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Chaos Magic II: Love Runes

TOP SHELF

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Chapter 1

As disasters go, it wasn't spectacular or even awe-inspiring. The earth didn't tremble, pillars of fire didn't speak, and locusts didn't darken the sky. All I did was turn the key in the ignition of my piece of shit car. It lurched forward hard and hit the curb in front of Hector's house.

"No," I groaned. By the time I shoved open the door and stepped out of my car, dark smoke poured from the engine compartment. Tapping my God power, I summoned a fire extinguisher and cautiously touched the hood. It wasn't hot, but to be safe, I carefully raised it and stood back. The smoke made me cough. I waved it away and peered into the engine compartment. There was no fire, but every hose was melted into black goo. The timing belt was shredded into pieces. How could that happen? I was a God. Why wasn't my life perfect?

Being a God was nothing like I imagined it to be. I thought that the Gods did whatever they wanted. It sure seemed that way. In reality, being the God of Sex was a job. A twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week job. Not that I was complaining -- much. I got paid in worship, which gave me power. The catch -- and there was always a catch -- was that I couldn't keep all of it. No God who hoarded power kept believers happy for long, so most of what I took in went right back to my worshippers in the form of answered prayers. Since so many people appealed for my help, I could have been one of the most powerful Gods, but my Master Hector only let me keep a small allowance of that power. Even though he was the God of Love, he was one strict, badass leather-daddy and he kept me on a very short leash. I worshipped him for that.

As I stared stupidly down at the devastation in the engine compartment of my car, Hector stood on the narrow strip of grass between the curb and the sidewalk, his hands in the pockets of his pleated dress pants. "Sam, those are your new shoes," he said.

Was he speaking English? Because what he said made no sense.

He clenched his jaw. "Look what you're standing in."

That I understood. A vile pool of motor oil and coolant seeped from under the car and surrounded me. The buckskin leather of my new shoes sucked up the liquid and turned sickly green where the stain had spread.

I reached for my cell phone.

“Who are you calling?” Hector asked.

“Tow truck.”

He rolled his eyes. “Sam, a car doesn’t get any deader than that.”

“Ray can fix it. He can fix anything.” I had near religious reverence for my mechanic. He wasn’t a God, but he rated as a deity in my book. As I was dialing, fate delivered the coupe de grace. My car let out a terrible death groan and the engine block shattered into three pieces.

“Even Ray can’t fix that.” Hector seemed so pleased. I glared at him. He scratched his forehead. “Okay. Call for a tow truck if you want to, you stubborn little mule. But I’m telling you that there’s no power on earth that can make your car run again.”

Knowing better, I still put a hand on my hip and sneered at Hector. “Oh, ye of little faith. Just watch. Ray will work his magic and it’ll be running in no time.”

* * *

“There’s nothing I can do,” Ray said. He was almost as short as I was, but solidly built with a nice little poppa belly filling his blue striped work shirt. He was just my type -- Mexican with a shaved head and big hands. If he’d been gay, and a Dom, I would have been all over him. Hector must have sensed that because he always accompanied me to Ray’s garage.

“I’ve never seen an engine in pieces like that.” Ray flipped his clipboard over, as if that were his final word.

We stood in the parking lot of the white and blue cinderblock garage where the tow truck had left my car. The hood was up, but no one worked on it. They didn’t even push it inside one of the bays.

“But you fixed it just three weeks ago!” I said. “How could everything go wrong at once like that? I drove it to my basketball game this morning without a sign of trouble. The engine light didn’t even go off. Four hours later everything is broken. How can that be?”

“I’m not a miracle worker. You’re lucky it ran this long,” Ray told me. In quiet Spanish, he told Hector, “You should have towed it straight to the junkyard.”

Even though he knew I understood what they said, Hector answered Ray in Spanish. “Sam insisted you could fix it. He wouldn’t listen to me, but you, he trusts.”

“I’ve been warning him for the past year that he’s wasting his money fixing it,” Ray said.

Hector shrugged. “What can you do?”

The two rational Mexican men were in agreement. Only the crazy gringo boy refused to accept that the car was beyond repair.

“The car is totaled. I can give him maybe a couple hundred for it, but even that--”

“Don’t. Get what you can for it. If it costs you more to get rid of it than you make, bill me for the difference. I appreciate it, Ray.”

“You got it, man.” Ray and Hector shook hands.

The front bumper of my car sagged, the passenger side door had a huge dent in it, and old towels covered the ripped seats. Compared to Hector’s pristine vintage truck, with its gleaming chrome and flawless paint job, my car was an embarrassing junker. I knew it wouldn’t run forever, but I couldn’t understand why it had suddenly died like that.

Maybe if I’d used some of my God powers on it instead of simply paying Ray to patch up the crisis of the day, it wouldn’t have happened. Not that I had much God powers to spare. Most of my allowance was already spoken for. Another thing I learned about being a God -- once you had power, there was always someone with their hand out to take a percentage.

Ray tactfully withdrew into small his office beside the repair bays. Hector put his hands on my shoulders.

“What do you think it would cost to get my car running again, Sir?” I asked.

He pressed his lips to the nape of my neck. When he spoke, his deep voice rumbled down my spine. “I’m not going to let you throw away your money on that.”

I turned to face him. “I thought you weren’t allowed to tell me what I can do with my money.”

The smile lines around his eyes disappeared and he crossed his muscle-bound arms over his chest. “You must like the taste of soap, Boy.”

I immediately bowed my head. “Sorry, Sir.” Having my mouth washed out with soap was one of the few punishments I hated. Normally, I didn’t get a warning. I’d be working up an attitude and the next thing I’d know, I’d be bent over the bathroom sink gasping and spitting as he fucked my mouth with a bar of the worst tasting soap in all creation.

Hector cupped my chin in his big hand and made me look up at him. “My therapist says I have to let you control your own finances, so I’m not telling you what to do, but I’m asking you to be logical. You’ve kept this car on life support for years, but it’s time to pull the plug. Don’t waste any more of your money on heroic measures to keep it running. I’ve been telling you that for months now. Ray has, too.”

I glanced back at my car. A hot, metallic scent like blood wafted from the wreck. Inside the garage, a hunky black mechanic and a weasel-thin white guy frowned at the screen of a computer running diagnostics on a van. They probably couldn’t hear me over the high-

pitched whine coming from a machine in the far bay, but I still lowered my voice when I asked, “How much do you think it would cost in power?”

“More than you can afford.”

My stomach clenched. So that Hector wouldn’t see the rising panic in my eyes, I stared down at my ruined shoes. I had no idea that he kept track of how I spent my power allowance. “How do you know how much power I have left?”

“I don’t. I just know that it would take more than I’ll ever let you have. Even if you hoard your power as carefully as you do your money, you’ll still never have enough.”

Relief surged through me. The close call shook me though, so I bent over the engine compartment of my car to avoid Hector’s gaze. Checking out the engine wasn’t just for show. I grew up on a farm and knew my way around machinery.

While I poked at the cracked engine block, my jeans slid down enough to reveal a glimpse of my ass. When I stood up, the baggy jeans I wore rode even lower in the front than in the back. My t-shirt pulled up to reveal the wispy path of dark hair below my navel and the defined muscles of my Adonis belt almost down to my pubes. That might have seemed posed, but honestly, those things just sort of happened to me. It probably had something to do with being the God of Sex. It was my nature to look like porn.

Figuring that it wouldn’t hurt to try to change Hector’s mind about the fate of my car, I decided to make one last appeal. It was time for my big blue eyes to work their magic. I opened them wide, the picture of innocence, and added just a hint of a pout to my bottom lip. “I know my car’s a piece of shit, Sir. But how could everything go wrong all at once like that? It’s like someone threw a powerful curse on it.”

Hector glanced away from me, as if he were embarrassed. “Don’t be so dramatic.”

Maybe the tiny quiver in my voice was a bit over the top, but it wasn’t all acting. Frustration welled up inside me. I blurted out, “How am I supposed to get to movie screenings and press junkets? I can’t write my movie reviews if I can’t get to the screenings.”

“We’ll work something out,” Hector told me. “Come on, let’s go home.”

“But... But...” My poor car. Were we just going to walk away and leave it there?

“This isn’t a discussion, Boy. Come now.” He headed for his truck.

* * *

I slumped against the passenger door of Hector’s vintage truck and stared out the window at the small, rundown buildings of our Long Beach neighborhood as we drove home from Ray’s garage. Even though it was Saturday, several of the shops we passed were closed, heavy iron gates locked over the entrances.

Hector ignored me as he drove, but I couldn't stop sneaking glances at him. When he glowered, adrenaline shot through my blood and made my nerves tingle. He had an edge to him that turned me on like nothing else. But then, everything about him turned me on, from the size of his hands, to the warm mocha coloring of his skin, to the laugh lines around his eyes that crinkled when he smiled at me. For a badass leatherdaddy, he smiled at me a lot. I think I amused him. Usually. He hadn't said a word since we left Ray's garage though.

The silence had me squirming. Finally, I couldn't hold it in anymore. I ran my fingers through my black curls and tugged on them until I winced. "I guess I can figure out the bus schedules." That would go over well. Me all hot and sweaty from a two-hour bus ride, trying to push through the mob of freelance reporters at a press junket in the hopes that I could get a quote or a private interview with a movie star. My shoulders sagged.

Hector said, "I'll take care of everything."

Sure, he was my Master, my doting Papi, but I hated it when he acted like I was some princessy sub. "I can take care of myself."

Hector gripped the steering wheel tighter and mumbled under his breath. The only words I caught were, "Stubborn," and, "Pain in the ass." I think he meant for me to hear that.

I slammed back against the seat and stared at the floorboard. Lost in my thoughts, I didn't pay much attention to where Hector was driving. Then it seemed we should have been home, so I looked up.

"Decided to stop sulking?" Hector asked. "I've been circling, waiting for you to snap out of your mood. If you'd been paying attention, you'd know that we've been around this block four times now." From his tone, there was no question he'd had enough of my emo-moment. If I didn't watch it, I'd be in for an attitude correction punishment. Those were always the worst.

"Sorry, Sir." Shaking off the last of my mood, I finally reached the conclusion he'd been trying to lead me to for hours. "Oh well. It's just a car."

"And?"

"And Master is going to take care of everything, so I should stop worrying about it," I said. I sneaked a few glances at him through my lowered lashes and made sure he caught me at it. When a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, I bowed my head in submission.

"Much better. You don't want to be in trouble today, Boy. I have plans for you. Open the glove compartment."

The glove compartment of my car was stuffed with parking tickets and pens that leaked ink. Hector's, like the rest of his truck, was clean except the owner's manual, a pack of fuses, and a thick blindfold. My day was definitely looking up. I secured the blindfold well and then put my wrists together as if he'd bound them. Oh Gods, did he know how to flip my switch. I went from worried to horny in nothing flat.

Hector must have seen the hint because he chuckled. He put his arm across my shoulders and drew me closer so that I could rub my face in his armpit. His fresh sweat wasn't as ripe as I liked, but that didn't stop me from pressing my nose against the damp cloth of his shirt. Anticipation and his scent worked their usual magic on my cock. By the time he stopped the truck, my car problems were forgotten.

After we parked, Hector got out of the truck and opened the passenger side door. "Can you see anything?" I shook my head. "Give me your hands so that I can help you out."

The step down from his truck seemed bigger than usual with the blindfold on, so it was a good thing my hands weren't bound. He kept hold of me until he was sure I had my balance. From the feel of concrete under one foot and grass under the other, I guessed we were in the driveway of Hector's old bungalow-style house under the lacy leaves of the ancient jacaranda tree that dominated the front yard.

When I first met Hector, the neighborhood around his house had been typical for Long Beach -- a mixture of elderly whites, Mexicans, blacks, and a few Vietnamese. Except for a four-unit apartment near the end of the block, the houses were built in the 1920s and 30s, back when the naval shipyards on Terminal Island were the biggest employer in town other than the Port of Los Angeles. The years following World War II weren't so good for the city, but the economic stagnation protected the houses from the constant rebuilding that plagued the rest of the Los Angeles metro area and destroyed the architectural heritage of the region.

After I moved in with Hector, other Gods took up residence on his block. Some of them, like Deal -- the Goddess of Negotiation -- and the Goddess of Eternal Youth, created crass stucco mini-mansions, but others, like Angelena -- the Goddess of Traffic -- and that poor, minor Goddess I dubbed First Date Girl, tried to keep the spirit of the old neighborhood intact. I couldn't complain too much though, because while Hector's previous neighbors would have been outraged if we'd paraded our lifestyle out on the front lawn, the Gods seemed to accept it as a given.

Holding both my hands, Hector led me several feet in a straight line. I grinned. We were headed toward the detached garage in his backyard where he kept his dungeon. Was there anything better than an afternoon of play in my Master's dungeon? I didn't think so. The muscles across my back already tensed and relaxed as if he already had me bound to the Saint Andrew's cross and was about to flog me. My grin grew wider and my cock strained against my pants.

Then we turned. I stumbled over the brick patio. Were we headed for the back porch of the house? We turned again, and again, and again, until I was hopelessly confused. Were we near my herb garden or the barbeque grill? I'd assumed we were at the house, but Hector often reminded me that I couldn't assume anything. I listened intently for clues. A car drove down the street. A leaf blower whirled a block away. The overhead electrical lines crackled. We could have been anywhere.

Hector led me in another circle. Finally, I gave up trying to figure out where we were or what he would do next. The noise shut out of my brain the way it always did when I

stopped struggling against his power. When I got to that point, I always wondered why I fought him so long. Peace felt good. Master was in charge. Master would take care of everything. All I had to do was obey. The simplicity was beautiful, like a Zen-inspired painting.

We stopped. Hector cupped my face in the palms of his hands and pressed his mouth against mine in a soft kiss. When he pulled away, I leaned forward for more, but realized he'd moved away. There was a slight breeze that passed over my bare arms. It was a warm day, but my skin got goose flesh. I tried to reach out with my senses to feel where he was and what he was doing. If I really wanted to cheat, I could have used my God powers, but my strict power allowance that didn't leave much to waste. Besides, the uncertainty turned me on. It felt like danger.

"Did you think I wouldn't find out?" Hector mumbled close to my ear.

It was the words, not his tone, which sent a stab of panic through me. Suddenly afraid of falling, I put my hands out and stumbled forward. My chest went tight.

What had I hidden from him? Lots of things. Which one did he catch me at? I couldn't stop my mind from darting through all my recent sins -- the white lies and the omissions. Did he know that I had jerked off in the shower that morning? Did he suspect that I flirted a little with that sweet older bear in the grocery store? Or what about the jogger who'd cruised me that morning during my basketball game with Brett and Joey? Oh man. Oh man. My brain swam.

"Sam."

What if he found out--

"Boy!" He grasped my arms.

That snapped me out of the spiraling panic. I gulped in deep breaths until I had it under control.

"Good Boy. That's right. Concentrate on your breathing." He touched my face again. "It's been a couple months since your last panic attack. I thought maybe we were past them. Guess not." His rough thumb traced over my lips.

It was hard to release the tension in my muscles. It was as if I had to think of each muscle separately and tell it to let go, first my feet, then my calves, and upward through my body until I unclenched my jaw.

"What triggered it this time?" Hector asked. Mercifully, before I could answer, he said, "I told you not to worry about the car anymore." If he wanted to believe that's what set me off, I wasn't about to correct him. "I'm taking care of it," he reminded me in a sharp tone.

I nodded.

“In fact, I’ve already solved everything.” He let go of my arms and yanked off the blindfold. “Open your eyes, Sam.”

I blinked at the bright sunlight. I blinked again. Sitting in the driveway in front of the detached garage was the most beautiful, hot, perfect motorcycle on the face of the planet. “That’s--” I pointed at it, because I’d lost the ability to talk.

“That’s yours. Happy Birthday, Baby.”

Leaping into Hector’s arms, I hugged him tight and covered his face with kisses. My legs wrapped around his waist. His big hands grabbed my butt to hold me up.

Hector laughed. “Oh, so you like it?”

Even though I was flying, emotion got the best of me. To hide the embarrassing tears, I twisted around to look at the sport bike.

“Sam, you’re going to throw my back out. Get down.” He was still laughing, but he made me stand.

“Thank you, Papi.” Those words didn’t even begin to let him know how stunned, amazed, and happy I was at that moment, but it was the best I could do.

He kissed the top of my head. “I’ve wanted to get you something for a long time, but you’re so damn stubborn about accepting gifts. When we were at brunch a couple weeks ago, I saw your eyes light up when you saw one of these in the parking lot.”

My fingertips brushed against the electric blue metal of the sport bike. I remembered standing in the parking lot of the restaurant where we’d brunchd as insane desire swelled in my chest. The sport bike was something beyond my reach, something to dream about, but not something I ever expected to have. That moment, all I wanted to do was stare at it and envy the person who owned it, but Hector told me to stop fooling around and get into the truck. He was immune to the beauty of machines like that. He barely gave it a second glance. But he did mention it on the way home.

“You said that I was too reckless to be trusted with anything that would go that fast, Sir,” I reminded him.

“And I meant it. Then you said, ‘But I want it.’”

At the time, I hadn’t realized I’d spoken aloud. Under the spell of the sport bike, I’d been careless. I winced. “You heard me say that?”

Hector’s warm eyes gazed down into mine. “Yes.”

“Thank you, Sir. It’s... It’s... It’s expensive.”

Hector shook his head. “Don’t even start that. I can afford it, and the look on your face is worth every penny.”

I ran my hands over the motorcycle. Even sitting in the driveway, it looked fast, like crouching power ready to explode. The bike was hot from the sun, as if it were alive.

“I still don’t understand why you didn’t tell me it was your birthday today,” Hector said. “You didn’t tell me last year either.”

“We weren’t even dating then, Sir. Just talking on the phone. It would have seemed like I was hinting for gifts. How tacky is that?”

“So what’s your excuse this year? If your Mom hadn’t called to wish you a happy birthday this morning while you were at your basketball game, I would have never known.” The corners of his eyes drooped. “I know it’s a lot to ask you to forgive me so soon after the problems we had, but I’m trying, Baby. I really am.”

That was something I wouldn’t talk about. As far as I was concerned, that was in the past, and everything was okay now, so why bring it up again?

“When your Mom called, I felt like a bad boyfriend. How could I not have known it was your birthday?”

“You’re the best boyfriend ever.”

A quick smile tugged at his lips but quickly disappeared. “At least I finally had an excuse to buy you something special.”

Suspicion dawned. “You killed my car. It was a curse. I knew it!”

His smirk confirmed everything. “I’ve been trying to get you to sell that pile of junk for months, but you had to be so stubborn about it. So yes, I cursed your car. Ah--” He held up a finger. “Not a word, Boy.”

A million things came to mind, and a few almost slipped out of my mouth. Hector stood in a wide stance, arms across his chest, while he watched me fight down the urge to mouth off to him. It wasn’t easy. Every smartass comment I managed to push away was replaced by an even better one. When I finally had myself under control, I put my hands to the back of my neck, stood straight, and forced my gaze to the ground so he’d know I was ready to obey him.

“Would you like to take your new bike out for a ride?” He dangled the keys over my head.

How could I still be angry with him? The bike was so cool, and it was a very sweet gift. I grinned at him. When I reached for the keys though, he yanked them away.

Hector got stern. “I know you. You think like a teenager. You may be a God, but you can be hurt, and you can die. I’m still not convinced that you can be trusted on this thing, so here are the rules. If you get a speeding ticket, I’ll take the keys away from you. If I ever find out that you were riding recklessly, I’ll cane your ass so hard you won’t be able to sit

for a week. If there are more problems, I'll take the bike away and get you something sensible, like a sexy little Mercedes convertible."

That cracked me up. "Some threat, Hector."

There was a smile on his lips, but it didn't reach up to his eyes. "I'm serious about this."

"I know you are, Sir. Thank you for the bike. I love it."

"I'll give you anything you want, Sam. All you have to do is ask."

That wasn't my Master speaking; that was Hector, the man. A warm rush of undiluted love pushed out from him and ruffled my hair like a gentle summer breeze. He'd once promised that if I served him I'd be cherished like no other boy, and he kept his word.

Feeling I could get away with some sass, I leaned over the sport bike and inched my jeans down enough to give him a glimpse of my butt. "Anything I want? How about a birthday spanking, Sir?"

"Before your ride?" Hector asked.

I nodded. "It might help me focus on your rules."

"You should follow my rules no matter what," he grumbled, but he grabbed the back of my shirt, pulled me to my feet, and dragged me toward the house.

* * *

We walked up the steps to the back porch. In the living room, Hector folded the ancient crocheted afghan that covered the cushions and put it over the back of the couch. When he sat, he raised his hand, palm up. I reached for it.

Hector tugged at my hand until I straddled his thigh. He wrapped an arm around my waist and handed me a wrapped gift. "This might come in handy."

I tore the paper and let it fall to the braided rug under my feet. Inside the box was a heavy but flexible black leather paddle. The five holes in it would add sting to his blows. Another rush of lust zinged through my groin. "Perfect. Thanks, Papi."

He took the paddle from me. "Let's put it to some good use. Over my lap, Boy."

When I'd settled across his legs, my feet against the far end of the couch and my head near other arm, Hector gave my shoulder an affectionate squeeze. He took his time pushing down the waistband of my jeans to bare my ass. That ritual always turned me on. I wanted to be naked so that I could hump against his leg while I was being spanked, but he left me trapped inside my jeans. It was uncomfortable, so I squirmed. Hector put his hand on the small of my back until I stopped. He was in control and I just had to deal with it.

"Now, how old are you again?" Hector asked.

I mumbled into the couch cushion, "Twenty-six."

"Really?" He forced me to turn my head to the side and look up at him. "Really?"

I nodded. His eyebrows furrowed. He was probably trying to figure out why he was still with me if I was that old. Not that he was a chicken hawk. The guys he eyed were usually older. Still, he picked me to be his boy, and I looked like a boy.

"Baby, one of these days, you have to show me the picture you keep in a closet, because I swear you haven't aged a day since I met you. I don't think you've aged a day since you graduated from high school."

I turned my face to the couch. Panic shot through me. He knew how old I really was. Would that turn him off? Was that reference to Dorian Gray just a quip, or did he suspect that I used God powers to stay young? And would he be relieved that I'd never allow myself to grow up, or would he be pissed off that I kept it a secret?

His hand slid over both buttocks and then he used his fingernails until my skin tingled. I let the tension ooze out of my muscles. When he felt that I was ready, he told me, "Keep count."

The paddled whacked against my ass. "One," I said.

He waited for the sting to fade before striking my butt again.

"Two."

He touched my warming skin and scraped it again with his fingernails. It would be a long, leisurely spanking. Content, I relaxed. He raised the paddle.

By the time I grunted, "Sixteen," my ass was plenty sore, but I suddenly wished I was thirty years old, or even fifty, so that he'd keep spanking forever. We were both hard. His cock jabbed my stomach. "Seventeen!" I yelped. He'd smacked me at my most sensitive spot, right at the top of my thighs. Hot tears slid down my nose, dropped on the couch, and spread. My back arched as I raised my butt for him.

"Your ass is getting pink," Hector murmured. "Harder?" he asked.

I nodded. Until I was sobbing, it wasn't a real spanking. Tears were a release for me and he loved it when they streamed down my face. He raised his hand high and hit my butt with the full force of his swing, but it was the last second flick of his wrist that made it sting so bad.

"Eighteen." I gritted my teeth. "Nineteen." When the next blow landed on my aching butt, I was supposed to say, "Twenty," but I thrashed and tried to shove my hand down my pants to relieve the pressure on my cock. Hector yanked my hand away, pushed me back down and landed a harsh blow across my buttocks that made me scream. I fought to rise off his lap, but he held me in place. "It hurts," I moaned.

His hand slid in soothing circles over my burning butt. “Poor Baby. You’re already sore.” I nodded and sniffled. When I glanced over my shoulder at him, he put a thumb to the fat tear that rolled down my cheek and wiped it away. Then he put his hand back on my aching bottom. “Your skin is almost too hot to touch already, and the blows are only going to get harder.” He slowly goosed me. “Do you want me to stop?”

“No!” I howled. How could he even think of stopping?

Hector chuckled. “I didn’t think so. Give me the count.”

“Nineteen,” I said.

He chuckled. “No, that was twenty, little boy. And just for that, we’re skipping twenty-one.”

I rose off him so that I could look him in the face. Doing the big innocent blue eyes thing, I said, “Honest, Papi. I lost count. I wasn’t cheating.”

“Sure you weren’t, pain slut. Now get back into position.”

Again, I tried to get my hand down my pants for a quick adjustment to my cock, but he gave me a stern look and patted his thigh. I grumbled but flopped back down over his lap. He wasn’t kidding when he said the blows would get harder. I had to suck in a breath and let it out slowly before I could speak.

“Twenty-two.” My voice was so meek that he caressed my hair.

It seemed like forever passed. The only sound was Hector breathing heavily and my pulse pounding. Sharp throbs passed through my butt, and my cock seemed to ache in time with it. Every muscle in my body was rigid. Slowly, I released my resistance and unclenched my butt muscles.

“That’s my good Boy,” Hector said just before the twenty-third blow landed. The sharp retort of the paddle landing on my butt rang through the room. That one was going to leave a bruise. Then he raised the paddle again and made me howl.

The last two blows stung so bad that I couldn’t give him the count. A loud sob pushed out of me. He stroked my back.

“Can you stand up?” he finally asked.

I didn’t want to, but I nodded and rose off his lap. My dick strained at my jeans as I stood before him. Sweat made my clothes stick to my skin. Jagged breaths shook my shoulders. I let my tears drip off my chin.

Hector got off the couch and circled me. He hugged me from behind and ground against my butt until I clenched my teeth. His lips pressed to my neck just under my ear as he

mumbled, “Sweet Baby,” and “Sexy Baby.” I heard his zipper go down and felt his cockhead rub against my raw butt. It hurt, but I held still for him.

“You’re so hot.” Hector exhaled the words. I didn’t know if he meant me or my butt. He gripped my ass cheeks with firm hands and parted them so that his cock could bump against my hole. Slut that I was, I tried to spread wider for him. He let go of my ass cheeks but kept his cock shoved between them. His hand slid down the front of my jeans to free my dick, but then rested in a loose grip right at the tip of the head. If I thrust forward into his hands, his cock wouldn’t be pressed against my hole. If I tried to impale myself on his cock, I’d slip out of grip he had on my cock. There was no good choice. Every movement meant I lost contact somewhere.

Hector kept me like that for an eternity and a half. He changed positions just enough to keep me from getting used to the sensations. The kisses along my neck continued, as did the mumbled words of love and praise as I subtly rocked my hips forward and back. I finally decided that I wanted to be fucked more than I wanted him to stroke my cock, so I shoved back against him. He gripped my hard-on and yanked me forward while backing off the pressure on my hole. So I thrust into his hand. He let go of my cock. Lesson learned. I had to hold still and let him tease me forever as my balls ached for release. He bumped his cock against my hole and took a light hold on my dick again. Every little shift of his gave me a fleeting moment of pleasure, but then it was gone. Frustration made me whimper.

“I love to watch you suffer, Baby,” Hector said before he bit my shoulder.

I felt something cool press into my hand. At first I ignored it, but Hector said, “Take your bike for a ride.”

“But...” My balls were going to explode if I didn’t get to come soon.

“When I want you to come home, I’ll call for you,” Hector said. That meant he’d use his God powers to heat up his brand on my ass. Any time I felt it burn, I was to come to him immediately. “I’ll be here when you get back, and we’ll finish what we started. Now go ride your new toy.” Hector backed away from me.

I wanted to stay, but I wanted to go. It was another one of his perfect tortures. Trapped between pleasures, I wasn’t sure what to do. Then I decided that the sooner I left on my ride, the sooner he’d summon me home, so I headed for the back door.

Hector grabbed my elbow. “Aren’t you forgetting something?” Not understanding, I blinked. He patted my head. “How about pulling your pants up? And putting on proper riding boots? And gloves?” he shouted as I ran for the bedroom to get dressed.

* * *

The ghost of Hector’s grandmother, Nanny, stood in the bedroom doorway with her hands on her hips. “I told him not to get that for you, but nobody listens to me now that I’m dead.”

“That’s because Hector doesn’t believe you’re real,” I reminded her. She blocked the doorway. I could have walked right through her, but that seemed rude. “I’ll drive safe. I promise,” I told her.

“You better, Mijo. Because if you become a ghost, too, I’m not going to let you have a moment of rest.” She glared at me. Hector was six foot four and solid muscle, but I had a feeling that even he’d obeyed that tiny woman when she was alive.

“You never let me rest now. You made me wash the kitchen floor twice yesterday,” I reminded her.

She sniffed. “Don’t get sassy with me. And don’t you dare try flirting your way out of this. It doesn’t work.”

“Me? Flirt? Never. You’re far too smart to fall for that.” I pulled off my shirt.

She sighed. When I unbuttoned my jeans, she giggled. “You’re a bad, bad boy. Teasing an old woman like that.” I felt the cold mist of her kiss on my cheek before she disappeared. She sure did like her slice of beefcake.

* * *

Hector had put out clothes for me on the bed. Everything was new. I frowned at the white cotton briefs, but pulled them on anyway. They were tight and chaffed against my sore butt. With my hard-on, it took a couple adjustments to get comfortable. The jeans were stiff, too. Only the plain white cotton t-shirt fit the way I liked, tighter than any straight boy would wear it. I grabbed the helmet and my old leather jacket, pulled on my boots, and bolted for the backyard.

Hector was waiting next to the sport bike. He rubbed my nipple until it hardened under the t-shirt. “When you get back-- Boy! Are you listening?”

My gaze had drifted to the bike. I looked up at him. “Yes, Sir.”

“When you get back, come to the dungeon. Don’t strip. Just knock.” He must have seen how tempted I was to go to his dungeon right then, because he chuckled. “I need time to set it up, slut. Don’t come back until I summon you. Enjoy your ride.”

I straddled the bike. He handed me the key. Even though my butt still ached, I ignored it as I leaned over the engine and thought how sweet it would be to race it up the tight curves of Ortega Highway, my knee scraping against the asphalt as I leaned into the turns.

Hector crossed his big arms over his chest. “Behave yourself.”

I pulled on my helmet and gave him a wicked grin. The engine growled when I turned the key, and I could feel the reckless power between my legs. The vibration felt great against my aching balls. Being spoiled sure had a sweet side.

“Happy birthday, Baby,” Hector called out as I zoomed out of the driveway.

Chapter 2

I rode with exaggerated care down the block to the stop sign. It was harder to keep balance while going slowly, though, so I sped up a little on the next block, and then more, and then more, until I was roaring down Ocean Boulevard, bent low over my bike and weaving between cars that went too slowly.

At a light, I unzipped my jacket so that I could feel the rush of wind on my chest. The bike wanted to be set free, and so did I, so I opened it up and headed down Pacific Coast Highway toward Seal Beach, the world a blur in my side vision.

Soon my hands were tingling and I felt that loose rush through my body like it was flying apart inside. Adrenaline overload. It's been too long since I'd felt it. I wanted to get on the freeway and just go, go, go for hours.

It was a perfect day. Not a cloud for miles, even though it was the rainy season. The outside temperature was in the high 70s, and across the pale yellow sand, the ocean looked like a sapphire. It was the dead of winter, but it felt like a perfect summer day.

Even though Hector hadn't summoned me yet, I figured that it wouldn't hurt to be ready, so I turned around and headed back into Long Beach. A biker on a big Harley pulled up beside me at a red light. He turned his head. I couldn't see through his pitch-black visor, but there was something familiar about him. I tried to think who he might be. He was big, solid muscle, the kind of guy that turned me on like no other. I didn't know the bike or the leathers. I must have been staring, because he gripped his package and nodded. A zing of interest went right to my groin. I could almost sense him grinning. He pointed toward the road and then gunned his big engine. The light changed and he took off. It took all of two seconds for me to lose my mind and race off behind him.

We blew through downtown Long Beach. I barely noticed going past the turn-off for Hector's house. Then we were at the 710 freeway entrance. He didn't look back to see if I followed. That kind of confidence always turned me on. I told myself that I wasn't cheating on Hector. I was just enjoying a ride, but deep down, I knew he'd be crazy jealous if he caught me. The other rider sped up. I leaned low over my bike and raced to catch up to him.

The speedometer rose steadily. My body got bumped around by the deep potholes and grooves on the freeway. The air cut harshly across the exposed parts of my skin and I

reveled in the wind burn. The other guy was far ahead of me, and the distance increased, so I accelerated.

Just as I was starting to lose my nerve, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of red, and then blue. I looked in my rear view mirror, and saw a motorcycle cop closing in on me.

“Shit!” I pulled over one lane, hoping the cop was after the other rider, but she got in the lane behind me and nodded toward the shoulder.

When I came to a stop at the side of the freeway, I pulled off my helmet and dug around in my pocket for my license. Was my motorcycle license current? I was in such a panic that I couldn’t read the date on it.

The cop got off her motorcycle and did that slow cop-walk swagger over to me. Solidly built, she towered over me. “Nice bike,” she said.

I exhaled a huge sigh of relief. “Goddess. You scared the crap out of me.”

Angelena lowered her mirrored cop sunglasses just enough so that I could get the full effect of her stern concrete gray eyes. “Do you have any idea how fast you were going, Sam?”

A spike of fear shot through my chest. “You’re not going to give me a ticket, are you, Angelena? Hector will kill me.”

She took her time before shaking her head. “I should. Fortunately for you, I don’t want to have to explain to the CHP why I was writing tickets in Long Beach when I was supposed to be patrolling the 101 Freeway. Consider this my birthday gift to you, Sweet-tart.”

“Thanks, Goddess.”

“Meanwhile, you be careful about how fast you ride, and who you ride with.” She glanced down the freeway, and so did I, but the other rider was long gone.

I took off my sunglasses and batted my baby blues at her. “It was just harmless fun.”

She whipped out her citation pad.

“Okay, okay! I’m sorry! I’ll be good.”

“You better, Sam,” Angelena said. “Over a hundred thirty, I don’t cut anyone slack.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Angelena stepped back to look over my sport bike. “That really is a sweet ride.”

My hands slid over the sleek instruments. “It sure is.”

* * *

As I meekly pulled back into traffic, Hector's brand warmed on my butt. I swore I could feel the three lines that formed the H and the circle around it. It steadily grew warmer. I squirmed a little, making the bike weave.

By the time I pulled into Hector's driveway, I was so horny that I forgot my worries. Angelena wouldn't tell Hector that she caught me speeding. It wasn't her style. So I was going to get away with it, unless I decided to confess to Hector. A shiver went right to my cock. Oh man, I loved confession. It always led to punishment.

Since I'd moved in with Hector, I'd transformed the backyard into a nice garden. I put in a big brick patio with a couple tables, heaters, and a huge grill where the steps led down from the back porch. Past the patio was a small patch of lawn, and then my herb garden, which extended all the way back to the pinkish cinder block wall. In front of the detached garage which housed Hector's dungeon was a slab of cement that served as a basketball court, and on the far side of it was an unkempt cypress hedge that belonged to the spooky house next door. My psycho ex-Master Marcus, the God of Fear, once lived there. I wasn't sure who lived there now. It seemed deserted.

I parked my motorcycle on the driveway on the basketball court and dismounted. Hector's brand was really burning by then. My hands shook. That could have been from the vibration of the bike, but I suspected it had more to do with my anticipation of the scene Hector had planned. I had no idea what he had in store for me in his dungeon, but I rarely did. Excitement and curiosity jumped through my blood.

I took off my helmet and put it on the steps of the back porch. Before I knocked on the garage door, I took deep breaths and tried to calm myself. Hector expected me to be in a certain mindset before we played. I had to focus. Once I felt I was there, I counted slowly to twenty. When I rushed the count, I knew I wasn't truly calm enough for him. When I could get through it at a steady pace, I knocked on the door.

Hector yanked open the door. His hand shot out, grabbed me by the collar of my t-shirt, and pulled me into the garage. The door slammed shut behind me. It was dark inside. My eyes had no time to adjust from the bright sunlight.

The dungeon smelled musty, but underneath it were the scents of leather, sex, sweat, and the faint coppery-sweet smell of blood. The air was warm.

Hector released me with a little shove. I felt him brush near me, but then he was gone. I rubbed my arm and listened. If I could hear him, I'd be okay. Being abandoned in the dark always reduced me to a sobbing mess.

Slowly, my vision adapted to the darkness. I'd crawled around that dungeon blindfolded so many times that I had it memorized. The wooden Saint Andrew's cross was against the wall opposite me. Off to the side of the cross was the padded leather bench. To my left was a cage with chain link walls, a prison toilet, and a small cot. Overhead, there were hooks and pulleys and bars. The walls were covered with whips, floggers, handcuffs, butt plugs,

spreaders, irons, and an assortment of evil, glinting toys that scared me and got me hard at the same time.

Hector flicked on the bare bulb that swung from a rafter. My breath caught and I held it a long time before I could let it go. He was in a cop uniform. The dark blue shirt pulled across his big chest and arms and showed a hint of white t-shirt at the neck. His dark chest hair spilled out over the t-shirt. The pants looked painted onto his muscular thighs, and they disappeared into a pair of shiny boots just below his knees. He even had on a heavy black leather utility belt with a pair of cuffs and a nightstick dangling enticingly from it. Did he know that Angelena caught me speeding? How much trouble was I in?

He walked a circle around me. I got a good look at the way those pants cupped his incredible butt. Everything about the cop uniform worked for me -- the boots, the belt, the cuffs, the badge, the aura of deadly authority -- and the man inside the uniform only made it hotter. Trapped in those tight white briefs he'd bought for me, my dick got painfully hard.

Cops turned me on, but I was scared to death of them. Hector knew that. I knew he loved me, but once we stepped into the dungeon, he let his sadistic side reign. There was nothing he liked more than to see me shudder, swallow my fears, and surrender to him.

Hector stood behind me. I didn't dare turn around. "Scared, Boy?"

I'd learned he didn't want me fake it. He only wanted real reactions from me in the dungeon. Anything else was a lie. I shook my head. Something hard hit the back of my knees and I collapsed onto the cool cement floor.

Hector leaned down close to my ear. "You will be."

He walked around me again, swinging his nightstick. He stopped in front of me and slid the nightstick through a loop before hooking his thumbs into that thick black leather cop belt. I understood what he wanted. I crawled forward and pressed my lips to the toe of his boot. Then I licked it. It wasn't his usual pair of boots. It tasted different, and the leather was slick against my tongue. I bathed the first one in reverential laps.

My back arched so that my ass was high as an offering. Hector shifted his weight, lifted his other foot, and stepped down on my butt until my hard-on ground against the concrete. Chastened, I went back to work with my tongue. As I got to the top of the second boot, though, I forgot to be good and dared to sniff my way up to his crotch for a noseful of his scent. He let me grind my nose against him for a while before he smacked my face and sent me sprawling. I propped myself up on my elbows, my legs spread apart, my chest heaving. Gods, that man could drive me crazy. Standing over me in that cop uniform, he was six plus feet of lickable God, and all I wanted to do was worship him.

"I can see that you need a lesson, Boy." Hector grabbed me by my hair and dragged me to the side of the cage. He hauled me to my feet and shoved my face into the chain links. After he tugged off my leather jacket, he threw it on the ground. He forced one of my arms to the metal pole that framed the cage, expertly snapped a cuff on my wrist, and hooked the cuff to the pole. My other arm was stretched to the pole at other edge of the cage and

cuffed to the frame. He kicked my feet until they were spread wide. His big hands clapped hard against my shoulders, sending pangs through the muscles. It was too soon to give him the satisfaction of hearing me yelp, so I stifled the sounds as they rose inside me.

