



TO LOVE AGAIN

BOUND HEARTS

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To Love Again

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

Bound Hearts

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Simone Anderson

Dedication

To Margaret and Maria, my heart sisters, for listening and plotting with me, and not cringing at the details.

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The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmark mentioned in this work of fiction:

Coke: The Coca-Cola Company

Chapter One

"If you love someone, let them go. If they return to you, it was meant to be. If they don't, their love was never yours to begin with."

Brendan McKenzie scoffed and balled up the card along with Aaron's photo. It'd been three years since his lover—the man he'd thought was his soul mate—had left, and Brendan was tired of waiting and hoping, only to be disappointed in the end. Aaron had made his choice. Brendan could live with it, would have to live with it.

He still hated it.

"It is better to have loved and lost, than to never have loved at all," he read, picking up a postcard. "Ha. Anonymous has obviously never had to deal with either."

Tearing the postcard in half, he threw it in the burn pile. He made quick work of the rest of the box, electing to keep only a few items. After he was done, Brendan sat on the fieldstone surround of the cold fireplace and started to build a fire. Feeling his pockets for a lighter, he swore, stood and went to search the junk drawer in the kitchen, retrieving a book of matches instead. He swore again when the doorbell rang.

"It's fucking midnight! What the hell?" Brendan stomped to the door, and yanked it open. "Harden! What the fuck do you want? And why didn't you just walk in?" He scowled at the dark features of Harden Langford, his best friend since third grade...and the cousin of his former lover. Harden's parents had named him after a grandfather, and it had given his friend no end of trouble.

"Thought it'd be better to knock this time," Harden said indicating a scruffy looking man standing near him. The other man stood slightly behind and to the left of his friend and stared at the ground, his hands behind his back. Brendan recognised the submissive stance immediately. This one was different. If he wasn't mistaken, the submissive had been abused. "Garrett's home, so he can't stay with me," Harden continued.

Brendan blinked and stared in disbelief at the dishevelled man as Harden's words finally sunk in. This wasn't just any submissive, abused or not. Brendan's scowl deepened. He recognised Aaron Langford, his ex-lover and partner, through the stringy, dirty blond hair and shaggy beard. The once bright, smiling green eyes were dull and lifeless. The

smaller man had lost weight since he'd left—that much Brendan could tell even with the baggy clothes he was wearing.

"No." Brendan shook his head. His stomach clenched and his throat tightened. The last thing he needed or wanted in his life right now was Aaron. Responsibility be damned. He wanted nothing to do with the man who had ripped his heart out. Brendan blew out a breath and shoved a hand through his hair. He'd finally agreed to go out with Matt Carson, the good-looking office manager from the financial services firm that shared a floor with the advertising company that Harden worked at, after the man had pursued him for months. He'd spoken with the man several times and had sensed a natural submissiveness in Matt that appealed to him on a certain level. Eventually, he would make a great sub. Aaron was a complication he didn't want or need.

"Brendan, he's only been in town a couple of hours and he has to stay somewhere," Harden implored. "Garrett can't stand him. He wants him dead and refuses to allow him in the house while he's around."

"The streets?" he suggested. "That smells like where you picked him up from. And what makes you think he is welcomed here or that my opinion is different than Garrett's?"

"He's family. My family...we're all each other has."

"He's not *my* family," Brendan ground out, ignoring the pleading invading his friend's voice and eyes. Brendan knew Harden spoke the truth. Both men had been kicked out of the house and disowned by their entire family the day they'd come out. They'd been closer than brothers since then. At least until Aaron left them all and headed for New York City.

"He's your soul mate."

Brendan shook his head. "No. He's. Not. He made his choice. Three years ago he walked away from me, from us and what we had together. He walked away from you."

"He'll die on the streets. It's just a couple of days. Garrett leaves on Monday."

"Hotel."

Aaron's eyes open wide, his face paled and Harden shook his head.

"It's not my problem, Harden. Put him in a shelter, a hotel, or a gutter. I don't care. But he's not staying here. He's no longer welcome," Brendan replied, steeling his heart. Having Aaron under his roof would be torture, especially when he knew Aaron didn't want him. Dating simply wouldn't be possible with his ex-boyfriend living under the same roof. He had a real date planned, not just a hook up with a submissive from the club, and he had hoped to

get lucky with Matt tomorrow. An idea that had lost its appeal when combined with the reminder of Aaron living with him. *Staying*, he corrected himself. Aaron wasn't welcome.

"When did you become a cold hearted bastard?" Harden asked, balling his fists, testifying to the fury and worry running through his best friend.

"Swing at me if you must, Harden. You're my best friend and you of all people should know exactly why Aaron isn't welcomed here. I refuse to put myself through that again. Not for you. Certainly not for him. Not for any reason. There is no room in this house or in my life for that selfish prick." Brendan pulled his wallet out of his back pocket and removed the cash and one of his business cards and handed it over to his friend. "Here is eighty-three dollars, that's enough to get a room for a night or two at a motel. If I'm a cold-hearted bastard, you can thank your cousin for that. Get him off my property."

Harden nodded reluctantly. "I'll be in touch."

Brendan watched Harden guide his one-time lover back to the light green sedan parked in his driveway. He kept watch as Harden drove away, wondering if he'd see Aaron again. Hoping he would. Praying he wouldn't. Brendan blew out a breath and ran a hand through his hair. Why now, after three years had Aaron returned? What had happened to the man who had been proud of his looks? Why did he look and smell like he just crawled out of a sewer pipe? Looking at the cold fireplace, he retrieved a beer from the kitchen, and weighed his options. Blowing out a breath and rubbing his chin, he sat down on the couch, his mind swirled with unanswered questions.

Thirty minutes later, Brendan tossed a second empty beer bottle into the recycling bin and picked up his ringing cell phone. He glanced at the display and flipped it open. "What do you want, Harden?"

"Aaron freaked when we got to the motel. Even changing motels several times he refused to get out of the car. Brendan, I know he screwed up—screwed up big time—but he needs a place to stay. I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important."

"What in the hell is going on? He hasn't been in town in three years. He looks and smells like he crawled out of a gutter."

"I don't know, brother, but he needs our help."

"Damn it. That's low," Brendan swore. They'd sworn a blood oath years ago, when they were little more than kids, after they'd realised they were both gay and made better friends

than lovers. They would remain brothers until the end, and would help each other out, no questions asked. Ever. "What time is Garrett leaving?"

"He's got a seven a.m. flight, which means he'll leave the house at four thirty or so."

"Aaron needs to be out of my house by five a.m. and while he's here, I don't want to see or hear him," Brendan spat. "See you when you get here."

Plugging his phone into the charger, Brendan headed towards the bathroom and laid out clean towels, shaving cream, soap, scissors and a disposable safety razor. He was adding navy coloured sweatpants and a matching sweatshirt to the stack when Harden called out. The quick arrival meant the pair had been close when Harden had called.

"I know this is hard, I'll make it up to you," Harden said, pulling Brendan into a hug.

"No need, you know that." Brendan squeezed his eyes shut and opened them, his gaze resting on Aaron. Fear swirled in the other man's eyes. "Five a.m., Harden. Not a minute later."

"Done. I'll call you tomorrow, if we make it out of bed."

"Get out of here before I throw up. The last thing I need or want is a visual of you and Garrett fucking. Go on and get out of here."

"Night, brother," Harden said hugging Brendan before squeezing Aaron's shoulder. "Cousin."

Tension filled the space between them. Brendan waited until after Harden pulled out of the driveway before turning to Aaron. "You know where the bathroom is, there is a razor and a change of clothes in there. You can stay in the guest room. Keep the door closed. I meant what I said. I don't want to see or hear you until Harden comes for you on Monday. I don't care where you've been or what you've done or not done. Take a shower. Clean up. Leave everything on the floor and I will start a load of laundry tonight."

"Thank you, Ma – Brendan. I...thank you," Aaron said quietly, his voice rough.

"Thank Harden. He's the only reason you are here. If it was up to me, you'd be on the streets," Brendan snapped.

He sank onto the couch and rested his head in his hands as Aaron headed down the hall. Brendan listened to the water running and tried to forget his uninvited houseguest. He tried not to remember running his hands over the well-defined body standing under the shower, water running down a rock-hard abdomen, or how many times he'd taken Aaron like that. His cock hardened, straining against his jeans. Brendan tried to focus on the pain

Aaron had caused him and circled back to the stumbled words from earlier. He could have sworn Aaron had started to call him Master. He'd recognised Aaron as a submissive before he knew who was standing in his living room. Aaron had no way of knowing about that part of Brendan's life. Brendan rubbed the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger, trying to release the building tension. If Aaron didn't know about Brendan's lifestyle, the slip meant that Aaron was also a part of the lifestyle. A submissive.

Brendan blew out a breath, his brain shifting the pieces of the puzzle reluctantly. Aaron was a badly abused lifestyle submissive.

Waiting until he was certain Aaron had gone to the assigned bedroom, Brendan walked into the steam-filled bathroom and picked up the pile of clothes and towels.

"What the—" Brendan pulled his hand away from the fabric. Bright red blood streaked his palm. Aaron was bleeding. The dark streaks on the material told him the wounds were either fairly fresh or kept reopening. Anger seeped from his body, replaced by concern. Hurt gave way to worry. Dropping the laundry, he reached into the closet and withdrew his first aid kit. He crossed the hall, knocked once and walked in.

"What can I do for you, Sir?" Aaron asked formally, rising from the edge of the bed, a panicked look in his eyes.

"What's bleeding?" Brendan demanded, his brain registering the clean-shaven face staring at him and the hesitation in the movements.

"It's nothing, I'm fine."

"Do not lie to me." Brendan held up his blood-splattered hand. "Strip. I want to see the wounds right now."

"Sir, it's really not necessary," Aaron protested, shrinking back, lowering his gaze.

"Voluntarily or I will do it for you!" Brendan ordered.

"Yes, M—" Aaron complied and removed the covers followed by the navy blue sweatshirt.

Brendan paused and raised an eyebrow. There was no way. Not Aaron. Sure, he'd always preferred receiving, but he'd never been submissive. Not to him or to anyone else that he was aware of. In fact, Aaron had always refused to do as he was told.

Brendan replayed the night's events, going over Aaron's actions. Aaron, who would've once protested being talked about like he wasn't there or while someone else made plans for him, had stood quietly by and let him and Harden discuss where he was going. It wasn't

until the man's cousin was gone that Aaron had said anything. His words and actions were those of a man who had undergone extensive training in the acceptable behaviours and his position in life.

"I'm going to ask you some questions and you will answer me truthfully," Brendan commanded.

"I'll answer what I can, Sir." Aaron nodded, turning around.

Brendan inhaled sharply. Aaron's back was a cross hatch of whip marks that had broken the skin. It helped to confirm his suspicion that Aaron was a submissive. How had he not seen it before? Is that why Aaron had left? Then why had he come back? How did he have fresh cuts with a beard that was several months old at least? None of the cuts seemed to require stitching. Although he had a feeling that Aaron wouldn't go to the hospital anyway, the wounds should be seen by someone with more training than he did. Brendan shuddered as another thought pushed forwards. Was Aaron submissive by choice or had he'd been forced into it? The thought made him shiver. Questions bombarded him. They would have to be answered. If not tonight, soon.

"These need to be looked at by a doctor."

"No." Aaron shook his head, pulling away.

"Are these it?" Brendan asked laying a staying hand on Aaron's shoulder and dreading the answer. "You will answer me on this Aaron," Brendan ordered when the other man remained silent.

Aaron shook his head. "No, Master."

"There are more." Brendan prompted.

Aaron nodded.

"Strip completely and let me take care of them," Brendan ordered. For whatever reason, Aaron responded better to commands than to requests. He needed to find out what had happened in the three years Aaron had been gone. What had he been subjected to? Had he submitted willingly? Had he been forced into it? Did he have a master or owner currently? Were they looking for him?

"Please don't," Aaron begged.

"Aaron, do as you're told."

"It's nothing, Master. It'll be okay. I broke the rules, that's all," Aaron whimpered. "Slaves are supposed to be punished when they screw up."

"I'm not asking," Brendan ground out. "Besides, no one deserves this kind of punishment." Brendan pulled Aaron into his arms. His soul sighed, knowing that Aaron was back where he belonged. His heart and mind protested his willingness to take Aaron back, to hold him or to allow him even the *thought* of a chance of being back in his life. "Now, finish stripping and let me take care of you."

"Brendan, are...are you a master?" Aaron asked stepping back when Brendan released him and gingerly removed the sweatpants.

Brendan took a deep breath and debated how to answer the question posed him. He hadn't known anything about BDSM or Domination and submission until months after Aaron had left. He had been introduced to it by a man he'd met at a bar one night after learning Aaron had left town. He'd quickly worked out he was a Dom and spent months learning, first from one of the masters at X-tasy, the area's first and oldest BDSM club, and then from another one at Chaynze—a newer club, but with more safety protocols—using the atmosphere of both places to hide his broken heart.

"Yes, I am," he answered.

"Then it is right that I call you Master."

"I doubt that is a wise idea for either of us. Roll onto your stomach and I will clean you up." His heart protested automatically. Images of Aaron submitting to him swamped him. Aaron's place was with him. *He ran. He left*, his mind reminded him. Aaron would always be a battle between Brendan's heart and mind. He wasn't even sure winning was even a possibility.

Aaron nodded and lay down on his stomach.

Brendan left, returning quickly with a pan of warm water, a washcloth, and a towel. Carefully, he washed and dried the cuts covering Aaron's back, ass cheeks, and thighs. Most of the injuries were confined to his back, with only a couple breaking the skin on his ass and the discoloured remains of bruises on his thighs and cheeks. Brendan was certain that an unskilled hand had done all of the current visible damage along with more that had disappeared by now. He was equally certain that it was the hand of was not just a Dom, but a slave owner. One who could own a slave for a long period of time, that had caused the web of scars on the other man's back, possibly made by the owner of the tattoo stamping his one-time lover's body.

His gaze travelled over the ink to the hairless balls resting between Aaron's spread thighs. His fists clenched, mashing the wet cloth. The tattoo of a pair of handcuffs in the shape of a half circle with the letters M and J inside and the number seventeen underneath commanded his attention. The two-inch tattoo on Aaron's right buttock looked like an ownership mark. He ignored it for now, knowing he would need to ask Aaron about it soon.

"Did the man who whipped you hit your cock or balls or anything else?"

"No, Sir."

"Are you certain? If he did, then I need to know, so we can make sure no damage has been done."

"I'm certain, Sir," Aaron answered firmly. A hint of sorrow or concern edged his voice.

Brendan raised an eyebrow and nodded. "This is going to hurt, infection has set in. I'm going to pour peroxide on each one to clean it further before bandaging it."

Aaron nodded.

Brendan poured hydrogen peroxide on the cuts. Aaron clenched his jaw and said nothing. The chemical bubbled and fizzed, ridding the laceration of bacteria. Brendan reapplied it several times before it finally stopped bubbling. Brendan washed the wounds, and squirted antibiotic ointment onto them. He then pulled the edges of each cut together with bandages and covered them with large pieces of gauze.

"Get under the covers. You will need to sleep on your stomach for a while."

Aaron nodded and obeyed.

"Aaron, do you have a master or an owner?"

"Um, Sir, uh...can we... Uh, can we talk about it in the morning?"

"Is anyone going to show up on my door tonight and demand you back?"

Aaron shook his head.

Brendan rubbed his fingers across his chin and nodded. "Then yes, we can talk about it tomorrow. Sleep now."

He ran a hand through the shoulder length blond hair and squeezed Aaron's shoulder before cleaning up his mess and leaving. It was a rush having a submissive in his house, something he'd always avoided to this point. *He's not yours*, he reminded himself, putting the first-aid supplies away. Throwing the towels down the laundry chute, he then balled up Aaron's old clothes and threw them away. He would take Aaron out to get new clothes tomorrow. It wasn't that he wanted to claim Aaron—he simply refused to let the man, any

man, walk around his house in stained clothes riddled with holes and smelling of God only knew what. Knowing for certain now that Aaron was a submissive, he had a responsibility to look after him until they could figure out their next step.

"Just keep telling yourself that, McKenzie. Someday, it might even be true." Brendan chastised himself.

What the hell was he thinking? Brendan shook his head and went through his house systematically locking the doors and turning the lights off before crawling into the cool sheets of his king-size bed. Squeezing the images of Aaron wearing his collar and on his knees from his mind, Brendan drifted off to sleep.

* * * *

Aaron blinked at the clock staring at him from the nightstand. The bright red numbers read four-thirty in the morning. He'd been relieved when he'd finally arrived at his cousin's place the night before, until Harden's boyfriend came home and threatened to kill him if he didn't leave. Aaron's wallet with his credit cards and driver's license had been tossed into a river years ago. He was supposed to have cleaned out his bank account and turned everything over to Master Greg. Instead he had the bank send the check to Harden and told Master Greg that it had been stolen while on his way home. Master Greg had been angry and whipped Aaron over thirty times. It had been the last day he'd been allowed to leave the apartment without Master Greg. Later when the wallet couldn't be produced for Master John, he'd been whipped with a cat-o-nine-tails across his back until he passed out. He'd learnt quickly that Master John wasn't the kind of master he wanted, but by then it had no longer mattered what he wanted.

His mind turned to Brendan—*Master* Brendan, he corrected himself. The man's tight black T-shirt and low slung jeans hinted at a heavily muscled body. His lover—and, he half-hoped, his new master—had filled out, losing the boyish quality he'd once had. His dark hair was cut short and his brown eyes were hard and unforgiving. It suited him, pairing well with the power and dominance emanated from him.

Brendan was a master, but would he be the master that Aaron wanted? The one he needed? Could Brendan forgive him enough to keep him? Aaron had never stopped loving

the other man, but he'd been too ashamed to talk about his desires and needs. He'd thought he could bear being separated from Brendan more easily than he could take his rejection. So he'd made the decision to leave. He'd occasionally asked Harden about Brendan, but then Harden had stopped talking to him and he'd been left to follow the rise of his lover's writing career through stolen moments on the Internet and later through two of the club's handlers, who would occasionally discuss Brendan's books while they were guarding the slaves. According to one of them, there was always a waiting list for Brendan's books. It was a sore point for one of the handlers, who enjoyed taking that frustration out on Aaron. He was proud of his lover, wishing, on lonely nights curled in an empty cage, that he'd taken the time to talk to Brendan without teasing him about his writing instead of taking the easy way out and walking away.

Aaron lay in bed, waiting to hear Brendan's footsteps. Brendan hadn't wanted his submission, and for the first time in almost three years, he was unsure of what he was supposed to do. Master John – no, *John*, Aaron corrected himself – the man was no longer his master. He wasn't even among the living. *John* had always wanted a blowjob first thing in the morning – a skill Aaron had learned to develop until there were no legitimate complaints about them. Forcing his eyes closed, he waited for the sounds of the door opening or footsteps approaching.

* * * *

Aaron's eyes snapped open. He'd overslept. Worse, he'd slept on the bed. A bed that was devoid of a Master. Fear and panic threatened to swamp him. He was sure to be punished. But why hadn't one of the handlers awakened him? They'd never been careless before. He tore off the covers and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

"Aaron?"

Calm rushed through him. Aaron recognised Brendan's voice. He let out a breath. He was at Brendan's house. He'd been left there after his cousin's partner had threatened to kill him. The hotels that Harden had tried to take him to weren't secure and he was afraid of being found. He thought he'd seen one of the handlers before.

Slaves don't sit on furniture. The long drilled-in rule came to mind. He knew he should kneel and present himself, but Brendan didn't want his submission, so he wasn't sure how to act. Aaron slid to the floor, drawing up his knees and wrapping his arms around them.

Without the protection of another master or his remaining family, the small amount of freedom he was trying to reclaim would be taken away from him, along with any chance of love or happiness. Brendan may not accept him or forgive him, but he hoped that his one-time lover had retained his honour and would protect him. Until he was completely free, he needed some form of protection. At one time, he'd had the strength and training to survive a fight, but years of obeying orders—first out of desire and then out of fear of punishment—had him backing down from fights and confrontations. In the world he'd lived in, slaves were dependant on their owners for everything.

"Aaron, it's almost noon," Brendan said, walking into the room.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know what you expected of me," Aaron said quietly, kneeling quickly, automatically spreading his legs as wide as he could. "Sir, I—"

"Why are you on the floor?"

Aaron bowed his head. "Furniture is for people, not for slaves."

"You are a person and no longer a slave, and I have no problem with you using the furniture."

Aaron nodded and stayed still.

"Return to the bed."

Aaron stood and sat on the edge of the bed, making sure to keep himself open and available.

"I don't need to see your body. You may cover up if you're more comfortable."

Aaron shook his head. "You've seen me naked before. You are still a master and isn't right for a slave to hide his body from his master or any master." It was another rule drilled into his head, beaten into him with floggers and whips.

Brendan nodded. "I want answers. Later. For now, I want you to take a shower and get dressed. After lunch, we need to get you clothes to wear."

