



WOUNDED

Hearts

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WOUNDED HEARTS

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For You
Thank you for Nashville

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WOUNDED HERO

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I walked into the bar at one fifty-three AM. My casual saunter made the black fringe dripping from my pretty lace wrap sway around my calves. I liked the silky glide of the tassels against my bare skin. Confidence rolled off me, intentionally so. A woman walking into a bar alone at one fifty-three AM has to be confident. If that confidence slips for one second, the veneer of adventure crumbles, and her stark loneliness will be laid bare for everyone to see.

Adventures. That's what I liked to call them. These little forays into the world, when desperation took me to seek comfort in the company of strangers.

Maybe one of them would be on an adventure of their own. Then, maybe we could both pretend we weren't lonely, just for a little while.

Just until the bar closed.

Luckily, the bars in Nashville stay open until three AM, even on a Tuesday night. I'd already wasted several precious hours singing karaoke and laughing with anyone who would talk to me in passing. Now, I wanted some company. Male company.

Maybe.

The thought of being intimate with a man terrified me. And thrilled me.

And left me feeling sick in the pit of my stomach, a churning that belied

the deeper ache between my legs. I hadn't gotten laid in...

I didn't want to do the mental math of how long it'd been since I'd left my husband. Or how long before that had been the last time we'd had sex.

I flinched away from that line of thinking. I'd only recently begun to accept the full, disgusting truth that I'd lived through years of abuse at the hands of a man who claimed to love me.

Don't think about Thomas.

Despite my wayward thoughts, my feet carried me smoothly from the entrance to the ebony bar without hesitation. Any indecisiveness would be seen as a moment of self-doubt, and I wasn't going to allow the neuroses that plagued me when I was sober to take over and ruin my all-important veneer of confidence. I shrugged into it like a well-worn coat, and a sense of cool calm settled over my shoulders.

I could feel male gazes dance over my skin, tickling my flesh like the silky tassels that bumped against my calves with every step. The black dress I wore was low-cut enough and short enough that the outfit left little to the imagination. While I always wished I could shift a few pounds off my thighs, body confidence wasn't an issue for me. I loved my curvy self.

I ordered a Dos Equis and turned to face the live band, my back arching slightly as I struck a casual but suggestive pose.

A pose. The way I positioned myself was artificial. A confident lie that I was exactly where I wanted to be. A lie that I was completely content being alone.

The male attention I could feel like a palpable sensation rolled from across the bar to skim over my body. I glanced in that direction. Found the man's startling pale blue gaze. Held it.

I allowed a small smile to tug at one corner of my lips. Then, I turned my eyes back to the band and took a swig of my beer, as though I hadn't seen the handsome man at all. As though I wasn't hoping I'd placed just enough bait to get him to come to me. As though I wasn't desperate for it.

I watched two women vie for the lead singer's attention, waving money at him as they called out requests. There was only time for a few more songs, and the women were hell-bent on getting their preferences played. The pretty brunette with the fiddle took the money with a smile and a promise to play both their songs. Briefly, I considered commenting to the nearest woman that I like the fiddle player's gold velvet, damask bellbottoms. Just to have a reason to talk to someone.

But I could still feel the man's eyes on me, so I chose to hold my place for a few minutes longer. Settling my elbow back against the bar behind me, I kept my muscles relaxed in a casual stance as I took another swig of my beer.

His attention made my stomach quiver, and excitement raced through me. I knew he was watching. I wanted him to come to me, to talk to me for a little while, at least. I wasn't looking for sex—the prospect of vanilla sex left me cold. I needed a little pain with my pleasure.

I doubted the man watching me could give me what I wanted in bed, but I craved company more keenly than I wanted an orgasm.

I felt his presence at my side before he spoke, but I didn't turn to face the man. I didn't want to appear overly eager.

“Is that your husband?”

“What?” I blinked up at him. He loomed tall beside me, just at the edge of my personal space. Respectful, but definitely interested. He was even more attractive than I'd thought. In the initial glance I'd allowed myself, I'd gotten an impression of pale eyes, blond hair, and a square jaw. Up close, I could see the fine lines around his eyes, which were set above high cheekbones.

“Is that your husband?” he repeated. “The lead singer.”

I laughed. “No, he's not my husband.”

“You're here by yourself?”

I tossed my hair back, a flippant gesture. “Yep.”

“The way you were watching him, I thought he must be your husband.”

That cut a little. My marriage was over. If he kept pressing me about why I was alone at a bar at two AM, I might not be able to maintain my casual bearing.

“Nope.” I held my smile. “If this is a pick-up line, it's a weird one,” I teased, putting some of the pressure on him to divert it from me. “I'm single, if that's what you're asking.”

“Oh. Good.”

“So,” I prompted. “You didn't tell me your name.”

“Scott,” he introduced himself, giving my hand a firm shake.

“Addison,” I replied, my smile more genuine. I'd gone through a string of Scotts back in my college days, and my best friend still joked about it. Now that I was single again, I supposed it was only fitting that I go on another Scott streak. Or at least, I'd indulge myself by talking to this particular Scott for the next half hour, until the bar kicked us out.

What would happen after that, I wasn't sure. I chose not to think about it;

I'd live in the moment and simply enjoy flirting with one of the hottest guys I'd managed to attract since I'd left my husband.

He was older than me by a few years, but that didn't make him any less handsome. He looked like he worked outside, his skin slightly tan and a little weathered. The rugged appearance suited him.

I leaned closer to him, my body thrumming with awareness of his masculine presence. Desire heated my veins, and I summoned up a flirtatious smile. Sex might not be on the table, but a kiss would be a welcome distraction from my loneliness.

"What do you do, Scott?" I loved learning about strangers' careers, their passions. As a writer, I soaked it up for inspiration.

"I'm in the lumber business," he said. "We're actually on our way back to Minnesota from Florida, but we're stuck here in Nashville because the weather's bad back home."

"Minnesota," I repeated with a slight smirk. "You definitely have the accent." I hadn't noticed it at first, but it was more pronounced when he told me where he was from. I did the same thing; I often lost my Southern accent unless I was talking about home or was around my family. The commonality was comforting, and I instantly felt more at ease near him.

It didn't hurt that he was regarding me with open interest, and he'd moved in closer, so we could hear each other over the loud country music. The heat in my veins warmed my chest, and something stirred between my legs. He smelled good. Masculine.

"Yeah," he allowed, shifting slightly. I wondered if he was self-conscious about his accent, or maybe I'd sounded a little too teasing.

"What were you doing in Florida?" I redirected the subject to ease his discomfort.

He shrugged. "We were there for business." He gestured to his friend, whom he'd abandoned across the bar. The dark-haired, stockier man frowned in our direction, and I chose to ignore him. He either didn't like being left alone, or he didn't like something about me.

"Your lumber business took you from Minnesota to Florida? And you drove?"

It seemed odd to me. If he was affluent enough to travel for business, why the long drive? Why not fly?

"Yeah," he replied again. "Have you ever been to the Bahamas?"

"What?" The sudden change of topic startled me, but I was intoxicated

enough that I didn't dwell on it. "Oh, I stopped in the Bahamas on a cruise once." I shrugged. "It was right after high school. I don't really remember it well, and we weren't there for long." I didn't like to think about it, but that graduation cruise had been eleven years ago. Acknowledging the passage of time—and the fact that I only had four more months left in my twenties—made me feel old. Especially now that I was having to start my life over at thirty, since my marriage had ended.

I chose to focus on Scott instead of my worries. Alcohol and his sex appeal made for an easy distraction.

"What's the weather like in the Bahamas in the winter?" he asked.

"I don't know. I went on my cruise in the summer. Why? Are you thinking about going there?"

"Maybe for business."

"The lumber business? In the Bahamas?" I was trying to get a read on his job. He was being vague, and something felt off. Suspicion made the back of my neck prickle with wariness, and I shifted back from him slightly. I didn't like being lied to, and I was usually far too gullible. My trusting nature had caused me a lot of heartache, and I'd become a little more cautious in recent months.

"Uh-huh."

He wasn't giving me a lot of information to work with.

"I love to travel for work," I said, trying to continue the conversation. I might not fully trust him, but my body told me to keep him close. I hadn't felt this kind of physical draw toward a man in years.

"I do it whenever I can," I chattered on. "Where do you like to go?" Travel really was one of my passions, and having that in common with him would give me the excuse to keep talking to him.

"I spend a lot of time abroad," he said.

"Oh!" Excitement buzzed through me. Finally, something we could talk about. "I've spent a lot of time in England." I didn't mention that I'd lived there on a spouse visa with my ex-husband and had recently been forced to move back to America. I tried to keep the wistfulness from my tone when I mentioned England. The loss of my adopted home made my soul ache and my eyes burn if I thought about it for too long. "Where do you travel?" I stayed in the moment, focusing on Scott instead of falling into familiar despair.

"Not England." His lips twisted with distaste, and his eyes darkened.

“Farther south.”

The way his expression shuttered let me know he didn’t want to talk about it, making me surmise that he found the subject unpleasant. I began to suspect that he’d been involved in something other than the lumber business in the past. Maybe he was former military and didn’t want to discuss his time in combat zones.

Whatever the case, I detected anguish in the clipped way he’d spoken and his carefully neutral expression. I might be halfway to drunk, but my empathetic senses were as sharp as ever. I didn’t want to dwell on any topic that might upset him.

“The band is really good.” I changed the subject again.

He smiled, his white teeth flashing through the dimness of the bar. Some of the tension in my chest eased. I liked his smile.

“They are,” he agreed. “Do you want to dance?”

I shook my head. “I don’t dance.”

“Come on,” he cajoled, taking a step toward the area in front of the stage, where two women were twirling and swaying their hips like no one was watching.

“I can’t dance. I’m sorry, but I’m really bad at it.”

I’d always wished I were more graceful, more coordinated. I nearly caved to the desire to please him and take his hand, but I knew how it would turn out: with me shuffling awkwardly and falling prey to my anxiety. I didn’t want to feel self-conscious around Scott. The way he was regarding me so intently made me feel beautiful and confident. I didn’t want to ruin that.

“Where are you staying?” he asked, shifting the conversation once again.

“My friend’s loft.” Georgia had left me hours ago, returning home with a migraine. I’d chosen to stay out by myself.

“What about you?” I prompted.

He pointed out the window. “I’m at the Hilton. It’s right across the street.”

I wondered for a moment if he was inviting me back to his room, but I decided not to pursue that line of thinking. I wasn’t ready to spend the night with a strange man, no matter how handsome he was. No matter how desperately I wanted to be touched. He wouldn’t be able to fulfill my kinky needs.

“Man, I really wish you’d dance with me,” he said. “It would mean a lot to me.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t.” Regret tugged at my heart. His words felt heavier than those of a man who wanted to grind on a woman. It sounded as though it really would mean something significant to him if he could share a dance with me. Again, I sensed the sadness I’d noted in him when he’d mentioned his travels abroad. His life must be more complicated than simply a man traveling for business.

“Okay,” he agreed, settling in beside me to watch the band and enjoy the music.

My chest tightened. I hated letting him down when he clearly wanted to dance with me, but I liked that he hadn’t pressured me. And I was relieved that my refusal hadn’t prompted him to return to his friend. I didn’t want him to leave.

As the silence stretched between us, I began to shift uncomfortably. It bothered me a little that he hadn’t asked anything about me. I’d given him openings to ask about my career and my time in England, and he’d chosen to give me clipped answers and not return with any follow-up questions. I didn’t like to think that he was a self-absorbed person who wasn’t really interested in knowing more about me, but then again, he hadn’t left my side.

He was hot enough that I overlooked the potential character flaw. Besides, it wasn’t as though I had anyone else to turn to for company. In a few minutes, the bar would close, and I’d have no choice but to return to Georgia’s apartment.

The band played one more song, and I drank my beer as I listened. Scott watched the band, too, but I could still feel his attention on me. I wondered why he didn’t prompt any further conversation, but I decided not to get hung up on it. He wanted to stay near me.

I wasn’t alone.

The song ended, and the lights turned on. Scott sipped at his drink, unconcerned by the fact that the bouncer was shouting for everyone to leave. I chugged some of my beer before setting the bottle down on the bar top. I didn’t have to finish it.

“We have to leave,” I told Scott, regretting that my time with him was over already.

“No, we don’t. Not yet.”

The bouncer shouted again, ordering everyone to finish their drinks and head for the exit. I wasn’t one to disobey or cause anyone the smallest inconvenience, so I stepped away from the bar with a sigh.

“We really do.”

I started to walk toward the exit. Scott set his glass down on the bar and followed me. I smiled to myself. I really didn't want to leave him yet.

But there was nowhere for us to go. Georgia was sleeping at the loft, and even though we had separate bedrooms there, I didn't want to disturb her. There was also the dilemma that Scott would expect sex if I invited him back. I just wanted to chat with him and pop the bottle of prosecco that waited in the fridge. Maybe make out with him. Just a little.

We stepped out into the balmy night, and I turned to face him. “Where are you going now?” I asked, fishing for an invitation to spend more time together. I didn't have to have sex with him. I didn't have to do anything I wasn't comfortable with, and I got a sense that he wasn't the type to try to talk me into something I didn't want to do. He'd proven as much when he'd respected my choice not to dance with him.

“Where are you going?” he countered.

I wasn't the only one who wanted to keep hanging out. I beamed up at him.

He stepped toward me and wrapped his arms around me, his big hands settling at my lower back as his hips pressed against mine. I drew in a shuddering breath, reveling in the first intimate contact I'd had in months.

His friend exited the bar, appearing at our side. Scott didn't let me go.

“You coming?” the man demanded.

“I'll see you later,” Scott dismissed him, only taking his eyes off me for the briefest moment. I loved the way he was so focused on me, so attentive. I felt beautiful and powerful. It was a heady sensation.

He surprised me with a kiss. I wasn't prepared, but lust instantly ignited in my belly when his lips touched mine and his hands firmed around my back, pulling me closer. I wrapped my arms around his neck, loving the feel of his hard body pressed against mine.

His lips were gentle, his tongue coaxing. A stray worry skittered across my mind. Had I forgotten how to kiss a man in my months of celibacy? And in the years of cold indifference from my husband before that?

I closed my eyes and pushed the worry away, focusing on him instead: the glide of his tongue against mine, his purely masculine scent that surrounded me.

When he finally pulled away, I knew I wanted to spend more time with him. Maybe even have sex with him. Maybe.

“Here’s the thing,” I murmured, teetering on the edge of a decision that I might regret. I swallowed and braced myself for the awkward admission. “I feel like you should know that I’m going through a divorce, and I haven’t... been with anyone.”

“Oh. That’s okay,” he reassured me.

I bit my lip. There was one other problem that I had to address: I couldn’t have vanilla sex. The lack of arousal made it extremely painful for me, and I wasn’t at all interested in that.

“And I’m into BDSM,” I said, shooting a nervous glance at the bouncer, who was far too close. My cheeks burned, but I had to say this. Alcohol helped loosen my tongue. “Is that something you might be interested in? Because if not...”

He leaned closer, so I could feel his warm breath fanning my face. “I’m sure we can work something out.”

I read that as a yes.

I desperately wanted it to be a yes. I craved the sweet release I’d find in giving up control to a Dominant partner. That reprieve from my anxiety and self-doubt was far more blissful than any orgasm.

“Okay,” I said quickly. “We can go back to my friend’s apartment, but we’ll have to be really quiet. She’s already asleep.”

He grinned. “Great. Lead the way.”

He took my hand in his, but he allowed me to guide him toward our destination.

“I write romance novels,” I blurted out, feeling the need to tell him something about myself before I had sex with him. “You didn’t ask, but that’s what I do.”

He squeezed my hand. “I love that,” he said, sounding strangely intense. His voice lowered, as though he was speaking more to himself than me. “That’s why I do what I do. So people like you can do things like write romance novels.”

I knew in that instant that Scott wasn’t in the lumber business. But I didn’t mind that he’d lied to me. I surmised that he was military, probably some division he wasn’t allowed to talk about. My dad’s best friend had served in Delta Force, so the secrecy was something I was familiar with.

We reached the corner where I needed to take a left to get back to Georgia’s place. The entire street was blocked off by construction equipment. A jackhammer started up, and I felt Scott tense at the sound.

PTSD. The pieces were falling to place in my mind, even though he'd barely said anything to indicate his real profession.

I held his hand more tightly and tugged him back in the direction we'd come from. Protectiveness surged through me. I didn't want him to feel any pain, and if the blasts of sound from the jackhammer were going to set off unpleasant memories for him, I wanted to quickly put distance between us and the equipment.

He began to relax within seconds of our retreat. I breathed a sigh of relief, pleased that his dark thoughts seemed to have been held at bay.

"You're not in the lumber business, are you." It wasn't a question.

"Why do you say that?"

"A few things you've said. Your time abroad, for one thing. You're military, aren't you?"

He was silent for a moment. "You're very intelligent."

"Not really." I certainly didn't feel very intelligent these days. Not after all the stupid mistakes I'd made.

"You really are," he countered, more firmly.

We rounded another corner, heading back to my apartment by a different route. I wasn't familiar with this street, but I knew we were headed in the right direction.

I was immediately grateful for Scott's presence at my side. We walked past half a dozen men who were sleeping rough on the pavement. They didn't make a move toward us, but I wouldn't have felt safe passing them on the dimly lit street by myself, especially not in my low-cut dress.

He pulled me closer. "Now I'm really glad I'm with you," he said in an undertone.

"Me too," I admitted.

When we reached our next turn, a voice sounded behind us.

"Hey!" the man called out. "I need to talk to you. I need—"

"No," Scott said firmly, releasing me to turn to face him. "Go away."

Unease flashed through my system, but I didn't need to worry. It only took a second for Scott to turn back to join me, the situation handled. He closed the distance between us, wrapping his arm around my waist again.

We didn't talk for the next three minutes that it took to reach the apartment, but I didn't mind. It was becoming obvious that Scott wasn't able to share much about his life with me, and I didn't feel like chattering at him. The silence was comfortable, almost intimate. The way his fingers curled

around my hip kept me focused on the desire coursing through me, so I wasn't caught up in nervousness over the lack of conversation. Companionable silence was a rare thing, and I marveled at how comfortable I felt with him, how connected. I felt like I could read him, even though he wasn't saying a word.

He needed this as badly as I did: connection, intimacy. For just one night, we needed to feel something good and pure. We weren't stumbling back to my place and tearing at each other's clothes in a drunken frenzy. This was more than a late-night hookup.

I already knew that I'd never see him again after tonight. We wouldn't exchange numbers and pretend we were going to call each other. His life wouldn't allow for that kind of communication. He lived in a world of secrets and solitude, and I wasn't looking to play games.

We reached the apartment, and I entered the code to unlock the door.

"That's not a very secure code," he commented, his tone heavy with disapproval.

I laughed, his protective instincts sending me flying high. For years, all I'd wanted was to feel protected and cherished. Even if only for one night, the illusion of a deeper connection was intoxicating.

This night was becoming strange and wonderful. The mystery he presented was intriguing. Sexy.

I didn't mind his initial lies about his job or his inability to share facts about his life with me. After the way he'd told me so seriously that he wanted to dance with me, and the way he'd tensed at the banging of the jackhammer, I just wanted to hold him. I wanted to give him something special that he could remember on long, lonely nights.

At least, that was the romantic fantasy I conjured in my head. I couldn't help myself; I was a romance novelist, after all.

We arrived at the apartment, and I fumbled at the lock. Nervousness made my fingers tremble, but I wasn't scared of him. I was apprehensive over what I was about to do. Could I put my heart at risk and have a one-night stand? Would I be an emotional mess in the morning, left alone and cold in a strange bed?

He touched the small of my back, the steady heat of his hand calming me.

I took a breath and tried the lock again. This time, the door opened.

"We have to be really quiet," I whispered. I didn't want to disturb Georgia. I wasn't sure how she'd react to me bringing a strange man to her

place at nearly three AM.

He nodded, saying nothing. I appreciated his silence as we walked down the corridor past my friend's bedroom. I breathed a little easier once we got into my room and I shut the door. I knew there was pretty good sound privacy in this apartment, so Scott and I could talk at a more normal volume.

That didn't mean I intended to cry out when he spanked me or brought me to orgasm.

Were either of those things on the table? Had he only vaguely answered my proposition about BDSM to get me into bed with him?

I hoped not.

I needed a moment to collect myself, to soberly consider my actions. I excused myself as I slipped past him into the privacy of the bathroom.

I took a moment to check my appearance in the mirror.

Shit.

My brown hair was still sleek and shiny around my face, but my mascara had creased under my blue eyes a little, and my naturally pink cheeks had even more color than usual.

