

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

THE EXECUTIVE LOUNGE

Angela Benedetti

Contents

Love Has No Boundaries	3
The Executive Lounge.....	6
CHAPTER ONE.....	7
CHAPTER TWO.....	13
CHAPTER THREE.....	22
CHAPTER FOUR.....	29
CHAPTER FIVE.....	37
CHAPTER SIX	46
CHAPTER SEVEN.....	53
CHAPTER EIGHT.....	63
CHAPTER NINE	71
CHAPTER TEN.....	82
CHAPTER ELEVEN	93
CHAPTER TWELVE	102
CHAPTER THIRTEEN.....	112
CHAPTER FOURTEEN.....	122
CHAPTER FIFTEEN.....	130
CHAPTER SIXTEEN.....	138
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN.....	143
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN.....	152
CHAPTER NINETEEN.....	158
CHAPTER TWENTY.....	169
Author Bio.....	177

Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

THE EXECUTIVE LOUNGE

By Angela Benedetti

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved worldwide.

This eBook may be distributed freely in its entirety courtesy of the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group*. This eBook may not be sold, manipulated or reproduced in any format without the express written permission of the author.

The Executive Lounge, Copyright © 2013 Angela Benedetti

Cover Design by Goodreads M/M Romance Group

This ebook is published by the *M/M Romance Group* and is not directly endorsed by or affiliated with Goodreads Inc.

THE EXECUTIVE LOUNGE

By Angela Benedetti

Photo Description

A slightly dazed-looking young man in a rumpled suit is sitting next to a motorcycle, cuffed to it by his wrists. He doesn't seem to be at all unhappy with his situation.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

It happened so quickly and was so unpredictable and completely out of control. A last minute, scratch that, a last second business trip out of town. A surprise office party for the CEO at the end of the very first day. BTW, does he look familiar or is my second martini and jet-lag messing with me? Late night bar hopping after that... and who on earth suggested checking out a BDSM club while we were at it? Certainly it couldn't have been my idea; I know how to keep my kinks well hidden and under control. But here I am, chained to a bike like somebody's pet and... happy? Damn if I haven't seen that bike somewhere else up close before...

Sincerely,

Mammarella

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: businessmen, lawyers, BDSM, public activity, age gap, over age 40

Content warnings: dub-con/non-con

Word count: 60,737

THE EXECUTIVE LOUNGE

By **Angela Benedetti**

CHAPTER ONE

The first thing I need you to understand is that I really can hold my liquor. Seriously, I'm not a lightweight, I know my capacity, and it's pretty damn good, plus I wasn't even drinking all that much. But Greg sprang this trip on me at the last minute, and I was up all night finding a twenty-four-hour cleaner and doing laundry and...

Okay, let me back up.

I'd been job hunting since graduation and was getting kind of desperate when I got a call-back from Castle Silicasystems. I did my best not to sound hysterically grateful when I made the appointment, then got into my best blue interview suit and headed down to their campus in beautiful downtown San Jose, praying to everyone from Ares to Zoroaster for luck and favors.

Castle has been around a while and is big enough to have an HR department, so it was another five weeks before I actually reported in to work, but finally, one bright Monday morning, there I was.

It took me most of the day to get out of HR—and my signing hand was sore by then, seriously—but I finally made it up to Greg Wyatt's office. Greg was the CTO and had decided that my shiny new degree and I were just what he needed in a personal assistant.

Yeah, I was a glorified secretary with an MBA, and a bachelor's in mechanical engineering. I'd figured that being able to speak to the techies in their own language would give me an advantage in the job market, and sure enough, it did. I still had ambition for more—maybe even Greg's job someday—but right then I was pathetically grateful to have a paycheck coming in, and it wasn't a small one, either. The university Financial Aid office would be really happy about that.

So there I was, settling in and getting to know people and figuring out what Greg needed and how to keep him organized and his office running, when he does the oh-by-the-way thing and has me book plane tickets and a hotel room for myself for Friday. It seemed that Nicolas Castle—the Mr. Castle—was flying in from Mumbai and planning to overnight in NYC. Executive row, basically the buddies Mr. Castle had hired back in the nineties when he'd started the company, were surprising him on Friday for his birthday.

Yeah, you know a company's solvent when its top dozen execs can fly twenty-five hundred miles for a surprise birthday bash. At least I didn't have to worry about getting laid off in the near future, right?

Greg said it'd be a perfect chance for me to meet everyone and hang out, be casual, get to know the guys. Obviously it's been a while since he was a new hire with a recent diploma, but it was a nice thought, and I was willing to step up for some face time with the big dogs in the company even if I wasn't stupid enough to think I could let it all hang out.

So, cleaning-laundry-packing, and off I went to New York. It was evening—late evening—by the time my plane landed.

I get motion sick, so I took some pills for the flight. I'm mentioning that because I'm pretty sure the drugs—which I totally needed—contributed to what happened later. I got checked in at the Algonquin, which is about twelve classes classier than any hotel I'd ever stayed in before, and found Greg's room. He gave me a once-over and a big smile.

“Hey, Rob, great timing. I was about to head up.” He closed the door behind him, and we went up the hall to the elevators. “Allan and Tony got in last night and ambushed Nick in the lobby, so the secret isn't very secret anymore. Nick cussed me out when I called up, though, so at least he was surprised enough to be growly about it.”

I made an agreeable sounding noise because I couldn't think of anything intelligent to say about that, and figured no specific comment was better than saying something stupid.

Besides, just being in that hotel was blowing me away. I mean, it's the Algonquin, right? Dorothy Parker and the Algonquin Round Table and all that? It's one of *the* landmark hotels in the country, maybe the world, I don't know. I expected it to be fancy, but this was like something out of a movie, only more so, because movies tend to be flashy and this was pure, long-nosed class.

The carpet was a rich burgundy, and I was willing to bet it was wool. It was thick and soft, with great padding. Okay, you're probably laughing now, but when my mom made a bunch of money on her wrench patent, my parents redid the house and Dad and I learned all about how much of a difference good padding underneath the carpet makes. This was the expensive stuff, and my feet were pretty much orgasming in my sixty-dollar work shoes.

The side tables between each pair of elevator doors were a dark wood, carved and stained and shiny, with potted orchids on them— real ones, not silk or plastic or whatever. The inside of the elevator was polished brass, with a light fixture that was all angled crystal spikes coming down out of the ceiling.

Up on the floor where Mr. Castle's suite was, the carpet was even *better*, which kind of blew me away.

Okay, I'll shut up about the carpet. I was jet-lagged and drugged, remember?

Greg rang the bell—yeah, there was a doorbell outside this hotel room—and someone I'd never seen before opened it. Greg waved a hand between us and said, "Hal, Rob, Rob, Hal," while walking through the entryway.

Someone put a martini in my hand, and Greg vanished into the suite. There was music playing, classic metal I think, but not loud enough to spike your eardrums, which I appreciated. I thought I recognized a couple of faces from the office, but basically it was a cluster of suits. Hot older guys in suits. Wherever Mr. Castle had met his friends back when, I wanted to go hang out there.

I walked around drinking my drink and occasionally saying hi to people. Some names went by, but none of them stuck. One of the benefits to being the

new-kid-slash-secretary-type is that you can just call everyone “sir” and that works, so I didn’t stress out about it.

A couple of martinis later—it was over an hour, I swear—I was looking at a painting of an African marketplace that I’m pretty sure didn’t come from a hotel supply catalog when Greg’s hand clamped down on my wrist, the one that didn’t have a glass in it.

“There you are. I’ve been looking for you. Come on.” He hauled me across the living room and through an open double door into a bedroom the size of my apartment. A king-size bed dominated the far end to the left, while close to the door was a conversation area with two loveseats and a big upholstered chair, arranged in a square around an expensive looking rug with a fireplace on the fourth side. We walked around in front of the fireplace and turned to face the men whose conversation had stopped as soon as we came in.

Sitting in the chair facing the fireplace—facing me—was an incredibly gorgeous man, even at a party full of hot guys. Thick dark hair, a nose like a hawk, sharp grey eyes, and a mouth I’d sell my mother to have on absolutely any part of my body.

Okay, maybe not my mother, but definitely my sister.

(Have I mentioned I’m seriously gay? I probably should’ve mentioned that earlier, and at this point it’s obvious, so... carry on.)

Greg said, “Hey, Nick, I got you something! Happy birthday!” His hand gave me a push just above my butt, and I took a quick step forward because otherwise I’d have fallen splat on my face. I managed not to spill what was left of my drink either, go me!

It took a few seconds for what Greg had said to penetrate, and when it did I was pretty confused.

Happy birthday? So... I was a birthday present? The first thing that came to my mind was that Greg had hired me to fuck the boss, or be fucked by, or whatever, and part of me was okay with that, however the interpretation went.

The second thing was that if I was a gift—ignoring the real world for a minute—then Mr. Castle would own me, and the thought made me want to fall down to my knees right then. The rug was thick and soft and I could slam right down at his feet and it wouldn't hurt.

The third thing that came to mind (and this was where the real world elbowed its way back into the front of my brain) was that I'd been hired for a real job, I *needed* a real job, and that being the boss's birthday present wasn't a great career move if you wanted your career to last more than a few days at most. Fun was great, fantasy was awesome, but I had bills and rent and student loans to pay.

Mr. Castle had to've been thinking something similar because he gave me a once-over, then glared over my shoulder at Greg and said, "Birthday present? Seriously?"

The guys in the loveseats to either side were smirking, snickering, ogling, and eye-rolling, respectively. They were all hot, too—yeah, I checked—and the one who was smirking was also eyeing me like he'd be happy to have me be re-gifted in his direction if his boss didn't want me.

Before I could figure out what I thought about *that*, Greg said, "Yes, seriously. You've been fighting me on this for months, but you need an assistant, period. He's got an MBA *and* an engineering degree, so I don't want to hear any shit, okay? You're buried, we're dropping balls, so deal."

Mr. Castle scowled at him, then gave me another look-over, this one a little less primal but actually scarier because we were back in the real world again, talking about that job that'd pay the bills.

I held out my hand and said, "Robert Arvazian, sir. I'm looking forward to working with you."

He stared at my hand for half a second, then leaned forward and shook it. He didn't try to break my fingers off or anything; it was a firm, professional handshake.

"Welcome aboard. I hope you're ready to dive right in."

“Absolutely, sir.”

I got a tight nod, and then he looked over at the guy to my right—the one who’d been smirking when we all thought I was meant to be a different kind of birthday present—and they picked up a conversation about a government contract that was slipping its schedule. I stood there for a few seconds, then took a couple of steps backward past Greg and slipped away.

I emptied my glass in one gulp and went looking for something non-alcoholic. I ended up with a highball glass full of ginger ale, and had actually fallen into a conversation with a guy named Nachman Levin, who was the head of Logistics, when the living room was suddenly a lot fuller and everyone seemed to be migrating toward the main door.

Greg tugged on my sleeve and said, “Rob, Nach, come on, we’re going bar-hopping. You can’t spend the night in New York and never leave your hotel.” He grinned and herded us out.

CHAPTER TWO

I want to note at this point that I'd stopped drinking, right? The whole bar-hopping thing was *not* my idea, and it wasn't like I could beg off. I was feeling more tired than anything else at that point, and kind of loopy, but I assumed it was because of the tired plus having my brain scrambled by the whole gift-to-the-boss thing—the non-reality of which I'll admit I was still kind of regretting, in the back of my brain where I don't have to take things for-real seriously.

So we all went downstairs and I ended up in the back of a cab between Greg and Nachman. We were kind of squished, but at least I knew them, which was better than being half in the lap of some stranger.

The next few stops were bars I don't remember the names of. Or what they looked like. Or even what I drank, although I'm pretty sure I tried to keep it down to one drink per stop. That wasn't hard—we didn't stay in any one place all that long. We shed a few people here and there as we went, and a couple hours later we were down to just the guys who'd been with Mr. Castle in the bedroom, plus me and Greg and a couple of others.

I was almost done with martini number whatever when one of the executives—I think his name was Hank—said that he used to live in New York and that he'd had all the mundanity he could deal with for one night. Then there was something about how the boss shouldn't have to be bored at his own damn birthday party, and everyone should follow him.

Two minutes later we were back in cabs on our way to someplace not-boring. I think I fell asleep for a few, or maybe just zoned out, I'm not sure, but the cold air that slammed through the car when the doors opened again got my brain cells firing and I followed the crowd into another place.

The outside was pretty plain—cinderblock walls painted grey, which seems kind of redundant to me, but whatever. The lobby area was pretty dull too, with a guy in a leather vest over a T-shirt sitting behind a counter, handing

out forms for everyone to sign while the guy we'd followed handed the desk guy a black AmEx.

I was having a hard time getting my eyes to focus that small, so after squinting at the form for a minute or so, I just looked around, saw that everyone else was signing, and figured I could sign too.

I know—stupid, right? I was out of it, is all I can say.

I followed the gang through a heavy wooden door with two bouncers on it, and we ended up in what looked like another basic bar, except it was all men, and a lot of them were wearing leather—pants, boots, wristbands, vests. It took me a minute (loopy, remember?) to figure out that it wasn't just a gay bar but a leather club.

Yeah, I was in New York City, in a BDSM club with a bunch of millionaires—like something out of a bad porny novel.

Okay, I actually like a lot of those books, but still, it's not exactly realistic, except there I was.

It wasn't all marble and velvet and St. Andrew's crosses, anything like that. It was a nice bar with dark wood paneling and comfy looking chairs and springy carpet, which was just as well because here and there I saw guys kneeling on the floor.

And right then it hit me that I was in a BDSM club surrounded by a bunch of really studly guys, some of whom actually knew my name, and I started getting hard. I know, you're thinking I had way too much alcohol for that, but like I keep saying, I wasn't that drunk—it was mostly lack of sleep, and the pills I'd had on the plane and the jet lag and all.

We wandered across the room, weaving between tables and couches and chairs, until a group got up and headed toward a door in the back next to the bar. Hank zipped in behind them and sort of used his aura to lay claim to a grouping of upholstered seats pulled into a vaguely oval-shaped conversation grouping, with a couple of small tables stuffed into gaps.

A server piled empty glasses on a tray and asked what we wanted while we got organized and started sitting. Orders for sodas and waters came at the guy from all directions, so I ordered a ginger ale. By the time the server took off, everyone was sitting but me and two of the other guys, and they settled down on the floor. Umm, okay.

One of the guys who'd been in the bedroom with Mr. Castle was kneeling at the feet of another guy I'd met earlier that week—I think he was a division manager in chip design. He wasn't all formal or anything, the straight back and palms up on his thighs that you see in pictures; he was on his knees but kind of leaning against the chair, and they were talking like two buddies. Another guy I hadn't met yet was sitting cross-legged on a pillow between the feet of another man from Mr. Castle's bedroom; I think he was the director of security.

I should probably also mention that I wasn't exactly a newbie to this stuff. I mean, I'd never actually had a Master or a Sir or anything like that, but I hung out with some people in the community back home. I'd been to a couple of munches, and I'd been going to the gatherings Brandon Cole has at his house every Saturday. They had a flogging demo once, and I tried it out.

I didn't go first or anything, but the Domme doing the demo seemed really cool. When I finally found the nerve to volunteer to be next, she gave me a sweatshirt to put on over my T-shirt for the first few blows so I could get used to it. I took the next few just on my shirt. It was... interesting. I wasn't in orgasmic raptures over it like you see in porn videos, but it was something I was interested in trying again, maybe in private, with the right guy, you know?

So I'm not a newbie, and I didn't get all freaked out or anything. But still, I didn't know any of these guys very well, and I had to work with all of them, and I was the last one standing there in the middle of the ring of seats, with everyone looking at me, and there were no empty chairs.

The guy sitting next to Mr. Castle pulled a big pillow out from where it'd been tucked next to his chair and tossed it down in front of the boss's feet. "There you go," he said, and he gave me this huge grin.

I felt myself blushing, 'cause seriously? And then Mr. Castle said, “No, absolutely not,” and shoved the pillow away with one foot.

He was glaring at the guy who'd put the pillow down—it wasn't like he was giving me any nasty looks or anything—but still, that was a pretty major rejection even if I hadn't been all eager to throw myself at his feet. And maybe I would've if he wanted me, you know? Because I *was* loopy and he *was* gorgeous and he could slot into that master-shaped hole in my fantasies pretty well. But that absolute rejection still stung, especially right there in front of everyone, and that's when I started thinking I could just leave and catch a cab back to the hotel.

But right then someone tugged on the back of my jacket, and the guy who'd been looking me over back at the hotel said, “Here, there's room by me.”

I was kind of frozen, what with the whole embarrassment thing, so he didn't have much trouble maneuvering me around and ten seconds later I was sitting cross-legged next to his chair. He wasn't handsy about it, so I let him get me settled on the floor; the carpet really *was* nice to sit on.

The chair on my other side had these tall sides, and the guy'd pushed a side table backward to make room for me, so I was in a little niche, like an animal in its den. I could look around at everyone, but I wasn't really in line of sight for most of them, so a minute later they were all talking about whatever, and so far as I could tell, no one was paying any attention to me. Which was fine, seriously.

When the server came back, the guy I was sitting next to passed me my ginger ale without having to ask what I'd ordered, and he said, “You okay?” in a low voice.

I said, “Yeah, thanks,” and took a sip of my drink, because what do you say?

“Good. I'm Evan O'Neill, by the way. I'm the CFO—it's my job to keep everyone else from bankrupting the company.”

I had to grin at that, at least a little. “You seem to be pretty good at it, from what I’ve read about Castle.”

“I try.” He gave me a grin back, with sort of an eye-rolling glance at the guys around us. “Greg said you have an MBA?”

I told him about my education and the research I’d done for the Masters, and he gave me a sketch of Castle’s financial workings. It was all very mundane and by the time I was done with my drink, I was calm again and the embarrassment was just a memory. And when I finished my drink and saw that most of the other guys had finished theirs, I felt comfortable enough to get up and say, “Another round?”

Half a dozen orders came at me. It wasn’t complicated, so I headed off to the bar, running through the list in my head.

The place was busier than it seemed from where we’d been sitting. All the seats were full and there were people leaning in, but I found a spot almost the size of a person in between a couple of stools. It took a minute to get one of the bartenders to notice me, but I gave the guy my order and put down enough cash for the drinks and a tip, then turned to look around.

It was nothing like the movies.

First, everyone was dressed, even if some of it would’ve gotten double-takes on the street.

Second, no one was having sex.

Third, there were all kinds of guys there, and it didn’t look like they were all following the same script.

There was a group of guys in a conversation area like ours, where all the men sitting on furniture were wearing leather pants and motorcycle boots and armbands and stuff. Each one of them had a guy on the floor in front of or next to him, kneeling, in what you’d probably think of as “proper” position—either back straight, eyes down, hands palm-up on their thighs, or kneeling down with forehead on the floor and palms flat to either side of the head.

But right behind them was another group sitting however. One of the guys on the floor was clearly the dominant partner, with his boyfriend curled up in his lap. They were talking and laughing, and obviously not trying to play Tough Dom or Perfect Sub.

Toward the middle of the room were two guys in slacks and shirts sitting in chairs and looking like any two guys talking in a bar after work. Except there was a third guy kneeling in front of one of the chairs, his wrists tied behind his back with a necktie, his head resting on his partner's thigh. The guy in the chair was talking to the other guy in a chair, but he was running his fingers through his boyfriend's hair, soft and slow. The boyfriend, the one on his knees, looked perfectly relaxed, like this was his way of shaking off a week of work stress.

The guy to my left at the bar said, "First time?"

He sounded mellow and friendly, not all aggressive, or wink-wink-nudge-nudge, so I gave him half a smile and nodded. "Here, yeah. First time in New York."

"But not your first time in the scene?"

"No. I have some people I hang out with back home." Which maybe implied more than was true, but I didn't want anyone to slot me into the wide-eyed virgin role, you know?

"Cool," said the guy. "If you're interested in playing later, come find me."

"Doesn't seem to be much playing," I said, glancing over the room again. There was a lot of stuff that'd probably get you thrown out of a regular bar, but nothing I'd call serious play either.

"The main room's kind of mellow," Barstool Guy said, "but it gets more serious in the playroom." He pointed toward the door I'd noticed before, next to the end of the bar. "Still no sex allowed, but more fun than you can have in the bar."

"I'll remember that, thanks. I came with some friends, though, and we're pretty settled for now."

“That’s cool. Hey, your drinks are up.”

I looked around and sure enough, there was a tray full of glasses on the bar behind me. “Thanks,” I said, hoisting the tray. “Later.” He nodded and gave me half a wave, and I headed off, careful to balance the tray as I wove through the furniture.

The group was three guys short when I got back. I handed out drinks, dropped the tray on a table, and went to sit on one of the little couches next to Evan, who’d moved—I figured he deliberately shifted to a place where I could sit next to him without having to be on the floor.

“More comfortable?” he asked, taking a sip of his soda.

“Yeah.” I settled back into the padded corner and toasted him with my glass. “I like having a back to lean on, you know?”

He nodded. “You could work on your posture, and you’d be more comfortable on the floor.”

I kind of stopped for a couple of seconds and switched gears. That definitely wasn’t business- or finance-related. “Umm, yeah, I’ve heard that. It’s something I’ll need to work up to, since I’m usually all about comfort.”

He laughed and nodded again. “You’ll be happy to know the company has a decent chair budget. We don’t want anyone taking time off to hit the chiropractor, or doing substandard work because their attention is all on their aching back.”

“Good policy,” I said. “More companies should spend some money on prevention. It’s cheaper than treatment later.”

“Absolutely. We have a great gym—did you get to that in the new-hire tour? It’s open to everyone, and you get an extra half hour for lunch three times a week if you spend it in the gym.”

“Seriously? Wow. That’s probably in one of the pamphlets they gave me Monday. I’ll admit I haven’t read through everything yet.”

“Hey, anyone too lazy to read everything probably wouldn’t want to hit the gym anyway.” He shrugged, looking me right in the eye. I felt myself blushing, which sucked.

“Probably so. I’ll definitely find the gym, though. I was taking PE classes at school so I could use the facilities there, but I haven’t gotten around to joining a regular gym.”

“Now you don’t have to,” said Evan.

“Awesome.” I took another slug of ginger ale, watching Evan while I drank.

He was a great looking guy. Not that anyone in the group needed a bag over his head or anything, but seriously, you could tell he wasn’t a keyboard slug, even when he was wearing a suit, and he had big, strong looking hands, which are one of my major turn-ons. Other guys are size queens about a man’s dick, but I’ll take an average dick and big hands any day.

His hair was brown and short and kind of messy; it was obvious it wasn’t full of product, which is another thing I like. When I touch a guy’s hair, I don’t want it to crackle. And he had a dimple in his chin, which I’m not usually into, but he made it work.

And he was smiling at me, a sort of knowing, sideways smile, like he knew I was checking him out and was amused by it but didn’t mind.

Usually that’d be a little embarrassing—getting caught checking someone out—but I felt relaxed and just grinned back at him.

Evan leaned in, close enough that he could lower his voice so only I could hear, even if someone walked past us. “You know, I think I envy Nick having something this pretty running around his office from now on.”

I had to smile wider at that, and twisted around so I was facing him. “You’re on the same floor, right? I could probably arrange to spread the pretty around every now and then.”

“I think that’s only fair.” Evan shifted his soda to his left hand and reached out to trace the line of my jaw with two fingers. They were a little damp from

condensation, and cold from the ice in the glass, but I could feel the warmth underneath, and that broad palm was right there, just a breath away.

We looked at each other and I could see the wanting in his face. I felt it too, so it was the easiest thing in the world to turn my head just a little and suck one of his fingers into my mouth. I give a pretty good blow job if I do say so myself, and doing a demo on Evan's middle finger was fun and way hotter than sucking on a finger should be. By the time he put down his drink and slid his other hand around the back of my head, my cock was swollen and solid in my pants.

He pulled me out of my corner and manhandled me onto his lap. I spread my thighs and straddled him, pressing my hard-on against his and sinking into a deep kiss. I felt him tug my shirt out of my waistband, and then his hands ran over skin, up onto my lower back and then down to cup the top of my ass.

I pushed my fingers into his hair and hung on to the kiss. I felt like I was falling into his mouth, into hot, wet sex. My hips thrust against his and suddenly I was frantic to grow a couple more arms so I could strip off my pants, and his, without letting go of him.

After that, it all went kind of fuzzy.

CHAPTER THREE

Next time I... well, I want to say “woke up”, but I’m not sure I was ever really asleep. Let’s say the next time my head was clear enough that I was aware of where I was, I was in a hospital bed. I had that faint hospital-chemical smell in my nose, and a buzz of unintelligible conversation was floating in the open door even at... whatever time it was. It had to be very early-late, because the light coming in the window was faint and grey, and there was no way it was evening. There was a lump in the other bed a few feet away, but whoever it was, he was facing away from me and I didn’t recognize the back of the guy’s head.

My own head ached like hell and I was feeling woozy, like the room was going to start swooping around me if I let go. I wasn’t actually hanging on to anything at that point, so that should tell you something.

I had some fuzzy memories of sharp voices and arguing, and I think a cop, and a bunch of people in uniforms. I think I tried to hit on a couple of them, which made me groan and squinch my eyes closed, ‘cause that’s totally not like me.

Then I remembered what I’d been doing with Evan, a guy I’d known for like an hour, in a mostly public bar, in front of a bunch of guys I have to work with—including my new boss!—and I groaned louder and pulled the covers up over my head.

I mean, it’d been fun and all at the time, but seriously? Looking back, I couldn’t believe that was me.

I’m not stupid, though—despite recent evidence to the contrary—so by the time a woman in scrubs came in with a clipboard, I’d pretty much figured out I’d been drugged.

After the nurse, then the doctor, I talked to a cop—Sergeant Sato, an Asian guy in his mid-thirties or so, hot if you like the short, muscley type—who wanted all the facts for his notebook. I had to admit I hadn’t even caught the name of the club we’d gone to, that I’d been with a group and we’d all

followed a guy who knew a place and that was it. He was mostly stone-faced (unlike TV cops, most real life cops don't get all intensely emotional over their cases, or at least don't show it when they're working) but I saw his jaw tighten when I gave him my incredibly short list of actual facts. I interpreted that as frustration, and maybe a little bit of wanting to smack the dumb guy around for being dumb. Hey, I'd probably have let him at that point.

When he asked me if I remembered anything else that might be useful, I said, "Actually, I've been thinking about it, and the only time anyone could've slipped anything into our drinks was when I was up at the bar. I was talking to this guy, just kind of passing the time, you know? And I didn't notice right away when my drinks were up. He pointed them out to me during a pause in the conversation, and I don't know how long they were there with no one watching them."

"Could the individual you were talking to have introduced the substance into your drinks?" the cop asked, looking like maybe he'd adjusted his opinion of me up high enough to believe that I *might've* been smart enough to finish high school.

"I don't think so. I mean, I wasn't looking at him every second once we started talking, but I was looking back and forth between the other people in the bar and him. If it'd been me, I wouldn't have counted on me-the-other-guy looking away long enough. I was looking back at him kind of at random."

"The people who do this regularly can be incredibly quick about it," he said.

"Right, I get that, but..." I stopped and frowned. "It couldn't have been just me and Evan, right? I mean, there's no way whoever did it would've known which drinks were ours. So he'd have had to dose every drink on the tray. That would've taken longer."

Sato glanced over at the other bed, at my roommate—I'd found out it was Greg when he turned over, still out of it, while the doctor was there—and said, "We haven't been able to interview everyone in your group yet, but from what

I've gathered so far, it seems all the drinks you bought were drugged except the two waters."

"So it would've taken more than a second, no matter how fast the guy was."

"Not as long as you'd think, but yes, longer than a second."

I thought about that, but it still didn't make sense. "Any idea why? I mean, if I'd been alone then it'd make sense, in a twisted way, if someone tried to roofie me. But no strangers even tried to pick me up after I was drugged. The guy I was talking to at the bar hit on me, but it was kind of low level, nowhere near as intense as you'd expect for someone who planned to drug me and drag me into the bathroom or something."

"I can't speculate about the perpetrator's motives at this time," he said. Definitely not like a TV show. He finished writing some stuff in his notebook, then asked, "Would you be available to testify if we do apprehend a suspect?"

That stopped me. I really wanted to say yes, seriously, but what I actually said was, "The thing is, I live in California." He nodded; he'd gotten my vital stats up at the top of the conversation. "I don't know if I could afford to fly out here again on my own. This was a business trip, and I know what the tickets cost. And I'd have to take time off work..."

"Did you tell the individual you were conversing with at the bar that you were from out of town?"

I had to think about that. Had I told him I was from California? "I mentioned I was from out of town, that it was my first time in New York. I didn't tell him I'm from the opposite coast, though."

"Targets from out of town—more than a couple of hours drive away—rarely show up to testify," said Sato. "A lot of perps target visitors for that reason; they know it'll be harder for the DA to get a conviction if the target doesn't testify. And if they are convicted, they usually get a lighter sentence if the jury and judge don't have the face of a victim right in front of them."

“Sucks, but makes sense.” I drew in a breath and rubbed my eyes, wishing I could get some more sleep. “If you do catch the guy, I’ll do my best to make it back to testify. But I have to say, I have a lot of student loans, not much money, and I just started a new job on Monday, so I don’t know if I could even get the time off to come out for the trial.”

Another pause while Sato scribbled in his notebook, then he gave me a look and said, in a lower and slightly more normal sounding voice, “All the other targets work with you, right? And they seemed to be mahogany row types? Maybe they’ll give you a seat on the corporate jet when *they* all come out to testify.”

I had to laugh at that. “No corporate jet—those things are ridiculously expensive and never pay for themselves—but I get what you’re saying. We’ll see.”

Sergeant Sato wrapped it up and left. About half a second after he vanished through the door, Mr. Castle came striding in looking grim. He glanced over at Greg, then at me and said, “You’re all right? Damn doctors wouldn’t tell me a thing.”

He’d changed into black slacks and a grey shirt with a leather jacket over it, and was pretty clearly pissed off, but he was still gorgeous; that much hadn’t been fatigue or jet lag or alcohol or drugs. I remembered that he’d been drinking water at the club, which meant he hadn’t been affected. Great—he probably remembered exactly what I’d done, with perfect clarity. I forced myself to meet his gaze and said, “Yes, pretty much. Doctor said I’ll be kind of out of it on and off for the next day, and the headache and nausea should go away in a while, but I’m basically functional again.”

“Good.” He crossed the room and gave Greg’s barely-twitching corpse a smack on the shoulder. “Greg! You alive in there? Come on, time to move.”

My first instinct was to snap at him to cut it out, since evidence suggested that Greg felt even worse than I did at that point, and if someone had come along hitting and shaking and trying to get me to jump out of bed, I’d have probably vomited on him. Which might’ve been just deserts for Mr. Castle

acting like a jerk, but Greg just moaned and rolled over. He peered up at Mr. Castle and slurred, “Nick? Whafuck?”

“Have you talked to your doctor yet?”

“Doctor?” Greg blinked a few times and levered himself up on to shaky elbows to peer around. He squinted at me, then said, “Hey, Rob.”

I said, “Hey, Greg,” but his attention was already back on Mr. Castle. “W’ happen?”

Mr. Castle stared down at him for a second. I could imagine the expression on his face just from the back of his body language, you know? He finally said, “The whole gang got roofied, or whatever the hell it was. I don’t know because I’m not related to any of you, and the doctors wouldn’t tell me anything. But everyone was definitely altered, everyone but me and Nach, because we were drinking water. The rest of you pretty much collapsed into a damn orgy right there on the floor. We were about to get thrown out when I persuaded the manager to call the police and a few ambulances instead.”

“Fuck,” said Greg.

“Not quite,” said Mr. Castle. “You were working up to it, though.”

Greg made a snorting sound, kind of like a laugh, then one hand fumbled around until he found the control panel for the bed. He stabbed at a button, and a few minutes later, the same nurse who’d come in to talk to me when I woke up poked her head in.

“Mr. Wyatt? Good, you’re awake. How are you feeling?” She bustled up and checked out some of the monitors over and around his bed.

“Awful,” said Greg. “But I’ve felt worse, and I need to get home. Any way I could bust out of here?”

She gave him a small smile. “I’ll let the doctor know you’re awake.” She sort of herded Mr. Castle out of the way through sheer personality aura, her pleasant expression never shifting, then pulled the curtain around Greg’s bed so she could do whatever—probably the same as I’d gotten when I woke up.

Mr. Castle scowled at the curtain, then came over to my bedside. “I don’t suppose the police had any ideas about who did this or why?”

I shook my head, then stifled a groan and decided not to do that again for a while. “Not really. I mean, there was a guy I talked to for a minute at the bar, while I was waiting for the drinks, but he didn’t really have time to do anything.” I described the conversation, and how I’d been looking between the guy and the room, back and forth.