"Yes, Master," Aaron said automatically. He saw Brendan tense and knew something was wrong. "What did I do wrong, Sir?"

"Do you have an owner or master, Aaron? Did you run away?"

Aaron shook his head and then nodded, not trusting his voice. Things were too complicated. The only thing he knew for certain was he didn't want to go back.

"Is there a possibility of someone coming to claim you?"

Aaron nodded. "But I don't want to go anywhere."

Brendan stood. "We need to talk about this. There is a lot you're not telling me and I want to know why you left three years ago. For now, I will take you under my protection until a suitable master is found."

Aaron nodded. He heard the pain in Brendan's voice and saw it in his eyes and posture. Burying his head in his hands, Aaron resisted the urge to cry. As hurt and angry as Brendan was, he was going out of his way to help him. But would Brendan want anything to do with him after he learned the truth?

Chapter Two

Aaron lay on his stomach, staring at the wall. There was another fifteen minutes in his rest period before he could get up. Hopefully, Brendan would let him make dinner. He liked to cook. Maybe he could go back to school. He didn't want to own a restaurant or be a head cook or chef anywhere, but enough training to maybe get a job if he needed and ultimately please his master would be nice. Aaron let out a breath and gingerly rolled onto his side, his back to the door.

They had spent the afternoon at the mall, Brendan picking out clothes for him to try on. The last time Aaron had been in a mall, the last time he'd really been anywhere, was three weeks after becoming Master Greg's boy, eight months before he was given to Master John. Aaron had been asked his opinion, how things looked or felt. Even knowing Brendan had made it an order, it still had felt wrong to give his opinion. Then he'd been surprised by his own actions when an overly pushy man—he thought it was a salesman, but he wasn't sure anymore—tried to get him to move from the place Brendan had left him. He'd tensed when the man had grabbed his arm and started to pull. Aaron hadn't refused an order in years, but this time he had, not caring if he'd be punished for it or not. Brendan had returned empty-handed then, threatening to break the man's arm if he didn't let go. After the man had left, Brendan had kissed his temple and told him to stay close.

The incident had left him shaken, and combined with the overwhelming smells and noise, he'd been exhausted after an hour, prompting Brendan to send him to bed for no less than two hours. Eventually Aaron had slept, waking up with thirty minutes left before he could get up.

He knew Brendan would want to talk about his past tonight. Aaron squeezed his eyes shut. He knew it was coming. Brendan had to know. There were rules to follow. More than that, if there was any possibility at a future for them, Brendan deserved to know the truth. Shame crept up. Did he want to risk it? Risk rejection? Brendan's rejection would most likely kill him. At the very least it would kill his spirit.

Aaron sighed. It would make him the perfect club pet.

Memories of Brendan's cock filling his ass flooded him. His hole puckered in anticipation and need. Being wrapped up in love the way only his man could give was worth the risk. It had to be. Harden was coming for him Monday morning. This weekend would either lead to love, or it would have to sustain him for the rest of his life.

The digital readout changed to seven minutes after five. His two-hour rest was up. Quickly, he pulled on a pair of jeans, ignoring the underwear Brendan had bought. Throwing socks on, he grabbed a sweatshirt, but didn't put it on. Brendan had scrubbed out his wounds and reapplied the antibiotic ointment and bandages before he took his nap.

Quietly, he moved down the hall to the third bedroom that had been converted into Brendan's office. All four walls held bookshelves, full of books. Brendan's desk, an antique roll-top, was tucked into a corner, facing the door. In the opposite corner, was an upholstered wing backed chair and a reading lamp. Posters, photographs, awards, and an assortment of toys, souvenirs, and memorabilia filled the walls and shelves. Aaron knocked once, stepped into the room, and waited for Brendan to acknowledge him.

"What do you want, Aaron?" Brendan asked after several minutes, without looking up from his computer.

Aaron winced at the harshness of the tone, making him painfully aware that Brendan hadn't forgiven him, even if he had offered his protection. "It's after five. May I start dinner for you?"

"Yes, but I have a deadline, so I don't have time for a formal dinner."

"If it pleases you, I will bring you a plate," Aaron offered, remembering Brendan's orders from last night about not seeing him.

Brendan nodded.

Aaron turned and left the room. He found everything he needed to make Chicken Fettuccine Alfredo, adding a side of garlic bread and mixed vegetables. Once finished, he fixed a plate and took the meal and a glass of Coke in to Brendan, waiting until he was dismissed before returning to the kitchen and fixing his own plate. Habit had almost forced him to the floor, but Brendan's orders—the orders of his new temporary master—were supposed to trump training, which meant he could sit at the table to eat. Conflicted between what he'd been trained to do and what he was supposed to do, he looked towards Brendan's office. Brendan wasn't here to tell him what to do, nor could he ask. Aaron sighed, looked from the table to the counter to the floor, then slid to the floor near the sliding glass doors

and ate, watching a squirrel running up and down a tree. After finishing his food, he silently collected Brendan's empty dishes, refilled his drink and washed the dishes before he returned to his room. He'd found a National Geographic magazine in the living room, and brought it in with him to read, hoping Brendan wouldn't mind.

A knock on the door had him dropping the magazine and rising. He glanced at the clock and noticed almost two hours had passed. Brendan entered the room before he was half way to the door.

"Aaron, will you come into the living room so we can talk?" Brendan turned and left.

Aaron sat on the edge of the bed, weighing his decision. He was being asked, not told. He knew what Brendan wanted to talk about, but he wasn't sure how much he wanted to tell. How would Brendan react? What would his own reactions be? Aaron ran a hand through his hair took a deep breath and went into the living room. Brendan was already sitting in the recliner. Aaron chose a spot opposite him on the couch.

"I'm sorry I borrowed the magazine without asking, Sir," Aaron said trying to get comfortable on the soft fabric.

"That is fine, just return it when you're finished. Two of the questions I'm going to ask you require an answer. The rest is up to you, although I expect you to tell me the truth with all answers that you give me," Brendan said, taking a drink from a fresh glass of Coke. "Get a drink if you want one first."

Aaron nodded and retrieved a small glass of water. "I will tell you the truth, Sir. What do you want to know?" he asked, sitting back on the couch. He reached for a pillow, but thought better of it. Masters deserve full access to slaves, he reminded himself. Brendan was a master and, for the time being, his master.

"Last night I asked if you had a master or owner, you avoided the question. I require an answer to this one."

Aaron nodded. "I had both. But my owner was killed in a police standoff."

"Is there anyone that will try and claim you as theirs? This is the other question I require an answer to."

"I don't know if my owner's partners made it out alive or are free. If they are, they may try to claim me, but I don't want to go back there. Ever. Even if he sold me to them," Aaron answered, pushing back into the couch.

"Tell me what you can about the police standoff." Brendan leant forwards.

Aaron took a deep breath. If he started down this path, there would be no stopping. He thought of Brendan fucking him, loving him, protecting him and nodded. "The police raided a club I..." Aaron rubbed his neck. "I worked at."

"Why?"

"Because not all of the boys there were there willingly. Most weren't."

"Boys as in underage?"

Aaron shook his head. "No, boys meaning slaves. As far as I know everyone was over eighteen."

"Go on." Brendan smiled and nodded once. Aaron found the gesture reassuring.

"I don't know how the police found out. But they raided the club a few hours after opening. I didn't know anything was going on until the police came in. They took a lot of pictures of all of us and then one of the officers released me from my chains. They—they had to use bolt cutters to get the collar and cuffs off. After they took more pictures they told us get on whatever clothes could be scrounged and led us to waiting ambulances. No one talked. I—I hadn't used my name in so long, I had a hard time. Finally, I gave one of the EMT's the number I had been given. At the hospital, there were more pictures and questions. I still couldn't say my name, but they let me write it down. At one point, I refused to say anything else, they said they would be back and left. I made sure no one else saw me and walked out of the hospital." Aaron remembered the first written words and the unstable hand, full of fear. Even reading had been difficult at first, his mind balking at the words of real men. Aaron shook his head, clearing the unwanted memories. Someday he would tell Brendan, but tonight wasn't the night. Not for those sorts of details.

"Why didn't you tell them who you were? They would've brought you home."

"I know, but I was one of the few that was there more or less willingly," Aaron replied staring at Brendan's feet.

"What kind of club?"

"A private BDSM one. All of the members were masters. They paid to use us, either to beat us or fuck us. Sometimes both. Condoms were used because neither our owners nor the masters wanted to deal with diseases."

"That makes sense. No reason to expose the members to diseases and risk a lawsuit or blackmail. No reason to let the rest of the world know what happened at the club or who was involved."

Aaron nodded.

"How did you get there?"

"That's a long story and it goes back to the reason why I left. The reason why after a few months I stopped trying to get in touch with Harden after he stopped talking to me," Aaron answered. "I was ashamed of my desires, my needs. I craved dominance, someone else's dominance and control of me. I was afraid of what you would think, of what you would say. I was afraid of how Harden would react. I preferred your anger to your rejection, so I left and made my way to New York City. I got a job and a room. I met Master Greg in one of the clubs I frequented. I quit my job and moved in with him. He taught me to accept my desires, what they meant, and how belonging to him fulfilled those desires, fulfilled me like nothing else ever had. I completely accepted his dominance. He was my master."

"And your owner?" Brendan prompted, moving from the chair to the couch next to him.

"Master Greg had to pay a debt. I found that out later. Master John told me later that I had been sold to pay Master Greg's debt. He came home one night and told me that he was giving me to one of his friends and that I was to obey him completely. I didn't think anything about it. By then, I only reacted and obeyed," Aaron said, pulling his feet up under him. "Master John became my owner. He marked me and redirected my training on giving pleasure and complete obedience. He used pain as punishment and sometimes as a reward."

"Go on, Aaron, there is no judgement here."

Aaron heard the truth, commingled with comfort and reassurance...and a slight undercurrent of either pain or anger, he couldn't be positive which one. Aaron nodded. "One day, he brought me to the club and told me to obey the handlers. He was always there. I adjusted. Accepted my place, took my punishment. Tried to forget about my past and a life outside my chains."

"What changed that?"

"A man came in. He looked like he could be your brother. He came back a few times, would whip me. His technique was shaky and unsure. Then he stopped coming and I began to remember. I no longer wanted to be a slave, not their slave anyway. I wanted to belong to one man. I wanted to belong to you. Not whored out, beaten and sold." Aaron wrapped his arms around his legs, pulling away from Brendan. "I had no freedom, no rights, and no way to tell anyone I wanted out. I wasn't even sure I was still in New York City. And then just as I

would be about to all-out rebel, Master John or Master Greg would do something to remind me why I had sought out a master in the first place and that would settle me for a while."

"What changed?"

"I don't know why, but one day I was removed from my cell and placed in a large holding cell dug into the ground with the others. It was done quickly and several were left ungagged. Chained, but no handlers were present."

"Left ungagged?"

"Before that, if more than one of us were in a room together, we were always gagged. It wasn't until then that I realised something was wrong."

"Continue."

"It was then that we learned only four of us had voluntarily submitted to a master before coming to the club. The others had been kidnapped. All but one had been kidnapped from the streets. The last one was on his way home from work. A couple of days later the police raided the club. I don't know what the police were investigating, but I heard on the news afterwards that a slave ring had been busted and most of the former slaves had been reunited with loved ones," Aaron answered, allowing Brendan to pull him onto his lap. "I wasn't sure if you'd see me again. I didn't think Harden would turn me away, at least I hoped he wouldn't, if for no other reason than I am family. I still don't know why he stopped talking to me."

Brendan kissed the top of his head. "He didn't. It tore him up when you stopped calling."

"I only stopped after Garrett repeatedly told me Harden didn't want to talk to or see me again. I wouldn't have believed him, except the last time I heard him myself. I still don't know why Garrett hates me," Aaron answered, shaking his head. His soul stripped raw, he huddled into the warmth of Brendan's body, afraid to look at him, and afraid of the disgust he'd see in his one-time lover's eyes.

"How did you get those whip marks? The slave bust was over two months ago."

"I hitchhiked. Sometimes the guy was nice and didn't ask anything of me. Sometimes, though, they wanted blowjobs or to fuck. On the last leg, the guy said that fucking wasn't enough. He was going to—" Aaron broke off his answer. Memories of walking for days on end, eating whatever he could scrounge, trading blowjobs and sex for transportation flooded him. The last guy had been mean and looking for an excuse to beat someone.

"Shhh. I understand." Brendan tightened his grip.

Burying his head in Brendan's chest, he allowed himself to be lost in the other man's strong arms, in the comfort they had always brought him.

Brendan's stomach roiled. Anger seethed below the deceptively calm surface. Peering down at the man huddled in his arms, he saw tears flowing easily, Aaron's body shuddering with the devastation of the escaping emotion. Brendan doubted Aaron realised what was happening. It bothered him that Aaron had been so ashamed of his desires he'd felt compelled to run away. Hugging the smaller man close to him, Brendan rose and carried his bundle down the hall, past the guest room and into the master bedroom. Scraps of past conversations pushed forwards in his memory.

Aaron had asked him once about bondage and discipline, and Brendan had laughed it off rather awkwardly. At the time, he hadn't been sure of his own feelings except that he knew giving up control was something he was incapable of doing. He had only been beginning to understand his own desires. It wasn't until Aaron had been gone for several months that he'd finally figured out what he was feeling. He'd trained under a master until he became a master.

Laying Aaron down in the centre of the bed, Brendan started to crawl in then his cell phone rang. He contemplated ignoring it, but with all that had happened, he decided against it. He retrieved his phone from the living room and looked at the display before answering it.

"Hi, Harden," Brendan said, sitting on the couch.

"Hey bro, I just wanted to speak to Aaron a minute," his best friend said, his voice quieter than normal.

"I just put him in bed, so you'll have to wait." The hair on the back of Brendan's neck stood.

"You did what?"

"We had a long talk. Was there someone outside the motel that you took him to?"

"Now, that I think about it, yeah. There were a couple of guys—tall, built and rough looking. Why?"

"I think Aaron saw something or someone that spooked him, possibly a handler," Brendan replied. "You should know though, that from what Aaron said, he didn't stop calling until after he'd heard you say you didn't want to talk to him again. Harden, before

that, Garrett was telling him you didn't want to speak to him. My guess is that Garrett wasn't giving you Aaron's messages."

"Sonofabitch! I knew he didn't like Aaron, but I didn't think he'd go that far. Great, I'll have a wonderful fucking holiday. Happy Valentine's Day, Harden, your boyfriend is so jealous of your cousin he caused you to stop talking to him," Harden bit out. "Wait, you know where Aaron's been this whole time, don't you? I can hear it in your voice. Am I responsible?"

"Yes, I know where Aaron has been. Responsible? No. You made his decision easier, but I think he would've made the same one anyway."

"Where was he?"

Brendan weighed his options. He had already decided to protect Aaron no matter what. That realisation had come early on in listening to Aaron's story. He knew what he had to say next would cause his friend to flip. "Do you remember the slave ring that was busted a couple of months ago?"

"Yeah, it was huge! There were males and females, Americans and foreigners. The largest concentrations were out of New York City, but it ranged all over the place. Feds are still investigating, I think. "

"That's the one."

"You're not telling me he was involved in that! Aaron doesn't have the capability to do that to another person."

"Aaron isn't a master, Harden," Brendan said quietly.

Brendan waited as his best friend processed the information and let loose with a string of curses. He noticed, with relief, that none of Harden's anger was directed at Aaron, but at Garrett, himself and the people who put Aaron in that position.

"Can you help him Brendan? You're a master." There was a plea in his friend's voice that he hadn't heard before.

"I haven't made up my mind completely, Harden. Aaron's gone through a lot, and a pretty strict training process."

"But I know he loves you. He said as much yesterday."

"And I'm fairly certain I still love him, but I don't know. And there is the fact that if any of the handlers or masters found him, they'd try and claim him again."

"Can they do that? You know, the whole BDSM thing is mind-boggling to me."

"He's told me doesn't want to go back to them. I'll do what I can."

"Fuck him and make him yours. I think he belongs to you or whatever you call it anyway. His heart does at any rate. I think it always has. I know it always will."

"I'm going to check on Aaron, maybe try and make some headway on my book before bed. However, as nice of a body as Aaron has, fucking him isn't an option tonight."

"You're a fool. A lovesick one, but a fool all the same."

Brendan hung up the phone and sighed. His gaze found the clock on the DVD player. He'd planned on going out with Matt anyway tonight, if for nothing else to get a feel for the other man and see if he might know of someone better suited for him to date. Dialling Matt's number, he told the younger man he had to cancel their date that night because of complications with his ex-boyfriend. Matt had sounded relieved and informed him that his sister had just had her first baby and he was hoping to go to the hospital tonight. Brendan congratulated him and agreed to meet him for lunch the next day. Hanging up for the second time, he headed back to his bedroom, ignoring his office. He slid the covers over Aaron, stripped and crawled in beside the other man.

Wrapping his arms around Aaron, Brendan listened as the other man's breathing slowed, signalling he was asleep. He replayed Aaron's story in his mind. The anger surrounding his heart had melted. He couldn't be certain they would still be together if Aaron had approached him about becoming his master and about exploring BDSM instead of leaving. He never stopped loving Aaron, that much he was certain of. Or at least he thought he was.

Chapter Three

Aaron smiled and snuggled closer into the strong arms banded around him. Brendan hadn't reacted with disgust as Aaron had thought he would. He wanted a chance with Brendan, both as Brendan's sub and as his partner. Would Brendan go for it? Would he allow it? And what would Aaron do if Brendan said no? Aaron forced the questions out of his mind. His heart was lighter after telling Brendan what had happened to him. It had been the single hardest thing he'd had to do. Aaron's eyes snapped open. Brendan hadn't shown disgust, but did he still find him appealing? Would he make love to him? Fuck him? There was one way to find out.

Aaron wiggled. Brendan's arms tightened around him.

"I'm not going anywhere," Aaron whispered.

Brendan hesitated before he loosened his grip. Aaron wiggled and turned around in order to face Brendan. He kissed one of Brendan's sensitive nipples, reacquainting himself with his lover's body and eliciting a moan. Without any orders to guide him, he trusted his instincts. Aaron kissed his way down Brendan's taut, muscular abdomen. Brendan wrapped a hand in his hair. Aaron paused slightly, waiting for direction. When none came, Aaron continued kissing his way down to Brendan's cock, wrapping his lips around the velvety tip. It was better than he remembered. Pure delight raced through his body, a headlong rush to his groin.

Brendan rolled onto his back and spread his legs. Aaron moved with Brendan, never losing contact with his body. Shifting position so that his body was tucked up under him, he laved the shaft while gently palming Brendan's balls. Aaron sucked and licked every part of Brendan's cock and balls, using every technique he had learnt to bring Brendan to the edge. Aaron felt Brendan's balls draw up in his hand.

Suddenly Brendan pulled him away. "No."

Aaron whimpered before he could censor it. "Don't you like it?" he asked, Brendan pulling him up towards him.

"Very much. Not this way, though. I don't want you to think you have to. That I took you to my bed just so you could please me."

"Then why did you bring me into your bed?"

"Because leaving you alone after bearing your soul to me wasn't an option."

"Brendan, I want to do this. I've thought of little else since leaving Master John. I want your cock filling me. I want to respond to your commands."

"You're a trained sub. I know the type of men that owned you. You would respond to any command given to you."

Aaron shook his head. "I don't think so. Not anymore. It took two months to get back here. There have been several times when I was commanded to do something, but I didn't." He wanted to tell Brendan that he was the only man who could command him anymore, but he wasn't sure it was the truth. He was the only man Aaron wanted to belong to, but he wasn't sure he could disobey an order from one of his handlers or the other masters that had either frequented the club or owned it. He was certain he'd seen at least one of the handlers the night before. Aaron inhaled slightly, waiting for Brendan to say or do something, anything that would let him know what to do next.

"I know you believe that, but I think your training runs too deep."

"I won't lie and say I don't want to please you or that I don't want to belong to you, because I do. But I also want new memories to replace the old ones. I want to know that there is a man I can please and that could be pleased with me that I haven't been whored out to or didn't own me. A time when my very life isn't dependant on if I please someone. Pleasure freely given and freely received. Is that so much to ask? I want to be human again. To believe I'm worthy of something. That I'm not just occupying space, a thing to please and serve. Please, Brendan," Aaron pleaded, avoiding Brendan's penetrating gaze, staring at the muscular chest as he drew light circles around one nipple with his finger.

"Look at me," Brendan ordered. Aaron allowed him to lift his chin, looking into Brendan's eyes for several moments before he had to squeeze them closed. "No, I think not. There is no topping from below left in you."

Aaron shook his head. "My life was for the pleasure of other men, not myself. Everything was regulated, from when and where I could pee or shit, to if and when I was allowed to eat, to cum, to sleep."

"Do you think it would be different belonging to me? You are ready to give yourself to me, yet you have no idea what kind of master I am. I could be worse than what you had," Brendan said, rolling over Aaron, his arms on either side of Aaron's head.

"You would not have let me clean up, have taken care of my wounds, or taken me to get new clothes. You would have beaten me for my behaviour and fucked me already."

