

BALANCE



ZUHRA
OWENS

“I HAVE a ten-thirty appointment with Nando.”

Behind the counter the girl with the raven-black hair and studded dog collar didn't even look at her appointment book. “Nando. He's here!” she shouted indiscreetly, her wide-eyed gaze never leaving the stranger. Her smile was accommodating, though, as she continued in a slightly more subdued tone. “He'll be right with you. Why don't you have a seat over there and make yourself comfortable?”

Nando looked at the new arrival from the shaded doorway he was hiding in and liked what he saw. One of the perks of being the welcome wagon for newbies at the club was that Nando got first look. Some of them were duds, but this one had potential. As the guy hesitated for a moment, Nando had some time to check out the pert ass encased in very tight jeans, the simple white T-shirt which also aided in showing off the man's lean physique, and veined arms that made Nando's leather pants grow tight. He liked men who took care of their bodies without looking like they spent time at the gym.

Although this was a BDSM club, Nando didn't look like your average Dom. He was too short and not impressive enough to dominate physically, but he more than made up for that in personality. He'd broken in his fair share of six-foot-two football players, but the physical type that did it for him personally was standing in the club lobby right now.

As the guy turned around, Nando saw the lines in the man's face, betraying that he'd left his thirties behind a few years ago, but the longish straight dark hair made him look younger than he possibly was. For a moment Nando thought he recognized the man, but he couldn't place him until he stepped out of the shadows to introduce himself.

"Hi, I'm Nando."

As the man firmly shook his hand, Nando mentally replaced the jeans-and-a-T with a bland off-the-rack suit, and it suddenly dawned on him. "And you're my health and safety inspector!"

"Didn't expect you to be that Fernando," the man answered in a soft, shy voice.

"I guess we're even, then," Nando replied. "Never in a million years would I expect to see you in a place like this."

THAT morning Nando had needed to open his tattoo shop alone. The appointment book was full, but Paulina, his shop manager, had very apologetically called in sick, and since it was a weekday, he was the only artist there. On top of everything, his eye fell on a little post-it note telling him to expect a visit from a health and safety inspector today. They hadn't been open that long, and he knew some paper-pusher would eventually come by and check on his little shop. Of all days, why did it have to be today?

Right after his first client came in, another guy followed, looking just like Nando expected: cheap suit, raincoat, and a

bunch of papers in a small briefcase. He really didn't have the time, but there was nothing he could do, so he apologized to his client and turned to the inspector.

"Cooper Miller," the man introduced himself without shaking Nando's hand or even seeking eye contact. "California Health and Safety," he added superfluously while he took a clipboard out of his overstuffed briefcase. "I'd like to take a look at your electrical system, your emergency exits, and your autoclave, among other things."

Nando sighed. The man had definitely left his sense of humor at home, and that was never a good thing. He'd been careful to keep to all the regulations, but he knew there were so many he'd never pass on the first go. He tried to be accommodating, showing the man the papers he got from the fire chief who'd inspected the property earlier, explaining their strict hygiene measures, and allowing him to inspect the still-pristine-looking workbenches. He knew how busy they'd been lately, so he silently thanked Paulina for doing a good job cleaning up the place the night before.

The inspector didn't seem too pleased with anything, though. He simply nodded stiffly when Nando showed him all the things they'd already done to accommodate for the regulations and seemed to be overly occupied with minute details like the correct way to mark emergency exits or the fact that there was no notification that the front door needed to be kept unlocked during business hours. He even managed to find one loose electrical wire and didn't like the fact that a garbage can was too close to the back exit. Although Nando had been over most of these things with the fire chief and had been given the all-clear, he was afraid this

inspector had the power to make him close his shop and send his customers home.

“These are the improvements that will need to be made,” the inspector stated as they returned to the front desk and he handed Nando his written report. “I’ll give you a temporary license and six weeks to make the necessary adjustments. When all these are met, I’m sure you’ll receive a permanent one.”

Nando couldn’t hold back a deep sigh of relief. The man’s expression hadn’t changed the entire time he’d been inside the shop, and even as he curtly nodded his goodbye, he still looked like the most even-keeled person Nando had ever seen.

TEN hours later, the man sitting opposite Nando in the lounge of the club was just as soft spoken as the inspector, but clearly nervous. Nando had no problems reading him now.

“Why don’t we pretend this is the first time we’re meeting?” Nando suggested, trying to put the man at ease. “I’m Nando Arenas, and I’m the official welcome wagon here at the club.” He extended his hand toward Cooper again. “Can I call you Cooper?”

Cooper nodded nervously but didn’t take Nando’s hand, so he retracted it. One thing that hadn’t changed was the man’s reluctance to make eye contact. They were going to have to remedy that, Nando thought.

“Why don’t you tell me what brought you here?”

Cooper shrugged. “I was curious. And someone suggested that you could show me the ropes.”

“The ropes of what?” Nando asked, although he already knew the answer. He just hoped Cooper would give him some things to go on besides the obvious.

“I came in a couple of nights and just... observed.” Cooper’s voice was soft but not too hesitant, as if he knew what he wanted, but he just wasn’t entirely confident about telling anyone.

Nando tried to prevent himself from smiling. “Did you see anything you liked?”

Cooper nodded. “There was a guy who was tied up with rope.”

“Shibari,” Nando said. He knew what Cooper was talking about. Although he didn’t hang around the club every night, especially not now he had a business of his own to manage, he knew what was performed on the stage in the Pit, where most of the passive players spent their time watching. “I should probably introduce you to Hikari. She’s the Shibari master.”

“No,” Cooper replied. His voice was still soft, but he sounded determined. “I want something else she can’t give me.”

Nando waited, hoping Cooper would actually tell him what he wanted. Newbies got a choice when they signed up, so the fact that Cooper had requested a man told Nando he was probably gay and that he wanted more than simply being tied up. Although not all encounters he had with

newcomers were sexual—some people, after all, just wanted to be paddled or spanked—Nando certainly didn't mind when they were.

"Look at me," Nando requested when Cooper stayed silent. "I can't give you what you need when I don't know what you want." Nando chose his words carefully. Although they were basically in a public lobby, it was late, and most patrons were in the private rooms or in the Pit, so they were virtually alone. "I believe in getting your cards out in the open. That way nobody walks away disappointed."

Cooper raised his head and looked Nando straight in the eye. "I want you to tie me up and then fuck me in the mouth."

In any other circumstance, Nando would have wolf-whistled and adjusted his crotch, but now he just smiled slightly and bit his lip, trying hard to hide just how much Cooper's confession turned him on. He didn't want to scare the man by seeming too eager. "I'm no Shibari master, but I know my way around a rope, so if we set some boundaries, I'm sure we can do that."

"Boundaries?"

Cooper's eyes drifted south again, so Nando moved closer and lifted Cooper's chin with his hand. "I need to know your safeword, and I need to know how strong your gag reflex is."

Cooper swallowed. Hard. "I've given blow jobs before."

"This isn't just going to be a blow job," Nando teased. "You're not going to have any range of movement left. I'm going to thrust my big cock in your mouth, and you won't be

able to pull away.” Nando let his eyes wander down—not to avert his eyes but to check out Cooper’s groin. Cooper’s jeans were tight so there was no mistaking his arousal. “So why don’t you give me your safeword on the way to the room?”

Cooper got up right after Nando did and followed him down the dimly lit corridor. “I have some questions.”

Nando turned around briefly but kept on walking. “Fire away, but I can tell you this. Our session will have a clear start and finish. Anything we agree upon will happen or not happen during the session. Outside of it, we just act normally. Afterward, we’ll review what you liked and disliked, and we’ll talk about what happened. This is for both our benefits. And all intimate contact will be safe. Even for the blow job, I’ll be wearing a condom.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Cooper was quick to say.

“Yes, it will,” Nando replied when he opened the door. He switched the door sign to “occupied” before going in. “What kind of health and safety officer are you?” He tried hard to make it sound like he was mocking rather than reprimanding Cooper. “We’re both gay, which means we’ve probably had a cock down our throat before, which also means we might carry a few unfriendly germs. I have a clean bill of health—you can check my records here if you like—but I take no risks with my clients. Why would I take one with you? For a Dom, the safety and well-being of his sub comes first.”

Cooper nodded, albeit reluctantly. “Crimson. My safeword.”

“Crimson it is,” Nando replied happily. “Now take off your clothes and kneel on the rug there.”

Nando walked to the small connected room. He knew it always worked best if he left the new guy to check out the room on his own, give him some time. Some guys hated the waiting and became more nervous. More than once, he’d returned to an empty room. When the potential sub was determined, though, Nando would return to the room and find the guy just as he’d requested: naked and willing. As he took off his shirt and briefly looked at his reflection in the mirror, he felt himself hardening. For a moment, Nando closed his eyes and inhaled. He had to stay in control, no matter how much the prospect of what was going to happen turned him on. Cooper came first tonight, in any way possible. Nando was going to have to make it good for him, turn his interest, his craving, into the idea that putting himself in the hands of an experienced Dom and completely letting go was the most amazing feeling in the world, and then Nando would find him that experienced Dom and turn him over. Assuming everything played out the way he imagined, he already had the right man in mind.

Nando took one more look in the mirror at his lean, well-balanced physique and elaborate body art and gave his tight leather pants with the zip-away crotch a short tug before rounding the corner to the room. Cooper was there, on his knees, naked and half aroused, his hands behind his back and his eyes downcast. Nando’s attention was momentarily drawn to Cooper’s left shoulder, which sported a rather large but sadly faded tattoo. It was an occupational hazard to see it wasn’t very skillfully applied, and even

though it could easily be twenty years old, it hadn't weathered the years well.

Nando shook his head to bring himself back to the business at hand. "Are you sure you've never done this before?" He strutted over to where Cooper was kneeling. He could see Cooper looking at him but at the same time trying to keep his head down.