“So I don’t know,” I said. “I mean, if someone wanted to get laid and was trying to take a shortcut, why hit all the drinks? And how come no one came over after we’d been drinking and tried to follow up?”

“Maybe it took effect faster than they expected? If this was their first time trying it...” He scowled at the wall past my shoulder, thinking. “It seemed like we were just talking and then suddenly it was like a porno—I wanted to look around for a camera.” He paused, then shook his head. “That’d be stupid. If the house wanted to sell hidden-camera movies, they’d have better luck in the playroom. It’d be stupid to start a lot of activity they usually don’t allow in the bar. And they were about to throw us out before anyone got to anything that’d work as a porno highlight.”

That made sense. I hadn’t thought about being filmed—the idea made me blush again, which was annoying—but Mr. Castle was right that the pieces didn’t fit.

He took a step closer, until he was leaning right over me, and lowered his voice. “That’s the cops’ problem. Before we’re back with the mob, I need to talk to you about Evan.”

I just nodded. He looked pretty grim, and I wondered for a second if maybe he and Evan had something going, and he was going to warn me off. Just my luck, ending up next to the boss’s boyfriend just when the drugs came out, right?

Except when he said, “You need to give Evan some space for a while. He’s married, and he doesn’t fool around. He’s the nicest guy you’ll ever meet. It was pretty obvious you were embarrassed, and he wanted to take you out of

the spotlight and make you feel comfortable. He's just like that. I talked to him earlier, and it's obvious he feels like hell for what happened between the two of you. He knows it wasn't your fault, or his fault for that matter. But it still happened, and he feels bad about it. His husband's not the type to be understanding about it, either, so he'll be getting shit at home for this for who knows how long—he doesn't need any more at work.”

That... okay, wow. Totally not what I'd expected, except the part about Evan being really nice. That'd come through loud and clear while we were talking. I nodded and said, “No problem. He's a great guy. I'll stay out of his way. Umm, as much as I can?”

Mr. Castle nodded. “Right. You'll have to interface with him at work at times. Just be professional and leave it at that level. Don't duck into closets to avoid him, but let him decide how friendly to be, and how fast.”

“Absolutely.”

“Good. I appreciate that.” He looked over at the curtain around Greg's bed. “I rescheduled all of us for a one-forty flight. Everyone should be ready in time to make that. We'll meet in the hotel lobby at eleven-fifteen and head out together.” He waited for me to nod understanding, nodded back, and left.

CHAPTER FOUR

I slept for most of the flight home, and spent the rest of the weekend sleeping, drinking water, and sleeping. Oh, and when I wasn't asleep, I mostly stared at the ceiling and imagined all the ways work would probably suck now.

Although having a bunch of people at work know I was submissive wasn't on that list, which felt pretty weird, but in a good way. I'd had a couple of lovers be jerks about it, and one of them—a guy in my Business Ethics seminar, which is totally ironic—told everyone at school who'd stand still to listen that I was a wussy little prick who wanted someone to tie me up and spank my ass. Which wasn't what I'd said at all, but people who have preconceived ideas they've picked up from bad jokes don't tend to care much about detail accuracy.

Almaden's a big enough school that "everyone Trey knew" wasn't a significant percentage of the student body, and after a couple of weeks the reactions had died down to just an occasional smirk or comment. It sucked, but I dealt with it. I'll admit it made me pretty gun-shy, though, and if I hadn't already been to a couple of Brandon's Saturday things, I probably would've ducked back into the kink closet and nailed the door shut.

So having people at work find out was nightmare fodder, but it looked like most of the executive staff was kinky. And they didn't even seem to be the kind of people who looked down on male subs. I know it's stupid, but a lot of people do. One of the guys on the floor at the bar had been the Security Director, though, and he couldn't do his job if people were smirking at him all the time. I wasn't worried about being harassed because of my preference for being the one kneeling, which... okay, that felt pretty damn good.

But still, I had—okay, a bunch of us had—been way out of line in our behavior, and drugged or not, it had to be embarrassing. I was still trying to get to know everyone and figure out how my cog fit into the company machine. This whole thing was a huge bucket of sand in the gears, and there was no way it wouldn't be awkward. At *least* awkward.

On Monday morning I arrived twenty minutes early. I got off the elevator on the executive floor and followed the seductive scent of coffee to the break room. Greg was already there too, doctoring his mug and looking normal, except for a tight expression like he had a low level headache, or like someone had chewed him a new asshole, or maybe both.

“Hey, Rob. You feeling okay?”

“Morning,” I said. “Yeah, I am. I spent most of the weekend unconscious and that seems to have taken care of stuff.” I pulled my mug off the shelf and poured. I like mine black with sugar, so I was ready to roll in half a minute.

He laughed and said, “Yeah, me too. Hey, Nick wanted to see you as soon you got in. Go ahead and take your coffee.” He waved a hand down the hall toward the CEO’s office. It took up a huge corner of the building, which wasn’t exactly skinny. I’d been in and out of it a couple of times the previous week while Mr. Castle was travelling. Finding it was no problem, but knowing that Mr. Castle would be in there made it feel completely different. My heart sped up and my mouth went dry.

I took a slug of hot coffee, ignored my screaming tongue, and headed down the hall.

The outer office had a hardwood conference table surrounded by ten expensive-looking chairs off to the left, and a more casual seating area to the right, with a couch, a loveseat, and three comfy chairs. Straight ahead was another door, currently open, to the inner sanctum where the actual work got done.

The morning sun made Mr. Castle look like he was ready for a photo shoot. One of those magazine spreads about the dozen most powerful and rich, hot, single CEOs that non-business mags do when they’re trying to look serious but really are desperate to sell copies and want women (or gay men) to stock up just for the photos. Like that.

Before I could freeze or pop wood or anything else completely disastrous, he glanced up from his computer and said, “Morning. Come in.”

I walked over and stopped in front of the desk. He was still typing when he said, “Greg calls you Rob?”

“Yes, sir.”

He just nodded and said, “Rob, then. Here, tell me what you think.” He reached over with his mousing hand and shoved a thick folder across the desk at me.

Okay. I picked up the folder and looked around.

“There.” The mouse hand stabbed a finger at a clean desk off to one side.

I took a couple of steps toward it. It looked like overflow rather than an actual assistant’s desk, and I wondered whether it was meant to be permanent.

“Should I, umm, order a desk for the outer room? I should be guarding your door, right?” I smiled to show I was sort of kidding, although not really, but he didn’t look up.

“I don’t need a secretary, Rob. People around here know better than to bug me with trivial crap, and I type my own e-mails and book my own plane tickets. I need someone who can function as my right hand. If that’s you, we’ll find out in the next week or so.”

He still hadn’t looked up, so I said, “Yes, sir,” and settled down at the empty desk. I spent the next hour skimming through the folder, then went to the supply cabinet in the break room. I filled a box lid with a load of loot, filled my new desk, and started through the folder again, taking notes this time.

At eleven-forty, Mr. Castle said, “I have a lunch appointment. I’ll be back around one-thirty,” and left.

Okay, then.

I went to the deli up the block and got a roast beef and cheddar sandwich, a bag of chips and a banana. I got an up-elevator in no time; it was twelve-fifteen and all the traffic was on the way out of the building. I ran into Nachman on my way back to the office—our office?—and he said, “Hey,

Rob! You all right? I haven't seen you this morning, thought you might still be sick."

"No, I've been in Mr. Castle's office all morning. He has me looking over the Bridger project."

"That one." Nachman scowled and gave me a nod. "Have fun."

"Oh, yeah, it's great," I said. "Seriously, are *all* the tech managers here like that?"

That got me a short laugh. "No," he said.

"Well, that's a relief." We exchanged smirks, waved and went our ways, him out to lunch and me back in to work. I was determined to be ready to discuss the project with Mr. Castle when he came back. He hadn't said when we'd talk about it, but I knew if I slacked off, he'd be on me as soon as he got in from his lunch meeting.

He hadn't been a jerk or anything, but he hadn't actually been welcoming, either, and I had a feeling he was just looking for a reason to toss me out. I remembered Greg saying that Mr. Castle had been fighting him on the subject of getting an assistant at all for a while, so it made sense that he'd take any excuse to reject me. My head knew it wasn't personal—probably wasn't, although I still wasn't sure what he thought of the thing on Friday night—but my gut wanted to impress him.

My bank account also wanted to impress him, and the tiny little Financial Aid clerk who lived in my head *definitely* wanted me to impress him.

I had some comments and suggestions about the issue he'd tossed at me, but there was some info I needed before I'd be willing to discuss it with anyone. Certain things were standard, but I wasn't willing to chance looking like an idiot by making assumptions that might not be accurate in this case. I needed to see the Bridger contract, which was unfortunately down in Contracts. I was pretty sure everyone down there would be out to lunch, and even though I might be able to get away with poking through their files on my own—"Me? I'm Mr. Castle's personal assistant!"—I didn't know where

exactly it'd be, and going in cold to hunt around on my own could take me the rest of the day, forget lunchtime.

Greg had shown me how to find a lot of data on the company server, though, and I had a log-in for that. If I really was the CEO's assistant then I imagined my log-in could get me into most of it.

What I didn't have was a computer, but Mr. Castle had one; there was a laptop on his desk that'd inspire a decent orgasm in anyone even vaguely technical. He wasn't using it right then, either, being gone and all. I hesitated for about twelve seconds, then took the Bridger file and all my notes over to Mr. Castle's desk.

Where I stopped and stared. He hadn't logged out.

Wow, that was kind of dumb for a man as smart as Mr. Castle had to be. Sure, he was on the top floor of a building he owned, with decent corporate security and presumably loyal employees all over the place. But one disloyal employee—or one more-or-less loyal employee who thought he deserved a nice raise—could make a lot of mischief on the company servers if he had access to the CEO's log-in.

Mr. Castle wasn't stupid, and Castle wouldn't be where it was if he were careless. So I was going to assume he'd left his account logged in—while he was away for an extra-long lunch meeting—because he wanted to see whether I had the balls to come over here and get the info I needed to complete my assignment.

I have great balls, and that's not just my own opinion, either, so I dove into the system with a huge smirk on my face.

When Mr. Castle returned at about quarter to two, I was still at his desk. I had everything I needed, but at that point it was a matter of pride to let him “catch” me there. I looked him in the eye and said, “Did you have a productive meeting, sir?”

He set his briefcase down on a side chair since I had my stuff spread out all over his desk. “Yes, I did. We're going to make a lot of money on the Pinelli

deal.” He glared down at me and added, “Making yourself right at home, I see. Anything else you need?”

I swallowed down a sudden surge of nerves, met his gaze and said, “Yes, actually—I need a computer of my own so I don’t have to borrow yours.” I managed to say it with a pleasant smile, holding his gaze for a full second afterward before I looked down to start clearing my stuff off his desk.

He made a sound that was a cross between a laugh and a cough. I assumed that meant I wasn’t going to be fired just yet, and did a little high-five in my head.

“Put in a request to IT,” he said. He slid into the chair I’d been sitting in until a moment ago, and said, “So, tell me about Bridger.”

I pulled the chair over from my desk to his, and sat, shuffling through my notes. “Bridger has overruns of both cost and schedule. Every time they have a design review or a trial with the customer, they end up with a list of fixes and changes and additional features.”

“The whole point of reviews and trials is to find things to fix.”

“True, but there’s a difference between fixing a problem to bring a system up to spec, and adding a new feature that isn’t in the spec, or even making an optional change to something that’s already up to spec. There are standard channels for out-of-contract change requests coming from the customer, but the techs and engineers—on both sides—aren’t using them.”

“Why is that anything I should be concerned about?” he asked in a sharp, impatient voice. “I don’t micromanage at the project level.”

I quailed a little, but I knew I was right, so I looked him in the eye and said, “Because this is a management problem, and if you don’t stomp on it, it’s going to spread.” He just cocked his head at me, like he was waiting for me to explain why I wasn’t wasting his time, so I went on.

“The techies in the trenches want to make their shiny thing cooler—if they have any kind of decent morale, they’ll be pretty enthusiastic about that. The techies don’t care what team they’re working for, they’re just messing around

with this cool thing they're building, and if someone comes up with a neat-awesome idea, they'll want to dive in and do it. I'm sure you remember what that feels like, sir."

That got an eye roll out of him, but his lips quirked in half a smile for about a millisecond. I thought, Hah! and went on.

"From the customer side," I said, "Bridger has no reason to rein in their own techies. They'd love to get a shinier system with more bells and whistles, and if their own people can make that happen under the table, that's a win for Bridger. But from our side, any additional bell or whistle has a price tag. Each additional line of code costs an hour of technical labor, not only for making the change itself, but for testing and documentation changes. That gets expensive."

Mr. Castle knew all this, so I hurried on with, "It's up to the managers on our team to rein in our techies. We're willing to make whatever changes Bridger wants, so long as they go through channels. An official add or change comes with an additional price tag to cover our costs. A change made under the table because the techies think it's cool, or that it makes sense, or that it's 'quick and easy' because it's just a few lines of code—that costs us money. If our people make the change voluntarily, out of contract, then we have to eat it. We don't want to squash the techies, but we have to get them to understand that every single addition or change, even one line of code, needs to be approved and go through Contracts. Techies think this is stupid, but it's up to their managers to make them toe the line anyway."

I leaned back and said, "If you don't stomp on this now, the techies will talk to their buddies about what they're doing, and it'll spread to the techies on other projects. And the managers who overlook it will talk to other managers about how much happier *their* customers are, and within a few years every project in the company will have this money drain in it. It's a management issue, and the best way to curb it is from the top."

He stared at me for a few seconds, then nodded. "I agree with you about the problem. Any suggestions?"

Specifics? Umm... What the heck. “Giving the division and project managers a good verbal reaming, as a group, would be a start. For a more concrete deterrent, separate out the costs associated with the unofficial adds and changes, and take it out of their bonuses. Something like three-quarters from the PMs and one-quarter from the DMs. That’ll add up fast, especially for the DMs who are responsible for a dozen or twenty projects, and motivate them to do some trickle-down reaming that’ll make an impact on the techies.”

Mr. Castle laughed while shaking his head. “I don’t think I’ll go quite that far, but I like how you think.” He crossed his arms and stared at me, his expression almost pleasant. “All right,” he said, “you’re not completely useless. Go put in a request for a laptop. I’ll have a few more projects for you by the time you get back.”

“Yes, sir,” I said. I put my files and notes down on my desk and walked sedately out of his office. As soon as I was sure he couldn’t see me anymore, I did one of those jumping fist-pump maneuvers and mouthed, “Yes!”

CHAPTER FIVE

By Saturday, I was definitely ready to head over to Brandon Cole's place and relax. The people at Castle were good to work with, but it was intense, and I was constantly aware that people were watching me, like, all the time. I was the new guy, some kid with the ink still wet on his master's. If I'd thought Mr. Castle was waiting for me to screw up on Monday, it was nothing to having dozens of people just looking for reasons to think I'd been hired for my looks or something.

It helped that I could babble techno-needery with the engineers. Most of them visibly mellowed out when they found I had an engineering degree. Being able to mention that I built my own computer in high school helped. The admin and support people were harder to impress, though.

No matter what anyone says, it's hard to stay on point twenty-four-seven. It's impossible, actually, and after a week of trying, I was wrung out.

I drove the few blocks from my apartment near the university to Brandon's house. I parked my eight-year-old Honda in front of a house half a block away from Brandon's, grabbed my contribution—a few of pounds of chicken thighs in a cooler for the barbecue—and walked down the tree-shaded sidewalk past lined up cars and trucks and motorcycles to the house.

It was a grey-blue single story with a private front yard. An intricately pieced wall, painted wood between stone pillars, enclosed most of the yard, with a sturdy gate near the driveway and mounds of jasmine between the wall and the sidewalk. The flowers were blooming in the September heat, and the sweet scent filled the air.

Jasmine vines climbed up the rough stone pillars to the top of the wall, six feet up. The wall was topped with another foot of woven-wood trellis, and the jasmine ran riot up there, filling in all the gaps and blooming with enthusiasm in the sun.

All the houses in the neighborhood were single story, so the front was completely private, unless someone stood on a ladder, or a neighbor climbed

up onto their roof. There was no actual sex allowed outside, or impact play (because of the noise) but when I hauled my chicken in through the gate and closed it behind me, the people already there showed a lot of skin. Which, seriously, wasn't all that unusual in the heat.

We'd done bondage demos out there before, but right then, everyone on the patio was a sub, so far as I could see.

"Hey, Rob!" Brandon came over to close the gate behind me while I wrestled with the cooler. "That goes around in the back, where the grills are. There's more ice in the green cooler if you need it."

I nodded and staggered off down the side, through another gate that was (thankfully) propped open. There were three grills waiting, plus extra folding tables and chairs other people had brought, and mounds of food. I set the cooler down with a thankful "*Oof*," and dug some ice out of the green cooler to pack on top of the chicken.

The grills and tables were lined up on a concrete patio, but most of the back was lawn, like the front. The back fence was lined with trees, a mix of fruit trees and liquid ambers that were just thinking about changing to their fall colors. The cherry and apricot trees were bare of fruit, but two of the apple trees were still ripening, and the corners were anchored by huge, fragrant lemon bushes that were loaded. Some kid could make a fortune with a lemonade stand if they had access to those trees.

I grabbed a ginger ale out of one of the coolers and headed back out front.

A guy I knew from the university, a cute blond with perfect hair, wearing a silver wheat chain collar with a turquoise medallion set into the front, was sitting on one of the loungers. His legs were crossed to make room for an older woman sitting on the foot of his lounger. A guy I'd seen around but hadn't met, who looked like he spent a lot of time at the gym, sat on the grass in front of them. I went over and said, "Hey, Riley," then gestured at the patch of grass next to the muscley guy.

Riley said, "Rob, have a sit. Rob, Marcus and Anna; Marcus and Anna, Rob." He waved his bottle of water at each of us as he said our names, and I

grinned and waved around the group while settling down cross-legged next to Marcus.

Once my face was lower down, I noticed that Riley's wrist was handcuffed to the lounge. I blinked a couple of times, then looked a question up at him.

He grinned and said, "Don wanted to be sure I'd be where he left me."

"Romantic," I said, grinning back.

"Totally." Riley glanced up at the house, then down at his watch.

"Only if he doesn't have to pee before the Doms get done with their thing," said Anna.

"I'm going slow," said Riley, waving his water bottle again. "It's actually pretty hot. I mean, being chained up and then left alone is hot to fantasize about, but fucking stupid in real life, right? But he can leave me here because there are people around, but it still *feels* like he's left me."

From my low vantage point, it was pretty obvious how much Riley liked his situation. I hadn't thought about it, but I could see where he was coming from.

"If I'm gonna play, I want someone paying attention to me," said Marcus. "What's the point if they just walk away? That's a punishment, not a reward."

"Why kay eye oh kay," said Anna. Hah, she was a net geek. YKIOK—Your Kink Is Okay, an Internet saying meaning whatever turns you on is cool, even if I'm not into it. "I don't know that I'd like it either," she continued, "but I suppose it'd depend on the situation. Mindset is everything."

"I guess," said Marcus. "Hey, any of you going to the KL party tomorrow? I've never been able to find anyone with connections to get an invite."

Kink Life, or KL, was a big BDSM group up in the city. Their parties were legendary; I heard they even have a party-within-the-party that you need a super-special invite for, where they make movies. I wasn't sure I wanted to get tied up and spanked for a camera, but you didn't *have* to do that and most people were never asked to. For most people, it was just a huge party where

you didn't have to worry about people smirking or glaring at you for your kink. It was pretty much the ultimate in exclusive kink groups on this coast.

Riley said, "Nope, I've never been. Either of you?" He looked at me and Anna, and we both shook our heads. Riley shrugged. "Don's not interested in playing with a bunch of strangers around. I'd have killed for an invite before we hooked up, though."

"I'm with Don," said Anna. "I mean, it's one thing to do a little playing here, where we know everybody, but with hundreds of people around?" She got a look on her face like she'd bitten into a bug.

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to, though, right?" I asked. "I mean, that's the whole point, I thought."

"Any large group has its leaders and followers, and its share of jerks," she said. "I'd be surprised if there's never any social pressure to do this or not do that. The bigger a group, the more assholes there are, and the more jagged the group dynamics get. It's human nature."

Well, yeah, that was definitely true. Still, I remembered the kneeling men from the bar a week ago. I still envied them—both for being able to relax and kneel to someone in a (sorta) public place, and for having someone to kneel to.

My brain flared up with an image of me kneeling next to Mr. Castle's chair, and I knew I was blushing. I took a big slug of ginger ale, which was a huge mistake, of course, and the next minute was taken up with me coughing and Marcus smacking me on the back.

By the time I could breathe without coughing, the front door opened and the rest of the party started to join us. Don, a handsome black guy who was a junior partner in a law firm downtown, came over to the lounge and said, "Still here, babe?" He tilted Riley's head back with one hand in his hair and kissed him, Don being the only person who could touch Riley's hair without getting whined at and swatted. Anna hopped up and settled cross-legged onto the grass on my other side. Don nodded thanks to her, then picked Riley up and slid onto the lounge, settling Riley back down on his lap. Riley was beaming and I was envious.

Anna asked, “Where’s everyone else?”

Don said, “Still inside, talking knots. Teacher’s got to pack and run, has an appointment or something. Wendy and Charlie and Chris and Jim are desperate to squeeze the last few drops of evil creativity out of the guy.”

“You’re not interested in a few more drops of evil creativity?” Riley twisted around to give Don an incredibly fake, pouty look of disappointment.

“I have plenty of evil creativity of my own,” said Don, squeezing Riley hard enough to get a yelp out of him. “I’ll show you later. The guy knows his ropes, though, no question. Good stuff.”

“Awesome,” said Riley.

It was. Or it would be. It was for Riley, at least.

Dating is no easier if you’re kinky than it is if you’re vanilla. If anything it’s a little harder, because you have a whole ’nother set of variables to match. Someone who likes a little spanking won’t be happy with someone who has heavy pain kinks. Someone who gets off on harsh rules and humiliation won’t be happy with a caretaker Dom. If you’re into puppy play or age play or electricity, you have to find someone else who’s into that, plus all the usual stuff—matching (other) hobbies and senses of humor and what you like doing for your vacation, and whether you’re a neat freak or don’t mind letting the dishes pile up.

Of course, if you’re just looking for vanilla sex, that’s easier. I’ve had my share of blow jobs and hand jobs and plain rubbing off with guys whose names I was sort of fuzzy about, but playing is a whole other deck of cards. Letting some guy you don’t know well enough to absolutely trust tie you up? Yeah, no.

Well, okay, that’s a “maybe” if I’m with other people I trust to look out for me while I’m helpless, but I’ve never been that big on having people watch me have sex, so that hasn’t happened very often. I can get into a threesome, or even a bed-full, but people just *watching*? I’d be too self-conscious to enjoy myself.

Before I could depress myself into oblivion by contemplating my lack of a love- and/or sex-life, Brandon came over to me and said, “You brought chicken, right?” When I nodded, he said, “Let’s go back and get that started on the gas grill, since it’ll take longest. I’ll fire up the charcoal for the burgers and sausages.”

I said, “Sounds good,” waved to the others and followed Brandon into the back.

I let Brandon set up the gas grill, since I’d only ever used charcoal, while I dug my bags of chicken out of the ice. They were sitting in a thick, garlicky marinade, so my hand got pretty yucked up while I was pulling pieces out, but there was a hose coiled up to one side where I could wash after, or I could go inside to the kitchen sink if I wanted to be fancy.

While I arranged chicken on the grill, I asked, “So what’s with the classified meeting? Demos are usually open.”

Brandon loaded up a chimney starter for the second charcoal grill and tossed me a grin over his shoulder. “It’s about surprising your sub. Not quite as effective if the subs are right there listening to all the tricks, I guess.”

“I thought it was about bondage?”

“That too. I don’t know, I wasn’t in there, but I guess it all goes together? Nick doesn’t come very often—he’s really busy—but when he teaches, everyone says it’s great, so I asked if he’d come. We just got lucky.”

I stopped with my hand in a chicken bag and stared at him. “Nick?”

“Nick Castle? He owns an electronics company downtown.”

“Holy shit, he’s my boss!” I turned and stared at the house, trying to peer in through the kitchen windows, like he was going to be standing there waving at me. “My boss is in there, right now?”

Brandon grinned. “No, I think I heard his bike a minute ago. He had somewhere to get to after the session.” Brandon left his charcoal to do its thing and came over to pat me on the back, like he was afraid I might faint and need a catcher or something. “You didn’t know your boss was kinky?”

“Oh, no, I knew. I definitely knew.” I gave Brandon a semi-abbreviated run-down on my first meeting with my new boss, eliminating the worst of the personally embarrassing parts. He was snickering up until I mentioned the hospital and that we’d been drugged.

“Shit.” I got a one-armed hug and there wasn’t any teasing in it. “I’m glad you’re okay. What if you hadn’t been with a group?”

“Yeah, that would’ve sucked large. I mean, whoever did it didn’t try to take advantage himself, not that I could tell. But even if it wasn’t an actual rapist, if I’d been alone and come on to some stranger? With no functional brain, no precautions or anything?”

“It still would’ve been rape,” said Brandon. “Maybe not the guy you came on to, unless it was obvious you were out of it when you propositioned him and he took advantage anyway, but the guy who drugged you. I mean, if you’re so impaired you can’t give valid consent, that’s rape.”

That made a kind of sense, but not completely. “I don’t think it’d be prosecutable that way,” I said. “I see where you’re coming from, but you need a rapist, right? To a guy I propositioned, I’d have just been a horny tourist looking to get laid. The criminal was the guy who drugged me, but he didn’t touch me. I mean, there’s got to be some law against drugging someone without their knowledge; if I’d let someone fuck me while I was drugged, that would’ve increased the severity of the charges, right? They take damage done into consideration? But I don’t think ‘rape’ would come into it.”

Brandon went back to the charcoal grills and poked at one of the chimneys. “Moot point anyway,” he said. “I’m just glad nothing serious happened.”

My first instinct was to say that blushing whenever I ran into one of the senior executives in a meeting or passed them in the halls *was* something serious, but I knew what he meant, and yeah, my embarrassment wasn’t major.

It was there, though. It wasn’t nothing.

And if Nick came to Brandon’s sometimes? I hadn’t seen him there before, but then I hadn’t been to all that many myself. That’d be... weird.

It could be a really good weird if I thought there was any chance he might be into me, even just to play with once or twice, because the guy was seriously hot. He'd made it pretty clear on party night that he was definitely *not* into me, though. Very much not.

I finished laying all the chicken out on the big grill, then looked around. Aha, trash bin. I went and dumped the bags, and Brandon looked over at my grill. "Just thighs?" he asked.

"My favorites. Lots of meat, best flavor." I smirked at him and added, "Anyone wants breasts, they can bring their own."

"Hey, I just said 'chicken', so however you want to define that is up to you."

"Maybe next time I'll bring a couple buckets of deep-fried hearts, then? Chewy, but they taste great."

Brandon got a weird expression on his face and laughed. "Hearts? Seriously?"

"Hey, they're muscles, just like the thighs or breasts or whatever. You've never cooked the heart that comes with a whole chicken?"

"I don't usually get whole chickens. I wouldn't know how to cut one up."

"I'll show you sometime. It's easy, and you can save a lot of money."

"I thought you only liked the thighs?" he asked with a teasing grin.

I gave him a scowl back. "They're my favorites, but I'll eat whatever. I figured if I'm cooking six pounds of chicken all at once, I want all the pieces about the same size and shape, and the thigh *is* my favorite piece."

"So it's all about doing as little work over the grill as possible," said Brandon, still teasing. "So much for your selfless contribution to the group event."

"It's called being efficient," I shot back, my nose in the air and the snottiest look I could manage on my face. "I make excellent money being efficient."

“I’ll bet you do, if you work for Nick. He seems to do pretty well. Plus he’s a handsome guy, and he definitely knows what he’s doing. You could do worse than hang around that all day.”

I didn’t have much to say to that, mainly because I didn’t want to explain just how wrong he was and exactly why.

CHAPTER SIX

On Tuesday, Mr. Castle sent me to attend a Change Board meeting for the Ferret project. (I know, but the project names are all silly and irrelevant; it's a security thing.) He didn't tell me why he wanted me to go, just that he wanted me to go. That meant he wanted to see if I'd spot something. It might be another test, or it might be that he knew something was squirrely and trusted me to see it. Or just to bring him the data so he could see it. I wished I knew.

Two and a half weeks and I still wasn't sure where I stood at Castle. I mean, okay, I picked up at the party that he had zero interest in me personally. It kind of sucked, but that wasn't why I was there. Mr. Castle isn't the kind of man who lays everything out for you in great detail illustrated with PowerPoint slides; he expects you to pick up on stuff yourself, and if you don't then you're not smart enough to work in his building.

I wish I had a hint, though. If he was still testing me, then it meant I might still find myself pink-slipped at any time. My blood pressure and I wanted to know whether I had a stable job or not.

Anyway, I went to the meeting and sat down at the far end of the long, rectangular table, to one side so I wasn't right in line-of-sight of the person chairing—present, but not in their face. Everyone knew by then that I was the CEO's PA, and I didn't want to freak anyone out.

A woman in jeans and a white polo shirt with some kind of convention logo on it was bustling around the head of the table. She said hi when I walked in, and when I took my seat she slid a stack of papers down the table, a long, smooth slide that ended up right in front of me, still in a neat stack. If I'd tried that, half the papers would've flown across the tabletop and the carpet. I guessed she had a lot of experience in unclipped-paper-stack sliding.

The table was an older one with a slick, Formica top; that probably helped. It sat in a no-frills, windowless conference room. There was a dusty plant in one corner that I knew was real because it had some dead, brown leaves on it. The putty-colored carpet had a few stains, and a large ripple to one side, like a

big blister. Everyone coming in who sat on that side of the table stepped over the rippled carpet, obviously used to it. I scribbled a note to mention it to maintenance anyway; someone not familiar with the room, like a vendor or a customer, or even a regular who was distracted, could trip and break something and sue us into oblivion. Or, all right, not quite into oblivion, but Mr. Castle wouldn't be happy about it.

When the meeting started, though, I was a little boggled to find that the person who'd been setting up wasn't some kind of assistant to the chair, but was the actual meeting chair.

Change Board meetings control and approve requested engineering changes. It was a configuration management thing, and I'd spent the morning boning up, since apparently you can get an engineering degree without knowing much about configuration control. The idea is to make sure the dingus you end up with is actually what you set out to build in the beginning, basically. Does it hit all the specs? Do the interfaces still interface? Are things like reliability and maintainability and upgradeability still in line with company standards, customer standards, any relevant legal standards? The initial set of approved drawings, specs, manuals, test plans and procedures—all the paper (or files) associated with a project—was its baseline configuration. Deviating from the baseline took consideration and high level approval, because going off in the wrong direction could hose the whole thing.

Which is why, according to the manual, a Change Board was supposed to be chaired by the project manager or the senior configuration manager assigned to the project, or the senior engineer. The person chairing the Ferret Change Board meeting was a young woman a little older than me, about thirty I'd guess, and a question whispered to the electrical engineer sitting next to me returned the information that she was a technical assistant with the Configuration Management Lab.

For folks who aren't familiar with technical organizations and job titles, "tech assistant" means a specialized clerk. She was basically a typing-and-filing kind of person who'd been around long enough to pick up some specialized procedures for the area she worked in.

Looked at another way, the person chairing the meeting was the only hourly person there, and the only one without (most likely, or why would she be in a clerical slot?) a college degree.

Ummmm.

I'd looked at org charts before heading down to the meeting, and the configuration manager assigned to the project was a guy named Glenn Calloway. Nobody named "Glenn" seemed to be there.

The tech assistant's name was Julie, and she ran through a stack of minor stuff—a bunch of components being used on the current build because of availability—which were all quickly approved because the subbed parts were better than called for. I flipped through my copies and everything looked in line. Julie noted that we'd already done first article testing with the baseline parts on this box, so the customer wouldn't complain if we put better ones in the production units. Right—you want to test with the lowest level parts called out. If you tested with better components—higher capacity, better reliability, broader environmental operating ranges—that didn't prove squat about what'd happen if you built the dingus with the not-as-good spec parts. Doing a production run with better components was fine, and since the vendors didn't have what we'd ordered, they were giving us the slightly better parts at no additional cost. Which tells you how much mark-up there is on piece parts, but anyway.

Next we had a set of drawings for a mounting plate that went with a different unit, and a QA inspection supervisor explained that some of the holes in the plate were too small—once the plate was painted, the holes closed up and the wires that were supposed to feed through wouldn't go through. The plate went onto the outside of the unit and had to be painted with a protective coating. The holes were to spec, but were still too small, so the spec itself was wrong.