"What makes you think I won't fuck you now?"

Aaron smiled slightly. "I'm hoping you will, Sir. I want you to fuck me so hard and fast I'll feel your cock in me for the rest of the night and all day tomorrow."

Brendan raised an eyebrow and rolled off him. "No, but you may finish what you started. And make sure to bring yourself off too."

Aaron quickly slid back down between Brendan's spread thighs, thrilled to see his man was still hard and needing. Licking his lips, he enveloped the soft tip with his mouth, cupping Brendan's balls in one hand and his own cock in the other. Brendan's body tensed beneath him, and he knew the other man was getting ready to come. Opening his throat, he swallowed as much of Brendan's length as he could and allowed to Brendan to take control. As Brendan's balls drew up, Aaron pulled back slightly, needing to taste his lover.

The hand Brendan had threaded through his hair tightened, pulling him closer. Brendan roared. Aaron swallowed every drop and licked at the shaft then brought himself over the edge, shooting into the sheets between Brendan's legs. Brendan released his hold and Aaron laid his head against Brendan's pelvis, the other man's cock slipping from his lips.

"Incredible," Aaron whispered.

"Let's get cleaned up and get some sleep."

Reluctantly, Aaron followed Brendan's suggestion, instinctively treating it as an order. Once back in bed, Aaron thought about what Brendan had said. Could he disobey an order? Could he disobey Brendan? One of his handlers? Would that prove his sincerity to Brendan? He'd seen the desire in Brendan's eyes. He'd wanted to take Aaron up on his suggestion and fuck him, but he'd refused to give into his own desire. Whether it was because Brendan was still angry with him, or because Aaron failed to meet his ideal of a submissive, he wasn't certain. But he did know that, had Brendan been like his handlers, there would have been no hesitation. He might not have even waited until Harden had left. If he had been, the second Brendan had identified Aaron as a submissive, unclaimed or otherwise, he would've started ordering him around. He would have fucked him hard and repeatedly until his desires were

sated. He wouldn't have been bothered with Aaron's orgasm, who would have been left frustrated and unable to relieve himself. He would have found himself in chains and out of sight somewhere within a couple of hours.

* * * *

Light trickled through a crack in the shades. Brendan groaned and covered his face with his arm. A small, lithe body snuggled deeper against him. *Aaron*. Aaron had slept with him last night. Hell, he'd almost fucked Aaron last night. He was still stunned over Aaron's blatant request. The man had given a compelling argument, but Brendan refused to allow himself to take advantage of Aaron's submissiveness for his own purposes. He never played without ground rules or safe words. Most of the men he played with were used to rules, contracts and safe words. They had hard and soft limits. Aaron wouldn't have those concerns. Any limits he might have had were gone. It made him more adventurous than most, but it also meant he could easily find himself in the same position or worse. Brendan exhaled slowly. His heart and head refused to come to a consensus on the man he knew he would have to protect until the right master could be found for him.

"Fuck me? Please."

Brendan shifted his arm, and blinked rapidly. "Go back to sleep, Aaron."

"I know what I'm asking."

"No, Aaron, I don't think you do." Brendan rolled onto his side, embracing Aaron.

"Brendan—"

"This isn't open for discussion," Brendan bit out. "I have to go out for a while later, so you'll have run of the house while I'm gone."

"Yes, Sir," Aaron said quietly.

"You may sleep a while longer. I'm going to shower."

Aaron nodded and closed his eyes.

* * * *

Brendan growled. He'd been home for less than an hour and Aaron had him pushing the edge of his self-control. Aaron's natural submissiveness and intense training commingled with the teasing clothes, moves, and expressions calling to not only to the dominant in him, but to his soul. Memories pushed forwards, reminding him of all of the times he had taken Aaron. His cock hard, Brendan had finally shut himself in his office and tried to concentrate on his manuscript.

Lunch with Matt had gone surprisingly well. Brendan had explained the situation concerning Aaron and his responsibility to the submissive. The mention of "submissive" had got them to talking about bondage, discipline, domination and submission. As he'd suspected, the other man was curious about the lifestyle and wanted to explore it, but wasn't sure how to go about it and didn't know who to trust. He was also scared, although Matt had refused to admit it at first. It was only after Brendan had told him that a certain amount of fear was not only expected, but healthy, that he'd revealed his feelings. Matt had been disappointed to learn it wouldn't work out between them, however Brendan had offered to help him explore his submissive side and introduce him to the right dominants.

After meeting with Matt, he knew the other man would make a great submissive to the right man, and while he might have liked to explore things with the would-be submissive, he wasn't certain he was the right master for the other man. He would need to observe Matt for a while before figuring out whom to introduce him to.

Aaron's return complicated his life, but he wasn't sure he wanted it any other way. The road before them both was going to be a long one. Even if he decided not to keep Aaron with him, too much had happened for him to simply walk away, even if that was exactly what his head was saying he needed to do. A knock on the door had Brendan looking up from the same paragraph he'd been staring at for the past two hours.

"What?" he growled, his breath hitched in anticipation.

"I brought you coffee," Aaron said quietly.

Brendan snapped his attention to the door. Aaron stood naked, his head bowed, carrying a tray with a full cup of coffee and a muffin sitting on it.

"Thank you."

Aaron came around the edge of the desk and set the tray down. Brendan clenched his fists to prevent himself from reaching out and grabbing Aaron's hard cock or ass as they grazed past him.

"I know what I'm asking." Aaron's fingers lightly stroked Brendan's arm.

"Aaron."

Aaron's fingers dropped and he walked away. "I want you, your cock filling me. I want you to fuck me," Aaron said before leaving the room.

Brendan ran a hand through his hair. Aaron asked. Not once or twice, but several times. He remained naked the entire time, although that, Brendan knew, could be simple habit. The men who'd owned him wouldn't have wasted clothing on a slave. Aaron had taken the initiative, enticing and teasing him, something Brendan hadn't expected. Not with the story that he'd been told last night. Aaron was a submissive and trained, but badly handled. Would it hurt either of them if he gave into his yearnings? Was Aaron lost without more direction? Scrubbing his hands over his face, he saved the document he'd been staring at and turned off the computer.

Brendan's mind rolled through memories of the day. Aaron's hairless body, toned if a little thin, taunting him. Brendan hated the ownership tattoo and the idea of his own replacing it was slowly growing. Leaving his office, he wandered through the house looking for Aaron, finally spotting him on the floor in front of the couch, reading a magazine.

"Let's get your back cleaned up."

Aaron nodded, replaced the magazine and gingerly pushed himself up from the floor.

"What is sore?" Brendan asked moving quickly to Aaron's side.

"My back. The cuts aren't as deep on my legs and ass, are they?"

Brendan shook his head. "Face down on my bed."

Aaron nodded, smiled and headed for the master bedroom. Brendan detoured into the bathroom, retrieving the necessary supplies to clean the wounds. He lay a towel down on the bed and waited for Aaron to situate himself before beginning.

"What do you know about your tattoo?" Brendan asked washing Aaron's back.

"It's Master John's property identification mark. Master Greg didn't mark his boys. At least that's what he said. I'm not sure that he hadn't planned all along to give me to Master John."

"What makes you say that?"

"I've been thinking about things. The differences in the way you carry yourself as opposed to the way Master Greg carried himself. There is compassion visible in you that I don't know that I ever saw in him."

"You've never been under my whip. As I said before, you don't know what kind of master I am." Aaron tensed under the towel drying him.

"I wasn't under Master Greg's when I had just met him either. I don't think it's in him. I think maybe he was funnelling willing submissives to Master John and to other masters."

"It's possible. There are always one or two bad apples that ruin it for everyone," Brendan agreed, applying ointment and bandages to the wounds.

"Master Greg brought me to Master John's at night, in the winter. There was snow on the ground and I was cold."

"What were you wearing?"

"An overcoat that belonged to Master Greg and a pair of flip-flops."

"That's it? No other clothing?"

"Just my collar, cuffs and a blindfold."

"Continue."

"Master John demanded a blowjob for him and required that I offered my ass to Master Greg in appreciation for his training and care. Master Greg fucked me and then waited until after Master John whipped me. Some time later, a heavily tattooed man showed up at Master John's door. I was bound to a bench while Master John's mark was tattooed on my ass."

"What about the number?"

"That was added later when I was sent to the club. It was so that everyone would know what to call me. After I became Master Greg's boy, that's what he always called me—boy. He never said my name, only boy. Not even when others asked if I had a name. Both Master Greg and Master John said names and spankings were for free men, slaves were things and not worthy of names. Master John called me some version of slave—it, boy or some other, um, derogatory name. At the club I was given a number. I was never known as anything other than seventeen," Aaron replied, the flat tone of his voice marked with sorrow. Brendan laid the bandage he'd been applying over the wound and squeezed the younger man's arm.

"Unless you like it, you should think about getting something to either cover it or remove it completely," Brendan said, brushing a stray strand of Aaron's hair out of the way before he finished applying the bandage.

Aaron shook his head. "That isn't a decision I want to make. I don't like it. But the mark I want is not one I can either put there or ask for. As I said before, Sir, you're the only man I

want to belong to anymore. It's your mark I want on me. And if I can't have it, then it doesn't matter whose mark is on me."

"That's a big step, I don't know if you're ready for it," Brendan answered, gathering up the supplies. "I never planned on collaring anyone, let alone marking them."

"Fuck me. Take me. You don't have to claim me if you don't want to, but fuck me. Please, Brendan, I need you — your cock, your dominance — even for a just a while."

Brendan's cock strained at his jeans. He could take Aaron. Closing his eyes momentarily, he knew he would take him. He didn't have to bring him into the basement he'd converted into a dungeon. He didn't have to claim him. He could just fuck Aaron. Brendan ran a hand through his hair. Was Aaron manipulating him? Was he allowing Aaron to top from below? Did it matter at this point?

It didn't. He'd been hard or nearly hard all day.

It was going to be rough and hard. There wasn't going to be anything gentle or loving about this. He'd simply been pushed too far. Aaron had driven him completely insane, passed the edge of his control. The man had spent all day running around the house naked. First cooking breakfast and then insisting he sit on the floor to eat, only relenting when Brendan had agreed to allow Aaron to keep one hand on his thigh the whole time. Aaron's gentle touch on the inside of his thigh had kept him hard throughout breakfast.

"This isn't going to be gentle," Brendan warned, pushing Aaron down onto the bed.

"Don't want it to be," Aaron said, shaking his head.

Brendan retrieved a condom and a bottle of lube from the nightstand drawer and crawled onto the bed. Aaron got onto his hands and knees. Kneeling between Aaron's legs, Brendan flicked his tongue across the tight rosebud staring up at him. Aaron moaned and arched his back. Brendan buried his tongue in the welcoming hole. Brendan ran one hand up the inside of Aaron's thigh, cupping the smaller man's hairless balls. He pulled first on the lorum, the small ring piercing the skin between Aaron's cock and balls, and then on the larger Prince Albert at the head of his cock.

"Smooth. Nice. Keep it that way," Brendan ordered, eliciting another moan from Aaron.

"Please, Brendan. Fill me. Now. Please," Aaron begged, pushing backwards.

Brendan squeezed Aaron's balls gently, pulling them slightly. He rubbed Aaron's cock, smearing pre cum on the pierced head. Rolling a condom on himself, Brendan slicked his cock with lube, using the excess to slowly stretch Aaron's waiting hole.

"God, you're unbelievably tight," Brendan said, sticking in a third finger. Brendan swatted Aaron's ass. Aaron might have driven him to the brink of insanity, but he was going to look him in the eyes. Aaron would see who was claiming him. *Claiming him. Was he going to claim him?* As soon as the thought entered his mind, it left again, so intent was he on the pleasure rushing through him.

"On your back," Brendan commanded, knowing they both could regret this come morning. "Grab the headboard."

Aaron nodded and obeyed. Brendan knelt between Aaron's spread thighs and lifted his legs onto his shoulders. Positioning himself at the entrance, Brendan forced himself to enter slowly. His soul sighed at the rightness and demanded more. He paused for several moments, allowing Aaron a moment to get used to his size, before pulling out slowly and thrusting hard and fast. He set a punishing rhythm, knowing instinctively it was what they both needed.

"Please more. Harder," Aaron begged.

"Come for me!"

Brendan knew he was close and sped up, pounding hard into Aaron's body, pegging the smaller man's prostate, eliciting moans of pleasure from him.

"Please more, Sir," Aaron begged.

"Now!" Brendan ordered.

"Master!" Aaron yelled, his seed painting their bodies.

Brendan thrust again and came. Aaron's body clenched, drawing his seed from him as he filled the condom. Shuddering, Brendan lowered Aaron's legs and fell to the mattress, careful to keep his weight off Aaron. "Stay put." Brendan kissed Aaron's forehead and pushed himself off the bed and went to retrieve a warm, wet washcloth and dispose of the used condom. After they were both clean and the washcloth taken care of, Brendan returned to his bed and helped Aaron roll onto his stomach. Brendan cursed silently at a patch of blood no bigger than the head of a nail. *Selfish bastard*, he chastised himself. If he had to fuck Aaron, it should've been in a position that would've been easier on his back. Brendan quickly checked the rest of the bandages and changed the offending one, before he lay down on his side and pulled Aaron close to him.

"Thank you," Aaron whispered into the pillows.

"For what?"

"For this, for giving me something positive. For caring. I think I forgot about all of this. In learning about what my true desires and needs were, I forgot what my heart needed. Thank you for reminding that even though I'm a submissive, I still want and need tenderness." Aaron turned over, burying his face in Brendan's chest. "What are we going to do, Sir? Where do we go from here?" Aaron asked, planting light kisses on Brendan's body.

"We'll figure it out. For now, sleep."

"Yes, Master," Aaron said, snuggling closer to him. "Will you ever forgive me?" The question came out no more than a whisper.

Brendan looked down. Eyes closed, his breathing slow and deep, Aaron lay on the edge of sleep. "I need time, pet." Brendan kissed the top of Aaron's head, not wanting to analyse the reason the endearment had slipped out.

Chapter Four

Aaron rolled onto his back and gasped. He knew the instant that Brendan woke up. Gingerly, he manoeuvred his way back onto his stomach, cushioning his head in his arms.

"I moved wrong," he whispered. "I'm sorry I disturbed you, Master, please go back to sleep." Brendan's arms wrapped around him, pulling him close.

Brendan had finally taken him. Aaron's ass throbbed with need. He would never get enough of Brendan's cock. The only question remained was, would Brendan take him back? Would he keep a damaged slave? He'd been surprised by his own forwardness. He would have never talked to Master John or any master the way he had talked to Brendan. Both Master John and Master Greg would have whipped him within an inch of his life for his behaviour. His body was for their pleasure, not his. But Brendan had never claimed him. He had never collared him. In fact, he had gone out of his way to make sure Aaron knew it was temporary. Still, Aaron had been trained to serve his masters, not look for his own pleasure. And he had. He'd goaded Brendan into taking him until the man actually had fucked him, allowing him to come in the process. Brendan was wrong, he *had* figured out how to top from below.

He waited until Brendan fell back to sleep, then carefully disentangled himself from Brendan's arms and slipped out of the bed. Quietly, Aaron made his way back to his bedroom and curled up on the floor. Aaron would have to figure out his next move today. He knew there was a club here. He doubted he could find someone to own him there, but maybe he would get lucky. The type of master didn't really matter, but he suspected someone more on the sadistic side would be better. He was simply a slave. If he couldn't belong to Brendan, a master he loved and he could hope would love him back, he would rather belong to someone who saw him as a possession.

Snapping his eyes open, Aaron stared at the door and pushed himself further into the corner. When had his goal changed? He knew that answer. When Brendan had rejected him.

Aaron had realised too late what he needed. He'd hurt Brendan when he left. He knew that—it was something that Harden had constantly reminded him of when they had talked. Aaron pulled further into himself, praying for solace in his sleep.

"Despicable slave. Have you learned nothing?" The whip hissed through the air and landed on his aching back. Aaron cried out as the pain rippled through his body. "You embarrassed me. You showed no control and no training. Worse than when Greg sold you to me to pay his debt. One of the handlers will be in to finish your punishment, you worthless pile of shit! If you weren't my most requested slave..." Heavy boots treaded across the concrete floor. His owner was gone. The door opened and closed. Pain racked his body. The door opened and closed again.

"Seventeen. You. Will. Learn." The kiss of the whip emphasising each word. The handler's face morphed into that of his beloved Brendan. "You disappointed your masters, Seventeen. You will be punished. Your masters are men, real men. You are a worthless pile of shit."

Aaron whimpered, wanting to hide from the never-ending strike of the whip.

"Seventeen."

"Aaron."

Aaron blinked, unsure of what had awakened him. His body hurt. His sanity felt as if it were slipping. Aaron half opened his eyes and saw the familiar looming figure. Master Brendan.

"Aaron, Aaron, what are you doing in here?"

Aaron scrambled to his knees, spreading them wide, his hands clasped behind his neck, his gaze focused on the bare feet in front of him. "Master, forgive this slave. It should not have forced itself onto you. This slave forgot its place." The words were spoken automatically before he could censor them. The feet took a step forward. Aaron ignored the fleeting instinct to pull back. He'd broken the rules. He had to be punished.

"Aaron, none of that. Come here."

The words were spoken softly, the order gently given. Aaron hesitated. He wasn't used to kindness. He was a slave, a possession. He'd broken the rules and deserved punishment. "This slave will accept whatever punishment you decide for it, Master. This slave put you in an unwanted position. It is sorry for its unacceptable behaviour."

"Damn it!"

Aaron winced at the anger and venom in Brendan's voice. *Brendan*. His beloved Brendan. He was at Brendan's. Brendan had different rules, different expectations, but he'd been wrong to push Brendan. Brendan wasn't his master, but he was a master and should've been treated better by Aaron. Bowing his head further, Aaron felt his stomach drop before twisting and knotting. He'd disrespected the one man he loved with his heart and soul. Aaron knew better. Even he hadn't been trained, he should've loved Brendan enough to let him make that move when he was comfortable, not when Aaron wanted. Just as he knew which buttons to push to drive Brendan crazy with need, he knew it wasn't his place to push them. It had been beaten out of him. It should have remained beyond his ability.

"Come here," Brendan said quietly, squatting in front of him.

Risking a look through half-raised eyelids, he realised Brendan was still naked. Inhaling deeply, Aaron dropped to his hands and knees and crawled forwards. Brendan swore again and wrapped his arms around him and lifted. Aaron allowed his body to be moved to a standing position and then to the bed.

"Come here," Brendan ordered softly, pulling Aaron into his arms. "Now, what is the meaning of all of this? Why did you leave my bed?"

"It was wrong of this slave—"

"You can and should refer to yourself as I or me, not as this slave."

Aaron shook his head. "But that is what it is. It is a slave. A thing. Something to serve and please others. Even though you are not its master, you are both a man and a master. It should not have pushed its wants and desires on you."

"Aaron, you will refer to yourself in the first person and as a person, not as an object or slave when you are with me," Brendan commanded, frustration in his voice.

Aaron nodded. "As you wish, Master."

"Aaron, you are a person, a human who can and should experience love and emotions. You're not a thing. You have free will. You always have the choice to obey or to not. To stay or to go."

"Emotions are confusing. It is better if it...I am told what to do. I can follow orders. I like it when my master is pleased with me, I just don't—" Aaron said curling his body into Brendan, clinging to him.

"Yes, emotions are confusing, but they must be accepted and dealt with," Brendan said, kissing the top of his head. "Now, answer my question."

"This slave took... I took advantage of the knowledge I had of you from when we were together and of what I have been taught then forced you into the position of taking me, of fucking me as *I* wanted. I know better."

"First, you aren't in a position to force anyone to do anything. Second, an admission on my own part, I've wanted you almost since you walked through my door. Finally, I want to know what prompted the return to this protocol. Up until this point, you never referred to yourself as a slave, an it, or slept on the floor."

"After we finished last night, I realised that I had made it impossible for you to resist me, not for your pleasure, but for mine. I wasn't allowed to sleep on a bed without permission from either of my former masters and I knew that, especially in this case, neither one would ever give it to me. And that because of my actions, seeking attention for my own pleasure first and not thinking about concerns or feelings you might have had, I should be punished. As I said before, my life—a slave's life—isn't for their own pleasure but for the pleasure of the men or man that owns them."

"Punishment for being pushy and not taking no for answer when it was given to you, yes, you should and will receive. But I received plenty of pleasure, and I see no problem with allowing my subs their own enjoyment." Brendan ran a hand down his back. "What did you think about yesterday?"

"I don't understand the question, Master," Aaron admitted, snuggling into Brendan.

"Quit wiggling and answer the question."

"I...I wanted to be filled by your cock, to be possessed by you. I wondered how different it would be to serve you. I wondered if I'd ever be worthy of serving you."

"And last night?"

"I thought I was happy that you took me, but—"

"But?"

"There was pure joy and peace when you came. That I was able to please you."

"So you thought of me?"

"When I was able to think clearly, yes, Master. Mostly I just felt."