He slid his hands underneath my shirt, found my nipples, and rolled them between his fingers until I huffed. My hard-on ached. He grasped it through my jeans, chuckled, and then squeezed my balls until I tried to pull away. He shoved me back against the chain link fencing of the cage.

“Do that again, slut, and I’ll make it so you can’t move. Hold still.”

Hector took off my boots and socks. The concrete floor was cold. Then he slowly patted his way up the inside of my thighs. I wanted his hands up higher, so I spread my legs further and stuck out my ass. His hand smacked the insides of my thighs with sharp slaps that stung.

“What did I tell you, Boy?”

“To hold still, Sir.”

“That’s right. And since you can’t seem to follow simple instructions, I guess I have to make you obey.” He pressed his groin against my butt while he unbuttoned the fly of my jeans. He pulled them down to my knees. By then, my underwear rode up my crack. I wanted them down too, but he left them on.

He must have known I wouldn’t be able to resist wriggling my ass for him, because he walked into the cage and picked up a foot-long divided metal bar with a small rounded gap in the center. It was called the humbler, with good reason. It was like a cock ring, except that when he put me on my hands and knees, stretched my nutsack back towards my ass, and closed the humbler around it, the metal bar rested across the backs of my thighs and my balls were exposed where he could easily torture them. With the humbler on, any attempt to stand meant instant excruciating pain.

Instead of forcing me down on my hands and knees as he usually did when he put me in the humbler, Hector shoved a hand through the fly of my underwear. Leaving my cock imprisoned in my briefs, he grasped my balls and pulled them through the fly. He stretched my sack, forcing my balls through a diamond-shaped gap in the chain link fencing. Sharp pangs shot through my balls. He opened the humbler, put it around my aching skin, and snapped it shut. I hugged the fence. The bar kept my groin pressed tight against the chain links and my balls squashed so tight in my sack that they felt like the skin would burst. I knew better than to fight against the humbler. It always won.

Hector dragged his fingernails over the tight skin of my ball sack. “Now maybe you’ll hold still.”

A tear trickled down my cheek. Hector caught the drop and licked it from his fingers. I clenched my teeth to hold back to low moan welling up from my chest. He glanced down at my trapped hard-on and chuckled as he walked out of the cage.

I turned my head to rest my cheek against the chain links. Every movement tugged at my balls. I couldn't crane around enough to watch Hector. My fingers curled around the fencing for support. Pangs shot down my cuffed arms and through my upper back.

Hector came back. He let me see a wicked knife in his hand and then pressed the blade against my back. I felt the tip at the nape of my neck. I held very still for him, knowing that the slightest movement could mean an unexpected cut. He sliced away my t-shirt and let it fall to my feet. Satisfied with his work once again, he went to the far end of the dungeon where I could hear him, but couldn't see what he was up to.

Moments passed. The ache in my arms went from dull throbbing to sharper pangs. My focus went from listening to Hector's movements to the pains in my arms, back, and groin. I closed my eyes.

The flogger caught me by surprise. I hadn't heard the soft swish before it landed between my shoulder blades. I took a deep breath and tried to relax my stance. Each stroke was gentle, but my skin tingled. I tried to imagine how Hector saw me -- arms spread wide, pants around my knees, underwear covering my butt, my shoulder blades pink. It was useless to try to guess what he'd do or what would satisfy him, but I always tried.

Hector clapped his hands hard against my shoulders and arms, a gentle pounding that set my teeth on edge. I tried to hold back the whimpers, but they got away from me anyway. He stepped away again. I concentrated on staying relaxed.

I heard Hector's boots scuff against the concrete floor. There was a loud whoosh, and fiery stings blossomed across my upper back. He must have picked up the braided cat with the hard leather knots at the end. He let it fly again and again until I howled. I tried to go inside my mind and surrender to the pain, but I couldn't yet. When I heard the cat slice the air again, I tried to dodge it. I tugged frantically at the cuffs. Pain shot through my balls. I screamed.

Hector pressed his lips to my back, tasting my sweat. He caressed my aching arms and kissed the nape of my neck until my sobs quieted. His kisses along my neck turned to nibbles and I felt the edge of his teeth. I pressed my lips together as the bites bruised. Between the caresses and the pain, my body wouldn't resist him. I was ready to be used.

When Hector realized I was relaxed, he picked up different flogger and worked my upper thighs until they burned. If the humbler hadn't held me in place, I would have stuck my ass out to let him know how badly I wanted him to pull down the underwear and use the cat on my bare ass. I wanted a lot of things, but we were inside his dungeon and only his wishes mattered. All I could think about was how much I wanted to be fucked.

Hector reached up and released my hands from the cuffs. My arms were weak. Pins and needles sparkled in my fingertips. I wanted to collapse into his strong arms, but I couldn't move yet. He squatted down behind me and gently removed my jeans. As he tapped each leg for me to lift it, another jolt of pain shot through my balls.

I thought he'd let me go, but he left me standing there when he walked away. I bowed my head and concentrated on the pain across my back. My arms still felt sluggish and I

couldn't lift them. Beads of sweat staggered down my back. All I could do was think, but I didn't want to.

He stepped inside the cage again. There was a crop in his hand. "No, no, no," I groaned.

A wicked smile spread across his face. As he turned the crop, the bulge of his biceps strained against the sleeve of the cop uniform. Oh Gods. I gulped. He lightly traced the crop over my balls.

"No, please, no," I begged.

It was just a light smack, but I screamed and tried to jump back. I clenched my teeth and huffed hard. My hands grasped the cage. It was worse being free, because he hadn't locked the humbler, and with my hands free, I could release it myself. He saw me struggle with the temptation. He tapped my balls again. I rattled the cage and danced on the tips of my toes. Pain rushed through me and swept me far, far inside my mind.

He gave me a moment to take it in.

There was a path inside my mind. Sometimes it was a mere line that I followed through haze. Other times, like this one, it was inside a sort of Japanese structure, with small rooms separated by rice paper and lattice walls. I walked down the hallway, knowing where I was headed. I could glimpse a garden far ahead of me. If I got there, I would be in my subspace.

Hector lifted my balls with the stiff end of the crop, and then let them fall. Intense, sharp pain almost made me double over. I knew I was screaming. I heard myself pleading with him to stop. But that was somewhere far away. I hurried down my path. Every fresh jolt of pain held me back, and then pushed me forward. I was almost there, almost there, almost there.

He parted my ass cheeks and fucked me slowly. I hadn't even noticed him releasing me and bending me over the bench. He grasped my hair, yanked back my head, and pounded my ass.

There was a door before me. Through it was the garden. A surge of raw masculine power filled me, and then I was inside. I exhaled and everything tense and bad inside me let go. I forgot about me and only wanted to serve my Master. There was nothing but perfect, floating peace.

* * *

"Baby, come back to me," Hector mumbled close to my ear.

I didn't want to.

He lifted my head and pressed his lips to mine for a long, caressing kiss.

Slowly, I became aware of my body. I was in our bed, sprawled across Hector's chest. Our legs tangled together. Cool, soothing gel was spread over my back. I hurt everywhere, but it was a good pain, like after a heavy workout. Hector stroked my hair. I opened my eyes and looked up at him.

"There you are." His eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled down at me. My fingers curled into the thick salt and pepper hair across his chest. He pressed his lips to the top of my head. "I'm sorry I had to bring you out of your trance, Sam, but we're supposed to join Brett and Joey for dinner in a little over an hour."

"I want to stay here," I said.

"They're throwing a birthday party for you."

The idea of getting dressed and going out exhausted me. All I wanted was to feel Hector's skin against mine and be with him, not talking, just being together.

After a heavy session in the dungeon, I could get away with a lot of things that normally would have meant trouble, so I said, "But I just want to stay here with you. Please, Papi." I worked the big blue eyes, looking mournful.

Hector would never admit it, but I saw how he melted for my routine. "Well, maybe we could go out another night." He reached for the phone and dialed. "Brett? This is Hector. It looks as if we're not going to make it tonight." He paused. No doubt Brett was giving him hell. "Sam wants to stay in. Yes, you can talk to him." Hector handed me the phone.

I cupped my hand over the receiver. "You should have called Joey instead," I told Hector.

"Brett would have called back. This saves me the trouble of talking to him later." No one intimidated Hector.

"Yeah, this is Sam," I said into the phone.

"What's going on?" Brett demanded.

I snuggled closer to Hector. "I don't feel like leaving the house tonight. Papi said I could stay in bed."

There was a long silence before Brett exploded. "You let him beat the shit out of you again, didn't you? And now you're too hurt or bruised to be seen in public. God, Sam, why do you protect him? What is fucking wrong with you?"

"Goodbye, Brett." I clicked the disconnect button and handed the phone back to Hector.

He put the phone back on the charger with a bit of a smile on his lips. He hugged me tight, binding me in his arms. "Did you like the uniform?"

I nodded.

“Sam, don’t go mute on me.”

I had a lot of bad habits, but silence was the one Hector hated most, even more than sulking or sassing.

“Thank you for the bike, Hector. I love it.” I hugged him and rested my head against his chest again. I listened to his heartbeat while my fingers traced swirling patterns in his chest hair. I wrapped a thigh across his legs, my knee resting against his cock, but I didn’t rub it. “May I serve you, Sir?”

One thing I loved about Hector was that he understood how much I craved his domination. So, even though he was hard, he wasn’t about to let me help myself. He stretched out his arms.

“Start with my nipples, Boy.”

Pouring myself into worshipping his body, I lapped at his nipple until it was a hard bead, and then I sucked it. I felt bad for his other nipple, so I switched over to it while I pinched the one I’d been sucking. He didn’t like the hard tweaking like I did, so I kept it gentle. That was enough to get him groaning.

Growing bold, I kissed my way down his stomach. His hard-on was tempting, but I scooted further down the bed and massaged his feet. Then he rolled over on his stomach and I went to work on his calves and thighs. When I reached his ass, I kneaded the solid muscle of his bubble butt. Ignoring the insistent need for release clenching my balls, I set to work massaging his back and shoulders.

“That feels good,” Hector finally said.

Pride swelled in my chest. Praise from my Master was everything to me.

Hector turned over again and settled back on his pillow. “Straddle my face, Boy.”

He didn’t have to ask twice. My knees sank into his pillow as I kneeled over him with my face towards his feet. Oh man, when he grasped my ass and sucked my balls into his mouth, I yelped. I could feel the rumble of his chuckle.

“Still sore?” he asked.

“Yes, Sir.” A long session of cock and ball torture could be felt for days. Hector was thorough and he loved to make me howl.

His hand slid up my aching back and then pushed lightly on the back of my head. “Suck my cock, Boy.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

I got down on all fours and plunged my mouth over his cock until I took in the entire length. He held my head down. At first, I had to fight my gag reflex. He rubbed my throat

until I stopped resisting. He forced me to keep his cock deep in my throat until I tapped his thigh, our signal that I needed to breathe. Slowly, he moved his hand from the back of my head.

First, I lavished long licks up and down the shaft of his cock. My lips nibbled gently to tease as I worked the length. I took his cock in my mouth until my nose pressed to his pubes, and then I slid my mouth up towards the head, adding suction as I went. Then I released the suction and bobbed back down again. I nuzzled against his balls, breathed in his scent, and then licked them to get the flavor of him into my mouth.

Hector plunged his tongue into my ass. To show him how much I loved being rimmed by a stiff tongue, I set my lips in a tight circle and slowly pushed them down over his cockhead. That got us both moaning. I was so damn hard. He loved to torture me with a long rimming session while I squirmed and begged to be fucked. I was trying to concentrate on his body, though, so no matter how much I wanted his cock inside me, I didn't plead. Hector lapped at the outer ring of my hole. I swore I was going to shoot if he didn't stop.

He sank his teeth into the cheek of my ass. The pressure of his bite intensified. Just when I thought he'd break my skin, he lapped my hole again, and then bit my other ass cheek. His hand gripped where I'd been bit.

It was too much. "Sir, please."

He mercilessly tongue fucked me for a while and then asked, "What, Boy?"

I could barely speak. "I'm going to come."

Hector shoved me off him, pushed my face down into the tangled sheets, and smacked my ass until it burned. "You don't tell me when you're going to come. I tell you."

"Yes, Sir." My ass got smacked harder. "Yes, Sir! I'm sorry, Sir!"

"You're a bad, nasty, spoiled little Boy. I'm not going to let you get away with it. You will obey me. You will learn discipline." Every comment was accompanied by a volley of harsh slaps across my butt.

It was getting harder to hold back my orgasm. "Sorry, Sir. I'll be good."

"Yes you will. And do you know why?"

I never knew the right answer. It changed. "Because you're the Master?"

"It that a question?"

"No, Sir!"

“It shouldn’t be. You should know who’s in charge here. And it isn’t you, Boy.” Hector flipped me over and shoved my knees to my chest. He slicked his cock with a generous handful of lube and pushed into me.

I didn’t know where to put my hands. I slid them over his back and up to his head, but his black hair was cut too short to grasp. His thumbs dug into the backs of my thighs as he held my legs apart. Each thrust was long and slow so that I could feel the full length of him opening me up. I tipped my head back. He leaned over me and bit down on my neck near my jugular. As his teeth pressed against my Adam’s apple, he sped up his thrusts. Then he was kissing me and forcing his tongue into my willing mouth. My balls tightened, and I winced, but I loved it.

Hector stared into my eyes. “Are you going to come?”

“Not unless you allow me to, Sir.” I had no idea how I was going to hold back.

He pounded deep into me, hitting the exact right spot over and over. He panted. My muscles tightened down and release coiled deep inside me. Hector pulled back so that only the head of his cock was inside me. I bore down, trying to get more, but he had me pinned so tight that I could barely move.

“If you want my come, you have to work for it,” he told me.

I tightened my ass around him and released it as I rocked a bit. His lips hit me with hard, wet kisses with each thrust. I could smell my scent spread across his face. Sweat slicked our bodies so that his chest slid over mine. He grasped my hand and intertwined our fingers. His hot breath against my neck made me shudder as I bucked under him. His free hand worked its way between our bodies and grasped my cock as he pounded my ass.

“Come for me, Boy. I want to feel it. Now.”

The coil released and shot up through my cock. Warm come oozed between our groins. Hector pushed my knees almost to my ears, straightened his back, and let out a huge groan. I could feel the pulse of his cock as he came inside me.

A wave of pure intermingled power shot out from us. It hit Long Beach and spread in an expanding circle of orgasmic bliss. Following seconds in its wake, our worshippers let out collective cries of pure loving sexual satisfaction. It was our gift to the world.

Chapter 3

I woke in the middle of the night. As usual, I was on my side with Hector spooned tightly against me. His arm pinned me down. I used to think he did that to make sure I didn't run away, but after a while I understood that he liked the feeling of my bare skin against his while we slept.

A winter storm must have moved over the Southland during the night. Rain splattered against the roof. I burrowed closer to Hector and enjoyed the warmth but couldn't fall back to sleep. Then I saw the glow of bluish light under the bedroom door and realized that we had a visitor.

Carefully, I slid out from under Hector's arm. He snorted and rolled over to his side of the bed, still asleep. I quietly found a pair of sweat pants to pull on, crept to the door, and tiptoed from the room.

The glow came from the living room. Carefully avoiding the floorboard that squeaked, I edged past the bathroom, down the hall, and into the living room.

"Sammy!" The Goddess of Eternal Youth stood in front of one of the many bookcases lining the walls of the living room as if she were searching for something to read. Her perfume preceded her across the room. As she advanced on me, she held out both hands, grasped mine, and squeezed until her rings cut into my fingers. Even though it was the middle of the night, she wore a tailored suit, ecru blouse, and a strand of pearls like drops of pale honey. I had no idea if she had a day job, but if she did, I bet she sold multi-million dollar mansions in parts of Los Angeles so exclusive that I'd never heard of them.

"Shh! You'll wake Hector." I glanced back at the hallway. The back of the house was dark, but the huge front window in the living room let in the glow from the streetlights.

"How is he? I don't see enough of him." She patted her carefully coiffed gold hair and went on before I could answer. "I'm here to wish you Happy Birthday."

For that, she had to wake me? I said, "Thank you, Goddess," but I didn't make it sound as if I meant it.

She started to sit in Hector's big poppa chair, but I glared at her, so she perched on the arm of the couch and carefully avoided the old crocheted blanket draped across it as if it might infect her. She crossed one svelte leg over the other. The skirt of her suit clung above

her knees with the kind of modesty only a very expensive suit could provide, showing just enough skin and shadow but not a hair's-breadth more. She smiled benignly at me. "Another year. They fly by so fast."

As if she had to remind me. I struck a pose that Joey and I had dubbed 'the twink uber-mo.' It radiated annoyed contempt. "What do you want, Goddess? Any moment now, Hector will notice I'm gone, and he doesn't like it when I leave bed without permission."

Her smile got feral. "Straight to business. My. Okay. We'll do this your way. I'm here for my payment."

"What?!" I clamped my hand over my mouth and glanced down the hallway. I lowered my voice to a whisper. "I just paid you, Goddess."

She frowned a little and nodded. "Yes, dear, you did pay me, but that was last year's rates, and now you've gotten a year older. It takes more of my power to keep you nineteen today than it did yesterday. I'm sure you understand. I'm going to have to raise my rates."

I fumed. "How much?"

She pretended to have to think it over. "Let's see. One year is six percent of nineteen--"

Oh, we were going to do the math thing? She probably thought she could confuse me with numbers. "One is five point three percent of nineteen, but shouldn't it be calculated as a percent of twenty-six, not nineteen?" I asked.

"Oh my. You did that math in your head? Pretty and smart."

People always assumed I had nothing going on upstairs. Except Hector. He expected me to be intelligent, which was another reason why I loved him. I might have been a bit naive about some things, but I wasn't stupid.

Eternal Youth waved her bejeweled fingers so that the rings caught the light coming in through the window. "I was rounding, but we can calculate it your way if you want."

"In that case, Goddess, we'll calculate it as a percentage of my real age, which makes it three point eight percent -- which is still too damn much. Hector only allows me a small fraction of my power as an allowance. You already get a fourth of that."

"Well, we can simply forget the whole thing then, and as soon as your last payment wears off, you'll turn into a twenty-six year-old man." She opened her eyes wide and enunciated each word carefully, as if I were a small child, or mentally challenged. "Of course, you won't be his little boy any more, but I'm sure he'll still love you. At least, that's what he'll tell you. And he can always close his eyes while he's fucking you and remember how young and beautiful you used to be." She smoothed down her skirt. "I can't imagine the God of Sex being anyone's pity fuck, but if that's what you want..."

I'll admit that I flinched, but I gritted my teeth and said, "Three point eight percent more."

She sighed. “I’ll take it, but believe me, it’s cutting into my margins. But I like you, Sam, so for you, I’ll do it. Never mind all those years I kept you young for free.” She tilted her head and cocked an eyebrow. If she was going for guilt, though, she had the wrong boy. Nothing was free from the Goddess of Eternal Youth.

We could hear the mattress springs as Hector moved on the bed. We both looked down the hallway. The bedroom light clicked on. A pool of golden light shone under the door and illuminated the aged wooden flooring in the hallway. Eternal Youth gave me a hard smile.

I pushed power at her. “Okay, there’s your raise. Now leave.”

“But, Sam, don’t you want me to pro-rate it for the week that’s already passed?” she asked.

Bitch. “No. Just go.”

“I wouldn’t want you to think I took advantage,” she said.

The sounds of Hector’s footsteps got closer to the bedroom door.

Furious, I whispered, “Go now, Goddess. If Hector finds you here, he’s going to be pissed off. He may take it out on me, but believe me, he won’t forgive you, either.”

Underneath all her makeup, Eternal Youth paled a little. “Until next full moon then, Sam.”

What a sneaky move! She almost conned me. “Wait a second, Goddess,” I said. “There are thirteen full moons in a year. Are you trying to slip an extra month in?” Deal would have been so proud of me right then.

Eternal Youth really looked pissed off that I’d caught her. “All right. The first of every calendar month.”

I nodded. She folded space and disappeared. I sighed with relief, turned around, and jumped three feet straight up.

Nanny’s ghost stood inside the kitchen archway, clicking her tongue. “Mijo, what are you doing with that woman?”

My hand went to my chest, as if that could stop the hard pounding of my heart. “Gods, Nanny, you scared me half to death.”

“I don’t think my Hector would approve of you sneaking around with her,” Nanny said.

The bedroom door opened. I scooted quickly through the arched kitchen entryway and whispered, “I wasn’t sneaking.”

“Oh? Then why are you whispering?”

“I...” She had me there. “Nanny, please don’t tell Hector. Please?”

She frowned. I gave her the full blast of my big blue eyes and the pouty bottom lip, and just like Hector, she fell for the whole act.

Her ghostly hand swatted my arm. “All right. I’ll keep your secret. Who listens to a ghost anyway?” she said.

“I do.”

“Yes, you do, which is why I let you get away with so much. Now get back to bed before you get into trouble.”

“Yes, Nanny.” I bowed my head and looked up at her through my lashes, the epitome of a contrite boy.

“You’re so good at that. No wonder you have my Hector wrapped around your little finger.”

It was really the other way around, but she liked to believe that Hector was somehow bewitched by me. I winked at her.

Hector shuffled into the kitchen and rubbed his eyes. “What are you doing out of bed?”

Nanny’s Ghost faded quickly.

“I needed a drink of water, Papi.”

“Humph.” Hector glanced up at the ceiling. “Sounds like rain.”

I shivered. “It’s cold tonight.”

“You have an interview tomorrow. You need your sleep. Get back to bed.” He yawned.

“Yes, Papi.” As I passed him on the way to the bedroom, he gave my butt a light swat. I hurried down the hallway.

When we were back in the bedroom, Hector put leather cuffs on my wrists and chained my hands to the bars of the wrought iron headboard. “From now on you’ll have to ask permission to get up,” he said.

“I didn’t want to wake you.”

“That’s not a suggestion, Boy.” Hector pulled off my sweatpants before he draped the covers over me. It was wonderfully warm under the blankets with him. He pressed his lips to the back of my neck. “You aren’t mind-fucking yourself over your interview, are you?”

“No, Sir.”

“I was a little afraid you’d be up all night, pacing. That’s why I worked so hard to wear you out tonight.”

“Truthfully, Sir, I hadn’t thought about it. Deal said my contract with the magazine is as good as signed. All I have to do is make an appearance. She’s going to handle everything.”

“I’m glad to hear it. You worry way too much, Sam.”

In minutes, Hector was asleep. I, of course, wondered if I should be worried about the interview. So I started to. I still hadn’t fallen asleep when my alarm went off the next morning.

Chapter 4

Deal pulled in front of the house in her red Ferrari and hit the horn. Since breaking up with Crash, the Computer God, she'd changed her look a bit, but she was still a frightening presence. Her talons were still ice pink, and bracelets still jiggled at her bony wrists, but she'd let her short-cropped blonde hair grow down to her shoulders. All she needed was a big hat and she'd look like a screen siren from the 1940s in her flawless green raw silk suit. I wondered if she and the Goddess of Eternal Youth shopped at the same couturier.

I raced out of the house and opened the passenger side door of Deal's Ferrari. She scowled at me. "Is that what you're wearing?"

Why did everyone say that? My jeans were clean, and so was my t-shirt. "Well, yeah."

"No." She turned off the engine. "I worked my ass off to get you this interview, and you are not going to ruin it by showing up looking like skater dude."

"But he's seen my writing samples. That's what matters."

She got out of the car and walked towards Hector's house. "Your writing may get you the job, but this interview is going to get you the money. Show me your wardrobe. I know Hector buys you better clothes than that."

I unlocked the front door. She followed me through the living room, down the hallway, and into the bedroom. I opened the closet door for her, but she concentrated on the wrought iron bed, the old dresser, and the homoerotic art prints on the wall.

"So, this is the den of iniquity, where it all happens. Looks like my grandmother's bedroom. I expected more leather. Black walls. Lots of steel."

"That's in the dungeon," I told her.

"A special room just for sex? How... very."

Something about her attitude always made me want to ruffle her, so I said, "Hector's fucked me in every room in this house."

Deal winced. "Please, tell me you haven't done it on the kitchen table."

I grinned. “Not since this morning.”

She rolled her eyes to the ceiling. “I had to ask. From now on, Sam, if I ask a question about your sex life, consider it rhetorical.” Deal went to the closet. She looked over a shirt, and then, with a scrape of the hanger across the rod, shoved it aside. I winced. When she got through the entire collection, she spun around to face me. “Any one of these would be better than what you have on. I swear, I thought my days of baby-sitting you were over when you became a God.” She turned back to the clothes. “I saw something here. Strip down while I find it again.”

“But, Goddess...”

Deal gave me an exasperated glance. “Sam, I have no interest in you. None. Except my percentage on this deal. So we’re going to dress you up and get you that -- good gods!” She jumped back a step.

As ordered, I’d stripped off the jeans and t-shirt and stood there, naked. She kept staring at me. Well, not me so much as my dick. I grabbed my t-shirt and clutched it to my groin. “You told me to strip.”

“Yes, I did.” She slowly licked her lip, then shook her head and turned back to the closet. “In that case, what’s your tightest pair of pants? Might as well flaunt your assets.”

“The blue ones.”

“Mmm. Hector has good taste. Italian, and from the designer, not a knock-off. He must spend a fortune on you. And you have a matching jacket. Good.” She flung the pants at me. I quickly put them on. “Do a turn. Okay, no jacket. We don’t want to cover that ass.”

She picked out a shirt, something tight that hugged my pecs. I was too skinny to bulk up, but what I had was defined. As the smooth silk of the shirt rubbed over my nipples, they got hard.

Deal said, “Put your ratty sneakers back on. Perfect! You know what you look like?”

“A dress-up doll?” I shoved my hands into my pockets and slouched.

“That’s the perfect stance! You’re a cross between a Hollywood bad-boy and a Paris runway model. Do you have sunglasses? Wear them.” She checked her watch. “Come on. I’ve perfected the grand entrance for a power lunch. It’s part art, part science. Being too late ruins the entire effect.”

Two minutes later, thanks to God magic, we pulled into the valet parking for a Hollywood restaurant so hip that I hadn’t heard about it yet. Deal leaned over the center console of her Ferrari and tousled my curls.

“He’s going to eat you up,” she said.

As we headed for the door, she whispered, “He’s into pop art and actually despises movies, so don’t get into one of your movie conversations.” She stopped and looked me over. “On second thought, don’t say much of anything. Just sit there and look bored, unobtainable and pretty. Think you can handle that?”

If she’d known what I was thinking, she would have flattened me.

Deal ignored the host when we walked into the restaurant. She headed through the maze of white linen covered tables. We passed directors and producers, the kind of guys whose names were familiar to anyone who’d seen a major picture in the past year. Many of them glanced up as we walked by. I’d interviewed a few of them, but was surprised when I got nods of recognition. The rest watched me walk past with looks that were sexual, but calculating, as if they were appraising my box office potential.

Deal sniffed the air. “Do you smell that, Sam? Power. Raw money power. I love this place.” A waiter jumped to open the door to the patio for her. Deal didn’t acknowledge him, but I gave him a nod of thanks. He gave me the other kind of nod, that ‘mo to ‘mo recognition that bordered on cruising.

The high walls and strategic foliage around the restaurant patio hid the two-story mini-mall on the lot beside the restaurant. The patio was more crowded than the interior of the restaurant. Deal bestowed curt nods to people -- the ones who didn’t immediately turn away. My embarrassed smile was returned by a few of the patrons, some of whom I actually knew.

A fussy, balding man in a yellow and white striped shirt glared at us from a center table. Deal sailed over to him. “George!”

He slapped his napkin on the table, rose, and then looked at me. His mouth opened a few times. “You’re Sam Dewey?”

Hector warned me that he’d cane my ass if I wasn’t on my best behavior at lunch, so instead of mumbling, I pulled my hand out of my pocket and offered it. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir.”

George’s face flushed right up to his scalp. “Oh, no. The pleasure is all mine.” He held onto my hand a bit too long. “You’re a lot younger than I expected. Not that it’s a bad thing. I like younger.”

It was obvious what he meant. I gave him a weak smile and withdrew my hand from his. Remembering my manners, I pulled out Deal’s chair for her. She barely acknowledged me and turned it so that she faced George. “Sorry we were so late. LA traffic is so unpredictable. And I had to wait for Sam to go through his wardrobe. He’s such a little fashion hound.”

Maybe she thought that was funny, but I didn’t. I plopped down in my seat. Waiters scurried over and handed us menus. One picked up my napkin, flicked it with a snap of his wrist, and drew it over my lap so that his knuckles trailed over my groin.

The patio seemed dark, until I remembered that I still had on my sunglasses. I pulled them off and put them on the table beside my water glass. Deal gave me a sour look, but George beamed at me.

“Wow! You’re going to look great on camera.”

Fear spread through my chest like a sickening mist. I choked out the word, “Camera?”

George put his elbows on the table. “You do know that our film critic covers all the major film festivals. Cannes, Sundance, Venice... But we were thinking, and just looking at you I know this is a great idea, that we’d get you on the red carpet at the Oscars to do some interviews.”

I fought down my panic. “The Academy Awards are three weeks from now,” I told him.

“Are they? Next year then.” He put on reading glasses, looked over the menu again, and then pocketed them. “When are the Emmys?”

It took everything I had to stop from rolling my eyes. “Those are for television.”

Deal kicked me under the table.

The waiter came and took our orders. I had no idea who was paying for that lunch, but whoever it was, they were getting ripped off. Even though the food sounded good, there was no way I’d ever order a thirty-dollar hamburger.

George grinned at me. “So, Sam, how long have you lived in LA?”

“A little over four years. Although I live in Long Beach, not LA.”

He nodded, as if he understood the distinction. “I live in Chelsea part time, but I have a house in Connecticut, and a little place in P-Town.”

I wasn’t sure if that was a boast about how successful he was, or if he wanted to make sure I knew he was gay, as if I’d miss that he was cruising me. Maybe it was a little of both. Men had a tendency to brag to me. I frowned and turned my attention to my water glass. Sitting there and looking pretty suddenly sounded like a good idea.

George picked up his water glass when I picked up mine. When I set it down, he did the same. It was called mirroring. Deal once told me that was a good sign during negotiations. It meant that the person wanted to please me. I thought it was annoying as hell.

“Do you spend much time mingling with the Hollywood crowd?” George asked.

No matter how sophisticated or blasé they wanted to act, people always wanted a tidbit of Hollywood gossip. I never had any for them. Sure, I saw a lot, and heard even more, but it didn’t interest me much. I liked movies. I didn’t care about the politics, I didn’t care who was sleeping with whom -- except when someone appealed to me as the God of Sex. All I wanted to know about was up on the screen.

I shrugged. “I get invited to parties, mostly the indie movie people, because they know me by now. I don’t stand in lines outside the club of the week and hope to party with the A list. I go to every press junket I can talk my way into, and occasionally I get lucky and get a one-on-one interview with a star.”

Deal glared at me, but George slapped his hand down on the table and laughed. “Well, with press credentials from our magazine, interviews won’t be a problem anymore. Of course, we have a staff writer who does the big interview with the cover, but your days of shouting out questions from a pack of other freelancers will be over if you sign with us.”

That wasn’t why I let Deal submit my writing to them. Truthfully, I liked the competition at press junkets. What I hated about being freelance was the constant begging for payment. I hated to spend so much time on the phone tracking down checks that were never mailed. Theoretically, I didn’t need the money since Hector would have kept me completely if I let him, but I paid my share of the household bills. The rest of my money I squirreled away as an insurance policy against the future. I wanted to believe that Hector would never throw me out, but nothing was a given in this life, even for a God.

The waiter brought our food. Deal and George talked more than they ate. For a while, I listened to their conversation, but since Deal made it clear I wasn’t supposed to interrupt her while she was working, I turned my attention to the food. That suited me just fine. I tried to figure out where the salmon was on my plate, and finally found it hiding under a mass of fried yam curlicues. Once upon a time, I would have dove in like a hungry farm boy, but Hector was on a campaign to civilize me, so I used the right fork and cut small pieces. No matter how slow I went, though, my plate was cleared long before Deal and George had eaten half their meals.

The waiter came back. “Are you finished, sir?” he asked me. I nodded. He took my plate and went to Deal’s side. “And you, madame?”

“Take it away.”

“You can take mine, too,” George said.

I wanted to ask for a bag to take the food home. It seemed like such a waste to throw it away. It would have heated up well. Deal must have sensed what I was thinking, because she shot me a nasty look.

Another waiter came to the table with a pitcher of water. He was cute, in a wanna-be actor, waxed and buffed kind of way. He looked me over and must have decided that I was somebody. It must have been the clothes. He smiled at me while he filled my glass. I smiled back, just being friendly. His expression subtly changed from ‘should I know who you are’ to ‘want to slip into the alleyway and let me suck your cock?’ And then something very cold landed in my lap. I jumped out of my seat and looked down. He’d overfilled my glass and sent ice water pouring across the table.

“Sir, I’m so sorry!” he said.

I whisked away the water and ice. “Don’t worry. It happens.” It happened to me a lot.

He was mortified. “I can’t believe I did that.”

I put a hand on his shoulder. “Really, it’s okay. I’ll survive. I won’t melt.” I grinned at him. That only seemed to make him feel worse. Deal and George didn’t help. They both made snide comments about his intelligence.

“I’m just going to run to the men’s room.” I bolted from the table, not able to watch another human being suffer from humiliation.

As I hurried through the restaurant, I realized that I had a huge wet stain over my groin. To make things worse, the wet silk blend clung to my skin, and I hadn’t worn any underwear. It felt as if I’d put a spotlight on my cock, and despite the ice bath, it decided to stand up and take a bow. The patrons in the restaurant weren’t Gods, but they had their own kind of power, and it amplified their desires. Visions of their fantasies jostled in my brain -- some surprisingly sweet, others brutal even by my standards -- and the noise almost overwhelmed me. I walked faster, but their lust clung to me.

Once safely inside the bathroom, I put my hands over my eyes and tried to calm down. It didn’t work. My hard-on wasn’t going to magically go away, and I couldn’t stand to parade it through the restaurant again. Knowing I’d have to confess it to Hector and take the punishment no matter how good my reasons for masturbating, I went into a stall and unzipped my pants. Closing my eyes, I tried to summon up a fantasy that would get me off fast. For a moment, I dared to think about that waiter’s sweet mouth around my cock. Then I drifted into the harsher fantasies that I’d glimpsed as I walked through the restaurant.

I gasped as my hand slid furiously up and down my shaft. I gripped the head of my cock and worked it roughly. Hector was going to be furious with me for touching myself. I groaned. I could picture him towering over me, his brow furrowed, his mouth set in a harsh line. Oh yeah. And then him shoving me down and ripping my pants off. Yes. He’d use the cane. Fuck. I’d try to escape, but he’d overpower me and whip my ass so hard that the welts would bleed. I’d scream and cry and beg for mercy, but he’d ignore all of it as he whipped my ass raw. And then he’d tell me what a filthy, nasty boy I was, and he was going to teach me lesson about obeying my Papi that I’d never forget. I groaned again. Then he’d put me in a chastity belt and smack my balls with his crop until I nearly passed out, and he’d tell me he’d never let me come again because I was such a bad, bad, boy, and then he’d take my ass... Shit! I lifted on my toes and shot hard into the toilet. Gasping, I opened my eyes and milked another small shot out of my dick. It hit the water like a smoke curl and dissipated. I leaned against the metal wall of the stall and panted. Then I grinned. That fantasy worked every time.

I was standing at the urinal when George came into the bathroom. He stood right next to me and stared down at my dick. I cursed myself for not pissing while I was in the stall, but I thought I had the place to myself. He just kept staring. Then he pulled his cock out and stroked it. Not quite sure how to gracefully handle the situation, I nodded to him, tucked myself back into my wet pants, and left.

Back out on the patio, I yanked my chair out from the table and slunk down into it. “Can we go now?” I asked Deal.

“What’s the matter?”

I leaned over the wet table. “George hit on me in the bathroom.”

She grinned and leaned back in her seat, the picture of contentment. “Did he? That’s got to be worth another two, three percent at least. You didn’t turn him down flat, did you?”

I leaned over the wet table. “Sometimes, this God of Sex thing is nothing but a huge pain in the ass.”

Deal made a face. “Oh, you poor baby. Everyone wants to fuck you. You poor, poor dear. Must be torture for you.”

That attitude pissed me off. I whispered over the table, “How would you like it if even people you weren’t attracted to were constantly hitting on you? Women grab my ass, or more, all the time. Guys cruise me right in front of Hector, as if he isn’t even there.”

Deal shrugged. “Comes with the territory.”

I slumped back in my seat and fiddled with my sunglasses. “Listen. I appreciate what you’re doing for me.”

Her lips pressed so tight they almost disappeared.

“Goddess, back when I was so poor that I couldn’t afford food, men offered me hundreds of dollars just to suck my cock. I starved rather than sell myself, because even though I hadn’t accepted my Godhood yet, I believed that sex was sacred.”

“That didn’t stop you from dropping your pants,” she said wryly.

“Well, of course I did. But I never took their money.”

“The hooker with a heart of gold. You’re a Hollywood cliché, Sam.”

I didn’t let her insults distract me. “I’m not starving, Deal. Not anymore. So why should I start selling myself now?”

She rubbed her forehead. I thought she’d yell at me, or give me a harsh lecture, but she suddenly sat up straight and snapped her fingers. “I can use this. You, leave the restaurant right now. If you see George, ignore him and keep walking.”

“That would be rude.”

“That’s negotiation, Baby. Get out of here and let me work a little of my magic.” She closed her eyes and drew a deep breath in through her thin nose, clearly relishing the moment.

Chapter 5

January was a weird month in Los Angeles. One day it was cold and rainy; the next clear and hot. We'd been stuck inside for almost a full week as a winter storm passed through. Hector didn't mind staying in, but my morning jogs had been cut short by the downpour and I couldn't work in my garden so I had a bad case of cabin fever.

Hector glanced over his newspaper as I paced the kitchen in search of things to do. "You're distracting me," he said.

"Sorry, Sir." I knelt at his feet and tried my hardest to relax and focus, but pent-up energy made me fidget. Try as I might, I couldn't be still.

Hector sighed heavily and folded the newspaper. "It stopped raining. Why don't you go play with your friends?"

"The basketball courts are still flooded. Besides, I'm going over to Joey's for a pizza and video night while you're out of town later this week. He got a new multiplayer game. Do you mind if I spend the night there? It could be a long evening."

"Who else will be there?"

Shrugging, I said, "Maybe Brett. I don't know. Do you want me to call Joey and ask?"

Hector quietly contemplated his hand, which opened and closed a few times. His brow furrowed as he frowned. For a long time, I thought he'd flat out tell me I wasn't allowed to go, but he finally said, "No. Go ahead and stay over if you need to. Just send me a text message letting me know where you are."

"Thank you, Sir."

His smile seemed sad. "I wouldn't want you riding that motorcycle after you've been drinking, after all, especially if we have more rain." Then his gaze focused on me and he showed me a brighter smile. "We need to work off some of your energy, Boy. You're making me jittery with all that pacing. What do you say to a long walk at the beach?"

* * *

The chilly wind blowing off the ocean cut right through my jacket. Hector had told me to wear something warmer, but I didn't want to admit to him that was my only coat. If I had, he would have dragged me off to a mall for an afternoon of shopping. So I shoved my hands in my jeans pockets and tried to hide my shivers as we walked on the concrete bike path that bordered the sand.

The ocean was gray with foamy whitecaps. High overhead, a solid bank of clouds seemed to cover the Los Angeles basin, but they weren't dark with rain. Despite the cold Pacific current and all the toxins from the storm runoff, there were surfers in the water.