The engineer on my other side cursed under her breath and sorted through her set of the drawings. "That was Lou. At the time he signed off on this, we thought it would go in a housing and wouldn't need painting. The housing was eliminated, and when we noted the paint requirement, nobody thought of the

holes. Usually the tolerances aren't that tight, but with wires..." She shrugged. "It'll cost, but we have to fix it."

Everyone agreed, although the program manager—who was also there, sitting halfway down the table and why wasn't *he* chairing the meeting?—wasn't happy about it.

They ran through a few more things, then Julie got to the last packet of papers. "Request to mod the uplink on TA-021834-03," she said.

The electrical engineer on my right said, "It's a simple upgrade and we can get a forty percent noise reduction with minimal additional cost. I've talked to Stan about it and he says the customer will go for it."

Julie frowned down at the packet, then flipped to the cover page of the actual drawing and tapped it with her finger. "This box is used by eight other projects. You can't just make a change without getting them all to sign off on it."

The PM scowled at her. "That's not practical. Look, it's an improvement, it's cheap, and the customer's willing to pay for it."

"I get that, Len," said Julie, "but you can't up-rev a drawing that eight other programs are using without getting their approval. I recognize five of these project numbers—they're long-running projects that've had multiple add-ons and upgrades and enhancements over the years, and they'll probably have more. What if one or two or all five of them don't want this change for whatever reason?"

"It's a cheap improvement. They'll want it."

"Then you'll be able to get the other PMs to sign off on it," said Julie. "It's company policy—all affected projects have to sign off or you can't make a change. Your other option is to re-identify. Start over with a new drawing number used only by this program and you can do whatever you want."

"Re-identifying is expensive," Len retorted in a voice loaded with exaggerated patience. "We'd have to change every reference to this box number on every piece of paper it appears on."

“I get that,” she repeated. “But that’s policy. You get the other PMs to sign off, or you re-identify, or you leave it as it is. Those are your only options.”

“I’m going to talk to Glenn about this.”

“Glenn’s buried in the Shoreline tank this afternoon,” she said, referring to another program. “If you can’t get ahold of him there, you can call Carl, but he’ll tell you what I told you. So will Glenn.”

Len the project manager muttered and scowled, but Julie wrapped the meeting and that was the end of it.

When I got back to the office, I dove back into the org charts and made a couple of calls. Carl was the director of the Configuration Management Lab. Glenn was a senior configuration manager, and was also Julie’s supervisor. Julie had been with the company for eleven years, having come in as an eighteen-year-old receptionist whose new boss was friends with Julie’s mother, who also worked for us. Julie’d done a stint as department clerk in Component Engineering, then moved over to Configuration Management as Carl’s secretary. From there she’d moved over to working projects, which is *not* easy, because secretaries get no respect; it’s like they’re perpetually branded with a scarlet “S” even if they move to another job in the company.

I had to dig into the accounting database, and then look up a few years worth of bid data from proposals, but I finally figured out what was going on.

I sat down with Mr. Castle late the next morning, and he said, “So, what did you find?”

“I found that Carl Emerson has a secret weapon. The CM Lab has gotten into the habit of bidding their chunk of a critical project with some ridiculously low number of hours for someone like Glenn Calloway—the bid for the Ferret project was eight hours a week—and then when it’s time to actually *work* the project, they plug Julie Kale in full time. They’ve been doing it for about six years, and it works beautifully. Julie makes a small fraction of what someone at Glenn’s level makes, but she can do the work. She knows her stuff, she’s organized, and she’s not intimidated by senior people. I saw her

face down a ticked off Len Johnson without any sign of nerves and without budging. She makes less than Len's secretary."

"Why am I paying senior CM people if someone who makes less than a secretary can do their job?"

"Probably because no one's figured out how to clone Julie. She should be an engineer, if not a PM herself, except she doesn't have the schooling." I shuffled through my notes. "She's taking classes at night, one or two at a time. Whenever things heat up—a design review or an upcoming delivery or a proposal, anything that requires overtime for more than a week or so, she drops whatever classes she's taking, and starts over the next semester. The company's paying for her schooling, but only when she finishes a class, which she doesn't do very often, because for all her smarts, she's dumb enough to let the company's needs override her education."

"Sounds like a deal for us, though," said Mr. Castle.

I glared at him and smacked my hand down on my notes. "It's not right. If you want to be cutthroat about it, ask yourself how long before someone headhunts her? They could double her salary and still be saving money on the deal for the work she does. And how much more could she do for the company if she had an engineering degree? Do you know how she learned to chair Change Board meetings?" He just raised an eyebrow at me, so I said, "While she was Carl's secretary, they released a CM Policies Manual and a CM Procedures Handbook. She must've typed them. Probably edited them, incorporated comments, did the formatting, built the indexes... She *typed the manuals* and that was enough to turn her into a senior CM in all but job title. Or pay grade. If she was able to read a few more engineering books, she could probably build us a Mars colony or something."

"We don't have a NASA contract," Mr. Castle pointed out.

I was annoyed enough to give him a huge eye roll for that one. "Fine. Whatever you want, she could probably do it, but she needs to get through school first. This nickel-and-dime stuff isn't working, obviously, and even if we could get her to quit quitting school every time her project goes into

overdrive, she'd still be there for another decade, and that'd just be for her bachelor's. If we could get her to sign a work contract for some period of years, it'd be in the company's best interests to send her to school, full time, and get her through—all the way to a doctorate, if that's what she wants. If she's this hot with a damn high school diploma, imagine what she could do with some real education."

"Possibly," he said. "Or we could just give her a few promotions so her title and salary match the actual work she's doing." He gave me a look and added, "I never finished college either."

It was clear I was supposed to say something there, but I couldn't think of anything. Of course I knew he'd dropped out of college—researching the companies you apply to is Job Search 101. Mr. Castle was one of those Silicon Valley millionaires who'd dropped out of school to start his company in a garage, and one of the very few who hadn't been shoved aside and finally kicked to the curb by his venture capitalists. I knew that, but it hadn't popped up in my head as a piece of relevant info, although it certainly should've. This was one of those head-desk moments, but people don't actually head-desk in real life, so I just sat there looking kind of stupid.

He finally went on to say, "Someone should probably talk to Julie and see what she wants. I'd be willing to sign off on sending her to school if she'd sign a contract to work for us after—at least ten years if she wants a PhD. Or if she likes bossing engineers and PMs around with her high school diploma, we can promote her and let her keep doing it. Her choice; find out."

CHAPTER SEVEN

After that, I headed out to the break room because I needed coffee, and a few minutes to reboot my brain. Of course, that's when I ran into Evan. He was standing in front of the coffee maker and had obviously just put up a new pot. It was rumbling and gurgling and dripping coffee into the carafe at a rate of approximately half a drop per minute.

I'd seen him before, of course. We passed in the halls every day, and had been in some of the same meetings. This was the first time since That Night that I'd run into him when we were, one, going to be near each other for more than a few seconds, and two, didn't have anything official to talk about.

I'll admit I had a gut-level impulse to turn right back around and leave. I had a second gut-level impulse to get something quick, like a glass of water, and *then* leave, to save some scrap of face. Courage is about overcoming your gut-level impulses, though, so I said, "Morning, Evan," and stood there next to him with my mug.

"Hey, Rob." He didn't sound tense, but he wasn't looking at me, either. He gave me a glance and a smile, then looked away. The wall in that direction had a few humorous motivational posters on it, plus about twenty Dilbert strips, but Evan had been there long enough that I was pretty sure he'd memorized them all.

Okay, so he was kind of nervous. I empathized, definitely, so I leaned closer and lowered my voice, and said, "I'm really sorry about that night. I should've kept a closer eye on the drinks."

That got him to look right at me, with a sort of surprised expression. He said, "Hey, nobody blames you. The bartender should've made sure you noticed when he put the tray down. Hell, the bartender should be watching for people who are hanging out right up at the damn bar drugging people's drinks. It wasn't your fault."

"Maybe not, but somehow that doesn't make me feel better."

He huffed out a laugh. “No, I guess it wouldn’t me, either.” He looked away again, then said, “You know, you’re a great guy and I like you a lot—”

I interrupted him before he could continue along that painful and awkward road. “No, it’s okay—Mr. Castle told me that you’re married, and you were just being nice. And you *were* being really nice. I appreciated it before the whole drugged-drinks thing.”

“Okay, good.” He nodded and stared at the coffee pot, still drip-drip-dripping. “I just didn’t want you to think I was actually...” He sort of trailed off.

“I won’t think you were actually planning to cheat on your husband if you don’t think I’m the kind of guy who climbs into the lap of a co-worker I’ve only known for half an hour.”

That got me another laugh, a little louder. “Deal.” He glanced at me again and added, “I have to admit that if I were free, I might not have minded the lap-climbing so much.”

I grinned and said, “If you were free, I might’ve made an exception for you. But seriously, not right then. I’d just met most of those guys, including Mr. Castle—who I’d just found out I was working directly for—and he made it pretty clear he wasn’t too impressed with me. I’d have saved the horribly unprofessional behavior for a later time and a different place, even if the circumstances were... different.”

He cocked his head at me and frowned. “Why—?” Then he cut himself off and scowled. “Oh, that. No, that wasn’t about you at all, not really. Greg’d been threatening to get him an assistant since I don’t know when, and then he just sort of sprang you on him. I told Greg that was a bad idea. But when Allan tossed the pillow for you, it was a joke—a jab at Nick, not you. Nick would never look at an employee in a situation like that. Like you said, you’d just been sprung on him and it was obvious you were pretty thrown by it. You were nervous and trying to figure out what the hell was going on, and there’s no way Nick would’ve taken advantage. Allan knows that, so it was a tease, sort of. He’d had a few and thought it was funny, but it wasn’t about you.”

“Oh. Umm, okay. Thanks.”

That was a bomb set off in my head. The thing with Julie faded into nothing—I felt like a spreadsheet trying to recalculate everything after one key number changed.

“So, how’s it going?” asked Evan after a pause. We were both staring at the coffee going drip-drip-drip, but the atmosphere wasn’t quite as thick as it’d been a minute earlier.

“Fine, great. Kind of a mix of routine stuff and interesting stuff.” It suddenly clicked that Evan was CFO, and Carl Emerson’s semi-scam was definitely a money thing. Not something Evan *needed* to take notice of, but I bet he’d enjoy hearing about it. “Umm, do you know Julie Kale?”

Evan frowned for a second, then shook his head.

“She works for Carl Emerson in Configuration. Tech assistant. She’s chairing Ferret’s Change Board meetings.”

Evan turned and looked at me with his mouth just a tiny bit open. I counted four before he said, “What?”

I said, “No, seriously,” and told him the story. It was pretty good, once you got over the sheer boggle of it, and we were both chuckling by the time the coffee was done.

So we were laughing and smiling at each other when one of the security guards poked her head into the break room and said, “Mr. O’Neill? There you are,” and a dark-haired guy wearing a visitor’s badge clipped to his slick suit pushed past the guard into the room. He stared at Evan, then at me, then at Evan.

Evan said, “Nate?” and looked at his watch. “Hey, you’re early. I just got coffee, but we can go now if you want.”

The visitor said, “No reason to rush. Funny story?” and he was staring at me again.

“Yes, kind of.” Evan got a stressed look around his eyes and mouth. “Nate, this is Rob Arvazian, Nick’s new assistant. Rob, this is my husband, Nate.”

Ahh. Oh. I put on a business smile, said, “Hey, Nate. Good to meet you,” and offered my hand.

Nate looked at my hand for about half a second too long, then gave me the most insulting handshake I’ve ever had. Seriously, I don’t know how he did it, but he communicated the fact that I was shit under his shoes with that shake.

“Hopefully Evan mentioned that he’s married more than two seconds ago,” said Nate.

I said, “Yeah, I’ve known for a while now,” doing my best to keep my voice and face even and friendly, or at least civil, because this guy seriously had “JERK” tattooed on his forehead. “Evan’s a great guy, you’re lucky to have him.”

Nate took a step forward and suddenly looked a lot bigger. “Maybe you want some luck for yourself?”

Evan said, “Nate,” and put a hand on the guy’s shoulder, but Nate shrugged him off with an angry twitch.

Crap. “Look, yeah, I’d like some of the same kind of luck for myself, which to me means finding a guy of my own who’s as built and handsome and half as nice as Evan is. But I’m not after your husband. And even if I were it wouldn’t do me any good because, see above, he’s a great guy and wouldn’t prowl around behind your back. Or if he would then I wouldn’t want him, because I’m looking for a great guy of my own, and sneaking cheaters are jerkwads.”

“Easy to say.” Nate hadn’t taken a swing at me yet, but he was still glaring. “You were eager enough to crawl into his lap.”

“If you know that, then you know we were both drugged. And he told you about it, right? See, a sneaking cheat wouldn’t have come home and told you about it. That means he’s not sneaking, and didn’t mean to cheat. Because he was drugged.”

I couldn’t believe this asshole. He’d better be a wildcat in bed, is all I can say, because Evan didn’t deserve this kind of crap. He was tense, his face was

all wincing, with gritted teeth, like he didn't know whether he should crawl under a table or drag his husband out by one leg. I'd vote for the dragging by one leg option—and down the stairs, not the elevator.

If Nate kept this up, I'd be half tempted to go for Evan anyway, just to detach him from this toxic fucker he was shackled to.

Before that thought had a chance to sneak out my mouth, Mr. Castle filled the doorway. He glared at everyone impartially, looking grim, and said, "The whole floor can hear you. Nate, you're leaving. Evan, if you want to go with him, that's fine—you can have the rest of the day off so you can deal with your shit. If you'd rather stay at work and let your shit cool down before you try to shovel it, that's fine too. Either way, I expect that neither of you will bring this crap into the office again, ever."

Nate glared right back at Mr. Castle and said, "This is personal—" but Mr. Castle cut him off.

"That's exactly why it doesn't belong in the office. Out, now." He stepped into the room and stood to one side of the doorway, staring at Nate until he left. Evan went with him, and I heard him whisper, "Sorry," as he passed Mr. Castle.

Well, shit.

I glanced up at Mr. Castle, who was still wearing an expression right off a stone statue. I turned away and topped up my coffee mug, added sugar. Stirring very thoroughly kept me occupied for another twelve seconds or so, before Mr. Castle said, "Let's order some lunch. I don't feel like leaving right now."

I turned around just in time to see him give a wry smile and add, "If I turn my back on this place, lightning will probably strike, or at least someone'll send a stripper-gram and that'll be it for the rest of the day."

I grinned back and said, "Possibly for the rest of the week."

"Most likely. How about Mexican?"

Since he was asking and not telling, I figured he wanted me to eat with him. We'd done that a couple of times, usually when we had something to work on through lunch. I said, "Sure," and headed out to place the order.

Twenty-two minutes later, I got a call that there was a delivery in the lobby. I headed down and came back up with three bags. I set them down on the work table in Mr. Castle's office, then went to get drinks at the break room. He took Coke Classic, high-octane, and I grabbed a ginger ale for myself.

By the time I got back to the office, Mr. Castle had the three bags. He said, "Let's eat in the lounge," and walked over to the door on the far side of the office, in the corner near my desk.

Oh, *that* lounge.

I'd never been into the executive lounge. It wasn't really an "executive lounge" because not all the executives got a keycard for it, but that's what everyone called it anyway. It was a private lounge for the CEO and his friends, mostly the guys he'd known since before Castle was a business, plus a few others who'd been given cards over the years. There were a lot of rumors about the luxury and general awesomeness of the executive lounge, passed around among the employees who'd never been there.

Mr. Castle slid a key card into the lock, and I followed him inside.

The executive lounge took up the rest of this end of the floor, as deep as Mr. Castle's office suite, and running all the way to the far end of the building; I could see sunlight from the windows on the far side. The long side, to the right, was also all windows, with basically the same view as we had out of Mr. Castle's office.

The inner two-thirds of the lounge was divided from the outer one-third on the window walls by six-foot partitions. The open area by the windows was about a dozen feet wide, and was set with tables and chairs, plus couch-and-chair groupings, with some potted plants on the floor here and there to divide the space. The partitions had gaps on the window side, and I could see that the

inner part of the long room was divided into half a dozen smaller sections, like cubicles.

I was wondering why anyone would come to an executive lounge to sit in a cubicle when I saw who was there ahead of us.

A handsome woman in a dark green suit was sitting on one end of a sofa. A man whose face I couldn't see, but who was wearing khakis and a polo, and silver and white sports shoes, was curled up on the sofa with his head in her lap. She was looking out the window, just relaxing, and running her brown hand through his blond curls, slow and gentle. Mr. Castle and I passed them, heading for one of the tables with our lunch, and I saw the guy huff out a sigh and visibly relax. The woman said, "There, good boy," and bent down to press a kiss into his hair.

Ahh. *That* kind of private lounge.

I maintained, because I'm not a dork, and followed Mr. Castle to one of the round tables that sat right in a patch of sun. While digging in the paper sacks, Mr. Castle said in a low voice, "This isn't work. This place is like an embassy—when you're here, you're not at work. This isn't part of Castle Silica. Coming in here is like going off-site."

I said, "Understood," in a voice just as low, and set down our drinks.

"Nothing X-rated out here," he went on. "That's what the cubes are for, or just if you want some privacy. Half of them have beds, two have benches, and the one on the far end is just matted. We keep the noise down; there's some soundproofing on the walls, but that only goes so far, and you never know when someone's going to open a door. If you're a screamer, deal with it, or use a gag."

"Understood," I repeated. I really had no idea what else to say. We sorted out the food and started eating, but even while working my way through a really great burrito, I couldn't help but remember what Evan had said earlier, that Mr. Castle wasn't actually repulsed by me, that he just didn't want to take advantage while I was new and obviously confused.

I was still new, but wasn't at all confused, so when he shifted one of his own burritos and knocked a packet of hot sauce onto the floor, some wild impulse had me say, "I'll get it, Sir." And instead of just bending over and picking it up, I slid out of my chair and knelt on the floor to get it, then offered it up to him in one hand.

I kept my expression neutral the whole time. I still had enough of a grip on sanity to know that not being repulsed by me wasn't the same as wanting anything to do with me outside of business. But there I was, and I guess I was going to find out.

Mr. Castle took the packet, gave me a smile that was a bare half-second quirk of his lips, and said, "Good boy." He brushed his hand through my hair once, then turned back to his lunch.

I stayed on the floor for a couple seconds, but the moment was past, or at least I didn't see anything else coming of it right then, so I got back into my chair and took another bite of burrito.

A minute later he said, "Next time we'll get fish and chips. You can kneel for me and I'll feed you."

I stopped in mid-bite and then had to swallow hard. I'd never done that before, never really seen the point except sort of intellectually. I mean, yes, kneeling next to someone and depending on them to feed you by hand was obviously an expression of submission, sort of like crouching in front of someone's chair and letting them put their feet up on your back. I'd never thought it was sexy before, but right then my dick was hard and aching, and my balls were sending little messages to my brain begging to get him to feed me.

After explaining to my balls that we were eating burritos today, and trying to hand-feed someone a burrito would only cause hot food to fall into that someone's lap, possibly causing burns, my balls got the message and calmed down. A little. They were still whining, though, and my dick was standing up with them in support. I was glad I was still sitting down just then.

Mr. Castle looked up at me as though expecting a response, and I said, “Yes, Sir. I’ll remember—fish and chips next time.”

“Do you like fish and chips?” he asked.

“I *love* fish and chips, Sir.”

That got a grin out of him. “Good.”

And that was that. For the rest of lunch we talked about movies. We both liked superhero movies, as long as they were well done. The recent Marvel movies, although the X-Men movies had been progressively suckier. The new Batman movies, definitely—I wanted to get on my knees for either Liam Neeson or Christian Bale, I wasn’t fussy. Mr. Castle said he saw the attraction with Neeson, but wanted to get Bale into a couple of sets of handcuffs.

I could see Bale switching. I have no idea what the guy’s into—he has a gorgeous wife and might be perfectly straight and vanilla for all I know—but if we’re going to be fantasizing, who cares about reality?

He liked old westerns, and I thought they were incredibly cheesy. I told him so, too. I like animated movies, the good ones, like Pixar does. He smirked and said, “Kid stuff.”

I said, “Right, because Batman and Thor totally aren’t kid stuff,” and he threw a wadded-up napkin at me.

It was like hanging with a friend instead of eating lunch with my incredibly rich and powerful boss, and it was cool. I only called him “sir” a couple of times, after I got up off the floor and all.

When we were done, I stuffed all the trash into the bags and took them along. Mr. Castle led the way out the far door, around the other side of the long room, which led to a plain, locked door on a corridor—just to show me the rest of the room and where most people came in. From there we went back to the office, where I dropped the bags into a garbage can. No janitors in the lounge, ever, for obvious reasons.

And then we went back to work, and everything was normal again. Except in my head, where I kept imagining what it'd be like to stay on my knees for him and have him feed me.

CHAPTER EIGHT

No fish and chips the rest of the week, unfortunately. He was back East again Thursday and Friday, touching base with a government customer who was looking at budget problems in the next fiscal year. Then on Monday we had a major commercial customer come in, en masse, and Mr. Castle was tied up variously playing host and monitoring the dog and pony show. On Monday and Tuesday he sat in on a CDR—a Critical Design Review—for a project we were already working for them, then Wednesday through Friday he was locked up with a mostly-different group of reps from the same customer for a bid presentation on a new project we wanted. I was running around doing everything from ordering lunch to re-crunching numbers to updating PERT charts with Ellen Corvalis, the proposal manager, to try to squeeze everything down into the timeline the customer wanted before Friday's final presentation.

Lunch was never fish and chips.

On Friday, I was in the conference room the proposal team had taken over for proposal work—the actual *work* work, as opposed to the presentation going on in the much fancier conference room across the hall. I sat on a long, battered table with a cheap, fake woodgrain top, watching Ellen stare at the latest version of the program PERT chart, a huge piece of paper tacked down the length of one wall. The project manager on the customer side was in his sixties and liked paper, so we gave him paper, although it was a ridiculous amount of extra work.

Half a dozen other members of the proposal team worked behind us, researching and updating and calculating and reprinting. Keyboards and laser printers clattered and hummed, and the air smelled of the pizza and fruit cups I'd ordered for team lunch, plus the ever-present coffee. Mr. Castle had taken the customer team to lunch at an Italian place about a mile away, giving us some time to work before the final afternoon session.

I thought of something, and picked up a binder of the detailed bid breakdowns. Yes, of course he did.

I clued Ellen in to Carl Emerson's bidding trick—he'd bid ten hours of a senior configuration manager's time, which would probably cover Julie Kale for full time plus some overtime—and I also mentioned that Julie probably wouldn't be making peanuts for very much longer, one way or the other. Ellen scowled and pulled out her phone to send a text.

"Creative use of resources is great," Ellen muttered while tapping in a message, "but stretch it too far and it snaps back on your ass."

I agreed with her with some enthusiasm, and she sent me a smirk while hitting SEND on her text with a flourish. "There," she said. "Carl has half an hour to get me some real numbers. If he tries to argue, I'll toss you at him—helps to have the CEO's right hand available to load into the rocket launcher."

I returned a weak scowl for her smirk. Not that I wouldn't like to give Carl Emerson a lecture on long-term retention of valuable personnel resources, but I was still enough of a newbie that I wasn't sure about chewing out someone on that level. I crossed a set of virtual fingers and hoped Emerson would be on the ball. It should be an easy conversion, after all, even if the final figure was larger than he wanted.

Larger than Ellen would like, for that matter, but a later overrun for what was clearly an under-bid wouldn't do our rep any good, especially with a customer who gave us a lot of business.

We went on with our tweaking and crunching and calling people to nag them about inputs and revisions and approvals, and eventually Mr. Castle and the customers returned from lunch and Ellen vanished back into the main conference room. Donald, her second, wasn't as enthused about using me, so I camped out at a table in a corner with my laptop and worked on some of the Pinelli research, which'd been tossed at me to deal with in all my spare time. I was out of the way but available if Donald wanted anything.

I was also right there in case Mr. Castle needed anything, although he didn't. Despite all the scrambling and updating backstage, the proposal presentations were pretty well scripted and, from what I heard, everything went smoothly in front of the customers, which put everyone in a good mood.

Tired—some of the people who were working in the proposal room had been putting in eighty-hour weeks for the last month—but having it all come together and the presentations go well kind of makes it worthwhile.

Or if it doesn't, you're probably in the wrong job, you know?

The afternoon went pretty much like the morning. I got through some research I was doing on one of our competitors, and by four I decided to head upstairs to the break room on our floor to get coffee, just to get out of that room for a few minutes.

The pot was empty—probably because most of the execs were down at the proposal presentation, showing our dedication to doing their project on the all-important last day—so I was standing there watching the fresh coffee drip-drip into the pot when Greg came in.

“Hey!” he said with a sneaky grin on his face. “You playing hooky too?”

“Not really,” I replied. “Donald thinks I'm useless so I'm just sort of taking up space in the proposal room, working on Pinelli stuff.” Greg had been on the Pinelli team for over a month—it was a major new business push and it'd had everyone on our floor working overtime for longer than I'd been with the company—so he knew exactly what I was talking about.

I continued with, “So you're the only one here who's actually playing hooky. What'll you give me not to tell Mr. Castle?” I grinned right back at him so he'd know I was kidding.

Greg laughed and held up both hands like he was surrendering. “I've been smiling at their chief engineer for so long my face is about to crack off—I had to sneak out for a few. Besides, we're at the summing-up, all the questions have been asked and answered. Ellen's the focus right now, Nick'll probably say a few words at the end, and then it'll all be handshakes and heading out. Nobody's going to miss me now.”

I was pretty sure Mr. Castle had noticed him leaving, but I was also pretty sure that if he'd objected, Greg would've gotten a stern text before he even hit the elevator.

The coffee finished and I filled Greg's mug for him, then my own. He doctored his and took a sip, then said, "How've you been doing? Aside from Donald, who just takes a while to warm up to people, by the way, so it's not you."

"Good to know," I said. "It's been great, though, really. Mr. Castle keeps me scrambling, but it's usually something interesting, so that's fine. If it were all easy, routine stuff, I'd be bored, so I'm glad he's throwing me some knots to untangle. Even if I'm pretty sure he already knows the answer to at least some of them when he gives them to me."

Greg laughed and nodded. "Knowing Nick, he probably does. If he weren't happy with your work, you'd be gone by now. I'm not saying relax, but don't stress out over it."

"No stressing out, got it." I put down my mug and pretended to write a note on my palm with one finger.

Greg snorted. "No wonder you and Nick get along—he's a smartass too. I'm glad it's working, though. When you came in to interview, I was pretty sure you'd be perfect for him. I'm glad I was right." He gave me a bright grin and raised his mug in my direction, like he was toasting me, then waved and headed out.

My phone had been on silent—not even vibrate—all day because I just knew that if I left it set to make any noise at all, I'd be sent to run something over to the presentation room and someone would call me at that instant, and I'd have to figure out how to die and somehow make my body melt and soak down into the carpet right there and then. I hadn't figured out the die-and-melt thing yet, so I kept my phone on silent and just checked it whenever I thought about it. I checked it there in the break room and saw that I had a text from Brandon.

Bsy 2nite?

I sent back, *No whats up?* then sipped at my coffee until he replied.

Get2gethr 2nite

Place up in the hills want 2 come?

I figured anything Brandon was inviting me to was a kink-type party. I'd been to enough daytime gatherings at his place that I thought I was ready for something a little more... more. Something in the evening would be "more", right? I typed:

Sure, sounds like fun

and then:

Address or directions?

There was a pause of a couple of minutes—maybe he was talking to someone else?—and I was almost done with my coffee by the time he replied again.

Pick u up? 7?

That'd work fine. I sent:

Sure thanks

He sent back:

Wear sthing nice :D

Huh. Maybe it was another munch-type thing, but dinner instead of lunch? I knew there were some nice restaurants up in the hills over the valley—especially Los Gatos, or down in New Almaden, south of the university. I sent:

Will do—see you then

I finished my coffee, got a refill, and headed back down to the proposal room. Having plans for the evening put me in a better mood, and I didn't even care about Donald ignoring me.

The wrap-up ran long, which everyone who'd worked proposals before said was pretty standard. But that meant it was after six-thirty by the time the customers had left, most of them rushing to the airport, and I followed Mr. Castle back up to our office.

I set my laptop down on my desk and asked, “Do we need to do anything else tonight?”

“No, that’s it for now. Ellen sent the team home to collapse for the weekend. She said you were helpful, by the way.”

“Thank you, sir. She was good to work with.”

“Go ahead and get out of here. I’ll see you Monday.”

“Yes, sir. Have a good weekend.”

He stuffed a few things into his computer bag, threw me a casual wave and took off.

I looked at my watch and scowled, then sent a quick text to Brandon.

Running 18, pick me up from work?

My phone actually rang a minute later, and I gave him directions while taking some teasing for turning into a workaholic executive when I hadn’t even been there a month.

I thought about just following him to the event in my car, but then I decided not to. Since I wasn’t planning to do any serious playing, I could have a few drinks if I had a ride home. Easier to pick my car up from work on Saturday than to find my way back to whatever place “up in the hills” we were heading to.

I felt pretty good about being done for the week, and about getting through all the presentations, so I figured I’d let Brandon rag me some if he wanted, I didn’t really care.

I hit the bathroom to wash my face and comb my hair. My shirt and tie looked okay, and my jacket had spent most of the day hanging off the back of one chair or another, so it was fine. I’d been planning to change at home, but I looked good for a nice restaurant or whatever we ended up doing.

Except when I hopped into Brandon’s Toyota ten minutes later, Brandon was wearing black jeans and scruffy black hiking boots, and a tight black tank top with a black open-mesh T-shirt over it. The bars in his pierced nipples

showed through both layers. Black leather bands were buckled around both wrists, about two inches wide. One had a watch on it, but the general effect was still wrist cuffs.

I folded myself into the car and pulled the door shut, then grinned at him and said, “Surprised you don’t have a collar to go with the cuffs.”

Brandon pulled out into traffic, giving me a quick smirk back. “Only club kiddies wear collars they bought themselves. You’re looking very... mundane.”

“Yeah, I’m getting the impression I’m going to stand out.” I wasn’t overjoyed, but there wasn’t anything I could do about it so I decided not to stress out over my outfit. “You said wear something nice—you didn’t define ‘nice’ for me, so I figured nice-restaurant type nice.”

He laughed and said, “Sorry, I just figured you’d get it. Next time I’ll be more specific.” He pulled onto the freeway and added, “Seriously, sorry. I forgot how new you are. I shouldn’t assume.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, I guess. So, umm, where are we going?”

That got me another grin. “Oh, you’ll see. This is going to be fun.”

“For you or for me?”

“Heh. Both, I hope.”

“No, really,” I said. “I don’t get off on making an idiot of myself.” I hadn’t been worried before, but I was starting to.

“Okay, you’re right. I was mostly teasing. It’s a meet-up in a campground—lots of outdoors, but there’s a rec hall too, indoor bathrooms, all the amenities. We’ve got the place all weekend, with gate guards so we shouldn’t be bothered by outsiders. I wasn’t planning to stay the night, but if you find someone you want to share a sleeping bag with, and can get a ride home, just let me know. I won’t leave without you unless you tell me, though, so if you’re going to vanish, text me.”

“Umm, okay.” I paused, then figured what the hell, and asked, “Why a campground?” Because that sounded kind of weird, and chilly.

“Just because,” said Brandon. “I mean, we’re usually inside somewhere, you know? In someone’s house, or at a bar or a club, or a commercial playspace like the KL building. Which is great, but sometimes the walls and the closed doors and the covered windows get kind of oppressive. It’s nice to be able to go on your knees for someone outside, you know?”

I hadn’t thought about it like that, probably because I was still sort of shy about this stuff around outsiders and felt safe with a group of kinky people and some solid walls around us, but I could see what he was saying. I’d probably agree with him in a few years. So I said, “Yeah, that makes sense.” I watched the traffic go by for a minute, then asked, “Is that why you built the wall around your front yard?”

“Yeah, exactly. It’s like ninety-eight percent private, but with fresh air and breezes, and sun and sky overhead.”

“It’s nice,” I agreed. “Great place to hang. It’s cool that you’re willing to play host every week.” I looked out the window on my side while saying that because it felt like a kind of dorky thing to say, but I really did want to make sure he knew that *we* knew he busted his butt to have everyone over.

“Thanks,” he said. “I like having an active community, and we have a great group. If no one’s willing to step up, the wheels would fall off and it’d be tough to get together.”

I nodded. “There’s always the Internet, but I like meeting in realspace.”

“Me too.”

Brandon pulled off the freeway, and sure enough we were driving through Los Gatos, even if we weren’t heading for a fancy restaurant.