Brendan nodded. "So, regardless of wanting to be fucked, you still put my satisfaction ahead of yours. You were happy because you were able to help me enjoy myself."

Aaron nodded.

"You came when you were told to. You waited until permission was given. You may have plotted to get fucked, but your behaviour is not that of a man playing at submission or a man that wants their master to cater to their desires. Your behaviour is still that of a man who enjoys pleasing others and must relearn that you are a man who *chooses* to serve another. Who likes to make his master happy and knows that it will make him happy," Brendan said firmly.

Aaron allowed the words to sink in. He did enjoy pleasing others. He was happiest when serving others. He wanted to be loved and cherished.

"There is a big difference between your old masters and the one you should have. A good master does not forget that the submissive choose to serve him. He doesn't force his submissive to stay. That does not mean the master won't choose to keep his submissive in bondage most of the time, but he understands that it is a choice and is freely given. Now, if property is how you wish to remain, that can be arranged, but you should receive fulfilment and pleasure from your service just as a master does from receiving it. That is part of what both of your *masters* should have taught you."

Aaron heard the venom and anger in Brendan's voice, but with the man's arms wrapped around him, felt none of it directed at him. Disappointment maybe, but with a layer of understanding mixed in. "Will you teach me what I am missing? I know you don't want to be my master, and I will live with that, as I caused it, but I need to belong to someone. Will you find a good master for me?"

"You don't want to meet one on your own? See if you are a good fit? See if there is an emotional connection? Love between a master and his sub can and does happen."

Aaron shook his head. The only emotional connection he wanted was with Brendan and Brendan didn't want him. "I would prefer not to end up in a similar situation as before, but if I do, then I do. I know I screwed up when I left you, and I'd understand if you sold me or gave me to the worst master you know. May I take a shower now, Master?"

Brendan dropped his arms. "Yes. I will see what I can come up with."

"I will only ever love you," he whispered on the way out of the room.

Aaron retreated to the safety of the bathroom. He hadn't looked at Brendan, but he'd heard something different in his lover's voice. He shaved all the hair below his neck, remembering Brendan's orders about staying hairless, and quickly washed up. After

cleaning the bathroom and putting on fresh jeans and socks, he took the first aid supplies and went to find Brendan.

"I understand. It's hard to accept an untried slave. Especially one such as this."

There was a pause. "Very true, bringing him to the club might open the way for other masters in search of a full time slave."

Aaron listened to the one-sided conversation through the partially opened door and hugged the first aid supplies to him. It was what he wanted, but to actually hear it come from Brendan tore at his heart. He waited until Brendan had hung up the phone before opening the door. Maybe if Brendan had a chance to punish him or gave him a chance to prove how good a slave he could be, he'd be willing to keep him.

Aaron hung his head. He loved Brendan, but hadn't he learned that his submission was about more than love? It was about belonging and about pleasing. Hadn't both Master John and Master Greg told him that? Even Brendan reminded him of that. His pleasure came from putting their pleasure before his own. That love was a matter for free men only. It was certainly not for slaves. His heart wanted Brendan, but he knew he would willingly go to whomever Brendan chose for him. Brendan said he could love his master, that a master could love his slave. But Brendan didn't love him, so it didn't matter if anyone else did. He would respect whatever master he had, but he would never love them.

"Sir, if it pleases you, I have brought the supplies for my back," Aaron said quietly. He clung to the memories he was creating, even as he forced himself to pull away. He could serve no master properly if he didn't put an emotional distance himself and Brendan.

"Go into my bedroom, lay on the bed and wait for me," Brendan said dismissively. The chill in his lover's words echoed in his own heart and soul.

"If I may, Sir, perhaps, it would be helpful if you put me through my paces in order to see how I compare with others submissives you know and which master would be best suited to be my owner. Or if you didn't want to, perhaps another master could," Aaron said quietly.

"Do as you're told."

"Yes, Master." Aaron nodded, turned and left. He went into Brendan's bedroom, stripped and lay face down on the bed. Maybe he'd made a mistake. Being so close to Brendan and the constant reminders of what he could never have wasn't a good idea. He'd be better off back in the club or in some cage far from Brendan. Someone would want him.

He wouldn't bring a huge price, but it was better than knowing Brendan didn't want anything to do with him and didn't want to acknowledge or allow feelings between them.

He waited until after he'd put the first aid supplies away and Brendan had returned to his office and before retrieving a slip of paper from his nightstand. Aaron pushed aside the voices telling him to submit to Brendan and to remain in the house and crept into the kitchen. He lifted the receiver of the phone, listened for the dial tone and punched in his cousin's number.

"Harden, will you come get me? I'll go to the hotel if you want."

"Did Brendan hurt you?"

"No," Aaron said quickly. He wasn't exactly lying. Brendan hadn't hurt his body, just his heart. "I've put him out too much."

"Sure, I'll be over in five."

Aaron hung up the phone and retrieved a sweatshirt from his room. Donning it, he pulled on shoes, grabbed the coat Brendan had given him and waited on the front porch. He felt guilty for taking the clothes and coat, but he would have to find a way to pay Brendan back or, at the very least, return the clothes.

"Thank you, Harden," Aaron said when his cousin pulled up. "We can go."

Harden nodded and pulled out of the driveway. "I'm going to drop you off at my house while I run a couple of errands. Will you be okay alone?"

Aaron nodded. "I'll stay at hotel. I don't want to come between you and Garrett."

"I kicked Garrett out. I couldn't believe it when Brendan told me what Garrett had done. The asshole didn't even deny it," Harden said, gripping the steering wheel before releasing it and embracing Aaron with one arm. "I missed you. I love you, cousin. No matter what kind of life you think you need to have, remember that and stay in touch."

"It's okay, Harden," Aaron replied, returning the hug. "I promise I'll try to stay in contact. That's all I can do."

Harden drove them back to his place in silence. Aaron stared out the window, wondering if he had made the right decision. Hell, he wasn't even sure he would be able to stay in contact with Harden. Keeping his promise would be dependent upon permission from his new master. After Harden left, Aaron flipped through the phone book, found what he was looking for, and called a cab.

Chapter Five

Brendan shut the cell phone again and turned back to his computer. He still hadn't found a new master for Aaron, but a long talk with his mentor had him re-evaluating the idea of searching for someone else. He still wasn't convinced it was what he wanted or needed for the long term, but he could handle keeping him for a little while, so Aaron could heal and be trained properly. This he had to do, as his mentor had reminded him, since Aaron had requested his help and protection.

Brendan ran a hand through his hair and sighed. If he was honest with himself, he hadn't looked hard for a new master for Aaron. He knew of a couple of men that were looking for full time submissives—good men—but the thought of Aaron submitting to anyone else had left him with his blood boiling and cutting conversations short. He couldn't think of another master who would look after Aaron's heart like he would or who could read his body language and know when he was lying or telling the truth, whether he needed tenderness or the sting of a paddle. Learning to read Aaron was similar to riding a bike or driving a new car, but more intense. There was excitement in new discoveries, comfort in old ones.

That Aaron was submissive shed new light on old behaviours and conversations long forgotten. Brendan clenched and unclenched his fists. Aaron belonged to him. His was the only collar Aaron would ever wear.

But once Aaron recovered, he might allow another master to whip him. Images flooded his mind. Brendan growled. No, Aaron was his and his alone. He had no intention of sharing. But did he love Aaron? Did he love him enough to be his master? To help him through the coming months and years? Did he forgive Aaron for leaving? Did he forgive himself for not going after him?

Did he love Aaron? Yes, without a doubt, he loved Aaron. He always had. But the question was, did Aaron love him? He needed to find that out. Now was as good a time as any other.

Stretching, he looked at the last paragraph he'd written and smiled. He was finished. Normally, he'd go to the bar to have a celebratory drink before starting the next book. He could take Aaron out. It was Valentine's Day and most places would be crowded with couples, but maybe taking the man out would help his transition. Would help them both. Saving the document, he turned off the computer, shoved his phone into his pocket and went in search of Aaron.

"Aaron!" He called opening the door to his office.

He was suddenly aware of the complete silence of the house. He'd grown so used to Aaron's constant presence, he'd forgotten how quiet it could get. The hair on the back of his neck stood. He raced through the house looking for his lover and came up empty-handed. His blood ran cold. Damn it! What did Aaron think he was doing leaving his house without telling him? Pulling out his phone he dialled Harden's number and ran back to his bedroom, changing his clothes. He had an idea of where Aaron would go. And an un-collared slave looking for a hard master was bound to find one there.

"Where's Aaron?"

"He didn't tell you he called?"

"No. Where is he?"

"I picked him up two and a half hours ago. I dropped him off at my house so I could run some errands."

"You left him unsupervised?"

"Brendan, he's a big boy. He can take care of himself."

"He's been a slave with no freedom for nearly three years."

"That doesn't mean anything to me. I'm not into BDSM or any of that. He called and wanted to leave, said he'd put you out long enough and he was willing to go to a hotel. Hold on, I'm home," Harden answered curtly. "Shit!"

"What?" Brendan's heart sank.

"He's not here. The phone book is open to the number of a cab company. I don't know where he would have gone to."

"I do. I'll call you when I find him."

"You can't force him to come home with you."

"Yes. I. Can."

"How?"

"I'm collaring him."

"You're going to keep him? Permanently?" Harden asked, pressing the issue. He could hear the love and concern in his best friend's voice.

"Yes. Permanently."

"Do you love him?"

"More than anything, Harden."

"Find him and bring him home, brother."

"I promise," Brendan said, grabbing his black leather jacket from the hall closet.

Brendan pulled into an empty parking spot in front of the grey, non-descript building, a singular word, X-tacy, printed in white block letters on a door painted the same grey as the building. Clenching and unclenching his fists several times, he tried to focus on finding Aaron. They would deal with the fall-out later. Taking a deep breath, he got out of his car and walked to the blacked out door.

"Master Brendan, it's good see you here tonight, Sir."

"Did an uncollared slave come in alone in the last two hours?" Brendan asked the bouncer.

"I've only been on for an hour, so I can't say for sure. Do you want me to find out?"

"No. I'll find him."

The bouncer nodded and smiled.

Brendan made his way through the second door and into the club. He allowed his eyes to adjust to the dimmer light and headed through the maze of tables, booths, and bodies in various states of dress towards the bar. His gaze swept the patrons. He didn't see Aaron anywhere.

"Master, are you looking for something special tonight?" a young man asked from behind the bar.

"Yes, an uncollared male with long blond hair and a tattoo of a pair of handcuffs on his ass. Gorgeous."

"Yes, Master, he was going to be put on display, but I saw him leave with another man and he had collar and leash on."

"Shit!" Brendan swore. "What did the man look like?"

The young man hesitated, chewing on his lip.

"Tell me whatever you can. I need to know everything I can about the man he was with."

The bartender nodded. "Tall. Big. Mean looking," the bartender said, his gaze sweeping the area before he leant forwards. "I'm not supposed to say anything negative about patrons, especially the masters —"

"It's all right in this case."

The bartender nodded and continued, "— but he looked creepy, like he was one of those abusive types. Your friend didn't look happy to be going with him. He looked terrified."

Anger coursed through Brendan's body. He clenched and unclenched a fist then forced himself to relax. Nobody here knew Aaron. They didn't know Aaron belonged to him. "And nobody would've stopped them because neither one of them have been in here before."

"Well your friend hasn't, but the other man has been a several times. Left with someone new each time," the bartender replied. "Who are they, if I may ask, Master?"

"Normally, you can't, but if this man comes in again, get the owner immediately. If I'm right, he's a handler for a slave ring. And the other man, my friend, he belongs to me. Or will. Just took me a while to figure that out."

"Slave ring...as in non-consensual slavery?" The bartender blanched and gave a full body shiver.

Brendan nodded. "Have the manager call me if he has questions. I have to find out who that asshole is. More than that, I need to find Aaron before I lose him forever."

"Go find your sub. I'll take of things here," the bartender said before calling to another man.

Brendan ran for the door, yanking out his cell phone, dialling Harden's number as sped out of the club's parking lot. "What hotel were you at when Aaron freaked out?"

"The Castle Inn Motel on Eighth and State. Why?"

"He was here, but he left with one of his handlers."

"Handlers? Aren't they the people that tell rich people and celebrities where they need to go, how to get there and what they do once they're there?" Harden asked. Brendan heard the confusion and concern in his friend's voice.

"In this case, no. This guy was hired to keep slaves in line. And possibly to grab more."

"Oh shit! Is that why he flipped out?"

"Yes."

"I'll meet you there."

"Harden, if I'm right, this is going to be bad," Brendan said, driving as fast as he dared.

"I'll be okay."

"Aaron may not be."

"Then we'll have to help him."

Brendan flipped the phone closed and debated on calling the police as he pulled into the parking lot of the motel. He stared at the row of rooms, wondering which one held Aaron. Brendan stormed up to the office just when Harden flew into the parking lot. He paused long enough for Harden to catch up to him.

"Do you know this handler's name?"

Brendan shook his head.

"Why didn't you ask Aaron?"

"It was hard enough listening to what these men did to Aaron, let alone ask any names. I doubt he knew any of their names anyways. Was the guy you saw coming out of a room?"

"Think so. One-oh-nine, I think."

Brendan rang the bell calling for the desk clerk, hearing an "In a minute" from the open door. "Have you seen this man?" he asked a young woman, holding up his phone and showing her a picture of Aaron, he'd snapped while they'd been at the mall.

She shook her head. "No, sorry."

"Has the same guy been in room one-oh-nine for the past few days?"

"I don't have to tell you that," she replied.

"No, no you don't. But if my cousin dies because you won't answer a couple of questions, I will hold you personally, criminally, and financially responsible," Harden barked. "Not to mention the trouble you'll have with the feds when they find out you're allowing people to be sold here."

The woman visibly paled. "Yes. He's rented one-oh-eight and one-ten also. One-ten connects to one-oh-nine. There is a do-not-disturb sign on all of them. Housekeeping hasn't even been allowed in."

"Why would he do that?" Harden asked, cocking his head.

Brendan's heart sank. "He can keep slaves in one and use the others to keep people and police away from him. It buffers the noise. He might even sleep in a separate room from where he holds his victims."

"Did you say slaves?" The woman asked, backing up, her eyes wide in terror. "Should I call the police?"

Brendan nodded. "Do you have a key? I'd rather not break down your doors."

The woman nodded and handed him the keys to each of the rooms. Brendan thanked her, promised to return the keys when they were done and led the way outside and down the sidewalk towards the rooms he hoped would lead him to Aaron.

"You can't go any further," a man said stepping out in front of him, a second man following closely.

"Bullshit. I can and I will," Brendan looked the man and his partner up and down. Dark suits. Weapons they weren't careful in hiding. More voices came from the inside the room. Feds. He was sure of it. If not, then the state police.

"No, you can't. We're with the FBI."

"Figured that part out," Brendan sneered. "While you're here then, you can arrest the sonofabitch in room one-oh-nine for human trafficking."

"What do you know about that?"

"My understanding is that there are possibly three men in there, one of whom had escaped once already, so he's going to be beaten within an inch of his life, if not killed," Brendan growled, allowing his worry and rage to show. Anger worked in tandem with fear for Aaron's life. Shifting his weight, he widened his stance and crossed his arms, steeling his features. He dared the agents to defy him. The small step back the man took had him smiling internally.

"There isn't enough evidence —"

"I'm glad you're willing to put evidence before lives, but I don't need a warrant, I have a key and permission. So either help or stay the hell out of my way."

"Maybe we can use him," the second agent stated. "It's obvious he is going in regardless of what we say."

Brendan nodded.

As the pair talked amongst themselves, Brendan and Harden circumvented them and made their way towards the door. Slipping the key into the lock, a gloved hand landed on his shoulder. He looked over to the federal agent, nodded and gave the key to room one-oh-nine to Harden, pocketing the one to one-oh-eight. They unlocked and opened both doors

simultaneously. Chains meant to stop them allowed muffled screams to pierce the air. Red haze clouded Brendan's vision. And he shouldered the door, busting the flimsy chain.

His brain barely registered the three scared men chained and gagged in cages in the corner of the room, hidden from immediate view by the bed. He headed for the open bathroom door. Blood filled his vision. A tall, well muscled man stood with his back to the door, a multi-tailed whip swinging.

Aaron howled. A hand grabbed at Brendan's shoulder. Ignoring it, he ran, inserted himself between the two men and grabbed the handler's wrist with one hand and swung, his fist connecting with the larger man's jaw. The handler stumbled back. Brendan shouldered him back against the wall, eliciting a cry from him as Brendan pushed him further into the counter. A knee to the groin had the handler doubling over. Brendan's arm shot out, grabbing the man by his throat. Cocking his arm back, it was restrained from pummeling the man further.

"FBI. We'll take it from here," the man said calmly, nodding towards the bathtub.

Brendan took a deep breath, tried to control his emotions, before he released his hold on the handler. Nodding once, indicating that he knew they left him alone on purpose, he turned, focussing his attention on Aaron.

Behind him, someone was taking photographs, while someone else called for paramedics. He heard Harden yelling from the other room. Aaron was chained to the shower rod in the bathroom, facing away from the door. Brendan could tell by the strip of leather banded around his head that he was gagged, weights hung from a ball stretcher, a two-inch strip of leather wrapped around his balls, his head was hooded and bowed and his body sagged slightly. New welts joined old ones and several others had been reopened. Aaron's ass was bright red where it looked like he'd been paddled. Blood covered the man's back. Anger surged through him. No one had the right to whip Aaron. No one had the right to touch Aaron except him. Carefully, Brendan untied Aaron, helping him to the floor. Aaron shrunk back, his eyes glassy, burying his head in Brendan's chest.

"Aaron. Aaron. Love, come back to me. You're all right. You're safe now," Brendan crooned, holding Aaron to him, pressing a towel someone had handed him to the man's wounds. "I've got you. He's not going to ever touch you again. No one will. I promise."

"He said he was uncollared," the handler spat. "That means anyone can have him. Besides, he's a whore who has already been owned. And I represent his new owner. The one his previous owner willed him to."

Brendan forced himself to breathe and focus. Tearing the man limb from limb, regardless of how appealing it sounded, wasn't the answer. Brendan helped Aaron to stand, supporting as much of his weight as he could. "You represent his owner?"

"Who the hell do you think you are?" the man gasped out, struggling against the agents restraining him. "He asked for it. They all ask for it. Fucking beg for it."

"He's mine. You come after him again, and you'll wish you hadn't," Brendan seethed. "No one asks for this. You're an evil, abusive sonofabitch who should find himself at the receiving end of that whip or better yet...dead." Brendan ran one hand through Aaron's hair, holding the towels with the other one.

"The paramedics are here."

"Sir, you need to let the EMTs help him."

Brendan nodded. "Don't move that asshole yet." He knew the feds needed something besides his word that this man was part of the slave ring.

"W—wa—was scared I—I—I would n—never see you again," Aaron stammered, his voice cracking, his gaze concentrated on the floor.

"I know, love, I'm here now. I need you to do something for me."

"W—what?"

Brendan turned Aaron around to face the group. "Aaron, pet, do you recognise this man?" Brendan asked. "What do you know about him?"

"Yes, he...he's one of my handlers. Was," Aaron stammered. He paled and backed away and started to drop to his knees. Brendan stopped him, supporting him as much as he could. "One of the slave handlers my owner and others used. He's part of the slave ring. He beat us with whips, canes, or chains. E—electrocuted us. I—I didn't ask for this. I didn't want this or him or any of that. He never stopped no matter how much I begged. It made it worse."

"That's enough for me," one of the agents said. "We will have questions to ask and a statement to take."

Brendan nodded. A male and female dressed in identical uniforms identifying them as emergency medical technicians and each carrying a large red bag made their way into the

already cramped bathroom. Brendan moved to the side, turning Aaron so his back was to the paramedic and helped Aaron to kneel on the tiled floor, granting the EMTs access to do work on him. Brendan ran his hand through Aaron's hair, never losing contact with the man. He'd been terrified he'd never see Aaron again. Brendan blew out his breath and thanked God for bringing Aaron back to him. Too many things had fallen into place at the right time for him to not believe he'd had help.

Aaron gasped and winced as the blood-stained white towel was pulled away from the reopened wounds. Brendan watched and listened to the EMTs while trying to keep Aaron from slipping away from him. Brendan spoke quietly to Aaron, talking about the places he'd like to take the younger man, telling him how he should be treated and reminding him that not only was Brendan not mad at him, what happened wasn't Aaron's fault. In a matter of minutes, they had retrieved a gurney, helped Aaron to lie down on his stomach, cleaned what they could and applied pressure bandages.

"Do you have a hospital preference," the woman asked Aaron.

"County General," Brendan supplied.

The woman nodded and radioed it in. The other men would also be taken there.

"We need his statement."

"We generally prefer to do this alone," the second agent said.

Aaron paled, shrunk back and shook his head.

"No. He will answer all of your questions and tell you everything he can about that asshole and the slave ring, but I'm not leaving."

"Sir, I understand that you want to protect him, but sometimes it's easier for everyone if a loved one doesn't hear the details about what happened to their partner."