I supposed a night of drinking hadn't done my appearance any favors. I hoped Scott wouldn't be disappointed now that he could see me under brighter lights.

I hastily wiped away the mascara beneath my eyes. It was all I could do, and I'd just have to face him with ruddy cheeks.

After a moment's consideration, I chose to remove my panties. They weren't my sexiest lingerie, and I definitely wanted to appear sexy.

When I returned to the bedroom, Scott was seated on the edge of the bed. He'd already stripped down to his boxer briefs. I paused, staring at him in awe for a few seconds.

For five years, I'd written books about hard-bodied men, and I'd wondered what it would be like to have sex with a muscular man.

It looked like I was about to find out. Scott wasn't bulky, but he didn't appear to have an ounce of body fat. He was lean. Chiseled. Probably lethal.

But the way he watched me, his eyes darkening with uncertainty, made a sense of safety settle over me, even though I knew he could most likely be a very dangerous man under other circumstances.

I closed the distance between us without another thought, craving to erase the worry from his brow. In that moment, my lingering nervousness evaporated, my decision made. I was going to have sex with Scott, and I

wasn't going to regret it.

I straddled his thigh, letting him feel my bare pussy against his skin. I wasn't wet yet, but my body was heating for him.

I reached behind me and unzipped my dress before pulling it over my head. I straightened my spine and arched my back slightly, so my breasts stood out. His gaze dropped to my chest, and I glowed at his obvious appreciation. I'd put on a few extra pounds in my depression over the last couple years, but the way he regarded me with open hunger filled me with confidence and gratitude.

I didn't usually enjoy initiating intimate contact—I didn't like being in control when it came to sex—but I felt powerful enough that I was emboldened to lean forward and kiss him. His tongue traced my lower lip, and I opened for him, allowing him to claim my mouth.

He gripped my hips and rolled, positioning me beneath him on the bed. A light shiver raced over my skin. This was what I needed: to be overpowered and fucked hard. The only way it wouldn't hurt was if he was savage with me, unrelenting. Anything soft and sweet would leave me cold and cause me pain when he penetrated me.

"Tell me what you want," he murmured.

I licked my lips, my cheeks heating with a touch of embarrassment. "Well, I told you about the BDSM thing. I like to be spanked. Have my hair pulled. Be held down."

His eyes softened, the sadness I'd sensed in him rising again. "I don't think I can be that way with you. If anything, it would be safer if you tied me up."

The heavy way he said the words, the way his voice dropped, made me realize he wasn't just making a kinky request. He couldn't trust himself to get aggressive with me. He'd feel safer if I restrained him, so he couldn't accidentally hurt me. Or maybe he'd hurt enough people that he couldn't separate his violent life from sexual aggression, and the thought caused him anguish.

I could see his pain in the lines around his eyes. Drawn to comfort him, I wrapped my arms around him, holding him close. I'd invited him back with me because I'd needed to be held, but his needs surpassed my own. My personal struggles seemed so small compared to what he must be dealing with.

"Things must be pretty hard in Minnesota," I said softly, staring up into

his aquamarine eyes. I wanted him to know I wasn't talking about Minnesota. I was respecting his secrets, his boundaries. But I needed him to understand that I was here for him. I would hold him, and I wouldn't let go.

For this one night, at least.

"Yeah," he said roughly. "They can be." He trailed his fingers through my hair, studying me intently. "Never change," he murmured. "When you walked into that bar by yourself, you ordered your beer, and your shoulders dropped back. You were totally relaxed. You felt safe. That's why I do the things I do. So people like you can feel safe in the world."

I didn't tell him that I hadn't been relaxed at all. I didn't say that my casual posture had been a carefully crafted lie to conceal my loneliness and desperation. That wasn't what he needed to hear right now.

"Thank you," I said instead. "I can't begin to imagine what you must have to do, but thank you."

"I love that you write romance novels," he said earnestly. "I have a lot of time to read while I'm traveling. I want to read everything you've ever written."

I squirmed beneath him, discomfiture nipping at me again. "You'll think they're silly. I mean, the suspense elements. They're not super realistic. And I know you... Well, you know more than that."

He smiled, and he didn't refute what I'd said. "I still want to read them."

"My pen name is Lauren Krane," I blurted out, my whole body burning with embarrassment. "But if you don't like my books, please don't tell me."

He chuckled. "If I like them, I'm going to review all of them. If you see a review by Melissa from Minnesota, that's me."

I laughed at the ridiculous proposition. "You really will think they're silly, though. My dad's best friend is always telling me that he'll give me real information on how the FBI works, but I'm too embarrassed to talk to him about it. He used to be in Delta Force, and he ran a private security firm after that."

Scott was silent for a moment, but he kept me locked in his intense blue gaze.

"I was in Delta Force," he finally said.

He didn't say anything else.

I put a few more pieces together in my mind. He used to be in Delta Force. But he probably still operated covertly, his life so secretive that he had to tell lies to women he met in bars. His age also made me wonder just how

deeply he was involved in special ops. He could have retired by now, but he hadn't. He'd chosen to stay in that life, even though it clearly haunted him.

"Thank you," I said again, trailing my fingernails down his back. He seemed to understand what I was saying, even though I was communicating more with my touch than my words.

He leaned in and kissed me again, his tongue gentle against mine. This wasn't the rough sex I'd craved, but I wouldn't deny him this moment, this comfort. He might not be kinky, but something about him tugged at my soul. I couldn't bring myself to break this connection with him. It was bittersweet and intense. I wanted to stay swept up in the moment, to fill my being with the empathy I felt for him.

Empathy felt akin to love, and the illusion of intimacy made my heart expand in my chest.

His mouth left mine, and his lips skimmed down my neck before trailing soft kisses between my breasts.

"Wait," I ordered, my tone sharp with sudden nervousness. I knew where he was headed, and I didn't want that. Not only was I deeply self-conscious about a man going down on me, but I knew I couldn't return the favor. My trauma when it came to oral sex ran deep, lurking in a dark corner of my mind that I chose to suppress. I wouldn't ruin this night with a panic attack.

"I don't want you to do that," I told him.

"But I want to," he said fervently.

"Please. Please, don't."

His expression softened, and he paused at my breasts. "What's wrong?"

I licked my lips, suddenly nervous. "Well, I can't return the favor," I admitted. "I...just can't." I didn't want to tell him about my traumatic past. I'd barely faced it myself. I just knew I'd crumble into a sobbing mess if he put his dick in my mouth.

He gave me a small, reassuring smile. "That's okay. I want to do this."

"I don't like it," I whispered. I'd never attained much pleasure from a man going down on me. I wasn't sure if it was because of my personal insecurities about my appearance and taste, or if it was because of the guilt that plagued me over the fact that I couldn't reciprocate oral sex. Probably both. I didn't like to think about it, so I usually refused the offer.

The same earnest light I'd glimpsed when he'd asked me to dance illuminated his pale eyes. "It would mean a lot to me," he said, mirroring the words he'd spoken in the bar.

“I’m sorry. Please,” I begged him to relent. Things were becoming strained between us, and I didn’t want the intense, intimate connection I shared with him to be severed.

“Okay,” he conceded, his tone soothing.

He kept me locked in his gaze as he lowered his mouth to my breast.

All thoughts of embarrassment or protest left my head when his tongue flicked over my hardened nipple. I’d always been sensitive, and no one had touched me like this in a long time. Pleasure rushed straight from the tight bud to my clit, making it pulse. This wasn’t remotely kinky, but Scott’s strong, hard body pinning me down as he licked and nipped at my breasts made lust bloom low in my belly. My fingers speared into his hair, holding him closer as his teeth grazed my nipple. I gasped and arched up into him. My sex grew wet, my body preparing for more of his erotic onslaught.

“I need to taste you,” he murmured against my skin as he began to kiss his way down my stomach.

My breath caught. Now, that was something straight out of a romance novel. How could I deny a man who told me he *needed* to taste my pussy?

I gave him a small nod, granting him my consent. This scenario wasn’t what I’d had in mind when I’d mentioned BDSM to him in the street, but the sure touches of his big hands on my thighs and soft brush of his lips over my skin made my core heat. I’d never been turned on by such a vanilla encounter, but Scott was different. Earnest. Intense.

And he’d said he needed to taste me.

His fingers curved into my thighs, spreading me wide for him as his head dipped toward my wet and waiting sex. Anxiety gripped me, making me stiff in his hold.

He peered up at me, his face hovering just above my most vulnerable area. His thumbs stroked little circular patterns over my skin. “Relax.”

“I don’t usually do this,” I said, my stomach dancing with nerves.

He pressed a kiss against my clit, and I sucked in a small gasp at the whisper-soft contact to the sensitive nub.

“Thank you for trusting me,” he said, his pale eyes spearing me in place as effectively as his firm hold on my thighs. He licked my slit in a long, slow glide of his tongue. “You taste so good.”

I drew in a shuddering breath. I’d never experienced anything like this. The way he was talking about how my pussy tasted should be dirty, but he watched me so intently, his beautiful eyes alight with genuine pleasure.

Something tugged in my chest, a deeper satisfaction than the erotic sensation of his hot mouth against me. I felt beautiful and powerful, as though I were a goddess he was worshipping with his body. But at the same time, I'd made myself vulnerable to him, and his strong hands on my legs reminded me just how much more powerful he was.

He released one of my thighs so he could press his forefinger inside me. I gasped as he slowly penetrated me, stretching me after long months of emptiness. His touch was firm, assured. He crooked his finger, finding the sensitive spot at the front of my inner walls as though we'd done this dozens of times.

My sex opened for him, responding to his confident touch. He might not be spanking me or ordering me around, but the way he handled my body—touching me as though he had every right—made me shudder with desire.

A second finger slipped into me, stretching me farther. I anticipated discomfort at the added intrusion, but he sucked on my clit and rubbed my g-spot again.

“Oh, god.”

My thighs quivered. Actually quivered. It wasn't the first time I'd experienced the sensation, but it had never happened with a man's mouth on me before.

He paused to look up at me, transfixing me with his steady stare.

“Put your hands behind your head,” he ordered.

I almost groaned as lust rolled over me. This kind of kink-lite usually wouldn't do anything for me, but my pussy clenched around his fingers as I obeyed, lacing my fingers together behind my head. Scott might not be able to bring himself to pin me down, but he'd found a way to restrain me with no more than a calm command and a possessive hold on my most intimate area.

His touch turned rougher when his mouth returned to my flesh. His tongue was firm against my clit, his fingers almost too demanding as he rubbed my g-spot. He didn't pump in and out of me. Instead, he focused his attention on the special spot that would make me come apart.

Pleasure built low in my belly, coiling within me. My thighs started to shake in earnest, my toes and fingers tingling. I bit back an ecstatic cry as my orgasm rippled through me. I lifted my hips as his touch turned harsher, demanding I give him more of my pleasure. Part of my mind marveled that there was no pain. I was wet, my pussy pulsing around his fingers as I came.

When the last aftershocks of my orgasm subsided, he slid his fingers out

of me and licked at the wetness at my core. I moaned at the decadent sensation.

“You taste so good,” he told me again.

Usually, I wouldn’t really believe such an assertion. But his rumbling tone and the cocky half-smile on his lips made it impossible to doubt him.

“Thank you,” I panted, not really sure how to respond when I was boneless beneath him, my body humming and my mind mercifully quiet for a moment.

He sat back on his heels, grinning down at me. “My pleasure.”

For the first time, I was emboldened enough to glance down at his thick erection, which was straining against his boxer briefs. I swallowed and met his gaze again. Scott was big. Probably too big for me.

But I still ached for more, even after my orgasm. He’d primed my body to be filled, and I wanted him.

“Do you have a condom?” I asked, temptation dripping from the question. Scott certainly made me feel like a temptress; a sensual siren he couldn’t resist. The way he was watching me with such open hunger, his mouth still glistening from my arousal, sent me flying high.

His lips curved with pleasure, and he nodded. He left me briefly to retrieve the condom from his pants, where he’d abandoned them beside the bed. He also stripped off his boxer briefs, and when he resumed his position between my thighs, I got my first look at his cock.

My eyes flew wide. I’d been wrong. Scott wasn’t big. He was *huge*.

“This is going to sound like I wrote it in one of my romance novels,” I babbled, “but that’s not going to fit.”

Did I just say that out loud?

“I mean, that doesn’t even sound like something people say in real life,” I continued on, nerves making the words spill out of me. “But yeah. That won’t fit.”

One corner of his mouth tugged up in a self-assured smile as he tore open the condom wrapper and sheathed himself.

“It’ll fit. Trust me.”

There it was again: *trust me*.

I’d only known Scott for a couple hours, but the pull I felt toward him went soul-deep. We both needed this: to feel cherished, to be held.

I nodded. I did trust him. He was almost a stranger to me, but I trusted him.

He gripped the base of his shaft and shifted forward, guiding his cockhead to my slick, swollen entrance. When the tip had barely penetrated me, he lowered his body atop mine slowly, pushing his cock into me with aching care.

I gasped and opened my legs wider for him, my knees falling to either side as I rocked my hips up to accommodate him. To my amazement, he entered me in one steady, controlled slide, my body perfectly prepared to accept him.

Pleasure suffused my system, and I grabbed at his shoulders, my fingernails sinking into his flesh.

“Oh my god,” I breathed. “I’ve never felt... I can’t believe you’re inside me.”

I was full, stretched around his enormous cock. But my body had welcomed him. There was no pain, just toe-curling pleasure.

Emboldened, I wrapped my legs around his waist and pulled him impossibly deeper. We both groaned, and my eyes nearly fluttered closed as ecstasy washed through me. I forced them open. I didn’t want to miss a second of this time I was sharing with Scott. I stared up at him, captured in his gorgeous blue gaze.

He closed the small distance between us, his mouth crashing down on mine as he withdrew slightly and pumped back into me, letting me feel him inside me. His tongue coaxed mine, as tender and careful as his cock penetrated my pussy.

I wrapped my arms around him and pulled him closer, opening for him and accepting him completely. Something swelled in my chest as I gave him so much more than just my body. The kiss tasted like my essence, but I wasn’t bothered by the flavor. Scott had reveled in it, so why should I find it unpleasant? I slid my tongue against his as he began to move within me, thrusting into my pussy with longer, rougher strokes.

I met each of his thrusts, my heels digging into his sculpted ass to draw him deeper, welcoming him to claim me. I panted into his mouth, exchanging breaths with him as both our bodies became slick with sweat. Pleasure built within me, my second orgasm cresting as his cockhead dragged across my g-spot. He caught my cry on his lips as I came apart, my pussy squeezing him as my legs locked around his waist, demanding he give me more. He drove in harder, giving me the rougher treatment I craved. Our kiss turned more frenzied as bliss pulsed through me, and I mindlessly met his thrusts with

wanton abandon.

I was still tingling with pleasure when he slid out of me and gripped my hips. Anticipating a new position, I rolled and started to get on my hands and knees, assuming he wanted doggy-style.

“No.” His hands firmed around my hips, pressing me down against the mattress so I laid on my stomach.

“What are you doing?” I asked, some of my awkwardness returning. I didn’t like that he wasn’t inside me, and I wasn’t certain what he wanted.

“Haven’t you tried this position?” he asked, rolling me and lifting my leg as he slid back into me.

I was on my front, my hips tilted slightly to the side to accommodate him. He filled me, hard and deep.

“I didn’t even know this was a position,” I marveled breathily.

Apparently, there were a lot more possibilities open when a man was as well-endowed as Scott.

He took me, long and slow. I felt pinned down, and there was little I could do to move against him in this position. It made me feel small and vulnerable, and I reveled in it, gasping against the pillow as he plunged in deep. I wasn’t going to come again, but pleasure suffused me.

Scott grunted and stiffened, driving deep before withdrawing suddenly. I hated the abrupt emptiness, but I appreciated that he’d pulled out as an extra precaution.

He dropped a kiss on my shoulder.

“I’ll be right back,” he promised before disappearing into the bathroom to clean up.

I rolled onto my back, stretching and smiling to myself. I’d just experienced the best sex of my life, and it had been almost completely vanilla. It was strange and wonderful. I’d never shared such intense chemistry with a man, and gratitude swelled in my heart.

Scott returned, climbing onto the mattress beside me. I cuddled close to him, tucking my face against his chest.

He pulled back slightly. “No.”

I blinked up at him, confused and a little upset that he didn’t want to snuggle with me.

“I want to see your face,” he said, immediately allaying my discomfiture. “Your eyes are so beautiful.”

I flushed at the compliment and trailed my fingernails down his back,

scratching lightly. "You have beautiful eyes, too."

The fine lines that aged his face deepened, his expression tightening with anguish. "Do I?" he whispered. "What color are they?"

"Blue," I told him, puzzled by his question. "Right?" I was suddenly uncertain, even though the evidence was literally staring down at me.

"I don't know. Sometimes, I forget. Sometimes, I think I don't have eyes. I don't think I even have a face." The words were soft, haunted. I wasn't certain if he knew he was speaking them aloud.

My heart ached for him as I realized he couldn't bear to look at himself in the mirror. Whatever violence he committed in his dangerous world, he'd done things that had scarred him deeply. His body was close to flawless, with only one small physical scar visible on his jaw. But Scott had wounds that went so much deeper than his flesh.

"You're a good man," I told him, my voice soft but firm.

"Am I?" he asked, strained.

I stroked his back. "Yes. I believe most people are inherently good, and I can tell you are."

His lips thinned. "I'd like to believe that, but not everyone is good."

Something dark stirred within me, too. "No," I agreed, remembering the terrible things my ex had done to me while claiming he loved me. "Some people aren't good."

Scott shook his head, as though to physically shake off bad thoughts. "Now you're talking about bad guys. Those are the guys I deal with. I don't want to talk about that right now."

"I'm sorry." I didn't know what else to say. I held him closer, my arms tightening around him as I buried my face in the crook of his neck.

He leaned back again. "No. Let me look at you. I want to remember this."

My chest tightened, but I swallowed my grief for him. I met his intense gaze and resumed stroking his back.

"Thank you," I said. "Whatever it is you do, thank you. I know it must be hard."

His jaw firmed, but his hand was gentle as he stroked my hair. "Never change," he said, a low, almost reverent command. "I do the things I do so people like you can be safe and live the lives they want. Tonight, you were so relaxed when I first saw you at the bar. And when I went down on you, you decided to trust me. Never lose that ability to trust. Thank you for that."

A lump formed in my throat, my heart twisting in my chest. Scott carried

the weight of the world on his shoulders, and I hated his pain.

I simply nodded, unable to find words heavy enough to express my feelings, my gratitude for his service and for the incredible gift he was giving me. Because he was trusting me, too. He hadn't told me anything about his life, but I knew parts of his soul he probably didn't often share with anyone. Maybe not even with himself.

He shifted, moving down between my thighs.

"Again?" I asked in awe.

"I love the way you taste," he rumbled.

His clever tongue touched my clit, and I was lost. He licked me to a third orgasm, one that left me trembling and limp against the mattress.

"Wow," I panted when he settled beside me, a cocky smile on his lips.

"Yeah," he agreed. "Three orgasms." Pride radiated from him, and I marveled at the fact that he seemed to find more pleasure in giving me ecstasy than he'd found in fucking me.

"Thank you." I'd been saying the words all night, but what more could I offer the man who'd just shattered me three times in the space of a few hours?

He pressed a kiss against my forehead. "I have to go," he said, his voice heavy with regret.

"Stay," I begged, even though I knew he couldn't. I'd already kept him for far too long.

"I can't. I'm sorry."

"I understand." I really did. I didn't want to make him feel guilty for leaving after sex. This had been so much more than a one-night stand; he wasn't using my body for his own pleasure and leaving in a rush.

"It's probably late enough—or early enough—to get coffee, if you want," I offered, craving a little more time with him.

He shook his head. "I really can't. I wish I could. This time tomorrow, my coffee will probably have sand in it." His lips twisted around the words, and my chest ached.

He must be going back to his dangerous job, to a dangerous place. What terrible things might he have to do? Would he add another scar to his soul, another dark memory that would haunt him?

"I really do wish you could stay," I said softly, to comfort him rather than guilt him. "This has been amazing."

He smiled and stood, leaving me alone on the bed as he began to pull on

his clothes.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “Man, I’m glad I kissed you outside the bar.”

I grinned. “Me, too.”

I started to push up off the bed when he was fully dressed. “I’ll walk you out.”

His big hand settled on my shoulder, pressing me back down into the mattress. “No. Stay. I want to remember you like this.”