CHAPTER NINE

We drove up a narrow, windy road for a while, then into a park. I didn't catch the name on the sign. Brandon said there were four rentable areas within the park, and a few minutes later we pulled up to a low, metal-barred gate guarded by four guys who looked a lot like bikers, and in fact there were a couple of motorcycles parked off to one side.

Brandon rolled down his window and one of the biker guys—all leather and studs and chains and shit-kicker boots, with a worked leather collar closed by a scuffed up padlock that proclaimed him to be someone's sub to anyone who knew what that meant—leaned down with a grin and said, “Hey. Here for the biker party?”

“Yep,” said Brandon, grinning back. “Bikers, that's totally us.”

“Cool,” said the gate guard. “Twenty each, for the site rental, plus there's some food and drinks.”

I dug a twenty out of my wallet and passed it to Brandon, who added his own and handed it out to the guard. He gave us a pair of wristbands in trade—leathery-plastic cord bands with metal clasps, with different colored plastic beads strung on the cord. The fattest of the plastic beads was a smooth cylinder that said “Rolling Thunder October 2013.”

One of the other guards opened the gate for us. Brandon waved and drove through. “Rolling Thunder is a club,” he explained, waving his right wrist where he'd put his wristband. “It's all bikers—mostly guys, but some women, too—who are also into kink. They do biker events as just bikers, and kink stuff as both. The two communities have almost identical uniforms, so that works pretty well for them.”

I had to laugh, but he was right—the whole leather and biker boots thing totally worked in the kink community. The guy who'd taken our money was pretty hot, even if we wouldn't have been able to play together very well. I imagined having an argument over who tied who up, and had to snicker.

The road in was narrow and rutted, and we couldn't go very fast. It was also pretty dark; we still had an hour or so until sunset, but the road was lined with trees, and there were hills all around. I don't recognize all that many kinds of trees on sight, and I don't know what kind these were, but they were pretty, still green even in the fall, the way a lot of trees in California are all year, especially down near sea level. They had little seedpod-things hanging from them, so I guess they knew it was fall even if the leaves hadn't turned.

Another biker guy was directing cars into a big, empty patch of bare dirt they were using for parking. He pointed to a spot and Brandon pulled in, all neat and with an amazing lack of frustration. It was actually better than valet parking since there was no fussing about passing over keys or getting a ticket.

The air was cool and smelled like dirt and trees. Which I know sounds very blah, but you know, that foresty smell? I don't really notice anything wrong with how the air smells down in the valley, even on smoggy days; it just doesn't register, even when other people are griping about it. I've lived in the Santa Clara Valley all my life, and I guess I'm used to it. I only notice that kind of thing when the smell changes—walking past a bunch of roses or jasmine, or a row of full dumpsters. The middle of a forest, even if it's just up the hill overlooking the valley, smells different enough that I notice; I'm just not good at describing the specifics.

I guess if I could do that, I'd be one of those perfume people, right?

The guy directing traffic pointed up the dirt road, which was pretty narrow once we passed the parking area, more of a dirt path. He gave me a weird look for a second before the next car came in and took his attention. I was pretty sure at that point that I was the only person on site wearing a suit and tie, and sure enough, when we got up to the main area—a big, mostly flat spot covered with patchy grass, with tables and barbecues and tents around the perimeter, and a rustic looking single-story building off to one side—everyone else was either in casual jeans or khaki type clothes, or wearing leather or net or chains or straps or latex or whatever they were into.

I got some smirks, but I got checked out a few times, too, so I guess some people liked the young-guy-in-a-suit look and didn't care that it clashed with

the setting. That helped me relax some. I wasn't looking to hook up in any serious way, but some flirting would be fun. I'm not exactly an underwear model or anything, so I'll take my ego strokes wherever I can get them, and don't feel at all guilty about it.

Brandon squeezed my arm and took off jogging, dodging in and out through the strolling and chatting people. I followed, and he led me up to Riley and Don, who were hanging out with some other folks. Riley was kneeling in the grass, leaning up against Don's thigh. Don was talking to a guy I didn't know, gesturing with one hand while the other sifted through Riley's hair.

"Hey!" said Brandon. He waved and got a wave back from Don. Riley smiled and said, "Hi." He didn't wave, and I noticed that he was cuffed, with the chain of his handcuffs threaded behind his belt. He was wearing jeans and sneakers and a plain white T-shirt, and other than his collar he looked totally vanilla. Somehow it was hotter seeing him on his knees dressed like a mainstream guy than it would've if he'd been wearing straps and chains and a hood.

Don was wearing shitkickers with three big buckles up the sides, over black leather pants, with a broken-in black leather jacket over a plain white T-shirt like Riley's. His only accessory was a pair of fingerless leather gloves; I stared at the hand that was playing with Riley's hair, and imagined what those gloves would feel like. My cock started taking an interest and I had to look away.

Which was just as well because Don was making introductions.

"Jonas, Karen, Ty, this is Brandon and Rob," he said, introducing the subs to the Doms. Then he glanced at us and, pointing to the others, said, "Andi, Christina." I nodded and said hi to the Doms, then waved to the subs. Andi was kneeling next to Jonas, leaning on his thigh the way Riley was on Don. Christina was standing, but was wearing a leash that Karen held in her hand. Ty was alone, or at least if he had someone, they were off doing something else.

Everyone said hello back and forth, and Karen asked Brandon if he were the Brandon who hosted the West San Jose gatherings. Brandon admitted he was, and there was some back-and-forthing about that. He issued an open invite to anyone who wanted to show up, and handed out some cards with his address, phone number and e-mail on them. I had one that lived in my wallet; I'd had it since a few months before graduation.

Ty was giving me a looking-over, and when I caught his eye his expression just got more predatory. I figured that meant that either he didn't have a sub, or he was a jerk and I'd figure that out soon. I gave him a grin and a mostly-discreet once-over, then turned my attention back to the others.

He wasn't bad looking. He looked like he was in his mid-thirties, which was fine because, as you've probably figured out by now with all my stressing out over Mr. Castle, I like guys who are older than I am. Ty had a blond buzz and was solidly built, without being cut. He looked like he cared more about being strong than flexing in front of a mirror, and I'm okay with that. He wore leather pants like Don's, dark brown, with a dark green wifebeater that drew my attention to the fact that he had green eyes. That was unusual and kind of cool.

Brandon was saying, "Rob and I just got here, and I haven't eaten yet. I was thinking of finding the food. Rob, how about you?"

"Yeah, I could do with some dinner," I said. I looked around but didn't see anything obvious in the way of food stalls, although I could smell meat cooking somewhere.

Ty looked at the others and said, "Food?"

Everyone nodded and the whole group rambled off in the direction the meaty smells were coming from. We joined a line that led up to a long table laid out in front of a series of barbecues. A woman dressed in biker leathers used a pair of pliers to crack one of the beads off my wristband, then handed me a plate. Okay, easier than keeping track of tickets, I guess. Especially since there were people around who seriously didn't have anywhere to *put* a set of tickets.

I got a couple of chicken thighs—what can I say? They really are my favorite—then filled in the spaces on my plate with a scoop of thick baked beans, a little half-cob of corn, and a hunk of cornbread slathered with honey. I managed to hold a roll of napkin-and-utensils in the same hand that was holding the (thankfully sturdy) paper plate, and grabbed a beer out of a cooler with my other hand. Our group took over a battered wooden picnic table.

Ty slid in next to me.

Brandon was on my other side, and Don and Riley were across from us. The others were farther down the table to my left; I could see them if I leaned forward or backward, but when we started talking we sort of broke up into separate groups, since the only alternative was a lot of leaning and shouting.

We started out mostly eating, but once a few bites of food had taken the edge off, Riley gave me a smirk and asked, “So, you looking for someone with a suit fetish?”

I scowled at him and made like I was going to catapult a spoonful of baked beans at him. I didn’t actually do it, mostly because I was afraid of missing and hitting Don, but I made the intent clear. “Actually, I had to work a little late. Didn’t have time to go home and change,” I said. “Although it wouldn’t have made that much difference even if I had, because Brandon decided to be all mysterious and hinty—I thought we were going to a nice restaurant or something, and might’ve ended up in a suit anyway.” I gave Brandon’s ribs a poke for emphasis, and he laughed out a protest.

“Sorry you’re the only guy in the valley who can’t put two and two together,” Brandon teased. “Someone you’ve only ever known in a kink community context asks you if you want to go to an event, why the hell would you assume a nice restaurant?”

“I was thinking an evening munch—my apologies for not keeping up with my online telepathy class.” I leaned over and bumped him, and he bumped me back, harder, which knocked me into Ty.

“*Children,*” said Ty, with a fake-menacing voice. “If anything gets slopped on my clothes because you’re rough-housing, I’m gonna start handing out spankings.”

It was a totally fake threat and everyone knew it, so I just stuck out my tongue at him and took another bite of chicken.

“I’m keeping count,” said Ty, then gave me a look while taking a slug of his beer. I washed down my bite of chicken with a slug of my own beer—it was okay, crisp and hoppy, but not my favorite—then clinked my bottle against his. He laughed and we sort of exchanged challenging smirks.

I’ll admit I’m not completely sure where I was going with that. I mean, I wasn’t really looking to hook up with anyone, as in finding a partner or going down for someone, but Ty was good looking and he was fun to flirt with. I’ve never been all that smooth when it comes to dating or picking up guys or *not* picking up guys, and I have to admit that one of the things I like about being a sub is that most of the time the Doms are the ones who make the first move. I know it’s lazy and all, I get that, but it’s easier sometimes to just let it run on its traditional rails, you know?

So I was sitting there finishing my dinner and trying to figure out how to let Ty know that I wasn’t interested in, like, letting him fuck me or anything, without offending him or getting that “What makes you think I was going to ask you?” kind of response you get from some people when they’re hurt and embarrassed and just want to smack you back for making them feel like that.

That was probably why I was twenty-five and had never had a serious boyfriend, much less a Dom to play with for more than an hour or two, and not many of those. All that back-and-forthing and fussing and worrying and what-iffing and shit? That filled my brain and started oozing out my ears whenever I tried to Negotiate The Social World. It was like there was some class everyone else took in high school, or even middle school, but I was absent that day and didn’t even know I’d missed anything until it was way too late to start asking questions without looking like a complete idiot.

Which just meant I'd been stumbling around like a complete idiot for years, wishing I'd done my thrashing around and asked my stupid questions years ago and gotten it over with. And five years from now when I'm still wondering how the heck it all works, I'm going to wish I'd done it *now*. I knew that then and know it now, but knowing never makes it any easier.

Or maybe there was no magic class and everyone feels like this? I've always been afraid to ask about that, too. So.

The sun went down while we ate and the site lit up with everything from candles to camp lanterns to tiki torches to flashlights to strings of tiny Christmas lights plugged into who-knew-what. There were people wearing glow necklaces (and sometimes little else) linked and twisted into different configurations—some sexy, some bondagey, and some just bright-colored fun. People gathered around the site in clusters, sometimes within a pool of light and sometimes deliberately in a patch of darkness.

We threw out our trash and walked slowly around the campsite, from group to group and light to light. I stayed next to Brandon, and Ty stayed next to me. We followed Don and Riley, who seemed to know a lot of people.

Whenever we stopped to talk to someone, Riley sank to his knees next to Don, smooth and graceful like he'd done it a thousand times, which he probably had.

While I was watching Riley, Ty leaned over, his voice low, and said into my ear, "Like that?"

I leaned back a little, but gave him a grin so he wouldn't (I hoped) take it badly. "Yeah," I said, "I do. I mean, what they're doing specifically, but even more for the connection, you know? They're so... together. It wouldn't be the same if Riley knelt for someone else, or if someone else knelt for Don."

"No, I know what you mean," Ty said. He glanced at me, then back at Don and Riley. "You connected to anyone?"

"Umm, not really. I mean, not yet? There's someone who's interested, I think, but we haven't really gone anywhere yet."

“But you want to?”

“I’d really like to. I don’t know if it’ll work out, though. It’s complicated.”

He leaned over and bumped my shoulder. “If it doesn’t work out, come find me and I’ll buy you a beer.”

I grinned at him. “Sure, I’ll do that.”

“Cool.” He pulled a card out of his pocket and handed it to me. I nodded and stuck it in the inside pocket of my jacket.

And that was the end of the stressing out around Ty. I love when it works out like that. And see? He made the first move, and it all flowed. It’s like, Doms are *supposed* to do that. The world works better when they do.

That’s my story and I’m sticking to it.

Twilight faded and it got seriously dark. I wasn’t exactly wearing dress shoes, but they weren’t sneakers, either, and I slipped a couple of times in the damp, slick grass. I ended up leaning on Ty, who hung onto my arm while we walked. It didn’t feel weird at all, and he didn’t try to push anything. I figured he was trying to show me his Nice Guy face so if my whatever didn’t work out, I’d remember him and come for that beer he promised me. Whatever he was thinking, it worked out fine and he wasn’t all stalkery or pushy or anything. And having a Dom attached to my arm kept anyone else from hitting on me, so I could walk around with the guys and meet their friends, and watch people teaching or demoing or just playing out under the stars without having to stress out about brushing anyone off. I hate doing that, especially in places like this where it’s perfectly reasonable to assume that anyone who came alone is looking for at least a casual hook-up.

But I already babbled about my social insecurity, so whatever.

We passed a couple of tables set up with drinks, one official and another not. I got a second beer at the official table in exchange for another bead cracked off my wristband, and Ty bought me one at the other table when he got one for himself. I said next one was on me, and he said okay.

By the time we stopped to watch a mostly naked woman getting expertly worked over by a bullwhip in the hand of a slightly older (but fully dressed) woman, I'd just finished my third beer and it'd been a couple of hours since dinner. I need to emphasize that I was not drunk, not even close.

So we were watching. We were up near the rec building or whatever it was, and the woman being whipped was standing between a couple of lamp posts, just holding on to the poles, a little more than head-high. She wasn't in any kind of bondage, just standing there, arching into the lashes, making these little gasping-whimpering noises when each blow hit. I'm not into women at all, but she was hurting so beautifully, it was just gorgeous, you know?

The lamps let us see every detail, her tanned skin and thick black hair, up in a high ponytail, with a few messy strands down the back of her neck, a little sweaty. The bullwhip was painting red lines on her back, across her shoulders, and a couple down on her ass. Her skin was flushed and starting to swell, but the woman holding the whip obviously knew what she was doing, and she hadn't broken the skin at all. The sub was going to be bruised up and welted, and would be feeling this for days, but she wasn't in any danger.

I leaned up against Ty and we watched. No one was counting, but a minute later the whipping stopped. The Domme coiled her bullwhip and tucked it into a duffle bag to one side, then went up to her sub. I saw her speaking, but couldn't hear what she said. Then she stepped right up behind her, pressing her body against the other woman's bare and glowing back, her arms wrapped around at waist- and breast-height. I could hear the sub's low wail of pain going on and on, then the Domme slid the waist-high hand farther down and the wail went from pain to orgasm in about a tenth of a second.

The sub lost her grip on the lamp poles, but the Domme held her up through a shuddering climax. When she was done, her Domme picked her up in her arms and carried her out of the light.

Wow.

Ty huffed out a breath. I'd been hyperventilating a little too, and I took a long, deep lungful of air to throttle things back down.

“That was intense,” said Ty. He was looking off in the direction the two women had gone.

“Yeah, it was.” I took another deep breath, and Ty gave me a pretty hot look.

I’ll admit that if he’d wanted to go find a private corner somewhere for a blow job or something, I’d have probably gone for it, but instead he just walked on, slowly, toward the next puddle of light. He still had his beer and his other arm was tucked around my waist, one finger hooked into a belt loop. I liked that he was nursing his beer; I enjoy drinking as much as anyone, but someone who *needs* to get really drunk to have a good time is someone I’ll be staying away from, even if I don’t feel like playing. Ty was scoring some points whether he was trying or not—better if he wasn’t, right?—and was firming up a strong number-two spot on my list.

Like I have enough hot guys panting after me to even have a list, but you know?

Brandon, Riley and Don had wandered off at some point, probably during the bullwhip thing. There weren’t so many people there that I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to find Brandon later, aside from being able to call him if I needed to, so Ty and I were sort of strolling along by ourselves, past the front of the rec building toward an area on the other side that’d been staked out for something. There were a couple of rows of chairs, pretty much every kind of portable camping or patio chair you could imagine, a row of blankets around front with people sitting on them, and an empty space in front of all the seating.

Around the back of the building was a stretch of flat, hard dirt surrounded by lights, like a small parking lot. It was full of bikes, pulled up in rows, and about a dozen people in leathers and boots—mostly guys but a few women—were standing around or wandering, checking out the motorcycles and talking about whatever bike people talk about when they’re together showing off their rides.

And because the universe didn't seem to care that there were only two guys even penciled in on my "list", and liked to mess with me, number one came walking up out of the bike-park with a backpack slung over one shoulder, tall and handsome, and massively hot in leathers and boots. I stopped to stare and try to get my brain rebooted. Ty stopped next to me and asked if I was okay. And Mr. Castle stopped just a few strides away to glare.

CHAPTER TEN

Fuck.

Now, I wasn't doing anything wrong. I know that now and I knew it then. But still, it's a classic set-up, and I was half expecting him to stomp up, toss me over his shoulder and haul me off somewhere, just because I've seen that happen in a bunch of movies.

Instead he dropped his backpack at the back of the clear space with all the people sitting around it, and came straight up to me and Ty, where he stopped.

"Rob," he said. "Didn't know you were going to be here."

"Umm, I didn't either. I mean, Brandon invited me kind of last minute. I rode up with him." I shut up before I did any more babbling.

He glanced around, and I guessed he was looking for Brandon, who of course was nowhere nearby. Then he looked at Ty and said, "Nick Castle," and held out his hand.

Ty said, "Ty Granger," and they shook, quick and firm, no obvious knuckle-busting, but they were staring at each other pretty hard. After the shake, Ty leaned over and whispered in my ear, "This your 'complicated wanna'?"

I had to laugh at that, just a little. I nodded, and he nodded back. He whispered, "You good?" and I nodded again. "Okay, then." He gave my shoulder a squeeze, drained the last of his beer and said, "I need to go find a recycle bin. See you, Rob. Good to meet you, Nick," and then he was gone, strolling off out of the light into the shadowed crowd.

Ty was definitely a nice guy. And if Mr. Castle was mad at me now, it was nice to know I had a really promising Plan B. Hell, if Mr. Castle was mad, I'd cross him off the list myself, 'cause like I said, I hadn't done anything wrong. I straightened my shoulders and said, "Doing a demo?" I tilted my head toward where he'd left his backpack.

"Yeah, I am," he said. "Rope bondage. I'm starting in a few minutes."

I figured, what the hell? And besides, I might not've been drunk, but I was a little braver than I usually am—not being in the office helped—so I said, “Need a model?” I even managed to hold his gaze after the words came out of my mouth.

Mr. Castle just looked at me for a few seconds, then said, “Rob...” He kind of trailed off, then sighed and said, “Okay, I need to know what you want.”

Umm? I wasn't sure what he meant. I said, “You're not just lecturing, right? It's an actual demo? So you'd need someone to demonstrate on, right? Or were you going to use people out of the audience?”

That got me a sigh and a hard stare. “I have a model waiting for me,” he said. “I need to know what you want from me, what you expect. Because what I expected was that we were going to see if we work out together. If you want to experiment with different guys,” and he glanced over in the direction Ty'd headed, “that's fine, but that's not what I'm looking for. I'm not willing to chance a sexual harassment lawsuit just because my assistant wants to have some fun once or twice.”

Well, shit. I'll admit I totally hadn't thought I'd run into Mr. Castle there, and I hadn't planned to play with anyone, so my thinking had been no harm, no foul. I had a right to hang out with whoever I wanted, but at the same time, I could see where he might be wondering.

“I'm sorry, I wasn't doing anything. I mean, I just met Ty, and we were just kind of hanging out. I didn't come to play. When Brandon invited me, I thought it was just an evening munch. I like hanging with other kinky people, so I'm hanging. I wasn't going to play, or have sex with anyone, or even stay the night.” My thought about being willing to blow Ty popped up into my head, but I shoved it aside because it hadn't happened and probably wouldn't have anyway.

Mr. Castle studied my face, and I think he saw maybe a shadow of that blow job thought on it, because he didn't really loosen up any. “So you're just hanging out with another Dom who's obviously very into you, and nothing

was going to happen? At all? I was twenty-five once, Rob.” He leaned in closer and took a breath. “And you’ve been drinking.”

“I had three beers! And it’s been hours, it’s not like I’m chugging or anything!”

He looked at me, his thumbs hooked through his belt loops while he stared. He let me squirm for a bit, then said, “All right, I probably should’ve been more clear about my intentions and what I expected. I’ve never seen you around the community, so it never occurred to me that there might be any hurry in moving things forward. That’s my mistake, and I apologize for it.”

Huh. Okay, a Dom who could admit he’d made a mistake and say he was sorry—he got a brownie point for that.

“So I’m going to be very clear,” he went on. “I want to see if we suit each other. I’m not ‘playing’ and I’m not taking this lightly. If I thought you were some air-headed party boy, I wouldn’t touch you with gloves on, because I wasn’t kidding—one complaint and you could wreck my company with a lawsuit. I’m an idiot for even considering this, but I like you, and you make me want to take a chance. But if you’re not willing to take this seriously, then that’s it, I’ll see you on Monday, and it’ll be all professional from now on.”

“No!” I reached out a hand on reflex, and stopped myself about half an inch from grabbing his wrist. I yanked my hand back and kept both fists at my sides, but I was leaning forward a little because I couldn’t help it.

“No, that’s what I want too, really. I wasn’t sure what you meant, or if you might’ve changed your mind or what. It’s been a while since the day in the lounge, and we’ve been busy, I know, but you haven’t said anything, so... I don’t know, I just... didn’t know. And I wasn’t doing anything, really. Yes, Ty’s interested, but I told him there was someone else and he was completely cool about it, he wasn’t pushy at all, didn’t try to change my mind. I just—I like to meet people, I have friends—” I paused and looked into his eyes, because this was serious. “I have friends,” I repeated. “I hang out with them, and if I want to... I don’t know, hug someone, I’m going to. If we’re scening that’s one thing, even if it’s a duration-of-event thing where you want to be in

role for an evening or a day or a weekend like this, or whatever. But I'm not going to give up my friends, or promise I'll never be alone with anyone or never touch anyone. That's not me, and I can't change that much for anyone. I won't."

If that was the end of it, then it was, but I'd seen what jealousy did to people, and I wasn't having any of it.

He tilted his head a little and gave me a hard look, then nodded. "Good," he said. "I don't want a doormat." He gave me another look, down-and-up, and then smiled at me for the first time *ever*, seriously, and added, "And I believe you didn't know what kind of event you were coming to."

I wanted to die and sink into the ground, but only for a second. I laughed and shrugged, spreading my arms and looking down at my suit. "I'd definitely have changed if I'd known."

"I'll bet," he said, still smirking.

"So... now what?" I asked. I was kind of hoping he'd ask me to help him with the demo after all.

Instead he said, "I have to go do a demo in a minute, so I need to make sure you'll be where I expect you to be when I'm done." He was looking straight into my eyes like he was trying to read my mind. "Does that sound good to you?"

I said, "Yes, Sir," because it sounded like an excellent second choice, if I couldn't be the one in his ropes right then.

"Good," he said. "Follow." He turned and strode away, back past the rows of people waiting for him to get it together for his bondage demo, and it finally hit me that we'd been standing Right There and probably a hundred people had been listening to every word. I felt myself blushing so hard it was like my cheeks were going to pop or something. I was following the hottest guy on the site, though, and I wasn't going to be embarrassed about it.

He led me back to the dirt parking area and down between two rows of bikes. There were still some motorcycle people there. One of the women

looked up and called, “Hey, Nick, thought you were in a hurry. Forget something?”

Mr. Castle waved at her but didn’t stop walking. “Just securing something.”

The woman and the two guys she was standing with all laughed, but it wasn’t a *bad* laugh, if you get the difference. It was more of a friendly, good-stuff kind of laugh. I kept my eyes on Mr. Castle’s heels until he stopped in front of a big, black motorcycle. After a second, I remembered seeing it before—it’d been parked in the driveway at Brandon’s the day Mr. Castle’d been there teaching a class for the Doms.

Most of the bikes there were Harleys, with a few BMWs and a bunch of Japanese bikes. Mr. Castle’s was different, though. It was... muscular, is the only word I can think of. Like a muscle car is muscular—strong and masculine, nothing fancy that was just for decoration. It was about power more than looks, but it was hot at the same time, like a big, strong man who’d snarf his beer at the thought of using hair gel or body glitter, but is gorgeous anyway. It was that kind of bike, and it fit Mr. Castle perfectly.

He pointed to the ground next to the bike, right in the middle, and said, “Sit.”

I sat. The packed dirt wasn’t exactly comfortable, but I’d sat on worse. Mr. Castle squatted in front of me, which put a big, leather bulge right there within easy range of my eyeballs. I stared, wondering if I could talk him into a blow job, until a leather-gloved finger tapped up from under my jaw and made me look up at his face. He was smiling again, kind of a smirky grin like he knew exactly what I was thinking.

Of course he did. I was a twenty-five-year-old gay sub, down on the ground, with a gorgeous man’s crotch right in front of my face. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out the first thought that’d go through my head.

“I’ll be about an hour,” he said. His voice was low and intense, and his eyes were straight on me, like I was the only thing in his world at that moment.

“I’ll be within calling distance if you need me, and there’ll be people around the bikes all night. Are you good with staying here?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good.” He reached into a pocket on the left side of his jacket and pulled out a handful of metal and chains. “Wrist.”

I held out my right hand, and he clapped a cuff onto it. It looked like a set of standard police-type handcuffs, but I could feel some kind of coating on the inside surface; it felt sort of like the plastic stuff on tool handles. He checked the closure, made sure it was secure but not too tight. Then he attached the second cuff to the front of the bike, one of the bars of the fork, up near the handlebars. With me sitting on the ground, it was about shoulder high, not too extreme. I could deal with that for an hour.

“Wrist.”

I swallowed hard and gave him my other hand. He had a second set of the cuffs, and he locked my left hand to another bar down under the seat.

I was spread out, locked to his bike, pretty much helpless. I couldn’t even scratch my nose if I got an itch, which should’ve been alarming but wasn’t. My cock was like iron and my balls were high and tight and needy, but the rest of my body had gone liquid, warm and tingly and relaxed.

He grasped my tie right up by the knot, and tugged just enough to tilt my face up. I hadn’t loosened my tie—I’m used to wearing one and they’re not uncomfortable—and with his hand squeezing, I felt it all the way around my throat. It felt like a collar, and I had to stifle a whimper that would’ve sounded absolutely stupid.

His face was just a couple of inches from mine; I could feel his breath on my lips. “While you’re cuffed to my bike, everyone will know you’re mine. No one will mess with you, because you’re mine. You’re safe here.” He searched my face, then asked, “Are you all right?”

I nodded. I was great, everything was awesome, and I’m pretty sure I had a really silly smile on my face. He nodded back, then leaned in and kissed me,

long and hot and deep, but not hard. He was exploring territory, but not plundering it—not yet. That was cool, I could wait.

He said, “I’ll be back for you,” then stood up and left.

If you’re not into it then you won’t get it and that’s just how it is, but I felt like a thing, like a possession Mr. Castle had chosen and wanted, and intended to hang onto. I was chained to another possession he valued, because he wanted to be sure I’d stay where he put me, he *wanted* me to stay where he put me, because he was going to come get me later and wanted me to be there, to be safe and waiting there for him. If you don’t get that then I can’t explain it any better, but if you do then you know exactly how I was feeling right then.

The night air was cool, but I was fine in my suit coat. I leaned my head back and it rested right on the side of the leather seat. I imagined some designer at a motorcycle factory figuring exactly where a biker-Dom might want to chain a sub to his bike and making sure the seat padding was right there. That was funny enough to make me giggle, which tells you something about my state of mind at the time.

There were too many lights around for any stars to be visible, but I could see the black of the night sky overhead. I heard the bikers walking around and talking, mostly about bikes, but about other stuff too. I wasn’t paying attention and it all sort of melted together into background noise. I closed my eyes and just sat, relaxed and waiting.

I’d done some meditating in college, when a roommate nagged enough to make me try. Once I stopped griping and got into it, it was relaxing, and I still did it every now and then. This was like that. I could feel my heart beating in my chest, and if I focused on any part of my body—my throat, my wrist, my inner thigh—I could feel the pulse there. I sank lower into myself, and my heartbeat was powerful enough that my whole body jolted to its rhythm. When I was this deep, it was hard to believe that there was ever a time when I *couldn’t* feel my heartbeat, it was so strong and so obvious.

I'd never gone this deep before without at least ten or fifteen minutes of deliberate relaxation and meditation. Being spread and chained to Mr. Castle's bike took me there in about thirty seconds.

Footsteps crunched in the dirt behind me, and a male voice said, "Now *that's* a pretty bike."

Another voice said, "I wonder if that's a standard option," and they all laughed. Usually I'd have been thinking about dying of embarrassment, but I was too mellow. They weren't important.

A silver-haired man in motorcycle leathers walked around and squatted down in front of me. He was farther away than Mr. Castle had been, which was good, 'cause I didn't really want some stranger's crotch right in front of my face.

"Hey, boy, you doing all right?"

I nodded. Speaking seemed like too much trouble.

"Need a drink? Anything?"

I shook my head.

The guy leaned closer. "Look into my eyes, boy. Come on, up here, just look at me."

He wasn't going away, so I looked up at him. He had a rugged face, with both smile and frown lines. He was scowling right then, and he glared at me for a few seconds. A gloved finger appeared in front of my face, then moved back and forth. I watched it, hoping he wasn't going to poke me or something.

The guy huffed out a laugh and stood up. "He's fine, just zoned. So deep in subspace he could probably hitch a ride on the *Enterprise*."

A bunch of voices all laughed, and someone behind me said, "Like Castle'd ever have to drug a boy."

The older guy said, "Gotta check. If you think someone never would, that's a reason to check right there."

They hung around for a minute or two, making comments about the bike, then wandered off.

I focused on my heartbeat and sank back inside myself, right there where Mr. Castle left me. It was a good place, and I hung out there for a time while the event slowly rotated around me.

The next set of legs that stopped in front of me was familiar. Mr. Castle went down on one knee and a big hand ruffled through my hair. “Hey, Rob. How you doing?”

“Hmm?” I blinked slowly, shifting focus from inside to outside. I leaned into the hand, enjoying the feel of it, the patch of solid warmth against my head. “Okay. Right here.”

He grinned at me and said, “I see that. You’re a good boy, staying where I put you.”

The praise was warmer than his hand, and I smiled up at him.

“You really are kind of easy, aren’t you?” he asked, but he was smiling when he said it and I could tell he meant it as praise, not a slam. “Come on, I’ll bet you need to hit the bathroom before we go.” He unlocked the cuffs and stashed them back in his jacket. I missed them. It felt like my wrists were too light, and I didn’t know what to do with my hands.

“Come on, Robbie, up we go.” He grabbed me around the chest, under my armpits, and stood up, lifting me with him. He held me while I found my balance, then led me off down the row.

We went into the rec building where there were bathrooms. Once he mentioned it, I did have to go pretty bad. The three beers, I guess, plus dinner’d been a while ago. When we were done he said, “Good, let’s take off. You’re spending the night at my place. Do you need to call anyone?”

I stopped, because that reminded me of something. Except not completely. I knew there was something I needed to do, but I couldn’t think of what.

He waited for me to think, but when I just stood there frowning past his shoulder, he said, “Did you leave anything somewhere? Briefcase, computer

bag? Want to say good-bye to anyone? Hopefully someone whose location you know for sure?”

“Brandon!” That was it. “I rode with Brandon. I need to let him know not to look for me when he’s ready to go.” I found my phone and sent Brandon a text.

Got ride home, call u l8r

I waited a minute to see if he’d respond, with Mr. Castle standing next to me, perfectly patient, but nothing came in. I hoped that meant Brandon’d found someone to play with, at least for a while. “Okay, ready to go.”

“Good.” Mr. Castle put a hand on my back, between my shoulder blades, and we walked back to the dirt lot. He had his backpack slung over one shoulder, and when we stopped by his bike, he handed it to me. “Here, you’re going to have to wear this.”

I nodded and put it on. I’d never been camping or hiking, and hadn’t worn a backpack since high school. My jacket wanted to slide open and off under the pressure of the straps pulling backward, but I buttoned it up and that fixed that.

Mr. Castle unfastened a helmet that’d been hanging off the right-hand side of his motorcycle, opposite from where I’d been sitting before, and handed it to me. He zipped up his jacket, pulled out a key ring and straddled the bike. “Up you go, behind me. Hold on around my waist.”