When I got so cold that my teeth chattered, I jogged down the path a bit, then back to Hector, and then took off running again. About a mile and a half down the strand, the tightly-wound spring in my gut finally loosened. Even though my nose felt like it was going to run, my cheeks grew warm and I stopped shivering.

Hector returned my grin when he strolled up to me. He reached for my wind-tousled curls, but must have realized that trying to tame them was futile, so he caressed my face instead.

With a wicked grin on my face, I bolted for the sand where a huge flock of seagulls gathered. I flapped my arms and cawed as I ran towards the birds. A few eyed me with some concern, but most of the flock ignored me. They were hardened LA birds, after all, big swaggering bullies who stole sandwiches right out of the hands of children. I glanced over my shoulder at Hector. He'd crossed his arms over his chest, but I was too far away to see his expression. He was probably chuckling at me.

Turning back to the birds, I stomped across the sand and tried to look menacing. A few more took to the air, but didn't glide far before settling back down on the sand. Not giving up, I charged. The flock squawked at me as I ran through their midst toward the water.

At the high tide mark, the sand changed from loose mounds that dragged at my bare feet to hard pack. There, the beach tilted downhill several feet. I stood at the crest of the dune and looked out into the water.

An older surfer paddled his long board along a rising swell. When it reached a peak, he nimbly rose to his feet. The far edge of the wave began to curl over, racing the surfer. He stayed just ahead of it, drawing out a long ride from a mediocre wave. When the water finally collapsed under its own weight, he quickly dropped off the board. For a second he disappeared, and then I saw him marching out of the ocean, board tucked under his arm, leash trailing.

He caught me watching and smiled. I grinned back. "Wow. You're good," I said.

"Been doing it for years." The gravelly pitch of his voice warmed me to my core.

"I'd love to learn how to surf," I told him.

He regarded me for a moment through squinting pale blue eyes. "I could teach you. Athletic boy like you would pick it up in no time."

I gestured to my jeans. “Not dressed for it. The water’s cold, isn’t it?”

“I got a wet suit back at my place that would probably fit you.”

Sure he did. And even if such a wet suit did exist, I bet he had an entirely different sort of rubber wear in mind.

A searing jolt of heat hit my ass right where Hector’s brand marked me. “Um, thanks.” I backed up the little hill. “Maybe some other time. Can’t right now.” As I turned away from the water, I stumbled on the sand.

Hector still stood on the bike path. His arms were still folded across his chest. Somehow, though, I didn’t think he was chuckling.

* * *

Not that I’d doubted she would, but Deal got the magazine to offer me a contract. Even though I didn’t care for her negotiation methods, I had to admit that the money was nice. I even got business cards and official looking press credentials. They made me feel like a professional.

Before I graduated from college, I was already submitting movie reviews to various ‘zines and small newsletters, so I had no idea why it felt so different when I submitted my first ones to my new editor. It did though.

“This is the big time,” I said. I almost hit the send button, but stopped and re-read everything I’d written. It looked perfect. Still, it took a leap of faith to send it.

I sat at my desk for a while and stared at the screen. I don’t know what I expected. Maybe an angry note demanding to know why I ever thought I could write. When an e-mail came, I quickly opened it, thinking it might be from George. Instead, it was from my sister, Linda, who sent me pictures of my nieces and nephews. I wrote her back. A few SPAM with Viagra ads made it through my filters. Laughing, I deleted them. Then, nothing.

I paced around the house a bit. Hector wouldn’t be home from his trip for a couple hours. I’d already watered and weeded my herb garden. The house was spotless. My time was my own. I hated that. At loose ends, I finally decided to take my motorcycle out for a long ride. I grabbed my helmet and went out the kitchen door into the backyard.

Every time I went out the kitchen door, I paused on the back porch for a moment and gazed at my motorcycle. I was still dazed that it was mine. It was parked at the end of the driveway, right in front of the detached garage. It seemed crouched, ready to pounce, ready to run. Sunlight sparkled off the metal. I was truly one spoiled boy. With a grin, I jumped down to the lawn and ran to it.

Heading south on my bike, I took the Pacific Coast Highway where it ran along the beach. The road was straight and flat, enticing me to lean low over the bike and let the power

flow. That time of day, there wasn't much traffic. A few cars lumbered along; I wove around them.

Out in the chilly ocean, brave surfers caught low slate-colored swells. I pulled into the parking lot at Seal Beach to watch them. The lean grace of the surfers' bodies was emphasized by their clinging wetsuits. Most of them had broad, muscled shoulders that were built up from paddling through the waves. Somewhere between dancers and athletes, they rose to their feet and balanced on their boards. The really good ones relaxed and went with the motion, their stances almost casual.

Like the older surfer I'd seen before, those guys mesmerized me. Ever since I'd moved to Los Angeles, I'd wanted to try surfing, but I'd always been too shy to approach anyone about it. I was still all kinds of tongue-tied, but with Hector constantly pushing me to talk to strangers, I'd at least gotten to where I could do it without stuttering. While I worked up my courage to ask one of the surfers for a lesson, I trudged across the sand.

A tall, blond guy eyed me while he wiped down his board. He didn't seem too friendly.

"Hi. Nice board." Oh yeah, I was the king of small talk.

He grunted and turned his back to me.

I chewed on my bottom lip while I tried to figure out what to say next. His wetsuit clung to his butt and thighs. Not as much of a bubble as Hector's ass, but still shapely.

"Go away, faggot," he muttered.

Other surfers were coming out of the water. Their eyes were cold. Alarms went off in my brain, but I hesitated. "I was just--"

"Checking out my butt, you homo? Get on your little bike and go back to faggot town."

How did everything turn so quickly? It was as if the world suddenly got very close and there was nowhere to hide. My hands balled into fists.

The other surfers dropped their boards on the sand. One laughed at me. "Look, the little faggot thinks he can take us on."

The blond guy shoved my shoulder. "This is our beach. No fags allowed."

Fear shot through my blood, adrenaline pumping, but I held my ground. They were huge, grown men, and there were four of them, but I was too stubborn, and too stupid, to run. "It's a public beach. I can be here if I want to," I said.

Someone bumped me from behind. The hit was solid, but I could take a lot of pain before I crumbled.

"Looks like someone needs a lesson." The blond grinned.

Could his dialogue have been more cliché? It was lifted straight from a B-grade movie.

I made one last effort at peace. “All I wanted was to ask about surfing.”

“Yeah, we know what you wanted,” the guy with the steroid belly said. While he distracted me, one of his friends threw the first real punch.

My butt landed on the sand with a jolt. Sharp pain throbbed through my upper lip. Anger settled like a dark mask over my brain, blocking out all rational thought. I staggered to my feet, and came up swinging.

Yeah, I got my ass kicked, but I did some damage, too. They knocked me down; I got back up again. At first they laughed, but a few punches taught them that I wasn’t just some nelly twink. Still, four against one was bad odds, and unlike the movies, they didn’t take me on one at a time. I got hit from behind and the side at the same time. When I fell to my knees, one of them kicked me. Then they were all kicking me, and even though they had bare feet, it felt too much like bad déjà vu, like I was back in my old apartment, and I was on the floor screaming and Marcus was killing me one kick at a time. That’s when I got scared.

Next thing I knew, I was on my bike, roaring out of the parking lot. With my helmet on, I couldn’t hear a word, but I imagined them laughing at me, and that was humiliating enough. I glanced back, afraid they’d follow me. I hated to use more of my God powers, but I’d do anything to get away from them. I was so busy looking back that I almost ran a red light. My hands shook. Every rib ached.

Another motorcycle pulled up to the light beside me. There was something familiar about him. Then I remembered that I’d seen him the day Hector gave me the bike. The visor on his helmet was so dark that I couldn’t see his face, but I had that nagging feeling that I knew him. He was too big to be Crash, the Computer God. He wore his leathers like someone who’d earned them. Maybe I’d met him at one of Ophir’s parties, or at a club.

He reached over and gave my hand a little squeeze. The light changed, and he took off. I started up a bit slower. Who was he? At the next light, I split the lane between cars, stopped next to him and stared. Not an inch of his skin was visible. He didn’t turn toward me. Before the light went green though, he indicated the parking lot of a fast food place. Curiosity made me follow him.

He parked and got off his bike. He didn’t say a word, but his hand gesture was enough. I was to wait where I was. He went inside the restaurant and came out with napkins in his hand. Standing beside me, he cupped my chin in his hand and tipped my head back. Then he dabbed at my lip where it was cut, gently, so that it barely stung.

I stared up into that black visor, sure that if I concentrated hard enough, my vision would penetrate it. All I saw was my reflection -- eyes wide, lip puffing out, and a smear of sand clinging to my cheek.

His touch felt so familiar. How many men had fussed over my bruises and cuts in clubs after a session? Not many. I usually took off as soon as the scene ended. But the way he

touched me, backing off so that I didn't feel crowded, and then a gentle dab as he wiped away the sand on my cheek -- he had to know how I felt about being touched.

He waded up the bloodied napkins and tossed them over the wall of the trash container. He started up his engine, but indicated that I was to go first. It made me nervous, but I pulled out of the parking lot with him behind me.

We rode to Hector's house that way, with him a respectful distance behind me. If I'd thought about it, I wouldn't have led him to where I lived, but there was something so comforting about a strong male telling me what to do that I didn't even consider disobeying the unspoken command.

When I pulled into the driveway, just up to where the sidewalk began, the other rider stayed on the street in front of the house. He gave me a nod, like he was saying, "You'll be all right now. You're safe." That's exactly how I felt. I sighed in relief. My ribs hurt when I lifted my hand to wave goodbye. He waved back and rode off.

I turned back to the house. Hector was glaring out the front window, his big arms crossed over his chest. Even from that distance, I could see that he was pissed off.

I thought about using God magic to heal my face and ribs before I got into the house, but that burst I'd used to get away from the surfers cost too much and the little that I had left had to be saved for emergencies.

Hector didn't say a word when I slinked into his house. I headed for the bathroom. He followed me. "What's going on?" he asked.

My fingers gently tapped the skin near the cut as I checked it in the mirror. I winced. Blood welled up in the long cut.

"I asked you a question, Boy."

I glanced at his reflection in the mirror. His aura was dark. The small bathroom felt too crowded and the air inside it was heavy like the atmosphere before a thunderstorm. "Fight," I said.

"Fight? That's it? That's all you're going to say?"

I opened the medicine cabinet and tried to find something to stop the bleeding. Hector had a huge collection of ointments that he used on me after a heavy session in his dungeon, but I had no idea which one was for cuts.

He pushed me aside and grabbed a small container. "Sit."

I hopped up onto the bathroom vanity. Hector focused on my lip as he sprinkled powder over it. My skin tightened, the blood instantly gelled into an artificial scab.

"What else is hurt?" he asked. His nostrils flared with each breath.

Maybe I was a bit spoiled, but I was used to him babying me when I was in pain. His scowl had me worried. Something felt wrong and I wanted out of that room. “Just my pride.” My ribs were sore, but I knew they were only bruised and he couldn’t do anything for them. I stood.

Hector blocked me. “You’re not leaving this room until you tell me what happened.”

Trapped, I had no choice but to admit how stupid I’d been. “I went for a ride along the beach. I stopped to watch the surfers. A couple of them surrounded me and shoved me around a bit. Then one of them threw a punch. I was doing okay until I fell on my knees and they were all kicking me, calling me a faggot. And I panicked and used my God powers to get to my bike.”

“You should have come straight home.”

“I did.”

“Oh? And yet you still had time to pick up an admirer. Was that the surfer you were flirting with the other day?”

Alarms went off in my head. “No! That guy on the motorcycle was just making sure I got home okay. We didn’t even talk. Honest.”

The furrow between Hector’s brows got deeper and the tension got unbearable. My eyes darted to the bathroom door. I figured that I could use my God powers to get away from him, but where would I go that he couldn’t follow? “I didn’t flirt with that guy. Please believe me.” I backed towards the shower while I talked. Oh, Gods. Oh. Gods. I’d forgotten to be careful. How could I have been so stupid? I should have gone straight home to Hector. I never should have gone out for a ride in the first place. “I’m sorry I let him follow me here, Sir. I wasn’t thinking clearly. I was a little shaken up and didn’t think things through. I won’t let it happen again. I know I made a mistake. I’m sorry. Please forgive me.”

“Did he touch you?” Hector asked quietly. I was trying to figure out the best answer when Hector bellowed, “Did you let him touch you?”

I flinched. “Um... Well... Just a little...”

Hector’s hands balled in and out of fists. Every deep breath swelled his big chest and he exhaled slowly through his nose. He moved toward me. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him raise his open hand. I cringed down, wrapped my arms around my head, and braced for a blow.

It didn’t happen. I finally worked up the courage to peer through my fingers at Hector. He stared at his hands as if he couldn’t believe something so disgusting was part of his body. His eyes were wide when he looked up at me. He opened his mouth. Some question was hanging there, waiting to be asked, but instead he made a sound that was so horrible I couldn’t stand it. It was as if his heart had been ripped out.

“I’m sorry, Sir. I won’t go to the beach again.” My apology seemed to only hurt him more. He backed out of the bathroom like I was a coiled snake. My hands shook, but I reached out for him. “I’m sorry, Sir. I won’t leave the house without your permission again. I don’t really want to go surfing anyway. I’m sorry.”

That was the wrong thing to say, apparently. I was such an idiot. Hector ran from me. The bedroom door slammed. I think I heard him crying.

* * *

The house was spooky quiet. Even the clock seemed reluctant to tick and tock. I crept around and did my chores as silently as I could. Something hung over us, as if someone had died. It wasn’t something I’d ever faced before.

“What are you up to, Mijo?” Nanny’s ghost asked as I stood in the kitchen making dinner.

I couldn’t face her. “Hector’s upset.” Everything felt wrong and out of control. “I did something wrong. So I’m making him meatloaf for d-d-dinner.”

Nanny’s ghost always took her beloved Hector’s side, but that time, she said, “You’re a good boy. Hector knows that.” Her voice came out in a sigh, as if she were as miserable as I was. Surprised, I turned to look at her. Her ghostly hand patted my cheek. That was the coup de grace on an already topsy-turvy day. I seemed to be the only one trying to put things back in their proper order again.

“So, what is it that you’re putting into his food this time, little bruja?” she asked as she peered over my shoulder. “I heard you muttering a spell.”

My eyes narrowed. “Isn’t a bruja a female witch?”

Nanny’s ghost lifted her hands, as if there wasn’t anything she could do about the gender of the word.

Frowning, I turned back to the bowl on the counter. “These are the same herbs I use all the time. They, um, make him more, uh, give him an energy boost. But the spell I’m casting is a simple wish for harmony under his roof. I don’t like it when we fight.”

“Me either, Mijo. But do you think it’s wise to rush back to bed?”

Nothing related to my nature as the God of Sex should have made me squirm that much, but for some reason, it didn’t seem right to talk about it with Nanny’s ghost. We had an unspoken agreement that she didn’t materialize unless I was alone, but I still had a feeling that she understood a lot more about my sex life with Hector than I was prepared to admit.

“Nothing’s better than make-up sex,” I said, even though I was losing my conviction that sex would solve our problems.

Nanny's ghost put her hand on my wrist, chilling my skin. "But you and Hector aren't fighting, Sam. Hector's fighting himself. That's different."

Maybe she was right, but it sure felt as if it were my fault.

* * *

I knocked on the bedroom door. There wasn't any response, so I carefully inched it open. "Sir? Dinner is ready."

Hector sat on the bed. All the pillows were stuffed behind his back, and he held a book in his hands, but when I'd opened the door, his focus seemed elsewhere.

"Sir?"

Hector set aside his book, stretched, and got off the bed. "I'm coming, honey."

Never, never had Hector called me honey. I was Boy, Sam, Slut, or Baby depending on his mood. Being called honey was another sign that my world was upside down.

As he passed me in the doorway and ambled down the hall toward the kitchen, I decided that setting things right was up to me. I followed him into the kitchen, served him a plate of mashed potatoes, meatloaf, and gravy, and then bowed down low at his feet. I really, really hoped that he'd feed me.

"Sam, sit at the table."

Disappointed, I did as I was told.

Dinner was excruciatingly silent. Hector didn't act angry, and he didn't look angry, but he kept his eyes on his plate. As soon as he finished, he pushed back his chair and said, "Great dinner, as usual," and went out to the living room.

The uncertainty drove me nuts. As I washed the dinner dishes, I tried to figure out what I should do. Despite my best efforts at a spell, his aura hadn't changed at all, so I probably wasn't going to get any sexual release. Not that I felt particularly horny, but who ever heard of a bad orgasm? Maybe he needed comforting. I knew I needed to be touched, even if it didn't lead to sex.

I went into the living room and poured Hector his usual whiskey. When I tried to hand it to him though, he waved it away.

"Not tonight, Baby."

He wouldn't even look at me. I stood beside him for the longest time while I tried to come up with a plan. It wasn't exactly panic, but the feeling of uneasiness grew inside me. Out of ideas, I tried to crawl into his lap.

Hector wouldn't let me. "No, Sam. Why don't you play one of your video games or watch TV until your bedtime?"

That meant I was allowed on the furniture. Cuddling next to him sounded good to me, so I sank down on the couch. But as I reached for the TV remote, he left the living room.

* * *

When I woke in the morning I was alone. The bed was still made on his side, so he'd never come to bed with me. My hands weren't shackled to the headboard. I rushed to the bathroom to see if he was in the shower. I didn't find him, but a note was taped to the bathroom mirror.

"I'll be out of town the next few days making sales calls. I'll be back on Wednesday."

He wasn't supposed to leave for another couple days. I flipped the card over, hoping for some sort of clue where we stood, but there wasn't anything. The thing that got me angriest was that he didn't sign it "Love Hector."

"Damn it!" I stomped to the kitchen and flicked on the coffee maker. I banged every cabinet door and kicked the pantry closed. The sounds echoed through the empty house. If I'd done that while Hector was home, he would have caned my ass.

Gods, I wanted to be punished. Any amount of pain was better than being abandoned. If Hector had just banished me to the punishment cot in the spare bedroom or caned me, I could have earned his forgiveness. Why was he punishing me with silence? It wasn't right. The problem was that I didn't really understand what was going on. If I couldn't get him to act like my Master, what could I do?

Despite what Nanny's ghost said, sex seemed like the perfect answer. Hector couldn't stay mad at me after a night of bliss. If only I knew what his biggest fantasy was, I could see that he got it.

While I sat at the kitchen table sipping my coffee, I mulled over what might turn Hector on. We talked about my fantasies all the time but whenever I tried to pry into his thoughts, he shut me out. Maybe we'd already touched on it, but if we had, I'd missed it. As the God of Sex, I should have known. As his boy, it was my duty to give him what he desired the most. Strangely, despite a year with him, I didn't have a clue. He had too much control. If only I could make him lose it, even for a short time, maybe I could get a glimpse into my Master's mind.

A bad boy smirk spread over my face. Hector would be gone four days. That gave me just enough time to brew up a little mischief. Reaching for the phone, I called my sister Linda.

"Hey. Can you do me a favor?" I asked her.

"Depends. What's it worth to you, brat?" Linda asked. I could hear my nieces and nephew in the background. I silently wished that they were giving her all kinds of headaches. What goes around comes around, or something to that effect.

“This is for Hector.”

“In that case, what can I do for Hector?” she asked.

I realized that I should have had a pen and piece of paper at hand before I made the call, so I cradled the receiver between my shoulder and head and went to my desk in the living room. “I need your ‘Fuck Me The Second You Walk In The Door’ spell,” I told her as I rummaged through my desk for a pen.

Linda laughed forever. “I thought this was a favor for Hector.”

“It is.”

“Uh-huh. And it won’t hurt you a bit either, will it? Hit a slow patch in the relationship?”

Except Hector, there wasn’t anyone who could get under my skin like Linda. She enjoyed it way too much. “Are you going to give the spell to me or not?” I asked.

Linda giggled. “Sounds like Hector’s going to be the one giving it to you.”

I picked up a pencil and tapped the eraser against my desktop. She could go on like that for hours. “Fine. I’ll call Mom and ask her for a copy.”

Linda sobered up. “Okay. First of all, ick. Do you really think I’d give Mom a spell like that? I mean, Mom and Dad? How gross is that?”

“You’d be surprised,” I said. “People in their sixties and seventies still have active sex lives.”

“Yeah. Thanks for that mental picture, Sammy. Listen, the spell is really complicated. I hope you have access to a good source of herbs. It’s going to take you three days, so clear your schedule. Oh, and before you even start, you might want to make some major offerings to the God of Sex.”

That made me laugh.

“What?” Linda sounded huffy. She hated it when the tables were turned and I knew something she didn’t.

“Oh, nothing.” My grin was smug, and I knew she could picture it.

“Do you want the spell or not?”

It occurred to me that Deal could have learned a thing or two from my sister. Even though Linda couldn’t see it, I shrugged. “You’d find out eventually anyway, but I am the God of Sex.”

Most people would have scoffed. Even my Wiccan family might have asked for proof. Some would have questioned why the God of Sex needed that spell. Linda simply said, “Well, I guess that makes sense, considering that the offerings to the God of Sex are beer and peppermint ice cream. I should have known. I would have stopped making offerings.”

“But then I wouldn’t get all those fascinating prayers from you.” Truthfully, I tried to block out the people I knew best, because it seemed far too intrusive to listen to their prayers. Hector helped me build mental barriers, but some stuff seeped through. Thank the Gods my sister and parents weren’t among those who did. Talk about ick.

“Pervert.” Linda didn’t seem too concerned, but she changed the subject awfully fast. “So, now that you’re a God, are you and Hector are coming home for Beltane?”

That was a good question, but not one I had an answer for. “We’ve talked about visiting. I’d love for him to meet Mom and Dad, but I’m not so sure he’ll want to meet all two hundred Deweys at once. He’s not used to hordes of family. And he’s still leery of the whole Wiccan thing.”

Linda gasped, not in surprise, but as if she’d had an idea. “I’ll get Mom to ask him. No one says no to Mom.”

I wasn’t so sure about that. “I don’t know...”

“Trust me. Mom’s got a way with people.”

“It’s called emotional blackmail,” I said.

Linda giggled. “I’m so telling Mom you said that.”

The thought of Mom’s expression when she heard that was enough to make me cringe. “Don’t you dare. I’ve got plenty of stuff on you.”

“Listen, brat, I have to go. The kids are building a tree fort out back. Hammers, nails, high branches, and siblings are a recipe for disaster, as you probably remember. Or did you break your arm jumping from the hayloft? I forget.”

“I was pushed,” I reminded her.

“Whatever. Give Hector my love.”

“The spell?” I reminded her.

She sighed. “I don’t think I should have to warn you of all the Gods, but this isn’t a spell to be evoked lightly.”

“I understand that,” I snapped.

“I don’t think you do. What you’re talking about is essentially taking away someone’s right to make a choice. I want you to think about that. Do you have the right to force

Hector to have sex with you? Is that something you'd do to someone you loved or respected? Is twenty minutes of pounding sex worth that betrayal?"

"I--"

"Don't answer me now, Sammy. I want for you to really think about the consequences of this spell. Sleep on it. Then, if you're really convinced that it's worth risking your relationship for some mindless sex, call me back."

"But--"

I heard a loud clatter and kids shouting.

"Sounds like trouble. Gotta go. Bye." Linda hung up on me.

* * *

I hated big sisters, especially ones who were always right. Still, I swallowed my pride and called Linda the next afternoon.

"So, I thought about what you said, and I decided that maybe you were right. Hector is my Master. We're in a lifestyle relationship. I can't top him from below like that. It would just be wrong. I'll figure something else out."

There was a long pause before Linda answered. "Okay, first off, Sammy, way too much information there about your sex life. Not that I hadn't guessed, but I don't need to know how you and Hector get your freak on, m'kay?"

Grinning at the phone, I leaned against the kitchen counter and opened a bottle of water.

"Second off, I'm glad that you thought it over. That spell is bad news. I should burn it before it falls into the wrong hands. I mean, at least you asked. What if someone copied it out of my spell book without me knowing?"

"If it's that dangerous, burning it is probably a good idea. Just wanted you to know that I changed my mind."

"It's for the best, Sammy. It really is," she said. "So. What's your problem with Hector?"

Sure, I needed advice. The problem was, I couldn't confide in my sister without admitting some stuff about Hector that I didn't want her to know. If I told her that he almost hit me, she'd turn into tigress sister and never, ever forgive him. I wanted her to get to know the man behind the bad-ass exterior and not be prejudiced by one little incident that in no way reflected the way he really was. "Um, just me being stupid. Linda, I gotta go. But before I do, can I ask you something?"

"Shoot."

"If I'd asked you for it, would you have given me the spell?"

“Hell no.”

That was exactly what I wanted to hear. Relieved, I said my goodbyes.

* * *

Even though we were next-door neighbors and friends, I rarely went over to Angelena’s house. She came over to dinner once a month, and we waved across the way when we saw each other, but since I’d become a God, her protective presence in my life diminished. I needed to talk though, and she knew enough about my life that I didn’t have to waste a lot of time filling in uncomfortable details.

I walked over to Angelena’s house and knocked on her door.

“Hi, Sam.” She was in jeans and an orange tank top emblazoned with the name of a local motorcycle shop. Her black hair, which she used to wear spiked, was a bit longer than she used to wear it, and the pomaded waves shone. Her concrete gray eyes were merry, as if she’d just heard a good joke. That was a big difference from the last time I’d seen her, when she’d caught me speeding.

“Got a moment, Goddess? I would have just prayed at your altar, but I saw your bike in the driveway.” I held up a bottle of tequila. “I brought an offering.”

She grinned and moved out of the doorway to let me in. “You’re a God now. You don’t have to do offerings anymore.” Still, she reached for the bottle.

I edged into her house and took a seat on her couch. Her house was very much like Hector’s, or at least the floor plan was -- a big living room, a good-sized kitchen, one bathroom, and two bedrooms. The floors were all wood like in Hector’s house and true to the Craftsman style, there were built-in cabinets on almost every wall. Where we had bookshelves, though, she had a china cabinet and buffet. Half of her living room was dominated by a formal dining table, which was stacked high with piles of papers. The room smelled faintly of oil and hot metal, a scent I always associated with her.

Angelena closed the door. She looked at the bottle in her hands. “Patron? Someone is in a heap of trouble.” Her eyebrow rose.

“Maybe I am. I don’t know.” My hands slid up into my hair and I bit down on my bottom lip. “I’m not sure where to begin, Goddess.”

She smiled. “How about with a margarita, Sweet-tart?”

Soon, we were in the backyard sitting on comfortable Adirondack chairs and holding frosty margarita glasses. We chatted a bit -- God gossip -- and then talked motorcycles, but my heart wasn’t in it.

“So, I take it you’re having problems with Hector,” Angelena prompted me.

“I didn’t know who else to talk to. I’m sorry.”

She settled back in her chair. “Don’t be. I sort of miss how you’d always run to me for help. After dealing with traffic issues all day, it was like sitting down to a three-D soap opera. Things have been so quiet lately that I’ve been tempted to make my own drama.”

“Oh?” I leaned forward, rapt. Angelena’s private life was so private that I never had a clue who she was seeing, if anyone.

She showed me a wary smile, then wagged a finger at me and shook her head. “You didn’t come over here to talk about me. So, what’s up?”

“The background in a nutshell, Goddess. Last week, Hector and I went for a walk along the beach. He caught me checking out a surfer bear. Then a couple days ago, I took my bike out for a ride along the beach and stopped to watch some surfers. They decided to do a little gay bashing. I panicked and rode off, but some guy must have seen what happened, because he caught up with me and helped me get cleaned up, and then he followed me home, just to make sure I got there safely. Hector...”

“Hector didn’t see it that way,” Angelena said quietly.

“He didn’t hit me! He didn’t. This cut on my lip was from the surfers. In fact, Hector didn’t touch me at all. He sort of locked himself in the bedroom, and when I went to bed, he slept somewhere else. When I woke up yesterday morning, he was gone. He didn’t even say goodbye.” I chewed on my bottom lip. “I don’t know how to explain this, but Hector’s mad and he won’t let me apologize. He won’t punish me. I need to fix this, Goddess. I just have to. But how can I?”

Angelena set her drink down on the small table between us. She moved to the edge of her chair and clasped her hands together while she mulled over what she was going to say. “You can’t fix this, Sam. You didn’t do anything wrong. Hector is damn lucky he didn’t raise a hand to you, because he knows I’d kill him. I’ve told him as much. Is he going to his therapy sessions?”

I nodded. “But what am I going to do, Goddess? All I want is for things to go back the way they were.”

“Listen to me. The best thing that you can do is stop apologizing. You didn’t do anything wrong. He knows that. He’s acting guilty, not angry. Let him work through that guilt. It will do him, and you, a world of good.”

When she said it, it sort of made sense, but I wasn’t convinced.

Angelena patted my knee. “What we need is another drink, and some really good Mexican food. What do you say we pop down to Ensenada for dinner? I know this place that makes killer fish tacos.”

“What if Hector calls?”

“Then he sweats.” From the look on her face, I think Angelena wanted Hector to call home and find me gone. She had a little bit of a mean streak. I’d never noticed that before.

Chapter 6

Early the next morning, I was eating breakfast when I heard the front door open. I peered around the archway into the living room. Hector stood in the doorway. I wasn't sure what I should say. I was about to crawl over to him when he gave me a sad, sweet smile. I don't remember crossing to him. One moment, I was in the kitchen, the next, I was trying to put my arms around his neck. He didn't seem to want to touch me, but he finally put his arm around my waist. I clung. We were being cautious with each other. For once, I didn't mind.

Hector took my face in his hands and stared down into my eyes. I tried not to let the worry show. His thumb traced over my lips. Turning my head, I pressed a kiss to his palm. My eyes closed.

"Baby," he whispered.

I quaked, not from fear, but from relief, I think.

Hector kissed me again, only longer. It wasn't a sex kiss. It was a love kiss. No matter what had been wrong between us, it was gone. The weight lifted off my soul. I hugged him hard. He stroked my back.

"Are you busy the rest of today?" he asked. "Any movies you have to screen?"

I shook my head.

"How about if we get away for a couple days? Would you like it if Papi took you somewhere nice? We could order room service and lounge around in robes all day. We've never had a vacation together. Would you like that, Baby?"

With my head pressed to his chest, I nodded.

He kissed the top of my head. "I know a little guest house in Palm Springs. You'll love it." His hand slipped down to mine and he intertwined our fingers. "We can leave right now."

I pulled away so that I could go pack, but Hector wouldn't let go of my hand. "You don't have to do anything. I'll take care of everything. The only thing I need you to do is this." Hector gave my hand a hard yank so that I collided with him. His fingers grasped the back

of my head as he kissed me. There was nothing to do but surrender when he pressed his mouth to mine like that. We melted together.

* * *

We could have phased to Palm Springs, but Hector wanted to drive, so we took his truck. Not wanting a moment to pass without us touching, I sat as close to him as I could without being in his lap. He put his free arm around my shoulder. Content, I didn't even complain about the ranchero music on his radio. Despite how much I tried to hold it down, I couldn't get past the feeling that this peace between us was tenuous. Nervous, I had to fill the void, so I talked. Instead of scolding me though, he turned down the music and let me yap.

"Linda wanted to know if we're coming out to my parents' farm for Beltane in May," I said.

Hector chuckled. "Your Mom already asked me. I'm not sure if I accepted. It was more of an order than an invitation."

Heat spread up my neck. "Sorry about that. Mom's used to being obeyed. She's the High Priestess, not just of our circle, but for the whole Dewey Clan."

"That's the third time you've told me that, Baby."

"It is? Sorry, Sir. Anyway, I know you'll just love it. The family can get to be a bit much. People come from every state. They park their RVs on the fallow fields behind the farmhouse. Others set up tents on the front lawn. Only Mom, Dad, Linda and her kids, and the two of us will get to stay in the house. Last year, Mom rented ten port-a-potties for all the extra people, and she said that wasn't even enough. If there's one thing Deweys can do, it's breed. I wouldn't be surprised if there were more than two hundred -- what?"

Hector pinched his nose and made a sound something between a cough and a hiccup. "Nothing. Go on."

At some point past Riverside, the landscape changed from vast developments of identical houses to desert. It was weird to catch a glimpse of what California really looked like without all the concrete and people. In a way, it was forlorn. Then we'd pass another gated community and that seemed even worse. I wondered if people ever got tired of all that beige.

"You were telling me about Beltane, Sam," Hector said.

"The religious significance -- and I know you hate this Wiccan stuff, but it has to do with the Gods, too -- is that it's when the God moves from the phase of childhood to manhood, sort of a seasonal signifier. It's also a fertility rite -- so you know the Deweys are all over that one."

I couldn't believe he was that interested, but Hector asked, "How do the Deweys celebrate fertility?"

“Well, the morning of Beltane, they set up an altar in the backyard and say prayers and offer sacrifices to the Gods. But the night before, Beltane Eve, is when things get sort of, um, interesting.” I sneaked a peek at him. His head tilted, as if he paid close attention to everything I said. “As the sun starts to set, the priests and priestess of all the circles light a huge bonfire out near the woods.” A wave of homesickness passed over me. “All the kids stay behind. There must be some kind of warding spell on the woods, because no matter how many times my cousins or I tried to sneak out to see what was going on, we always ended up back at the farmhouse. All we could do was climb up to the third story and watch the bonfire from a distance and listen to the music. Then we’d fall asleep, and when we woke in the morning, the adults would just be straggling back to the house, with dazed, sated smiles on their faces, their shirts on backwards, sometimes with only one shoe on, and nine months later, in January, a new crop of Deweys was born.”

“Sounds fun. Have you ever been out to the woods?” Hector asked.

“Me? Oh no. I haven’t been home for Beltane since I got old enough to celebrate. This must be boring you.” My mouth was dry, so I sipped my water.

“Not at all.” There was something in his tone that sounded as if he were teasing me, and the corners of his eyes crinkled, but for the life of me, I couldn’t figure out what was so funny.

“What is it? Why are you laughing at me?” I finally asked.

“I’m not laughing at you, Sam.”

“Sounds like it to me.”

“I’m just enjoying your excitement. I think this get-away was a much better idea than the dozens of roses I almost bought for you.”

“Much better,” I agreed. He loved to give me flowers, but I never had any idea what I was supposed to do with them. He was right, I was excited about our impromptu vacation, but taking Hector home to meet my family seemed much more important. I was a little worried that he’d be overwhelmed by all the Deweys and our strange ways, so I wanted to warn him about what to expect. After all, he’d grown up with just his Nanny. He wasn’t used to a huge family getting up in his business. Deweys weren’t shy about interrogating people.

I thought of something else to tell him. “Oh! Wait until you see the Zen shack, Sir. You’ll like it.”

Hector grinned. “What’s a Zen Shack?”

“We just call it that, but it’s not a shack. It’s really the original old wooden barn on the property. Dad restored it. It’s sort of a Buddhist Temple slash spa, slash Wiccan ceremonial space, with a meditation maze painted on the floor, altars on the walls, a table for Japanese tea ceremonies, and a wide-open floor covered in mats. There are these rice

paper walls that you can slide around to partition off parts of the room if, say, you want to practice yoga in the nude, but someone else is trying to meditate. But the part you'll like are the traditional Japanese baths. There's a room to rinse off, and then separate room with a huge hot tub. Dad is really into Japanese culture."

"How did a cowboy like your father get so interested in Japanese culture?"

"I told you, we're not cowboys. Wrong part of Oklahoma. Dad was in the Navy before he met Mom. He was stationed in Japan and just fell in love with the culture, I guess." I shrugged. "Dad said that sometimes you have to travel far away to appreciate home, and sometimes you have to go back home to appreciate the rest of the world. He says stuff like that."

"I'd like to meet him," Hector said. "See what he's like."

"I'd love for you to meet the entire family, Sir. They've been asking. Well, Linda asked. Mom sort of demanded."

Hector chuckled. "I like Linda."

"I adore her, too. But please don't tell her I said that. It would ruin our entire relationship." Although, for a moment, I relished the look on Linda's face if I was suddenly sweet to her all the time. Her head would probably explode. "Wait until you taste the food. Real barbeque that falls apart in your mouth... Oh. I already told you about that."

Hector turned away from me and coughed a few times. When he turned back, he wiped the corner of his eye with his thumb.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"You are laughing at me, Hector."

He couldn't deny it any longer. As hard as he tried, he couldn't stop the smile that brightened his face. Seeing me scowling, he made a pity sound and squeezed my shoulder. "My little chatterbox." He kissed the top of my head. "I never thought I'd see the day when you'd talk non-stop for an hour."

I scowled at him.

"Don't make me pull this car over, little boy." Despite his growl, the twinkle in his eyes gave his real mood away.

I scowled hard at him and fought the urge to laugh.

"I warned you. I'm pulling over right now."

Would he really? Right there on the 10 freeway? My eyes were wide. He signaled and pulled over a lane. Adrenaline shot through my chest. He didn't mean it. Not where people might see. Would he? He slowed and pulled off on the shoulder. Cars raced past us. Gods, he had me so worked up already that my pants were tight across my crotch.

"Scoot over, Boy."

Mesmerized, I slid across the bench seat all the way to the passenger side door. Hector moved over to where I'd been sitting. I glanced around at the traffic going past us. People drove fast and seemed intent on their drives, but that didn't stop me from blushing. The risk of being caught excited me even though I dreaded it.

"Unbutton your jeans," he ordered.

Slowly, I opened my fly. My cock pushed out. He chuckled and patted his thigh. I took a deep breath, checked once again to see if anyone noticed, and slinked down low to lie across his lap. I put my hands over my eyes, as if that would make me invisible.

Hector took his time sliding my jeans down to reveal my ass. Then he yanked my shirt up so that it wadded under my pits. His fingertips trailed down my spine. When they got to my butt cheeks, his hand lifted away from my skin, and he brought it back down with a sharp slap. While he waited for the sting to fade, Hector forced his hand between my thighs. I spread my legs as best I could and lifted my ass. He caressed my balls.

"I'm not going to spank you enough to make you cry. We have all day ahead of us. This is just a teaser." He slapped my butt again.

Even if it was a teaser, Hector didn't hold back. Every smack stung. Between the slaps though, he stroked my cock and balls.

An eighteen-wheeler rushed past on the near lane of the freeway. Hector's truck rocked in the wake. The driver blew his horn and I had a terrible feeling that it was because he saw my naked, spanked butt. My arms wrapped around my head as I tried to shut it out. I tried to concentrate on Hector's hairy thigh against my cock and the hard smacks of his palm on my ass.

"Relax," Hector said.

Slowly, I forced my muscles to give in and I settled back down on his lap.

Hector stroked my back. "Good boy."

I'd almost gotten to the point where I'd risk sneaking a glance at Hector when he unleashed a volley of hard smacks. Instead of waiting for the sting to fade before striking, he kept going so that it built. I imagined his hand raised almost to the ceiling of the cab before it came rushing down at my butt. He grunted from the effort of a hard slap. I yelped.

Panting, Hector rested his hand on my burning skin. “You can sit up now.” I reached down for my jeans. “Leave them down. I have a feeling this isn’t going to be the only spanking you get on this drive.”

I sat up. He scooted back behind the wheel and started the engine. I slid next to him. He looked down at my hard-on, grinned, and pulled back out into traffic.

* * *

It took us twice as long to get to Palm Springs than it should have, but it was no mystery why. As soon as my hard-on waned, Hector pulled over to the side of the road and put me over his lap. Each time the stakes rose a little. He parked places where we had a bigger chance of getting caught. The spankings went on longer and the swats grew harsher. He made me keep my pants wadded down at my ankles so that anyone who could see into the truck would know how horny I was. The adrenaline coursing through me made me fidgety, and my bare butt throbbed against the seat, but I was so turned on. Hector always knew how to drive me crazy.