He pulled the covers up to my chin and tucked me in before brushing a kiss over my forehead. I felt precious, cherished. I hated that he was leaving, but I settled into the bittersweet perfection of the moment.

“Thanks,” I whispered.

“Goodbye,” he murmured.

He straightened and walked away, disappearing through the bedroom door in three long strides. I heard the apartment door close and lock automatically behind him.

I let out a soft sigh of regret, but a satisfied smile lingered around my lips. I was suddenly glad that I hadn’t killed myself last month, when loneliness and despair had engulfed me. Scott would never know it, but he helped save my life.

WOUNDED HEARTS

CHAPTER 1

Ten Months Later

When I first got married, I never understood how people who had once been madly in love could grow to hate one another. I understood now.

Ugly, toxic resentment swelled in my chest, mingling with yearning as I stared out through the ballroom window, surveying the gorgeous city of York. The massive Minster shined gold in the morning light, a gleaming beacon at the heart of town. Tendrils of fog clung to the surface of the River Ouse, protected from the sun by a thick layer of gray English clouds. Despite the general gloom, cheery yellow daffodils brightened the March day, lining the vibrant green, grassy banks of the ancient city walls. It was one of my favorite views in the entire world.

“Is something wrong?” Lizzy’s voice jolted me out of my reverie.

I swallowed my turbulent emotions and blinked back the slight burn of tears.

Yes, I wanted to say. *Everything is wrong. My whole life is wrong.*

But Lizzy already knew how I felt. I might occasionally confess my deepest pains with a shrug and a dismissive wave, but my friend had known me long enough to tell when I was hurting.

“I’m fine,” I lied to both of us.

“Are you sure?” Her big hazel eyes regarded me carefully, her dark lashes lifting to her blonde brows as she studied me.

“Positive,” I said with a huge grin. I’d never been a good liar, but I’d

become well-practiced at putting on a brave face.

“Okay,” she allowed with a slight shake of her head, making her platinum hair sway around her pale, delicate features. She wasn’t buying the lie, but we had work to do. “Let’s get you set up.”

I suppressed a sigh and turned away from the breathtaking view of the city provided by the huge windows that lined the ballroom of The Grand Hotel. Dozens of other women bustled around the opulent space, straightening tablecloths and setting up banners with their author names emblazoned upon them.

The book signing would start in just under an hour, and I’d wasted too much time staring glumly out at the city. Lizzy hurried me over to my table, and we started pulling my books out of boxes.

“I loved this one,” Lizzy said, her bright enthusiasm clearly meant to perk me up. She gestured with a copy of one of my darkest titles before propping it on a stand in the center of the table.

I gave her a wry smile. Lizzy’s love of the darker side of BDSM was no secret. Well, it wasn’t a secret when it came to her kinky circle of friends.

“Of course you did,” I teased, but I flushed with familiar embarrassment. Even after six years as an author, I still had a hard time taking a compliment.

More recently, I was also having a hard time coming to terms with the fact that the darker concepts had come from my own brain. My therapist had suggested that I wrote abusive relationships with a happily-ever-after because I’d hoped for a positive outcome to my own abusive relationship.

I’d just thought the Stockholm Syndrome content was a reflection of my love for *Beauty and the Beast*.

Turns out, not all beasts have a secret heart of gold once they learn to love. Not in the real world, at least.

After that disturbing revelation, I’d struggled to write anything. And what I had released had been light and fluffy in comparison. I couldn’t face the dark, so I’d turned to sweeter love stories.

I suppressed a grimace as I pulled one of the lighter books out of the box: a mafia ménage that had initially been conceived as a dark romance. What had come out on the page was a desperate fantasy of a loving relationship, where my heroine was worthy of being cherished and protected by not only one, but two men.

I realized I’d been setting up my table on auto-pilot, rudely ignoring Lizzy. My thoughts were tangled up now that I was back in York. I’d shared

a home with my husband here. I'd thought I'd live here for the rest of my life. I couldn't help falling prey to darker thoughts when I knew he was nearby. I struggled with the fact that I was on the same continent with him, not to mention the same city.

I have every right to be here, I told myself. I'm not going to live my life in fear of Thomas. This is my city.

He'd never wanted to live here, anyway; yet another reason he'd claimed I was the source of his depression and therefore his inability to treat me well. It was my fault we lived in a city he hated. My fault that he was cruel to me. My fault that he couldn't find fulfillment in his life.

"I know something's bothering you," Lizzy told me. "Are you nervous about the signing?"

I fiddled with my fingernails, my signature anxious habit. "A little," I hedged.

"And?" she prompted for more, her hazel eyes meeting mine in a silent demand for honesty.

I blew out a breath. "I'm nervous about seeing Thomas. What if he shows up today?"

My pen name was no secret, and it wouldn't be hard for him to track my signing schedule online, even if I had blocked him on social media. He could be aware that I was in York, and he'd know exactly where to find me today.

Lizzy reached for my wringing hands, giving them a reassuring squeeze. "Then I'll be here to tell him to fuck off."

I offered her a weak smile. "Thanks." I appreciated her loyalty, but even her fierce, protective presence wouldn't shield me from the emotional consequences if Thomas decided to show up.

"You haven't bumped into him in town, have you?" she asked. "It's a small city. You're bound to run into him."

"I haven't seen him yet. I hope I don't, but I know that's wishful thinking." York was primarily a pedestrian city, with most of the shops and pubs concentrated within the city walls. I could walk from one side of town to the other in fifteen minutes.

I straightened my spine. "But whatever," I said with flippancy I didn't feel. "I'm not going to spend my life hiding from him. I'm not going to stay away from York because of him."

Lizzy nodded her approval. "Good. We want you here. Do you know anything new about the visa situation?"

My chest tightened. I wanted to live in York more than anything. Over the last decade, I'd come to identify the city as my home, but I wasn't able to settle here without the proper paperwork.

Getting a visa to live in England was next to impossible in my situation. My only feasible avenues were to quit writing and take another job that would sponsor me, or I could get married again.

I wasn't interested in getting married again. Ever. I didn't believe in soul mates, and I wasn't even sure if I believed in spending a lifetime with one partner. The likelihood of finding that kind of romantic match seemed impossible.

It was the primary reason I'd been struggling to write lately: I no longer believed in happily ever after. Most days, it was hard enough forcing myself to get out of bed, much less hit my word count.

"Nothing good on the visa front," I replied, trying to sound like my heart wasn't breaking at the admission. "But I'll figure it out. Maybe the laws will change soon."

"I hope so," Lizzy said, but her tone told me she doubted it.

"Five minutes until we open the doors!" the organizer called out, shouting so all the women in the ballroom could hear.

Butterflies danced in my belly as nervous excitement began to override my tumultuous thoughts. In a few minutes, I'd be greeting readers and gushing about our mutual love of all things romance. I truly loved this community and the wonderful women who lifted each other up every day. I owed many of them my sanity. They might not realize how much they'd helped me get through the tough times, but I was immensely grateful for their presence in my life.

"There," Lizzy declared as she finished erecting my banner. "I think we're all set."

I straightened the stack of black and red faux-leather paddles I'd fanned out on the table beside my books. As far as swag went, I was pleased with how they'd turned out. I hoped readers would come by my table and give their friends a little playful smack or two. Gleeful giggling and the sound of sisterhood made me happy. Not to mention the prospect of people embracing and normalizing BDSM. I might be out and proud, but most of my kinky friends had to hide their lifestyle so they didn't face personal or professional ramifications.

"Thanks," I gave Lizzy my first real smile of the morning. "I really

appreciate you being here to help me.”

“Of course. I’m going to sell so many of your fabulous books.”

I blushed. “You don’t have to do that. I just need you here to hold my hand under the table when I get anxious.”

“I know I don’t have to do it, but I’m going to,” she declared. “Your books are awesome, and everyone needs to read them.”

My heart swelled with gratitude. I hated that I couldn’t live in the same city as Lizzy. Usually, an ocean separated us.

I gave her a quick hug and thanked her again before we took our seats behind my table.

“Here. Have some coffee. You’re going to do great.” Lizzy handed me my signature Starbucks cold brew, and I took a long draw of the mocha-flavored beverage. I could use the caffeine to get me through the day.

The doors opened, and a chorus of cheers emanated throughout the ballroom as women began to flood inside.

No. They weren’t all women.

My heart stuttered. I blinked hard.

It couldn’t be him. I had to be mistaken.

Because there was no way Scott was striding into the room, at the very front of the crowd. I’d tried so hard to remember every detail of my gorgeous, tortured mystery man’s appearance. My memory didn’t come close to reality.

He paused inside the threshold, his pale eyes searching the room. His gaze landed on me.

I forgot how to breathe. The man who had embedded himself in my memories was closing the distance between us. I’d thought about him so often over the last ten months, wondering if he was even alive. I’d thought about him late at night, alone in my bed with my vibrator.

I hadn’t been with anyone else since our one-night stand in Nashville. I’d told myself I was just avoiding boring vanilla partners, but really, no one had measured up to Scott. No one had come close to the intoxicating connection I’d shared with him.

Excitement should have shot through my system, but my hands trembled with anxiety instead. He wasn’t smiling at me as he advanced, purpose in every sure step. His expression was blank, unreadable. His granite jaw was even sharper than I remembered, and his aquamarine eyes pierced the space, pinning me in place.

I shrank back in my chair, intimidated.

What was he doing here? Had he followed through on his promise to read my work? Had I somehow offended him with my more outlandish suspense plots or the darker elements of the sexual scenes in my books?

And even if that were the case, why would he be here, in York of all places?

His face gave nothing away: not a hint of a smile, nor a grimace.

Too soon, he was standing in front of my table, towering over me. How had I forgotten how tall he was? I felt small and vulnerable in his shadow. Nothing could have prepared me for this, and my wits deserted me. My mind was uncharacteristically blank, numbed by shock.

“Addison.” He said my real name in that deep, rumbling voice. It made me recall other, dirtier words rumbling over my thighs as his face hovered near my pussy.

“Scott,” I managed to gasp, sucking in oxygen for the first time since he’d entered the room.

“I’m sorry,” Lizzy said in a hard tone that held no contrition. “How do you know Addison?” My friend grabbed my hand beneath the table.

“We met in Nashville,” he said in a monotone. He didn’t take his eyes off me.

My belly quivered, and my core heated. I couldn’t read him at all, but my body reacted to his nearness, despite my trepidation.

“What are you doing here?” I asked on a puff of air. It was difficult to breathe normally when he was staring down at me.

“I came for a book.”

“What?” Was this some bizarre dream? Maybe I was still asleep, and the signing hadn’t started yet.

For the first time, his lips twitched, tugging up at the corners. “I told you I would read them. I want a signed copy.”

“But you’re in England,” I said, somewhat stupidly. I couldn’t wrap my mind around the fact that he was here.

He nodded. “I’m here for business.”

Business. I knew what he meant. I’d asked my dad’s friend about Delta Force after meeting Scott. He’d told me that sometimes operators trained with the British S.A.S. I supposed it wasn’t completely out of the realm of possibility that Scott really was here for his work.

But why was he *here*? There was no way he’d been stationed near York.

“But how did you end up in York?” I pressed, completely out of sorts.

He flashed his brilliant white smile, and I could have melted into a puddle under the table.

“I came on the train,” he said, a teasing lilt to his tone. He reached out with his big hand, his long fingers tracing the spine of one of my books. I shivered as I remembered those fingers inside me, penetrating deep and stretching me for his cock.

“I want this one,” he declared, picking up a copy of my *ménage* title.

Now, I definitely wished I were under the table. It seemed like a good place to hide for the rest of my life. Mortification made my cheeks burn. This was one of the filthiest books I’d written. Had he really read it?

The glint in his eye and the curve of his lips told me he knew the contents of the book.

Oh, god. I kept the horrified groan locked in my chest.

“Will you sign it?” he prompted when I didn’t move a muscle.

I realized I was staring at him in shocked silence. My entire body seemed to have locked up, my brain stalling.

“Of course she will,” Lizzy said breezily. “It’s twelve pounds.”

“No, it’s not,” I said quickly. I couldn’t take Scott’s money. I couldn’t let him buy the book. Even if he had already read it, handing him the physical copy would be more humiliating than I could bear.

“Yes, it is,” Lizzy insisted. “You’re not here to give away books for free.” She spoke with asperity that was clearly directed at Scott. She didn’t understand what was going on, but my protective friend wasn’t going to sit there and let a man intimidate me.

Scott reached into his pocket with his free hand and pulled out the notes and coins to pay. Lizzy took the money from him, but I still didn’t make a move to sign the book. I couldn’t even look at him anymore. My eyes dropped to the paddles on my table, and my mortification increased tenfold. How was this happening?

“You can make it out to Melissa from Minnesota.”

I peeked up at him. I didn’t detect any mockery in his stunning eyes. Instead, I sensed...

Yearning? That couldn’t be right.

But there was some deeper emotion tightening the fine lines around his eyes. Memory stirred, and I recalled the pain that had filled his blue gaze as I held him all those months ago, our naked bodies entwined.

Drawn to ease the strain from his brow, I reached for the book. My fingertips brushed his, and I shivered at the electric contact. Our connection was even more visceral than I remembered. Or maybe it had intensified because I'd fantasized about his touch so often on long, lonely nights as I traveled the world alone.

We both froze, staring at one another as we held the book together.

"Here's your pen," Lizzy prompted, her voice a little softer as she addressed me.

Suddenly, my gold Sharpie was in my hand. I jolted out of my reverie and yanked the book away from Scott as though he'd burned me.

My hand shook slightly as I made the dedication out to Melissa from Minnesota, my trembling ruining my usually elegant cursive. My signature was a squiggly mess.

I was a mess.

I closed the book and shoved it across the table, not daring to make contact with Scott again. Nervously, I tucked my hair behind my ear.

"Thank you." The earnestness in his tone brought back more memories.

Thank you for trusting me.

That night had been burned into my brain, haunting me for months. So many times, I'd wondered what Scott was doing, hoping he was even alive.

And now here he was, standing in front of me at a book signing in York, England. It was all too surreal.

"You really came all the way here for a signed book?" I asked, incredulous.

His pale gaze burned into me, blue flames flickering in the depths of his eyes. "No. I came here to see you."

My mouth went dry, and I realized my jaw had dropped. I closed it with an audible snap of my teeth.

"Oh," I said, struck dumb.

He smiled again, and the sight of his levity knocked all the air from my chest. After the intensity of his declaration, his pleasure sent my mind reeling. My emotions were tangled, my stomach in knots.

"Have dinner with me tonight?"

"What?"

Was he really asking me on a date? I could hardly accept the reality that he was here, let alone think about going out to dinner with him.

"Okay." The agreement tumbled out of me. "I have my signing all

afternoon, but I'm free after that."

He beamed at me. "Great. Where do you want to go? I'm not that familiar with York."

I scrambled to come up with a worthy suggestion. "Do you like Indian food? Akbars is great."

"If you like it, then I'm happy to go there."

How had I forgotten how swoon-worthy he was when he smiled? How had I forgotten how heady it felt to have him regarding me so intently, like I was the only woman in the world?

"Addison," Lizzy said in an undertone. "You're getting a line."

I blinked and managed to tear my eyes away from Scott. To my amazement, there actually were several women waiting behind him. Although, they seemed far more interested in checking out his ass than looking at my books.

He was facing me, so I couldn't admire that perfect ass. But that meant my gaze fell directly on his crotch. My mouth watered as I remembered the thick cock that was confined by those jeans.

"I'll see you tonight, then."

My gaze snapped back to his to find his eyes glimmering with amusement. My cheeks flamed impossibly hotter.

"Okay," I practically squeaked. "I'll meet you at seven?"

He beamed at me, and my heart did a funny flip. "It's a date."

He picked up the book he'd purchased and turned away from me. I couldn't help staring at his ass as he strode away.

Lizzy poked my leg hard. "You're going to have to explain that to me later," she muttered. "But for now, you have some fans to greet."

"*Readers*," I corrected her automatically. I felt like such a diva if I referred to people as *fans*.

"Right," she said with a dismissive wave. She turned her attention to the first woman in line, who was still watching Scott walk away. "Hi, how are you?"

The woman jolted to attention at Lizzy's greeting. I managed to plaster on a smile and start chatting about romance novels. I wasn't at all certain how I'd make it through the signing with my wits intact. With each passing minute, I got closer to seeing Scott again. It was going to be a long day.

CHAPTER 2

“*H*iya, how are you?” The host at Akbars greeted me with a smile and a familiar handshake. I frequented this restaurant often—probably too often—and they knew me here. Well, it had been one of my favorite haunts when I’d been allowed to live in York. Now, it was a special treat, since I was only a visitor.

I summoned up my practiced, bright smile to cover my grief. “I’m great, thanks. How are you?”

“Good.” He returned my smile, oblivious to my pain. I must be getting really good at concealing my darker emotions. “Just you tonight?”

“I’m meeting someone. I’ll wait over here.”

I’d arrived early. Eagerness and ingrained anxiety about tardiness had brought me here five minutes prior to seven PM.

I fiddled with my fingernails. Would Scott realize just how desperate I was to see him? Would he think I was pathetic?

Before I could become consumed by my worries, his voice sounded behind me.

“Sorry if I’m late.”

I jolted, but his big hand touched my lower back, instantly grounding me. I resisted the urge to lean into him. My body craved more contact.

I forced myself to step away and turn to face him. “You’re not late. I was just a little early.”

He smiled. “Punctual. I like that.”

I supposed he would, being a military man. I glanced at the clock on the wall. He’d arrived three minutes before our date was scheduled.

Was he as eager to see me as I was to spend more time with him? Or did he simply hate being tardy as well?

My stomach danced with nerves, and my palms began to sweat. My emotions were a roiling mess, making me almost giddy. I couldn't believe he was really here, after all these months wondering where he was in the world. Wondering if he was all right. If he was happy. If he was thinking of me, too.

But what did he want out of this dinner? Was he here for sex?

Although the idea of his big body pinning me down made my blood heat, I couldn't shake a sense of dread. He'd said he'd read my books—my dark, kinky books. What did that mean? How would he see me now that he knew the depths of my deviant needs?

"Just the two of you?" the host asked, puncturing my mounting anxiety.

"Yeah," I said breathlessly.

"This way." The man picked up two menus and a handful of rose petals to scatter on the table.

"They always put rose petals on the table," I babbled as we followed in the host's wake. "They do it when I come here with my girlfriends, too. I mean, it's not like a romantic thing." I didn't want him to think I was being presumptuous. He'd declared that he'd come to York to see me, but that didn't necessarily mean this was a grand romantic gesture. Maybe he really did just want a signed book. Maybe after he fucked me, he'd pass it around to his buddies, and they'd laugh at the dirty dialogue.

The prospect made my stomach turn.

"Oh," Scott replied simply as we took our seats at a corner table. His expression was blank, his emotions indiscernible.

"Anyway," I chattered on quickly, "the food here is amazing. Some of my favorite dishes in the whole world, actually. Well, just one, really. I'm kind of a creature of habit, so I always order the same thing."

His stare remained steady on me, his face still an unreadable mask. A moment of silence weighed heavy on me, but words stopped streaming from my lips. They all seemed to have deserted me.

"You don't have to be nervous around me," he finally said.

Shit. Was I that easy to read? I thought I'd gotten better at masking my more unstable, negative emotions. But I couldn't seem to hide from Scott's penetrating blue gaze.

The waiter came to our table, saving me from having to formulate a response. I ordered a beer and the same dish I always ate. Scott took a few

minutes to look over the extensive menu and finally settled on a spicier option.

“That’s going to be really spicy,” I told him as the server walked away.

“I can handle a little heat,” he said with a smirk.

Was that a sexual innuendo? Scott had been so earnest and raw with me during our night together in Nashville. There hadn’t been much time for teasing. Well, unless I counted him teasing my breasts and my pussy with his mouth.

I flushed and glanced down at the table, hoping to hide my flash of lust from him. I didn’t want him to know how desperate I was. He’d claimed he’d read my books, but that didn’t mean he’d turned into an experienced Dominant since I’d last seen him. I wasn’t certain what he wanted from me.

I knew what I wanted from him: his big cock inside me, stretching me as he stared down at me like I was something precious. I craved to indulge in that connection again, but I feared he wouldn’t think of me the same way now that he knew the contents of my explicit books. I couldn’t imagine him regarding me with reverence after learning the depths of my kinky desires.

In Nashville, he’d looked at me like I was something good and pure. Surely, he couldn’t feel the same now. I didn’t consider my sexual needs degrading—quite the opposite, in fact—but to a vanilla outsider like Scott, they could alter his perception of my character.