I pulled the helmet on—it felt weird and not really comfortable, pressing up against my cheeks—and climbed on behind him. Hanging on wasn’t a problem; I plastered myself against his broad, solid back and hung on tight.

“Have you ever ridden a motorcycle before? Ever been a passenger on one?”

“No, Sir,” I called. I could hardly hear him through the helmet and it made me want to yell. Which was probably kind of dumb, but whatever.

“Lean when I lean,” he said. “Don’t shift your weight without telling me first. Put your feet on the pegs, there.” He waved a hand down near our feet,

and I saw there was a second set of footrest thingies farther back from his, for a passenger. I picked up my feet and put them where they belonged, then shifted around until I felt balanced and comfortable.

“Okay?”

“Ready, Sir!”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The night air had cooled down and it was even colder once we got going, what with wind chill and all. Mr. Castle wasn't stupid enough to floor it (or whatever you do on a motorcycle to max out the acceleration), but even going at a reasonable speed, it *felt* faster with the wind whipping past my neck and slipping up my sleeves and in through the gaps in the front of my jacket. And the street was right *there*, tearing past just a few inches below my feet.

It was a great excuse to hang on to Mr. Castle as tight as I could, with my chilled front pressed up against his warm back.

I'll admit it was kind of scary at first, aside from being cold. I'd ridden a bicycle as a kid, like every other kid, so leaning into curves made perfect sense, but doing it that fast—and on a motorcycle, even twenty-five or thirty miles per hour feels *fast*—I was terrified we were going to wipe out on a turn, especially on that narrow, twisting mountain road in the dark.

If I hadn't trusted Mr. Castle absolutely, I probably would've been yelling for him to stop and let me walk home within the first five minutes. But I did trust him, so I kept my mouth shut and my eyes closed and hung on, leaning when he leaned. I'd never been so aware of someone else's body before; I guess having it be a matter of life and death focuses your attention.

The scents of the trees and the damp ground streamed by, with an undertone of hot asphalt and engine exhaust. If I were a dog, I'd have probably been smelling birds and animals, too, and I'd have my head leaning out around... no, that was a bad idea. I could prop it up on Mr. Castle's shoulder, and take the helmet off so I'd get the wind right in my face and catch all the smells.

I had to laugh at that, and Mr. Castle yelled, "You all right?"

That just made me laugh again. I yelled back, "Sorry, Sir! I'll bet dogs love riding motorcycles!"

I felt his chest tremble for a few seconds, and he shook his head. He probably thought I was kind of crazy, but I didn't really mind. I'm weird sometimes—isn't everybody?—and it was just as well he figure that out right up front.

By the time we got back down to the valley floor, I'd relaxed a little and was sitting up more, holding Mr. Castle at the hips for balance rather than wrapping myself around him like a squid. Not that I didn't like hanging on to Mr. Castle, but I doubt he wanted to have sex with a squid. I hoped not, anyway.

I was trying to make a good impression, though, and first-time jitters were normal, but he said he didn't want a doormat. I was interpreting that to mean he wanted someone with a backbone, which is definitely *not* a squid. I was still kind of nervous on the bike, especially once we hit traffic, but I didn't have to be a clinging little boy about it. And besides, once I pushed the fear away, the speed and motion and vibration were awesome.

We rode across the valley, from Los Gatos in the southwest, through San Jose to the eastern hills. After about half an hour, he pulled up into the driveway of a huge house—Spanish style, all beige stucco and a tile roof, with a round fountain splashing in the curve of the drive. This was swanky even for Evergreen; we'd passed the nearest neighbor almost a quarter mile back, and there was a wild-looking patch of trees and all in between the properties.

It popped into my head right that second that he could make me scream and I wouldn't have to hold back—no one would hear. I felt my cock getting hard in my trousers at the thought.

The next thought to pop into my head was ??? because I wasn't into heavy pain. I mean, I'd never tried it, I'd never done anything like that, never really wanted to, it always sounded kind of scary. That whole flogging-through-my-shirt thing I mentioned before was the only time I'd ever tried pain play. The woman getting bullwhipped at the campground had been fascinating, but I hadn't really imagined myself in her place.

I could imagine trying it with Mr. Castle, though, and that made me sort of nervous. The being-able-to-imagine-it part, I mean. It's like, being there on the bike with him, knowing he really was into me That Way, feeling him and smelling him and hanging on to him for almost an hour? It'd remodeled my brain, kind of, and noticing that made me a little uncomfortable.

The garage door rolled up and we headed in. It closed behind us. I looked around—the dim garage was big enough to have a lot of stuff in it without being cluttered, boxes and tools and a sleek silver car—until Mr. Castle nudged me. Oh, right, he'd have a hard time climbing off with me back there. I dismounted, sort of like you would from a horse, and pulled the helmet off. I didn't bother worrying about my hair 'cause I figured it was a lost cause.

He took the helmet and strapped it back to the bike. “We'll have to get you one, if you're going to ride with me,” he said. Then he looked at me and asked, “Are you?”

“Yes! I mean, if I can? I was kind of nervous at first, but it was great!”

I managed to stop myself before my extended “yes” turned into babbling, and he smiled at me again. Mr. Castle has the greatest smile, like he's sharing something really cool with you, or like he's happy 'cause you shared something really cool with him, either way. I figured out right then I'd do just about anything for that smile, and I know I sound like an idiot, but I really couldn't help it.

“I'm glad you like riding. I know exactly what you mean—there's nothing like it.” He led me inside, pulled off his leather jacket and hung it in a closet in the entryway, where both the garage door and what looked like the main front door were, opposite a big, curving staircase with a wrought iron railing in a geometric pattern. He held out a hand and gave me a look; I handed him my suit jacket—which was in pretty desperate need of a dry cleaner by then—and he hung that up too, next to his. While he fiddled with hangers, I pulled off my tie, rolled it up and stuffed it into my pocket.

When I looked up, he was watching me. After a moment he said, “Well, don't stop.”

I just blinked, then got it. I felt myself blushing, but my cock got a little harder. With all that blood occupied in my cheeks and my prick, it took another few seconds before I actually thought, *Oh, yeah*, and went for my shirt buttons.

He said, “Put your clothes on the bench there,” pointing to the leather-padded bench against the wall next to the closet. “And let a friend know where you are. When you’re done, come into the living room. Kneel and relax for a while. Think about what you want.” And then he walked away.

That was... not quite what I expected, but okay, I could do that.

I pulled out my phone and texted Brandon:

At Mr Castle’s house if I’m murdered he did it :D

then finished stripping. I piled my stuff on the bench, except for my shoes. I tucked those underneath—hoping that much interpretation of an order would be okay—then went down the hall he’d taken.

It opened out into a big living area with floor-to-ceiling windows and two sets of French doors set all along the back wall. There was a fireplace off to the right, surrounded by Mexican tiles, white with little cartoony pictures on them in bright colors. The sofa and loveseat and chairs were all leather, sort of like the bench in the entryway—dark wood with brown leather upholstery. On the left was a step-up to a kitchen and dining area. There was an island with four stools lined up on this side of it, and beyond the island was a big kitchen, all white and wood. Mr. Castle was there, setting up a coffee machine.

Coffee was good. I looked forward to having some if we weren’t going to get to the sex part right away.

Before that, though, I had some other stuff to do.

I stepped into the middle of the living room, behind the loveseat which faced the fireplace, and knelt down. The carpet felt good under my knees, thick and springy and comfortable. I wondered whether he’d gotten that deliberately, because he had guys kneeling on it a lot, or if it was just good carpet? Not something I could ask, at least not right away.

I'd had a couple of people show me how to kneel, but it seemed every Dom wanted something a little different. Since Mr. Castle hadn't given me any instructions, I figured anything in the ballpark would be okay. He'd said to relax, so I spread my knees for stability, straightened my back, and put my hands behind me, my right hand clasping my left wrist, because that was easier to maintain than just crossing my wrists.

At least I thought it would be; I'd never done it for more than a minute or so before.

Relax.

Relax, and think about what you want.

I started by getting as comfortable as I could and feeling for my heartbeat.

A few minutes later, Mr. Castle came over to the living room with two mugs of coffee. He sat down on the couch, which was up against the wall a few steps from where I knelt, and put the mugs on a side table. He caught my eye, spread his knees and patted his thigh.

What he wanted was obvious. I went over to him—crawling, because I thought he might like it, and because he had that great carpet—and knelt at his feet, between his knees. I could smell the warm leather surrounding me, and it sent a thrill of warmth through my body.

“Good boy.”

And another one. I had to focus on sitting still, because I was excited enough—yes, that way too—that I wanted to fidget. Or just throw myself at him, because after almost an hour of constant contact on the bike, I felt like I *needed* to touch him again, right then. Instead I settled back down, on my knees with my wrist clasped behind my back.

“So, tell me what you want.”

I'd known it was coming, but still, it took me a while to chase down all my thoughts and scrape them up into a pile.

“I want you,” I said. “I want to be touched, a lot. I liked being left cuffed to your bike tonight—you were close by, and there were other people around,

they were nice, so I felt safe and that was... that felt really good. But just for a while.”

Mr. Castle just watched me, his hands on his thighs. Mmm, big hands on leather pants, strong thighs. I had a hard time not following the obvious path from there, but I managed to look him in the eye again.

“I want...” This one was hard, just because my damn blush was back, I knew it. I could only hope that once I was used to all this, I’d stop blushing whenever I talked about it, or thought about it, or came within a mile of someone else thinking about it. I knew I had to, though, because the one thing they emphasize every time someone does a workshop for newbies, or even just starts talking about it with newbies around, is that you have to communicate about what you want and don’t want, or this wouldn’t work at all. I knew that, I really did, but it was still hard, and years of reading and watching porn where the hottest Doms were totally omniscient and basically telepathic weren’t helping. This was reality, though, and I knew I had to make myself talk about it.

“I want bondage,” I managed to say. “I really like that, not being able to move, feeling helpless. And I like feeling like you want me to stay where you put me, that you *want* me enough to make sure I stay where you put me, like when you cuffed me to your bike.”

Mr. Castle nodded, and I thought I saw a sort of twitchy half-smile for about a microsecond. He reached over and got one of the mugs, handed it to me. I took a sip, and it was black and sweet, exactly the way I like it. I have no idea how he figured that out, unless he’d been paying a lot more attention than I thought during the few times when we were both in the break room and I was getting coffee for myself. Maybe that’s where the myth of the omniscient Dom comes from, that they’re always paying attention, watching and remembering?

He took his own coffee, but didn’t say anything, just watched me. Not getting any feedback made me uncomfortable—I’d have liked some sort of response so I could tell if he agreed, or if I was doing it right. Maybe he just wanted to know what I wanted right then, that night? Or maybe he wanted a handful of bullet points, like a summary at work?

At the same time, though, getting the same response no matter what I said or how I said it helped me relax as I went. I was still kind of twitchy about all this stuff, like I said, and had a hard time talking about it. But the more I said without getting grouched at or smirked at or glared at, the more I felt I could just ramble on and nothing bad would happen.

“I want to feel like I’m yours,” I said. “While we’re playing, I want to belong to you, like a thing, or a pet.” I was still blushing, but I kept going. “Yours to use, however you wanted. Or…” I frowned and looked down for a second, then back up. “It’s like, I want to feel like that, but, I mean, there are things I’m really not into. I like the idea that you’ll do whatever you want to me, that I’m there for your use and that whatever you do with me is to please yourself. But there are things I definitely wouldn’t want and that’d kind of… I’d safeword out.”

That got a very small head tilt, but still no indication of whether he approved or not, so I explained, “It’s like, if you decided to tie me down and dump a jar of spiders on me, I’d safeword. I’d start screaming, actually, and I’d never play with you again. And I’d need lots of therapy. Not that I think you’re into spiders with your sex, but you know?”

Hah, that got a reaction—I could tell he was stifling a really big grin there. “No spiders,” he said. “Noted. And you’re right that arachnophilia isn’t one of my kinks. What else?”

I took another sip of my coffee, just to buy some time, then took a breath and said, “I think I want to try pain play. Not a lot, not necessarily right away, but something to think about? I don’t even know if I’d really like it. I mean, it’s sexy to think about, but that doesn’t always mean you’d like doing something, right?”

“That’s right,” he said. “So you’ve never tried it at all?”

“Not really. I mean, when Christine did a demo a few weeks back, I tried it then. She used a flogger through a T-shirt and a sweatshirt, then just a T-shirt. It was okay, I guess. I mean, I didn’t hate it, but it wasn’t really fun either. Sort of like…” I stopped to think for a second, then came up with the perfect

comparison. “It’s like how getting a prostate exam is like anti-sexy, but having someone play with it during sex is awesome? For some people?”

Hah, I made him laugh!

He finally said, “So Christine trying a flogger on you during a demo was like a prostate exam, and you want to see if it’s different in a more sexual context.”

“Exactly. I mean, I like porn with pain play, watching or reading, but I like kidnapping porn, too, and I know for a fact I wouldn’t get off on a gang of strangers kidnapping me and gang-raping me. Some things *only* work in a fantasy.”

“True. So, we’ll find out how you handle pain and figure out whether you enjoy it or not. Just impact?”

“I don’t know? I guess I’m open? So long as I have a safeword?”

“We won’t worry about that until we get a lot further along,” he said, and I was kind of, *Wait, what??* until he went on with, “No means no, and stop means stop. We’ll talk about safewords if we start role-playing. If you ever want to do a scene where you get kidnapped and raped by someone you can pretend you don’t know, then we’ll talk about safewords. While it’s just us with no pretending, we don’t need code words.”

Oh. Okay, that made sense.

Then what he’d said hit me and damn it, I could feel my cock swelling—even more than it already was—because I’d totally love to have him kidnap and pretend-rape me.

I just hoped we were together long enough to get that far down the list.

“Anything else?” He sipped from his mug, watching me.

“Umm, no, Sir. I mean, just details...?”

“All right, then. How are you doing down there? Sore? Stiff?”

I did *not* make a cheesy pun. I deserved a gold star for that. “Fine, Sir. You have great carpet.”

That got me a quick half-smile, and I took a long gulp of my coffee to hide the fact that I was grinning back.

“Do you have any questions?” he asked.

“No, Sir. I mean, I trust you. I figure you’ll tell me what I need, at least for now, and it’ll probably be more fun if I just go with it, right?”

“Possibly,” he said. “A lot of people think so. Finished with that?”

I peered into my mug. One more good slug emptied it, and I handed it to him. He put it back on the side table with his own.

“Follow me,” he said. “We’re going upstairs, so you can walk.”

I said, “Yes, Sir,” and climbed to my feet to follow.

CHAPTER TWELVE

We went back out to the entryway and up the stairs. They were carpeted too, and it probably wouldn't have been all that bad to crawl up them, just a little awkward. Down would be harder.

There was a big open area at the top of the stairs, done up like a den, but with a lot of windows, which didn't seem very den-like. But the furniture was more casual than the stuff downstairs, a big, lumpy couch upholstered in what looked like faded denim. The floor in the den—and all along the upstairs hall—was hardwood. That wouldn't be comfortable to kneel on, although I could do it if I had to. One wall was all bookcases, mostly full of paperbacks, and the other wall was a shelving unit full of sound gear.

Mr. Castle's room was down at the end of the hall, through a pair of double doors. He closed them behind me, just because, I guess. There wasn't anyone else in the house who might walk in on us, or hear us, or at least I didn't think there was. I figured probably not, since he'd had me strip down as soon as we came inside. That made sense, right?

The bedroom was carpeted again, which made my knees happy, figuring I'd probably spend a lot of time kneeling there. He had a king-size bed, of course—he was a tall man and probably would've wanted a king even if it was just him. The headboard and footboard had wood frames filled in with wrought iron patterns, complex geometrics like the stair railing, but not exactly the same. It was all solid and expensive looking, without looking like it might as well have a price tag left on it, like whoever owned it wanted nice things, good stuff, because it was good, instead of wanting stuff that'd hit other people over the head with how expensive it was.

The woodwork was kind of medium dark, on the bed and the nightstands, and a tall dresser next to the closet door. The walls were a cream color, like a warm beige, and the carpet was dark brown. It was like the whole room was made of chocolate or coffee. I liked it.

There was a heavy chest of carved wood sitting under the window, and Mr. Castle went over and opened it up. He said, “Get on the bed and lie on your back,” without looking at me. I obeyed while he rummaged around. The patchwork comforter, shades of brown and cream and black, was made of flannel. It was soft and comfy, and I sort of wallowed around on it, enjoying the feel of it on my bare skin. He hadn’t told me to lie still, so I figured I didn’t have to.

Besides, I was feeling kind of... antsy? I mean, I was exactly where I wanted to be, but still, having sex with somebody for the first time is always kind of jittery. And sure, we’d worked together in the same office for almost a month, but it wasn’t like we’d dated or anything. The closest we’d come was that lunch hour in the lounge, and that was great but there hadn’t been much to it, just a promise for a next time that hadn’t happened yet. So I wasn’t sure what to expect, or what Mr. Castle expected from me. And still being kind of new to all this, I guess I was angsty about doing something stupid.

In theory all I had to do was obey him. When you’re in the middle of it all, though, it feels a lot more complicated than that.

“We’ll start with something simple,” Mr. Castle said. He walked over to the bed with some cuffs clinking in his hands. “On your back, arms over your head.”

I obeyed, and he climbed right up on top of me, his knees on either side of my ribs. He wasn’t quite sitting on me, which was good because all his weight on my belly would’ve made it hard to breathe. Most of his weight was on his knees, and I felt the mattress sink under him.

He buckled a leather cuff to each wrist, then used a kind of squared-off oval clip thing to fasten the chain in the middle to one of the bars in the headboard.

“Don’t come until I tell you. If you’re about to disobey me in that, let me know.”

“Yes, Sir.” I tugged on the cuffs. There was a little slack, but just a couple of inches worth, and pulling on it sent a tingly thrill through my body, which was already having a pretty good time.

Mr. Castle scooted down some, then slipped one hand under my head on the pillow, leaned down and kissed me. It was firm but not harsh, just lips at first, but I felt surrounded, my whole head cupped in his palm. His fingers were spread out to hold me right where he wanted me, but the kiss was light and gentle. Like he was cradling my head, like all of me was right there in his hand, and I felt warm and safe and secure. My nerves settled down some and I wanted more, so I opened my mouth a little, inviting him to come in if he wanted. He whispered, “Good boy,” then everything got deeper and more intense.

His other hand brushed over my ear, then one finger drew a line along my jaw. The back of his hand glided down my throat, that vulnerable spot where even a light smack can lay you out, but this was just exploration, just enough pressure that I knew he was there.

Then out across my shoulder, firmer, kneading, and a push up my inner arm, not hard enough to bruise but not light enough to tickle.

I felt the solid bulge of his cock pressing into my belly, through the leather of his pants. I arched up against it, wanting to feel it, because it was Mr. Castle’s cock. Damn, even if it wasn’t skin-to-skin, even if it wasn’t in the perfect place, which was about ten inches south and aching for some attention, but that was what he was giving me right then and I wanted more of it.

The chains clinked and jerked, and the leather cuffs pressed against my skin as I yanked on them. Not pulling just to pull this time, but because I wanted to touch him. Maybe help him out of his pants, or even the jacket, pull up his T-shirt, *something*.

His tongue filled my mouth and I moaned around it, couldn’t help myself. The sound came from all the way down in my gut, and I imagined he could feel the vibration against that hard cock that was still pressing down on me. His hips shifted and rubbed harder, so who knows, maybe he did. I wrapped

my legs around his thighs and pulled him in tighter, showing him that I loved what he was doing and didn't want him to move, since I couldn't exactly say so right then and wasn't sure if I was even allowed. I'd heard some Doms didn't like that kind of thing, thought the sub was holding up a scorecard or something, and I didn't know what Mr. Castle thought of it, but if I *were* holding up a scorecard, it'd be an "11" with lots of exclamation points after it, 'cause I've never felt this close to popping right off with just a kiss and some grinding.

Well, not since I was fourteen, but that doesn't count, right?

The mattress shifted and Mr. Castle sat up. He started to unfasten his pants, and I made a noise that didn't have any words in it, but sounded pretty enthusiastic. I got another one of those little half-smiles for about a quarter of a second.

He knee-walked forward and said, "Do a good job and I'll let you come tonight," right before feeding me his solid, thick cock.

Obviously he didn't want an answer, or at least not a verbal one, so I went straight to tasting him. He was musky and a little salty, and there was a flavor of leather in there, too, which I liked more than I thought I would. I didn't just glom right on—I wanted to show I had some technique. That's what he meant by a good job, right? I mean, anyone can just blindly suck. They probably have machines that do that.

Instead I held him in my mouth and mapped out the territory with my lips and tongue. The head was broad, with a smooth curve to it, and the tiny slit tasted stronger than the rest of it. Which made sense, duh, so I sucked on that and teased it with my tongue, trying to get it to give me more of that flavor that meant I was doing it right.

He let me do that for a while, then pushed a little more into my mouth. Not a big, choking thrust, but just another half inch or so, like he was reminding me there was more where the first part came from.

The shaft was bigger than the head, and I had to suck in a good breath before I clamped my lips down over it. I'd seen cocks like that in porn, but

never gotten to play with one before. I gave him a couple of good sucks, then went back to exploring, teasing around the base of the head with my tongue, along the crease where it met the shaft. Feeling how it bulged out there was kind of weird, but it made the whole thing seem bigger.

I thought of him filling my throat with it, cutting off my breath, and that made me moan. My hips thrust up into the air a couple of times, pure frustration with nothing to rub on.

“Easy, settle.” His hand was back in my hair—not pulling, not petting, just there, another point of connection, one that had nothing to do with him getting off. Or at least I didn’t think it did. I’d never heard of anyone who had a kink for holding someone’s head.

“Breathe.”

I took a big breath and he pushed another inch into my mouth. The angle really wasn’t great and that was about as much as I was going to be able to take. It was like he knew that because he stopped right there, just before I would’ve started gagging. I focused on relaxing, feeling my heartbeat, figuring that if I was relaxed I’d use up my air slower and would be able to work on him longer before having to breathe again.

Relaxing my muscles when all I wanted to do was hump his leg (if he’d put his leg, or anything else, in range to be humped) was tough, but I did my best and I think I succeeded a little. I ran my tongue around the tight skin of his shaft, rubbing up and down the ridge underneath, right there where my tongue was, then explored up one side where I found a squiggly vein that felt pretty neat. It stood out like it was pumped up with a lot of blood—well, of course it was—but I could poke it with my tongue and it gave. That was fun, so I ran the tip of my tongue back and forth over it a few times, but then I needed to breathe again. I tilted my head back a little, as much as I could with his hand supporting it, and he pulled back some right away.

I sucked in a couple gulps of air, then strained forward again, so he pushed back inside—just as far as he had before, no farther, which was great—and I went back to exploring.

The skin was smooth and tight and so warm. It was a solid, thick intruder in my mouth, and he could hurt me with it if he wanted to, which was kind of thrilling to keep in mind, especially when I knew he wouldn't. But I could hurt him too—my teeth were right there, you know, and your jaw muscles are the most powerful in your body—and he trusted *me* just like I trusted him. A blow job was a two-way promise of good will, and that was a connection, or it could be. A lot of people didn't see it that way, although I had, ever since the first time I'd thought of—

“Robbie!” I felt two stiff fingers give me a rough poke on the forehead. “Relax. I can hear the babbling in your brain all the way out here!” It sounded like Mr. Castle was about to laugh, but not quite.

I made a ??? noise, the best I could manage since my mouth was still really full. He seemed to understand, though, because he said, “I know you, your mind is always buzzing when you look like that. Let me handle whatever it is you're thinking about, or worrying about, or wondering about. I'm running this, you're experiencing it. Relax, turn off your brain. Your mouth, my cock, everything else can wait.”

I made two noises close together that hopefully approximated, “Okay,” and tried to figure out how to turn my brain off, because he was right, I *had* been thinking too much. They say the brain is your primary sex organ, but I don't think that's quite what they meant.

And I was doing it again.

Mr. Castle pulled out about halfway so I could breathe okay without having to pay attention to the timing, and I tried relaxing. Exhale... listen to my heart, feel it beating, let my body inhale. Exhale... feel gravity pulling me down, feel my heart beating, each pulse jolting my chest, let my body inhale.

I closed my eyes and just felt. Exhale. Full mouth, the feel and flavor of the cock filling it, the strong beating of my heart, inhale.

The cock started thrusting, slowly, not too deep at first. Back and forth in my mouth, through my mouth, I was just a passage, something warm and

slippery and just tight enough. Exhale, feel it with my tongue, let it move through my mouth, feel it passing through, back and forth.

I heard Mr. Castle let out a short moan and the cock went a little deeper. I couldn't breathe around it for... I don't know, a little while, but that was okay because I was just a passage he was using to pleasure himself, and if he was making noise and going deeper, that meant I was serving my function. I was pleasing him, and that was what I was there for.

The thought of him using me, of just lying passive while he made use of me, of him enjoying me like a thing, like a sex toy, made *me* feel good. I shifted and felt the cuffs around my wrists, holding me there for him. Perfect, that was perfect.

A groan, and another one, then he thrust hard and filled my throat with come. I sucked and swallowed, not worrying about air right then, and he pulled out just about the time my lungs were starting to tap me on the shoulder. I swallowed again, then gasped in a big breath and panted a few times.

I was covered in sweat, mine and his both, and I'm pretty sure I had the goofiest look on my face, so bad I don't want to even imagine it—feel free if you want to. Mr. Castle was still kneeling up, looming over me with one hand braced on the headboard, and he was panting as hard as I was.

It was a great view. I just lay there and enjoyed it while it lasted, which was only a minute or so, dammit.

He moved back down the bed and rubbed his hands up and down my shoulders and upper arms. "How are you doing? Getting stiff?"

"No, Sir. I'm fine." I was. Actually, I was great, except one particular part that was painfully stiff. I still had just enough blood in my brain to decide not to make that joke, because it was something a sixth-grader would say and then giggle about.

"Good." He stretched out and lowered his body down onto mine, which meant I didn't need to mention the only uncomfortable part of my body because it was pressing against his balls.

He leaned in and kissed me again, slowly, like he had all night. Which I guess he did, if he wanted to take it. By the time he moved, I was breathing pretty heavy and sweating again, not that I'd ever completely stopped because, you know, not getting to come and all. He explored every inch of me with his lips and tongue and fingers and palms, and here and there with his teeth, flipping me over a couple of times, watching and listening the whole time to see how I responded.

A fingertip behind my ear made me suck in a breath, and his tongue drawing a slow line across my collarbone had me squirming; I couldn't have stopped if I'd wanted to, so good thing I didn't see a reason to try. He sucked hard on a nipple, and when that made me arch my back and whimper, he bit down on it, first a little, then more, until I was yelling in a really good way and trying to rub off on his stomach because I felt like an orgasm was Right There and I couldn't help reaching for it.

He slapped my hip hard and said, "No. Not yet."

The sting jolted my awareness away from my dick and I was able to hold my hips still, but it was tough and I was kind of cussing him out in my head right then.

The spot to the left of my bellybutton was connected to my balls, but not the spot to the right. Don't ask me why, I just enjoyed the discovery. Kisses across my hipbones did it for me, but my inner thighs were just, like, whatever. The backs of my knees were ticklish when touched with a hand, but a tongue there had me yelling again, and struggling not to hump the mattress.

He found a good spot on my left calf, and my left instep, and I'm pretty sure he sucked a hickey onto the top of my right foot. The burning went straight to my dick and I could feel it leaking a hot, slick drop onto my belly.

He saved my ass for last—almost last, because he still hadn't touched my dick or my balls, which just proved he's a fucking sadist—but by the time his tongue pushed into my hole, I couldn't remember why anyone thought that was a bad thing.

I was up on my knees, leaning on my elbows, and the pillow was wet from where I was crying in frustration. I didn't know how long it'd been, but my dick was so hard it was about to break off and my balls were so tight they'd buried themselves up in my body and were probably somewhere up under my lungs.

I'd never been rimmed before—most guys think it's kind of gross to actually do, even if it's hot in porn—and the feeling was mind blowing. Tongues can move in ways cocks can't, and the only downside is that they're smaller. If someone ever figures out how to get a tongue the size of a cock—or at least long enough to reach your prostate—no gay man will ever let anyone merely fuck him ever again.

Yeah, the genetics people can get right on that. I'll donate a chunk of my salary to fund the research.

Despite the lack in both length and thickness, Mr. Castle knew exactly what to do with his tongue and made the most of it. I couldn't help squirming, even with his hands gripping my hips hard enough that I was sure I'd have bruises the next day; I was pretty proud of myself for not just letting go and thrusting back onto his tongue. Every nerve in my body was lit up, and I think my ass grew a few new ones for the occasion. I was moaning and whining and didn't even have enough functional brain cells to be embarrassed about it.

He pulled out and asked, “Can you come like this?”

I made a wordless noise of protest, but my dick was swollen and aching and he'd been teasing me for ages and I really didn't know.

Mr. Castle said, “Try. Come on, Robbie—you're so sensitive, I know you can do it. Give it up for me, like this.” Then he pushed his tongue back into my ass, and I felt a finger go in below it, stretching, reaching, until it was right there, rubbing on my sweet spot, where I'd been wishing for a lick, a touch, *some* kind of stimulation for the last however long he'd been torturing me, and everything shattered.

It was like the sun exploded and emptied out my balls through my dick, and the heat flashed down every part of my body, from my toes to my hands to my throat where it came out in a long, loud wail that echoed off the walls.

I ended up lying on my side, and a damp washcloth appeared from somewhere. Then a warm, strong, naked body was curled up behind me, holding me close, and the last thing I heard was, “Good boy,” before I finally zonked.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When I woke up the next morning, I was alone in bed, and a really good smell was wafting in through the open bedroom door. Two smells, actually—one was coffee, which would've been enough to drag me out of bed all by itself, and the other was... something like pancakes or waffles or something like that, which was an awesome bonus because while I love that stuff, I usually only eat it in restaurants. I like cooking, but I'm not really up for anything more complicated than coffee and maybe a muffin or something (assuming I made some earlier) first thing in the morning.

I hit the bathroom, and when I came back to the bedroom to look for my clothes, I noticed a pair of black sweats and a black T-shirt with a wolf on it laid out down at the foot of my side of the bed. I made the obvious assumptions, and put them on. Much better than crawling back into a beat-up suit on a Saturday morning.

I followed my nose downstairs, and a sizzling sound mated with the frying-batter-and-bacon smell. The combination got my stomach rumbling.

Mr. Castle was standing in front of the stove in a pair of blue shorts that completely held my attention for a good twenty seconds, which is forever in coffee-deprivation time. They weren't painted on or anything, but they were very nicely filled anyway, and even once the siren-scent of coffee dragged me the rest of the way over to the pot, I kept an eye on that muscled ass as long as I could. It made me wonder if he ever bottomed, 'cause damn.

"Hey, Rob," he said, with a quick glance over his shoulder. Luckily after I'd stopped ogling him and was opening cupboards looking for cups. "Mugs are there on the left. French toast will be ready in a few minutes."

I said, "Mmmm," because I love French toast, and besides, a display of appreciation seemed polite. I doctored my coffee with sugar, and once I got about half a mug inside me, we were sitting at the island, on adjacent stools close enough together that I could feel the heat from his body, with about twenty pieces of French toast piled up in front of us.

Okay, probably not that many, but it was a lot. I took four and drowned them in syrup. Mr. Castle grinned at me and said, “Sweet tooth?”

“Replacing all that energy I burned last night,” I said. I did my best to keep a straight face, but it was tough and I was pretty sure I was blushing again, dammit.

He just laughed and pushed the syrup bottle back toward me, which I took as a really good sign for the rest of the weekend.

By the time I got through my breakfast—bacon thicker than I’ve ever seen before, which was seriously incredible—and my second cup of coffee, I had enough brain cells firing to start wondering whether we’d actually have a whole weekend, since he hadn’t really said, and whether any of this was smart, him being my boss and all.

Great time to wonder about that, right? Hey, I’m a guy, I’m in my mid-twenties, I’m supposed to think with my balls at least sometimes. It’s, like, a rule or something.

Thought processes had finally moved farther north, though, and I wondered what’d happen if Mr. Castle only wanted a day, or a weekend—would my job still be safe? Would he be able to sort of forget that he’d had his tongue up my ass—God, that was amazing!—and fall back to a purely professional relationship?

Even if he did want to... I don’t know, see me regularly for a while, how would that work at work? Obviously a lot of other people at the company were seeing each other, and in the same way we were—they wouldn’t need the Executive Lounge if they weren’t. But still, I was just a PA, and a newbie.

I guess I was wondering whether anyone would respect me in the morning.

