Elbows on his knees, he stared at me.

"Kneel."

I rose to my knees. He lifted my chin and turned my face from side to side in a slow inspection. "You're allowed to be angry. You're allowed to disagree with me. But you will use a properly respectful tone when you speak to me, no matter what. You know that you'll be punished."

"Thank you, Sir," I blurted.

"But that's what you wanted all along, wasn't it?"

"Sir, I wasn't trying to manipulate you." My teeth dug into my bottom lip. "It wasn't like that." I hoped he knew me well enough to know when I told the truth. "Please forgive me."

His shoulders rose as he sighed. "Come here."

I crept up onto his lap.

"Papi is disappointed in you, Baby." He rubbed my back. "Need a barf bag?"

My laugh was more relief than happiness. Teasing me showed that he wasn't angry anymore. Snuggling in closer, I had a tight grip on him and there was no way he was going to peel me off easily.

"We're back to this, are we? It's been a long time since you've been this close to one of your melt-downs." Hector's thumb teased my lip out from my bite. "No more of that. Are you content with a simple scolding?"

I nodded.

"Use words."

"Yes, Sir."

"That's too bad, boy, because this time, I'm not going to let you get away with it. I thought I cured that mouth of yours, but apparently, you need a reminder. Get my cane."

Hector didn't believe in half measures. When his boy was bad, his boy learned not to make that mistake again. It wasn't fear of his punishments that kept me in line, though, because I dug the pain. What made me obey was the simple desire to please him. None of his rules was unreasonable. None was hard to follow. I wasn't trying hard enough.

I went into the bedroom. A harsh shove from behind put me chest down on the mattress.

Hector took his cane from the altar on his dresser. He pressed the thin wooden rod to my mouth. "Kiss it."

He touched my ass right at the meat. "The first blow will be here. After that I'll work my way down to your thighs. By the time I've finished, you'll have deep welts and your skin will be on fire."

I concentrated hard to get my muscles to unclench so that he could start. Man, I was turned on.

The cane sliced the air, giving me a few seconds warning before it struck my ass. His aim was true, but I gave an honest yelp when the rod wrapped around more than I expected. More than he expected, too, from the sound he made. But did he apologize? Hell, no.

The second and third hits were right on target.

He jerked my head back as the next blow sliced through the air. I drew quick snorts in through my nose, but refused to make a sound. By the time he laid down three more, I writhed and tried to stay on top of the pain, but it was a battle that I was losing fast because he wanted my will broken.

The next stroke was bad. The accumulated burn on my skin was hot enough to spark into spontaneous combustion, and the secondary throbbing deep in my butt muscles was intense. My lips parted and I glanced over my shoulder at him. He cocked an eyebrow at me and waited, but I snapped my mouth shut.

No. Not yet. I could take more. There was someplace I wanted to go and only complete Domination would get me there.

Mentally, I went to my Japanese teahouse. Instead of partitioned realities, I finally saw that the floor plan was a labyrinth. I followed the path that folded back on itself, passing by alcoves of realities. I kept my focus and followed the hallway. Pale, cold light filtered in through the rice paper screens. I refused to be turned from my meditation by large or small distractions, even by pain. In the center of the labyrinth, I expected I would find my subspace. No one had taken me there.

Hector drew his gaze away from mine long enough to deliver the next blow. I closed my eyes and concentrated. Walk the path. Find the center. Another stroke landed in close parallel with the others. A cry pushed out of my chest and through my mouth.

The sharp edge of pain told me that he broke skin. With my ass so hot and infused with blood, the tiny sliver was probably already welling into a crimson line. He lapped it up, pushing his tongue into the cut and spreading it wider to intensify the pain. Blood play. No wonder he demanded fidelity. He sucked at my cut.

Control slipped from my grasp. Every pain built on the others like fireworks hanging in a July sky. The underlying haze of earlier strikes never cleared away, though. I could feel my heartbeat throbbing in the welts on my ass.

I fought my body and mind and slowly opened my eyes to meet his again. A red smear went across his cheek. Feast on me. Determined, I awaited the next blow so that I could surrender. Complete, abject surrender. It would be the best moment of my life. I'd be free and bound, safe and exposed. Loved. Cherished.

My vision was as clear as air at altitude, sharp and focused. I could see everywhere and everything. Every reality inside my teahouse slid open its doors and revealed its inner rooms to me. It all made perfect sense. So complete. All I had to do was make it that one final step into total bliss.

I was up to my neck in trust, ready to completely immerse myself.

Then I realized I was talking almost non-stop, as if the words coming out of my mouth came from somewhere else. "I'm sorry, Sir. I'm sorry. I won't ever mouth off again!"

Oh crap. I didn't mean to break yet.

"My stubborn boy," I heard Hector sigh over me as he embraced my sweaty body.

"Don't stop!" I needed more. It was almost in my grasp.

"Stop trying to Top yourself."

"Please."

"I forgive you." He took my cock in his hand and jerked me off. It felt so good, so complete. I gave up peace for the joy of surrender. An orgasm ripped through me, quick and hard. I poured come down his fist.

Forgiveness was a wonderful thing.

I barely noticed the cool ointment across my welts or the damp cloth that wiped away tears, blood, and sweat. Hector cooed over me and I didn't mind being babied. I was too relaxed to object to anything.

Hours later, I was still so completely coddled that I could barely rouse myself from my stupor. My mouth was on his dark brown tit, sucking in languid pulls. Hector murmured things to me that I barely heard. We were good again. That was all that mattered.

"Are we supposed to be somewhere tonight?" I tried to remember, but couldn't. Anything outside of Hector was a blur. Then I groaned with memory. "We have tickets to some fundraiser."

Hector loved an excuse to dress me up in the tuxedo he bought for me.

I snuggled closer. "What time is it?" I didn't want to move.

He groped along his nightstand and came up with a watch. "A little after five. We're going to blow it off. I'm too comfortable, and I love you like this. Completely mine."

"Yours," I sighed agreement.

I couldn't remember ever being so thoroughly dominated. No scene with any Master compared. My body ached, but my mind was still. His body was warm and hard against mine. My muscles yielded to his and I conformed to his shape. Something about that was pure.

After a long stretch of quiet, Hector said, "You don't have to work, you know."

Yeah right. Those bills of mine just pay themselves.

So much for my Zen moment.

"I earn enough to support you."

"I know that you make, like, twice what I do —"

He bellowed laughter. "No Sam, I make over nine times what you do."

"How do you know?"

"I looked at your checking account."

That was pretty fucking nervy of him.

"I'm amazed that you manage to get by on so little."

Like most farm kids, I was raised on the brink of poverty. Land rich; cash poor. Making the most of every penny was ingrained from birth.

When Hector and I talked, it was about films, books, or sports. We never discussed money and that kind of stuff. I wasn't even sure how old Hector was. "You make a lot selling oil drilling stuff?" I asked.

"Top salesman for my company, three of the past five years. Trust me, when you sell millions of dollars of equipment, the company wants to keep you happy, and happy means money. I also have income from a couple apartment buildings, a strip mall Ophir and I own in a partnership, some other things. Baby, I live rent-free and I'm on an expense account on the road. I've got nothing to spend money on but you. You want a kitchen to rival Ophir's? It's yours. A big screen TV to watch your sports? Say the word."

"Are you sure you want to be responsible for me? I might be an expensive hobby."

Man, did that crack him up. I never saw him laugh so hard. "It would be so much easier for me if you were expensive."

I didn't get that at all. "Why?"

"Greed, I can understand. If buying several hundred bucks of stuff every month made you happy, I'd know exactly where I stood. At first I thought that you had sugar daddy down to an art—ignore the smaller gifts and wait for something really worth your time."

He thought that about me?

"Baby, don't look so hurt. That's what I thought at first. No, that's what I expected at first. Oh damn it," Hector muttered. "I know that look. You'll never accept a gift from me now, will you?"

"It can't be about money."

"Sex is sacred to you. I've figured that out."

"But you said it would be easier if it was about money."

"Easier, but not so..." his fingers traced down my stomach. "If you were in it for the loot, I could be cynical about us. Hot, young studs like you don't lust after men my age. They make love to the wallet. But you're allergic to gifts. That makes things much more complicated."

He thought I was after his money.

"Sam, please don't get so stressed out. All I'm saying is that I didn't expect to be in love again."

No man ever said that to me before and meant it. Stunned, dazed, I didn't know what I was, except incredibly happy, like everything inside me turned to light. "I love you, too." I snuggled closer to him so that he wouldn't see the tears at the corners of my eyes.

"Then let me take care of you. I can never be your true Master until you trust me."

"I do trust you." The look on his face showed he didn't believe me. "I do! I'll prove it."

"All right. From now on, I control the money. I pay for everything." He watched me struggle to hold back my protest. He was so good at tricking me like that. I finally nodded. "And unless it's on your regular schedule of chores, you don't leave this house without my permission," he said.

"But what about my work?"

"As long as you tell me before you go, as long as you ask, there won't be a problem." Hector hugged me. "You're going to be the most loved, cherished boy on this planet. You can float through life in that little bubble of yours, and I'll make sure nothing bursts it. No more worries about bills. I'll take care of everything."

Chapter 18

It had been weeks since I saw Marcus in the hedge. The only address I was able to find for him was a P.O. Box, so it was possible, though unbelievable, that he lived next door to Hector. I almost had myself convinced I imagined seeing him, but I kept far away from the house next door. As I worked in the garden, though, I didn't turn my back to the hedge.

Hector came out to the back porch. "Are you ready to go to the market?"

I dusted my hands off on my jeans. "Let me wash up first." Going to the market by myself shouldn't have been such a big deal, but my chest still got tight when I thought about running into Marcus there. Under Hector's new rules, though, I couldn't go alone. I was relieved to have him along to help keep me calm.

When we got inside the market, I realized that there was a trade-off. Sure, I didn't have to worry about Marcus anymore, but I had to deal with Hector. He was used to buying whatever he wanted. I did what I could with a tight budget. Those weren't compatible shopping styles.

"How much do I have to spend, Sir?" I asked.

Hector smiled. "Don't worry about it."

"But how do I know when to stop?"

"Just get what's on your list."

He'd obviously never experienced the humiliation of putting one item back at a time while the cashier and bag boy looked on in pity and disgust.

In the shampoo aisle, I reached for a big bottle of the bargain stuff.

"Wait. Why are you buying that?" Hector asked.

"Because I have a coupon for it, and it's a third of the price of the fancy stuff."

Hector picked up a different bottle. "I like this brand better."

"Read the ingredients. It's the exact same thing as the cheap brand. Why pay extra for a bottle and advertising?" My temper was rising and I didn't know why. It was just shampoo.

Hector put his bottle into the cart and put mine back. He was that way about everything. If I picked up the marked-down chicken, he wanted to know why I didn't pay 30 cents more per pound and get the fresher one. When I grabbed the in-store brand of tomato sauce, he told me to get the national brand instead.

By the time we got to produce, I was worn out.

"Sam! You're staring off into space. Focus. What else do we need?"

I pointed to the heads of lettuce.

"Well?"

I was right in front of the display. All I had to do was grab one, but I didn't. He'd just tell me it was too big, or too small, or the outer leaves of the head were too wilted. Hector finally reached past me, grabbed one, and dumped it into the cart.

"What else?" he asked.

I shoved my hands into my pockets and stared at the floor. We had everything on my list, and a lot of extra stuff he'd picked up, but I had no idea if he was done or not.

"I guess we're done then." Hector pushed the cart over to a checkout.

The ride home, he tried to get me to talk, but I wasn't in the mood. Maybe he felt a little guilty, because he tried joking with me. His cheerful tone felt forced, though. I stared out the window.

"Hey," he said. He squeezed my shoulder. I shrugged his hand away. "I've got something that will cheer you up."

I was a little curious, but didn't ask.

Hector sat on the kitchen counter as I carried in the groceries. He sure did look good that morning, despite the searing heat. His shirt clung to his muscles, showing the curve of his biceps.

"Don't you want to know?"

I bent over the bags, looking for the frozen stuff. "Sure."

He jumped off the counter and thrust something close to my face. "Tickets to a soccer game."

As quick as that, I quit being upset. I mean, it was his money we spent on food, not mine. He had the right to question what I bought. As usual, I was way overreacting.

To show I wasn't pouting anymore, I gave him my best "aw, shucks" farmboy grin. "I haven't been to a live soccer game since college. Thank you, Sir. I know you hate it."

"I don't hate it. I just don't care for it." Sweeping the tickets lightly across my face, he grew stern. "If I catch you looking at the players, I'll drag you out of your seat and bring you home."

The first time he pulled me away from the TV to lecture me, I talked back, insisting that I couldn't watch baseball without looking at the players. A rough session with his cane put an end to that conversation. It wasn't what I said that earned the punishment, as usual. It was my tone.

When I wanted Hector to know I remembered my lessons, I wrapped myself around him and played with his chest hair. Nothing melted him faster.

"I won't look," I promised.

Hector reached around and smacked my ass playfully. "That's a good boy." He put the tickets down. "We have to leave in forty-seven minutes."

"Almost an hour, huh?" That sounded long enough to thank him properly. I left him to look through the grocery bags for the things that had to be refrigerated. The stuff in cans I could put away later. "Guess I should go change." I pulled off my shirt. "And shower. It's so hot outside."

