

OFF DUTY



Lucas X Black

Ellie Masters

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ELLIE MASTERS
LUCAS X BLACK

JEM Publishing

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OFF-DUTY

A Novel
From

**Ellie Masters
&
Lucas X. Black**

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In other words, we got together and cooked up some wild and wooly imaginary shit for y'all, so don't get all butt-hurt about this stuff. At one point, the tailgate of a pickup truck is even used for a spanking bench.

This novel contains scenes of BDSM between consenting adults. SSC/RACK aware. SSC means Safe, Sane and Consensual. RACK means Risk Aware Consensual Kink. If you don't know what in the fuck you're doing, don't do this shit at home. If you engage in these activities, we accept no responsibility for it.

We are responsible authors and believe in safe sex. In real life, please use condoms to protect yourself...assume our characters do the same (hint: they are not real).

If you're looking for faeries and unicorns farting rainbow glitter, the authors regret to inform you that you're shopping the wrong aisle.

No animals were harmed in this novel, not even unicorns and we don't even like those annoying little pests farting rainbow glitter all over the place. Okay, well, Ellie might like dragons, but there ain't none of the fire-breathing vermin in this tale. The male lead in this story catches some fish at a few points through this book, but the fish were imaginary in any event, most were tossed back and the others grilled over a wood fire. Our characters swear they were yummy! So screw you, PETA.

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DEDICATION FROM LUCAS AND ELLIE

This book is dedicated to all the children who are living with life-threatening illness, to their families who support them, and to the angels of Make-A-Wish Foundation who make dreams come true.

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AUTHORS' NOTES

WARNING

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This story contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. This story isn't suitable for those who don't enjoy dark romance, uncomfortable situations, and dubious consent. It has strong elements of BDSM with female domination and submission.

The story is sexy and twisty and dark. The themes of safe, sane, consensual practices and risk aware consensual kink are held by the main characters, and authors, as they should be in real life. Heed this warning, and enter the world of Off Duty.

A WORD OF CAUTION FROM THE AUTHORS

This book is a work of fiction. It does not exist in the real world and should not be construed as reality. As in most romantic fiction, we've taken

liberties and compressed the romance into a sliver of time. We've allowed these characters to develop strong bonds of trust over a matter of days and engage in heavy S/M play and M/s relationships.

This does not happen in real life, where you, our amazing readers, live. Take more time in your romance. Negotiate. Make certain you understand what you are agreeing to, and when it comes to establishing a trusting Dom/sub relationship, we urge you to move with caution. Always protect yourself.

Please be careful. There are a lot of amazing and loving individuals who will walk with you on your journey, but there are dangers as well. People who may not be safe.

When you find your partner, TALK TO HIM or HER. Be open and honest about your needs, your expectations, and your limits, especially your HARD limits. Never allow them to violate the tender trust you give into their hands.

Always remember: they can't read your mind. It is your responsibility to talk to them, no matter how frightening that might be. In return, you must listen to what they have to say and understand their limits as you do your own.

Share your hopes, desires, and deepest, darkest secrets. And always, always, be SAFE and SANE. Nothing that happens should ever happen without your CONSENT.

Have a safe word, and use it if you must. You MUST have a safe word. That is non negotiable. Use protection if you're not in a committed, monogamous relationship.

Most of all, don't be afraid to seek who you are, become what you want, and share your journey with your partner.

Love,

Ellie and Lucas

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CHAPTER 1



The call came in two hours before my shift ended. The situation sounded bad, a five-year-old fell from a climber at a local playground. Keith and Tom, our best critical care transport team, took the call. It was wrong that I looked forward to their arrival. I'd snuck glances at Keith since I'd been hired into this position. But I was the attending trauma doctor and Keith was a paramedic. In our line of work, we were worlds apart.

Years of experience told me what to expect. I pushed thoughts of Keith aside, and grabbed Tim Sanders, one of the pediatric emergency fellows, to join me. When I had been in his shoes, no one had taken the time to teach me this part of the job. Books taught about disease and how to cure it. Clerkships, residencies, and fellowships honed our skills in patching together the worst the world threw at hapless victims. But this? No one taught us how to deal with what was about to come through that door.

Two minutes out and my trauma team was ready. Tim looked too eager, bouncing on the balls of his feet, probably thinking about all the procedures he'd get to do.

Time to reel him in. "Tim!" My sharp voice cut through the ordered chaos of a waiting trauma bay.

"Yes, Dr. Peters?"

"Five-year-old, witnessed fall. Top priorities? Go!"

The bouncing stopped. Every case was a learning opportunity in my world. "Airway, breathing, circulation."

"Obvious. Then what?"

"Secondary injuries." He ran through our standard barrage of tests.

“The kid fell. What do we need to be most concerned about?”

My first year fellow stared blankly. The wheels in his head were spinning.

“You don’t have time to think,” I snapped. He flinched at the bite of my words, but I had no patience for those not at the top of their game.

Nancy, our senior trauma nurse pointed at her head, pantomiming head trauma, trying to give the poor guy a clue.

“Cervical spine immobilization?” Tim asked.

In the world of trauma there was no room to question the next move. “Wrong,” I snapped again, losing my patience. “Head CT. Think subdural, epidural bleeds, and brain swelling. Call your specialists the moment you get this kind of call. Think about the mechanism of trauma and pre-plan the next step.” I’d alerted the neurosurgeons to be on standby. Radiology already had the CT scanner waiting. This wasn’t my first rodeo.

Sirens sounded outside, announcing the arrival of our patient. My team surged forward.

Keith and Tom off-loaded the stretcher, a tiny body lay on the adult-sized bed. Tom squeezed a self-inflating bag, breathing for the child and rattled off vital signs to Tim.

My mouth gaped as Keith straddled the small form, squatting on the stretcher while he pushed on the child’s tiny chest, performing CPR. We’d never really spoken, but his eyes cut to mine, a simmering sadness reaching out to me. In that look, he told me all I needed to know. This wasn’t one we’d be saving. I stepped aside, my gaze zeroing in on the mother climbing out of the ambulance looking scared, lost, and traumatized.

I gave Nancy a jerk of my chin, and without words she understood. Nancy flagged down Janice, a junior nurse, to join me.

I offered my hand to the mother. “Hello, my name is Dr. Peters, I’m the trauma attending and I am going to do everything I can for your child.”

The woman sobbed. “Thank you. My husband will be here soon.”

I put a hand on the woman’s shoulder. “What’s your son’s name?” First lesson, knowing patient’s names showed the family I cared, their loved one wasn’t some nameless diagnosis to me. Names had immense power.

She looked at me, red-rimmed eyes swelling. “Caleb. His name is Caleb.”

“This is Janice,” I introduced Janice. “She will explain what is happening. I’m going to take care of Caleb. Janice will take you where you

can see everything we're doing for Caleb."

Except everything wasn't possible. Caleb returned from the CT scanner, the results the worst I'd ever seen, a large bleed and his brain was swelling. The neurosurgeons didn't have any options. Caleb's heart stopped beating coming out of radiology. We brought him back, stabilizing him, but his heart showed signs of slowing again. It was time.

"Tim, we need to talk with them."

I explained my process. How I set up the room, the words I used. How I looked parents in the eye to deliver bad news, telling the truth. I told him the importance of using names, of not using too much medical lingo, but speaking clearly, allowing for silence to stretch—sometimes for as long as it needed to. I told him not to forget to bring in tissues. I even admitted I usually cried, and to expect I would this time too.

"Um...Dr. Peters," he said, "I'm not really comfortable talking to parents."

"No one is, but we're going to go in there and do it as best we can. This is their son."

Caleb's father looked at the clock. "There's nothing you can do?" He hadn't taken his eyes from the clock since I delivered the bad news. He couldn't look me in the eye.

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, no."

His mother stroked Caleb's head, her crying stopped for now. "Is he in pain?"

Another shake of my head. "No."

"Can I hold him?" Her voice pulled at me, a mother needing to provide comfort.

"Of course you can."

"I don't want him hooked up to tubes." The man hugged his wife, who gave him a nod, some deep communication passed between them.

I sensed something happening.

Tears pooled at the corners of his eyes. "Do you think there's any possibility he'll survive?"

For the third time, I shook my head.

Her husband stood, pulling his gaze from the clock. "We want to take him off life support...to die a natural death. We discussed..." He cleared his throat, then continued. "If possible, we'd like to donate Caleb's organs so another child can live. Can we do this?"

They both looked expectantly at me.

I grabbed the box of Kleenex and pulled out a wad, dabbing at the tears in my eyes. “Yes, yes of course. And you can definitely hold Caleb.”

“Thank you,” the wife said. She grabbed a piece of paper from her purse and scribbled a note. Her hands shook. “Is it possible to give this to—to...” She pulled Caleb into her arms and broke down crying.



I found Dr. Sheldon, the transplant surgeon, at the end of my shift, staying over to find out if they’d found a recipient for Caleb’s organs. To my surprise, a child in our hospital was a match.

I handed him the note Caleb’s mother had written. “The mother of the donor wanted the parents to have this.”

He took it from me. “I’m headed to speak with them now. Do you want to give it to them yourself?”

Did I? I wanted to know what a mother would say.

“Yes.”

Dr. Sheldon led me to the waiting room where Josie and Mark Peterson waited.

“Their daughter’s name is Kelly,” he said.

“What organ is she getting?”

“Kelly is in kidney failure. She’s been on dialysis a long time.”

I walked into a waiting room and picked out the couple on sight. These were old timers, parents used to the rhythms of hospital life.

Dr. Sheldon introduced me.

I handed over the note. “I was asked to give this to you.”

The woman took it from me, her lips moving as she read the words. When she was done she held it to her chest.

Her husband, Mark, asked, “What does it say?”

Josie read the note out loud. “It’s from his mother, she says, ‘It wasn’t supposed to be like this. I wasn’t supposed to lose my son, but if his death means your child might live, then his life had meaning. He was my little hero.’”

Mark reached over and took my hand in his. “Please tell her, he’s ours as well.”

I never found the mother. Never relayed that message. Instead, I finished out my shift, my thoughts turning to the loneliness of my bed. The life of a trauma surgeon left little time for forming relationships, dating, or finding love. Hell, I hadn’t been laid in years. The closest I came were the dreams of Keith struggling to save a life. I imagined him crouching over me, breathing life into my dead lungs, and kickstarting my frozen heart. I hadn’t felt the excitement of anything beyond the cold words of a medical textbook, or the adrenaline rush of a trauma code, in nearly a decade. I needed more than a fuck. I needed someone else to make the life and death decisions in my world. My life sucked.

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CHAPTER 2



I sat in the report room, drinking coffee and wishing it was tequila, and one hell of a lot of it. My report was electronically filed, and I swear I could almost taste the tequila. But I was on duty through the night until 7:00 in the morning. It was always tough with kids. In fifteen years working a 911 truck, I'd seen more carnage and horror than any decent man should be forced to face.

That kid Caleb ... shit like that was burning me out. And there was nobody to blame, for Pete's sake. A careless kid and an oops, and now he was dead. From the medical standpoint, I was glad Dr. Peters was there. She's the brightest star in one hell of a constellation of doctors here. Fair being fair, she's also the coldest and bitchiest of them. I'm close with a few of the doctors here, and with many of the nurses, and we can unburden to one another. But whatever humanity the woman has was reserved for her patients and their families. To the staff, she was all business, and zero emotion. I think she'd have been happier if patient care was entirely done by fucking robots. Sometimes, I think I'd be happier that way as well, and should get a job as a bank teller or some shit like that.

My thoughts returned again to Dr. Laura Peters, MD. She had a string of other letters following her name, embroidered in blue against her starched bright-white lab coat, which to me looked like a steaming pot of alphabet soup. She's an Ice Queen. She's also drop-dead beautiful, if the truth be known, long and slender, really even elegant. If she showed a bit of humanity, I could even have a crush on her. But that wasn't going to happen. I'd been through five girlfriends over the past two years. They were

a good match in my dungeon and in my bed, but ultimately, four of them said I was simply too cold for them. The other simply couldn't handle the hours I worked. Working 48-hours on-duty, and then 96-hours off-duty, had good and bad points, but meant I seldom had an entire weekend off work. *Who knows, I considered. Maybe I've become a robot, but if so, why am I sitting here fighting crying about Caleb and his parents who looked destroyed?*

I guess the reverie could've lasted all day and into the night, but my walkie-talkie toned, a man-down call at Marson Park. Tom and I trotted to the ambulance, then drove to Marson Park, where we found a wino passed out drunk, reeking of things I didn't want to consider. Jimmy Fletcher, a frequent flyer who needed to dry out. Again. We ran him to the VA, my third time to transport him in the past year, and God alone knew who else ran him how many times.

I wasn't hungry, but needed to eat, so we went out of service and found a burger joint near the VA hospital, where I ate a burger and fries, washing it down with a Coke, barely tasting any of it while brooding about poor Caleb. Tom was a good guy, I guess, but he was pretty much a basic EMT driver, eight months out of school, twenty-one or maybe twenty-two years old, green as a gourd ... he simply didn't understand yet. One way or another, I wasn't fond of him and we certainly hadn't bonded. But I was patient. What the hell, I had been much the same way when I'd been a greenhorn like him, a total trauma junkie with very little empathy. But I'm older now. Maybe I'm even wiser.

Fortunately, the rest of the night went quietly. There was one COPD patient who called around 10:00 that night and was a routine transport on oxygen and an IV of D5W. The lieutenant asked if I was willing to work to 11:00 AM for comp time, and I declined. Actually, I think my exact words were "fuck off and die," if I'm going to be brutally honest here. I had four days off and meant to spend them blitzed on booze. I was home at 7:30 and drunk as fuck by 8:30 before I dropped onto my couch to find a movie on HBO. I woke up at noon, hung over and needing to piss. After, I built a ham sandwich, I noted I'd need to hit the grocery store before long.

I ate the sandwich, brooding while I watched TV and slowly sobered up. Already, I knew I'd be drinking myself to sleep. But I had to get the fuck out of my house for a while. It was too lonesome and too depressing. I was still brooding about that poor kid Caleb. And for reasons I couldn't

explain, my thoughts also kept circling to Laura Peters, M.D. and a whole pot of alphabet soup.

At 6:00, I fired up my pickup truck to drive into town. It was an ancient 1980 GMC K-15 that I kept in immaculate condition. It had belonged to my father, who'd died when I was 17. Mom bumped it down to me and I'd kept it ever since. It was a relic. It even had an 8-track stereo system. The original red paint had grown dull, and a hell of a lot of it had flaked away, but I spent a small fortune having it restored into an enviable glittering candy-apple red. I'd even won blue ribbons for it at three antique auto shows held hither and yon.

I drove to Louie's, a steak place out on Highway 11, and went in, then ordered a huge porterhouse and a pitcher of Budweiser. Like a cop, I sat at a table with my back to the corner, facing the crowd and the door. Life had made me a bit paranoid, I guess. I was surprised to see Dr. Peters alone at a table thirty feet from me, with a bottle of wine before her, eating what looked to be a piece of baked chicken. I pondered saying hello to her, but decided against. I drank my beer and reflected on her beauty as opposed to my feelings about her. I kept circling the fact that I don't like her and sure the hell didn't want to socialize with her. My steak dinner arrived and I attacked the 24-ounce Porterhouse. But my eyes remained on Dr. Laura Peters, M.D. and a pot of alphabet soup.

CHAPTER 3



I hated eating alone, but even worse than sitting at a steakhouse with a half empty bottle of wine and gorging on chicken, was heading home to silence. Two choices greeted me there, frosted cereal or the last of the tuna fish I'd made. How many days ago had that been? Hm, I should probably toss it when I got home.

The chicken tasted divine, and I savored every bite. I'd traded out the garlic mashed potatoes for steamed broccoli with a side of ranch. A passerbyer would think I was on a diet, one of those paleo things, but I wasn't. Grilled chicken and steamed broccoli were kind of my favorites. Comfort foods, they soothed me after coming off a hellacious shift. The steak looked better, and I'd almost ordered it, but I needed a little bit of self-soothing. I went with tried and true.

Finding time to eat during twenty-four hour shifts was a treat I rarely enjoyed. I spent my hours on my feet, saving lives, and running from one catastrophe to the next. My mother always said I had model thin looks, but it wasn't because I didn't love food. Maybe that passerby had it down. I was on the don't-have-time-to-fucking-eat diet. My mother, God rest her soul, had graced me with her beauty, whereas my father had gifted me with a sharp intelligence. These two things both hurt and helped in my life, and I'd developed a reputation over the years. The names whispered behind my back bristled my nerves, but I embraced them. My favorite? Ice Queen. I'd earned that within my first month in the Emergency Department when I'd chewed out a junior nurse for hooking up an IV bag wrong. When she cried, I'd turned my back on her. In the emergency department, there wasn't time

to deal with the emotions of staff. I had more than enough dealing with traumatized patients and family members reeling with shock.

My neck bristled, and I got that feeling I was being watched. A quick glance around and my breath hitched upon seeing him. Master of hotness himself, Keith Evans, occupied a booth at the back of the room. His searing blue eyes drilled into me, and the bastard didn't even flinch when I caught him staring. His cocky arrogance challenged me to look away, and damn if it didn't work. Thank God he worked a rig. If I had to spend my days beside him, I think I'd go insane. It wasn't because of his ridiculously handsome looks. Although, honestly, no man deserved to look that ruggedly perfect, or smell that good. In our line of work, it wasn't uncommon to work in very close proximity. I'd go insane because he filled my dreams with lascivious fantasies.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. He affected me on a gut level. Primal urges flared when he was near. I hated him for it, because he was one of the worst offenders when it came to calling me names. Ice Queen my ass! The bastard was *still* staring at me. Shifting in my seat, I turned away. I hadn't even acknowledged him, and had probably given him more fodder to use in ridiculing me.

Nobody took a pretty girl seriously, let alone when she was a surgeon. I wasn't just any surgeon either. Trauma, with its fast pace and accompanying adrenaline rush, drew me from the very first months of residency. Briefly, I'd considered neurosurgery, but I tired of breaking into the old boys club. Not that the same wasn't true in trauma surgery. It simply wasn't as pronounced.

My days were spent kicking ass, busting balls, and proving myself over and over again to men exactly like Keith. There wasn't time during my shifts to stop for idle chit chat. I didn't hang out at the nurses station like Keith did, flirting with the girls every chance he got. And that man could flirt. He did so relentlessly with every female except me. Didn't matter their age, from the newest graduates to the most senior nurses, his smile, and those electric eyes, had every heart swooning each time his rig pulled in.

Most of my days were spent with my hair tied up, covered with a surgical bouffant cap, and a mask which covered my face. My looks had no bearing on my skills. I said *screw them* to those who made fun of me. And screw Keith, too.

You'd think I had it all; beauty, brains, a successful career? I had all three, but what I lacked was the one thing which would soothe my soul. When I went home, there was nobody to talk to about my day. If I weren't so damn busy, I'd probably have a herd of cats. Who was I kidding? I didn't have time for pets, let alone a man.

A sip of wine washed down a bite. More wine flowed from the bottle, filling my glass to the rim. Wondering how pathetic I looked, sitting alone, I flicked my eyes toward the back of the room. To him. I hated for Keith to see me like this, to have a peek into how lonely my life was that I came to a restaurant by myself. I wasn't the only one sitting alone, though. There was only one plate set at his table. One glass. A pitcher of beer. But it seemed different with him. I was alone because there was no one else. Keith had his pick of women. If he wanted company, all he'd have to do would be to snap his fingers. For whatever reason, he chose to be alone, whereas, I was simply alone.

My phone buzzed with a text. A picture followed the kind words. Josie Peterson shared a picture of little Kelly in her hospital bed. I'd made a point of visiting the kid during my last shift. She still had a long road toward healing, but little Kelly was no longer dying from kidney failure. Caleb's accident had been nothing short of a tragedy, but something good had come out of his death.

I glanced at Keith. He'd been on that call. I wondered if anyone had told him the gift Caleb's parents had made. In my line of work, I mostly saved lives. In Keith's? First responders saw the best and worst life had to offer. From deliveries of babies in the field to transporting the dying to emergency departments, he saw it all, except what happened afterward.

I might be an Ice Queen, but that didn't mean I lacked a heart. Taking another sip of wine, I rose from my seat and headed over to his booth. His hard gaze tracked my every move as I wove between the tables, then his left eyebrow arched in question with my approach.

"Hello," I said, and stopped there. Small talk wasn't my thing.

"Good evening," he said. "Enjoying your meal?" He'd demolished his, some steak, generous in size by the look of the platter set before him.

"I did, thanks."

Silence stretched between us.

"Can I do something for you?" The low rumble of his voice tunneled under my skin. He had one of those sexy panty-melting drawls.

“Um, y-yes,” I stammered. “I wanted to tell you something.”

“I’m all ears.”

“Do you remember that little boy? The one who fell from the playground equipment.”

His eyes clouded over with pain. “Yeah?”

“Well, I thought you’d like to hear some good news.”

“Ain’t no good news about that one, Doc. The kid died.”

I pulled out my phone and found Kelly’s picture. “See this little girl?”

“Yeah, so?”

God, he could be an ass. This is why I didn’t waste time with chit chat. I’d never learned that social dance. I pressed on, letting the words rush from my mouth, using my Dr. Peters’ voice. It was the only way I could focus around him.

“Caleb’s parents donated his organs. This is Kelly. She received one of his kidneys.”

His eyes widened. “You’re kidding?”

“No, and several other kids now have hope, too. Caleb is a hero.”

“You don’t say.”

Other than exchanging vital signs and medical information on patients, this was the longest conversation we’d ever had.

“Well,” I said, shoving the phone in my back pocket. “That’s it, just thought you might want to know.”

“That was right kind of you, Doc.” He wiped his chin and leaned back in his booth. Half a pitcher of beer remained on the table. “Now, what do you say to bringing over the rest of your wine, and tell me more about it?”

Oh hell, no. No. No. No! There was no way I would do that. But my mouth opened and words spilled out. “That would be nice.”

What the hell had I done?

CHAPTER 4



I wondered if I'd lost my pea-pickin' mind. I didn't like her. Frankly, I thought she was the coldest person I'd ever met, to put a point on it. But something ... maybe a glimpse into how lonesome she seemed ... drew me. I don't pity her, mind you. Beautiful and successful people are on no account objects of pity. But I think I felt a bit sorry for her, and recognized the unexpected kindness, telling me about Caleb's organs saving that other little girl, Kelly the cutie, who would now have a life that Caleb's death had afforded her. I knew enough about myself to know I was maudlin about Caleb, and that, for now, the beer was far less than a good idea. As Dr. Peters went to retrieve her things, I hailed the waitress and asked for iced tea and limes.

Just then, three tables away, a woman yelled as her companion stood, grasping at her throat. On paramedic-autopilot, I dashed over and did the Heimlich on the lady, who coughed out a wad of hamburger and gasped for breath. I got her squared away, then returned to my table when Dr. Peters arrived.

"Thank God you saved her," she said. "I didn't want to use this crappy steak knife to do a trach. It wouldn't have been sterile." She held up the knife, stained with grease and Heinz 57 sauce, which I had with my steak. The steaks at Louie's aren't bad, but can sometimes be a bit dry. "Jesus, it wouldn't even have been sanitary."

I gaped at her, for a moment not believing my ears. The Ice Queen cracked a joke! I opened my mouth to say something, then bellowed

laughter from deep inside, surprised anew when she tipped me a wink and a sidelong grin.

“Jesus,” I finally gasped.

“I have my moments,” she said, seeming suddenly far more at ease, even approachable.

A wild part of my mind envisioned shaking her and demanding to know what the pod people had done with her. Yeah, ordering the tea was wise. The waitress arrived with the tea, and I drank it down, then asked her to pour out the beer and refill the pitcher with iced tea.

“You don’t like the beer?” Laura asked.

“Actually, I do, and it’s heartbreaking to have her pour it out, even tragic, but I know when it’s a bad time to be drinking beer, and a run like that one yesterday ... well, one pitcher is too many and two pitchers aren’t nearly enough,” I returned. “You want the truth, this job ... I’ve been at it too long to save my soul, and too long to turn back from it. Fifteen years in, civil service, I get to pull the pin and retire in five more years. That’s not as good as it sounds. The pension is a nice supplement, but maybe I can drive a taxi or dig ditches, something with far less stress. Part of me loves this job, but the part that hates it grows bigger with every shift.” I grimaced at a flare of pain in my back, one that happened after a fright or excitement.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, things like that out-of-the-blue Heimlich surprises ... they result a bit later in back pain,” I said.

“It’s your adrenal glands going nuts, or the aftermath of it,” Dr. Peters said. “That happened a lot to me when I was an intern working ER.”

“It’s only happened to me on the streets maybe three or four times, once when some clown started spraying bullets at a dead-on-scene call,” I remarked. “His momma was terminal and at room temperature when we got there, but he was in a fury of denial. Fired six shots and didn’t hit either of us. He was trying to reload when my partner rearranged his teeth with a flashlight. Sucked that we had to treat him. He got off charges on a psych.”

“I used to believe in that sort of thing, not guilty by reason of insanity, but not so much anymore,” Dr. Peters said. “I mean, I get the idea and yeah, the crazy made them do it, but one way or another, they did it. I guess it’s like a dog that bites someone, even only once. You can never trust that dog again, not really.”

“Yeah, you were on that day and damn near got to plug my wounds,” I said. “That would’ve been a horrible date, right? You rooting around in my chest to dig out a bullet?”

“I’d have done it, but no, none of that really howls out wine and roses, I guess,” Dr. Peters said.

“What do you do for fun, Dr. Peters?” I asked.

“Look ... shit, I need more vino,” she said, glaring at the empty bottle beside her. “Anyway, I know everyone has to be all formal at the hospital, but is it possible for you to just call me Laura?”

“Sure, Laura,” I said, astonished at the informality. *Is the Ice Queen thawing*, I wondered. “I’m Keith, but you already know that, or I think you do.” Pondering that, I honestly couldn’t ever recall her addressing me as much more than “hey you” and that sort of thing. She flagged down the waitress and ordered another bottle of riesling.

“So tell me all about Keith,” she said.

“Not much to tell,” I told her. “I went into the Navy out of high school, became a corpsman, served in combat, then got out in four years and went through the paramedic course and got a degree in biology. But I guess I wasn’t done with adrenaline, and got a job working EMS. And now here I am, 42 years old and working a 911 truck, wondering if shrinks have a more official name than cray-cray for my condition.”

“Oh, come on,” she said as the waitress brought a fresh bottle of white wine for her. She poured a glass, drank it down, then poured a second and drank that as well, then filled her glass again. It was, I noted, riesling, a sweet wine without a high alcohol yield like champagne might boast. Still, she was knocking it back pretty hard. “There has to be a pretty wife and probably a dozen kids going on.”

“None of the above,” I said. “I don’t know if that’s ever in the cards for me. I’m getting kind of old to be changing diapers.”

“Some of us fuck up and marry our fucking jobs,” she said, then drank the third glass of wine and poured a fourth, emptying the bottle. She yawned and her eyes drooped. Long shifts and alcohol weren’t a good combination.

I was growing concerned. I didn’t need to be a Rhodes scholar to see she was too drunk to drive.

“I don’t think it’s arrogant to say I’m a damned talented physician, even goddamned talented.” Her words came fast and furious, but had started to

slur.”But sometimes I wish I’d taken a residency in dermatology and have a life with banker’s hours, a life with some normalcy.”

“Yeah, I understand,” I said, and I did. Whatever dreams and idealism I might’ve had at 18 or 20 years old were gone forever. Truth is, I was bitter now. To quote the country song, *my give-a-damn* was busted. But then she fell asleep, or passed out, and one way or another I knew she was about to be thrown out of the roadhouse, and that a DUI or even a public intoxication charge would stand a chance of fucking her up, maybe for life, and I’d rather not learn she went out drunk and killed some poor schmuck because she was at the grape. I flagged the waitress for a check and she told me the woman I’d saved paid my tab. I asked about Laura’s tab and the waitress shook her head, then handed me that check, which I paid with a handsome tip and a smile. She smiled back and dashed away.

I helped Laura, who was only semiconscious, to her feet, and escorted her out to my truck. “Schloox like Daddy’s,” she slurred, and wept some. I unlocked the passenger door, then picked her up and deposited her on the front seat, buckled her seatbelt, shut her door, then fired up the big engine in my truck. I didn’t know where she lived, nor what kind of car she drove. She was in no shape to tell me, and I’m too much the gentleman to go rooting about in a lady’s purse for her wallet and driver’s license. I drove her to my house, unloaded her from the truck, then walked her indoors, where I deposited her on the guest bed. She was out cold in a heartbeat.

I took my bathrobe into the guest room and put it over her like a blanket, then removed her shoes. Her slacks and blouse remained untouched. I went to the third bedroom, which was more or less my office and man-cave - don’t judge, it’s a guy thing - and scrawled a note to her.

Laura,

You had a bit too much wine and I don’t know where you live, so you’re in my guest room. When you feel up to it, I can take you back to the restaurant to retrieve your car. The Keurig is in the kitchen and you have the privilege of the fridge. There are several quart bottles of Gatorade in there, which tends to turn my own hangovers back into a buzz. Feel free to wake me if I sleep in.

K

I folded the note into a tent and wrote her name on it, then put it on the nightstand beside her, turned out the light, then went to the shop behind my house. The original owner had been a woodworker and built what amounted to a second 3-car garage back there. When I bought the place nine years before, I probably vacuumed a cubic yard of sawdust from the garage. I'd converted it to a dungeon, making a few pieces of furniture with my own rudimentary tools, and had it heated and air-conditioned. I pulled a bullwhip from a hook and laid 100 lashes into a dress-maker's mannequin wearing an old tee-shirt of mine, staying in practice, an activity I frequently engaged.

I'd be lying if I didn't admit that my head was full of imaginings of Laura instead of that dusty dummy, but I knew that wasn't going to happen. Yeah, so she showed me a bit of humanity buried in the iceberg that was her. It didn't mean I liked her. I respected her, yes, but I hadn't abandoned my perception of her as a frozen iron bitch.

Done, I went to bed. Usually, I sleep in the buff, but because Laura was there, I put on scrub pants and a tank top. I jacked off, and came hard, with images of my guest in my mind, then slept like the dead until 7:00.

CHAPTER 5



I awoke with a pounding ache in my skull. It ebbed and flowed like a relentless tide. There was one constant. Pain. The blackest of clouds shrouded my memory, patches of things I remembered overlapped with gaping holes where there was nothing.

Pressing my hands to my temples did nothing to help. This was the cost of overindulgence. A thick moan escaped me, not the sexy kind, but a needy, regretful noise. I wrapped myself in the thick layer of fabric covering me, inhaling the most heavenly scent. It was a deep, masculine aroma, which flooded my senses and brought up way too many questions, most pressing being where the hell was I?

I raised my heavy eyelids halfway, only to slam them shut again. Light burned through my lids, and more pain told me I didn't want to do that again any time soon. Except, this wasn't my bed. That alone drove me to attempt the impossible.

Against better judgment, I fluttered my eyes open, determined this time to discover where I might be. It was too bright, but a glance across the unfamiliar room revealed thick drapes blocking a window. I squinted and groaned again. My mouth was dry and sticky with thick saliva. Whatever is covering me was not a sheet, but a ... robe? It was the only piece of heaven in my universe right now, and I couldn't get enough of how wonderful it smelled.

The aching in my skull subsided. I didn't want to get up, but my bladder pinched, demanding relief. Slowly, I raised myself to a sitting position and took stock of my predicament. With relief, the first thing I noticed was my

clothes, the most important piece of information being that I was still wearing them. No shoes. I swung my bare feet down, meeting the roughness of a Berber carpet. Moving brought back the ache in my head, but I needed to find the facilities.

I was in a home, or apartment. There had to be a bathroom nearby. So, what was the story? Had I gone home with someone? I never went home with anyone.

Once on my feet, the room swayed, and I nearly lost my balance. The room swirled around me, but slowly became stationary again. I smacked my dry lips, tasting the foulness of my mouth. My stomach turned in the worst way, prompting me to seek food. And water. Gallons of it. First, I needed to negotiate my way across the room, and find that bathroom.

I eyed the bed again. Maybe I should sleep this off? No. I was awake, and to be honest, I was a little scared. Fortunately, the bathroom was just down the hall. I entered and closed the door behind me, turning to the sink where I splashed cold water on my face. I wished I could wash my brain free of the toxins too, but that wasn't medically possible. The mirror did me no favors. Sunken eyes. Sallow face. My hair a mess of tangles. I looked exactly like I felt.

Quickly, I brushed my teeth using my finger and a little dab of toothpaste from the tube by the sink. After taking care of business, I headed down the hall, seeking an answer to my most nagging question. Who the hell had I gone home with last night?

Before exploring further, I went back to my room to find my shoes. Odd how the mind works. There was nothing *mine* about that room. A quick glance around and I spotted my shoes. I also noticed a note propped up beside the bed. It had my name on it.

With my hands shaking, I grabbed it, and my jaw dropped as I read. I fleetingly wondered who the hell 'K' could be, and then memories of Keith across the table from me hit me like a slap in the face. Of all the people to have gone home with? It had to be him? I'd never live this down. Now, not only would I have to endure the snickers of the Ice Queen moniker, but drunk-assed-bitch would be added to the list. Not that I was a bitch, I just didn't have time to deal with people.

I wanted to find a hole, crawl inside it, and never leave.

Instead, my stomach grumbled. That shakiness persisted, telling me I needed food. Well, he said the fridge was mine. I wondered if he kept it

stocked with beer and empty ketchup bottles, or if the man knew what a grocery store looked like.

There was no sign of life, except for my cautious shuffling. He'd said to wake him, but I wasn't ready to face the judgment in his eyes. Perhaps I could entice him with a little food? Men ran on their stomachs, and maybe he'd forget about my indiscretions while he shoveled chow into his face, leaving me time to sort out exactly how mortified I should be.

All kinds of images ran through my head of what might have happened in my drunken haze. The guy was handsome, ruggedly so, and mature. He'd lived hard and didn't approach life with hesitation. Images of him performing the Heimlich maneuver on someone flitted through my head. I hated him because I always felt off guard around him, fluttery, and unexpectedly needy. There were many things I might be, but needy wasn't one of them. Which made me hate him even more, because he turned me into something I despised.

Surprisingly, he kept a well stocked fridge. Okay, maybe there was one thing I could admire about him. I poked around and found the makings of omelets. I liked mine stuffed with fresh veggies, ham, and plenty of cheese. I found all of that, and more in his fridge.

In no time, I had bacon sizzling and omelets on the grill.

"Something smells like heaven." Keith's low rumble had me turning around. That low gravel vibrated deep in my chest, tugging on strings bound tight around my heart.

His cowboyish gait was at odds with the faded scrubs covering his impressive frame. All that was missing was a ten-gallon hat and one of those low slung belts with a pistol jutting from his hip. He gave me more than a smile and rendered me speechless by the look on his face. My breath stopped and my pulse pounded. My skin tingled, and for a moment I forgot all about my hangover. Time was suspended as his gaze latched onto my mouth, then descended in a slow, meandering path. He took in the shape of my breasts, the narrowing of my waist, and lingered on my hips before dropping to the apex of my thighs.

My entire body reacted with a flush of something I hadn't felt in a very long time. My core ignited and spread outward. The rush of heat inflamed my skin and tightened my nipples. And as my pulse kicked up a notch, a throbbing ache settled between my legs.

Behind me, the bacon burned.

“Oh, dammit!” I spun around and pulled the bacon off the stove.

“Need some help?”

“No,” I exclaimed. “I saved it.”

“Wasn’t expecting breakfast.”

“It’s the least I could do.”

Slowly, I turned around, hesitant to meet his gaze. The man was potent. At work, I kept my distance, but in his home, his undeniable masculinity washed through me, drowning me in fantasies I had no business dreaming up. Like how his sculpted lips naturally curved up at the edges and what I wanted him to do with them. Like me, the man had a hard job, but he always seemed to carry a smile. His strong jawline framed his seductive lips, making him look commanding. Masculine. And way too hot to be standing less than ten feet from me.

He hadn’t moved his focus from my body. The man had made an art out of checking me out.

I snapped my fingers. “My eyes are up here.”

His brow quirked up and his lips tightened. “I know where your eyes are.”

“You don’t like me very much, do you?”

“Why do you say that?”

I shrugged. “Look, about last night...”

“Hun, no need to say anything. We all have nights like last night.”

“I just don’t want you thinking...”

“What, that the overly serious doc is human?” He shook his head. “We all put on our pants the same way. Maybe our masks too.”

Holy hell. I heard his words, but his eyes said he wasn’t thinking about putting clothes on. I needed to ask about last night, but couldn’t admit to the holes in my memory.

“Food’s done, if you want any.”

He sauntered toward me, and I couldn’t help but take a step back under the heat of his gaze. I thought he was coming over to me, to...to I don’t know. Was it too presumptuous to think he might find me attractive too? But he stopped at the fridge, opened the door, and pulled out a bottle of Gatorade.

He shoved it into my hand. “Drink this. It’ll help with that hangover you’re trying to hide.”

“I’m not—”

“Hun, this ain’t my first rodeo. Don’t argue with me. Drink it.” He opened the cupboard and pulled out two plates. Bringing them to me, he held them out. “Food looks good, and smells even better. If it tastes half as good, I might just keep you around.”

I’m pretty sure my heart stopped. My mouth gaped. To cover my awkwardness, I shoved food in my mouth. He’d better damn well like my cooking, this was a slice of heaven. Closing my eyes, I let the savory flavors swirl around in my mouth, then gagged when my mind shifted to something much more deviant.

It was time to flee this place, because the longer I spent in Keith’s home without the buffer of work, the more I wanted to never leave. Unfortunately, I didn’t think he felt the same.

With a sigh, I took a long gulp of Gatorade. Now that I’d had some food, and a little fluid, I was on my way to recovery. It was time to broach the one question I didn’t want to ask.

“What happened last night?”

He leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. His biceps bulged and I couldn’t keep my eyes from enjoying the sculpted muscles of his chest.

He huffed a laugh. “My eyes are up here, doll.”

Fuck him, but tossing my words back at me had me laughing. “Sorry.”

My plate wasn’t even half done, but he’d scraped his clean. Guess he liked my cooking.

“What all do you remember?” he asked.

Now, wasn’t that a loaded question?

CHAPTER 6



I was amused at her sheepish smile, the one that really told the tale that she remembered little, if anything, of the night before. “Would you believe we went to a strip club, where you mounted the stage and danced like a slithering snake?” I asked, keeping a perfect poker face.

A bit late, red warning flags popped up in my mind, fluttering on a high wind. I already knew the teasing would annoy her, so that wasn’t why the warning flags popped. Her not-unexpected eruption caused me to set that thought aside. It would be some time before I understood why I said it and why it caused her temper to flare, far more than expected.

“Not on your life,” she sneered. “Goddammit, I should’ve known better than to have asked. You win. I’m humiliated, doing the walk of shame from your fucking house. Fuck you. I’ll call a taxi.” She stormed off to the guest room while I drank my own bottle of Gatorade, pleased that I’d stopped last night’s beer drinking at the half-pitcher. She returned a moment later, looking more annoyed than ever. “Did you take my phone?” she asked.

“Nope,” I said. “The reason you’re here is I didn’t think it proper to dig in your purse for your driver’s license. For that matter, I paid your tab last night for your dinner and wine. I know you hate my ass. Or you at least don’t like or respect me, and that’s okay. I’m used to that from you. But I swear to God on a stack of bibles nine feet high that I was entirely the gentleman. I didn’t want to see you fucked up for a public intoxication charge, or worse, a DUI charge. And, still being the gentleman, I’ll give you a ride to your car. Maybe your phone is there. Maybe you dropped it.”

“No, I don’t hate your ass,” Laura said, looking a bit deflated.

“As far as last night goes, I’m not running my mouth to anyone,” I said. “No good deed goes unpunished, right? Thanks for breakfast. Let me get into jeans, grab my wallet and keys, and I’ll run you back to the roadhouse.”

“Look, how many ways do I need to apologize, to say I’m sorry?” Laura asked.

“None at all, Dr. Peters,” I returned. “I’d rather not be lied to anyway. I’ll be ready in a moment.” I went to my room and shed my clothes, then donned jeans and a western shirt, and slid into my Nocona cowboy boots. *Maybe I should give her cab money and send her on her merry way,* I considered. But I knew that wasn’t in my makeup. I might seem rude and crude to many, maybe even to most, but I liked to think of myself as a gentleman, and a gentleman doesn’t behave like that. *One way or another, I’ll be shut of her in fifteen minutes, probably faster than a cab could get here anyway, come to think of it,* I considered. *And, God willing, I won’t transport anyone to her for the next five fucking years until I retire.*

“Let’s go,” I said a moment later, finding her sitting on my favorite chair in my living room.

“Let’s talk instead,” she said, looking me in the eye. “Look, I know what people say about me. Ice Queen. Frozen bitch. Cunt. I’m not stupid, Keith.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” I said. “You showed me a bit of your humanity last night, then shut it off this morning. It’s okay. I’m just a lowdown paramedic, just a lackey to you, Dr. Peters, beneath your notice until this hour in time. You’re not the first, and won’t be the last.” I looked her in the eye. “I’ll say this, though. Never, ever, fool yourself into thinking you can do my job or deal with the horrible shit I endure to own and keep this house and make my way in the world. If you want to be Miss High and Mighty Arrogant Goddess of Medicine, be my guest. But thank you for telling me that little boy’s organs saved other kids. That doesn’t make it easier, but makes his death a bit more acceptable. I broke my hump to keep ... to keep that poor kid alive.” I choked back a sob, surprised at how much it hurt to lose a kid. It wasn’t my fault he died. It wasn’t even hers, and I don’t know if he’d have survived if this had happened right outside a neurosurgical OR with a full team on standby.

“Please don’t think it’s easier for me,” she said. “But ... I guess we live in different worlds.”

“I envy yours,” I said. “I had the grades to get into medical school, but not the money. So here I am, a degree in biology, and working as a paramedic. I like to think I’m good at it. Scratch that. I damn well know I’m good at it. I’d test for lieutenant and probably pass, and get to drive a desk, but all three lieutenants are younger than me and have been there longer, so unless one of ‘em dies, I’m stuck on an ambulance until I retire. After that? Who the hell knows ... maybe high school science, 20 years of showing 10th grade kids how to dissect frogs. The thought is breathtaking, ain’t it?”

“Bullshit,” she said. “Look, I know I’m not good at saying it, but I’ve been in this game as long as you have, Keith, and you’re the best paramedic I’ve ever seen, and anyone you ask in that ER would say the same. But don’t think I can’t do your job. You’re smart, and you’re skilled, but I have training and responsibility a million miles beyond yours.”

“Yeah, sure,” I said, not choosing this battle. “You ready?”

“Okay,” she said. “Look ... thank you for being the gentleman last night. I guess, the way you see me and my bitchiness, I’m glad you treated me right and didn’t take advantage of the situation.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, do you think I’m so much of a fucking loser that I’d rape you passed out?” I said, fighting a sharp burst of anger. “Goddammit, just get in the truck so I can take you to your car.”

“I didn’t mean that,” she said, actually managing to blush.

“Whatever,” I said. “Let’s go.”

“Keith, I didn’t mean it that way,” she repeated.

“Look, get in the truck,” I said. “I’m done with this discussion.”

“Goddammit, I meant I’m grateful you were a gentleman, that you didn’t post photos on Facebook of me drunk, or put me in my car drunk, or didn’t otherwise make a fool of me. Swear to God.”

“Yeah, but you doctors seem to think God doesn’t exist,” I said.



The trip to the restaurant was a silent one. I didn’t wish to speak to her, and I guess she had nothing more to say. I stopped next to a black Mercedes, the only car in the lot. “My daddy had a truck a lot like this one,

an '80 Chevy," she said. "His was black as midnight in a mineshaft, but ... it brings back good memories."

"This was my father's truck," I said. "How'd you know it was an '80?"

"Square headlights," she said. "The body style changed in '81, and through '79, they all had round headlights. Thank you again, Keith." She exited the truck, got into her Benz, fired it up, and drove off.

For my part, I decided some fish needed to die this day, sped home, hitched up my boat, and drove to the lake. I puttered around and caught three bass, but mostly wanted to be on the lake, and didn't give much of a damn about the fish. I drove home, filleted the fish, put four fillets in the freezer, and grilled the other two after baking a potato on the grill. I ate well, then drank myself to sleep, wondering why I was still annoyed by Dr. Laura Peters, M.D. and other alphabet soup. Maybe I should've taken the plunge and loans and gone to medical school, I drunkenly pondered. By now, I'd be several years out of residency and in practice, I knew. But that wasn't the choice I'd made and it was too damn late to do it now. By the time I finished a residency, I'd be ready to retire.

I dreamed of Laura Peters that night, of taking her to my dungeon and doing all sorts of delightful evil with her, something else I knew was never going to happen.

CHAPTER 7



The next few weeks found me actively avoiding Keith. He'd taken care of me in my drunken stupor, acted like a complete gentleman, and right when I thought he might almost be human, he turned everything around calling me a cold-hearted and entitled bitch. Those hadn't been his exact words, but he had this image in his head that I was living some kind of dream life.

Money had always been hard for my family. I didn't ride on anyone's coattails. I worked my ass off in college, waiting tables until I found a more lucrative stream of money stripping. God, his comment about me slithering around stage had hit a nerve. There was no way anybody knew of that past, and I intended to keep it that way.

Despite what he thought about my perfect life, nobody ever gave me anything. Every penny I earned went to fund my education and I still wallowed in hundreds of thousands of dollars of debt.

Easy? Privileged?

Keith had no idea.

While all my college friends were shaking their asses at frat parties, football games, and just hanging out, I was either in the library studying my ass off, or I was shaking it to earn money to put food on my table, a roof over my head, and somehow survive the overwhelming debt piling up.

What would Keith think about that? His drunken-assed Ice Queen had stripped her way through college? Why did I even care what Keith thought about me?



My pager went off, and I groaned. Another trauma call coming in. Like I had for the past few weeks, I prayed Keith wasn't on that run. Since that night, the few times I had seen him, I couldn't get past the look in his eye. Not the judging one, but something darker, an assessment of sorts. It was like he was trying to figure me out, or get under my skin, or... hell, I don't know. I was delusional when it came to him and, to my chagrin, he was definitely under my skin.