I wanted to demand to know what he wanted from me, specifically; I wanted to cut to the chase, so I wouldn’t be tormented by uncertainty.

But I couldn’t bring myself to be so bold. I feared his response might sting too badly if he just wanted a quick, meaningless fuck.

“So, you’re in England for work?” I asked, directing the conversation to safer topics.

“Yes,” he said. He didn’t elaborate.

Crap. That probably wasn’t such a safe topic. Of course he wouldn’t tell me anything about his real job or where he was stationed. According to my dad’s friend who’d served in Delta, Scott would never be able to say where he’d been or where he was going. That was classified.

“You’re here for work, too, right?” he prompted, taking up the conversational slack.

“Yeah,” I said quickly. “I came for my signing today, but I’m also here to visit friends. I’m actually staying for six weeks.”

His brows rose. “Why so long?”

“I like it here,” I said, dismissing my secret grief with a casual wave. “As long as I have my laptop with me, I can work anywhere. I’ll spend my evenings with my friends and my days in Starbucks to hit my word count.”

If I’m not too blocked to write. I kept that cynical thought to myself. Scott didn’t need to know the extent of my damage, my struggles. In Nashville, we’d both needed to be held, but we’d talked about his pain, not mine. I’d lied and pushed down my true emotions, going along with his idealized view of me as a confident, composed woman. I couldn’t bear to shatter that illusion. It felt too good, and I cared more about pleasing him than unloading my baggage on him. If he needed a happy fantasy of me, I’d preserve that. I didn’t want to ruin the memory of the beautiful night we’d shared together.

If his perception of me hadn’t already been ruined by the contents of my books.

“But you used to live here,” he said, a statement of fact.

I blinked at him. “How do you know that?”

“I looked into you.” He shrugged.

I shifted in my chair, suddenly uneasy. The server brought our food. It smelled delicious, but I no longer had an appetite.

“How much do you know?” I asked, my mouth dry. With the resources he likely had access to, he probably knew everything about me. I’d thought he would know me too well after reading my kinky writing, but I hadn’t considered the fact that he might take the time to really look into me: Addison Burke, not my pseudonym Lauren Krane.

“Quite a bit,” he admitted, unrepentant. “But I don’t know *you*. Just background information.”

I frowned, irritation threading through my mounting dread. It wasn’t fair that I’d thought about this mystery man for months, knowing I’d never be able to find him again. And he’d been able to look me up and learn everything about my life. I supposed that was my fault for telling him my pen name, which had given him all the information he would need to research me.

And hadn’t part of me secretly hoped that he’d think about me, just like I’d so often thought about him?

“That’s not fair, you know,” I pointed out, crossing my arms over my chest. “I don’t know anything about you.” Something horrible occurred to me. “Is your name actually Scott?”

Had everything been a lie?

“Yes,” he replied, allaying that particular fear. “I know it’s not fair, but I

still wanted to see you. Like I said, I know things about your life, but I don't know *you*."

I cocked my head at him. "What do you know about me?"

"I know you were born in Savannah, Georgia. I know you rode horses competitively between the ages of eleven and seventeen. You went to Duke University, and after that, you attended the University of York in England, where you got your MA in Archaeology. Then, you went on to start your PhD in the same subject. You quit the program, got married, and moved to North Carolina. You moved away from Raleigh after a year and bought a house in your hometown of Savannah. Two years after that, you tried to relocate to the U.K., but you didn't stay longer than five months. You filed for divorce and moved back to America, renting an apartment in Chicago, where you live now." He ticked off facts about my life on his fingers, his expression betraying absolutely no remorse over digging into my past. "I want to know more."

I closed my jaw from where it had been hanging open. "What more could you possibly want to know?" I asked faintly, struggling to find air. "You seem to know everything."

"Well, why Archaeology? Let's start there."

A strained laugh caught in my throat. "Sure. Let's start there. I don't know anything about you at all, and I never will. But I'll tell you all my hopes and dreams and failures." My words dripped with sarcasm.

His lips pressed to a thin line. "You do know," he said quietly. "You saw me in Nashville. You saw me. I don't... I don't usually talk like that."

I wanted to snap back that he hadn't actually talked. He hadn't openly admitted anything except for the fact that he used to be in Delta Force.

But I knew exactly what he meant. He'd opened up a facet of his soul to me that night. I might not be allowed to know facts about his life, but I knew him much better than he knew me. He only knew his fantasy of me, but I'd seen his deepest pain, his scarred heart.

"Your food's getting cold," he said, his tone detached. "Eat."

I instantly lifted my fork, responding to the direct command without thought. I obeyed orders.

We ate in silence for a few achingly long minutes. He barely looked at me. I could feel him putting up walls between us, and I hated the barrier.

"I wanted to be an archaeologist ever since first grade," I blurted out. "Well, I wanted to be an Egyptologist, at first. I had a picture book about

King Tut, and I was fascinated by ancient Egyptian culture. My parents bought me an archaeology toy kit, and I ended up excavating a corner of the sand box at school. I thought the black plastic lining underneath was hiding dinosaur bones.” My cheeks burned at the memory of my classmates’ reactions to my behavior, their laughter. “I always was a weirdo.”

“I don’t think you’re weird. I think you’re fascinating. You’re one of the most interesting people I’ve ever met. On paper, at least. That’s why I wanted to come here to see you. I had to know more.”

I peeked up at him, hardly able to believe his earnest words.

Fascinating?

In adulthood, I’d overcome the shame of being *weird* and started to think of myself as *unique*. But for a man like Scott to think I was fascinating was... heady. The way he stared at me with open curiosity was both thrilling and disconcerting.

“So, how do you go from being a six-year-old who loves ancient Egypt to studying postgrad Archaeology?” Scott prompted me to elaborate.

“Well, I fell in love with Greco-Roman history in high school, and I decided I wanted to become a professor of Archaeology,” I continued, compelled to respond when he was regarding me so intently. “I spent the next ten years pursuing that dream. Until I abandoned it to write romance novels.”

“I want to know more about that,” he said. “Your writing, I mean. When did you start writing? I know you first published during your MA. What made you decide to write a book?” He held up a hand before I could answer. “You know what? That can wait. You need to eat, and then, you can tell me all about it later.”

“Later?”

He grinned. “Yeah, over drinks. You didn’t think I’d let you off with just dinner, did you?”

I tried to puzzle out if there was a deeper meaning to his words. He might have said I was *fascinating*, but would he still look at me like his fantasy woman if I took him back to my apartment? Would he still touch me with awe if I were stripped naked in front of him?

“I, um... Well, I don’t know. I didn’t expect you to show up here. This is kind of throwing me for a loop.”

His expression dropped to something more neutral. “Do you want to call it a night after dinner?”

“No!” The vehemence of my reply surprised me. I might be setting

myself up for heartache later, but I couldn't help craving more time with him. "I mean, I'd love to go out for a drink. I know this awesome underground gin joint."

His smile returned, and my insides went all gooey. "Sounds perfect."

CHAPTER 3

“*W*ow. That’s a lot of gin,” Scott remarked, flipping through the four-page-long gin list.

“Isn’t it great?” I smiled. I really did love Sotano. The brick walls and dim golden lighting enhanced the underground-cool vibe, and I was ready to snag the snug seating in the darkened corner. “I always get the same thing, though,” I added.

Scott shot me a wry smile. “Of course you do. You’re a creature of habit.”

I flushed with pleasure that he’d remembered what I’d said at dinner. He was so attentive, so focused on me. As though he truly did find me fascinating.

“What do you usually order?” he prompted.

“Sikkim strawberry gin with elderflower tonic. It comes with a fresh strawberry and black peppercorn garnish.”

He shook his head slightly. “Sounds a little sweet for me. I think I’ll try this one that comes with rosemary.”

“Interesting choice.” I nodded my approval. “I hate that we don’t have gin joints like this in America. Maybe they have them in some cities, but not where I live. I’m usually a prosecco girl, but I have to take advantage of the local gin culture while I can.”

“A *prosecco girl*?” he asked with a crooked grin.

I waved him off, trying to ignore the way my heart fluttered at his teasing smile. “But you already knew that, I’m sure. You’ve done your research, and I post about prosecco all the time on social media.” I tried to sound acerbic,

but I wasn't all that bothered by the fact that he'd looked into me. Now that I'd gotten over the initial shock at the extent of his research into my past, I was feeling a little flattered that he'd cared enough to follow up on me after our night in Nashville.

I was more concerned with how his reaction to the BDSM content in my novels would have shaped his perception of me. He might assume I was a slut he could use for his own pleasure. He wouldn't be the first man to react that way after learning my profession and looking up my books.

"You still haven't told me about how you got into writing," he reminded me, pointing out the gaps in his knowledge about me. "Let's grab a seat, and you can tell me all about it."

Being so close to him, feeling his palm spanning the small of my back, made all sorts of wicked thoughts flash through my mind. After months of fantasizing about our night together, I wanted so much more.

But I had to figure out what he really wanted from me, now that he'd accessed my deepest, darkest fantasies through reading my books. I couldn't bear to take him back to my apartment if all he wanted was a quick, soulless fuck.

I moved from the bar to the corner snug booth. The padded bench seating area was big enough to accommodate eight people, but the bar wasn't busy, so I didn't feel guilty about taking up the space. I scooted into the darkened corner, trying to be as graceful as possible—a challenge for my awkward self. The hem of my pleated red dress slipped up my thighs as I slid along the leather-covered seat. I quickly tugged it back down, not daring to glance up to assess Scott's reaction.

He sat beside me, settling into position without scooting or fumbling. The man knew how to maneuver his big body, even though his size should have made him appear ungainly in such a tight space.

He pressed close to me, his knee touching mine. We sat beside each other, tucked into the corner of the snug. My body hummed with awareness of his closeness, and I inhaled his unique, masculine scent. Memory was sparked by my olfactory senses, and our passionate night together raced through my mind like a montage. I resisted the urge to breathe more deeply.

I didn't have to rely on memories anymore, no matter how sweet they were. Scott was right here, his body heat pulsing over my skin.

Suddenly, I was far too warm. I held my ice-filled gin globe glass more tightly, finding the straw with my lips and sucking down a long draw of the

sweet drink. The flavor of fresh strawberry mingled with a touch of peppery spice, and I indulged in it for a few seconds. Long enough that a significant portion of the drink disappeared from my glass.

"I told you, you don't have to be nervous around me," Scott murmured, reading my anxiety. His hand rested on my knee, sending a wave of heat flowing up my thigh to warm my sex.

I released my straw and set the drink down on the table beside his. "Sorry. I don't usually drink that fast."

"It's okay," he reassured me. "I just don't want you to feel uncomfortable around me."

I managed a wry smile. "I'm not uncomfortable. A little overwhelmed, maybe. I wasn't expecting to see you again."

His thumb caressed my knee, teasing beneath the hem of my dress. "I didn't think I'd ever see you again, either. But then I looked you up. And when I found out you'd be in England, I decided I had to come to York. Which brings us back to your books," he pointed out. "You were going to tell me how you got into writing."

"Well, I used to write pieces of stories in college." I began my familiar story, one that I'd told many times. "I went through a brief phase when I was twelve, when I wanted to be an author instead of an archaeologist. But then, I decided I wasn't creative enough to come up with the plot for an entire novel. Procrastination on my MA dissertation allowed me the time to write my first full-length novel. Once I gave myself permission to be creative, I came up with a dozen ideas for new books."

"Only a dozen?" he asked with a sly smile. "When last I counted, you had over thirty published works."

I waved off the number. "Some of those are short stories and novellas. Besides, I've been writing for six years now."

"That's still impressive for only six years. And you're a bestseller. That's incredible."

I ducked my head. "I haven't hit *New York Times*," I muttered, deflecting the praise. I'd never been great at accepting compliments, and I often suffered from imposter syndrome in my career.

"I'm sure you will. You're really talented."

I made an unladylike snort. "I write smut."

His fingers firmed around my knee, calling my attention to him. I realized I'd been staring at a spot on the wall, but his touch drew my eyes back to his.

“Is that really what you think?” he pressed, his pale gaze staring straight through me.

“No,” I admitted, the truth tumbling out. “I actually hate when people call it that. I work really hard to create complex characters and compelling stories. I’m just used to people making jibes about it. Most people outside the romance community don’t take my job seriously.”

“You’ve accomplished so much. You should be proud.”

Proud. I tried not to flinch.

Thomas had told me he was proud of me. He’d said it often. Right before he’d tell me that I was neglecting him because I worked too hard; he’d tell me that my job kept me from satisfying him sexually. In the last days of our marriage, he’d told me the reason he’d been depressed for years was because I hadn’t fucked him frequently or enthusiastically enough.

Now, if someone said they were proud of me, I’d hear a lie in the words. I didn’t believe a declaration of pride could come without some emotional consequence.

“What’s wrong?” Scott asked, his brows drawing together.

I flipped my hair over my shoulder, a falsely nonchalant gesture. “I just have mixed feelings about what I do. I love my job, but I know not everyone understands it. Most people think it’s silly.”

I tried not to watch him too incisively as I anticipated his response.

His jaw firmed. “Who thinks it’s silly?”

I breathed a small sigh of relief. He didn’t think my career was something to be derided.

Did that mean he wouldn’t misjudge me and think I was an easy slut?

“Well, people in my hometown think it’s silly, for one,” I admitted. “I’ve tried to keep my pen name secret from them, but I know people gossip about me.”

“Is that why you moved back to England last year? You sold your house in Georgia when you first applied for your U.K. visa,” he stated, reminding me how much he already knew about me.

“That’s part of the reason I wanted to move. I changed a lot in my twenties. Traveling and living abroad changed me. I tried to move back to Savannah, but it didn’t feel like home anymore. York felt like home.”

I didn’t say that my childhood home lay in ruins, a painful symbol of my torn family. I hadn’t been able to drive through that part of town in years.

I shook off the dark thought, putting on my signature bright smile. “York

is absolutely wonderful, isn't it?" I gushed. "All the history here. It's amazing."

Scott nodded, but he didn't return my smile. His eyes continued to study me, as though trying to puzzle out my true emotions.

I decided I preferred when he looked at me the way he had in Nashville: like I was confident and composed, without a care in the world. I liked being that fantasy woman. Not this broken, anxious mess of a person who could barely get out of bed by midafternoon.

I took another long gulp of my drink. When I set the glass back down, it was nearly empty.

Scott sipped at his own gin, not saying anything for a moment.

"You get to travel a lot for your work," he finally said, a statement of fact. "I saw your signing schedule on your website. You must enjoy seeing new places."

I enjoy running away from reality.

Like so many other unpleasant truths, I kept that one locked inside.

"I love to travel," I confirmed. "I love having adventures and meeting new people. It's great for my writing, because I'm learning new things about different cities and lifestyles all the time."

He cocked his head at me. "*Lifestyles*. That's what you call it, isn't it? In your books. That's how you refer to people who are into BDSM."

My heartbeat ticked up a notch. Now, we were finally getting to the content of my books, the deviant secrets he'd read on the pages: I liked to be tied up, spanked, and bossed around in the bedroom.

Would he understand the true value I found in giving up control and comprehend the beauty in the trust of a power exchange? Or would he see me as an easy floozy?

"Yeah," I replied, curling my fingers in my lap to hide their trembling. "That's what we call it. *The lifestyle*."

"We? So, you consider yourself to be part of this lifestyle?"

I squirmed. "Well, yes. I thought I'd told you that. You know. In Nashville."

"I thought you just wanted kinky sex. But what I read in your books... That's more than just kinky sex. You're submissive, right?"

I lifted my chin, a little defiant. "Yes. I'm a sub. But that doesn't mean I'm easy. That's not what the D/s dynamic is about."

"I know. I think I have a better understanding of it now. That night, I

thought you wanted me to hurt you. I couldn't do that. I can't." His voice roughened, the fine lines on his face deepening.

If anything, it would be safer if you tied me up. I remembered what he'd said; I remembered the way he'd paled when I'd asked him to pin me down, pull my hair, and spank me.

I covered his hand with mine where it still rested on my knee, drawn to comfort him. "I understand." I imbued the two words with as much weight as I could muster, even though they were spoken softly.

He leaned toward me, closing the slight distance between us. He paused when his lips were a mere inch from mine. His intoxicating scent suffused the air around me.

"I want you," he murmured, sounding almost pained. "I know I'm not what you want. I understand that now. But I can't stop thinking about that night. I can't stop thinking about you."

My breath stuttered. He wasn't looking at me like I was a piece of meat, a conquest. His pale eyes still shone with the reverent light they'd held on that magical night in Nashville. Despite the fact that he'd learned my darker sexual proclivities and researched my life, he was still looking at me like I was his fantasy woman.

"I think about you, too," I admitted on a whisper. "A lot."

"Why? I'm not right for you. I'm not good." The last was barely audible.

My heart ached for him, and the same sense of protectiveness I'd felt for him that night in Nashville surged through me. I placed my hands on his cheeks, touching his face with tenderness as I speared him with a determined gaze.

"You are good," I swore. "I know you are. I might not know anything about you, but you were right. I saw you in Nashville. You let me see *you*. And you're a good man."

His eyes tightened with yearning just before his mouth crashed down on mine. A soft moan left my chest at the decadent contact. My memories didn't come close to the reality of his lips caressing mine. His hand slid into my hair, cupping the back of my head as he pulled me closer. I opened for him, inviting him to deepen the kiss as my arms wrapped around his shoulders to embrace him tightly. His tongue slid against mine with the same confidence that had intoxicated me on the passionate night we'd shared all those months ago. He might not be pulling at my hair and demanding that I surrender my mouth to him, but he knew how to seduce a woman. I remembered how his

tongue had felt against my pussy, and I shivered in his hold as my core pulsed.

A low whistle made me jolt away from him. The bartender had come to collect empty glasses, and he'd not-so-subtly broken up our lewd display.

Scott's fingers laced through mine. "Let's get out of here," he urged.

"Where do you want to go?"

His flame-blue eyes burned into me. "Your place."

I licked my lips. "Okay," I agreed breathily. "We can go back to my place. I have a bottle of prosecco in the fridge."

"Sounds delicious." His heated stare let me know he wasn't talking about the bubbly. "Lead the way."

I willed my shaking legs to support me as I stood and headed for the exit. Scott's hand settled at my lower back as he followed me out into the night, a promise in the familiar, assured touch.

We were going to have sex tonight. I wasn't sure if he'd be able to dominate me in the way I usually craved, but the connection I felt with him went deeper than physical desire. For one more sweet night, I'd hold this damaged man in my arms, and he would hold me.

CHAPTER 4

We walked along the illuminated path that ran alongside the River Ouse to reach my flat. The night was chilly, but Scott's body heat kept the cool air from kissing my skin. I could hardly believe he was with me, his strong arm wrapped around my waist as we walked through my favorite city in the entire world. It was surreal. Magical.

I sighed, enjoying a rare moment of contentment as I watched the clouds move over the moon, leaving the city in silhouette.

"So, you have a place here?" he asked.

"No. I'm renting an Airbnb."

"But you have an apartment in Chicago?" The question was a casual inquiry, but it cut deep.

I did have an apartment in Chicago, but that wasn't my home. I'd tried to learn to ignore my sense of homelessness in the months since clawing my way back from rock bottom.

"Yeah," I replied with a shrug. "I have a place there, but I've barely been there since I moved back to America. I like to travel."

I didn't mention that I couldn't trust myself to be alone in that cold, utilitarian space. The contents of my pill bottles tempted me far too often. I had to keep myself surrounded by other people, so I didn't give in to my burgeoning sense that my life was pointless. Sometimes, giving up seemed far easier than carrying on in pain and hopelessness.

I forced a laugh and shoved the listlessness away before it could rise up. "I'm kind of a nomad." I made my familiar offhand joke. "The world is my

home. I want to see as much of it as possible.”

Scott paused, catching me around the waist with his firm arms. He caged me in, capturing me in his incisive blue stare even more effectively than his muscular body trapped me. My breath caught in my throat as he studied me, and my false humor melted away. I felt exposed, raw. He was staring straight into my soul, but I couldn't seem to break away. I couldn't hide from him.

“I don't have a home, either,” he murmured after several long seconds.

“I'm sorry, but I don't know what you're talking about,” I lied faintly. I didn't want him to see me like this: broken and bleeding inside. I wanted him to look at me like his fantasy woman again: whole, carefree, perfectly confident and content.

His fingers curved into my waist, and a shiver rolled through me.

“You do know,” he countered levelly. “You don't have to talk to me about it, but I want you to know that I understand.”

“What about Minnesota?” I tried to distract him from my damage.

He grimaced. “I'm from Colorado.”

“Oh.” Of course he'd lied to me about where he was from. He'd lied about almost everything.