I pulled my nipples like taffy, sending rockets of sensation through to my groin. "Forty-seven minutes. That's not much time. I hope I don't get sidetracked, or dragged into a wrestling match," I hinted. I let him hop off the counter before I pretended to run.

He tackled me in the living room. I was laughing even before he dragged his fingertips lightly over my skin. He loved tickle torture, and I was ticklish everywhere.

"Escape from me and I'll give you anything you want," Hector promised.

I didn't move for a few seconds, and then went into a flurry of action. I almost got away, but he grabbed me by my ankle and stroked the bottom of my foot until I hiccupped. Problem was, I was laughing so hard I could barely see straight.

"No! No," I gasped. "I'll piss my pants, I swear, Papi."

He tickled harder.

I got as far as the coffee table when he yanked me back. He dug his fingers into my abs until the tickling wasn't so funny anymore. My stomach muscles ached. I didn't know why, but my temper exploded. I stopped pulling my punches. A quick shift of his weight was the only thing that saved him from taking a vicious jab in his ribs. Kicking and hitting, I got out from under him and scooted to the far end of the room beside the bookshelves. Breathing hard, I watched him warily.

Hector gave me his sweetest grin. "That was good, Baby."

"You're not mad?"

He crawled to me. "If you were in trouble, you wouldn't have to ask." Grasping my leg, he pulled me under him. Hector was being gruff and sexy. "You're a jock. Play rough like one."

Pop! He tugged at the waist of my jeans so that the button on my fly came undone. He tugged again. The second one down sprang open. Hector stretched on the floor next to me and slowly dragged his fingers up to my neck and then down to my groin.

"What do you want for your reward?"

I want you to fuck me.

I couldn't bring myself to say it. Instead, I turned on my side so that my belly pressed to his. "Spank me."

He loved it when I begged for it.

When I stood, I slow-teased my jeans down the curve of my ass. From the way he watched me, Hector enjoyed the show. I bent over the arm of the couch.

It was always the little details of play that I remembered in sharp focus. The feel of the afghan on the couch rubbing against my cheek. The scent of the orange oil I used to polish his furniture. The sound of my Sir pulling his belt so slowly from the loops of his jeans that I wanted to spin around and yank it out for him. Excitement was tight in my belly.

The fly of his jeans was harsh between my ass cheeks as he shoved close, but damn it felt good. I bucked back against him and rubbed my hole against the thick fabric. I heard him breathing hard.

"Feeling your oats, boy? Feeling wild? I know a cure for that." He smacked me with his belt. Using light blows, he worked my ass over until the skin was extra sensitive. Then he changed the direction, gradually increasing the intensity.

I struggled to stay silent as his fingernails dragged down my hot skin. A deep moan broke free from my chest when he bit into my ass.

When he grabbed a book off the shelf to use as a paddle, Hector concentrated his blows on my upper thighs and lower ass, so I'd feel it when we sat at the game. Before long, a throbbing haze of pain spread across the surface of my skin and underneath it.

Hector went into his bedroom and returned with his crop to finish the job. The crop laid out sharp little stings that got me hopping on my toes. "No, no, no," I cried out, but we both knew I meant, "Fuck yeah!"

Soon my legs were shaking and a river of sweat poured off my scalp. I could spend the whole day like that, but not another second. My ass cheeks quivered after each blow.

Hector pulled me over so that my back arched painfully over the arm of the couch. He tapped the crop against my engorged dick. Already flush with blood, my cockhead went purple. The second smack almost sent me through the roof, but it was the taps against my aching balls that pushed me past my endurance.

"Okay, easy." Hector brought me to his chest and held me. We stood there, me shaking from the adrenaline, him solid, until I calmed down. He kissed the top of my head. "Good boy."

He pressed his mouth to mine. Grasping my butt hard, he asked, "Think you're going to feel that?"

I winced. "Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir."

"Rest, while I start the shower running." He put me onto the cushions of the couch, a real privilege. "I won't be far away from you. Just down the hall." Even as he went, he kept talking to me so that I could hear his voice.

My skin was hypersensitive to the currents of air that rasped against my butt. Man, I was flying. What a fucking turn-on. I felt as if I was pure Sex at that moment, completely comfortable in my skin, a cherished object of desire. For me, there was no higher plane of existence.

The old pipes in the house gave a sharp squeal as Hector started the hot water flowing.

He lifted me up and helped me walk to the bathroom.

I didn't have to move, didn't have to think. Hector washed my hair and my body. He was as gentle with my balls as he could be, but being that primed to come, any touch meant pain. I grasped his shoulder for support while he ran the washcloth over my sac. When he scrubbed my back, I cuddled close to his chest, latched onto his flat, brown nipple, and sucked with my eyes closed.

We stood huddled under the water while I stroked his cock and he stroked mine. His foreskin slid over the head of my dick, hiding us for a moment in shared flesh until he was too hard for that. He held me close and kissed me as if I was the best thing he ever tasted.

Please. Please. Please. Please.

"Your lips are moving, Sam, but I can't hear what you're saying."

Am I really going to do this? "I trust you. I—You can—" I turned my chest to the white tile wall, put my hands on my ass, and spread for him.

Hector rested his brow against the top of my head. We stood there for a long time with the water pouring down us. "Your limit."

I nodded. He understood what I was asking.

"If you say yes, I expect everything. It's not a one time 'I tried it, I don't like it, never again' thing. You'd be saying yes to every time I want you from now on. You'd never be allowed to say no to me again."

"Yes. I'm saying yes."

Strong arms hugged me close to his chest. "Why are you saying yes?" He sounded as if he didn't really want to hear my answer. "Are you afraid I'll leave you if you don't? We're solid, Sam. You don't have to do it for me."

"I'm saying yes because I want your big, fat cock in my ass." I ground against him until my sore butt couldn't stand it. "You said I could have anything I wanted. I want this. I'm saying please, before I go crazy."

It was more than physical need, though; I wanted to bare my soul to him.

Silent laughter shook his upper body. His tongue traced along my earlobe. "I understand a thing or two about wanting something." Then he let go of me. "Wait right there. Don't move."

I heard wet footsteps squish down the hall to the bedroom, drawers slam, and then him padding back into the bathroom.

The grout between the tiles on the wall drove my cockhead crazy. I heard the lube being squeezed from the tube, and then Hector slowly pressed his finger inside my ass.

More kisses trailed along my shoulders. "This is what I want from you. True submission. That's good. Let me in."

Approval. I soaked it in until my cells were quenched. "I love you," I told him. "I worship you." And I did. I adored him with that queasy, puppy-love affection I always felt for my Masters, but there was something else inside my heart, too. Solid, comfortable, everyday love.

"I'm going to add my second finger. If it's too much, say something."

"I'm okay with pain." Everyone said it hurt the first time. I wanted to have the pain so I could move on to the pleasure. I bore down on his fingers, trying to take him in deeper.

"You're so little, and my hands are big. I'm worried I'll rip you with just the two, even though you're loose. We're going to do this slowly. I promise that I'll take the time to train you right."

Yeah, the second finger was almost too much. I felt very full inside. I was lucky that Hector cherished me, so he was going to take the time to do me right. It could be days before we worked up to it, but when his cockhead finally pushed into me, I'd be prepared.

"No. Don't force it. I don't want this to be about pain." His fingers began a slow slide in and out of me. "Let me make you feel good."

Oh, man, he already was. The voice killed me, though. I thought I had no resistance left, but he got into that sweet-talk mode where I was hot Baby, sexy Baby, and good Baby. No one else in the world got to hear him talk like that. They knew the man who snapped orders at me and never forgave a mistake. They knew how thoroughly he punished me. They saw how hard I worked to obey him. What I earned was this—the moments where he was gentle and sweet, and it was only for me. No one else knew.

"Lover," he called me.

I melted and swirled down the drain with the water from the shower.

"You're going to enjoy training. I'll get you relaxed and then work your hole. You're going to feel so good," he promised. Hector grasped my dick with one hand while he pushed his

fingers into my hole past his second knuckle, touching something that felt too fucking awesome for words, like having my dick rubbed on both ends.

Hugging the tiles and standing on my toes until my calves ached, I presented like a bitch in heat. My shoulders pushed into the wall as my wet hands tried to grasp my buttocks and keep them spread for him. I was aware of places inside my body I never knew existed and was glad he was the first to touch me there. It was so fucking incredible to have his body pressed against mine and his fingers working in and out of my ass with long, slow pulls and then those fast rams that pushed his knuckles against my balls.

His grip on my cock was harsh as he jerked me off. "You like that?"

I grunted, "Yeah." Oh, yeah. Flying, swooping, falling from the heavens to join the other rutting beasts, I was in pig ecstasy. The scent of ass fucking hit my nose. I want more. Can't you tell from the way I'm riding your hand?

"What do you want, Baby?" Oh, man, that voice, rumbling right next to my ear in an excited whisper. "Do you want me to fuck you?"

I tried to speak several times, but my ability to think ended where his fingertips stroked my prostate. I couldn't be sure when it happened, but I lost my mind and said exactly what I was thinking. "Make me your ass slut."

He wriggled his fingers inside me, sending me to the moon. "You want to be my ass slut?"

It was stupid, but I nodded because I wanted to give him everything. I had a terrible feeling that he was going to tease me until the end of time for saying that. I turned my head the other way, felt the cool tile against my burning cheek, and closed my eyes hard against the memory of what I said.

"It's going to be so much fun making you beg for it."

I swore that I wouldn't, but he kept barely stroking my prostate and slowly fucking my hole with his fingers. He lightly stroked my dick, not enough to help, and soon I was howling for it. I had to come. Had to. No choice. My cock was going to explode in his hand if he didn't jerk me off hard and fast, and soon! "Fuck me, Sir, please! Please."

"Not Sir. Never Sir when I'm loving you, Baby, because Sir doesn't let his boy do this." He grasped my dick and shoved his fingers against my prostate until I let go of my butt and clawed the tiles trying to find something to hold onto.

The power jetted out from me. Passion, in all its purple glory, blossomed in hearts and groins and brains. Across the world, lovers dared to share their private fantasies and had them lovingly fulfilled.

Words fell in torrents from my lips, praise and love, because only he could coax those things out of my mind. My jizz sprayed up across the tiles as my hole clenched his fingers. Inside me, and outside me, the few throbbing after-quakes felt so good, strong, and hard.

I never left a shower feeling so dirty in all my life.

* * * *

Spanking, sex, and soccer. What a fucking fantastic day. The sky was almost true blue, scoured clean by Santa Ana winds. It was going to be over a hundred degrees at the stadium, but I didn't mind. I was blissed-out, a post-orgasmic ass slut.

Hector's Ass Slut. I needed that tattooed on my forehead.

We inched our way up the road to pay for parking. I rolled down the window to get a better look at the stadium. Multi-colored pennants from all the MLS teams flew from flagpoles.

"What section are we sitting in?"

Hector tugged on a curl of my hair. Daddy taking his boy to the ball game, how wholesome and All-American of us.

I heard the crowd inside the stadium. "The game is already starting!"

His eyebrows rose.

I slumped back in the seat. "We're missing everything."

"That's your fault, not mine, ass slut."

Instead of blushing, a sly smile stole over my face. I was still flying. If his fingers could make me feel that good, his cock was going to launch me to the heavens.

I heard the crowd. I could barely stay still. No one had ever taken me to a live game before. Ignoring everyone else in the parking lot, I gave Hector a quick kiss. "Thank you for the tickets."

"I spoil you," he growled.

I flashed him a flirty grin over my shoulder as I walked a couple steps ahead.

"But at least you finally let me buy you something."

I stopped dead, my mouth slightly open as my smile slid away.

"That's right, I finally found your price." He gave my ass a hard goose that made my teeth grind. He tugged on my belt loops to get me moving again. "According to my rules, once an ass slut accepts a gift, the slut can't refuse any others."

"Like hell I can't." I glowered at him.

He put his hand on the back of my neck. "Watch your language, boy. I might start spanking you when you act up in public. I've tried everything else to cure that mouth of yours. Maybe a little humiliation will keep you in line."

I went white. We handed our tickets to the people at the gate and went through the turnstiles. The energy pent up in the crowd vibrated in the air.

He would put me over his knee and pull down my pants in front of all of them if I pushed him to it. There were at least two hundred people in the concrete walkway between the concession stands and the seats. They'd all see me getting spanked. I couldn't get over how sexy and terrifying that was.

"You're turned on, Sam."

"Yes, Sir, I am."

* * * *

I should have guessed that something was up when he showed me the tickets. Hector kissing my ass was never a good sign. My second beer was nearly gone before he decided to break his news. I started to rise from my seat for a trip to the men's room when he put his hand on my arm, so I sat back down, sucking air between my teeth as my painted-on jeans abraded my sensitive skin.

It would be days before that spanking faded into erotic memory. It was exactly what I hoped for, and so much more.

Hector didn't look at me after I sat back down. He leaned forward, elbows resting on those powerful thighs. "I have a three-day trip. When I get back I have to head right back out to a convention in Vegas."

I didn't get what the big deal was. There had to be more to it. "Okay."

He leaned back in his seat, drawing his hands along his thighs. "I can't take you." He sounded angry.

"Fine." I didn't remember asking to go. Man, those two beers were both coming due with a vengeance. "May I go piss now, Sir?"