"I can't help him if I don't know what he's going through, where he's been and at least try to understand. I'm not guaranteeing that I won't kill the sonofabitch, though."

"That's good to know."

"You can talk to him after the docs have seen him," the male paramedic stated as they began to manoeuvre the gurney through the motel room. "You can meet us there."

"No!" Aaron shouted and started to push himself up.

"Aaron, pet, it'll be okay. I'll meet you at the hospital," Brendan answered, running a hand along the bare patch of skin at the back of Aaron's neck.

Aaron shook his head. "No!" Aaron screamed. "Won't go alone! Don't want to be kidnapped. No Brendan! No! Please, don't make me go!" Aaron's body shook uncontrollably.

Anger, fear and confusion boiled up. He wasn't sure what had happened or what Aaron was alluding to, but as strong as Aaron was, he could hurt himself or someone else if he didn't go along willingly.

"Either you let me ride along or I'll take him in my car. He's not going to go with you otherwise."

The woman hesitated, looked at her partner and nodded. Brendan tossed the keys to Harden, who was sitting on the edge of the bed, looking slightly off colour. As much as he wanted to reassure his friend, Aaron was his first priority.

"County General, Harden."

"Heard. Take care of him, Brendan. I'll meet you there."

Brendan nodded and climbed into the ambulance after the paramedic and gurney carrying Aaron. More ambulances had arrived and would transport the other men to the hospital. The agents would arrive soon and demand information from all of them. Brendan hoped he could actually listen to everything Aaron told them. The first time had been hard enough.

* * * *

Brendan paced the hospital corridor outside Aaron's hospital room. The last week and a half had been one of the hardest times in his life. He'd listened as Aaron had relived his ordeal and answered every question asked by the police and the two FBI agents, who had introduced themselves as Allen Burke and Carl Tennison and would be the primary contacts for this case. Brendan had stayed with him as the doctors and nurses came in and changed the dressings, scrubbing the wounds clean and giving out prognoses and then had excused himself under the guise of needing to take a shower shortly after the conversation between Harden and Aaron had turned to Aaron's submission and why he did it. Brendan had been surprised at the genuine look of interest on Harden's face and left only after he was certain of

Harden's intentions. He would never have guessed Harden would be interested in the BDSM lifestyle, let alone the submissive side.

Turning at the sound of his name, Brendan groaned internally at the sight of the two FBI agents.

"What is it now?" Brendan asked holding up a hand, stopping the two men.

"We wanted to let you know that Mr. Langford will need to return to New York to testify."

"Why?" Brendan crossed his arms. He didn't want Aaron out of his sight or reliving more than was absolutely necessary.

"His testimony will be vital against the remaining handlers and ring leaders of the slave operation. He can identify most, if not all, of them. And what he's gone through—"

"Is bad enough," Brendan interrupted the agent. "Now you want to put him on trial?"

"How he got involved could come up in trial," Agent Burke acknowledged.

"Would, not could. We all know that. I won't have him feeling bad about that also." Brendan shook his head.

"At least think about it. More than likely, though, you'll get a summons," Agent Tennison said firmly. "It might go towards helping you both heal."

"Not necessarily. Is his testimony necessary for a conviction?" Brendan looked from one agent to the other.

"It will be instrumental in solidifying a conviction."

"I will talk with him about it and see if he'll be up to it. If that is all gentlemen, I will be taking him home today and I don't want him further upset," Brendan said, blocking the door to Aaron's room.

"That's all for now."

Brendan watched the men walk back down the corridor and disappear around a corner. Catching a glimpse of the clock, he headed back into Aaron's room, interrupting the conversation the cousins were having.

"What is it, Brendan?" Harden asked, turning to face him.

"Feds dropped by. They wanted to let me know that they were probably going to need Aaron to testify in New York against the members of the slave ring."

"I want to do it."

"Aaron, I don't think you understand what could happen," Brendan said, holding Aaron's hand.

"Brendan, I not only understand, but I want to do this. I need to do this. Please. For me. For us."

"And if I say no?"

Aaron swallowed and took a deep breath. "I'll simply go around you. I *will* do this. No one should have to endure what I did. My desires aren't wrong, but what those assholes did is."

Brendan cocked his head and studied Aaron for several moments before finally nodding his agreement. It both surprised him and pleased him that Aaron would go against his orders. He knew for his own peace of mind that Aaron would need to be able to make his own decisions. He would welcome some disobedience from Aaron, it would reassure him that Aaron was capable of forming his own thoughts, drawing conclusions and more importantly standing up for himself. He wanted to know that Aaron could think for himself without someone always telling him what to do. He was certain they both needed that for them to be happy.

"Even if you were going to be punished?" Brendan asked.

"Without a doubt," Aaron said, struggling to get up. "They destroyed lives. They took a part of me. Most of those boys wouldn't have chosen that. They didn't want that. Nobody should be forced into that."

Brendan laid a restraining hand on Aaron's shoulder. "Calm down, pet."

"But —"

"I have no intention of stopping you, I would have encouraged you and I will support you, but this is not something I would have ordered you to do or not do," Brendan said firmly, running a hand along Aaron's cheek. "It is not my place to make that decision for you, but to support you and your decision in whatever way I can."

"You aren't going to tell me what to do?" Aaron asked, his green eyes swirling with confusion.

Brendan shook his head. "No. You are perfectly capable of making that decision yourself. Mindless obedience is not fulfilling for me, nor do I believe it is fulfilling for you."

Aaron nodded then shook his head. "I — I like being able to go out, but —"

"I know you're not used to it. I know you've been mistreated and don't know what to expect from me, or life in general. We are going to take this slow and one step at a time. I want to know, in time when you're ready, what dreams you might have, if there is something that you might want to do."

"I want—" Aaron started to protest.

"Settle down. We have time. You need to rest and heal. The docs are letting you come home today, but you don't have to go anywhere or make any decisions right now. You are coming home with me," Brendan said, looking from Aaron to Harden and back again.

Harden nodded. "I'm glad to hear that. I think you two belong together."

"So do I," Brendan said, stroking Aaron's cheek. "So do I."

Chapter Six

Aaron squeezed the arms of the wheelchair as the nurse pushed him towards the hospital entrance. Brendan had hardly left his side and Harden had tried to reassure him that Brendan cared about him, but he was still scared. What if Brendan didn't want him or was disgusted with him?

"Are you scared to go home with your boyfriend?" the woman asked gently as they entered the elevator. "Did he give you those injuries?"

Aaron shook his head. "No, he saved my life. He rescued me from the man who did it. I'm just afraid he won't want me. The doc says some of the scars may fade with time, but they'll always be there. And even if they weren't there physically, we both know they are."

"Anyone who is as protective of you as he is, isn't going to leave any time soon. It's evident he loves you a lot." The woman smiled, patting his shoulder.

Aaron nodded and scanned the lobby entrance for Brendan, relief filling him when he saw a car come to a halt and his man jump out. Brendan helped him out of the chair and into the seat, handing him the seatbelt before closing the door. Taking a deep breath, Aaron buckled himself in. It was a small thing, being able to buckle himself in, but he was realising there was a wealth of emotions and meaning behind it. Master John would have done everything himself, and while he wouldn't have spent any time with Aaron—let alone the entire time in the hospital—one of his handlers would have been there...*if* they would have even taken him to the hospital. Aaron shuddered at the memories and the realisation of just how helpless and vulnerable he'd been.

"Aaron, pet, what's wrong? Are you cold?" Brendan asked, laying a hand on his arm.

Aaron jumped. "Aah."

"Shh, I didn't mean to scare you. What is going on?" Brendan gently ran a knuckle across his jaw.

"Um, I was just thinking."

"Will you share it with me?"

Aaron looked at Brendan then turned his attention out the window. Brendan was asking him. Instinctively, he spread his legs further apart, inviting Brendan's touch. Brendan asked, not demanded. He could say no. Brendan wouldn't like it, but he knew Brendan wouldn't push, wouldn't demand. "I—I don't think that...I don't think that Master John would've taken me to the hospital," he said finally.

He heard the belt release and felt it slide across his body and ignored it. Moments later, Brendan wrapped his arms around him and pulled him towards him. Aaron turned and clung to Brendan, allowing Brendan's words and presence calm him down.

"Can we go home please, Master?" Aaron asked, slowly pushing away from Brendan.

"Of course. Buckle up," Brendan answered releasing him.

Aaron winced, reaching for the seatbelt. His back still hurt, but it was beginning to heal. He'd be fine in a few weeks. Would Brendan still want him in several weeks? Was he caring for him out of guilt? How would things change when they got home? Brendan started the car and pulled out of the hospital driveway and onto the main street. Aaron watched out the window, recognising some of the buildings until it became too much and he closed his eyes, relying on Brendan to get them home.

* * * *

"We're home, pet," Brendan said softly. "I'll come around and help you."

Aaron opened his eyes, recognised Brendan's house and smiled. Brendan pulled into the garage and parked the car before retrieving his things from the back seat and then came around and helped him out of the car. Aaron wasn't convinced he needed as much help as Brendan was giving, but he enjoyed the feeling and the nearness. He hadn't been able to touch Brendan properly the entire time he'd been in the hospital.

"To bed with you," Brendan said, unlocking the door and letting them in then locking it behind them.

"Do I have to? I've been in bed for a week." He knew he was pouting, but he was tired of lying down, of being still. He wanted to move. To do something. Anything.

"Are you going to argue with me?" Brendan asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I don't want to disobey, I just don't want to stay in bed anymore. I'd rather be with you. I'll sit and behave," Aaron pleaded, following Brendan to the master bedroom.

"Maybe tomorrow you can sit in my office while I work, or outside on the deck, but today, you're to go to bed. Now, pet."

Aaron nodded. "Yes, Master. Um, Master, will you... I mean, I know I shouldn't ask, but, um, will you...will you make love to me?"

"Now?"

Aaron nodded. "Please. I want to belong to you again."

"Is this what you want?"

"More than anything. Please, make me yours. Fill my ass with your cock. Hard and fast, so I will never forget that I'm yours."

"Yes, but there is a matter of punishment. Just because I understand why you did, doesn't mean that you can get away with it," Brendan said firmly. "I think you need to be punished for running away first and I don't think that is something we should do tonight."

"I would rather sleep with your whip marks covering his, than just his. He was a mean bastard, and I'm not going to let him keep me from my life or from my desires. I want this. I want to belong to you. I want to follow your rules, and to feel the kiss of your whip when I've broken them."

"Are you telling me that you want me to punish you tonight? After what you've been through the last couple of weeks?"

Aaron nodded. "Please, Master," he begged.

"Strip," Brendan ordered.

Heart pounding in his chest, Aaron slowly began to remove his sweatshirt before letting it fall to the ground. Turning around, Brendan pinned him gently against the wall. Aaron arched his back, wincing at the pain and braced himself. Brendan tugged on his chin until he was looking at his master. Brendan slanted his mouth over Aaron's, his tongue pushing into him, tasting, taking. Aaron relaxed, welcoming the invasion. Aaron's heart melted. It was better than he remembered.

Brendan slid his hand into the waistband of Aaron's sweatpants and cupped his balls. Aaron moaned and arched into Brendan, silently begging for his master's possession. He'd been horrified when his handler had shown up at the club, demanding he leave with him

and so relieved when Brendan had found him. He knew there had been others there during the rescue, but it was Brendan's presence that he had sought out and clung to.

"Mine," Brendan said, squeezing his cock.

Aaron gasped. "Always and only, Master."

"Finish stripping."

Quickly Aaron removed his clothes and had started to clasp his hands behind his back, when he was stopped.

"Not until you're healed," Brendan said firmly, grabbing his hands and returning them to his side. "When I punish you, you will know it. Tonight, is about reminding you who you *choose* to belong to. It is also to remind you not to worry your master. Ever."

Aaron nodded and followed Brendan further into the bedroom. Brendan moved to a chair in the corner of the large bedroom and sat down. He patted his knee and Aaron positioned his body over his master's knees. A spanking. Brendan was going to spank him.

People...submissives get spanked. Slaves get whipped.

The echo of the words from the handlers and owners mocked him. Brendan was going to spank him. The idea held more excitement than it should have, but he refused to analyse it further. It was Brendan's hand, the hand of the man he'd loved for years.

"Do not hide reactions from me. Do you know what a safe word is?"

The word sounded vaguely familiar, but he couldn't put a meaning to it at the moment. "I—I don't know. It sounds familiar, but I don't know." Would Brendan think less of him? Would he change his mind about the spanking?

"Shhh," Brendan said, brushing a hand across his neck and buttocks. "It's a word that you say when something gets too much and you need me to stop. Generally it's a word that you won't normally say. If this becomes too much, if it brings up memories that bother you in *any* way, I want you to tell me. Immediately. For now, if you need me to stop or it becomes too much, I want you to simply say stop. And I will."

"But, I want don't want you to stop," Aaron protested. "I want—"

"Hush. You have no more control over the pain and memories overwhelming your mind than I can cause the sun to rise."

"Do you want me to count, Master?"

"No, I want you to think about why you're getting spanked. I can count on my own."

"Yes, Master."

“Ready?”

Aaron nodded. “Yes, Master.”

Brendan ran a hand over his cheeks. Anticipation and excitement coursed through his body, abated only slightly by the fear of what was coming. Brendan was going to punish him for causing him worry. Brendan had worried about him and had come after him. Aaron had never stopped loving Brendan—it had been that love that had helped him get through those years, had given him the courage to leave the hospital and had comforted him on the long road back home.

Aaron yelped in surprise as Brendan brought his hand down on his ass. Two things passed through his mind within seconds of each other. First, he hadn’t received a hand spanking since he was three or four. Certainly none of his masters would have soiled their hands dealing directly with a slave. Not when there were implements available to inflict more pain. And second was that he could already feel the hand-shaped mark raising.

Brendan’s hand alternated cheeks, continuing until not only his ass felt on fire, but so did the tops of his thighs. He whimpered and moaned. His cock was hard and dripping, rubbing against Brendan’s cloth-covered thigh. The combination of pain and pleasure was overriding his brain so he couldn’t focus, couldn’t count out his punishment.

Brendan ran his fingers over his inflamed skin for several moments before swatting his butt lightly and telling him to get down. Aaron knelt, his knees wide, his hands clasped behind his back, and bowed his head. Chewing on his lower lip, he wondered if should speak without asking for permission or if he needed to ask first. Every master was different and he didn’t know exactly what Brendan—*Master* Brendan—wanted from him. He’d been spanked for worrying his master, but he’d enjoyed the spanking. The feel of Brendan’s hands on his body had felt right, even the discipline had felt right.

He’d been a complete fool to leave again.

“Sit quietly there until I return.”

Aaron nodded. He watched Brendan stand and leave until the older man disappeared from sight. Pain shot out from his butt and thighs and radiated outwards. He forced himself to sit still, relishing the pain from his first spanking. He hadn’t reacted like this since the first days with Master Greg. Did that mean the feelings would change? Would Brendan change? Had Master Greg changed? Aaron wasn’t sure. He hadn’t really known anything about his former master.

"Up into bed," Brendan said, running a hand over Aaron's head.

Aaron started and nodded. Carefully he stood, wincing in pain as his body stretched and moved, obeying Brendan's gentle command. Sitting on the edge of the bed, a new wave of pain rolled through him. He still found himself hard and dripping with need. He enjoyed punishments administered by Brendan. He enjoyed this one, though he was sure there would be ones that he wouldn't enjoy – that was the nature of punishments. Aaron stared at the ground, thrilled with the new insight the spanking had given him.

"Is there something you need, pet?" Brendan asked, squatting down in front of him.

Aaron fought the instinct to slide off the bed, to be lower than his master. He knew Brendan wasn't being submissive. There was nothing about his body language or behaviour that could be mistaken for submissiveness. The posture was that of a caring partner. Aaron wasn't sure he rated that status either.

"Thank you for spanking me," Aaron said quietly, his gaze focused on the carpet, unable to meet Brendan's gaze.

"Tell me what you're thinking." Brendan reached out and forced him to look at him.

"Master Greg and Master John both said that only people were spanked. Slaves were whipped," Aaron replied while wondering if Brendan would know if he didn't tell the whole truth.

"Greg and John were mean, sadistic bastards who should never been allowed near –" Brendan stopped himself mid-sentence, but Aaron could see the fury in his lover's eyes for several moments before it disappeared, replaced with controlled calm. "What else are you thinking about? What are you afraid to tell me? Or are you afraid to believe it in yourself?"

Aaron shrugged and took a deep breath. "I – I liked the spanking. It hurt, but I felt alive and invigorated."

Brendan smiled and nodded. "I noticed as much. Does it bother you? Does getting turned on by pain bother you?"

"I don't know."

Brendan raised an eyebrow.

Aaron felt the heat rise on his cheeks. "Yes. I know in the beginning it bothered me to know that I wanted to get hurt and to have someone tell me what to do. But then I met Master Greg and several others who made it okay. In the early days with Master Greg, I enjoyed it. I looked forward to pleasing him, to knowing that he would take care of all of the

little things and I could just be with him. Then it started to get harder to please him. He would get angry over little things or change the rules or the way something needed to be done but not tell me. After a while it just hurt. It never felt good. But I was used to it. I didn't know that it should have remained... It—"

"Shhh." Brendan stood then sat down on the bed and pulled Aaron onto his lap. "It's okay for pain to turn you on. There are two things that you must always keep in mind. First is that you must trust your master. Trust that they will take care of you and that while they may push your limits, they will not ignore them. If you can't trust them, it is always okay to respectfully walk away. Regardless of who it is. Even me."

Aaron shook his head vehemently. "I trust you. More than anyone else, I trust you."

"Even so, it is something that you must remember."

Aaron nodded. "And the second?"

"The second is communication. You must talk to me, tell me when you need something, want something or don't want something. Is there something you've wanted to try, but haven't? Something I suggest that you don't want to repeat? Whatever it is, you need to remember to talk to me. I can't help you if you don't let me know when something is bothering you. And never ever worry me again."

"I will do my best, Master." Aaron chewed on his lip. Brendan hadn't told him what to do get his permission to talk.

"What is it?" Brendan manoeuvred Aaron back on to the bed and stood.

"Master, will you tell me how to ask for permission to speak?" Aaron finally asked.

"Tell me what your previous master wanted."

"Master John never let us speak. Ever. But Master Greg wanted me to kneel and lick his hand. He said that submission was full time, that there were no scenes. Scenes were for people who simply play at domination and submission. They don't truly live it."

"I thought as much," Brendan said quietly. "He is wrong. Even for the full time submissive there can be scenes—those times when you go to the playroom for more bondage, punishment, training, or whatever reason it is given. You should find pleasure and fulfilment while serving a master, not because you don't have a choice or you'll be beaten, even when you break the rules and are punished. There must be trust and an understanding between you and your master. The correction for the mistake should fit the mistake, in whatever way the two of you agree to it. Each submissive is different and what works for one

doesn't necessarily work for another. For some a small spanking is enough, for others, it is a flogging and for still others, it is a denial of being able to serve their master or mistress. Now, what did you want to ask?"

Ducking his head, Aaron wrung his hands. Asking for what he wanted was making him distinctly uncomfortable, but he couldn't be certain of the reason. He'd had no problem earlier asking Brendan to fuck him. But now that Brendan was asking what he wanted, he suddenly wanted nothing more than to do whatever Brendan wanted him to.

"Ask."

Aaron shook his head.

"Ask." The firmness in Brendan's voice sent shivers through Aaron's body straight to his cock, hardening it once again after having softened during their conversation.

"Will you fuck me? Please."

Brendan smiled. "Was that so hard?"

Aaron nodded and started to reach out for Brendan, catching himself in time. He didn't have permission to touch. Brendan caught his hand and brought it back to where it had been aimed. The contact flamed his need. Brendan dragged a finger along Aaron's cock. Aaron gasped, thrusting instinctively, fresh pain racing along his heated flesh.

"Please," he begged. "More."

"Never be afraid to ask for something. I always have the right to say no, but you need to ask," Brendan said, tapping the tip of Aaron's cock with just enough force for it to sting without hurting or inflicting any damage. Aaron moaned, thrusting towards Brendan's hand again.

"Y – yes Master. I will try."

"I know it will be hard at first, but you will learn, as long as this is what you want."

"I am happiest serving and pleasing you. It has become a need. I think that is why I didn't try harder to escape from either of my previous owners."

Brendan nodded. "That is something for you to look into and to discuss with a counsellor. Now, onto your hands and knees. I want to see that bright red ass of yours," Brendan ordered.

Aaron scrambled into the centre of the king-size bed. Aaron moaned and clenched the sheets as Brendan raked his hands over his inflamed skin. Pre cum dripped from Aaron's cock.

"Give me your hands. Remember what we talked about. You need to tell me if anything gets too difficult for you."

Aaron nodded and widened his legs, stretching out low to the bed so that his arms were straight out in front of him. Brendan grabbed a set of chains from behind one of the wooden slates in the mission style headboard and connected them to the leather cuffs. A length of rope was wound between Aaron's thigh and calf on first one leg than the other, forcing his body closer to the mattress. Next Brendan connected a thin chain to his Prince Albert piercing and the lorum piercing and added a small amount of weight to the chain. Aaron groaned.