But any hurt his deception might have inflicted was mitigated by the fact that he'd just told me a single, simple truth about himself.

No. It wasn't simple. He might be admitting where he was truly from, but he was sharing something much deeper with me.

I don't have a home, either.

I reached up and caressed his cheek, smoothing away the tension in his face with a brush of my fingers.

“You travel a lot, too,” I said. It wasn't a question.

“Yeah.” The word was terse, but he leaned into my touch.

“Do you ever get to go back to Colorado?”

“I go back to see my family sometimes. But it's not home. Not anymore.”

I stroked his brow, trying to ease the furrow that creased it. “I understand,” I admitted. “I feel the same way about Georgia. I've...changed. I don't seem to fit anywhere anymore.” My eyes burned, but I swallowed back my tears. “Well, except York. But I'm not allowed to live here.”

“You gave up your visa.” He reminded me that he already knew so much about my life.

A strangled laugh that held no humor caught in my throat. “Well, I wasn't going to stay in my marriage just for a visa. That didn't seem like the right

thing to do.”

“You mean legally? Or morally?” he prodded me, poking at the wounds I usually hid beneath a bright exterior.

“It was what was best for me.” I didn’t want to say more. I didn’t want to taint this night with ugly words about what Thomas had put me through, about the sick hold he’d had over me. I’d had to escape, or I never would have been truly free of him. I’d still be beholden to him, and I couldn’t allow that kind of toxicity to continue crushing my spirit, grinding me down over long years of callousness and cruel manipulation.

Scott simply nodded, allowing me to hold in my darkest secrets. He clearly wasn’t willing to divulge his, either. For tonight, it was enough for us to hold each other. To feel connected. To be told we were good people who deserved tenderness. We both needed it, just as desperately as we’d craved it on that night in Nashville.

“My flat is just a few minutes down this road,” I prompted, breaking away from the painful conversation.

He leaned down and brushed a kiss on my forehead before pulling back. I hated the cool air that closed over me in the absence of his embrace, but I knew we’d be hot soon enough, our sweat-slicked bodies entwined.

I started to direct us toward our destination once again, my heart slowly lifting with each step. There was no reason to be coy or play games. The need that pulsed between us was palpable, and neither of us would deny it.

One night with him in Nashville had helped keep my demons at bay for months. I hadn’t seriously contemplated ending my life since then, even if the idea no longer unnerved me the way it should. Sharing another passionate night with him might be enough to keep me going. He’d reminded me that I could do something good for another human being, that I could impact another life in a meaningful way. That was reason for continuing to exist, even if I didn’t feel like *I* was worth living for.

He gripped my hand more tightly, his thumb stroking my palm. He didn’t ask what was bothering me, but I preferred it that way. I wanted another sweet night of bliss, not an emotional breakdown. That sense of quiet understanding settled over us once again, just as it had on our first night together. We needed to be touched, held. We didn’t need to share hard truths to understand one another’s souls.

My hand was steady when I unlocked the door to my flat. I wasn’t remotely nervous or hesitant about my decision. I craved to feel his bare skin

sliding against mine, his cock stretching me and penetrating deep inside.

“I’ll go pop that prosecco,” I offered when he locked the door behind us.

He tugged at my hand, pulling my body against his. “I don’t want any prosecco. I just want you.”

My back bumped against the wall, and he pressed his weight into me, pinning me in place. I gasped, taken off guard by his sudden domineering treatment. He hadn’t been remotely aggressive before, despite the commanding, confident way he’d handled my body.

My core instantly heated, and my nipples pebbled against the silky material of my dress. I wasn’t wearing a bra, and the stimulation of the stiff peaks rubbing against his hard chest was enough to make me shudder.

His big hands bracketed my face, and his mouth descended on mine, kissing me like a man who had me exactly where he wanted me.

And I was exactly where I wanted to be: back in his arms.

Fire ignited in my belly, and my fingers fumbled at the buttons of his shirt without thought. My body acted on instinct, desperate to get him naked so I could revel in skin-to-skin contact.

His hands slid into my hair, tightening in the fine strands as he tore his mouth away. He rested his forehead against mine, his heavy breaths teasing across my lips. I tried to drop my head back and invite him to claim me again, but his fingers firmed around my head.

“Wait,” he murmured. “I need to know that you want this. I need to know that you want me.”

“Of course I want you.” How could he possibly think otherwise?

His expression drew tight with indecision. “I know I can’t be how you want me to be. You write about women being restrained and punished. You said you live that lifestyle. I can’t be that way with you. I can’t hurt you.”

I stopped plucking at his buttons and rested my palms flat against his chest. “You won’t hurt me. I know you won’t.”

The lines around his eyes deepened. “But you want me to. You asked me to spank you and pull your hair and hold you down. I just can’t do that. Not after... Not after the things I’ve seen.”

Grief for him welled in my chest. I couldn’t begin to imagine the terrible things he’d seen, but I understood why he couldn’t be sexually aggressive with me.

“That’s okay,” I promised. “Nashville was the best sex of my life, and you didn’t hurt me then. Not at all.” I still marveled over the fact that vanilla

sex hadn't hurt, but the chemistry between us was undeniable. "I won't lie and say I don't like a little pain with my pleasure," I continued quietly. "But I don't expect that from you. I don't want you to do anything you're not comfortable with."

"But why? Why would you want a man to hurt you? I live my life the way I do so I can protect people like you. I can't imagine causing you pain."

"I know it's hard to understand, but I've always been this way." I didn't need to go into the details of why I was into kink. Chemical imbalances in my brain and childhood scars weren't what I wanted to talk about right now.

"I still can't hurt you. Not like you want. I'm not that man."

"Let me show you," I whispered.

I slid one hand under the top of my dress to touch my breast. My fingers closed around my hardened nipple, pinching slightly. The familiar flare of pain and his masculine presence made lust light up my body. My inner muscles fluttered, greedy for his cock.

I bit my lip to hold in a soft moan and rotated my hips against his, seeking stimulation against my needy clit. He began to harden, his erection pressing into my belly.

I released my breast and gripped one of his wrists, slowly guiding his hand and sliding it beneath my dress. The contact of his calloused palm against my flesh released the moan I'd locked inside. My behavior was wanton, but I wasn't ashamed of my sexual nature. I wasn't ashamed to lay this part of my soul bare to him.

"It's okay," I promised on a shaky breath. "I want you to pinch my nipples. It'll feel amazing. Trust me."

"I do trust you," he said with the weight of an oath.

I firmed my hand over his, urging him to squeeze my breast. His touch sent desire rolling through my body.

"Yes," I panted. "Just like that. Please."

He kept one hand twined in my hair, holding me in place while he studied every nuance of my expression. My lashes fluttered when his fingers found my nipple and pinched.

I'd taken—and enjoyed—far more erotic pain, but watching his eyes flare with fascination as he watched my lustful reaction was far more fulfilling than my most devious past encounters.

He pinched harder and tugged, catching my soft cry on his tongue, as though he wanted to taste the flavor of my perverse desire. I rolled my hips

against his hard thigh, and he wedged it between my legs so I could stimulate myself further.

He trailed scorching hot kisses down my throat, his tongue tracing the line of my vulnerable artery. He paused for a moment at the sensitive spot where my neck met my shoulder. I tilted my head to the side, inviting him, tempting him.

“Do it,” I whispered. “I want you to.”

A low growl left his chest as his teeth sank into my flesh. He bit hard enough to mark me, and I reveled in the rush of pleasure/pain. The possessive, primal act was even more arousing than the physical sensation it inflicted, and I ground against him with abandon. My fingers speared into his hair, pulling him closer and encouraging him to continue ravaging me.

He finally released me from his bite, his hands finding my shoulders and sliding under the thin straps that held up my dress. He pulled them down my arms, and the silky material fell away to reveal my breasts. He cupped them fully, rolling my nipples beneath his thumbs.

“You like this?” His voice was rough with desire, even as he sought confirmation that I wanted him to continue touching me with harsh confidence. He pinched down again, and my eyes rolled back.

“Yes,” I hissed out. “More. Please.”

His head dipped lower, and he caught one of my hard peaks between his teeth. I squealed at the shock of pain and his bold actions. I hadn’t expected this reaction to my begging. He might not be hurting me much, but the knowledge that he was putting his trust in me and pushing his own boundaries was heady.

His bite eased, and he licked away the pain. Little jolts of electric lust pinged from my breast to dance down to my core.

“I need you inside me,” I whimpered, eager for him.

“Fuck, you’re so hot when you beg for pleasure,” he groaned. “I think I like it.”

“Please.” I didn’t at all mind begging, and if it turned him on, I’d encourage that particular domineering trait. “Please, fuck me.”

His tongue traced a searing circle around my nipple. “Not yet,” he murmured against my skin. “I need to taste you. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it for months.”

With other men, I hadn’t enjoyed oral sex. But I knew from experience that Scott was different. He wasn’t the only one pushing his own boundaries

tonight.

He dropped to his knees and slid his hands up my thighs, pushing my dress up to my waist.

“Keep playing with your tits.” He punctuated the order with a soft kiss against my aching clit. I bucked against him, and he steadied me, his fingers curving into my thighs and pressing my ass back against the wall. “Stay. I want your pussy right here.”

I whined my frustration, but I obeyed. Scott had been confident the first time we’d been together, but when he started issuing commands, I melted. I could be a brat with new Doms, but his calm orders brought out my submissive side. I wanted to please him.

He caught the elastic band of my red lace panties between his teeth and tugged downward. His mouth grazed my sex as he slowly exposed me. I shivered, but I resolutely remained in place.

When my pussy was bared, he glanced up at me, his pale blue eyes glinting in the moonlight that filtered through the gauzy curtains.

“Pinch your nipples. Show me how you like it.”

I didn’t have to be told twice. Emboldened by the fact that he was embracing a more domineering nature, I cupped my breasts in my hands and pulled at my nipples, squeezing and rolling them between my fingers. My back arched, but I didn’t move my hips toward him, even though I craved contact with his soft lips.

“Good girl,” he breathed against my swollen folds. “That’s what you like, isn’t it? To be my good girl?”

He really had learned so much about me from reading my books. It should have been disconcerting, but I was too thrilled and sexually stimulated to care.

“Yes,” I moaned. “Yes, I want that.”

He nuzzled my inner thigh, and I quivered with the effort of holding myself still. “I like this part,” he rumbled against my skin, his hot breath teasing over my clit. “I like you trembling in need and wet for me. You didn’t want me to kiss your pussy before, but look how badly you want it tonight. Your panties are soaked. I bet you’re even wetter now.”

To test his theory, his tongue traced the line of my slit. Desire swelled, and I would have thrust my sex against his mouth if his hands hadn’t firmed on my thighs in silent rebuke.

He hummed his satisfaction against my pussy lips, and the vibrations

against my achingly sensitive flesh made my inner walls contract in desperation to be filled and fucked.

He stared up at me, capturing me in his steady gaze as he circled my clit with his tongue. He didn't have to command me to continue toying with my breasts. His aquamarine gaze and clever mouth made me eager to follow his orders. He might be on his knees, but he was thoroughly in control.

My legs began to shake as he continued to lick me. His grip shifted from my thighs to my hips, helping support my weight. Despite the way my body sagged, I felt light enough to float away. Only his firm touch kept me grounded. My fingers tingled; my breasts ached; my brain buzzed. Lust sizzled through my veins, heating my entire being.

"I'm going to come," I panted, unable to hold back my impending orgasm.

He sucked my clit, forcing me over the edge. I fell with abandon, my world lighting up with bliss as I cried out my pleasure. His hold on my hips eased, and I ground mindlessly against his mouth. He groaned, driving his tongue deep to taste my orgasm.

He didn't release me until I was shuddering and whimpering from oversensitivity.

He stood to his full height, reminding me just how small I could feel in his shadow. His hands slipped around me, finding the zipper at my back. As he slowly pulled it down, my fingers flew to the buttons on his shirt, rapidly undoing them so I could touch his bare skin. His abs rippled beneath my hands.

My mouth watered, and I leaned into him to press hungry kisses against his shoulder as I eased the shirt down his arms. I nipped at his neck, communicating my own primal need for him. He grunted, and he abandoned my dress to unbuckle his belt.

I didn't waste any time tugging my dress over my head and slipping out of my panties and flats. By the time I was fully naked, he'd finished stripping, too.

Before I could fully admire him, he scooped me up in his arms and tossed me over his shoulder, as though I weighed nothing at all. A delighted giggle bubbled from my chest as he carried me the short distance to the bedroom. He bent slightly, releasing me so I fell back on the mattress with a soft gasp.

"I want to see you," he rumbled, flipping on the light.

He towered over me, staring down at my body. The intensity of his

scrutiny should have made me want to squirm and cover myself, but I didn't feel a hint of embarrassment or shyness. Boldly, I arched my back and cupped my breasts, showing him exactly how I liked to be touched. My thighs dropped open, offering my pussy to him.

The soft golden glow of the overhead light cast shadows beneath his defined muscles, making him appear more imposing than ever. I released my breast to reach out a beseeching hand.

"I want you," I said, my voice husky.

His jaw tightened, the lines of his angular face sharpening with hunger. "I'll get a condom."

I wanted him to take me raw, with nothing separating us, but I knew that would be foolish, even if I was on birth control. I swallowed my protest, contenting myself with watching his perfect ass as he walked back into the hallway to retrieve the condom from his jeans pocket.

When he returned, he'd already torn open the foil and was sheathing himself. He was even bigger than I remembered. The sight of his thick length made my belly quiver with equal parts desire and trepidation. I remembered how perfectly he'd filled me before, but I could hardly wrap my mind around the fact that my tight sex had accepted him.

He noticed me staring and shot me a wicked smile. "Don't worry. It'll fit, remember?"

I nodded. "I remember." The words were much heavier than his levity. I wanted him to know that I remembered every moment of the beautiful night we'd shared.

His expression hardened to something more intense as he read the intent in my declaration. He joined me on the bed, his body covering mine. I loved his weight on top of me, pressing me down. I felt safe when he caged me in. He was so strong, but he treated me with tender care as he stroked my hair back from my cheek. Just like on that night in Nashville, I felt protected, cherished. My heart ached with the bliss of it.

He lined his cock up with my slick opening and pressed inside. He penetrated me slowly, stretching me with a delicious burn. It was almost too much for me to bear, but not because he caused me pain. I rarely made eye contact with my sexual partners, but with Scott, I couldn't look away. I couldn't break our connection. He stared straight into my soul, stripping me down to my most raw, true self as he joined his body with mine.

We both groaned when he was fully seated inside me. He paused, his

cock pulsing. His jaw ticked as he gritted his teeth against the pleasure. My inner walls contracted, welcoming more. I wrapped my legs around him, angling my hips up and pressing my heels into his muscular ass to draw him deeper.

He bit out a curse and pulled back, withdrawing at a maddeningly slow pace.

“More,” I begged. “Harder.”

He slammed back into me on a growl, and I cried out at the sudden rough treatment. My core fluttered around him, craving more harsh thrusts.

He grasped my left thigh and guided it toward my chest, pulling my leg up until my calf rested on his shoulder. The position opened me wide, allowing him to drive impossibly deeper. His cockhead rubbed across my g-spot, and my fingernails bit into his shoulders as I clung to sanity.

Although he was thoroughly in control, he accommodated my demand. He took me in hard thrusts that rocked my entire body. All I could do was hold onto him as each harsh invasion of his cock drove me closer to oblivion.

Just as bliss claimed me, his lips crashed down on mine. He swallowed my ecstatic scream, and his grunt of pleasure rumbled against my tongue. His cock jerked inside me as my pussy squeezed him. I could feel the tension in his lips as his body shuddered with his orgasm. I writhed beneath him, my entire being claimed by delicious sensation.

He pulled out, and he allowed our kiss to soften, his mouth lingering on mine for long minutes. I was bound to him, my body melded to his.

I whined my disappointment when he finally pulled away. His lips brushed my cheek, soothing me.

“I’ll be right back.”

He disappeared into the bathroom. I heard water running, but he quickly returned to me.

Just as he’d done in Nashville, he tucked me beneath the sheets. I caught his wrist.

“Don’t go,” I begged.

His lips pressed to a thin line, indecision warring in his tight features. Finally, he blew out a sigh and climbed into bed.

I snuggled into him, and this time, he didn’t make me pull back so he could look at me. He let me tuck my face against his chest and breathe him in. He turned off the light and wrapped me in a tight embrace. I fell asleep pressed up against him, clinging to him so he couldn’t leave me.

CHAPTER 5

“*W*hat time is it?” I grumbled, tugging the covers over my head to block out the light. Usually, I slept well into the day, but Scott’s movements roused me.

Scott.

I jolted upright, reaching for him. “You’re not leaving, are you?”

Sleep still fogged my mind, slowing my thoughts. But the panic that knifed through me at the prospect of his sudden departure was sharp enough to make me gasp.

He smiled down at me and pressed his hand to my shoulder, guiding me back onto the pillow. “I’m going to my hotel to change.”

“You got a hotel room?”

His smile tugged up at one corner. “I wasn’t sure where I’d be sleeping last night.” He leaned down and kissed my cheek. “I’m going for a run, and then I’ll come back. I’m sure you’d like to sleep in.”

“I’d rather spend time with you.” I didn’t want to lose sight of Scott. “How long will you be in York?”

His expression fell slightly. “I have to get the four o’clock train down south.”

Down south. Of course he wasn’t going to share his destination with me.

My heart sank. We only had a few hours left before he’d have to leave. Then, he’d disappear from my life. I might never see him again.

His presence in York was a miracle, one I’d never expected to be granted. I’d thought of him for months, and now, I’d shared another beautiful night with him. Although I knew he’d be gone again soon, I couldn’t stop myself

from begging him to spend more time with me.

When I was with him, I wasn't alone in the world. I couldn't let him go. Not until I absolutely had to.

I'd face the emotional fallout later.

"Don't go for a run," I beseeched. "Just come back here."

He stroked my hair back from my forehead. "Okay. I'll be here in an hour."

I nodded my agreement. That would give me time to shower and get ready for the day.

"I know a place where we can get a great fry up. Coffee Culture makes the best English breakfast in York." I couldn't wait to share more of my city with Scott. We might not have many hours left together, but I'd make the most of them.

"Great." He beamed at me. "I'll see you soon."

I sighed softly as I watched him walk into the hallway to gather his clothes where we'd abandoned them last night. The few seconds it took him to cross the room didn't give me nearly enough time to admire his ass.

When I heard the apartment door shut behind him, I finally emerged from bed and made my way to the bathroom so I could get ready. Giddy anticipation made my heart beat faster, as though I'd sprinted to get across town rather than simply walking through the flat. Scott had been gone for all of one minute, and already, I couldn't wait to see him again.



"SO, WHY ENGLAND?" Scott asked as he cut into his Cumberland sausage. "You lived here for several years. What drew you here?"

My heart tugged with longing, but I chose to focus on my fond memories rather than falling into despair.

"Well, I traveled here when I was seventeen. It was my first archaeological dig. I spent three summers at the same field school, studying an Iron Age hillfort. That was actually in Wales, not England, but it was run by the University of York. I fell in love, so I decided to study abroad in York for a semester during undergrad."

His brows drew together. "You fell in love with the U.K.?"

"No, I mean I actually fell in love. With an archaeologist who lived in

York. We dated long-distance, but studying at the university gave me the opportunity to spend several months with him. And yes, that's when I fell in love with the city. It's why I came back for my postgrad studies."

"This man you fell in love with. That was your husband?"

I tried not to flinch at the mention of Thomas. "No." I swallowed the sour tang on my tongue. "I met Thomas during my Masters year. Arran and I had broken up for a long time before that. He's actually one of my best friends now."

Scott's face became impassive. "You stayed friends with your ex. Are you still friends with your ex-husband?"

"No," I said, schooling my own face to a blank mask. I never wanted to talk to Thomas again. I didn't have anything nice to say, so I'd prefer to say nothing at all. Really, I hoped I'd never see him again. I could only pray I wouldn't bump into him around York, as vain as that hope may be.

"Anyway," I moved on with a dismissive wave, "I met most of my York friends through archaeology. I've known them for nearly thirteen years now. Which is crazy to think about. I can't believe I'm thirty."

I can't believe I'm starting my life over at thirty.

I forced a polite smile. "How old are you?" I truly was curious. I couldn't quite pinpoint Scott's age. When he smiled, he didn't look much older than me. But when his eyes took on that haunted light, he aged a decade.

"Thirty-seven."

"You're thirty-seven, you're from Colorado, your name is Scott." I ticked off the facts on my fingers with a teasing smile. "You still know a lot more about me than I know about you."