"You'd be too distracting. I'll take you on a vacation sometime soon, but you can't go this time." Hector was terse with me, as if we were arguing about it.

"Fine." How many times did he want me to say it? Our conversations seemed to be taking place in different universes.

I felt our perfect day slipping through my fingers and the harder I tried to hold onto it, the faster it evaporated.

"May I go to the men's room, Sir?"

He waved his hand, dismissing me. I bolted up the stadium stairs.

I hurried into the men's room. A guy walked in behind me, his footsteps echoing against the concrete walls. He stood close to me and a bad scent overwhelmed the usual public toilet odor.

"Sam. Why do you keep showing up everywhere I go?" Marcus' almost colorless eyes couldn't seem to focus on me. There was something feral about him, as if he'd forgotten how to act human. Always spooky, he seemed to have tipped toward madness.

I shoved my dick in my pants and buttoned the fly of my jeans. "Go away." Good thing I got angry with him for being there, because my other choice was a panic attack.

He shook his head sadly and smoothed his blond buzz cut with his hand. "I try, Sam, I do. You send me away and I go just to please you, but you always manage to reel me back in."

What the fuck?

I headed for the exit; Marcus followed easily with those pumped legs of his. A body builder, Marcus was all about bulk. He grabbed me around my waist and pulled me close to his leathers.

"What a sexy little ass you have, Sam. I forgot that. Your new daddy getting tired of you teasing him with that?" Marcus kneaded my butt.

I held my howl behind my teeth, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of seeing how much it hurt. He was killing the pleasure buzz of my pain, and I wasn't happy about that.

"I can barely go to the grocery store or car wash without running in to you, Sam. We both know that's no accident. You have to accept that it's over."

Other way around, you sick fuck. I struggled out of his hold and jogged through the stadium, dodging people holding plates of nachos swimming in neon orange cheese.

"Running to get daddy to handle your problems? Did he turn you into a complete twink, Sam?"

I hated myself for being so stubborn, but I didn't want to prove Marcus right. I could handle him on my own. I could do it.

Marcus grabbed my arm. Before, I was pissed. The fact that he was getting away with throwing me around, and no one seemed to notice, terrified me.

"Sam, I've told you before, we're through. Why do you keep trying to get back into my life?"

I wriggled free and jogged past a cotton candy vender. The overpowering smell of sugar did nothing to help the stench Marcus gave off. Leather gone bad, in more ways than one. He kept on my heels. "You knew that I'd have to come see you the moment you filed that restraining order. That was your way of worming your way back into my life."

Fuck, fuck, fuck! The people at the domestic violence support group pressured me into filing that restraining order. I knew it was a bad idea, but everyone in the group told me that I needed one for my protection. Yet there Marcus was, claiming that the restraining order was what brought him to me. Fuck!

Marcus got an evil grin on his face. His pinpoint pupils seemed to pull the color out of his eyes. "Maybe I'll tell Hector that you asked me to meet you here for a quickie in the men's room."

A spike of fear shot through my chest.

Marcus inhaled. "Sammy boy, I never get tired of the flavor of your fear. It's as pure as prayer."

It wasn't something I wanted to do, but I went to the nearest stadium security guard and said, "I have a restraining order against this man. He isn't allowed near me."

The rent-a-cop took one look at Marcus and decided that for a lousy eleven bucks an hour, he wasn't having any part of a six foot-four body builder with crazy, colorless eyes. It was his fucking job, though, and I needed him to give a damn about doing it.

"No one cares about you, Sam. No one except me." Marcus forced a kiss on me.

I wiped my mouth and spat.

"Hey, you can't spit here!" The security guard yelled at me.

Oh sure, that he cared about.

Marcus ignored the rent-a-cop. "I don't have much patience for your little game, Sam. If you want me to take you back, you're going to have to get down on your knees and beg. You used to beg so good, baby. I can still remember the feel of your sweet lips around my cock."

"Watch your mouth, Marcus, there are kids around here."

"Fuck 'em." His crazy laughter sent chills up my spine. "Oh, Sam, you always were so proper and polite in public. I wonder what people would think if they saw the way you beg for the whip?"

Pushing up the short sleeves of his T-shirt the way he used to before he took a swing at me, Marcus displayed his heavily veined, grotesquely pumped upper arms. "I could toss you over my shoulder and carry you out of here, and no one would give a shit, Sam. No one cares about little faggot boys. They like it when people like you disappear off the face of the earth forever."

I grasped the security guard's little walky-talky handset that clipped to his pocket. "Call the cops now!" People turned to see why I yelled, and they stared, but I didn't care. If I didn't make someone see me, Marcus could drag me away.

The guard murmured code words while he gave me a pissed-off glare.

Marcus patted my head. "Okay, so we're still playing your game. Be seeing you, Sam. Real soon." He raised a hand in an unconcerned goodbye wave as he sauntered away.

The guard probably called the cops to haul me away, but the police took me seriously. As soon as I explained, they put out a description of Marcus and searched the stadium for him. One stayed with me and took down my information.

When he had every sordid detail, including the rent-a-cop's homophobic version, the officer asked, "Do you have a ride home?"

I nodded. I wrapped my arms around my waist to stop from shivering. "Can I g-g-g?"
Shit!

A flicker of pity washed over the cop's face when he heard my stutter, but then he got over it. He handed me a card. "If you have any further problems."

I wanted to tell him that I lived in Long Beach, out of his jurisdiction, but I wasn't going to be able to speak until I calmed down, so I took the card.

"Be careful, son." The cop told me.

Hector was pissed that I missed most of the second half. "I got tickets so that we could spend the day together, Sam. It's not as if I enjoy soccer."

"S—." I was in meltdown. The Marcus thing was over, but I couldn't get past my delayed fear. Not a chance in hell I could talk for a while.

I reached for Hector's hand.

He jerked away and pretended to watch the game. "I won't put up with the pouting, Sam. You can't come to Vegas with me. End of story."

I forced my muscles to relax so that my thigh would rest against his. He turned in his seat so that his knees pointed away from me. The only contact he let me keep was the toe of my shoe against his.

Something was wrong. Hector couldn't hear what I was really saying. Somehow, we were in alternate universes, like passengers in parallel trains in a station. I could pound against the glass with my fists, and I could shout all I wanted to, but I couldn't make Hector wake up and realize I was trapped apart from him, and I couldn't stop us from moving in opposite directions.

Everything felt slow motion and syrupy like a nightmare, only I was awake.

Defeated, I stared at the green expanse before us and saw bright uniforms rush across the pitch, but didn't see a moment of the last half of the game.

Chapter 19

Obsessing over Hector's mood wasn't doing me any good, but I couldn't stop. Instead of pacing circles, I cooked a huge meal. After my cooking frenzy was sated, the sink overflowed with pots and pans. Once I got started in the kitchen, it was hard for me to stop. Sometimes I cooked for two or three days straight without even sleeping.

The problem was what to do with all that food. I didn't feel like eating, so I invited Joey, Brett, Angelena, Crash, and Deal over for dinner.

There was barely space on the table for our plates and all the food. Crammed into that one room with so many bodies, I felt the emptiness in the rest of the house. I huddled closer to the table and turned my back on the overwhelming absence of Hector.

"I can't stand the way things are with Hector. I've never been with anyone this long, so I've never run into this kind of thing before. I don't understand exactly what I did wrong and I don't know how to fix it. Are we fighting? About what?" I glanced around the table, hoping one of them had an answer for me.

"Maybe I should have a chat with Hector," Angelena said.

Deal kicked her under the table.

"It's those fucked up games you play," Brett snapped.

I was so tired of his attitude. "There's nothing fucked up about it."

"Convince me." He folded his arms.

I picked up the wine and poured more into his glass until it sloshed over the sides and ran down onto the table. Crash looked at me with renewed admiration. Deal lifted her plate out of the growing puddle.

Brett grabbed the bottle. "What the fuck are you doing, Sam? My glass is full. There's no room for more."

"You're already so full of opinion, Brett, that there isn't room left for understanding." I soaked up the wine with my napkin.

Deal set her plate back down on the table.

Joey and I polished off the first bottle of wine between us, so I opened another and poured myself a generous glass.

"Leave Sam alone." Joey put his arm across my shoulders.

Brett pushed back his chair and went out to the porch to smoke. He leaned against the doorjamb. Huddled over his lighter, he bowed his head to the flame. Small, gray moths flew into the kitchen and slammed into the overhead fluorescent lights.

I could see the house next door reflected in the glass of the open back door. Or more accurately, I could see the absorbing darkness of it in silhouette against the brighter night sky. Did Marcus live there now? Was that how he knew I was at the soccer game? Did he follow me?

Joey gulped down his wine. "Next time you want to try to make Sam jealous, don't pretend you're into me, Brett. Sam only cares who Hector's fucking." He reached for the wine bottle.

Brett snorted.

Joey muttered, "I'm never fucking friends again. Learned my lesson. Brett was all over me until you were gone, and then nothing. Like I didn't exist. You never treated me like that, Sam. You're one of the nicest guys I know. And you too, Crash. Best basketball teammate I ever had, even if you are straight." Joey stared at Deal, drew a blank, and moved on to Angelena. "And you, Scarecrow, I'll miss you most of all."

Angelena ripped the wine from Joey's hands. "Bar's closed, Joey."

The wine left a funny, dried-out feeling on the back of my tongue, as if I was licking leather, so I downed another mouthful. My head swam. "What am I going to do?"

Brett threw his cigarette down and ground it onto the porch. "If you had any brains, you'd pack up and leave."

"I'm not stupid."

"You're living with some nut that goes into a jealous rage every time a man cruises you." Brett stalked back into the kitchen. "And where is Hector? Is he content to stay home and fuck this amazing piece of ass that only he's good enough to touch? Hell no."

"Don't listen to him, Sam. Fucking is easy. This relationship shit is hell," Joey said.

Crash said a quiet, "Amen."

"I think Hector's the one, Sam. I do," Joey assured me as we leaned together for support. "Since you've been with him, you haven't been so down. I can't remember the last time you crawled into bed and hid under the covers for a couple days. That's good, right?"

"You've been doing much better," Crash agreed quietly.

Brett leaned over the table, his expression vicious. "Hector probably laughs his ass off about his little husband sitting at home folding his laundry while he fucks hustlers in alleyways. Bakersfield hustlers. Guys too ugly and skanky to work in Sacramento."

I shook my head.

"You're such a cold-hearted bastard, Brett." Joey's eyes were thin slits against the bright kitchen lights. His breath smelled like garlic, but I didn't care because he didn't treat me like a freak.

"Joey's right, you know," Crash said cautiously. His eyes flashed up to meet mine then went back down to his plate. "I mean about Hector. There's the potential for balance."

Joey stood, but held onto the back of the chair for support. "I got it," he assured me as he rounded the corner. He bumped and swore his way down the hall.

Angelena wouldn't let me have more wine, so I picked at my pasta. "I started going to a support group for domestic violence survivors. Hector asked me to go."

Brett sneered. "So you admit he's beating you?"

I decided to ignore him and talk to Angelena, Deal, and Crash. "I hate it. I didn't even tell Hector that I'm going because I keep thinking I won't go to the next meeting and I don't want Hector to get angry with me for quitting. I keep going anyway. They talked me into filing a restraining order against Marcus. I didn't want to, but they insisted I needed it in case he stalked me."

"Marcus is stalking you," Angelena said.

"When I ran into Marcus at the soccer game, he said that the only reason he came back was because I filed the restraining order. He says that I used that to get his attention. Everything is so fucked up. I only made things worse."

Angelena patted my hand. "Why do you believe anything Marcus says to you, Sweet-tart? He's a liar and a violent asshole. It's a mind game. Don't play."

"I spent so much time talking to the police about Marcus at the soccer game that Hector thought I went off to sulk. I couldn't even tell him, couldn't talk, and I have to tell him, but the more time that passes, the harder it is to find a way to bring it up."

Brett groaned. "Drama queen."

Angelena pushed back from the table, dark anger on her face. I urged her to sit back down with a hand gesture. My Gods seethed. Even Deal. I never knew she cared that much.

"I know your true name," Crash threatened Brett.

Gods! They were so superstitious about stuff like that.

Brett shrugged. "So?"

The moment felt so awkward that I rushed in with words, hoping that I could distract everyone from the tension. "The part I hate the most about the domestic violence support group is the way the counselor treats us like victim-saints. I'm not a saint, and neither are the others in the group. We don't deserve to be hurt, but it's not as if we're innocent little virgins minding our own business and some total psycho breaks in and beats us." I tilted the wine bottle between my hands, watching the dark wave slosh behind the green glass. "Sometimes we drink too much. Sometimes we throw the first punch. That doesn't make the violence right, but I hate the way the counselor dismisses our side of the equation, as if we aren't part of what's happening. And another thing—he won't let us talk about the sex. Any time the conversation starts to go there, he makes us talk about power instead. I'm not allowed to say it's cool to be the only person who sees Hector's softer side, or what a turn-on it is when he gives hard looks to a guy who cruises me. It's so hot when he starts growling and making it clear he owns me, but in those sessions, I can't admit I get hard-ons for the jealous rages and fights that end in rough sex."

The kitchen was absolutely silent.