A few miles out of Palm Springs, Hector stopped at an old, rundown gas station. “Pull up your pants and go get the bathroom key, Boy.”

He filled the truck’s gas tanks while I dutifully went up to the small cashier’s window and asked for the key. The attendant barely looked up from his sudoku puzzle to hand it to me. I brought the key to Hector.

“Here, Sir.”

He grabbed me by my upper arm and dragged me towards the side of the building, past a stack of tires, to the bathrooms. Anyone who had bothered to look would have known this boy was on his way to an ass whooping.

Hector unlocked the bathroom door. The room was small, filthy, and stank of brackish water barely concealed by an overpowering sickly sweet scent. “Hands against the wall, over the toilet,” Hector told me as he shoved me inside.

Reluctantly, I put my hands on the slick yellow wall over a small ink drawing of a girl’s anatomy. When I glanced over my shoulder, I noticed that Hector left the door slightly open.

He followed my gaze and showed me an evil smile. As he lightly stroked my arm, he leaned close to my ear. “If the attendant hears you cry out, he might come around here to check it out. Do you want him to watch you get spanked?”

I frantically shook my head.

Hector wrapped his arms around my waist and slowly unbuttoned my fly. “Do you want him to see how hard you get?” He yanked down my jeans and then grasped my cock. “And it does make you hard, Baby. You love every second of this, don’t you?”

Bowing my head, I said, "Yes, Sir."

"That's why I'm doing this. I know you were a good boy when I was out of town. This isn't punishment. This is a reward. Do you want me to spank you some more?"

I nodded.

He kissed my neck. "Lift your head and open your mouth." When I did, he slipped a bit gag between my teeth so that my mouth was held slightly open. He buckled the wide leather straps around my head to hold it firmly in place. My tongue tried to push it aside and escape, but it was firmly trapped under the gag. With my mouth forced open like that I had to breathe through my nose. The stink of the bathroom made me feel like sneezing.

Hector kissed my mouth around the edges of the gag. "So beautiful like this. Such a gorgeous boy." Then he stepped back and looped his thumbs into the waist of his pants.

I glanced at him. If he only knew how hot he was when he looked at me like that, like I was something he owned completely and would bend to his will. I loved the power of him.

Hector's hands moved along his waist. He took his time unbuckling his belt, making sure I watched every second of the ritual as the long, supple black leather slid out of his belt loops. He doubled the belt, and then made a loop that he held in his right hand. I gulped. He smiled at me. "If your hands come off the wall, I stop. Do you understand?"

I nodded, and then turned to face the wall. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw his arm lift. Anticipating, I winced.

The gag didn't stop me from screaming, but the sound came out garbled. Hector didn't let up until sweat dripped down my back and my ass was on fire. As the pain blossomed into searing heat I shook. My legs grew weak and threatened to give out.

"Your bottom is deep pink, Baby. So hot to the touch," Hector told me. He slid his hand over the sorest part. "Tender?"

I nodded.

"I know," he cooed. He spit in his hand and gripped my cock. The tight grip he had on me was rough, but I was so hard that I didn't care how sore I'd be later. His lips brushed my ear. "Later, I'm going to tie you up so tight you won't be able to blink without permission, and then I'm going to fuck your ass raw, Baby."

Behind the gag, a torrent of words spilled out of me. Nothing came out clear, but Hector had heard my filthy mouth enough times to guess that I was begging him to make good on his threats.

"Come," he said.

He didn't need to repeat that order. Grunting, I shot my wad into his hand. He released the gag long enough for me to lick him clean, but put it back on me. After he helped me stand, he yanked my arms behind my back and secured them with his belt.

"I'm going to pull the truck around to the side here," he said. "Wait here."

I nodded.

Gagged, bound, my jeans around my ankles, and my butt glowing from a sound whipping, I hobbled out to Hector's truck. He parked so that no one could see me from the road, but I was still grateful that he opened the passenger side door and helped me up. Before I could sit, though, he slid a coconut fiber door mat onto the seat. That damn thing was like sandpaper against my butt, prickling and chaffing my tortured skin. Hector grinned as I squirmed. That hurt worse, so I huffed and held still.

After he climbed into the driver's side of the truck, Hector checked out my seat belt and then unbuttoned my shirt to bare my chest. A spot of drool hit my sweat skin and trickled down to my nipple. "Now that's how I like to see my Boy," he said.

* * *

Past the city of Palm Springs, we turned off a side street into the parking lot of a small compound. A discreet black wrought iron sign on the honey-hued high stucco walls was nearly hidden by the desert plants in front of it. The name Big Horn Ranch rang a bell in my mind, but I couldn't place it.

Understandably, I was nervous about getting out of the truck while trussed up, gagged, and almost naked, but I was relieved to rise off that prickly mat Hector made me sit on. My butt was chaffed. It felt as if I'd sat on a pincushion.

The courtyard of the guesthouse was hidden from the road, and I didn't have to shuffle far before we were inside the modest Spanish hacienda off the parking lot. Inside, the floor was beautiful imported tile, and off to the side, a quiet fountain trickled. There was a long front desk in dark wood and a small black leather couch. A huge arched door of weathered wood with massive wrought iron hinges at the far end of the desk.

Hector rang a bell at the front desk. A few glimpses around left me no doubt what kind of place he'd brought me to. One sign behind the desk reminded guests that slaves were not allowed on furniture in the common areas. Another stated that clothing was optional for Masters, but all boys were to remain naked while on the grounds. A third, smaller, sign asked guests to please sit on towels if they were nude. That made me smile.

The dark door behind the reception desk opened. Larry, one of Hector's friends, strode out. He was lanky, with thinning light brown hair, and wore a blue cotton shirt and jeans. Upon seeing Hector, his grin glowed.

"Hector! So good to see you again." Larry came around the side of the desk and hugged Hector. "It's been too long since you've visited us here."

Hector nodded. "Thanks for giving me a room on such short notice."

Larry went back behind the desk and typed on a computer. While he looked at the screen, he said, "Not a problem. Got your favorite cabin. Number Five." He glanced up at me and winked. "You'll have to take Sam's shirt and jeans off before you go onto the grounds, but there's a room where you can strip him just through that door." Larry pointed to the big door at the end of the reception desk. He flashed a smile at Hector. "But you knew that. I'll take you to your room." He went to the end of the desk and unlocked the door.

We entered a short tiled hallway with a low ceiling. There was a door to one side. "I'll wait out here while you prepare Sam," Larry said. "Take any locker. We'll open it for you when you leave."

Hector prodded my back until I shuffled through the door. The room we entered was bigger than the hallway. There was a shelf with an industrial sized bottle of lube and a padded bench. Small beige metal lockers lined the wall.

Hector sat me down on the bench. I yelped at the cold against my hot butt. He knelt in front of me to take off my shoes and jeans. He set my shoes in a locker and put my neatly folded jeans on top of those. Then he took his belt off my wrists. That had been more for show than anything. I could have easily escaped if I'd wanted to.

I started to take off my shirt, but Hector stopped me.

"Unless I give you an order, you don't do anything while we're here, Baby. Papi is taking care of you. Understand?"

I nodded.

He took off my shirt, folded it, and put it in the locker. Hector stood before me, his legs spread and his arms crossed over his chest. His eyes crinkled up at the corners and his smile was so warm that I grinned around my gag and gazed up at him in adoration. My chest was slick with drool and my butt was sore. I was one happy boy.

Hector reached down to caress my hair. "I'm tempted to put a butt plug in you. I love watching you walk with a full ass, but I know how much you hate that, so I won't. But I think I'll shackle you." He summoned my shackles and put them on my ankles. A short chain clipped between them so that I'd be limited to a shuffling walk much as I had when my jeans hobbled me. Hector straddled the bench behind me. He hugged me so that my hands were on his groin and his chest pressed to my back. "I think I'll use rope on your arms though. You love your rope, don't you?"

I nodded hard. His hand slid across my thighs and stroked me a few times until my cock swelled in his hand.

"I'm going to take good care of you," Hector promised.

He summoned a length of white cotton rope. Before he bound my arms behind my back from my elbows to my wrists, he drew the rope across my groin and then across my nipples. The soft rope bumped across my chest and made my nipples harden. By the time he helped me to my feet, I was rock hard for him.

When I shuffled out of the room ahead of Hector, Larry gave me a long, appreciative look that traveled from my face to my chest to my feet and then up to my groin where it lingered. Hector shoved me a little so that I was ahead of them. Since I had no idea where to go, I waited for an order to move.

“You do nice work,” Larry said to Hector. “Always a pleasure to see a real rope artist, and a well-paddled bottom. Fiber mat? That rash of red pinpricks across his bottom looks familiar.”

Hector squeezed my ass. I jumped. “He’s going to be very sensitive for a while. Makes him more responsive. That’s what we call a warm-up in my house. I haven’t even begun the real thing. By the time we leave here, that butt’s going to be bruised.”

My cock twitched even as my butt cheeks clenched.

“I’ll bet. Sam’s spanking fetish is legendary,” Larry said. “Any chance you’d do an impromptu demonstration? Some of our other guests would probably love to see you two in action.”

“Maybe another time. Sam and I need some peace and quiet.”

Larry guffawed. “Quiet?”

“That’s what the gag is for,” Hector said. I could imagine him grinning.

Larry pushed open the door at the end of the hallway. “You know your way around here, but a few things have changed. Let me show you.”

Hector and Larry sauntered out the back door. I kept up as best I could with my limited stride. While they talked, I looked at the grounds.

The compound was maybe half an acre. Inside the high stucco walls were ten separate one-story cabins. All the cabins faced the turquoise swimming pool at the center of the compound and the cabana bar beyond it. If it hadn’t been for the pillory and stocks on a raised dais between the pool and the hot tub, it would have looked like any small desert resort.

Around the pool, there were a few big planters full of tropical plants. The deep green and big, lush leaves were a nice contrast to the starker desert landscaping in front of the cabins. A few men, some in bathing suits, some nude, sat on deck chairs near the pool. Overhead misters rained light droplets of water in the air above them. Two hot forty-something slaves in leather harnesses knelt beside their bearish Masters. Another boy, smooth and well-tanned, sprawled naked on a towel. A roll of towels was under his groin, pushing his butt up and making him bend his knees as if he were offering his ass to

anyone passing by. I wondered if that pose was his idea or his Master's. From the way he blushed and kept his eyes down, I had a feeling he would have preferred to be a bit more discreet.

Our path took us close to the pool. Men glanced at Hector and Larry with mixed amounts of interest, but conversations stopped dead when I came around a big potted palm tree. I froze. Panic shot through me. I wanted to run and hide, but I couldn't with my ankles shackled. My face got hot and I was sure it was as deep pink as my ass. Every breath around the gag was a struggle. Not sure where to look, my glance flittered everywhere but rested nowhere until it caught Hector's steady gaze. Unable to beg him any other way, I tried to put all my agony into my eyes.

Hector was beside me in an instant. He put his hand on the back of my neck. Bowing my head forced me to look down and helped calm me. Every inch of Hector's body language radiated the message that I was his property. Relieved, I shuffled forward. His brand heated on my ass, not as a reminder to me, but to further enforce the warning to the other men to stay away. When he got all territorial like that, my heart just about melted.

* * *

Larry showed us into the cabin. It had a western feel to it, but nothing screamed 'theme.' Immediately inside there was a small room with a couch, a coffee table, and a sturdy desk with internet connection. On the far wall was a wet bar, and I assumed that there was a refrigerator hidden in the bottom cabinet. The drapes could be opened to give us a view of the covered bar area and beyond that, the pool.

We went through a door into a hallway. To one side there was a big closet, and to the other, a bathroom. Beyond that was the bedroom. A big bed dominated the room. The usual lamps, nightstands, and wardrobe completed the furnishings. Somehow, I expected something a bit more gothic, like black leather and steel. Instead, it was comfortable and almost homey.

"We've added a few in-room touches, but if you want dungeon action, you'll have to go to the new cabin past the cabana. The door is black. You can't miss it. The dungeon is open to all our guests, but if you want, you can reserve it for private play." Larry reached under the king-sized bed. "Knowing your preference for private play, you may be more interested in this. We installed an under-the-bed restraint system that will hook up to any cuffs or shackles you use." He showed us the end of a chain. "Just reach under and you'll feel them. The system is versatile enough for almost any position, but we have extension chain if you need it. The eye hooks over the bed are tested to four hundred pounds, but I suggest using the sling or the wenches in the dungeon if you want Sam suspended. Rubber sheets are in the closet if you need them. There's a TV in the wardrobe. It's satellite, so there are a million channels, but we also have an extensive offering of porn at the front desk. If you want something, just ask. You know the house rules, so I won't get into them, but you might want to review them with Sam so that he doesn't get into any trouble."

He looked around the room. "Well, I have to get back to the front desk. I'm sure you two can take it from here. If you're eating dinner in, let me know. I have menus from a wide

range of restaurants, some of which won't admit they do carry out. We have connections in the kitchens." He let himself out.

* * *

Encased in a web of white rope, I couldn't move. Perfect. I was pressed against the mattress and knots down my spine dug into my back. Hector had taken his time tying the intricate rope design. My arms were tied together and stretched over my head. A short length of rope secured then to the headboard. My legs were tightly bound together from my thighs all the way down to my ankles. Knots rested over my nipples and every time I moved, the abrasion sent shock waves right to my cock.

Hector checked that I was okay as he bound me. As soon as I felt the rope against my bare skin, I went into a trance of pure pleasure. When he was finished, he checked me again before pushing the gag into my mouth. My eyes were full of adoration for him. He gazed down at me for a while and stroked my face. He could have fucked me. I was helpless. My cock jerked and my ass tightened as I pictured him using me. As time passed, though, I realized he wouldn't. He rarely did when I was bound like that. Maybe he wanted me to beg. I tried to talk around the gag, but only made garbled sounds.

Hector groaned. I held my breath. I'd lost my hard-on, but knew it would come raging back if he touched my cock. Instead, he busied himself down at my feet. Hector grunted, and my feet lifted off the bed. Another grunt, and my tightly bound legs no longer touched the bedspread. Before long, it felt as if my ankles were over my head. My ass was completely exposed. It was hard to breath in that position.

Hector climbed on the bed next to me. The heat of his body radiated to my chilly skin and I could smell his sweat.

A wicked paddle smacked my ass and upper thighs. I didn't have to see it to know which one it was. Deceptively soft and flexible, the heavy leather paddle had three holes in it, which added a lot of sting. He rarely used that one on me, because it hurt so bad that I couldn't take much. Ten strokes, and my butt cheeks would be beyond pink. He smacked my ass again. I tried to grit my teeth, but they were held apart by the gag. Already, I knew that my ass would have a pink imprint, except three spots of glowing white where the holes were.

After the third smack, I sort of lost it. White hot pain exploded like fireworks inside my head. I writhed, trying frantically to pull my legs free from the intricate bondage that held them tight together. No matter how I twisted or strained, I couldn't pull them apart. Hector leaned down close to my ear. "Had enough?" He pulled the blindfold down.

Anger stormed through my brain, sweeping away reason. I glared at him. Words garbled deep in my throat as I cussed a blue streak at him.

After that, he didn't pause between strikes. I barely had time to scream and squirm before the next one landed on the tender spot at the top of my thighs. Crying hard, I could barely catch my breath enough to curse him. No matter how hard I struggled against the rope, it

wouldn't give. My ass burned, and I knew the ache went deep into my muscles. He kept the unrelenting assault going.

Inside my mind, I slipped into my subspace. The pain was still there, but distant. The anger ebbed away. I was walking a path -- not my usual meditative maze that doubled back on itself, but a path that led somewhere, to something important.

Hector sat on a stone by a small waterfall. When I sank down in a low bow at his feet, he said...

He said, "I know you have it in you. Why do we have to work so hard every time to get you here?"

We were cuddled together on the bed. My fingers curled into his chest hair. Pain throbbed across my well-paddled ass. His arms were around me, holding me close. There was nowhere else I wanted to be. I hugged him tighter.

"I wish you could be like this without having to go through a scene every time, Baby."

I lifted my head from his chest. His eyes tugged down at the corners. "Like what?" I asked.

"Like this." He shifted on the bed, putting his lips gently on mine. I nuzzled against them, taking my time to work into a deeper kiss. "Like that," he said, breathless. "Like it's love."

Chapter 7

All I wanted was a quick ride on my bike, maybe an hour. Usually, I puttered around town and along Pacific Coast Highway, but they were so crowded, and flat, and straight. No challenge at all. I sat on my bike in Hector's driveway and tried to decide where to go. Nothing sounded exciting.

When I was with Marcus, we'd take long drives on the twisting canyon roads down in Orange County -- Trabuco, Silverado, Modjeska -- or travel Ortega Highway. Now that was fun -- except the part where he'd smack me around or abandon me on the side of the road when he got pissed off. But the roads -- oh man. I loved the scrub oaks that grew on the high canyon walls and the dusty, verdant scent of the chaparral.

The more I thought about it, the stronger the urge was to ride those roads again. It wasn't as if Marcus owned them. On pure impulse, I phased onto a quiet shoulder along Santiago Canyon. It was mid-day on a Tuesday. There wasn't much traffic.

After adjusting the chin-strap on my helmet, I started my bike. The power of it between my legs always got my heart pounding. How stereotypical was that? But it was true. The vibration felt great against my crotch and yeah, it was an extension of my cock, but I liked it.

I followed the road into one of the bigger canyons. At first, it was just a flat highway, but soon I passed between the steep mountainsides of the canyon. There were a few streets, quiet houses, a small store, and a post office. It was a completely different California than the over-built, pseudo-Mediterranean displays of conspicuous consumption that littered most of Orange County. No one bulldozed hills and built McMansions or gated communities in the fire-prone Santa Ana Mountains.

After I passed the side streets, the highway narrowed down to one lane each way. Visibility around each tight curve was a couple feet at most. Any mistake would be the last one I ever made. Knowing that pegged my thrill meter. Talk about an adrenaline surge. Before long, I was screaming along, leaning into each curve, loving every twist as the road climbed higher into the mountains. I hit a patch of loose dirt coming around a switchback and felt the back wheel starting to slide out. I was afraid of scratching the paint. I was afraid of what Hector would do to me if I wrecked the bike. But afraid for my life? Not at all. I could handle it. And I did. It cost me a bit of my God magic, and my boot got a couple long, ugly scrapes, but I got it under control. Still, I knew I was too high from it to keep riding. Besides, a sign warned that the pavement ended in fifty feet.

I pulled under a tree, put my hands on my hips, and grinned like the happiest fool in the world. Unable to hold it in, I raised my fists into the air, pumped them, and shouted, “Whoo-hoo!”

Down the road, another bike zoomed along. Not wanting to look like an idiot, I put my hands down. In seconds, it seemed, the other motorcyclist appeared around the curve. The rider hit the same sandy spot I did, but he controlled his bike better than I had. Just past me, he slowed and spun quickly around.

“You?” I said.

It was that same rider who’d helped me after my fight with the surfers. As before, he was covered head-to-toe in his well-worn leathers, not showing any glimpse of skin. His dark visor hid his face from me. He tugged on the gauntlets of his gloves. Then he pointed down the hill and revved his engine.

Oh, hell yes!

I could have sworn he grinned under that visor. He took off. I immediately followed.

Oh Gods, if I drove like a maniac, that guy was pure insanity. He wore kneepads, and needed them. We raced. A few times, I could have passed him, but sanity kept me from leaping into the other lane. I was laughing, eating up the exhilarating mixture of fear and speed.

Whoop!

My heart plunged at the sound. A cop. Hector was going to kill me. I glanced at my speedometer. Panicking, I tried to phase back home. I leapt ahead a few feet, but that was it. I tried again and felt my power sputter over my skin. Oh fuck! What a time to find out I’d spent the last of my power allowance.

I looked around. The other rider was gone. Damn it! The cop was getting closer. I slowed down and pulled over. Frantically, I went through my options. I could tap into my powers beyond my allowance, but Hector would know. There’d be questions, and repercussions. He’d be furious, and worse, he’d take the bike away. Or I could take the ticket, hide it from him, and go to traffic school to get it off my record. Technically, that was lying, too, but at that moment, as the burly older Sheriff got out of his cruiser and sauntered towards me, it seemed like my only option.

Chapter 8

Hector had my hands cuffed to the top of the posters of his wrought iron bed and my ankles shackled to the floor. My groin pressed against the mattress as I stood helpless. We were both naked. I loved an evening that started off that way.

He'd already used the softer flogger to put a little color on my shoulders and butt. Because he loved me, he'd tightly bound my balls and cock in a leather pouch before setting to work on my sensitive inner thighs. The room was cool, but by the time he'd flogged my chest, thighs, and stomach, my skin radiated heat.

Hector knelt on the mattress before me and tugged at my nipples until I grunted. With a wicked gleam in his beautiful eyes, he brought out a set of clips I'd never seen before. When he picked one up, he shook it, and a tiny slave bell tinkled. "You're going to provide musical entertainment tonight." He pulled my nipple like it was pink taffy and then attached the clamp.

I gritted my teeth and sucked in a breath. With that small rise and fall of my chest, the bell made a soft sound.

Hector pretended to be disappointed. "How am I supposed to hear that over your screams?" His eyes opened wide, as if he had a sudden idea. "More bells," he said.

I muffled a grunt as he tortured my other nipple for a bit and then snapped a clamp onto it. I concentrated on holding still.

"Oh, no. I want to hear them," Hector said. He drew his fingers lightly over my stomach. They trailed lower to my groin. The touch tickled like hell. I tried to hold it in, but I burst out laughing as I squirmed. He tickle-tortured me, running his fingers lightly up my sides and down my groin until my stomach hurt from laughing.

"You keep doing that, Papi, and I'm going to have an accident," I said.

Hector gave me a strange look, as if he were considering something. Then he shook his head. "You've turned into a chatterbox, little boy, but I have the perfect cure for that."

Most of the time when Hector gagged me, I obediently opened my mouth. That time, as soon as I saw the gag, I clamped my mouth shut. He knew I hated the one shaped like a big cock. It forced my jaw open so wide that my face ached and it tasted horrible.

“Still got some fight left in you?”

We’d barely begun. I had plenty of strength to resist him.

Hector climbed off the bed and stood behind me. “Open your mouth, Boy.”

I shook my head.

His finger ran down the side of my cheek. “I hoped you’d say that.”

Stubborn, I forced my mouth to stay shut as he snapped a wet towel against my thighs, butt, and back. The second I screamed, though, the tip of the gag was past my lips. I twisted my head back and forth and fought back with my tongue, but slowly, inch by inch, Hector pried my mouth open and filled it. Furious that I’d given in, I strained at the chains that held me spread eagle. Hector laughed. That only fueled my anger. Serious then, I thrashed and swore up a storm. It came out garbled, but Hector probably knew what I meant.

“That’s right. Let it out. You’ll feel better,” Hector crooned as he stroked my arms.

When I was already mad, nothing tipped me over the edge like that patronizing tone. My chest heaved as I fought and swore and stared daggers at him. Hector reclined on the bed and watched me with a smirk on his face. For a good five minutes, I rattled the frame of his bed. Sweat streamed down my temple and spine as I put all my effort into breaking free of the shackle on my left wrist.

While I fought, Hector calmly removed the leather pouch over my cock and balls. He idly fondled me. By then, a steady drip of drool ran out of my mouth and onto my chest. I felt like a rabid dog. Limp curls of my dark hair stuck to my forehead. I hurled more curses at him.

Completely ignoring me, Hector picked up a clamp and held it close to his ear. He jingled it. Pleased by the sound, he reached for my balls. He pinched the skin of my sac between his thumb and finger. My eyes widened and I shook my head. The bells on my nipples bounced and tinkled. He sprang the clamp on my balls. I shrieked.

One by one, the belled clamps went onto my sac. Raw pain seared through my groin. Tears streamed down my face. By the time the last one went on, I was beyond swearing, beyond pleading. All I could do was whimper. Defeated, I bowed my head.

“Looks like you’re finally ready,” Hector said. He stood up on the bed. Towering over me, he forced me to look up at him. His beautiful brown eyes gazed down on me as his thumb spread the drool from my chin. “I love how you look with this on, but I’m going to take it off for a moment. Would you like that?”

My eyes pleaded yes as I slowly nodded.

After he removed the gag, I swallowed several times and moved my aching jaw around. I never wanted to open my mouth again. That was, until he smacked my face a few times with his cock and said, “Open.”

Hector caressed my hair and face as he slowly slid his cock in and out of my mouth. “Is that good?”

“Yes, Sir.” My voice was raw from screaming into the gag.

“Show me.”

Grateful to be free of the gag, I threw myself into worshipping his cock properly. I lavished long licks on the shaft and then worked the head for a while. Even though I didn’t dare glance up at him, I knew from the way he petted me that he was pleased by my mouth. As much as I hated to ignore his nice, fat cock, I lapped at his balls for a bit. When I tried to deep throat his cock again though, he smacked me away.

“That’s enough.” He picked up the gag. I groaned, but opened my mouth for him. I think he was surprised, and touched, because he kissed me for a good, long time before gagging me again.

Hector unhooked my arms. Numb from pain, they dropped uselessly to my sides. He kept my feet shackled and spread, but he helped me to sink down to the mattress before he got off the bed.

Standing behind me, Hector stroked my sweaty back. “Are you close to your subspace?” I shook my head. I was exhausted, but nothing he’d done had put me near it. “Good.” His fingers trailed over my well-punished butt. I winced. “It’s all right. I’m not going to hurt you right now.” I heard lube and his fingers pushed into my ass. “Do you like that? Would three feel better?”

Fingers were nice, especially when they found my prostate and stroked it, but I wanted to be fucked. Too tired to flirt any other way, I tensed and released my muscles around his fingers.

Hector chuckled. “Do you need to be filled?”

No matter how long we were together, I always fell for soft questions when he had me like that. For some reason, even with painful clamps on my balls and nipples, my body mercilessly flogged and whipped, and a huge gag in my mouth, I forgot what a sadist Hector could be. So when he asked if I needed to be filled, I assumed he meant with his cock. He knew that’s what I wanted, and expected. Instead, he shoved a huge butt plug into me. The second that cold metal touched my skin, I realized I’d been had, but my arms were useless and it was too late for anything but token resistance as he filled my ass.

He ran his tongue up my spine and snuggled in close to my ear. “You look so beautiful like this, Baby. People should see you. Let’s go out.”

My eyes widened. Out? Like outside? Where people could see me? Hector unshackled my ankles. Terrified, I didn't move. He put a blindfold on me and made me stand.

"Dinner, Baby?"

A thin stream of drool dropped on my chest.

"I'll take that as a yes," Hector said.

* * *

The front seat of Hector's truck was cold on my bare ass. Getting into the truck had taken a major act of will. Between the huge butt plug in my ass and the sound thrashing I'd taken, I didn't want to sit. Not to mention that the idea of driving through Long Beach wearing a blindfold, a gag, and a bunch of tiny bells was humiliating in the extreme. I almost faltered, but Hector's lips brushed my ear and he said, "Trust me," so I obeyed.

After a short drive, he parked and came around to help me out of his truck. I wanted to plead with him, but gagged and blindfolded, I had no way to let him know how close he had me to a limit. I just didn't think I could do it. Crying for real, my tears ran out from under the blindfold. I shook all over. Hector took my hand. My chest heaved as I stumbled blindly after him.

Every step we took, the bells on my balls jingled. It was just too much. I could hear cars driving past us. Finally, my feet wouldn't lift. Hector tugged. I simply couldn't move. I expected him to scold me, or shove me along. Instead, Hector's arms wrapped around me. He quickly unbuckled the gag and took off the blindfold.

"Shh. Baby. You're okay."

I was crying so hard that I couldn't get a word out.

"You're safe."

I was slowly collapsing to the ground.

Hector rocked me. "To anyone driving by, you appear to have clothes on. You're cloaked by my power. No one passing by would give us a second glance. I swear, Baby, only you and I know." He stroked my hair and my back and kissed my cheeks. "Do you want Papi to take you home and give you a bath and cuddle with you on the couch?"

My fingers curled into the chest hair that showed above the top button of his brown shirt. How could I have ever doubted that he'd protect me? I was calming down, but occasional sobs still wracked me.

I peeked out through his comforting arms at the world around us. We were right in front of Ophir's house. Once we got inside, I'd be okay. I wiped away the tears on my cheek. "I'll be okay. I'm sorry I doubted you, Sir."

For the briefest of moments, Hector seemed on the verge of apologizing to me, but he didn't. "Well, maybe when we get home I'll give you a bath and cuddle with you anyway." He pinched his nose and turned to Ophir's house. "We're going to be late," he said gruffly. He started for the front door.

"Sir?"

He stopped and looked back at me. "What?"

"May I have the gag and blindfold back on?"

* * *

Ophir's three slave boys were always dressed during his parties. That wasn't the way most Masters would have done it, but Ophir seemed to live by his own set of rules. Number Three once told me that Ophir wanted them to concentrate on serving his guests, not on sex. Private dinners were different. His boys wore nothing, not even shoes, except Number One, who wore an apron while he cooked.

The same rules applied to boys visiting Ophir's house. During parties, it was up to the Masters to decide how their boys were dressed, but otherwise, boys were naked. I was used to stripping the moment I set foot inside, but since I'd walked in wearing nothing, Number Three immediately led us past the foyer.

Hector put his hand on the back of my neck and urged me forward. My head bowed, I proudly shuffled ahead of him, my bells jingling with every movement. When Hector's hand left me, I stood still. I listened to him greet Ophir.

I could picture the scene. Hector, tall and brawny, clasping short, thin Ophir in a warm embrace. Ophir would be the first to step back. A handsome man of southern Mediterranean heritage, he had no problem attracting boys into his service even though the harsh conditions under his roof were well known in our circle. Maybe it was because he rarely spoke or smiled, but I always felt like a failing student in one of his college lectures.

I was led to another place. Hector put his hand on the top of my head and gave a slight push. I sank down to my knees. I heard the creak of leather, so I knew we were in the living room by one of the leather couches. One of the boys, probably Number Three, brought Hector a whiskey. I could hear the ice in the glass. Hector put one hand on my stomach and pressed another to my shoulder blades until I was on my hands and knees. He put the cold glass on the small of my back.

"That's doesn't spill," Hector told me.

My bells jangled quietly when I nodded.

His hand slid over my chest. He flicked the clamp on my nipple. I gasped, but the sound never made it past the gag. Then he released the clamp. For a moment, I was numb, but then pain shot across my chest. I shook. The glass on the small of my back threatened to

topple. Breathing deep through my nose, I tried to control my body. Then Hector released the other nipple clamp. Tears streamed down my face.

Hector's hand glided down my back. He lifted his glass, probably taking a sip, while his hand slid down my rump and between my thighs. I shook my head hard as he flicked bell after bell. My pleas garbled into the gag. Drool ran down my chin, mixing with tears. Hector released the first clamp from my ball sac.

I'd like to say that I took it stoically, but the truth is that I screamed my head off. If it hadn't been for the gag, I'm sure Ophir's neighbors would have called the police. I cried and screamed as Hector methodically removed all ten clamps. The throb of blood was hard and sharp. I fought the urge to cup my balls in a protective hand and to curl up on the floor. Keeping in time with my heartbeat, the pain waxed and waned. My ass throbbed around the base of the butt plug. But I didn't spill Hector's drink.

"He's drooling on my carpet," Ophir snapped.

Knowing that he meant me, I blushed, but it wasn't as if I could help it. Still, I was ashamed. My head bowed even lower.

Hector's hand forced my head up. "But he looks so good gagged."

Ophir's voice changed subtly, like silk suddenly rough. It pinged directly to my groin when he said, "Yes he does. Very nice."

Hector set his drink down on my back while I hiccupped and sobbed. I concentrated on holding still. Condensation formed a chilly pool at the base of my spine. Hector kept his hand on me, sliding it between my thighs and giving the occasional stroke to my hard-on. They chatted as if I weren't there, as if I wasn't suffering, as if I were furniture. I wanted to crawl into Hector's lap and be petted and kissed.

"I must admit, I'm a little surprised," Ophir said. "You've been together for some time now. I wouldn't have guessed. Sam doesn't seem your type."

Hector picked up his drink. "Oh? How so?"

"No offense, Hector, but I've been watching Sam for quite some time. He's a masochist, yes. His erection is proof enough of that. I've never seen such a pain slut. I can see where that would appeal to your tastes, but where's the challenge?"

Of all the reactions I expected from Hector, a burst of laughter wasn't one of the top choices. "You have no idea, Ophir. Not a clue. Look at him. You'd think he was the most submissive boy you've ever met."

Ophir sounded a bit miffed. "I've never seen anything to suggest otherwise."

"That's because Sam is quite the little actor. When I first met him, I told him that he would eventually give me his will. He still hasn't, but he lets me borrow it for an hour here and there if I can get him to the right frame of mind."

Someone snorted. I was sure it was Ophir. “You’re proud of that?”

“You asked me where the challenge was. I told you. Eventually, I will break his will, but not any time soon. I’m in no hurry. It gives me something to look forward to every day.”

I didn’t know if I should be horrified or happy. Hector didn’t believe I’d submitted to him completely?

“That sounds suspiciously like love, Hector.”

“There’s nothing wrong with love.”

There was a sound, as if Ophir gathered energy for a scathing retort, when someone bustled into the room. The wake of air from his passing gently ebbed against my bare skin. Since I couldn’t see, I had to imagine the scene from what I heard. A boy knelt before Ophir. He waited as Hector and Ophir talked. Then Ophir finally gave him permission to speak.

The voice sounded like Number One. “Dinner is ready, Sir.”

“Dismissed,” Ophir said.

The boy rose and hurried from the room. Ophir rose. Hector removed his glass from my back, wiped away the small ring of chilled water, and helped me to my feet. His hand on my neck guided me to another room on the first floor.

“Kneel,” Hector said.

The floor was wood, so I assumed that we were in the formal dining room. Before long, my knees ached, but I’d be damned if I’d make a sound that betrayed my training. Instead, I rested my head on Hector’s thigh and took comfort in the warmth of contact. As he and Ophir talked, he reached under the table and stroked my hair.

Dinner smelled wonderful. Plates were brought out and wine was poured. I had no idea if one of Ophir’s boys knelt beside him. They usually didn’t.

Hector removed my gag. I worked my jaw for a bit, loosening it. He gave me a sip of wine. The vapors seemed to go right to my brain. Something pressed against my lips. I opened my mouth. Hector fed me a piece of pork chop that tasted of maple and apples. That was followed by little bites of cornbread stuffing. As soon as he began to feed me, I realized how hungry I was and gratefully licked his fingers clean after every morsel. Then he brought the wine glass to my mouth and let me take another sip. Feeling guilty that I was cleaning Hector’s plate, I tried to slow down, but he kept it coming until I was full.

Hector and Ophir talked for another hour or so. By then, my back ached, my knees were numb, and I wanted that butt plug out of me. I nudged Hector’s thigh with my forehead. He kept talking. When the conversation lapsed, I nudged him again. He put a hand on my

head, but otherwise ignored me. When I couldn't stand it any longer, I squirmed and pushed my face into his groin.

Instead of letting me up, Hector unzipped his pants and gave me his cock. I tried to swallow it down, but Hector pressed the palm of his hand to my forehead. Then he forced my head back down to his thigh, so that only the head of his cock was in my mouth.

"Lightly," he ordered.

Sometimes he made me do that all evening. It made me crazy when he controlled me like that. He'd never come. His musky scent filled my nose and I wanted to be filled with his cock any way I could get it. Instead, I was limited to careful probing around his foreskin with my tongue and then gentle sucking when he got hard. Carefully, I moved out of my regular bow and onto my hands and knees. Trying not to be too obvious, I thrust my hard-on at the air. The rocking made the butt plug bump against my prostate. Little growls of satisfaction rumbled at the back of my throat.

"Your little slut's begging to be fucked," Ophir commented with a grunt.

It never occurred to me that it might be a bad thing to show how desire for Hector consumed me at those moments. Yes, I was begging to be used. Wasn't that what Masters wanted from their boys?

Hector removed my blindfold. I blinked in the dim light of the formal dining room. Without lifting my head from his thigh, I glanced up at Hector for some sort of sign. Was I supposed to hide how horny I was? His warm brown eyes met mine and he smiled. No matter what Ophir thought of me, Hector approved. Worship for him flowed out of me. Maybe Ophir couldn't see the arc of blue electricity between Master and boy, but I knew Hector felt it. Taking it as his due, he soaked in my gift of adoration.

Between the good food, the wine, and the workout he'd put me through before we went to Ophir's, by the end of dinner, I must have drifted off with his cock in my mouth, because I was taken by surprise when Hector's thigh jerked out from under my cheek. I crawled after him back to the living room. The rug felt wonderful on my knees.

When Hector sat down, he indicated that I was to sit in his lap. Grateful, I crawled up and snuggled against his chest.

"You spoil him," Ophir said as he sucked on the end of a cigar to light it.

"I seem to remember spoiling you quite a bit, too." Hector spoke quietly, but I saw Ophir's reaction, like something stung him. I'd never seen a Master correct another Master, at least not men I respected as Doms. For that split second, though, Ophir was a boy again, and he was ashamed that his old Master felt it necessary to put him in his place.

I didn't want to see it. My humiliation was bad enough. Watching another man experience it was agonizing. Bold, I unbuttoned Hector's shirt and sucked on his nipple. He didn't swat me away.

Hector took a few puffs on his cigar and leaned back into his chair, bringing me with him. "Sam has been with me over a year now. I seem to remember that even before I met my boy, your Number One was in his current position."

Ophir's mouth set into a hard line. He picked up his drink, stared into it for a moment, shrugged, and took a sip. I was skilled at buying time when I was in trouble, so I recognized that he was stalling.

"Boy, how long has Number One been in Master Ophir's service?"

Why drag me into it? "I couldn't say, Sir."

"Ever since you started going to Ophir's house for parties?" Hector asked.

"Yes, Sir."

"And how many years has that been, Boy?"

"Almost four, Sir."

Ophir moved to the edge of the couch. "That can't be. How old are you, Boy? Twenty-one? I don't allow children in my house. You couldn't have been coming to my parties four years."

Hector chuckled. "Sam is twenty-six, Ophir. I know he looks like he's nineteen, but he's not. Now, you can keep denying this, and you can question our memory, or we can solve this by asking Number One."

Why any of that was important was beyond me, but Hector never caged someone without a reason. He was deliberately making Ophir uncomfortable and defensive. Ophir's arms crossed his chest, but he didn't speak.

"What is your rule, Ophir? Number Three is in training, Two is in his second year, and One is in his final year. Then you show him the door. Isn't that right?"

Ophir couldn't seem to decide between sipping his scotch and taking a draw on his cigar.

Hector caressed my hair. "There's no shame in being in love, Ophir."

Ophir set his drink down with exaggerated care like I did when I was buying time. "Love? Only you're foolish enough to fall in love with your boys."

Hector shook his head. "Can you honestly tell me that if Number One were to leave you tonight, you wouldn't be hurt? You love him, but you withhold it from him. That isn't right. It's cruel, Ophir. It's cruel to you, and it's cruel to him. You aren't like that. You have a heart."

"I've changed. I'm a Master now." The once calm, cool professor squirmed under Hector's unflinching gaze. "Just because you're weak doesn't mean I am, Sir-- Hector." I'd

never heard anyone sound so frightened to be alone, except maybe me. Ophir drew in a deep breath and composed himself. "We've been friends for a long time, Hector, so I'll consider your words. But don't make the mistake of believing all Masters are like you."

Did he mean that to be an insult? It sounded like it. It was a good thing Hector had worked all my anger out of me, or I might have given Ophir a piece of my mind. I was still put out when we left his house, though.