He grasped my hand and laced his fingers through mine. "I like learning more about you. I'd like to spend more time together after breakfast, if you're free."

"I am," I said, probably more eagerly than I should have. "I can write this evening. That's one of the best things about my career: I can make my own schedule."

"I love that," he said, his small smile belying the intensity in his eyes. "It's great that you love your career."

I do the things I do so people like you can be safe and live the lives they want. I remembered what he'd said that night in Nashville. He put his life on the line so I could be free and happy, so I could live in a safe bubble while he risked everything to protect people like me.

The knowledge was overwhelming. It made me feel insignificant and a little unworthy.

I squeezed his hand. "Thank you." I was thanking him for so much more than the kind comment about my career.

He cleared his throat. "So, what do you want to do today? I'd love to see more of the city."

I grinned, genuinely excited to share my love of York with him. "We should start with Stonegate. It's my favorite street in town. Then the Minster, I think, and we can go to lunch on The Shambles after. If we have time, we can do Clifford's Tower and the Yorkshire Museum."

He returned my smile, his eyes glinting with pleasure. "Sounds great."

We paid the bill and made our way down the crooked, narrow stairs to get back to street level. When we stepped out into the sunlight, Scott caught my hand again. He held it as we walked through the city, as though the intimate contact was the most natural thing in the world.

It did feel natural, comfortable. It also made me very aware of his nearness, and the way his big hand enveloped mine reminded me of how much stronger he was, how his body covered mine when he drove his cock inside my wet and willing sex...

"Are you too warm?" he asked.

I could feel my cheeks heating. Damn my rosy skin for giving away my thoughts so easily.

"A little," I said, deciding to slip out of my jacket. The spring air helped cool my heated skin. "This is Stonegate," I announced.

We'd arrived at the western end of the ancient street. Medieval shop fronts jutted along the road in a drunken line, dark wooden beams sagging from age. The Minster wasn't visible here, but the golden edifice would peek between the buildings as we made our way down the paved path.

"Why is it your favorite street?" Scott asked as we began to walk.

"The view is amazing, for one. Just wait until we get to the Ye Olde Starre Inne pub. You'll see."

We meandered down the street, walking slowly so we could take in the beauty of the city. I'd seen this view countless times, but it never ceased to amaze me. Sharing it with someone was especially satisfying. Watching their appreciation was almost as magical as experiencing the city for the first time myself.

"Wow," Scott said with a smile, his head tilted up to take in the view.

A black iron banner emblazoned with *Ye Olde Starre Inne* in gold lettering spanned the width of the street above our heads. Ahead, the buildings that lined the street wound gently to the left, revealing the first glimpse of the Minster. It shined so brightly in the morning light that the stone appeared almost pearly white.

"It's a beautiful cathedral," he remarked.

"Minster," I declared.

"What's the difference?" He seemed genuinely curious rather than affronted that I'd corrected him.

"It's the title given to churches established in the Anglo-Saxon period. The origins of York Minster date back to the seventh century. Even cooler: it's built on top of what used to be the heart of the Roman fortress, so excavations beneath the Minster have revealed some really fascinating Roman archaeology. There's a Roman column set up in the square ahead."

A wide smile split his features, but he didn't say anything.

"What?" I asked, a bit self-conscious.

"You're a really passionate person."

I shifted on my feet, nervous that he might be mocking me for my nerdy enthusiasm. "Oh. Sorry, I don't mean to bore you with all the history stuff. I just think it's cool."

"I love that you're passionate." He allayed my mounting discomfiture. "And it is cool. Tell me more about York. I don't know anything about the city or its history."

"Be careful what you ask for; I'll talk your ear off."

His smile broadened. "Talk away. I like hearing what you have to say."

Again, I was struck by the sense that he was completely focused on me. When he looked at me so intently, I could believe that he really did find me fascinating.

"Well, if you're sure. I can give you a tour of the Minster when we get to the end of the street."

"I'm sure. I'd love to learn more about it."

"Oh, wait." I paused. "Do you mind if I take a look in this window? I love this place."

He glanced at the shop sign. "Cavendish Antiques?" he said with a wry smile. "What is it you like about it? The jewelry or the history behind it?"

"Both. I love holding pieces of history. Knowing that the piece meant something to someone who lived in the past is incredible. You have to

wonder what their lives were like. What their hopes and dreams were. If they were happy. Also, I like all the shiny,” I joked to cut the weight of my words.

He stepped up beside me, surveying the glittering contents of the window display. “What’s your favorite piece?”

“I love the Edwardian pendants.” I pointed at a particularly lovely white gold necklace. The intricate curves of the metal recalled the appearance of a chandelier, accentuated by the oblong freshwater pearls that dripped from it. It was smaller than some of the other pieces, more understated. “I’ve had my eye on this one for ages,” I admitted. “It’s been here for a couple years.”

“What do you like about it?”

“It’s elegant. I’ve been looking for a unique necklace I can wear every day, and this would be perfect. I used to wear an antique key every day, but I...I don’t wear it anymore.” I cut off what I was going to say. Scott didn’t need to know about that.

He was watching me too intently for me to escape his scrutiny. “Why not?”

I cut my eyes away. “My husband gave it to me,” I said in an undertone. “It was a symbol of our relationship. It meant I belonged to him.” I lifted my chin and met Scott’s blue gaze, feeling suddenly defiant. “I want a necklace that means I belong to myself. Something I can wear every day and know that I’m free.”

He studied me in silence for a long moment. “You should get this one,” he finally said.

I shook my head. “It’s too extravagant. I’ll keep looking.” I stepped away from the window, suddenly uncomfortable. I’d revealed far too much. I wanted this day to be carefree; I wanted a beautiful day with Scott that I could cherish once he disappeared from my life again.

“Let’s get to the Minster,” I urged, tugging him back onto the street.

He didn’t resist or press me to talk about my pain. When we got into the Minster, he mostly let me chatter at him about the history of the church, asking the occasional insightful question. After a while, my cheerfulness returned, and I moved past the awkward, intense moment in front of the antique store. When I was with Scott, I was able to forget about my worries. Being in his presence was intoxicating. I didn’t want him to leave.

I didn’t allow myself to think about his impending departure. Instead, I chose to live in the moment with him.

CHAPTER 6

“*P*lease tell me you’ve read *Harry Potter*,” I said fervently as we stepped onto The Shambles. The narrow Medieval street was purportedly one of the sources of inspiration for Diagon Alley. Therefore, it was fitting that York’s first and best *Harry Potter* shop was located here.

The Shop That Must Not Be Named opened up to our left, the display window full of Quidditch paraphernalia. I bounded up to the shop to stare inside, tugging Scott along in my wake.

“I’ve read them,” he confirmed. “Several years ago.”

“And?” I demanded, turning a challenging stare on him. “What did you think?”

His response might affect my opinion of him.

His grin hit me square in the chest. “I thought they were great. I usually read thrillers, but I really enjoyed the *Harry Potter* series.” His smile turned sly. “Although, a certain someone has turned me on to romance novels recently. At least, by one esteemed author.”

I blushed and poked his chest. It was stone beneath my finger. “I’m not esteemed,” I insisted, trying to ignore the rush of lust that surged through my system. The reminder of his hard body that was concealed by his bright blue button-down was enough to get me hot for him.

“You shouldn’t downplay your accomplishments.” He grasped my finger where I’d poked him, squeezing my hand in reprimand.

There was an answering squeeze between my legs. Was he being domineering on purpose? Or was this a natural reaction?

I shook it off before I could become more hopelessly enamored with him. We only had a few hours left together. I'd enjoy what time we had, and then I'd be left with a happy memory.

I tried to pretend it wouldn't torment me, once I was alone again.

"Do you want to see the inside?" I asked. "It's a really cool shop."

"Sure," he agreed, crossing the threshold with me. He didn't take his eyes off me to study the wizarding décor. "What Hogwarts house are you?"

"Ravenclaw," I answered definitively. "Let me guess. You're a Gryffindor."

"Of course."

His smile really was sinfully sexy. I liked when he smiled more than when he stared into my soul. It was easier to be with him like this: carefree, happy. Not peering at the raw, ugly things inside me.

"Why Ravenclaw?" he pressed.

"I love books and learning. Education is the best way to better society. It's the most important thing in the world. Although, I do love Hermione, so that's a point in Gryffindor's favor. She's so badass. I wanted to be like her when I was growing up: intelligent, brave, and loyal."

"I'd say that's an accurate description of you." He was staring into me again, his pale eyes pinning me in place.

I tore my gaze away and immediately picked up a plushy Hedwig stuffed animal. "I think it would be really cool to have an owl," I babbled. "But I'm a cat lady, so I'd probably have a cat instead if I were a witch. Or both. Both would be good."

"You're really cute, you know." The words rumbled with mirth.

My gaze snapped back to his to assess if he was mocking me. I detected nothing but warmth in his sparkling eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what I said: you're cute. There's something innocent about you."

My cheeks burned as I thought about all the depraved things I'd written. Things that he'd read.

"I'm not innocent," I mumbled.

He stepped closer to me, inserting himself in my space as his hands bracketed my waist. My head tipped back so I could meet his eyes, and I found myself trapped by his steady stare. "You are. It's not something I get to see often. Don't ever lose that."

"You don't know me," I protested weakly. "Not really."

“I know enough,” he said firmly. “Never change.”

Never change. He’d issued the same low, soulful command on our first night together; the night he’d seen only a fantasy of me. Surely, he was beginning to see me more clearly now. I’d given him far too many glimpses at my damage over the last twenty-four hours.

If he wanted a fantasy of me, he could have it. He must need it. Thinking he was protecting something good and pure probably kept him going on his darkest days.

I swallowed further words of defiance. He didn’t need to know the real me: the mess of a woman who could barely get out of bed every day. Besides, it felt nice being his fantasy woman. I longed to be her. She had worth. She wasn’t damaged beyond repair, her life empty and meaningless.

He plucked the owl from my fingers. “I’ll get this for you.”

“You don’t have to do that. I don’t need it.”

“You like it. I want to get it for you.”

“I... Okay.” I knew I should refuse. It was inappropriate to accept a gift from Scott. He was buying it for a woman who didn’t exist, not for me.

But a selfish part of me wanted it. I wanted something sweet to remember this day.

“Thanks,” I added as I accompanied him to the register.

He paid for the stuffed animal, and the cashier placed it in a black and gold gift bag. I accepted it with another “thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Scott smiled down at me and took my hand again. I loved how he didn’t seem to want to release me, not even for a minute.

“Do you want lunch?” I asked. “There’s a great place just down the street. They do a prosecco high tea.”

“Sure,” he agreed, easily accepting my suggestion.

We walked the short distance to the Earl Grey Tea Rooms, where we were ushered to a table on the back terrace. The sun was high and hot—unusual for York this time of year. I tilted my face back to soak in the sunshine and took in a deep, blissful breath.

When I lowered my eyes again, I found him watching me with a small smile. “You’re beautiful.”

“Thank you,” I said softly, cutting my eyes away as I took my seat beside him. I picked up the menu and started to peruse it, giving myself a reason to divert my attention from him.

I could still feel his heavy gaze on me.

“You are beautiful,” he said, more solemnly.

I peeked up at him. “Thanks,” I said lamely. His attention was overwhelming. I’d built up my self-confidence in my twenties, but I still wasn’t great at taking a compliment. When Thomas had told me I was beautiful, the praise was usually followed by a critique of my shortcomings as a partner.

“You don’t believe me,” he surmised.

I shifted uncomfortably. “It’s not that, necessarily. It’s just...” I didn’t want to go into the mindfucks Thomas had put me through. I didn’t want to ruin this perfect day. “I appreciate the compliment,” I hedged.

He regarded me in silence for a moment longer before nodding. “You’re welcome.”

He looked down at his own menu, breaking the tension. “What’s good here?”

I let out a small breath of relief. “We really should do the high tea. It’s super fancy. You get a sandwich, a scone with jam and cream, and a slice of cake. It’s wonderfully British. Oh, and it comes with a glass of prosecco.”

“Shouldn’t it come with tea?”

“I mean, you can get it with tea, if you want. I just think the bubbly is fun. And it’s a nice day to sit outside and have a cool drink. Tea would be really hot, you know?”

“All right,” he agreed. “Prosecco it is.”

A waitress arrived, and we put in our order. When she left, Scott started questioning me again.

“What are you working on right now? Your book, I mean.” One corner of his lips twisted up. “Another ménage?”

“Oh god,” I groaned. “Please, don’t tease me about that. I’m so mortified that you read it.”

“Why? It was really interesting.”

“*Interesting?*” I squeaked, his word choice confirming my worst suspicions. He’d thought it was ridiculous, surely.

“Well, I thought the dynamic between three people was a little... Well, different. But it helped me understand your lifestyle better. It wasn’t violent. They really cared about her.”

“Of course they did.” I waved off his observation, trying to ignore the way my heart tugged at the idea of being cared for and cherished. “It’s a romance novel.”

“Some of your other books aren’t like that,” he countered. “Some of them are really dark. Why did you write those? Surely, no woman wants to be kidnapped and abused.”

“It’s not about promoting that,” I said, suddenly fervent. “It’s about helping women embrace darker facets of their sexuality. A lot of women have those fantasies, but no one would ever want that in real life. I think it’s a biological imperative that’s built into a lot of us; our bodies have learned to accept nonconsensual sexual interactions to survive. It’s been that way for women for millennia. Some of us have these fantasies, and they can be confusing or bring on shame. By writing these books, I’m allowing women to explore that aspect of their sexuality in a safe way. It’s empowering, not debasing.”

I didn’t even want to begin to touch on the memories that surfaced. Those dark recollections brought on their own confusion and shame. I was speaking from experience, but Scott didn’t have to know that.

“That’s an interesting way of looking at it,” he said, jerking me out of my fucked-up thoughts. “I still didn’t like reading those, but I can understand when you put it that way.”

“You didn’t like them?” My heart sank.

“I think you’re a talented writer. But no, I didn’t like those particular books. That’s not a fantasy in my world.”

I swallowed down the lump in my throat. I had no idea what he’d seen, but I’d known he was troubled by his experiences. A different shame made my insides burn. He must think I was really depraved to romanticize things that haunted him.

The waitress arrived with our food, which was arranged on a pretty three-tiered tray. I couldn’t muster up the interest to admire the display. Instead, I grabbed my glass of prosecco and took a long gulp.

“I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings,” Scott said when she’d left.

“You didn’t,” I replied, my voice tight. “It’s just... I never should have told you my pen name. I should have known you wouldn’t want to read those. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I wanted to understand you better. I do understand a little, now that you’ve explained some. And I really did like your other books. The ones that weren’t dark.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled, unable to look at him. This felt just like being with Thomas: a compliment sandwich with a gut punch in the middle.

“I’ve upset you. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” I lied, taking another draw of my prosecco.

“It’s clearly not fine.” His hand covered mine where it was fisted on the table. “Hey. Look at me.”

I couldn’t resist the direct order. My eyes met his.

“I’m sorry.” The apology held the weight of truth. “I know it must be hard to make yourself vulnerable by putting your work out there. I should have been more careful with my words.”

“No. I’m glad you said how you actually feel. It’s hard to hear, but I understand completely. I’d prefer honesty to a pretty lie.” That much was the truth, even if my stomach was still in knots.

“All right,” he allowed. “I really do think you’re talented. You should be proud.”

Proud. There it was again: the reminder of how Thomas had told me he was proud, right before he’d blame my career for all of the problems in our marriage.

I picked up my sandwich and focused on eating so I could escape as soon as possible. I ignored the way the egg and cress tasted like ashes on my tongue.

Scott tucked into his food as well, and we ate in tense silence. The beautiful day was marred now. I blinked back tears, the intensity of my swinging emotions irrational. I’d been flying so high, and now I was crashing. It felt like I was dropping after a BDSM power exchange scene. Like I’d been whipped and then left without proper aftercare.

The sun no longer warmed my skin. I slipped back into my jacket to ward off the chill.

“I’ll walk you to the station,” I offered in a monotone when we’d split the bill. There was no reason to be rude, even if I did want nothing more than to run away from him.

He nodded his agreement, his jaw tight. When he stood, he didn’t take my hand. Mine twitched, tempted to reach for him. I balled my fingers into a fist at my side.

We walked out of the tea room and back onto The Shambles in awkward silence. My feet nearly carried me toward my Airbnb so I could get in bed and huddle under the covers. Resolutely, I forced my steps in the opposite direction, heading for the train station.

We made our way down the quaint Medieval street, but I barely paused to

appreciate my surroundings. I no longer wanted to share this with Scott. I didn't want any more memories with him. He was going to leave in half an hour. Why torment myself with more painful conversation when he was about to disappear from my life?

I stared straight ahead as we came out of the street and into King's Square. The sweet scent of chocolate permeated the air, emanating from York's Chocolate Story, an interactive museum about the candy manufacturer that had been established in the city back in the nineteenth century.

Despite the sweetness in the air, my stomach instantly soured. I stopped in my tracks with a sharp gasp.

"Shit." The curse dropped from my lips without a thought.

Thomas stood in the square, watching a street artist perform a magic act. A woman stood next to him. She was pretty.

Nausea curled up my throat. She was my opposite: Slender. Petite. A mass of curly blonde hair framed her delicate features.

Jealousy didn't flare. No part of me wanted to be tucked next to Thomas' side. I wanted to be as far from him as possible. And yet, he stood only a few yards away from me.

I wanted to go to the woman, to warn her that he'd destroy her. He could be charming at first, but he'd rip her apart and wear down her spirit until there was nothing left.

"What's wrong?" Scott's warm hand touched my lower back.

I leaned into him, unable to resist the support. "That's my ex," I whispered.

"Where?"

"The guy with the dark hair. And the beard." Per usual, it appeared that Thomas hadn't bothered to shave in several days. It wasn't exactly a beard. Just a disregard for his personal appearance. It had driven me nuts when we'd been together, but I hadn't dared harp on him about it. According to him, I was already the source of his depression and callousness. I didn't want to add to that by being a nag.

"Him?" Scott's tone was colored with incredulity.

"Yeah." I remained frozen in place, trapped by shock. I'd known that I'd probably run into Thomas around town. I'd told myself I was ready for this. But nothing could have prepared me for the turmoil that raged inside. I wanted to scream at him. I wanted to coldly smile at him and pretend I didn't

give a shit about his wellbeing. I wanted to cruelly mock him and make him look pathetic in front of the woman who accompanied him.

I wanted to run the fuck away and never look back.

Thomas glanced my way. His brown gaze held, his eyes widening with his own shock.

I forgot how to breathe. My skin pebbled beneath the protective layer provided by my leather jacket. I shifted back into Scott's touch.

"Are you okay?" His voice floated down to me.

I nodded, but I couldn't stop staring at Thomas. Tumultuous emotion kept me rooted in place, drowning me in indecision.

Suddenly, a hulking body blocked Thomas from my view. I blinked up to find Scott's flame blue eyes burning into me. His hands cupped my face, and he leaned toward me. His soft lips captured mine without invitation, as though we'd done this dozens of times. As though he had every right. His tongue branded mine, stroking in to claim me.

My fingers curved into his shoulders, and I clung to him, barely able to match the passion of his mouth on mine. All thoughts were obliterated from my mind as I was swept up in his possessive kiss. The knots in my stomach loosened, melting with the heat that ignited in my belly. My panties grew damp, and a soft moan rolled from my chest. He devoured the sound, keeping my lips locked under his until my head spun from lack of oxygen.

When he finally pulled away, I sagged against him, gasping for breath.

"Let's go," he commanded.

He wrapped his iron arm around my waist and guided me forward, away from the square. Away from Thomas.

A giddy laugh bubbled in my throat, but it held no humor. I was flying high again. No, I wasn't flying. I was caught in a riptide of emotion; tossed in the storm.

My lips tingled, and heat still simmered in my veins.

Anger followed lust. Why did Scott have to do this to me? Why did he have the power to raise me up high and send me crashing back down? I barely knew the man, but he had thoroughly captured all my senses.

And now, he was going to leave. We were walking toward the train station. In a few minutes, he'd be gone. I'd never see him again.

I tried to step away from him. He held me fast.

"I need to go," I announced. "Do you know how to get to the station from here?"

His jaw tightened, and his nostrils flared as he drew in a deep breath. I shrank out of his arms.

"I'm sorry," the apology tumbled out. Despite my confusion, I hated that I'd upset him. "It's just... You're leaving. And I'm... I need to go home."

I don't have a home, either. He'd shared one of his soul's secrets with me last night, after plucking my own from my psyche.