That man occupied my thoughts more hours in the day than I cared to admit, and he'd starred in way too many dreams. Dreams which began with heated words, arguments, and me storming off. Those turned into ones of him chasing me down, pinning me in place, and those...well, those turned into decidedly dark and twisted things.

I waited in the trauma bay while sirens sounded outside. The crew was bringing in a gunshot victim.

"Do we know where the patient is shot?" I turned to Nancy, my best trauma nurse, and she shrugged.

"They didn't say."

"Well, it would help to know if we're dealing with a head shot, chest shot, or gut shot." I couldn't keep the irritation from my voice. Any advanced warning helped us prepare. Sometimes these crews thought we were miracle workers and would sort it all out once they arrived. Not me. I liked to know. Having the time to call in extra help, or hell, even set up a chest tube tray, were seconds I didn't have to waste once I had the patient on my table.

Seconds meant the difference between life and death.

Nancy's mouth twitched. I couldn't tell if I'd annoyed her or if she was laughing at me.

"We'll know in about three...two..." She counted down the seconds. That woman was crazy intuitive, even psychic. She kind of freaked me out.

When she reached one, the outer doors slid open and two men guided a stretcher inside. My luck, which had been good these past few weeks, turned south fast, because Keith walked beside the stretcher, his powerful arms flexed with every squeeze of the self-inflating bag. He breathed life into the patient, while my mind went blank. His gaze cut to mine, and our

eyes connected across the space. Beside me, Nancy jumped into action, while I stood still, pinned by the simmering anger in his heated gaze.

Now what the hell had I done to deserve that? Or, maybe that was my overactive mind at work? What was it about him? And why did my thoughts focus more on him than the man lying on the table?

One look, gunshot to the chest. Shit.

Keith blinked, and shook his head. He'd missed giving a couple breaths via the mask, almost as if he, too, had been distracted. He'd probably been eyeing one of the nurses on his way in. Insufferable flirt.

It was time to swallow my pride. Like the few times this past week, I approached him, and pretended like he hadn't seen me in all my drunken glory. Because of that night, I hadn't touched a drop of alcohol since. I pretended I was the consummate professional, someone to be respected instead of ridiculed. I'd embarrassed myself in front of him, and I hated how much that mattered.

In some weird way, his respect meant something to me.

Before I could speak, Keith barked vitals out to me. "Gun shot to right chest, Heart rate dropping. Not breathing. Carotid pulse thready, none in extremities."

Shit, the man was in shock.

I reverted to what I knew best, the cleanness of the rhythms of trauma medicine, and ignored the thudding of my heart. Keith smelled too damn good and was impossible to ignore.

"Bleeding?"

He shook his head. "No exit wound."

The bandage he had dressed in the field only showed a small dab of blood, which meant...

"Nancy, I need a chest tube tray."

There'd been no need to yell, but that's what I did. Nancy had already grabbed a few more nurses. The respiratory therapist, Mark Tribault, stood at the head of the bed. In some hospitals, I would've had to place the breathing tube to secure his airway, but our therapists were allowed to take over that task. In this case that was a blessing.

A quick listen with my stethoscope revealed what I'd already expected. The right lung was down, and the chest was probably filling with blood. I had three priorities. Drain the blood. Inflate that lung. Stop the bleeding.

"Activate massive transfusion protocol," I ordered.

To anyone not familiar with a trauma bay, the scene may have looked a bit chaotic, but to us it was a well-synchronized dance. Mark took over the airway from Keith. Mark secured the airway, inserted a breathing tube, and hooked our patient up to a ventilator. This left Keith standing right next to me as I cleaned and prepped the right chest to insert the chest tube.

The deep pull of Keith's breaths whispered against my neck. Close quarters were simply a part of this job, but with Keith standing that close, it felt like I couldn't breathe.

"Can I help?" he asked.

I angled my chin toward the bandage he'd placed in the field. "I'm going to need that off."

While I scrubbed at the man's skin, Keith leaned over me, and helped Joyce, a young nurse, peel back the bandage. The scent of him was intoxicating, and it took all my concentration to not let his nearness affect me.

I bit my lower lip as I made the incision over the man's rib, and inserted the chest tube into the side of his chest. Blood poured out. I barked out orders for blood, fluids, and a surgical tray. We had an active bleeder on our hands and were losing our patient. Joyce secured a second intravenous line, adding to the one Keith had placed in the field. While my team poured in fluids and blood, I cut open the man's chest.

An hour later, our patient was stable enough to move to the main operating room. I stretched, leaning back and twisted to relieve the kinks in my back. Reaching into the back pocket of my scrubs, I searched for my phone, what I found was a note instead.

"Smile, Doc. You're prettier with a smile than a scowl." It was signed with a scratch of ink... 'K.'

I glanced around, but Keith was nowhere to be found. When he'd left I couldn't say, except I felt oddly disappointed. Why, still remained a mystery. He and I didn't mix. It wasn't that we were oil and water. Something crackled in the air between us. It was a combustible energy I found confusing in a man who I couldn't stand.

But, he'd left me a note. And, that made me smile.

CHAPTER 8



I slipped the note to Dr. Peters, then rounded up Tom and took him to an exam room, where I shut and locked the door. “Put us out of service, Tom,” I ordered.

“Dispatch will want to know why,” Tom pointed out.

“Use your imagination,” I said. “Take that boot knife of yours and slash a tire or something, just put us the fuck out of service.”

“Okay,” Tom said, the fretful rookie.

After putting us out of service with dispatch, he stared at me as I scissored off my uniform shirt, then gaped more at the hole in my tee-shirt, the dark color concealing a blood stain that looked like I’d lost maybe a half-pint of blood. While on scene, crowded with cops, a little girl maybe four or five years old came out from behind a chair where she’d been hiding when the shooting went down. She had a little derringer in her hand, a piece of crap pistol generally only good for barrel-to-head assassinations. I don’t think she was shooting at me, just a careless fucking kid, but a careless kid with a loaded pistol in-hand. That made her plenty dangerous.

She shot me.

I swear to God I saw the bullet as it traveled to my chest, felt an all-too-familiar punch and burn as it hit, but the pain told me the bullet had done no serious damage. I ignored it. I had a patient to attend, so I tuned my mind to my patient and away from the pain. The cops didn’t have to disarm the kid. When the derringer fired, she dropped it and bawled in terror. I wasn’t going to be the drama queen and add to the kid’s freak-out. My only

reaction at the time was a grunt as air was punched out of my lungs. Until this moment, I think Tom didn't even know I'd been hit.

In the exam room, I slid the tee-shirt off and told Tom to glove up and rinse the thing in the sink. He gaped at me but did as told while I found forceps on a tray, took a deep breath, and found the base of the bullet, gusted out the breath, took another deep breath, and yanked it out. It had hit my sternum and didn't penetrate, and a distant part of my mind realized the round had to have been a .22 short. I think at that range, even a .22 long-rifle would've punched through and I'd be strumming a harp upstairs, or, more likely, getting jabbed in the ass downstairs with a pitchfork or trident or whatever the fuck it was demons toted about.

I slipped the bullet into my pocket, then had Tom round up towels, and poured irrigation saline onto the wound. I had Tom squirt half a small tube of triple antibiotic ointment into the hole. Tom shaved off the chest hair in a biggish square surrounding the wound, then dressed the wound with gauze pads and tape.

I was wringing out my tee-shirt for the last time when Dr. Laura Peters, M.D., alphabet soup, and a fiery expression, barged into the exam room. "What the hell's going on here?" she demanded.

"Just some first aid," I said. "I figured there was enough going on out there without bothering you for a Band-Aid." I put my shirt on and she gaped as I turned to face her. The white gauze was as visible behind the hole as birdshit on a windshield.

"You got fucking shot, and you're calling it first fucking aid?" she snapped. "How much more fucking macho are you going to get?"

"It's nothing," I insisted. "Look, a kid, barely more than a toddler, picked up a little Saturday Night Special and it went off and dinged me. It didn't even penetrate the sternum, so I plucked it out. It's not my first time. I had to do it when I was in the Navy and a corpsman with the Marines. Ricochet got me in the thigh and I had to yank it out of the hole, then stuff it with gauze and wrap the thing. The lieutenant put me in for a Purple Heart. That, and five dollars, bought me a coffee at Starbuck's on my way home."

"Shut your fucking mouth and lie down on the stretcher," Dr. Peters said. But her alphabet soup, all 10 gallons of it, cut no ice with me. I wasn't her patient. I wasn't her employee, not even by proxy. I was employed by the city, not by this sexy pot of alphabet soup.

“No, Ma’am,” I asserted. “I need to run home for a fresh uniform shirt and get my ass back on-duty. This is Friday and I’m in the barrel until Sunday morning. Goddamn if I’m going to leave EMS shorthanded. We’re a medic down in two stations, one with a broken leg he got when he tripped over a root out camping, and another with a death in the family that had her out of town at a funeral. You know how it gets out there. Never mind. You don’t know. You have no idea, Ma’am. I didn’t get to go home injured when I got shot in the Middle East, and I ain’t going home now.”

“Look, don’t make me pull rank,” she said, growing red-faced with annoyance.

“Tom, why don’t you go get us a cup of coffee from the report room?” I said. Tom knew an order when he heard one, and looked grateful to escape the friction as he escaped the room. “You have no rank, Dr. Peters,” I said when the door closed behind Tom.

“Keith, your Chief Mickey Ranford is a friend of mine,” Peters said. “I can call him right now and have you ordered to stand down. I trust your medical judgment that it’s just a flesh wound, but I mean to treat the wound. What hit you?”

“This,” I said, digging into my pocket and coming up with the .22 slug.

“A .22,” she said. “I shouldn’t have to explain this to you Dick-and-Jane, but your pride seems to be in your way. See Keith. See bullet hit Keith. See Keith trying to self-treat. Macho Keith. See microbes on the bullet, on Keith’s fucking shirt, on Keith’s tee-shirt, on Keith’s skin. See the wound infect. See Keith go from lightly injured to septic shock in about three days. Stupid Keith. He’s on medical leave with sepsis for six weeks because he was Mr. Macho. Now, shed that shirt and lie on the fucking stretcher, God damn you.”

“No,” I said. “I had Tom pack it in antibiotic ointment, and if I need treatment, I’ll make an appointment with my own doctor Monday. Go tend to someone who has an emergency. I know you hate my ass, so I’d rather you don’t treat me anyway.”

“How many times do I have to tell you I’m sorry about how I acted at your place?” she asked.

“I don’t want an apology you don’t mean,” I said. “I gave my word that stays between us, and I kept my word, Dr. Peters.”

“What’s it going to take for you to call me Laura?” she asked.

“Not even an act of Congress or a still-smoking Eleventh Commandment on a fresh tablet of stone,” I returned.

In a vacuum, I’d have thrown her on the stretcher and done stuff worthy of a whole new volume of the Kama Sutra. But this wasn’t a vacuum, and this woman ... she clouded my judgment with her utter beauty and sexiness. I hungered for her but despised the icy human being she was. One way or another, she set off my alarm bells and had all my red warning flags waving furiously in the breeze, signs I’d long since learned to heed. Besides, the soreness had risen to new heights, and I wasn’t in the mood to flirt, much less fuck.

I pushed past her and out of the exam room, got as far as the nurse station, when I lost consciousness, giving my head a hard thump on the desk’s edge as I hit the floor.

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CHAPTER 9



Goddamn him! And right after I told him to stop and let me take a look. That man was going to drive me insane, but first, I needed to save his sorry ass life. I reached him first, but in an ER, it didn't take much to draw a crowd. He was surrounded in seconds, but I didn't care about the people around me. I ripped open that damp shirt and looked at the bandage.

It wasn't bleeding. My mind went to trauma mode, thinking about the method of injury. A .22, he said. Hit him square in the chest, he said. Over the sternum, he said. Bastard said a lot of really scary shit.

My mind worked the differential of what had knocked him out as my fingers pressed against his neck searching for a pulse.

Bastard's pulse raced beneath the pad of my finger. It was rapid and irregular, as was his breathing. Shit. The ragged pulls of his breath concerned me. I looked to our respiratory therapist. "Mark, he needs oxygen."

Mark took off at a trot, as someone arrived with a stretcher. We loaded Keith up and took him to a bed. I grabbed my stethoscope from around my neck, put in the earpieces, and pressed the cold metal to his chest. I'd never been this close to him. Well, I had, but this seemed more intimate, in a not-wanting-to-be-here kind of way.

Trying to remain professional while staring at the broad expanse of his chest was a feat I simply wasn't capable of, and now I had to touch him. My fingers fluttered over his skin, eager to feel him, but needing to respect him too. I'd been in a vulnerable position only a few weeks ago, and he'd treated me with more kindness than I deserved.

Nevertheless, I needed to examine his chest for injuries. Airway and breathing were under control. His pulse was a little stronger now. Nancy had a blood pressure cuff wrapped around his arm. I was looking for crunching around his ribs, something that would indicate that bullet had caused more trauma than his thick-assed skull wanted to admit. When he breathed, there weren't any abnormal, or asymmetrical, movements of his chest. My immediate thought was he'd cracked a rib, punctured a lung, and I'd have to shove the second chest tube in for this shift. Breath sounds were present, and equal. He would be chest tube free.

Our team cut off his clothes, exposing more of his flesh to my eyes. The dips and valleys of his abs had me biting at my lower lip. My exam was more thorough than it needed to be, but I couldn't help myself. I'd never be this close to him again, and just once, I wanted to know what he felt like.

"His blood pressure is a bit low," Nancy said. "Want me to give a bolus?"

The picture wasn't adding up. "Not yet. He needs to get to CT. I don't see any blood on the back of his head, but he hit it pretty hard coming down. We'll rule out any bleeds in there, and have them add on a cardiac CT too, while we're at it."

"Cardiac?"

"I'm worried about a cardiac contusion. If he has that we need to be light on the fluids."

"How would that have happened?"

"Don't ask." Keith had kept my secrets. Now was my turn to repay the favor.

It seemed important to him to keep what happened quiet. I loved his compassion for kids; the kid who'd shot him, and poor Caleb who'd died. He might look tough on the exterior, but I'd seen glimpses of the man inside. I respected that, and it made it a little harder to hate him. I might even like him a little as a result.

Before we could get him to the CT scanner, X-rays revealed no rib fractures, no air accumulating in his chest. His EKG was abnormal, but there was no sign of a heart attack. I called Karl Simmons, our cardiologist, to read the EKG and do an echocardiogram of Keith's heart. We drew blood. I paced behind the CT tech, gnawing at what little nails I had left. As a surgeon, I kept them cut short.

In my line of work, I'd seen hundreds, if not thousands, of CTs, but I didn't trust myself to read Keith's. He'd gotten under my skin, which meant I'd lost perspective. There was nothing else for me to do. He wasn't a trauma case, so I handed his care over to the attending ER doc.

The rest of my shift dragged on. Eventually, it came to a quiet end, and no further trauma calls came in. That was good, because my mind was focused elsewhere. I checked Keith's chart. I'd been right. The bastard had a cardiac contusion. There'd been no way to hide the bullet wound. Everyone here had seen too many of those, but I kept the who and how to myself. What I did make certain of was cleaning it out. Had he really glopped on antibiotic ointment? He probably had. Good thing he hadn't had Tom pee on it. I'd heard stories about military types using urine to clean contaminated wounds, and then duct tape, or crazy glue, to seal them. What was it with the male brain? Did they just make shit up?

I found out what room they'd put him in and headed up to check in on him. He thought he'd get back to work, but he'd bought himself a night of observation and monitoring, and could say goodbye to the rest of his weekend shift. I crept into his room, keeping the lights dim, and pulled up a chair beside his bed.

I didn't immediately sit. Instead, I stood over him, watching the monitors, watching him breathe, watching how the thin sheet moulded to the contours of his body.

Reaching down, I gripped his hand. I took my seat, and I pressed my lips against his knuckles. "You arrogant bastard," I said. "Next time, don't be such an ass."

His lids fluttered open, and he blinked up at me. "Now isn't this a sight."

With a hiss, I released his hand, mortified at him catching me being so inappropriate.

"I didn't think you'd be the one to kiss me first," he said.

CHAPTER 10



I have to say even that mild gesture of her kissing my knuckles was heartening. Even in this much pain, a surprising amount of pain, I felt my cock starting to stir. “What happened to me?” I asked, surprised at the events of the afternoon. Yeah, I was sore from the shooting, but I’d felt more soreness after a softball or touch football game, and certainly more when I’d been shot in the Middle East, earning a Purple Heart that day and a Silver Star two days later for saving the bacon of three Marines.

“You got shot, you asshole,” she answered.

“I already know I was shot,” I returned. “I was there and don’t have the Old Timer’s disease. For God’s sake, I plucked out the bullet, remember? Why did I keel over, Dr. Peters?”

“Laura,” she said. “Just ... please call me Laura already, for God’s sake.”

“Laura, then,” I agreed with a studied casual air. I was glad it wasn’t anything critical, but if it opened up more of her humanity and gave me a chance at her, maybe it was worth being shot, I considered.

“The bullet ... do you know how fucking lucky you are it wasn’t even a .22 Long Rifle that got you?” she said, looking angry. “You have a cardiac contusion. It would have been much different if the kid had a higher caliber pistol.”

“Do me a favor?” I asked.

“Depends on the favor,” she returned. I sensed no alphabet soup at all, and liked that.

“Find out how the kid is that shot me, please?” I asked. “I’m sure CPS has the case. The kid didn’t mean to shoot me or do harm. I mean, what kid that age is malicious, you know? I want to be sure she’s okay and this didn’t fuck her up, Dr. ... uh ... Laura.”

“I’ll see what I can learn,” Laura said. “The police chief and I are friends too. And if he’s difficult, the mayor and at least four of the city council owe me a favor or two.”

“Thank you,” I said. “What’s wrong? Your tone is odd, and you look like you’re torn between jumping in this bed or out of that window?” Long street experience had given me decent insight into people.

“Am I that transparent?” she asked, darting a fast glance at my bed, or maybe my middle.

“Maybe only to me,” I said truthfully. “Talk.”

“Jesus, even with a fresh hole in you, you’re an arrogant ass,” she said.

“I regret that you see me so,” I said. “Never mind. When do I get out of here and back to work?”

“I’m here as your friend, not your attending physician,” Laura said. “I barely treated you down in the ER. Conflict of interest. Your attending is Dr. Karl Simmons, a cardiologist. But if I had to guess, tomorrow or the day after.”

“As to the rest?” I pressed.

“The rest?” she asked.

I smirked, then patted my bed and pointed at the window, my gestures clear as I wagged my brows a bit.

“Jesus Christ,” she moaned. “Goddammit, yes, I have ... I guess you’d call it a schoolgirl crush ... on you, you asshole.”

“So when do we marry?” I returned with a grin.

“Goddammit ... never fucking mind,” Laura returned. “Fuck off, Keith.”

“Laura, do you think you’re the only one who feels something here?” I shot back.

“Do you have to mock it?” she demanded.

“Look, the other night, when I took you home, you showed me your humanity,” I told her. “That appealed to me. You kissing my hand today appealed to me. Both told me you’re really human and not the Ice Mistress of the ER. I’d say you appeal to me and that would be true, but you have mirrors at home and a closet full of Size-2 attire, so you already know

you're a Victoria's Secret model." Just then, the penny dropped for me, and suddenly I felt like an ass as a deep awareness fell over me as red flags returned in my mind, this time bearing memory.



I'd taken leave here while still in the Navy. *Jesus H. Christ, I'm surprised she didn't throw kitchen knives at me*, I thought, understanding ancient memory. Young and dumb, I went into a strip club. A lean beauty on stage indeed slithered like a snake, with moves right out of a wet dream. She appealed so much that I even spent money I couldn't afford on a lap dance, so intense that I came in my shorts while she writhed all over me. That beautiful woman was Laura Peters, 21 years old just like I was.



“Jesus fuck,” I breathed.

“What?” she asked.

“Skirtless Pub, 20 years ago,” I said, still stunned.

“Holy Christ, what the fuck?” Laura demanded.

“I'm sorry about teasing you at my place,” I said. “I think my subconscious was trying to tell me we met back then. Jesus, I even bought a lap dance.”

“Oh, God,” she moaned, looking horrified.

“Same gentleman rules apply,” I said. “That's all your business and not mine, and I'm close-mouthed.”

“Thank you for that. I know it's a cliché to cover bullshit, but I really was paying my way through college. My parents were poor as dirt. But I had a fire in my belly.”

“That's why I went in the Navy. I had the grades for college, but when my dad died, so did that dream. I wanted to be a doctor. He made the money to have sent me to college. But his heart attack ended that. There was enough insurance to pay his funeral off, and my mother was able to

refinance the house to lower the payments, or would've faced foreclosure. She's retiring next year.

"Anyway," I continued. "I tried to go for the student loans but disqualified due to my father's income. Fucking bureaucrats didn't care that there was no more income. It was like talking to a brick fucking wall. He'd made too much money before he died. So Penn State was out and I was wild enough for the state pen but smart enough to know that wasn't a good idea for me. Hello US Navy. The bad thing about being deployed was that I got shot and Iraq is a miserable fucking place. Thinking on it, I don't know why anyone would fight to have that dustbowl. The good thing is there was nowhere to spend my pay while I was in-country. So I came out with a boatload of money and the GI Bill, and I worked that system. I went to college and lived like an inmate otherwise, but got my degree. In many ways, the GI Bill is a good thing, but in many more it's a sick fuckin' joke, so no way could medical school happen. I thought to work for a year or two and save up money to attend medical school, but that couldn't happen. Besides, I'd have been graduating medical school at 30 or 31, and not really starting my life until about 36 years old. I wanted to start living on my terms and nobody else's. And now here I am." I snorted, regretting that long-ago decision in a big way, but now, at my age, I could afford it but was unwilling to invest ten years in it.

I was shocked. I never told my tale, but I figured I accidentally knew too much of hers and fair was fair, right? Wrong, I knew. I admitted to myself that I liked her, I had feelings for her that I hid behind a mask of anger and annoyance. I told her about me to draw her closer. I wanted her to know some of my tale. Sharing that knowledge, part of my tale, was exciting and terrifying at the same time.

CHAPTER 11



Shit, shit, shit. That word seemed to repeat itself a lot in my head when I was around Keith. Now, he knew two damaging things about me. Not only did he know I couldn't hold my liquor, but we'd basically already fucked when I gave him that lap dance. It might have been twenty years in the past, but twenty lifetimes ago would have been far too recent.

I was soooo fuuucked!

He kept looking at me with those damn eyes of his, sucking me in even further. There had been a gentleness there as he shared those pieces of his life with me. His words touched me deeply and had me seeing him in a new light. Keith lived life with passion, but that was nothing like what simmered deep within his gaze. I sensed a hunger and rawness. Something wicked and dark sat there, sizing me up, and measuring my every breath. He made me feel stripped bare. Not naked, but stripped of the protective layers I'd built to keep people out. Before him, I became vulnerable and raw.

I didn't like that one bit. He didn't deserve to know me. Not like that.

If he only knew everything about me. I nearly laughed. If he knew what drove me, it would send him screaming to the hills.

I'd made good money as a stripper, but that only brought in the dollar bills. I raked those in, stuffing my g-string, but the money which offset my bills? That came from what I did off-stage, in twenties, fifties, and hundreds. I was well paid for my lap dance skills. And he knew exactly how good I'd been. Shit, that was a level of intimacy I didn't want with a man I could barely stand. Except, I knew what I wanted from Keith. Dark

desires brewed in my heart and my mind, needs I could never voice. I hated that about myself.

The men I'd danced for weren't allowed to touch me, but I sure as hell touched them. That strip club was topless, but my g-string left little to the imagination. If Keith had been there, and by the fire smoldering in his eyes, and the impressive bulge growing beneath his sheet, he remembered every naked inch of my body and likely every bump and grind of that dance.

I was dying to know if he'd been the twenty, fifty, or hundred kind of man. How much had I rocked his world? My ego would get the better of me if I let it. No way in hell would I ever ask that question. If he'd given me a twenty, I'd hate him and feel bad about myself. If he'd given me a hundred, I'd want to curl in on myself and never show my face to him again.

What the hell was going through his mind, because mine was all messed up?

Back then, I became another person when I stepped foot in that club. My mind blanked and I allowed something deeper and darker out to play. He probably thought I was a whore from the way I'd danced. Wouldn't he be surprised? I never went on a single date during my college years. It was the library or work for me.

There was no way to deny what had happened. I'd fucked him through his clothes, and I wasn't even going to try to convince myself he hadn't had one hell of a time either. I had lots of repeat customers for a reason.

Shit. Shit. Shit. There wasn't a word for the depths of the mortification rushing through me.

I wasn't that desperate girl anymore. I had a career. A reputation. There was so much to lose, and Keith held my fate in his hands. Gentleman? He was for now, but what would push him over the edge? He didn't like me. I didn't trust him. He was only saying that because...shit. I always knew my past would catch up to me. Never did I think I would be in a position to lose everything.

I glanced out the window, thinking maybe a good swift plunge might be better than staying in this room. Instead, I faced my fear head on.

"Look, I really appreciate you taking care of me the other night, but that's nothing like..." I rubbed the back of my neck. "Look, that was a chapter in my life. I've left it behind."

Except, I still had a stripper pole at home. It was the best medicine for destressing from life. Not to mention, it kept my body toned. He didn't need

to know that. And he sure as hell didn't need to know the fantasies raging in my head.

In college, I'd danced for a room full of men. In my fantasies, I'd only ever danced for one man. He'd been nameless and faceless for nearly two decades. One man. One man who took me, broke me, and gathered all the pieces of me at the end. One man who owned my mind, body, and soul. One man whose features had slowly begun to reveal themselves over the past few weeks.

"We all have pasts, darlin'," he said, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Not like that," I snapped.

He arched a brow. "Look, there's no reason to bite my head off."

"You don't get it."

"Get what? You're fucking hot, Dr. Peters..."

"Laura! Dammit, my name is Laura. Use my fucking name!"

I'd danced in his lap, I'd ground my pussy against his cock. I'm certain he came. I might have too. It happened sometimes, if there was a connection with the guy. My inhibitions had been much looser back then.

"Don't take that tone with me," he said. "Or, you'll find yourself over my lap and my hand raining down on that fine ass."

Shit. Shit. Shit. Don't react!

I needed to not respond to the fire those words lit inside of me. He was only teasing. The man was an insufferable flirt, and meant nothing by it. He'd never do something so viciously hot. An ache settled at the apex of my thighs and I bit back a groan. If he only knew how much that turned me on.

Crossing my arms, I turned my back to him. I couldn't let him see the flush in my face, or the tightening of my nipples. A quick glance down and I breathed out a sigh of relief. My nipples might be tight as fuck, but they were buried beneath my sports bra, a tee-shirt, scrub top, and my white coat. Thank goodness for small miracles.

"You're insufferable," I said, staring out the window. Yet again, I contemplated taking that plunge.

"What? Never had your ass spanked?"

I spun around. "How dare you!"

"A good swat might just unfreeze some of that bitchiness...Dr. Peters. Heat thaws, right?"

“Oh my God,” I screeched, curling my fingers into fists. I stomped off, stopping at the door. “Forget what I said. I must have been confused. I’m tired and not thinking. I hate you.”

The corner of his mouth lifted in a smirk. “You don’t hate me. Said so yourself, got a little crush on me, and now you’re wondering what it might feel like if I do smack that ass.”

“I’m not—”

The smirk turned into a full-bodied grin. “Oh, I’m pretty sure you are, but you’ll have to wait to find out. Let me get out of this bed...unless, you’re thinking of joining me in it.”

“Ass!”

I left him then, stormed right out. Hot tears pricked at my eyes. I made it to the call room before the tears began to fall. Bastard saw right through me. There was only one thing to do. I needed to quit and move far far away. No way in hell would I ever speak to him again.

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CHAPTER 12



I chuckled as she stormed off. I don't know how I knew about her submissive desires. I chalked it up to long street experience, that knowledge I learned from dealing with hundreds and thousands of people under God knew how much duress. I was confident she'd return, probably even later this day. Just then, there was a knock at the door and Lieutenant Mike Samuels entered, with Tom in tow.

"First and foremost, how the hell are you?" Samuels greeted me.

"Ready to get the hell out of this loony bin," I said.

"Second, a loony bin is right where you fucking belong." Samuels' tone changed to an authoritarian note loaded with imperious bluster. "What in the red, white, and blue bleeding *fuck* is wrong with you? Do you think you're fucking Superman, asshole? Goddammit, how many people were you about to put at risk with a fucking bullet in you?"

"Look, I pried the thing out," I said, annoyed and in no mood for Samuels' crap.

I didn't like the son of a bitch in any event, and was sure the reverse was true. But I was on good terms with the captain, a Marine vet with a fondness for former corpsmen. Samuels would make a bunch of sound and fury, but it meant nothing. He was toothless and could only recommend discipline.

Captain Abe Briggs wasn't going to do shit to me, nor let shit happen to me at this schmuck's hands, and I knew it. Samuels had to have been aware of it too. By Tom's sheepish look, I also knew Samuels pressured him to rat me out. I decided on the spot that I'd ask for a new partner when I went

back on-duty. I damn sure wouldn't have a partner I couldn't trust with everything, and Tom had ridden off that range.

"You think that's the example to set?" Samuels asked.

"Mike, get the fuck out of here before I come off this bed and turn you into a patient," I said. My tone was mild but carried plenty of menace. "Nothing would give me more fucking pleasure. And take this moron with you. I'm putting in for another partner. This is your official notification, Lieutenant."

"He deserves better than you, anyway," Samuels sneered. "At least he's loyal and understands good sense and the chain of —" His lecture ended when I flung my water pitcher at him, missing him by about three inches. The pitcher, plastic, broke into shards, as I swung my legs from the bed, my IV yanking out in the process.

"Both of you get the fuck out of here and as far from me as you can get," I said. "Even here with a hole healing in me and stoned on whatever drugs they gave me, I can whip both of your asses so bad you'll cry for your mummies. Scram!"

Tom fled the room and Samuels looked wide-eyed at me. "You ... I'll have you fired," he blustered.

"Roll the fucking dice," I returned. "Now, get lost." Samuels left, and I sat heavily at the edge of the bed. My IV pump was chirping like 90 and my arm was bleeding from the hole when the nurse came in.

"Oh, damn," the nurse said. "What happened?"

"I should think that's obvious," I replied. "My IV came out, and unless your Doc Simmons has a good reason to put one back in me, I'd as soon go without one. In fact, put gauze and tape on this so I stop bleeding all over the place, then call him and get me kicked out of here."

The nurse looked at me with wide eyes and fled while I smirked. In a moment, the nurse came in with Laura and another distinguished looking alphabet soup in a lab coat embroidered Karl Simmons, M.D. and beneath it Chief of Cardiology. Just the man I wanted to see.

"What happened?" Laura demanded.

"I had unwelcome guests and invited them to leave," I told her.

"By hurling a pitcher at them?" she pressed, glancing down at the shards and puddle.

"I felt the need to be emphatic," I told her, then looked at Simmons. "What's it going to take to get the hell out of here, Doc?"

“I want to run an EKG on you, and listen to your chest,” he said. “C’mon, give me the chance to doctor, dude. Don’t tell me I sobered up to see you and you won’t let me work my magic?”

I snorted. What can I say? I liked this guy. “Okay, fine,” I agreed.

“If that looks good and sounds good, I think the next thing you’ll need is a ride,” Simmons said. He poked his head out the door. “He seems less emphatic now, so it’s safe to come in,” he said to someone. Two women entered, one pushing an EKG machine, and the other, my mother.

“Hi, Mom,” I said.

“Jesus, when your captain called, he scared me out of my mind,” my mother said.

“Ah, I’ve cut myself worse shaving,” I told her.

“Your Captain Briggs told me you were shot, kiddo,” she said. I darted a glance at Laura and saw amusement in her eyes at me being called kiddo, but I cut my mom a lot of slack.

“I wish he hadn’t called and scared you,” I said. “That was impolite of him and I’ll challenge him to pistols at 20 paces to learn him a lesson about not scaring you.”

“He was always a smartass as a kid,” Mom told the audience.

“Lay your ass on the bed like a good boy and let the nice lady run the EKG on you,” Simmons said. “With a spot of luck I can boot you to the curb in 20 minutes and she might be kind enough to drive you home ... kiddo.”

At this, Laura made a high-pitched squeak, red-faced and obviously struggling not to giggle at my discomfiting moment. *Jesus H. Christ.* I knew when I wasn’t going to win, so I laid on my back while the respiratory therapist quickly and efficiently ran the EKG. Finished, she handed the sheet to Simmons, then departed, and Simmons listened to my ticker for a moment.

“Okay, if you can keep your silly ass from getting shot again, I think you might live to be a hundred,” he pronounced. “I’m discharging you, kiddo. There’ll be orders to do a follow-up with me in a week, and you should probably be able to return to work in two weeks. Certainly at least two weeks.”

“Jesus, I’d rather go back today,” I said, but really didn’t mean it. Two weeks off the streets, on worker’s comp, sounded great to me. Probably

wouldn't sound too cool to the local bass and catfish population, I considered, but God knew I could stand the downtime.

"No, I don't want anything hitting your chest until that contusion heals," Simmons said. "Two weeks, unless you'd like me to up the ante to four weeks, which might be in the cards anyway ... kiddo."

"Okay, okay," I said, and winked at Laura. "Maybe I can convince some pretty nurse here to be my fishing buddy."

Surprising me, Laura rolled her eyes and left the room without a word. Forty minutes later, I had a bunch of discharge paperwork in an envelope, was crammed into a wheelchair, then rolled to the lobby, where my mother waited in her car. She announced she was going to stay overnight then head home in the morning.

That night, I took her to the roadhouse, a place called Louie's, to treat her to dinner. I ordered the big ribeye and iced tea, somewhat to mollify her uber-Baptist temperance attitude, but as much as anything because I still felt a bit woozy from conking my head on that desk, as well as the Norco I'd been prescribed. She'd already frowned enough at the wet bar off my parlor at home and I wasn't in the mood for a temperance lecture.

Never really comfortable in crowded places, my eyes searched the roadhouse from time to time, peeled for trouble. I can deal with this roadhouse or with the big beer joints with garage doors, but I simply can't go to bars. I spend all my time wondering where's the knife, who has the pistol, and what's the quickest point of egress, so I can't relax.

My eyes settled on Laura, again at a table alone with a bottle of wine before her and a plate of salad. Her eyes met mine, and I figured the ball was in her court. She could accept me as-is and approach, or reject me. Probably she was out of my league anyway. I couldn't imagine she didn't have her choice of a dozen rich suitors.

She was attracted to me. Of that, I was certain. But the harsh reality was that I was a lowlife paramedic, just a worker bee in a hive where she was queen. That hateful look told me the tale, though. I was no longer confident she'd come around. In fact, I was confident she wouldn't.

CHAPTER 13



Alcohol. It was the great anesthetic. That property was one I capitalized on now. After the hospital, I needed to seek the bliss of becoming numb.

Weeks! I'd gone weeks without a sip, and yet one day around Keith and here I was sucking down more wine. I was only one glass in. Okay, I was one huge ass glass in, but I'd told the waitress to only let me order one bottle. While I saved that fucker's life, he unraveled mine. He tugged, and teased, and pulled on the threads I'd long since cut out of my life. That bastard uncovered the secrets of my past, and now that knowledge threatened my future. That wasn't allowed.

And I still couldn't get him out of my head. One moment, I wanted to shove an ice pick in his chest. The next, well, in those vulnerable moments, I imagined him shoving something else inside of me. I ached for him in the worst possible way, which made me hate him even more.

It wasn't fair either. He knew my secrets, but I'd preserved his. When they'd cut him out of his clothes, I hadn't looked. Every young thing in the ER had got an eye full of his goods, but I'd averted my gaze. Why?

That answer bothered me the most. It felt intrusive and wrong. Like I needed his permission to gaze upon what lie...well, what lie down there. In my line of work, clothes were a hindrance. Male or female: no one cared what you looked like. Small boobs. Big boobs. Shaved pussies or not. We saw it all. I'd seen long cocks. Small cocks. Thin cocks. Hell, I'd seen massive cocks. What I hadn't seen was Keith's cock.

But I imagined everything about his cock, and the things he might do with it. Those thoughts had brought me to Louie's Roadhouse, because I refused to drink alone. It was a country western bar. On the weekends, they had a live band. Line dancing was a big thing. The two-step was, too. My plan was to drink until I forgot, maybe shuffle my stuff on the floor. Line dancing wasn't stripping, but I still loved to shake my ass.

Here I was again, me alone at a table, drowning my sorrows at the bottom of a glass of wine. Who the hell was I kidding? After what had happened with Keith, I should've been smarter about it, but I hated drinking alone. Somehow, downing a bottle at home made me feel like shit. Downing a bottle at a bar? Well, I was surrounded by people. I guess that made this okay. Technically, Louie's wasn't a bar, so that was good too.

Except, wouldn't it be my luck, but that shit showed up here as well? What was it with Keith? When I was at my lowest, wallowing in my deepest sorrows, he had this uncanny knack for showing up. It wasn't that he was under my skin. The bastard had crawled his way deep inside.

Spank my ass? Oh no, not that. And how dare he suggest I might like it? Except I would. I craved it with a desperate hunger. Not the playful lover's taps going around these days after that craptastic movie. What I needed delved much deeper.

The joke was on him though. He'd brought his mom, and I was just drunk enough to have a little fun with the *kiddo*. Images of him inviting me into his hospital bed invaded my thoughts. Well, I would give him something to think about.

Our gazes snagged and tumbled across the crowded restaurant. The band was beginning the next set. The dance floor had its fair share of eager players. With a lift of my glass, I saluted the jerk who invaded my dreams. Years ago, a lifetime ago, I'd ground my ass against his cock. Well tonight, I'd show him that ass, and he'd know it would never again be his. The first notes of a song rumbled through the house. Climbing to my feet, I tested my balance. Not too drunk, and tipsy enough to really let loose.

I joined the line of eager dancers, taking my position two rows back, somewhere off center. Keith could see me, but he'd have to look close. My heels kicked up. I shuffled to the side. When everyone jumped, I followed suit. It took a few rounds before I learned the steps, but I had it down in no time flat. That's when I started shaking my ass and rolling my hips.

Not once did I look at him, but I did glance at the chap in line beside me. He had his eyes on my tits and ass. I shook those for him, making a show. Really, this was the most fun I'd had in months.

When the steps turned me around to face Keith, the scowl on his face brought a smile to mine. Then I noticed how the other dancers began to hang back, giving me more room.

Keith gripped a knife in his hand, and tore at his steak. Beside him, his mama nibbled at her salad, oblivious to the war we waged, and I hadn't even begun to strut my stuff.

I reeled in the guy beside me. He was tall, skinnier than I liked, but moderately decent with his steps. He made his move, and I let him grab me around the waist, a bit more familiar with his hands than I liked. I'm not even sure what I was trying to prove. Keith hated me, so this wasn't about making him jealous. Perhaps, I was simply trying to prove I wasn't so achingly alone? Not that it mattered, because I was kind of having fun.

The tall guy and I broke the line and danced our steps. He pulled me close. I stepped away with a sashay of my ass, rocking my hips. I couldn't help the moves, or my dance. A freedom overcame me when music played. Dance had always been my escape. My partner's hand slipped from my hip and settled on my ass. He tugged me up tight against his groin, letting me know exactly the effect I was having on him.

That's when the fists started to fly.

Keith didn't even waste time with words. He clocked my partner in the jaw and ripped me out of his arms.

"Get your fucking hands off my girl's ass," he growled to my makeshift dance partner.

My guy didn't even fight back. What ever happened to staking a claim? He rubbed his jaw, then back-pedaled off. "Hey man, didn't know she was your girl."

"I'm not—" I protested.

"Shut up," Keith growled, as he grabbed my waist. Before I knew what was happening, the music kept playing, and I was two-stepping with a neanderthal.

Keith took me for a spin. Not once did he speak to me. I'd expected him to have two left feet, but he surprised me on that dance floor. I tried to take the lead, but he put me in my place, turning my back to the flow of our dance. I gripped his shoulder, as hard or harder than he gripped my waist.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I said.

He brought me back to my table and sat me in my chair. With a scowl, he pulled out his money clip and set five bills down. “You’ve had too much to drink, darlin’, and I’m buying your dance card for the night. Sober up and head home. You’re done dancing here tonight.”

With that, he left me sputtering. Keith grabbed the remainder of my bottle and stalked off towards his mom.

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CHAPTER 14



“**W**hat the hell was that all about?” my mother demanded as I returned to the table with a half-bottle of white wine.

“Leave it. Just ... let it go, Mom,” I said, as I watched Laura dropping money on the table and marching from the roadhouse.

“She’s beautiful,” Mom observed. “Spill, kiddo.”

“She is a beauty,” I agreed. “She’s a trauma surgeon at that hospital. Truth is, she’s one of the best. We have ... God, I hate saying ‘it’s complicated,’ but it is. Let me cover the tab and we can get out of this loud-ass place.”

“The tab is mine, kiddo, and I don’t want to hear any guff from you, but it is loud as an airport here.” She flagged down the waitress and handed the girl a hundred, which would’ve covered our meal twice over, and we left, getting into her car.

I didn’t tell Laura or Mom that I knew the fucker she’d been sexing up at Louie’s. He was a lowdown street scrote known as Bobby Z, whom I’d treated five times at the local jail for various ass-whippings he’d taken while being arrested. I was sure he didn’t recognize me. They memorized cops, these scrotes, but had no memory of paramedics, and I didn’t mind the anonymity. But Laura was naive, I knew. No, I corrected myself, she was sheltered and had forgotten the dangers of her former life. She might never want to speak with me again, and I could accept that, but Bobby Z. was the prime suspect in the rapes of several young women I’d run to the hospital post-rape. He’d escaped arrest in those cases. Witness intimidation works.

You know, even in the worst horrors I was forced to see, the rape cases were the worst of them. To be honest, those haunted eyes will plague my nightmares until the hour of my death, amen and again. Physical wounds heal. Spiritual? Not so much in my experience.

Even with Laura hating my ass, guts, liver, and maybe even my synovials and even lymph nodes and toenails, I couldn't bear the idea of her waking up, beaten to a pulp, and raped by Bobby Z., no matter the point Laura was trying to prove to me. *Goddamn, she hates my ass, so when do I stop being her protector?*

On the drive home, my mom demanded, "Tell me all about the blonde beauty."

"She's not what's important," I returned, even admitting to myself the demurral. "We flirted a bit, but that didn't pan out. What matters is the guy she was with. He's known as Bobby Z., and he's bad news, a pimp and serial rapist who keeps getting away with it. I didn't want Laura tangled up with that asshole. Christ knows I ran enough of his victims."

Mom was silent a long moment as she piloted her car to my house, and parked behind my father's truck. "Keith, do you think I'm fucking stupid?" she asked as she parked. "You were being the alpha male, and that means you have feelings for her. To be fair, you have good taste. She's hard to forget."

"I just didn't want her in over her head. And she was in way over her head, Bobby being Bobby."

"Sure," Mom said, but let it drop.



Mom left the next morning after breakfast, and I pondered taking the boat out and drowning a few worms when my doorbell rang. I opened the door, and lo and behold, there was Laura, looking furious, a look with which I'd grown mighty familiar. "Who the hell do you think you are?" she demanded.

"I think I are the man who saved your bacon last night," I said. "That guy you used ... yes, I said 'used' ... to bait me last night is known on the

streets as Bobby Z. Remember that girl eight or nine months back I brought to you, raped and beaten to a pulp?”

She nodded.

“That was his handiwork. Nobody has the guts to testify against him. I get it, Laura. You don’t like me. Maybe you even hate my ass, and more’s the pity. But I protected you anyway.” I let my annoyance slip its leash. “Goddammit, junior high is a long way behind us, so please stop playing junior high games. Can you just leave now and save the inevitable argument?”

“No,” she said. “May I come in, Mr. Kiddo Gentleman?”

“Jesus,” I groaned, rolling my eyes, but I stepped back and let her inside.

“Keith, one of us has to bend a stiff neck, and on balance, it should be me,” she said. “I baited you last night, I was drunk enough to do it and sober enough to remember it. Both are equally regrettable. I don’t know what it is, but around you my wiring scrambles. You appeal to me at primal levels, Keith. I get around you and my belly rolls, and then I get scared and the armor goes up, and no wonder you look at me with suspicion. God, I’m like a lunatic around you.”

“I see,” I said, then stood as I made my decision. “Come with me, please.”

“I didn’t come here for you to throw me on the bed and fuck me,” she protested, then looked nonplussed. “Shit, I did it again.”

“You did,” I agreed. “You really do need a good hard spanking to warm you up or keep that armor down. Come with me, please.”

She stood, looking uncertainly at me, and I led her through the kitchen and out the back door, snagging a Gatorade from the fridge on the way, and walked with her to the dungeon. “Before this gets too deep for you, I want you to step inside and look around. You want to know me, consider this building a warning,” I told her, and unlocked the door, then cracked open my Gatorade and drank a third of the quart in a few long swallows.

Laura shrugged, and entered my dungeon. I heard her gasp as she shut the door behind her. A moment later, she exited, wide-eyed and flushed of face. “Holy shit, you don’t bluff,” she said, barely above a whisper.

“No, I don’t,” I said, deflated.

“I need time to think,” she said. “This ... I need time, Keith.” She walked through the gate and out to her car, and drove off.

I was disappointed, but more or less expected this reaction. At least I put it on the table before we grew close and one of us got hurt. One way or another, she needed to know this about me. I'm too old to turn from what I am, or to deny what I am, or set it aside. If she couldn't accept what my needs were, it was better this shit ended now, before either or both of us wound up heartbroken.

The BDSM that dungeon represented was a need, a requirement, not a simple want, kink, or desire. By this point, I was too old to deny or deflect it. Laura could take it or leave me, and my needs, if she wanted. Evidently, she'd chosen to leave it, and so be it. It was regrettable she bailed, but better this way than going with doomed pretense that she was submissive or that I could turn vanilla.