* * *

On the ride home, I asked Hector. "Sir, how did you know Master Ophir was in love with Number One? I mean, did you see it, or did Number One offer up prayers?"

Hector chuckled. "Actually, it was Ophir doing the praying. He's so in love with Number One that he can't see straight. I thought it was time to end his torment. It's funny how the simple solution is never the one people think of."

"But does Number One love Master Ophir?" I wished Ophir's slave boys had names. The loss of personality was the point, but it sounded so stupid outside of Ophir's house -- not that I would have dared say something like that aloud.

Hector caressed my cheek. "Every slave loves his Master. If not out of love, then why serve? They have strong feelings for each other, and neither one wants their relationship to end. But is it enough?" Hector shrugged. "There aren't any guarantees, Sam. You know that."

I bit my bottom lip.

"I'd like for Ophir to come to his senses, but he probably won't. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if Ophir kicks One out of his house. He's stubborn, like you. Sometimes, a boy has to suffer for his own good."

"Ophir's not your boy," I pointed out.

Hector laughed. "Aww, Baby. Jealous?"

Maybe I was a little jealous, but that was beside the point.

Hector made me look up at him. His eyes crinkled up in a real smile. "I'll always be Ophir's Master, no matter how many boys serve him. That doesn't change my place in his life. Understand, Boy?"

"No, Sir."

"Some day you might. Don't worry about it. There isn't a Boy on earth I'd rather have serving me than you."

Grudgingly, I smiled at the praise.

“That’s my sweet little boy.”

I tried to stifle it, but I yawned.

“Tired, Baby? Papi will give you a nice bath and tuck you into bed, just like I promised.”

Resting my head on his shoulder, I was content.

* * *

Hector carried me into his house when we came home from Ophir’s. He wanted to baby me, so I played along. The first thing he did was put me on the bed on my stomach and removed that damn butt plug. As I lay there, he stroked my back and seemed deep in thought. After a while, I glanced up at him, wondering if he was going to fuck me right there. I sure needed it.

Instead, he said, “Rest while Papi draws a bath for you.” He headed for the bathroom.

The hot water felt wonderful when I got in the bath, except for my very tender balls. I winced as they submerged. Every part of my body was stiff and sore. A long soak would take care of most of my aches; time would heal the rest.

Hector knelt by the bathtub and soaped up a washcloth. “I should remodel this bathroom. Wouldn’t it be nice if we could fit in together?”

Exhausted, I nodded.

Hector lifted my arm and washed under it. “Do you want to go right to sleep, or stay up for a bit?”

I shrugged. That was a mistake. Jolts shot through every muscle across my shoulders and down my back. Hector made soothing noises while he gently washed me.

“Let me put it this way. Do you want to go to sleep, or do you want Papi to take care of you?” Under the suds, his hand crept to my cock and gently squeezed.

Suddenly, I was completely awake. “I’d like some play time before bed please, Papi.”

Hector was still laughing about that after he toweled me dry, dressed me in my flannel pajama bottoms, and carried me to the bed.

“I can walk, you know,” I groused as I sprawled across the mattress face up.

Hector said, “Hands.”

I clasped my hands together and put them over my head. He put shackles on my wrists and chained me to the headboard.

As he undressed for bed, I said, “You’ll put your back out carrying me around like that.”

“Then you can wait on me hand and foot, but for tonight, I feel like pampering you, so you’ll just have to endure it.” He raised a finger. “Ah! Not another word, or the gag goes back in.”

My mouth snapped shut.

Hector slipped onto the bed beside me. He turned my head toward him and kissed me lightly. My mouth opened, and his tongue worked its way in. Our breathing got heavier. His hands wandered over my body, caressing me in all the right places while we kissed. I loved how warm his touch was.

He kissed his way down my stomach and then moved between my legs. A few strokes over my flannel pajama bottoms were all it took to get me going. Hector eased the waistband down just enough to free my hard-on. He took it into his mouth.

“Like that, Baby?”

Did he have to ask? Wasn’t I moaning loud enough? “Yeah.” I wanted my hands free so that I could touch him.

“I promise I’ll make you feel good afterward,” Hector said.

I was all for that, but I wondered what he was up to when he stopped giving me head and quickly flipped me over on my stomach. He lay on top of me and panted as if he’d exerted himself. I loved being pinned down by his weight. Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t have escaped from him. Hector roughly grasped at me and let go, as if he couldn’t make up his mind about something. His muscular thighs were on either side of my legs, forcing them together.

His voice dropped into a gruff whisper with undertones of urgency when he said, “I’ll try not to hurt you.” That had me really confused. He pulled my pajama bottoms down in back just to my thighs. He grasped my ass cheeks roughly, parted them and quickly shoved lubed fingers inside me just long enough to slather it in. Then pushed his cock into my hole.

Surprised, I gasped at the raw pain.

“Does that hurt your bottom, Baby? I’m sorry. I promise that it won’t hurt for long. Okay?” He kissed my back as he slowly fucked me. “Papi is being as gentle as he can.”

I tried not to, but I whimpered. That was the first time he’d ever taken me without spending a long time preparing my hole. Now I knew why. Those hours wearing the butt plug had loosened me up some for him, but I was still too tight for his fat cock. I told my body to stop fighting him and give in to the rough treatment. Submit was my mantra. Finally, my body listened and the tight clamp of my hole loosened for him.

Hector grunted with each thrust. His groin slammed into my ass. My cock had been hard when he flipped me over, but I lost it when he shoved into me. Once I relaxed though, the

rhythm of fucking and the rub of my cock against the sheets had me rigid again. Pain slut? Masochist? Ophir had my number, all right.

“Does it feel like Papi is ripping your ass apart?” Hector asked as he shoved deeper into me.

I nodded.

“It’s okay to tell me if it hurts. Show me tears.”

The tears were already falling. For a long time, I bit my lip to hold in the yelps, but then I realized he wanted to hear it. “It hurts, Papi. You’re hurting me.”

Hector drew in a ragged breath. He moaned and a rush of energy flowed off him. It surged through me like a prayer.

Understanding the game, I whimpered, “Take it out, please, Papi. You’re hurting my bottom.”

“I know it hurts now, but it’ll get easier when your tight little ass gets used to my cock inside it. Try to relax for Papi.” Hector’s hands switched between caressing me and keeping my ass cheeks spread. He was breathing hard and mumbling about how hot I made him, how he couldn’t help himself.

The smell of sex and sweat was thick in the room. I wanted to slip my hand down to squeeze my cock, but when I moved my arm, I remembered that I was chained to the headboard. Frustrated, I whimpered and squirmed. Hector held me down tighter. I glanced over my shoulder at him. If he hadn’t been fucking me, I would have been worried about the intense concentration on his face. His eyes were closed to narrow slits and his nostrils flared wide with each deep breath. I yanked on the chain holding my wrists above my head. Hector’s eyes opened wide for a moment. He pulled all the way out of my ass and then plunged back in as deep as he could go.

I cried, “It hurts. Stop, Papi. You’re hurting me.” Thank the Gods Hector knew I didn’t mean it. His lips twisted in a quick grin as he sped up the pounding rhythm. “You’re too big for me,” I wailed. I’d always wanted to say that and not sound stupid.

Hector slowed down his pace. His hands moved from my ass to my waist, and then caressed my hair. “You’re just not used to it, that’s all. It will get easier. Try to relax. I’m being as gentle as I can be, Baby, but it’s hard to hold back when you’re so sweet.” His chest pressed to my back. We were both slick with sweat. “You’re a good boy,” he told me. “Such a sweet boy.”

By then my moans weren’t pain. My cock was rubbing raw against the sheets. It was such a hot game we were playing, and I loved the furtive whispers and sense of urgency Hector added to the scene. It made it dirtier.

I tried to milk his cock by tensing and releasing my ass muscles, but Hector slapped my face. “Don’t act like a slut,” he said. “You’re a good boy.”

All the times I'd played innocent, no one had ever asked me to take that act into bed. It was a stretch for me, but I lay still like a boring virgin and pretended I didn't enjoy how raunchy it was. My cock gave me away though. I could feel myself getting to that point of no return where I couldn't stop myself from coming, but instead of fighting to control it, I let it build because it felt so good.

Hector's forehead rested at the nape of my neck for a moment. "Do you like having Papi's dick in your bottom, Baby?"

Oh, Gods, if he was going to talk dirty like that, I was going to shoot. Still, I tried to sound like I had to think about it when I said, "Yes."

He sped up his thrusts. "It doesn't hurt anymore?"

"It still hurts, but not as much."

"That's my good boy. Your tight little ass feels so good to Papi's dick that he's going to come real soon. If you let me come in your bottom, I promise I'll give you a treat. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

I tried to sound reluctant. "I don't know."

"I only give it to you," he said. "You're the only boy special enough for my come."

"Please don't! Stop!" I struggled a little under him. "No!"

"Hush, Baby. Shhh." He was pounding my ass pretty hard by then, the way I liked it. He had a firm grip on my ass and had the cheeks spread wide even as he kept my legs pinned down together. The only sounds in the bedroom were our grunts and the squeak of the mattress springs.

I prayed that he'd come soon, because I wasn't going to last much longer. "Please, Papi, take it out," I wailed.

Then he pressed close to my back again and kissed my shoulder blades between ragged breaths. "I love you," he whispered frantically. "I'm only doing this because I love you. I tried to be gentle. Do you still love me even though I'm doing this to you?" he grunted out between thrusts.

Whether he was asking me in scene or for real, the answer was the same. "Yes."

A deep, rumbling groan seemed to rip out of his chest, and he shoved hard into me as he came.

He slowly withdrew from my ass, gave my butt a little pat, and pulled up the back of my pajama bottoms. "Good boy. Now you've earned you treat."

Between my ass cheeks was slick with lube, come, and sweat. I hadn't felt so thoroughly fucked in a long time. Little spasms of pain shot through my ass, but I knew they'd fade soon.

Hector rolled me over and got serious about getting me off. Between his grip sliding on my shaft, his mouth working wonders on the head, and that incredibly hot, dirty little scene we played out, it didn't take me long to get to the point of no return.

"Papi, I'm going to come," I gasped.

He nodded and slowly squeezed my balls. I lifted up into his mouth, my back arching off the mattress as I aimed for the back of his throat. A couple more jerks, and I came hard. Panting, I collapsed against the mattress.

Hector sucked the last drops of come out of me. After tucking me back into my pajamas, he rolled me onto my side. Then he turned off the light and spooned tight against me. "Your bottom is going to be sore in the morning. I'm sorry about that. I tried to be gentle. Did you like that at all, Baby?" He kissed my shoulder. "Do you want me to do this to you again?"

Was he kidding? Then I realized that he was worried that I was disgusted. "Yes, Papi. Please."

He wrapped his arm around me. "You are one kinky boy, Sam. Good thing I like my boys on the wild side."

Chapter 9

Hector found out about the speeding ticket I got while riding in the canyons, of course. Masters always found out.

After a press junket on the west side, I walked into the house to find Hector waiting for me. He was in his poppa chair. There was an envelope in his hand. Even though I had no idea why I was in trouble, I knew that punishment was immanent. Dropping to my knees, I set my helmet aside and started the agonizing crawl to his feet.

Hector wasn't in a mood to play guessing games. "You left this speeding ticket on my desk?"

I'd been waiting for that ticket to come so that I could hide it from him. I had no idea how it got onto his desk. How could I have screwed up like that?

"You were clocked at one hundred twelve miles per hour. I didn't recognize the name of the street, so I phased over there to have a look," he told me quietly.

My heart pounded in my chest and dread poured over my skin.

He bellowed, "Are you out of your fucking mind?" His voice shook the rafters. What scared me more than anything was that he swore. He never did that. He didn't say anything after that. I waited and waited and waited, but nothing happened.

Horrible realization came over me, and before I thought about what I was saying, I blurted out, "Does this mean that you're taking the bike away from me, Papi?"

I won't repeat what Hector said, mostly because it came out too garbled for me to understand. He grabbed his keys and stormed out of the house. The front door hadn't even swung shut when his truck pulled out of the driveway.

* * *

Monsoon season was nearing an end, and it would be months before there were clouds over the Los Angeles basin again. Still, I could feel something dark looming off in the distance. I stood beside Hector's truck and scanned the sky even though I knew what was coming was inside me.

“We’ll be late,” Hector said. He turned over the engine.

I opened the passenger side door and climbed in.

“Don’t keep me waiting like that, Boy.”

“Sorry, Sir.” As we pulled out of the driveway, I craned around to search the horizon.

“What is it?” he snapped.

I rubbed my bare arms. “Something. I don’t know.” That was a lie. I knew perfectly well what awaited me.

Hector snorted. Despite being a God, he didn’t really believe in my witches’ powers. Of course he never said anything, but I could tell from the expression on his face when I sprinkled salt on the floor or burned herbs. He still didn’t believe that I talked to Nanny’s ghost every day, although he had to admit that when I made pozole for him, it tasted exactly like hers had.

“We go through this every week, Boy. You dawdle and try to make me late for my therapy. I don’t understand why. I’m doing this for you. You made me promise to get help, but you act as if you don’t want me to go,” he said.

When I was in a strange mood, it was a good idea to keep my mouth shut, but inside me felt like static, black and white crackling with no clear signal coming in. I felt like I was flying apart under my skin, like I was worn out and on edge at the same time. “I don’t see why you have to keep going, that’s all,” I muttered.

He raised an eyebrow. “I have to keep going because I almost hit you.”

“You did not! I overreacted. You tell me that all the time.”

”You didn’t overreact, Sam.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I went into full sulk. I was so tired of everything between us being so tense. He acted as if he didn’t hear a word I said.

“Once. One little incident, and nothing really happened. The rest of the time, everything is good between us,” I reminded him.

His grip tightened on the steering wheel. “Stop making excuses for me! I almost hit you. Do you understand that? Do you realize how close I came? You’re not safe from me, not yet. This is going to take some time, and I’d like a little more support from you.”

Lately, it felt as if that was all we talked about. That wasn’t the only thing I dreaded about our weekly appointment though. For some reason, he felt that if he needed to be in therapy, I did, too. While he talked to his doctor, I was stuck in a domestic violence survivors support meeting. For an hour, I was bored out of my skull and wondered what I did to deserve that kind of punishment.

We parked at a three-story medical building near the hospital. Hector glanced at his watch and frowned. "You almost made me late again. From now on, you will be in the truck, ready to go, fifteen minutes early. Understand?"

"Yes, Sir."

Obviously, my word wasn't good enough, because he said, "Tomorrow, we'll start working on discipline drills again."

He was so fucking hot when he was gruff like that. Everything out on the edge was better. The air was crisper, the food had more flavor, and the world jumped in vibrant colors. My cells sucked it up like the desert soaking in rain, and the adrenaline coursing through my veins was such a rush.

He got out of the truck. "I'll meet you back here in an hour."

"Yes, Sir."

He glanced at his watch again and strode quickly toward the building.

I took my time crossing the parking lot. One great thing about my therapist -- he refused to tell Hector what went on in my group therapy. So Hector had no idea that most sessions I sat out of the circle and read the newspaper instead of participating. The only thing that would have been better would have been to skip group entirely.

Now there was a brilliant idea. I stopped where I was. The coffee at the medical center was horrible, but just a block away there was a great little bookstore that made a killer cup of joe. I had a choice. I could waste an hour of my life and drink bad coffee, or I could spend a pleasant hour in a bookstore. It was no contest.

* * *

"What's in the bag?" Hector asked when he met me in the parking lot.

"I found this really cool book--" Oops. I winced.

Hector put his hand out. I gave him the bag. He pulled the book out and looked at the receipt. "You didn't go to your group."

It was pretty obvious that I ditched it, so I didn't even try to lie.

"Get in." He slammed my door and stomped around to the driver's side.

The entire ride back home, he glowered and stared ahead. I clutched my book and sneaked glances at him. He took the turn into his driveway a little too fast, throwing me against the door. He slammed on the brakes and said, "I rearranged my entire sales route so that I could be home for this session every week. That obviously means nothing to you. You selfish little brat."

Gods, I was such a fuck up. When I'd paid for the book, a little voice inside me warned that it wasn't a good idea, but did I listen? No. That's what I got for spending money so freely. I used to spend weeks agonizing over a decision to buy things. Every time I acted on impulse, it came back to haunt me, but somehow I never learned. Maybe I was stupid.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw ominous clouds approaching. Misery, a pale, gray God, crawled along the floor to my feet. I tried to kick him away, but I couldn't stop him. He passed a hand over my eyes, dimming every color into muted pastels. I could only whimper, "No, no, no," as he turned into a film that coated my skin.

"Did you say something, Boy?"

I bit my lip and shook my head. For a moment, that seemed to help shake Misery away, but then I felt him oozing darkness through my brain.

Hector got out of the truck.

I watched him go inside the house. He didn't seem to care if I followed or not. Why couldn't he feel it? The air weighed a thousand pounds and it pressed down on me. I was sliding under. Drowning in misery. I put my hands over my eyes. All I needed was a couple days, and then the bout of depression would pass. Maybe Hector would go out of town on another trip. It was too much to hope for. He'd told me that he'd be in town until Monday. Maybe I could convince him that I had the flu. He'd believed me last time.

* * *

Hector glared at the empty place setting in front of me at dinner. "You aren't eating?"

My stomach hurt. I shook my head and kept my gaze lowered, hoping he'd think I was showing proper submission.

"You didn't eat lunch. You must be hungry by now."

I could barely stand the smell of his food. My stomach lurched. When I spoke, my voice was weary. "I'm fine, Sir."

Hector slammed his fist on the table. "I've almost had it with you. When are you going to grow up? I tell you something, I'm sick of this game. I'm the Master in this house, and it's about time you learned what that means."

Stunned, I sat there with my head bowed. He didn't want me. Of course he was sick of me. I couldn't do anything right, not even follow his rules. Any moment he was going to tell me that it was over and to pack my things.

"Bring me the wooden spoon."

As much as I loved being spanked, I hated that wooden spoon with a passion. It sat in a container on the counter with my whisks, spatulas, and ladles as a constant reminder to

behave -- not that it seemed to work. With the spoon balanced on my upturned palms, I crawled across the floor to Hector. When I reached Hector's feet, I stopped.

He made me wait for a while before he reached down to take the spoon off my hands.

"Bare that bottom and raise it up for me."

Trembling, I pushed my pants down and then arched my back past the point of comfort. He finished eating his dinner in silence. The ice maker in the refrigerator cycled. His fork scraped across the plate. My face burned. I wanted the punishment to be over, but I dreaded it starting. I tried to think of ways to make everything right, but unless I could go back in time, that was impossible.

Finally, he turned his attention back to me. "Why are you being punished?"

"Because I was bad, Sir."

The spoon slapped against my ass.

"Try again."

"Because I disobeyed my Master."

He smacked me hard for that. My thoughts skittered around and tried to come up with an answer that would please him. When I took too long to speak, he smacked my butt a couple times on each cheek. It stung badly.

"I'm sorry, Sir."

Hector answered my apology with an unrelenting assault on my ass. I grasped at the linoleum floor.

"Keep your ass up!"

Groaning, I corrected my posture.

"We're discussing your sins, boy. It's too early for apologies. Now tell me why I'm punishing you."

It was hard to talk. "I'm being punished because I didn't go to my therapy session."

Smack!

"And because I don't take my sessions seriously."

Whap!

"And because I make my Master late for his session every week."

Slap, slap, slap.

Sobbing, I curled my hand to my mouth. “And, and, and ‘cause I’m a spoiled brat and I give my Master attitude and do as I please.”

“Yes. And that has to change, Boy.” He gave me another ten smacks with the spoon and then stood up. “I think you’re finally in the proper state of mind for your punishment. Come to the bedroom.”

I crawled down the hallway after him.

Hector helped me off the floor and positioned me with my chest on the bed. I clutched at the chenille tufts on the bedspread and inhaled the scent clinging to the sheets. Even though I knew what was coming, the feeling of dread passed.

“Ten strokes, Baby, and then you’re going to spend some time in the corner.”

I nodded.

“One,” he said as his cane seared pain into my butt.

No matter how much I apologized, the unrelenting count continued. I could feel each stripe as if he’d just laid it down. The initial pain was bad enough, but after a plateau, it built again. Screaming and crying, I took it all without once begging him to stop. I was very proud of myself for that.

Hector stroked my hair. “It’s all over now.” He helped me back to my feet. Seeing my puffy red eyes and tear-streaked face, he made a sympathy sound. “Are you going to be a good boy from now on?”

I nodded hard.

“You know I’d much rather take you into my dungeon and reward you for your obedience than have to punish you like this. I want you to think about that while you’re in the corner. Think about how disappointed I am with your attitude toward therapy.”

That stung worse than any cane. I bowed my head.

“I want you to think about maybe growing up a little, Baby.”

Chapter 10

Hector reclined on the bed and watched me get ready to go to Brett's Oscar Night party. It took me several minutes to find my favorite jeans. Hector didn't make me dress up for my friends, but my old clothes were slowly disappearing from the closet and it was getting harder to find something I wanted to wear. I gave up trying to find a t-shirt, grabbed the first top I saw, and shut the closet door.

"You know that you can go without me," he said.

Maybe I was a little slow getting the hint, but something finally dawned on me. "You don't want to go? I know you hate Brett--"

"Hate's a strong word. Brett annoys me. I don't like the way he talks down to you." Hector plumped the pillow behind his back. "You deserve to be treated better, especially by a friend."

"That's just Brett." As I slipped my bare feet into my old sneakers, I wondered how long it would be before Hector tossed them out. He had a real thing about shoes, especially ones with huge holes in them.

"My therapist said that I have to let you spend time with your friends," Hector said.

"You do. You never come to our basketball games." I wished he would. I wanted him to see me play. Even though I was short, I was pretty good.

"I'm not a big fan of the Oscars."

Sacrilege!

Hector laughed. "No insult intended, Sam. Movies are okay, but I have better things to do with my time than watch a long, dull awards show. And unlike you, I have to be at work in the morning."

"Watching the Oscars is work for me," I reminded him. "Besides, who gets up before you and makes your breakfast every morning?"

He raised an eyebrow.

“Sorry, Sir.” I climbed onto the bed and straddled his thighs. “Maybe I’ll come home early.” My fingers grazed the salt and pepper fur across his chest. I glanced up at him through my eyelashes.

“If you keep that up, we won’t leave this room.”

That sounded like a good idea. Grinding against him, I pressed my lips to his neck. “I’m recording the show, so I can watch it later,” I mumbled between kisses.

Hector captured my hands and gently pushed me back. He shook his head. “I hope your sex drive will slow down a little as you get older.”

Fat chance of that. I’d be nineteen as long as I could afford to pay Eternal Youth. I slid off the bed and removed my shoes.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m not going to the party.”

“Sam.”

“I’ll watch it here.”

“Sam.”

I’d miss the fun of watching the show with my friends, but since I signed that contract with the magazine, those days were pretty much over anyway. The following year, I’d have to be at the Kodak Theater for the show. Going to Brett’s party one last time seemed kind of futile. I pulled off my shirt.

“Boy!”

My head jerked up, but I kept my gaze down.

“Why aren’t you going to Brett’s party?”

I shrugged.

Hector climbed off the bed, cupped my chin and forced me to look up at him. “That isn’t how you answer me. Why aren’t you going to Brett’s party?”

“I changed my mind, Sir. I don’t feel like going out.”

Hector’s mouth set tight and his expression hardened around his eyes. I swallowed hard when his nostrils flared out with each breath. “Put on your shoes, Boy.”

“I’ll stay home with you.”

That only pissed him off more. He stomped over to the closet and grabbed one of his shirts. "Congratulations, Sam, you got exactly what you wanted, again."

My mouth dropped open. "I don't understand."

"Oh, I think you do. Gods!" He rolled his eyes to the ceiling and gritted his teeth. "You're good. I'll give you that. And the worst part is that I'm still doing exactly what you want me to, because I can't figure out how to get myself out of this without playing right into your plans. I swear, sometimes I'm not sure if you're the God of Sex or the God of Manipulative Submissives."

My mouth opened and closed, but I couldn't talk. He thought I was manipulating him? He was so wrong.

He pointed at my face. "Not a word, little boy, not a single word from you. I'm taking you to that damn party, just like you wanted me to. Now put on your shoes."

* * *

Brett opened his condo door with a big grin on his face, until he saw Hector glowering behind me. Then the smile faded. "Oh. You brought him."

Hector had me by the scruff of my neck. He pushed me ahead of him until we were in the middle of the front room. Guys hanging out in the kitchen and sitting on the couch fell silent, like a classroom full of kids watching the Principal haul a troublemaker to his office. Heat radiated off my face.

Thankfully, Joey bounded across the room. He'd stopped dying his hair different colors and let it grow out so that straight brown bangs hung into his eyes. "Thank God you're here, Sam. There's a betting pool, and I need you to help me fill out my Oscar guesses. You don't mind if I borrow him for a minute, Hector?" Joey grabbed my hand, pulled me past the kitchen, opened a door that had a PRIVATE sign on it, and yanked me inside with him.

When he flicked on the light, we both stood, transfixed. The room was decorated with memorabilia from a drum corps that Brett once performed with. On the closet door, he had a huge poster of himself in uniform, his trumpet cradled to his chest.

"No wonder Brett always wants to go to my place," Joey finally said.

"Somehow, I pictured him in the entertainment unit," I said. "I never knew he played trumpet."

"Didn't you? Apparently, he was pretty good. Until he switched to accounting, he was a music major." Joey settled on Brett's bed and looked at a slip of paper. "Anyway, best picture. I can't decide between the one with Colin Farrell's naked butt scene and that chick one that made everyone cry." He held a pencil over the long sheet of paper and watched me expectantly.

“You can’t go wrong voting for Colin Farrell’s naked butt,” I said. That tantalizing glimpse of male flesh had lasted maybe five seconds on screen, and didn’t have anything to do with the story, but I didn’t feel like lecturing Joey about art.

He checked off a box on his list. “Exactly! Help me out with the rest of these. The pot is up to two hundred this year.” I sat down on the bed beside him. He glanced up from his list. “Hector problems? He looked a little pissed off.”

“He didn’t want to come tonight. He said I made him. But I swear, Joey, I didn’t.”

“Get your ass paddled?”

I chewed on my bottom lip. “No. I wish. At least then it would be over.”

“Best actor?”

“What?”

“Who do you like for best actor?” Joey asked.

We went through the list. My answers came in monotone as I fretted about what Hector said. Was I manipulative? I didn’t think so, but Hector always saw things differently than I did.

Brett opened the door. “The red carpet interviews are starting. And what part of Private didn’t you two understand?”

Joey pointed to the poster of Brett. “You were so cute in your little uniform.” Brett’s melancholy eyes lit up. Then Joey ruined it by adding, “What happened?”

“Same thing that happened to you and your psychedelic hair colors. I aged out,” Brett snapped. “Now get the hell out of my room.”

* * *

A crowd of guys sat on floor in front of the TV. Hector, as usual, had space around him. His arm draped across the back of the couch. I kneeled at his feet, resting my butt on the heels of my feet, and put my head on his thigh. That’s how we watched TV at home, unless he invited me up for a cuddle.

“For Christ’s sake, Sam, sit on furniture like a human,” Brett said. Everyone stared. “Just because he treats you like a slave at home doesn’t mean you have to do it here.”

“Are you, like, lifestyle BDSM?” A cute blond guy who sat on the floor near me asked.

I nodded.

“And he’s your master?” The guy looked up at Hector. “Wow. That’s cool.”

Brett lost it. “No it isn’t! It’s disgusting. Hector beats the shit out of him for every little mistake.”

Hector’s gaze left the TV and focused on Brett. I could feel his muscles tightening in his leg. “Sam deliberately breaks my rules because he wants to be punished. If he doesn’t want to be paddled, all he has to do is obey. It’s that simple.”

Brett put his hand on his hip. “That’s no choice. Obey you or get beaten? Why have the rules in the first place?”

Tension seemed to flow through the room. Great. Brett would blame me for ruining his party.

“I don’t care to discuss my lifestyle choices, Brett,” I told him. It was time to change the subject, so I turned to Joey. “Joey, I got invited to a premiere next month. Want to come? It’s a spring release movie, so it probably sucks,” I warned him.

“Is there a party?” Joey smirked at the other guys in the room, saving his most exasperating grin for Brett.

I shrugged. “Yeah. At____,” I named the latest, hottest, mere-mortals-can’t-cross-our-threshold club. Everyone in the room seemed to hold their breath, a moment of respectful silence for the unobtainably hip.

Joey gloated over his good fortune. “I’m in. Oh man, I have to go shopping,” He paused and gave me a pained glance. “Do we have to watch the movie, or can we just go to the party?”

“You’ll fit right in with the Hollywood crowd,” I said.

“Thanks!” He beamed, thinking that was a compliment.

Conversations started up again. Whew. Party crisis averted.

“Would you like a beer, Sir?” I asked Hector. He nodded, so I went into Brett’s kitchen to get one.

Brett followed me into the kitchen and grabbed a beer for himself. “Jeeze, Sam. Are you ever going to grow up? How long are you going to keep playing this game with Hector? You wait on him hand and foot, you do whatever he tells you to, and in exchange for that, he gets to beat you up? What the hell is wrong with you? Why does that get you off?”

That had me pretty steamed. Why did Brett think it was any of his business? Why did Brett feel he had the right to criticize everything I did? I’d already told him that I wasn’t going to discuss it with him. Hector was right. Brett always talked down to me. I popped open a beer for Hector and one for me. Not bothering to answer Brett, I stomped back to the party.

Hector took the beer from me. He gave me a questioning look as I sank down to his feet, but didn't demand to know why I was so upset.

Guys crowded around the TV. The pre-show was underway. That stuff never interested me. I should have watched in case I'd have to do red carpet interviews the next year. I had no clue what people talked about during those moments. Fashion? I was hopeless at it and didn't even want to try.

Normally, I sat riveted through the main part of the Oscar telecast, happily debating every winner with my friends, but instead, I kneeled at Hector's feet and rested my head on his thigh. Brett had ruined the evening for me. Instead of ignoring the bad feeling creeping over me and enjoying the party, I let it drag me down. I downed my beer and -- as Hector would have described it -- sulked.

The Best Actress was announced. Joey stood up and did a victory dance. "Another one!" he crowed.

"You cheated!" someone called out.

"Yeah, no fair using a ringer," another guy said.

Joey danced his way to the kitchen and danced back out during the acceptance speech. He handed me another beer. "You earned it," he said.

By the time Best Director was announced, I had quite the collection of empty beer bottles on the coffee table. Drinking them was a mistake, but at a certain level of buzz, I didn't feel so morose. When it wore off I felt even worse, so I drank the next one Joey handed me. By the fifth beer, I'd completely lost interest in the awards show and dwelled on things that made me unhappy. For a while, I worried about the things Hector had said earlier that night, but I didn't begin my massive mind-fuck until I started obsessing on the demands of my new job.

The idea of talking to strangers in front of cameras made my tongue feel thick in my mouth. There was no way I could do it without stuttering. On national TV, my eyes would roll up with the effort of getting out some simple word, and I'd make those horrible strangling sounds, and people would laugh at me. Dread spread through my chest. I couldn't do it. I couldn't face it.

My neck and face were hot. I moved my head from Hector's thigh and tried to burrow under his knee with my nose so that no one could see how red I was. It was hard to breathe.

Hector's hand rested on the back of my head. When I turned my face into the couch cushion, his fingers twined into my hair and pulled back. I resisted as long as I could, but I couldn't take the sharp pains shooting through my scalp, so I submitted and looked up at him.

"Do you have any idea how annoying that is?" Hector asked.

“Sorry, Sir.” I gulped in shallow breaths, but even away from the suffocating cushions, I couldn’t get enough air. It was too hot and thick. “I need to go outside for a minute.” I jumped up, swayed a little, and then stumbled for the front door.

The night was cool. It felt wonderful over my skin. I grasped the wrought iron railing around Brett’s landing and closed my eyes. The world spun, so I opened them again.

The front door opened and Hector came out onto the landing. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t do it,” I wailed.

He sighed, long and resigned, then put his arms around me. I don’t think I could have stood up without his help. “Can’t do what?” he asked.

“I c-c-c-can’t be on TV.”

“Oh. That.” He pressed his lips to the top of my head. “That’s a year away, Baby, and you’re making yourself this miserable over it already?”

I nodded, my face pressed against his chest. He smelled like home to me, his cologne just a faint whiff of sweetness, a little cigar smoke, but mostly just the scent of him. My hand rested on his pecs. We stood like that for a long time, but not long enough for me.

He gave my butt a firm pat. “That’s enough melt-down for tonight. No more beer for you. Okay?”

I gazed up into his dark brown eyes, trying to figure out his mood. “Sir, they’re going to make me travel a lot to film festivals and stuff.”

“We talked about that. That’s good for your career.”

“But if I’m traveling all the time, who will cook for you and pour your whiskey? Tell Deal I made a mistake signing the contract. Tell her I have to stay home and serve you.” My words came out in a rushed slur.

Hector stepped back from me. His eyes were wide, as if I’d said something horrible. He pointed to my face. “I will not lock you into the house, Sam. Never again. I almost destroyed you last time.”

“This is completely different.” I didn’t mean for that to sound as whiny as it came out.

“No it isn’t.”

“But--”

“Enough!” he bellowed. His voice rang off the building and in my ears. “You are not giving up your career for me, and that’s final, Boy.”

There was nothing I could do right. Everything I said and did just made him furious. My shoulders slumped. I didn't have a career. I had a hobby that barely covered my bills. My real job was serving my Master. That was all that mattered.

Brett yanked open his front door. "Are you finished smacking him around, or should I come back later?"

"Shut up, Brett," I said. "Just fucking shut up and never talk to me again."

Hector and Brett stared at me for the longest time. Hector finally said, "Brett, Sam's had too much to drink. Haven't you, Baby?"

"No." I glared at Brett. If he made one more rude remark about Hector, I was going to punch him.

Hector put his hand on the back of my neck. "I'm going to take Sam home and put him in bed before he gets himself in trouble."

Brett stood on his landing and watched me stumble down his stairs. If Hector hadn't been there to keep me on my feet, I would have fallen.

Chapter 11

After being soundly punished for that scene at Brett's party, my behavior was exemplary the following week. I was even in the truck waiting when it was time to go to therapy and I participated in my group session. Hector noticed, I think, but he didn't say anything. Why would he? It was what was expected of me.

When Hector completely dominated me everything was right in my little world. Bound by his rules, I was more confident. I even sent off my movie reviews without mind-fucking myself over them. It was a happy place for me.

But, unlike happily-ever-after tales, it couldn't last. It wasn't that I slipped back into my selfish ways or broke his rules. It was just that the dark clouds I felt looming on my horizon hadn't disappeared. In fact, they were drawing closer. On the outside, I had everything together. My job was going well, my chores were done, and my Master smiled at me. Inside, it wasn't such smooth sailing. Little parts of me felt like they were fracturing off like shards of glass slowly dropping from a broken mirror. No matter how much I ignored it, my internal barometer felt the relentless approach of something very, very bad, and no amount of obedience or praise from Hector could stop it from engulfing me.

When he went to the oil fields up north on his next sales trip, I prayed hard every day that the depression would just go ahead and take me so that I'd be over it by the time he came home, but it didn't. Like someone in the path of a hurricane, I rushed around trying to get everything done before it hit. I submitted my reviews early. I prepared a couple days' worth of dinners. I shopped and cleaned and did all the laundry and watered my garden. But no matter how ready I was, it wouldn't come.

The night that Hector came home from his trip, I couldn't fall asleep. The worst part was that I was so worn out. My body wanted to rest, but I couldn't silence my thoughts. The green glowing clock on my nightstand showed that it was two in the morning, and then three. The last numbers I read were 4:47. Miraculously, I eventually drifted off.

Hector shoved my shoulder. "Get up, Boy."

I groaned. It couldn't be time to wake already.

"Your alarm has been going off for five minutes, Sam." When I didn't respond, Hector smacked my butt. The sharp pain briefly cleared out the fog in my brain, but the fuzziness settled back again.

Shit. I needed another couple hours of sleep.

He smacked me again, harder. “Go make my breakfast, Boy. I have to get into the office today.”

Breakfast. I had to make his breakfast. The smell of cooking eggs was too horrible to imagine.

“Are we going to have to have another discipline session?”

I wiped away the unexpected tear that pooled in my eye. Sliding off the bed, I reached down for my flannel pants. When I stood, the world went out of focus. A head rush made my brain swim. I put out a hand to steady myself, and must have misjudged, because I stumbled against the bed. It should have cleared away, but the dizziness expanded. I felt disconnected from my body.

“Boy!”

Hector crawled over the bed. He grabbed my arms so tight it hurt. I fought down nausea. Hector peered closely at my face. I just wanted to lie down. Just another hour. A little more rest would make everything all right. I fought to keep my eyes open.

“Are you sick?”

Oh Gods, he knew. Just from looking at me, he knew something was wrong with me. Fuck! On top of the dizzy swarm buzzing in my ear, I felt a panic attack coming on. I couldn’t breathe.

“Sam, why didn’t you just say so? Do you think I’m that heartless?”

My legs were buckling under me.

“Come on. Back in bed,” he said in his sweet gruff poppa bear voice.

When I curled up on the mattress, Hector pulled the covers up to my shoulder. He looked so guilty. I didn’t want him to feel that way.

“I’m fine, Sir. I promise I’ll get up in an hour,” I told him.

“Tough guy. You’ll never admit you need help,” Hector chided me. He put his hand on my forehead. “Do you want me to make you some breakfast?”

I groaned. The idea of food was enough to make me puke.

“Okay. Get some rest.” He kissed me lightly and caressed my cheek before quickly dressing. “Is there anything you want Papi to bring home from the market for you?”

Instead of answering, I pulled the covers over my head. Even with the daylight shut out, I couldn't get back to sleep. My stupid mind wouldn't give me a moment of peace.

* * *

Two days later, I was still in bed. Hector hovered, annoying the hell out of me, but when he left the room, I got mad that he'd abandoned me. It wasn't rational, and I knew it, but I couldn't seem to snap out of the cycle.

Hector tried to feed me a small dinner. When it got so that the texture of toast in my mouth was enough to make me gag, I refused to pretend anymore. "I'm not hungry," I said. I nestled down into the covers and turned on my side.

Hector set down the bowl of soup on the nightstand. "Poor Baby. Roll onto your tummy."

When I did, he got out the lube and pulled down my pajamas. He spread my ass cheeks and dabbed some lube onto my hole. The scenario was too familiar, but instead of turning me on, it turned my stomach. Rising panic gave me energy. I snatched my pants, pulled them up, and said, "Red!"

Hector stared at me. His eyebrows furrowed and his mouth hung open. "Red?"

"Please don't, Papi."

"Don't what? I was going to take your temperature."

Feeling foolish, I admitted, "I thought you were going to take me."

He pointed his finger close to my face. "Don't you ever, ever talk about that again." As suddenly as it came, his anger passed. "Baby, do you really think I'd do that to you while you're sick?"

"It felt, I don't know. The ritual was the same." The blankets were clutched in my fingers and my other hand gripped the waistband of my pajama bottoms.

Hector took a few long, deep breaths. "I promise you that I will never, ever force you to do anything. Especially sex. All I want to do is take care of my little boy and help him get better. Okay?"

There wasn't anything he could do to cure me, but I nodded.

He took a thermometer out of the nightstand drawer and shook it down. "I promise this won't hurt a bit. You'll probably enjoy it. Roll over."

"I don't have a temperature," I grumbled as I let go of the covers and turned onto my stomach for him.

“You’re so cute when you’re being butch.” Hector chuckled. Then he pulled down my pants again, added some more lube, and slid the cold thermometer inside me. He was right. It didn’t hurt. If we’d been playing, and I’d been my usual self, I probably would have gotten a hard-on just from that. As it was, I was more humiliated than turned on, something Hector probably enjoyed.