Because I wasn't going home. The York flat I'd shared with Thomas and our cats wasn't my home anymore. It never would be.

All I could do was return to my rented apartment and cry in the only private place I had.

"Bye." I offered Scott a jerky wave and turned on my heel, half-fleeing down the cobbled street. I blinked back the burn behind my eyes. I could crumble in a few minutes, when I wouldn't make a public scene. I straightened my spine and drew in a long breath, willing my steps to slow. Even now, I couldn't bring myself to let Scott see what a mess I truly was. I much preferred being his fantasy woman.

CHAPTER 7

“So, how big is his dick?”

“Ashley!” I scolded, slapping my friend on the arm. She tried to scoot back, but she was trapped on the booth between me and Lizzy. My friends and I had taken over half the snug at Sotano, but we weren’t alone.

It was nearly two AM, and the underground gin joint was packed with people, all of whom were varying degrees of drunk.

Myself included. I couldn’t count how many glasses of prosecco I’d consumed, and now I was sipping my signature strawberry gin.

Ashley tossed her curly copper hair and straightened her glasses. “What?” she asked, trying and failing to sound completely innocent. “You’re obviously hung up on this Scott fellow. So, is he hung?”

“Oh my god,” I gasped, sneaking a glance at the lads across the snug from us. One of them caught my eye, and he smirked.

“Scott must be big,” Lizzy surmised. “But how big? Is he hung like a horse?” She held her hands out, measuring a distance of about three feet.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I scoffed.

Lizzy’s blonde brows lifted, and she widened her measurement.

“He’s not an actual horse.” I rolled my eyes. “I know you’re into women, but I also know you’ve seen a human penis. You’re being silly.”

The guy across from me chuckled. I glanced back at him, and he held my gaze. He pushed his dark blond hair back off his brow, preening and leering.

“Can we not talk about penises right now?” I begged my friends, lowering my voice so I couldn’t be overheard.

Ashley waved me off. “Since when are you shy? You’re our favorite smut peddler.”

I suppressed a wince. “I write romance novels,” I corrected her. I’d laughed along with the *smut peddler* moniker in the past, but it really did bother me.

“Kinky romance novels,” Lizzy said pointedly. “Just how kinky is this sexy Scott? Surely, you’re not fucking a ’nilla.” She said our slang term for *vanilla* like it was a dirty word. “You said the sex was amazing.”

I sighed. “And I’m starting to regret having said that. Can we be a little quieter, please?”

“Fine.” Ashley leaned in so we could speak at a lower volume. “But seriously, you said he’s the hottest guy you’ve ever fucked. He must be kinky.”

“Well, not exactly. The first time we were together, he got a little bossy. But he made it clear he can’t be physically aggressive with me. I think the idea of it bothers him.”

“And what about the second time? How was last weekend?” Lizzy prompted. I’d already spilled the CliffsNotes version to her over text earlier in the week. “I’m not attracted to men, but I could objectively appreciate that he’s a handsome guy. Still, you don’t go for vanilla, no matter how hot they are.”

“Things were... more intense last weekend,” I admitted, still keeping my voice down. “He was more demanding. He knows how to seduce a woman, that’s for sure. And he started issuing orders, so that was hot.”

Lizzy blinked at me. “But he didn’t even spank you or anything? Let’s not pretend you’re not a bit of a pain slut.”

“Lizzy,” I hissed. I chanced another glance at the lad across from us. He was listening with open interest.

“Spill,” she demanded.

I rolled my eyes. “No,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “No spankings. And I’m not a pain slut. I just like a little punishment from time to time.”

“Uh-huh,” she replied sarcastically. “Yeah. Because you don’t love a good flogging.”

My sex clenched at the thought of Scott wielding a flogger.

I shook the image from my mind before it could fully form.

That would never happen. Not only was he not inclined to inflict pain, but

I'd never see him again. I swallowed against the lump that threatened to form in my throat.

"It was wonderful, but we're done," I said firmly, pretending the words didn't cut at me. "I don't have any way of contacting him, and I don't think he'll ever contact me again." My stomach turned as I remembered the harsh set of his jaw when I'd abandoned him in King's Square. "We're just not compatible. It would never work between us."

"But you want to see him again, don't you?" Ashley pressed.

I shifted, and Lizzy jumped on my hesitation.

"You do want to see him again!" she exclaimed. "Maybe he'll come to another one of your book signings. That was pretty romantic."

"Sounds very romantic," the boy across the table slurred. He shot me a drunken grin.

"We weren't talking to you," Ashley said in her most scathing fuck-off-you-twat tone.

"Come on," I urged. "Let's go. I'm getting tired, and I really should write tomorrow."

Lizzy held up one finger, indicating that I should wait a moment. She sucked down the last of her old fashioned and set the crystal glass on the wooden table with a definitive *thunk*. Ashley hadn't indulged in anything but lemonade for the last hour—ever the responsible one, even if she did like to make lewd jokes rather loudly.

I checked my own glass to make sure I'd drained every drop of gin. All that remained was ice and some stray peppercorn garnish. I'd already consumed the boozy strawberry.

Aware of the boy still watching me, I carefully scooted out of the snug, keeping my form-fitting yellow dress pulled down so the hem didn't ride up over my knees. I wasn't usually so modest, but I didn't like the way he was smirking at me.

A few steps later, and I'd forgotten all about him in my tipsiness. My friends and I made our way up the stairs back to street level. We said our goodbyes and hugged one another before heading off in opposite directions. It was late, but I was familiar with the short walk to my Airbnb. York was a safe city, and I had no concerns about walking myself across town at any time of day or night.

I headed through the Spanish Quarter, past gaggles of people spilling out of the dance clubs that crowded this street. I took a sharp right down a little-

trafficked snickleway—one of the tiny alleyways that served as a shortcut through the city. It was quieter in the narrow space, and I welcomed the reprieve from raucous laughter and pulsing music.

“Oy!” a masculine voice called from behind me. “Where you headed, love?”

I turned to face the blond boy from Sotano. The back of my neck prickled with warning, but I was drunk enough to find foolish confidence.

“My apartment,” I said coldly. “You should go back to your friends.”

He took a step toward me. The snickleway suddenly felt far too isolated and cramped.

“I’d rather go with you.”

“That’s not on the table.” I remained cool, implacable. Running seemed like an extreme choice, as did screaming. I wasn’t some attention-seeking victim. I could handle myself. “Go away.”

“Don’t be like that, pet.”

“I’m not your pet,” I snapped. Usually, I found that Yorkshire endearment particularly sweet. Now, it left me cold. “I’m leaving now.”

I turned away from him, but he caught my wrist.

I knew fighting was useless. Not only would I probably rile him, but I had zero skills when it came to general coordination, much less self-defense.

Instead, I turned my coldest, most polite Southern smile on him. “You should go back to your friends. There are plenty of women at Sotano. You’ll have a lot more fun there.”

“I’d rather have fun with you. I heard you talking to your friends. You like big cock. I’m huge, love.”

My heart beat faster, but I still wasn’t as panicked as I should be. Alcohol dulled my sense of danger. I knew this wasn’t a safe situation, but my mind was too muddled to muster up a solution other than talking my way out of this. Screaming was definitely out of the question. That was far too dramatic.

I eyed the boy up and down. He couldn’t be much older than twenty.

“You don’t look huge to me.”

He scowled, and his hand tightened around my wrist.

A shadow appeared behind him, looming large. “Walk away.” The accent was American, the voice rough with menace. “Let her go, and walk away.”

The boy released me and spun around to face the threat. Scott stepped into the dim light provided by a spare bulb overhead. Shadows pooled beneath his drawn brows and high cheekbones, giving his face a skull-like

appearance. He seemed taller than ever, much taller than the boy who'd accosted me.

I shrank back against the brick wall behind me.

"Go," he bit out.

The boy darted away, half-running out of the alley and back toward the safety of the crowds in the Spanish Quarter.

Scott didn't afford me a similar escape. He took a step toward me, and the light shifted on his face. Suddenly, his eyes were illuminated: pale chips of ice that cut straight into me.

"I'm taking you back to your place," he announced.

"What?" I spluttered. "What are you doing here?"

"I was looking for you. When the bartender said you'd just left Sotano, I started heading toward your apartment. Then, I heard that little shit talking to you. What in the hell were you thinking, walking down this alley at this time of night?"

"It's a snickleway," I corrected him, my voice slurring slightly.

"You're drunk."

I shrugged. "That's none of your business."

He took another step toward me. I tried to put distance between us, but there was nowhere for me to go. He stared down at me, imposing his will on me.

"Are you going to walk back to your apartment, or am I going to have to carry you?"

I lifted my chin, my tipsy state still keeping my fear responses dulled. "I'll walk."

I should be far more intimidated, but I was stuck on irritation. Why was Scott here, back in York? Over the last week, I'd convinced myself that it was for the best that I'd never see him again. I'd convinced myself that I didn't *want* to see him again. I hadn't been lying when I'd told my friends that Scott and I would never work as a couple.

"You're not even kinky," I said sulkily, continuing my line of thinking aloud.

"Excuse me?" he demanded, his voice as icy as his gaze.

I rounded on him. "You heard me. You're not kinky. So, what are you doing here? Why bother?"

His eyes narrowed. "I'm asking myself the same thing right now."

I gasped and reeled back. "You don't have to be a bastard about it."

“You’re not being very nice yourself,” he retorted. “Now, walk.” He pointed toward the mouth of the alley. I couldn’t resist that imperious gesture and the bark in his tone.

My shoulders slumped, and I started heading toward my Airbnb.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. “You’re right. That wasn’t very nice of me. I’m just drunk.”

“That much is obvious.” He blew out a breath. “Apology accepted. Let’s get you home.”

“It’s not home,” I lamented. “It’s just where I’m staying.”

“I know,” he said quietly. His hand settled on my lower back. How had I forgotten how good his supportive touch felt?

We walked in silence for a few minutes. My mind reeled. I could hardly comprehend the fact that he was back by my side.

“Why did you come here?” I asked.

“I told you. I came to see you. I arrived on the last train into York. After I found your apartment empty, I decided to check Sotano. You said it’s your favorite late-night place.”

“It is,” I agreed, marveling at the fact that he’d remembered an offhand comment I’d made.

“I’m glad I came when I did,” he said, his tone hardening. “What possessed you to walk down an alley alone at two in the morning?”

“I’ve done it plenty of times before.” My defense was sheepish. “I guess it wasn’t very smart. But York is always so safe.”

“I’m sure it is, but that was a foolish choice. Careless. I know you’re a trusting person, and I love that about you. But you can’t put yourself at risk by being so reckless.”

“I know,” I half-groaned. “I know. I’m so stupid. I always trust everyone, no matter how many times I get burned. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

His arm snaked around my waist, and he pulled me closer against him. “There’s nothing wrong with you, and you’re not stupid. It’s not a bad thing to trust people. Just be more cautious when it comes to your safety.”

“Okay,” I said softly, still feeling thoroughly rebuked and more than a little idiotic.

I stopped in my tracks, my heart skipping a beat. “I didn’t mean to come this way.” My mouth went dry. I hadn’t been paying attention to the route we were taking, but my feet had carried me here automatically.

I'd walked home.

Well, I'd walked to what used to be my home.

Dread twisted my stomach, but I couldn't stop my gaze from lifting to the window above the shop that fronted my former townhouse. The townhouse I'd shared with Thomas. It had been my dream home: a restored pub set over three levels, complete with original features and a huge finished basement that I'd intended to kit out as my personal kinky dungeon.

The living room window was illuminated. Thomas was awake. He was most likely glued to his computer, absorbed in the video games that were his life. There wasn't much risk that he'd come to the window and see me staring longingly at the only home I'd known in adulthood. I'd only lived here for five short months, but it had been my first home since I'd left my childhood house at the age of eighteen.

A fat calico cat jumped up into the window, sitting on the inside sill to stare out at the street.

My eyes began to burn.

"What's wrong?" Scott prompted.

"That's my cat," I whispered. "That's my house."

He moved in front of me, blocking the painful view. His thumb traced the line of my cheekbone.

"I'm sorry," he murmured.

My tears spilled over his fingers. I drew in a sharp breath.

"No, I'm sorry." I gulped for air. "I'm just drunk. I didn't mean to come here. I didn't mean to get emotional."

"It's okay to be emotional. You haven't shared much with me, but I can tell you've been through a lot."

I choked on a humorless laugh. "You know everything about me."

His fingers curled beneath my chin. "I don't. I'd like to know you. Really know you. It's why I came back. I had to see you again. Even if you don't want me, I can't help wanting you."

I blinked away my tears. "What makes you think I don't want you?"

His jaw firmed. "You said it yourself: I'm not what you need."

I shook my head. "I don't know what I need. I just know that I can't help wanting you, either. It doesn't make sense, and it's a terrible idea, but I do want you."

"Why do you think it's a terrible idea?"

"This won't work. You know it won't. You'll leave. You'll always leave,

and I'll never know if you'll come back."

"I want to come back for you."

He sealed his declaration with a searing kiss, and I allowed myself to fall into the moment. His strong arms felt too good around me, holding me up and supporting me. I'd been starved for affection for so long, and I couldn't resist this intimacy.

I'd accept the emotional consequences later.

"Take me back to my apartment," I panted against his mouth.

"Of course I will. I'm going to make sure you get back safely."

"And then you'll stay?" I couldn't keep the pleading note from my tone.

His lips brushed my forehead. "Let's get going. It's late."

My heart sank. He hadn't answered me. Not really.

I resolved to change his mind. He'd said he wanted me. I'd just have to use my feminine wiles to get him into bed.

A fresh layer of lust covered my grief. I'd only ever felt this with Scott: keenly aware of the scars on my soul, even as he set my body on fire.

It made me hungry for him. Desperate. I needed to join with him as badly as I needed my next breath. Anticipation thrummed through my veins, and my steps quickened. I couldn't wait to get back to my apartment so he could hold me and fuck me hard.

We arrived at my Airbnb in a matter of minutes. As soon as I opened the door, I grabbed his wrist and yanked him inside with me. If he wouldn't be aggressive, I could do the job for both of us. I was accustomed to teasing Doms; acting like a brat goaded them into action.

Scott might not be a Dom, but he'd proven he could be commanding when I needed him to be.

I pushed him up against the wall, pressing my breasts against his chest and wrapping my hand around the back of his neck. When he didn't dip his head toward mine, I dug my fingernails into his skin, urging him on with a bite of pain.

He might as well have been made of granite. My nails in his flesh didn't so much as make him wince.

"No," he refused. "You need to go to bed."

"What?" Confusion threaded through my lust. "But you said you wanted me." I sounded a little petulant, and I put on an intentional pout.

"You're drunk. I won't take advantage of you."

I pressed my palm to his muscular chest. "What if I want to take

advantage of you?” I purred.

“I should go,” he announced, his expression hard. “I’m not going to fuck you when you’re under the influence.”

I exaggerated my pout. “That didn’t stop you in Nashville.”

“You weren’t this intoxicated in Nashville.”

“I’m not that drunk,” I insisted. “I fully consent.” I went up on my toes so I could whisper in his ear. “Fuck me.” I bit his lobe and tugged with my teeth. Hard.

He grasped my shoulders, forcing me away from him before he spun me around. Suddenly, my chest was pressed against the wall. Instinctively, I tried to push back. His hand curved around my nape, pinning me in place. I began to pant as desire rolled through me. This was exactly what I wanted: for him to snap. To get frustrated with me and take control.

He leaned in, so I could feel the heat of his words against my cheek. “I said no.”

“What?” If he was refusing, why was he trapping me against the wall? “Please,” I whined. “Please, fuck me.” I knew he liked when I begged for pleasure.

A shock of cool air hit my ass when he flipped my dress up to my waist. I squealed when he landed a stinging slap against my butt. I writhed in his grip, but he didn’t let up. He spanked me three more times; sharp, punitive strokes.

I shuddered and softened on a moan, submitting.

“I’m not going to fuck you,” he said, his voice low in my ear. He didn’t sound angry. He didn’t sound lustful. Just determined. “Get ready for bed. Now.”

“Yes, Sir,” I whispered, the honorific rolling from my tongue without thought.

I heard him inhale sharply. He slapped me one more time, more gently than before.

“Go on,” he ordered, finally releasing me from his hold.

I drew in a shaky breath and stepped away from the wall. I peeked up at him, gauging his mood. He lifted his chin, staring me down. He pointed in the direction of the bathroom, a wordless command.

I ducked my head and shuffled off in that direction, thoroughly chastised. And more than a little hot. My panties were soaked, my clit throbbing. My ass burned where he’d punished me. I wanted so much more.

He’d made it clear that he wouldn’t fuck me. He wouldn’t give me what I

wanted.

But he'd given me what I needed. He was taking care of me, not taking advantage of me.

I closed the bathroom door behind me and got ready for bed, washing my face and brushing my teeth.

When I emerged, I dared a sheepish glance in his direction. He stood exactly where I'd left him: arms crossed, watching me expectantly.

"Get in bed."

"Will you stay with me?" I asked, my voice small. "I mean...I want you to stay. Just to sleep. Please."

I just want you to hold me.

I'd taken a lot more physical pain in the past, but I needed to be cuddled after the brief punishment. The power exchange had been swift and intense. I needed to feel his arms around me and know I was forgiven.

He regarded me for a long moment before he finally nodded.

I heaved a sigh of relief. "There's a spare toothbrush in the bathroom, if you want," I offered. "The Airbnb host provided toiletries, but I brought my own."

He nodded again and headed for the bathroom.

My fingers began to tremble from the brief adrenaline rush. Meekly, I went into the bedroom and stripped.

I slid under the covers to hide my body. I didn't want him to think I was trying to tempt him further, but I always slept naked.

When he entered the bedroom, he'd stripped as well, wearing only his boxers. My mouth watered at the sight of his chiseled body. I doubted I'd ever tire of marveling at his perfection.

Regret tugged at my heart when he flipped off the light, but he immediately joined me in bed. He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me close. I snuggled into him, clinging to him like a lifeline.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Wonderful," I replied on a happy sigh. "Thank you."

"Are you thanking me for spanking you?"

"Yes. You were taking care of me. You are taking care of me. I appreciate it. Most men... Well, they wouldn't have stopped me. Thank you," I repeated my gratitude.

He kissed the top of my head. "You're welcome." He cuddled me closer. "Go to sleep," he ordered softly. "I'll be right here."

I tucked my cheek into the crook of his neck and breathed him in. I fell into sleep within seconds.

CHAPTER 8

The mattress shifted, and I rolled over with a groan. My mouth was dry, and my head pounded.

“Morning, sunshine.” Scott sounded far too amused.

“Shhh,” I urged. “You’re so loud.” I covered my closed eyes with my arm. “And it’s so bright.”

He chuckled. “Here. Drink some water. Then, you can go back to sleep.”

I opened my bleary eyes and swallowed against my sandpaper tongue. “Are you leaving?”

“I’m going to the shop to get some food. I’m making you breakfast. Apparently, you only stock your fridge with olives, cheese, and cured meats.”

“Who doesn’t love a charcuterie?” I mumbled in weak defense of my unhealthy diet.

“I’m sure it pairs well with all that prosecco,” he jibed.

My stomach soured. “Please don’t mention prosecco right now.”

“All right,” he agreed easily. “Now, drink.”

He held out a glass of water, and his free arm slid behind my shoulders, propping me up so I could swallow without spilling all over myself. Despite my wicked hangover, contentment settled over me. No one had taken care of me like this... ever. I considered myself responsible for the damage I caused my own body, so I never asked for or expected assistance. Not even when I felt like I was dying.

That might have been an exaggeration. But I did feel like shit. I was fairly certain I looked like shit, too.

I buried my face in my hands when he pulled the glass from my lips.

“Headache?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I mumbled into my palms, not mentioning that I was hiding from him. I didn’t want him to see me like this.

“I’ll buy some ibuprofen, too,” he offered. “You can take it when you get some food in your system.”

“I don’t think I can eat.”

“Finish that glass of water and get some more sleep. I’ll wake you up when breakfast is ready. You’ll feel better once you’re hydrated and rested.”

I chanced a glance up at him. “Why are you taking care of me? I wasn’t acting my best last night. I understand if you just want to leave.”

“Do you want me to leave?”

“No!”

I groaned when my sharp exclamation reverberated through my head. “I just feel guilty for how I behaved. I was being inappropriate. You said no, and I didn’t listen.”

“You didn’t,” he agreed. “Are you upset with me for how I handled that?”

“No,” I said shyly, my cheeks heating. “I liked how you handled it. I needed that. Thank you.”

He cocked his head at me. “You really are thanking me for spanking you.”