He watched Brendan strip, grab a condom and the lube from the nightstand, before crawling onto the bed and positioning himself near Aaron's head. Smiling, Aaron opened his mouth and engulfed the head of Brendan's cock. Inhaling deeply, Aaron savoured the taste. Brendan moaned. Aaron licked and sucked, his hole twitching in anticipation as Brendan tore open the condom wrapper.

Brendan pulled out of his mouth, bent down and kissed him. Aaron watched him roll on the condom before disappearing from sight. He felt Brendan's fingers travel over his body. Aaron arched into the touch. He heard the bottle of lube open and gasped when one lubed finger entered his body. Aaron bit back a moan. Brendan was taking the time to stretch him, one more difference between his new master and his old ones. Although, he wouldn't be opposed to Brendan taking him once or twice without stretching him, to feel the bite of pain before pleasure over rode him. Brendan finger-fucked him for several minutes before adding a second finger, and then a third and fourth. Aaron pushed back as far as he could, meeting Brendan's fingers, needing more of his master inside of him.

Brendan removed his fingers and slapped his ass.

"Ah!" Aaron jumped.

"After the HIV test comes back clean several times, then we will forgo condoms. No one else will ever penetrate you again," Brendan said, pushing the head of his cock into Aaron's waiting hole.

"Yes, Master, if it pleases you. I can hardly wait," Aaron said, wanting to push back and impale himself on Brendan's cock. Brendan was claiming him. It was almost as good as a collar. His heart had always belonged to Brendan, now his body would also. One day he

hoped Brendan would collar him, but for now he savoured Brendan's touch and the calming influence he had on him and his emotions.

"It pleases me. Your ass is mine, only mine," Brendan said pushing in slowly.

"All of me is only yours."

"Yes, you are."

Brendan's movement stopped. Aaron's body adjusted to the welcomed intrusion. Brendan pulled out almost all the way and thrust back in. Brendan set an agonisingly slow pace, burying himself fully inside Aaron each time, pegging his prostate, the effects ricocheting through his body, settling in his already hard cock. Aaron's body tensed.

"Master! Can I come?"

"Not yet," Brendan ground out.

Aaron felt the increase in pace, and Brendan's grip tightened on his hips. Brendan reached around and grabbed Aaron's cock, and he pulled, matching the rhythm he'd set. Brendan thrust deep and pulsed. Cum filled the condom, and for the first time, Aaron despised the barrier that separated them.

"Now, pet!" Brendan ordered.

Aaron erupted, sending pearly white ropes of semen onto the bed. "Master!"

Brendan pulled out of him and moved off the bed. Aaron's head dropped onto his arms. Moments later a warm washcloth had cleaned him off.

"You look beautiful like that, pet."

Aaron blushed. "Thank you, Master."

Brendan released him from the ropes and unchained his wrists. "Use the bathroom and come right back."

Aaron nodded and obeyed, returning quickly. He slid under the covers next to Brendan.

"Give me your wrists," Brendan said with the chains in his hands.

Aaron snuggled closer to Brendan and raised his arms over his head. Brendan reconnected the chains to his cuffs before leaving the room. He returned several minutes later and cleansed the wounds on his back, reapplied the antibiotic ointment and bandages before taking care of the supplies and flipping off the lights.

"Now, I know you aren't going anywhere," Brendan said, pulling him closer and wrapping an arm around him.

* * * *

"Time to get up sleepy head." Brendan kissed Aaron and rubbed the man's neck.

He'd laid claim to Aaron last night. Essentially, he'd promised Aaron that he was going to collar him. The thought of anyone else touching Aaron had brought out a jealous streak he didn't know he had. He'd spent most of last night trying to sort out his feelings. He'd come to terms with the idea of wanting Aaron always with him, but he hadn't reconciled his heart. He'd never really stopped loving Aaron. He wanted to believe Aaron wouldn't run again, but he wasn't sure. He could take him to the club and give him free rein of the Doms there.

Brendan clenched his fists at the thought. Aaron was his and nobody else's. They would just have to work it out. He wanted Aaron. He loved him.

Brendan blew out a breath. He wasn't sure the idea of loving or not loving Aaron had ever been an issue. More, it was the fact of the betrayal and the pain of Aaron's leaving that had been the hardest thing for him to deal with.

"Master?"

"We've a busy day today. Are you up to making breakfast for us?" Brendan asked, releasing Aaron's arms to massage his arms and shoulders.

Aaron nodded.

Brendan rubbed a hand over Aaron's ass, smiling when the other man pushed against his hand. "Go on, get busy, or we'll never get out of bed," Brendan said, slapping him.

Brendan returned to his office and was working on his latest novel when a still-naked Aaron knocked on the door informing him breakfast was ready. While it didn't necessarily bode well for his writing time, he could definitely get used to Aaron being around all of the time. Clothes might be something he would need to have Aaron wear in the future, but he enjoyed looking and touching Aaron whenever he chose.

He sat down at the table and waited for Aaron to serve him, before telling Aaron to serve himself and join him. "This is very good. But if you're going to continue cook in the nude, we'll have to get you an apron so you don't get burned," Brendan said after taking a bite. Reaching under the table, he squeezed Aaron's thigh.

"Thank you, Master." Aaron blushed.

"Does praise make you uncomfortable?" Brendan asked.

Aaron nodded. "Only slightly. I'm not used to it, that's all."

"I see. I've made an appointment for you this morning with a counsellor to talk about what you went through while you were gone. I appreciate your willingness to tell me what happened, but right now, I think it's best that you talk to someone who doesn't want to rip the responsible parties limb from limb and, more importantly, can help you deal with it and heal properly. A safe person to talk to about any insecurities or other issues that might come up. Afterwards, we are going to meet Harden for lunch and then in the afternoon we have an appointment for us to see a lawyer friend of mine so we are prepared for the upcoming trial and news coverage." Brendan watched Aaron closely to gauge his reaction.

Aaron paled and swallowed. "We have to be outside the whole time?"

"The appointments are necessary."

"I understand that. I just wish they'd been on different days so I could ease into things. I wasn't allowed outside. I certainly wasn't allowed to walk around without chains on."

"You'd feel better with a collar on?" Brendan asked. The time it had taken for Aaron to get home evidently hadn't softened his reaction to the real world. Brendan squeezed Aaron's thigh. "Coming home must have been terrifying."

Aaron nodded. "It was easier in some ways because I knew I had to make it back here. But this...this is different. I belong to you, you said you'd protect me, but to be that exposed where anybody could see me, could find me... I—"

Brendan heard the pleading in Aaron's voice, bordering on near-hysteria. Standing, he pulled the smaller man up and into his arms, hugging him tight. He ran his fingers down his back. "I'll be with you, but you are going to these appointments. I meant what I said about no one else touching you. You belong with me and to me." Brendan released him and they sat back down to finish eating. "Eat up."

"Yes, Master."

They ate the remainder of their breakfast in companionable silence, broken only with Brendan asking the occasional question about what Aaron had been reading. Aaron seemed to enjoy simple things like reading—an activity that he'd had consistently refused to do before he left. The Aaron he now knew was vastly different from the one who had left him three years ago. He knew things would be different and hard for Aaron, and he hoped the counsellor would be able to help Aaron readjust to life.

"Clean up, get dressed and then come see me in my office," Brendan said, getting up from the table. He kissed Aaron lightly and headed to his office after stopping in his bedroom. He wasn't completely surprised by Aaron needing a physical reminder to reassure him, but it bothered him nonetheless. It reinforced the need for Aaron to see a counsellor.

"Master Brendan?" Aaron asked, knocking on the door jam.

"Come here," Brendan said, patting his knee. Aaron crawled onto his lap and sighed. "We have to discuss the rules, but there is no time this morning. However, when the door is open, you don't have to knock. Just come in and stand by me and wait. You asked for something to remind you that you belong to me, something to reassure you."

"I'm sorry, Master, I shouldn't have asked."

"No, it's all right, love. I need to know when you're either uncomfortable or need something. I told you last night that you needed to talk to me. Up, and take off your jeans."

Aaron nodded, stood and pulled down his jeans, revealing his lack of underwear.

"Do you always go commando?" Brendan asked, running his hands over Aaron's ass. "Bend over."

"Only when I have clothes on, Master." Aaron smiled, obeying.

Brendan chuckled and retrieved a small butt plug and a bottle of lube from the desk drawer where he'd placed them along with a leather paddle. Lubing the plug, he flipped the bottle's lid closed and stuck it back in the drawer, before using the excess lube on Aaron's ass and shoving one finger into the man's waiting ass, eliciting a moan.

Brendan removed his finger and replaced it with the plug. "Push back," he ordered, pushing the toy into Aaron's ass.

"Ah. Oh...ah. Thank you, Master."

"Now get dressed. You will call me Brendan around others unless they understand our lifestyle."

"Even around Harden? We talked about it, about the whole BDSM lifestyle, and he knows I call you Master. He already knew you were a master."

Brendan nodded as Aaron pulled on his jeans, unsure if he was surprised or not that Aaron would want to call him Master around his cousin. "Around Harden, Master is fine."

Chapter Seven

Aaron looked around his master's bedroom and sighed contently as he put his clothes neatly away in the dresser his master had moved into the room for him. The past couple of weeks had been a learning experience for both of them, an emotional roller coaster that had required patience and talking through things in order to make it through the day sometimes. Aaron couldn't imagine another master who would have taken care of him like Brendan had. Emotions he'd both clung to and buried resurfaced, and he found himself always wanting to be near his lover. A position Brendan had welcomed.

Heading into the kitchen, Aaron smiled, the plug in his ass shifting with every step. It had given him the reassurance that he both needed and wanted. It was almost as good as collar. Brendan inserted it before they went out and removed it after dinner. Days he went to counselling were emotionally exhausting, prompting Brendan to send him to bed for an hour every time. He'd hoped Brendan would have joined him this afternoon like he had the other day, but he hadn't.

Today's meeting with the counsellor had gone well and he was scheduled for weekly meetings for the next several months. Guilt had crept up this afternoon and had eaten at him after he'd seen Brendan pull out his credit card to pay for the session. He'd told Brendan how he'd felt after his master had asked him what was wrong and demanded the truth. Brendan had reminded him that it wasn't his concern and that not only did he want to do it, but as Aaron's master, he needed to do it. Brendan wanted him healthy and that included his mental health. Aaron had wanted to snuggle into Brendan right then, but today they had gone out again for lunch, with Harden joining them at the restaurant, and he hadn't been able to. Instead Brendan had let him place one hand on his thigh.

While Brendan had helped him decide what to eat at the restaurant when the plethora of choices had sent him reeling, Brendan flatly refused to tell him what he wanted for dinner at home, leaving it to Aaron to decide what they were having. It was a small step...and one he wasn't completely comfortable with. The last thing he wanted to do was upset Brendan.

Aaron took a deep breath and tried to refocus. He knew the future was uncertain, and his own recovery was a ways off, but he knew with absolute certainty that this is where he wanted to be, in Brendan's arms and someday in Brendan's heart, with Brendan's collar around his neck. Looking through the cupboards, Aaron opted for spaghetti and garlic bread with mixed vegetables. Aaron chewed on his lip as he gathered the necessary ingredients for dinner. Of the thousand or so books that Brendan owned, not one of them was a cookbook. A cookbook would have ideas on things they could try. He wondered if he should ask his master to pick one up for him.

After putting the finishing touches on dinner, Aaron set the table and went to Brendan's office. He paused outside the door momentarily before he walked in and knelt on the pillow beside Brendan's chair, waiting for his master to acknowledge him. That too had changed over the weeks. Aaron had wanted to kneel, not stand. The counsellor had reminded him to tell Brendan what he needed and wanted. When he and Brendan had talked later, he'd told Brendan about how the appointments were going, and how he preferred kneeling over standing—the way it made him feel—and asked if they could try it. After three days, Brendan had agreed to keep it that way.

Brendan's fingers toyed with his hair, trailing down his neck. "Dinner time already?"

"Yes, Master."

"Let me save this and I'll be right out. I have a surprise for you tonight."

Aaron's stomach flipped. His master had a surprise for him. Aaron nodded. "Yes, Master." He waited for Brendan to release his hair before standing and leaving. He had dinner dished and waiting when Brendan arrived.

They had talked about the counselling session over their meal, with Aaron finally asking his master if he could have a small cookbook. Brendan had agreed and offered to take him to both the library and the bookstore so he could try a couple. The request had led to questions about where he had learned to cook. After reminding Brendan of the little he had learned from his mom, he'd admitted to having to cook for Master Greg. Brendan had scowled then, a frown that had deepened when Aaron had gone on to explain that he'd been punished for everything in the meal that was wrong until he'd learned to perfect his skills. Brendan had punished him for worry and for minor infractions here and there, so Aaron doubted it was the fact that Master Greg had punished him, which was causing Brendan's

reaction, but more likely it was how he was punished or the fact that it was Master Greg. Brendan hated his past masters.

"Go into the bedroom and dress in the things that are laid out on the bed," Brendan said, walking into the kitchen from the dining room.

"Yes, Master," Aaron answered, washing the counters after the last of the dishes were loaded into the dishwasher. Aaron's stomach flipped again and he smiled. Brendan had a surprise for him. Then Aaron frowned. Brendan only had him get dressed when they were leaving the house or when someone besides Harden came over. Chewing his lip, he made his way down the hall towards the master bedroom.

"Oh!" Aaron gasped and clamped a hand over his mouth.

"I take it you like it, pet?" Brendan asked from behind him.

"Yes, Master." Aaron nodded.

"Hurry up then," Brendan said, kissing the back of his neck. "Hands on the bed and bend over. Legs wide."

Aaron quickly obeyed, clutching the bedspread tightly as the plug was removed. Training had him staying where he was, listening as Brendan walked into the adjoining master bathroom and water was turned on and then off. Aaron frowned. His master was cleaning his toy, a job he should've done. Chewing his lip, he waited for Brendan to return.

A large hand ran up his thigh and over his ass, trailing up his back. "My beautiful pet. Are you happy here?" Brendan asked, one finger toying with his hole. Aaron wiggled his butt. "Delicious, but not now. Hold still and answer my question."

A lump formed in his throat and he stopped moving. "Happier than I ever could have imagined, Master," Aaron replied, ignoring the spark of hope the question generated.

"Get dressed. Put on only what is on the bed. Nothing more and nothing less," Brendan said, pushing a thin plug into his ass.

Aaron nodded and stood. Aaron stared at the leather harness. Straps went over his shoulders, around his chest and waist, with one strap with a ring attached to it hanging down. Slipping the straps over his shoulder, Aaron stood still as Brendan fastened them snugly, locking them in place with small locks. Carefully, Aaron manoeuvred his cock and balls through the cock ring. He slid on a pair of tight leather shorts and then buckled wrist and ankle cuffs on, waiting as Brendan locked them in place before kneeling before his master. Brendan placed a stiff leather collar around his neck. Aaron's heart was racing as it

was locked in place. It reminded him of how much he wanted Brendan, how much he wanted to belong to the older man. Brendan then pulled out a pair of jeans, a sweatshirt, socks, shoes and a coat and ordered him to finish dressing.

* * * *

Aaron shifted uncomfortably in the car, his wrists chained together at the back of his neck. His master hadn't said more than a handful of words since he'd finished dressing and those were only giving him orders—first into the car, and then to remind him to be on his best behaviour and to obey him. Every time Brendan had touched him, Aaron had tensed as his lover positioned him the way he wanted. Brendan still hadn't truly put him through his paces. He didn't know if the positions Masters Greg and John had taught him would work for Brendan. Aaron chewed his lip. What if he embarrassed Master Brendan wherever they were heading?

His nerves were taut and on edge by the time they pulled into the parking of a beige and grey, nearly windowless building. The white dagger-like font emblazoned a single word on the awning over the black glass doors. *Chaynze*. It was a better club than X-tasy, the club where his handler—former handler, he corrected himself—had found him. Where he'd found the other men who had also been kidnapped in order to sell them into slavery and return all of them to Master John's business associates. He hadn't been able to get into Chaynze before—they had a strict membership policy and at the time, he'd barely had his driver's license. Without a member willing to vouch for him, he hadn't been given an application. As his master's guest, he had a way in. He'd gone to X-tasy to find a master who would accept him. Tonight, he entered Chaynze at the end of his master's leash.

The last few weeks with Brendan had been the best he'd known in years, had been better than he remembered of their time together before he'd left. As a lover, friend and Master, Brendan had been patient and gentle, willing to explore his likes and dislikes with him. But his master still hadn't put him through his paces. Doubt crept in. What if Brendan hadn't put him through his paces because he didn't want him? Or wanted to do it in public, so that other masters could see? This sort of club would have respectable masters—maybe that was what Brendan had been waiting for. Where he far enough along in his recovery to

be put on display for other masters to see, so if one was interested he could be given to them with minimal worries on the part of either master.

Brendan turned off the car and came around to the other side, opened his door, and helped him out. Smiling, Brendan kissed him deeply as he attached a leash. Aaron swallowed hard.

"You listen only to me unless I tell you otherwise," Brendan said, cupping Aaron's cock through the thick denim.

Aaron groaned and nodded. Brendan released his arms from behind his neck and let them hang loose. Aaron walked slightly behind and to the left of his master as they entered the club, remembering to stay in Brendan's periphery. They stepped through the darkened glass doors and Brendan presented two separate cards and then had Aaron produce his driver's license and they both signed a form. They passed through a solid wood door and Aaron gazed around quickly before ducking his head, his focus on his master's feet. His gaze travelled up Brendan's body, finally resting on his ass. Not his foremost favourite feature of his master's, but it was one of them. Brendan spoke to several men and a few women as he led them through a maze of people. Aaron heard his name mentioned once but had missed the conversation while he was trying to take in his surroundings. There were men and women present. Someone had disobeyed and was receiving a spanking, and if the moaning and whimpers belonged to the same person—a woman, he thought—she was definitely enjoying herself.

"Pet—"

Aaron stumbled to an abrupt stop beside Brendan. "Yes, Master?" Aaron said, directing his full attention back on Master Brendan. "Forgive me, Master, I was taking in the surroundings and not paying attention to you." Aaron winced bracing himself for the blow he knew he should receive.

Brendan's hand slid down into his jeans and squeezed his ass. Aaron gasped and instinctively relaxed into the possession. He was Brendan's, no matter what happened, he would only ever truly belong to Brendan. Squeezing his eyes shut, he hoped his master, his lover, would keep him. Aaron bit his lip and gasped at the jab of pain, as Brendan pushed on the base of his plug.

"We'll take care of your mistake later," Brendan said, pressing against the plug again before releasing him. "For now, go inside and remove your outside clothes and shoes." Brendan unclipped the leash from his collar.

Aaron blushed and nodded. "Yes, Master." Aaron started forward and stopped. "Aren't you coming with me?"

"No, the locker rooms are strictly for subs. The door on the left is for males, the one on the right is for females."

Aaron's gaze followed Brendan's indication. The door on the left had an illustration of a man kneeling, his arms cuffed behind his back, a leash connected to his collar. The door on the right had the same picture, a woman in place of the man. "Why aren't masters and mistresses allowed?" Aaron asked, cocking his head. He'd never been to a place where his master wasn't allowed. Slaves weren't to be trusted. Trust was for free men. Aaron shook his head to clear his thoughts. Brendan trusted him to go in there alone and to do as he was told. His heart pounded. *Brendan trusted him.*

"For safety, pet," Brendan replied, cupping his cheek. "Hurry up."

Aaron nodded and walked through the door with the male sub on it. The door led to a small hallway guarded by another bouncer. The man glanced at him, asked to see his pass, and opened the door after he was satisfied. The locker room was nearly devoid of people. Two men—one white with blond hair, and the other Asian—sat on a bench, removing street clothes.

"Your first time here?" The Asian man asked, looking up at him.

"Is it that obvious?" Aaron asked, trying to play off his discomfort.

"Sort of. The empty lockers have keys in them. Attach the key to your collar so it doesn't get in the way," the blond said, removing his jeans, revealing a pair of tight black leather shorts that barely covered his ass.

"Or you'll lose it or drop it somewhere," the Asian man added.

"Why isn't my master allowed in here?" he asked, choosing a locker near the pair.

"For safety. If you get in out of your depth or meet a psychopath, when you come in here to change you leave out the back door over there. It takes you to the manager's office, who will make sure you get to your car or a taxi safely. You have to talk to the managers for a few minutes before they let you out. They'll send one of the bouncers to deal with the master," the blond replied, pointing at a door at the end of the locker room.

"Even if I came with him?"

The two men looked at each other and then at him. "Yes, it doesn't matter. Abuse isn't the same as bondage or domination and submission. Someone who is being abused can use the out the same way. And they should."

"You're not having issues with your master, are you?" the Asian asked walking over to him. "You can talk to us."

Aaron shook his head. "No, my master is nice. He's not like —"

"He's not like that?" the blond asked, standing and walking over to him.