"I haven't, but I've done some... research."

"Good," Nando answered, lowering his voice a little. "Then you'll know that as soon as we start, you will only speak when I specifically give you permission to do so. If I ask you anything, you will either nod as a 'yes' or shake your head as a 'no'. Of course, you can always use your safeword, and then I'll stop what I'm doing immediately, and the session will be over. If I cross any of your boundaries, don't hesitate. I won't think any less of you if you use it, no matter what happens. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Cooper answered; then he nodded to show he did.

"Now, before we start: do you have any more questions?"

Cooper shook his head.

"Then let's begin."

COOPER felt cold, although it wasn't cold in the room. He was shaking with anticipation too. He knew the theory of what he had to do, but this was the first time he was going to experience it himself. He had to remain still, not move, and do what he was told, and in return, he would be taken

so high he'd experience ecstasy like he'd never felt before. All right, he knew this probably wouldn't go all the way the first time. At least he'd surprised himself by telling his Dom exactly what he wanted from him. Of course, it helped that Nando was who he was. Cooper had been nervous, afraid that the man who was going to initiate him would be so far from his type, he'd be turned off and tempted to leave. Instead, it was the guy he'd been lusting after since he'd inspected the newly opened tattoo shop that morning. This must be his lucky day.

Nando walked around him predatorily, and Cooper had a hard time keeping his eyes down. That morning he'd seen Nando in a T-shirt and jeans. The tattoo artist's not-short-but-still-compact frame had been evident, even though there was nothing figure-hugging about his clothes. Now his chest was bare, and he was only dressed in extremely tight leather trousers and his tattoos, which Cooper hoped he would get a chance to study up close some time in the future. For now, he had to content himself with stealing looks when Nando wasn't watching him.

"Are you nervous, Cooper?"

Cooper nodded.

"Do you trust me?"

At first Cooper shrugged slightly; then he nodded hesitantly.

Nando leaned over to whisper in his ear. "You're at my mercy. As long as you behave, I can make it really good for you."

Nando moved away, and Cooper had to resist turning around when he heard some unfamiliar noises. It was exquisite torture, but he told himself to trust the man. It wasn't like he had a choice. He wanted this, wanted to be taken care of, wanted to experience what he'd seen that man on stage go through, only better, because he was going to be manhandled by another man, not a woman.

"You have nice arms, Cooper," Nando said softly, somewhere near his ear. He was stroking Cooper's biceps. "Push them back a bit."

It wasn't a question. Cooper knew that, even though Nando's voice didn't sound very commanding.

"Further," Nando demanded. "Push your elbows toward one another."

Cooper tried hard to comply, but it was an awkward position. Then he felt the slightly coarse scrape of rope on his skin, and his breathing sped up. Nando's soft humming in his ear certainly helped keep up the tension as the rope slipped over his left upper arm, then his right. Cooper resisted the tension on the rope, but even after one rotation, he found he could do no more than place his hands on his thighs. For a minute, he stretched his arms back again but found he could only touch his hips after that. The rope didn't pinch any nerves, and Cooper didn't think it was cutting off the circulation to his hands. Even if Nando was no master, he certainly knew what he was doing.

AFTER checking the rope was secure, Nando moved around Cooper again. Maybe it was his imagination, but he thought he could see Cooper swaying a little as he sat on his knees. Maybe he'd misjudged the man's strength? Maybe his knees were starting to hurt? He couldn't start feeling sorry for him now. If it became too much for him, he could always use his safeword. Somehow, Nando thought Cooper wouldn't unless he was really desperate, and judging from the more than ample erection standing out from Cooper's flat stomach, he was only desperate to continue. Nando had to admit to himself that he was rather proud of his handiwork. He'd only tied Cooper's elbows together and not even that tightly, yet the man could barely move.

"You like this, don't you?" Nando asked, standing in front of Cooper. Cooper nodded and looked up at him with all the admiration of a loyal puppy. The configuration wasn't right, though. Cooper on his knees came to about Nando's nipple line.

"Sit back."

Much better.

"Now scoot back until you're against the wall."

Cooper complied without question, like a good little sub. When he was in position, he looked at Nando again, silently asking if it was good now. Nando smiled and ruffled Cooper's hair. A strand ended up in front of Cooper's eyes, and Nando could tell he was having a hard time not blowing it away, so Nando did it for him, tenderly brushing it behind Cooper's ear. He wiped his hand through Cooper's hair some more until he could grab a handful of it to pull his head back.

“Open your mouth.”

Nando pushed his thumb into Cooper’s mouth, and Cooper immediately started sucking on it, so Nando retracted it.

“I don’t recall giving you permission to suck me,” Nando said. He reinserted a finger, and this time Cooper didn’t react; he simply looked at Nando until Nando caved. “Show me what you’re going to do to my cock later.”

The way Cooper sucked on Nando’s finger made Nando’s cock jump to attention, making his leathers uncomfortably tight. It didn’t take a genius to figure out that Cooper didn’t just like having something substantial in his mouth; he also knew what to do with it. Nando replaced his finger with his thumb, but instead of making him feel more in control, the way Cooper was moaning turned him on even more, so he pulled away.

Cooper didn’t dare protest, and Nando was glad of that. He walked away from him again, this time under the pretense of picking up a condom, but he knew he couldn’t stay away long enough to let the heat die down. He simply had to keep the momentum going. Cooper wasn’t in a very comfortable position, and Nando had already teased him to the point where he could see the pre-come beading at the slit of Cooper’s cock. Nando pushed the thought that he wanted to lick those beads away to the back of his head and took a deep breath in.

COOPER'S legs were starting to tingle, so as soon as Nando moved across the room, he shifted his weight around, hoping it would help. He wasn't cold anymore, but the anticipation was killing him. He knew Nando was teasing with the finger sucking, but he hoped his response to it had turned him on enough to continue. It had certainly whetted his own appetite for more, and he hoped that Nando would give him what he'd asked for. But now Cooper felt greedy and wanted even more. Should he have asked for more? It was too late now. Now he would just have to wait for what Nando had planned for him and silently hope he would get another chance.

Nando returned with a condom packet in his hand and a wide smile on his face. Cooper was not looking directly at him, which meant that as soon as Nando was standing in front of him, Cooper got a front row seat at Nando's crotch. His very bulging crotch. In fact, his tight leather pants looked like they were going to rip at the seams.

Cooper subconsciously licked his lips.

"You want this?" Nando asked seductively, pushing his hips even more forward, which, considering he was standing close to Cooper, his legs spread around Cooper's knees, looked like a very debauched move.

Cooper wanted to shout, "Yes, I really want this!" but decided to stay obedient and simply nod with a certain vigor. But hell yes, he was salivating like a dog presented with a juicy bone, and maybe that's what he wanted to be.

Nando proceeded to get rid of the crotch patch on his leather pants, first unzipping the top and letting the head of his erection surface. "Do you want a taste of this?"

Cooper opened his mouth and leaned forward. He could just reach far enough to lick the head with the tip of his tongue, and that was exactly how Nando wanted it, apparently, since he moved back as soon as Cooper tried to move closer.

“Greedy little shit, aren’t you?” Nando teased as he continued to unzip himself.

Cooper waited patiently, trying not to move too much and trying even harder not to let his neglected erection drive him mad. Nando had promised that if he was obedient, he’d be rewarded beyond his wildest dreams, so Cooper could hold on a little longer.

Nando rested his outstretched arm against the padded wall Cooper was sitting against and pushed his uncovered cock closer. As soon as Cooper moved toward it, he pulled back. “Let’s put on some latex!” He took a step back and rolled the condom on. “Open your mouth.”

Cooper swallowed before complying. This was his prize. This was what he wanted. Nando had quite a nice-sized cock, certainly ample for what Cooper wanted. He just hoped that Nando had the nerve to do it.

NANDO wasn’t entirely sure he could do what Cooper expected of him. He knew he could fuck Cooper’s mouth. That was easy enough, just like the tying up. Cooper had proven to him what he could do with that delicious mouth of his, so it wasn’t a question of not wanting it. Nando’s problem was that he was afraid of losing his legendary

control, and frankly, he couldn't do that. Although what they were doing only touched on the BDSM the club was known for, Nando was the Dom, and that meant he couldn't lose control. He had to keep a clear head, and, at the same time, bring his sub off.

The condom helped. It helped with the visual, although watching his cock disappear into Cooper's mouth and seeing Cooper move forward to take it deeper looked amazing even with the shiny transparent jacket. It also helped mute the sensation. Theoretically. Who was it again that said the most important sexual organ was the brain? Well, that whoever was right, so he was royally screwed.

Cooper looked up, easily taking what Nando was giving him, so Nando pushed deeper, leaning on both arms and setting a steady rhythm. Even so, Cooper still found a way to move closer, urging Nando to hit him harder. The temptation strong, Nando grabbed Cooper's head to hold him still. At first Cooper took it easily; then as Nando picked up the pace, giving in to his body's demand to thrust harder, Cooper's eyes started tearing up. Something in the back of Nando's mind told him to back off, but his body was on autopilot. It felt so amazing to give in, and he was incredibly close to coming, his climax aided by the fact that Cooper was now fighting him, pulling back from Nando's thrusts. Cooper's hands were clawing, unable to reach anything, and he was gagging and trying to get away, but like Nando had predicted, he had nowhere to go. Nando was reaching the point of no return, so he pushed in two, three more times. Suddenly Cooper spasmed, and as Nando pulled back, he saw Cooper's hips thrust up convulsively, splattering his thighs and stomach and Nando's leathers with come.

It didn't take more than that for Nando to come as well, but what he'd predicted to be a stellar climax left him feeling guiltier than hell. He fell to his knees, pulling Cooper into his arms.