No matter what was going through my head, I was determined that none of it would show outside my skull, so I finished my breakfast and did my best to look normal. I gathered up dishes and headed over to the sink. Cleaning up seemed like the thing to do, since Mr. Castle had cooked and all, and besides, aren’t subs supposed to do this sort of thing? Maybe not always, but I wanted

to make a good impression, and it wasn't like he'd torn apart half the kitchen anyway.

He didn't comment, just put away the bread and sugar and syrup, which was good because I had no idea where anything went. He went out and came back in a couple of minutes later with a stack of mail, which he tossed onto the big dining table we hadn't used. I was just finishing up rinsing out the sink, and as soon as I was done, he took my wrist and hauled me back toward the stairs, saying, "Let's take a shower."

That sounded like a great idea, so I went along.

We were naked, like, forty seconds later and walking into the biggest shower I'd ever seen in someone's house. It didn't have a door, or even a curtain—we just walked in through a gap in the grey tiled bathroom wall, then turned a corner and there was the shower area, half the size of my bedroom at home. There was only one shower head, which sort of surprised me, all things considered, but it was a good one, and when Mr. Castle turned it on, it put out a lot of water. There was a bench built into one side of the enclosure, and a couple of built-in shelves with soap and shampoo and stuff.

The water was just hot enough, and it felt pretty wonderful when I stepped into it—a good, hard pressure on my chest, then hot streams down my belly and legs. I turned around to give my back some of the awesome, and ducked my head under to wet my hair.

Mr. Castle was waiting with a bar of soap and two sudsed-up hands when I turned around, and he started lathering up my shoulders, then my chest. He worked his way down my front, and my cock was half hard before he ever got there, just from the feel of his hands on me.

I'd already figured out he was a horrible tease—and I mean that in the best way, really—so when he lingered over my balls for maybe a little longer than hygiene required, I pulled him up against me under the stream for a kiss. Sharing soap worked, right? By the time we came up for air, his front was as lathered up as mine, and we were both hard and ready to forget the whole getting-clean thing for a while.

He opened up my ass with a finger—not a soapy one, either, which made me very happy, because this other guy I’d been with (only once) thought soap would make a great lube during shower sex and my ass had felt like it was on fire, on the *inside*, for like an hour after, and we hadn’t even made it to the sex part. Of course Mr. Castle knew better, and it turned out one of the bottles was waterproof lube.

What is it about being wet, about having water streaming down a naked body, that makes an already handsome, sexy man so much hotter? Not that Mr. Castle needs much help you’ve picked up on the fact that I was completely gone on him by now, right?—but being wet and slippery and shining in the falling water cranked it all up to twelve.

He bit my earlobe and said, “Relax for me,” in a low voice that penetrated to the nuclei of my cells, and every one of those cells, both singularly and in groups, immediately obeyed him without consulting me at all. I went all soft in his grasp—well, okay, not *completely* soft, but you know—and let him slide his fingers up inside, teasing and touching and working me up into a blob of moaning jelly. He maneuvered me around and planted my hands on the bench, leaving my ass in the air. He nudged my feet wider, then said, “Stay. Just like that.”

I said, “Yes, Sir,” without really thinking about it. I heard him tearing open a condom wrapper and then he was sinking into me.

This is going to sound weird, but the main thing I remember about that time was how safe I felt. Yeah, the sex itself felt awesome and he played me like a piano, but I still didn’t know him very well, and I’d pretty much given myself into his hands. I could’ve said, “No,” or “Wait,” or “Stop” at any time and I know he’d have done exactly that, and there was some security there, sure. But mainly I felt safe in his hands, obeying him, letting him control what happened and do whatever he wanted with me. Not that we’d gotten into anything really freaky (yet—I was still hoping) but the way I felt, he could’ve pulled out pretty much anything and I’d have gone along, and had a ridiculously adoring expression on my face while doing it. It’s one of those things that makes you want to hide under a table when you think of it

afterwards, but at the time it's just perfect and natural and doesn't take any thought at all. It just *was*, like I'd slotted right into the space I belonged and that space was within arm's reach of Mr. Castle.

I guess what it comes down to is that I trusted him, absolutely, which allowed me to let go, completely. It was pretty incredible.

He curled over me, his chest rubbing against my back as he thrust in and out. His hands slid up and down my chest, over my water-slick skin, jerking my cock or teasing a nipple at random. His teeth scraped down the side of my throat; it didn't hurt but it was heading in that direction just enough to get me shivering, anticipating, maybe even wishing for the stinging-hot pain of a bite.

He shifted my hips just a little, and suddenly his cock was sliding past my sweet spot, tight and hard, with every thrust. I was making these little whining noises in time with our movements, louder and louder as the tension built deep in my gut, winding like a spring until my cock was aching and my balls were tight and I needed release more than I needed to fucking breathe.

I was pretty loud, still no words, just noises, heavy gasping with voice behind it because I was desperate and there wasn't enough blood left in my brain to make speech and I was down to raw, primitive communication.

"That's it," he said, his voice harsh and gasping, right next to my ear. "Let me hear you. Let me hear how much you need this."

My voice filled the room, echoing off the tile, high and desperate and begging with nothing but vowels. I wasn't consciously obeying him. It was more that the order itself, the command in that tone, with his body behind and inside and around me, his arms tightening while he commanded me—all of that triggered an increase in volume to match the increase in desperation that surged through me. If he'd ordered me to be silent I'd have had to struggle with it, and I can't swear I'd have succeeded.

One soapy hand slid down my body and wrapped around my cock and that was it, the last nudge I needed to send me falling over the edge. I spurted against the streaming tile and felt my ass clenching hard around Mr. Castle's cock.

I pretty much collapsed right there, and he supported me with one arm around my hips and the other across my chest, while thrusting into me harder. Finally he climaxed, long and tense, his grip tightening until I thought I'd end up with two wide, bruised stripes across my body. I didn't much mind the thought, either, and not just because my brain hadn't rebooted yet.

He maneuvered me around and sat on the bench. I ended up on his lap, with my face tucked into the crook of his shoulder. Luckily I was too gone to even think about what I looked like, much less care. Heck, I'd have slid onto the floor of the shower if he hadn't hung on to me.

It took me a few minutes to get back up to fully functional. Mr. Castle said, "Back with me?"

I said, "Yes, Sir," to the side of his neck, which was about an inch away from my lips. Since it was right there, I pressed a kiss onto it.

I got a hug for that—he just tightened his arms for a second—then he said, "Let's finish getting clean."

We did that, and got dressed. While I was putting on the borrowed sweats and T-shirt again, he said, "You do want to stay the weekend, right? How about if we swing over to your place so you can change and pack a bag?"

That answered some questions and brought up others. While I was sorting through them, after a few seconds of silence, he added, "If you need some alone time before transitioning back to work mode, that'd be perfectly natural. Just let me know what you need and that's what we'll do."

He was dressing himself while he spoke, pulling on a pair of faded jeans and a plain grey T-shirt that did gorgeous things for his grey eyes. And yes, I'm totally gay for noticing that, why do you ask?

I said, "Staying the weekend would be great, Sir, if you don't mind running me over to the office so I can get my car at some point, so I can get home Sunday night without you having to make a round trip to drop me off."

"Not a problem. For that matter you can grab your work clothes and we can go in together on Monday."

“Oh, that works too, sure.” More shifting around in my brain, because walking in with the boss after a weekend was A Thing. I ventured, “I don’t mind going in to work with you, if it won’t cause any problems.”

Mr. Castle smirked at me and said, “I’m the boss. If I don’t think it’s a problem then it’s not a problem.”

Well, of course. How else would a strong, dominant man answer that question? It made my dick regret that it couldn’t quite give him the salute he deserved for that, because, hey, I was twenty-five and not sixteen. I mentally gave him a rain check and said, “Sounds good.”

He nodded and started pulling on his boots. “What do you think about going back up to the meet for the day?”

Huh, that was an idea. Now that I’d been there and knew what to expect, it sounded more like fun and less like something to stress over. And going with Mr. Castle? As in, *with* Mr. Castle? Hell, yeah. “I’d like that, Sir.”

“Good. Would you be interested in dressing up a little? Do you have any gear?”

I sort of blinked and thought, *Eep?* although luckily I didn’t say it out loud. “Umm, do you mean like a leather harness or a collar or something? I don’t have anything like that.”

“Not a collar—your Dom will give you one when you get into a formal relationship. And a full harness is probably a little much for someone new to the scene to wear in public, although you’d look good in one.” He gave me an appreciative look-over that made me want to climb back into his lap, but I focused on fastening my shoes instead because I am not a complete dork a hundred percent of the time.

He went on with, “How about some wrist cuffs? Subtle, but a nice, constant reminder.”

“That’d be great—thank you, Sir.”

He went back to the wooden chest under the window, rooted around for a second, and came back with a set of black leather cuffs. Each one had two

steel rings on it, on opposite sides, and a small key lock set in. I held out my hands and he wrapped the first one around my right wrist. The leather was soft inside, comfortable. He adjusted it so it was loose enough to rotate on my wrist when he tried to turn it, but tight enough not to slide off. He snapped the latch shut, then locked it with a small key.

“If you just close it, it opens with the catch on the side, here.” He showed me the small catch on the arm side of the latch. “It takes a key to lock it, and then unlock it. I think I want these locked on for the day.”

I felt my dick trying to respond to that while he put the second one on and locked it. It got a little farther than it had earlier. I figured by the time we got to my place, I was going to be pretty uncomfortable. I was okay with that, actually.

“Bundle your clothes up,” he said, “and I’ll get a plastic bag for you.” He went downstairs, and I followed him with my suit and shirt sort of half-folded, half-wadded up under one arm. Seriously, the suit was wrinkled enough, there wasn’t much I could do right then to hurt it.

Mr. Castle gave me a plastic grocery bag for it, then held out his open gear pack. I stuffed the bag in on top of a lot of coiled ropes. There was some stuff on the bottom that rattled and clinked, but I couldn’t see what it was.

We headed out, back to the bike. He gave me his helmet again and I put it on, then mounted up behind him, wearing the backpack, and wrapped my arms around him. I didn’t need to anymore, but I wanted to and he didn’t seem to mind.

I gave him my address before we took off. He nodded, but we made a detour and ended up at a bike shop in East San Jose, where we shopped for a helmet for me.

“Here,” he said. “Try this one, see how it fits, whether it’s comfortable.” It was good but not great. I went through a couple of others, trying on what he handed me, and finally found one I liked. It was dull, dark silver with a black-tinted faceplate, nice looking without being ridiculously flashy, but what I really cared about was that it felt good on.

I pulled it back off and said, “Here, this one.” Then I looked inside at the price tag and said, “Umm, wait, this one’s kind of…” I looked around and saw there were others that were a lot cheaper. I’d love a nice helmet, but the one I liked was four-twenty and that seemed kind of ridiculous. I walked over to the back wall. “Here, let me try this one—”

Before I could even touch it, Mr. Castle had me by the wrist and hauled me up to the register. “You get a fifty dollar helmet if you have a fifty dollar head,” he said. “Don’t argue.”

I shut up and waited while he paid for the helmet. We were back on the road a minute later.

The next stop was my place. My apartment was in Almaden. It wasn’t horribly far from work, and it was cheap without being a dump, which worked out fine if you didn’t mind living in a building full of university students.

All right, it *was* a dump next to Mr. Castle’s place, but then just about any place that wasn’t an actual mansion was a dump next to Mr. Castle’s place, so I didn’t stress out too much about it.

I let us in, waved toward my ugly beige couch and said, “I’ll be out in a minute,” then headed back to my bedroom.

Now, what to wear? I tossed the bag with my sad suit onto the closet floor and toed off my work shoes while digging around some. I pulled out a pair of jeans about the same faded blue as Mr. Castle’s. They fit really well without being ridiculously tight. I sorted through my shirts, discarding a couple of silk shirts and a spandex tank—club gear wasn’t really what I wanted, especially since Mr. Castle wasn’t fancied up. A cotton muscle shirt was tempting, but not quite.

I finally pulled on a plain black T-shirt. It went with the wrist cuffs, which I was coming to like a lot. Mr. Castle was right—they were comfortable, but I could *feel* them, and they were a constant reminder of what I was to him, at least for the weekend.

When I went back into the living room, I saw that he hadn’t sat down—he was standing in front of my bookcase with his head turned sideways, reading

titles. I grinned at his back because I always did that too. You could find out a lot about someone by checking out their books. I hadn't had a chance to see what Mr. Castle read, but with any luck I'd be able to do that before the weekend was over.

He turned around and said, "Ready?"

"Yes, Sir."

He very obviously checked me out, and I got an approving look. "Come here."

I walked over and he pulled me up against him with one hand on the back of my neck and kissed me, hard. Just as I was thinking that I had a perfectly good bed only a few steps away, he bit my lower lip—not enough to draw blood but hard enough to hurt, a sharp, deep sting. I made a startled, pained noise but didn't pull away. Instead I pressed closer, pushing my hips against his, looking for friction. My dick had definitely recovered from the shower and was enthusiastic again.

Mr. Castle pulled back, gave me another quick kiss that made the pain flare for a second, then tightened his grip on the back of my neck before stepping away. "There," he said. "The best accessory to go with cuffs is a bruise."

The hungry, I-own-you look on his face while he studied my swelling lip wasn't discouraging my libido at all, but before I could figure out how to hint that sticking around for a while might be a good idea, he said, "Let's go," and headed for the door.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I grabbed a leather jacket I hadn't worn since I was an undergrad and followed him back out to the bike. It wasn't cold or anything, but when we got up to speed on the road, the wind chill could get dire, even with Mr. Castle right in front of me acting as a windscreen. The jacket kept the goose bumps away, and between Mr. Castle's warm back in front of me and the heavy backpack behind me, I wasn't really cold; it was unfamiliar, but I figured I'd get used to it soon enough.

Riding through the hills in full daylight was a lot different from riding at night, or even riding in a car in the daytime. The colors seemed brighter, not only the brown and green of the trees and bushes and grass, but the sky was a brighter blue and even the pavement seemed more richly textured, looking at it directly without a car wrapped around me.

Everything smelled fresher, wood and dirt and asphalt, and as we pulled up into the campground, the scents of cooking meat and frying dough blew by on the breeze, making me want to ignore the fact that I'd had breakfast less than two hours earlier.

We parked in the same lot near the rec building, and a few people who were hanging around the bikes called or waved to Mr. Castle. He took the backpack from me and bungeed it to the bike. I gave it a worried look, but he said, "The community here is pretty close, and our events are as safe as you're going to get in a situation where you're around people who aren't your personal friends. I've left stuff with my bike before and never lost anything."

"That's pretty awesome, Sir."

"Yes, it is. It's one of the reasons I like these events."

I followed Mr. Castle across the parking lot, stopping a step behind him whenever he paused to talk to someone. He seemed to know a lot of people, and a lot of people knew him. I guess he'd been around for a while.

That was a good thing, actually. Since I was a newbie myself, I wouldn't have felt comfortable with a Dom who was still trying to figure out what to do and how things worked.

We were talking to a couple of biker ladies when Riley came dashing up. He didn't quite tackle-hug me, but it was pretty close, and if I hadn't seen him coming we'd have probably both ended up sprawled in the grass.

"Hey!" he said, "You came back! And you lost the suit! You don't look like a dork anymore!"

I smacked him upside the head, not hard enough to hurt but enough to mess up his hair a little, which is the best revenge against Riley, who yelped and swatted at me. "Cut it out! The hair is sacred!"

I made like I was about to go on a hair-ruffling spree with both hands, with Riley threatening dire revenge, until one of the biker ladies said, "Children! Company manners!" in a sharp tone that suggested she was the kind of aunt or maybe schoolteacher who carried a crop for these situations.

Riley and I chorused, "Yes, Ma'am!" then looked at each other and cracked up.

Mr. Castle tugged me back to his side with one hand around my upper arm—hard enough to hurt some, and not in a good way—then snapped his fingers and pointed at the ground next to his boots. I froze for a couple of seconds, then swallowed hard and went down to my knees with my arms behind me, right hand clasping left wrist. I glued my gaze to the grass between my knees.

"A decent enough boy when you remind him," said the same biker lady who'd spoken before. "What about this other one—who's in charge of him?" No one said anything, and she finally said, "Well, boy? Whose collar is that?"

Riley said, "Don McIlroy's, Ma'am. I'm sorry, Ma'am."

Mr. Castle said, "There he is," then called, "Don, come collect your pet." I couldn't see, but it sounded like he might be smiling. Or at least, he didn't

sound like he was really upset at all. Maybe entertained? At least a little? I hoped?

Footsteps approached, crunching through the drying grass, and I heard Don say, “Am I going to have to spank him again?”

“Not unless you want to,” said Mr. Castle. “He and Robbie were just getting a little rambunctious.”

“He needs to learn to behave a bit better around dominants he doesn’t know,” said the biker lady. Her voice was friendly, now that she wasn’t talking to me or Riley anymore. “Just basic respect when he’s within arm’s reach. Some folks take offense, and that can get nasty.”

“I’ll be sure to remind him,” said Don. Riley made an embarrassed noise and knelt next to him, leaning up against Don’s thigh. Don pushed him away. Not roughly, but he got his point across. “Don’t even think it,” he said. “When I gave you permission to run ahead and say hi to Rob, I didn’t expect you to forget how to behave.”

Riley said, “I apologize, Sir,” in a small voice.

“I’m not the one to whom you owe an apology.”

Riley tried again with, “I’m sorry, Ma’am. Umm, and... Ma’am?”

The second biker lady, who hadn’t said anything yet, laughed. “He’s right, we need a plural for ‘Ma’am’. Two or more men are ‘Sirs,’ but ‘Ma’ams’ isn’t a word.”

“It sounds like what some country kid in a very old movie would’ve called his mother,” said the first biker lady with a huff. She sounded like she thought it was kind of funny, and like it kind of ticked her off, both at the same time.

“That’s because any individual Domme should have the full attention of anyone addressing her,” said Don, which I thought was pretty damn slick.

The first biker lady snorted. The second one laughed again and said, “All right, for that I’ll forgive your boy—clean slate. Make sure he appreciates it.”

“Oh, I will,” said Don. “Thanks, Judy. Ellen. Nick.” There was some shuffling around, and I saw Riley stand and follow Don’s legs away. The biker ladies walked off too in a different direction, chatting about why older subs were so much less hassle but also less fun, until their voices faded away into the background people-buzz of the crowds scattered across the campground.

I stayed where I was and after a few moments of silence Mr. Castle said, “I know Riley instigated that, but you went along. I hope you know better now?”

I wanted to say *yes, of course*, but I honestly couldn’t. I swallowed hard and said, “I’m sorry, Sir. I’ve seen some demos at Brandon’s house, and I’ve read a couple of books, and I’ve seen a lot of porn, but I’m still trying to figure all this out. I don’t... I don’t know what we did wrong, and I’m afraid I’ll do it again because I’m not sure what the offense was. I’m really sorry.” My hand was clutching my wrist so hard I was losing feeling in my fingers on that side, and I had to focus on my breathing because I knew I’d start hyperventilating if I didn’t. I’m used to being pretty quick on the uptake, to learning fast and having a good grip on what was going on around me, but I was feeling seriously stupid right then for the first time in long time, and I was afraid Mr. Castle would decide I was just too much of an idiot to waste his time on.

Mr. Castle was silent for a while, probably just a couple of seconds, but I was kneeling there with my shoulders hunched, staring at an ant climbing a blade of grass in front of me, and it seemed like forever.

Finally he said, “All right, come on.” His hand ruffled through my hair, and he helped me up with a firm but definitely non-angry grip on my arm. I stood and walked with him over to a bench made of half a huge log sitting in front of a stand of trees. He sat straddling the bench, and patted the spot in front of him. I copied him and straddled the bench too, facing him.

He reached out and took my wrists, his hands wrapped around the cuffs I was wearing. The natural thing for me to do was clasp his wrists, so I did.

“Robbie, look at me.” When I raised my eyes, he was looking at me with a kind of lopsided smile. “I do understand that you’re new to this. I’m not going to get mad at you for not knowing something you’ve never been told, so long

as you're obviously trying. That's ninety percent of it—making an obvious effort to be polite and respectful, and usually you do.”

I nodded, because yeah, that part seemed obvious. Not just in the BDSM community, no, but how you behaved, depending on your role, was seriously important there. I knew that.

“All right, then. There are particular things, like calling dominants ‘Sir’ or ‘Ma’am’ as a default, which are pretty universal, but with other things, different people have different preferences in protocol. No reasonable Dom is going to get offended if, for instance, you look him in the eye when he trains his own subs to never do that unless ordered, but you don't know that. If someone jumps your case for something that's not universal or nearly so, when you didn't know their preference, then they're an asshole, and I'll tell them where to go and what to do when they get there if they complain to me about your behavior. So long as you were generally polite and respectful.”

I nodded again. That sounded reasonable, and I was kind of relieved that he *was* that reasonable about it.

“One thing that is pretty much universal is that ignoring a dominant when you're within close proximity, unless you're deeply focused on your own Dom or have been ordered by your Dom to stay quiet or withdrawn or whatever they asked of you, is rude. Your *submission* is for me alone so long as we're together, but you owe *respect* to everyone who hasn't completely fucked up. Riley's mistake was in coming bouncing up to you and starting to roughhouse while ignoring me and Judy and Ellen. He should've waited quietly for us to acknowledge him, then maybe asked you, as his friend, to introduce him to us—I'd have done that, since you were being quiet and I hadn't introduced you yet—and then asked my permission to take you aside so you could chat. Once you were out of range—call it reasonable conversational earshot—that would be the time to try to knock you down with a hug and start joking back and forth. There are ways of accomplishing all that without going hyper-formal, but Riley didn't do it at *all*, and by acting like we weren't there when he was within arm's reach, he was rude. Does that make sense?”

“Yes, Sir,” I said. “Thank you.”

“All right, then. You’re very well behaved and respectful—I don’t want you to think I’m displeased by how you conduct yourself.”

“Thank you, Sir,” I repeated. “I don’t want to make any stupid mistakes, but sometimes it’s hard to know, or even know that there’s something *to* know.”

“Everyone gets that,” he said, nodding. “And so long as you’re obviously trying, no one reasonable is going to get too bent out of shape.”

“I’ll try hard not to embarrass you when we’re together, Sir.”

“I know you will. That became obvious as soon as I got to know you at work. It’s one of the things that attracted me, actually.” He reached over and stroked a hand through my hair, like a slow, affectionate pet, then pulled me in close for a kiss.

The angle was awkward and our knees were kind of jammed together on either side of the log bench. I couldn’t get as much contact as I wanted—Mr. Castle makes me want to sort of melt against him from the lips down—so I wrapped my arms around him, one at shoulder level and the other just below, feeling his body heat through the leather. That also stopped me from losing my balance and ending up in an awkward, back-wrenching angle with my nose squished against his chest, so hanging on to him was useful as well as fun.

Before we could really get into anything, though, Mr. Castle leaned back, looked over my shoulder and said, “Hey, Roy. Did you need something?”

I looked around and saw a guy about my age, Asian, in jeans and a white tank that showed off some decent muscles. He was wearing a pair of wide leather cuffs that didn’t look at all like mine—they covered about six inches of each forearm, and didn’t have any rings or anything on them. Scuffed leather boots and a seriously un-submissive posture made it obvious he was a Dom, if one of the younger ones around.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he said, “but Tim heard you were back today and wants to know if you’d like any time on the schedule.”

Mr. Castle frowned a little, then looked at me and said, his voice low enough that only I could hear, “We haven’t gone very far in private yet, so this is up to you. Would you be comfortable having me put you into serious bondage for the first time in front of an audience? If you’d rather not, I can find someone else to model for me, and you can watch.”

“No, Sir! I mean, yes, Sir, I’d love to model for you.” I still had my hands on him from our interrupted clinch, and I squeezed his shoulders as kind of an emphasis. We didn’t have anything formal between us, and I still wasn’t sure he’d want to see me outside of work once the weekend was over with, but right then I wanted to be able to at least sort of pretend to myself that he was mine. If I had any choice in the matter, I was going to be the one he focused on when he got his ropes out.

That got me a smile and a quick kiss. “Good, I’m glad.” He looked over at Roy and said, “Sure, we’ll be here till at least dinnertime.” Then he glanced between the two of us and added, “Have you two met?”

I said, “No, Sir,” and Roy shook his head.

“Roy, this is Rob. He goes to Brandon’s, so I thought you might’ve run into each other.”

Roy said, “Hey, good to meet you. I haven’t been in a while—my advisor has me running around finding the most esoteric crap for him, and I’ve been trying to do my own research in all my copious spare time.”

I grinned and said, “I feel for you. I just got my MBA this last June and it was pretty insane for a while.”

“Business, ick!” Roy gave me a teasing shudder. Then he said to Mr. Castle, “I’ll let Tim know you’re good with taking a slot, and let you know what he’s got for you.”

Mr. Castle said, “Sounds good, thanks.” Roy waved to us both and left us alone.

“He’s a good guy,” said Mr. Castle. “Young, but with some experience and a clear head. He doesn’t have a sub right now, but I’ve known him for a couple of years, and he’s safe.”

I said, “Sounds like a nice guy,” and nodded, but I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to get from that. I mean, it was good that Roy was a safe Dom and knew what he was doing, but how was that relevant to me? Was Mr. Castle saying that when he was done with me, I should try to hook up with Roy? He was a good looking guy and seemed nice, but even if I didn’t have a thing for older men, I wasn’t about to go on the prowl for a new Dom any time soon.

Or was I? Mr. Castle had said he was serious, but that didn’t necessarily mean long-term. Maybe he just wanted my serious attention for as long as it lasted, however long or short a time that might be.

Mr. Castle tapped me on the forehead with two fingers and said, “You’re thinking too hard. I can hear you. Shut off your brain and come here.”

Before I could move, he lifted me up with his hands under my ass and pulled me into his lap. I yelped in surprise, then laughed and tightened my legs around his waist.

“There,” he said, “much better,” and then he was kissing the stuffing out of me. Not being completely stupid, I relaxed and went with it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The slot Tim-the-demo-organizer gave Mr. Castle was at four, a time when, Mr. Castle said, things usually started to kind of wind down and get tangled up as people wrapped afternoon stuff and started doing different dinner things, either cooking or figuring out where to eat. Mr. Castle hadn't let me eat anything since lunch—which sucked because there was Indian fry bread, which is awesome—and cut off liquids at a little before three. Because, he said, running to the bathroom when you were in full-body rope bondage was kind of problematic.

So at three-fifty I was neither hungry nor full, and neither thirsty nor full of liquid, kneeling in one corner of the demo area, hand clasping wrist behind my back. I watched while a guy who'd been demonstrating hot wax play on his cute female sub cuddled his girl, got her a bottle of water, then cleaned up his gear. Once they'd cleared out, a couple of bikers removed a sheet that'd been covering a big, sturdy-looking folding table in the center of the demo space and tossed a new, clean one over it.

Mr. Castle laid two hanks of rope on the table, one black and one red, along with a large pocket knife, which was for emergencies. The silk-blend rope he used was expensive, but he said that if I panicked or got a cramp or anything else happened, he'd cut me out of it right away. I hadn't really been worried about anything like that until he mentioned it, but having that knife there was sort of comforting.

He'd retrieved his backpack from the bike and left it on the ground next to me, along with both our jackets and my folded T-shirt. The breeze was cool, but Mr. Castle had asked if I minded the bare skin—he said the color contrast with the ropes would be pretty—and I said no. Having his hands on my skin or on my shirt? It would've had to be a lot colder to get me to choose to have a shirt on for that.

When he nodded to me, I climbed to my feet and walked over to where he was standing in front of the covered table, and stood facing him, wrist clasped

behind my back, with the audience to one side of me. I was sort of nervous having a couple hundred strangers watching me, but it was easier with them out of my direct line of sight.

Tim, a big guy with a bushy beard whom I'd met earlier, introduced Mr. Castle and ran down his experience with rope bondage, then left us to it.

I focused on my breathing and heartbeat while Mr. Castle said some things I didn't pay much attention to, then he was there with the black rope. He had me turn to face the audience, then got going.

"Folding the rope in half is the easiest way to find the center," he said. "Loop it around the back of the neck. Never the front." He turned and gave the audience a hard stare. "Seriously, *never* loop a rope around the front of the throat unless you've got a rigid collar on first, one you're absolutely sure isn't going to slip out of position. Threading the rope through loops *on* the rigid collar is best, if you have to do that. The windpipe is in front of the vertebrae. If you cut off your sub's air, he won't even be able to safeword."

He looked back at me and knotted the two ropes together at about the top of my breastbone. "This first rope is going to be the foundation," he said, "which is why I'm using the shorter one here. Tie a knot—I just use square knots, although an overhand will work, or anything else that'll hold the two strands secure to each other right where you put it. From here, figure out how much slack you'll need. It depends on the size of your sub and what effect you want."

I looked down and saw him pull the two ends apart at an angle, then pinch the ropes with his fingers and thumbs at a point where they were not quite half way to my nipples.

"I like it about here," he said, stepping aside and turning me slowly so everyone could see. "If you have a female sub and want to outline her breasts, take the rope out to a little less than nipple width. Less because there's always going to be some shift when you tighten things up. This is going to be the outer edge of the center diamond and the inner edge of the spaces going down

on either side. Your next knot is going to be twice that length from the first one.”

He measured with his hands and tied the two ropes together again, with another square knot.

“From here, you can either space all your knots evenly, or you can position each individually, depending on what effect you want. I usually like them even.” He tied three more knots down the length of the ropes, leaving a couple of feet of tail. “You can pull a loop in this if you want, or tie a bow, just to keep the ends out of the way while you work. I wouldn’t tie a bow with a male sub, but that’s just me.” He gave the audience a crooked smile and got some snickering in return.

He stepped over to the table and picked up the coil of red rope. This one was a lot longer than the black one. He folded it to find the center, then said, “Arms up.”

I lifted my arms straight out from my sides, and Mr. Castle looped the rope around me so the center was at my back, right below my shoulders.

“Here’s where it starts to come together,” he said. “Under the arms,” and he wrapped the rope around to my front, “then the ends go through either side of the first knotted space.” He threaded each end through the loop, pulling the space into a triangle.

“Now, back under the arms.” He wrapped the red rope toward my back, then said, “Arms down.” I lowered my arms and he ordered, “Hold the ropes with your arms.” Then to the audience, “It really helps to have your sub’s cooperation here. If you like having your sub struggling, you’ll probably need a helper. Maybe two. This style is about looks, not just secure restraint.”

He passed the ropes, one at a time, around the outside of my arms, then back underneath to the back, then adjusted both sides so they were secure without being too tight. Then he had me turn around so my back was to the audience.

“Now, cross the ropes around each other, tighten them up just until they’re firm, and back to the front, low enough so they’re level with where the next black loop will be when it’s stretched out. You’ll get a feel for it.”

He turned me to face the audience again and wrapped the red rope around my chest, this time at a level just below my pecs, threading each rope under one of my arms. I couldn’t move them much to help him this time, since the first stretch of the red rope was pinning my upper arms against my sides. I saw where he was going with this and immediately started to get hard. I was going to be completely immobile by the time he was done, at least from the waist up. I hoped he had plans for my legs, too, because I already felt helpless and kind of excited.

“Through the black loops on each side like before—notice that as you add tension down the black structure, the spaces turn into diamonds—then around to the back again, with a loop around the arms. Then just keep going.”

The red rope zigzagged back and forth around my torso, squeezing, compressing, trapping my arms so I couldn’t move them at all. With a rope just wrapped around, you had a lot of slack to move underneath it; I’d seen a couple of subs at Brandon’s tied that way. One had knelt in a corner of the yard for most of the afternoon, wrapped in rope and looking pretty hot. I’d imagined myself in her place, and jerked off to the fantasy later that night.

Looping the rope around the arms individually was so much more restrictive, though, it was like the difference between a rubber band and a handcuff.

By the time he was done with my upper body, my arms were tied down to just a few inches above my wrists. I was completely focused on Mr. Castle, aware of him moving around me, touching me, turning me, wrapping my body in his ropes. If he’d told me to go down to my knees and suck him off right there in front of everyone, I probably would have without even thinking about it. My brain wasn’t really in “think” mode just then.

“I like this technique because it immobilizes the sub. Robbie, try to move your arms. Wiggle for me.”

I obeyed, squirming back and forth, looking for play in the ropes. There was pretty much no give anywhere. It felt awesome, and I was pretty sure everyone watching could tell I had a hard-on right then.

“This is just a basic application,” said Mr. Castle, “but you can do a lot with this technique. You can make the foundation longer—imagine the black rope structure going down the back as well. In that case, the red rope would go back and forth down each side. Two red ropes would make the whole thing neater. You can also leave the arms free and just bind the torso— that forms a corset tie, and your sub can wear it under street clothes without attracting attention from mundanes, especially if you use a thinner cord. The hardest part here is maintaining even tension.”