"The therapist is cool, but kind of stern. I've been talking to him a lot. He says that when I don't want to hear something, I tune it out or get sarcastic. I don't know what he means. I'm sitting there, listening to everything he says just like the rest of the group. I think he's the one with the hearing problem, because he can't seem to tell Hector and Marcus apart."

"So he thinks Hector is bad for you, too."

I gave Brett a searing look, and didn't drop it.

"Brett, why don't you go check on Joey?" Angelena suggested.

He scowled, but suddenly he was up on his feet and walking away. I could have sworn an invisible hand had him by the back of his collar and was shoving him out of the kitchen.

Deal reached for the wine, frowned at the label, and set it back down. "Got anything stronger?"

I pointed to the liquor cabinet.

Deal poured a glass of whiskey, neat. Crash took the vodka I had in the freezer and downed a shot.

"Something I said?" I asked Angelena. We were the only two left at the table.

"You look like a complete innocent, so even though you put out a strong sex vibe, it's still hard for them to accept that you're, well..."

Did I truly want to hear the verdict on me? "What?"

"Kinky, Sam. Very kinky. You are Sex. Pure, unadulterated, Sex."

I didn't think I was anything pure. "Sorry."

Angelena polished off her beer as she laughed at me. "Between the worship and the sex aura you send out, you're one great neighbor to have next door on date night, especially if you're getting a little something yourself. Your orgasms are contagious." Picking a crouton out of the salad, she tossed it in the air and caught it in her mouth. Her grin was so randy I had to wriggle my eyebrows. She got a case of the giggles and wiped tears from the corners of her eyes as she tried to catch her breath.

Mirth, I noticed, poured from the outside corners of people's eyes, sorrow from the inside.

Brett came back into the kitchen. "Joey passed out on your bed. Hope you don't mind."

Not good. Not in Hector's bed. "Get him out." I rose off my chair.

"He's-."

"Get him out of Hector's bed right now!"

"Jeez, don't blow a gasket. I'll see if I can wake him." Brett gave me a strange look and headed back for the bedroom.

Angelena rose. "Thanks for dinner Sweet-tart. It was wonderful, as usual." She chucked my chin. "I have to get moving. I'm meeting someone in Portland."

"Portland? It'll take you hours. Or are you flying?"

"Sam, I'm a Goddess. The move from here to there is as easy as—," she snapped her fingers and the scene outside the window changed. The air felt moist and smelled of distant woodlands. "It's like folding a map. Everything between is still there, but tucked away. Space can be warped a lot more easily than time. You can't ever turn the clock back."

I barely paid attention to Angelena. The smell of rich loam made me realize how much I missed Beltane celebrations at my parents' farm. The ache for family hit me under my ribcage and spread up to my heart. I let Hector become my entire world. With him pushing me away, only a void was left.

Crash peered out the window, too. "I can't believe I never thought of doing that." He grabbed Deal's hand. "Care for some real Thai food?"

Deal gave him the friendliest smile I'd ever seen her give him. "You know what I like, honey."

The air around them flickered and I heard a crowd. I could see a marketplace, and in the distance a shrine. Crash took Deal's hand and kissed the back of it. Smoke scented by lime leaves and coconut billowed around them, and they were gone.

That amazed me. I had never heard them talk sweet before. From the outside, no one could ever guess what a relationship was truly like. No wonder Brett didn't understand Hector and me.

"You are going to put us back, right?" I asked Angelena as I cleared dinner. "I'm not allowed out of the house."

"You're inside the house."

"Please don't get me in more trouble, Goddess. I don't need the help." I chewed on my bottom lip.

"Sam, there's a reason why Hector's acting this way."

"What?"

She shook her head. "I won't help you."

More God games. I hated that shit. I slammed dishes into the soap-filled sink as I cleared the table. "Why not? Why does it always have to be hints and riddles?"

Angelena towered over me. "If it bugs you that much, you know what you have to do."

Not that again.

"I'm not going to make it easy for you, Sam. What else can I possibly use to bribe you into becoming? Power? You don't want it. Wealth? You make the Spartans look like hedonists. There isn't a temptation I can dangle in front of you that will get your head out of the clouds, except Hector. So if you want answers, you'll have to come down to earth with the rest of us Gods and find out."

I batted my eyelashes at her. "A hint?"

"I am so far out of your demographic, Sweet-tart, it ain't gonna work."

"Explain Hector's actions, Goddess. Make me believe."

I could see how tempted she was to break down and tell me. Angelena played with the snaps at the wrists of her black leather jacket. "No. I've told you as much as I'm going to. If you want answers, find them within yourself."

"Please."

"It's all about Fear. That's as much as you'll get out of me. It's for your own good that I'm putting my foot down on this, Sam."

I turned on the taps and got more hot water to pour into the sink until it was almost too hot for my hands. I put the big casserole dish in to soak. A puddle of foam spread over the white tile kitchen counter.

"I gotta go. My hot date's waiting." She left, letting the screen door slam on her way out. Hector's backyard reappeared when she unfolded space.

* * * *

Brett didn't come back into the kitchen until the dishes were done. I didn't want to be alone with him, so I went back to the bedroom, and found Joey tucked into Hector's bed.

"Brett! You were supposed to move Joey, not put him under the covers!"

"Let him sleep."

"I can't." I felt a panic attack surging. If Hector ever found out I let another guy sleep in his bed, it would be one short step to an accusation that I cheated. Things were too fragile between us to risk it. "Please."

Joey sprawled across Hector's side of the bed. I shook Joey but couldn't rouse him. I paced the floor while I chewed on my bottom lip. Fuck, fuck, fuck. "He can't stay, Brett. Can we at least move him to the couch?"

"No."

Bastard. "What am I going to do?"

Brett reclined on the bed and patted the mattress beside him. "Sleep on it?"

I dialed Hector's cell phone.

"What?" Hector snarled at me.

"I'm so sorry to interrupt you, Sir. I know you're busy, but I didn't know what to do. Joey passed out in your bed, and —."

Brett ripped the phone from my hand. "Hector? Yeah. Brett. You know, I used to think you were good for Sam, but he's a total case right now, pacing and babbling like he used to back when Marcus had him. He's so upset that his bottom lip is bleeding where he bit through it. Sam swears that you're nothing like Marcus, but I don't see it. So I hope you're happy on whatever little power trip you're taking, because Sam is fucking miserable, and it's your fault." He snapped shut the phone and handed it back to me. "There. All fixed."

I gaped at him. My life was over. My life was completely, fucking over. I cradled the phone to my chest.

Hector didn't call back.

Chapter 20

I daydreamed my way through my support group. The counselor tried to talk to me, but Hector was due home the next morning so there wasn't a chance in hell I'd concentrate. Afterwards, the counselor pulled me aside for a private lecture. His chiding half-sentences made nothing clear.

Too distracted to listen, I spoke into my coffee cup. "Hector won't be home long before he heads out to Vegas. I have to make sure the house is right."

The counselor fingered his bolo tie. "Sam, you seem down. You mentioned that you haven't been eating. And you look tired. Are you having problems sleeping?"

"Hector isn't the problem. My ex-boyfriend was the one."

"That wasn't what I asked. And you know coffee won't keep you going forever."

"I'm fine."

All the sadness in the world was in those tightly pursed lips. I couldn't wait for him to choose his next words. I had to go.

* * * *

I should have noticed too many lights were on in the house, but I was caught up in make-up sex fantasies. Hector would come home calm, and be sort of sorry, and we'd spend some naked time together, and everything would be like it was.

I unlocked the front door and walked into the house.

Hector sat in his poppa chair.

I grinned. "You're home!"

"Sam, we have to talk."

When in the entire history of humans had that phrase ever been followed by good news? My emotions flew high, smacked their heads on the ceiling, and fell to the floor, twitching.

Hector was quietly livid. "Where have you been?"

My gaze flicked around the living room. My computer was on, the e-mail open. Drawers were pulled out of my desk and my papers were strewn everywhere. My stomach sank along with my heart. "Out. Just for –."

"You're not allowed to go out. There's a reason why I made a schedule for you. You're supposed to be sitting in this room reading or watching TV, but you aren't."

Hector held up a white business card. "Were you out at a bar with your cop friend?"

"Who?"

"Don't. Lie. To. Me!" The house shook as he bellowed. I flinched. Hector never raised his voice to me before.

At the support group, the counselor said that the best thing to do when my partner was angry was to avoid responding with more anger, because he could use that as an excuse to escalate to violence. I had to try to answer Hector in calm, even tones.

I wondered if my counselor ever faced a big, angry man and still managed to speak calmly.

Fuck, fuck, fuck! Please don't hit me, Hector. Please don't do it. I can live through anything but a beating. Call me names. Kick me out of your house. Make me eat soap. Banish me to the second bedroom. Stick me in a corner and forget about me. Tell me you don't love me. Turn your back on me. Drive me out into the desert and abandon me by the side of the road. Yell some more. Do anything but raise your hand to me.

I could smell my terror. It had a metallic tang.

"My favorite flavor," a voice said inside my head.

Hector slammed his hand against the coffee table and I shrank down a bit more. "Don't ever make me ask twice. Where. Were. You?"

My eyes rolled up into my head from the effort to get my words out. "I w-w-w-w-was at the d-domestic violence support group at the c-c-community center." Irony, huh? Cold dread sheared through my chest like shrapnel.

"I told you to go to those meetings. So why did you feel the need to sneak out? You see why I have a hard time believing you, Sam."

At the time, I had a million good reasons, but I couldn't think of any of them when he was so angry.

When he spoke again, Hector's voice was so chillingly quiet that I wished he'd yell again. "You complained to Brett about the way I treat you?"

I put my hands up and shook my head slowly as I stepped back. I had to remember how Marcus taught me to hand my dignity over on a plate. Did I remember the script? Of course I did. It was pounded into my brain.

Forgive me, Sir, for I have committed the sin of thinking I'm special, worthy of your love and somehow your partner, when all I am is your fuck.

Forgive me for the sin of pride. I was a submissive, and had a right to it, but now I am about to become a battered boyfriend and I can't find any dignity in that.

"Never, Sir. You treat me good. I tell them that all the time. I didn't complain, honest." How far away was the fucking door anyway?

"Brett said that all on his own and I didn't want him to."

Forgive me for the sin of stupidity. I thought you wanted me to come to you with my problems.

"I didn't mean to make you come back home. I'm sorry, Sir. I didn't mean to interrupt you. I know how important your job is. I'll never make that mistake again."

For the sin of having a life outside of you, for having friends, for having a job, for having a family. Forgive me for not believing you were enough to replace all of them.

"I'll never talk to Brett again, if you say so."

I couldn't take my eyes off Hector's fists.

"Who is this?" He showed me the card. As frightened as I was, I had to move close enough to read it.

"The support group made me file a restraining order against Marcus. He violated it, so I had to talk to the cops. That officer gave me his card in case I had problems." My tongue felt thick.

"So some stranger can help, but not me?"

"I didn't realize I kept the card. I didn't mean to, Sir. I never called him. I swear. You can call him and ask. Cops keep records of stuff like that, right?" I backed down the hallway to the bedroom.

"Who are these people that you're e-mailing all the time? The ones who call you Sammy and seem to know you so well?"

"My sister, Linda. My parents. C-c-c-c—" I stopped to breathe and get on top of my words again. "Jenny, my cousin." Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck. Did I have any old e-mails from before I met Hector still lingering in my saved files?

He watched me back all the way to the bedroom, but didn't get up from his chair.

When I got in the bedroom, I shook. My relationship was going worse than I imagined, for once. I thought I was safe with Hector.

All my smartass thoughts about how much better off I was than every other person in that domestic violence group were coming home to roost. I brought it on myself. I wasn't any different from the other people who sat in that converted classroom sharing personal horror stories. I was worse. At least they weren't in denial.

I passed a trembling hand over my eyes. I was too keyed up. I needed something to do. I needed distance, before I got buried under an avalanche of ugly reality.

Hector's suitcase was on the bed. I stared at it, and just that quick I understood what I had to do. I simply had to be perfectly obedient. If he couldn't catch me at a single mistake, then he wouldn't be able to get mad anymore.

I unzipped the suitcase and unpacked his stuff. Socks in dirty clothes hamper. Pants into dry cleaning pile. Shoes back into the bottom of the closet. Tasks that should have been mindless. I focused on every tiny detail.

When that was done, I decided to go ahead and pack his clothes for Las Vegas. I got underwear out of his drawer and put it in the suitcase.

Hector showed up in the doorway. "What, you're packing to leave?"

I went to his drawers in the dresser and took out socks. "I'm packing your bags for your trip to Vegas, Sir." Inside, I was chewed up and spit out, but on the outside, I hoped it didn't show. "Do you want me to pack a suit or nice casual, Sir?"

Don't think, just serve.

For once, I didn't follow my comments to him with some smartass thought. I finally did it. I pushed my emotions down far enough that they didn't surface. I was like one of Ophir's slave boys.

Take shirts out of the closet like nothing else is happening.

Hovering inside my head was one of my “crawl in bed for three days” moments of depression. I could feel it coming on.

Folding his shirts, I focused on the crisp lines to help control my trembling hands. I wanted the dark mood to lift. It pressed the air out of my lungs.

"Will there be anything else, Sir?" I zipped up his suitcase.

He gave me a strange look, as if he heard me shouting for help from my parallel reality. "No."