Aaron shook his head again and his body shivered involuntarily. "My new master isn't like that, but my old master was."

"How did you meet your new master?" the blond asked.

"A club? The Internet? Or was it arranged?" the Asian pressed.

"He was my ex-boyfriend. I was embarrassed about being submissive, so I left. He recently took me back in and it's been better than it was before I left."

"How long were you gone?"

"Years."

"Well, maybe we'll see you and your new master around."

Aaron nodded and thanked them both. Someplace like this club with its exit door might have kept him from getting kidnapped. But then, if he hadn't, they wouldn't have found the other men or the handler. Methodically he removed his clothes, putting them neatly into the locker. What was he doing here? Why couldn't they have gone someplace where he would have been comfortable? It had been too many years since he'd gone to a club where consensuality and rules were enforced. Not since before he'd met Master Greg. A sign on the wall reminded the subs to play safe, sane and consensual only and to always use a safe word. Aaron swallowed and sat down hard on the bench.

"Hey man, are you okay?"

"Maybe you should go home for the night."

The concerned voices of the men he'd been talking to filter through the fog in his brain. Home? He didn't have a home. He didn't have anything. He didn't belong here with people who had only played to their own limits. He needed to leave. Now. He needed his master, the love of his life. Surrounded by strangers, panic drove through him as he tried to make sense of the clothes in the locker and how to get out. Questions were asked but he couldn't

make sense of them. He wanted Brendan. His master would make everything all right. Rough hands pushed his head down, commands told him to breathe slow and deep.

Commotion at the door breached the haze surrounding him and he knew he needed to get to his master. Brendan could fix everything. Would fix everything. Hands pushed and pulled until he was sitting on a lap. He fought against the hard muscled wall until Brendan's familiar scent penetrated the welling panic, calming him.

"Brendan? Ma—" Aaron blinked up at the older man and smiled, snuggling into the familiar body. "How... Why—"

"Shhh, love. You needed me. I am here. You told your new friends who your master was and one of them came and got me. Now, let's get you dressed and home. It was too soon to bring you here. I'm sorry, pet," Brendan said, hugging him tighter.

Aaron shook his head. "I want to do this. I just wasn't prepared for the emotions."

"This is what you should've seen and experienced. How it will be from here on out."

Aaron nodded. "Show me. Please, Master?"

Brendan paused for a long moment, staring at him, his hands running over Aaron's body, before nodding. "I will wait outside for you. Come when you're ready."

Aaron nodded and allowed Brendan to put him back onto the bench. He watched Brendan and several other men leave. The two men he'd talked to earlier remained behind, watching him. He squirmed under their gaze.

"You look better. Are you sure you're up for this?," the blond asked, squatting down in front of him. "Name's Kyle, by the way. Don't be afraid. I'm an EMT."

"Actually, we both are. I'm Devon," the Asian said, sitting down next to him, two fingers pressing against the pulse on the side of Aaron's wrist. "Your master seems like the type that wouldn't mind if you left now. He really cares about you."

Aaron smiled and nodded. "I am sure. He's a good man and I'm lucky to be with him. I will talk to both my master and my counsellor about what happened and I'll be okay. I was just surprised and overwhelmed a bit."

Both men shared a glance and then nodded. Devon released his wrist and handed his wrist cuff back to him. Aaron glanced down at it and thanked them both. Carefully he re-buckled the cuff around his wrist. He hadn't been aware of it having been removed. Aaron stood and stretched his limbs before closing and locking the door to the locker. Saying his goodbyes and thanking them once again, he connected the key to the D-ring on his collar and

took a deep breath. Brendan was waiting for him. Brendan had become his rock in an unfamiliar and uncomfortable world.

Chapter Eight

Aaron walked down the hall, reassured the bouncer he was fine and continued into the main room of the club. He quickly spied Brendan sitting in a plush chair talking with another man. A burgundy pillow sat on the floor off to one side. Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, he walked over to the pillow and knelt. He spread his knees wide, clasped his hands behind his back, his eyes and head lowered. Brendan's hand threaded through his hair, down his neck and settled on a shoulder. Aaron tensed and then relaxed into Brendan's touch. He heard the snap of the leash and knew it had been reconnected. His gaze wandered to the club's other patrons. It was obvious that the private nature of the club meant clothing was optional. Men and women both were in varying stages of dress, with most being nude except for strips of leather or metal around limbs and necks.

A tug on the leash and Aaron started to drop to his hands and knees. He looked up at Brendan who shook his head. "Up."

Aaron stood and followed Brendan through the crowd to a hall with several doors lining either side. When they stopped by one of the doors, Aaron dropped to his knees and waited for Brendan to lead him into the room. Brendan's foot tapped once. Aaron swallowed, apologised and stood.

"That's twice, pet. You walk unless you are told to crawl. I prefer to know that you are here willingly. Always willingly," Brendan said, cupping his chin and forcing his head back slightly so he looked into Brendan's eyes.

"Yes, Master." Aaron nodded and followed Brendan into the room. Glancing around, he swallowed hard. The room was set up like a medieval torture chamber. It reminded him of one of the rooms at the club where he'd been enslaved.

"Is it too uncomfortable for you?" Brendan asked, drawing him further into the room.

"No, Master."

"If it becomes too much you need to tell me. I'm guessing most of the room styles here were present at the *club* you were at before," Brendan said, pulling him into his arms.

"I—I don't know, Master, possibly."

Brendan kissed him gently before pulling away from him. "Have you ever used a safe word before?"

Aaron shook his head. "No, master. At first I didn't know about them and then there was no need. I don't have limits."

"But you have likes and dislikes."

"It never mattered what I thought, felt, or wanted before," Aaron supplied, starting to shake.

"You're fine. You belong to me now and I am not going to let anything happen to you," Brendan said, kissing him again, his hands running up and down Aaron's back. "Now, pick your safe word, take your shorts off and get onto the table."

"A safe word?"

"Yes, something that you will remember and can say to make things stop."

"Can I use Brendan?"

Brendan shook his head. "It needs to be something you won't say accidentally."

"I—I don't know."

"Most submissives use red."

"Red?" Aaron asked, climbing up onto the table.

Brendan nodded. "Red for stop. Like the stoplights."

"So, I use it when I want things to stop?"

"You use it when you become too uncomfortable and scared about what is happening. If something becomes too much to bear. If you say red, everything stops. Immediately. We'll talk and figure out where to go from there. There will never be punishment if you need to use it."

"I understand, Master," Aaron said, laying down on the table and stretching his limbs out. Aaron focused on Brendan, watching his master retrieve an item. He heard the curtain open and inhaled sharply. Moments later Brendan stroked his cheek lightly.

"I haven't gone anywhere. I'm showing you off this one time," he said quietly. "I want you to trust me."

"With all that I am, Master." Aaron took several slow, deep breaths. He'd been on display before, had been used by many men at the same time. This time was different. This time Brendan was his master and he trusted him enough to show him off. One time. Aaron frowned. What if one time meant he was being offered up to a new master? Squeezing his

eyes shut, he shook his head. Would Brendan have told him? Should he ask? Aaron took another calming breath as Brendan attached his wrist cuffs to a spot on the table above his head. "Master?"

Brendan lightly traced a line down one arm and across his jaw. "What is it, pet?" Brendan asked, disappearing from sight. Aaron's legs shifted and his ankle cuffs were attached at the other end of the table.

"Am I to be sold...I mean, offered to another master tonight?" Aaron asked, stumbling over the words. Brendan wouldn't sell him, but he might still be considering parting ways with him.

"I would tell you if that was my plan. I would have told you before you dressed for the night. No, we are not here tonight for you to find another master," Brendan said firmly. "Are you secure?"

Aaron tugged on the bonds, chains rattling. "Yes, Master."

Brendan buckled a blindfold over his eyes and kissed him quickly, taking his pleasure and leaving Aaron gasping for air. Brendan had the power to turn him inside out. Brendan. His lover. His master. His soulmate. He knew it. He'd been a fool to leave all those years ago. It might have worked out, but it almost hadn't. Brendan and Harden were the keys to his sanity, to his freedom. Brendan alone, though, held the keys to his heart...and the thought terrified him.

Aaron waited, listening as his master moved around the dungeon. He bit his lip, wondering which implement would be first. A cat-of-nine-tails. A cane. A riding crop. Something worse? He shivered involuntarily at the thought. He'd only been struck once with a whip with spikes on the ends. The master had been inexperienced and had drawn enough blood that the handlers had actually intervened. He'd only seen the man one other time. That whip hadn't been used again, but several others had been.

"Relax, pet." Brendan said, his voice placing him somewhere near Aaron's feet.

Something whispered against Aaron's skin. The touch was light and soft, sending shockwaves rippling through his body. Individual fibres brushed against him. A feather, he surmised, the slow motion causing him to focus on the sensations coursing through him. Everywhere the feather touched his skin, heat rose, his hair stood, and his nerves tingled in anticipation and excitement. The feather moved up his leg from his foot to his hip and then up the other leg. One at his hips, it touched his inner thigh before moving towards his

abdomen, missing his groin completely. The feather traced along his torso and arms, pulling his awareness to his body. Aaron's cock jutted out, hard and aching with need. The feather danced lightly around his balls and with the tip of his cock. Aaron arched his body into contact with his soft tormentor, clenching his jaw trying to unsuccessfully to remain silent.

"Hmm, nice," Brendan said, the feather flicked across his inner thigh one more time before disappearing.

Aaron whimpered and then gasped as a drop of ice cold water dripped onto his calf muscles.

"Aahhh!" Aaron yelped as an ice cube rested against his leg momentarily before drawing patterns over his muscles. It disappeared from one part of his body to reappear in a different area with seemingly no rhyme or reason. Unprepared for the sensations, he could only react.

"So responsive," Brendan murmured.

The ice cube ran up the underside of his shaft before it disappeared and he heard noise come from another part of the room. He strained, listening, instinctively wanting to know what was next. Aaron forced himself to take a deep breath. He was with Brendan, his master. One who cared about him, who wasn't out to use him and throw him away. He trusted Brendan. With that knowledge, he relaxed. No matter what, he was safe. Aaron squeezed his eyes shut behind the blindfold.

Aaron yelped and hissed, his body arching as tiny drops of pain seared his flesh. Wax. His cock throbbed. Silently, Brendan used the wax to draw designs onto his body, sometimes on two different parts of his body at the same time. Aaron clung to the sensations, his body reacting without direction from his brain.

"You like my touch?" Brendan asked, wax splashing against his nipple.

"Yes, Master," Aaron gasped out. His master's touch was everywhere, eliciting sensations and feelings he'd never experienced before. Aaron shuddered. Firm hands released him from the table and helped him to sit up.

"Do you want more?" Brendan asked, a hand running down Aaron's back.

Aaron leaned into the touch. "Yes, Master."

Brendan removed the blindfold and led him to the large metal X leaning against one wall. Facing the St. Andrews Cross, Brendan connected his wrists and ankles to rings bolted onto the frame, stretching him into a spread eagle. A long chain hanging down from an

eyebolt in the centre of the cross was connected to his collar. There was enough play in the chain to ensure he didn't get hurt, while reminding him that he wasn't going anywhere.

"I'm going to whip you," Brendan whispered, his breath warm against Aaron's ear. His cock throbbed painfully.

"Yes, Master, please," Aaron pleaded. He wanted this, needed this. He wanted to feel Brendan's whip, to know the kiss of pain as the leather painted stripes onto his back. "Please Master, give me everything."

Multiple strips of leather caressed his back before the first stroke fell. Gently at first and building, Brendan expertly manoeuvred the whip across his back, the intensity rising and ebbing. He moaned his pleasure at the strikes, his cock leaking pre cum. Aaron breathed through the pain, allowing it to clear his mind of everything else. Slowly the pain turned to pleasure and he felt his mind disengage from his body, floating above it, enjoying the sensations. Tension left his body and he slumped against the cross.

Strong arms embraced him, and his body was lifted and moved. Warmth surrounding him. He snuggled into the arms that held him and the familiar scent. *Brendan.*

Slowly, Aaron became aware of his body, his heart beating, and the gentle crooning from beside him. What had happened to him? His heart began to race. Brendan laid a hand on his chest and told him to relax and ride through it. Aaron nodded.

"Master?"

"Shh, you're okay. I have you," Brendan said quietly.

"W – what happened to me?" he asked, trying to turn in Brendan's arms.

"You don't know?"

Aaron shook his head, his gaze darting around the room before settling on Brendan.

"It's called sub-space. It can happen to a submissive during a scene, where they feel disconnected or separated from their mind and body. Like floating."

"It's a good thing, then?"

"Yes, pet, it's a good thing."

"Does it happen to everyone?"

Brendan stroked his cheek and kissed his temple gently. "No, love, it doesn't. It takes the right combination of master and sub, where the sub feels safe and trusts his master. I did not expect you to go there."

"You can't make me go there?" Aaron asked, wiggling on Brendan's lap, enjoying the feel of leather against his bare ass.

"No, not if you didn't trust me enough or want too. Have you gone into subspace before?"

Aaron heard the hesitation and concern in Brendan's voice. "No. And I've been whipped before. I've even had wax and ice before, but nothing ever made me feel like this before," Aaron replied. "Master, I—"

"Shh. There's your answer. At some level you didn't trust your previous masters or yourself to their care."

"I've passed out from being whipped, though."

"It's not the same thing, pet. Now, if you're feeling okay, there is something else I want to show you."

"I'm a little tired, but I want to see it, Master."

Brendan nodded. "A little while longer and then we will go home. I want to make love to you tonight."

Aaron wiggled his ass again. He wanted his master's cock buried deep in him, so he would feel him the next day. "Maybe we should just go home now?"

Brendan laughed and helped him to his feet, reconnecting the leash he'd taken off at some point. "No, now you have to wait. Put your shorts back on and come with me, pet."

Aaron turned and nodded. "Master, when did the curtain get closed?" he asked, following Brendan out of the room.

"Before we sat down on the couch."

They made their way through the crowd of people to a stage and a table near it. Aaron took his place on the pillow next to his master and watched what was going on around him. A spark of anticipation ran through him as Brendan's hand wound through his hair.

"Watch."

A woman in a black, clingy dress stood in the centre of the platform, a tall candelabra on either side of her. From the side a woman entered and stood next to her. The crowd parted and two men came to the front, one holding the leash of the other. The sub dropped to his hands and knees and was led over to a master standing to one side of the platform. Once there, the sub knelt with his legs splayed wide and his arms behind his back. Aaron inhaled sharply as he recognised the two men from the locker room that had helped him out when

he'd first arrived. The sub being led was Kyle. The other sub, Devon, had led Kyle to the master, handed the leash over and retreated to the edge of the platform, where he knelt in a similar fashion as Kyle.

The crowd quieted as the woman in the dress raised her arms and began to speak, telling the gathered crowd that the mistress was accepting the sub as her permanent and personal property. Love and trust resonated from Kyle as he crawled towards his mistress. Kneeling once again in front of the woman who spoke and angled towards the mistress, he bowed his head as the man holding the leash removed the collar from his neck.

Aaron watched with fascination as Kyle stated he was willingly giving himself completely to his mistress and recited vows he'd written, stating his intent to honour and obey her, pledging his devotion to her. She in turn accepted him as hers, giving her own promises of care. The priestess took the collar from the mistress and asked for blessings from the goddess and the community before handing it back to her. The mistress then fastened the collar around Kyle's neck and connected a leash to it. A round of applause went up from the crowd.

"Come, it's time to congratulate them," Brendan said, getting to his feet. Aaron stood and followed Brendan to the pair.

"Margaret," Brendan said, hugging the woman. "Congratulations. And a thank you."

"What for, Brendan?" the woman asked.

"Your sub helped mine through a difficult time this evening. I didn't realise that he was yours, or I would have made a point to mention it before now," Brendan said.

"You went and collared someone, Brendan?"

"Not yet. But your boy deserves a reward for what he did."

Aaron blushed and shifted uncomfortably. He offered his congratulations to the mistress before walking to the sub. Kyle smiled and pulled him into a hug, careful of his back.

"Congratulations, Kyle," Aaron said. "I didn't realise you had a mistress."

"I do. I like both men and women, but I am in love with my mistress. Devon is looking for a master, though," Kyle said easily, indicating the man standing next to him. "Congratulations yourself. Mistress let me watch part of your flogging."

Aaron blushed and ducked his head.

"Are you ready to go, pet?" Brendan asked, saving him from having to respond to Kyle.

"Yes, Master."

"Congratulations on finding your mistress and thank you again. You know how to get a hold of me if you need anything," Brendan said quietly.

Kyle nodded and thanked him. Brendan tugged on Aaron's leash and led them back to the front of the club to where the changing rooms were. He removed the leash and told Aaron to go get dressed. Aaron quickly complied and returned, kneeling on the pillow near the chair where Brendan sat. Brendan reconnected the leash and led the way to the car. Once there, he opened the door for Aaron, attaching his wrist cuffs to his collaring before helping him into the car and buckling him in. Once Aaron was secure, Brendan got in and drove them home.

"Master, may I ask a question?" Aaron asked quietly, hoping Brendan wouldn't think him stupid.

"Of course, pet, what is it?"

"If Kyle has a mistress, why did he go to the master first?"

"The master, a friend of theirs, stood in as a representative for Kyle's family and our community as a whole."

"I don't understand."

"It is a reminder to masters and mistresses that they have a responsibility for the safety and welfare of their subs and to all subs, and that the community will know if they're mistreating them. The master was also Kyle's first master."

"He gave Kyle to her?"

"No. He and Kyle parted ways on friendly terms, and he continued to look after Kyle until he found a master or mistress that he was willing to be collared by."

"Oh," Aaron said, trying to digest the information.

"That was a collaring ceremony. Kyle was saying that he permanently belonged to his mistress. He would only wear her collar."

Aaron nodded. He knew the significance of collars. Of what they meant, what they were supposed to mean. In this world, in Brendan's world, they were almost the same as a property mark. But with more honour and consent, more along the lines of wedding rings. "Wait, Kyle could have said no?"

Brendan nodded. "Only his mistress could offer the collar and only he can accept."

"Are all collarings like that?"

"As formal? No. This was their choice. How, when and where a collaring takes place is up to the couple."

Aaron nodded. "Thank you for answering my questions, Master."

"You can't know if you don't ask."

Aaron nodded again and stared out the window as Brendan finished driving them home. Once there, Brendan pulled into the garage, turned off the car and helped Aaron out. Brendan led the way to their bedroom. Leaving the leash attached, Brendan watched as he stripped and then removed the plug, telling him to get onto the bed while he disappeared into the bathroom. Aaron obeyed, still uncomfortable with Brendan cleaning his toys.

Chewing his lip with anticipation, he waited as Brendan connected the leash and his wrists to the headboard. He watched Brendan stalk around the room and felt like prey waiting to be attacked. With Brendan as the predator, he knew he was safe and would enjoy being ravaged. Brendan grabbed lube and a condom and climbed onto the bed. Aaron groaned as Brendan opened the package, rolled it down his length and slicked his shaft with lube. Brendan propped his legs over his shoulders, opening him. Brendan used the excess lube and took his time to stretch Aaron's waiting hole. An eternity passed before Brendan removed his fingers and replaced them with his cock, slowly sinking into Aaron's body. Aaron groaned and arched up to Brendan.

"Please, Master, more," Aaron begged. He wanted to feel Brendan's cock in him for the rest of the night.

Brendan bent over, kissing him deep. Aaron ached to run his hands over his master's body in the same way as Brendan was touching him. Brendan was slow and methodical, playing with his nipples and balls. Pre-cum leaked from the head of his hard cock. Brendan ran a finger along Aaron's length and scooped it up. Aaron groaned, watching Brendan suck on his finger.

"Master."

"Enjoy, pet."

Aaron nodded, groaning and gasping as Brendan filled him, marking his claim on Aaron's heart and soul, pulling his orgasm from him. Brendan faltered and surged into him. Aaron's body convulsed, demanding more from both of them. As Brendan's climax overtook him, Aaron knew without a doubt that he was home, he was where he should have been all along. Brendan collapsed onto him momentarily, before pulling out. After cleaning them

both up, he removed the collar, leash and cuffs and put them on the dresser. Aaron loved the sight of them, hoping he'd get to wear them more often as he snuggled into Brendan's arms to sleep.

Chapter Nine

Brendan stared at the wealth of emotion playing on Aaron's face as he sat on the floor of the living room across from them.

"Why? I don't understand. I'm happy here," Aaron cried out. "I don't want to leave. Ever. Why are you sending me away?"

"Aaron, pet, come here," Brendan said patting his knee and holding his arms open. "I don't want you to regret being with me. I want you to have recent knowledge of what is available, to know that there are other masters that you might prefer or that submission isn't something you really want to do anymore. We all need to be sure, before we can move forward."

Sending Aaron away was the single hardest decision of his life. It was one that he hadn't wanted to make, but knew after his own appointment with the counsellor that it would be good for both of them. It had the possibility of helping Aaron in his recovery along with removing doubt from their relationship as to whether it was choice or habit that had Aaron staying. Having Aaron in his house and bed was right, but his own refusal to let Aaron meet other masters, to let anyone else put him through his paces, was almost as bad as those assholes who had kept him under lock and key for the last three years.