He had me rotate slowly and said, “I’m a perfectionist, so I like everything even, with all the lines and spaces symmetrical and balanced. Sometimes you’ll need to make some temporary knots to tie off one side and maintain tension while you work on another side, especially if you get into the more complicated applications of this technique. If you don’t care about symmetry or neatness and just want to see your sub covered in rope, you can do whatever you want.”

There were a few more laughs at that.

“How to finish is up to you,” he said, “although you’ll want to secure the bottom somehow to prevent the structure from riding up and losing tension. You can take the ends down the crotch and do all sorts of interesting things there, whether your sub is male or female. You can start with the black rope much longer and run a pair of ropes down each leg, zigzagging back and forth, using the same twist on each side that you used down the back of the torso. I tend to get impatient right about here, so I’m going to go for something simple.”

He helped me move back until I was right in front of the table, his hands on me, helping me keep my balance, since if I lost it and fell I wouldn’t be able to catch myself.

“Up on the table.”

I managed an awkward hop and landed on my butt on the table. It protested but held, and felt sturdy enough that I didn't worry about it collapsing under me.

Mr. Castle had me turn, swinging my legs up, then lifted me and moved me about a foot so I was sitting in the center of the table, facing the short end. He lowered me back until I was lying down, with my feet hanging off.

"On each side, I'll take the red end down and around the ankle." He had me bend my knees and secured the ends of the ropes around my ankles so I couldn't straighten my legs.

"I like this because it's simple and quick, and gives you access to everything you might be interested in playing with at this point."

"Your boy is pretty interested too," called a guy from the crowd. I blushed and turned my head away.

"Robbie is a wonderful sub," said Mr. Castle, resting a hand on my chest. "Responsive and eager to learn. I'm fortunate to have him." There was a hard note in his voice and the guy who'd commented didn't say anything more.

"Any questions," he asked.

There were a few, but I tuned them out. The embarrassment of having my bulging jeans pointed out in front of a bunch of strangers faded, and I just lay there with my eyes closed. Without vision, my sense of touch seemed to intensify, and the feel of the tight ropes made the world shrink down to just my body, my bondage squeezing it all around, and Mr. Castle's hand on me. I squirmed a little bit, slowly, just for the pleasure of feeling how restricted I was. It was like my arms were *gone*, absorbed into my body, and I had no ability to manipulate the world at all. I lay there completely powerless and passive, dependent on Mr. Castle for anything and everything. I was sinking into my own helplessness and his domination over me, and it was such a thrill I thought I could almost come from it, if I let myself.

Then it was over, and Mr. Castle leaned down to kiss me while the audience applauded.

When he straightened, I opened my eyes and managed a dreamy smile.

“You liked that?” he asked, although I could tell from the hungry look on his face that he knew the answer.

“Yes, Sir. Very much.”

“Would you like to stay like that for a while?”

“Can I? Don’t they need the space for someone else?”

“Yes, but you’re portable,” he said with a grin. “Maybe not as easily as a skinny little twink type would be, but I can manage.” He looked around, stared somewhere off past my head for a moment, then scooped me up into his arms, bondage and all.

“Roy, bring our stuff?”

“Sure, Nick.” I heard footsteps and some shuffling behind us as Mr. Castle carried me over to a spot under a shady tree. It wasn’t grassy, but the ground was spongy with loam. Mr. Castle set me down, settled himself under the tree with his back to the trunk, then shifted me into his lap. Roy set our jackets, my T-shirt and Mr. Castle’s pack down next to us, waved and left us alone.

I leaned into his chest, cuddling as well as I could.

I really wished we were somewhere private, because I wanted, *needed* him to fuck me while I was tied like this. Or suck me off, jerk me off, play with me, *something*, because I was a bundle of helpless ache and need and not being able to do anything about it was going to make my balls explode.

“You’re such a sweet boy.” Mr. Castle tightened his arms around me, rubbing my back over the tight ropes and pressing a kiss into my hair. I pressed my cheek against his smooth, leather-covered shoulder and kissed the side of his throat, the only part I could reach. He’d been sweating a little in the sun, plus carrying me over to the tree, and his scent surrounded me. I closed my eyes and breathed it in—warm and musky and him. It was familiar even after such a short time, and catching just a hint of it, even at work, made me relax and feel a little aroused. Tied up and curled in his lap? The scent was a desperate tease.

“I want to fuck you so bad it’s driving me crazy,” he said, his voice quiet but intense. “I wish I could teleport us home.”

“I wish so too, Sir,” I said, and my voice had a little more urgency to it than I would’ve chosen to show, if I’d been thinking about it at all. He hugged me again and made a low noise that sounded like a frustrated growl.

I could hear a blurred buzz of voices from where we sat at one end of the campground, with laughter or whooping here and there. Occasionally a motorcycle rumbled in or roared out of the nearby bike lot. A sharp cracking sound and cry of pain marked the start of the next demo, not too far away; I could almost make out the just-unintelligible voice of whoever was instructing, commenting in between strikes.

There were people all around, and a sexual charge filled the space, flowing through the huge, outdoor area. We were all there for the same thing, more or less, and no one was likely to be offended by whatever anyone else might choose to do, or if they were, I figured they’d probably hide it because dissing someone else’s kink is pretty uncool.

Despite all that, though, most of what was going on—definitely what Mr. Castle and I had done for the last hour or however long it’d been—was foreplay, bottom line. Not for everyone, because there are people who are into D&S but don’t have sex when they scene, but I’ll admit I don’t get that, not at the gut level. I never did, but right then, having had my first real experience of complex bondage with an expert Dom I was totally gone on, it was a lot of other things too, but it was definitely foreplay.

And it was *good* foreplay, good enough to get me so worked up I felt like I was going to spontaneously combust if I couldn’t get some relief, but there was no way to move on to the obvious next step unless we could borrow a tent from someone. Even then, I didn’t know that I’d really want to have everyone walking by within fifty feet hear what we were doing.

Fuck it, that’s a lie. The way I felt right then, I wouldn’t have given a damn.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

We sat there for a while. I didn't know how long because I wasn't wearing my watch with the wrist cuffs, couldn't have raised my arm to look at it even if I had been, and wasn't thinking about it at the time anyway. But the sun was in a noticeably different place when Mr. Castle gave me a hug and a deep kiss, then shifted me to the grass and undid the knots at my ankles with two quick jerks.

It took almost as long to untie me as it had to tie me in the first place, if you subtract the time he'd taken in the middle of the wrapping and looping and knotting to stop and explain what he was doing. I was shivering before he was halfway through.

"Hang on," he said. "I'll bring your shirt and jacket as soon as I'm done. Your blood pressure is dropping some with the release of tension and that's chilling you down. It'll pass in a little while." He kept working while he talked, but he couldn't go very fast—pulling a rope too fast out of a tight loop against my skin would've left me with some awful rope burns, so that slowed him down.

"I'll be all right, Sir. It's uncomfortable, but not really bad."

I wasn't lying, but goose bumps aren't my best look and I was glad when he tossed me my shirt, then my jacket. Even the T-shirt helped, and the leather jacket made me feel almost normal again.

He pulled me to my feet with both hands, then backed me up against the tree and kissed me again, long and slow, making my bruised lip flare. I was figuring out that Mr. Castle was *really* into kissing, which was fine by me 'cause he's seriously good at it.

We finally wandered off to see what was up and who was around. I hadn't really seen much of the event the previous night, and it was interesting to walk around and look. It *almost* distracted me from my aching erection.

There was an aisle lined with vendor tents selling things I'd only ever seen online, from cuffs and clothes to books and benches to studs and slings. I was trying hard to look without looking like I was looking. I failed miserably, of course.

Mr. Castle just laughed and slowed down, hauling my blushing ass around and talking about things like stitching and rivets and padding and penetration. I saw something called a "spider gag" that I'm pretty sure I don't want to try any time soon, but there were a few other things that looked like fun.

What I really wanted to look at was the collars, and I very deliberately controlled myself in the four tents that sold them. A collar is a big deal—I guess it's like a plain gold ring to a vanilla woman?—and I didn't want Mr. Castle to think I was hinting or anything. Not that I knew him well enough to accept a collar from him right then, even if he'd offered. My brain knew that even if my gut (and parts lower down) didn't. But still, it's the idea, you know?

We moved on without buying anything, and when we'd looked at all the vendors, Mr. Castle said, "Let's go for a walk."

Since we'd been walking, I was okay with doing more of it, so I said, "Fine with me, Sir." He steered me over to the edge of the campground, opposite the rec building and the bike lot, and we headed off down a trail into the woods. We just kind of ambled, not heading anywhere in particular.

"It's been too long since I did this," said Mr. Castle. "I like living in the valley, high tech and high-rises and lots of activity. And I love my bike, especially when I can just go for a ride away from traffic. But I like nature, too—it's relaxing and quiet. I wouldn't want to live in the woods, but it's a good place to take a break."

"I guess," I said. "I mean, I like it here. I've never been camping or anything, though—my family wasn't into it. It's cool, something different. Usually a forest is just something I see on TV or in a movie, you know?"

"Really? Huh. We'll have to fix that."

"Yes, Sir."

He gave me a look and said, “I’m not going to put you on a leash and drag you along on a twenty-mile hike. If you don’t want to, you don’t have to.”

“No, Sir. I mean, sorry, yes. I don’t know if I’d be up to twenty miles, but this is good. I’m fine being here, and wouldn’t mind doing it again.” I did *not* say “with you” because I’d probably grow tits or something, but the thought was there.

“We’ll have to pencil that in, then.”

“Maybe we could go out on the bike, and stay in places where there’s forest and do shorter walks? Then ride somewhere else and do it again? Sort of seeing a lot of wilderness without having to hike through every bit of it? Is that even a thing?”

He kind of laughed and said, “Sure, it could be. That’s a good idea—motorcycling and hiking, best of both.” We walked along for a few minutes without talking, and I looked around at the big rocks and bigger trees, gnarled roots bulging out onto the side of the trail. A sort of ditch ran along the other side that looked like it’d been cut by water. There was all kinds of nature stuff I’d never really seen in person before. I spotted a little grey lizard clinging to the side of a tree; it scuttled around to the other side out of sight when we passed by.

“So your parents never took you anywhere out of the city?” Mr. Castle asked. “I don’t think I’ve ever known anyone who’s never been camping before, not even once.”

“No, never,” I said with a shrug. “My parents just weren’t into it. We went to Disneyland when I was eight, and we went to Great America once every year or two. We went to movies, and Chuck E. Cheese—I was pretty good at Skee-ball when I was a teenager and had a big shoebox full of tickets, although I never traded them in for anything. But except for that one Disney trip, we never did anything major, vacation-wise, when I was a kid. And now we hardly see one another.”

“Did they have a hard time about you being gay?” His voice lowered, like he was ready to be sympathetic, but I shook my head.

“No, not really. I mean, they weren’t thrilled or anything—my mom wanted grandkids, and now she’s going to have to depend on my sister, who’s busy with other things and not interested in having kids any time soon. It wasn’t a huge deal, though. There wasn’t any huge argument about anything, or any big event labeled ‘the break-up of the family’. We’re just different people. Like, when my parents wake up in the morning, the first thing they do is turn on the TV. Whenever they’re at home, the TV’s on unless they’re sleeping. It drives me crazy. I think that was the number one reason I moved out as soon as I could afford it, even though I went to UA and could’ve lived at home the whole time.”

“Do you see them very often? Sunday dinners?”

“No, I don’t. Dad’s a VP with a big insurance company, and they transferred him to St. Louis three years ago. I fly out for Christmas, and call on their birthdays and Mother’s Day and Father’s Day. We e-mail sometimes. We’re just not that close.” I thought for a moment, then added, “You know, I think the closest we’ve felt, or at least the one time I felt like my dad was really proud of me and we were having a good time together, the whole family, was when I got my MBA. They came out for my graduation, and Dad was grinning so hard I thought the top of his head would fall off. Business is his life, you know? He was sort of... not really disappointed, but unimpressed when I majored in engineering as an undergrad, although Mom thought it was great because she’s a mechanic. Dad approved of the MBA, though.”

“Getting both was smart,” said Mr. Castle. “I learned engineering because I loved it, and I learned business the hard way because I had to, because I was determined that no asshole in a suit was going to take my company away from me. Most of the people in this business do one or the other, either the business or the tech. Having both is valuable.”

“I’m glad you’re happy with my work, Sir.”

That got me an eye roll and a smack on the shoulder. “Don’t pretend you don’t know how good you are. For someone who’s been with the company less than a month, you’ve slid right in. A few people thought at first that you were the gay equivalent of the little blonde secretary with huge boobs and no

brains, but I've gotten some great comments about you. You're impressing people, and I expect you to keep it up."

"Yes, Sir. I'll try."

We came to a little stream trickling along, and stopped in the middle of a wooden bridge. I leaned against the rail and looked down. The stream was less than a foot deep, but I figured that during the rainy season it was probably more impressive. A breeze blew past, and the air smelled cool, all trees and water and soil. It's funny to think about soil—dirt—smelling clean, but it did. It's not like dirt on the sidewalk, or in your house. It's more the kind of dirt that belongs where it is and has things growing in it. It's hard to explain why that's different, but it is.

"What about you, Sir?" I asked. "Are you close to your family?"

"Not really. My grandparents raised me, and they've both passed away. My mom had me when she was twelve, then she left me with her parents and ran away from home. Or maybe something happened to her, I don't know. We never heard from her again. I never knew her except from photos." He said it in a matter-of-fact tone, like it was the weather report, or a listing of the cars his family had owned while he was growing up. Just stuff that happened.

"I'm sorry," I said, because I didn't know what else to say.

He shrugged. "It's really not an issue. You don't miss what you never had, and I never had my mother around. I had my grandparents, and they were great. They never treated me like a burden, or tried to punish me for my mother's bad choices. I had a good childhood." He glanced at me, then smirked and added, "We went camping every year when I was a kid. You're the one with a deprived childhood."

I laughed and leaned over to bump shoulders with him. "You'll just have to make it up to me."

"I'll have to do that," he agreed, and that made me happy.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

We stopped at my place again on the way back that evening. I packed a gym bag with underwear and socks, and a T-shirt for the next day, and put a suit and shirt and tie and my work shoes in a garment bag for Monday. Carrying both bags on the bike was awkward, but the next stop was the office where I picked up my car, and I only live about fifteen minutes from Castle, outside of commute time.

Riding with Mr. Castle was definitely more fun, but the car was practical, and I followed him back to his house. We had great sex that night, and I slept with a chain fastening me to the headboard by my neck, the black leather cuffs still on my wrists and Mr. Castle's arm wrapped around my waist from behind.

Sunday we went to see a couple of movies, with an early dinner in the middle. It was kind of weird doing something so normal and date-like, but the movies were good—the new Marvel movie, and an SF movie with aliens and explosions—and I had fun. We talked about a lot of nothing over dinner, and just sort of hung out like two guys getting to know each other. He got a couple of texts, and had to make a call to yell at someone once, but for the most part it was just us.

By Monday morning the bruise on my lip had faded. It was still a little swollen, but the color was pretty much gone and it wasn't really visible unless you knew to look for it. I was sort of happy about that and sort of not, and I figured Mr. Castle had let it fade deliberately, to be reasonably discreet at work.

While we showered, though, Mr. Castle said, "Hold still," and bent to kiss my throat, right below my Adam's apple. The kiss only lasted a second, though, before he started sucking. He sucked hard for almost a minute, then bit, carefully, increasing the pressure of his teeth until I was gasping in short, pained breaths. He held the skin of my throat in his teeth for another minute or so, then backed off to sucking again, then let go.

"There," he said, and went back to washing.

I'll admit I was kind of confused. That patch at the front of my throat was sore, and he'd made sure it'd be bruised purple right away, but why there? It wouldn't show when I was dressed for work, so he wasn't "marking" me, as in staking a claim to other people. Which I was just as happy about because I wasn't sure I wanted to walk into the office with the boss while showing a hickey, on my neck or my lip or anywhere else. And for a private mark, it was in a weird place—if I wanted to mark someone in a private spot that only we would see, I might go for a hip, an inner thigh, just below the belly button—someplace sexy, you know?

I figured it out while getting dressed. Trousers, shirt, tie... and that was it. The knot of my tie sat right where the mark was. It was only a little raw and sore on its own. The pressure of the tie tightened right on top of it made it hurt a lot more, but loosening the tie would look sloppy. I tried to adjust it a little up or down, just enough to shift the pressure of the knot onto unmarked skin, but it looked stupid either way, and wouldn't stay anyhow.

While I was messing with it, I caught Mr. Castle's eye in the mirror. He gave me a hungry lion smile, then turned to get a suit jacket out of his closet.

I'd just have to deal with it all day, and the raw ache would keep him and the weekend right up at the front of my mind. As if I'd need a reminder.

The office was in Monday mode, and we had mail to read and stuff to sort through and meetings to go to. In addition to the usual, the Pinelli project was coming to a head. We were heading back East on Wednesday for meetings with Pinelli Systems Integration, a big SI house we were romancing. They had a lot of government contracts, and we wanted to build some boxes for them.

They'd been working with one of our competitors, Syntronics Research Labs, for quite a few years, but Mr. Castle was determined to show Pinelli that we could do a better job than SRL for less money. A lot of plans, a lot of data, some alcohol and some smooth talking, and we just might persuade them to kick the competitor to the curb. We were giving it a good shot, anyway, and Mr. Castle is incredibly persuasive when he turns on the charisma.

Or maybe I'm just biased? Probably. But he's still a great negotiator.

I'd been aware of the bruise on my throat all day long, which was why he'd done it, and it worked. I found myself fiddling with the knot every now and then to intensify the sensation, usually while I was reading or something and had a hand free. Greg Wyatt had given me a weird look once, then grinned when he noticed me noticing him noticing what I was doing. Which I know sounds kind of goofy, but you know? It was just that kind of day. I wondered for a moment whether he knew what was under my tie, but then my phone buzzed and I didn't have time to think about it.

So normal business was going on, for various values of "normal," while the "Backstab SRL" team was finishing up research on both Pinelli and SRL, running numbers, arguing strategy, and getting our presentations ready. Mr. Castle was coordinating and making final decisions, and I was doing a lot of running around. At the end of the day, or at least when I ran out of things that absolutely had to be done right then, Mr. Castle was still in the war room with the rest of the executive types.

I poked my head in and asked if anyone needed anything. Mr. Castle said, "No, we're fine, you can take off," then went back to talking about how Pinelli's VP of subcontracts was a partyer and we could take advantage of that, and on they went, everyone in the room focused on the files scattered across the table and displayed on the half dozen computer monitors, with me looking at the backs of their heads.

Okay, then.

I thought about sticking around for a while to see if maybe they'd wrap up soon, or end up needing some help after all, but then I figured that was way too pathetic so I did what Mr. Castle said and took off.

There was a grocery store on the way home, so I stopped in and picked up dinner, a strip steak and a sweet potato. I like them better than the white ones, which are kind of bland. You don't need to doctor sweet potatoes as much.

When I got home I scrubbed the potato and put it into the oven, then went to change. Sweats and a T-shirt were my usual grubbing-around-at-home clothes, unless it was hot, when I swapped shorts for the sweats. It wasn't hot.

Taking off the tie felt like a loss. Which was kind of ridiculous because I really didn't want to wear a tie when I was slobbering around at home, but still.

When I got undressed, I rubbed the bruise with a finger, then went into the bathroom to look at it in the mirror. It'd bloomed a dark red-purple, and there were darker blotches in the upper right and lower left where Mr. Castle's teeth had dug in extra hard.

Looking at it got my dick swelling. Pressing on it made it worse. Or better, depending on how you wanted to look at it.

I'd told Mr. Castle I wanted to experiment with pain play in a sexual context, and he'd been taking me there. I still wanted to try impact play—if he could make me feel anywhere near as good with a paddle or a flogger or his hand as he could with his teeth, I was going to turn into a major pain slut—but I didn't have any complaints about what he'd done so far. No complaints at all, except maybe that I wanted more and I was having a hard time moving back to normal-life mode by myself. I'd only spent a weekend with him; I wasn't supposed to be this dependent this fast.

It was kind of scary, actually. I mean, submissive doesn't mean dependent. Subs have to be strong, able to figure out what they did and didn't want, able to negotiate that with the Doms they played with. You have to *have* power before you can give it to someone else. If you grant power to someone else because you *can't* take responsibility for your own life, that's not healthy. I knew that, and even so, I was standing there staring into my bathroom mirror, wondering what Mr. Castle was doing and whether he was missing me, thinking about me the way I was thinking about him.

I turned away from the mirror and pulled on a T-shirt. I couldn't put the steak in for a while, so I grabbed my phone, flopped down on the couch and texted Brandon.

U free 2 talk?

A minute later the phone rang.

“Hey, Rob, what's up?”

“Just... I don’t know, just wanted to BS?” Because once I had him on the phone, I wasn’t sure what I wanted to talk about. I sure wasn’t going to tell him I was all depressed and confused because I wasn’t sure Mr. Castle liked me. Uh, yeah, no.

Brandon wasn’t dumb, though, so he said, “Something happen this weekend?”

“Sort of. I mean, there wasn’t an ‘incident’ or anything, but I’ve never spent a whole weekend—or even a whole day—immersed in the community, and going back to work has me a little freaked out, you know?”

“Does the fact that you work in the same office with your Dom make it easier or harder?”

“He’s not my Dom,” I pointed out. “He hasn’t collared me or anything.”

“No, but he made it pretty clear that you’re his and everyone else should back off.”

“Yeah, but I’m not sure what that means. I mean, it was great while we were at the meet-up, but then bam, nothing, and I don’t know what to... I don’t know.”

“So this is about today, not so much the weekend.”

“I guess, yeah.”

“What did you expect?”

“It’s not like I wanted him to pin me to the wall in the lobby or anything!”

“No, I mean seriously, what did you expect him to do, or expect that the two of you would be doing, when you went in to work today? If you’re confused and disappointed, you must have been expecting something different from what happened. Figure out exactly what you expected and why you expected it. Then look at what happened and figure out why it was different from what you expected. Maybe you can work out on your own where the disconnect happened, and that’ll be satisfying. If not, you need to talk to Nick about it, and make sure you’re both on the same page.”

Oh. Usually when someone says, “What did you expect?” they’re razzing you, but if Brandon meant it as a serious question then that was different.

“I don’t know,” I said. “It’s not like I had a plan, or like he said anything and then went back on it. It was just *nothing*—it was like I was hardly even someone he worked with, much less someone he had chained to his bed this weekend. I expected... something. Nothing specific, really, but not just... not to have him completely ignore me.” I growled to myself and said, “I sound like a girl, don’t I?”

Brandon laughed at me. “I know you met a bunch of Domes this weekend, plus you know a few from Saturdays. Try asking any of them if you ‘sound like a girl’ and see what it gets you.”

The mental image of what’d happen if I were ever that dumb made me wince. “No, I know, you’re right. But you know what I mean?”

“Sure. You’re confused and off balance trying to reconcile full immersion at a kink event with re-immersion in mundania. And you’re disappointed because your guy isn’t fulfilling fantasies you didn’t know you had. Not really fair to him.”

“No, I know, but—”

“Look, instead of focusing on what didn’t happen, think about what did. I know you had some great experiences—I watched you and Nick doing that rope demo.”

The memory of that made me shift on the couch, my body responding to just the thought. “Yeah, that was awesome. I just wish we could’ve had some privacy after.”

“I know what you mean,” said Brandon. “I really envied you. So you had that, and it was great. What else?”

“Umm. Riding with him on his bike was great. And he bought me a helmet, a pretty expensive one, so he must mean to have me riding with him for a while, right? He wouldn’t have bothered if he meant to walk away after this weekend.”

“True. What else?”

“Great shower sex.”

“Okay, Nick’s great at sex—I’d kind of figured that anyway, so let’s take it as a given. What else?”

“Umm, we went to the movies? And out to dinner. It was pretty ordinary and I don’t know if that counts, but we hung out and talked. We took a walk at the event, out into the woods, and talked about stuff. It wasn’t exactly exciting, but I liked just hanging with him and getting to know him.”

“That definitely counts. A guy who just wants to tie you up and fuck you and move on to the next sub doesn’t bother with long conversations or ordinary dates. If you’re hoping he’ll eventually collar you, if you want to be with him long term, that’s a good sign. What else?”

I brushed a finger over my throat and the bruise flared with pain, it made me squirm and want to keep touching it. “He marked me, a huge hickey with teeth marks, right on my throat where the knot in my tie was pressing it all day. It was damn distracting, but I liked it a lot.”

The phone was silent, then Brandon sighed. “Rob? Hello? Anyone in there?”

“Huh?”

“Rob, that’s... Okay, look. He bruised you up, and made sure it was in the one place that you’d be feeling, thinking about, aware of, all day while you were running around at the office in your little suit and tie. Did it occur to you that he intended that?”

“Of course! It’s not like he did it accidentally!” I felt like Rob thought I was stupid, and I didn’t know what he was getting at so I *felt* stupid, which was pissing me off.

“What I mean is, he intended for you to be thinking about him all day, feeling his mark on you? Like maybe he knew he was going to be busy with work all day, knew he wouldn’t be able to give you any personal attention, so he gave you that mark that you’d be feeling *all day long* so you’d know he was

thinking about you and that he'd marked you as *his* so you'd know who you belonged to even if he couldn't be reminding you personally every hour on the hour?"

"Uhh, no, I actually didn't think of that." Now I was *sure* I'd had an attack of stupid, but I felt a lot better about Mr. Castle ditching me all day, so I didn't care.

"Well, think about it," said Brandon.

"Yeah, thanks. Shit, seriously, thank you."

"No prob. It's what I'm here for."

I heard a rueful note in Brandon's voice, and some manners came popping back up into my head, so I said, "How about you? Did you have a good time? Do anything fun?"

"Yeah, actually." His voice perked up and I relaxed, ready to listen for a while. "I met a guy from Gilroy named Trenton who was there with a tent and all, so I actually got laid." I heard a tease in that, so I just huffed loud enough for him to hear that he'd gotten a rise out of me.

"I've usually played with people who are into ropes or leather, but Trenton's into chains and metal cuffs. The feel is different, harsher. I don't know if I'd want to switch over completely to metal, but it's fun as an option. Made me feel smaller, or like I was in trouble, if that makes sense."

"Sure," I said. "I can see that." I paused then said, "Trenton? Should we be discussing ways to get back at his parents?"

Brandon laughed. "No, that's his last name. His first name is Edward."

"Poor guy."

"Exactly. He's really pissed off about that."

We shifted to talking about work for a while. Brandon does software configuration control, so I told him about Julie and he was properly boggled by the situation. He told me about turning down a raise that would've had him

working on a project where the legacy code, all one point three million lines of it, was in BASIC.

“No amount of money could get me over there, seriously,” he said. “Which is why they offered me twenty-eight percent. Nobody wants to work on that code, so the people who do are the highest-paid in the company.”

I boggled back at him, then said, “You’d think that if they’re having to pay that much of a premium to get people on the project, they’d just say ‘Fuck it’ and pay to have a team rewrite it in something from this century. Or even late last century.”

“You’d think,” he said. “Management isn’t that smart. They won’t do it until they can get a customer willing to pay for the re-code, and nobody will.”

“I can’t imagine Mr. Castle letting a train wreck get that big. It’s been... how many years?”

“Nick was probably in kindergarten when this code was first written,” he said. “But I agree, he would’ve fixed it by now. Our management, not so much.”

“You could put in an application at Castle,” I said. “It’d be cool to have you in the building.”

“If they keep pushing me at this mass of rotting spaghetti, I’ll think about it.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Tuesday went by pretty much like Monday, and Wednesday we were on a plane for North Carolina. I was sitting in the middle seat between Greg, who had the aisle, and Brad Kellerman, our VP of Contracts, who had the window. Greg slept and Brad spent the flight on his laptop.

I'd expected this week's dog and pony show to be based out of Pinelli's HQ, but instead we'd rented a conference room at our hotel. Mr. Castle and I had a suite, and within an hour of check-in the living/dining area looked like an office, with multiple computers and phones and binders scattered around.

We met the Pinelli team down in the conference room that afternoon, and everyone was introduced, including me and a woman who seemed to be the Pinelli team flunky—pretty much my opposite number.

I studied their people as the discussions spun up, trying to get a read on the major players, after figuring out who the major players even were. It wasn't always obvious. Mr. Pinelli the Third, their CEO, made some introductory remarks, then turned the business over to a Mr. Olson, who was the overall manager of the projects we wanted in on. The team had found out weeks ago that he was the decision maker here, although his title was "group manager."

The guy Mr. Castle had been talking about Monday evening, Thomas Cotts, the Pinelli subcontracts guy, seemed sharp, but in a kind of oily way, like a stereotypical salesman, you know? If he'd come up in the business negotiating subcontracts, applying pressure and charisma and whatever it took to get the best advantage for his company, then it made sense he'd have evolved into that kind of personality, assuming he hadn't been that way all along. I'm sure he was effective, but I wouldn't want to be buddies with him, especially after I caught him checking me out. He gave me a cruising-you kind of smile, and I had to fight not to react the way I would've in a bar. I managed a neutral nod, then looked back at Mr. Olson, who was speaking.

One of the Pinelli people, a black woman who managed the core project of the linked cluster we were trying to get in on, hadn't been on our list of people

to check out for these meetings. Word was she'd be busy in Texas this week, dealing with Pinelli's customer on these projects. Either the schedule had changed or she'd sent someone else, because there she was, and we had a bare minimum of info on her. Mr. Olson tossed her the conversational ball periodically, and her opinion obviously carried weight, so not knowing about her beyond the basics was a major problem.

As soon as we took a break, Mr. Castle cornered me and said, "Go back upstairs and check out Danielle Mayfield. She carries a big bat, and I want to know her history. Text me when you've got anything significant—if it's more than a text, say so and I'll tell you what to do with it."

I said, "Yes, sir," and left.

I never did make it back down to the conference room that evening. My location up in the command center our suite had turned into made me the de facto research-organizing-compiling-phoning guy; a steady stream of texts, phone calls and e-mails had me too busy to leave the room. I ordered room service for dinner, along with a large supply of coffee packets for the machine in our kitchenette, and kept going.

By ten the info stream slowed down, and Mr. Castle texted me.

Moving to the bar for social negotiation. Stay upstairs.

I texted *yes sir* back and thought about going to bed. I expected more of the same the next day, and suspected Mr. Castle would be up getting ready at oh-dark-thirty and would expect me to be with him, awake and bouncy. I was exhausted, even though it was only seven-something back home, just from having to focus and figure and push info around all afternoon and evening without a break. My brain felt like it'd put in a full day's work and was griping at me, and even my body was a little cranky.

To wind down, I switched over to my own e-mail account and worked on that for a while, then checked some blogs. I wrapped up with a bunch of web comics, and by eleven-something I figured I could actually sleep if I went to bed. I shut down my laptop and headed for the bedroom, pulling off my shirt and T-shirt as I went.

I'd just tossed my shoes and socks in the direction of my suitcase when the doorbell rang. Yeah, the suite had a doorbell—I guess Mr. Castle was into that when he travelled.

I padded over to the door in just my suit trousers and opened it.

Mr. Cotts, the Pinelli subcontracts guy, was standing there.

“Mr. Cotts?” I said. “Umm, hello. What can I help you with?”

He gave me a smile that reminded me of a lion about to take a bite out of a dead zebra. “Nick Castle said you'd help me out with something urgent,” he said. He rubbed his pants right next to where his crotch was bulging, his eyes locked on my half-bare body, staring at the still-obvious bruise on my throat. “He said you were really good and that you'd take care of me.”

What the fuck? I said, “I beg your pardon?” not believing he was standing there, saying what he was saying. That kind of thing didn't really happen, it was just in bad porn.

While I was standing there in shock, he reached out and flicked one of my nipples. I yelped and jumped back out of his reach, and he took the opportunity to follow me into the room.

“There must've been a misunderstanding,” I said. Actually, I thought Cotts was just a predatory asshole trying to bullshit me, but we were there for business and I didn't want to overreact.

“Don't play dumb,” he said. “Everyone knows what the Castle execs get up to out there on the Left Coast. Anything goes, right? You wouldn't be with Castle if he weren't fucking you, and probably more than just fucking, so don't pretend to be so shocked.”

I was still backing up and he was still following me. We were most of the way across the office set-up, and suddenly I had the big dining table pressing against my hips.

What popped into my head right then was Mr. Castle's voice in the strategy session on Monday, saying that they were going to take advantage of

the Pinelli VP of subcontracts being a partyer. And I'll admit I wondered at that moment whether Cotts was telling the truth.