I changed clothes, hitched my boat to the truck, and drove off to the lake in hopes of catching a few fish, but more just for peace and solitude. I didn't admit I felt a bit heartbroken, reminding myself hollowly that I didn't like her. But I knew I was lying to myself.

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CHAPTER 15



The man had a dungeon! Not a spare bedroom with a cheap assed pegboard holding his toys. No! He had a huge ass, garage-sized dungeon. There'd been a pegboard, an intricate, highly organized display of more implements than I cared to admit an interest in. One in particular caught my eye. Coiled round and round, a bullwhip occupied its own special place on that wall. I'd seen the dummy too, and the precision of the strikes which said he practiced often enough to be a pro. He also had a cage.

Holy hellfire, how had I not known? This changed everything.

I'd come to his home to apologize. I came because I'd baited him, and he'd basically schooled me, swiped my wine, and sent me home. It had been really hot, which is why I'd swallowed my pride and knocked on his door. I thought I could give my apologies and maybe we'd talk it out over dinner. Not in my wildest imagination had I expected that conversation to end in him showing me to his dungeon. Keith was one kinky bastard, which had me salivating the whole drive home.

Even in that he displayed his arrogance. It hadn't been an 'I accept your apology,' kind of event. Nope. He'd basically said 'if you want this you'll have to accept pain with your pleasure.'

Well, a fully stocked dungeon, spanking bench, Saint Andrew's Cross, cage, and all the rest, meant this man was interested in a whole hell of a lot more than a slice of pain with his pleasure. Which left me with one hell of a decision to make.

I sped home, running from him yet again. That seemed to be our thing. We came together, then flew apart. We were explosive in that way. But

something kept pulling me back to *him* though, or rather '*Him.*' A capital letter meant the world to me. I ran from the possibility he presented, knowing full well where I would wind up.

First, before I accepted that need, I had to wrap my head around the fact that asshole had a fully equipped dungeon. He hadn't been the least bit shy about sharing it either. My problem? I didn't want to be a one-spank-and-fuck kind of girl.

That garage out back. It lived in my fantasies. I wondered if I'd lost my mind, but maybe, at long last, I'd found exactly what I'd been looking for. Not just what, but maybe who. Maybe I'd found...Him?

Shaking my hands, I tried to loosen up. That man wound me so damn tight. Fortunately, I had the perfect solution to help me Zen out. Unbuttoning my blouse, I headed to the back of the house, down the stairs to the basement, and stopped at the door. Smooth polished floors ran up against a wall of mirrors. There was no furniture down here, except for a single folding chair. A flick of a switch lowered the lights. Another switch activated the spotlight over the brass stripper pole which occupied the center of the room. A quick flip through my playlist and I made a choice. Something deep, rhythmic, and pounding.

I stood there for a moment, closing my eyes, and let the powerful thumping of the music flow through me. A tremor of excitement skated across my nerves. I pole danced at home to keep myself fit. My love of music and dance kept my demons at bay. The pole gave me something else as well, a guilty pleasure where I could sink into another place and allow my fantasies to fly free. When I danced, I always danced as the slave to my nameless master.

Now? After seeing Keith's dungeon? That faceless man in my dreams was no longer a nameless stranger. Today, I danced for Keith, even if he didn't know it. As the music thumped and settled into my soul, the pace of my breaths matched the beat. I pulled off my blouse and unfastened my jeans, shimmying out of them nice and slow. I wasn't here to do a striptease. I'd come to dance, but I would do it in nothing more than a thong.

Standing with the pole at my back, I lifted my arms overhead. They floated upward, moving with a sensual promise, curving and twisting as I reached behind me to grip the pole. I stroked it, gliding my hand up and down, much like I would fist a cock. Then I pressed my shoulders back as

my hips began to sway. I engaged my abdominal muscles and imagined Keith's eyes pinned to the expanse of my nearly naked body.

I rolled my hips slowly, imagining him staring at me. Sweet hell, but that thought turned me on. For now, I controlled the dance, fantasizing about what might happen in that garage turned dungeon. My mind conjured images of him stripping me, commanding me, forcing me to endure his pain. An expert it seemed in all things kink, where did his tastes fall? Did he like to spice up his life with a little kinky play? A slap and a tickle? Or did he delve deeper, exploring the limits of power exchange?

Could he sense my need. If he hadn't yet, it would only be a matter of time. That man had an uncanny knack of seeing right through me.

I gripped the pole hard, and turned to face it. I loved the sensual dance around the pole. Stepping high, I focused all my attention on being long, lean, and sinuous as I teased my imaginary Dom. I wanted to affect him deeply, show him my body, and what I could do with it. I wanted him to not just desire me, but need me on a soul-deep level.

A rippling shiver overtook me and I followed its flow. My body undulated against the pole as I imagined his shoulders lifting with a sharp intake of air. I wish I could remember that lap dance I'd given him so many years ago. I had to have made an impression. He'd tossed a hundred dollars on my table last night. That had to have been a message. Or maybe he was just being a jerk? With Keith, I never knew what was going on in that noggin of his.

The beat of the song intensified and I wrapped my leg around the pole. I loved this part. The freedom of spinning round and round. I could do a lot with the pole, and I did that now, climbing it all the way to the ceiling and then dropping with a heart-stopping plunge, until my nose nearly brushed the floor.

Then I let go and allowed my body's natural rhythms to take over. I forgot about Keith, his dungeon, or the unapologetic way he assumed I would let him spank my ass. But wasn't that what I wanted?

Maybe, but I didn't want to surrender without a fight. My only problem was I didn't think he'd be a man who would take what wasn't freely given. I spun around the pole, my thoughts in a frightening spin. If I wanted this, I would have to ask.

Knowing Keith, he'd make me beg.

Long after exhaustion took me to the edge, I continued to dance. I danced for me as much as for him, my thoughts settling into what I needed to do. When I could barely lift my leg to wrap around the pole, I called it quits and headed upstairs.

My skin glistened with a sheen of my perspiration. A shower would calm me down, and maybe slake the throb between my legs.

It did neither. I climbed out of that shower more spun up than I'd been going in. Which left me with one choice.

I could have spent an hour getting dressed, until I decided it didn't matter. If I got my way, my clothes wouldn't stay on for long. I did slip on a lacy black thong and a push-up bra to lift the girls. With keys in hand, I drove back to Keith's house.

The sun had crested the horizon long ago. The bright pinks and darker oranges of a beautiful sunset had merged into purples and the beginnings of midnight black. I pulled up along the curb outside his home, biting my lower lip with indecision.

Then I grabbed a sticky note from the glove box of my car, and scratched a quick note.

The last time I'd played Ding-Dong-ditch, I must have been seven. I approached his front door with a much lighter step than I thought possible. If we were headed down the path I thought, I intended to have a little bit of fun. After I pressed my note to the door, I hightailed it around back, praying he didn't catch me in the act. He'd know soon enough where I'd gone.

Outside the door of his dungeon, I took my place. There I waited while he read my note.

K,

"I see your warning and raise you one of my own. I'm not afraid."

Laura

CHAPTER 16



The doorbell rang and I wondered who it was. I opened the door but nobody was there. I almost didn't see the sticky-note, which fell to the porch. I picked it up, read it, and smirked, impressed that any physician's handwriting was even decipherable, then looked at the clock on my phone, and set an alarm for 20 minutes, wondering if she'd lose her nerve or come beating on the door to cuss me out, or even barge in through the kitchen. Time is relative, and if I had to bet, she was a nervous wreck out there, in the dark, fretting and fidgeting. As a physician, she was accustomed to instant gratification, so denying that to her seemed just the thing to do, didn't it? I smirked at the thoughts and sat to watch TV, glad I was home and hadn't checked into the Lakeview Motel, since I planned on fishing more the next day, and my catch could've stayed on ice. But I came home, filleted my catch, put it in the freezer, and showered. It amused me that if she'd gotten here 45 minutes earlier, I'd have seen her dashing into my back yard.

I wondered fleetingly if we were simply meant to be, but then dismissed the thought as New Age horseshit, and watched TV while the back of my mind pondered Laura. I knew she was scared and blustering. After all, I was still mostly an unknown to her, and it was a tell that she said she was unafraid. Besides, she was, however irrational around me, a highly intelligent woman, perhaps even brilliant, and I didn't doubt her all-around sanity. My timer went off in the middle of a rerun of Big Bang Theory that I'd seen a dozen times already. Don't judge. The show is funny, dammit.

I wandered outside, wearing shorts and sandals, and nothing else, and found her beside the door. That wasn't a surprise. That she was on her knees was a surprise. That she was in a foul mood was expected.

"Jesus, you took long enough to build the balls to come out here," she said. "And what is that horrible stink back here?"

"Fish guts," I snickered. "I garden, and bury them out here. I went fishing after you ran away earlier today and caught a few. Now, my dear, I am going to suggest that you curb your tongue before I simply go back inside and spend my evening watching TV. I'm not in the mood for you to try to top me from the bottom out here, sweetheart. Your choice."

"I'm sorry about the attitude. I'm a nervous wreck right now," she said, then added, "I used to love fishing with my dad."

Well, there were problems with that," I said. "First, I wanted to be alone after your latest rejection. Second, I didn't know you like to fish. Third, I don't even have your phone number, and fourth, I've no clue where you live."

"First, I'm sorry," she told me. "You know that old saying about being careful what you wish for, lest your wish come true? That was me. All my desires and cravings are on the other side of this door and I've been scared shitless of letting those walls down. Second, now you know. Third, I don't have your number either and we need to rectify that. Fourth, I'm on Dahlia Avenue in the Rolling Meadows subdivision, about three miles from here. Fifth, if you don't take me in there and spank me silly right now I'm going to lose my nerve. The ball, as they say, is in your court."

In spite of it all, I liked her sass. She had moxie, and that impressed me. I unlocked the dungeon, then bowed and made a grand sweeping gesture. "Step inside," I said. Not surprising me, but utterly shocking me, she did so on all fours, crawling toward her fate.

"How far do I have your consent to go?" I asked her.

"Right now, I'd be happy if you beat me like that woman in *12 Years a Slave*," she said. "God, I've wanted this since I peddled my ass at Skirtless. But ... I've done a lot of soul-searching, Sir ... uh ... Keith ... shit, I don't even know what to call you right about now. I have problems trusting people, maybe especially men. And that's not fair to either of us, before you go off calling me Captain Obvious. Maybe I need to jump from the plane, and trust my parachute was packed well."

“Tellya what,” I said after digesting her statement. “I’ll put you on the St. Andrew ... that’s the X-shaped cross ... and I’ll lash you with my whip until one of us decides you’ve had enough.”

“Yes, Sir,” she said, shocking me again. Until tonight, I didn’t know she knew the word Sir, much less how to use it, to say nothing of the circumstances. “But ... will you put me on that bench first and spank me like you threatened?”

“I’d like nothing more,” I told her, growing even more aroused and hoping I didn’t jizz right in my fucking shorts. “You can keep your panties on, or show me all you have to offer. I think the proverbial ball is back in your court, honey.”

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CHAPTER 17



During that space of forever where he'd left me waiting, I fought off no less than five panic attacks, two anxiety attacks, and one *what-the-fuck-are-you-thinking* attack.

What had come over me? I'd driven to a man's house, and not only knelt waiting for him, but crawled on all fours and begged for a beating. I didn't even know who I'd become.

And it was Keith!

Of all the men I could have chosen, and I could have any I wanted, he kept boomeranging back into my life.

He soothed me in this odd way. Not once did he snicker, or lord himself over me. Instead, he seemed to accept whatever this was. I'd come to him because I needed two things. While I could have any man, my career ensured I had no time to date. My life lacked connection, and I craved that feeling of belonging to another. I sought that in him. Why? I still didn't know, except it was in the gentle acceptance of his eyes.

He could've turned me away. He could've laughed in my face. He could've done so many damaging things. Instead, the surety of his voice, that low rumble, comforted me when I should have been scared as shit. He didn't look down on me with scorn, but a look of wonder ghosted across his face. Then there was the second thing. What he offered was something I'd craved for far too long.

To get to the spanking bench, I had to stand. My knees ached from kneeling for so long and I winced, shaking them out.

“Can I ask you something?” The tremor in my voice wasn’t something I could control.

“Isn’t that kind of a question?”

I rolled my eyes. “You know what I meant. It’s a serious question, or rather, a request.”

“Sure,” he said. “Lay it on me.”

I bit my lower lip, debating whether to even voice what was going on in my head, but he needed to know what drove me.

“You going to stare at me until the sun comes up, or spit it out?” He asked.

My insides knotted, one part fear, one part holy-hell-he’s-hot, and a final pinch of I-was-fucking-crazy.

I cleared my throat. “Can you stop asking me what I want? I just need to kind of ... let go. Can you kind of just...” Holy hell, I was certifiable.

“I’m waiting?”

“The ball is yours, from the moment I crossed that threshold, you have my consent. Panties on or off. The cross or the bench. Whatever your pleasure, I’m yours to do as you please.”

“That’s a whole hell of a lot of power for two people who don’t know each other all that well, and considering you kind of hate my guts...”

My eyes widened. “I wouldn’t be here if I hated your guts. I’m just not one to warm up to someone.” I glanced down. “Look, my life is intense. The job is insane. For an hour, or two, or however long you’ll have me, can I just not be the one to have to make any decisions?”

He cupped my chin, his eyes smouldering with desire. “I hear ya. I really do, but not for our first time. I asked you a question, and I expect an answer. Panties on or off?”

I hooked my fingers under the lace of my panties and pulled them down, then I unfastened my bra and let it flutter to the floor. With my eyes latched to his, I lowered to the floor. My knees met the hardness of concrete, while my eyes latched onto the hardness beneath his shorts.

I licked my lips, wondering how far this night would go. Would he beat my ass and send me home? Or would I find myself strapped to that Saint Andrew’s Cross? Or would something more happen?

“I’m yours,” I said. “Holy hell, but I am.”

He said nothing. There was no sound between us except the heavy pull of his breaths. He left me there, kneeling, and walked over to the wall. I

followed his every move, watching his powerful thighs, the flex of his ass, and when he turned around, the prominence of his erection bobbing beneath those shorts.

“There are only three words you need to know,” he said. “Red, Green, and Sir.” He tapped the bench. “Now climb on board, and tell me, restraints or no?”

“Tie me down. As much as I’m asking for this, from that first strike, I’ll be screaming to make it stop.” I looked at him, drilled right into him with my stare. “Don’t stop.”

He waved me on, and I rose and felt the warm leather of the spanking bench. This man loved his toys. He’d either spent a fortune on this stuff, or he was a master woodworker. The tooling on the leather amazed me.

“You going to pet it, or hop on board?”

I glanced at him. “I’m just admiring the work.” In reality, I was checking out my chosen device of torture. Odd, how it didn’t matter to me standing buck naked in front of him. Perhaps, in my mind, I figured he’d already seen me naked from my stripping days. Any hesitation I may have had fled the moment I’d knelt before him. Despite my fears, I was committed. I draped myself over the bench, wiggling until I found a comfortable position.

That was funny! Comfortable position!

In a few seconds, I’d be in so much pain, comfort wouldn’t even be in the equation. I wiggled my ass, enticing my doom, then screeched as his hand connected with my left cheek. A loud *smack* filled the garage, and my scream rolled through a second later. I bucked up, lifting off the bench, but he placed a hand between my shoulder blades, pinning me in place.

“Don’t you dare fucking move,” he growled.

“I wasn’t ready!”

“Who the fuck cares? You belong to me, or did you forget that little speech?”

Smack. Smack. Smack. He lit my ass on fire. One hand pinning me in place, the other destroying my ass.

“You fucking ass!” I screeched.

“Oh, see, you shouldn’t have said that,” he said with a laugh. “That’s going to cost you. Rule number one, never swear at me again.”

CHAPTER 18



I don't know when, or if, I'd been hornier, ever in my life. I know the twenty-something models were supposed to be iconic to our culture, women with not an ounce of fat and not so much as a hint of crow's feet or laugh lines, but I swear to God, nobody had ever appealed to me as this woman did. I selected a razor strop from my assembly of toys, and took delight in lashing Laura, and even more in upbraiding her for her runaway mouth. My God, her ass was a work of art to me, proof of God's Holy Supremacy when He created Woman from Adam's rib. I raised the strop, then gave a sharp smack onto Laura's ass, one that could've gone far further, but I didn't want to fuck her up. If she howled "red" at any point, the scene was instantly done, I knew. And if I decided she'd had enough. I would damn sure heed my own safeword.

A series of submissive girlfriends ahead of Laura taught me what I'd sought and hadn't found up to this evening in this building. She meant to give her utter surrender, matched with my utter acceptance, gripped by my need to lay no mercy on her until one of us decided she'd had enough, until one of us cried red. I knew that was likely to be me, considering Laura's stubbornness, but, even ten lashes into this session, I knew she was going to be the one to cry red. I was ready to beat her ass until it was swollen double and purple, and only then putting her on the St. Andrew and laying the whip to her. Only then did I mean to fuck her, and fuck her hard. All of this assuming I didn't drop my load right into my Hanes undies while laying the strop into her, not as hard as I was able, but harder than just fun-and-games.

I've learned good people instincts in my life, like when someone was about to turn violent, or the right turn-of-phrase to de-escalate tensions. It's more art than science and can't be explained in metrics. But all of those instincts were telling me she needed, was indeed begging, to be bested, and I had the honor of doing so. Maybe a medal was in the offing, perhaps the High Order of the Purple Paddle or some shit like that, I considered, stifling a laugh as I laid down lash after lash, being sure to catch her thighs with the odd lash here and there, which I knew were far more sensitive than the ass. Speaking of ass, hers was coloring beautifully, very dark pink, and I paused a moment to touch and caress, hardening even more at intimately touching this beauty, this goddess being humbled, my own captured Helen of Troy. She moaned, and I sensed her aroused aromas on the still air.

"We're far from done," I said idly. "And when you cry red, that only means you go see my buddy St. Andy for a date with my whip. He'll keep you still for it, honey-pie."

"Oh, God, what did I get myself into?" she moaned. "Turn me loose, asshole!"

"Not on your life," I returned. "You know the magic word, and I think you know I need not only to crack that armor, but to shatter it, yes?"

"You bastard," she hissed, then deflated. "Yes, Sir, I know," she admitted in a surprisingly humble tone. "I deserve it."

"You do," I agreed. But it wasn't that she deserved it for all of her ice-queen bitchiness or being Miss High and Mighty. This was more of a catharsis for her, I knew, not a punishment. She deserved to be happy, to be free of all that fucking armor she'd built up, and this whipping and probably several more to come, was the tool to disarm her, so to speak.

"Let's continue," I said, and laid in probably twenty more lashes, not counting them as I might do in a punishment. Again, art not science. Finally, instead of weeping and wincing with the occasional yelp, she shrieked, a sound that came from the deepest pits of her being. She broke into wracking sobs which I took to mean red. Or maybe RED in flashing neon and possibly even fireworks and a high-school marching band.

I dragged a chair to her and stroked her sweated hair while she cried out God alone knows what pains of her past, present, and perhaps unforeseen future maybe forever altered on this crude spanking bench in my 3-car dungeon. The tears lasted a long while, and as I stroked her hair and kissed her cheek, I came to understand I had deeper feelings for her than simple

physical attraction. I wasn't willing to call it love, not yet, but it was moving in that direction. Or maybe, it was simply admitting it to myself. I think this is what confused me and had my own signals scrambled when it came to Laura. I only hoped she felt as I did, that I didn't do this *to* her but *for* her.

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CHAPTER 19



I'm not really sure how I got from here to there. One moment I hated him, and the next?

Too many emotions swirled in my head to put a name to it, but he'd bridged a connection with me. The sobs? Those were easy enough to explain, and I embraced them with every fiber of my being.

I'd almost walked away. I'd hoped to impress him as I waited on my knees. A man who maintained a fully stocked dungeon knew how the game was played. Certain things were expected, like meeting him on my knees, and giving him a title which placed him in a position of power over me. I hadn't expected to have to wait, and my anger intensified as I considered getting up and leaving.

I'd seen him inside, and knew he'd read my note. He was testing me, and I'd be damned if I proved him right and walked away. Besides, I needed him, or at least what lay inside his dungeon.

Somewhere along the way, this had stopped being a game.

My ass hurt. My bruised flesh pulsed with pain and was swelling as blood rushed in to soothe tissues pushed past their endurance. I might be standing, or kneeling, for several days to come. Good thing a surgeon's life was spent on their feet. I'd need a few days to heal.

But we weren't done yet.

He'd broken through a wall I didn't even know existed, and sat with me now, soothing me with his tender touch, but we had further to travel on this journey. He'd taken me on a path I couldn't take alone. I needed to be

sundered and broken in the worst possible way, and he'd risen to the challenge.

Now, it was time to give him my soul.

My choked sobs rattled Keith's dungeon. In his arms, a catharsis within me took place.

Only daughter of two amazing parents, I'd grown up loved and cherished. We had enough money to get by, but we were always just barely getting by. The accident which took them from me, changed me. I'd been outgoing in high school, but that last year ripped me apart. I faced the horror of foster care. I endured and survived. I was achingly alone. Friends abandoned me. My boyfriend tired of my endless sobs and left me to wallow in my misery. Those last few months of high school, were something I breathed through, because I definitely didn't live through them.

College plans evaporated too, until I found a way to wait tables to make ends meet. Only they didn't. A huge gap separated the ends of my finances. My parents, as loving as they could be, had failed one major task. They'd left me bereft.

Which began my stripping career. The heated glares of greasy men were things I pretended didn't matter. Their pawing and overly intimate touches, I discounted. I was making ends meet, and that was all that mattered. In the meantime, my soul shattered.

I sobbed for the loss of my parents. I cried at the objectification I'd willingly endured. I wallowed in self pity, at the distance I'd placed between myself and anybody else. Keith brought me here. The hardness of his hand pushed me through and past the brink. He destroyed my shields, because he was stronger than them. My fate rested in his hands.

The man who held me now? He'd ripped and shattered all my walls. Deep inside, I knew that was what I'd needed. It's why I swallowed my pride and returned to his doorstep. It's why I'd knelt and waited for him to acknowledge my presence.

While my cries quieted, I rubbed at my cheeks.

I glanced at him, assessing him.

"What happens now?" I asked.

"What do you want to happen?"

My eyes cut to the Saint Andrews. There was no way my body could endure much more, but I didn't want to have that choice.

“May I climb down?” As comfortable as the spanking bench might be, I needed to move.

“Depends where you intend to go.” He jerked his thumb toward the door. “That’s not an option for you. We’ve barely begun.”

My breath hitched and I dipped my head. “Do I have permission to come down?”

“Depends, you going to ask like it’s owed you, or are you going to ask the man who owns you?”

My pulse jackhammered in my throat. “The fact I’m even asking should be answer enough.” That I waited outside, so damn long, on my knees should be answer enough. But, I rephrased my question. “Sir, may I please climb off this bench?”

“Since you asked all sweet and shit, why the hell not.” He leaned forward and gripped my hair, yanking my head back. “What’s going on in that sweet head of yours?”

I crawled off the bench and rubbed my ass. “I didn’t think it would hurt this much.”

“Did you think it would tickle?”

My initial reaction was to roll my eyes. Instead, I lowered to my knees. “I have a few questions,” I said. “If it pleases you... Sir.”

“Hm,” he said, sitting back and crossing his arms. “Seems like the doc has learned some humility.”

I smiled. “Maybe, I’m just now beginning to learn my place.”

He gave an imperious wave. “What’s your question?”

“Where do you see this going?”

“As far as you like.”

I hated how he deflected and never answered directly. If I was going to do this, become whatever the hell this was, I refused to lead from the wrong end of the whip. He either needed to step up and take control, or I would find that door and chalk this whole evening up as one hell of a fucked up learning experience.

I glanced at the Saint Andrews. “If I got up and headed for the door, what would you do?”

“Is that what you want?”

“No, you ass. I want to know what you would do? Do you just enjoy beating a woman’s ass? Or is there more?” *Do you have the balls to take*

control! I wanted to scream my frustrations at him, but was smart enough to keep that to myself. Problem was, he had a way of seeing right through me.

I didn't want to be an easy quick lay. And I sure as hell didn't want to be Keith's easy quick lay. What I wanted was for all the clamoring in my head to stop. I wanted, for one moment in time, to not be Laura Peters, MD, savior of the world. I wanted to be me. I wanted to belong. I wanted to be his. But, the problem with Keith was he couldn't help being an ass. I wanted him to rule me, but not lord over me.

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CHAPTER 20



“**Y**eah, there’s more,” I said, then took my own breath and let it out. “How about I have feelings for you, dammit?”

“My name isn’t dammit,” she returned with her automatic mouth.

“It is now,” I told her. “At the risk of repeating myself, I love you. Please don’t say it back unless you mean it. You’re not chained to the wall and I won’t hold you here against your will.” These weren’t cheap words with me.

In that succession of subs over the past two years, I had started to love one of them when she bailed on me, Kaela, the one who couldn’t handle the hours I worked. I didn’t love easily, but I loved Laura.

I looked at her and chuckled. “I hope you stay, but if you do leave, you might want to get dressed first before you get busted for indecent exposure.”

“Ass!” she snapped, but blushed and flashed me a sheepish grin.

“You have a nice one,” I returned. “Throbbing much?”

She blushed a bit more, but nodded. “It ... it’s a good hurt, if that makes sense.”

Her blushing charmed me, but I saw the juxtaposition of her prior life, and wondered after it. Maybe she was just too far from that former life, too accustomed to being the High Priestess of Healing, armored in a lab coat, and suddenly confronting hidden facets within her. That answer felt right.

“It does,” I acknowledged. “Look, Laura, I know you think I’m evasive, but I’m not goal-oriented about a relationship. I’m far more about the journey than a destination, and this thing with you and me ... all I can say is

I want to ride it everywhere and hope this ship never finds a shore. Truth. So if you don't go out the door, dressed or naked, how about giving me the benefit of the doubt and offering yourself to old Saint Andy over there? And keep a respectful tongue in your head. I know you're the High and Mighty Goddess of Healing over at the hospital, but you're off-duty and so am I. That makes me 'Sir' to you. Got it?"

"S ... Sir," she said, bowing her head. Then, surprising me, she got on all fours and crawled to the cross. Her ass, I saw, was a colorful mess. "Sir, permission to offer myself for my whipping?" she asked.

"Granted," I said, and hurriedly cuffed her wrists and ankles, then secured her in place.

"Sir?" she asked in a trembling voice.

"Yes?" I returned.

"Break me, please," she said. "Even if I bleed, even if I scream. You ... it's time I put it out there and trusted someone. You've trusted me with one hell of a lot, and I've accidentally been in a few sticky spots where you proved yourself worth my trust. You're right, Sir ... I need to be broken from being such an icy-cold iron bitch."

I couldn't answer around a sudden lump in my throat, and simply went in front of her and cradled her beautiful face in my hands. I kissed her, lightly at first, then deeply as our tongues danced and we growled into the lingering kiss.

"Holy wow," she said when the kiss broke.

"I'm going to whip you hard but not as much as I want to do," I said. "I want to break you, but not destroy you. I want your pain. I want your tears. I want your heart, but I'm learning you, and I guess you're learning me. I really don't want to fuck this all up on our very first date, right?"

"Things like that make me want you that much more," she whispered. "Please, whip me to red, Sir. Let's find out what I'm made of."

"If you ask nice, I might even have sexual intercourse with you," I said. "I don't know about you, but I'm growing cobwebs down there."

"Sir, it's best right now that you just do what you want and take what you want," Laura said. "But yeah, cobwebs," she added with another sheepish smile that charmed me in a strange way.

"So be it," I said, feeling intoxicated with arousal as I took the whip from its hook. I popped it on the air, close to her, and she let loose a

surprised squeak that delighted and amused me. And then she suddenly howled out, untouched.

“Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck. Red!” she howled. “Charley horse! Oh, fuck!”

“Where?” I asked.

“Right thigh, oh God.”

I hurried to remove that ankle cuff while she fought against the cramp, then undid the remaining cuffs. She came off the cross and lurched about the dungeon.

“Walk it off,” I said. “I’ll be right back.” I trotted to the house and fetched two avocados and two bananas, as well as a paring knife, spoon, and a bowl, and returned to the dungeon, where Laura was still walking off the cramp.

“God, I’m so sorry, Kei ... Sir,” she said as I returned.

“By the look of you, you keep toned, lotta exercise,” I said. “My experience is that cramps are because you need potassium. I didn’t think you’d go in for a raw potato, so I offer you a mixed grill of avocados and bananas, and a knife for the avocados if you prefer those.”

“Yeah, I usually eat something like that,” she groaned. “You’ve made a nervous wreck of me and after I got some exercise, I was too upset to eat. My bad, huh?”

“Shit happens,” I said.

“And I prefer the avocados, so thank you,” she said. She knelt gingerly before a table, deciding not to sit on her battered ass. She deftly opened and scooped out both avocados into the bowl. “I’m sorry about this,” she said after eating three avocado halves. “These are helping.”

“I’m glad,” I said.

“I don’t know if a steaming load of hot cum is rich in potassium, but I think that’s a good dessert, Sir,” she said, then blushed beet-red.

CHAPTER 21



Somehow, I'd gone from offering myself to taste his whip to offering to taste something else entirely. I couldn't help but smile. Our hot as fuck scene went from my ass turning red, to an aborted whipping at the cross, to me asking to suck his cock. Mm, I ached to surrender myself there. Becoming his source of pleasure did yummy things to my insides.

Keith said a lot of things, things I thought were coming too soon and too fast, things which promised a future I desired, things I may or may not feel as well. I couldn't speak that word back to him. In my life, those I loved tended to die and leave me hanging.

There was a whole lot of fucked up shit going on in my head, and even worse being ground up in the blender of my heart. Putting him in all that mess wasn't something I needed right now, no matter how much I ached for it. Right now, I needed a strong hand, and a man willing to put it to good use.

I hated being called cold-hearted, but there was a truth to that. I preferred 'distant and untouchable.'

The avocados helped ease the cramp in my leg. It had been years since I'd had a cramp like that. Working out on my pole as long as I had probably hadn't helped, but I'd needed it. Dancing took me to another place, and I'd needed distraction after Keith revealed his dungeon. With music thumping through my veins, my inhibitions melted away, and at some point during all the swirls and kicks, acceptance had flown through me.

I glanced at Keith. He'd grown quiet after my remark. We both knew the rhythms of this dance, but were still learning how to step in tune with

each other. What I was, and was not, allowed to ask remained unclear. Whether I should kneel, or crawl, or even look him in the eye were things I hedged around. He kept me on edge, struggling with how much I could direct our interaction. Left to myself, I'd opt for nothing, but that was a deep-seated craving I couldn't yet voice. So far, it seemed he appreciated me on my knees, and his eyes certainly followed me when I crawled.

"Did you like what you saw in the ER?" he asked. "Hungry for a taste?"

My eyes rounded and the heat in my cheeks returned. I hoped I looked sexy with a beet red face, because he seemed to put it on me often enough. Which I didn't understand.

People never got under my skin like this, but he made me face a whole other side of myself. Yeah, I'd once been a stripper. I'd sold my body on stage, but that didn't mean I'd lost the ability to blush. It was different when I'd stripped, like there was an invisible barrier between me and the hungry stares of the men who watched me dance. I'd left that life behind, armored myself with a white doctor's coat, where I could hide behind the power of my job.

There was no hiding, no armor, with Keith. He saw through me and brought me face-to-face with my vulnerabilities. With him, there was no escaping my desires, and I hated that transparency. It was like the wiring in my head short-circuited when he was near, going haywire and malfunctioning.

I glanced at the prominent bulge of his shorts. "I didn't look."

"What? You didn't peek at my pecker?"

"Oh, God, please don't call it that."

"Pecker? Got something against that word?"

"It just sounds funny," I said with a laugh.

His left eyebrow arched up, and I realized my mistake.

"Sir!" Oh shit! "It just sounds funny, Sir!"

He glanced at the cross. "You know, that's going to cost you five lashes from here on out."

"Yes Sir," I said as warmth flooded my body. It looked like he wasn't against setting some rules. I curled my lower lip between my teeth and schooled myself on not making that mistake again. It was odd how that word fluttered in my belly.

Top Dog. High and Mighty Goddess of Healing. He had other names for me, too. He was still an ass, but I loved calling him Sir. I pinched my thighs

together, trying to soothe the aching throb between my legs. There was something indescribable about placing him in a position of power over me. In many ways, it liberated me to simply be me. It also granted him the authority to take what he wanted.

I'd always hoped we would arrive here, or at least, becoming his had always played in my fantasies.

"Sir," I began. "I didn't look at what appears to be a glorious cock when you passed out."

"Why not? Lost a good pair of pants that day when they cut them off. You're trying to tell me you didn't take a peek? Miss High and Mighty whose first thing is to strip all her patients in the trauma bay?"

That was true, and I'd bit Keith's head off a time or two when he'd wheeled patients in who hadn't been divested of their clothes. In my line of work, hidden injuries were often the life-threatening ones.

"No, Sir," I said. "I did not."

"Lies," he said with a growl, "will see you strapped until your throat is raw."

I shook my head vigorously and explained. "It's true, Sir. I think even then...well, I guess I've always kind of held you in high regard. My thoughts and fantasies may be coming true right now, but it didn't feel proper to be looking at what you hadn't offered." I glanced again at the cross, both terrified and intrigued by it.

"That's not the trauma doc I know."

"No Sir," I said, hanging my head down. "But I really didn't look. I didn't look because I didn't have your permission. And I thought...well, I just thought that should be your choice, not mine."

"You like having control stripped from you, don't you?"

"I'm still figuring things out. I know what draws me, but yes Sir."

"I see." He glanced down. "I think this is going to be fun." He snapped his fingers and pointed to the floor in front of him. "I was gonna fuck you after whipping you until you couldn't think, but I'm thinking a bit of cock worship will do for now."

"Yes Sir," I said. "Shall I crawl?"

"I see no reason to stop now. You look pretty fucking hot on all fours."

Despite the ache in my ass, I managed to make it over to him. I'd knelt for him outside his dungeon. I'd draped myself over his bench. Now, I did

something much more significant. Stopping at his feet, I leaned back on my heels and dared to look him in the face.

His eyes smoldered, the blue completely blown out by his lust. There was a presence about him, different in the privacy of his dungeon. He'd always been rock solid in the field, exuding a confident presence. There'd been no lie spoken when I'd said he was the best. But the man who stood over me now? He seemed taller, stronger, more in control than I'd ever seen before. I ached to please him, because if I failed, I had no confusion as to what he would do.

My vision clouded and my pulse raced. An edgy twitch coursed through my body. I needed him to punish me for my arrogance. I needed him to take me to another place. I needed him to own me, capture me, and make me his. Most of all, I needed to show him how completely his I needed to be.

Sitting back on my heels, I dropped my gaze, travelling a path down the ridges and planes of his chest, skipping down the stacked muscles of his abs. I lingered on the prominent bulge still hidden from my eyes. Then my gaze angled downward, along with my body.

Before him, I knelt in full supplication. "Please Sir," I whispered. "May I worship you?"

His breath caught for a moment, but only a moment. Then his hand fisted in my hair and he pulled me upright. His other hand freed his cock, and he thrust it at me.

"Open," he said.

My tongue licked along my lips, moistening them for him, then I opened my mouth and took him in. The flare of his cock breached my mouth and I closed my lips around him, not yet eager to take him fully in. I wondered if Keith would direct this, or grace me with a moment to truly worship at his feet. His fingers tightened in my hair, and his low moan rolled through the dungeon.

"Shit, darlin' that feels good."

I glanced up at him, swirling my tongue around the head of his cock, tasting his sinful essence.

His heated gaze met mine. "You have no idea how many times I've jerked off to this right here. You at my feet, my cock filling that mouthy trap. I've wanted to beat your ass for years, girl, and shove my cock so far down your throat you couldn't breathe."

If he only knew...but I couldn't tell him my thoughts. My mouth was full with one of the most amazing cocks I'd ever seen. Closing my eyes, I broke contact with him and focused on the only thing of any importance. My fantasies were similar, but they rarely involved me kneeling at his feet. I craved darker things, more forceful scenes. In my mind, he usually had me tied up, or otherwise restrained, as he shoved his cock down my throat, gagging and choking me into an oblivion he controlled. Choosing to please was never an option. In my dreams, Keith took and I gave.

An ache pulsed between my thighs as I tasted him, drawing him deeper into my mouth. My throat tightened, while my heart lightened. His hips jerked forward, like he wanted to take over, but then he stilled and allowed me to explore.

The pull of his breaths deepened and, when I gripped his hips, the muscles of his ass clenched.

I traced the rosy veins of his cock, knowing the roughness of my tongue would drive him wild. I flicked the sensitive area beneath his cock, pulling more moans from him, then cupped his balls, giving them attention too.

When his hips jerked again, I widened to take him fully in.

"Fuuuuck," he said with a groan, "that feels so good."

I pulled off him, and lifted my gaze, then spoke with my rising need. "Use me, Sir. Fuck my mouth. Fuck my body. Fuck my very soul. Do with me as you please."

His breath hissed inward. "Fuck, if I don't think I will."

CHAPTER 22



Jesus God, she was an amazing cocksucker, and I'd too long needed this release, too long hungered for this beautiful woman. I grasped her soft hair and indeed fucked her face, fucked hard, for the moment only giving a damn for my own pleasure. Yeah, I used her, to put a point on it, and delighted as she choked on my cock as I came, not setting her head free until she swallowed all I gave her, which I have to confess was a considerate load for a man too long denied. I was coated in sweat and growling from deep in my belly as my seed exploded into her. My vision actually even tunneled. Finally, the last of my spunk shot into her so talented mouth, and I drew out of her, growling again and panting for breath as I sat on a chair. *If only she knew the true purpose of this table*, I thought with a bit of humor.

"Gatorade, Sir?" Laura asked with a satisfied grin.

"I thought you'd never ask," I breathed.

"On it, Sir," she answered. She looked at her clothes, shook her head, and strode out of the dungeon, bold and naked, surprising me. But she had an amazing figure to flaunt. She was back in a moment with two bottles of orange Gatorade, and opened one, then handed it to me and sank back to her knees.

"May I have the second one, Sir?" she asked. "I should be hydrated for whatever fresh hell you have planned for me."

"Yes, you should," I said after drinking half my quart bottle. "How far should I go with you?"

“Sir, I’m off work until next Monday,” Laura said. “The insane hours there mean I can take a week off every month. It’s a week when I’m not even on call. I’m kind of hoping that week is spent right here, under your thumb.” She gestured to her scattered clothing. “I’m already packed for it,” she added with that winsome grin that melted my heart.

“Jesus,” I chuckled. “Yeah, we can probably go fishing for a day or so of it. I’m pleased you at least had the good sense to wear casual attire.” I smirked, knowing that fishing was a million miles from her mind when she came to see me.

She giggled. “Fishing naked is a leap I don’t think I’m ready to take, but I’d like to fish with you, Sir. A good slave even cleans and cooks the catch.”

“Sounds marvelous,” I said, turning the word *slave* over in my mind, and sensing, deep inside, that it fit her. She really was. Meanwhile, my energy was rapidly returning. Like most men, I need a breather after sex, but I don’t consider it a sleeping pill. I’m often energized after a hard cum, and my energy was fast returning. She’d knocked back half of her Gatorade and I could see she was reinvigorating as well.

“Am I to be whipped now, Mast ... Sir?” she asked.

My brows raised just a bit at what she almost called me, and what it meant. “Yes, all the way to red,” I told her, then took her chin in my hands. “This is for a number of reasons tonight, Laura. You need to keep in mind that when I must punish you, and I’m sure I will, considering how fiery you are, there will be no safeword. You’ll be whipped beyond pleasure, beyond kink or even maintenance and discipline, so you keep that in mind, my love, before your mouth starts overloading your ass.”

“God ... yes, Sir,” she moaned. I saw her nipples harden at this announcement.

“But I won’t punish you beyond my ability to treat your wounds, if your skin opens,” I said.

“Sir ... nothing is beyond my ability, and I pretty much have a trauma room at my house,” she said. “If it gets to that point, I can coach you through patching me up.”

“I don’t think we’ll get that far,” I said. “All fours, crawl to St. Andy, and this time, keep your nipples dragging the concrete. Show me humility.”

“Yes, Mas ... shit ... Keith ... dammit ... Sir,” she said, now flustered.

“What is it your heart wishes to call me?” I asked.

Her eyes widened at this question. “Maybe when I’m here, I should acknowledge you as Master,” she finally answered.

“So be it,” I said agreeably.

“Thank you, Master,” she said, brightened. She went to all fours and crawled as ordered to the cross, and at my command, she stood.

I bound her again and retrieved my whip. “All the way to red,” I repeated as my cock started twitching back to life.

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CHAPTER 23



I really must be insane. The cat was out of the bag and I was crawling toward my doom, terrified and horribly turned on. To red, he said. Holy hell what did that even mean?

Insane!

When I reached the base of St. Andy, as he called it, a quick glance over my shoulder showed Keith staring at my ass. I shook it for him, enticing him to maybe light me on fire.

“Not going to work, slave,” he said. “You’re not going to distract me from what I have planned. Now stand and let’s try this again.”

Raising up, I was surprised to find my legs shaking. This hadn’t happened the first time he’d strapped me in, but I’d been full of more bravado then. Maybe my leg would cramp again? A girl could hope.

Only that didn’t happen. Keith tightened the leather cuffs around my ankles. He strapped in my wrists with a sense of finality. My mind spun and whirled, because this was happening. A yank on my restraints confirmed the truth. I was here until he set me free.

To red?

I hung my head and took in a really deep breath, then confessed. “Master?”

“Yes, slave.”

“I’ve never really done... this.” That spanking he’d given me had been my first real exposure to pain. I’d done the slap-and-a-tickle thing once or twice, but it never progressed beyond light play. Of course, there were my half-assed attempts of self correction. They amounted to more frustration

than anything else. At the first blush of pain, I held back. There'd never been a man I could trust to take me to the place of my dreams. Not really sure why I was trusting Keith, except somehow I felt it bone-deep, I'd allowed him to immobilize me. He would push me, but not destroy me. At least, he wouldn't if he didn't think that's exactly what I needed.

"Can you take it kind of easy on me to start?" I begged. Suddenly, this didn't seem like such a good thing.

"You don't get to call the shots, my pretty slave. You've handed over the reins, unless you want to go back to using first names?"

My life lacked in many ways. This wouldn't be obvious to someone looking from the outside in. To them, they would see a woman who seemed to have it all. Only I knew where the gaps were, the aching chasms in my life screamed at me, every lonely day of my life. I didn't need Keith to fill them in. I needed him to carry me across. I needed him to break me down and gather up the pieces, do with them what he wanted. Because I sure as shit was done playing at pretending I had the perfect life.

I tucked my chin to my chest and pulled in a deep breath. "No," I said. "I don't want that, at least not for this week."

He swatted my ass, right over the bruises he'd placed less than an hour ago. I rose up on my toes, screeching at the top of my lungs.

"Holy shit!" That hurt like hell. My butt was bruised and swollen, and in no shape for more pain.

Smack. Smack. Smack. Smack.

Four more blows found my lungs billowing with my screams.

"What the hell was that for?" I screeched, tugging on my restraints and twisting to glare at him.

"Don't ever forget your place, slave," he said. "Sir or Master! You'll show some damned respect. And don't ever question a punishment you damn well deserved. Eyes front."

Fire! My ass burned like fire, but that was nothing compared to the anger rising inside my belly. Those swats had been uncalled for.

"For someone who's never done this before," he said, "you sure seem overly eager to be laying titles at my feet. Perhaps I've misjudged you and this is just a game? Although, I'm not sure I believe you, my pretty slave."

"It's called research," I spat at him. "Fantasies and research. I've never been a slave before. I've never found a man... I'd never found a man I respected enough to kneel down to."

He took a few steps back, then the rasp of leather dragging across the floor hissed in my ears.

“You’ve got one chance, Laura,” he said, using my name. “We stop now. I take you down. But if I do that, you’ll march out that door and we’ll never speak of this again. Or, you dig in deep and accept this is your place. Embrace your position and stop running that mouth. Your only purpose is to accept whatever I have to give. Pleasure or pain. You’ve surrendered that choice. I own you now, and tonight I intend to mark you with my whip. I’ll decorate your flesh, and the pain I lay down will etch deep into your soul. Neither one of us is coming out of this unchanged. Now tell me...red or green.”

I think my breath seized in my lungs. “Please,” I begged. “I didn’t mean—”

His voice dropped to a rumble. “That’s another five if you stay. You seem to want to rack up the punishments.”

A chill swept through me. I didn’t want to leave, and I certainly didn’t want him to kick me out.

“I’m sorry, Master,” I managed to find my words. “I’m just really scared.” I was offering myself up to him. Nobody knew where I was. I was trussed up and completely at his mercy. For my safety, I should do exactly as he said. I should run; run far and fast. This was insane, and yet I ached for it.

I gulped in air and gave my answer. “Green, Master. For the love of God, my answer is green. I just thought you should know, I’ve never been whipped before.”

“Then consider this your initiation, slave. And I have to tell you something about me.”

“Yes, Master?”

“I’m going to love your screams.”

A crack sounded in the garage, like a bullet going off, but my scream pierced through the air as the tip of his whip found my left hip. I rose up on tip-toe and tilted my head back. I fisted my hands. Agony lit through me, sharp and blinding pain became my universe.

“Now, that was number one.” He came to stand in front of me, gloating perhaps in the power he held over me. Cupping my chin in his hand, he lifted my face to meet his. “Tell me, slave, shall I take you down? Do you want this to end?”

Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes. My hip still burned with that cutting strike. I looked at him and sealed my fate. “I don’t know what you’ve done to me, Master, but I-I don’t want down.”

“Oh, you’ll be screaming for it soon.”

“Break me, please. Make me yours.”

Keith leaned in and kissed me. “Ah, you see, but you already are. You have been since you crawled through that door.”

“I know,” I said, “and Master?”

“Yes?”

“I won’t say red. You chose when this ends.” He was my master. I knew this in my heart. It was up to me to trust him. I had only one regret. I wished he’d fucked me before strapping me down. Through the pain, I couldn’t deny, that man turned me on.