The air conditioner must have kicked in, because the air around me had a chill to it. "In that case, Sir, I'll be retiring for the night."

He moved to let me pass him at the door. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I'm spending the night on the cot, Sir." Oops, almost snapped at the end of that word. I had to watch my temper. Bury it deeper.

I went into the spare bedroom and sat on the thin, stinky mattress. Rubbing my face, I pulled in deep, calming breaths. "Call if you want anything, Sir."

Push it down. Bury your Self deep.

The light came through the doorway, so I couldn't see Hector's face when he came to the door, but I could see from the way he held his shoulders that he'd finally, finally, calmed down. Too late.

I curled on my side on the mattress. I had no energy to get a pillow or blankets out of the linen cabinet.

"You're going to spend the night in here? Come on, Sam. Come to bed and get some rest. You'll feel better in the morning."

I felt fine, if feeling fine was a gray haze of nothingness in the pit of my stomach.

"Sam, come to bed," Hector chided me.

"It's been a long day, Sir. With your permission, I'll go to sleep now."

He laughed. It was an ugly sound. "Come on, Baby. Don't pout."

Instead of apologizing, he probably planned to get me into bed, hustle me into sex and then roll over and go to sleep, content that everything was all right, but it wasn't.

He sat on the cot beside me. I shrank away. Don't touch, don't touch, don't touch.

"You gonna make your Papi sleep alone, Baby?" He ran his hand along my arm. "Sam, you're tense."

No shit.

He sighed as he stood, as if I made him weary. "Okay. Play the little martyr."

I wouldn't be hustled, I wouldn't be sweet-talked, and I wouldn't be threatened. There was no moving me.

In the morning, I could hear Hector moving around his bedroom. Depression still loomed on my horizon. Taking a few moments, I worked on pushing my Self further away. Taking real Sam on a little walk around our internal teahouse, I found a small closet, shoved my Self inside, and propped a chair under the knob. That's where I hid him while Marcus was beating me.

Empty shell Sam went to make Hector's breakfast.

Hector walked into the kitchen with my credit card bill in his hand and waved it under my nose. "What's this charge? Health insurance? You expect me to pay that, too?"

I'll admit I paused. Had to bite my tongue. Had to fight down the urge to remind him that I didn't want him to pay my bills. He watched me closely. I could feel his anticipation.

"I will pay that, Sir. You've been incredibly generous to me already."

That wasn't what he wanted to hear. The twinkle went out of his eyes. He thought he had the perfect bait to make me come out swinging, but 'real me' was still locked away in a closet in my teahouse and 'perfect servant me' had no pride to protect.

"When I get back from Vegas, things are going to change around here."

"Whatever Sir wishes."

"I've let you have too much freedom. After this trip, you'll be traveling with me."

Pour his coffee, stir in the sugar. Go out to the front lawn, retrieve his paper.

"Sam."

Funny how he kept calling me that. I had him fooled. He thought I was still there.

"Moping isn't going to work, Sam."

"Sorry, Sir. I'll stop. May I take your plate? Do you need another cup of coffee?"

"Your only job now is serving me. Write your editors and tell them that you quit. Close your checking account. From now on, if you need money, I'll give it to you."

"I understand, Sir." Blank, bland, nothingness.

I gave him nothing to react to, but he managed to anyway. "Your behavior is the reason why I had to resort to this. Don't ever call me when I'm with a client."

"I'm sorry, Sir. Your customers are your first priority. I won't intrude on their time again. My apologies."

He opened his newspaper and spread it over the table, but he stared at me, not the articles. "Such a typical little sub."

Hector watched me with sharp focus, and I could see the expectation that I would snap.

That's one thing you won't get from me, Sir, an excuse to justify your cruelty.

"I will work on that, Sir." Physically I was still in the room with him, but emotionally I'd gone miles away.

"Shall I carry your bag out to the truck for you?" I finally figured it out. I channeled bellhop. Helpful, cheerful, but emotionally uninvolved.

He gave me a strange look. "Thanks, Sam, but I've got it," he said quietly.

"You're welcome, Sir." I almost put my hand out for a tip.

Hector thought of a new way to hurt me. "Get another HIV test."

Real Sam went berserk when he heard that. He pummeled the inside of my brain, trying to get me to protest his innocence. I said, "Okay."

Keep pushing and see if I'll push back, Hector.

There was no limit. I had become the ultimate bottom, the bottomless bottom. I had unfathomable depths to sink down into where Hector would never find me, down below where the pressure could crush my heart if I screwed up and sighed at the wrong time, or said the wrong word, or thought the wrong thing.

I've been practicing this disappearing trick my entire life, Sir. Look at me, I'm an object.

"Okay?" Hector's voice had an odd sound to it as if he was sad but couldn't show it. I wondered if that whole scene was from the "this hurts me more than it hurts you" school of domination, or if for some reason he found our chat devastating. I didn't, or at least I didn't think I did. For all I knew real Sam was crying his eyes out in the darkness of our teahouse, but perfect servant me had no feelings.

"Yes, Sir," I corrected myself. Perfect servants didn't say, 'Okay.' They said, 'Yes, Sir,' or, 'No, Sir.' Perfect servants blindly did as they were told. Perfect servants were models of obedience. I stood in my perfect servant's position with my wrists crossed behind my back and my gaze humbly lowered to the floor.

"You can take your morning jog."

"Thank you, Sir." My voice sounded a little dull. I resolved to work on that. No emotions. Just obedience.

"Only your usual route. No more."

"Yes, Sir." Much better. There wasn't a single trace of me in that anywhere. They were just words.

Life will be nothing but smooth sailing from now on, Sir. Your rules followed meticulously. No attitude in your face, no more of Sam's little emotional problems, no games. Nothing but the finest service. Impersonal, yes, but oh, so flawless.

"I'll be back in three days, Sam."

Maybe real Sam will be, too, Sir.

* * * *

I lost track of how long I sat on the couch not so much mind-fucking as running in endless mental loops like a neurotic hamster.

Nanny's ghost materialized next to me and patted my knee. "Hector's not himself."

I hoped not.

Nanny was upset. "He's sorry. Even he can't believe what he's been saying to you. Deep in his heart he knows that you're not cheating on him, but he's scared Sam, because he can feel you pulling away from him."

I'm not pulling. I'm being pushed.

"Hector loves you."

He couldn't tell real Sam from the empty shell sitting on his couch.

"Yes he can, *Mijo*," Nanny insisted tearfully. Of course she rushed to his defense. He was her precious Hector. "You know that sometimes people say things that aren't their true thoughts. It's happened to you, Sam. Can't you forgive him for the same mistake?"

"No. If he really loved me, he would see how scared I am of him. I shouldn't have to tell him."

The tears were really flowing. I'd never seen a ghost cry. "He's blinded by fear."

"What does he have to be afraid of? He's the one with the fists."

"He's afraid that you're going to break his heart forever."

As if I had that kind of power. I was the one drowning. He was holding my head under a sea of misery.

I realized as I sat there that I was already deep in the grips of depression. It wasn't coming; it was there. I felt like the eye in the center of the storm. One false move and all hell was going to break loose.

Nanny fussed over me. "Your aura is losing its vibrancy. You're not your self, either, Sam."

Good thing, because real Sam wanted to slit his wrists.

Chapter 21

I spent the next two days in bed. I couldn't eat, couldn't sleep, couldn't think. But Hector would be back and I couldn't let him see me like that, either, so I dragged my ass out of bed. Perfect servants didn't cry for days on end.

Our street was beyond quiet when I went outside. No birds fluttered to nests hidden in the red clay tiles of the Spanish roofs, no dogs barked from backyards, no cats skulked under the deep green leaves of camellia bushes. Ours was no ordinary street anymore, though. Hector's original neighbors were pushed far down the block, except for the eerie house next door. The neighborhood had become a fraternity row for Gods.

The air felt syrupy to move through as I started my jog. City workers pulled up in heavy trucks to work on the magnolia trees down the block, but the brakes didn't give a long, tortured groan when the huge truck came to a stop.

When I jogged over the invisible line between the new houses and the original houses, I burst out of the bubble of isolation and into real-world noises. The diesel fumes of the rumbling city trucks coated the inside of my nose.

Moving through the regular density air, I loped past the men with chainsaws. The men watched me; I kept my eyes on their bright orange safety vests at tit level. No faces, no well-filled packages in faded jeans. I couldn't help the glimpses I caught of soft bear bellies and simple, green-blue tattoos, stuff that usually put my libido in overdrive, but I didn't feel a twinge of interest.

I was a little worried that I'd been too successful pushing away my emotions. I didn't want to be sad and I didn't want to be angry, but I wasn't feeling anything, not even lust, and that seemed wrong, too. I felt disconnected from my Self. I didn't feel blue; I felt gray. Neutral. Nebulous.

As my sneakers slapped against the faded asphalt road, I wondered why the sunlight didn't seem to reach my skin. Even after a half-hearted jog around my regular neighborhood loop, I wasn't sweaty or even warm.

The tree-trimmers filled the street with branches, so I had to run on the sidewalk next to the creepy house when I turned back onto our street. As I went around the corner, the cypress hedge scraped my side. I pulled up my shirt to see long, harsh scrapes prickling with drops of blood.

Inside Hector's house, I checked for phone messages. There weren't any.

The scrapes along my ribs from the hedge didn't hurt much when I got them, but the sting got bad fast.

I had a new list of chores from Hector, beginning with closing my bank account and quitting all my jobs. I figured that I'd tackle those as soon as I cleaned the scrapes along my ribs. The welts were angry red. I didn't think I was allergic to cypress, but the scratches hurt.

Quit my jobs. I couldn't help it. I hated Hector right then. I hated him for making me say those things Marcus used to make me say, and I hated him for making me give up my only accomplishment in life, my career. He had no idea how hard it was to get where I was, where publicity people knew my name, where I was treated like a serious journalist.

I decided maybe I'd hold off on quitting. Maybe I could hide it from Hector. I'd give Joey the checks to cash. I owed him some money anyway.

The pangs on my side got worse, as if they were infected.

I went to the bathroom to find something to clean out the scrapes.

The doorknob fell off in my hand as I opened the bathroom door. I wondered what happened to the knob as I set it down on the counter.

Oh well. A screwdriver would fix it.

Strangely enough, a screwdriver was on the bathroom counter. I didn't leave things around the house. When was the last time I used the screwdriver? Weeks past. Shaking my head at the weirdness, I opened the medicine cabinet to find something to cleanse my skin. Hector had lots of ointments and salves because after a heavy session he always spent a lot of time tending to my body. I knew that he'd have antiseptic for my scrapes.

The house was so quiet. The air conditioner exhaled cool air through a vent in the hallway. Far, far down the street, the tree-trimming crews hacked at city trees. A clock ticked in the front room. It ticked. It tocked. It tick-ta-ticked.

In the mirror over the sink, I saw the white shower curtain billow. Weird. The fan wasn't on. I turned. The shower curtain yanked back with a screech.

I froze. My heartbeat felt like the pounding of hooves in a horserace.

Marcus. Oh, fuck. Marcus in the bathroom. Marcus in the only place on Earth I felt safe.

"That's much better, Sam. I'm glad to see that your emotions are back. Especially Fear."

I ran for the front door of the house. Marcus chased me, his long legs easily closing the distance. He hurdled over the couch to block the front door.

He was bigger than I remembered. More muscled. Marcus was one of those guys who couldn't walk with his arms down at his side. Large zits studded his jaw. No doubt his nuts were shriveled like raisins from the steroids he shot up to get that huge. I wondered what I ever saw in him.

I saw someone who had enough power to control me.

I knew he was bad news. From the beginning, I knew.

"Hector told me that he's tired of you, Sam. He asked me to take you out of his house forever." Marcus pointed to my cell phone. "G-g-go ahead and c-c-c-call him."

Go away. I tried to evoke chaos magic.

Marcus giggled. His eyes were like crystalline shards. All the color and humanity was gone. "Come on, Sammy, keep trying. You're so cute when you try to be powerful. But you aren't. You're nothing."

His words drained away my confidence, and with it, my ability to evoke magic. No wonder I couldn't wish him away while he beat me before. I sure as hell tried. I never wished so hard in my life for something, but with Marcus' ability to kill my self-esteem, I had no power.

I couldn't move.

"You know I didn't mean to hurt you before. You pushed me to it. But I'll never hurt you again. I promise, Sammy. Don't you remember how hot it was between us?" He put his hands on my waist and nuzzled close to my hair.

"Come ride on my bike. I'll take you on a long ride along PCH, you know, like we used to, and then we'll go to my place and play. Your new daddy never plays with you, does he?"

Why did that tempt me? I loved riding behind him on his bike, hanging on tight as he drove too fast and too wild, the constant hum of the bike against my balls, glimpses of the cold, blue ocean flashing between long, narrow beach houses.

Marcus' hand was warm on my skin. Hector addicted me to touch, but then he pulled away. How could Hector leave me like that? He didn't even try to kiss me before he left. He didn't reach out for me.

"Come on Sammy. Come with me. If you come along easy, I promise you no more pain today. You won't feel a thing."

I pulled back from Marcus. Something was familiar about the scene.

"This isn't you, Sam. Playing house? Shopping for dishes? Wearing cashmere sweaters? You hate that. Don't you miss sex with a different guy every night? Five or six guys jerking off on your face? Sucking cock until sunrise?"