"Hang on," I said. My phone was there on the table where I'd been working. I grabbed it and scooted around so there was most of a table and a couple of chairs between me and Cotts. He just smirked and looked around, strolling slowly in my direction without going fast enough to be accused of chasing me.

I texted Mr. Castle, and asked:

Did you send Cotts up to our room?

Half a minute later I got an answer:

Yes take care of him

All I could do was stare at the screen. My brain crashed and my stomach tried hard to turn itself inside out.

"What did he say?" asked Cotts, still smirking. He was suddenly behind me, reading the phone over my shoulder. He gave a satisfied grunt and said, "There you go. So, how about if you show me what you're good at?"

He slid a sweaty hand around my bare waist. His other hand was pushing down into the front of my pants and I felt his breath on my shoulder. The smell of his body—of a too-warm, too-aroused stranger—filled my nose.

"No!" I slammed an elbow back into his gut, then twisted out of his reach and scooted the rest of the way around the table and across the room. I was angry and scared and confused, but the one thing I was sure of was this asshole wasn't going to touch me again. I glared at him and pointed at the door. "Get out. Or I'll call hotel security and have you tossed out. If that doesn't work, I'll call the police."

"Drama!" he snarked. "Come on, kid, you're not going to make a fuss about this. It's what you're here for, and you'll just look stupid if you pretend to be an offended virgin. Castle wants this contract, you're not going to lose it for him."

“I don’t give a damn what Mr. Castle wants. You’re not touching me. Get out.”

“You know you’re throwing your job away, and over what?” He moved toward me, but I stood my ground. I put my phone in my pants pocket so I’d have both hands free if it came down to anything physical.

“If this is my job then I don’t want it. I didn’t go to school for seven years to be a whore.”

“You have a naive picture of the job market if you think you can just walk across the street and find anything better,” he said. He stopped just a couple of feet in front of me, and I was strung as tight as a piano wire, waiting for him to try to touch me again, ready to react if he did.

The fuck of it was, I knew he was right. The economy still sucked, and jobs were tough to come by, especially decent jobs at this level for a new grad. There were too many people with all my schooling plus twenty years of experience who were fighting for the same positions. I’d lucked out with Castle—or I thought I had—and my chances of finding anything similar within the next six months, or even the next year, were slim. I knew that.

I also knew I couldn’t let this slimeball touch me, no matter what Mr. Castle expected. I obviously didn’t know him at all, I’d completely misinterpreted what he wanted, who he was, how he saw me. I was so angry I felt tears burning behind my eyes, but damned if I was going to cry in front of this asshole. Or at all. Castle wasn’t worth it.

“Get out,” I repeated.

“Come on, it’s not a big deal,” he coaxed, half whining and half impatient. He reached out to touch me again, and that was it—I slammed my fist into his nose, then drove a knee up into his balls. He collapsed onto the floor, curled up and mewling, all high-pitched pain and cussing.

He wasn’t coming after me anymore, so I left him lying there. I ran into the bedroom, pulled my clothes back on, zipped up my suitcase. I hadn’t unpacked anything, and the laptop I’d been using out on the table belonged to Castle. Socks, shoes, undershirt, shirt, tie. The bruise on my throat still ached under

my tie, but it just made me clench my jaw. The last thing I needed was a lasting reminder of all my idiotic delusions about Mr. Castle.

It'd be a lesson. I'd been stupid, but I'd know better next time.

I pulled on my jacket and looked around the room, at Mr. Castle's suitcase, at the big bed I'd been looking forward to sharing with him that night. Screw that.

I stepped around Cotts, who was still curled up on the floor in the outer room, and left. I took the elevator downstairs, then pulled out my phone as I crossed the lobby. I asked the doorman to call me a cab, and while I waited, I texted Mr. Castle one last time.

I quit

Then I shut my phone off and dropped it into my pocket.

When the cab came a minute later, I headed for the airport.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The first thing I did when I got home was take a shower, then I fell into bed. I took another one when I woke up, then I started right into looking for a new job. I didn't want to, didn't feel like doing anything except lying in bed staring at the ceiling or maybe watching some mindless TV, but I needed a job and I was determined to find one and move on.

I got online and reactivated my listings on all the job-search sites I'd used before. They weren't even all that out-of-date, since I'd only been at Castle for a few weeks.

Of course, explaining that to a prospective employer was going to be great fun.

"It was going very well, and I got consistently positive feedback, until my boss tried to whore me out to a prospective customer. That task wasn't in my job description, and I'm afraid I'll never be that much of a team player, so..."

Yeah, I needed to work on that.

When I turned my phone on, there were dozens of texts from Mr. Castle. The first few were all on the theme of *WTF?* so I just deleted the rest. I also deleted the four voice messages he left without listening to them. I didn't care how angry he was, or how disappointed, or what he might have to say to try to persuade me that I should have been willing to obey him in that way as part of my submission, or whatever. If I couldn't feel safe in our fucking room, I didn't want anything to do with him.

Around noon I started getting calls on my land line. Caller ID showed the first few were Mr. Castle; I let those ring through to voice mail and turned off the speaker. Mid-afternoon I got a call from a number I didn't recognize, but the area code was the same as the hotel in North Carolina. Sneaky bastard. I ignored that one too.

On Friday, I was lying around wearing the same sweats and T-shirt I'd slept in. I'd started going through Google for job announcements, since I was

at the wait-for-responses stage on the job search sites. My mobile rang again, and it was Brandon, so I picked it up.

His first words were, “Rob? What the hell happened? Are you okay?”

Huh? It took me a second, but then it was obvious. “Mr. Castle called you?”

“Yeah, you might say that. Apparently you won’t talk to him, so he’s getting creative.”

“If you’re calling to persuade me to listen to his shit or give him another chance, save it. If you don’t I’ll hang up on you, and I’m not even kidding.”

There was a pause, then Brandon said, “All right, forget him. What about you? Tell me what happened. Are you okay?”

It was a great opportunity to practice what I’d say when an interviewer asked me why I quit Castle with no notice after such a short time, but I still had no idea how to explain it, and Brandon wasn’t a prospective employer anyway. He was a friend, he was in the scene, he knew me better than he knew Mr. Castle—at least I thought he did—so I could probably trust him to be on my side, at least mostly.

Brandon was listening, and I wanted, *needed*, to share all this shit with someone who’d be sympathetic, but I had no idea how to start.

“He just... I don’t even know what happened. I didn’t understand what was going on, what he wanted or expected. I had all these ideas in my head, and I was just being stupidly romantic or something. But he sent that guy to our room, he told me to ‘take care of him’ and I just... I can’t do that. I know some people do, that some Doms share their subs, and the subs are into it and that’s cool. But I’m not like that, it’s not my kink and I can’t do that, and if that’s what he wants then it’s not going to work. And just sending someone up like that, without asking me first? Or even trying to tell me himself, give me a chance to respond ahead of time, offer an opinion?”

I heard Brandon take a breath, like he was about to say something, then just let it out. We sat there in silence, then he tried again. “You still haven’t answered me. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, of course. I mean, I can still feel that asshole’s hands on me, but I’m not hurt or anything. Except my hand’s sore from where I punched him—noses are harder than I thought—but I didn’t need stitches or anything. I just put some ice on it when I got home.”

“So nothing *happened*?”

“What? No! No, shit, I didn’t get raped or anything. Fuck, no, it didn’t get anywhere near that far. He was just an asshole who thought I’d bend over for him to get the contract. He wouldn’t leave and he was grabby, so I punched him and kneed his balls up into his shoulders, and that was it.”

“Okay, good.” Brandon huffed out another breath, and I could hear the worry flow out of his voice. “So long as I don’t have to come over and drag you to the hospital or anything.”

“No, nothing like that. He was just some pudgy sales-type—no way he could’ve forced me.”

“Good. So, what next? Have you made any plans?”

“Looking for a new job,” I said. “I started yesterday, re-activated all my accounts, started cruising for openings. I’m moving on from this, seriously. I’m not just moping around, crying lonely tears over lost love or any shit like that.”

“Well, good. You coming over tomorrow?”

I almost said *of course*, but then I thought about it. If Mr. Castle was trying to chase me down, that’d be one place he’d know to look for me. The team was scheduled to stay in North Carolina through that night, Friday, then fly back Saturday morning. I personally never felt up to doing anything complicated after a long flight—that’s what got me into this mess in the first place, or part of it—but Mr. Castle was a determined bastard, and when he

wanted something he went for it like a machine. I could see him showing up at Brandon's straight from the airport or something.

"No, not tomorrow," I said. "He'll be flying back tomorrow, and if he's still trying to get ahold of me, I don't want to be anywhere he knows to look. Shit, I should probably get out of here, actually. He knows where I live. Maybe I'll go visit Mom and Dad."

I headed over to the computer, holding my phone with a cocked shoulder to free up both hands, and did a search for plane tickets to St. Louis, that night. My parents would be surprised to see me, but not angry or anything. We could be civil and get along for a week or so.

I'd have to think about what to tell them, since there was no way in hell I could explain to my mom and dad why I'd quit Castle.

"You shouldn't have to run away from your own place," said Brandon. "Look, talk to him once, tell him to fuck off to his face. Make sure he gets that you don't want any contact with him anymore, and that'll do it. Nick's not the stalkery type."

"I can't do that."

It just fell out of my mouth without my conscious permission, but it was true. I wasn't exactly proud of it, but it was still true. I knew I should be able to look Mr. Castle in the eye and have that last conversation, but I didn't want to. The thought of seeing him again, of standing in front of him, made me want to curl up and hide under the bed, because that teenage girl inside me who'd been doodling hearts and flowers in her imaginary notebook whenever I thought about Mr. Castle just could not handle seeing him again. Yes, I was a coward with the emotional maturity of a high school kid. At least I knew where my issues were, right?

So I went on with, "I just can't. I can't handle seeing him, or talking to him. Not right now. When I come back from my parents', maybe then. I'll send him an e-mail or something, let him know I don't want any contact. Then maybe in a few months or so, I can handle seeing him at your place, or wherever. But right now I just can't."

“Rob... okay, I get it. I’ve been there. Your brain knows the obvious answer, but your gut isn’t cooperating. That’s normal. Just don’t bury yourself, all right? Avoiding an ex is one thing, but don’t try to hide from everyone. Nick doesn’t come to Saturdays very often anyway, so I’ll tell him to stay clear for a few months. You need the rest of your life to go on as normal, so come see everyone, hang out, relax. If you need to go visit your folks, do that after.”

“I don’t know...” I trailed off, scanning through flight information. I’d lucked out getting home Wednesday night—or actually, early Thursday morning—but the airline gods weren’t cooperating this time. The earliest flight I could get to St. Louis without paying a ridiculous price was leaving at almost midnight Saturday. Shit.

“All right, I’ll come. I can’t get a flight out ’til that night anyway. I’ll pack tonight and come over with my stuff, and if I can stick around a while tomorrow night then I’ll head right to the airport from your place, or if you have plans then I can hit a coffee shop or something, and—”

I stopped, realizing that I was babbling and that I sounded pretty crazy. Brandon just waited for me, and finally I said, “Okay, I’ll be there. And I won’t be a twitching wreck curled up in the corner, either.”

“Good,” said Brandon. “And seriously, if you’re not up to it, you can hole up in my room, relax, veg, whatever you need.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I appreciate it, seriously. I know I sound like an idiot.”

“No, you don’t,” he said. “But you won’t have any perspective for a while, so I won’t argue with you. I expect you by two, though, or I’ll come looking for you.”

“Two it is,” I said, and we hung up after a minute or so of good-byes.

Two it was, when I pulled up in front of Brandon’s place the next day. It was earlier than I usually got there, and I parked right in front. I didn’t even have a packed suitcase in the trunk, although I did pack the night before, and

the bag was near my front door, ready to go to the airport that night. My flight was at eleven-fifty and I planned to head for SJC at nine-thirty.

I'd had a bunch of ground beef in my fridge and I wanted to use it up instead of tossing it out, so I'd made a huge batch of chili to bring. I headed up the walk to Brandon's gate with a full crockpot in my arms. (Yes, I own a crockpot—I said earlier I like to cook, remember?)

The walled yard was still empty, although the chairs and loungers and tables and pillows were scattered around. I went up to the front door and rang the bell with one elbow.

Brandon answered a few seconds later. "Rob! You're here, great. It's good to see you." He let me in, and we went to the kitchen where I put the crockpot down and plugged it in. As soon as my arms were empty, Brandon pulled me into a hug.

"I was worried about you," he said. "I'm glad you came."

I hugged him back and said, "I figured if I made you come drag me out of my place when you had people coming over, you'd be kind of ticked off, so I didn't have much choice."

"Damn straight!" He glared at me, then smiled. "No, really, I'm glad you're here. You'll be fine, I promise."

"Sure, I'm just twitchy. Umm, I've got more chili in the car—back in a minute."

I headed out to get the other container, feeling a lot more relaxed. Honestly, I'd half expected Mr. Castle to be there, lurking, waiting for me, which was kind of crazy because his plane wouldn't even land for over four hours, but my gut wasn't listening to facts or logic. It'd taken a lot of effort and will to screw up my courage and come over, and I only did it because I *knew* Brandon would come get me if I didn't, and that making him come deal with my shit on Saturday afternoon would completely fuck up his day.

I hadn't trusted him enough, and I should've. It was going to be fine, and it was good to be outside. I grabbed the big plastic container of chili from the

passenger side floor and took it in to the fridge. When what was in the crockpot ran out, I'd refill it and heat up a new batch.

When other people starting arriving, Brandon stuck near me and played shield. I felt bad that he needed to but was glad to have him doing it. Especially when Don and Riley came into the yard and Riley bounced up to me, looked around, and said, "Hey, Rob! Where's your Dom?"

Brandon stepped right up and said, "Rob, could you go get another flat of sodas out of the garage? Thanks," and steered me off toward the front door. I heard his lowered voice talking in an urgent tone to Riley, and probably Don.

I felt like shit, felt like going home, felt like going into Brandon's garage and just staying there. I'm not that much of a coward, though, so I picked up a flat of cans and brought them back out to load into an ice chest. I felt Riley kind of hovering behind me, and when I stood up with the empty flat, he was right there, looking like someone had run over his dog.

"Dude, this sucks!" He gave me a big hug. Then he grabbed my arm and pulled me across the yard. "Come on, I'll share Don. And we brought cookies—cookies always help."

"Riley..." I detached myself before I had to find out what Don thought about being "shared." "I need to go dump the box," I said, waving the cardboard flat, "but I'll be back in a minute."

I headed back to the front door before Riley could latch on again, and took the box into the garage where the garbage can was. Once there, I stopped for a minute to breathe and focus on my heartbeat. I knew Riley meant well, but that kind of puppy-eyed sympathy would break down all the barriers I'd built up. I couldn't deal with that, especially not in front of everyone.

It was closer to five minutes than one, but I didn't let myself hide for very long. I did some breathing exercises and when I felt the stress backing off, I headed back to the yard.

I got a few glances but no one was staring at me. Which was a little weird in and of itself, because when you walk into a big space where you know just about everyone, it's more common for at least a couple of people to be looking

at you, wanting to wave or call you over or just smile. I appreciated the effort, though.

Riley was over near Don, and I saw that Don had cuffed him to the lounge again. I had to kind of grin at that. Don caught my eye, gave me a wry smile, then went back to his conversation with Christine, the Domme who'd let me try out flogging a few weeks earlier.

The gate swung open and Anna came in carrying a multi-layered stack of trays. I headed over and took the top two from her, then led the way into the house.

"Thanks!" she said, following me into the kitchen. "I almost dropped the whole pile coming up the driveway."

"That would've been a shame," I said. "Whatever these are, they smell good."

"Bacon and cheese quiches," she said. She set down the two trays she was carrying on the counter next to the fridge, then opened it up and started shuffling things around. "I love this recipe, but I'm never making this many minis again."

"Quiche pastry isn't that hard, but four trays' worth of tiny little shells is too many unless you're being paid to cater," I said with a nod.

"Definitely." She set her two trays on one of the fridge shelves, then eyed the result, took my trays and added them. They all fit stacked up, barely. "There. I didn't want to put them into an ice chest—they'd get all gummy." She closed the fridge and turned around to smile at me. "How's life? Did you make it to the Rolling Thunder event last weekend? I had to work."

My stomach clenched, but only a little. "Yeah, I did," I said. "Brandon took me up. It was fun. I've never been to anything like that before, and would've liked to stay longer."

"I haven't been to many," she said. "Working an odd schedule sucks."

"True," I said. "But I'm back to job-hunting, and right now my checkbook would trade places with your checkbook any time you want."

She laughed and said, “True, at least I’m working. That sucks—good luck hunting. I’ll keep an ear out, and if I hear of any openings, I’ll let you know. You’re an MBA, right?”

I nodded. “Also mechanical engineering, but only a BS in that. I’ll take anything I qualify for, though, so long as it’ll keep the Financial Aid people at bay.”

“I remember that,” she said with a grimace. “Anything is better than nothing, but I’d much rather have a job with a regular schedule. It’s probably just as well I don’t have any kids.”

She squeezed my shoulder, and we headed back outside. I followed her over toward Riley and Don, and sat in the grass next to her. Riley was behaving, and Marcus came over with an armful of sodas, so I was chatting and feeling pretty relaxed when I heard a motorcycle come roaring up in front of the house.

I think my heart stopped for a second. I found myself staring at Brandon, eyes wide, wondering if I could get away through the back somehow. Brandon must’ve seen my “fight-or-flight” response revving up, because he pointed at me and snapped, “Stay!” before heading out the gate, making sure it shut behind him.

Sharp voices started up. It *was* Mr. Castle—I was pretty sure I recognized the bike, but I definitely recognized his voice—not yelling but definitely snapping. Brandon’s voice was just as hard, and he snapped right back, “Keep your damn voice down!”

I curled up right there, sitting on the grass with my arms around my knees and my face buried in them. I wanted to listen but couldn’t stand to hear his voice. I wanted to die because this was happening in front of twenty-some people I knew, people I hung out with, and leaving this group meant leaving the scene, and I didn’t want to do that but I didn’t want to face them after my pathetic break-up drama happened right in front of them.

“Fuck you, Brandon! I would *never* do that to him!” Mr. Castle was pissed, and I bet everyone for a block around could hear him.

“I don’t give a damn! He doesn’t want to see you, and forcing it won’t do anything to prove he should ever trust you again. I told you not to come, and this is my property so what I say goes. Get out or I’m calling the cops.”

That didn’t work. I’d tried that back at the hotel and if they didn’t want to leave, it wouldn’t work.

A hand rested lightly on my shoulder, and Anna said, “Come on, hon, let’s go in the house. You shouldn’t have to hear this.” I let her coax me up onto my feet and inside. She steered me back to the kitchen and into one of the chairs at Brandon’s tiny table. It sat right next to a window looking out over the backyard, as far away from the driveway as you could get and still be in the house.

She brought me a glass of water and I drank some of it, just because it was there.

“I’m really sorry, hon. I didn’t put it together, what you losing your job meant, since you’d been with Nick.”

“No, it’s okay. It was actually good to talk to someone who hadn’t figured it out.”

She kind of laughed, and nodded. “Yeah, I get it. Okay, so, what else is going on with you? Or I could talk about this last call I got, which I promise will take your mind off your own issues for at least a few minutes.”

“Sure, sounds good,” I said. “Hit me.”

“So I get a call at five this morning. The cops raided a meth lab, and there were three little kids in it, all under the age of four. They’re sick and malnourished, and I’m pretty sure two were born addicted, although the tests haven’t come in yet—”

She chatted on about some really horrific stuff. I hadn’t known, but it seemed Anna was a social worker. She’s one of the ones they call when they find kids in serious trouble at odd hours—like imminent-danger kind of trouble, not daddy-let-him-have-a-sip-of-beer kind of trouble. She was right, it *was* distracting, and it put my problem of not wanting to talk to my persistent

ex-boyfriend (ex-Dom? ex-fuck-buddy? what'd we actually been, anyway?) into some perspective.

When Brandon came in and said, "He's gone," I was feeling almost normal.

"Good," I said. "Thanks."

"I'm really sorry, Rob. After I talked to you, I called him and told him not to come."

"He shouldn't even have been here," I said. "Our tickets were for a four o'clock flight. He should still be in the air over, like, Kansas or something right now. I was afraid he might show up this evening, but he shouldn't have been here yet."

Brandon and Anna looked at each other for a second, then looked away.

Yeah. Obviously he'd taken an earlier flight. He'd wanted to get home sooner so he could come find me. I wasn't sure whether to be afraid of him or sorry I hadn't talked to him.

No, that was my gut talking, like Brandon had said earlier. My brain knew what was right, but my gut wasn't cooperating. That kind of persistence was scary. That Cotts guy had been just as persistent—the only difference was I hadn't been attracted to him.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I was back home by five. I stuck around at Brandon's for a little while, mostly hovering in the kitchen. I heated up the chili and picked at some food when Brandon put a plate in front of me, but I didn't feel like socializing, so I told him I'd be fine and left.

Actually, I was exhausted. I hadn't done much that day, but all the emotional crap really sucked it out of you, so when I got home, I kicked off my shoes, set the alarm on my phone for nine and crashed out on the couch.

It seemed like I'd just fallen asleep when the doorbell woke me up.

I hauled my butt off the couch and staggered over to the door. My brain wasn't fully fired up yet, or I'd probably have expected what I saw when I looked through the peephole, which was Mr. Castle, standing there in his leather jacket and that damn grey T-shirt, with a grim look on his face.

Fuck.

He rang the doorbell again, and I heard him say, "Rob? Come on, I know you're in there. I just want to talk."

But I *didn't* want to talk, and he didn't seem to get that. Or maybe he got it but just didn't care.

It didn't matter. I couldn't imagine him breaking the door down, and I didn't have to open it. If I just ignored him, he'd go away eventually. I'd go catch my flight and that'd be the end of it. I was going to be at Mom and Dad's for a little over a week—I was flying back a week from Sunday—and by then he'd have cooled down, gotten distracted, and he'd leave me alone.

"Robbie?" That time he knocked, four times, hard.

I looked out through the peephole again. He was staring at the door, right at eye level, as though he could see me looking at him. He waited. We both waited. I didn't say anything. Finally he looked away and his face fell. He looked lost for just a second, and I almost wanted—

No. That was my gut talking again, and my gut was an idiot. I clenched my jaw and turned around, but I couldn't walk away. I focused on not saying anything, not making any noise at all, as I sat down right there on the floor and leaned back against the door, like I was barricading it with my body.

“Robbie, come on, let me in? Please?” He waited a few seconds, then said, “Fine, we can talk like this.” As if he knew I was there, knew I was listening.

“I didn't send Cotts up to the room for sex. He had some questions about our org chart, and I knew you were up there with all the info. I was talking to Olson, and Cotts said he was going to head for bed, that his room was on our floor so he'd be glad to stop by and ask you for the info. He's a slimeball, and he's already cost Pinelli over a million dollars to pay off employees he's harassed. They told him not to swim in the company pool anymore, so he went after you. I'm sorry it happened—I can't express how pissed off I was when I found out—but I would never try to order you to have sex with someone else, certainly not an asshole like Cotts.”

I heard a thump, like he'd leaned up against the door, and I kind of jumped. He probably heard me, because he went on. “When I got your text I texted you back, but you weren't answering. I went up to the room and Cotts was there. He admitted propositioning you, that he'd twisted what I'd said to make you think I'd told you to. I'd have kicked his ass, but you'd already done that—good job, by the way—so I called Olson up. That's when I found out Cotts had done it before. I told Olson that I didn't want Cotts on our projects, that if I ever saw his face again we'd walk. Olson's used to cleaning up after the guy, so he agreed.”

That was... damn. Everyone knew what he'd done, he'd cost his company money with his shit, and they hadn't fired him? And Mr. Castle seemed to think that was normal?

“Robbie, this is my fault. I should've made sure you understood what I expected, what we had. I never really established what was happening with us, and that was stupid. I suppose at first I wasn't sure it'd work out, and then even after I was sure I wanted you for—” he paused, then went on, “for long term, I just let it go, never got around to talking about it. I left you hanging,

and that was stupid. Maybe I thought you'd try harder if you weren't sure of me? I don't know, that's... it was an asshole move, and I'm sorry. If I'd told you what was going on, made sure you understood, you'd have been secure enough to know that this was bullshit, that I'd *never* have done that to you. The fact that you could think that for even half a second proves how badly I fucked up."

I heard another *bonk* and imagined the back of his head hitting the door.

"I don't even know what to say now, so I guess that's it. I just wanted you to know I didn't send him up for sex. I'd never do that, no contract is worth that, not with anyone, and definitely not with you. If you hadn't already taken him down, I'd have done it myself, and if he'd actually touched you—"

"He did."

Mr. Castle went silent, and I had to think back to realize I'd said it, that I'd interrupted him. I hadn't intended to say anything, but I couldn't stand him thinking I'd quit over nothing.

"What?" he finally said. "Robbie, what happened? Robbie?" The door creaked, he was leaning on it, I could almost hear him breathing.

"He did," I repeated. I just sat there on the floor, staring at the carpet. He wasn't really in the room, so it was like I was talking to myself. "I was getting ready for bed, I just had my pants on and he rang the bell. I didn't think about it, I guess I thought it was Greg or Hank or someone, so I opened it. He said you'd sent him up so I could take care of him, and he was staring at me and rubbing his crotch. He grabbed my, my chest, and I backed off, but he came inside."

"Robbie, let me in. Please?" I could hear the stress in his voice, and there was a light smack against the door.

I had to finish once I started, I couldn't stop, it was like it was all just flowing out, so I ignored him and went on. "He said everyone knew what the Castle execs get up to, and that you had to be fucking me and I shouldn't pretend to be shocked. He sort of chased me across the room, and my phone was there so I texted you. You said to take care of him, and he saw and said,

‘See? Your boss wants you to,’ and he put his arm around me, pulled me back against him and put his hand down my pants. I elbowed him in the gut and got away. I said I’d call hotel security or the cops if he didn’t leave, but he kept saying it wasn’t a big deal, that I’d lose the contract, I’d lose my job. I felt sick and didn’t know what to do, except I knew I couldn’t do what he wanted, what I thought you wanted. He tried to touch me again and that’s when I punched him in the nose, and kneed him. He went down, and I got dressed and left.”

We were both silent for a moment, then he said, “Robbie? Please? I need to see that you’re okay, I need to—Please? Let me in.”

And I needed to see him too, so I opened the door.

He was right there in front of me, with his hands up like he’d been leaning on the door. He looked me up and down, and for the first time there wasn’t any desire in his gaze. It was more like he was checking for injuries, as if he’d been expecting to see bandages, or missing parts.

“Are you all right?”

I nodded. “Nothing really happened. He just had his hands on me, and I didn’t know what to do, until...” I shrugged. “It wasn’t really a big deal, it was more what I thought, what he set me up to think.” I looked away and said, “I’m sorry, I should’ve trusted you.”

“I didn’t give you much reason to,” he said. “Can I come in?”

“Yeah.” I backed up and let him in, then closed the door behind him. I saw him notice my suitcase, then look away.

“So, umm...” I leaned back against the door with my arms kind of crossed, like I was hanging on to myself. My gut really wanted to just go to him and have him hold me, but I wasn’t sure if I could trust it yet.

He met my eyes and said, “I’m sorry. I want to fly back and kick that bastard’s ass. He said he just propositioned you, that you attacked him when he hadn’t actually touched you. I should’ve known better.”

I just shrugged because yeah, he should’ve.

He laced his hands together behind his neck and looked down, shifting his weight back and forth. I'd never seen him look so unsure.

Somehow that helped. Right then I didn't need Mr. Castle the perfect Dom, the unbreakable CEO who always knew what to do, who set an impossibly high standard and then challenged everyone around him to try to come within a couple of zip codes of it. It was a great fantasy, but it also made him hard to read, hard to approach, hard to get close to.

I needed him to be human, the guy I'd gone for a walk with, and the fact that he'd not only admitted he'd fucked up, but that he looked like he felt awful, like he was kind of wrecked and didn't know what to do next? That helped, a lot.

I reached out with one hand and said, "Nick?"

He looked at me, then took my hand and pulled me up against him in a crushing hug.

"Fuck, Robbie, I'm so sorry."

We rocked back and forth, slowly, while hanging on to each other. Even after everything that happened, I felt safe with him. In fact, it was the first time I'd felt really safe since that hotel room on the other side of the continent. I relaxed, a stage at a time, like staggering down some steps until I was at the bottom, leaning against him with my head on his shoulder and his arms around me. He was practically holding me up, and the release of tension-fear-stress I hadn't realized I was carrying sent a wave of fatigue running through me.

"Come on," he whispered. "Let's go lie down."

I nodded, and we maneuvered back into my bedroom without letting go. Once we got there, he lowered me down onto the bed, dropped his jacket on the floor and pulled off his boots, then crawled up beside me. We stretched out and wrapped up in each other, touching from faces to feet. He had a leg tangled with one of mine, and I had a hand pushed up under his shirt, slowly rubbing across his back. I needed that skin contact—I'd have wrapped myself in his skin if I could have.

Once we were there, I didn't fall asleep. I'd kind of expected to, but my brain was still swirling, even if my body was wiped out, and sleep wasn't on the agenda right then. That was fine, I hadn't hoped for this, for the world to turn out to be one where I could have Nick back, and I wanted to be conscious enough to actually experience it for a while.

I shifted a little, snuggling in closer. His arms tightened around me, and he whispered, "You know I love you, right?"

I shook my head, then whispered back, "I do now."

"You'd have known sooner if I weren't an idiot."

"Maybe. But so long as it's obvious you're trying hard, I won't get really mad at you."

He growled, "Brat," and I went tense for a moment, looking up into his eyes to see if I'd gone too far. He must've felt the shift, because his hands moved over my back, gentle and comforting. "No, sorry," he said, "it's too soon for that." He shifted us around so I was on my back and he was kneeling over me. "You still don't feel safe." He was scowling, and I shook my head.

"No, I do, it's just—"

"I got off track. When you said that bastard touched you, everything else went out of my brain and... Damn. Wait a sec." He went down and rummaged around on the floor. I heard his jacket moving, that unmistakable sound of leather. When he came back up, he sat down on the side of the bed, twisted around to look at me, his eyes solemn. He was holding a flat, white box.

"Here," he said. "It arrived last week. I was waiting for the right time to give it to you, as if the 'right time' would just sort of pop up with a big sign hanging in the air."

I sat up, staring at the box. I knew what it was, I was sure I knew what it was, but I hadn't expected anything like it, it was too soon.

He was holding it out, waiting for me to take it with that perfect patience he'd shown when I was still drifting in subspace after he'd chained me to his

bike, waiting for me to remember what I had to do, content to wait for me forever. He'd give me as much time as I needed, I knew.

I took the box and opened it. Inside was a gold collar. It was about an inch wide, made like chainmail. The gold links were small but not particularly fine for their size—it was obviously meant for a man.

The clasp was a flat plate with a hole in the center and a latch on one side. I recognized it—it was the same kind of clasp that'd been on the leather cuffs I'd worn to the meet-up, the ones I'd worn when Nick had tied me up in front of hundreds of people, made me so hard, and kissed me, and carried me off to cuddle.

I'd been silent for a while when he said, "If you don't want to lock it right away, that's fine. Or ever. You can wear it to work under your shirt—it won't show, and even if it did, it's discreet enough to pass to a mundane."

I knew how this worked, I'd seen this, read about it. I took the collar out of its box, slid down to the floor and knelt between Nick's feet. I held up the collar and bent my head.

Nick sucked in a long breath, then whispered, "Robbie..." I just knelt there, offering the collar, until he took it out of my hands and wrapped it gently around my neck. He clicked it shut, then asked, "Do you want...?"

"Please, Sir."

Another huff of breath, then he reached into a pocket and brought out a small gold key. His arms went around me again and he found the hole with the key, turned it until it clicked.

The collar rested right where the bruise on my throat was, the yellow-purple splotch that still twinged when something brushed against it. The collar was a solid weight on my neck, and it pressed down on the bruised spot, making it ache. I wanted it to last forever, and figured I could persuade Nick to keep it fresh.

He put the key into a tiny pocket in his jacket and zipped it closed, then leaned down and kissed me, light at first, and gentle. When I leaned in closer

and opened my mouth for him, our tongues met and he went deep, intense, pulling me close while claiming territory that was completely his.

Once we were both hard and panting, he leaned back and pulled me up, then shifted farther onto the bed, taking me along. I relaxed on top of him, leaned down for another slow kiss, then whispered, “You know I love you back, right?”

“I do now,” he said.

And that’s the end, because what more do you need?

THE END

Author Bio

Angela Benedetti lives in Seattle with her husband and shares her skull with a small horde of diverse people. She writes what the most eager and enthusiastic of them tell her. That gives the others a bar to shoot for.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Website](#) | [LiveJournal](#)