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CHAPTER 24



I chuckled as she trembled, then popped the whip in the air. She trembled harder, shaking like a leaf on a high wind, and I sent the whip into her back. I left a thin welt as she loosed a pained yelp. Her flawless skin looked all the more beautiful to me, painted in welts and suffering, so I drove the whip into her back again. This time she grunted a high-pitched sound as the second welt rose in the whip's wake. God, she was stunning like this, and four lashes later, I was again stone-hard, gripped with desire. But business before pleasure. I told her all the way to red, and so it would be. I fell into a slow and cruel tempo of lashes, one stroke about every ten seconds. She sobbed shamelessly, her pride and defiance out the window, but I didn't miss the puddle between her feet. My Laura was horny as an alley cat, but not at her limit yet.

I kept lashing, stroke after stroke, keeping a silent count in my head. *Twenty-seven ... twenty-eight ... twenty-nine ...* Laura was sobbing inconsolably, but still taking what I gave. My cock was near to painfully hard for her. I craved her, but I wanted her to know humility, to be humbled, so I kept lashing. *Fifty-four ... fifty-five ... fifty-six ...*

That was the one. "Red!" she screamed. "Oh, God, red, please, Master ... please ..." she broke into wracking sobs as I coiled the whip and returned it to its hook, then released her cuffs, turned her and held her while she sobbed it out. She said she wouldn't call red, but everyone has limits and boundaries. I didn't hold it against her. She was proud, and devoted. She probably didn't want to let me down. But at least now I knew that "punishment" for my Laura would begin at around fifty of the whip.

“God, thank you, Master,” she whispered when the tears abated.

“For?” I asked.

“For everything,” she groaned. “For giving me this chance, for whipping me, shattering the armor, for stopping, for holding me, for everything, Master. I knew I said I wouldn’t call red. I’m sorry, Master..”

“Back to the bench,” I said. “Offer yourself, slave.”

“Oh, no,” she groaned, then caught herself and corrected herself. “As Master wishes.”

She placed herself into position and I examined her skin in better light. She was welted, even painfully, and it might occur to her to be grateful for her enforced nudity. A bra strap across those marks would be its own visit to hell. One mark had a couple dots of blood, but nothing a bit of ointment wouldn’t handle. And it could wait, I knew.

I parted her labia and thrust my cock hard into her pussy, groaning at how tight she was as she loosed a hoarse grunt of surprise and passion. Lovemaking was for another time. This was hard fucking, and I slammed it into her, under far more control for the blowjob she’d given earlier. I rammed in and out, my hips slapping against her battered ass on every thrust as she moaned and writhed. Suddenly, she came, her pussy grasping my cock as she tried to thrash with her climax. I held her down, not wanting her to fall off the bench to become my patient this night, and finally her orgasm crested and fell off. I resumed fucking her, hard and fast, until I felt that familiar throbbing in my cock that told me my own cum was close. A few more thrusts and then I arched my back, groaning loudly to the rafters as another considerable load of my seed shot deeply into her.

I helped her from the bench, where we held one another, both of us on trembling legs, spent by our evening. We gave one another one hell of a workout in my dungeon. But we’d both had enough, I knew. She was sweaty, panting, hair matted, and so was I. *Right about now we smell like a bordello*, I left unsaid.

We didn’t bother with our scattered attire. My back yard had a tall privacy fence and neither of my neighbors were back-yard people, both in one-story houses. We could spend our lives naked in my back yard and be the only people in the world who would know. In the shower, we were a mass of lather, hands, caresses, and passion before coming out. Acting the geisha, Laura toweled me dry, then we stumbled to the kitchen for a snack. I poured a glass of Patron for myself while Laura opted for Gatorade. Too

tired for anything else, we went up to bed. But my mind was on another matter, and I knew it would be a while before I slept. As she fell into a light doze, I went to my parlor, poured more tequila, and gathered my thoughts.

“Are you okay, Master?” Laura asked, breaking my reverie.

“There are things you need to know,” I said. “We need to talk. Sit down, please” I saw the look on her face. “Laura, I’m about to open up a painful door to you. I’m talking to you not as master to slave or paramedic to doctor, but Keith to Laura. Sit down, please. Make a drink if you like. You might want it.”

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CHAPTER 25



Conversations between men and women never ended well when the words ‘We need to talk,’ were mentioned.

Keith played that card with me, and now I was freaking the fuck out. What was this? Keith’s revenge? Was he going to sit me down and then tell me this had all been nothing but a joke? Would I really have to go through on quitting my job and skipping town? Because there was no way in hell I was heading back to work with Keith snickering behind my back, telling everyone how’d I’d debased myself for him.

My insides quivered with fear, anticipating what would follow those damning words.

We need to talk.

Fuck that shit. Any talking should have happened before turning my ass black and blue, the face-fucking, the whipping...the delicious glide of his cock... Shit, just thinking about his glorious member had me wanting him all over again.

My soul had been handed to him on a goddamn silver platter. He’d broken me down to my most base level, had heard me howl out my deepest pain. He’d seen me not just crawl, but supplicate myself before him. I’d given myself to him, moving from work acquaintances, through submission, to fucking begging to be made his slave. We were only playing at it now. He allowed me to call him Master, but he hadn’t put a collar on me. None of this was real.

I saw the painful truth now. This was all in my head, and the ass had simply been humoring me to get in his fuck. With that out of the way, he

was going to let me down, and probably not do it too gently.

I was a damned fool! We needed to talk? I needed to slice off his dick and feed it to him on a damn silver platter.

He patted the chair beside him. The chair! The man wanted to sit and tell me whatever was swirling in his head. I belonged at his feet, not beside him in a chair. There was no way I was going to stay, but from the look in his eyes, there was no way he'd let me leave.

"I think I'd like that drink," I said. "Maybe something stronger than that Gatorade?"

"I've got a well stocked bar. Whiskey, wine, Patron? Name your pleasure."

I needed something that would take time. My mind was made up and there was no way I was sticking around for whatever the hell *We need to talk* meant. Of course I was naked, but I'd left my keys in the car. I couldn't count the number of times I'd left that damn key-fob sitting in the cupholder since I'd bought the Mercedes. It's a miracle it hadn't been stolen ten times over. Now, that bad habit would work in my favor.

All I had to do was get Keith out of the room, find something to wear. My clothes were locked up in his dungeon, and I knew better than to ask for them. I'd have to escape in more daring attire. "Do you mind mixing me a drink?"

Depending on how Keith wanted to run things, as his slave I might be the one responsible for serving him, but I wasn't really his slave. The ass could mix me a damn drink.

"Sure, love. What's your poison?"

I was a wine kind of gal. I had no idea what went into most mixed drinks. My mind blanked for half a second. "Whiskey and coke...Diet Coke if you have it."

"Do I look like I keep Diet Coke on hand?"

"Whatever you please then." I'd dropped the honorific. He wanted to take us all the way back to Keith and Laura. Well, I could run with that.

The moment he left the room, that's exactly what I did. Buck naked, I hurried down the hall, went to his dresser and grabbed the first tee-shirt I found. It hung to my thighs, covering up all my bits. At least I wouldn't get caught for indecent exposure on my drive home.

As dressed as I was going to get, I sprinted for the rear door and ran barefoot around the house, heading for my car. I drew to a halt, my heart

pounding, because Keith was there, waiting. How the hell had he known?

“Now, love,” he said. “What the hell is going on in that pretty little head?”

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CHAPTER 26



“Come back inside,” I told her. “Look, I guess ‘we need to talk’ sent the wrong message. I’m not breaking up with you. There are just ... you need to know about me, more about me than you do. I’m trusting you, honey, and I’m asking you to trust me just a few minutes more.”

“This isn’t some bullshit prank?” she asked.

“No, no shit, bull or otherwise,” I said sadly. “Come back inside?”

“Fine,” she said, not looking at all mollified, but damn cute in my tee-shirt.

Inside, I handed Laura her Jim Beam and Diet Coke, the very thought of which sounded like some killing potion Snape would teach those evil little fucktards in Slytherin House. I had three cans of Diet Coke lurking in my fridge, that had languished there for a year since a cousin of mine visited. She took an experimental sip and set it on the coffee table, then knelt on the floor, but I sensed she was only playing the role at this point.

“Laura ... I got married thirteen years ago,” I said in a wooden tone. “We were so happy together. I adored Cindy. Until one Wednesday nine years ago. I got home from a 48-hour shift, a bit late. My partner wanted us to have breakfast together, and I needed a tank of gas and a car wash on the way home, so I was in no hurry. It wouldn’t have mattered anyway, right? She wasn’t there but usually she was leaving for work about the time I got home if I hurried, so I didn’t think anything about it. We were renting a house, a nice place with a pool in back, but had just signed the dotted line on a house we were buying, this house, in fact. We’d scrimped and saved like you wouldn’t believe, but we had a strong down payment and good

credit. I was off the coming two weeks so we could do the move and just have some time together. I wasn't worried. Until about eleven that morning when her boss called, hopping mad and wondering why she wasn't at work.

"I didn't know where she was, and told him that," I continued. "I looked in the garage, and lo and behold, her car was there, a three-year-old Nissan. So I looked all over the house. She wasn't in the bedroom, but her purse was there. There was no sign of a struggle or forced entry, no blood.

"I went out to the back yard, wondering if she was out there," I went on. "She was."

"Was she okay?" Laura asked, looking fretful.

"She was at the bottom of the pool, and bloodstains dried on the diving board, which had shattered," I said. "She often liked taking a bedtime dive and swim to cool off and burn off energy. But I called 911, dove in, fished her out. My stupid fucking ass did CPR on her, even knowing she'd been at the bottom of that pool the past twelve or fourteen hours. I couldn't ... I couldn't accept that Cindy was gone. Air wouldn't go into her lungs because they were full of water. A thousand other times I wouldn't have lifted a finger, not for anyone else. But this wasn't some nameless patient. She was my Cindy, you see? She was irretrievable and this part knew it." I tapped my head. "But this didn't ... couldn't ... accept that." I put a hand on my belly, then over my heart.

"Oh, God," Laura moaned, rising then sitting beside me on the sofa.

"I ... they had to take her to the ER since I started CPR," I said, my voice monotonal, shielding painful wounds behind a cold recitation of facts. "She was pronounced dead on arrival. The coroner said she drowned, that she'd severed her spinal cord at C-2 when the diving board gave way. She struck the back of her head. Either way, he said she was surely unconscious when she went into the drink, and died without suffering. That's cold comfort, but even if she'd survived she'd have been a vegetable, probably. She didn't deserve that. No one does."

"Keith, I'm so sorry," Laura said, stroking my hair as I drank another deep drink of tequila.

"Yeah, thanks. The worst of it was she was two months pregnant," I said. "We'd been trying, ready for a munchkin. I don't know if she knew and was waiting to surprise me, or if she didn't know yet. Her periods weren't at all regular, so that's anyone's guess. Laura, it killed a part of my

soul, killed it. I was crushed, angry, bitter. They even put me on desk duty a month after I got back, and there I sat for four months.

“Cindy ... she saw in me what I didn’t,” I recounted. “She was submissive and showed me I was her master even without me even knowing it. We were overjoyed with one another. I wasn’t burned out yet, I wasn’t bitter. I was one of the happiest men I ever knew. Anyway, the lease was terminated on that house and the mortgage signed on this one, so the movers came and schlepped our stuff to the new house, to this house, and here, I slowly unpacked. Half the weapons of ass destruction I used out there were things we had together, I guess.”

“I had no idea,” Laura said, sounding uncomfortable.

“Virtually nobody does,” I told her. “I’ve never opened this door to anyone until you. But since we’ve grown closer, I’ve done a ton of soul-searching and introspection while ... I think I know I was fending you off as bad as you were to me. You had your reasons and I had mine. I didn’t date for three years after Cindy died. I’ve come to realize that I never let things grow serious with anyone. I’d chase ‘em off by not letting ‘em inside, you see. I’d put up a front. I’d put up my armor by looking like a bloodless asshole, Laura, by acting in many ways as you have. I finally realized in the dungeon that I was looking in a mirror, at the yin to my yang, maybe? You took down my armor the same as I took yours. I’m ... I’m ready to turn Cindy loose. I’m ready to let her be gone, to let her be at peace, to let me dare to hope for a happy future. That’s what you did to me out ... out there. It’s like I’ve been running around with a festering boil for nine years, one I pretended wasn’t there, but you lanced it and let all that crap leak away. Maybe ... no, not maybe but definitely ... we saved one another out there.” What else I was about to say, I don’t know. I opened my mouth and a scream came out, then a wail of pain finally let go as the emotional dam inside me crumbled away.

How long I sobbed, I’ll never know, but I know my eyes were burning and my voice was shot on the heels of it when the tears stopped and I was in Laura’s arms as she held me, stroking my hair, until I cried out those nine years of grief.

“Thank you for trusting me,” Laura said. “It tells me you love me and that you trust me at least as much as I’ve trusted you.”

“I do,” I said.

“Doctors shouldn’t prescribe tying one on, but friends do,” she said. “More of those awful Mexican cactus squeezings?”

“Just what the doctor ordered,” I said with a wry smile. “More Patron, please.”

“As Master wishes,” she said, beginning to rise.

“I really do love you, Laura, or that door would’ve remained nailed shut,” I told her as she poured more booze into my glass. “I’d have never opened it to you. Christ, I didn’t even cry like that when my dad died. I’ve seen a thousand senseless things in my career, but me trying to save Cindy tops that list. But I guess denial isn’t just a long river down in Egypt land, right?”

“In your shoes, I might’ve done the same,” Laura said. “Emotion always overrides logic, which is why I guess I’ve mostly stifled emotion.”

“I sued the company that made the diving board, and they settled for a ton of money,” I said. “I was living poor here for the first few years until they settled, then paid a lot of money toward the house and paid it off entirely. I still pay through the nose for taxes, but at least if I get crippled and unemployed next week, I still keep a roof over my head”

“You seem to live frugally,” Laura said. “Your dad’s old truck. Your boat isn’t some glitter-ridden gaudy monstrosity.”

I snorted at this. “There’s a car in the garage that I drive here and there, a three-year-old Mustang, but I like Dad’s old truck. Cindy’s sister turned sixteen a week before Cindy died, and Cindy had the insurance on the car to pay it off if she was disabled or killed, so I gave it to her sister. She’s still driving it. But Dad’s truck ... it was top-of-the-line when he bought it, as far as I know, but a good memory of him too, y’know?”

“I do,” she said. “My dad had one very much like it, but a Chevy and black.”

“I remember you saying,” I told her. “It impressed me that you could pick up on even the year model.”

“Just one of my things, that I’ve always noticed the variances,” Laura said. “In some ways, I like to think that trait makes me a good diagnostician.”

“I think we both owe this to Cindy,” I said. “She showed me my desires, showed me what I am, and from that, I could help introduce you to Laura Peters, without the alphabet soup. And in return, you were able to set me

free. In other words, darlin', you're stuck with me. Goddamn you, you're sentenced not to die until after I do. I couldn't take another loss like that."

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CHAPTER 27



I rose from my seat, drained in more ways than one. “I’m sorry for reacting how I did. In my head, I thought the most vile things of you. I shouldn’t have, but I did. I thought this had all been some joke. I let myself think that you hated me so much that you did all of that just to laugh at and humiliate me.”

“I would never do that.”

“I know that now, or rather, I may be learning that. But don’t you see how broken I can be? I find it impossible to trust, and jump to thinking the worst.”

He cocked his head. “Well, that’s true, and we’ll deal with that in a bit, but I own some of that.”

“No, just me. Either I’m pushing or running away. You look at me like I’m something wonderful, but you don’t see the blackness eating at me. I look like I have it all put together, but I’m just a mess.”

He stood and came to me, gripping my arms in his. “I’ve been a bit brusque with you in the past, called you a bitch and other names. I’m not proud of that, but I understand where you went in your head.” He stooped down to get eye-to-eye with me. “But listen up, that won’t be tolerated from here on out. We sit and talk it out. If you run from me again, you won’t like what happens next. That’s one of the worst possible offenses you could make. Am I making myself clear?”

His words had me gulping. There was the steel I needed. Perhaps it was my time to talk.

“Look, Keith...” I almost said *We need to talk* but swallowed those words down along with the lump in my throat. “Are we moving too fast?” I glanced at the tee-shirt covering my nakedness, feeling now horribly overdressed, but still bereft of one small thing.

“You want to slow this down?”

Did I? I gripped the hem of his shirt, wringing the fabric in my hands. “Maybe, I just need some direction. Perhaps if I knew what you craved? You like your whip and all the other toys, but what are you looking for in me?”

“I thought I’d been pretty clear out there.”

“There’s more to this than the bite of your whip.”

He released my arms and took his seat, leaving me standing before him, fidgeting with that damned shirt. “Do I need to punish you for running away from me just now?”

I squeezed my legs together, because the thought of heading back to his dungeon for a punishment made me instantly wet, but I didn’t want to be one of those slaves begging to get whipped. He needed to make that choice, not me, and he’d already said *next time*. I took that to mean I’d gotten a pass.

“Your head, love. What’s going on in that head?”

“Only that I prefer pain with my pleasure. But to answer your question, No, I don’t want to head back outside.”

“From the way you’re fidgeting, it looks like that’s just what you do want. Love, I can smell your need from here.”

“Well, I like it. I love being restrained, and whipped and beaten, but I don’t think that’s the best thing considering I’m still too sore to sit and my back still stings from your whip. You said next time, and if I ever run from you again, I hope you light into me, but for now...do you think you could just hold me?”

“Just hold?” His gaze went to the apex of my thighs, zeroing in on the glistening evidence of my growing need coursing down to my knees.

“Take off the shirt,” he said with a growl. “Clothes are things you need to earn around me, and I can say, in this house, that price will rarely ever be met.”

“Yes, Sir,” I said, pulling the hem up to my hips.

He licked his lips and stared at the juncture of my legs. “Sir?” His eyebrows lifted. “That isn’t something you’re allowed to use here either.

Love, you're mine. All of you. Every bit of you. I intend on making that more permanent, but until then, call me what I am."

I yanked the shirt over my head, revelling in what he said. His words flowed through me and settled in deep. What the hell had I been thinking to run from this man?

I cast the shirt off and watched the fabric flutter to the floor, then lowered myself to my knees. "Thank you, Master."

We'd had a long night, and I didn't know what to expect, but his shorts tented, making me grin.

"Now, slave, what is going on in that pretty little head?"

"I'm wondering if I might be able to take care of that."

He glanced at his crotch and gave me a grin. "Now aren't you the needy one."

And so it began. Not whips and chains, or screams of pain. I took him in my mouth. He took me against the wall. Then I found myself nearly upside down, draped over the couch. He moved me down the hall, and fucked me there too. Before the bedroom, we stopped in the bathroom where he fucked me again. I found myself on all fours beside the bed. There he took me, with his cock, his fingers, and finally his mouth.

My screams were not those of pain, but of the most delicious pleasure. He might have only had three orgasms, but he was going double digits for me. I wound up in his bed, snuggled against his side, a very content and worn out slave.

We still had much to discuss and demons to slay, but I knew where I belonged, and had only one more thing to say.

"Master?"

"Yes, slave?"

"If you really feel like you need to punish me for running away, I won't say no."

He huffed a laugh. "Now where did you ever get the idea you had a choice?"

CHAPTER 28



I got the subtlety, I did. She was asking me to break her, to punish her bad behavior, and I wholly believed she really deserved it, but by this point, I was exhausted, and more than a little bit intoxicated, and in this shape might accidentally lynch us both with that whip. The mental imagery amused me, and oh-my-God the headlines in the papers, right?

Local Paramedic and Trauma Surgeon Dead in a Whip Misadventure!

“You’ll be lashed harshly tomorrow,” I added. “Eighty of the whip, Laura, and perhaps confinement. You might not have noticed the jail out there, but you’re going to notice it tomorrow. You’ll be a disciplined girl, and how much you suffer to get there is on you, my love.”

“Oh, God,” she moaned, then caught herself. “I know I deserve it, Master. As bad as it’ll be, in my heart, eighty is even lenient for what I almost threw away for my fucking stupidity.”

“You bled a bit today, but only a couple of dots where marks intersected,” I pointed out.

“I gave you my consent, Master,” Laura said. “Even if I scar, that’s your privilege. Maybe I even want that, to be marked for life by my master, marks only the two of us will ever see. I won’t say I’m not afraid. Truth is, I’m terrified. It’s arousing and frightening at once. When I saw us fucking in the mirror, I really wondered who I was when I saw my face. But I ... I didn’t love myself when I came here, and I think I could love this new me, this enslaved and disciplined me. I’ve lived a life without consequences, the

top dog at that hospital, but ... with you, I like that I don't get choices, that you're my lawgiver, and if you order me to march out there naked to be whipped, that's the law. There's no recourse. There's no appeal. There's no begging. There's simply acceptance. I'm owned here and you'll do as you please. It's ... it's breathtaking, how much I've needed this. I don't understand it. I'm only just discovering it, but even so, that need is deep-seated inside me, Sir."

"I saw it in you the same way Cindy saw it in me," I said after a moment of digesting this. "That's the only answer I have."

"Master?" she said.

"Go on," I prompted.

"I have a third hole, Sir. That's yours too. Tomorrow ... God, I can't believe I'm saying this. Tomorrow, before you jail me, can we go to my house? I want you to do something to me there, rule and own me there, so I know my house is no refuge from your ownership. I also have ... I like butt-play and have an array of ass plugs. But ... suddenly it's important that you have the key to my house, unquestioned entry. I ... Jesus, I know this isn't as deep a door as you opened to me ... I have a stripper pole in my basement, and I'd love if you made me slither for you. Maybe lash me if I'm not one hundred percent pleasing?"

Jesus H. Christ! my mind exclaimed. Despite erupting in her three times tonight alone, damn if my cock wasn't twitching.

"I still ... Master, I think detention in your jail will be the harsher punishment, and I deserve that. I'm not trying to get out of it, but I think some time between your whip and that jail cell, time in my house under your rule, will benefit this journey we're taking."

"I agree," I said.

"I mentioned being afraid of tomorrow, Master, and I am," she said.

"Wait here," I ordered. "I'll return." I went to the dungeon and fetched a bondage belt and cuffs for her ankles, then went back to the bedroom, where I put the bondage belt around her slim waist, buckled behind her, then handcuffed her wrists to a ring on her lower belly, and cuffed her ankles with a short chain. She could only shuffle, but could at least get to the john, for instance.

"Thank you, Master," she moaned. "God, I love being so helpless with you."

I gave her pussy a hard spank and she moaned anew. “No masturbation,” I said. “You only orgasm when I say you do. Got that?”

“Master is a harsh one,” she moaned. “But, yes, Sir.”



We fell to sleep, or I did, at least. By the haunted look on her face when I woke, she'd slept precious little, hopefully fretting about the day ahead. She asked permission to go to the bathroom. I liked that, that she wanted permission for everything when in my presence. I released her handcuffs, then told her she could use the john. Most of her wounds were healed by this point, or mostly healed. There was a little bruise here and there, but the welts on her back were all but gone, only three remaining. She flashed a grateful look and shuffled to the bathroom. When she came out, I told her to make us breakfast.

“Yes, Master,” she said, then shuffled to the kitchen.

As she did this, I did something I needed to do alone. There's a high shelf in my parlor with what looks like a simple vase on it, but it's the urn with Cindy's ashes. I took it down from the shelf, struggling not to weep, then kissed it.

“I love you, Cindy,” I said. “Go with God, my love. I think I'm going to be okay.” I returned the urn to its place, then went into the kitchen for breakfast.

Breakfast was a ruination of burnt bacon and eggs. The toast was on a timer, so that wasn't fucked up, and neither was the stuff she didn't have to cook, like the butter, OJ, jelly, that sort of stuff. She looked at me in horrified humiliation, maybe more so at my look of amusement. Beginning to weep, she scraped the burned chow into the trash, and knelt before me.

“I'm sorry, Master,” she said.

“Nervous, much?” I asked.

“A wreck,” she confessed. “Mixed emotions, like that joke about your mom-in-law driving off a cliff in your new Corvette.”

“I wouldn't know,” I chuckled. “I liked my mother-in-law.” This was true. We still kept in touch. I'd even had Christmas dinner with them this

past Christmas. Cindy's parents are good people. I was genuinely fond of them from the start, and kept on good terms. "You going to eat?"

"I think I'd just throw up, Master."

"Malnutrition isn't one of my kinks," I told her. "I'll let this pass for now, but I hope you're not some sort of anorexic trying to be Skinny Minnie here. I ran a call ten years ago, a cute lesbian couple. One was anorexic and the other bulimic. The bulimic ate the anorexic. I mean, the anorexic was back in twenty minutes, but a chewed up mess. It wasn't pretty." I smirked, but saw on her face that my joke had fallen flat.

"No, Sir," she said. "It's just nerves. Truth is, once this whipping is done, I'll probably want to hit Jack in the Box and loot them for a dozen of those nasty tacos." She made a sardonic chuckle.

"Hey, don't rank on my Purina Paramedic Chow," I shot back, and she looked at me with wide eyes then giggled. Good, I wanted her to dread punishment, but not to live in fear of me. Usually, that anorexic/bulimic wisecrack gets all kinds of laughter. I hurriedly downed three slices of toast, washing it down with orange juice, then had Laura fetch two quarts of Gatorade from the fridge. "To the dungeon," I ordered, rising to my feet.

Laura shuffled in her ankle cuffs, but got to the dungeon, which I unlocked. She set the bottles on the spanking bench, then made her way to the St. Andrew cross. "Will I be lashed on my back, or on my tits and belly, where I can see the marks?" she asked. I sensed a hopeful note in her tone. "It all belongs to you, Master. I'm coming to see myself as the custodian and caretaker, but you own the woman, Sir."

"Back to the cross," I said. She backed up clumsily and offered her wrists to the upper arms of the furniture, which I quickly cuffed before releasing the ankle cuffs, and re-cuffing her ankles. To further hold her still, I opened a drawer and retrieved eight short belts I'd bought in the kids' department at Walmart, and bound her at her upper and lower legs, then upper and lower arms. I removed the bondage belt, exposing her entire toned belly for the whip.

"Kiss me?" she begged. "I know I deserve this. I was on the verge last night of begging for it, Master. I even know this is you loving me. But please ... some reassurance?"

I don't think I'd ever object to kissing this beautiful woman. I shed my shirt first. I liked being shirtless when lashing someone, so there wasn't a chance my clothes would bind. I approached her, pressing my body to hers,

and kissed her with a depth and longing that had my cock instantly hard. God, what she did to me. I kissed a trail down her belly to the top of her pubis.

“You know this is going to look like a war was fought here,” I said.

“I hope so, Sir,” Laura returned. “I need you to be steel to me. My owner and lawgiver. Escape is despicable, Master, beneath contempt. You have my blanket consent, Sir. Already, I want that forever, not for this week of vacation, but for your rule to extend everywhere but the hospital. I have to be the tough old bitch there, but even there, I need you to soften me, to make me human. This is well worth what it’s going to cost, Master.” She sighed, taking another deep breath and gusting it out as she quivered. “Master, I meant every word I said last night.”

“So am I doing this to you or for you?” I asked.

“Neither, Master,” she said promptly. “I wondered after that too. I think you’re doing this *for us*, Sir.”

“I like that answer, and it’s the truth,” I agreed. “Have you more to say before I finish preparing you? You’re to be gagged so you can’t call red, and it’s going to look a bit silly, but I’m going to put a face shield on you just so if I lose control of the whip, your face is undamaged.”

“That would only stall this,” she said, then opened her mouth. I fetched a ball gag, put the ball in her mouth, then buckled it in place while she looked at me with wide eyes. I adjusted the headband on the face shield, and put that on her, wondering if I shouldn’t order up a welder’s mask, so she couldn’t see the lash coming.

I slashed the whip into her, a vertical stripe between her tits that stopped just above her navel. She groaned, but didn’t fight her bonds. I lashed again, popping her left nipple, then another lash to the right, which made her shriek and fight her bonds, but she was going nowhere.

She looked at me with an expression of mingled love and horror, and I continued lashing, showing her no mercy. She sobbed throughout the whipping, shrieking now and again at a particularly painful lash. I took my time, extending her suffering. The sixth lash opened her skin in a diagonal welt across her belly, and by the time I laid down the 80th stroke, she was leaking blood from four open stripes.

I set the whip aside, wiping the wounds and seeing none were deep. One of them might scar, but I doubted it. I went to my first-aid box and produced a styptic pencil, one that every man knows who shaves with a

blade, and dabbed her wounds to stop the bleeding. She cried out again at the burning sting of the pencil. I knew every time she bent or twisted, she'd remember this whipping and what it meant. It didn't really mean *don't run away from your master*. It meant *your master owns and loves you, and is keeping you on his leash forever*.

Her chin, throat, and belly were coated in drool, the inevitable result of gagging her, but the gag had a hole through it so she wouldn't choke if she puked, although nothing was in her belly to puke up. Doctors took an oath that included *primum non nocere*, a Latin term meaning "above all, do no harm," or words to that effect. I would do no harm either. My Laura would face suffering and discipline, but I would never do her harm. I loved her, and I knew that. It was that simple. I removed her face shield and gag.

"God, I bled," she whispered in a marveling tone. "Marked by my Master. I'd have shrieked red ten lashes into this. Thank ... yes ... thank you for gagging me, for being the iron bastard to my iron bitch, and making me take it. I doubt I'm broken. It took years to become such a bitch, and I know it'll take years to break me."

"That's how punishment will be, Laura," I said. "And, yes, I expect you'll be punished often, my dear, at least until you settle in. You are a headstrong type. I don't take it personally, but I will outlast you, my pet."

"It stopped feeling sexy or kinky by ten lashes," she told me. "You took me beyond. I can't believe I'm thanking you for owning me and whipping me bloody, but I am."

I released her cuffs and straps. "Put it all away, then come kneel at my feet," I ordered. I was horny, almost painfully so, but knew I wanted to fuck her under her own roof, so I reluctantly stifled my urges. She came to me and knelt, and I let her drink her Gatorade, which she gulped down while I drank mine.

"Let's go to your house, slave," I said. "And you're going to wear your runaway tee-shirt and nothing else. I hope that drives your lesson home as well."

"Master is inventive," she muttered. "I get to do the walk of shame anyway. Yes, Sir."

CHAPTER 29



I wore Keith's shirt and nothing else, slipping into the passenger seat of his truck. I'd wanted to take my car, but he insisted on driving. As far as I was concerned he could drive the Mercedes. Hell, the man owned me body and soul. A car was nothing next to that. It took about half an hour to negotiate the roads to my house and I squirmed in the seat as he backed down the drive, my mind a flurry of excitement for what the afternoon would bring.

"Lift it," he commanded.

I turned to him, not liking the direction this was headed. In his truck, the daily drivers wouldn't be able to see in, but we passed more than a handful of truckers. They had an eagle's eye into the cab.

"Lift and spread," he said. "I need to feel you."

Feeling me turned into finger fucking me into oblivion. How he kept us from crashing wasn't something I cared about. My ass stung. Small twinges of pain still pricked at my back. My midsection, tits, and hips remained angry and deliciously raw. He'd put his marks on me to imprint how he owned my pain, but his fingers had me writhing and screaming with pleasure. One trucker gave us one long ear-splitting blast of his horn. I'm not sure what expression was on my face, except I was riding Keith's hand hard, grinding my pussy, and making a mess of the seat.

I really didn't care about the trucker, and Keith seemed pleased with the result. After I climbed down from the intensity of the orgasm, he tilted his strong chin downward and licked his fingers. "Damn but I've got one tasty slave," he said.

My pulse hammered in my chest, and my insides still vibrated with the coursing of pleasure. “And I have one generous master.” A glance between his legs revealed he agreed. “Master?”

“Yes?”

“What would you say to a little bit of worship from your slave right about now?”

His chuckle bounced around the inside of the truck. “I’d say we’re lucky we haven’t already crashed, but wrap your lips around me now, and I’m sure we’ll find a ditch in no time flat.”

“Ah, that’s a shame,” I said. “You can deny me all you want, but you shouldn’t deny yourself. Not when you have me.”

“Oh, I’ll have you. I plan on fucking your ever-loving brains out as soon as we get inside.”

“I would like that very much, Master.” I used the title more often than needed, but I loved that I could say it at all. If it were up to me, I’d give a litany of verse of what he meant to me.

“Doesn’t matter what you want,” he quipped. “You get what you’re given.”

As it should be, but I loved when he fucked me, and we hadn’t done that nearly enough. I had a few days before work sucked me under. Keith had longer on his workman’s comp. I wanted him to fuck me until I couldn’t walk, until I ached remembering him all day. Shit, the man intoxicated me. My master had turned me into an addict whose favorite drugs were domination and control.

“Why are you grinning?” he asked.

“I was thinking about your hand reddening my ass as you plowed into me from behind.”

Really, my mind was buzzing over what would happen later today. Confinement would be new to me, and I wasn’t looking forward to all the thoughts that stirred up. He planned to take all of me too, as was his right. I may have overstated my love of ass play, but I’d felt a need to give him every piece of me. In truth, I’d experimented, but I’d never really had a partner who was any good at it. All it meant to me was discomfort and pain. But, like everything else, that choice no longer belonged to me.

The corner of his lips turned up. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“Oh yes. My favorite position actually.”

“Why?”

“It’s the most dominant position. When a man is behind a woman, he’s not making love to her. There’s little eye contact. When a man is behind me, I’m pretty certain I’m getting fucked.”

“First off,” he said, “no other man is ever touching you again. And second, you’re getting fucked in every position, not just when I’m behind you.”

“Mm,” I said. “Thank you, Master.”

“Oh, you might want to hold off on the thank yous.”

We’d arrived at my house. He pulled into my drive and turned off the truck. Turning to me, fire burned in his gaze, heating with his lust.

“Master.” I spoke in a whisper, my breaths captured by his gaze.

“Do you feel all the evil things I want to do?”

My belly still burned. Each twist of my body reminded me of the lashes he’d laid down. A punishment for running away. Those hadn’t been strikes for his pleasure. They’d been a lesson to me. A good one too, because his look made me want to run, but I would never run from this man. The penalty was too severe, both in the lashes I would endure and the disappointment I would cause.

My words came out a breathy whisper. “Yes, Master, I do.”

“I’m going to fuck you in your home, Laura. I’m going to mark every square inch with the memory of me taking you. Mouth, ass, and pussy, we’re not leaving until the deed is done.”

My entire body quivered. This man had an insatiable appetite. He’d said he’d wanted to dust off the cobwebs. We’d done that and more. By the time we were done, we will have polished granite to the highest shine. Only, I hoped he never tired of me.

I reached into my purse and pulled out my only key. “This doesn’t belong to me anymore.” I surrendered my freedom. Only one place remained free of this thing between us. Work would see our roles dissolved by necessity, but for now, I remained his.

He took the key, opened the door, and jumped out of the truck. I took several deep pulls of breath bracing for the removal of even more of my freedoms. He came around the truck, helping me out, hiding my nakedness beneath his shirt from the inquisitive stares of Mr. Hurley next door. Then Keith led me into the home I no longer called my own. By his grace, I would live here, or not. We hadn’t discussed what came next.

He closed the door, sealing off the outside world, then turned his gruff voice on me. “Strip, slave. You haven’t earned the right to cover your body from me.”

The shirt came off, and much like before, it puddled on the floor.

Pointing to a spot in the front hall, he ordered me into place. “On your knees, ass up, head down.”

I thought he would fuck me, but he left me there instead. His heavy step turned toward the kitchen, moved through the living room, and faded down the hall. He opened doors as he explored my home, taking his time. Then the sound of his steps heading down alerted me to his visit to my dance studio. To my most private place, where I danced to forget my job and sank into another place. Beneath my knees and palms, the deep vibrations of my soundsystem shook the floor. He’d turned on the music and my breath caught.

He returned, deep breaths tugging and slapped my ass.

“Who’s the damn chair for?” he demanded. “Who’s the asshole you dance for?”

I gave a squeak with the next slap of his hand, lifting my ass as my body surged forward. “No one,” I huffed. “It’s for no one.”

“Doesn’t look like no one,” he said. “Who is it for?”

How to explain to him the meaning of that chair? How that chair embodied my fantasies of the nameless and faceless man I danced for until my body gave out.

“No one has ever been downstairs,” I said. “The chair is a symbol.”

“Of what?”

“Of you!” I yelled. I shouldn’t be yelling at him, but it was true. Only I hadn’t really known who would occupy that chair. In my heart, I’d always known it would be claimed someday. Not once did I ever think it would be him.

“Come,” he said, and angled back down the hall.

I rose to my feet, tugging in that breath.

Keith turned around, a scowl on his face. “Did I give you permission to stand?”

CHAPTER 30



“**M**aster, may I lead you to my bedroom?” she asked. “There are things I’d like for you to see, Sir,” Laura said nervously.

“Yes,” I decided, knowing she could neither climb nor especially descend stairs on her hands and knees. “Keep your nipples on the floor until we’re at the base of the stairs and I give you permission to walk on your hind legs.”

“As my Master wishes.”

She crawled, clumsy but resigned, as I prescribed. She was beautiful, and all mine, and I reveled in this private humiliation of her. I sensed she reveled in my rulership as well. She didn’t need to make decisions, except to obey or suffer the consequences. I cursed myself for not having the good sense God gave a gopher and bringing a whip to her house, a quirt, flogger, something. God knows I had plenty of toys, even some duplicates or near-duplicates, in my dungeon. I’d have to rectify that and resolved to pack a trunk with weapons of ass-destruction to have a stash of them here.

Her house, compared to mine, was a palace, a master bedroom downstairs, another upstairs, and four other bedrooms upstairs. One of the bedrooms up there was empty as a politician’s promise, as my grandfather liked to say. My mind took a left turn as I thought I needed to make the trip to visit him soon, maybe after Laura returned to work. He was closing in on his 100th birthday, but didn’t look a day over 65. I set those thoughts aside as another thought rose to mind. I’d taken drafting in high school, and for not one hell of a lot of money, we could make one hell of a nice hidden dungeon from the room adjacent to her bedroom.

“You may rise,” I told her. “Show me what I’m to see, Laura.”

“Thank you, Master,” she said, rising and going up the stairs while I followed. She led me to her bedroom and opened the walk-in closet, then opened a wardrobe at the back of the closet, revealing a decent collection of BDSM gear. She opened the drawer beneath the main carcass of the wardrobe, showing me an impressive collection of ass-intruders. “I like stretching my ass with the plugs, Master,” she said. “For a long while, I did a lot of DIY play, but it didn’t work for me, really.”

“No, not particularly,” I agreed.

“Master, may I go downstairs and get my laptop?” Laura asked. I nodded, and she dashed downstairs, back in a long moment bearing an HP laptop. She connected it to the big screen TV on the wall, reset the input to HDMI-3, then tapped on the computer, sending a video to the television. “I have nearly 800 videos here, which is sad and pathetic, to be honest, but ... that’s been my life until you. Truth is, I’d probably have added twenty more videos to this throughout this vacation. This first one is from a year ago, Master.”

She hit the start button and a video began to play. It was shot in this bedroom. She appeared, spectacularly naked. “This is self-punishment, not play,” she announced to the camera. “I picked up a speeding ticket today. I tried to doctor my way out of it, but the trooper didn’t bite down. It’s not the money, but the inattention and embarrassment at my stupidity of him eating up thirty minutes of my day in the name of me trying to save myself five minutes on the drive. I wasn’t driving to an emergency, and so what if I get to the hospital five minutes late? I got there forty minutes late after he took his sweet time writing me a ticket, and nobody cared. They only care if I’m there with a tough case. Otherwise, interns, residents, and other lesser mortals can handle the load since they need the experience. But it was still wrong and stupid of me, and I know this.”

She held up three drawstring bags, one blue, one white, and one red, and a white die with black dots. “I’m going to roll the die. The number I roll will tell me how many slips to draw from each bag. The blue bag has instruments that will hurt badly. The red bag is numbers from 30 to 100, indicating the number of lashes I am to receive. The white bag is what region of my body is to endure the punishment. It’s ... I’ve never done this before, but I know I have to do it, and I know I’ll never have a master to do it. There’s a man I fantasize about, a paramedic, but he hates me. To be

honest, I'm not all that fond of that tomcat either, flirting with anything in a skirt. But my God, he still excites me. No matter, none. I'm alone and that die is cast, no pun intended." She rolled the die on the dresser. "I'm in luck. It was a two." She drew two slips from each bag, that were in color-coded slips of paper. "Jesus. First, I am awarded fifty of the quirt to the backs of my thighs. Second, I am to be paddled 85 swats to each side of my ass. Oh, God. I'll be back."

She stepped out of view of the camera, then returned with a round-faced paddle in one hand and a quirt in the other. "Get on with it, bitch," she said, then turned her back to the camera, returned to the camera to aim and zoom it, resumed her position, and started lashing with the quirt, sidearm strokes to wrap around and catch her thighs. She yelped, but lashed again and again, marking beautifully, and lashing admirably hard for the first forty or so strokes, but the pain began to overcome her, and the lashes weakened for the final few. She dropped the quirt on the bed and picked up the paddle, then began smashing it furiously into her ass, ten to the left, ten to the right, and so forth, until each cheek of her ass was bright red at seventy strokes, when she ceased, and knelt, facing the camera, her face red and tear-streaked.

"I chickened out on the last few strokes of the quirt, and that's not acceptable, so this paddling is going to worsen for the final fifteen. She knelt and opened a tan bag with orange print, one I recognized as Home Depot. She planted sticky-backed sandpaper on one face of the paddle, then deftly cut the overlap away with scissors. "That will abrade me, and maybe having to peel my panties off the next time I undress will remind me to keep my lead foot to myself, and to take what I have coming. God hates a coward, right?" With that, she took her position again and laid fifteen far harsher swats to her right cheek, repeating it on the left, crying out several times. I could see her ass was abraded, and admired her resolve even as I wished I'd been in her life then to administer this punishment. She knelt again before the camera. "I'm sorry," she said, then ended the video.

"Jesus," I said.

"I've had twelve more punishments since this one, Master, at my own hands," she said. "A lot of these are me dancing, and many are me playing and masturbating. This isn't my computer now, Master. It's yours. But I want to show you some of these to give you a sample. You mentioned learning me as I learn to submit. I can't have any doors closed to you,

Master, none. I need ... well, you were the paramedic I mentioned in that video, as if I have to draw you a picture. Anyway, I guess this is your entire four-year major for your degree in Laura Peters.”

“I’d figured as much,” I said, but was pleased with the confirmation from her.

“This one is a play session,” she said, starting another video on the enormous television. Again, she was naked, and I got the sense she maybe spent much of her alone time au naturel. I made a mental note to ask her later. On screen, she stepped forth, and I told her to pause the video.

“Go get lube and choose a plug,” I ordered. “It’s another good reminder of who owns that ass.”

“Yes, Sir,” Laura said. “Master, I’m a virgin there to anything but the plugs. I ... it would honor me if you took that from me, right here in my own home.”

“I gave you orders,” I said. “Bring the quirt and paddle too.”

“Yes, Master,” Laura said, crawling into the closet. She crawled back, this time with a book bag in her teeth, then knelt before me. I took the bag and looked inside. She had done as bidden, and I wondered if she was trying to impress me. The plug she’d chosen was a tempered glass one, longer than my cock and thicker at its bulb.

“Elbows and palms on the bed, legs straight,” I ordered. Laura’s eyes widened, but she obeyed. “I’m going to give you those ten strokes where you weakened, plus ten more to teach you to obey even your own orders, and another ten for ... call it accrued interest on what you’ve owed for so long.. After that, I’m going to paddle you for talking rather than obeying, and then you’ll get the plug.”

“Y ... yes, Master,” she said in a fretful tone, but obeyed. My Laura was a fast learner, adaptable and obedient. It wouldn’t get her a discount on lashes, but it would prevent extra ones.

“You’ll take this unbound, but if you have a gag in your cabinet in there, and request, I can gag you,” I said.

“I wish I did, but I don’t,” Laura breathed. “Master, that was so humiliating and such a turn on, coated in my own drool. And it was effective at shutting me the fuck up. A request, though, Sir?”

“Ask,” I said.

“Punish me extra if I evade or beg mercy, Master. I need these harsh lessons in what I am.”

“So ordered,” I said.

“Thank you, Sir,” she breathed. She seemed to tense her lean body, and a second later, the quirt slashed across her thighs, far harder than she had the resolve to do in that video. She shuddered and hissed, but held her place, like a statue, showing me the slave I owned, a slave I guess she hoped was worthy of my ownership.

I knew mercy would dishonor Laura, so I gave her none, lashing again and again into her thighs as she cried, but held her place, although I could see by the twitching in her feet that she was struggling. The end of the quirt was thick latigo leather, cut to twin points, and left deep and thick welts. I had already resolved that the tee-shirt was to be her standard uniform when outdoors or traveling, unless we were going somewhere public. Maybe the welts on her thighs, showing as she made her way from house to truck, would make her feel I was making an example of her.

The lashing done with the quirt, I set it aside, but Laura maintained her position. I saw she'd brought me the same paddle from the video, that still had the sandpaper face on it. “Twenty to each side with the paddle, then you go over my lap for twenty more,” I decreed. Without further preamble, I smashed the paddle five times into each side of her ass, using the sandpaper, impressed with the abrasion and with her resolve to hold her place as she yelped. I pondered giving some backhanded to her, but the truth was, my backhand wasn't at all strong, and really pretty clumsy. So I kept paddling forehand, left-right-left-right, as her delicious ass reddened and chafed at the rough surface. The sandpaper was about 50-grit, I judged, coarse as hell. Finally, she'd taken 20 to each ass cheek, and sobbed uncontrollably. But still, my Laura held her place.

I sat at the corner of the bed. “Over my lap now,” I ordered. She rose and took her ordered position. “Hands behind your back, slave.” She obeyed and I grasped her thin wrists in one hand, making her more helpless as she moaned. The paddling resumed, a merciless punishment while she was over my lap like a little girl. I laid them in hard, wanting sitting to pain her for the coming week, deciding that when I permitted her to sit, it would only be in hard chairs, so she would feel the throbbing and be reminded of her place and my expectations. No, I corrected myself as I laid down the final swat. Not my expectations, but my outright demands and requirements.