"What is going to happen to me?" Aaron asked, his head bowed.

"You will go home with Harden. I have a friend, Jace Allenson, who owns the restaurant we went to after your first counselling session."

"Allenson's?"

"Yes, that's the one. You'll stay with Harden and work for Jace. He's going to start you out as a dishwasher working part time."

"I—I—"

Brendan could see the rising panic. He'd originally decided that he would keep Jace's identity a secret, but seeing Aaron now, he knew couldn't. "Jace is a friend of mine. He was the man I was sitting with last night when you came out of the locker room. He is not your

master and you do not report to him, but he does know that you were kept against your will as a slave."

"Why did you tell him?" Aaron squirmed. "It's my life we're talking about."

Inwardly Brendan smiled at the reaction. It let him know that Aaron could stand up for himself. "I told him just what I said, no more and no less. I told him because he needed to know so that if you were put in an uncomfortable position and didn't get out yourself, he would be able to help."

"Will I be able to see you?"

"No. After a month, we'll see how you're doing and figure out where to go from there."

"But —"

"Aaron, this is so there is absolutely no doubt for anyone that you still want to be Brendan's submissive. That you have had time and experiences away from him to know that your heart is still with him and away from the BDSM lifestyle to know it's what you want. That you two actually love each other and it's not a matter of opportunity or of Brendan being the first good master you've ever had," Harden said firmly from the couch.

"I guess I understand. I just wish you had talked to me about it before you made the decision for me."

"Would you have agreed to it?" Brendan asked, running his hand down Aaron's back.

Aaron cocked his head and sat quietly for several long moments before answering. "No, because I don't see the need for it."

"That is why I want you to do it. I don't want you to have any doubts nor do I want you to do this because it is all that you know. And this way, I will have fewer doubts."

"Fewer?"

Brendan nodded. He wasn't ready to admit his own insecurities and feelings. This had to be about and for Aaron, not him. It was more important that Aaron heal than he try to absolve himself of guilt. "Harden is going to take you to the bank to open savings and checking accounts. They will remain only yours, regardless of what happens in the future."

Aaron looked at him quizzically and Brendan pulled a cheque from the end table and handed it to him. "Harden is also not your master and will not order you around. For the time being, the only person you need to listen to is you," Brendan said.

"Seven thousand dollars!" Aaron exclaimed. "Why?"

"I told you that I would take care of you. That means that until you are either on your feet or are with a master of your choosing, I will help you out. Many masters and mistresses require their submissives to have their own bank account with money set aside, so that if something happens to them they are not left without some sort of safety net. You haven't had a chance to do that, so this is my gift to you. A safety net. Every penny you earn from work is yours. If you want to work more, Jace will let you. That has to be your choice and you have to ask."

Aaron nodded. "I understand."

Brendan pulled him tighter. "I care about you. I want you to have a chance to heal and to know who you are and what you want without the stress of having to deal with the wants and peculiarities of a master and the BDSM lifestyle. Go pack, pet. A month goes by very fast."

"Not fast enough," Aaron said sliding off his lap.

"No, pet, definitely not fast enough."

* * * *

Aaron stepped into the staff lounge in the back of the restaurant. The first week after he'd been sent away had been pure hell. Harden refused to tell him what to do, although he would offer suggestions, sometimes giving multiple suggestions or viewpoints. The following week had been better. There were plenty of times he'd been overwhelmed, but he'd been able to talk to his counsellor several times, and Harden was always willing to listen and help.

He'd taken refuge in his room and made friends with one of the other dishwashers and one of the busboys. They had even dragged him out to a movie the other night. Harden had helped him get a cell phone, so he would be able to stay in contact with people. He'd been tempted to call or text Harden a couple of times when he started to feel overwhelmed, but he'd resisted and found ways to deal with everything, feeling better with himself afterwards.

The manager had tried him out as a dishwasher and waiter so far. The sous chef had answered his questions when he wasn't busy and even had shown him how to cut and peel different fruits and vegetables, all under the watchful of the head chef and owner, Jace

Allenson. Aaron had hated being a waiter. He didn't mind serving people, but most of the people he'd had to wait on were rude and mean. He hated interacting with a lot of people. He found he was more comfortable with a small group of friends.

"Still certain you want to try full time?" Jace asked him, stopping him on the way into the lounge.

"Yes, Chef," Aaron replied. He'd given it a lot of thought the last couple of days and wanted to see if he could manage it.

"Okay. We'll give it a trial period and see how you do with it."

"Thank you, Chef," Aaron said, excusing himself. He greeted his friends and watched the other man leave. Even though he knew the chef was a master, he didn't find himself looking at him as his master, or even a person he had a deep-seated need to listen to. He wasn't attracted anyone else.

"Aaron!" the manager called, leaning into the break-room.

"Yes?"

"I need you to wait tables today and tomorrow."

"No, thank you."

"It wasn't a choice, Langford."

"I was hired as a dishwasher, not a waiter. I don't like waiting tables and dealing with those whiny, rude people who are never satisfied. Get someone else to do it."

"Who do you think you are?"

"Um, Aaron Langford the last time I checked. There are other waiters that can fill in, I'm not one of them."

"You're —"

"Correct," Jace said, interrupting them. "Aaron, I want you helping Paul tonight. Paul and Dan will teach you what you need to know. Call in another waiter," he told the manager.

Aaron nodded, said goodbye to his friends and headed back into the kitchen. While he was grateful for Jace intervening and not firing him, he was thrilled he'd been able to stand up for himself and for what he did and didn't want. Aaron found the sous chef, Paul, and Dan, the line-cook, and told them what Jace had said. Both men smiled at him. Paul rattled off orders to Dan that Aaron couldn't understand before walking away, then Aaron followed Dan and helped to prep food for the upcoming day and night.

* * * *

For the third day in a row he had spent the entire shift working with Dan and helping out with dishes when he was needed. Working eight-hour shifts was okay, but he wasn't happy there. He liked cooking and learning to cook, but he didn't enjoy the demands of a restaurant. He still wanted to be with Brendan. His lover filled his dreams and every night he found himself jacking off to memories of his time spent with Brendan.

Aaron stretched as Harden pulled into the driveway of the house. He hated that he had to keep asking Harden for rides everywhere. He still wasn't comfortable driving and the busses stopped running just before he got off from work. He didn't know his new friends well enough to ask for a ride nor did he trust them. There were still too many unknown variables for him to be comfortable.

* * * *

"When are you going to come and get him?" Harden asked, taking a sip of the beer he'd ordered.

"Is there a problem?" Brendan asked, perking up. He'd intentionally kept his distance the last few weeks. He didn't want to interfere if there wasn't a need, but between Jace and Harden, he knew what was going on in his lover's life. "Has something happened?"

Harden shook his head. "No, but my house has never looked so good. Aaron busts his butt at home and at work. He's made friends and gone out to the movies, and even to the bar last night."

"I hear a but."

"He's living and experiencing things, but I know he's not happy. He's as miserable as you are. He wants to be with you."

"I'm not miserable," Brendan protested, knowing as soon as the words left his mouth they were a lie. He missed Aaron more than he thought was possible.

"Yeah, when was the last time you wrote anything?"

Brendan swallowed and stared at his beer. "The day I made the decision to send him away. God, I miss him."

"So go get him."

Brendan shook his head. "I can't. I said a month, it has to be a month. Anything else and he won't be able to trust me. I need him to know that he can count on me."

Harden nodded. "You're a fool. I understand, but you're still a fool."

"You understand, but I'm still a fool?"

"Yup. What did Jace have to say?"

"He's doing good. Asked to go to full time and while he's handling it, Jace can tell Aaron's not happy. He did stand up for himself. I guess last week the manager told Aaron he needed to wait tables —"

"He said it's the one job he's tried so far that he absolutely hates."

"Jace said as much. But apparently, Aaron told the manager no, and told him why. Something about whiny, ungrateful or unsatisfied and rude people."

Harden laughed and nodded. "Aaron doesn't like a lot of people. He'd rather be with one or two."

"I'm not surprised. One more week of hell. But the question is, will Aaron come back to me? And under what terms?"

"I don't know, brother. Although, sometime in the future I want you to take me to Chaynze."

"As what?"

Harden shrugged. "I'll figure it out."

"Sooner rather than later I hope."

* * * *

"Aaron, can I talk to you a minute?" Jace asked, stopping him on the way out of the restaurant.

"Yes, Chef?" he asked, his heart pounding. Was the older man going to fire him? He hoped not, he liked working here. It had been hard at first, but he'd grown to like most of his co-workers. He still wanted Brendan, more than that he wanted to be Brendan's. The enforced time apart had only deepened his love and need for the older man.

"I'd like to see you outside of work, if that is agreeable to you?" Jace asked him.

Aaron blew out a breath. He couldn't. Even if it cost him his job. He loved Brendan, and until his heart told him differently, he would love only Brendan. Jace had asked him the same question a week and a half ago. "I'm sorry, I can't. I love Brendan. Even if things don't work out, my heart still belongs to him. It always has."

"I see."

"Thank you for letting me work for you. I will always appreciate it."

"Are you quitting?"

"I assumed since I turned you down and will always turn you down, that you would be letting me go," Aaron explained.

"No, I'm not firing you. You intrigue me, but I can tell you still love Brendan."

Aaron nodded. "With all that I am."

"He's a good man."

"He's a good master," Aaron replied firmly.

Jace smiled and nodded. "I believe your cousin is waiting for you. I will see you in two days. If you need to drop back down to part time, call me as soon as you know so I can alter the schedule. Someday you'll make a great chef."

Aaron blushed and nodded and retreated to the waiting car. He normally worked weekends, but Sunday was the last day of the agreed-upon month and he wanted time to think about what he wanted to do. Jace had understood and given him the time off. The decision he needed to make would change the nature of many things and he didn't want any more pressure than he already had.

* * * *

Aaron was in the kitchen making dinner when he heard the front door open. His heart skipped a beat. Brendan. He wanted tonight to be special. It would open a new chapter in their lives. He pulled the lasagne out of the oven and set it on the counter. Ignoring the two men in the other room, he buttered the garlic bread and stuck it in the oven, using the time to organise his thoughts. He hoped Brendan still wanted him. He'd replayed his options. He'd gone to X-tasy twice to see if he still wanted to be a submissive, if he could handle playing with anyone else. The first time he'd primarily watched, but the second time—last night—he

had allowed himself to be flogged by a master. He had been controlled and the pain had just turned into pleasure, but he hadn't wanted to submit to him like he had to Brendan. Even the flogging was different. Afterwards he'd caught sight of Jace, who had nodded and smiled and had asked him if he'd learned anything. Aaron had. He'd learned everything he needed to know. He'd slept badly last night, much like he had the two weeks after he'd left Brendan, but his thoughts had been clear this morning. He knew what he needed and wanted.

Brendan.

The timer beeped and Aaron removed the bread and put everything on the table before walking into the living room. Heart in his throat, it took everything he had to not go over and drop to his knees.

"Hello, Aaron," Brendan said quietly.

Aaron swallowed hard. Aaron, not pet. He was glad he hadn't dropped to his knees. Maybe Brendan had decided he didn't want Aaron any longer.

"M—Brendan, I... Dinner is ready."

Both men nodded and stood. Aaron started to turn and walk away, but was pulled into strong arms. "I missed you," Brendan whispered.

"I've missed you too, Brendan, so much," Aaron replied calmly.

"Dinner smells good, let's eat and then we'll talk."

Aaron smiled. "Lasagne."

"My favourite."

"I remembered."

Conversation over dinner was filled with the events of the last month. Aaron found himself with mixed emotions as he told everything that had happened. He wanted Brendan to be happy with him, to know that he had tried and that the decision he'd made was one he'd thought long and hard about.

After dinner was finished, all three men cleared the table, took care of the leftovers and did the dishes before heading back into the living room. Aaron waited until Brendan had chosen a seat, before taking his customary seat at the end of the couch.

"Aaron, first let me tell you that I'm very proud of you and what you've accomplished. Whatever your decision is, I will respect it and help you in any way that I can. You will have my support in whatever form is needed as long as it is needed," Brendan said firmly.

Aaron nodded and for the first time saw doubt in Brendan's eyes. The last month must have been as hard for his master as it had been for him.

"I've had a lot of time to think. I've made friends, stood up for myself and even went back to X-tasy."

Brendan inhaled sharply and Aaron could see him tightly gripping the arms of the easy chair. Aaron held out a hand, so he wouldn't be interrupted.

"I needed to know if another man's whip would feel as good, if my submission was to just anyone or only whom I chose to give it. I needed to know for myself that I knew what I truly wanted and needed."

"What is that, Aaron?" Brendan asked, nodding.

"You, Master. No matter what I did or where I went, I wanted to be with you. I like my job, but I don't want to run a kitchen or a restaurant. I want to learn how to cook more, but I don't like dealing with lots of people. I find too many of them to be rude and demanding."

"You don't think your master will be demanding?"

"Yes, but I know that it is possible to please my master now. People are hard to please and rarely satisfied, which makes it hard for me to enjoy what I'm doing."

"Tell me what you want."

"I want you, Brendan. I want to give you my submission, to learn to please you, to serve you as I don't want to serve anyone else. I love you. I hate being away from you."

"Did you try sex without BDSM?" Brendan asked carefully.

Aaron swallowed and shook his head. "I thought about it, but couldn't go through with it."

"Why not?"

"Because it wasn't you and it felt like I was cheating, but also there was something missing. I like serving you. It makes me happy. Knowing that you would be pleased with me is something that I can't get from anyone else, much less a normal vanilla partner."

"That makes sense," Brendan answered after several moments. "You once asked me to find you a master for you, but I couldn't. In truth, I never truly tried. I couldn't stand the thought of anyone else touching you. That I wouldn't let you try to interact with other masters made me the same as Greg and John."

"No!" Aaron shouted, jumping up and bolting over towards his lover. Aaron dropped to his knees, laying a hand and his cheek on Brendan's knee. "You are nothing like them. You let me go. I want to come back. I want to be yours. Only yours. Please."

"What about work?"

"I don't want to quit, but I don't want to work all the time either."

"Call Jace in the morning and let him know you'll be going back to part-time. He'll understand."

Aaron nodded. Brendan pushed him back slightly, when he did Aaron caught a glimpse of guilt and doubt in his eyes, before he smiled and nodded. "Harden knows of our lifestyle, the one we want. I want him to remain, but only if you're comfortable with it. Will you strip for me? Here?"

"I will, Master." Aaron nodded and removed his clothes, folding them and laying them on the floor next to him.

"Kneel in the centre of the room."

Aaron obeyed, placing his hands behind his back, and bowing his head. His heart pounded in anticipation. He didn't want to get his hopes up, but he hoped this meant what he thought it did.

"Aaron, I need to ask you something and I need an honest answer. There will be no punishment and no repercussions. Do you understand?" Brendan asked.

"Yes, Master."

"Think carefully. Do you wish to remain with me, as my sub?"

"Yes, Master, more than anything. I was a fool to leave before." He looked up and watched Brendan's face.

"I promise to love and cherish you, to protect and care for you always. Will you wear my collar permanently?"

Aaron's heart jumped, his answer on his lips immediately. "Yes, Master. I promise to love you. To obey and honour you. To always strive to please you."

Brendan lifted a braided silver necklace and fastened it around his neck, locking it on with a small hex screw. "I love you, Aaron. I always have. Thank you for trusting me."

"Thank you for giving me another chance. I never stopped loving you. It was you and my memories of you that kept me going during the darkest times," Aaron replied.

"About damn time. Congratulations to you both!" Harden said standing. "Now, as much as I love having you live with me Aaron, I think it's time for you to go home. You can come back tomorrow and pack. Take only what you will need for the night."

Aaron nodded as Brendan pulled him to his feet and wrapped his arms around him.

"Get dressed. Let's go home."

"Yes, Master." Aaron got dressed and followed his master, his soul-mate, out to the car to return to Brendan's house. He couldn't wait to thank Brendan for all that he'd done.

* * * *

"Thank you, Master. I've never been happier," Aaron said, burrowing into his master's arms. Brendan had taken him, slowly and gently, claiming him again and again. The chain around his neck was a comfortable weight, and he couldn't keep the smile from his face. He belonged, truly belonged, to Brendan.

"More than when we were together before?"

Aaron took a deep breath. "Yes, because I don't have to be afraid of who I am and what my desires are. I don't have to be ashamed of that any more. I know I hurt you when I left, I didn't want to, but..."

"Shh. It's all right, pet, I forgive you. I love you, Aaron. I've never stopped loving you."

"Me either. In the beginning, I used to wish I had never left, and then at the end before I came back, I was afraid you'd be disgusted with me. I told myself I could do without my submission if it meant having a chance to be with you again."

"Your submission is part of who you are. A big part, love. There is nothing wrong with that. Would you be willing to consider something for me?"

Aaron nodded, digesting the information.

"I want to mark you, to place my own tattoo on your ass over that asshole John's."

"I would love that, Master," Aaron said, rolling over on top of Brendan. "Tomorrow? Please, Master."

"Yes, but not until after your counselling appointment," Brendan answered. "You're home to stay, pet."

Aaron beamed. "Thank you, Master. I'm glad I came back. I love you."

"I love you too Aaron, I always have."

Epilogue

One year later...

Aaron inhaled deeply and let it out slowly, trying to calm his nerves.

"Are you ready for this, pet?" Brendan asked quietly, squeezing Aaron's hand as they walked into the crowded federal courtroom.

"Yes, Master," Aaron replied, running his hand over his collar, hidden under the suit Brendan had bought for him. He looked from his master to his cousin and back again and offered an uneasy smile. The last year had been an emotional roller coaster and Brendan and Harden had been there every step of the way with him. The trial had required a prolonged stay in New York, but tomorrow they would fly home and life could return to normal. He preferred being naked and at Master Brendan's beck and call.

They found their seat towards the front of the courtroom where many of the other former slaves, their lawyers, and family were seated and waited. Aaron's own lawyer sat on the other side of him, with Harden sitting on the other side of Brendan. No charges had been brought against the former slaves. He knew two had found new masters and were as happy as they could be now. Aaron smiled at the thought.

"All rise!" A voice boomed. "The Honourable William Farnsworth, presiding."

The crowd quieted and stood.

"Be seated."

Aaron squeezed Brendan's hand as the multiple charges of rape, prostitution, assault and battery, abuse, torture, coercion, and human trafficking were read against the handler he'd seen in the club.

"On the first count of human trafficking, how does the jury find?"

"Guilty."

Emotionally and physically exhausted, Aaron sagged against Brendan's shoulder as each count was read off and came back with a guilty verdict. He would have to return to New York several more times in upcoming trials and sentencings, but he knew they would

make it through them. Brendan was his master, his lover, and his soul mate and had given him hope and strength when he needed it the most. Master Greg had pled guilty three months earlier to coercion, prostitution, and human trafficking. Master Greg had admitted that he purposely found men who were interested in BDSM, but knew nothing about it, in order to funnel them to Master John and other masters. Learning the whole thing had been a set up had been tough to accept at first, but when it came down to it, Aaron knew it didn't change the fact that he found pleasure and fulfilment in belonging to Brendan.

"You're safe, pet," Brendan reassured him, slipping an arm around his shoulders.

* * * *

Safe in the confines of their hotel room, Brendan ordered him onto the centre of the bed on his knees. Soft rope tied his ankles to his thighs and his wrists to the headboard. Aaron moaned as Brendan lubed and stretched him. The HIV tests had come back negative again, and Aaron hissed as Brendan slid his bare cock into his aching hole.

He was home and he was safe. He belonged to Brendan. Readjusting to the world around him was taking time, but loving his master, his soul-mate, had made it all worthwhile. Gently, Brendan traced the outline of the tattoo on his ass. In black ink, a large stylised B within a traditional tribal ring completely covered the previous tattoo.

Aaron yelped as Brendan withdrew and slammed back into him. Burying his face in the pillow, he pushed back, wanting Brendan even deeper. He loved it when his master took him like this—hard and fast and with a bite of pain, pegging his prostate with each thrust. Brendan pushed deep and Aaron knew his master was close.

"Come for me, pet," Brendan ordered, thrusting hard.

Aaron's shuddered as his climax ripped through him, spraying himself and the sheets. Brendan pounded into him several more times before emptying his seed into Aaron's body.

"Mine," Brendan growled, his fingers digging into Aaron's hips. "You're mine." Brendan pulled out and collapsed to one side, waiting several moments before retrieving a washcloth to clean them up with then untying Aaron.

"Mine," Brendan said again, pulling Aaron into his arms.

"Only yours, Master. I belong to you. Always."

About the Author

Simone lives in West Michigan with her family. She has been writing all of her life, seriously in the past few years, when her writing took on a dark and delicious twist. A college student, she offsets the tedium of lectures by thinking up new and interesting ways to torture her characters, occasionally shrieking in the middle of class, "I got it!" to the puzzlement of those around her.

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