"I'm sorry, Coop," he panted. "I'm so sorry." Nando pulled Cooper to the side so they both fell to the soft mat underneath them. He continued rocking him back and forth while Cooper panted hard, his eyes closed but still tearing.

"Why are you fucking apologizing for giving me what I asked for?" Cooper eventually replied. His eyes were still closed, but his breathing was now slower and more even. "Could you untie me, please?"

"Fuck, yeah," Nando answered, pulling at the rope he had tied for easy release. He got up to loosen it until he could pull it free and then continued to the back room to get rid of his condom and wet a towel to clean Cooper up.

Cooper let him fuss for a moment, but as soon as the worst of the stickiness was wiped off, Cooper grabbed Nando's head and kissed him violently, pushing him to the mat with surprising power.

Nando barely registered what was happening until he felt Cooper's tongue invade his mouth. His first instinct was to pull away, but Cooper's body was covering his and the heaviness of the taller man's frame felt so heavenly he kissed the man back. He couldn't think, which was probably just as well, because he generally wasn't a great fan of kissing. Except Cooper's mouth tasted so good he couldn't stop.

They eventually had to come up for air, and Cooper was giggling as much as a manly guy like Cooper could against Nando's neck.

"I can't begin to tell you how much I've wanted to do that. Actually I've been daydreaming about it since this morning," Cooper confessed, first brushing his hand over Nando's shortly cropped hair and then letting the thumb of his other hand run over Nando's full lips. "You have the sexiest mouth."

Nando felt himself turning crimson. "Pot. Kettle. Black."

"Seriously," Cooper insisted. "Not to mention you helped me live out one of my all-time fantasies."

"Well, that was sort of the idea."

Cooper shook his head. "You're not the first guy I asked. Most men like the idea but can't seem to pull it off. You, on the other hand, pulled out all the stops."

Nando still couldn't get over his shame. "A Dom isn't supposed to 'pull out all the stops'. A Dom is supposed to stay in control at all times. The sub can't control anything, so it's the Dom's job to make sure everything—"

Cooper stopped Nando's rant with a searing kiss, and with it, any chance of coherent thought went out the window. This couldn't happen. Nando couldn't lose his head again, yet it felt so right.

"All I can say is that I'm eternally grateful for the fact you screwed up as a Dom," Cooper said when he ended the kiss. He wanted to dive right in again, but Nando pushed him away and reluctantly got up from the floor.

“I’ll find you someone else next time you come to the club,” Nando said as he turned his back on Cooper to tuck himself into his leather trousers again.

Cooper didn’t give up easily, though. He got up and, unperturbed by his total nudity, approached Nando again. “What did I do wrong? You said we would talk about the session afterward. At least give me the courtesy to tell me what I did wrong?”

Nando didn’t turn around. He couldn’t look Cooper in the eye. “You did nothing wrong. I was the one who made the mistake.”

“Wasn’t it your job to make it good for your sub? Isn’t that what you told me?” Cooper moved closer to Nando, until his front was almost in contact with Nando’s back. “I’m not a one-night stand sort of guy, Nando. I’ve had three long-term relationships in my life. The shortest lasted six years. I loved those men dearly, and I don’t feel that a short fling can be better than any of those relationships, so why bother? I’ve been on my own for a while now, though, so I thought I’d try to fulfill some of my fantasies, since no matter how great my lovers were, they never managed to make them come true.” Cooper sighed. “You, on the other hand... hell, I met you this morning, and all you know about me is that I’m a bland paper pusher.”

“You weren’t bland when you sat in the lobby, unashamedly telling me exactly what you wanted.” Nando cringed at hearing himself say the words and was infinitely grateful that Cooper couldn’t see the pained expression on his face. His mind told him to cut his losses and walk out, but something was holding him back, and for the split

second that he allowed himself to feel it, he knew. He was curious. Curious about what else this guy could come up with. Curious about his kisses and his tender touches. Aching to feel them again.

As if Cooper knew about what Nando was feeling, he tenderly put his hands on Nando's hips, and Nando couldn't pull away.

"I don't do relationships, Coop," he whispered. "Not the kind you need."

"You don't know what I need," Cooper replied, equally quietly. "I didn't come here to find a relationship."

"But you just told me that's all you value."

Cooper nodded, and Nando could feel the motion against his neck.

"I won't push you anymore, Nando. I just want a chance. I'd like to see you again. Here at the club, or somewhere in the city, or even at your shop. You choose the time and place."

Nando swallowed hard. "I need time."

"OKAY," Cooper conceded. He stepped back and only then realized that he was still naked. Although he felt like Nando was running away, he couldn't tell himself he hadn't given it his best shot. He knew he was probably moving too quickly for Nando's liking, but he'd been here before. He knew when it felt right, and this, for some elusive reason, felt right.

Cooper walked to the chair he'd hung his clothes on and started getting dressed. Since there were no sounds in the room other than what the two of them were making, it wasn't hard for Cooper to figure out what Nando was doing even without him being in his field of vision. He'd expected Nando to leave, but he didn't. He loitered, pacing back and forth behind Cooper's back and sighing, although Cooper could also hear he was trying to be as inconspicuous as possible—and not succeeding very well. It was killing Cooper to have to hold back, but he figured he'd gotten his message across earlier; now the ball was in Nando's court.

By the time Cooper was fully dressed, Nando had left, and the tension in the room dissipated.

FOR one long week, Cooper held back from going to see Nando, but he couldn't stop thinking about the man. He knew he wouldn't be able to get him out of his mind without seeing him again. He hoped Nando had taken the week to put things in perspective as well and that he'd be able to talk about it now. At least Cooper hoped he'd be able to make sense of the mixed signals Nando had been sending him.

It took another three nights of stalking Nando outside of his shop before Cooper got up the nerve to confront him. He waited near the entrance door until Nando closed up and walked outside.

“WHAT the hell! What are you doing here?” Nando looked both spooked and relieved when Cooper stepped out of the shadows as Nando was locking the front door. “This isn’t the kind of neighborhood you can just hang around on the street after midnight! People get mugged here all the time.”

“I’m sorry,” Cooper apologized. “I didn’t want to just barge in while you were working.”

Nando smiled wryly. “Next time, just come inside, okay? I’m pretty used to people opening the door while I’m tattooing.”

“I don’t know if there will be a next time,” Cooper replied hesitantly.

“Oh?”

“Can we go somewhere and talk? I think we need to clear some things up.”

Nando wasn’t sure how to react to Cooper’s offer. For the last two weeks, he’d tried hard to forget what had happened, but he found he couldn’t. He’d been back to the club but had told the club manager that he was too busy with his new business to break in other guys for a while. There was no way he could tell him he’d met a man who had made such an impact on him that he couldn’t even contemplate being with someone else right now. On the other hand, he wanted as little to do with Cooper as possible. He was afraid his obsession would only get worse.

“There isn’t much open around here at this time of night,” Nando replied. “Expect maybe McDonald’s.” He chuckled nervously. “It should be pretty deserted about now.” He couldn’t believe he had accepted Cooper’s offer, but

they were going to a public place to talk. Maybe it would be easier to turn him down there, because really, what did they have in common?

Nando locked the gate over the front door and pointed across the street to the golden arches. The street was pretty deserted, but they let a lone car pass before jogging across the avenue. Like Nando had predicted, they were the only patrons, and the bored-looking night attendant found his best smile to greet them.

“You want something to eat?” Nando asked.

Cooper shrugged. “No, thanks.”

Nando ordered two coffees and a hot fudge sundae.

“Sweet tooth, hey?” Cooper teased as they sat down near the back, at opposite sides of a table.

“It’s been a long day,” Nando sighed. “Didn’t have time to eat.”

“You should have said something. I know a place where you can get a decent dinner at any hour of the night. It’s across town, but—”

Nando shook his head so Cooper stopped talking. “It’s okay. I’m used to it.” He wanted to add he didn’t need rescuing, but decided not to be too defensive. Cooper was being patient with him, sitting across the table with a hint of a smile on his face, drinking his coffee. He seemed relaxed, or at least trying to look it, and somehow this calmed Nando down too. He was tired, and maybe that was making his resistance a little weak, but despite his earlier misgivings, it felt good to see Cooper again.

“So what did you want to talk about?” Nando asked a little apprehensively.

“Us,” Cooper answered, seemingly without thinking.

“There is no us,” Nando was quick to answer. “We did a session. I made one of your fantasies come true. That doesn’t mean we’re in a relationship.” The words sounded too loud in the empty restaurant, and Nando wished he could take them back. He looked around to see if the guy at the counter had overheard them, but if he had, he didn’t let on.

“I know we’re not in a relationship. We hardly know each other—”

“We don’t know the first thing about each other,” Nando interrupted.

“And I’d like to remedy that.”

Nando had to give it to Cooper. He wasn’t easily put off or insulted. And he seemed like a decent man: a determined, but decent man.

“So what do you suggest?”

Cooper pursed his lips as if he was thinking about it, but Nando had a sneaking suspicion he’d already thought about what he was going to say.

“I’d like to take you out to dinner one night. Just so we can talk. You don’t work every night until midnight, right?”

“I suppose I can get away early from time to time,” Nando admitted, not wanting to sound too eager, but not shutting the door completely. “So you want to go on a date?”

Cooper laughed nervously. “Why do I feel that makes you uncomfortable?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “It’s just

two guys sharing a meal and getting to know each other, so it can be whatever you want it to be.”

“And what if either of us wants more than just polite conversation?” Nando asked, looking over his shoulder again to check if anyone was there.

“I’m sure we can talk about that too. Our first decent conversation was a lot more sexually oriented than the average ‘your place or mine’ would be.” Cooper looked at Nando with that slightly teasing, slightly wry smile of his. “Why don’t you come and sit here next to me; then we can both see the whole restaurant, and you don’t need to be so paranoid.”