I lubed the plug then parted her ass cheeks while she was still over my lap, then slowly and gently slid the plug up into her. She moaned and relaxed, then groaned as it seated inside her. She trembled and quivered as I felt wetness escaping her pussy to soak my leg, but she didn't cum, though it was close. "Lick your mess off my leg, slave," I ordered. She rolled off my lap and licked her juices off my bared leg, doing a credible job of accepting such abasement.

"I'll want to watch each and every movie," I said. "But for now, I'm in the mood for you to dance on that pole, and then give your owner a lapdance."

"Thank you, Sir," she said, and smiled. "Your slave would love nothing more."

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CHAPTER 31



Somewhere along the way, I think I had truly died and gone to heaven, or maybe this was hell. My ass sure had been lit on fire. Keith didn't disappoint. He laid into me with brazen determination to make me answer for my faults. Showing him my computer may not have been the smartest thing, but I'd decided somewhere between lash ten and I-don't-know on his St. Andy's that I was just jumping straight in. He would either surprise me or fail me.

From the burn in my ass and the welts on my front, I knew I would rue that decision for days to come, perhaps even longer. I didn't know how long we could keep up this pace. My body could only handle so much, and eventually our off duty time would end and I'd have to get back to work. I had to trust in Keith. He wouldn't be easy on me, and how I loved him for that, but he wouldn't go too far either. I trusted him to keep us on the edge, and to keep me in line.

For far too long, I'd tried mastering myself, always knowing I'd only been playing at a game. When things got too hard, or too painful, I always let up. The evidence had been in that video. I simply didn't have what it took. Keith, on the other hand, had little compassion for my screams. I needed the harshness of his discipline and his conviction to control me.

"Master?"

"Yes?"

"Will you give me a moment and meet me downstairs. If it pleases you, I'd like to surprise you?"

Oh, I hoped he granted me this request. It may be bold of me not to instantly comply, but I knew he would love what I had planned. I cast my gaze down and held my breath.

I didn't even know if I could pull off the moves. My body ached from head to toe. It would be torture to twist and contort, but I wanted this. Me and that pole were connected to him. I still didn't remember him coming into that bar. I didn't remember him watching me, nor did I remember taking him to the back room for a lap dance. He did. From the heat simmering in his gaze, there was no question it was a memory he visited often. How many times had he jacked off thinking about me dancing on that stage? I bet it was more than a time or two. No wait. That wasn't true. He'd only recently realized I had been that girl. What a shame.

But it would have been a sight. There was nothing more erotic than a man comfortable enough with his masculinity who would grab himself and beat off. Technically, that was my job now, but I'd be lying if the thought of watching him pleasure himself didn't turn my insides to jelly.

"What is going on in that head of yours?" he asked.

"Please don't make me answer," I said. "I will if I must. I'd never hold anything from you, but please, give me five minutes to...well, set the stage."

"You've got a glint in your eyes going on," he said. "And I have a mind to give you a little leeway seeing as how well you took your strikes."

Heat flooded my face. "Thank you, Master," I said. "I should've thanked you sooner."

"Got any liquor in this place?"

"I keep wine and whiskey in the cupboard beside the fridge."

"Well, I suggest you hurry on up. I'm going to pour a drink and meet you downstairs."

"Thank you!"

I headed to the door, but then stopped and grabbed a flogger. I thrust it at him.

"What's this for?"

"I don't keep anything downstairs," I said sheepishly. "Just thought you might need something...in case, well...in case I fail in my task."

He took the flogger, then pulled me close. "God damn, but you make my blood boil."

After he released me, I skipped down the hall and headed downstairs. He'd kicked the chair over, leaving me to wonder exactly what had been

raging in his head. That chair had always been meant for him, even if I hadn't known it. He'd found my stereo and turned it on. Thick bass thumped out from the walls. A quick glance at my playlist and I changed the tune to something sultry and seductive. Alannah Myles' *Black Velvet* would do the trick. I had one closet down here. It was hidden behind the mirrors, so I was confident he hadn't seen inside. Not that I would hide anything from him, except as a surprise.

As the seconds ticked down, I shimmied into the outfit I'd chosen, then I flicked on the overhead strobe lighting up the pole. The light was attached to motion sensors and would track my movements. It had limited range, but enough for what I needed.

Stretching nearly brought tears to my eyes. My master had certainly laid into my body over the past few hours. There was no choice but to dance through the pain. I welcomed it actually, because each bend and bow of my body would be accompanied by a reminder of what I'd become.

All the walls were mirrored down here. Sleek, slim, and slender, my reflection bounced back at me. I had a mind to seduce him, really drive him wild, and the flowing silks fluttered behind me with each practiced twirl. I headed to the chair, setting it in place, my stomach tingling with the knowledge its rightful owner would finally sit in his place.

Dance had always been a part of me. Elegance at its finest, it was also pain in its purest form. I was the embodiment of passion when I danced and an admirer of agony as I floated and twisted weightlessly across a room. Poised and balanced, it was as if I were made of the flowing silk covering my form.

That computer revealed the root of my deepest need. I'd always turned to self-punishment to set my life right, but when that failed I came down here, dancing away the hours until my body collapsed in a heap. It took great strength to make my dancing look as graceful as it was, involving total exertion while I plastered a smile on my face. Dancing the pole truly was an athletic feat, more punishing to my body than the half-assed attempts at self-flagellation upstairs.

When I danced, I brought all my emotions to the surface, and I would beat at myself until a unity of purpose overcame me. I think I'd never left that girl who stripped for a living in the past. It had paid the bills, but I think even then I'd craved the objectification being on stage brought. I'd always wished to serve a man. Some might think that odd coming from a woman

who chose one of the most demanding fields in medicine. Perhaps I was a modern day, female Jekyll and Hyde. One meant to save lives, and the other meant for this?

Keith's heavy step down the stairs alerted me to his imminent arrival. I should kneel on the ground, the proper place for a slave when her master entered the room, but I faded to the back of the room, and began my dance.

I knew what he would see. The grace of angels burst from my soul and flowed into my limbs when music poured into me. Over the years, I'd danced for many reasons, love of performance, to stay fit, to seduce strange men and free them of their hard earned cash. I used dance to punish my body, but tonight I danced only for Keith.

When he entered the room, I was already moving in the darkness. He would see only the barest outline of my form as I moved slowly toward him. My body was clad in lengths of silk and gauze. With the music and the swaying of my hips, the strips of cloth cast a sense of the forbidden, building tension and a craving for the faster movements which would lift the silks and reveal what lay underneath.

Keith said nothing, although he did stand by the doorway silent and appraising as I moved for him. Then he came to the center of the room and took the chair which had always been his. My breaths hitched in that moment as I danced for my master. My body flowed with joy and peace, love and grace, emotions spilling out of my heart where I gave them physical form. The bright silks chased my movements, and I grabbed one, pulling it free and passing it before my eyes. Someday, if he allowed, I would show him my harem outfit and give him a true sultan's dance, but tonight he would have the dance of a hundred silks.

The silk fluttered to the floor, and I stepped close to the pole. My movements triggered the motion sensor of the light and it locked on to me. As it did, I pulled another silk free, teasing it around my body as I judged the effect I was having on Keith. He shifted in his chair, and leaned back, placing a hand in his lap.

I continued my dance, every movement precise and filled with the residual pain from his previous discipline. I advanced, retreated, and pirouetted. My arms undulated, mirroring the sultry flow of my hips. As my head swayed, more silk fluttered to the ground as I stripped for him. I held one up as a veil, hiding my features, while enticing with the flash of my eyes from the other side.

Heading to the pole, I pivoted in a revolving whirl of sharp precision and impeccable grace. I wanted to please him as badly as I wanted to breathe, and threw the entirety of my being into my movement. It took absolute control to work the pole, and I did that now, moving my body against it like it was my lover. Then I smiled, because I would never have a lover. Instead, a master had settled his mantle of authority over me. I danced by his grace and his alone.

A glance at him revealed his hand moving over the fabric of his shorts. He was stroking his hard length, moving slowly, but with purpose. My dance had a destination, and I worked my way to him now. Only two lengths of silk still covered me. I peeled them away, first revealing my breasts and then baring myself to him.

The music thumped all around us, and I lowered to the ground, my eyes feasting on what he gripped beneath his shorts. On all fours, I crawled to him eager to climb into his lap. He stared at me, his eyes hungry and raw. I licked my lips, wondering if he'd prefer my mouth instead and arched a brow in question.

CHAPTER 32



Her moves had excited me then, and she'd honed those amazing skills to nothing less than awesomeness in the years that had rolled on. She had moves that would make even a cobra weep with envy, sinuous, graceful, serpentine, and sexy, as my eyes stayed riveted to her every move to the sultry *Black Velvet*, a song that always put me in the mood. I never could remember who the singer was, but she had that voice that would harden any man, alive or dead. I know, I know, the song is a tribute to Elvis Presley, who died when I was still in diapers, but that voice coupled with this beautiful slithering goddess turned my cock to granite.

I was a hot mess of want and need as my slave gave me the full show. As the song wound down, she crawled to me, not that crawl with nipples dragging the floor. That was for upstairs, we both knew, not down here, where I learned without being told that so much of her soul lived. I even had a grasp on why. I couldn't for the life of me remember what stripper name she used on that long-ago stage-and-pole, but I knew they used stage names, much like authors of erotica, wanting the safety of their own lives and privacy, and I didn't need to be told that before she was Miss High and Mighty, she was certain to have had a wide assortment of people creeping her. Suddenly, from a dusty corner of my mind, her long-ago stage name rose into my mind unbidden. Fiona Flame.

"Dance for me," I commanded. "Dance, Fiona." Her eyes widened, then glazed over.

"God, you remember," she moaned. "Name the tune, Sir."

“*Tubthumping* from Chumbawumba,” I said. “Good beat and you can dance to it, right?”

“A song about surviving,” she said. She went to her sound system, brought the song up, and came to me in sultry and enticing motions. She gracefully mounted the arms of the chair as the hard beat of the song poured through the speakers, then moved in hard and fast motions through the first thirty seconds, wiggling and twerking until her ass plug popped out and hit me right in the nose, and fell onto my crotch. Fortunately, my hard cock acted as a shield for my balls as she dismounted and looked at me with horror in her eyes. Without a word, she went to the stage, knelt at the pole, and grasped it overhead, her makeshift whipping post.

“Slave’s sentence, Sir?” she asked. “I’m so sorry!”

Until that point, I’d given little attention to the flogger, but it was an evil one, not a warm-up flogger of doe hide or elk. This one had eight thin braided falls, like eight two-foot bullwhips all sharing a handle. It was meant to punish. She seemed to want no forgiveness before paying the price.

“I guess that plug was like a turkey timer,” I said. “When you’re ready, it pops right out.”

“I ... I deserve a lashing, Master,” she managed to say, but I could hear a darkly amused chagrin in her tone.

“Face down and ass up,” I told her, sliding my clothes off as she obeyed. I’d slipped the lube into a back pocket of my shorts, pulled it out, then lubed my cock. “I’ll flog you while I fuck your ass, and then you’ll go back on the pole for a more ... epic ... flogging.”

“Oh, I deserve no mercy from Master’s cock or his flogger,” she moaned, opening her knees wide, then reaching behind and harshly opening her ass-cheeks, exposing herself to be plundered, completely submissive and offered.

“None,” I said, but the truth was, I was amused, trying very hard not to fall over with the biggest belly-laugh of my life. I mean, how many men have this story? My slave was giving me a lapdance until the glass ass plug came flying out to bop my honker and then bounce off my schlong. It was epic, and in the mirrors, I saw my face bright red from stifling the laugh.

She turned and looked at me with concern. “Is Master okay?”

It was too much, and I howled laughter, literally lying on the stage, cackling in a fetal position until I fell into a coughing fit.

“Sorry,” I said. “I ... how many men can tell this story, getting bopped in the nose by a runaway butt-plug? I ... it tickled me,” I breathed.

“It’s entertaining seeing a hot naked man, with such an impressively hard cock, lost in a giggle-fit,” she grinned, her own sass rising to the top. “God, that was so embarrassing. I’m still mortified that I did that.” She gave her own blush, then couldn’t help herself, bursting into her own giggles.

I grabbed her wrist and pulled her to me, then kissed her longingly, and spent time just caressing her as she caressed me, until a finger found the divot on my upper thigh. “What’s the scar?” she asked.

“My Purple Heart,” I told her. “Remember me telling you I got shot in the Middle East and had to pluck out the bullet?”

“You seem to have done a good job,” she said.

“I’m sure it was a ricochet or I’d have been flown out at great risk to one hell of a lot of good men,” I said. “Anyway, now that your turkey timer popped out, I guess it’s time to take that last virginity.” Even if I wasn’t horny, I didn’t like talking about those days in combat.

“As Master commands,” Laura grinned, taking her position, and again spreading her ass for me to offer her hole. I fetched the flogger and draped it over her as I slid the head of my cock into her ass. “Hard, please, Master,” she pleaded. “You deserve to take me ... I am only to please Master and not myself.”

“Indeed,” I agreed, thrusting hard into her, finding her very pleasingly loosened, as I slashed the flogger hard into her back. She grunted and pushed back, taking my entire cock, squeezing at it while I groaned, lashed again, then slid back, lashing once more as I rammed into her again, my hips slapping against her deliciously paddle-heated ass. I fell into a nice coordinated pattern of lash-thrust-lash-withdraw, taking my time as she moaned, squeezed, and quivered. But I was very needful of her, of giving her my seed, and finding her ass was tighter than her pussy. It was a delight.

Before long, I erupted into her, my cock throbbing for all it was worth as I lashed in a harsh flurry with the braided flogger. Suddenly, a deep shudder ran through Laura as she bucked and thrashed with her own cum, I suppose overwrought by all of this. She screamed her passions, echoing impressively from all the mirrors siding the walls. Her legs gave out and she collapsed on her belly, curling up.

“Jesus, intense,” I gasped out, my heart pounding so hard that it deafened my ears.

“Oh ... wow,” she moaned, lost in an orgasmic haze. I was distantly aware I was hungry, and guessed she was half-starved if she gave her belly even scant attention. But first, a shower. We were both coated in sweat and fuck.

I helped her to her feet, then threw her over my shoulder like a caveman, and climbed the stairs to find a woman in the kitchen, cleaning. I’d tread quietly and walked swiftly through to the living room. But glass shattered on the floor as she loudly exclaimed, “madre de Dios!”

“*Ella esta cansada. La llevaré a su cama,*” I said. “She’s tired. I’m taking her to bed.” While I wasn’t what you’d call fluent in Spanish, I knew enough to get by. So many of my clientele spoke Spanish only that I suppose it was a by-product of my job.

“*Ella parece herida. ¿Que pasó?*” she asked. She looks hurt. What happened?

“I’m fine, Marisol,” Laura said with a weak groan.. “Keith, I think we’d get up the stairs faster if you put me down.”

“Probably,” I agreed as the housekeeper crossed herself. I set Laura down and we trotted up the stairs, where she hurriedly donned a robe, then went back down the stairs. It got louder as an argument escalated. I heard a downstairs door slamming, and then Laura trudged up the stairs to the bedroom.

“What was that all about?” I asked.

“I forgot it was her day to come clean the house, Master,” Laura said. “Every other week. To say we shocked her old-world sensibilities would be the understatement of the decade. Oops. Either she quit or I fired her. My Spanish isn’t as good as it ought to be, and she lost all her English in her tirade before she stormed out. She left her key on the counter. From what I could glean, I’m a *puta* and *la diabla*. I think that means a whore and a she-devil.”

“I had no idea she was here,” I said. “Then I saw her washing dishes, and I thought I’d get past her with her back turned, but no such luck. I guess she got the full show. Jesus.” I chuckled.

“Yeah, laugh, Buster,” she said, but couldn’t help chuckling. “But now I gotta find a new housekeeper.”

“Fuck her,” I grinned. “First order of business is a shower. Plan-B is I’m so hungry I could eat the south side of a northbound hog, and I can’t imagine you’re any less hungry.”

“I am now, Master,” Laura said. “Skipped breakfast and had a decent workout downstairs. Ass-artillery with that kind of accuracy is tiring and requires added caloric intake, don’t you know?”

“Jesus, such a wiseass,” I chuckled. “Shower. Food.”

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CHAPTER 33



Well, the best sex of my life cost me the best housekeeper of my life. When I looked at the pros and cons, I think I came out ahead. I led the way to my bedroom and headed to the bath. I wasn't clear if I should be crawling, but he didn't say anything. I took that to mean it was okay. I don't think he meant me to live my life on all fours, as hot as that was, life would intervene. However, for the times that fire sparked in his eyes, I would crawl, ass up and tits dragging on the floor, and love every second of it.

I think we were both exhausted, physically and mentally. Maybe it was time for a little break? I know I needed a moment to breathe. He'd worked my body hard and I ached all over. My ass burned too. I'd toyed with ass play in private. People said it could be great, but I'd kind of given up on it, because I generally got nothing out of it. I kept the plugs, using them for the sorry-assed punishments I dispensed on myself, and had resigned myself to being an ass virgin for life.

I bit my lower lip, not in the least surprised by the throbbing in my clit. Keith did that to me. Every thought made me horny as hell. Thinking about my first time with him would forever be imprinted on my mind. Pain mixed with pleasure seemed to be my drug.

It took no time for the water to heat up. While Keith climbed in, I pulled out two fluffy towels, joining him a few minutes later.

"You know what, Master," I said.

"Hm?"

I placed my palms against his chest and leaned in for a hug. His strong arms wrapped around me as steam billowed and fogged the mirrors.

“My body aches in the best possible way.” I peeked up at him. “My ass too.”

“It seemed like you enjoyed that.”

“Very much, Master. I didn’t think I would, but with you, my body hasn’t stopped feeling new things.”

He laughed and spun me around. “Yeah, seems like you took some punishment.” He grabbed the bar of soap and lathered up his hands. “Hands on the wall, slave, and spread those legs. I go first, then we’ll switch.”

Go first for what? Ah! The gentle glide of his hands ran up and down my back. He lathered me up as I held my position. Another day, I would have sunk into the pleasurable massage, but the marks on my back were exquisitely tender to the touch.

“You’ve got some deep bruising on your ass,” he said, cupping my cheeks and giving them a hard squeeze. “I think sitting is going to be problematic for a few days.”

I hissed against the pain. “I suppose I shall just have to kneel.”

“Do you enjoy that, Laura, do you like kneeling for me?” His finger slid down my crack and pressed against my puckered rim.

“I enjoy pleasing you,” I said. “I’m loving becoming your slave.”

He slipped his finger inside my ass, pressing against the sensitive tissues. “I have to say, this might have been my favorite part so far. I’m an ass and tits and mouth and pussy kind of man.”

“You mean you’ll take whatever you please, Master?”

“I’m saying there’s nothing about you I don’t crave.” He slipped his finger out and picked up the soap, creating more lather. His hands found my hips and he gripped them hard. “If I wasn’t so worn out, I’d take you in here.”

I glanced over my shoulder and wiggled my ass against his groin.

His hand came down hard on my ass, making me yelp.

“You do like to tease.”

“I’m just a greedy slut.”

“We’ll deal with that later. Now, spin around so I can wash your front.”

I turned around and stood before him while he explored my body and cleaned me with the soap. He paid particular attention to those few areas which had bled, bending down and inspecting them.

“These will heal without a scar,” he said, “but remind me to put some ointment on them.”

“As you wish,” I said.

He dipped his fingers between my legs. The palm of his hand pressed against my clit, while his fingers found my slit. With incredible slowness, he teased me there, lifting me up on my toes as I panted for breath.

“Do you know what happens to greedy sluts,” he said, scissoring two fingers inside of me. He curled his fingers hitting my g-spot making me claw at his shoulders.

“Oh, please,” I begged. “Please, don’t torture me. Let me cum.”

He slipped out his fingers, like I knew he would, and gave my clit a hard flick. “I think that is a privilege which must be earned.”

I held back my scream, because he’d taken me right to the edge. I pressed my head back against the tiles and stared at the ceiling, desperate and defeated. He had my number. This man drove me insane with need.

He handed me the soap and spun around. “Your turn, and slave?”

“Yes, Master,” I said, still shaking from my unspent need.

“Don’t even think about putting your tiny fingers in my ass.”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed out loud. “Not that kind of ass man I take it.”

“Never. I’m a giver, not a receiver.”

That was true, and I loved how he gave me just what I deserved.

With the soap in my hands and him standing before me, I had my first opportunity to really look at the man who owned my world. Beginning at his neck, I lathered him up, massaging my way across the expanse of his shoulders. Keith was a paramedic, and well fit to his job. Expansive shoulders, wide chest, and a strong back, he was every girl’s wet dream. And I’d had his cock in my mouth, in my pussy, and now in my ass. I wondered what those silly girls at work would think of that?

As I bent to my knees, a chuckle escaped me. He turned around, and I gasped as his semi-hard cock hit me in the face.

“I thought you were spent, Master,” I said.

“You seem to have a magic touch.”

Water sluiced down his shoulders and rippled across the dips and ridges of his abs. I glanced up at him and arched a brow.

“Well, since I’m here...” I said.

He fisted his cock and my pussy clenched. I loved watching him grip himself. Someday I would ask him about fulfilling that fantasy of mine. Maybe. The thought of me touching myself in front of him most definitely

wasn't my kink, but I salivated thinking about watching him. For now, I would keep that thought to myself.

With his cock in his grip, he tapped the side of my cheek with the wide, and rapidly enlarging, head. "Open up," he said. "Let's see what that mouth can do for your poor tired Master's cock."

Eagerly, I took him in my mouth. I could tell he was tired, but like me, it seemed he couldn't get enough. He didn't try to force his way, letting me take complete control. I didn't hurry along, but made myself comfortable at his feet, expecting to be there for awhile.

To be honest, I enjoyed this rare moment, because so far, Keith hadn't let me direct any of our interactions. He was more of a taker than a giver, not that he denied me in the least. I'd lost track of the number of times I'd cum. The man liked to fuck hard and raw.

I used my time wisely, learning what he liked, how to place my tongue, where to lick him, and how to suck him. I let his moans guide me, paying close attention to the tension winding ever tighter in his body.

When he came, his seed exploded in my mouth. I was thankful for the shower, because I failed to take it all in, but I sucked and licked, and sat back when the last wave of his orgasm rolled through him.

He reached down and gripped my hair, pulling my face up to meet his smoldering gaze. "Now that was deserving of a reward."

"Thank you, Master," I said, then grinned as thoughts of all those girls floated in my mind.

"What's got you smirking, slave?"

"I was just thinking about work?"

"While sucking my cock?"

"Not while... but after."

"And why did that make you think of work?"

"Only wondering what everyone would think. If all those flirty girls knew what you've done to me." He'd made me a slave, a fully debased, and wildly happy, slave.

"I'm not interested in what any of them think, and as for work, we need to discuss that."

I grew still, wondering what he meant. I'd given myself to him. In every way, I'd placed myself at his feet, existing for one purpose alone.

But work?

My insides vibrated with a silent scream. What did we possibly need to discuss about work? Neither of us had discussed limits. I didn't want any, and I think he'd been testing me when he'd taken away my safeword during my punishment. If it had been an issue, I would have said something, but I hadn't. In truth, I wanted to live free of safewords and protection from Keith. I meant to surrender my soul to him.

But work?

That might be a deal-breaker.

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CHAPTER 34



“I’m excited about this, about us, Laura,” he said. “But rumors fly all over hospitals, all over EMS, cops, firefighters, and probably also the physician’s lounge. This is new with us and I think we’re wiser keeping it between us for now. It’s our thing, not a spectator sport, and I don’t think either of us wants to be fodder in the gossip mill. I might slip and call you Laura, but there, for now, it’s better that you’re Dr. Peters and I’m just Keith, not Sir and decidedly not Master. You can and should give me medical orders, but if you turn Queen Bee on me, you’ll be Princess Purple Ass when I get you alone, my love. In fact, you’re going to treat everyone, even stupid fucking interns, with respect. You’re to always act in ways that will make me pleased to own you, even when I’m not around. No more iron bitch, but aluminum bitch is negotiable. Speaking of not being around, I’m probably going to visit my grandfather next week. A day up, a day there, a day back.”

“Master makes sense,” she said after digesting this, then chuckled. “Aluminum bitch? Oh, God. I didn’t know you had living grandparents.”

“My only grandparent, older than Methuselah and the picture of health,” I said. “God knows your Marisol might be posting this shit all over Facebook as we speak about *la puta y diabla y la amante de Lucifer*, A whore and she-devil, and Satan’s or Lucifer’s lover, if you require translation, my pet. Sooner or later, someone’s going to snoop or just see us somewhere, and if we haven’t come out as a couple by then, the cat’s out of the bag.”

“I was so shocked by her that you should be pleased I didn’t pee down your chest, Buster,” she said, then giggled. “Jesus, that was a stunner.” She paused a moment, then chuckled. “Lucifer’s squeeze, huh?”

“More or less,” I acknowledged with a chuckle. “I’ve an idea to hatch on you, but for now, if I don’t find something to eat, I’m going to hair out and attack cattle on that pasture we passed on the way here.” My stomach uttered an angry rumble of protest as hers suddenly sang in chorus.

We turned off the shower and she toweled me off. “Problem is I don’t have much food here, Master,” Laura said. “I don’t know why I bought this huge damn house since I’m never here. Status symbol, I guess, like my car.”

“I have an idea about the house,” I repeated. “Get dressed and we’ll go out for lunch. There’s a place called Ernesto’s a couple or three miles off that has good Mex food.”

“I’ve seen it but haven’t been there,” Laura said.

“When we’re done, we’ll return here and put you back in your tee-shirt for the ride back to my house,” I said. *Shit, my clothes are downstairs from me playing caveman*, I realized with a mingling of annoyance and amusement. We’d sure given poor Marisol an eyeful.

“Yes, Sir,” Laura said. “May I retrieve Master’s clothing?”

“Yes,” I said, pleased that she’d read my mind.



We ate a hearty lunch at Ernesto’s, an enchilada plate for her and a carnitas plate for me, washed down with two margaritas for each of us. Keeping this all under wraps seemed like it wouldn’t be long-lived, though. I groaned as Tom approached our table with his arm slung around the waist of a pretty brunette.

Goddammit, that treacherous asshole was someone I hoped never to see again, much less while I was out on a date with Laura. But I softened a bit. He wasn’t treacherous so much as weak. One way or another, I didn’t much like him before he dined me out, and certainly not since. He’d exhibited that he could not be trusted. It was that simple, and unavoidable.

“You got a minute, Keith?” he asked.

“No, not really,” I said, still annoyed with him.

“Please, only a minute, then Sheila and I will go eat elsewhere,” he said.

“Sure,” I grumbled. “Please pardon us, Laura.”

“Of course,” Laura said. “Won’t you please be seated while the men go do ... whatever it is men do, Sheila?”

“Thanks,” Sheila said, looking uncomfortable.

“Man to man, I’m sorry, Keith,” Tom said when we stepped outside. “I ... I got an offer from Johnsville EMS and told them today I’d accept. I picked up a snitch reputation when I let Lieutenant Samuels sweat me like he did, and Captain Briggs told me I’d be happier elsewhere. I’d already been looking for a better package, and Johnsville wants to send me straight into paramedic training, so I accepted and gave Captain Briggs my notice. I’ll be gone before you return. I fucked up with Samuels, and I just wanted to apologize.”

“Accepted,” I said. The truth was that I was nowhere close to forgiving him. But it made no sense to up the ante since he’d made himself a non-issue. Whatever political capital I had, which I’d planned to use to have him fired, could be held for another rainy day, thanks to Captain Briggs. We shook hands and went back inside.

“Sit with us,” Laura said to Tom. “It’s a big table and on me.” Tom looked uncertainly at me, and I gave a non-committal nod. “I didn’t know you two were seeing one another. Sheila is a tech in radiology, but seldom in the trauma center. I doubt you remember it, but she took some fascinating photos of your thick skull when you conked out the other day.”

She grinned and blinked a few times as I chuckled. But I seriously had no recollection of Sheila. Sometimes my focus was so great on my patients that I might not notice KISS playing a concert in the waiting room, though.

“I’m Keith,” I said, offering my hand.

“Pleased to meet you,” Sheila said.

“Sheila was asking me not to tell people at the hospital that she and Tom are dating,” Laura told me. “She’s worried about gossip and rumors.”

“Sheila’s right,” I said. “Look, it’s your business and not mine, so I won’t go blabbing. Just don’t go to smooching over a bleeding patient, is my advice.”

“Oh, Gawd,” Laura groaned, then chuckled as the waitress returned. They ordered their meals, and at Laura’s urging, margaritas. We didn’t talk

shop, all of us seeming to understand that we shouldn't gross out the other diners there. Tom and Sheila, oddly enough, hadn't met at the hospital, but at the local Y, at an art class they'd taken six months or so before.

"I like painting faces, portraits," Sheila said. "Tom is more about painting nature. We actually each have a painting going up for the auction to benefit Glen Hayes."

"Excellent," I said. Glen's dad was a sergeant in the sheriff's department. The little boy, four years old, was fighting ... I think the flyers, which were all over town, indicated ... non-Hodgkins lymphoma. The outlook was bleak, and the bills mounting, but there was a possibility he could be treated in some program that Texas Children's Hospital and MD Anderson were doing in Houston. But getting him there was the issue, hence the auction. All sorts of goodies were going on the block. I made a mental note to take Laura there and part with a few dollars on something I'd probably donate to Goodwill on my way home.

"How's your wound and head?" Tom asked.

"I've been hurt far worse," I told him. "Stupid that I'm off work for two weeks, but I'll milk it, and I've already gone fishing on their dime, so that's good."

"Catch a limit?" he asked.

"I never try to do that," I said. "I freeze a bit of it, but prefer it fresh, so I rarely take more than two or three. Truth is, if you go fishing to catch fish, you're missing the point, in my experience. I go just to get out on the water and relax. A bigmouth bass is an added bonus."

"I haven't wet a hook since high school," Tom said.

"I never fished but get a kick out of water skiing," Sheila chimed in.

The small-talk continued for an hour before Laura paid the check and we went our own ways. I drove us back to Laura's house and had her put her tee-shirt on, then drove us back to my house, where she shed the shirt as soon as my front door closed behind us. I had her crawl to the dungeon and told her to wash all the furniture, which was covered in exterior paint, and would keep her busy on humble scut work. She was done in two hours and did well, then gaped as I opened the door to the cage, which was equipped with a canvas cot, a thin blanket, a spool of Charmin, a big blue Lowe's bucket, and a flat of Ozarka water. She wept a bit as she crawled into the cage, then wept more as I locked her in.

“Spend this time thinking on the behavior I require of you,” I told her. “I think sometimes you’ll need this, time to meditate, reflect, and consider matters.” I turned out the lights, then went into the house, where I opened a drafting program on my computer, a hobby of mine, and did a rough of the upstairs of Laura’s house.

I know it wasn’t to-the-inch perfect, since I obviously didn’t have blueprints, but would do. In short, we could remove the hall door to the bedroom adjacent to Laura’s, and drywall it in, then put a hidden door between her bedroom closet and the next-door bedroom, then ta-daa, instant dungeon, just add kinky fuckery. From all she’d said, I was her decision-maker, her lord and master, but I’d only have her order this work done if it enthused her. But mastering her in a dungeon in her own home? God, it threw a thrill through me.

Around 6:00, I got hungry, so I fired up charcoal, and when it was ready, I threw on baking potatoes and, 45 minutes later, a pair of ribeye steaks, which cooked seven minutes on each side to a nice medium-rare, just how I liked them. Feeling a fresh burst of amused ornery, I cut her steak into bite-sized morsels, and unwrapped and smashed her potato with some cheese and sour cream, then skinned a cob of corn onto her plate. I set both our plates on my outdoor table, then got her from her cage. I had her crawl to the table, then lie on her belly. I cuffed her hands behind her back, then set her plate beside her face. She looked at me in wide-eyed astonishment as I set a bowl beside the plate and poured green Gatorade into it, then sat.

“Eat, slave, and drink,” I commanded.

CHAPTER 35



I wasn't completely sure what I'd thought of the cage. On the one hand, it was so fucking hot. I mean, seriously, he tossed me in there without a thought and walked away. There couldn't be a stronger message as to what I'd become. The first few minutes in that cage, my pussy throbbed with an unrelenting ache thinking about his dominance and control, marveling at the cavalier way he'd locked me inside. I'd wanted to touch myself, and get some relief. He'd kept me wanting from the shower, and with this added on, I was a pretty hot mess and I needed to be fucked.

His words returned to me though. What I was and was not allowed to do. I knew if I disobeyed his command, I wouldn't be sitting for a week. Which brought me to the next however many minutes, contemplating my place. Cages and confinement weren't my thing, at least that's what I'd thought when he locked me in.

But trussing me up and laying me on the ground? I would've been fine with that, until he put the plate and bowl in front of me, and barked at me like a dog.

Eat slave, and drink!

I rolled on my side and glanced up at him, feeling fire building in my body. I understood the cage. I even rationalized it in my head. There was a point to it, but this? This was degradation above and beyond anything remotely sexually hot.

"What the hell, Keith," I said, or tried to say. I think I got to *What the* before he snapped to his feet.

He yanked on the cuffs, securing my wrists behind my back, pulling me to my feet. I wobbled there, terrified by the fury in his eyes.

“What did you say?”

The low, ominous tone of his voice lifted the hairs on my nape. All the blood in my body drained to my feet, leaving me shaky, terrified, and unsteady. My disrespect for him had been so profound, even I didn’t believe what I’d said.

“I’m sorry,” I begged. “Please, Master, I didn’t mean...”

He spun me around and pulled my wrists high up my back until I screeched with the pain. Then he swatted my ass, hard. These weren’t the taps of a master exploring the limits of his slave. These were brutal and meant to hurt.

“I see we have a misunderstanding.”

“No Master,” I began.

“Are you deaf?” he said, punctuating his words with an attention getting strike. “I told you to remain silent. How deep do you want to dig this hole?” He dragged me back to the dungeon, kicking open the door. “And here we were progressing so nicely.”

My eyes brimmed with tears. I wanted to apologize for my transgression. I wanted to reverse time. Maybe then, I would’ve thought before opening my trap. It was too late for apologies, because he pulled me to the spanking bench where he bent me over.

“Spread your legs,” he commanded. “And don’t you dare say a word.”

He bent down and secured my ankles to cuffs attached to the frame. Then he came around and palmed the back of my neck, pushing my face into the leather of the bench.

I wept with fear and with disgrace, but I didn’t beg for his leniency. First off, I wouldn’t receive it. Secondly, I’d done this to myself. And thirdly, shit, I’d really fucked things up.

He left me there, my torso unrestrained. I could have stood, if I’d been completely stupid, but I understood his silent command. I wasn’t to speak and I wasn’t allowed to move. My legs shook, the tremors so strong, my ass shook too.

My mouth had gone dry, and I licked at my lips. Over at the wall, by the racks of implements, he searched for something. I squeezed my eyes shut, because I didn’t know what he had planned, except he passed up the

flogger, the quirt, and the tawse. He paused to consider the bullwhip, but moved on.

I was under no illusions I was to be punished. If he bypassed the whip, what the hell was he looking for? When he returned to me, I noticed the tremors in his hands. His fury soaked the air, and his silence couldn't be more deafening. I wanted to apologize. I needed to grovel and beg for forgiveness. What the hell had I been thinking?

He held a thick strap of leather and slid it beneath my throat. I glanced up at him, but he gave a harsh shake of his head. He was beyond speaking to me. It was a thick leather collar that he secured around my neck, with rings attached to it. He bent down at the front of the spanking bench and the rattle of a chain sounded too loud in my ears. He pulled this up, then clipped it to one of the rings on the collar. Then he tightened the chain, effectively immobilizing me on the bench.

My tears broke into full-bodied sobs, because I knew this would hurt. I also knew I'd caused this. Perhaps, I hadn't really understood my place? Because, what else could have been going through my head? This was the man who'd spanked me, whipped me, he'd flogged and fucked me more ways than I could count. I'd lowered myself to a position beneath him, willingly crawling and prostrating myself before him. What had it been about a damn plate and bowl that had set me off?

I didn't know if he would ever forgive me, but I was certain I would hold my failure for the rest of my life.

"Try to move." He barked the sharp command.

I wiggled my feet and tried to stand, but I was trussed up tight. With my arms cuffed behind my back, I felt off-balanced. I would've much rather had them cuffed under and around the bench.

He tapped something along the crease of my ass, something long, hard, and skinny. *Oh no!*

"This is going to hurt. It's going to make you howl."

I whimpered on the bench, needing to beg for mercy, even while knowing I could not.

He bent over me, his breath whispering across my cheeks. "I'm not playing at this, Dr. Laura Peters. You're my fucking slave. That means you do as I say, when I say, and how I say it. If I tell you to eat at my feet, you'll fucking eat at my feet. Do you understand?"

I nodded, unsure whether I was permitted to speak.

“Tell me, Dr. Peters, do you understand your place?”

Again I nodded.

“Where’s your place?” he demanded.

This required a response, and my insides shivered with my reply.

“Wherever Master says.”

“And what is your name?”

“Whatever Master says.”

“That’s right. The high and mighty Dr. Laura Peters and her lippy mouth has no place here.”

My heart caved in, flooded with my shame, and I braced for what would come next.

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CHAPTER 36



I'd selected a cane for this punishment, the so-called Victorian weapon of terror, an item used for punishment throughout much of the world. Those in the BDSM world were long-familiar with the cane, a thin rod of rattan, dense and flexible. As red and sore as her ass and thighs were, I was certain the cane would teach her a harsh lesson. I'd put food down for her as I had to ensure she knew her place. I guess getting to sit at a table and socialize with Tom and Sheila had brought on another uprising of her arrogance. But I didn't think we were anywhere close to breaking Laura. I knew there were liable to be many such sessions over the months to come.

I really wished we had a good two or three months together, a boot camp to utterly immerse her in enslavement. Instead, she had a career and so did I, and I knew we were in for a good year of such sessions before she finally broke into her place, the slave every instinct I had told me she was.

"What I have is the cane," I informed her. "You can't DIY that, really. But do you know what the cane is, Dr. Peters?"

"Please, Master, even if you scar me ... please ... Laura, slut, bitch, slave ... but not Dr. Peters," she begged.

"Such honorifics are earned, Dr. High and Mighty, MD and a pot of alphabet soup," I sneered.

The truth was, I wasn't angry. She was like a wild horse that needed training, and, while I couldn't predict every time she'd try to buck and thrash, I expected that she would. Indeed, I'd have been suspicious if she didn't, if the truth be known.

“Is this understood, Doctor?” I put emphasis on “Doctor” to make my point.

“It ... yes, understood, Master,” Laura said, freshly weeping without a lash being laid into her.

“I haven’t lashed you yet,” I said. “Do you think the tears will buy lenience?”

“No, Master,” she said. “I ... I deserve whatever you’re about to do. It’s ... Jesus, it’s self-loathing. I’ve failed, and that’s bitter. The last time I cried at failure, I was a silly intern and blew a diagnosis.”

“I see,” I said, and I did. God knows when I first completed corpsman training, more intensive than paramedic training Stateside, I was a bumbling fucktard who couldn’t seem to do anything right for the first four months. So I understood the self-loathing, because I’d walked more than a mile in those shoes. It made a better corpsman and paramedic of me. It made a better physician of her. And it would make her into the best slave that ever shit between two shoes or she’d die trying, I knew. But as much as I didn’t want to do this to her, to shatter her like some Russian shot glass hurled into a blazing fireplace in Kiev, it was necessary, and I knew beneficial to her, and to our relationship.

“Have you been caned before, Dr. Peters?”

“No Master. My father took his belt to me when I was a kid, and four times he used a switch on me, until I started to develop. After that, I just got grounded or my computer taken away. But until you took me in-hand, no. I ... the last time I got corporal punishment was when I was in fifth grade. The principal paddled me for ... I can’t even remember what I did now ... and called my parents, and my dad went over my ass with his belt that night, on my bared ass. But that was ... other than the stuff I did DIY. But I got spanked then as a wayward girl. And my DIY stuff versus what we’re doing ... that’s like comparing Sprite to Everclear. And now you have me. I’m ... I guess I’m the potter’s clay, Sir.”

“Remember me telling you that to rule you, to own you, I had to learn you?” I asked. “You just taught me a bit of Laura 101.”

“Yes, Master,” she said.

“But I don’t know how well you take the cane,” I went on. “My objective is to break you of your bad behavior, but not to have you hunkered in a corner, hollow-eyed and blowing spit-bubbles, utterly destroyed.”

“Permission to speak, Sir?” Laura asked.

“Go ahead,” I told her.

“Sir, write up a document of enslavement, a title of ownership, whatever you want in it, and I’ll sign it and even have it notarized,” she said. “I know it doesn’t really have legal standing, but it can be waved under my nose when I rebel, to remind me of my honor and promises made, Sir. We’re both working on this, on improving not only my behavior, but improving me into someone we’ll both admire, someone worthy of your ownership. You need no permission to lash me, Master. Please ... just own me and give me what we know I deserve. I appreciate your caution, but ... I’m made of flesh and not glass, right? I’ll learn and heal, Sir.”

“Fifty, then, and I’ll decide if more is indicated,” I decided on the spot.

“I deserve at least that, Sir,” Laura said.

“Tell me, why did I order you to eat as I did?” I asked.

“It doesn’t matter, Master,” she said. “That it was your order should have been enough. I hate myself for that and I guess you hate me too, and I deserve it.. But I suppose it was for humiliation, to teach me my place, a lesson I obviously have yet to learn. I ... I’m trying, Master, but I’ve told a hundred interns that trying is still failing.”

“A good answer,” I said. She ... it was like she’d swim into her arrogance, get scared, and flounder back to shallow waters of submission and safety.

Figuring we’d talked this to death, I laid the first lash of the cane into her ass, still colorful from the paddling. Laura shuddered, but seemed determined to hold her tongue. Maybe it was pride. Maybe she felt like I might be guilted into lenience. One way or another, I lashed again, upper arm glued to my side, using only my forearm, as I’d learned long ago, that the cane was a weapon of speed and not force. The lashing continued.

I showed her not one whit of mercy, not for my benefit, or hers, but *ours*. I’m a rightie, so the right side of her ass was a purple mess at the end of the caning, the left a bit less so, all the way to midpoint of her thighs. Three of these, overlaid on recent stripes from the quirt, opened, one leaking more blood than expected.

Throughout all fifty lashes, she struggled, but never once gave an outcry or begged for my mercy. Her ass was mostly a purple mess on the right, and not much better on the left. She’d hurt for a while from this. Her upper

thighs were no better. I irrigated the wounds with sterile saline, then dried them, put on ointment, and deftly taped gauze over them.

Even if she hadn't endured enough, I decided I had. I undid her bonds and helped her off the bench. "Our supper is cold, but will you eat now?" I asked.

"I . yes, I ... I ... will eat as ordered, Sir," she said in a faint voice. "Master ... please ... I know I need to be humbled, but I'm not a dog." I looked at her, then nodded. Sometimes what seems a good idea in my head isn't so much a good idea in my hands. I had wanted to break her down some but not shatter her, and for whatever her reasons, she found such abasement harmful, and I wasn't here to harm Laura. I reached down, picked up her plate, and fed her with her fork while she knelt up with my assistance. I went inside and fetched a straw, then let her drink Gatorade from a bottle.

"Good girl," I said.

I uncuffed her, then told her to take the dishes to the kitchen. She obeyed, walking with stiffness and soreness, but without protest. In the kitchen, she rinsed the dishes and put them in the dishwasher, before kneeling at my feet.

"May I wash my face, Sir?" she asked. I'm afraid we didn't coordinate as well as hoped, and she picked up stains on cheek and chin, as well as a dab of sour cream on her nose when she had an inopportune hiccup. "Sir, thank you for according my request. In a way, being hand-fed like that was sexy."

"You may not wash your face," I decided. "Meet me in the parlor."



“I want you to look at this,” I said a few minutes later in the parlor, and I showed her my idea, while her eyes widened.

“Oh, my God, I love it, having a dungeon and being owned in my own house,” Laura said. “With Master’s permission, I can take this to a contractor and begin work immediately. We could soundproof it and have it walled in steel, so the contractor thinks it’s a safe room. I’m not so high-profile that I’m paranoid, but ... circumspection, you know?”

“So ordered,” I said, sensing Laura’s enthusiasm. I made a mental note that we would need to stock and furnish her dungeon similarly to mine. But then my mind took a turn and I found myself confronting an array of worries about where this was going, and I knew we’d need to talk about that too. I filed that all aside, too needful of Laura.

The lube from earlier was still in the back pocket of my shorts, and damn if I wasn’t horny as an old goat all over again. I shed my shorts then put her face-down-ass-up on the floor. I lubricated my cock as she wept while she spread her swollen ass-cheeks again for my access.

I thrust into her tight ass while she groaned, then fucked her hard, hips slapping into her ass again as she shivered at each thrust, my hands grasping her as I impaled her over and over again, pumping it to her until I exploded once more deeply into her. This time, I sensed she was aroused, but fought back her climax. I was pleased. I liked denying her climax until she earned it.

I stood, winded from more marathon sex, wryly looking forward to the week after this, when I could grow fresh skin down south. I smirked, realizing this was the first time ever that my cock had been actually sore from fucking. I desired Laura that much.

“Follow me,” I said as I stood. Laura followed on all fours, nipples on the floor, then on the ground in the back yard. “You’re to sleep out here tonight, slave, in the cage. You’ll maybe be let inside my house in the morning.”

Her eyes flashed at me, but she bit back whatever acid retort was loaded into her muzzle and ready to fire. “Thanks, Master,” she said instead, deflating from whatever it was she actually wanted to say.

I went inside and fetched two bottles of Gatorade, then took them to the dungeon, pointing her into the cage. She crawled in, seeming humbled again, but I knew we were a long way from having her fully enslaved and non-rebellious.