After some time, he pulled up my pants and gave my butt a pat. He put on his reading glasses and peered at the thermometer. “You don’t have a fever.”

“I told you I don’t.” Normally, the slick of lube between my ass cheeks felt good, but right then, I wished he would clean it off my skin.

Hector sank down on the mattress beside me and caressed my face. “Then why won’t you eat? Baby, you can’t go without food this long. It isn’t healthy.”

I meant to sound angry, but it came out more like a whine. “Just leave me alone.”

“Sam, I know how stubborn you are, but please don’t make food an issue. You win. Okay? You win. Whatever you want me to do, I’ll do. Just please eat something.”

“Don’t you think I want to eat? I just can’t.” Misery stirred at his sleeping place in my chest, reached up, and choked me from the inside. He squeezed deep sobs that made my ribs ache. “I’m not being stubborn, Sir.”

“Prove it.” Hector reached for the bowl of soup. He lifted a spoonful to my lips. I tried. The chicken noodle soup reeked of the inside of a metal can. I opened my mouth, willing myself to please Hector above anything. Then my stomach heaved and I couldn’t do it.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Hector held the blue bowl in his big hands. A smile flickered over his mouth, but I saw Misery slinking across the covers and into his lap like a fluffy kitten that could turn into a venomous snake.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Sorry I let another God creep between us.

Sorry I let him infect you, too.

Sorry that I’m so fucking ungrateful.

Why did I have screw things up by getting depressed? Over what? How many times did I ask myself that as the clock ticked away hours in the middle of the night? There was still no answer. Before I met Hector, I was barely holding my life together financially. I got mixed up with Marcus. That was a real reason to be depressed. But my career as a film critic was taking off. I had Hector. He gave me a home. He was an incredible Master. I had no fucking right to be sad.

“I’m sorry,” I said again.

“Hey, it isn’t as if I made the soup from scratch for you. Then I’d be insulted. Is there anything you will eat? I bought you some peppermint ice cream.”

I wanted to sleep more than anything. At best, I was getting a couple hours a day. Most of the time I pretended with my eyes closed, but it wasn’t real. I shook my head.

“Okay. But if I don’t see some improvement quick, I’m taking you to the emergency room.”

“No! No hospitals!” I held up my hands to ward off the idea.

“At least drink some water. You’re getting dehydrated.” He poured water into a glass with some ice. “Just the way you like it.” Hector tucked the covers around me. He hovered over me as if searching for a clue how to make me feel better. I hated myself for the worry I saw in his eyes.

“Do you want me to call your Mom and ask her to come out?” Hector asked.

I groaned and pulled the covers over my head. Hopefully he understood that meant no.

* * *

I might have drifted off. Mentally, I was inside a skewed version of my teahouse, but it was dreary, as if a veil of gray covered everything. Hallways led nowhere. The Zen garden I enjoyed so much for its clean lines and minimalist plantings was barren. I had slippers on. They were flat, blue terrycloth that matched the robe I was wearing.

Lost and weary, I pushed back a sliding wall of rice paper in blonde wood frames, hoping to reveal something that felt familiar or at least comfortable. The sliding door at my hand became a heavy, white door with a small observation window in it.

Behind the door was a hospital bed with sheets pulled so tight across it that I wondered how anyone could get under them. Frightening metal poles loomed like preying mantises over the pillow. An old spray of blood made brown exclamation marks above the mattress. There were bars on the small frosted windows, and restraints on the cold frame of the bed. The room stank of piss and cleanser. Small white tiles covering the walls to chest height were separated by grungy grout.

I couldn’t breathe. It was a terrible place and I wanted to go, but I couldn’t. Echoes of terrible things hovered in the atmosphere like ghosts. Sensing me, they oozed over my skin.

Hoping Hector would shake me awake from the nightmare, I tried to scream but I had no voice. Desperate, I tried to phase away from it, but I couldn’t. My God powers were gone.

The hospital room seemed to creep toward me. It was a tide of invisible taint that could wash up over my shoes and dry, quick as cement. Panicked, I backed away from it. My feet didn't shuffle fast enough. I turned and ran.

When I felt I was far enough away from the room that it wouldn't find me, I sank down on the rusted metal grid floor and hid my face in my hands. I had to convince Hector that I was all right, or the room would get me.

* * *

Joey's voice boomed in the hallway outside the bedroom. My eyes didn't want to open to the sharp sunlight glowing on the windowsill. I listened. Maybe I only dreamed I heard him.

The bedroom door slammed open and Joey bounded in. Damn. I pulled the covers tight over my head.

Joey bounced onto the bed. "Rise and shine, Sam. Time to go to the premiere." He yanked the covers out of my hands. He was wearing an outrageous shirt that hurt my eyes more than the sunlight. "Are you even skinnier? How do you do that, you little shit?" Peering closer at me, he asked, "Damn. When did you last take a shower, dude?"

It had been a couple days, I admit. The idea of standing up long enough to wash exhausted me.

"I told you he had the flu," Hector told Joey. He leaned against the wall, watching Joey with an amused expression.

"Aw, this isn't the flu, Hector. This is just Sam's blues. He does this all the time. Three or four days in bed, and then he gets over it." Joey sprawled beside me. "I am so psyched about tonight. Do you know which celebrities will be there? I brought, like, my entire wardrobe. I want to make an impression. Should I change after the movie, or do you wear the same thing to the club afterwards?"

I didn't have the energy to answer. That didn't stop Joey. He rolled on his back, got comfortable on Hector's side of the bed, and blah, blah, blahed for seven solid minutes about possible pant and shirt combinations. He didn't even pause to breathe. Hector arched his eyebrow and left us alone.

Joey rolled back on his stomach. "So?"

"So what?"

"Haven't you heard a word? What am I going to wear?"

"It doesn't matter." Talking that much used up all my energy.

"Harsh, Sam."

“I’m sorry. I meant that no matter what you wear, you’ll be fabulous.”

When his ego was sated, Joey’s smile was painfully bright. He wriggled into a new position. “Thanks!”

I lifted my hand, but let it drop back to the mattress.

He pursed his lips as he looked at my sorry ass. “I take it that this means you aren’t taking me to the hottest party in town.”

I’d lost track of days. Somehow, I thought I had time to get my act together. “Passes are by my computer. Have a good time.” I licked my lips and was immediately sorry that I did. They were rough under my tongue.

Hector came back in the bedroom. “Joey, I think we should let Sam rest.”

“Okay.” The mattress bounced as Joey hopped off. “Seriously, dude, a shower? And brush your teeth, too, 'cause they’re getting furry.”

Hector shut the door behind Joey, leaving me alone. I thought about getting up and dressing, but I was so drained that all I could do was think about it.

About an hour later, I heard our front door shut. Then I heard Hector's footsteps in the hallway. Damn it! I should have at least been dressed. He opened the door.

“I promise I’ll get up,” I said.

His eyebrow cocked.

“I’m fine. I’ll make your dinner.” My head swam when I sat up, but I couldn’t let him see that. I rested for a moment and then forced myself to stand up and walk to the bathroom.

Hector didn’t say a word.

* * *

I felt better after a shower. I shuffled into the kitchen. Hector sat on the couch, reading. The idea of cooking completely overwhelmed me. I couldn’t concentrate. A brain fog of exhaustion clouded my mind. Every dish sounded like way too much work. I finally decided on pasta. Through the summer, I’d made marinara from the tomatoes I grew and froze it, so at least I didn’t have to make sauce from scratch.

After the water for the pasta went on the flame, I sank down on one of the chairs at the table in the kitchen to rest. Pasta and sauce wasn’t enough for dinner. I had to make a side dish, but nothing sounded good, and everything felt like a huge effort. I tried to concentrate, but my thoughts drifted.

Next thing I knew, the flames on the stovetop were hissing as water spilled over the edges of the pot. I had no idea how that happened. Before I could get up, Hector ran into the

kitchen and turned the burner off. I don't know why, but a fat, hot tear slid down my face, and then another one. I was so fucking tired.

Hector cupped my chin in his hand and pushed away the line of tears with his thumb. "It's okay, Baby."

"I'm sorry. I was going to take care of it. Honest." Everything felt so hopeless. I couldn't even boil water. Lately, everything I did was wrong.

"I understand now. You aren't well. It isn't your fault." He helped me down the hallway and undressed me. My legs were so weak they trembled. He even had to lift me up onto the mattress. He'd changed the sheets on the bed. I wondered when that had happened.

Hector kissed my forehead. "I'm making a doctor's appointment for you."

"I'll get up tomorrow. I swear. I'll be over this soon."

"I'm taking you to see Dr. Kranz."

His therapist? I started to protest, but he put a finger to my lips. "I can't believe I didn't see it, Sam. No appetite, lying in bed for days on end but not sleeping, no interest in sex -- that alone should have told me something was very wrong. Thank the Gods Joey came over, or I'd still believe you have the flu."

"No doctors. No hospitals," I said. The room wasn't going to get me.

"Sam..."

"I won't go."

Hector made a sound as if he were strangling on frustration.

Chapter 12

In a few more days, I was back to my old energy level. On our morning jog, I did laps around Hector to prove I was okay. That didn't stop him from postponing his next sales call to the oil fields up north so that he could stay home. No matter what I was doing, he found a reason to be in the room with me. He watched me out of the corner of his eye and brooded.

Exasperated by his hovering as I sorted our laundry, I finally told him, "I don't need a baby-sitter. I'm fine."

He sat on the bed and frowned. "How can you say that?"

I lifted the laundry basket. "Because I am. Oh -- Linda reminded me that for Beltane Eve we're going to want to wear clothes that we don't care about. The word she used was disposable. I looked through your entire closet and couldn't find anything suitable, so you might want to go shopping." I gave him a cheery smile and backed quickly out of the bedroom before he could bring up things I didn't want to talk about.

* * *

The Friday before we were supposed to head to my parents' house for Beltane, Hector started acting weird. Maybe he was nervous about meeting my family. I didn't blame him. Through dinner, he cleared his throat a lot, but when I looked up at him, expecting him to say something, he focused on his plate or said things like, "Great salad, Sam."

After dinner, I brought a piece of rhubarb pie to him in the living room and went to pour a whiskey for him.

Hector put his plate down on the coffee table and patted the couch cushion beside him. "Have a seat, Sam."

He wasn't sitting in the poppa chair. He didn't look angry. It didn't feel like trouble. Cautiously, I sat as far from him as I could. I drew my feet up onto the couch and grabbed a pillow so I'd have something to do with my hands.

He smiled. Then he rubbed his hands down his thighs. He cleared his throat. "So, I think my therapy sessions have been going really well."

Was I supposed to respond to that? I nodded.

“I still have a lot of work to do, but Dr. Kranz is really helping me.” He watched me, so I nodded again. Hector drummed his fingers on his leg. “It’s good to have someone to talk to, you know? I tell her about work, about what I’m feeling, about us. There are a lot of issues she’s helping me to work out.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Because of my sessions, things are getting better between us. Don’t you think? You don’t feel as suffocated anymore? I’m getting better at controlling my temper, and my jealousy. You feel like you’re free to go out with friends, and leave the house, and work, right?”

I hoped he had a point and that he’d get to it real soon. “Yeah, sure. Things are great.”

He frowned. “Well, no, things are not great, Sam. It seems like it now, because you’re getting everything you want, and you’re just bouncing along through life in that little fantasy bubble of yours, and I’m making sure nothing touches you. But...” He stared down at his hands. “Baby, things have to change around here. I’m not going to ask you for much, but I need a sign from you that you’re willing to do a little work, too.”

I scowled. “I do all kinds of work around here.”

He nodded, and said slowly, “Yes, I know. I don’t mean your chores. I mean that I want to see you working on us.” He stared at me.

I worked my hands around the edge of the pillow. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Hector picked up his dessert plate and gently cut a corner off the rhubarb pie. “Your training hasn’t progressed at all since you moved in. You play at being a submissive, but we both know that you’re not. You do as you damn well please and then enjoy the punishment. I want to take your training to a different level, but I’ve been too worried to push the issue, so I’ve been letting you have your way. I’ll be patient and continue to let you do what you want just as long as I know that you’re working on your end of the problem.”

What was he talking about? “What are you worried about?”

“About you.”

My temper flared. “Me and my problem.”

He nodded. A hopeful smile flitted across his face.

“And what, exactly, is my problem, Hector?” Any more attitude, and my mouth was going to get washed out with soap, but I didn’t care.

The smile disappeared. “Depression.”

Jumping to my feet, I tossed the pillow down. “Depression? Do I look depressed to you?”

“No,” he admitted.

I rolled my eyes. “Then there’s no problem.”

“Yes there is, Sam. You could have another episode at any time.”

I couldn’t believe what he was saying. “So I spend a few days in bed, Sir. Eventually, I get my chores done. I get over it. I can handle it.”

“I was here this time, and I completely missed the signs. What happens if I’m gone on one of my sales trips and you have a really bad episode? What then?” he asked.

He really thought I couldn’t take care of myself. That pissed me off. “I’ve spent days in bed when you were out of town. I survived.”

Hector gripped his hands together so tight that his knuckles turned white. The muscles along his jaw clenched. “You need professional help.”

I put my hand on my hip. “A few months of therapy, and suddenly you’re an expert on depression.”

Hector rose off the couch, his hands clenched into fists. “Don’t you raise your voice to me, Boy. I’m still the Master in this house.”

We glared at each other.

“Fine. I won’t yell. But I’m telling you that I don’t have a problem,” I told him.

“Sure, Sam. No problem, until the next time you try to jump out a window, or swallow a handful of pills.” He shook his head and pinched his nose. When he spoke again, his voice wasn’t steady. “I can’t lose you like that. It’s my job to take care of you, to protect you. Every time I think of how close you came to killing yourself, it scares me, Sam. I’ll admit that. It terrifies me. And when I think how many times you convinced me you had the flu, but you were really struggling with depression, it tears me up, because who knows how close I’ve come to losing you again?”

How dare he throw that in my face? “I haven’t done anything.”

“But you could. You’ve tried before. How many times have you attempted suicide that I don’t even know about? How many times have you been alone in this house with no one to watch over you? All it would take is me turning my back on you for a moment, and you’d be gone. I still have nightmares about you slipping through my fingers and hurtling out that window.” He was openly crying by then.

I didn’t know where to look. Seeing him like that made me feel so guilty, but I wasn’t going to let any Doctor get hold of me. Not again. One slip, one wrong word about Gods, or being Wiccan, or seeing ghosts, or even about being gay, and some prejudiced Doctor

would have me committed. Been there, done that, would rather die than go through it again.

Hector enveloped me in a bear hug. He rubbed my back and rocked me. I turned away from him and stood there, not returning the embrace. He pressed his lips to my neck under my ear. “Baby,” he said. He exhaled and the warm air sent shivers down my back. “What would I do without you?”

My body betrayed me. It couldn’t resist him. Hector must have felt the way my muscles yielded to him, because he turned on the charm.

“I know what you need, Sam.” He pulled off my t-shirt and nipped at my neck while his hand trailed up my bared chest to my nipples. He pinched one between his finger and thumb and drew it out until I squirmed. He put his free hand on the back of my neck. “Don’t move, Boy.”

My cock was all his. Yeah, I knew he was hustling me, but all the decisions were being made at the level of my groin by then. Sweet Baby. Sexy Baby. Baby, baby, baby. I was such a sucker for those words, and he knew it.

Hector’s bites along my neck got harder. I closed my eyes and lifted my chin. He grazed my Adam’s apple with his teeth as he squeezed my nipple. The urge to move got stronger and I had to fight to control myself. He let go of my nipple. Fresh, harsh pain flowed across my chest. While I gasped and blinked, Hector used my t-shirt to bind my elbows behind my back. My chest thrust out to counterbalance. His other hand trailed down my chest at such a slow pace that I desperately prayed he’d get to my pants before it was my bedtime. When he finally cupped my package in his big hand and gave it a long, slow squeeze, I nearly shot my wad.

“Open your eyes, Boy.”

My lids felt heavy, but I obeyed. Hector forced me to look over my shoulder at him. His smile was mean as he squeezed my balls harder. Gasping, I fought the urge to wriggle free from the painful grasp, even though I was so turned on that I didn’t really want to get away from him.

“I know what you want. You want me to shove your face into the couch, rip off your jeans, and pound your ass so hard that you’re still hurting tomorrow.”

He knew me so well. My ass pulsed in anticipation. The few times Hector had taken me like that were seared into my mind. Each tear, each pain, each brutal moment a cherished memory. For that, I was ready to give him anything he wanted, right until he said, “You can have it if you promise to start sessions with Dr. Kranz.”

“No.”

Hector gripped my dick and rubbed it through my jeans. “Then you’re going to bed frustrated.”

“Fine.”

He scowled at me. “And you’ll be sleeping on your punishment cot until you submit.”

* * *

Hector didn’t talk to me for three days. Every time our eyes met, he shook his head and turned away. Even when I asked him what he wanted me to pack for our trip to my parents’ house, he refused to acknowledge me. It was all bad, but the worst part was that in the evenings, he shut himself in the bedroom. I couldn’t even kneel at his feet.

I was getting desperate, and desperation called for prayer, so I set out offerings, lit candles, and burned bundles of dried herbs until the house reeked of white sage.

None of the other Gods I knew seemed particularly religious. Hector sure wasn’t. If a God needed something from another one, they bartered in power like I did with Eternal Youth. Unlike the other Gods, though, I was raised in the faith. Prayer and worship were as normal to me as breathing. Besides, it usually made me feel better.

The God I really wanted to pray to was Hector. If he wouldn’t listen to me any other way, I thought that maybe he’d hear my prayer for forgiveness. All I wanted was for him to punish me. Then we’d be okay.

When I knelt before the altars, though, I lost my nerve. I decided to work up to him. First I prayed to the nameless Gods who shared the small altar. Then I went through my childhood Gods -- Aggie, the God of Agriculture, Mama Fertility, and the Storm King. Talking to them was like chatting with my elderly aunts. They pretended to be interested and I was polite, but we kept it light and cut it short. Praying to Angelena and Deal was a bit more complicated. They lived on my street. They saw me at least once a week. They ate dinner in our kitchen. And without a doubt, they knew that I was in big trouble with Hector. It was tempting to plead with them to talk to Hector on my behalf, but I had a feeling Angelena would side with Hector this time, and I didn’t even want to know what Deal would expect in return. I didn’t have any power to spare after I set aside Eternal Youth’s payment.

To prepare for my appeal to Hector, I cleared my mind as I would before entering his dungeon. I focused on a proper submissive attitude. Everything had to be perfect. I bowed my head and clasped my hands behind my neck.

“Aren’t you a pretty picture?” a female voice cooed.

I craned around to look behind me. The Goddess of Eternal Youth sat in Hector’s poppa chair in a pink and black hounds tooth suit.

“What are you doing here, Goddess?” I whispered.

She tried to look dismayed, but I didn’t believe it. “Sam, is that any way to greet me?”

“This is a really bad time. Go away.”

Eternal Youth pretended to pick a piece of lint from the hem of her skirt. "I'm here for my payment."

I glanced toward the hallway, but I couldn't see the bedroom door from where I knelt. "Keep your voice down."

She fiddled with her rings. "Pay me, and I'll go."

"It isn't the first of the month yet," I reminded her.

"You're going to make me wait for Beltane?" Eternal Youth frowned a bit, but her Botoxed forehead didn't reflect any emotion.

"Go away," I said.

My gaze kept darting back to the hallway. She saw that. "Beltane is such a busy time of year, especially for you, little boy. I thought it would be easier for both of us if we took care of this transaction before the celebrations."

I rose to my feet. "Not now, Goddess."

"Don't be cheap, Sam. It's not at all attractive."

"I am not paying you until the first. That's our deal. So you're just going to have to wait," I said.

"Pay her for what?" Hector strode into the living room.

My heart stopped. Oh fuck. Shards of panic burst like glass under my ribs. I glanced from Eternal Youth to Hector and back to her again. Eternal Youth grinned.

"What are you paying for, Boy?" His voice was oh so quiet, but I heard the rumble of anger in it. He stood in a wide stance with his massive arms folded across his chest.

I couldn't speak. I couldn't look my Master in the eye. The world was coming to an end with every second that passed.

Eternal Youth rose from Hector's chair. "Sam and I have a little business arrangement, Love."

Hector ignored her. "Boy, I asked you a question."

Misery kept me silent as I tried to stutter out an explanation that would stop him from being angry. I raised my hands palms up, pleading for understanding.

Eternal Youth picked up her handbag. "Well, I can see this is a private moment. I'll leave you two to talk." She phased out.

As much as I wanted her gone, I didn't want to be alone with Hector. His aura swirled black and purple like a bruise.

Hector flexed his hand and inspected his fingernail. Then he started talking. "When we first met, I hesitated getting involved with you. I knew that you were too young for me. But I decided that I could overlook your youth because you would eventually grow out of it." His voice grew steadily louder. "And now I find out that you're deliberately staying this way. I was patient with you for nothing!"

"Sir!"

"I want a man to share my life. Haven't I made that clear? I don't want to raise a child, especially one who will never grow up!"

I reached out for him, but he stepped back. What could I say? What could I do? I dropped to my knees. "But you like to play kinky age games!"

"That's completely different!" Hector bellowed. His face twisted into the meanest look I'd ever seen and his hands worked in and out of fists. Anger and embarrassment were such close emotions that I wasn't sure which one colored his aura.

"How is that different? I stay young for you, Papi, because I know that's what turns you on."

Hector breathed hard in and out of his nose. The struggle to hold his temper in check was visible. "Would you listen to me for once, Sam? I don't want a boy. I want a man who knows the difference between reality and fantasy. Until you figure out what's real and what's a game, don't call me Papi."

Oh -- I'd fucked up huge. "Sir--"

"Get out of my sight."

My mouth opened and closed. Get out of his sight? Trembling, I did the only thing I could think to do -- I obeyed my Master and phased out of his house.

Chapter 13

I phased in on Broadway in front of the coffee shop where Hector and I had our first date. We went there all the time. It was like a second home, and I needed a comfortable space right then. Besides, I could nurse a coffee for hours while I waited for Hector to calm down and summon me back home.

How would he punish me? I was already sleeping alone in the guest bedroom on the punishment cot. We hadn't had sex in days. He wouldn't talk to me. What could be worse?

A motorcycle pulled up to the curb in front of me. My heart flipped a little, not happy, but wary. I recognized the rider. He was the one who tempted me into racing in the canyons. He was the one who rode home with me the day I fought with those surfers. He was trouble. That was the only thing I knew about him.

He got off his motorcycle. As usual, not an inch of skin showed. I backed up until I was against a storefront. He regarded me, or at least I think he did, for a long moment as he towered over me. Then he pointed to the coffee shop. I couldn't say why, but I obeyed. It was as if my body was on automatic pilot. A dominating male told me what to do, and I did it. Maybe I was relieved that someone took over. Besides, it gave me something other to think about than the punishment that waited for me back home.

I walked in past the small tables of people with their laptops, the punks and the Goths to the counter in the back of the storefront.

The woman behind the counter wiped it down with a cloth. She smiled at me. "Hi, Sam. Alone tonight? Is Hector out of town again?"

Ashamed, I kept my gaze down. "Th-th-th--."

"The usual? One large black coffee coming up, hon," she said.

I hated it when people finished my words for me when I stuttered.

The motorcyclist didn't order. He found a table and took the seat facing the window. As I stood at the counter pouring sugar into my cup, I tried to figure out who he was. He was so familiar. I shook my head. It was just from the other times I'd met him.

Oh, man. If Hector found out I was having coffee with that guy, he'd blow a fuse. Too late. He already had. I was in so much trouble I didn't even know where to start to fix it. Having coffee with another man was probably the worst way to get Hector to forgive me. Hector. Maybe he needed a little time to cool off. I'd drink my coffee and wait.

The motorcyclist turned and beckoned me over. As if I had no control over my feet, I went to him.

He'd saved me the seat near the window. I didn't like that, but he pointed at the chair, so I sat. It was as if my body was on automatic pilot. When I sat, he crossed his legs, pushing the table even closer to me so that I was pinned near the window.

The motorcyclist pulled off his leather gloves slowly, as if he had all night. I had my first clue. He was white. That narrowed the field of Masters I knew -- and I was sure from the way I responded to him that he was a Master. My curiosity was definitely piqued.

His hands went to his helmet. My breath held; I leaned forward. The helmet rose.

I tried to bolt, but I was pinned behind the table.

"Hello, Sam."

Marcus! Oh fuck! My psycho ex-Master, the God of Fear. How could I be such an idiot?

Marcus sighed as he set his helmet down on the table. It rocked as I struggled to get free. "I wouldn't blame you if you phased out right now, Sam. But at least let me apologize before you run to your Master for protection."

People stared as I frantically shoved at the table. My coffee spilled, splattering over my legs. The Goths laughed. Embarrassed by all the attention, I blushed. "Okay, you apologized, Marcus. Now let me go."

"Of course." He scooted back his chair and put his hands on the table. "I'm clean now. Part of my twelve steps is apologizing to people I've hurt, and there's no one I've hurt more than you. So, I'm sorry. I don't expect forgiveness. I only wanted to say that I'm sorry." Then he pulled the table out.

Shaking, I got to my feet.

A busboy scurried over and mopped up the growing puddle of coffee on the floor.

Marcus set my empty coffee cup upright. "Let me at least buy you a fresh coffee. That is, if it's not against your rules about gifts."

"No." I rushed out of the shop.

Gods, my hands were shaking so bad that I couldn't even pull my keys out of my jeans pocket.

Marcus followed me out onto the sidewalk. “Did the coffee burn you, Sam?”

I backed away from him, holding my hands up as if that would keep him far enough away from me. “What do you care?”

His eyes were so sad. I realized that they had focus again, not like the last time I’d seen him. His shoulders slumped. It was odd, seeing him look almost human. The massive muscles and formidable height were gone. Even the boots that I used to fear so much had been replaced by a more modest pair.

“I guess I deserve that. Don’t blame me for wanting to make amends, and I won’t blame you for hating me,” Marcus said.

Traffic crawled by as people headed home. Would they see it if he grabbed me? Would anyone help?

“Sam, you’re shaking.”

My laugh was bitter. “No fucking shit, Marcus.”

He raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. “Okay, okay, so it wasn’t right of me to surprise you like that, but would you have let me near if you’d known who I was?”

What a stupid question. “No.”

“I didn’t think so. And it’s not like Hector would have let me near you if I’d shown up on his doorstep.” Marcus took a step toward me. I scooted away. He shook his head and stepped back. “Sorry. I forgot. It’s just when I see you like this, your eyes so round and frightened, you trembling, well, you can’t blame a man for wanting to hug you and make everything okay. You’re so very beautiful, Sam. You’re the perfect boy. For a moment, you were mine, and I drove you away.” He frowned and turned to look at the passing traffic. He sniffled quietly, but was composed when he turned back and showed me an embarrassed little smile.

I didn’t want him to see how terrified I was, so I crossed my arms over my chest.

“Meth can do that. It strips you of everything important,” Marcus told me.

My expression must have showed my doubts.

“Oh, you didn’t know? I was doing meth while we were together. And afterwards. It made me crazy. That I don’t have to tell you. I think Las Vegas was rock bottom for me. I almost drove you to suicide. Thank the Gods Hector was there to save you, right? I look back at that night, and I wish so many things had been different, but I didn’t deserve you then.”

That explained a lot, like why that horrible smell that used to linger about him was gone. He no longer stank as if he rotted from the insides. Still, I didn’t trust him. The aura

around him flickered between colors. Sorrow tinged true and then false, as if his emotions shifted with an internal conflict.

“I’ve been clean now for almost four months. Not long enough, but I’m working on it day by day.”

A stab of guilt cut through my hardening heart. No matter what someone had done, I’d been taught to believe they could change. If he was overcoming an addiction, he didn’t need to be discouraged. “I’m glad you’re off it,” I finally said.

He smiled again and bowed his head. “So am I. It hasn’t been easy... Well, I won’t bore you.”

“Good luck.”

His gaze held mine. “Thank you, Sam. That’s beyond generous of you.” Marcus lifted his arms in an exaggerated shrug. “Sorry doesn’t begin to cover it. But once again, I’m sorry. You were just a sweet boy, doing fine, and then I came along and drove you to the edge. I’m glad you’re with Hector now. He’s good for you. You’re back to your old self. Just as hot and sweet and gorgeous as before.”

The longer we talked, the less frightening he seemed. We were just two old acquaintances talking on a sidewalk as the sun went down. The history between us seemed like old news. The past was past. At least he didn’t turn me on anymore. Maybe it was his demeanor. I never could get excited over a man who groveled at my feet. “I’m fine,” I told him.

“Of course you are. There’s nothing wrong with you. It was all my fault.” Marcus glanced up and down the street. “I guess I should get out of your life now. I wish you nothing but the best. Now get on home to your Master, Boy.” He showed me a rueful smile.

Go home to my Master? If only I could. I should have been making Hector’s dinner. It was getting late. He expected his plate to be on the table exactly at eight. If he didn’t summon me home soon, it would be nearly impossible for me to serve him. Unless he didn’t want me to serve him. Before I could control it, my bottom lip quivered.

“Sam, is something wrong?”

It was getting harder to breathe. A minor panic attack rushed through me and my blood pounded at my temple. “I can’t go home,” I blurted.

“Of course you can,” Marcus told me in soothing, syrupy tones.

I blinked. His aura pegged toward a lie. What did he know that I didn’t? As hard as I fought to keep it down, the tide of panic was rising. Why hadn’t Hector summoned me? I clamped my mouth shut and shook my head so hard that my black curls fell into my eyes. “I don’t dare. Not until Hector forgives me.”

Marcus looked at me like I was the silliest boy on the face of the planet, like he understood things I never would. He lightly placed his hands on my arms and stooped down so that

he could look directly into my eyes. “Whatever you’ve done, I’m sure that if you go home right now, your Master will punish you for it and then everything will be all right.”

“He told me not to talk about something. We were fighting, and I said it. Hector told me that he wanted me out of his sight.” Shit. I was starting to cry.

Marcus’s eyes widened. “He kicked you out? He broke up with you?”

It never occurred to me that Hector meant for me to leave his house forever. Had we broken up and I was too stupid to know it? Oh, Gods. Doubt crept into my brain. I clutched at my hair. A sob welled up inside me and pushed its way out. Stunned, I asked Marcus, “Is that what he meant?”

Marcus cupped my chin in his hand so I had to look up at him. “No. You misunderstood. That’s all. Hector would never let such a beautiful little boy go. You’re the God of Sex, Sam. Hector would have to be crazy not to adore you just the way you are right now.”

His aura went off the charts toward a lie again. I chewed on my bottom lip. It cracked. Sharp and sweet pain brought my wildly flitting thoughts into focus. Blood dribbled into my mouth.

“I’m sure that your Master is pacing the living room and wondering where the hell you are,” Marcus said. Nothing about his tone sounded sincere. Mistrust for him crept back into my brain and I cursed myself for ever trusting him.

“He’s not waiting for me.” I wiped away tears with the back of my hand, but more fell.

“How can you be so sure?” Marcus asked.

“Because he isn’t summoning me.”

“Oh.” Marcus seemed a little embarrassed. Then he got that look on his face like he knew he was lying but wanted to sound as if it was the truth. “Now, Boy, Hector loves you. I’m sure everything will be all right.” He went over to his motorcycle and got on it. Before he put on his helmet, he paused. “But you might want to give him a few days to cool off.”

“But we’re supposed to go to my parents’ for Beltane tomorrow!”

Marcus shrugged. “I don’t know what to tell you. Maybe you should go ahead, and he’ll probably meet you there.” He smiled. “I’m sure he will. After all, what man in his right mind could resist you, Sam? The most beautiful boy there ever was.” He pulled on his helmet. “Listen, I have somewhere I have to be, but if you ever need help, you know my number.”

Stunned, I watched him drive away. It was dark, I was alone, and not even my psycho ex-Master wanted me.

* * *

I shoved my shaking hands into my jeans pockets and shuffled down the sidewalk as I fought back doubts. Halfway down the block there was a small bar. The usual crowd there was older working class gays. Back when I first moved to Long Beach, I'd cruised there a lot because those were the men who turned me on. It had been a couple years since I'd been inside though. It hadn't changed much. It was narrow and dark. The regulars sat on barstools and concentrated on their drinks.

They didn't have table service, so I went to the bar and ordered a beer.

The bartender would never have been able to work a WeHo bar. He was older, looked like he could kick some serious ass, and knew how to pour a stiff drink. "You got ID?" he asked. People carded me all the time, but right then, it felt like another reminder that I'd screwed up with Hector. I could hardly look at the guy while he peered at my driver's license. He passed it under a small black light, tilted it to check the hologram, and studied the typeface for a long time before grunting and handing it back. "Are you over twenty-one?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Have to hear it," he said.

"I'm over twenty-one," I said. My voice was so thick with tears that it came out in a whisper. Still, he nodded and handed me a bottle. I took it and shuffled to the back so I could drink in peace.

Someone touched my elbow. "Hey." I wasn't in any mood to be picked up, so I shook off the hand. "Sam, it's me. Master Ophir's Number One. Or at least, I used to be."

Even though I'd known him for around four years, I didn't know Number One's real name. If I closed my eyes, I doubted I could recall the features of his face. His hair had grown out a bit from the short buzz cut, and he had it waxed into a peak. He wore a dingy t-shirt, loose jeans, and a scruffy pair of black sneaks. I'd never seen any of Ophir's boys in street clothes. They either wore their gray uniforms or went nude.

"Um..."

"Chris," he whispered, as if unsure about that himself.

I nodded. He glanced around, touched my elbow again, and steered me toward the men's room. Thankfully, we stopped outside the door, next to a pinball machine.

Chris glanced around the bar. "I hope you don't mind. Can we talk?" He exhaled and leaned against the pinball machine. "You're the first person I've seen since..." When I didn't finish the sentence for him, Chris rubbed his arms. "Since Master Ophir kicked me out."

I was so bad at that kind of thing, and I was torn up with my own problems, but I squeezed his arm. "I'm sorry. I hadn't heard."

“I don’t understand why. Things were going so good. I served Master well.” Chris met my eyes and I saw how proud he was of that fact, then his gaze dropped back to his shoes.

Instead of saying something, I tipped back my beer and drained most of it. The older men in the bar checked us out, but seemed to have dismissed us as two emo boys in the middle of drama. I finished my beer.

“I’m getting myself another beer. Want one?” I asked.

When Chris smiled, I saw braces, something I’m sure Ophir paid for. “Sure,” he said.

I brought back two cold ones. We sipped them for a while in silence. It wasn’t as if we were friends, so we didn’t have a lot to say to each other. Still, it was obvious he needed to talk to someone, and until I was forgiven, I couldn’t go back to Hector’s place. Using my time to help out another boy in trouble seemed like a fitting way to start earning back some redemption.

Chris picked at a skateboard sticker stuck to the side of the pinball machine. “Has anyone said why Master kicked me out?”

I shook my head even though I had a sneaking suspicion that Hector’s chat with Ophir had a lot to do with it.

“I didn’t deserve it, no matter what you might have heard. Suddenly, Master found fault with everything I did, even though I did it the same way I always had. Finally, he reminded me that my contract was up, and had been for some time. He gave me fifteen minutes to pack. Then he kicked me to the curb. He shut the door behind me, Sam. Pushed me out and locked the door. Said he wanted me out of his sight.”

Oh, Gods. It felt like I’d been punched in the stomach. Reeling, I held onto the pinball machine and downed my beer.

Oblivious to my spiraling panic attack, Chris said, “I didn’t have any place to go.”

I took a long look at him then, and saw that he was dirty. Horrified by my selfishness, I said, “There has to be somewhere.”

“Where am I going to go? My parents kicked me out when they found out I was gay. I was a street kid when Master took me in. He got me into college, but I haven’t finished my degree.”

“He didn’t even give you any money?”

Chris shrugged. “A thousand dollars. It’s in the contract. When I signed, it seemed like so much. Now?” He shrugged again.

“Have you tried the S&M clubs? Anyone there knows how well you’ve been trained,” I asked.

He looked shocked. “Why would I ever want another Master? Do you?”

Stunned, I stared at him. Did he know Hector kicked me out? No. There was no way he could have. And yet, I took that as a sign that it was true. Hector and I were over. But I couldn’t think about that, not yet, or I’d spiral into a panic and then I’d be a mess if Hector ever did summon me. As long as I kept drinking, I felt like I could push that panic down and far away. I tipped my beer up and was surprised that there was only a swallow left. Chris nursed his, but I went ahead and bought him another one when I ordered my next drink. While I waited for the bartender to wait on me, I got an idea.

When I went back to him, Chris was playing a game on one of the pinball machines near the bathroom. I leaned against it and watched him play. It didn’t take long for him to lose.

I handed him the fresh beer. “Go see Hector. Tell him what you just told me. He’ll have to do something. He’ll find you a place.” I managed to say it without a single waver in my voice.

Chris shook his head. “I just told you that I don’t want another Master.”

“I’m not talking about another position in service. Hector owns, like, five apartment buildings. I’m sure he’ll let you stay in one while you finish up school. He’s really great that way.”

“Really? So, I can go home with you?” Chris had puppy dog eyes suddenly, all sad and vulnerable and pleading.

It was my turn to stare down at my shoes. “About that -- I sort of fucked up big time, and Hector’s really mad at me right now.” Chris looked like I had taken his last dream and pissed on it. I reached out for his arm. “Hector will take care of you. I promise. And if he doesn’t, go next door and ask for Angelena and tell her that I said you’re a friend. She’ll take you in. But don’t worry. Hector will.”

I guess Chris wanted to believe me, because half an hour later, he got on a bus headed toward Hector’s house.

I thought about taking the bus myself, but where? Unlike Chris, I had places I could go, but none that I wanted to. I didn’t want to face Angelena or Deal. Brett was out of the question. I could picture his smirk. Joey was the only choice. He wouldn’t judge, wouldn’t preach, wouldn’t even ask why I wanted to hang out at his place. The only problem was that his apartment was a couple miles away, and I was too damn tired to walk it.

That was easily solved. I used some of my God powers to summon my motorcycle. Realizing that I had four beers in an hour, though, I decided that I should wait a while to ride. I didn’t want to go back into the bar. For a while, I stood on the curb. There was nothing to do but think. I didn’t want to do that, but I did, and then I realized what I’d done. I sent a well-trained boy to my Master’s doorstep just hours after he kicked me out. Number One had probably made Hector meatloaf for dinner, and was already kneeling at Hector’s feet. Perfect. Just fucking perfect.

Depressed as hell, and angry at myself, I decided that I wasn't that tipsy, so I got on my bike.

Chapter 14

For a while, I simply rode. Supposedly I was headed to Joey's, but I didn't pay too much attention to what streets I took. Arbitrary turns got me on the freeway, then another, and the next thing I knew, I was climbing the Cajon Pass to the high desert.

No matter what I did, my thoughts went back to the things Marcus said. I didn't exactly trust him. Still... He didn't try to touch me. He wasn't mean. He didn't even look all that frightening anymore since he'd lost some of his muscle mass. He'd apologized. He'd admitted that he'd had a drug problem. And he was the one who kept assuring me that I'd misunderstood Hector. But what if I hadn't? What if Marcus was wrong? I believed his aura more than anything that came out of his mouth, and his aura contradicted everything he said.

Maybe Hector had meant that we were through. The more I dwelled on the fight, the more I believed it was over. Nothing inside me felt right.