Nando weighed his options. He felt tired, and that made him needy and horny. He figured he just had to make a slight move and Cooper would follow him like a faithful puppy, but he wasn’t in the mood for a follower. Nando was in the mood for a strong, take-charge sort of man tonight, and he hadn’t seen a lot of evidence that Cooper could be that sort of man. He had enjoyed their maiden session, though. In fact, it had fueled many a steamy dream and consequent, rushed, self-administered orgasm. Even if he had to be the one in charge, maybe it would be good to feel someone else’s hand again. He was getting ahead of himself, though. Maybe Cooper *did* simply want to talk.

Nando looked over his shoulder once again and scooted out of the booth. He sat down next to Cooper, who slid closer to the wall to give him some space to sit. Nando knew that if it didn’t feel right, he could easily leave.

“Your sundae is melting,” Cooper remarked, pointing at the slowly liquefying white and brown sludge.

“I like it that way,” Nando answered smugly as he dug into it, watching from the corner of his eye how Cooper slowly sipped his coffee. When he was done, Nando leaned back against the seat, rubbing his stomach. “I needed that.”

“Not much food-wise, is it?”

Nando gave him a questioning “And why is that any of your business” look, but Cooper seemed genuinely worried, so Nando backed down. “I’m sorry. I had no right to give you that attitude.”

“No offense taken,” Cooper answered quietly.

“Don’t you ever want to go against the grain? Be a rebel?”

Cooper shrugged. “I like following rules, conventions. They make our society function.”

“Yeah, but don’t you ever just want to pick up a guy in a bar and fuck him into the mattress?”

Cooper chuckled uncomfortably. “I told you I’m not much of a one-night stand sort of guy.”

“You want the happy ever after?” Nando asked. “After three failed relationships, you should be catching on that there’s no such thing.”

Cooper shook his head. “What do you know? My first lover killed himself, my second one died of cancer, and the third cheated on me, so I asked him to leave. I don’t think I have the worst track record here.”

Nando looked at the deserted restaurant. Cooper raising his voice could have sparked some interest, but nothing happened. “I’m sorry.” He didn’t dare look at Cooper. He

wasn't feeling strong enough for that. He drank the last few sips of his coffee and started to get up, but Cooper's hand, with a surprisingly strong grip, held him back.

"Sit down for a minute. First you insult me, and then you walk away? At least give me a moment to explain."

Nando sat down again, still not looking at Cooper.

COOPER liked a challenge. The men he'd fallen for in the past were never the ones who were easy or eager, but always the ones who played hard to get, intentional or not. Was that what intrigued him about Nando? He couldn't figure him out. The first time he'd met Nando he was eager to please and very forthcoming; the second time, cocky and self-assured, in control and outspoken. Whenever he thought back to their session at the club, he still felt his groin grow tight, so he was certainly in lust with the man.

Only tonight was almost two weeks later, and Nando seemed like a different man. He was moody and seemed unsure of himself. Cooper didn't know what to make of it. Part of him wanted to push more, to get Nando to tell him what he wanted, but another part of him was afraid that Nando was telling him he didn't want anything more to do with him. There was only one way to find out.

Cooper squeezed Nando's wrist, which was still contained in his hand. "Nando, I still want to get to know you better," Cooper started a little hesitantly. He cleared his throat, because he didn't want to give Nando the idea he doubted anything he was saying. "We can take it as quick or

as slow as you like. It's up to you. You set the pace, but I just want a fair chance."

"I'm not who you think I am."

Cooper smiled nervously. "That's why I want to get to know you."

Nando shrugged.

"The guy I met is quite a talented tattoo artist. Adventurous too. And a hard worker." Cooper wanted to keep talking, hoping it would make Nando stay. He was pleasantly surprised to feel Nando relax little by little, although he was still staring at the restaurant's front counter. "We had a pretty amazing time that night at the club, but I don't expect it to be like that every time. In fact, we can just talk, or go for a drink one night, or to dinner. If I'm in the neighborhood, I could probably swing a quick lunch, too, if you don't mind being seen with me in my work suit." Cooper chuckled, thinking about how different he looked during the daytime.

"You don't want to have sex with me?" Nando asked out of the blue, turning toward Cooper and fixing him with his deep brown eyes.

Cooper wasn't sure how to answer Nando's question, but the way he was looking at him made him think on his feet, and quick answers were easier if he kept them close to the truth. "Of course I do, but—"

Nando didn't let him finish. He leaned forward and kissed Cooper full on, pushing his tongue past Cooper's lips. Cooper let him, and after a few moments, kissed him back. Nando crawled on Cooper's lap, straddling him as he

squeezed between Cooper and the table, his groin rubbing against Cooper's belly. To Cooper's surprise, he felt Nando slowly relax. He stopped kissing Cooper but didn't take his lips from Cooper's mouth. It seemed like forever as they continued breathing the same air, their foreheads touching.

"Do you still want to have sex with me if I ask you to fuck me?" Nando asked suddenly.

Cooper moved his head back as far as he could so he could look at Nando. Although Nando refused to meet his gaze, Cooper could see he meant what he'd said.

"Come home with me, and I'll show you."

Nando kissed Cooper again, and Cooper could almost taste the desperation. He wanted to ask Nando some questions but feared he wouldn't get a straight answer anyway, so he remained silent as he led Nando to his car and drove him home.

Nando didn't speak, but the tension didn't rise as high as Cooper had expected. He tried telling Nando that if he had anything to say, he would listen, but Nando ignored his soft plea.

"I just need this right now. If you can't give it to me, then just drive me back to the shop so I can take my bike home," was all Nando would say.

Cooper understood need very well and reached out to touch Nando's hand, but Nando didn't let him. His attitude changed once they entered Cooper's house, though.

Nando barely took the time to acquaint himself with his surroundings. He pushed Cooper against the door as soon as Cooper closed it and kissed him again almost violently. They

knocked into each other as they both rushed to get out of their clothes. Just before Nando discarded his jeans, Cooper saw him pull out a condom and a small packet of lube. Although Cooper knew he would be expected to top, there was no mistaking who was in charge, but he didn't mind. If this was what Nando needed, he was more than happy to give it to him, so he conveniently forgot his aversion to one-night stands and silently hoped it would become more than that one time.

In the living room, Nando turned around in Cooper's embrace and pushed his ass against Cooper's groin. "Fuck me."

Cooper kissed his neck. "Need to prep you."

"Fuck prep," Nando answered breathlessly. "Need your cock inside me now."

When Cooper hesitated, Nando returned to face him and sank to his knees, unzipping Cooper's jeans and wantonly looking up at him as he wrapped his mouth around Cooper's erection. "Hang on," Cooper stopped him. "Give me the condom."

Nando let Cooper's cock out of his mouth with a plop and then rolled the condom on, immediately returning to his ministrations. He didn't wait long to rise again though. "You are more than ready for what I need." He handed Cooper the packet of lube and leaned over the back of the couch, reaching out for Cooper to come closer.

By that time, Cooper was so riled up he was ready to plunge right in. Although he usually took better care of his lovers, he knew all Nando wanted right now was a quick,

passionate fuck, so he banished all the complaining voices to the back of his head and resolved to give him just that. It took a lot of self-control, therefore, to push in slowly, knowing Nando had barely been prepped. He didn't count on Nando urging him on, so after adding even more lube, he was soon in up to the hilt.

"Fuck yeah," Nando panted. "I knew that cock of yours would feel good."

Cooper pulled back and plunged in again a few times. Then he slowed down. "We'd probably be more comfortable on a bed."

Nando looked over his shoulder, eyes dark with lust. "Too far."

"Small apartment," Cooper countered, pulling out all the way. He thought he heard Nando whimper but recover quickly.

"Lead the way."

Cooper pointed at the door to the right, and Nando didn't hesitate for a moment.

They didn't bother pushing the duvet off the neatly made bed; Nando just pushed Cooper down on it, straddling him in one fluent movement. Cooper tried to relax, resolved to being the passive one as Nando sank down over his erection with a deep sigh. Cooper's fingers buried into the skin over Nando's hips, and he didn't care whether he left bruises. Nando was riding him; a mix of bliss and tension in his face, and his moans and groans reassured Cooper that this was just what Nando needed right now.

Nando was touching his own chest, making his nipples peak before moving down to his cock. It was a lovely vision, seeing Nando fist himself with both hands. “So fucking close. Fuck me harder. Please. Harder!”

Nando’s pleas became more and more desperate, and Cooper knew he was close to coming as well. He started meeting Nando halfway, and suddenly Nando convulsed, shooting his come all over Cooper’s chest. Cooper lost his rhythm, but the tightness of Nando’s pulsating channel pulled him over the edge, too, and he filled the condom with his release. He only just had enough sense left to hold onto it as Nando let himself fall to his side, panting hard, his face turned away and one arm covering his eyes. Cooper got up to get a cloth to clean them up.

Nando allowed Cooper to wipe him and wrap the blankets around him. Nando’s eyes remained closed, and Cooper didn’t dare move closer to him. The feeling of insecurity was back. Nando had gotten off, and it was obviously something he’d needed, but Cooper had no idea if this had just been sex and nothing more. Even his own feelings on the matter were a bit muddled. Nando had closed himself off, so it wasn’t like Cooper could ask. With a sigh, he crawled into bed and soon felt himself drifting off to sleep when Nando snuggled up to him.

“I’m sorry I used you.”

Cooper opened his eyes. “I don’t mind, remember?”

“This time it wasn’t something you wanted.”

Cooper chuckled. “Says who? Maybe being ravaged is another one of my fantasies?”

Nando turned to his back again and stared up at the ceiling. "You're just saying that."

Cooper cocked his head. "Okay, it isn't, but it doesn't mean I minded. You made me come. Wasn't the best orgasm I ever had, but then the one you gave me before this was a little hard to surpass. You set the bar very high for yourself last time."