Yeah. Sex. Plenty of it. Fast, raw, purely physical. I loved that. Gods, but I wanted it. I was tired of denying my basic nature. I was a pig. Lead me to the trough.

"That's right Sam. Wallow in sex."

Except that Marcus didn't let me do that either.

"I like being with Hector." I didn't sound convinced.

"Except that he leaves you alone, doesn't he? Days and days, all alone, no one to talk to. I promise that I won't ever leave you alone, Sammy. I want you back. It'll be different this time."

Angelena warned me once, "One day you'll be lonely, and it won't take much baby, baby I'll never hurt you again..."

Fuck!

Glancing at the back door, I tried to make him think I planned to bolt that way.

"I can see that you've got it nice here, Sam. You know, we could get a nice thing going. When Hector goes out of town, you could give me a call and I would come over to keep you company. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Hell no.

"Don't you get lonely for play?"

Not with you, sick fuck.

Marcus cracked his knuckles. "Just remember, I gave you every chance. This is your fault. I was being nice, and you threw it in my face."

I thought I'd be scared, but more than anything, I realized that I was going to die. And I was okay with it. He could only hurt me so much, and then I'd be dead, and it would be over. It was amazing how calm I was. It seemed so easy. It seemed perfectly reasonable.

"Here's how it's going to go, Sam. First, I'm going to break your leg in so many pieces that you'll have a limp from now until the day you die. I'll take a hammer to your foot, so no more dancing. Of course I'll have to smash your left hand to pieces, because you jerk off with that hand, don't you? Then I'll get a knife and slice up that pretty face of yours, but only on one side, so that everyone will know what you used to look like; a before and after image."

He wasn't going to kill me. He was going to leave me alive. That was worse. I fought down the fear welling up inside me, because I knew it only fed his power.

"Here's the deal. You commit all your worship to me alone—screw the other Gods—or I'll tie you to your lover's bed and fuck you. Hell, I'll even let him watch."

Fuck me? No. No one was going to fucking rape me, and that would be the only way Marcus would ever get my ass.

"Do you think he'll want you after that? No one will want you."

Vintage Marcus. If only he knew how much he sounded like a bad script for mental mind games. I used to believe it all, until I heard those exact same words and themes repeated by every person in my support group:

"No one wants you."

"Only I love you."

"No one else will ever care for you."

Bullshit.

I realized that I never once got angry with Marcus for what he did to me. My temper was on a slow burn, but rapidly getting hotter.

An intense prayer welled out of my soul. Hector, I believe in you. I need you.

It all came back in a rush of terrible memory—the pain, the fear, the self-loathing that I let that beating happen to me. I hated myself for not being able to stop Marcus. I never wanted to feel a fist strike me in anger again. I'd do almost anything to avoid that shame.

Marcus set a hammer down on the floor where I could see it. "I'm giving you to the count of three to get your pants down, Sam. One. Two..."

I punched him on the count of two. I swung low and kept on hitting. My temper took off like a rocket, leaving burning fury behind. I wanted to hurt Marcus so bad. The first punch I landed made me realize I could fight against him, and my belief in myself came back in trickles.

Marcus grunted as my fists made quick contact. I had some power behind my punches, more than I expected. Part of it was adrenaline and anger, but I realized that all those weights Hector made me lift made a difference. I wondered how Hector knew. Or maybe he simply prepared me for the worst.

I danced out of Marcus' reach as he grabbed for me. He circled. I meant to feint left and then dodge right, but I forgot about that low table on the far side of the couch and tripped back.

Marcus grabbed me hard and swept my feet out from under me. I hit my back on the table as I went down. Fuck, that hurt! But I'd been hurt worse and survived. Marcus taught me that hard lesson. Pain meant I was still breathing.

Marcus grasped my pants and tried to yank them down. I went wild, punching and kicking and biting until I hurt him enough to wriggle out from under him.

He staggered to his feet. "Keep trying, Sam. You and I both know I'll get you, because I'm the God of Fear."

Every night I woke screaming, every time I ran, it was like a prayer to him. I gave him strength.

I lifted my chin. "I won't believe in you anymore, Marcus. You may be a God, but I won't bow down and worship you."

He walked toward me. I scuttled backward across the floor. I didn't watch where he herded me until I realized I was in a corner. There were infinite exits in front of me, and none behind, but I had to go through Marcus to get away.

I head-butted him in the groin and scrambled around him. He swore as I grabbed the front door and flung it open. I got away. I got away!

I bolted out of the house, running headfirst into something. At first I thought Marcus had me, so I slammed fists into the thing blocking my way.

"Stop it, Sam. Easy."

Hector? He was supposed to be in Vegas, or driving there. Oh, my God, Hector. I wanted to say something, but the only sound I made was a huge sob of relief. Everything was going to be all right. I had faith, but I still wanted Hector between Marcus and me, so I tried to run behind him.

Hector held me tight, his fingers digging into my upper arm. "What's going on?"

Marcus staggered to his feet, groaning. Seeing him move, I went crazy trying to escape Hector's hold. I dug in my heels and yanked away, twisting and turning like a demented snake.

"Who is he?" Hector growled as his hold clamped down harder on me.

Marcus saw Hector, leaned against the door in a casual pose, and grinned. "You must be Hector."

With a harsh jerk, Hector put me behind him and walked up the stairs of the porch. "Who the hell are you?"

Marcus let his gaze rise over Hector's shoulder to meet mine. "Don't mind me. I'll take what's mine and go."

"Don't let him take me!" I found my voice. "Hector, please."

"You must be Marcus." Hector's voice was quiet, but I heard it as I held onto the jacaranda tree. He crossed the porch with that damn sexy swing of the arms and on-the-balls-of-his-feet predator saunter of his. His fist swung out so fast I didn't see it. All I saw was Marcus flying backward into the house.

Blood. I wanted to see Marcus' blood. I wanted to hear the glorious crunch of cartilage cracking under Hector's fists. I wanted to hear crying and pleas for mercy and retching, and Gods help me, I wanted Marcus to piss himself. I wanted capital R revenge. Even though I wanted to run away, I went to the door.

In that short time, Hector must have gotten in a few more punches, because Marcus bled from the lip and his eye was already swelling. Marcus regained his composure, though. He got into a stance and waited for Hector to come at him again.

"Careful, Sir. He's a God."

Marcus smirked.

"I'm not impressed," Hector sneered.

Marcus asked, "You're a God?"

When Hector spoke, his voice rumbled along my spine. "I was in Las Vegas. As I unpacked my suitcase, I felt a wave of power come over me and I heard Sam's prayer as distinctly as if he was in the room with me. Suddenly I was on my front lawn watching my boy beat the shit out a man twice his size. Now, your average human would stop to think if that happened to him, but it didn't faze me a bit. Maybe it was because I knew that Sam had an altar dedicated to me and I suspected that meant more than he told me. Maybe it was the surge of power I felt every time he told me that he worshipped me. Whatever – the moment I became aware of who I was, I already knew I was a God."

Hector shoved the coffee table out of his way. "Why are you in my house?"

Marcus got a cunning cast around his eyes. His gaze slid to me again. "Sam invited me over. He promised we'd have the bed to ourselves for a few days."

"That's a lie!" I stepped over the threshold, too angry to be cautious.

Hector looked right at me, and through me, and his mouth set in a harsh line.

A chill went through my heart. "It's not true." Even as I said it, I realized how hopeless it was. As the God of Fear, Marcus knew everyone's deepest, ugliest thoughts, and he knew exactly how to turn them against us.

Marcus chuckled. "Of course it is, Hector. Isn't that how it always goes? You leave town, and your boy bends over for any man who will have him. It happens every time. You know what a slut Sam is."

Hector let out a great bellow that seemed to shake the house. He lunged at Marcus.

I backed out onto the porch. When Gods fought, did it do any good to call the cops? I didn't know what to do. "Angelena! Someone! Gods!" I screamed at the sky. Pacing between the shade of the tree and the front porch, I didn't know if I should go back inside. I could hear the sharp smack of fists against flesh. Furniture groaned and scraped across the floor as it was shoved out of the way.

"I can be a princess," I told the fly buzzing around my face. My teeth chattered. "I can sit here and look cute. No one expects me to be a hero." But what if Marcus fought dirty and got unfair advantage over Hector? What if he hurt Hector?

"Aw – fuck it." I went inside.

Marcus and Hector grappled on the floor. Marcus had a knife.

"Shit!" I forgot about the knife he kept in his boot. I should have warned Hector.

Marcus flicked a glance in my direction and laughed. "Oh, Hector, your little twink has come to save you."

"Get out, Sam," Hector growled.

"Run along, Sam. I'll be with you in a minute," Marcus taunted me.

I could see Hector's wrist losing strength. The tip of the knife was turning toward him. Could Gods die that way? I didn't want to know.

I moved closer. "Marcus?" Don't be nervous. You know this man. He has a key. Think, Sam.

"What the fuck do you want, Sam?" Marcus demanded as he bent the blade nearer to Hector's scalp.

Do it now, Sam. "I know your real name."

Marcus laughed. "Yeah, I'm Marcus, God of Fear."

"No. I know your true name. You're Chester. Chester Mark Olafson."

Marcus seemed to shrink a size. His hold on the knife loosened. The power of superstition affected the Gods, too. I could see him lose strength. That didn't mean he wasn't dangerous. "How the fuck did you find that out?"

"The restraining order. There was no Marcus Olafson with a motorcycle license."

"You little shit! I'm going to introduce you to a new world of pain, boy."

I grabbed the hammer Marcus planned to use on me, and I slammed it down on his hand. Marcus screamed. I just kept hammering, turning his hand into mincemeat.

"I'm a God." Marcus whined. "You can't do anything to me."

I hammered his hand so hard that I broke the skin. Lovely blood spilled. I kept pounding. I was smiling. I was smiling, but I wasn't happy. Marcus howled.

A big, brown hand clamped over mine. "Easy."

I jerked out of Hector's hold and crushed Marcus' thumb. Marcus screamed.

"That's enough, Sam." Hector pushed me back and got Marcus under control. "Keep squirming, Marcus, and I'll let Sam have the hammer again. He might take the claw end to your nuts."

Marcus held still.

Angelena plopped into Hector's poppa chair. She put her boots on the coffee table.

Gods phased in everywhere. They tried to surround me. I had the shakes real bad and wanted to anchor myself on something.

Marcus sneered at the other Gods. "This isn't over. Sam will be mine. Mine alone. When he's trapped in a nightmare that won't ever end, I'll be so powerful that no God will be able to stop me."

He winked at me. "I'll see you later, Sammy." He phased out.

"This is serious. We all need to sit down and have a chat," Angelena said.

The other Gods nodded solemnly.

There was no mistaking Hector's expression when he turned to me. He wanted to fuck. He wrapped his hands around me and pulled me close. "We can discuss that later," he told the other Gods. "I feel like celebrating with Sam." He kneaded my ass.

Ah, yes, the conquering hero, expecting his proper due. A cold spike went through my heart, hardening it. I hadn't felt like sex in days and still didn't. Depression was like that. It sucked all the pleasure right out of life.

For some reason, I couldn't stand to have Hector's hands on me. All the pain he put me through came back in a petulant rush, and I wasn't about to let him get away with treating me like that.

"I haven't had a chance to get a new HIV test yet, Sir."

"You—" He didn't even remember demanding it, I could see that. "Oh. Well now, Baby, you know that was in the heat of the moment. I didn't mean it." He nuzzled into my neck. I didn't move even though he tried to power me back toward the bedroom. "Don't be stubborn, Sam. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I haven't even asked you why Marcus was in my house."

"You believed Marcus."

"What am I supposed to think, Sam? You let your former boyfriend into my house. You know how I feel about that."

I sure did. I headed for the front door.

"Whoa, Baby. Where are you going?" Hector grabbed my arm.

"Don't fucking touch me."

"Boy!"

I yanked away from him. "Leave me alone, Hector. I'm not playing."

The Gods looked worried.

Hector half-smiled, because he wasn't sure what I meant. "What's going on?"

"I'm leaving."

"You're not allowed to leave."

I wanted to be cool about it, but I couldn't help the tears that were welling up in my eyes. "No matter what I do, you'll always think I cheated. You told me one affair, and I was out. Well, I'm out then." I tried the front door. It wouldn't open. Damn Gods. "Hector, just let me go."

"We need to talk," he told me. He grabbed my arm, and suddenly, we weren't in his house anymore.

He sure caught on to that God thing quick.

Chapter 22

The padded headboard, drapes, and bedspread in the Vegas hotel room Hector took me to were all the same gaudy pink, green, and beige harlequin design. It was so ugly that it pissed me off to have to look at it.

He took my clothes and left me alone without saying a word.

My head throbbed. I closed my eyes, but that made it worse. I sank down into a chair by the floor-to-ceiling windows because my legs wouldn't hold me up anymore. The cushion was slick and too damn chilly on my bare ass. I tried to turn the heat up in the room, but the air conditioner kept pumping out arctic winds.

An insidious voice echoed inside my head. "Hector will beat you because you wouldn't have sex with him. He's downstairs watching television in the bar. He's giving you time to think it through. When he comes back, if you don't bend over for him, he's going to hit you. If Hector beats you, he'll kill you."