Somewhere near the town of Barstow, I realized I'd been riding too long. My hands were numb from the vibration, and I wasn't dressed right for a long ride. The wind whipped through my thin shirt. My back ached from leaning forward. It wasn't the right kind of bike for long rides. I pulled off the road at an underpass, got off my bike, and sank down to the cement. If Hector wanted me back, why didn't he summon me?

Cars zipped by doing ninety on their way to Las Vegas. It was a clear night, but for some reason, I wasn't surprised when I saw a low fog creep towards me. Sometimes the God of Misery seemed to move on stealthy paws, other times he seemed to slither. He crawled into my lap, turned three times, and settled comfortably. I drew my knees to my chest, bowed my head, and threw myself a private pity party.

* * *

It was well after one in the morning when I phased in at the driveway leading to my parents' house in Oklahoma. I sat on my bike where the gravel lane turned off the rural two-lane highway and looked at the three-story farmhouse, with its forbidding mansard roof and weathered exterior illuminated by moonlight. No matter where I'd lived in college or even when I'd moved to Long Beach, it always used to be home. I tried to convince myself that I belonged there. The familiar smells of earth, crops, animals, and the verdant scent of the nearby woodlands were right, but deep in my heart, I knew I'd moved on. Home was with Hector, except that he wasn't home anymore either.

Not wanting to wake anyone sleeping in the tents that dotted the long lawn in front of the house, I got off my motorcycle and pushed it. As soon as I stepped onto Dewey land, I felt warding spells prickle over my skin. Recognizing me, they let me pass. Ancient oaks lined the lane, their branches meeting overhead and casting dark shadows. Gravel crunched under the tires as I made my way toward the house. I cringed at the noise, but no one in the tents stirred.

I left my bike by the side of house where several cars were parked. Most had out of state plates. Even though I couldn't see them, I knew there were at least thirty RVs parked in the fallow fields beyond the Zen Shack.

There was a dim light on in the kitchen. Some midnight snacker had probably forgotten to flick off the light in the pantry under the back stairs. I walked around to the front of the house and carefully climbed the steps to the door. Every time they creaked, I stopped and held my breath. No one stirred though.

My parents lived in a tiny rural town in a sparsely populated county in Southeastern Oklahoma, so I wasn't surprised that the front door was unlocked. In fact, I couldn't remember ever having a key. The big door creaked on its hinges as I opened it just enough to slip inside. Putting my hand to the smooth, cool wood, I shut the door.

My parents' house had been in the Dewey family ever since the land rush days. The Deweys were, of course, a maternal line. When Mom passed on, the farm would go to Linda, and in turn her eldest daughter. That drove the rest of the people in the county insane. They encouraged their daughters to marry Dewey men in the hopes of getting their hands on some of our prime bottom land, only to find that males had no claim to the farm. There'd been court battles, but the charter of the Dewey Land Corporation -- one of the oldest companies in the state -- withstood challenges all the way up to the State Supreme Court.

Because it was so old, the house had its share of ghosts. Sensing me, the ones who still had enough energy materialized. A few hung onto this plane of existence only as smears of haze or cold spots, but they tried to make their presence felt. One good thing about ghosts was that most had lousy memories or were so absorbed in their dwindling presence that they didn't tend to ask embarrassing questions, like why I was sneaking into the house in the middle of the night, and why I was alone. Not wanting to deal with the living, who felt free to ask such nosy questions, I decided I wouldn't risk climbing the stairs to my old bedroom. Instead, I slipped into the dark parlor, took off my boots, and curled up to sleep on the couch.

Chapter 15

“Uncle Sammy!”

The brain-shredding shriek came as a warning just seconds before the attack. My nieces jumped on me with the careless abandon of people who’ve never had their nuts kicked. I was fully awake and desperately trying to protect myself from their affection by the time my nephew joined the pile.

My eldest niece, Cora, decided that my stomach was a trampoline. “Whadja bring us?”

“Cora,” Linda said in that Mom voice that always cracked me up. If her kids only knew.

“Yeah! What did you bring us?” The rest of Linda’s horde joined in the chant.

Thanking the Gods that I was a God, I summoned a handful of miniature candy bars and flung them across the room. The kids swarmed on the carpet. I sat up gingerly. The kids didn’t hurt me, but hours on my motorcycle left my upper back and thighs sore.

“Candy before breakfast,” Linda said.

“I’m an Uncle. It’s my job.” I rubbed my face. The wonderful scent of fresh coffee wafted from the kitchen. It was like a siren song, and I was in no mood to ignore it.

Linda followed me into the kitchen. It was a huge room, taking up at least a fourth of the first floor of the house. Designed to provide food for the family as well as any farm hands, it had a long table that seated at least twenty, two refrigerators, two vintage 1920s stoves, fifteen running feet of counter tops, and a sink big enough to wash a cocker spaniel in. It made Ophir’s kitchen look cozy by comparison.

“If the kids puke, you’re cleaning it up,” Linda said.

As I poured a big mug of coffee, I shouted out, “Kids, if you puke, I’m not bringing you candy again.” They trooped into the kitchen with their little hands full of candy wrappers. “It’s gone already? You’re not supposed to inhale it,” I told them. My imitation of them snorting up a chocolate bar had the kids shrieking again. I winced.

Linda had the whole Mom thing down. She glared at her brood until, cowed, they quietly thanked me. “Get on outside. We’ll call you when breakfast is ready,” she told her kids.

“Out back!” She reminded them before they disturbed the tent city on the front lawn. They galloped in the other direction. The back door of the house slammed at they headed outside.

“Did I hear Sammy?” Mom came into the kitchen, her arms outstretched for a hug. “Oh, it’s so good to see you, honey,” she asked as she held me tight. Mom’s hugs were impossible to avoid, but once I was in one, I wondered why I fought them. It was as if her arms could shut out the world and there was nothing left but comfort and peace. “When did you get here?”

“Late last night. I didn’t want to wake anyone.”

She released me from her hug, but kept her hands on my arms. We were the same height and had the same blue eyes, but she had matronly curves where I was slim. Her gaze flickered over me and even though her sweet smile never faltered, I sensed that she saw things I didn’t want her to. I looked at her, too, and was surprised to see that despite her vitality, she was a lot older than I remembered. When I kissed her cheek, it was like pressing my lips to a plump peach. There were more lines around her mouth and eyes, and a ton of gray in her short hair.

“I put you up in the sewing room. We’re a little full this year, so you, Linda, Doug and the kids all got bumped to the third story. Sorry about that.”

“Hey, hey, hey!” Dad ambled into the kitchen. Lanky, he towered over Mom. “Look who’s here!”

“Hi, Dad.” Unlike Mom, who was still in a night gown, Dad was in his usual faded jeans, short sleeve cotton shirt, and US Navy cap already. He stooped a bit more than he used to, but otherwise, he was the same as I remembered him -- weathered, but tough.

He shook my hand. “Good to see you, son.” He clapped his hands together. “Well, are we going to stand around gossiping all morning, or are we going to fire up the galley? Folks will be showing up on the doorstep any time now.” Dad ambled over to one of the refrigerators and opened it. He bent down and shuffled stuff around. “If someone took it, there’s going to be words. Oh, here it is.” Withdrawing a plate, he turned. “I set aside some biscuits for you. Tucker in. We got work to do.”

Grinning, I took the plate of biscuits from him. That was vintage Dad. Even though it was a sin, I split the biscuits, tucked slices of cheese and ham inside, and nuked them in the microwave. After wolfing them down, I gulped the last of my coffee and went to the pantry.

“Should I start the grits?” I asked. Not waiting for an answer, I went to the cabinets and pulled out a pot.

“Whoa! That’s way too small,” Dad said. “We got two hundred mouths to feed.”

By the time Dad and I were ready for the onslaught of the Dewey Clan, the twenty foot long kitchen table would be groaning under huge platters of grits, fried okra, toast, bacon,

ham, sausage, biscuits, two types of gravy, scrambled eggs, pancakes, hash browns, miso soup, tofu scramble, grilled onions and peppers, cottage potatoes, oatmeal, chilaquiles, iced tea, several types of juice, fruit salad, and urns of coffee.

I shrugged sheepishly. “Sorry. I’ve been cooking for only two for so long that I forgot.” I put the small pot back and grabbed a huge stockpot. My back twinged as I stood up.

Linda set down her mug of coffee. “Speaking of which, where is Hector?” Mom and Dad gave her a look. “What? Like you weren’t wondering either? I’ve been wanting to meet this guy for a year.”

Turning my back to them, I measured water into the pot for the grits. “Hector isn’t coming.”

* * *

Four hours later, only a few pieces of toast remained of the breakfast Dad and I had cooked. A small army of dishwashers moved into the kitchen and began clean up. I’d been grateful for the busy work of cooking. There wasn’t time for embarrassing questions, or at least it made it easy to avoid them. Once the food was gone though, I’d lost that protection.

Aunt Lila bustled into the kitchen. A reluctant group of teens followed her. “The dishwashing brigade has arrived!” She put her hands on her ample hips. “You’ve done enough, Sammy. Now, scoot. Go on.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. My muscles were tight from the long ride, sleeping on the couch, and hours working in the kitchen.

“You look like you could use a long soak. Why don’t you go relax in the hot tubs?” Aunt Lila suggested as she gently, but firmly, escorted me to the kitchen door.

Across the foyer, in the parlor, I could hear a heated conversation about football. It didn’t matter that football season was months away. Deweys were either misguided Auburn fans or die-hard Sooners, and never tired of the subject. I was tempted to join them and maybe help some Auburn fans see the error of their ways, but I could hear Linda’s voice cutting through the spirited discussion, and I wanted to avoid her as long as I could. Instead, I sneaked out the back door and headed for the Zen Shack.

As I’d told Hector, the Zen Shack wasn’t a shack. It was the original wood barn built on the property by my ancestors. Back in the sixties, my Grandparents built a new metal barn by the orchard. The old barn sat empty until Dad and Mom got together. Fresh from a long tour of duty in Japan with the Navy, Dad set about refurbishing the old barn into a Japanese style communal bath.

Strangers who met Dad probably had no idea that he had a hippie streak. He certainly didn’t look the type with his military haircut and farmer’s appearance. Underneath that gruff exterior though was a man at complete ease with the Dewey Clan, a pantheon of Gods, and Wiccan beliefs.

The hot tubs Dad installed in the Zen Shack only took up about a third of the old barn, so he converted the rest into a relaxing meditation space. A solid wall separated the bath complex from the central room. The original oak beams and stone floor of the barn had been preserved, but the walls featured large plate glass windows that looked out on the woods and a small stream. Altars for the Gods covered the back wall. Some were so far up that people stood on step-ladders to make their offerings. In front of the altars was a low table that we used for tea ceremonies. There was a meditation maze painted on the floor and yoga mats stacked in a corner. Against one of the walls, there were rice paper screens that could be set out to partition off parts of the huge, open room.

Since it was Beltane, I expected that some of my family would be at the altars offering small sacrifices and prayers, but the shack was empty. Relieved, I headed for the tubs.

I pushed back the sliding wall and closed it behind me. In the first small room, I stripped down. Years back, I would have simply wadded up my clothes and shoved them on one of the shelves, but Hector's rules were so ingrained that I took time to carefully fold everything before moving on to the next room.

The tiles in the second room were cold on my bare feet. I grabbed soap and a washcloth, sat on the small stool inside the shower stall, and lathered up. When I was clean, I pulled the cord dangling beside me. A deluge of cold water splashed down and rinsed the soap away. Sputtering and shivering, I braced myself and pulled the cord again.

When I slid the wall to the third room aside, steam curled into my face. I quickly shut the door so that none of the heat would escape. It was wonderfully warm inside. I eased down into the oblong pool of hot water. Closing my eyes, I tried my hardest not to think.

Five minutes later, I swore I heard something, but when I opened my eyes, all I saw was steam. Figuring that someone had come in the shack to pray or to escape the hordes of kinfolk, I didn't think too much of it. Then part of the steam grew thicker and took on a familiar shape.

Nanny's ghost materialized enough that I could see her, but I could see the cedar walls behind her. It was like peering through thick gauze.

"Nanny. What are you doing here?"

"I've come to talk to you, Mijo." Her voice was faint and forlorn.

My entire life, I'd always believed that ghosts were affixed to a place. "I had no idea you could travel."

"I don't have much time, Sam. Coming to you has taken the last of my strength. But I had to ask. What are you doing? Why aren't you home with Hector?"

The question wasn't unexpected, but as much as I tried to prepare for it, my throat still got tight. "We had a fight."

“And?”

“And what? We had a fight. It’s over.”

Nanny’s ghost chuckled. I heard echoes of Hector’s voice in her laughter. “One fight doesn’t mean the end of the world.”

Focusing on the sensation of the rippling water, I moved my arms in circles before me. “This one did.”

“People say things when they’re angry that they don’t mean,” Nanny said.

“Things like, ‘Get out, I never want to see you again?’”

Nanny crossed her arms over her ample tummy. “He didn’t say that.”

My bottom lip puffed out. “Not exactly. No.”

“Don’t start putting words in his mouth. My Hector never said anything like that to you, and you know it.”

Maybe not, but I was pretty sure that’s what he meant. I met Nanny’s gaze. Her form wavered like a reflection on the surface of water.

“Go to him.”

“I can’t. Not until he calls me.”

Nanny snorted and put her hands on her hips. “So proud. So stubborn. I wonder sometimes why my Hector puts up with you. But I suppose he loves you.”

I moved my hands in circles through the water and watched the overhead light sparkle on the little waves I made. “He has a funny way of showing it.”

“Aiye. Mijo. You’re so young. Love is never going to be perfect. Stop expecting it to be, and things will come a lot easier for you.”

Love should be perfect. I was going to tell her that, but when I looked up, she was gone. I had a sinking feeling that it was forever. She’d crossed to the other side. Perfect. I’d killed his Grandmother’s ghost. There’d be no forgiveness for that mistake.

* * *

After lunch, I played basketball with Linda and our cousins on the court beside the new barn. I chatted with elderly relatives, went on tours of massive RVs, showed off my motorcycle, and played kick the can with an unruly gang of kids. In other words, it was a typical Dewey Clan gathering. The same people, same conversations, same everything, but I didn’t feel as if I were part of it anymore. I drifted through the day like I was in a parallel

world that didn't really connect with theirs. Maybe it was because I was a God, but I suspected it was because Hector wasn't there with me.

My mind kept going back to the things Nanny's ghost had said. She'd sacrificed herself to deliver a message, and even though I wasn't sure exactly what her message had been, I didn't dismiss such things lightly. If she thought I still had a chance with Hector, I had to honor her and try to make up with him.

I paced the back porch of the farmhouse while I dialed Hector's house on my cell phone.

At the first ring, my heart suddenly seemed lighter. When we talked about Ophir and Number One, Hector told me that people always overlooked the simple solution. He might have been proud of me for seeing the obvious. All I had to do was talk to him, and everything would be all right. But the phone rang and rang. He didn't answer.

The God of Misery chuckled in my ear and wrapped himself tighter around my ribs.

Refusing to give in, I dialed Hector's cell phone. No answer. I called the house again. No answer. I kept hanging up before it rolled over to voice mail, because I didn't want to hear the message, "You've reached the residence of Hector Garza and Sam Dewey." Then my phone chirped at me, and I saw that the battery was about to die. I dialed Hector's cell phone one last time. All I heard was "Please leave a voice mail and I'll be back to you," in Hector's deep voice before my phone went dead.

I tossed the dead phone from hand to hand while I tried to figure out what to do next.

The back door of the house opened, nearly hitting me.

"Sorry, Sammy. Didn't see you there," Mom said. The green robe she wore, with intricate Celtic embroidery down the lapels and at the cuffs of the sleeves, was the same one she'd had as long as I could remember. Every time she put it on, I was filled with pride in her position as our High Priestess. I couldn't imagine anyone else officiating over our rituals the way she did. She carried a huge chest. I knew that it held a ceremonial athame, a cup, a wand, and other family heirlooms that were probably over a thousand years old.

That artifact of our past evoked surprising emotions. Memories of joy and loss swept through me, and suddenly I felt the connection to my family I'd been hungering for. The power of nature, Gods, and wild magic rose from the ground and spread over me. Taking a moment to soak it in, I said nothing. Mom gazed at me, and somehow, I knew she understood.

Before the rising emotions overwhelmed me, I shoved my cell phone into my back pocket and rose to my feet. "Let me help you with that, Mom."

"Thanks, sweetie. Can you take it to the altar? It's time to start the sacrifices."

As we walked across the back lawn to the large stone sacrificial altar, conversations quieted and running children stopped in their tracks. Without a word, the family rose and converged at the edge of a circle around the altar. Seemingly appearing out of thin air, the

other priestesses and priests emerged from the crowd and took their place in the circle. Linda, dressed in orange robes, took the chest from me. Even though I was a God, I didn't pass into the circle.

After the initial rites, a priest lit a fire in the sacrificial altar. To the uninitiated, it would have appeared to be a big barbeque grill. Except for offerings though, to my knowledge the sacrificial altar was never used to cook anything.

As I looked over the crowd of Deweys, I spied Gods among us. I wasn't sure if my family saw the Gods the way I did, but they had to feel the gathering power.

Mama Fertility wore a red dress that clung to her voluptuous curves. Several of my uncles and cousins waited with abated breath to see if she'd spill over her plunging neckline. The bearded bear of a man behind her had to be the Storm King. He glowered at the men and tossed a small stick of lightning between his massive hands.

Aggie, the God of Agriculture, stood next to Dad. They could have been brothers. They even dressed alike.

Looking over my shoulder, I caught Angelena's eye. She nodded slightly, but immediately turned her attention back to Deal. While Deal talked, she leaned close to Angelena. Even though I couldn't hear what she said, I felt suddenly as if I were eavesdropping on something private, so I turned back to watch the Priestesses. It was better that way. I didn't want to have to answer Deal or Angelena's embarrassing questions about Hector -- if they didn't already know how I'd screwed up with him.

Mom's voice cut through the hushed conversations of the crowd. "We make this offering to the Storm King." She carefully placed the appropriate offerings on the sacrificial altar and then sprinkled them with grain alcohol. Over the hot fire, it burst into flame and turned to ash quickly.

Linda's voice behind me made me jump. "Make way, coming through!"

We move aside for her as she carried a heavy platter across the lawn.

"We make this offering to the Goddess of Traffic!" Linda announced. Carefully balancing the platter on one hand, she triumphantly yanked aside the cloth that covered it.

"What is that?" someone yelled.

Linda smirked. "Some of you may not know this, but Angelena is a vegan. So this year, I thought it would be more appropriate if the offering to her was vegan, too. You've heard of tofurky? I give you tofoffering!"

You could have heard crickets chirping.

"I molded it in the shape of a goat," Linda said. She seemed to be expecting praise.

"That's a goat?" Someone finally asked. The family giggled quietly.

Linda frowned. "Of course it's a goat. Can't you see its little ears here, and its face here?" She pointed to various lumps on the mound.

"Looks more like a slug to me," her heckler said.

Linda scowled at the crowd.

Angelena pushed her way through them and entered the circle. "It's a very nice bunny," she assured Linda.

"It's a goat," Linda grumbled as she turned to the altar.

With far more ceremony than was needed, Linda dumped her tofu sculpture onto the altar. For a moment, nothing happened. Then part of the goat cleaved off, fell through the grill, and splattered on the burning logs below. Smoke and an awful stench quickly billowed over the backyard. Laughing, the Dewey Clan ran to get out of the stinking cloud.

Coughing, Linda fanned smoke away from the altar. "Okay, that's the last of it," she called out.

People cautiously moved back to the lawn. I hung back. They were probably going to make a sacrifice to Hector soon. I couldn't face it. As quietly as I could, I made my way to the side of the house and then went around to the front door. I smelled charred meat. Another God, another offering. I climbed the flights of stairs to the third story of the house, went into Mom's old sewing room, and shut the door.

Chapter 16

Downstairs, I could hear the hum of voices and the scrape of chairs across the kitchen floor. I leaned against the frame of the sewing room's small window and peered outside. The sun had set, but there was lingering light in the western sky in shades of honey and amber. The underside of the few clouds glowed neon pink. Far off in the woodlands there was a deeper orange glow near the ground. They'd lit the bonfire. I opened the window and smelled wood fire.

Another wave of loneliness hit me. I ached for Hector.

Figuring that I'd use my parents' phone to call him, I headed downstairs. I went right, cut through the laundry room, and emerged in the back of the kitchen near the pantry. The kitchen was crowded. No way was I going to have such a private conversation in front of fifty people. The call would have to wait until after dinner.

The kitchen table groaned with food. Steaming bowls of macaroni and cheese stood next to platters of breaded chicken. I sauntered up, reached over the gang of children seated at the table, and grabbed a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

A teenager in head to toe black clothes with heavy black eyeliner raccooning her eyes leaned against the wall, her arms crossed over her chest. "I don't see why I can't go to the bonfire," she said.

An adult, probably her father, said, "You aren't old enough."

"I am, too!" she wailed. When the other adults in the kitchen chuckled as she stomped out of the kitchen, her thick-soled boots making her dark mood clear.

My heart went out to her. I'd begged my parents plenty of times to let me go. It never worked. Beltane Eve was strictly an adult event. Even if her father allowed it, she'd never get past the warding spells. I knew that, too, because I'd tried. Now that I was an adult and could go, I wasn't so sure I wanted to. Without Hector, it seemed pointless.

By the time I'd wolfed down enough food to take the edge off my hunger, I decided to stay upstairs alone rather than join in the festivities. I wasn't in the mood for it. No one seemed to notice me. They were all too busy getting the kids fed and settled for the night. When I got to the landing of the back stairs though, I could hear far off music through the screen door. A bodhran -- a celtic drum -- and penny whistle wove an interesting melody. I

figured I'd just go out on the back porch and listen for a while, then go back inside, wait for everyone to leave for the bonfire, and then call Hector.

I could never resist music. It got under my skin and commanded me to dance. Bad things happened when I did though. Fights broke out. Orgies started. Riots, and then police, and everyone pointing at me and all those accusations. I didn't dare ever dance in front of anyone, not even Hector. Dancing was something I did with the curtains drawn and in the dark when I was alone.

At some point, I realized that the music was a spell, but by then, I'd made my way past the back porch, past the Zen Shack, and past the field full of RVs. I wasn't the only one drawn irresistibly to the music. People drifted closer to the orange light that glowed through the thick bushes at the edge of the woodlands.

Even though it was pitch dark under the canopy of trees, I had no problem following a path. It was probably part of the spell. In the woods, there were more people. They spoke in hushed tones as they wound their way through the trees. Occasionally, someone would stumble, but they'd laugh and continue on. I could feel the warding spells grow stronger.

By the time we reached the huge clearing, everyone walked single file in a solid line along the path. As we reached the open space, groups peeled off and walked around the blazing bonfire. I felt the power of a magic circle prickle over my skin.

* * *

The bonfire was at least twenty feet wide and surrounded by a wide circle of waist-high stones. Inside a ring of smaller stones, the stack of logs stood higher than my head and the flames shot even higher. The wood crackled and orange embers floated up into the sky.

The music came from the other side of the bonfire. I walked around it, skirting the growing crowd. A slight man, wearing only jeans, lounged on a stack of hay bales and stared off into the forest as he play the fiddle. Beside him, a dour man leaned close to his bodhran and beat out a lively rhythm with the tipper. Sitting on top of the stack of bales was a girl with purple hair who played a lively counter melody on a tin whistle. A stocky mandolin player stood nearby, his eyes closed in concentration. An older woman whirled in dervish circles and played finger cymbals to the music. I had no idea if she was with the band or simply enjoying the music.

From that side of the bonfire, I could see a stone altar. It was the size of a picnic table. It, not the bonfire, was in the center of the clearing. I turned towards the house and saw the roof above the trees. We weren't that far from it, maybe half a mile. It amazed me that all the times I'd explored the woods near our house I'd never followed one of the trails to the altar. How could I have missed it? The clearing was almost the size of a football field, and from the looks of it, it sat directly in the middle of our farmland. I'd probably walked near it a thousand times while I was growing up. Clearly, that sacred spot was heavily protected by wards year round. It was a bit annoying that no one ever told me, but then again, I supposed it was partially my fault for ignoring things I didn't want to see -- things like how much my immaturity bugged Hector -- until it was too late.

Candles held aloft by large wrought-iron candelabras marked the ordinal points of the clearing. North was marked by large crystals of raw salt, South by an oil lamp, East by a wreath of flowers, and West by a cup that I was sure held water.

Mom, Linda, and the other priestesses stood before the altar. First Mom faced North, then West, East, and South. She chanted, but it was hard to hear over the music. Her voice crept into my mind though. I headed toward her.

At some unseen signal, the music abruptly changed. The beat sped up, and the music's spell filled the air. The flames of the bonfire flickered from orange to blue to green to yellow. The crowd began to dance, at first in slow, sultry moves, and then, entranced, with passion. The music called to me too, but not with the same power.

Drawn to the altar, I threaded my way around the dancers. Heedless of me, the dancers threw off clothes. People touched me as I passed. In the flickering light of the bonfire, it was impossible to recognize anyone. Some gave off God power and I sensed Mama Fertility, the God of Agriculture, Deal, Angelena, and many other deities among the humans. The caresses as I passed through the crowd were reverent. Then I realized that it wasn't their bodies that touched mine, but their worship.

This is about me, I realized. They are worshipping me. This is why I didn't feel a sacrifice or prayers earlier today.

The dancers swirled madly around me, lost to the music's spell. Finally, I reached the altar. The priestesses were gone.

I reached out and touched the cloth covering the stone. It felt like silk. The usual objects, a knife, a cauldron, candles, stones, and offerings, weren't there. Instead, it was covered in flower petals. I ran my fingers over the carved runes on the edge of the altar. I'd never studied ancient runes but the message was as clear to me as if it had been written in English. It was a spell for unity, for love. My breath caught in my throat. Love runes. Yeah, I knew how to ruin love.

A small white pillow sat on one end of the altar, as if it were a bed. So much came clear to me at once. It was a bridal bed, meant to be used when the God consummated his union with the Goddess. But I wasn't about to mate with any Goddess. I only wanted Hector.

How could I have been so stupid? How could I have let things get so bad between us? Hector was right, I was selfish. I never thought about what he wanted. It was always about my sexual fantasies and my needs, not his. I gripped the side of the altar and bowed my head.

Behind me, the music reached a fever pitch. Pressure built inside me. It didn't hurt, but it was uncomfortable. I turned to the gyrating crowd. The fire reflected in their eyes. Everyone stared at me even as they danced. When I thought the music couldn't get any more intense, it sped up.

Clearly, they waited for something, but what? I opened my mind just a crack, as Hector taught me, so that I could take in the worship without being overwhelmed. Hundred of voices implored me.

The power flooded through that little crack in my mind and threatened to overwhelm me. I turned away from the dancers. How could they be so selfish? Couldn't they see how much it hurt me to be alone on a night like that? I was the God of the hour. Vast power flowed to me. I had nothing.

Dark chaos swirled like a dust devil around me and threatened to burst through my defenses. Without Hector there to help me, I knew I couldn't handle it. I spoke the spell of the runes carved into the altar and felt the power of the ancient spell focus the worship. Blue arcs crackled over my skin and underneath it, I felt the pull of the music. It insisted. It demanded. I drew my fingers up my chest and into my hair. I tried to stop myself, but then I was moving, hips and arms beckoning lovers to worship my body and give themselves to me.

They drew forward. I tried to stop, but it was madness and my body wouldn't obey me. I wanted tongues and cocks and hands on my bare skin, pulling me apart, stroking me, devouring my flesh. They came forward and pulled back, a heaving mass of desire. All I wanted was Hector. No one else.

I gathered the power into the center of my being and sent the worship out in a cataclysmic wave of unbridled lust that shot through the clearing, pushing the worshippers away, rejecting them all. Seconds later, rumbling like thunder followed the energy. Without looking, I knew that couples and groups ran for the woods. They didn't care if I wanted them. They had each other. The orgy had begun.

I was alone in the clearing. Not a human was to be seen. The other Gods were gone, too, caught up in the revelry. How pathetic was it that I was the God of Sex, and I had no one to celebrate Beltane with. Angry, I knocked some of the flower petals off the altar to the ground.

Misery clung to my neck like a scarf with bad intentions. My throat was raw. Why hadn't I listened to Hector? He told me over and over that he wanted me to grow up. Was that so much for him to ask? The constant mood swings, the reckless behavior, my stubbornness over things that didn't really matter -- no wonder he got tired of me. But then hope, that small, merciful Goddess, reached out from her realm and kissed my cheek. Maybe it wasn't over. Maybe Nanny was right and it was just a fight.

I squared my shoulders. For once, my stubborn streak came in useful. I wouldn't give up. If I had to fight to get Hector back, I'd do it. Any sacrifice was worth it. Anything he wanted, I'd do. I'd change my ways.

Figuring that I wasn't needed anymore for the celebration, I decided to head back to my parents' house and try calling Hector again. If that didn't work, I'd phase home. He still hadn't summoned me, but I was willing to risk his wrath.

* * *

Feeling better than I had in a couple days, I crossed out of the protective circle surrounding the clearing. With the bonfire to my back, it was easier to see the faint trail through the woods leading back to the farmhouse. I mulled over my first words to Hector. "I'm sorry," seemed inadequate, but it was the best place to start. I hoped he'd listen.

Pausing for a moment, I decided that I'd make him listen. I had no idea how a boy did that to his Master, but if I had to, I would. Some things were too important to give up on.

"Sam! There you are!" The Goddess of Eternal Youth phased in and blocked my path. She stood in a small shaft of moonlight that cut through the trees. No doubt she picked that spot for its theatrical setting. The cool white light glowed off her gold hair and glinted on her many rings.

"Not now, Goddess," I told her. The path was too narrow to go around her, and the low bushes had prickly leaves, so I waited for her to move aside.

"Yes now, Sam. You owe me a payment. And since you made me wait for it, I'm afraid that I'm going to have to charge you extra." Her smile was harsh.

It was a moment to savor. "About that -- I've decided that I'll no longer be needing your services," I told her.

"What?" she screeched. Her voice rang through the woods. Then she regained her composure and patted her puffed-up hair. "How are you ever going to find a new Master if you're not young and beautiful?"

"I don't need a new Master. I have Hector." My voice betrayed my doubts though.

Eternal Youth turned around. "I thought you had him convinced that he and Hector were through," she said.

Wondering who she was talking to, I peered over her shoulder but saw nothing. Then Marcus stepped out of the shadows. He was huge again, and wore his thick black boots.

Oh crap. Frightened, I couldn't move.

"I did," he said. "But I underestimated how stubborn Sam can be."

"You failed. You aren't worth the power I paid you. I want it back," Eternal Youth snapped at Marcus.

"I already spent it. Do you have any idea how much power it took to block Sam from feeling Hector's summons? Or to put Ophir's former Number One in the right spot at the right time? And have you ever tampered with an aura? These things don't come cheap."

My hand immediately moved down the back of my jeans to touch Hector's brand. The skin was blistered like second-degree burn. He'd summoned me! But I hadn't answered.

“Plus, I couldn’t get past the wards at Hector’s house that Sam raised, so I had to pay Misery to put that speeding ticket in Hector’s hands,” Marcus said.

The God of Misery chuckled in my ear and clutched tighter at my neck. I’d forgotten he was draped over my shoulders.

Marcus grinned at me. Panic raced through my veins. “There are other ways to convince Sam to pay, Goddess.”

“Like what?” she asked.

“I won’t pay,” I said. “I told you.”

Marcus squeezed past Eternal Youth and sauntered close to me. He grinned down at me. His eyes were crystalline, colorless shards that glowed from within. There wasn’t a trace of humanity in them. My heart pounded against my ribs. “You have the power to keep people young, Goddess. I’m sure that power can work in reverse. Age him. Turn Sam into an old man.”

“No!” My throat was so tight that I squeaked.

Eternal Youth’s grin got evil. “That I can do.”

I turned and ran.

Eternal Youth’s cackling followed me through the woods. I had no idea why I thought I could outrun the power of a God, but I sure tried. It caught me though. Pain shot through my legs. I stumbled, but kept running.

The pain ratcheted up until every muscle felt as if it were on fire. That wasn’t the worst of it. My bones ached. Then they seemed to liquefy. Screaming, I fell.

Eternal Youth and Marcus quickly caught up to me. There was no time to get used to the level of pain before it intensified. I writhed on the ground. My clothes were too tight. I tore at them, leaving them in shreds on the ground beside me.

Marcus breathed deep. His nostrils flared and a sadistic grin spread over his face. “Do you smell that, Goddess? That’s fear. Undiluted fear. Welcome back, Sam.”

Eternal Youth stalked over to stare down at me. “You’re getting older every second, Sam. Soon, your hair will be white and you’ll need a walker. Only you can stop it. Pay me, Sam. Give me power.”

Marcus put a hand on her arm. “I have a better idea, Goddess. Let him suffer for a while. Just for me. I do so love the flavor of Sam’s fear. It’s so unique, and strong. After he’s had some time to think about it, come back and make him an offer. I’m sure you’ll find him receptive. I always did after a long session in the dungeon. If you want to get the most out of Sam, you have to top him, and it has to scare him like nothing ever has before.”

Eternal Youth looked down at me in disgust. I was beyond the ability to speak. All I could do was shake and moan. “You’re going to pay dearly for this,” Eternal Youth warned me before she and Marcus phased out.

* * *

Lovers, unaware that I lay wounded just off the path, ran past me. The smell of the damp earth was strong in my nose. The pain was subsiding, but as Eternal Youth had threatened, I felt like an old man. Everything hurt, even my skin. I wanted Hector so bad. He knew how to soothe away aches.

If only I’d refused to pay off Eternal Youth from the start, none of that would have happened. Hector wouldn’t have been mad at me, I wouldn’t have felt like I’d been beaten, and I wouldn’t have suddenly been turned into an old man. I wanted my Master. I wanted to phase right into his lap and beg for forgiveness and let him take care of all my problems, but the second he saw me, he’d probably be so disgusted that he’d send me away.

What was I going to do? If there was no one to fuss over my aches and pains, I guess I had to do it for myself. Using a bit of my powers, I concentrated on easing the worst of the pain.

Not too far off, I heard someone stomping through the trees. It was probably someone in pursuit of a capricious lover. I closed my eyes for a moment and prayed the happy couple would find me and bring help.

“Sam?” a deep voice rumbled through the darkness.

It was Hector. Elated that he’d come, I almost called out, but I didn’t want him to see me. I dragged my aching body deeper into the brush.

“Boy!” Hector called out. “I know you’re here. Answer me!”

It gave me strange satisfaction that he called me Boy. I wasn’t one, but it meant a lot to me.

Using a tree for support, I rose to my feet. I used the underbrush for cover in case the moonlight suddenly illuminated me. “I’m here, Sir.” My voice sounded strange. It was at least half an octave deeper.

Hector peered into the shadows where I hid. “Are you wearing antlers? Never mind. It’s the branches behind you. It’s darker than sin out here.”

That was something I was grateful for. I reached for his hand and tried to pull him into the shadows with me. Once he saw me we’d be over for sure, but before that happened, I wanted one last chance to let him know how I felt about him. Like he once asked, I wanted to show him it was about love.

“Sam, why are you pulling me in a bush?”

“Please, Sir, may I hug you?” I wanted to feel those arms around me one last time.

“Sure, as soon as we go somewhere comfortable.”

I shook my head but realized he couldn’t see that. “Here, Sir. Please.”

Hector sighed. “Sam, whatever drama you’re up to, give it a rest.”

“I swear, no drama.”

He snorted. “No drama? You refused to come when I summoned you. While you were off throwing a temper tantrum, Ophir’s Number One showed up on our doorstep and said that you promised I’d fix his problems for him. What was I supposed to do, Sam? Ignore him and chase after you, as usual? Sometimes a God has to put duty ahead of his personal life. It’s called being responsible. So I had to spend this afternoon breaking Ophir down. He’s just as stubborn as you are, but the humiliation of being paddled while his ex-slave watched worked wonders on his attitude.”

He didn’t. Well, maybe he did. Hector said that he would always be Ophir’s Master. I couldn’t even picture Ophir over Hector’s knees with his pants down and tears flowing down his face, or maybe I just didn’t want to. Jealousy surged inside me.

“And then there were all the phone calls. Did you think I couldn’t see who was calling and hanging up? What’s the matter Sam? Did you think I needed to be reminded that you were waiting for me to come chase you? And then, of course, you refused to answer your phone when I called you back,” Hector said.

“It wasn’t like that--”

”I’ve had a tough couple days, Sam. Frankly, I’m worn out. So we’re going to get out of these woods and sit down somewhere comfortable and have a little talk,” Hector said. “Now!”

Limping, I led Hector toward the bonfire. Before we got there, I turned to face him. I knew that with the fire behind me, he couldn’t see my face, and my body would only be a dark silhouette. “Sir, can I say just one thing before we go into the clearing?”

Hector growled. “What?”

I’d practiced what to say, but my mind went blank. Finally, I blurted out, “I love you. I mean, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. About everything. I was wrong. I know that. I shouldn’t have been selfish, and I shouldn’t have made you live in my fantasy world. I should have been a better boy. I swear that I’ve learned my lesson. I’m not asking for forgiveness. Just... Please...” I choked on my words.

“Sam, is it my imagination, or are you taller?”

Everything welled up inside me and came out in a halting, rambling confession that probably made no sense to him. I'd heard two-year-olds tell a more coherent tale. "It's not your imagination, Sir. Marcus found me after our fight and he convinced me that we'd broken up. I mean, he kept saying that you didn't kick me out for good, but the way he said it made me believe you had, and then he blocked my mind so that I couldn't feel you summoning me. I wanted to beg you to take me back, so I called, but then the battery on my phone died, which is why I didn't answer. Honest. I can show you, if I ever find my clothes out here. I think it's still in my jeans pocket." I chewed on my bottom lip. "Since I didn't think you wanted me, I came here, and then tonight, I ran into Eternal Youth. She demanded payment to keep me looking young, but I refused. She got really angry. Then Marcus convinced her to turn me into an old man and she aged me. I'm ancient now, Sir. Really old. And probably ugly. It hurts so bad. I prayed for you to come and help me. But when you came, I knew if you saw me, you wouldn't want me anymore, so I tried to hide from you. I just wanted one last time with you, Sir. I wanted to show you that I do love you, and it isn't just about sex, but then--"

"Eternal Youth hurt you?" Hector asked quietly. His hands balled into fists and his eyebrows furrowed. Illuminated by the flickering bonfire, he looked demonic. "Nobody hurts my boy."

I loved it when he got all possessive like that. My heart melted, but it was bittersweet joy at best.

Hector reached for my hand and tugged me toward the bonfire. "I want to see the damage."

I shook. "Sir, please don't. Just remember me the way I was. I'd rather you walk away now than after you see me. I don't think I can take it otherwise."

Hector ignored me and dragged me to the edge of the circle of stones. He put his hands on my face and made me turn towards the flames so that the fire illuminated my face. He sucked in a breath. Stepping back, he took a long time to look me over.

Unable to bear it any longer, I asked, "How ugly am I?"

Hector shook his head. "This is bad."

My heart sank.

"This is terrible, Sam. I don't know what I'm going to do."

I knew it. I was a troll.

"I don't know how I'm going to control my jealousy with you looking like this," he said. He moved closer to me and put his hands on my shoulders. He was right, I was taller. I could look him straight in the eye instead of gazing up at him like before. "Your Papi better get a shotgun and fill it with salt pellets."

That made no sense. Was he speaking English? Did that mean I was horribly ugly, or extremely ugly?

He chuckled at my puzzled expression. “Sam, you’re the God of Sex. Did you really think that Eternal Youth could take that away from you? Yes, she aged you, but I think her powers could only bring you up to your real age.”