"I still had no right to do it."

"Don't beat yourself up about it. I'm a grown-up. I could have just said no."

"But you didn't." A hesitant smile appeared on Nando's face.

"I certainly didn't." Cooper chuckled.

Nando's face turned serious again. "Your first boyfriend killed himself?"

"Mmmh." Cooper nodded. "It's almost twenty years ago now." The memory didn't sting quite as badly anymore, but it wasn't something he would ever be able to be casual about.

"What happened?"

Cooper wasn't entirely sure he wanted to spill everything about this painful period of his life, but he hoped Nando would reveal a few things about himself if he did. "We were each other's first, but then he found out he was HIV positive. I guess he was afraid to tell me he'd been unfaithful to me."

"Not to mention he was going to die anyway."

"That too," Cooper admitted. It had been a long time since Cooper had thought about it.

“How did you recover from that?” Nando’s voice was so low that if it hadn’t been silent in the room at the time, Cooper would not have been able to understand him.

Cooper turned toward Nando but kept his distance. He rested his head on his hand. “Wasn’t easy. I loved him. We’d been together for six years, and we were in college at the time. Losing someone that way is pretty devastating.”

“You’re clean?”

Cooper shrugged. “I showered.” Nando’s only reaction was to give Cooper a questionable look. “Even ‘positive’ people are ‘clean’, Nando.” He knew he sounded condescending, so he decided to answer the question Nando was really asking. “I went through a few harrowing months, I admit. We were a couple, so we didn’t use condoms.”

Nando nodded his understanding. “And then you met someone else, and you loved him too?”

Cooper nodded. Although Nando wasn’t looking directly at him, Cooper was sure he understood the gesture. Nando was still on his back, staring up again. Then it dawned on Cooper.

“Did you lose someone, Nando?”

Nando turned away from him, giving Cooper his answer. Cooper moved closer and put his arms around the smaller man. Nando fought him, but Cooper didn’t give up until he relented.

“Sssh it’s okay. It’s okay to hurt, and it’s okay to cry.”

Nando shook his head.

“Yes, it is. And it’s okay to talk about it too. Sometimes it’s easier to talk to a stranger than to someone you’re close to.”

Nando shook his head again, but he started talking anyway. “I never knew why he did it. We’d made love, and he got out of bed. I fell asleep again and then woke up when I heard something fall upstairs. I figured he was up in the attic or something. I’d had a late night, and I turned around and buried my head under my pillow so I wouldn’t hear it anymore. I found him four hours later, hanging from a rope.”

“Oh Nando,” Cooper said, unable to find words that could soothe him. Instead, he pulled him tighter into his embrace, and this time Nando let him. Cooper kissed his hair, inhaled his scent, and found himself getting turned on again. He silently cursed himself for being so easy at such an inappropriate time. Nando didn’t need this now; he needed support and maybe a little compassion, not a horny man holding him.

“Is that why you’re so negative about relationships?” Cooper asked softly.

“I don’t ever want to hurt like that again.”

“I promise I won’t try to kill myself.”

Nando turned around inside Cooper’s embrace and wrapped his arms tightly around Cooper. Then he looked up as if something suddenly dawned on him.

“You want to be dominated. You want a guy who’s in control. I can’t be that. I’m not strong enough.” He looked down as if he was ashamed of his admission.

Cooper chuckled. “It’s a fantasy, Nando. Everyone wants to experience their fantasies, but nobody wants to live them. I liked the Nando I saw in the club, but I also liked the Nando who was trying very hard to keep his shop open, and I like the Nando that just devoured me.”

Nando moved away some but didn’t pull out of Cooper’s arms. “Bet you can’t stand the Nando who cried and broke down.”

Cooper shrugged. “No, I pretty much like him too. He’s very human, and I like that in a guy.”

“I made you top.”

This time Cooper laughed. “No way. I may have been inside you, but I definitely didn’t top.”

Nando smiled, looking like he got caught.

Cooper caressed Nando’s face with his hand. “Yes, I like to be overpowered by my lover, but I’m quite happy topping. Then again, I rarely say no to bottoming. I just don’t get the chance that often. For some reason, guys always think I’m a top.”

“And they think I’m a bottom. Which, of course, I am.”

“You don’t bottom at the club,” Cooper stated more than asked.

Nando shook his head. “I’ve fucked a few guys there. Not everyone comes for that, though. Some just want to be paddled or degraded.”

Cooper shuddered theatrically.

“I better leave,” Nando announced.

Just like earlier, Cooper pulled him back. “Don’t. It’s the middle of the night. I drove you here, and I don’t feel much like getting up and driving you back, and like you said, the shop isn’t the best of neighborhoods in the middle of the night. This is a big bed. Even if you want to sleep on your side of it, this is better than getting up. Surely.”

“I don’t usually sleep over,” Nando murmured.

Cooper didn’t think Nando was all that comfortable, but he remained in his bed, yet again staring at the ceiling. Cooper curled up next to him, staying close without touching him, hoping Nando wouldn’t feel threatened by it.

NANDO felt Cooper sneak out of bed, but he pretended not to notice and feigned sleep. He never slept over because he didn’t like the confrontation with a one-night stand in the first morning light. If it hadn’t been for Cooper’s gentle plea to stay, he would have been at home, sleeping in his own bed. If he were honest with himself, Nando would have admitted that it felt good to sleep next to a warm body. Cooper was a beautiful if somewhat ordinary man, but a master in the power of persuasion. He’d been beyond patient with what Nando knew was a childish tactic of his to get the man to turn away from him, but Cooper hadn’t. Instead, Cooper had taken him home and then fucked him until Nando had seen stars.

As soon as Nando heard the front door close, signaling that Cooper had left for work, he rolled over onto Cooper’s side of the bed and buried his face in Cooper’s pillow,

inhaling his scent. Maybe that was it. Maybe he just liked the way Cooper smelled? It was a clean smell with slightly musky overtones; nothing overt like cologne or strong aftershave, yet distinctively male. He'd smelled it the first time, at the shop, when he'd stood behind Cooper pointing out the fire escape at the back, and again that night at the club. Cooper's scent then had been mixed with fear, and how it had aroused Nando. It had instantly made him hard. Then Cooper added to the turn-on by asking Nando to fuck his mouth.

This morning Nando's arousal was more a force of nature. He wrapped his hand around his erection and fisted it a few times; then he rolled his hips so he could fuck his clenched fist. He was sore in the best possible way, helping him recall last night's exercise, and with his free hand, he reached behind his back to finger his hole. It took just a single finger for Nando to come, shooting his spunk through his fingers to the bedding below. He rolled over to his back again, closing his eyes and drifting off to sleep amidst dreams of fucking Cooper after tying him up with coarse rope.

Nando woke up a little while later from the sun shining through the half-closed blinds. He vaguely remembered Cooper telling him to feel free to take a shower, so he did. When he returned, a towel around his hips for his own modesty and nobody else's, he noticed the rumpled bed sheets and figured that soiling them twice in the last ten hours or so was enough to warrant a wash, so he ripped the sheets off the bed and went in search of a washing machine.

While the sheets were soaking, he wandered into the kitchen and found a note from Cooper near the half-full coffee pot.

“Didn’t want to wake you. Help yourself to breakfast and coffee. Take the money for cab fare.”

There was twenty dollars next to it, and Nando eyed it sharply. All of a sudden he felt dirty, although he knew the shower had done its job.

“Sheets are in the washing machine,” he wrote under it, before getting dressed in a hurry and rushing out the door, leaving the money untouched. He took the bus instead and was at the shop even before Paulina arrived. She gave him a questioning look, since he was never there before her, but she had the good judgment not to ask.

A good day’s work was the best way for Nando to get his mind in order, and by evening time, he was smiling and joking with the clients again. Somewhere after ten, the steady stream of patrons dried up, and Nando was restocking the workbenches when Cooper walked through the front door.

Instinctively, Nando turned away from him, opening one of the drawers to refill it with tissues. He didn’t want to be confronted by the man he’d slept with, not after all that morning’s mixed feelings. On the other hand, he didn’t have the heart to send him away. Even in the split second he’d seen Cooper, he knew he’d gone home to change after work. Nando didn’t know whether it was his imagination or whether Cooper really was wearing the tight jeans he’d worn to the club, but it was making things stir in his groin. He didn’t want to be this affected, but the truth was, he couldn’t

do anything about it. He heard Paulina talk to Cooper in hushed, conspiratory tones from the front desk, which she was preparing for the next day.

“Thanks for washing my sheets,” Cooper said, suddenly a lot closer than Nando expected.

“Was the least I could do,” Nando answered almost automatically, pretending to be too busy to look at Cooper.

“Well, it was a nice gesture,” Cooper added softly, as if he didn’t want Paulina to overhear their conversation. “I see you got here from my house, yet you didn’t take the money?”

Nando shot him a poisonous look and then kicked the drawer shut as if he was blaming it for all the evils of the world. “Listen,” Nando started before backing down and simply walking away toward the supply room in the back.

Cooper followed him and only just managed to prevent the supply room door from slamming into his face.

“I don’t appreciate being *paid* for my *services*,” Nando spat out, emphasizing the word “paid.”

Cooper shook his head, his expression doubtful. “Paid? You mean the cab fare I left you? Nando, I drove you halfway across town, and I know money is tight for you with starting this business up and probably sinking all your savings into it. I didn’t mean anything by it. Please, you have to believe me.”

For the first time Nando looked straight at Cooper, not disguising the emotion in his face. He was fighting back tears and didn’t feel like crying like a kid in front of Cooper, but he could barely believe how forgiving Cooper was of his

tantrums. The man was a saint. Nando swallowed hard, biting back the emotions.