Another fiery flash from Laura’s eyes was followed by a humbled nod, and I locked her in the cage. I woke around 3:00 in the morning to the sounds of a violent thunderstorm, peed, then returned to bed. It briefly flitted across my mind to let my slave indoors, but she was warm and dry in the cage. With a spot of luck, she was afraid of thunder and lightning, but the dungeon was well-built and I’d paid a ton of money two years before to have it re-roofed along with the house, so she’d stay dry as a bone. I drifted

back to sleep, knowing how loud rain was in that dungeon. It was a sound that lulled me. Her? I guess I'd learn that when I woke her to cook breakfast, hoping this time wouldn't be another burnt offering.

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CHAPTER 37



It's amazing what can happen in a short span of time. I found myself locked again in the cage, an unusual place for anyone to find respite. It both angered and soothed me. Odd, how I could feel such conflicting emotions. To say my thoughts drifted far and wide would be an understatement during that long night.

My anger was a beast I needed to analyze and understand. Did I like being tossed in a cage? Not at all. I hated the objectification. Did it turn me on? Most definitely. I rocked and squeezed my legs together, hornier than I'd ever been in my life.

It may have been the result of Keith denying me those orgasms. Both the almost one in the shower by his hand, and the other last night with his cock in my ass. I hated to say it, but for an ass virgin, I was quickly enjoying him taking me there. It hurt, and stung a bit, but I liked it. First off, it felt good, different good, but damn, it felt great. Second, the position turned me on. There was no other position more dominant than a man rutting from behind.

This cage kept me separated from Keith. That gave me anxiety, because I was coming to understand how much I needed him in my life, overseeing me as the case may be. To be physically separated from him felt like a knife slicing open my chest. I craved him on a level I didn't understand. Not to mention, being separated meant he couldn't slake this incessant hunger I had for him. I loved his hands, his mouth, and that ever-loving cock. His hands on me, his mouth kissing, licking, and sucking, and his cock sliding

in and out with that agonizing slide, all of it made me hunger for the rapture he brought to my mind.

In this too, my mind went for a spin. The pleasure he dispensed chased away the agony of my day. The incessant demands for life and death decisions which had to be on point or someone died, that pressure to perform with perfection built up an explosive level of stress inside. When he drowned in the ecstasy of the orgasms he gave me... Well, all that stress simply melted away. Pain served the same purpose, although in a different way.

That was the funny thing, or weird thing, the thing I didn't understand. Keith didn't withhold pleasure. Hell, we'd hit double digits with my orgasms in the span of a day. He'd cum only a handful of times. I really think he enjoyed watching the pleasure he could draw from my body. It was a control thing, something I understood but was only really beginning to feel in my heart. He withheld to ensure our roles remained true. The giver and the receiver, and by his grace, and his alone, I received pleasure. I think that was the message.

He was becoming my center.

Which brought me back to why I hated this cage. I was a bright, intelligent woman with a complicated, but successful life. To be caged like this? I couldn't help but think of it as wrong. So why did it soothe me? I didn't have that answer, except that in an odd way, I felt safe.

My need for pain didn't confuse me nearly as much as how I could find confinement a nearly blissful escape. In the pain department, Keith didn't disappoint. He had a strong arm and no problem using it. Sometimes, I wished I could crawl inside his head to understand what drove him. Why did he need to hurt me? Did it excite him? Get him off? Or did he merely do it for me? I hoped it was some combination, but didn't really know.

For me, pain worked the same as pleasure. Sometimes, I simply needed the world to *shut-the-fuck-up*. There was more. I needed the fog of pain to obliterate the racing thoughts in my head. Sometimes, my thoughts spun so fast, there was no way for me to reach pleasure without pain. I needed to feel that sharp edge where pain obliterated me. Most definitely, I was a pain slut. Pain to achieve pleasure.

But I needed discipline too. I'd tried for years to accomplish that with self-flagellation, but it only took off the harsh edges of all the

recriminations, self doubt, and general frustration and irritation a single day brought.

I sat through the night, my mind and heart wrestling with each other about what everything might mean, and that's when I realized the cage soothed me too. At first, I'd sat angry and annoyed. Then the rain began, pounding on the roof. It sounded like elephants dancing on the ceiling, and I wondered if it might be hail. There was no way for me to know. There were no windows to see outside.

Something else had happened too, and I wasn't sure how I felt about it. I'd mouthed off to him. Nothing like the previous missteps. I'd disrespected him, dropped his title, and cursed at him. I think I'd found a limit I didn't know I had. I'd wanted to be his everything, to give all of myself up to him, but he'd surprised me with that plate of food. I'd reacted on some gut level, and it hadn't been something I could control.

He'd done things over the past couple days I didn't like. Each time, I'd been able to tackle my resistance and embrace my submission to please him. I hadn't been able to control that request, finding a limit where'd I'd hoped to have none.

While I'd paid dearly for the transgression, Keith had listened. My punishment hadn't been withheld. I received that in spades, but I think he understood.

I curled my legs to my chest, then whimpered against the pain. Most of the evening, and through the night, I rested on my belly because of the pain. There were still welts over my legs, and I was certain stripes of purple and blue would remain there for days. It was a good reminder for me. The price I paid for disobedience would be steep with him.

As I sat, absorbed in my thoughts, I yawned against incredible fatigue not having slept a wink during the long, lonely night. The lock sounded and I glanced up, watching a sliver of light spread against the floor. I moved into position, kneeling in place, and placed my forehead on the backs of my hands.

"Good morning, slave," he said. "How was your night?" He crossed the distance to the far corner of the dungeon where I knelt in the cage, and ran his fingers across the bars.

Without looking up, I gave my answer. "Lonely."

"Lonely?"

"Yes, Master, and enlightening."

“How is that?”

“I spent the night thinking about us.”

“And...” The barest hint of hesitation fluttered in his voice, almost as if he feared what I might say.

“Permission to sit, Master.”

“Granted.”

I leaned back on my heels, and placed my hands on my knees. “I want to thank you for last night.”

“Can you be more specific?” He sounded a bit relieved.

“First, for the discipline. What I said...it was wrong, and disrespectful. I’m thankful for a master who’s not afraid to punish me when deserved. But there’s more.”

“I sense that.”

“Second, thank you for allowing me to voice my concerns. I’d wished for there to be no limits between us, and stumbled with that one. I’d like to say I can move past it, but I’m not sure I can. It made me feel like you didn’t care about me.”

He crouched before me, still on the other side of that cage. I desperately needed to feel the reassurance of his touch. I needed to know he could still love me, even if I couldn’t...well, eat like a dog. Even now, that thought made me shudder.

“Go on,” he encouraged.

“Thank you for putting me in the cage. In truth, I don’t like what it represents. I hate being separated from you, but I understand it’s purpose.”

“I’m well aware of that. The cage remains.”

“Yes, Master,” I said with regret. What more could I say? I glanced at the bars and faced an uncomfortable truth. He knew what I needed, perhaps more than I did myself. I would have to trust him, and perhaps pray he reserved the cage for special moments.

“Did you sleep?” he asked.

“No, Master. The rain kept me up, and the thunder shook the roof.”

“That’s unfortunate for you,” he said. “We have a long day.”

My gaze cut to the spanking bench and the Saint Andrew’s cross, fondly nicknamed St. Andy. I didn’t think my body could withstand much more. What I needed was my Master’s touch, and for him to soothe the ache between my legs. He’d never said I couldn’t ask for what I needed, and I certainly wasn’t above begging.

“May I ask another question, Master?”

“Yes, my beautiful slave?”

“I need you. Your mouth, your fingers, or even your cock, but I ache to be filled by you. Please, I’m begging, how much longer must I stay in this cage? I’ve thought of a lot of things through the night, but I’m dying to be used. And before you ask, I didn’t touch myself. I know that belongs to you, but please, Master, I’m begging you. Please fuck me and allow me to cum.”

He unlocked the cage and opened the door. “Such privilege is something which must be earned. You’re master is hungry, slave. I suggest you make my breakfast. Perhaps, if you don’t burn the shit out of it, I might just give you that reward.”

I whimpered at his denial, but accepted his right to direct me, even when ignoring my needs. With my clit throbbing, and needing his touch, I headed to make his meal.

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CHAPTER 38



She blushed, and I permitted her to march to the kitchen, surreptitiously examining her. I decided she'd had enough of the lash, unless she seriously misbehaved, and hoped she wouldn't. I wondered when she'd get the biggest point of being caged. It wasn't for the kink. No, that wasn't entirely true, but kink wasn't the main thrust of it, and while the solitude ideally made her ponder, neither was that the main objective. No, it was as simple as grounding a kid.

Laura hadn't said she loved me. I think she did, but wasn't ready to put a voice to it. I figured the punishment was in the separation from me, that knowledge she had disappointed me so much that I didn't want her in my presence. Maybe I'd need to tell her Dick-and-Jane, I considered. She was highly intelligent, even brilliant, but a by-product of that brilliance, in my experience, was the tendency to overthink things while overlooking the obvious. I didn't hold it against her. She's a physician, often hearing the thundering hooves and thinking of zebras.

Breakfast was simple but good, no burnt offerings, and I had her sit on a hard chair and eat.

"We need to go to your house," I said after she rinsed the dishes. "I want you to call the contractor about our plans, and set that appointment, and we should inventory your toy chest and see what needs purchased, then maybe shopping and lunch. After that, why not go fishing?"

"Fishing?" She parroted, in obvious surprise.

"Laura, I'm your master, owner, lawgiver, and all the rest," I pointed out. "But I'm still your boyfriend. I want you to face that wall, lace your

fingers behind your head.”

“Yes, Sir,” she said dubiously. I took a photo with my phone.

“Come sit at the table again,” I ordered her, then showed her the photograph.

“Oh, God,” she moaned. “That’s ... I know this sounds narcissistic, but I look so sexy in all these marks, Master. Jesus, please ... let me cum, Sir.”

“Yes,” I said, seeing the flush in her throat and erect nipples. “Masturbate for me, slave. Show me my nasty girl.”

“God, yes,” she moaned, her fingers trailing teasingly down the flat planes of her belly before getting to her pussy, then working, teasing herself, tormenting herself, while my cock, sore from all the recent action, nevertheless twitched to life. Laura began gasping and moaning. “Please ... God, please!” she cried out as she teetered on the brink.

“Cum!” I barked, and she screeched, doubled over and sliding from her chair to moan, curled in a quivering ball on the floor.

“Jeezus ... omigod,” Laura moaned.. “What you do to me, Master.”

“That’s one of the sexiest things I’ve ever seen,” I said. To be honest, it really was, and an ego stroke that I had this impact on this beautiful woman who could take her pick of any man she wanted, but landed on little old me.

“So are you, Master,” Laura said.

“Go and shower, then meet me in the parlor,” I told her.

“Yes, Sir,” she said.

I helped her to her feet, knowing after yesterday, she was bound to be feeling rather grimy. It was part of her punishment too, in truth. Doctors tend to be neatniks.

“Thank you,” she said. “I’m starting to smell myself and that’s not all too ladylike.”

I gave her ass a playful smack. She yelped and giggled, then hurried off to the shower.



“I need to ask you some questions,” I said when she returned downstairs, looking refreshed, and honestly, smelling far better. “No, it’s

not 'we need to talk,' so stifle that shit now, please."

"Yes, Sir," she said.

"Laura, you come from the salon and I'm from the saloon," I said. "I'm good with that, from my standpoint. I'm dating upward, right? But how is this going to be with your friends, your peers, when it comes out that we're together? You know how elitist and hoity-toity many physicians can be. You probably make a good five times more money than I do, perhaps ten and maybe even more. How are you going to be when they sneer that you're slumming? Because you and I both know that's what's going to happen. I just worry that the peer pressure is going to make you think you need to push me away to please your peers or keep from damaging your career."

"God damn you," she snapped. "And I won't be punished for this, you lout! Tell you what ... pick any ten friends of mine, any ten coworkers, give the command, and I'll blow you in front of all of them and tell them to kiss my ass if they don't like it."

Her anger fell back a bit. "The truth is, I don't have friends. I have associates. Care to guess how often I've entertained guests in that fucking palace of mine? How many dinners I've put on? The answer is zero. Z. E. R. O. Keith ... I'm not ..."

She breathed a sigh of frustration, then continued. "Until you, I never really connected with people, never knew how to sit and chew the breeze or shoot the fat or whatever the fuck people call it. And, I'm telling the blunt truth here, I wouldn't care if you were a minimum wage janitor somewhere, I love you and I don't give a flying fuck what others might think."

I arched a brow, not convinced, but she was hell bent on continuing, so I let her.

"And don't worry about my career. This sounds arrogant but it's no less true: that hospital is fucking lucky to have me, and they damn well know it, and anyone above the level of a fucking aide there knows it too. God, I can't believe my status intimidates you. Jesus Christ, I'm not slumming, damn your hide. I'm surrendering myself, and reveling in every second of it. Jesus fuck, I'm naked as a jaybird here, marked by ... I don't know how many lashes and spanks ... you've hurt me, humiliated me, fucked every hole I have, and I keep coming back for more. Please take your own insecurity and stuff it up your ass, Kei ... Master, like I've stuffed so much of mine."

She groped my cock, still hard in my shorts. “And please stuff this up my ass, and often.”

“I love you so much,” I told her. And that was true. “I’m not the arrogant ass you seem to think I am, and I have worries too. Sorry.” I took a breath. “Uniform. Truck.”

“Yes, Master.”

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CHAPTER 39



There was no question as to what my uniform might be. I ran to his bedroom and found one of his tee-shirts. Naked underneath, I loved how it clung to my form. The black fabric was thin enough that my nipples peeked through, but thick enough not to reveal my nakedness underneath.

I returned to him and presented myself for inspection. He said nothing, only slapped my ass. “Get,” he barked. “We’ve got errands to run and fishing to do.”

“Yes, Master,” I said.

I raced out to his truck, the one which reminded me of my daddy, and gave a deep sigh. When I’d had to sell daddy’s truck, a little piece of me died inside. I’d missed it for so many years. In many ways, this drew me to Keith. Not in a daddy way, that wasn’t my thing, far from it. But him driving a truck like my dad’s? I don’t know. It made me feel like I could really trust him. I’d handed Keith my body and soul, but sometime soon I’d be giving him the keys to my life.

I needed that, because I struggled in many ways to give Keith my full surrender. Like the twinkle in his eyes, this truck was something which humanized him. He wasn’t just the master who held the whip, but the man who loved me enough to use it.

Our drive to my house was quiet and uneventful. I think we were both captive to our thoughts. He’d brought the plans with him, and we spread them out on the kitchen table. I, of course, had ditched the tee-shirt at the door. Keith went around closing all the curtains. I adored that about him. What he did to me was for him alone, and I reveled in every gentle caress,

every adoring kiss, every loving word whispered in my ear. As harsh as he could be, Keith was a wonderful romantic. I had the best of both worlds, a loving boyfriend, and an unrelenting master.

“I’ve got some plans stashed in the kitchen,” I told Keith. “When I first moved in, I’d wanted to turn that empty bedroom into a dance studio. I scratched that when I decided to fix up the basement instead. I didn’t know what to do with that room, and tossed around the idea of turning it into a safe-room, even took a few bids.”

“Are you afraid of living alone? You live in a nice neighborhood. I can’t imagine crime is an issue.”

“It’s not, but I don’t like the creaking of the house at night.”

“Why didn’t you ever build it out?”

“Work, I suppose. I got busy. But, I have the list of contractors. I’m sure we could call them and have them at least build out the safe-room. It wouldn’t take much to soundproof it from there, and build out your dungeon.”

“For a slave who will spend many hours of agony in that room, you sound a bit eager.”

He saw right through me. “I hope that’s okay?”

“Oh, fine and dandy by me.”

I called a few of the contractors and scheduled appointments for them to come look at Keith’s plans. He took the time to explore my home. When I finished, he took my hand and led me upstairs, no crawling today. He seemed to reserve that for what I was learning to recognize as heavier, deeper scenes. Times like now, he was sweet and gentle, loving even.

That all changed when we got upstairs. When his belt came off, I went to my knees. There I took him in my mouth, while he heated my back with his belt. Compared to what I’d endured before, these were simple love taps, but I still felt his strength, his control, and his unwavering dominance.

He flipped me to my back and tortured me with his tongue, until my juices dripped down his chin. I came hard and with a warbling scream, but he had only begun. Up against the wall, I came on his fingers. Then I rode his cock, tits bouncing while he grinned up at me. Right when I was about to cum, he pulled out, making me scream with the frustration of another aborted orgasm. While I bit my tongue, he flipped me back to hands and knees.

“Who owns you?” he growled, as he slid inside my ass.

I hissed against the burn, sensitive from the last several times he'd used me there.

"I belong to you," I screamed, as another orgasm threatened to drown me in pleasure, but I held back my release, denied until I had his permission.

"God, you're so fucking tight," he said as he plunged into me.

As he thrust his hips, I fell forward, my arms collapsing beneath me. "Please," I begged, "I need to cum."

I rocked back against him, praying he gave his consent, because I was about to explode. I didn't want to be punished for disobeying one of his rules, but I didn't think I could hold this one back. My need to please him overrode all thought, even if my body didn't want to agree. I rode the edge of my impending release, my cries escalating as I begged.

"Cum, you needy bitch," he said.

My world exploded into a million bits, all thought in my head disintegrating as he plowed into me chasing his release. With a grunt he emptied his seed into me, marking me yet again as his. He slapped my ass, and pulled out.

"I can't seem to get enough of you, slave."

I looked up at him through the curtain of my hair. "May I ask a question, Master?"

"Yes."

"What is the most times you've ever...well," My cheeks heated. How I could blush in front of him amazed me, especially after everything he'd done to me. But, I was honestly curious. "What's the most times you've ever cum in a day?"

"Well," he said in his thick drawl. "Remember the cobwebs? I don't think I've ever counted, and to be honest, I think my pecker is feeling a bit raw."

"Master! Can't we please call it something else?"

"It?" He pointed to his softening cock. "You mean this?"

I rolled my eyes. "Yes! Can't we call it Rocky the Rooster. Or Master Magnum? Or..."

"How about you let me name my cock? Master's prerogative."

"Of course, as Master wishes, but I'm the one who gets to suck it." I mouthed *Rocky the Rooster* in full sight of Keith.

He grabbed me by my ankles and gave me ten fast swats. I kicked and screamed, but wound up giggling when he dug his fingers into my ribs. He tortured me mercilessly, until I screamed Uncle and begged, promising anything if he would stop.

“See, this is what you have yet to learn,” he said. “There’s no promise to give. You no longer have the choice to say no.”

“Oh, God,” I moaned, pressing my thighs tight against a throb of pleasure. “That’s so hot. It turns me on.”

His fingers slipped inside my pussy, dragging against the walls. “Your surrender turns me on, now ride my fingers, little slave. Show me how greedy you can be.”

I bucked my hips, while he finger-fucked me through another release, then lay on the floor completely spent and insanely satisfied.

He lay beside me, curling his large frame around my body, cocooning me within his strength. “Over there, I plan on placing an overhead rail. The perfect device for suspension.” He pointed to the other wall. “St. Andy’s twin will rest there. A bench over there.” He detailed his plans for the dungeon he would build, and I grew wet thinking about all the nasty things he would do to me inside this room.

“God,” he said, “I can smell you from here. Is this turning you on too?”

“I can’t help it,” I moaned. “You’re fulfilling my every fantasy, Master.”

He flipped me around and buried his face between my legs. I dug my fingers into his hair, moaning with pleasure, riding his face as he worked his jaw and tongue to drive me insane. As my body came down from another indescribable high, he pointed to the corner of the room.

“And over there,” he said, “I plan to put a device of the most exquisite torture.”

A fog of exhaustion filled my mind. “Yes Master?”

He laughed. “Your newest toy, a Sybian.”

“What is that?”

“Oh, something I intend to enjoy watching you ride.”

I had no idea what that might be, not that I cared. Rolling over, I raked my fingers through his hair. “You mentioned fishing, Master.”

“Indeed I did.”

“I think it might be wise if I dress in something more appropriate, if you would allow?”

“Of course,” he said. “Are you eager to go?”

“It’s been ages since I’ve fished,” I said with a smile. “I wonder who will catch more?”

“I sense a competitive streak in you. You might want to be careful with that.”

“Why? Is Master afraid his slave will out fish him?”

His brows drew down and his lips firmed into a thin line. “Be careful, slave. Even if you win, you lose.”

I couldn’t help but taunt him. “Even if I lose, I win.” As long as I was with him, I could never lose. We cleaned up and I put on some jeans, then tugged my *uniform* over my head. I loved wearing his clothes. His scent flooded my senses with nearly every breath.

We spent but a few hours in my home. He’d taken me, as was his right, but it felt different. He’d been nearly gentle with me, loving, maybe even reverent. I treasured him sharing that side with me. I needed his gentleness nearly as much as his steel.

“What’s going on in that head of yours?” he said, as we walked back out to his truck.

“Just feeling thankful, Master,” I said. “And I had a question, if I may?”

“I’m feeling incredibly generous. Ask away.”

“Well, what gets you hard? What drives you? I want to know how to be a better slave.”

CHAPTER 40



God, what she did to me. I felt suddenly half my years with Laura, that wiseass corpsman home on leave, visiting that half-forgotten stripper bar a lifetime ago.

“Laura, I want to say what drives me is you, and that’s true,” I told her. “You’re ... I hope I don’t have to reassure you about how hot and insanely sexy you are, even beautiful, and we ain’t even started talking about your dimples.”

Laura tittered and blushed at this as I serioused up.

“All of that appeals to me, honey. It’s all you. But your surrender draws and drives me, your devotion to me. You don’t ask ‘why’ but ‘how,’ and it ... you really haven’t denied me. You’ve maybe tried to talk it to death, and God knows you’ve bucked. But you’ve surrendered. You’ve accepted my mastery, even if you breathe a bit more fire than you ought. That excites me, that submission and obedience.”

“I ... Jesus, I can’t believe I’m saying this ... but I love you,” she said, looking at the hardwood floor.

“It would mean more if you said it looking in my eyes,” I suggested.

“God,” she said, then her eyes met mine, unwavering. “I love you, Master. There. I said it. I finally dropped all my defenses.” Her voice rose. “I love you!” She threw herself at me and kissed me with the same longing that I kissed her.

“Well, I find you mostly non-objectionable,” I returned, and she giggled at this.

“Lashes or not, you’re an ass,” she grinned.

I knew she respected me. This day, we were Keith and Laura, perhaps dom and sub, but not quite master and slave. No, we were lovers, boyfriend and girlfriend.

Her contractor couldn't come over for two days, and there was nothing to be done for our plans, so I rose, helped her to her feet, and we drove to my house, where we quickly hitched the boat trailer to my truck then drove off. Along the way, we stopped at Cortland Sporting Goods, where Laura got a fishing license and I bought bait and a rod-and-reel rig for her. We rode off to the lake and I got the boat off its trailer, where Laura deftly tied it off to the dock while I parked, showing a bit of her knowledge of rope, or maybe sutures. I boarded the boat, fired up the motor, and then we rode out onto the mostly abandoned lake to a spot I knew usually produced fish. To be fair, she caught six fish to my four, but one of hers was big enough to be a keeper and three of mine were big enough bass to keep.

I bent her over one of the pillar chairs on the bass boat, and gave her fifteen good spanks to her ass, since three of my keepers exceeded one of hers.

"But I caught more fish!" she objected.

"Catch-and-release don't count," I countered, laughing while she grinned.

After, I piloted the boat down an offshoot creek and pattered around a bend to a small beach. By small, I mean it was maybe fifty feet wide and extended about as far from shore, shaded by a thick wood of oaks and pines, mostly trees that were well-established before my father was born. It was a weekday, and I'd only seen two more boats on the lake. I'd parked the boat here a few times in the past to wander about. I even built a fire here a few times to grill my catch. I doubted there was another human being inside two miles of us, maybe more. In my several stops here, I'd never once seen anyone, and didn't see footprints on the tiny beach on my visits here.

We tromped into the woods and I found a willow tree, from which I cut a few switches with my knife, a survival knife I'd "lost" and didn't turn in when my deployment ended. The Marine captain winked at me as he marked it as lost in combat, after a chairborne warrior E-5 presented the paperwork to him, and that was the end of it. The knife had a saw-back on it, that went right through the switches, while Laura looked at me, wide-eyed and transfixed.

Without being ordered, she understood, and stripped down, then went face-down-ass-up for me. I stripped the leaves, which robbed the effectiveness of the switches, blocking them from cutting through the air, then examined my beautiful woman in the dappled light of the warm and beautiful day. I gave her ten lashes across her plump ass while she whimpered. But that was all I thought she could take, and I was too hard to keep lashing.

I shucked my clothes, went to my knees, and thrust my cock deep into her pussy as she let loose a hair-raising moan of desire. I plunged in and out of my Laura, hard and fast, fucking her for all I was worth. We came together, both of us making feral growls in the woods. We snuggled up a while at the base of a huge oak tree, then found a huge blackberry patch and half-filled my hat with berries, which we had along with a fish from the live well that we'd filleted. I built a fire easily enough from oak twigs for kindling, then sawed-off parts of a fallen branch, with a simple grill made of three steel posts with a grill atop them. It was simple stuff, but a magnificent lunch to devour. We ate half the berries we picked, then put the rest into a Ziploc bag, then pushed off the boat and puttered away.

"Master, I've been thinking, and today gave me more thoughts," Laura said. "One thing we doctors do is invest. Four years ago, I bought a section of land, 648 acres, at the suggestion of my accountant. It had been a ranch until the 1950s or 60s, when the owner died. His heirs held the place but didn't do anything with it. There's a simple house on it that was built around 1894, high ceilings, the whole schmeer, a Victorian loaded with potential. It needs one hell of a lot of work, but the house is set back a good quarter-mile from the road. The original idea was to sell it to a developer, or maybe develop it myself into a neighborhood. But ... a year after I bought it, an archaeology professor from the university tracked me down and got my permission to do a field trip there. They found a five-acre cemetery at the northeast corner of the property.. The newest grave was dated 1905. They believe it's a slave cemetery perhaps dating to 1830 or so. It made a bit of a splash in the local news, but my name was kept out of it. I didn't want to be associated with owning a slave cemetery, and now here I am, enslaved and taking delight in it. Life has its ironies, right?"

"I suppose so," I chuckled.

"I parceled off that land, had a stone wall built to bracket it off, twelve acres in all, then donated it to Holiness Church, a mostly black church a

couple or three miles away from the property,” she went on. “They worked six months on weeding, landscaping, beautifying the place. I bought an easement from there to the highway and had a road dozed. Upkeep is on them, and I got a good tax deduction. They’re planning to put a museum on the grounds as well, but want to add my name to it and have me at the ribbon-cutting ceremony. You told me doctors don’t believe in God, but I do, and once in a blue moon I attend Sunday services there. But that’s all beside the point, Master. I’d like us to go see it. It’s about twenty minutes from your house.”

“Then let’s drop off the boat and go,” I agreed, enthused. “What are your plans?”

“I was thinking, instead of altering my house, why not spend the money there, a dungeon getaway for us, where you can work me hard, whip me hard, keep me naked at all times, although I’d ask for footwear,” she said. “I can sell my house and we can live there, you the master of the plantation and me its slave.”

“Let’s go,” I repeated, loving the idea.



On the drive home, my phone rang and I answered.

“Keith, this is Captain Briggs. I know you’re on leave healing up, but get your ass to my office at 9:00 Monday morning. Samuels just resigned and you need to fill out the paperwork to take the lieutenant’s exam so I can promote your sorry ass.”

“Resigned?” I said, shocked.

“Between us girls, it wasn’t altogether voluntary,” Briggs said. “Put a point on it, I told that simpering shithead to get lost on his terms before I fired him on my terms. The only ones who qualify to take the exam are you, Lisa Johnson, and Mike Bennett. Lisa’s about to retire and told me she’s not interested, since she’s gone in four months anyway, and Bennett ... face facts, Keith, he’s dumb as dirt, a skilled medic, but not a leader. What I’m telling you, dummy, is that about all you need to do is put your name on the fucking test and you’re a lieutenant when you return. It’s a nice pay bump

and inflicts more sanity on your life. You've done your time in the trenches."

"Yes, Sir," I said, excited.

"You've been seen here and there in the company of a beautiful blonde, I hear," Briggs chuckled. "Did you hypnotize her or something? Have fun, son." He ended the call and I chuckled.

"Congratulations," Laura said. "He seems fond of you."

"Captain Briggs is one of the good guys, and ... yeah, we've liked each other from the get go," I agreed. "I guess he's become a surrogate father to me over the years. He's got a soft spot for grizzled old corpsmen."

"Grizzled, yeah, right," she said. "More like chiseled."



The property was out in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by forest in all directions. The house needed work, I could see instantly, at the very least, one hell of a lot of paint. Indoors, the house needed help, but I sensed it needed cosmetic help and probably not structural. The kitchen was huge, and I could see the propane tank behind the house, through the window. The parlor and all four upstairs bedrooms had fireplaces in the unfurnished house. It wasn't as big as Laura's palace, but bigger than my simple house. A barn was out back that looked in decent shape.

"Jesus, I love this," I said.

"Follow me," she told me, and we walked down a winding path to a clearing, in the center of which was a stout post, cedar, and I could see we had the same thought. A whipping post awaited my wayward slave.

"Yeah," I said.

"It's not particularly more of a drive for me," Laura said. "I don't think for you either, Master. Do you want to do this?"

"Yes," I said.

"I'll call an engineer to ensure the house is stable," she said. "I'll get people started on working on the barn, fresh paint, a new roof. Your dungeon and my prison when I've misbehaved. Thinking on it, your jail ... do you put me in there primarily to take me away from you?"

I nodded.

She gaped a moment. “Holy shit, I understand it now. I love you, Master. There, I said it, so ninny ninny boo boo. I love you, and that’s the third time that pays for all, right?” She grinned and stuck her tongue out at me, and in a moment, her tongue was dancing with mine in a passionate kiss.

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CHAPTER 41



We had a great time exploring that parcel of land. There were a few year-round creeks crossing the property. Keith's eyes brimmed with excitement as he checked out potential fishing spots. The property had a fair sized stock pond on it. I thought it was a lake. Keith informed me of the differences between stock ponds and lakes. He asked if it was stocked, but I had no clue. I think he was making a list of things to do, and I loved seeing his excitement grow.

“If there ain't fish in it, we can bring 'em from the lake, a few bass, catfish, bluegills,” he said thoughtfully. “I like it, a fish dinner a couple hundred yards from the back porch.” Just then, a large bass leapt from the water in a graceful arc, catching a dragonfly, and Keith laughed in sheer delight. “It seems that won't be necessary, huh?”

Meanwhile, I plotted my doom. Meaning, I had him drop me back off at the house, while he went exploring in his truck. While he was off, I returned to the clearing with the pole. Trailing my hand across the wood, I imagined all the fun we would have here. Keith and I seemed so incredibly in sync. He whipped me for his pleasure as well as mine, but he also dispensed heavy discipline. There was more going on between us than two people enjoying kink. We were defining our roles.

It wasn't enough for me to surrender to him. I needed him to truly take the reins. He'd done that in spades, and my love deepened with every passing day. In my limited interactions with men on the romantic front, I'd decided most were pussies, too afraid to take what they wanted. Keith had no problem with that. I think he'd been born to rule.

A quick trip to the barn had my imagination overflowing. There was a part of me that wanted to plan it with him, but another, quieter part, felt I shouldn't be involved. The dungeon would belong to him. His realm. His rule.

He'd seemed excited about the plans for my house, but those had been shelved after I showed him this property. I would use the same contractors, but ask them to come out here instead of my house. We seemed to be moving away from separate residences, joining our lives together. I liked that. I didn't want a His and Hers. Ours sounded quite nice, although there was a long road to truly unifying our lives. In the end, it would all be his. As the slave, I would own nothing of it.

It scared me a little, to be honest, because I would have no respite from his control. Every moment of my life would be spent beneath his thumb. Of course, there would be work. The realities of life demanded no change there. I had loans to repay. I think he was better set in life than me. He'd mentioned his home was debt free and, if I remembered, he'd said something about an inheritance. Funny how he'd been worried about the disparity of our jobs. It seemed he'd done much better in his than I had in mine.

Of course, I spent more than I should, and saved less than was wise.

Moving to the property meant I'd lose my dance studio. I needed to speak with him about that. Dance was my escape from work as much as anything else. Hopefully, he enjoyed my dancing. The house on the property needed a lot of work. Unlike the dungeon, I had a vision for this place. A wide-open kitchen flowing into the greatroom. We'd only need one bedroom, something large for a massive, and sturdy, four-poster bed. I'd seen pictures of bondage beds online. Never had I considered buying one, but I think it would be easy to talk Keith into one. He seemed to enjoy restraining me while I slept.

My insides fluttered with all my plans for our future, and I twirled around the place, feeling at peace. The rumble of his truck pulled me from my reverie. I went out to greet him, eager to hear what he thought.

He rolled down the passenger side window of his truck. "You hungry? Or do you want to stay and look around some more?"

My stomach surprised me by rumbling its need. "Whatever you please, Master," I said, "but since you've asked, I'm a bit hungry."

"Then hop on in."

He took me to a steakhouse where we devoured our meals, then we headed back to his house. I stripped upon entering, my nakedness feeling more normal than ever before. We didn't make it far before he had me on my knees performing a little worship of the man I loved and the master I served. He fucked my face with a ruthless possession, then emptied his load down my throat. After that, he headed to the living room, where he flipped on the television and sank into the couch. I crawled to him, and took my place on the floor. There I curled against him, laying my cheek against his knee. His fingers ran through my hair as we watched some cop show on TV. My life was too busy for TV and I had no idea what the show was about. Not that it mattered. I snuggled against him, perfectly content.



Our lives settled into a comforting routine. Eventually, I headed back to work. Keith did the same. He took the test for lieutenant, and we were simply waiting for the results. The promotion meant big things for him. My days went back to chaos, stirring up my mind with stress and what-ifs. I struggled to be less of a bitch to those at work, but as my stress levels rose, my patience disappeared.

Every time I returned home, Dr. Laura Peters shed her position at the door along with her clothes. With Keith, I was simply me. His slave. Only one purpose filled my life. I was his to use however he saw fit. Most days, we lived simple lives, laughing and having fun while we cooked our meals. We spent our evenings watching TV. I sat at his feet, reading a book, while he saw to his shows.

We fucked nonstop, slow, easy, hard, and rough. I kept a ledger at work, listing my transgressions. He reviewed my *sins* each night, punishing only those he deemed required correction.

Bruises marked my skin, proof I had much to learn. We played with pain, exploring the limits of my masochism and his sadistic desires. It became clear his needs ran deeper than mine. I called red a few times too many, which led to an honest discussion between us about trust. My safeword had been removed for discipline, but he took it from me for

regular play as well. People at work kept asking if I was getting a cold. I had to lie and say the hoarseness of my voice was from laryngitis. They didn't need to know it came from my screams.

When I was at work, Keith spent his time at the property, meeting with contractors about the house and the barn. We discussed floor plans and general decorating for the house. My input regarding the barn was never solicited. This made me worry, especially as Keith explored our boundaries.

We were to head out there after our shifts. Keith still had a few calls running his rig before he took over as Lieutenant. I prayed our paths didn't intersect at work. I didn't think I would be able to call him by name. It seemed terribly disrespectful, but he insisted we act as normal as possible in public. I feared making a misstep, calling him *Sir* in front of others.

It was a disaster in the making.



I'd made it through my entire shift with only an hour left. I was at the end of a twenty-four hour call, while he was in the middle of one of his two-day marathons. It had been a tough call for me, and my frustration level had reached a peak. Keith had been working with me on being less of a bitch at work, but my *Please* and *Thank yous* had simply run out.

I should have kept my mouth shut. I knew better than to yell, but fatigue and frustration pulled me back to an older version of me. He'd told me to use his name at work. Well, I used it.

Dr. Laura Peters version 1.0 spit out all her frustrations and laid into one Keith Evans, the man, who in the heat of the moment, I forgot was my master.

It turned out to be a horrible mistake.

CHAPTER 42



I took her tirade silently, looking straight into her eyes while she railed at me like I was some stupid-ass rookie because my patient, who had severe blunt trauma to the chest and abdomen, had only a 22-gauge IV in her. For trauma, an 18-gauge or bigger was the standard. Laura knew that. The thing was, so did I, and she knew that, and damn well knew if I had such a small line going in this girl of about fifteen years, I had my reasons. In this case, the kid had small and shitty veins. I'd tried an 18-gauge and then a smaller 20-gauge on her left arm, both of which blew, then established the 22-gauge on her right.

"Yes, Ma'am," I said. "Tell ya' what, Dr. Peters, why don't you stick an 18-gauge in her, and if you do, I'll eat my hat, Doc. I'll stone guarantee I've started a thousand or more IVs than you have, but be my guest, Doctor. Show me how it gets done, since I'm not capable of sorting that out."

Throughout, I kept my eyes on hers and my tone conversational. The sudden widening of her eyes told me she got the message, but I wasn't done.

"Tellya what, Doc ... Since you seem to know how easy it is, why don't you ride a shift with us next time I'm on. Four days sound good?"

In short, I threw down the gauntlet, and wondered if she'd pick it up. It had been a terrible day and I wasn't in the mood for anyone's shit, maybe most especially hers.

She looked a bit cowed. "I'm working in four days. How about five?"
Good, I thought. School is in session.

“Station Three, at Main and 16th,” I told her. “Get there at 7:00 AM, please.” Soon, we’d be getting an influx of students from the university, but not for another three weeks.

“I’ll be there,” she said, still haughty and arrogant.

I recognized the signs of her fatigue and was willing to cut her some slack, but only some. I’d whip her soundly for this, perhaps on that post at the new place, where work was going slower than Christmas. It had been electrified probably when Thomas Edison was still shitting in diapers the first time around, and the insulation on all the wiring was crumbling, and new standard Romex wiring was going slowly.

The barn was coming along nicely, and she’d ordered a building for her dance studio with an amazing sound system. It even had a three-foot stage under its twelve-foot ceiling. But one way or another, she could be put on that post for a long and harsh whipping. This was Friday at oh-dark-early and I’d be off-shift in two hours.

She was off at noon, since Dr. Mawson was going to be in late. He’d flown to some CE conference in Miami and his flight got scratched due to weather, a chain of violent thunderstorms crossing southern Florida that knocked out power to thousands of homes and otherwise wrought havoc.

As it was, he’d drive straight from the airport to the hospital. I was exhausted and so was she, but we’d venture over there as the workmen were striking the band near 5:00. She could spend a couple or three hours on the post, then the whole weekend in the cage.

Besides, I’d been working on a surprise, and would have time to pursue that work. The house was uninhabitable at this point, but a huge garage had been built. It took three trips, but I’d moved my array of tools there, and kept the garage locked. Only I had the key. There was also another building that would be my man cave, where I could watch ball games and smoke cigars while being a general Philistine. I held the key to that building as well. Like her dance studio, the man cave was electrified and air conditioned.

Her tirade threw a wet blanket over the news I’d gotten. I was to be promoted to lieutenant in about another month, after some administrative work got out of the way. Lieutenant Samuels had departed, along with Tom. Neither of those luminaries got a going-away party.

Oddly enough, at that auction, Laura bought a piece Tom did of a couple in a fishing boat on a pond, the woman grinning as her rod arced. It

was reminiscent of Norman Rockwell's work and would look good in the parlor of the ranch house.

I bought a few bits of bric-a-brac, which indeed went to Goodwill on the way home, but had purchased a painting Sheila did of a horse at full gallop, its cowboy rider racing like hell on it, something that looked reminiscent of Remington. That would go in my man cave. The truth was, Tom and Sheila could both pursue art full-time. They were legitimately that good. But "starving artist" is a cliché for a good reason. Many are called and virtually none chosen.



When I got home, I'd had virtually no sleep throughout my shift. I set the alarm for noon. Laura would be going to her house. She'd texted, apologizing for her bitchiness and saying she knew she'd be punished, but was a zombie in no better shape than me.

I texted back for her to meet me at the ranch at 5:30.

Work had been done on the lane to the house, making it an asphalt drive, but she'd traded her Benz in on a Jeep Wrangler, something more in keeping with the country life we were planning to establish. Her Mercedes was a damned nice car, but it wouldn't get far without pavement beneath it.

By 12:45, I was at the ranch while the workmen did their thing on the house. The barn was complete and ready for use. I set my alarm for 5:00 so I could be out of the garage in time. I didn't want Laura blundering in and spoiling her surprise. Yeah, I was peeved at her tirade, and there would be a serious scolding to accompany a serious whipping.

I was pondering how long to leave her jailed. She was due back to the hospital for a 12-hour turn starting at 6:00 PM Sunday, and it was a huge temptation to keep her in that cage from as soon as I treated her whipwounds until 4:00 Sunday, which would just give her time to run to one of our houses (we each had clothes at both) shower, dress, and dash to the hospital in her jet-black Jeep.

In the garage, I busied myself, up to my ass in work and grime. When the alarm fired at 5:00, I set stuff aside, thoroughly scrubbed my hands with

GoJo soap, and took a shower in the small bathroom off the garage. Done with that, I put on fresh duds from a bag I'd thrown in my truck, then sat on the porch of the house and waited for Laura to arrive. I even brought the Keurig out onto the porch, put a cup on it, and when she drove up to the house, hit the go-button on it.

"Thank you for the coffee, Master," she said. "Are the workers gone?"

"They left at 5:00 on the dot," I said.

"Oh, thank God," she said, taking a sip of her coffee, then stripped naked, and knelt before me. "Master, I know I deserve punishment, harsh punishment, for how I behaved. I could give you a hundred reasons for why you caught me in a high-riding state of bitch, but none of those reasons are an excuse."

"Drink your coffee," I said. "Tell me what happened. You're going to be whipped hard, Laura. You're right. You have no excuse, not because I'm your master, but because I'm a fellow caregiver, due respect and due the benefit of the doubt, as well as simple respect for being a fellow member of the human race, darlin'. But vent it out so it's all off your chest when you get punished."

"What did I ever do to deserve you, a man who will still hear me out even when I'm wrong?" she asked, then gave her head a vigorous shake. "It was hell in there. Pandemonium. Two nurses were off sick, one in the hospital with an emergency appendectomy, and another with the flu. A third got punched by a patient's family member, and was out with a concussion. I don't supervise them, but the fucking hospital runs a skeleton crew in the first place, so being down three nurses from an already short staff had us backed up like hell."

She rocked back, adjusting her weight. "And not long after, a resident showed up with booze on her breath, and pinged a 0.05 BAC, so she's suspended until the chief of surgery decides whether to put her stupid ass into a rehab program or fire her."

Her words paused, and she glanced up, not at me, but at the ceiling, as if pondering her words. "Personally, I'm on the fence. She's smart as hell, but stressed out, and the stress never diminishes. I did six surgeries, and no way that two of those six are going to survive. Another died on the table. The dumbfuck was out on his balcony that he built onto his house. But he only nailed it to the house with those big-ass foot-long spikes rather than running joists under it. So the balcony fell off and he brained himself on the brick

patio beneath it. He might've made it if they'd been able to put him on Air Care, but they were socked in with fog. They seemed a good EMS crew, but outlying, and the transport time ate up that fabled Golden Hour."

Laura rubbed her brow, leaving me to wonder about her level of stress. Her punishment would be fierce and in this I tread a thin line, too little and I wouldn't give her what she needed. Too much, and I'd hurt her beyond what was sane.

"He left behind a wife who looks none too healthy," she continued, "and three kids. The oldest looks maybe eleven years old. She glared at me and told me she hates me, so that was lots of fun. So then you came rolling in. I ..."

The poor thing looked lost. She needed my strength and discipline in this moment, but also my compassion.

"Master, logic told me if that 22-gauge IV was there, it was surely the best you could do, but it was that last silly damn thing. Logic was out the window and temper was in the driver's seat. You're right. I didn't respect you even as another person then, much less a fellow caregiver. I was in the wrong, and ... shit, they had to do a cut-down cath on the kid. No track marks, but it seemed like she already had the spider veins of a woman in her 70s. And, you know, you're right. I wasn't bluffing or blustering about riding a shift with you. Okay, I was blustering, but you're right. Maybe time on the streets will give me perspective on what you paramedics encounter live on the streets. It's bound to make a better doctor of me, right?"

"I think so," I said. "You have the skills, but I don't think you understand the chaos that often happens out there. I don't think I'm being elitist, honey, but you've done all your doctoring in a far more controlled setting, even the ER. It's different out there. That patient I brought you, she got thrown from a car that landed on top of her, fortunately wheels-down. Lucky she was a scrawny little thing or she'd have been crushed. I was flat on my belly, under the car, with a flashlight in my teeth and starting that IV while we waited on the FD rescue people to lift the car off the kid. That's why, if you looked, there were EKG electrodes on her back. The kid was on her belly. Anyway, how is she?"

"She went up to surgery," Laura said. "Bleeding into her stomach, three broken ribs, pneumothorax, cardiac contusion, concussion. And a broken leg as an added bonus."

"Yeah, a wheel was on top of that leg," I said. "Is she going to live?"

“I don’t see why not,” Laura said. “Truth is, she’s lucky she had you. She was in bad shape. She needed four units of whole blood. But I think she’ll make it, Master.” She drank more of her coffee and finished her cup. “Thank you for listening, for letting me unload to you. I’m ... I guess I’m never ‘ready’ to be punished, but I know it’s better not to stall it.”

“You’re going to be whipped on your back and ass, then turned around and whipped on your chest and belly,” I told her. “After, you’ll be fed, and then jailed.”

“May I ask for how long?” she asked.

“You may,” I said. “You’ll be in there until 4:00 Sunday, which gives you time to run home, do the shit, shower shave thing, then to work.”

“Jesus, you make me feel like George Washington,” she muttered. “Master, I cannot tell a lie, even one of omission. Jerry Mawson agreed to take that shift since I wound up having to cover so long for him. So I’m due Monday at 6:00 for 12 hours, and same Tuesday and noon to midnight Wednesday, then to go on duty with you Thursday. I hope you don’t, but if you wish to leave me caged until 4:00 Monday, I don’t need to be anywhere.”

“Tellya what,” I said. “You’re sentenced to be imprisoned until 4:00 Monday, but if I like your attitude Sunday, I’ll parole you. That should be a nice juicy carrot dangling off the end of the stick.”