Yeah, I had to agree with the voice there. One punch from Hector would probably do me in. Even if it wasn't fatal, it would kill me.

"It'll get worse." The voice pried into my mind and defiled it with terrible visions of Hector beating me into a bloody pulp. "You know the cycle. He'll sweet-talk you into forgiving him. Baby, Baby, Baby," the voice mocked me. "And then it will happen again."

"And again."

"And again."

"Until you are nothing."

The words echoed, as if the inside of my skull was hollow, stygian darkness. I clamped my hands over my ears. I was at my limit mentally and I knew it. Hector was right; I lived too much inside my head, and the inside of my head was a mess.

I needed to disappear. There had to be a place Hector and Marcus wouldn't find me. I'd go some place where they couldn't reach me.

I picked up the phone.

"That's right, get out while you can."

The phone was in my hand and it was ringing on the other end of the line. I didn't remember dialing. I almost hung up, but then I heard Joey's voice. "Can you come get me?" I blurted out with a sob.

"What's up?" Joey asked.

I had no idea what I wanted to ask him, but words poured out of me, and with each one a weight lifted off my soul, so it must have been what I meant to say. "Hector brought me to Las Vegas and I need to leave. Can you come get me?"

"Are you okay?" Joey asked. "You sound like hell, Sam."

"Did something happen with Hector? What's wrong?"

I didn't want to have to talk anymore.

"Are you still there? Tell me what hotel you're at and the room number."

The door wouldn't open for me. I found the room number on the safety chart on the back of the door. Stationary near the phone told me the name of the hotel.

"Four hours, assuming traffic doesn't totally ream us. Can you hang on that long?"

I put my hands over my eyes. "I'll be fine. Bring clothes. I've got nothing to wear."

"Sure. Anything else?"

"I don't feel well. I want to go home."

"I'm leaving right now. Right now," Joey promised. "Sam, did you take any pills?"

"When?"

"Recently. Today." Joey was trying hard to be patient.

"Oh. No. I don't think so. I don't remember taking any."

"Oh, shit," Joey sighed. "Is there a pill bottle anywhere around?"

I checked the bathroom. "No. I don't see one." I was so tired. I wished I could sleep.

"Thank the Gods for small favors. If you need me again, call my mobile. I'm leaving now, Sam. Don't do anything until I get there, and please don't take anything."

I nodded at the phone and hung up.

Man, my stomach hurt. No breakfast, no dinner the night before, nothing but a steady diet of anxiety. I tried to warm up under the blankets, but it was as if they were all illusion and no substance. My teeth chattered hard until I willed myself to stop. I was so tired.

I moved the chair from behind the small desk to the windows, shoved back the curtains, and watched the sun set over the hazy, violet hills bracketing the city of Las Vegas. The lights along the strip flicked on as I waited for Joey.

People down on the sidewalk outside the hotel were walking around in shorts and T-shirts. I was freezing my balls off and on the other side of the window was all the heat I could ever need.

* * * *

Over the next four hours, every time I almost drifted into sleep, that voice chattered inside my head.

"Hector's going to hurt you."

I felt my fingers pried one at a time off my grip on sanity. It was hard to hold onto my thoughts for long. They seemed to loop around in warped circles.

All I knew was that Hector was coming. He was going to get me. There was no use hiding in the bathroom. I knew there was no safety there anymore. I was backed into a corner, but I didn't have enough strength to come out swinging.

* * * *

I heard the muted ping of the elevator down the hallway and somehow knew that it was Hector. I swore I could hear his footsteps on thick carpeting. Was it possible to burn out on terror? At some point, would I get numb to fear, my racing pulse, the sickness in my heart and stomach? Evidently not. I was blindsided by a rush of pure panic.

The voice inside my head chuckled.

I heard a key slide into the card slot on the door. Now. I had to escape now. It had to be before the door opened. I spun around. The door was blocked. The only way out was the window. I pressed my body against the glass.

How?

Staggering, I picked up the chair and smashed it against the glass. It made a dull clunk, but it didn't shatter.

The door pulled open.

"Fuck! Open! Open! Open," I pleaded with the glass.

Hector flicked on the lights. Our reflections destroyed my view of the city below. I could see every feature of his face in the glass. I was only a tiny, black mass.

I closed my eyes and dug deep for chaos magic. In my mind, I saw it clear. The window was simply another sliding door between realities. I just had to shove it out of my way.

"You okay?" Hector asked.

Mentally, I shoved the glass. A blast of hot air slammed into my chest. Noise from the city drove me back a few steps.

Hector stared at me stupidly, as if I'd done something spectacular.

The lights were bright from the signs and hotels. I didn't like all the noise. My hands went up in front of my face and I inched toward the ledge. All I had to do was step through and I'd be beyond Hector's reach forever.

"Look down," the voice urged.

Panic gripped me. I heard Marcus laughing. "You're so delicious, Sam."

"Sam, step back from the window," Hector yelled at me.

I couldn't escape either God. It was hopeless. Unless I jumped.

Would my little splat on the sidewalk far below be like a movie by Todd Haynes, all cheap glitter and beautiful ugliness, or will it be in Derek Jarman's style, homoerotic and forlorn?

Hector sprung, grabbed me around my waist, and threw me back across the room. I smacked into the desk. A lamp fell sideways. I heard the bulb explode into fragments.

Would it happen like that for me? Quick? Or would I dissolve slowly?

Hector wrapped his big arm around my waist.

"Holy fuck!" Joey bounded into the room, followed closely by every God I knew. "What the hell happened to the window?"

"Sam moved it somehow," Hector told him.

"You shouldn't have brought him here, Hector," Angelena scolded.

"Help me hold onto Sam," Hector begged the other Gods.

Someone put my window back. I was pissed. I threw all my will at the window. It shimmied.

Crash yelled, "Angelena, do something fast! We're holding onto the window with all our power, but Sam is pushing it!"

"Sam, can't we sit down and talk?" Angelena asked.

"I'm leaving Hector." My skin was in a permanent state of gooseflesh, bumpy and tight. My voice sounded as if it came from miles away.

"I understand that." She talked slowly. "I'm sorry it took us so long to come for you. There was a big debate over whether we should get involved. But we're your friends as well as your Gods, and we realized we needed to be here for you."

The window vibrated.

"We're not going to be able to hold it," Crash warned.

The hotel room wasn't that small, but it was wall-to-wall Gods. Those who couldn't shove onto the bed stood crammed against the walls. Joey and Brett gawked.

Angelena turned on Hector. "This is your fault. You drove him to this. And you call yourself the God of Love."

"I haven't done anything to him!"

Everyone shouted. I put my hands over my ears and closed my eyes. With that much noise, I couldn't focus enough to move the window.

"I never abused him!" I heard Hector bellow. "Well, I don't see it that way," he yelled over the accusations.

Deal shoved Gods out of the way and took the chair behind the small desk. "Sam, I have an idea. We'll let you move the window and jump if you want to, but first, we need you to prove something to Hector."

There had to be a catch. Gods were notorious for making lousy bargains with mortals. Deal was the worst.

"What do you say, Hector?" Deal asked.

Hector got up from the floor. "I'm not letting him go out the window."

I threw my will against the plate glass out of spite, just to show Hector I could do what I wanted. A small crack started in the lower corner.

Angelena glowered at Hector. "None of us has much of a choice. Sam will break through. He has strong will behind him, and he's not too stable right now."

Why did everyone treat me like some broken thing? Maybe I was getting thin. Not skinny, but transparent like glass, and brittle, too, so that the right word spoken at the right frequency could make me shatter. Pulled like taffy, molten glass could be forced to such extremes that the molecules strained to keep their links. If one connection failed, the entire structure collapsed. My chain of molecules was slipping apart, but I could keep it together long enough to get away.

Hector glanced over at me. "He's a little shaken about Marcus. I'll grant that."

Angelena shook her head. "He's in shock, Hector. I dare you to glimpse inside his mind for a second, if you have the balls."

No, no, no. Not a good idea. My mind was a mess and I was way too exhausted to clean it up.

"Sam, are you willing to sit down and negotiate?" Deal asked in a gentle voice.

"For what?" I didn't understand what they were doing.

"We want Hector to understand how he makes you feel."

Everyone watched me with such hope on their faces.

"Please, Sam. You owe me," Joey said as he led me to the small desk. "I'll never forgive you if you don't."

"If you negotiate, you'll lose everything," the voice in my head whispered.

Anything I hadn't already lost I'd given away. Someone moved a chair near to Deal for me. Keeping a wary eye on Hector, I edged over to the chair and sat down.

Joey smiled at me. "Thanks, Sam."

"Hector?" Deal said.

He crossed his arms. "What are we negotiating? Sam has no right to leave me, and I don't appreciate this blackmail with the window."

"Aren't you curious why he's so desperate to get away from you?" Angelena asked.

Hector yanked out a chair and sat down opposite Deal. "Five minutes, and then you all leave this room."

Deal turned to me. "Okay, Sam. This will only be a little painful. I want you to simply remember the times Hector was abusive—."

Hector made a rude sound. "I never raised a hand to him outside of consensual play."

The counselor from my domestic violence support group pushed out of the bathroom and through the Gods. "This is the most unique intervention I've ever seen." He peered around the room while he combed back his frizzy, gray hairs. "But I'm glad to see it. I've been very concerned about Sam."

"A Dom/sub lifestyle isn't abuse!" Hector protested.

"I know all about that. The wife and I are casual players. It isn't the physical side that worries me. Sam seems depressed, clinically depressed."

"I'll second that," Joey chimed in. "I've seen him like this before. Not good. He took pills that time."

Hector whipped around to look at me. "Is that true?"

That was an accident. About two months after Marcus beat me, I took some pills I found in Joey's medicine cabinet to help me sleep. When they didn't work, I took a couple more. The problem was that I kept losing track of whether I'd taken the second dose because I wasn't falling asleep, so I'd take another dose. It wasn't as if I did it on purpose. All I wanted was for the nightmares to stop so that I could make it through the night.

I looked at Hector with cold eyes. What was it to him anyway?

Hector turned to Deal. "What do I have to do?"

"Sit there. Sam, can you just remember how you felt?" Deal asked me. "Angelena will help Hector to experience it with you."

There was no place to start. It was there from the beginning.

"Then start from the beginning," Angelena urged.

Everyone was using their soft voices with me. Except Hector. He glared at me.

Memory wasn't a continuous recording. There were lapses. The best I could do was remember spurts of time that had strong emotions linked to them. There was the really great stuff, like the time he taught me about kissing. Then there were those glimpses of his jealousy. And there were those times he said things that devastated me, but he didn't seem to notice. I couldn't think of all that without remembering the pure joy I felt when he came back into town, or when he said he was proud of me. That elation flowed from me and I could see it in his face.

Hector was a little smug that I loved him that much. All of my adoration was laced with worship, and that built him up.

Then I remembered the time at the grocery store when he accused me of seeing Marcus behind his back. Hector winced. That memory reminded me of the time I got lost jogging and how hurt I was when he accused me of cheating.

Hector looked away.

I remembered driving home from the counseling session. I was obsessing about what I could do to make Hector happy before he headed out for Vegas.

Hector put his hands over his face.

I remembered walking into the house and seeing him waiting for me. I let him feel how happy I was to see him.

Hector groaned into his hands. "Okay! Enough! I get it."

"Keep it coming Sam," Deal told me.

Angelena nodded. "He needs to see it all."

When the fear began, we all heard Marcus laugh. "Just as tasty the second time."

Hector spun around, searching the room for Marcus, his fists clenched.

"All of it, Sam," Angelena prodded.

"Let him see the nothingness, Sam." Angelena had no pity.

I flooded Hector with the void. I took him from unpacking his suitcase through to the moment the doorknob of the bathroom fell apart in my hands. He flinched when Marcus came out of the shower. He felt my terror.

Marcus' laughter rang through my brain, but the others heard it, too. Many were pale.

I saw Hector's shoulders shake. "Baby, Baby, I'm so sorry."

I let him feel what it was like when he believed Marcus over me. That's what broke him.

"Make it stop!" Hector went to his knees in front of me. "Baby, I had no idea. I didn't mean to do that to you. Forgive me," he pleaded. He tried to reach for me, but let his hand fall. I hated everyone seeing him like that. Hector was strong, and they made him bow down to me.

The Gods spoke quietly, as if at a funeral. They cast nervous glances at Hector. Deal and Angelena were all grim satisfaction and terse agreement. No one comforted me.

I needed my world back in order. I was splintering into shards and no one knew it.

I looked at my hand, but it didn't seem to be part of my body anymore. "I'm breaking into pieces." What was I, a couple bucks worth of chemicals and some water? No, water was a molecule. All that would be left would be atoms.

"What pieces, Sam?" Hector asked. "What did you mean?"

He was the only one listening to me.

I looked out the window and saw the Las Vegas lights.

"Baby?"

I pushed at the window with my mind. The safety glass crackled into a web pattern. The Gods rushed to support it against my will.

The only way out was through the window.

"Stop, Sam!" Marcus shouted.

Why did Marcus want me alive? So he could torment me and draw power? I couldn't face it. Every possible reality was some variation on a nightmare. Hector or Marcus, it didn't matter. I was doomed.

Hector grasped my hand. "Okay, Sam, here's a deal. If you want to leave me, I'll let you go, but you have to leave with Joey and Brett. You can't go out the window."