“I’m sorry I misjudged the situation. I didn’t think,” Cooper said by way of apology. “I was going to wake you up and drive you back into town, but you looked so sweet. Not to mention delicious,” he added almost as an afterthought. “I didn’t have the strength to rouse you. I took a picture of you, lying there with these small strips of light filtering through the shutters. You had your arm over your head, and you looked so beautiful. If I’d had more time, I would have taken a closer look at your tattoos, but I didn’t or I’d have been late for work, and I had an early appointment with a repeat offender.”

“There’ll be other occasions to study them up close,” Nando replied softly, moving closer to Cooper. He felt himself inexplicably drawn to the taller man’s tenderness; at the same time he felt his anger die down. How could he be angry with him for giving him money when he’d done it out of empathy, not out of the disdain Nando had read in it? “I’m sorry I jumped to conclusions without knowing all the facts.”

Cooper nodded slightly and took a step closer as well. They were definitely in each other’s personal space, and Nando leaned forward to place his lips gently on Cooper’s. They kissed tenderly, chastely almost, and Nando wished they were at his apartment or at Cooper’s place, where they could just end up in bed together without having to break the spell. He wanted to make up for being such an asshole by showing Cooper he could be accommodating too.

They continued kissing for a while as Nando almost hesitantly ran his hands over Cooper’s back. Cooper’s hands

stayed on Nando's hips, as if he wanted to keep Nando in place, and Nando realized it wasn't a bad move, since it curbed his need to run from the intimacy. This wasn't what he usually did with a lover. He only ever kissed like this as a tease, breaking away sooner rather than later to entice his lover to move the action along, but now he didn't seem to be able to get enough. The heat was rising between them, as was the hardness Nando could feel through the two layers of denim every time he pulled Cooper closer to him.

"You're wearing the tight jeans," Nando remarked coyly as they broke their kiss.

"I like the way you look at me when I'm wearing them," Cooper answered, not as shy as Nando expected him to be. "It's Friday night. I thought maybe we could go by the club and watch a few sessions in the Pit? Only if you want to, of course. Or I could take you right back home with me."

Nando pretended to think about it for a moment. It wasn't an easy choice, but he'd prepared for this in a way. "Or we could get a private room at the club, and I could show you what Hikari taught me about rope bondage."

Cooper's eyes grew big, and he kissed Nando again, moaning against his lips and grinding his still-clothed erection against Nando's. "You took lessons?"

"She demonstrated a few things and let me try out a few knots and configurations," Nando answered teasingly.

"Did you fuck her afterwards?"

Nando chuckled. "Hell no! Even if she would let me, I'd never lay a finger on her. She's a woman!" he added, as if it was an insult.

Cooper laughed, their foreheads still touching. “Would you fuck me after you tied me up?”

“Just try and stop me.”

They slowly disengaged, still stealing kisses and touches as they pulled at their clothes in an attempt not to give away what they’d been up to in the cramped supply room.

When Nando eventually opened the door, he wasn’t totally surprised to find Paulina sitting on top of the bar which was located just opposite the supply room. She looked like she wanted to tease Nando but held back; instead, she jumped down and whizzed past them with a knowing smile.

“Why didn’t you knock if you needed to get in there?” Nando asked, knowing she would see right through his attempt at covering up.

“It’s not good for a girl to walk in on her boss licking off his boyfriend. In that case, it pays to be patient.”

“I wasn’t...licking him off,” Nando said indignantly. “We were... making up.” He looked sideways at Cooper and saw him blush, which Nando found very endearing.

Paulina giggled sweetly. “Making up, making out. Whatever,” she called back. “Go on, leave. I’ll close up the shop.” She winked at him.

Nando looked at Cooper, who shrugged.

“Thanks, Paulina!” Nando shouted as they left the premises in a hurry.

“Shall we take my car?” Cooper asked as they walked around the corner into the alleyway.

“Depends,” Nando answered. “Are you sleeping over at my house tonight?”

“I could,” Cooper teased. “Or we could go to mine again? Do you need to be in early tomorrow?”

Nando nodded regretfully. “Saturday’s a busy day.”

“Why don’t we see how we feel after we leave the club?”

Nando smiled. “We could take my bike, but I don’t have another helmet for you.”

“I’m sure I can survive riding a bike without a helmet,” Cooper assured him.

“It’s a motorbike, and no, I’m not letting you on without a helmet,” Nando said.

“Oops, okay,” Cooper agreed. “My car it is, then.”

COOPER had felt a little uncomfortable in his slightly too tight jeans ever since Nando mentioned the bondage lessons he was going to try out on him. The sex they’d shared the previous night had been rushed and over way too quickly, but it had also been incredibly passionate, and he’d really enjoyed the pushy bottom Nando had turned out to be. Cooper had always been an equal opportunity guy, though, so after last night, Cooper was ready to bottom again. Of course, the promise of being tied up only added to the rising excitement in Cooper’s groin, which almost left him too uncomfortable to drive his car. He’d offered to let Nando drive, but Nando had admitted that while he had a driver’s

license, he'd never driven anything bigger than his motorbike in the city.

So Cooper tried to will his cock to play nice and calm down. He'd almost succeeded, but then Nando put his hand on Cooper's thigh, and little Cooper was ready to play again, nudging his zipper until it started to hurt. Luckily, he found a parking spot just around the corner from the club.

Nando greeted the Goth receptionist Cooper recognized from their first encounter and fished the appointment book from behind her counter. He didn't say anything, simply made a note in the book, winked at her, and then dragged Cooper down the hall to the room they'd used last time.

"I'm glad this room was available, because it has a big antique mirror and lots of rope in the closet," Nando told Cooper as he turned the sign to "Occupied" and pushed Cooper inside.

"Shouldn't we agree on what's going to happen during the session first?" Cooper asked.

Nando smiled too sweetly for Cooper's taste. "How about you let me tie you up while you watch yourself in the mirror, and then, when I'm done, I bend you over the bench and fuck you?"

Cooper pursed his lips. "Can I talk?"

"Mmmh, yes, if it's to beg me to fuck you."

"Can I ask you to do certain things to me?"

"You can beg me to fuck you," Nando repeated.

Cooper rolled his eyes. "Other than asking you to fuck me."

Nando nodded resolutely. “As long as you know you’ll be at my mercy. I’m the boss.”

“You’re the boss,” Cooper acknowledged. Although he wasn’t quite sure if he could trust Nando the person, he certainly trusted Nando the lover. Despite their less-than-perfect track record so far, he knew that whatever Nando dished out for him, it would be good. Here in this room, he knew Nando placed him first, and so he spread his legs a bit and crossed his wrists behind his back, looking down at his feet.

Nando reappeared with a rope draped over his arm. The length of it made Cooper feel a little apprehensive, but he tried not to let on. He was sure Nando had learned enough from the rope mistress of the club to know which rope to pick.

“Take your shirt off,” Nando ordered.

Cooper complied, his movements slow and deliberate.

“Pants too. I want to see just how much I’m turning you on.”

The mocking smile Nando was sporting wasn’t lost on Cooper, although he could only steal the occasional look. He didn’t speed up his movements, wanting to prolong the interaction. Besides, Nando prowling around him was a turn-on all by itself, even though he was clad in casual jeans, not his tight black leather pants.

Nando was holding the rope in a loop, and he stroked Cooper’s shoulder with it. “You don’t seem too eager.”

“Oh, I am, *Sir*,” Cooper said, emphasizing the title he bestowed on Nando.

“At least you brought your manners.”

Although Cooper knew they were just playing around, not being too serious about it, he'd seen this sort of interaction in the Pit, in the rare Dom/sub partnerships where the sub was allowed to speak.

“Cross your arms in front of your chest,” Nando demanded after Cooper had shed the last of his clothes.

Cooper did what was asked. He didn't need to look down to see he was at least half-hard. Nando would be pleased.

Nando didn't let on he noticed. Instead, he started to weave the soft natural rope around and through Cooper's arms. He didn't tie it too tightly, and Cooper thought that if he resisted, it would fall off, so he stayed extra still.

“Look at yourself,” Nando instructed, pointing at the large antique mirror leaning against the wall. “With every winding you get harder.”

Cooper closed his eyes for a moment. He'd felt his cock growing heavier, but seeing himself in the mirror, hands tied in front of him with the light brown rope and erection sticking out, made his blood rush south even faster.

“This rope is a little softer,” Nando whispered. He was behind Cooper. “You'll know why in a little while. Now I'd like you to breathe in and hold it.”

Cooper did as he was asked and felt Nando do something, but he couldn't figure out what.

“And breathe out.”

Cooper tried to look in the mirror, but he only saw a full frontal view of himself, and Nando behind him.

Nando repeated his instructions a few times and every time, the rope grew tighter. Cooper had no idea whether it had to do with what Nando was doing to him or whether it was his imagination, but it was becoming hard to do more than breathe normally. Nando abandoned the rope at Cooper's back and moved in front of him, holding on to a second rope, a blue one. Every time Cooper moved slightly, the blue rope hanging down behind him tickled his ass cheeks; Cooper figured Nando probably meant for it to be like that.

"Spread your legs," Nando ordered, his voice sounding quite a bit sweeter than before.

Cooper carefully let his feet slide apart until he was eye to eye with Nando.

"I like this," Nando said softly before kissing him, moaning into the kiss. "I think I'm going to ask you to stand like this every time." He winked, signaling to Cooper he was kidding. "It's turning you on, isn't it? All this tying up and all this anticipation?"

Cooper nodded and then remembered he was allowed to beg. "Yes, *Sir*. Because you'll fuck me when you're done, *Sir*."

Nando smothered a chuckle, but he smiled. "Patience, darling," he answered, moving his hand to Cooper's erection and softly stroking it. "Feeling this in my hand almost wants to make me put it in my own ass instead of me putting my cock in yours. How does that sound?"

Cooper swallowed. "I'd rather you fuck me, *Sir*. If you don't mind."