“Thank you for the opportunity, Master,” Laura said. “I can’t wait until the work is done and we’re living here, so we don’t have to steal time for our relationship.”

“I agree,” I said. “I’ll sleep in the man cave this weekend. There’s a hideaway bed in the sofa out there, so I won’t be far from you. I’m going to have to run to town, to the grocery store, since I don’t plan on starving either of us this weekend.”

This likewise wasn’t a problem. I had bought a secondhand refrigerator for the man cave, one I’d planned to stock with beer and its freezer with liquor, but I had only a six-pack of ale in it at this point, and there was a wet bar, and a small walk-in humidor that so far held two boxes of cigars, one from Punch and one from Macanudo. One way or another, there was plenty of room in the fridge for groceries.

“You get to crawling to the whipping post, pet. I’ll be back soon, and I expect you to be prostrated before the post when I get there.”

“Yes, Master,” Laura said.

She sighed, stepped from the porch, then went to all fours and began her clumsy crawl toward the path to the post. I got into my truck, drove to the liquor store for a bottle of Hornitos Anejo, then on to Daley's, a mom-and-pop supermarket, where I stocked up on goodies.

I dashed home, stocked the fridge, grabbed my whip, then fired up a Kawasaki Mule she'd purchased, and drove the path to the clearing, where I found Laura, on her belly before the post, fingers laced behind her head. I'd seen blood along the path and saw that her left knee was cut. She'd be bleeding from other places soon, and I resolved to treat those wounds when we were done.

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CHAPTER 43



There was nothing about this punishment I looked forward to. It wasn't sensual, erotic, or fun. I was a masochist, eroticizing pain for my pleasure, and his as well. But what I would soon endure? There was nothing sensual or sexy about it. I was terrified.

My actions forced Keith's hand. He was a sadist, the perfect compliment to my desires. In our unique way, we fit each other. That didn't mean he enjoyed punishing me. Not like this, and there was no doubt in my mind he intended to break me. I hadn't left him a choice. My actions demanded a response. To let this transgression slide was to undermine everything we'd struggled to build.

If it were up to me, I'd beat my own ass, but that responsibility no longer belonged to me. As my master, Keith would determine how much I paid in screams, agony, and perhaps even blood.

Over the past few days and weeks, I'd earned punishments for minor infractions, but this? The way I'd disrespected and stepped away from my enslavement was inexcusable. I couldn't pick and choose when I obeyed. I knew this. He knew this. I'd crossed a line, violating the very tenets of my slavery. To bow before him was a choice I made. He might wield the whip, but I chose to accept it.

I chose.

I had surrendered my will to him. To Him! That act was irrevocable, or it should have been. It's what I needed from him, no recourse, no safety net, no way back to the suffocating freedom of free will.

Except, I'd taken everything back, becoming that cold-hearted bitch he abhorred. In that moment of frustration, I'd stolen my freedom from the man who owned every piece of me. How was he ever going to trust me again?

I hated that I'd earned this. I detested the way I'd disrespected Keith. Fear gripped me as I lay before the post. I was terrified of what he would inflict upon me, but I'd earned every bit of punishment he would soon lay down.

My head knew this was what we'd agreed upon, and I believed he would forgive me. More than anything, I needed his gentle embrace. His forgiveness was what I craved. Instead, my future would be filled with unbearable pain and loneliness as I served my sentence in his makeshift jail.

I was his slave. He was my master.

And he would teach me this truth, laying down the lesson with each strike of his whip, and whatever else he chose.

My heart embraced my role, but that animalistic beast inside of me? It wanted to run, and hide. That terror, the need for self-preservation, warred within me.

I was his slave. He was my master.

I had a duty to respect him. That meant enduring this.

The perfect storm had rained down on me. Short staffed. Multiple deaths. I'd busted my ass to save lives. There were many things I could fix, but impending death wasn't one of them. I'd been forced to perform miracles with one arm tied behind my back. People lived because I refused to accept piss poor performance. Because they feared me, they gave me their best.

I was the Ice Queen, the cold-hearted bitch, but my patients lived. I'd seen the stats comparing me against my peers. I saved lives, but that was no excuse for disrespecting Keith.

He had me reconsidering everything. Maybe a warmer heart would make me an even better physician, a stronger mentor, and more compassionate leader?

While he didn't work in my world, he knew the ebb and flow of the ER. It was a miracle I didn't bite the heads off all my staff. We lived in a world where the smallest mistake ended lives. I was at the top of that totem pole, but it sure felt like the bottom. I was the one who ate the shit when things

went south. The mistake of any member of my team landed squarely on my shoulders.

It wasn't fair. None of it was fair.

But I'd fucked up. I'd disrespected the one person who meant the world to me.

That's why I didn't run. I waited for my punishment because I believed in what we were becoming. I trusted him, even when I feared him.

His boots crunched on the ground behind me. I'm certain he carried the whip, and I hated him even as I loved him. I hated that he needed to hurt me, but what I hated more was that I had forced him to this act. I hated that after this I would spend days aching alone when all I needed was his sweet reassurance that everything would be okay.

Not my decision. Not my choice.

I was his slave. He was my master.

A choked sob escaped me. Whatever chance I had to run was gone now.

"Stand," he ordered.

Without looking at him, I rose to my feet.

"Present your wrists to be bound."

I lifted my hands, wrists locked together, head bowed. Always before, he'd cuffed me, but this evening he drew out a length of rope and secured my wrists. Without another word, he pulled me toward the post and lifted my hands up. With a gasp, I noticed the iron peg driven into the post. It hadn't been there before. He lifted my arms high, forcing me on tiptoe, and secured the rope over the peg.

While I didn't dare try, it was clear there was no way to free myself from the post.

"Master..." Fear laced my futile cry. I told him I deserved this. I'd put on a brave face while guzzling my coffee. I pretended to accept my fate. In truth, I was scared. Every thing before this seemed like play. We'd been testing the waters, and now I would sink or swim. From the look in his eyes, it was clear I had no choice.

"Silence," he said. "I will not gag you. I sense you need to scream. There is no one around for miles. No one but me. I will not be lenient with you. Nor will I offer you a gag."

"Please..." I squirmed against the post and tried to free my hands. "Master," I wailed.

Please, don't do this. Please just forgive me.

I didn't dare voice my thoughts. That's not what we'd become. And if he did forgive me, if he let me out of this punishment, I would lose respect for him. When I was at my weakest, I needed him to be his strongest. I needed him to set my world aright, to beat me until my screams rent the air, and to love me enough to hurt me. I needed him to break me, tear me down, and place me back where I belonged. I needed to know he would accept nothing less.

He stepped back and uncoiled the whip. It skittered across the grass, snapping and hissing and popping like the devil.

"Scream all you want," he said. "Belt out your fury, but don't you dare beg for it to stop. I'm going to bring you to your knees, Dr. Laura Peters. I'm going to whip that out of your soul. You belong to me. There's not a second of any minute, in any hour of the day, that you don't bow down to me. No matter your anger, frustration, or fear, you bow to me. Do you understand?"

My insides clenched. I understood, but I still needed to explain what had been going through my head. "When I yelled at you, Master, I hadn't been thinking of you as my master. I'd been trying to save a life. I never want to forget what you are to me. I'm sorry, Master. I'm so very, very sorry."

"I know, but I also know we both need this. You're mine, and after tonight, you'll never forget your place."

My tears fell in fat drops before the first crack sounded in the early evening air. All around us, the insects woke from their daily slumber. Crickets chirped and cicadas deafened the air with their buzzing vibrations. For myself, my throat opened with an ear-piercing howl.

My master cracked his whip. A shot sounded in the fading light. My scream rent the air. This went on until the stars shined down with a fiery brilliance and the moon lit the night.

I hated Keith for hurting me.

Pain spun me toward oblivion. Sweat beaded on my skin and dripped down my body. He split my skin, and the salt from my sweat made the cuts burn.

I thought we were done when he came and lifted my hands off that peg. I craved the solace of his jail, because I could no longer stand.

The steel of his eyes met mine, plowed right through any remaining resistance I might have had, and he lifted my hands back over my head,

anchoring me to the post. He ignored my choked sobs and readied his whip.

In this way, our evening progressed. I stared at him as his arm reached back and flicked forward in a relentless assault. The post rubbed against the tender skin of my back, while he laid down his lesson over my breasts, my belly, and my thighs.

I became something altogether insane on that post, lost and adrift in the agony of my failures. I'd failed him. I'd failed my patients. I'd destroyed careers because of my arrogance. Mostly, I'd failed myself. I bled for my sins beneath my master's whip, and it poured out of me in one agonizing wail.

At some point, I collapsed. My legs gave out beneath me. I think I faded in and out. It didn't really matter. The world tilted and I jerked in surprise. He carried me. That's when my tears returned. I didn't want to spend my weekend in that jail. I didn't want to be alone. My soul ached for my master. He was my anchor and I was helplessly adrift. I needed to cling to him and see his gentle smiles. To feel his tender caress. To know his love as he chased his pleasure, using me to seek his relief.

In this way, I curled upon myself, and not once did I realize the constant grating of the outside world had been silenced. I simply didn't care. Until he forgave me, I didn't care about anything.

CHAPTER 44



I had whipped her with ferocity, without mercy, trying to teach her humanity. I honestly didn't care about deference to me, not as her master or even a lesser practitioner of the healing arts, but her simple basic humanity. The whipping had been intense, fifty to her back, and another fifty to her tits and belly. About a dozen of the marks opened her skin, some of them bleeding enough that I thought two across her back and one across her belly might scar. Maybe those reminders will make her a better person.

I wanted to hold her and let her cry it out. Yeah, I'm the sadist and she's the masochist. I'm the master and she's the slave, but I love Laura and felt the need to give her comfort and my love, but the look in her eyes told me that wasn't quite what she wanted or needed in this moment. I set my own need to the side and took care of hers. I think few people seem to understand the aftercare isn't just for the submissive. It's likewise an affirmation of love for the dominant. But few people seem to grasp that, or the concept that my dominance was as much a gift to her as her submission was to me. I set all that aside, and considered Laura.

I don't know if it was possible for her to become a better physician. She was written up even internationally for her spearheading work in trauma, known by every trauma physician who mattered in every corner of the world. I'd heard rumors she was even being talked up for the National Safety Council Award and Meritorious Achievement Award for trauma surgeons. I hadn't learned this from Laura but from articles I'd read, found accidentally while researching other matters on Google with regard to my surprise. I'm a paramedic, maybe even learned and gifted, but I'm not a

physician. I understood the generalities of field care, maybe even the minutiae, but precious little of the nuts and bolts of her work.

I wondered if she understood another basic facet of her frequent punishments, wishing we could both take two or four months off our jobs for me to run her through a boot camp of enslavement. But I was four years, nine months, and eighteen days to my retirement, which I still planned to take right on time, but she was unlikely to retire when I did. The truth was, Laura was a workaholic, and I figured she would probably retire only when she died. Maybe that was even for the best. I loved her, and loved our time together, but she needed to be Laura at times as I needed to be Keith.

I set that tangent aside and returned to the original point. She looked at me with wide eyes, tearful and fearful.

“Are you afraid of me?” I asked.

“Yes, Master,” she answered in a fearful voice. “I keep hoping you’ll forgive me.”

“Let you in on a little secret?” I asked.

“Please?” she asked.

“Long and short, every time I’ve had to punish you, I’d already forgiven you, even this time,” I said. “Laura, love forgives. I ... I wasn’t annoyed with you on my behalf. I know you’re an internationally renowned physician. But I think you’ve forgotten you’re surrounded by humans, some of whom are under your thumb, and still deserve respect even when they’ve fucked up.”

“Yes, Master,” she said with a whimper.

“It’s a lesson Captain Briggs taught me, back when he was a lowly lieutenant. And it’s one I’ve kept close. The medic-in-charge is a supervisor, and on a multi-unit scene, the most senior paramedic is the supervisor, usually yours truly anymore, and that goes for students on our trucks. I had to send in bad reports on two of them, one only yesterday. A paramedic student showed up a week ago and I had him take vitals. The dumbfuck gave me a blood pressure. Later, he gave me a pulse, and only with more prompting, a respiratory rate. The little bastard wore a nice wrist watch without a fucking second hand, and I hit him hard on the evaluation report, which I sent by e-mail to his instructor. Another, on the 3-11 shift yesterday ... she freaked out over a motorcycle accident that we ran, a pair of morons on a crotch rocket who were running from the cops, hit a curb, and cracked up. They weren’t even bloody, just muddy, but our student,

Miss Whitebread Princess Penelope ... I think she lives in your neighborhood, and I'm not shitting you."

"Her name?" Laura asked.

"Maura Thibodeau," I said after a moment of memory search. "She's a nice kid, and bright, but she ... she's not adaptable, can't take know-how from her brain to her hands. The paramedic student ... I wanted to burn that moron a new asshole, but told him once that paramedic patch is on his sleeve, his era of hiding is done. I was nice to him. What the hell, he's a nice kid, right? But I made it plain to him that if he fucked up with a paramedic patch, nobody was going to adopt his mistakes and cover for him. He stormed off, pissed off that I gave him a bad evaluation, but I kept my respect for both kids. What was to be gained in belittling them?"

"I know you have responsibilities I can't fathom, including people you don't directly oversee who can still fuck you up. But ... take yourself back to your internship and residency ... did haranguing and verbal abuse make a better doctor of you, or just resentful? I swear, you doctors ... it's like abused children growing up to abuse their young."

"Maybe you're right, Master," she said, looking like I'd given her food for thought. She snorted with dark humor. "Maybe if they used a whip on me rather than belittling me, it would've had a better effect. God knows it's worked wonders for me in this relationship."

"Get on the Mule," I said. Her knees were rubbed raw from the crawl out here. "I think you've been on your hands and knees enough for one day."

"Thank you, Master," she said, sitting on the passenger side. I drove her to the barn, where I washed her wounds and treated them with ointment. She'd feel this whipping for a week, I guessed.

"May ... may I relieve you, Master?" she asked. "I know I don't deserve sexual pleasures while dressed in welts from punishment, but you should ... Master, if your balls are heavy, it means I failed you."

"Yes," I said, "it's only right to feed you an appetizer before supper." I stripped and sat on a chair, then she crawled to me and swallowed my cock. I gasped as she took me into the velvet heat of her mouth, expertly bringing me to the brink. As I'd learned her, she'd likewise learned me, learned to use her mouth to get the most out of my cum.

I cried out as my cock erupted in her mouth while she expertly sucked every morsel that my balls sent flying into her mouth. I sat for a few long

moments, blinking and gasping, before gaining enough energy to stand and point her to the cage. She entered, and I locked the door, then went to the man cave and grilled a sausage and corn on the cob for her.

I passed the plate to her through a slot at the bottom of the door.

“Thank you, Master,” she said. She ate heartily, moaning in pleasure at the flavors. Daley’s made their own sausages, and they were prize-winners. The corn, I suspected, was cut from the stalk that morning. We’d eat well out here.



I went to the garage and busied myself on Laura’s present. I’d done well on it, and called my buddy Ray Johnson. He told me to bring it over and he’d do his part, and that’s what I did, returning an hour later. A TV was in the man cave, but we hadn’t gotten satellite service or even internet out here. Thank God for my DVD player. I watched a movie while enjoying a cigar and three fingers of tequila, then folded out the bed and fell to sleep.

I woke with a start at about 7:00 Saturday morning to begin my day. I took a bacon-and-eggs breakfast to Laura, which she mowed down, apparently starving. After that, I went about my day. Four big oaks were in the way of another path I wanted to blaze. I put a trailer on the Mule and began cutting one of the trees with a chainsaw. I’d have Laura stack the pieces in the barn after she was out of confinement. Sometimes drudgery and menial work was good for reminding her she’s my slave.

CHAPTER 45



Not a fan of the cage. I hated it, in fact. I hated that he'd had to put me in it, and I hated how I'd wasted a weekend where we could have been with each other. That was the worst rub. I was in here, while he was out there. Craving him wasn't something I could turn off. He made me ache for him. I needed his companionship, his dominance, his touch. Stroking me. Loving me. Bringing me to the heights of pleasure and enduring his pain. I felt starved, empty and hollow without him.

The night had been easy enough to endure. My body ached from the whipping, but the exhaustion from my recent shift, along with what my body had been through, tossed me into a dreamless sleep.

The breakfast filled my belly, but his fierce determination to keep me in here left my heart an empty wasteland. I wanted to howl for my loss, and all I wanted was to crawl to him and have him hold me in those powerful arms.

Instead, morning passed to afternoon, then faded to evening. My thoughts centered on Keith, on what I wanted with him. The issue of work went round and round more than a few times. There had to be a solution there for me. I needed to retain my authority without belittling those who worked with me to save lives. That would take a major rewiring in my head.

What I'd done with Keith had been instinctual, a gut response. Learning to temper that would be a difficult lesson. I anticipated many future episodes within this cage until I was broken of that.

I slept when I got tired. I stretched to ease my aches. I examined those welts I could see, and tended to the cuts on my palms and knees with the

tube of ointment Keith had left behind. Throughout that time, not once did he visit me. Part of me assumed he would come to check on me, or even just come to use me for his release, but I remained desperately alone.

Eventually, I stretched out, and between staring at the bland ceiling and featureless walls, I fell into a deep sleep. The rattling of the cage door woke me, making me jump.

“I leave you for a day and you’re skittish?”

It had only been one day. I had one more to endure.

“You startled me, Master,” I said, moving to my knees where I could greet him properly.

“I brought you something to eat.”

“Thank you, Master, you’re too generous.”

“I’m not being generous. I have a duty to see to your needs.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Come,” he said with a gentle smile. “I might be feeling a tad generous. You may use the facilities, but then straight back to the cage. Don’t take too long.”

I glanced up at him and thanked him again with my eyes. “I’m sorry, Master. My mind has been to a million different places, but everything keeps coming back to you. I’m sorry I ruined our weekend. I hate being separated from you.”

“It seems you’re finally learning the true purpose of the the cage.”

I gasped, upon this realization. Was that the truth?

“Now, get on, slave. Relieve yourself and return to the cage. You still have another day of confinement left.”

With my head hanging, I wandered over to the attached bathroom, shuffling my feet. One more day. I wanted to scream, or maybe hit myself with a whip. Begging to be released early crossed my mind, but I kept my lips sealed tight. He’d denied me his attention, and I wondered if I might not be the only one suffering as a result of this punishment.

I returned to him, this time on hands and knees. My palms hurt, but they were free of cuts. I gritted my teeth and bit back the pain. My kneecaps were bruised too. As he’d commanded, I returned to the cage, turning around to kneel before him.

“May I speak?”

“If it’s to beg for leniency, that answer is no.”

“No, Master. While that may have crossed my mind, I accept my punishment. I was worried about you.”

“Me?”

“I thought the cage was many things, but I hadn’t realized its true purpose. I hate being kept apart from you. And while I accept this, I realized my punishment keeps me from you too. I wanted to ask if I might...well, I know you’ll take what you want, but I wanted to ask if you needed me to...to.”

“Spit it out!”

“Do you need to fuck?”

“You miss me that much?”

“I miss you terribly, but that’s not what I’m asking. I know your needs, and your stamina. I also know how hard you work. My behavior ruined our time together, and I’m both sorry and ashamed. My concern is that your needs are unfulfilled because I screwed up. It’s not that I’m offering myself to you, because you’ll take what you want, I just thought...”

Hell, what did I think? I was offering myself to a man who didn’t need my permission. Should’ve kept my mouth shut, because I sounded like a damn idiot. I bowed my head. “I’m sorry for taking up your time.”

My entire body broke out in a sweat, and I shook from head to toe. In a moment, he’d lock me in, and I would once again be alone. Instead, he leaned into the cage and wrapped me in his arms, where I sank into his warmth. God he smelled like heaven!

“It’s a difficult thing to admit when one’s wrong. I admire the strength it’s taken you to see the truth of the lesson of the cage. And yes, I most definitely need to fuck. I’ve been all over the property, blazing trails, cutting wood, anything to keep my mind off coming in here.”

“You have?”

“We’re learning together. I thought I’d made myself clear with you, on my expectations when you’re away at work. If I’d been a better master, more firm, perhaps clearer in my goals for your behavior, you wouldn’t have lashed out like you did. Work is a difficult place for us, confusing our roles, even turning them on their heads at times. Your disrespect for me, and others, isn’t something I’ll ever allow. Next time, if there is a next time, I’ll ream you out in front of the crowd. Don’t make me do that.”

“I won’t, Master. I really won’t. You mean the world to me, and I want you to be proud of me. I’ll work on how I speak to the others, but I’m afraid

I won't be perfect. I'm trying to be a better slave for you, someone you're proud to call your own, but I'm human. I'm going to make mistakes. I'm going to wind up in here again, and I hate that. I hate being separated from you.”

“Fuck, but you make me hard. You asked what drove me. It's this. It's your struggle with submission. The gift you lay at my feet everyday.”

He threaded his fingers in my hair and yanked my head back. In the blink of an eye he went from staring to crashing his lips against mine. I shuddered and nearly came right then. If my submission drove him, then his dominance turned me to jelly. It was an indescribable feeling, having him in such a position of power over me. I could cum from this voice alone—as long as it was combined with his indomitable will.

With me held in his arms, he took my mouth. His tongue lashed against mine. His teeth grazed my lips, nipping and biting until I whimpered in pain. He reached between us and found my left nipple, pinching it until I screamed. I found myself dragged away from the cage and laid on my back. I arched against the hard floor, hissing against the pain from my welts. He pressed me down, feeding off my pain, and took my nipple into his mouth, sucking and flicking it with his tongue. I dug my fingers into his hair, pulling at his scalp. Then I arched up again. This time it wasn't away from the pain of the floor, but into the pleasure of his mouth.

As he licked and sucked my breasts, he slipped a hand between my legs. His fingers searched for my slit, then forcibly rammed in. I cried out from his rough touch, then keened with pleasure as he took me to the brink.

“Master,” I begged. “I can't... I'm not going to be able to stop!” And I desperately didn't want to disobey one of his rules.

He lifted off me, propping himself on an elbow. His fingers withdrew and I cried out, desperation lacing my voice. He struggled with his pants and freed his cock. Then his hand gripped my throat and squeezed tight. With one thrust, he buried himself deep. Those soul seeking eyes of his drilled into me as I gasped for air.

His hips thrust while I clawed at his hand. Faster. Harder. Deeper. He rammed into me, all while cutting off my breath.

Each of his words punctuated with a thrust of his hips. “Don't. Ever. Disrespect. Me. Again.”

As my vision greyed out, I whimpered beneath him, clawing desperately for air.

“I. Own. You. Even your breath. I. Own. You! “

I was going to pass out when his climax ripped through his body. His hand squeezed my throat, and I accepted his words.

“Cum,” he commanded. “God damn you, cum!”

He released his grip and I sucked in air, then rode the most intense climax of my life. I milked his cock, slowing his thrusts, his chest laboring to pull in air. Dots swam in my vision and I gulped air too. And then I broke out in heart wrenching sobs. This is what I’d taken from him. This burning hunger he held for me, I’d ripped it from him with my disobedience. In that moment of discovery, I vowed to never again call him Keith. To me, he would forever be Master. Or Sir when in public, or at work. I would need to ask his permission for this change, but there was no doubt in my mind. It wasn’t enough to play at enslavement, I needed it to fill my every breath.

He rolled off me, turning to lay on his back. Bringing a hand over his brow, he closed his eyes. I crawled back to the cage, and pulled the door shut. This was my place. How I hated this cage, but then he spoke.

That low gravelly voice full of the sweetest Texas twang reached out to me. “Come, my love. You’ve learned the meaning of the cage. Let’s not waste any more of our time together apart. Come to your Master.”

CHAPTER 46



I was happier with her out of the cage than in, and we both damned well knew that. Besides, I'd been killing myself cutting that tree into pieces, although the bottom eight or so feet of the stump, cut into three pieces ... those were too heavy to lift. There was a log-splitter out in the barn, but the wood needed to dry for a long while before we could split and burn it. I pulled the trailer out to the barn and unhitched it, gave Laura work gloves, and put her to work stacking wood, then put a sturdy chain in the bed of the Mule, rolled back to the job site, wrapped the chain around the stumps, and dragged them to the barn, where I stood the three stumps near where Laura was busting her tail stacking the firewood.

While she worked, I stacked seasoned firewood in a stone circle, and lit it. It was a smoky fire that I hoped would keep bugs at bay. A grill, similar to the one from my boat, rested atop it, and I would grill fish on it, two bass I'd reeled in from a pond on the property, respectable fish but not record-setters. I'd filleted them with the skins on, and the fillets waited in the fridge. She came out a short time later and asked for water, and I pointed to the ice chest. She reached in and came up with water and Gatorade, chugged down half of each, then trudged back to the barn to get to work.

I looked at her as she walked away, beautiful lines, curves, and stripes. And all mine. Entirely my Laura. She labored while I sat and rested, master of my plantation. The truth was, Laura owned the property. We had decided that until this house was ready to occupy, we weren't going to list either of our houses, and would have this property deeded in both of our names.

After we ate, we went back to my house and stumbled into bed after a lengthy shower. Sleep was a long time coming for me, despite my fatigue. The future I foresaw with her excited and frightened me, the what-ifs nipping at my mind like a flock of mosquitoes. I gave up on sleep for the time, and went downstairs for a stiff drink, pouring some 120-proof Knob Creek bourbon into a glass with an ice cube. Work on the house would be done in another two or three weeks, and then we would be in official cohabitation. I polished off my whiskey, sighed tiredly, then returned to bed.



We went shopping for furniture the next day, and placed orders for a gorgeous handmade four-poster bed, king-sized, as well as living room furniture. Undecided about the other bedrooms of the house, we decided to leave them bare for the time being. We'd hired an estate sale company to sell off most of the contents of the two houses. My stuff was too beat-up by this point of the game, and even Laura said her own furnishings were too stuffy. Truth was, in some ways her house felt like a hotel or maybe a museum.



She showed up on-time for the shift she was to ride with me on my command, dressed in black slacks and a white shirt, like any other EMT student.

I walked her through the checklist, to ensure we had all we needed, and that everything was in its place. I only had one more 48-hour shift to turn after this one, and then would be at a desk with a supervisor car. Yeah, I'd still show up on scenes to check up on people and be an extra set of hands, but would mostly be a chairborne warrior until my retirement. I yearned for it, in a big way.

Oh, I knew I'd miss the streets, the adrenaline and camaraderie, but I was getting long in the tooth to still be on the streets and was ready to lay it aside. Briggs told me he was going to start grooming me to promote to captain upon his own retirement in three years. He wasn't fond of the other lieutenants, which I already knew. He wanted me in the big job. Part of it was a written test, but other examinations were oral, therefore a bit more subjective.

With the ambulance checked out, we went inside, where Ann, a new hire who replaced Tom, was hustling through cooking breakfast, nothing fancy, just bacon and eggs with toast. Laura dropped a twenty in the kitty for food and coffee, then we sat and ate. Laura even volunteered to wash the dishes, but we got toned to an MVA.

It was a bad one. Indeed, the cops had already called in Air Care before we arrived. A school bus plowed into a little foreign roller skate of a car. A dozen kids on the bus were banged up and we rolled two more units to the scene. Laura checked the woman in the car, then looked at me and shook her head. I'd have been surprised if the driver of the little car was alive anyway. The driver of the school bus was drawn on his left side, and had two broken legs as well as a bad rap across his forehead, where his head hit the steering wheel. Ann and I got him packaged and intubated for safety's sake.

"What can I do?" Laura asked.

"Not much," I said. "He had a bad stroke, it looks like. Out here, all we can do is try to keep his ass alive and hope the hospital does too. If I had to guess, he had a stroke and the bus went out of control. The uninjured kids left the bus out of the back. See what needs the others have. They look like walking wounded, nothing severe."

"Got it," Laura said, approaching the kids, many of them crying. Air Care landed on the road and we loaded the bus driver on their stretcher, then they took off. Laura, meanwhile, splinted broken arms on four of the kids, and we packaged three more complaining of neck pain for transport. The backup units arrived, along with another bus.

Laura cleared the remainder for spinal trauma, as a paddy wagon from the PD arrived. The kids boarded the Econoline van and were driven to the hospital while some official from the school showed up to assess things and start calling parents. We took ours to the hospital while Laura looked more and more worried about one of the kids, a little girl with a blown pupil who

was starting to posture. Her EKG was decelerating and her blood pressure rising a bit.

I didn't blame Laura for her worry. She called the hospital and said she had one that needed instant radiology and to prepare for emergency surgery on the kid, who looked to be maybe nine years old, a very pretty black girl at that age where she was getting to be all leg. God, how I hated running hurt kids. Fortunately, the ones badly injured were few and far between.

"How's Luree?" the other girl asked, an elfin brunette.

"I think she'll be okay," I said. "She banged her head harder than you did. What's your name, sweetie?"

"Kaela Montgomery, Sir," she said dutifully.

"Well, Kaela, you and Luree are in the best of hands," I said with a reassuring smile. "I've been doing this work since long before you were born, and this lady with me is Dr. Laura. She wanted to see what it's like out on the street, so she's with me today. She's one of the best emergency doctors ever."

"You're going to do just super," Laura said with her own reassuring smile. "When they get you in, they'll take some x-rays of you, but it's like just having your picture taken. They'll look at your head, and your wrist and ankle. You might get casts on the wrist and ankle, but I think once they're done, that collar can come off your neck."

She and I exchanged a look and her eyes cut to Luree, who didn't look good at all. A falling pulse and rising blood pressure, along with the fixed pupil, all screamed rising intracranial pressure and attendant brain damage that might be permanent. I swear, I could smell the frustrations rising with her, knowing exactly what to do but with no ability to do it.

"Where were you going, Kaela?" I asked, keeping the kid distracted.

"A field trip to the museum," she answered.

"Well, maybe you can go after they finish with you at the hospital," I told her.

We dropped the kids off at the ER and dodged reporters who were already flocking about like vultures.

"Jesus, I ... I guess I understood the frustrations of your job from an intellectual standpoint," Laura said. "But that was emotional, knowing exactly what needed to be done but unable to do it. Swear to God, I'd be the biggest alcoholic in nine counties if I had to do this for a living."

“Many’s the morning I came home, had a Bible in one hand and a bottle in the other, hoping one or the other would help make sense of things,” I admitted.

At the station, we restocked and went to the day room to rest while I wrote up reports. We got a sick call in the afternoon, a woman at her office vomiting violently until she fainted, and ran her to the ER. On the way back, Laura checked up on the bus driver and Luree. The driver was on life support but not expected to survive. Luree looked like she’d recover, but would be touch-and-go for a couple or three days. Kaela didn’t have a concussion. She’d sprained a wrist and broke her tibia a few inches above the ankle, but was fine and dandy otherwise. The other walking wounded were patched up and were slowly but surely being discharged to their parents.

It was dead from then until we got toned at midnight to a bar where, surprise, a fight broke out. We arrived to the dimly lit dive to find a woman beaten to a pulp and a man in like condition. The woman was semiconscious, and the man unconscious. Four cops had arrived, trying to get the story, when Laura hunkered down to see what was going on with the unconscious man. Another man suddenly grabbed a pool stick and hit Laura in the head, snarling, “let that asshole stay fucking dead!”

On autopilot, I swung my flashlight at his head, and flattened him. Two cops tackled the assailant and hurriedly cuffed him while I bent down to Laura, scared to death.

“I’m ... I’m okay,” she said.

Fortunately, the thin end of the stick hit her and shattered. I checked her out like I’d check out any other patient, and agreed she was okay, but would be rocking one hell of a bruise and probably a prize-winning headache. It was a shame the cops were there, which meant I couldn’t finish the job of killing that lowlife asshole.

Laura checked out the unconscious man and pronounced him dead. His face was beaten and bloodied so badly that he was unrecognizable. We called Air Care for the battered woman and the man I’d coldcocked with my light. I got him right at the temple, shattered an eye socket, and destroyed his left eye. The woman went by helicopter to the hospital and a second ambulance called in transported the man I’d hit. He was in police custody, violent, and they insisted he go by ground rather than put a helo at risk.

I was detained on-scene while the cops did their investigation before clearing me. I was confident there'd be no charges against me. Meanwhile, the story unfolded. The woman, a Jill Saunders, had run from Bobby Z., who was the man Laura pronounced dead on scene. The redneck who attacked Bobby was another thug with a long history of arrests, named Richard Lathrop. He launched himself on Bobby, I guess trying to be the hero, then maybe rape that poor woman for himself afterward, and there seemed to be no doubt he was still in a feral state. Eyewitnesses said Lathrop used brass knuckles on Bobby. Many of the denizens of the dive looked uneasily at me, but the cops who'd seen what happened, as well as the witnesses, seemed to accept I was defending Laura.

I'd only hit him once, and he was armed with the shattered pool stick when I took him down. Ann and Laura both seemed very defensive of me, and finally, we were let go. One way or another, a call was placed to Briggs, who told me my shift was over and to head home. It was policy that a medic was put on paid leave in the wake of any altercation while an investigation went on.

"Don't sweat it, Keith," he told me. "From what the cops are saying, you were on the side of the angels. This is mixed emotions. Part of me wants to kill him for hitting the doc, and the rest of me wants to give him a reward for finally killing that dickhead Bobby Z. I knocked the fuck out of two or three of 'em when I was riding a box. Sometimes shit gets out of control and you're left without a choice. That sounds like what happened tonight. Fucking cops run so many calls at those shit bars that they get complacent, and then a good medic gets attacked. Anyway, go get some rest, son."

He ended the call and my mind turned over the word *son*. It wasn't the first time he'd used that affectation, but the truth was, over the span of my career, he really had become my father figure.



"You're my hero," Laura said when we got to her house. "Come on upstairs, hero. It's time I pampered you for saving my ass. God, I sure the

hell won't be bitchy to EMS anymore. It's chaos. Not even controlled chaos, just chaos."

"It's the water where I do my swimming," I said. "I don't question it. I just accept it. You do the best you can with what you have, which usually isn't nearly enough. But it's something I drill into students and junior medics, to not waste time on scene diagnosing what you can't treat anyway. Abdominal pain, for instance ... no matter the diagnosis, it all comes down to we start an IV, give oxygen, and transport, whether it's a gall bladder, appendix, ruptured ectopic pregnancy, or constipation. Trauma is easier. You can see what's going on. But take that little girl Luree with the closed head injury. At the end of it all, IV, oxygen, monitoring, and hope you get her there in time."

"True," Laura said with a pensive expression. "I've only seen the patients and never considered what you encounter. It's raw out there. I'm glad the pool stick only gave me a headache. Hard lessons learned are the ones that stick, right?"

"Yeah, you ... you're a doctor and I'm not going to blame you for getting tunnel vision with the patients. But sometimes you need to assess the scene." I kissed her, loving and longing. "I thank God it wasn't worse, Laura. God, I'm ... I just reacted. It was like combat. The dead guy? He's the one who tried to sweep you off your feet at Louie's, the one I fought off. Burn in Hell, Bobby Z."

"Jesus, you're my hero twice," she said, then kissed me again.

Upstairs, she drew a hot bath in her whirlpool tub, deposited me into it, then got in and bathed me, massaging and caressing, soothing her master. As the adrenaline burned off me, exhaustion crept in. She shook me awake some time later as the water started cooling. I got out of the tub, and she dried me with a towel, then herself. We stumbled to bed and she stroked my hair until I fell into a deep sleep.



We both woke half-starved at daybreak, and decided fuck cooking, then went to IHOP, where we both ordered hearty breakfasts and helped

ourselves to strong coffee, when a tall and imposing black woman appeared at our table. “Dr. Peters?” she asked.

“Oh!” Laura exclaimed, surprised. “Have a seat and share some coffee, Marilyn. Keith, this is Marilyn Cross, one of our OR nurses, and why aren’t you knee-deep in the operating room already, come to think of it? Sit. God, you look worn out.”

Marilyn sat, and I could see she looked an emotional wreck. She was beyond tired. “I’m trying to understand yesterday,” she said. “I’m on FMLA time right now. I was working on that poor bus driver when they yanked me out of the OR to tell me Luree was hurt with head trauma. It was hard shifting gears from tough OR nurse to scared mom. They ... they told me you brought her in. What happened?”

“Keith here was medic in charge,” Laura said. “The bus driver ... he had a stroke, which we think led to the accident. Luree ... your daughter?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Marilyn said. “Leon stayed with her overnight. Thank ... thank you, Dr. Peters. She’s our only child, our Luree. But ... how were you involved?”

“Well, I got bitchy with Keith the other day and he dared me to ride a shift with him,” Laura said. “I did, and he was right. Whatever they’re paying him isn’t half of what he deserves.”

“We did all we could, which mostly amounts to getting her to the ER as fast as we could,” I said.

“Kaela kept wanting to be with Luree,” Marilyn said.

“She seemed a sweet kid,” I offered.

“They’re inseparable,” Marilyn told us. “She’s ... she lives four houses down from Leon and me.”

“What’s Luree’s prognosis?” Laura asked.

“They think she’ll recover, but will need all kinds of therapy,” Marilyn said. “Leon’s mom is flying in next week and my sister will be here the week after. Thank God for a support system.” She opened her mouth to say more but sobbed instead. Laura stood and awkwardly hugged Marilyn while the woman cried. The waitress approached, looking nonplussed.

I stood and spoke quietly to the waitress. “The woman’s daughter was hurt badly yesterday,” I told her. “It’ll be okay. She’s just overwrought. We have her tab, Miss. Just add it to ours.”

“Y’all are friends?” the waitress asked.

“Yeah, or they are, at least,” I said. “I was the paramedic on that call.”

“I thought I reconnized you,” the waitress said, and winked. “Ain’t seen you before with your clothes on. Y’all good on coffee?”

“Refill, please,” I said, handing her the pitcher.

“Got it, and y’all just flag me down if you need more.”

By this point, Marilyn’s emotional storm, or at least this outer band of it, seemed to have passed. “Breakfast is on us,” I told her. “And you won’t be any good to Luree half-starved.”

“Thank you for Luree’s life,” Marilyn said.

“Mrs. Cross, all I did was speed her to the hospital,” I told her honestly. “Thank Luree. That kid’s a fighter, but she’s going to need you and Leon in a huge way for a while, as I understand it.”

The waitress returned with coffee and chow, and Laura ordered a second breakfast of whatever she was having, and slid her plate before Marilyn. “Big Chief there is right,” she said, and smiled. “Starving yourself helps nothing. And this doctor thinks you’re too tired to drive. How much sleep did you get overnight?”

“Not much,” Marilyn admitted.

“Keith, I’d like to drive her to the hospital after breakfast, if you’re willing to follow us?”

“Absolutely,” I said, very proud of Laura and her extension of humanity to Marilyn.

But I had my own food for thought from this encounter. I seldom, almost never, had follow-up with patients. Oh, we had our frequent flyers, but they were seldom serious matters. As field medicine was something Laura’s education and experience had denied her, anything beyond the field was denied me. I seldom took one step into a hospital beyond the emergency department, except for the occasional L&D patient run straight up to the obstetrics department. I found myself happy for that.

Marilyn was shattered by this, and her kid was going to live. What about those hopeless ones like Caleb? I couldn’t imagine the wrenching ordeal so many others endured. I couldn’t do it. I guess in that moment, I found a new avenue of respect for Laura. She’d just needed the shell cracked off of her humanity, I guess like a pecan, I thought with dark humor behind my poker face. Marilyn managed to eat about half her breakfast, and I did the same, my appetite suddenly dust and memory amidst the emotions of the morning. Laura only picked at her breakfast, for that matter, but the three of us put down the whole second pitcher of coffee and most of a third,

then got OJ to go for all of us, and at my urging, a to-go breakfast for Leon. At this, Marilyn had a genuine chuckle.

“He needs to eat too, but he’s a chef by passion and a total foodie, even if he is an engineer at Exxon, and he’ll think we’re trying to poison him,” she grinned.

“Let’s get you to Luree,” Laura said. “Keys.”

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CHAPTER 47



Over the next few weeks, we settled into a routine. A newfound respect for Keith flowed through my veins after running that shift with him. Intellectually, I knew what he endured out there, or thought I had. Being on the streets with him changed everything. There was no question I respected him as my master. That man knew exactly what I needed and how to give it to me, but I don't think I really respected him as a professional medic until the day I rode with him in the rig.

It was a sobering experience when brought face-to-face with that superiority complex I'd been walking around with. Trauma surgeon extraordinaire! I saved lives for a living, and I think Keith had a right to be a little derisive with me about my god complex. I didn't think I'd had one, but he showed it to me in the most elegant manner, allowing me to see it for myself and draw my own conclusions.

Now, I walked the halls of the hospital a little differently, attempting to really see what it was others did for me and my patients. Not that my standards dropped. I still ripped people a new one when mistakes were made. Only now, I did so with more compassion and humanity. Rather than tearing them down and pointing out all their flaws, I explained how their actions could harm the patients they touched.

What I found, after all this self reflection, was that not only did I like myself more, but others seemed to react differently to me as well. I saw more smiles aimed at me, more jokes shared with me, and I heard them calling me Ice Queen less and less.

All of this was attributable to the man who opened my eyes with his strength, compassion, and unwavering commitment to not only dominating me, but truly loving me.

We spent all our free time together. Each morning, if I didn't wake with him sliding into me, fingering me, or licking me into an orgasmic coma, I had my mouth on him, stirring him from sleep. We were insatiable when it came to each other. Weekends were spent at the property, supervising the revisions. All the furniture had been ordered and would be delivered soon.

Keith was funny about his garage and mancave, refusing to let me inside the garage at all and allowed in his mancave only grudgingly. Which was fine with me. My new dance studio had been completed and I spent my time there.

Work still pulled at me, and I needed to destress in my way. Sometimes he watched, other times, like now, he left me to my own devices while he disappeared into his garage. I'd tried once to peek inside, and regretted it immediately. He strapped me to St. Andy 2.0 and reminded me who in fact was in charge. He did another, more important thing for me. That list of failures and transgressions I'd kept, the one where I'd pitifully attempted to self-master, had been taken over by him.

One of the things I feared was that as we slipped deeper and deeper in a normal life, our connection as Master and slave might fade. Life had a way of bringing monotony into everything. So far, his dedication to not just ruling over my life from work, but enforcing those rules he set for me as his slave had not slackened.

Once I finished my dance, sweaty and exhausted, I went to check on Keith. He was still squirreled away in his garage, which left me time to explore. He'd taken to making paths through the property, and I'd taken to exploring them, loving being outdoors. Around the main complex, I mostly went naked, but when in the woods, he allowed protective clothing against chiggers, ticks, mosquitos and biting flies. Today, my path brought me by the field with the post and I had to stop and pause.

He hadn't brought me back here since that horrible weekend, and I kind of shuddered with the memory of what I'd endured. There are moments which really mark a person, and I'd been marked heavily on that post. Two of the cuts had scarred after they'd healed. Tiny white lines over my hips. They were a constant reminder of the choices I'd made. I both hated this

post and embraced it, but I hoped to never again disappoint, disrespect, or drive him to beat me back into my submission again. I hoped I'd learned.

I stepped close to it, regarding it with a certain reverence. I stretched out and felt the roughness of the wood and glanced up at the peg where my hands had been bound. Then my fingers fluttered at my throat, feeling the empty expanse of my skin. With everything we'd been through, he had yet to offer me an enduring symbol of what I'd become. I tried not to let it bother me, but it pricked at the edges of my thoughts. We were making a world together. In every way I felt his love, and had the blanket of his dominance guiding me. This was a thought I never expressed to him.

He seemed content with where we were, and I didn't want to ruin that by expressing my insecurity over the lack of a collar. I had to accept maybe this was as far as we would go.

Under the noon sun, I went to my knees before that post, and repeated the litany I'd been working on in my head. He didn't know about this either, but I'd made a short devotional to him. When things got tough in the OR, and I was losing a patient, or when my temper flared at work and I was moments from ripping someone apart, or any time when I felt adrift or unsure, I repeated these words in my head. They soothed me in those moments when he wasn't with me.

The crunching of boots sounded behind me. "Whatcha doin'?"

I was surprised to see him out of the garage so early. He would stay in there until the sun came down, working on whatever he had hidden inside.

"Just remembering." I shifted around, staying on my knees, and greeted him properly. "May I serve you, Master?"

"I don't think I'll ever tire of hearing those words or seeing you on your knees, slave."

A flush of contentment sped through me, along with a flutter of need. It was always like that with him, especially in the moments where we could fully embrace who we were.

"Do you come out here often and kneel before the post?" His brows drew together, like he was trying to puzzle me out.

"Not often, Master, but when my walks bring me past, I almost always stop."

"On your knees?"

"Most times," I admitted. He didn't tolerate lies.

"Hm," he said, but didn't elaborate.

I expected him to ask me ‘what was going on in my head.’ He asked that often of me, and I’d spill whatever random thoughts were flitting through my mind. He kept his silence this time. We paused there for a long moment; him glancing at the post and me staring at him. I’d tried the whole eyes down thing, but for day-to-day interactions he preferred I look at him directly. When he felt like taking me deep into my slavery, he let me know.

Suddenly, he spun and headed back to what we’d affectionately dubbed the compound. “Come along, slave. My arm is twitchy and I’m feeling up for some practice with the whip. And come to think of it, my dick is a bit twitchy too.”

“Oh! Yes, Master.” I hurried to catch up to him, staying a step behind him. If he was interested in whip practice, I needed to get my head in the game.

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CHAPTER 48



Finding her kneeling before the post made my heart do a funny lurch and flip-flop. It spoke volumes to me that Laura found the clearing and the post to be something sacred, perhaps even holy, as did I. It was where I finally broke her, where she finally embraced enslavement with that agonizing whipping.

I'd noticed, since that whipping out here, and certainly since she'd ridden that shift with me, that a certain fresh sense of serenity seemed to have overtaken her. A woman with few friends, she and Marilyn had built a strong friendship in the wake of Luree's injuries.

Marilyn and Leon had been guests here a couple of times, and we'd visited them likewise. Leon was an engineer with Exxon, but not the total nerd that the career brings to mind, a rabid Astros fan and quick with a joke, and we were all in awe of the man's culinary skills, enough so that Laura begged his forgiveness for the to-go breakfast from IHOP, a rather dramatic and emotive apology that had the man doubled-over laughing at her Shakespearean antics. They were members of Holiness Church, which Laura and I had visited on three different Sundays, which I guess made us halfway members as well.