He was just trying to make me feel better. I dropped my gaze to my feet and tried not to get my hopes up. “She seemed so certain, Sir.”

“I’ve never known you to be vain, Sam, but if you need to hear it, here’s the unvarnished truth. You’re the hottest, sexiest man who ever walked on the face of this planet. You make Michelangelo’s David look like a garden gnome. You make underwear models look like flabby frat boys. You--”

His aura read nothing but the truth, and it was making my face burn.

“As long as I don’t turn your stomach, Sir.”

“And the best part is that you’re mine.” His brand seared on my ass. He wrapped his arms around me and nuzzled close to my neck. Soaking in the joy of his touch, I closed my eyes and tipped my head back. Hector’s teeth gripped my throat. His warm breath on my neck made me shiver. “Mine,” he said again with a quiet growl.

Eternal Youth’s voice cut through the night. “Time’s up, Sam.”

Hector growled again, but instead of sending jolts to my groin, the sound made the hairs on my neck stand up. He put a finger to my lips and pulled me close to the altar. “Stay,” he told me quietly before he phased away.

“Sir?” He left me alone. I couldn’t believe it. It tore at my heart. But my Master gave me an order, and I was so damn grateful that he was still my Master that I wouldn’t disobey him.

“Where is he?” Eternal Youth asked.

“He didn’t crawl far. I can sense him,” Marcus said.

“You said that he’d be paralyzed by fear.”

They were getting closer. I could hear their feet scraping on the bare dirt of the clearing, but I couldn’t see them. They must have been on the far side of the bonfire. I braced myself against the altar and tried to peer through the flames. A large log fell from the top of the stack of wood and tumbled down to the edge of the ring of stones. Sparks flew like fireflies.

“Oh, he’s afraid, Goddess. I can taste it. He’s thinking about phasing, but he knows it’s useless to run. Don’t you, Sam?” Marcus asked.

He was behind me. I spun around and clutched at the stone altar for support. Now that I was taller, his hyper-muscled frame didn't seem quite as menacing, but his thick-soled boots were still enough to make me quake.

"Mmm," he said as a smile curled at the corners of his mouth.

Eternal Youth stopped and hopped on one foot as she removed one shoe, and then the other one. A leafy twig fluttered to the ground. "Chasing you all over the woods is ruining my shoes. You're going to pay for them, too, Sam."

I squared my shoulders. "Those cheap knock-offs?"

"Cheap?" Eternal Youth screeched. "These are Manolo Blahniks."

"Sure they are, Goddess. Sure."

She put her shoe back on and strode over to Marcus. "When I'm through with him, make him scream."

"Oh, I plan to. But first I'll have to cover his repulsive old carcass in a gimp suit. And he'll have to wear a mask. Otherwise," Marcus gave an exaggerated shiver.

Eternal Youth smiled at me. The effect was ghastly. She walked toward me with her hand out. "Give me the power, Sam."

"No."

"He needs more persuading, Fear. Do something to him. Make him beg me to take his power," Eternal Youth told Marcus.

Marcus pushed up a sleeve and flexed his muscles. "My pleasure. Let me think about this." He inhaled deeply.

I almost laughed. They already thought they'd done their worst to me, but according to Hector, they'd done me a favor. Besides, I was a God, and I knew that Hector would have no problems with me drawing on all my power to protect myself. They thought I was beaten, but I hadn't even begun to fight.

Marcus went through a series of menacing poses. Eternal Youth clasped her bejeweled hands together and breathlessly awaited his next move.

"First, I'm going to stomp his face. And then I'm going to rape his ass. That's what you fear most, isn't it, Boy?" Marcus asked.

Not any more. I feared losing Hector more than being raped, but I wasn't about to put that idea into Marcus' head. Besides, there was no way I'd let Marcus touch me. I was Hector's property.

“When I’m done with you, you’re going to be so ripped apart that no man will want you.” Marcus grabbed his dick through his pants.

Hector’s voice rumbled from the darkness at the edge of the clearing. “Actually, you’re not going to lay a finger on him, asshole.”

The God of Misery jolted awake. At the sight of Hector, he flinched. He slowly unwound himself from me and slunk away into the darkness.

Hector and a woman walked to the altar. I didn’t recognize her, but I knew a Goddess when I saw one. She was wispy thin and tiny, maybe five feet tall. My immediate impression was that she was mixed race, but which races I couldn’t guess. Her graying hair was shaved close to her scalp and she wore a crimson robe with bands of black velvet on the sleeves. Dark freckles covered her high cheekbones. Although she had a hand on Hector’s arm, he wasn’t supporting her.

“Ah, Hector. Riding in to the rescue. How very sweet of you. But what are you rescuing? Have you seen Sam? Are you sure you want to save that?” Eternal Youth pointed at me.

“Sam is perfectly capable of saving himself, Goddess. He had enough balls to say no to you even after what you did to him. I’m just here to make sure that you get everything that’s coming to you,” Hector said.

His faith in me touched my heart. He didn’t think I was a helpless, useless, princessy sub. That respect meant so much to me.

If Eternal Youth had known Hector better, she would have immediately apologized when she heard that quiet voice, but she had no idea who she was dealing with. Instead, she grinned. “So you’re going to convince Sam to come to his senses and pay me?”

Marcus’ smile faded. He glanced from me to Hector to the unknown Goddess. Maybe he didn’t know Hector well, but must have sensed my fear evaporating.

Hector glanced down at his hand. It balled into a fist and released. “I like Sam the way he is.”

He was so kind to me.

Eternal Youth laughed. She patted her gold hair. “You liked the way he was. Take a good look at him, Love. He’s changed.”

Hector didn’t even glance at me, but he nodded. “He’s changed for the better.” He gently removed the unknown Goddess’s hand from his arm. “Boy. Come to me.”

I rushed over to kneel at Hector’s feet. Hector reached down and forced me to turn my head to them. “Take a look, Goddess. You do nice work. Have you ever seen a more gorgeous man?”

Eternal Youth’s smile faded. “Oh.”

Marcus took a small step backward.

Hector's head snapped in Marcus's direction. "Leaving so soon, Marcus? Go ahead and run, coward. Try to hide. It won't do you any good."

Marcus sneered at Eternal Youth. "You screwed up. Sam isn't old, just older."

She licked her lips and tried to compose her face. Several times she almost said something, but hesitated. Finally, she said, "It should have worked. I don't know what went wrong. He should be at least eighty. I used enough power to age him fifty years."

Hector turned to the silent Goddess beside him. "Is that enough of a confession?"

"I've heard quite enough," she said in a lilting Caribbean accent.

Hector looked down at me and smiled. His warm brown eyes crinkled as he caressed my face. "When Sam's Mom invited me to this Beltane celebration, I thought I better read up on Sam's religion. For too long I've dismissed it as just another of Sam's quirks. I didn't take it seriously. That was wrong of me. If it was important to him, it should have been important to me."

A little burst of love and worship shot from me to Hector as I pressed my lips to his palm. He caressed my face too briefly as an acknowledgement.

"I learned some interesting things. One is the Wiccan creed to do as you want to, but to harm no one."

"No one would have been hurt if he would have paid me what he owed me," Eternal Youth said.

Hector's aura went inky black and the power that radiated off him stung like a sandstorm on bare flesh. "You hurt my boy."

The unknown Goddess pursed her lips. Her eyes moved, but didn't seem to focus on anyone. Then it struck me that she was blind. "There is evidence to suggest that the contract between the two parties was 'at will.' Either party had the right to break it for any reason at any time. If the God of Sex verbally terminated the contract, then he didn't owe any further payments," she said. Her voice was almost musical, but she was so stern that I wasn't sure I wanted to like her. The way my stomach flipped, it was as if I was the one in trouble.

"Who is she?" Marcus demanded. He puffed his chest up and tried to look menacing I hid my smirk. All that posturing was lost on the blind Goddess.

"I am Divine Retribution. Justice, if you will," the Goddess told him. She reached into the long sleeve of her robe and withdrew what looked like a hand mirror. She held it before her face, but turned the mirrored side toward us. The deep orange glow of the dying

bonfire reflected of the dark surface of the mirror. A black silk square appeared on the Goddess' head. "You have been found guilty of breaking the creed."

Eternal Youth stepped forward, her hand raised. "Wait! Is this supposed to be some sort of trial? I want a lawyer."

Divine Retribution snorted. "Who said you had a right to one? This is ancient magic. I am judge; I am jury; I am executioner. Justice is swift, because Justice has a nice plate of red beans and rice and pulled pork waiting for her back at home, and she hates eating cold food."

I almost laughed at that, but stifled it because everyone else was so serious.

Marcus and Eternal Youth exchanged a worried glance. I hugged Hector's leg. The mirror in Divine Justice's hand glowed.

Divine Retribution solemnly intoned, "There is a belief among some of our path that the power that you use on others will come back to you threefold. That, however, is not a universally accepted law. It's a nice guideline though. Makes most people think twice before engaging in malicious mischief. You tried to age the God of Sex by fifty years. I should age you both by a hundred and fifty years--"

"You'll ruin me," Eternal Youth whined. "No one will worship me anymore."

"Look at him! We didn't hurt Sam. We did him a favor. He's ten times hotter now than he was before. We should get a reward," Marcus whined.

Divine Retribution raised her voice. "Quiet, muscle-brain. Did I give you permission to speak? No. Don't interrupt. It's rude. As I was saying, I should age you both by a hundred and fifty years -- and right now it's very tempting -- but since there are two of you, I'll give you each half of that. Seventy-five years each is the sentence."

Marcus pointed at Eternal Youth. "This was all her idea. I wasn't the one who aged him."

Eternal Youth screamed outrage. "My idea? You liar! It was your idea to age him. Now Justice, I'm sure we can work out a deal? How about I put Sam back the way--"

"Silence!" Divine Retribution snapped. "I thought I already made it clear that this is my court, and I make the rules. I don't accept plea bargains."

The mirror shook in her hand. The orange light it absorbed from the fire shot back in tight white beams onto Eternal Youth and Marcus. For a moment, nothing seemed to happen. Then Eternal Youth clutched her face. Jowls formed at her chin. Her breasts sagged. Blue veins crept under her shrinking skin on her legs and hands.

Marcus' shoulders slumped and his belly puffed out. His mouth shrank in as if his teeth were gone. Dark spots appeared under his skin.

I watched them wither until I couldn't take it anymore. I closed my eyes tight and nuzzled against Hector's leg. The screaming was horrible. I never wanted to hear anything like it again. They didn't sound human; they sounded like animals. I clapped my hands over my ears and curled into a ball. I knew how much it hurt to be aged quickly. I could imagine how their muscles ripped and their bones cracked. I wouldn't wish that on anyone, no matter what they'd done to me. The screams grew hoarse and then faded.

Hector patted my head. "You're okay, Boy. It's over."

Except for the three of us, the clearing was empty, thank the Gods. It would be a long time before I'd be able to shake the last sight I had of Marcus. He was the thing of nightmares, a walking corpse.

I got to my feet. "Goddess, may I ask something? Are they dead?"

Divine Justice snorted. "Appearances are only surface deep, Sex. You should know that. It's what lies inside that matters. Because they only harmed your appearance, the magic only affected theirs. Whether this teaches them a lesson and they change their ways, I can't tell you, but we always hope that punishment is deterrent enough." She put the mirror up the sleeve of her robe. "I hope our business here is concluded. If my dinner is cold when I get home, you can expect three nights of lukewarm meals as your punishment," she grumbled.

Hector winked at me. "If it isn't, my Boy can whip up an incredible meal for you in minutes. He makes one hell of a meatloaf."

Her lips pursed. "He doesn't put hard boiled eggs or spinach in his meatloaf, does he? I hate those ones made with ground turkey."

"No, Goddess, just beef and pork, onions, garlic... the usual stuff," I told her.

To my great relief, she smiled. "I'd hate to lose my reputation for impartiality. However, if a meatloaf were to suddenly appear in my refrigerator as if by magic, well, who am I to question the mysterious ways of the Gods?" She shrugged.

Hector chuckled. "I understand. Thank you, Goddess, for your time. Let me see you home."

Divine Justice drew herself up to her full five feet. "See me home? I don't need anyone to see anything for me." She tucked her black silk handkerchief into her robe. "Gentlemen." With that, she disappeared.

* * *

Hector took in a deep breath that swelled his chest. "It's been a long night."

"Yes, Sir." So much had happened that my mind could barely keep track of it all. The important thing though was that Hector was still my Master, and we were together. Everything else was just details.

“The night’s not over yet. Climb up on the altar, Boy. Inspection position,” Hector said.

Eager to show him obedience, I hopped up on the petal-strewn altar. My chest pressed to the white satin sheet. I reached between my spread knees and clutched my ankles. My back arched. I was completely exposed for him.

Hector sauntered to the edge of the altar. His hand slid down my spine. I closed my eyes and relished his touch. Little caresses here and there stirred my libido. When his hand slid between my spread thighs and stroked my cock, I moaned. As much as I wanted to thrust into his grip, I held still.

“Good boy,” Hector crooned. “Up on your hands.”

I posed on my hands and knees, my knees spread almost to the edge of the altar, my butt still held high. His hand slid over my chest, grasped a handful of hair, and yanked on it. “If you ever shave or wax your chest, Boy, you’ll be punished every day until it grows back.”

When did I get chest hair? I stared down, puzzled for a moment, and then remembered that I wasn’t nineteen anymore. I wasn’t as furry as Hector, but I had a respectable tuft between my pecs.

Hector’s fingers traced down my stomach. I’d always had a few wisps of a treasure trail starting above my belly button, but it felt as if there were more hair leading lower when he gave it a tug. As his fingertips wandered down and tickled my Adonis belt, he kept lightly stroking my skin. My body responded to him the way it always had, with intense arousal. My balls pulled up tight.

“No.” He coaxed my balls down into my sack. His grasp made my balls push tight against the skin. He ran his fingernails over them. I was so sensitive that I was soon shaking and moaning at the lightest touch. Then he let go and pinched my nipples until I gasped. He pulled and pinched, torturing my chest until a tear splattered on the white silk below me. Making a small sympathy sound, he sank his fingernail into the hard nub of my nipple. At the same time, a lubed finger slid into my ass, and then another. His fingertips grazed my prostate as he slowly finger fucked my ass. The next drop that fell was from the head of my cock.

For a while, I thought he was being deliberately cruel, holding me on the edge of orgasm without sending me over, but when I stopped concentrating on my needs and watched him, I realized that he was mesmerized by my new body. He simply couldn’t stop exploring it.

I groaned when he pulled his fingers out of me.

“On your back.”

I rolled over. Hector lifted my head and put the small pillow under it. He stirred the petals that were strewn over the altar, picked one up, and lightly ran it along my cock. I stretched my arms over my head as if I were bound.

Hector took his time undressing. I would have gladly unbuttoned his shirt and placed kisses on his chest as it was revealed. There was nothing I wanted more than to kneel at his feet and pull the zipper of his pants down with my teeth so that I could nuzzle into his groin and smell his musky scent. He must have known what torture it was for me to only be allowed to watch though, because he chuckled at my frustrated groan when his hard-on popped out of his boxer briefs. The fading light of the bonfire shone on his brown skin as he stood naked beside the altar.

As horny as I was, when he climbed onto the altar and lay down on top of me, the only thing I wanted was his kiss. I fought the urge to grab him and draw him down to my mouth. His body was warm. Until then, I hadn't realized how chilly the night had grown. I loved the weight of him on me and the way it made me feel pinned down.

Hector stroked my face as he stared down at it. Then the caring, gentle expression changed subtly. A shiver shot down my spine and landed with a thud in my groin.

"Mine," Hector said. He wrapped his arms around my head so that I could smell the scent from his pits. I wanted to lick them, but couldn't turn my head. He kissed me hard, forcing my mouth open and attacking with his tongue. My lips were bruised, but I didn't care.

He grabbed my hair and forced my head back so that my neck was exposed. Unlike his earlier, gentler nips, those bites hurt. My breath was ragged. His teeth sank around my jugular. The pressure grew. Static filled my vision. I completely surrendered to him. He released his hold.

On my butt, his brand immediately seared instead of the gently increasing heat I was used to.

"Your lack of faith in your Master displeases me, Boy."

"I believe--"

He smacked my face. So hot.

"How could you believe that I wouldn't summon you back home? How could you believe for an instant that I would let my property go? But you did. So I guess I'm going to have to make things clear to you."

His hands went around my throat. They went from warm to hot. I whimpered, but didn't try to escape. They felt heavier around my neck. When he removed his hands though, I still felt weight there. I touched my neck and felt metal.

"You've been collared. Neither man nor magic can remove that unless I decide to. As long as you wear that, you are my slave. Is that clear enough to you? You are mine."

Grinning, I nodded.

“It’s going to show, Sam. Unless you wear a scarf, everyone who sees you will know that you’re a collared boy. So I will offer you this one chance to decide if that’s what you want. You know that I will never force you to do anything you don’t want.”

“I want it, Sir. Thank you!” I touched the collar again. There were four D-rings on it so that he could chain me by the collar or lead me around on a leash. “I want people to know. I’m proud to be your boy.” My voice nearly faltered. A little tear trickled out of the corner of my eye. “Thank you, Sir.”

He frowned, but from the way his eyes crinkled up at the corners, I knew he wasn’t angry. “This is what you wanted all along, isn’t it, Boy? You really are the world’s most manipulative submissive. But that’s all going to change. Any attempt to get your way is going to be severely punished. After tonight, your real training begins, and you are going to finally going to learn what it means to be a true slave. Understand?”

“Yes, Sir!” Happiness just about melted me.

Hector grinned. He brushed his lips lightly over mine. “But that’s tomorrow. I’ve missed you, Baby. You’re the soul of our home. Without you, it’s just a house. A quiet, dull, lifeless house.” He punctuated those words with kisses down my stomach. “I never want to sleep alone that many nights again.”

“Me either, Papi.” I gulped. “Can I call you Papi?” I asked shyly.

“Only when you’ve been a very, very good little boy. And you are going to be very good, Baby, because I’m going to be so strict from now on that you won’t dare misbehave.” He shifted his weight so that his cock poked into my thigh.

My fingers curled into his chest hair. “I love it when you’re gruff with me.”

“And I love giving you the discipline you crave. Spare the rod, spoil the Boy. You need a firm hand applied to your backside regularly.”

I sighed. “Sweet talker.”

He chuckled. “Speaking of sweet, what was it that you said earlier about showing me it was about love?”

We made out like randy teenagers for a good, long while. By the time faint silver light glowed in the east, my lips were swollen. We ground against each other, then cooled off a bit, and then went at it again until his eyelids got heavy and we panted. Then he pushed my knees up and oh so slowly fucked me while we locked our lips together. His thrusts got faster and harder. Finally, we couldn’t kiss anymore as he went up on his knees.

Instead of my usual torrent of dirty talk, other words come out of my mouth. I realized that I was evoking the spell from the love runes carved into the altar. Only that time, the words were sweet in my mouth instead of bitter.

A whirlwind of magic whipped around us. I struggled out from under Hector and flipped over. He grasped my hips and pumped into me. The gathering power swirled faster as if in a frenzy. I grunted as he pounded my ass. Hours of denied need surged into my balls and squeezed.

Hector grasped the D-ring on the back of my new slave collar and forced my head back. "Come," he gasped.

As we both shot our loads, the whirlwind flew apart. Love and lust flung in all directions, splattering the world with orgasmic power and bliss.

I collapsed on the altar. Hector sprawled over me, his cock still in my ass. For a while, I couldn't speak or even think. Waves of pleasure still ebbed through my body.

"Fuck!" I crowed. "That was incredible."

Hector's answer was a quiet snore. With a bit of a smile, I phased us into the bed in the sewing room in the farmhouse. I covered my Master with a blanket and then crawled into bed with him.

* * *

The two beds Mom pushed together were slightly different heights, so when I woke, Hector and I were squished together on one of the twin beds. His arm was around my waist and I felt his steady, deep breath on my back. My fingers brushed the back of his hand.

"Mmm," Hector said as he snuggled closer. I gripped the side of the bed to keep from falling off.

"Do you need breakfast, Sir? It's late. Past ten already. The teens would have fed the other kids a couple hours ago, but there may be leftovers." When I tried to rise, Hector caught my hand. Smiling, I turned to him. "Did you need something, Sir?"

Hector made a low, rumbling noise as he pulled on my hand. Even though a faint smile pulled at his lips, his eyes were dead serious. He kept pulling until I stumbled against the bed. He tugged me onto the mattress and crouched over me on all fours. His hands covered mine, our fingers intertwined. He straddled my legs, pinning them together. He sniffed his way up my body and stopped at my chest. His teeth sank into my nipple.

"Sir, the walls in this house are thin," I whispered. "Let me go get your breakfast."

He stared down at me without smiling. "Your Master always comes first, Boy. After you've served me, if I feel like letting you go, then you may go downstairs. Got it?" He flicked the D-ring on my slave collar.

I nodded.

“Boy, I asked you a question.”

“Yes, Sir,” I whispered.

He cocked his head and frowned as he loomed over me. That made me uneasy, but in a good way. More than anything, I wanted to please him and earn a smile. It had been a long time, I realized, since I’d felt so dominated by him.

“If you’re so worried about being heard, I can always gag you.” His hand rested on my cheek and I wasn’t sure if he was going to slap me or force my mouth open.

“I can be quiet, Sir,” I whispered.

Hector forced his tongue between my lips. The bedsprings let out a loud groan as he shifted his weight and shoved his knee between my thighs. “You’re so hot with your morning beard. I can’t decide if I’m going to let you shave or not,” he said quietly. “Maybe I’ll tie you up and shave you myself.”

His lingering kisses touched above and below my slave collar and then whorled down to my hairy pecs. He bit my nipple. My eyes opened as the bite grew harder. I pressed my lips together to stop from crying out.

“Not a sound, Boy.”

When he tugged at my nipple and then pinched it hard between his thumb and forefinger, I thrashed underneath him. My hard-on pushed against his stomach. His cock pressed against the tender inside of my thigh.

Hector pulled back and stared down at me a long while before he shook his head and reclined beside me. His lips played with my earlobe. A crop appeared in his hand and he trailed it from my stomach to my balls. I couldn’t tear my gaze from the leather tip of the crop as he drew it lightly over my cock and balls. “Hush,” he murmured, but he was the one making all the noise. Every time he moved, the bed creaked.

We’d never taken things so slowly. It was like moving through thick water. He kissed over every inch of my skin, tasted it, bit it, licked it, and then set it on fire with sharp slaps from his crop. It was agonizing and overwhelming in the best possible way. I pressed my arm over my mouth and sank my teeth in to stop from crying out when he tapped a crop against my balls.

As soon as he stopped torturing my hard-on, I drew my knees to my chest. I needed to be fucked. “Please, Sir. Please.” I whimpered as he rubbed the head of his cock on my hole, and then moved it away.

“Bad boy. I shouldn’t let you have this at all.” Hector gripped his cock.

“Please, Sir.” My hands clutched at the bedspread. I wanted to grab his cock, but knew better. That control was slipping though. “Please,” I whispered. “Please, Papi.”

“You want this?” Hector shook his cock.

I nodded frantically. My hands slid up and down my stomach. Despite the chilly morning, sweat shone on my skin.

Hector leaned forward and wrapped an arm around my head, pinning it in place. “You want Papi to fuck you, Baby? You need it?” He mashed his lips against mine before I could answer and slid his cock into my ass at the same time. “Does that feel good? Is your ass full enough, slut?” It turned me on to listen to him for once, instead of me being the one talking dirty. As he continued his excruciatingly slow rhythm, I tensed and released the muscles in my ass. He groaned. “I love how you milk my cock.”

We stared into each other’s eyes as he fucked me. That’s how I knew a shift was coming. Once second, we were grinding together, our bodies sliding up and down against each other, the next, he knelt and gripped my knees and he pounded my ass.

Hector plunged into my ass and bellowed. I could feel his cock pulse as it emptied his load into me. Bad boy that I was, I immediately shot, without permission, and covered my chest, and chin, with my load. Hector didn’t seem to mind.

“Quiet as a mouse, Sir,” I told him as he collapsed on top of me.

He chuckled even as he kissed me. “We were definitely squeaking mice.” He pushed on the bed and made the springs creak in a recognizable rhythm.

* * *

After wrestling with my old jeans for five minutes, I had to accept that my twenty-two inch waist was gone forever. Even if I had been able to pull them over my thighs, the jeans would have been eight inches too short. Hector was thrilled that nothing I owned fit anymore. He summoned an outfit straight from the show rooms of an Italian designer for me to wear.

For once, I was dressed before him. Hector changed in and out of three outfits before settling on crisp jeans and a tight plum t-shirt that hugged every muscle. “Why do I have to dress up and you get to wear jeans?” I grumbled.

Hector folded his arms over his chest. He didn’t say anything, but he didn’t have to.

“Sorry, Sir.” I bowed my head, but dared quick glances up at him. “You look hot in that shirt.”

He tried to scowl, but the crinkles around his eyes gave him away. “I’ve noticed that you like it.”

Getting bold, I squeezed his biceps. “It sets off the brown of your eyes and skin so well. And your pecs.” My hand slid over the hard bulge of his pecs and lingered over his nipple.

Hector grasped my wrist and pulled my hand away, but didn’t let go. “None of that. It’s time for us to go downstairs, and I’m not going to meet your parents for the first time with an obvious hard-on.”

I tried to look innocent.

“That doesn’t work anymore,” Hector said. The grip on my wrist tightened. He forced my arm behind my back and pulled up on it until I winced. His kiss was hard, but too quick. “Be a good boy today, and I’ll get out the rope tonight. And your ball gag. It’s been too long since your face has been smeared with drool.”

I frowned and glanced down at the bulge in the front of my silk pants. “Great. Now I’ll be the one with the hard-on.”

Hector put his hand on the back of my neck and steered me out of the room. “A little humiliation is good for you, Boy.”

* * *

When Hector and I walked downstairs, the house was quiet, as if everyone tiptoed. I remembered that the morning after Beltane was always that way. Sullen teenagers took care of the younger kinds while the adults staggered around in a cloud of joyous exhaustion. For the first time ever, I was one of those adults.

I glanced over at Hector, grinned, and grasped his hand. Sure, I was stupidly, goofily in love, but I didn’t care who saw it. He smiled at me and a quick, warm caress of his power surged over my body.

As we stepped into the kitchen, Linda jumped out of her chair and launched herself into Hector’s arms. “You must be Hector! I’m Linda!”

Hector grinned down at her. “That’s funny. After all Sam’s told me about you, I expected horns or cloven hooves.”

Linda made a face and slapped my arm. “Brat. But you do have great taste in men. Woof! Hector’s a hottie!” Then she scrunched up her nose and looked me up and down. Maybe it was silly to expect a human to notice such things, but instead of commenting that I’d grown up overnight, she said, “Hector must be picking out your clothes. Thank the Gods for small favors.” She turned to Hector. “People were beginning to hand him quarters.”

“Hey, hey, hey!” Dad’s voice boomed through the kitchen. “About time you two got up.”

“I think they’ve been up for a while,” Linda said with a smirk. Just in case we missed what she meant, she thrust her hips back and forward while she moaned, “Yeah, Baby, do you want Papi’s--”

“Linda!” Mom called out from the pantry.

Linda rolled her eyes. “Oh please, Mom. It’s not a big secret that Sam and Hector knocked it out this morning. Twice. Although I give them props. After last night, I don’t even want to think about sex for a couple days. I’m worn out. I’m impressed that they had the energy, much less the desire.”

Mom put a can of coffee down on the counter and put her hands on her hips.

Linda cupped her hand over her mouth and leaned close to Hector. “The walls in this house are like paper. Voice of experience here -- sneak downstairs and knock it out on the couches. Or go out to the Zen Shack.”

Ignoring Linda, I clutched Hector’s hand and turned to my parents. “Mom, Dad, I’d like you to meet my...” I glanced over at Hector. What word could possibly describe what he was to me? Boyfriend was too casual. I’d never felt that partner described our relationship. Lover? Beau? None of those words fit. “This is my Master, Hector,” I finally blurted.

Mom looked puzzled as she shook Hector’s hand. Instead of letting go, she held onto his hand and peered up into his eyes. “But who are you really?” she asked him.

Hector grinned. “God of Love.”

Linda’s mouth dropped open. For a moment, she was blessedly speechless. “Oh man! You’re a God? How did I miss that?”

“You were too busy cruising him,” I reminded her.

Linda was never embarrassed for long. She shrugged. “Can you blame me?”

Dad shook Hector’s hand. “Hungry, boys? I can rustle up a little something. How does eggs and ham sound? Some grits, toast, bacon... You probably worked up quite an appetite.”

“Just eggs and toast, Dad. Hector doesn’t eat a big breakfast. Besides, it’s only two hours until lunch,” I said.

Mom said to Hector. “I’m glad you made it here this year after all.”

Hector put his arm across my shoulders. “So am I... I’m sorry, how should I address you?”

Mom put her hands on her ample hips and broke into a mischievous smile. “Considering that you and Sam consummated your union on the Beltane altar last night, from now on, you can call me Mom. Welcome to the Dewey Clan.”

A little embarrassed that she knew that, I blushed.

“Thank you,” Hector said.

“Yep, he’s a Dewey now,” Dad said. “Fried or scrambled eggs?”

I said, “Hector likes fried, over-easy, Dad.”

Mom’s grin grew downright wicked. “Our clan recognizes same sex pairings, and seeing as you two effectively handfasted last night, well, congratulations are in order.”

I went every shade of red. “Mom.”

Hector squeezed my shoulders. “I guess you could say that I popped a question to your son last night. Even gave him a ring.” He flipped one of the D-rings on my slave collar. “Sam made me a happy man when he said yes.”

“He said yes, yes, yes several times this morning,” Linda quipped.

Hector sat down at the table and tugged me into his lap. I was really too big to fit there anymore, but he didn’t seem to mind.

Mom poured coffee for us and brought the mugs to the table. She sat down opposite us and stirred sugar into her drink. With exquisite timing, she waited until Hector had a mouthful of coffee to ask, “So, Hector, when can I expect grandchildren?”

Hector choked. “But-- We’re both men,” Hector finally sputtered.

Mom waved her hands, as if dismissing his objection. “You’re both Gods. I’m sure you two can manage to work out a miracle. At least four little miracles, to start. Sammy always wanted a big family. Didn’t you, dear?”

Linda’s face turned red as tears sparkled at the corners of her eyes.

Hector, still stunned, turned to me. “Sam?”

One glance at Linda and I lost it. We burst out laughing. Linda wiped the tears at the corners of her eyes. She let Hector off the hook. “Mom had you going, Hector. Don’t feel bad. She did the same thing to my husband Doug. If you’ve been teased, you know you’re part of the family,” she said.

Mom still had that sparkle in her eye. “Who said I was teasing?” She finished her coffee and went to the sink.

Hector didn’t seem sure how to take Mom, but finally, a grin spread over his face and he chuckled a bit at himself.

Sheepishly grinning, I shrugged. “Well, at least she likes you.”

Dad slid plates in front of us. “Eat up, boys. Then what do you say to a long soak out in the Zen Shack? I always find that helps me recover from Beltane celebrations.” He went over to Mom and patted her butt.

Chapter 17

I wasn't prepared for the emotions that swept over me when Hector and I phased into the living room of his house. From the familiar smells to the comforting space, everything felt right. Overwhelmed, I hugged Hector and nuzzled against his neck.

His big arms wrapped around me. He waited patiently as I got my emotions under control. It was bittersweet being there. Nanny's ghost was gone forever. I'd changed. At least I was home.

"Before you get too comfortable, Boy, we need to have a little talk."

My eyes widened.

"I can forgive a lot. I understand that you didn't know I summoned you. I understand that the battery on your cell phone died. However, there is something that I will not forgive, and you will be punished for it." He stepped back from me and got into his stern Master stance. "Go get the wooden spoon."

I crawled back to him from the kitchen with the wooden spoon balanced on my hands. He was already seated in his poppa chair.

"Bare your bottom for me."

There was no reason why it should have felt that way, but that position humiliated me. I was a grown man being punished like a younger boy. Any dignity I felt I'd gained overnight was suddenly stripped from me. My face and neck were hot. I cupped my hands around my face and tried to hide my shame.

"Ass up, Boy. Don't make me reach."

I raised my butt until he grunted satisfaction with my pose.

"Your warm-up used to be thirty strokes with the spoon, but now that you're a big boy, the count is going to sixty."

That was all the warning I got. He smacked that spoon down in a volley that never slackened. He didn't ask me questions. He didn't stop to inspect my bruised ass. The spoon landed again and again on the same spots on both buttocks until I gritted my teeth

and tried to figure out where we were in the count. I couldn't keep track though. The building pain was too much for me.

"It hurts," I whimpered.

"It's going to hurt a lot more when I cane you. This is just to get you into the proper state of mind." He smacked me at least another ten times before he slid his hand over my sore, burning butt. Then he reached down and lifted my chin so that I had to look up at him. "Ophir's Number One told me that you drank quite a few beers with him. Then your motorcycle disappeared from the driveway. Am I correct in assuming that you rode it when you weren't completely sober?"

I gulped. "Yes, Sir."

"Plus, you were upset, which means you were riding without a clear head."

I nodded. The disappointment in his eyes was worse than the throbbing pain across my ass. A sob rose out of my chest.

"You won't make that mistake again," he told me. "Go into the bedroom and prepare for your punishment."

To show him how very sorry I was, I crawled the entire way. I thought about undressing, but it was more shameful to have my pants down to my knees, so I bent over the mattress and tried to prepare myself mentally for the coming punishment.

Hector left me alone in the room to think over the error of my ways for a long time. The harsh pains in my butt had dulled down to background noise in my mind, but the mind fuck I put myself through was pretty harsh. By the time he quietly opened the bedroom door, I was crying pretty hard.

Hector sat down on the bed and stroked my hair. "I'm doing this for your own good. You understand that, don't you?"

"Yes, Sir." I sniffled.

"You're going to be much happier if I'm strict with you. Things are going to change, Baby. You're going to change your ways, and I'm going to change mine. You're grown up now, so I expect you to behave a certain way. If you slip back into your bad ways, it doesn't matter where we are or who is there, I will immediately punish you like the spoiled brat you are. That means if we're in the market, and you sass, I will pull your pants down right there in the aisle and take a belt to your butt. If we're at Brett's, and you're rude to him, I will put you over my knee in his living room and let him watch you get your ass paddled. You don't handle humiliation well, but it's about the only punishment that works. I'm not going to protect you from it like I used to."

The mental images in my mind frightened me, but my cock, as usual, hardened at the visions. Sometimes I wondered if he were tempting me into misbehavior on purpose.

“I’ve made another decision, Boy. You’re off your power allowance. From now on, you have full access to it.”

“No!” I wailed. “But why?”

“You’re a more powerful God than I am. Love is a powerful force, but sex is a stronger urge. To be honest, I find it so much hotter when a more powerful man willingly bows down to serve me.” He ruffled my black curls. “And because I said so. Get used to that answer.” He rose off the bed. “I’m going to get my cane. As I once warned you, you’re going to be so bruised that you won’t be able to sit for a week.”

“Sir?”

“Yes, Boy.”

I looked over my shoulder at him. “Thank you, Sir.”

He nodded.

I turned my face to the mattress and awaited my fate. It would hurt, but I’d earn forgiveness. Then we’d start working together to bring me to a new level of submission. That sounded really good to me.

Hector put his hand on my butt. “Are you ready?”

“Yes, Sir.” I forced myself to relax. There was a whoosh, and then the cane landed on my ass.

Twelve strokes later, my upper thighs to my ass cheeks was a solid blanket of pain. The punishment wasn’t over, not by a long shot.

Hector set his cane on the bed. “The welts are already turning to bruises.” His finger traced a line of pain. He forced me to turn my head and kissed me hard. “You’re so beautiful when you’re suffering. I love your tears. I love how puffy and red your lips get when you’ve been crying. But what I love most is how sweet you are.” He wedged his fingers between my ass cheeks and spread them so that he could stroke my hole. “I can’t resist this hot ass.”

He slid off the bed and tongued my hole. His grip on my ass cheeks hurt like hell. Every time I yelped, he chuckled. His tongue darted in and out of me, fucking me between licks. The pleasure and pain got jumbled inside my brain. I heard lube and then the press of his cock against my hole. All the fight was out of me. I couldn’t do anything but take it. I couldn’t even thrust back against him. He was fucking me roughly, just the way I liked it, but I was so sore from Beltane that I cried out. He pulled out, smacked my butt with his hand until I screamed, and then forced his way back into my ass. Then he pulled out again, and I felt wet, warm come splatter on my tortured ass.

“Only good boys get come in their ass,” Hector reminded me when my bottom lip puffed out. He forced me to lift off the bed and checked to see if I was still hard.

“I didn’t have an accident, Sir.” I’d come close, but kept under control.

“Good, because you don’t want to know what happens to boys who come without permission.” He shoved me back down on the bed. “Time to finish your punishment. Prepare yourself. This is going to be the worst part.”

Standing behind me, Hector went back to work on my thighs. A thousand points of pain landed on my upper thighs. Whoosh! He caught me over one of my other welts.

“Sir! Please! I’m sorry. I swear I’ll never drink before I ride again. Please!” That’s what I meant to say, but the blows came so fast that it got garbled with my screams.

My mind slipped. I was in the bedroom, screaming apologies to my Master, then inside my mind, and then back to the bedroom. In those flickers of time when I was inside my mind, I was in my teahouse, which I realized looked a lot like the Zen Shack, but then it changed again to something much more familiar. It was as if I were a ghost walking through Hector’s house. I could hear myself screaming and apologizing, I could hear my cries and whimpers. I could hear the inevitable smack of the cane, but it was elsewhere. Unlike before, when there had been closed rooms, everything was open and I saw things so clearly that it almost hurt to look on them. Every mistake I’d made with Hector was there in our house, echoes of memories, ghosts of emotional imprints. My mistakes embarrassed me a little, but I was on the path to forgiveness. Then I saw something else. Moments between Hector and I replayed from a different angle, as if an objective eye recorded them. I saw us in the bathroom, I heard myself telling Hector about the surfers who tried to beat me up, and I saw Hector giving in to his rage. Strange, but from where I was standing, that scene was so clearly Hector’s fault. He’d told me I did nothing wrong, but until that moment, I didn’t believe him. That took a while to sink in. It really wasn’t my fault when he got jealous.

New pain dragged me back to the bedroom. “Just one more, Baby,” Hector promised. The last stroke landed. I howled.

I was back inside my mind, in our kitchen. Hector sat at the kitchen table, his brow furrowed in worry. I knelt at his feet, lowered into a full bow, and rubbed my cheek on the toe of his shoe.

“There you are,” he said. “I’ve been waiting.”

“I’m sorry it took me so long, Sir.” I rose on my knees and lifted my hands, palms flat, above my head.

“What’s this?” Hector asked as he looked at my empty hands.

“My promise. Not as your Boy, not as your slave, not as your submissive, but as Sam. I had a lot of time to think the past couple days about things you said. Now that I have a little more mature point of view, I realize that you were right, of course. So you have my word that I will get treatment for my depression. If you want, I will go to couples counseling with you. I will go to, and participate in, my domestic abuse survivors group. I

will do whatever it takes to get better. I will do whatever you ask of me, not because my Master ordered it, but because you asked. That's how it has to be is between us. Mutual respect, man to man."

Hector reached down, cupped my chin, and lifted it so that I looked up at his face. There was a little sparkle at the corners of his eyes. He spread his arms. I rose and went into his embrace. He pressed his lips to my cheeks, and then my lips, and then my forehead. "Thank you, Baby. Thank you so much. You don't know what this means to me," his voice quavered. And then, as if he needed to tell me, he said, "I love you."