Nando bent down and retrieved the hanging rope from behind Cooper's back, pulling it to the front between Cooper's legs. The rope ground over Cooper's hole, between his ass cheeks; it was a strange but not entirely uncomfortable feeling. "You think this will keep me from fucking you?" Nando mused as he tied the end of the blue rope around Cooper's wrists so he was immobilized as if he was praying.

"Yes, Sir," Cooper admitted softly.

"Close your legs," Nando ordered. "And walk toward the mirror."

Cooper feasted his eyes. Seeing himself up close, the coarse brown ropes beautifully entwined, crisscrossing his chest and arms and then the soft, blue nylon rope coming up between his legs, staying to the right side of his sac and erect cock, moving along the middle of his stomach to his hands where it was neatly twisted around his wrists... it all added to his excitement. When he felt Nando behind him again, he realized his lover was naked.

"I'm already wearing a condom," Nando said. "And you know what that means."

Cooper almost moaned.

"You like what that means. You're dribbling." Nando kissed his shoulder and snaked his arm around Cooper's waist to touch the tip of his cock with his finger. He brought the finger to his mouth and licked it. Cooper heard a whimper and realized it had come from him.

"I can taste how turned on you are," Nando teased. "Can't fuck you yet, though. You're nowhere near ready."

“But I am,” Cooper replied, his voice unsteady.

“Oh no, you’re not,” Nando answered, sounding like a mother telling her four-year-old he isn’t ready to cross the street on his own yet. “Your little hole is still way too tight, darling. If I slam into that it’s going to hurt, and we wouldn’t want that. I might even tear you, and then where would we be? Nope, can’t have that.”

With that, Nando turned away from Cooper.

Cooper could barely stand still. He’d felt Nando’s aroused body against his back, felt his erection prod his ass, and the anticipation of getting a thorough fucking was getting the better of him. “Please fuck me, Nando. Sir,” he corrected himself. “Please don’t make me wait longer?”

Nando returned with an old-fashioned wooden chair and another rope. Cooper liked Nando’s choice of color, as this one was red. He started making another intricate pattern along Cooper’s thighs, effectively tying his legs together.

Cooper let him for a few windings, but then he couldn’t stop himself. “Please, Sir. Don’t tie me up any more.”

“Do you want to use your safeword?”

“No!” Cooper answered quickly. “No, Sir,” he continued, slightly calmer now. “I just want you to be able to fuck me, Sir. Later.”

“Oh, I will. Don’t worry,” Nando replied soothingly. “You’re being extra good, and that deserves a reward.”

Cooper swallowed and moved his weight to his other leg. The movement made the rope between his legs chafe against

his hole and the side of his balls, and he looked up as if he was expecting help from above.

Nando ignored him and finished tying the red rope. He smiled at Cooper in the mirror and moved to his side, letting one hand envelop Cooper's erection and the other push along the rope between Cooper's ass cheeks to touch his hole. Cooper almost veered up as Nando pushed his finger against it.

"See, I told you it wasn't ready yet." Nando massaged the taut muscle, and Cooper distracted himself by watching Nando grind his latex-covered erection against his hip. It didn't help the heat die down, but it assured Cooper that Nando wouldn't be able to wait forever either.

Cooper groaned when Nando's finger slipped past his guardian muscle. He started making the only movement he still could, moving between fucking Nando's hand around his erection and impaling himself on Nando's finger.

"I think we need some lube now."

Cooper still wasn't sure how this was going to play out, but he reminded himself to trust Nando, hoping he would make everything work.

Nando's touch returned, this time with cold, slippery gel against his relaxing hole. After fucking Cooper on one, then two fingers, Nando withdrew and moved the chair closer. It obscured Cooper's view somewhat, but then Nando changed his mind and moved the chair in the other direction. He turned Cooper sideways and told him to lean forward so his upper body and the arms tied in front of him rested on the back of the chair. When Cooper looked in the mirror, he saw

himself from the side, complete with horizontal erection. The colors of the different ropes showed off Nando's handiwork, and Cooper could now see the blue twists the rope made across his back. As he leaned on the chair he realized it didn't feel entirely steady, but he braced himself for what was coming.

Nando approached Cooper, and it all seemed to move in slow motion.

Shifting the rope aside, Nando fingered the now-relaxed hole and then fisted his erection a few times. "Are you ready?" he asked Cooper.

Cooper sighed and nodded fervently, unable to keep his eyes off the mirror image, especially Nando's erection. The push of the blunt head against his muscle, the sudden release of tension when it gave way, and Nando slipping inside him drew a moan Cooper couldn't suppress and made him toss his head. He pushed back, wanting to take Nando deeper, but Nando pulled out, leaving him empty. The next time Nando pushed in, Cooper tried his best to stay still, savoring the feeling of slow advancement with every soft thrust. He also dared to look in the mirror again, seeing his own bound form with Nando behind him, his slick cock visible whenever he pulled almost completely out. Cooper knew he was going to lose it sooner rather than later.

"Please make me come?"

"Don't come until I let you," Nando answered determinedly, but Cooper could tell his voice wasn't entirely steady anymore.

“Don’t know... if I... can wait,” Cooper groaned between thrusts.

Nando’s movements were speeding up, and the strength of his thrusts was increasing as well. Cooper could only hope Nando was close to coming, but he knew Nando wouldn’t come before he did.

Cooper was having a hard time taking in enough air to feel comfortable, and it only added to his feeling of confinement, just like having his legs tied together made him tighter and made the sensations of Nando’s cock inside him more intense. He tried to tear his eyes away from the image in the mirror, hoping it would help him stave off his orgasm, but he was nearing the point of no return with surprising speed.

“Please, let me come?” he begged.

“Please let me come, *Sir*.”

“Please let me come, *Sir*,” Cooper repeated obediently.

“I want to feel you come,” Nando said, wrapping his arm around Cooper again so he could touch his cock.

Cooper instinctively thrust against Nando’s hand, the glorious friction making his balls pull tight and the tingling start at the bottom of his spine. “Please, can I...?” Cooper couldn’t finish his sentence. He expressly wanted to hear Nando give him permission, but he didn’t know if he could wait that long, so he clenched his muscles, trying to stave off the inevitable.

“Damn, you’re tight this way,” Nando exclaimed.

“Sorry, *Sir*,” Cooper managed to squeeze out.

“You can come, Cooper,” Nando said after slamming into Cooper one more time. He kept thrusting as the hot seed spilled over his hand while Cooper wailed, unable to prevent the sounds coming from deep inside his belly.

When Nando cried out, too, and then stilled, clinging to Cooper, Cooper could barely stay upright. After a few moments of panting, trying to catch enough breath to come down, Cooper felt the ropes being loosened. When Nando untied the coils around his legs, Cooper slumped down and slid to the floor. Almost immediately, Nando knelt down with him and held him tight.

“Fuck, that was something else,” Cooper said, his breathing slightly calmer but his heartbeat still pulsing in his ears. “How did you untie me so quickly?”

Nando kissed his neck and pulled him even tighter to his chest. “It’s a technique Hikari taught me. You tie someone up loosely, and then thread another rope through it to fasten it. Then when it’s over, you pry out the second rope, and the ties loosen.”

“Damn, it works for me.”

“I could use some more practice,” Nando admitted. “I was surprised it worked so well.”

Cooper pulled his arms up, the loose brown rope giving way so he could chuck it before turning around to face Nando. He took Nando’s face in his hands to kiss him.

“You can practice on me any time you like, but will you come home with me now?”

Nando nodded.

“I have a much more comfortable bed there than we have here. You said yes, didn’t you?” Cooper said.

NANDO was surprised how easily he’d taken to sleeping next to Cooper in the next few weeks. Yes, the man was easygoing, but there was still this nagging voice in his head, telling him he was getting too involved and it would all end up badly again. Nando pushed it away, telling himself that Cooper was different, that he *was* getting involved, but that didn’t mean he was selling his soul to the devil. What would it hurt to get to know the guy better? He still had his own life, still had his own apartment, was spending more than a full-time job at the shop.

And now there was Cooper, who never failed to pick him up at the shop around midnight. This habit had started early on in their relationship, and Nando hadn’t resisted it, since he was always pretty tired at the end of a long working day and Cooper was always there to take care of him. Nando had to admit he liked having someone to go shopping with at the local supermarket after midnight, and he enjoyed sharing his stories with Cooper too. He’d never had the feeling he was missing a partner in his life until he realized that having a captive audience to listen when something weird happened in the shop was just what the doctor ordered to wind down. Even the repetitiveness of their life, with a visit to the club every Friday night, didn’t seem to bother him, although that had always been his number one reason not to get involved with someone steady. His Shibari technique had certainly evolved, although he only had one

victim and they had no intention of showing it off in the Pit. For now, Cooper was more than enough for him.

In the early hours of the morning, Nando couldn't resist crawling closer to Cooper and snuggling up to his sleeping lover. He slowly caressed Cooper's shoulder, where the faded tattoo used to be. Now it sported a shiny new one of a bucking stallion, lovingly put there by Nando.

They'd fallen asleep, tired and sated from their session at the club, but now Cooper stirred and mumbled something Nando didn't understand, so he kissed him softly.

"Time to get up?" Cooper mumbled again, this time more eloquently.

"No, we have hours."

"Mmmh," Cooper replied appreciatively, twisting so he could cuddle up close to Nando and kiss him. Slowly the kisses became more passionate and the touches more intimate until Cooper was lying on top of Nando, grinding into him. There was no urgency, though, no need to rush. These middle-of-the-night bouts of lovemaking, both of them half asleep, not talking, just feeling, were one of Nando's favorite parts of being a couple. No need for negotiating or setting parameters, only guided by what felt good and what they knew would make the other feel even better.