I returned my attention from the tangent to matters at hand. Considering what was about to happen, I was tempted to whip her in like manner again out here, but discarded the notion. I won't say I'm reserving it for only the most serious of transgressions, but I figured it to be a special occasions location on the estate.

In the barn, she crawled to the St. Andrew, or Andy 2.0, as she liked to call it, and awaited my orders.

“Back to the cross,” I said. “This won’t be lengthy, but I want you maintained.”

We hadn’t seen much of one another. Two nights before, Terry Cleaver, one of the medics, was running a guy with a heart attack. He opened morphine to give the patient, but the ambulance hit a bump, and Terry punched it into his own thigh. Intravenous morphine works faster, but intramuscular, as he had done, lasts longer.

He was stoned on arrival at the ER, and I got called to take the rest of his shift while he got shuttled home to sleep it off. I’d only gotten off at seven this morning. Fortunately, the overnight had been quiet and I’d slept. Unfortunately, the twin beds at the station are lumpy fuckers, and sure the hell were Laura-less.

I bound her to the cross, then started lashing as she growled with rising passions in the still air of the barn. In all, I laid in forty lashes, but not hard ones, not pushing the whip to full speed and using a thicker cracker. She was welted but nowhere close to bloody by the time I was done.

I coiled the whip and approached her, dropping my shorts, squatting a bit, then hunching upward, fucking her hard while she took it, bound and moaning. She came. She came hard, if the thrashing was any indication. A moment later, I growled as my cock erupted its seed into her. I drew back, shuddering, and kissed her deeply. She was surprised as I blindfolded her, something I seldom did.

“Now, don’t go anywhere, my love,” I teased.

“I guess I can hang out with Andy the Second all day,” she grinned. “He’s the strong and silent type, and I’m totally gaga for him.”

I wandered toward the house, delighted with her sass, and got one surprise for her, then to the garage for the other. Once that was in place, I returned to the barn. “Oh, good, you stayed put,” I teased, in a grand mood.

“What can I say? Andy is good company and hugs me well,” she returned. “I love the big lug.”

I chuckled as I removed her bonds. I left the blindfold on and led her to the garage, where I took her blindfold off. She gaped. “Oh, God, it looks just like my daddy’s old truck,” she breathed.

“Probably because it is his old truck,” I said. I was pleased to find the truck had a title and current registration, being used as a farm truck. The

paint had mostly flaked away, but the farmer had taken good mechanical care of the ¾ ton 4x4. I bought it from him while he looked at me as though I were crazy, until I told him why. His wife wept and the farmer's face reddened.

"You must really love her, Son," he said.

"I must," I agreed.

But obtaining the truck was only Step One. I had the engine overhauled, along with the transmission and clutch, as well as the entire interior and instrument panel. My buddy, Ray, put an amazing metallic black paint job on it, with purple pinstriping.

Laura approached the truck, hesitantly, weeping, then placed a hand reverently on the passenger window.

"I won't pretend this wasn't one hell of a lot of effort, but I had it restored showroom new," I grinned. "I even replaced the wiper blades and had the presence of mind to fill the tank. The title and registration paperwork are on the seat, ready to go in your name."

"I was heartbroken when I had to sell this truck back then," she said. "I ... I don't know how to say thank you, Master."

"I do," I said.

Laura turned to see me on one knee, both hands upraised. In one hand was a 22-karat gold chain with a BDSM triskele pendant. The pendant had three holes. In one, I had the jeweler place an emerald, her birthstone. In another was my birthstone, a ruby. In the third was a diamond for April, when we really became a couple and not two professionals carping at one another to deny our true feelings.

"The clasp on this only closes once, Laura. It's your collar, something prosaic that you can wear at all times. But it won't reopen, so it's for life. Be mine forever." I glanced at the other hand, in which was a box with an engagement ring. "Oh, and will you marry me, already?"

"Oh, God," she cried falling to her knees and into my arms, sobbing out a million emotions.

"I take that as a yes?"

"Forever, Master. Forever and always, yes!"

"Drop the tailgate of the truck and bend over," I ordered.

Laura grinned through teary eyes and hustled to obey her master and now fiancé. After I spanked, and then fucked her, I told her to get dressed and take me for a spin in her wheels. In the truck, I pointed to the garage

door remote, which would open the second bay. Now that my surprise had gone off, she would enjoy garage access.

We went for a long drive in the behemoth Chevy truck, Laura familiarizing herself with the clutch and four-on-the-floor, recently re-acquired skills between my Mustang and her Jeep. Finally, we hit the highway, and just drove, enjoying the day and the 2/70 air-conditioning, until she ran the tank nearly dry. We filled up at a Walmart, said fuck it, bought clothes, and checked into a tawdry motel, where we wrecked the sheets in a long sexual romp until the neighbor pounded on our wall and hollered to knock it off.

“I did, I did,” I called back, laughing, to Laura’s responding peals of delighted laughter.



We married a month later, almost a year to the day after I punched out Bobby Z. at Louie’s. It wasn’t a huge ceremony, but our nearest and dearest were there. Even my grandfather made the trip, as well as Cindy’s parents and sister, who all charmed Laura. Cindy’s dad pulled me aside and told me he was happy for me, that after all this time I could finally let Cindy go in peace. We hugged, brethren in that moment, united in grief that was finally laid to rest.

Reverend Hosea Washington of Holiness Church officiated. Marilyn was matron of honor and my cousin Mike, recently retired from the Air Force, was best man. Mike was in his Class-A uniform, an E-7 at retirement with an impressive array of ribbons. I was likewise in my Class-A uniform from the fire department, a uniform I seldom wore.

As we marched out of the church through the hail of birdseed, we saw that Captain Briggs, who happily gave away the bride in Laura’s father’s stead, had been busy. A good forty men from the fire department lined either side of the walk, in dress uniforms, and saluted as we marched past, under an arch of two ladder trucks, one ours and the other pressed into service from a town over. The getaway car, a 1980 Chevy truck, glittering

black and festooned in white shoe polish, even with a string of tin cans tied off to the bumper, awaited.

We hopped into the truck, fired her up, and drove away into our new life, both of us off-duty for the coming month. A reception was held at the house, and went late into the night, before the last of the guests went home and we could properly consummate the marriage.

“Master, a request?” she asked as we lay in bed, exhausted from our day.

“Even my toothbrush, if thy needs require, m’lady,” I said, grinning. What can I say? I was in a grand mood and, while I wasn’t drunk, I had consumed a generous amount of champagne.

“Put me on the post tomorrow, please,” she said. “You broke your slave out there, enslaved me once and for all out there. I beg you to start our marriage on that right step, Master, to lash me senseless, maybe scar me again, so I’ve no question from Day One that ...” she seemed to search for her words.

“That marriage only enslaves you more deeply to me?” I suggested.

“Yes!” she exclaimed.

What the hell, I figured. I’d decided on my own that the post would be for special occasions, right? What was going to be more special than finally marrying my beautiful and amazing Laura? I couldn’t imagine what that might be.

At her age, the risks of pregnancy were too high for us to make a child of our own, but we were discussing adoption, and even if we were ten years younger, I don’t think whipping her would be an appropriate response to a positive pregnancy test in any event. Besides, we wouldn’t leave for another two days, flying to Tampa to take a weeklong Caribbean cruise. I doubted I could whip her much at sea, although I had some makeshift ideas for that too.

“After breakfast, you are to crawl to the post to be horsewhipped and re-broken,” I decided. Already, my cock was hardening at the idea as we kissed once more and drifted to sleep, master and slave, husband and wife, undeniably in one another’s thrall. I can’t imagine being happier.

AFTERWORD

ELLIE

After our first live-write, people were saying we made a good team and needed to write a book together. Lucas approached me and asked what I thought. I was all on board, but I had four projects stacked up in front of any collaborative effort. He had the same, probably more. Our co-write dream faded with the passage of time. Then we did another live-write and that magic flared again.

It was time to take it to a new level, but we each had projects and deadlines looming. I messaged him one day and said ‘look, this will never happen if we don’t start.’ I told him I’d opened up a Google Word document and tossed in the first chapter. I said, this will probably take a year or two, but at least we could write when we had the time. I thought we’d write maybe a chapter a month, maybe every other week, tossing the ball between us. Well, that isn’t exactly what happened...

My words for Lucas while writing this have been ‘You’re KIIIIIIIIING ME!!!’ This man has kept me on my toes and on the edge of my seat throughout. Although I wrote this with him, we toyed and teased one another, tossing curve balls left and right. To say this hasn’t been a blast would be the understatement of the century.

To hear the story of how this book came about, and how it was created, you’ll just have to come chat with us.

LUCAS

Wow, what a wild ride this was. When I first approached Ellie several months back about us co-writing a novel, on the heels of several fan suggestions, she was dubious at first, and needed time to think, and to finish off many of her own projects. I figured what the hell, a stack of works-in-progress is a good problem for an author to have, far better than writer's block or carpal syndrome, right? I didn't take it personally. The truth is, we run around in the same circles but were unknown quantities to one another. Some time later, we did a live-write event on Facebook, co-writing a story under the heat of a one-hour time limit, and it was like we were one writer, and I think we both knew it was time to take this to a new level, so now we present *Off Duty* to you, the work of a pair of medical perverts. She slung out the first chapter of this novel and caught me by surprise, but I was on it like a chicken on a junebug.

When we first started this, Ellie guesstimated a year for us to finish this one, due to our own insane schedules and the things we obviously write independently of one another. But this became our addiction, and across the span of a mere sixteen days, we co-wrote this full-length novel in your hands, cresting 70,000 words, so I think she underestimated what we can do together, right? Bad Ellie! No cookie!

I write because I love writing. I mean, where else can I go be God, create places and people, orchestrate it all, and nobody put me in a straight-jacket and hurled me into a rubber room, right? This venture with Ellie has been a huge blast, exciting and fun, and I hope you all enjoyed reading this tale we've woven for you. For my part, I love what I do, as I've said, but this was maybe the most fun I've had writing. I'm a former paramedic but have never written about it, and I've never written a cock-of-the-walk character like Keith, who Ellie invented for me. This was miles outside my "comfort zone" but I loved every minute of it, and hated saying so long to Keith and Laura. Thank you, Ellie, for this opportunity and this wild and wonderful ride, and for the buckets of "words go here" laughs along the way. Seriously, I think we challenged one another at every turn, and I've remarked that our whole seems far greater than the sum of our parts. For my part, it's been a challenge I've relished, and I hope this isn't our last rodeo

together, and I'll bet it ain't. To you, our dear readers, thank you for reading, and keep your eyes peeled for what we write!

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

ELLIE MASTERS is a multi-genre author, writing the stories she loves to read. These are dark erotic tales. Or maybe sweet contemporary stories. How about a romantic thriller to whet your appetite? Ellie writes it all. Want to read passionate poems and sensual secrets? She does that too. Dip into the eclectic mind of Ellie Masters, spend time exploring the sensual realm where she breathes life into her characters and brings them from her mind to the page and into the heart of her readers every day.

When not writing, Ellie can be found doing the doctor thing, and when not saving lives, she spends her time outside, where her passion for all things outdoor reigns supreme: ATV-ing, scuba diving, hiking, and breathing fresh air are top on her list of favorite things. Ellie's favorite way to spend an evening is curled up on a couch, laptop in place, watching a fire, drinking a good wine, and bringing forth all the characters from her Mind-to-the-Page and eventually into the hearts of her readers.



LUCAS X. BLACK is a veteran novelist, formerly a paramedic, and entirely a redneck, born Mr. Redneck McNeckerson, in a cabin in de woods outside the burgeoning metroplex of West Bumblefuck, Texas, which is more or less still in the USA. Kinda. He is the author, thus far, of the *Josiah's Love and Justice* saga, several novellas, and *Lights ... Camera ... Surrender ...* as well as a wide array of works in fiction that keep him all kinds of busy.

When not writing at a fever pitch, he can be found bumblng about his house muttering random lines from *Star Wars* or *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, and farting at suspected silly English kuh-niggets, or perfecting his Yoda impersonations, and generally redneckng and being a redneck savant and non-technical kinky Luddite.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

LUCAS X. BLACK:

This has seriously been some of the absolute most fun I've ever had writing. First and foremost, I want to thank Ellie for believing in me, for taking a chance on me, and doing this project. She's been an amazing partner for this venture, and I devoutly hope this ain't our last rodeo, but I suspect we'll have more in times to come. Next, I have to thank Kim Lehnhardt. She's my PA, the one who keeps me sane. Okay, more or less sane. Alright, I still howl at the moon, but she keeps my ass organized, and no way could I do this without her. She also made this amazing book cover for *Off Duty*, entirely on her own, before we were even halfway done. She knows not to even ask for my suggestions on graphics. She just reads the manuscript and presents a cover, a system that's worked magnificently. She's also the wizard who did all the teasers our street teams have been using to promote this novel now in your hot little hands.

I also absolutely want to thank our beta readers, who brushed up those last few mistakes we missed in a hundred re-reads. They are, in no particular order, Aundrea Mielke, Deana Flinchum, Donna Lorah, Sisilia Bailey, and Lisa Pichner. Additionally, Deana, Lisa, and Sisilia are on my Blackhearts team along with Vicky Smith. Hats off to all you wonderful ladies for your efforts on our behalf to get this book into your hands. All of you occupy a special place in what passes for my heart.

But I also want to thank you, our readership, for reading this book, and for the support you've helped us to give to the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

Ellie and I both have a soft spot for kids, and your support heartens me, so, again, thank you. This is Lucas X. Black, checking out of this one, reminding you that since all you seek is in the last place you look, look there first and save a whole lotta time, okay?

LXB

ELLIE MASTERS:

Lucas left me a placeholder, saying “Words go here.” When I set up our ‘living’ document in Google docs, my OCD was in full force. I made chapter headings and placeholders for text. The words I used were ‘Words go here.’ Well, I think poor Lucas thought I was trying to help his sorry ass out, showing him where he needed to type. Anyway, it became a gag between us, and I loved seeing him tease me as we added more and more chapters.

Lucas, I’d like to thank you for making this experience something I won’t ever forget. I don’t think I’ve ever had so much fun writing a book. It was MORE fun, because you were there with me, pushing me to write, write, write! And I enjoyed, literally watching you create your words in real time as I leaned forward staring at the screen, urging you to write faster so I could have my turn again. Knowing you watched me too, made it even more exhilarating. Lucas has been an amazing source of support and laughs.

There wasn’t a single difficult part of this project. I don’t think I’ve laughed or smiled as much than crafting this tale. To say we were struck by our muses...really misses the point. There was a creative synergy in force, a bit spooky at times with how aligned our thoughts were. This tale was written without a script, we winged it the entire way, setting each other up at the end of each chapter. Somehow, it all came together into something I’m still a little bit awed by. I had to write, because I needed to know what came next, then I would eagerly watch Lucas lay down his words. We’re already talking about the next project...because...because writing together has become that addictive.

I'd like to thank Kim Lehnhardt, Lucas' PA, who designed our cover, teasers, organized pretty much everything, and was a wonderful support throughout. She pulled the essence of this tale outta our minds and created the most amazing cover! Kim, thank you...You rock!

To my alpha reader, Shea, your support and encouragement is a true gift. Your honesty in pointing out inconsistencies, plot gaps, things that work, and things that don't, is invaluable. You work hard to make me look better and I can't thank you enough.

To our beta readers, your eyes caught all the boo-boos we left behind. Thank you for scouring our tale, and dressing it up for its debut into the world. You have no idea how grateful I am.

I'd like to thank my street team, the ELLZ BELLZ, who are tireless supporters of my writing and amazing friends. I love and adore each of you, thank you for your support, and none of this would be as much fun without you cheering me on.

Finally, writing and creating people and worlds is fun and all, godlike even, but it means nothing without someone to share it with. You, the reader, are what makes this worth all the hard work...(Um....there really was no hard work writing this novel...I've never had words flow so easily)...but what fun is there in that, if we can't share it with our readers?

But most of all, this is a labor of love. Lucas and I are donating all proceeds to the Make-A-Wish Foundation. Kids are special to each of us. There was a time, in my past, when Make-A-Wish entered my life, granting the most amazing wish to my younger son. My son's story had a happy ending, and this is my chance to pay it back. Thank you for buying this book and contributing to making another child's wish come true.

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OTHER WORKS BY LUCAS

COMING UP!

From Bethany. Copyright © 2017 by Lucas X. Black. All rights reserved:

I was out of town on business, at a convention of sorts, when my phone chirped a notification I certainly didn't expect. It was from my security system, and there had been an internal breach. Wondering what the hell was going on, I took the elevator to my room, booted my laptop, and grumbled.

Bethany, whom I had hired to deep-clean my house in my absence, had gone through my second-floor home office and accessed the door that led up a hidden staircase to my third-floor dungeon, my finished attic. I wondered what had gotten into her, wondered if she was going to give me grief, as I watched the motion-activated video, using my headphones for the audio.

She walked about the dungeon, her face showing surprise and nervousness at the array of weapons of ass destruction, as well as the dungeon furniture, most of it covered in plastic sheeting. I went up there every week or so to practice my whips, but hadn't had anyone up there in most of a year, since Laura moved away, transferred to some shithole in Michigan in a corporate restructuring.

I watched, riveted, torn between arousal and annoyance as Bethany stripped naked, folding her clothes neatly and setting them on a whipping

bench. She wandered along the wall of floggers, and chose the wickedest of the lot, one with six thin and tightly braided falls, with smooth metal tips crimped to the end of each fall, guaranteed to impart much pain at full-strength, then sank to her knees.

She was nothing less than a beauty, needful of more money than her job paid, and I could feel my cock stirring as I gazed upon the contours of her body, her kinked copper hair seeming a force of nature in its own right. I wondered what I was about to see. In a way, I felt like I was violating her in what she surely thought was absolute privacy. On the other hand, she had entered, somehow or another, a room I kept locked with a separate key than the rest of the house took, even a different brand, and I kept one key on my ring, which was in my pocket, and the other in my safe, which she hadn't opened, or another alarm would have gone off, and the police would have descended upon my house like an avenging angel of a wrathful god. So, with that in mind, I had the absolute right to watch what she was doing.

"Five hundred," Bethany said, barely above a whisper. "You deserve this for violating him. No mercy, Bethany. You deserve punishment, not play. And no orgasms for a week, you stupid bitch. You knew better than to do this shit. God, this is going to be bad." Her preamble done, she swung the flogger sidearm, letting it wrap around and land on her back, in what I judged to be a harsh lash, one that made her shiver a long moment before steeling herself and slashing again. Another angle showed her from behind, and I could see the marks were vivid, glad that I'd let the salesman talk me into the premium system with high-resolution cameras.

Bethany kept lashing, lash after lash, sobbing at the pain as she continued the self-flagellation through 120 lashes before she dropped the flogger, screamed, and fell sobbing to the floor, curled up in a ball for several minutes. She rose again to her knees. "That was your only freebie, bitch," she snarled. "Take the remainder or you have at least one hundred added to your sentence, you nosy little bitch." She was silent and still for a moment, then moaned, "oh, God," and resumed her self-flagellation, furious strokes spaced eight or ten seconds apart. I have to say I admired her resolve. Redheads, in my experience, mark more vividly than others, mostly being of fairer skin. But even so, I was seeing the marks on her back of a harsh whipping, a merciless beating, in fact, and she didn't ease up through four hundred lashes before she dropped the flogger again, groaning as she worked out a cramp in her right hand. It took a few minutes, and for

her sake, I hoped Bethany slept on her back, and wondered if there was a husband or boyfriend who was going to see her marks, and how he would react, if so.

After a long moment, she picked up the flogger again. “An added one hundred,” she said, then countered herself. “No, one hundred fifty, and any more weakness brings the total sentence to a thousand. You will learn better than to pull this kind of stupid shit.” She steeled herself, then started slinging the flogger again, screaming at the first lash, which she drove a bit far. The tips caught her on the side of her chest, at the start of her right breast. I knew on most people, that region was terribly sensitive. I think she was one of most people. But she was devoted, dedicated to enduring the entirety of her self-imposed sentencing. The lashing continued, although she was visibly weakened through the last fifty or so strokes, but the flogger wasn’t a lightweight, although well-balanced. At long last, it was done. Her upper back was a mess.

“Jesus,” she whispered, then broke down bawling, curled on the floor for several long minutes. Finally, she recovered, and knelt, head bowed. “Your weakness means you also are barred two weeks from orgasm,” she said at length, then stood and hung up the flogger. She dressed herself and went downstairs, where the monitor showed her putting the door back on its hinges and hammering the pins into place.

After, despite what I knew had to be terrible pain from her marks, she broke her tail working, polishing windows on every upstairs room from the inside, and dusting every surface about. She even opened the windows in the bedrooms to bring in fresh air. Giving the devil her due, she worked her ass off, and I gave her props for that, even as deeply annoyed as I was with her.

By then, it was growing dark. Bethany stopped for a time and opened a small ice chest she’d brought with her, and bolted down a sandwich, chips, and a Coke for her supper, not even helping herself to a Coke from my fridge. She balled up the trash and tossed it into the kitchen can, then busied herself cleaning my fridge until it sparkled like new.

“Okay, tomorrow. I’ll get the floors tomorrow,” she said, then left.

I played back her self-flagellation and grew erect, wishing I’d been the one laying the leather to the beautiful Bethany. Laura had left long since, and I had been too long without the company of a woman, tangled up in my work, and in family drama around three deaths since she’d left for

Michigan. While we'd parted on good terms, she rapidly excised me from her life, never answering my calls or e-mails. After three weeks, I took the hint. I didn't even send her a birthday or Christmas card. To put a point on it, my balls were heavy and demanded release.

Bethany's beautiful image was on my mind as I slid my pants down and pumped my cock, hard and fast, until I exploded a load into a wad of Kleenex. It cleared my mind and I felt better, relieved and relaxed. I returned to the convention, but was bored. I'm not much of a gambler or into the flash and glitz, and had already gotten what I needed from the convention, so Las Vegas had little to offer besides people-watching. I pondered and discarded the idea of a call girl, something I'd never before done, just for the novelty. But the idea didn't appeal. Tired from my day, I returned to my room, smoked a cigar and drank some whiskey from a bottle I'd brought with me, then called it a night.

LXB

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OTHER WORKS BY ELLIE

Just Released!

Becoming His
A Collective Novel
(Part II Learning to Breathe)

What if I can't give you red or green?

That had been Sally's response to Derek's question about becoming his submissive. He ordered her to make a choice. One opened doors. The other ended everything before it even began. She'd never know if she belonged in Derek's world unless she took a leap of faith, but she was smart enough to appreciate the inherent dangers of moving too fast.

Red or Green. She needed a middle ground. A *yellow* would have been nice, but he'd only offered *red* or *green*. Had that been intentional?

Make a choice, he'd said.

Her decision hung somewhere between yes and no. She'd inadvertently found something worth living for in Derek, or rather had been surprised he'd brought such a richness of flavor back into her dull existence. He'd promised her a taste of something more, and she wanted to savor it, explore it, and perhaps live it, too.

The force of his personality intrigued her, and he had an uncanny ability to delve deep inside her mind and know exactly what she would do,

sometimes before she even knew which way she would jump. What he offered promised to spice up an otherwise bland and flavorless existence. *Red or green?*

However, as tantalizing as that night on his yacht had been, his ultimatum gave her pause.

You know what I want, he said. You need to decide two things.

His words repeated in her mind, turning over and over, twisting around and around, generating more questions than she had answers.

She'd tried to give Derek a knee-jerk response at Del Mar's diner. Beating on the window of the town car, she'd ordered the driver, Dan, to take her back. Again, Derek had read her mind, knowing what she would do before she'd even formulated the thoughts. Perhaps in ordering Dan to ignore her, Derek had forced a pause on what they were becoming.

Dan, however, turned mute on her, ignoring her demand to turn around and take her back to Derek. Adhering to Derek's orders, Dan kept driving. He didn't take her to the garage where she'd left her car after last night's ballet but drove her to the Medical Examiner's office, where a dead body and a long afternoon of work waited.

It didn't matter that she understood the why behind Derek's actions. His decision to overrule her choice was a difficult pill to swallow. Nevertheless, there was nothing she could do about it.

Dan drove, parked, and opened her door.

"Miss Sally..." Dan was all brusque and business-like, except for the odd address: not Doctor Levenson, but Miss Sally, which implied he, too, was involved in the lifestyle. "Your car will be delivered in a few hours."

Was that a smirk on his face? Yes? No? Great, now she was imagining things. But damn if that didn't look like amusement twitching at the corners of his eyes. It didn't escape her notice that by not having her car, Derek had effectively trapped her at work.

"You do realize you basically kidnapped me?" Crossing her arms over her chest, she straightened to her full height, falling far short of Dan's six-foot-plus frame. Her attempt to stare him down failed.

That twitching turned into a full-bodied smirk. Yeah, he was having fun with this. "I'm not in the business of kidnapping unwilling women."

"Take me back." At least her voice held firm. This man had an undeniable presence about him, too, but she refused to be bullied by him. Dan lacked the overwhelming-ness of Derek but still exuded a gentle

power. It felt very different, softer than Derek, more of a caregiver than a master.

He shut the back door of the town car and placed a hand on top of the roof. "Master Derek has instructed me to remind you about the case you have waiting."

Of course she had a case waiting. The panicked tone of her office assistant, Bruce, had her itching to see what it was about this body that had him on edge. He'd been at the office for five years. Mostly clerical in nature, his duties extended to the care and maintenance of the lab's equipment, body preparation and disposition once she completed her exams, and whatever odd jobs required attention.

Dead bodies were a part of the job. As they came and went, he'd seen his share of mutilations, stabbings, gunshots, and worse. Why this particular body had him on edge had her concerned.

Derek and Dan were correct on that front. She did have a job to do, and it wasn't something she'd walk away from. Actually, right now, she could use the distraction.

Derek's words whispered in her head. *You need to decide...Are you willing to surrender your will?* That question tunneled straight to her gut, twisting into a tangled mess, but that was nothing compared to what it had done to her heart. He'd burrowed deep with those words and lodged his presence firmly in her life. However, it was the second question that gave her the greatest pause.

And why?

Hell if she knew. Maybe Derek had been on to something? That second question needed to be answered before she answered the first. Until she discovered the answer to *why*, there wouldn't be a way to answer about surrendering to him.

A gust of wind tickled her cheek, blew hair into her mouth, and flicked at her eyes. She gathered the long length of her hair and secured it into a ponytail. Maybe her subconscious would stew over Derek's questions while she lost herself in work.

Tugging in a deep breath, she blew it out in a huff. "Fine," she said, "but don't think this is over."

"Miss Sally..." Dan's brows tugged together, a deep furrow creasing his forehead, "I'm supposed to remind you to look over the websites Master Derek assigned." Dan seemed to know a great deal about Derek's plans.

“I’m well aware of his assignments,” she snapped, then turned, leaving Dan at the curb.

Breezing into the front office, she was surprised to find it empty. She headed to the locker room to change and grabbed a pair of scrubs from the rack of clean laundry. A few minutes later, she’d changed and tied her ponytail into a messy bun. That was the only drawback of this job. She had to keep her hair up.

Grabbing a cap and mask, she headed into the exam room, startling poor Bruce with her sudden appearance. The tray in his hands fell to the floor with a loud crash. Instruments spilled across the linoleum.

Bruce spun around. “For the love of God, why do you always do that to me?”

“Sorry.” She headed to the rack of gloves attached to the wall and snapped on a pair of size small, blue nitrile gloves. Ah, the smell of rubber. So it begins. “Let me help you with that.”

She bent down to help gather up the instruments. He’d have to get another set. Sterility didn’t matter with the dead, but they needed a clean set to avoid contamination of potential evidence. Her methods and practices were pristine, and she didn’t want to think about what could be on this floor.

They placed the instruments back on the metal tray. She stood and stretched, turning to take in the body while Bruce went to grab another set of instruments.

Unremarkable in appearance, the victim appeared to be late thirties. He looked oddly reposed in death, peaceful. A stark contrast to the ragged gash over his abdomen, and yes, there was indeed a white, creamy substance leaking out from the edges of the wound.

A white sheet covered his waist. Why Bruce insisted on maintaining the dignity of the dead confused her to no end, but he did. He did it with an almost religious fanaticism which was odd considering the first step of her exam was always a full series of photographs. For that, everybody got stripped. The dead had no need for modesty. One of the things she loved about Bruce, he didn’t discriminate. He covered the women as well, drawing a sheet over their hips and using smaller towels to drape across their breasts.

“Tell me about him.” She walked over to her desk and grabbed the camera.

“He was found in a back alley.”

“And why the urgency?”

Rushing a report helped no one. Meticulous adherence to protocols ensured the information she gathered allowed the District Attorneys to successfully prosecute their cases. She also worked closely with Homicide. People like Detective Mackenzie were crucial to the successful gathering of evidence. They were all critical links in that ever-important chain of custody for evidence collection.

Whoever had a bug up their butt, and thought they could pressure her through Bruce to rush this exam, could cool their heels. This exam would take as long as it took.

Already past noon, complicated autopsies like this one would keep her well into the evening hours, and she probably wouldn't finish processing all the slides until Friday.

With a sigh, she stepped close. At first, she did nothing, taking a moment to form initial impressions. The man had been dead for some time. Lividity had set in hours ago.

“Did they take liver temps?” She turned to Bruce, hoping those on scene had followed procedure.

“They did. Liver temp on scene was 19.5 Celsius.”

She did the math. Every hour past death, core body heat dropped by one-and-a-half degrees Celsius until it equilibrated with ambient temperatures. Holding out her hand, she asked. “Get me the temperature probe.”

Ever helpful, Bruce handed over the slim metal probe.

“Can you get me a report on the last 48-hours of ambient temperatures, please?”

“On it,” he said, sitting at the desktop computer. The tapping of the keys, as he searched relevant information, broke up the silence of the sterile exam room.

She inserted the temperature probe through the same hole the on sight examiner had used, making certain to hit the center of the liver. The temperature stabilized at 17 Celsius.

The deceased's face had taken on the classic grimace associated with contractions as the protein, ATP, drained from his muscles' cells. Rigor had set in.

“Can I have my recorder?”

Bruce handed over her voice recorder, and she settled it around her neck.

“Temps last night were in the low fifties,” he said.

“Fahrenheit?” He’d have to convert that.

“Sorry. Ten Celsius.”

“Check the math on the liver temps, please.”

With a push of a button, she spoke into the recorder using a clear voice. “Body is clearly in the rigid stage of rigor mortis. Facial, upper neck, and shoulder muscles are tense.” She lifted an arm and checked bicep and wrist flexor movement. Completely fixed. “Lower arms as well.”

Pinching the toes, she moved to push on the ankles which completed her assessment. “Entire body is stiff, which is in line with whole body rigidity occurring eight to twelve hours after death. That with liver temperatures...” She glanced at Bruce.

“If we assume 10 Celsius as an average temperature...” He pulled out a calculator and did the math. “If the liver temp was 19.5 Celsius on scene, then time of death was...” He glanced at the screen.

She completed the calculations in her head. “Time of death is approximately eleven hours from when the team arrived on scene.” The body had dropped another two and a half degrees since then, which meant the man had died around midnight last night.

Bruce nodded, his calculator confirming what she already knew.

“Okay,” she said, more to herself than to Bruce. “Let’s do this.”

She snapped an initial set of pictures, making certain to get quality images of lividity. It was impossible to know what the prosecuting team would find useful in their case. In her line of work, more was always better.

“Interesting tattoos,” Bruce said.

“Yeah, incredible really.”

“They have the same three-dimensional effect as that junkie we looked at. Remember? The one with the rose thorns?” Bruce added.

“Yeah, that must be like a new trend.” She handed the camera to Bruce. “Get a good set of pictures of the tattoo, please.”

In cases of unknown identity, standard procedure required dental molds and X-rays, in addition to finger prints. In recent years, with the prevalence of tattoos invading mainstream society, they had better luck if they used tattoos to identify bodies.

It was still a long, laborious process, but fortunately not one she had to worry about. Bruce would turn over the photographs of the tattoos to the crime scene investigators. They would do the legwork and track down the tattoo parlor that had inked it and hopefully match receipts to discover who John or Jane Doe might be.

Bruce took the camera and clicked away, leaving her a moment to admire the skill of the artist who'd inked the tattoo. Another three-dimensional rendering, this man had a scorpion crawling over his left shoulder. The shadowing made it look as if it were real, rather than inked into the skin. Over the right bicep, a black widow had a foreleg lifted, and silken strands jetted backward, forming a web over the man's shoulder. It curved around to his scapula. As impressive as that one was, the one that took her breath away was the raw, ragged edges of skin peeling back to reveal a metallic framework inside. It looked so real, she had to touch it to convince herself it was simply a tattoo.

Instead of the ghost inside the machine, this was a depiction of the machine inside the man. It was at once poetic and profound.

There was a gash over the abdomen. A real one. Congealed blood had crusted at the skin edges, and with the contraction of tissues, a creamy, white substance oozed out of the cut. No wonder it had Bruce on edge.

She tented her fingers and forced herself to ignore the obvious. That gash would have her full attention soon enough. For now, she fell back on her highly-structured exam protocols and moved to the head of the bed to begin.

BOOKS BY ELLIE

Learning to Breathe: A Collective Novel
Publisher: JEM Publishing, LLC
Released May 2017

Blurb: A Contemporary Romantic Suspense / Thriller...

WORK. EAT. SLEEP. REPEAT.

Since her husband's death, Sally Levenson's life has become dull and monotonous. She's the county Coroner, and while the dead reveal their secrets on the exam table, she hides from the living. But hiding isn't working anymore. Sally is trapped in a bland, colorless existence. She can't breathe! She's suffocating and wants more, whatever that might be.

When the dark and mysterious Derek Lemark enters her world, he opens doors to new possibilities, reveals dark desires, and challenges her to take a

second chance on life. He dares her to breathe again, and promises...more. But what he offers comes at a price.

Sally must choose: take the next step, or speak the one word which will end everything before it even begins.



Twist of Fate
Publisher: JEM Publishing, LLC
Released February 2017

Blurb: A Contemporary Romantic Suspense / Thriller...

Melissa is a victim, capable of attracting only the worst kind of man. She seeks redemption for crimes she did not commit.

CJ struggles to absolve himself of an unforgivable act. He seeks salvation through heroism, but fails every day.

Our prince, a man with the blackest of hearts and an endless capacity to inflict pain, seeks validation for his work. His corruption is absolute, but even he will sacrifice for love.

Meanwhile, a man of pure evil invades their lives, weaving his sinister threads and binding their futures.

But Fate has different plans for them all. As tornados tear through the town, their lives will be uprooted, twisted, and tangled beyond what any of them could foresee.



Sensual Secrets: Not Your Mother's Coffee Table Book
Publisher: JEM Publishing, LLC
Released November 2016

Blurb: This isn't a novel...it's not a book of poems...it's something
MAGNIFICENT!

Enter a world of luscious thoughts and decadent desires. Within these pages you will find a momentary escape from the real world as you sink into a sensuous reality, where fact and fiction combine to sweep you away in an unadulterated fantasy.

Why is it called "Not Your Mother's Coffee Table Book?"

Because, the stories and images inside this book are not fit for younger eyes. They are however, meant to inspire your imagination; to take you on a sensual journey into "what if" and "what may be." It's a key to the discovery of the soul, a path less taken, a road you will want to travel again and again.

It's something to share with your lover. You'll want to keep it close at hand. Under your pillow might just be the perfect place!

The concept for SENSUAL SECRETS: Not Your Mother's Coffee Table Book came to me in the Fall of 2016. I enjoy writing erotic shorts, snippets of stories, kernels of revelation, simple moments where we can dip our toes into another place, a sensual realm where we can dream and play. Sensual Secrets is a compilation of my sinful shorts, passionate poems, and sexy short stories written this past year, all bundled into a visual feast for your enjoyment.



Ashes to New: an Angel Fire Rock Romance Prequel
Publisher: JEM Publishing, LLC
Released October 2016

Blurb: Ashes to New, prequel to Heart's Insanity: An Angel Fire Rock Romance, is not a romance. It's a story about the fiercest kind of love. It's about enduring. Surviving. And never giving up.

Elsbeth and Forest are two teenagers trapped within an abusive foster home. They endure horrible abuse, but find there is light in the darkest places. And hope is as limitless as the summer sky. All they need is the love of one another to survive.



Heart's Insanity: An Angel Fire Rock Romance
Publisher: JEM Publishing, LLC

Released August 2016

Blurb: Skye Summers endured a tragic past. She wants what the past stole, and despite lingering scars, she's surviving and thriving. Now she cures the sick, heals the wounded, and takes care of those clinging to life. The only person she can't heal is herself, because Skye is too broken for love.

Ash Dean has it all: Fame, fortune, and the adoration of screaming fans. The constant parties, drugs, alcohol, and an endless string of one-night stands are taking their toll. He gives and his fans take, until he's lost within the crowd. He wants someone to see him for the man he wishes to be rather than the one he's become.

One fate...

Two lives...

Three Days...

No sex.

That's the proposition...

It would be insane to accept and Skye's a fool to agree, but she's tired of playing it safe.

It's time to take a leap of faith, besides what could go wrong?



Changing Roles
Publisher: Loose Id
Released March 2016

Blurb: Kate Summers's career on the Police Force came to an implosive end when the Mayor's wife exposed her secret life as the Mistress of Pain.

Kate lost not only her detective's badge, but something much more valuable. She lost her confidence as a Mistress of men.

She now scrapes by as a private investigator, feeding off the misery of others. When the Mayor and his wife ask her to investigate the murder of their daughter, Kate faces a difficult decision. To follow the leads, she must reenter the world that destroyed her career and go undercover as a submissive to a noted Dom. Only Kate swore she'd never endure the submissive role again.

Yet Jake Davenport is the one dominant fearless enough to not only challenge her rules, but break them. While accepting her new role and the erotic thrill it brings her is difficult enough, Jake's complicated past raises many questions. As her investigation progresses, the man she's fallen in love with might just be her number one suspect.

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BOOKS BY LUCAS

Josiah's Love and Justice, Volume I: Four Slaves

Blurb:

Josiah Bailey is a successful attorney married to Molly, a physician specializing in sports medicine. But that's what they do to earn their livings, but not quite what they are in deeper places within. Josiah has found a rather unique niche for himself and his interests in BDSM. He works as a beadle, paid to punish and train slaves belonging to others, whose owners have difficulty doing so. He also owns an old horse farm, where he taps into the competitive spirit of other doms and masters with rickshaw races held on occasion. But an unrelated chain of events meet and intertwine, and in time he finds himself owner of several amazing women, a flurry of remarkable and devoted slaves, loving him and loving being under his power.



Josiah's Love and Justice, Volume II: Bonding

Blurb:

As the story of Josiah and his expanded family of slaves continues, the family expands further when new clientele are taken on, potentially to be adopted. Elaine comes in, injured from an accident at home, with her slaves Marvin and Beth, who have a most unhappy history with Darla. It is a history that killed Darla's marriage, and threatens far worse damage to her as fresh revelations from Marvin, and then from Beth, disturb Darla even further. Conflict arises, deep and profound, as the four become seven, and Josiah is left having to make a map into their future, to end the conflicts and bind them as family. Will his love and lashes succeed in bonding the seven into one, or are the divisions simply too deep for the damage to be undone?



**Josiah's Love and Justice, Volume III:
Slave Life**

Blurb:

Astrid and Becky have joined the family, and things seem to be normalizing, when a death changes their lives forever. In the midst of it, one slave meets with redemption and forgiveness. Meanwhile, a friendship is forged between Josiah and Simon, master of Anita. Anita is an attorney but seems to have but a nodding acquaintance with ethics, and Simon wants to learn more of dominance, to master Anita more effectively. Along the way, the bonds of Clan Bailey grow stronger than ever.



**Josiah's Love and Justice, Volume IV:
Bound in Love**

Blurb:

The saga continues as a new client arrives to be trained and kept in custody as her master travels overseas on a work assignment where he cannot take her. Her conduct opens up old wounds inside Becky, and a counselor's presence only makes things worse, but the family rallies around to try to heal those wounds once and for all. Meanwhile, Anita's family shocks her with their knowledge of her lifestyle and a dose of tough love. A profoundly changed Molly strives to make amends to people she wronged not long ago, and in this, blunders onto help for Becky. As a way of repayment, the slaves all contribute to a special gift for Josiah, a gift of their love for him and understanding of an important part of his past. Along the way, bonds tighten among the family, as master and slaves all grow together.



**Josiah's Love and Justice, Volume V:
Into Tomorrow**

Blurb:

As the saga comes toward its end, the family meets with fresh new challenges and some old skeletons in long-forgotten closets. Tim reaches out to Darla through General Orton with a request, and old scars are ripped open in a confrontations that will hopefully lead to long-needed healing for all concerned. And Josiah receives an unexpected call from someone he didn't know existed, his niece, asking him to come to San Antonio to attend his long-lost brother, who has his own burdens to add to Josiah's shoulders. Along the way, the family grows tighter with one another, and stronger, leading to a signal event.



Legacy
Released May 18, 2016

Blurb:

Jim Ford is a widower, turning to work where he used to turn to his wife and slave Colleen. Until one day his old friend Corbin calls and, with his wife and slave Belinda, charges into his life. The two need a huge favor from Jim, and in it, a huge gift for Jim.



Blind Date
Released June 11, 2016

Blurb:

Audrey works with Jack's brother and Jack works with Audrey's best friend. A matchmaking campaign is launched and the two agree to meet for a blind date, lunch at Mabel's Tables followed by a baseball game. The date is going wonderfully until a thoughtless comment from Audrey derails it, and Jack calls things off. Two hours later, after an aimless drive to cool his annoyance, he arrives home. Moments later, his doorbell rings. It's Audrey, bearing a ready apology and ready to pay the price for her thoughtless words.



Punishment
Released June 22, 2016

Blurb:

Evelyn and Mark are a dominant and submissive living far from one another, able to see one another a few times yearly around their careers. Evelyn misbehaves and Mark sends her to a dominatrix for punishment, but Mark has a special surprise in store for his Evelyn.



Taming
Released July 20, 2016

Blurb:

Ed has known the beautiful Allison virtually his entire life. But Ed went on to become an adult, and Allison, once his babysitter, never quite grew up. Allison's immaturity finds her waking Ed with a 3:00 AM phone call and Ed reading her the riot act, one that resonates with her and makes her realize she needs to grow up. But she knows she needs Ed's help in her taming and training.



Evolution
Released August 5, 2016

Blurb:

My name is Vince Tucker. I met Nicki Stuart as a customer at the gas station where she works. I always liked to flirt a bit with her, until one morning a flirtation led to a clumsy accident, which led to a test balloon, which led to a date that led to ... well, read and see.



Detention
Released August 22, 2016

Blurb:

Mitzi, 18 years old, was caught cheating on a final exam. The headmaster, Mr. Dorsey, gives her a choice of expulsion or remaining in detention, being punished through the winter break. Mitzi knows her parents will bar her from returning home in such dishonor, so what other choice has she? Along the way, she discovers much about herself.



Submissions

Lucas X. Black has gathered a collection of tales.

Legacy Blind Date Detention Evolution Punishment Taming And the never-before-published Indentured, the tale of Elizabeth Martin, who is purchased as an indenture in 1757 Georgia Colony by David Montgomery as a gift to his son Thomas, visiting from his own plantation.



Disciplines

Blurb:

Lucas X. Black brings you four new tales for your reading pleasure: Breaking Peggy: Wesley and Peggy have been master and slave for a long while, and are preparing to take a far deeper step into his dominance and her submission. Girl Next Door: Gabrielle, known to all as Cubbie, is eighteen and orphaned, and has more than a crush on her neighbor, Ken.

She comes to him and confesses she's had her eye on him, and even shows a video of Ken with his ex, offering her surrender. Will Ken take her or send her away? Barista: A man with two slaves answers a knock at the door. The visitor is a barista who's held a crush on Laura, gutting up to ask her if she's interested. To Love, Honor, and Obey: Cathy has been a bad wife to Ike, who finally has enough, packs his things, and leaves. She goes to her best friend Zoe to bemoan Ike's departure. Zoe cuts Cathy no slack, but shows her friend a whole new way to conduct her marriage, in surrendering to her husband.



Lights ... Camera ... Surrender

Blurb:

Meet Eddie and Josie Forrest, a married couple living west of Houston. Eddie manages a prefab shop and Josie is a day trader, working from home. The passion has faded from their marriage. Afraid of her reaction if she learned his interests, Eddie has taken to watching S&M porn many evenings. This might have gone on for years, but after the cat knocks her computer off a table and destroys it, Josie gets on Eddie's computer and discovers his interests. She is surprised that these things arouse her so. That night, Josie gives Eddie her surrender, for all time. They wind up recording their activities in the guest room of their house, which becomes their dungeon, and at Josie's urging, they upload videos to a website. Their friends Gene and Marjorie Jordan are headed toward divorce after Marjorie learns he's having an affair, until Marjorie gets an anonymous e-mail detailing her years of mistreatment of Gene, and a link to Eddie and Josie's video, a video that changes several lives forever and binds two families, and others, into one.

CONNECT WITH ELLIE

If you would like to read this book with like-minded readers and be in Q&A sessions with Ellie Masters, please join her Facebook readers' group.

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CONNECT WITH LUCAS

If you would like to read this book with like-minded readers and be in Q&A sessions with Lucas X. Black, please join his Facebook readers' group.

Lucas X. Black: Lucas X. Black Fans (not the actor but a novelist)

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/LucasBlackFans/>

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Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/Author.LucasXBlack/>

Fan Group

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/LucasBlackFans/>

Twitter:

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FINAL THOUGHTS

We began this tale on May 6, 2017, and finished the first draft on May 22, 2017. Jesus, we're both going to die of writer's cramp!



Thank you for purchasing this book. All proceeds are being donated to the Make-A-Wish Foundation.



Thank you for making a child's wish come true!

If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review. Reviews, and word of mouth, are the number one way to get this book into more readers' hands. We thank you in advance for taking the time to leave a few comments in your review.

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