But if I went out the window, I'd be free of everyone. The Gods threw their collective strength into holding the window as chunks of glass dropped at their feet.

"Sam, I apologize. I admit I was wrong. I accused you and you didn't do anything to deserve it. I was wrong. Is that what you need to hear?" Hector sounded desperate.

Stupid Gods. They were so fixated on that one window, so I moved the one next to it and lunged for the opening. Hector threw me down before I could go through. He passed his hand over my eyes. I couldn't move.

Carefully, Hector pulled me far from the window. The Gods parted for him, but the room was so crowded that there wasn't any space. He cradled me close, with his face pressed into my hair for what felt like an eternity.

Then he said, "I love you, Sam. I do. Maybe, if you're not dating anyone in a couple months, if you can forgive me, maybe you'll let me see you again. I will change. I'll show you that I can."

His kiss barely touched my forehead. "I'm the one that screwed up. I'll stay away from the house until you've settled somewhere. If you need anything, have Joey call me, okay? Tell you what, let me buy you a new car so you don't have to worry about breaking down all the time. No? Sam, please, relent a little. I need you to give me a sign that you won't hate me forever. I know! I'll get you a condo near the beach with a huge kitchen. The best of everything. Anything you want. Then you won't have to worry about rent anymore."

"Don't rush into anything," my counselor advised.

"You're my only family, Sam. That house won't be my home without you."

Words had so much power. Words spoken in love had a magic of their own. Love was worth living for, right?

Hector smelled of Bay Rum, cigars, beer, and his scent—like home. I breathed it in. I didn't feel like I wanted to die anymore. I was suddenly deeply scared of death.

I reeked of fear.

"I advise you not to agree too fast, Sam," my counselor warned me. "We talk about this all the time in the sessions. This is the honeymoon phase. You know all about that. He may be genuinely sorry, but if you forgive him, he has no incentive to change his ways."

"It was just a fight, a misunderstanding. That's all."

Brett couldn't keep his mouth shut. "Sam, don't be an idiot. He's not going to change. Come with us to the car."

My counselor agreed with Brett. "People don't change that quickly. They fall back into their habits."

"If you don't think people can change, then it doesn't make any sense to bother with counseling, does it?" I asked.

His mouth opened and shut a few times. "Well, with intense work, and a real desire to change..."

"I have that," Hector said.

Deal was right. I'd been giving away power in all my relationships without getting anything in return. Not anymore. I turned to her. "Get this in writing, or in stone, or whatever Gods use. Hector, I'm telling you that you have to change. A lot. Immediately. Because if you ever treat me like that again, I'm gone. Forever. No more chances. Understand?" I surprised the hell out of both us by being dead serious. There was no negotiating that one.

"Hardball," Deal approved. "I like it." She got into her business mode. "So we have an agreement? Hector?"

"I'm not agreeing to anything unless Sam changes, too."

Brett snorted. "There's nothing wrong with Sam. You're the problem."

"Shut up, Brett. You're not helping." Then he gave me his stern Papi look. "You haven't been well for a long time, have you?"

"I'm fine."

"Oh, Gods." Hector laughed like he was crying and looked up at the ceiling. "This is not fine."

"I'm okay."

He made growling noises. "Prove it. Show me who you are."

"I can't."

He grabbed my wrists hard enough to hurt. "Show me who you are."

"Samuel Calhoun Dewey. Says so on my birth certificate and everything."

Hector's shoulders slumped. "Okay. I guess I deserve that after what I did to you. Shut me out of your world."

Are you the God of Love or the God of Guilt Trips?

"Maybe one day you'll forgive me enough to let me come inside."

I groaned. Guilt Trips. Definitely the God of Guilt Trips.

"I would, but I don't know how."

Hector must have seen the defeat on my face. "Sam, I'm not giving up, and you're not allowed to either. Haven't you ever felt close? Talk to me. Tell me what's going on up there." His finger thumped my forehead.

"If I just ... I keep feeling that if I could reach my sub-space, I'd be okay. It's like every time we get deep into play, I'll be on the verge of something, and then suddenly words fall out of my mouth that I don't mean to say, and you stop, and I get so damn frustrated because I want to keep going. If I could push that edge a little farther."

His thumb traced along the back of my hand. "I have an idea. Turn over."

"Oh, man," Brett groaned as Hector bared my butt.

"Don't move," Hector warned me. "It's going to hurt a lot."

He drew his fingernail across a small area on my ass cheek. At first it felt like being scratched, but then it burned. He was using his God powers to brand me. The pain built with each pass until it felt as if he held a burning branding iron against my skin. I expected the putrid, sweet scent of burning flesh, but I only smelled sex.

My mind screamed for me to run, but Hector was right. I wanted to be branded more than anything.

"Run!" Marcus screeched in my mind. "You can't let this happen." Visions flashed in my brain. Hector, shoving me out of his house. Other lovers, turning in disgust from my scarred body. Me, without friends, without a job, without love.

Those were false visions. If he branded me, I'd always be Hector's boy.

"And he'll hate you for that."

"This is a private scene," I reminded Marcus. "Get the fuck out of my mind." With all my will, I shoved him away. I wasn't going to run.

The pain of the brand flared. My screams probably shattered glass for miles. There were no words to describe that deep, throbbing ache that could turn a man into an animal. The threshold started high and sloped up to infinity and my mind tried to shut down, but I had to stay in control of my body. Burns always hurt worse hours later, but it was bad enough while it was happening. Hector hadn't tied me down, so all the will to hold still while my flesh seared had to come from my mind. I screamed and howled, and cried for mercy, but I didn't move.

My mind slipped into a fantasy of loping through woods. Between the trees, I could see the Beltane bonfire the Dewey clan always lit at my parents' farm. Lovers ran past me, their wild laughter a reminder of the joy of our pagan rites. That was no fantasy, but a clear vision of the future. Without realizing, I'd ripped the veil, and for once it didn't kill me to do it.

Hector was waiting for me near the bonfire. The High Priestess was chanting. The altar was prepared. Power flowed through my body. "This is about me," I told Hector as I gestured to the dancers. "They're worshipping me." The wonder of it made me feel light, as if I'd float away into the night sky and touch the stars.

My vision ended.

"Okay, it's over now." Maybe the actual branding was over, but the pain was just beginning to arc through my brain.

"That ass is mine now, boy."

"Yes, Sir!" I was dying from the pain, but I worshipped him.

My vision flickered. I was near the Zen garden, in the hotel room surrounded by Gods, almost to the Zen garden, then back inside Hector's house. I howled my anger as I couldn't quite reach my center. It was always a step too far, like I could run and run forever and never be able to grasp it.

Hector's fingers rammed inside me.

A moment of clarity shone in my mind like sunbeams through cloud cover. The Zen garden was an illusion Fear used to torment me. It wasn't real, and I would never, ever, be able to reach it. My true center was somewhere else.

Following threads of feeling, I came to a halt at a non-descript door I'd gone by a million times as I wandered through my internal teahouse in pursuit of internal peace.

I groped for the knob and turned it.

I thought it was a mirror inside, but I was looking at my true Self. Full awareness struck me. I knew the divine within.

The world tilted.

Inside my mind, I was at the threshold of the universe. Hector booted me in my ass and sent me sprawling in the void. Energy crackled under my skin. It shot through my veins. Lust seared my soul.

I knew every person in the world who was fucking, knew them intimately. I was male and I was female and I was every flavor and variety between genders that ever existed, the full spectrum of sexuality, the entire rainbow. Fantasies whipped through my mind like comets, leaving long tails of satisfaction sparkling in the suns of a thousand galaxies. Every inch of me, inside and out, tingled, burned, sighed as a billions lips and tongues and fingers stroked me. It was a fucking cosmic orgy and I was the center of it all. I was so damn hard, like gonna explode hard, like I had to shoot, shoot, shoot for the stars.

Hector clamped his fist around my balls. "Don't you dare come without permission, boy."

Every orgasm was worship for me. The release of energy was almost boundless, and the prayers so pure with desire that it was like taking hit after hit of some incredible drug that filled me with electric visions.

I tried to get a grip, but felt myself sliding away. Oh, man, the lust wanted me to be a part of it. The universe got down on its knees and sucked my cock. I could dissolve into an eternity of sensation. The pull was temptation I couldn't resist. Sex, nothing but pure sex. It promised an everlasting orgy, and I was the source, benefactor, and recipient of all that pleasure.

The true pain of the brand unveiled in hard throbs. It built in steps on my ass. Finally, the pain was so overwhelming that it sobered me.

"Thank you, Sir." I was so thankful for his control. It was comforting to be completely Topped. White-hot blossoms of searing heat exploded in my mind as he let me know how much pain my body was truly experiencing. I tried to stay on top of it, but finally had to surrender to the overwhelming torture.

I slipped under the surface.

Then there was peace.

I was inside my mind. I looked through a window and saw a garden I knew. Bliss was in reach. I pushed open the back door of our house, amazed and relieved that I seemed to have the key. I stepped into our backyard.

"So this is where you go." Hector sat on the step of his back porch.

I kneeled at his feet and put my head on his thigh. "I never made it this far." Warm sunlight and a light breeze off the ocean made it a perfect day. The sky was reasonably blue for L.A.

I was home.

"Thank you for controlling me, Sir. You can see why I need it. I could lose myself in that universal orgasm and never snap out of it. It drowns me and I lose my Self."

He tugged on my earlobe. "And you are...?"

"Sex," I admitted finally. "I'm the God of Sex."

"Baby, I knew that the first second I set eyes on you."

If he was making fun of me, I didn't see it on his face.

I frowned. "Everyone else can control their power. You don't have any problem, Angelena controls her power, but mine is too much for me. I'm a lousy God."

His thumbs smoothed my brow. "Baby, the reason why you can't control it is because there's so much more for you to handle. No one has the power base that you do. Think of how often you tapped into chaos magic. You were powerful even before you became. But don't worry. I'll keep you under my control."

"Thank you, Sir."

"Come back into your body."

I settled back into the physical world.

Hector spooned behind me and pushed the head of his cock inside. I was loose and lubed and, man, did I ever want him. My body gave way as he penetrated, like warm butter taking in a hot knife. When he knew I was ready for more, he slowly went deeper until I could feel the squish of his balls on my sore ass. He stroked my cock as best he could, but my legs were drawn up tight.

He turned me over and then pushed his hard cock back into me. I rose up off the mattress so that I could hump back against him. Soon I was up on my knees, despite the tight, hot pain in the back of my legs. I shouted "oh yeah, fuck me," My hole tightened around him and released as my muscles revved up for orgasm.

"I love the way you grasp at me. You're such a horny slut. You need this. You need to be fucked hard," Hector moaned.

My counter-thrusts slammed against each of his. My balls tightened. "I'm gonna come, Sir."

He had my cock in his hand again and he pumped it furiously. The pain of the brand was mercifully distant. "Come now. Now!"

"Come inside me," I begged.

His thighs pressed against mine. Our fuck rhythm got serious, devolving into short, brutal thrusts that slammed against the huge blisters covering his brand on my ass cheek, and I screamed at each impact. I felt the throb through his cock as he came. I shot hard into his fist. The pressure in my dick was incredible, but it made the release that much sweeter. Every pulse of my orgasm clamped down on his cock in my ass.

Shockwaves rippled from our flesh. The energy exploded in concentric rings, moving so fast that cries of pleasure followed long moments in its wake. It kicked Marcus hard in his shriveled nuts. He dropped to his knees, howling, "No!"

Our energy gained momentum, exploding past Los Angeles, through Tangiers, and extending to Kiev, until our orgasms went supernova.

Hector and I collapsed onto the mattress with him over me, on the burn.

"Fucking fantastic," I croaked. "Sir, please don't pull out of me, not yet, please. I can't explain it, but this is..."

"A deeply spiritual moment for you."

"Yeah." I grinned over my shoulder at him. It was so cool that he understood me.

Hector's body pressed down on mine, but the weight of him couldn't stop me from flying.

It was a strange time to have an epiphany, or maybe the most natural, but I realized that my body was sacrificed to him, and as we were locked together in sweat and blood and pain and love and sex, we worshipped each other. For a second I dismissed the thought that Hector worshipped me, but then accepted it.

"This rocks," I told him.

* * * *

Then we were back in the hotel room in Las Vegas. Hector shielded me with his body. The room reeked of sex. I breathed it in like perfume.

"What just happened?" Brett yelled.

"You didn't see any of that?" Thank the Gods. I wasn't a prude, but if that wasn't the definition of a totally private moment, I didn't know what was.

"One moment, he's carving his initials on your butt, and the next thing, there was a bright light, and suddenly you two are on the bed, and ... what the fuck happened to you?"

"Well done, Sam." Angelena nodded at me. "I can see the divine radiating from you."

Afterglow.

"I take it that seals the deal, so to speak, Sam?" Deal asked. "Good. I'm out of here." She disappeared. The other Gods offered nods of respect, or grins and hugs, before phasing out.

Brett looked like he was about to cry. "I don't get it. What happened?"

Hector pressed his lips to the nape of my neck. He chuckled, but so quietly only I could hear it. I gave him a sly glance, and couldn't help but grin.

"Total peace, total awareness, and hot, pounding sex, Brett. Now that's a combo to enlighten the entire fucking world."