Nando spread his legs, wordlessly inviting Cooper to move to the next stage. They still used condoms, but they'd had "the conversation," so it wouldn't be long now. Nando saw Cooper smile just before he slowly pushed into him and Nando threw his head back on his pillow, bliss on his face as their coupling became more intense.

There was a balance to their lives now, one Nando never imagined he'd enjoy so much. Their fun and games at the club was Cooper's time to bottom, but in their own bed, which was usually located in Cooper's more spacious apartment, it was always Nando on the receiving end. Just as Cooper willingly gave into Nando's every whim at the club, Nando enjoyed it when Cooper took care of him when they made love at home. It balanced out perfectly.

THE Friday after that, Cooper arrived at Nando's shop to pick him up about ten in the evening.

"I expected you this morning," Nando said, clearing up the last of the debris from his work station.

"This morning?" Cooper replied.

"The repeat inspection?" Nando added. "Instead I got a very cute young lady. I'm happy to say she complimented me on a very well-equipped and neatly run shop."

A teasing smile spread over Cooper's face. "Maybe you would have preferred her that first time as well?"

"Not exactly," Nando answered, moving closer to Cooper. "She was nice. A lot nicer than you were, Mr. Inspector, but I'm still glad I got you. I just expected you to do the repeat as well."

"I can't," Cooper replied, avoiding Nando's gaze. "It would be a conflict of interest."

"Oh?"

“Move in with me,” Cooper asked abruptly, still looking at an imaginary speck of dust on the floor of the shop instead of at Nando.

“Coop.” Nando sighed. In the beginning of their relationship they’d discussed not rushing into things, and Nando had to admit that Cooper hadn’t mentioned it again after that, but now something had sparked him to ask again, and Nando didn’t know if he was ready after only six weeks. Admittedly they hadn’t spent a single night apart in the last month, and just the thought of being separated from Cooper made Nando break out in a sweat, so maybe he *was* ready to move their relationship to the next level.

“We’re always at my place anyway, and it has plenty of space so we won’t crowd each other. With all your money going into the shop, it doesn’t make sense to keep paying rent on an apartment you never use.”

Nando didn’t answer Cooper right away. He needed time to think about it, something he knew Cooper understood. Nando had to admit Cooper made a good case, though.

“It’s not that I don’t want to, Coop,” Nando finally said.

“I know this is a big step, Nando, but so is chucking the condoms, and we’ve already had the tests done, so that’s a matter of a few days, right?”

Nando nodded. “Okay.”

“You take the bus to work every morning, and that works well, right? And we pay for groceries together anyway, and... you just said yes?”

Nando nodded again, trying not to chuckle too much.

Cooper grabbed Nando and lifted him up in the air, turning him around as he buried his face in Nando's shoulder.

"Put me down, you big lug."

"Why the change of heart?" Cooper asked.

"It makes sense, although you know I'm scared shitless."

Cooper got down on one knee and took Nando's hand. Nando's eyes grew to the size of saucers, and he felt exposed all of a sudden, wondering if half the boulevard was staring through the windows of his shop at what Cooper was doing. At the same time, he was feeling butterflies in his stomach.

"Fernando Arenas, will you be mine?"

This time Nando couldn't keep from chuckling. "Seriously?" Nando asked. "I'm yours already, you fool. I was yours that morning you inspected my shop and tried so hard not to look at me."

"I was that transparent?"

"Not really," Nando admitted. "You were very persuasive the following weeks, though."

"I know a good thing when I see it. We make a good pair. We balance each other out."

Nando nodded and kissed his Prince Charming. "That we do."

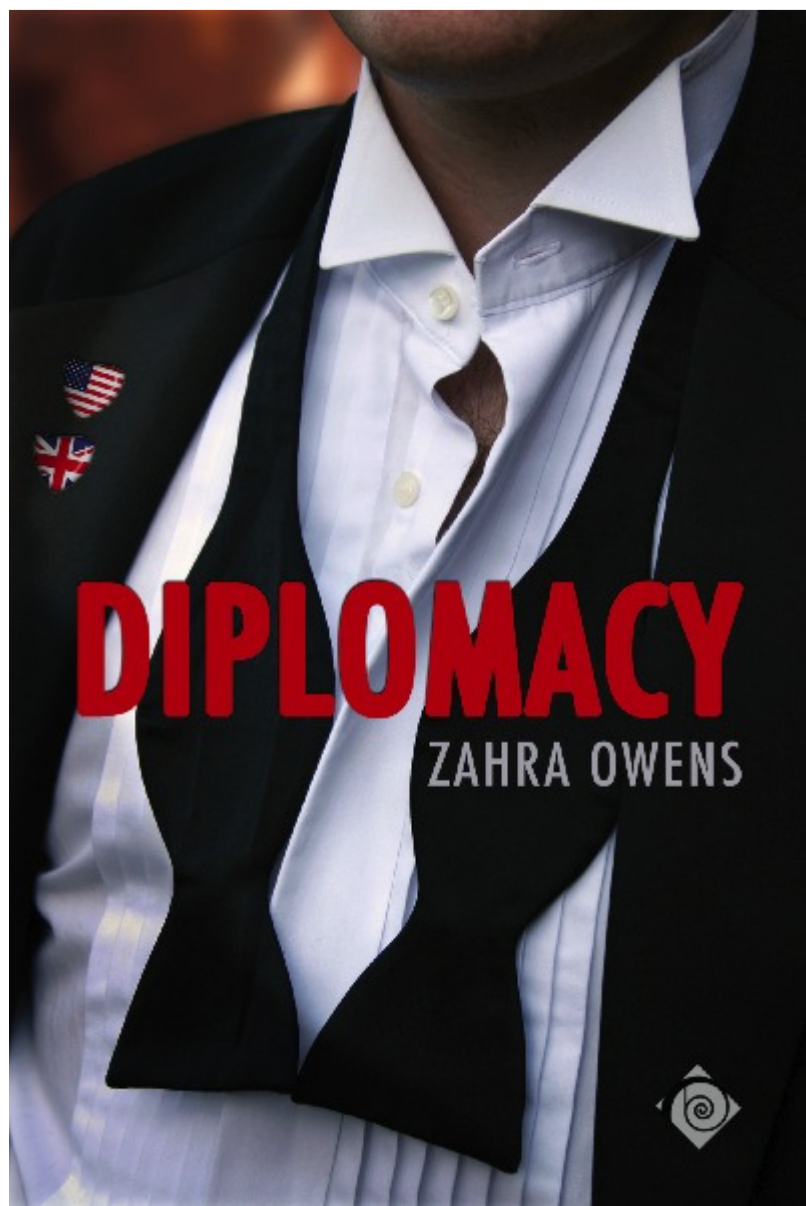
ZAHRA OWENS was born in Europe just before Woodstock and the moon landing and was given a much less pronounceable name by her non-English-speaking parents. Being an Aquarian meant she would never quite conform, and people learned to expect the unexpected.

She started writing fairy tales in first grade; the same year she came into contact with her first group of English-speaking friends, a group which would eventually grow to include people from all over the world. On the outside she was a typical only child, accustomed to being with adults most of the time. On the inside, she sought ways to channel her wild imagination.

During the daytime she earns a living as a computer specialist, but it's her former career as an intensive care nurse that tends to seep into her fiction. Maybe this has to do with her weak spot for flawed characters and imperfect bodies, or maybe it's just her sadistic streak coming through. You be the judge.

Visit her web site at <http://www.zahraowens.com/> and blog at <http://zahra-owens.livejournal.com/>.

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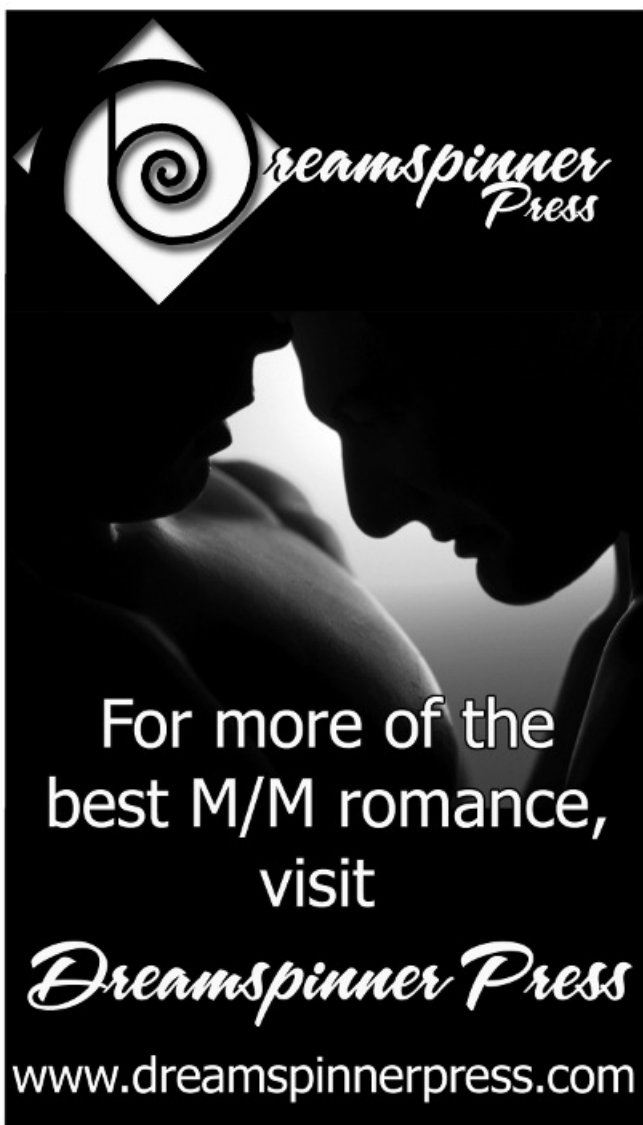


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