I’d said the same thing last night, but it seemed he didn’t quite believe me.

“Yeah,” I admitted. “It’s helpful for me. I like structure. I can be reckless sometimes.”

“After finding you walking home alone last night, I can believe that.”

I dropped my eyes. “Thanks for being there. I’m glad you came back to see me. And not just because you saved me from that creep.”

“I’m glad I came back, too.”

I peered up at him. “Are you? I was a mess last night.”

I’m not your fantasy woman. Surely, I’d finally shattered the illusion.

“You were drunk, but you weren’t a mess. You just needed someone to take care of you. It’s not safe for you to wander around by yourself in darkened alleys at night.” His lips twitched. “Excuse me, I meant *snickleways*.”

“I’m such an asshole,” I lamented. “I was so rude to you, and you were just trying to help me.”

“You’re not an asshole,” he said firmly. “Don’t talk about yourself like

that. You were a little sassy, but you weren't acting like yourself."

"You don't know that," I said quietly. "You don't know what I'm really like."

I'm a mess. I'm broken and useless.

"I know you're sweet and trusting. I know you can be a little reckless, and now I know you can get sassy when you've been drinking. You're a strong woman, but it's okay to want to lean on someone else sometimes."

I shifted deeper into the covers, wanting to hide from his incisive blue stare. "How do you know I want that? I'm fine on my own. I can take care of myself."

"Can you?" he challenged calmly.

That got my hackles up. We were skirting dangerously close to the fact that I could barely function on a daily basis. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I'm starting to understand you a little better. You want someone to take some of that burden off you. You want someone who will look after your wellbeing, especially when you willfully neglect it."

"I guess you do know me, after all," I said glumly. The illusion was finally shattered; I wasn't his fantasy woman anymore. I'd obliterated her with my drunken behavior and my emotional breakdown in front of my house.

"You don't have to stay for breakfast," I murmured. "I understand if you want to go. I'm sorry I've been so needy."

He sat on the bed beside me, and I smothered a wince when the mattress dipped.

"Look at me." He issued a low command. My eyes snapped to his. His pale stare pierced my soul. "It feels good to be needed. I like taking care of you. Even if that means using methods I don't fully understand."

"Like spanking me, you mean," I concluded miserably. "I'm sorry you had to do that. I know you didn't want to."

His features drew tight. "I liked it," he admitted. "I liked when you called me *sir*. I shouldn't have enjoyed it, but I did."

"It's okay that you enjoyed it." I reached for him, drawn to erase the tension from his jaw. "You didn't hurt me."

His brows drew together. "You can't tell me it didn't hurt. I saw my handprint on your ass."

"And how did you feel about that?" I pressed.

"I liked that, too," he rasped.

“So do I. I like the idea of you marking me.”

“Fuck,” he bit out, but he tenderly brushed my hair back from my forehead.

“You were right,” I said. “I do want someone to help take care of me. That’s what I’ve always wanted. It might not be realistic—maybe it’s only possible in my books—but I can’t help wanting it.”

I’d always been the emotional caretaker for everyone around me. My deepest desire was to have someone strong enough to earn my trust, so I could let go. For once, I wanted to be selfish. I wanted someone to take care of *me*.

Scott would never be that person. Even if he had started to discover a more domineering side of himself, I’d been right in saying that he’d always leave.

I want to come back for you, he’d said.

But wanting that wasn’t enough. Wanting something didn’t equal a promise to make it so.

“How long can you stay?” I asked quietly.

“A few hours. I want to be with you, while I can.”

“I want that, too,” I admitted, ignoring the knife slicing through my chest. I was only causing myself pain by indulging in spending more time with him. I was becoming dangerously attached, and he would disappear again soon.

He caressed my cheek. “Go back to sleep,” he urged. “I’m going to get groceries. I’ll let you know when breakfast is ready.”

I closed my eyes obediently, but the ache in my heart tormented me as keenly as the pounding in my head.

Time passed, and I drifted in and out of fitful sleep. I was dimly aware of the sounds of Scott’s return, and after a while, tempting scents wafted into the bedroom from the direction of the kitchen.

I dragged my dead ass out of bed and went to the bathroom to take care of my morning routine. When I was finished, I slipped on a silky black robe, which I kept handy so the neighbors wouldn’t see me walking around naked through the window.

The scent of bacon was enough to draw me out of the relatively dim hallway and into the sunlit kitchen.

“Is that American bacon?” I asked, hopeful.

Scott turned to me, and his wide grin took my breath away. I still wasn’t accustomed to how stunning he was when he smiled.

“She’s alive,” he joked, chuckling. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I want bacon,” I responded, gesturing toward the frying pan. “Is that streaky bacon?”

“Of course. There’s nothing like crispy American bacon.”

“It is one of the things I miss when I’m over in England,” I admitted. “Their bacon is good, but it’s not the same.”

“A woman after my own heart.” He winked at me.

“You’re in an awfully good mood this morning,” I remarked.

“And you’re just a ray of sunshine, yourself,” he teased.

“I guess I deserve that,” I conceded. “I think food will help. I’m ready to eat now.” I no longer felt unbearably nauseous. “Thanks for cooking me breakfast.”

“It’s the most important meal of the day.”

“I usually skip it.”

“That’s not healthy. Good thing I’m here to feed you.”

I didn’t say that I skipped breakfast because I usually woke up just in time for lunch. Scott probably woke up at the crack of dawn and ran five miles or some other form of outrageous exercise. He didn’t need to know just how unhealthy I truly was. The extra pounds around my hips should have been some indication of my sedentary lifestyle and carefree approach to calories. At least Scott seemed to appreciate those curves.

“Good thing,” I agreed, inhaling the rich scents of a cooked breakfast. “Did you make sausage, too?”

“Yep. And eggs. I hope you like a protein-heavy meal.”

“Oh yeah,” I agreed fervently. “I love meat. I’m a total carnivore.”

He shot me a wry smile. “Savage. I like it.”

“Is it ready?” My stomach rumbled.

He laughed. “Impatient, too. It’s a good thing you’re cute.”

I blushed. “I’m just hungry all of a sudden. I didn’t mean to be impatient.”

“Let’s get some food in you, then. You’ll feel much better after.”

He fixed me a plate of bacon, eggs, and sausage, finishing it off with a typical serving of English baked beans.

I eyed the plethora dubiously. “That’s a lot of food.”

“And you’ll eat every bite. You need it. Then, you can take your ibuprofen.”

I huffed out an indignant breath. “You’re being a little high-handed, don’t

you think?”

A single blond brow rose. “Somehow, I don’t think you really mind. Do you?”

Despite my headache, my body still reacted to his domineering, self-assured attitude. My clit pulsed, and my nipples hardened so they peaked against the silky fabric of my robe.

His gaze fell to my chest, and his lips tilted in a satisfied smirk.

“I guess that’s my answer, then.”

I tried to compose myself, tossing my hair over my shoulder in a show of nonchalance. “I guess so,” I allowed, keeping my voice flippant rather than husky with desire.

He handed the plate to me and prepared one for himself before following me into the open-plan living room, which had a small dining table tucked into the corner. As soon as I sat down, I took my first bite of bacon. The salty flavor exploded across my tongue.

I let out a low, satisfied moan and licked at the lingering juice on my fingers.

Scott cleared his throat. The sound caught my attention, and I looked up just in time to see him adjusting his cock. He wore jeans, but the ridge of his growing erection was clear against the thick material.

“Eat,” he prompted me. “But try not to enjoy yourself so much.”

My lips curved up in a sly smile. “But I do love meat.”

His jaw ticked, but his eyes sparked with hunger. “Just eat your breakfast, Addison.”

“Yes, Sir,” I purred before taking a huge bite of my sausage.

He drew in a shuddering breath, and the bulge against his jeans grew more pronounced.

“Don’t tease me,” he reprimanded.

“What are you going to do about it?” I challenged, feeling saucy. I remembered the sting of his hand against my ass. I craved more.

“Right now? Nothing. After you finish eating and take some meds? We’ll see.”

“Fine,” I grumbled with an exaggerated pout. “I’ll eat.” My headache still lingered, so it really was the best choice.

“Good girl.”

Suddenly, he captured my full attention. The rumbling words of praise acted like a trigger, and lust instantly lit up my system. My breath caught in

my throat, and I stared at him.

Now, he was the one smirking. "It's not nice being teased, is it?"

"I guess not," I said, contrite. "Sorry."

"You're forgiven. Just stop licking your fingers like that."

I nodded my agreement and used my fork and knife instead. Scott had fully taken control, and a pleasurable shiver raced through my body as I relaxed. His control felt nice. Comforting. He wasn't manipulating me or ordering me around for his own satisfaction. He was taking charge and seeing to my needs, shutting down my sass in the process.

It only made me that much more enamored with him. I tried not to stare at him as I obediently ate the delicious food he'd prepared for me.

"So, tell me more about how you got into BDSM," he said, a hint of an order in the casual request. "When did you decide you wanted to be submissive?"

"I didn't decide," I clarified. "I just am. I've always been this way. I'm a people pleaser. I like making people happy and seeing to their needs."

"But you said you want someone to take care of you."

"It's reciprocal. Symbiotic. At least, it is in an ideal relationship."

"Okay, so you like making people happy, but you also like being taken care of. How does that lead to kinky sex? Can't you be that way without whips and chains?"

I rolled my eyes at his description of kink. "It's not all whips and chains. I mean, those are nice, but it's about the power exchange. At least, the facets of BDSM I'm drawn to are about that. You can be a submissive but not a masochist, or you can be a masochist but not identify as a submissive. Same goes for Dominants and sadists. They're not necessarily interchangeable."

He frowned slightly. "Explain that more, please."

"Well, not to launch into a lecture, but BDSM had a threefold meaning: Bondage and Discipline, Domination and Submission, Sadism and Masochism. You can identify with any or all of the above and be part of the community. There's no one true way to practice BDSM, and anyone who tells you otherwise is an asshat."

He chuckled. "An *asshat*?"

"Yes." I nodded decisively. "For instance, I identify as submissive, and I enjoy the bondage and discipline aspects. I also like a little pain, but I wouldn't consider myself a masochist. It's more about the power exchange for me and less about how much pain I can take. I mean, the endorphin rush

from a good hard flogging session is amazing, don't get me wrong."

He cocked his head at me, curious. "Why do you like it so much?"

"Well..." I shifted, uncertain how much I was comfortable divulging. I decided I owed him the truth. "I'm not saying everyone in the lifestyle has damage or struggles with their mental health, but I'm Bipolar. And I have pretty severe social anxiety. It's not a great combination."

"You're Bipolar?"

"Yeah. Not a lot of people really know what that means, and people who are diagnosed experience it differently. For me, it means months-long depressive periods followed by a couple of manic weeks. I get a lot of writing done during my manic phases, but I struggle during depressive phases. My meds help keep me regulated and functional. They help me be myself: the person I can be when I'm not hampered by a chemical imbalance.

"At least, they get me as close as possible. I still feel the swings and pulls. BDSM helps with that. It's a release and a relief from my busy brain. I can find peace and calm in a power exchange. I don't have to worry, because my partner is in control. Does that make sense?" I asked, hopeful and a touch apprehensive. I'd just unloaded a lot.

I released the breath I didn't realize I was holding when he finally nodded. "It does. It helps me understand better. I don't like the idea of hurting you."

"It's not hurting me. It's helping me, even if I do experience a little pain."

I set down my fork, my plate clean. I popped the ibuprofen in my mouth and swallowed it with a gulp of water.

When I'd drained my glass, he was still watching me intently.

"I'd like to help you," he said quietly.

My heart leapt into my throat. "You mean... What do you mean?"

He stood and held out his hand. "Come with me."

I grasped his long fingers without hesitation, placing my trust and my hope in him.

CHAPTER 9

“Sit with me,” he requested, patting the mattress at his side. I immediately settled down, lacing my fingers through his.

He took a deep breath. He seemed to do that a lot; he considered his words carefully before he spoke. I appreciated that. He didn’t speak in anger, and he’d taken a while to gather his thoughts every time he’d shared one of the deepest secrets of his soul.

I sensed this was one of those times. He was about to reveal another facet of himself to me, even if he wouldn’t tell me a fact about his life. This was far more important than telling me his hometown or even his last name—something I desperately wanted to know, but I understood why he hadn’t volunteered the information.

I waited in silence, allowing him time to prepare whatever he needed to say.

“I want to help you,” he said. “If you just liked kinky sex, I don’t think I could do this. But the way you talk about it... It’s something you need. And I like it. I’m so fucking turned on by what I’ve shared with you, what we’ve done together. I like giving you pleasure, taking care of you. You say being submissive is just who you are, and you’ve always been this way. Well, I’m built this way: to protect those who need it most. I might not be protecting you from an outside threat, but this is its own kind of protection. I can see that now. I just don’t know...”

He trailed off, his eyes darkening with some thought he didn’t voice.

“What is it?” I urged softly. “You can talk to me.”

“I don’t know if I can separate this from violence. The things I’ve seen.”

“Like you said: you’re helping me. I do need this. And it’s okay that you’ve enjoyed it. Do you know how wet I get when you take control? How much it meant to me that you put my own wellbeing above your desire to fuck me last night? That turns me on, and I’m not ashamed. You shouldn’t be, either.”

Acting on bold intuition, I spread my legs and directed his hand between my thighs. “Feel how much I want you.”

His fingers brushed my soaked folds, and I shuddered as pleasure rolled through me. He pressed inside, stretching me and testing my arousal. My breaths quickened, my pulse ticking up. I spread my legs wider, inviting him deeper. He leaned into me, until his lips teased across mine as he spoke.

“Tell me what you want.” The command was roughened by lust.

“Spank me,” I panted. “I want to feel my ass burning under your hand. Then, I want you to fuck me hard.”

“Fuck, you’re creaming all over my hand.”

My inner muscles contracted around his fingers as lust surged. “Please. I want you, Scott.” I brushed my cheek against his so I could whisper in his ear. “I want you, Sir.”

His fingers curled inside me, pressing hard against my g-spot. “You really shouldn’t call me that,” he warned over my ecstatic shout.

My lashes fluttered, but I forced myself to stay in the moment with him. I couldn’t float off into bliss. Not yet.

“Why not?” I managed to whimper.

“Because I like it too fucking much.”

I traced the shell of his ear with my tongue. “Spank me, Sir. I want you to mark me.”

He cursed again, and suddenly his touch left my sex. His strong hands gripped my hips. The world spun around me, and I found myself draped face-down over his lap.

A delighted giggle burst from my lips.

His fingers curved into my ass, squeezing hard through the silky material of my robe. “Is this funny to you?”

“No, Sir,” I gasped out at the little bite of pain inflicted by his harsh hold. “I’m just happy. I tend to get giddy and laugh.”

He eased his grip, stroking the area he’d grabbed. “I like when you laugh. It’s a beautiful sound.”

I nuzzled his calf, rubbing against him like a content kitten as I settled

into my submissive headspace. "Thank you."

"So, you can take a compliment," he remarked. "I should bend you over my knee more often."

I wiggled my ass at him. "You definitely should."

His hand skimmed under my robe, slowly sliding the silky material to my waist so my bottom was exposed. He touched my wet slit, stroking my sensitive folds. I shuddered and pushed back against him with a wanton moan.

"Do you trust me?" he asked, his voice low and serious.

I craned my neck back so I could look up at him. "Yes," I vowed. "And I need you to trust me, too. I need you to trust that I'll tell you if it's too much."

He rubbed his palm over my ass, lighting up my nerve endings so I became fully aware of his sensual touch. I practically vibrated in his hold, desperate and hot for him.

"I trust you, too."

I beamed at him. "Good."

I felt more connected to him than ever. The bond we were establishing was far more significant than being punished by a skilled Top. We were learning to trust one another, but he was also learning to trust himself, even if he didn't realize it.

When I'd first met him in Nashville, he hadn't been able to trust himself to get aggressive with me. He hadn't been able to separate his life of violence from kinky games.

Now, he appeared more at peace than I'd ever seen him. The tormented light was absent from his eyes, and his touch on my body was assured. The idea of hurting me no longer caused him anguish. He understood that this was what I needed, but I wasn't certain if he understood yet that this was what he needed, too.

Just as he did when he gathered his thoughts, he took a deep breath and let it out on a long exhale. Calm settled over him, and he continued to stroke my ass, learning the curve of my body. I felt precious, revered.

Longing layered over my lust. This was what I'd always fantasized about. I craved this connection, and I never wanted it to break.

I continued to stare up at him, needing to read his expression. His pale eyes were focused on my ass, completely absorbed in what he was about to do.

The first slap was gentle, but there was intent behind it: a deliberate calculation of force. He delivered another on my opposite cheek, spreading out the warmth. He hit lower, catching the sensitive seam where my ass met my upper thighs.

I gasped and shifted away. The movement made my clit rub against his leg. I shivered and sighed, immediately arching my back and presenting myself for more.

His warm palm rested on my enflamed skin, sending heat permeating through my flesh to lick at my core.

“More. Harder.”

He delivered a sharp, stinging hit. “Are you supposed to be this demanding?”

“No, Sir,” I groaned, my head dropping forward as I fell deeper into my submissive headspace. “Harder, please.”

“That’s better.” His voice was rough, but not with anger. His cock pressed against my belly. I wasn’t the only one who got turned on when he took control.

He delivered another stinging slap, obviously affected by my begging. This hit was harder. It thudded deep into my flesh, and he held his palm against me so the heat sank through my skin. My inner muscles fluttered in response, and I squirmed on his lap as primal urges took over.

“I need you to fuck me. Please.” I released my plea on a strangled cry when he spanked me again.

“I’m not finished. Nowhere close.” His voice was hoarse with lust, and his cock strained against my hips.

I whined in need, but I didn’t beg him again. He’d fuck me when he was ready. Now, all I could do was submit to his will. The release I found in surrendering to him was intoxicating. Even as he continued to inflict stinging pain, I let out a long, blissful sigh as my entire body softened in submission.

He paused. “Are you okay?”

“Mmm,” I hummed, past the point of verbal articulation. I wiggled my ass, welcoming more.

When his palm struck me again, it landed on my swollen pussy lips. My shocked squeal melted to a moan when he stroked away the sting. Liquid heat dripped down my thighs, coating his fingers with my desire.

“Is my good girl horny?” he rumbled.

All I could manage was a strained whimper as I writhed on his lap,

wordlessly begging him to penetrate me.

He obliged me, thrusting his fingers into my wet sheath in one brutal motion. I cried out at the intrusion, pleasure flooding my system in response to the rough treatment.

“You want it hard? You want me to fuck this tight pussy?”

“Yes, Sir,” I panted. “Yes!” I shrieked my affirmation as his fingertips pressed down on my g-spot, stimulating deep inside me.

I came apart under his hands, my entire body shuddering with the force of my orgasm. “Thank you, thank you.” I released my gratitude in a mindless litany as bliss sang through my veins, sending me flying high.

My inner walls were still spasming with the aftermath of my pleasure when he abruptly withdrew from me. He gripped my hips and shifted my body, moving me easily with his vastly superior strength.

He positioned me so I bent over the edge of the bed, resting the weight of my torso on my elbows. I spread my legs wide, offering my pussy to him.

My eyes were closed in residual ecstasy, but I heard him undressing behind me. I heard the condom wrapper tear, and seconds later, his cock pressed against my entrance.

I gasped in shock when his hand fisted in my hair. He didn’t pull, but he kept me anchored in place as he slowly penetrated me. I tried to push back against him and increase his pace, but his free hand slapped my thigh in reprimand.

I groaned and stilled, bliss washing through me as I sank further into submission. He thoroughly controlled my body, my pleasure.

He withdrew at a pace that made me ache. My core throbbed to the point of discomfort, my body primed and desperate for more. I’d become a purely sexual being, caught up in a torrent of lust. My mind receded to its most primal state, and my entire being was completely consumed by need.

“Please,” I whimpered.

He spanked me, but not in rebuke. He was urging me on. “Again,” he commanded gruffly. “Beg me for pleasure. Beg me to make you come.”

“Please, Sir. Please, let me come.” My sex squeezed him in response to his deviant demand. I was so close to the edge, but his will kept me barely tethered to sanity. I wanted to please him. I wouldn’t come without permission. Gritting my teeth, I resisted the pleasure that tempted and tormented me.

He began to drive into me, hard and fast. “Hold on,” he hissed through

gritted teeth. "Not yet. Wait for me."

His hand left my hair so his fingers could sink into my hips. He pulled my body back, guiding me to fuck him in time with his harsh thrusts.

"Now," he growled, increasing his pace.

I felt his cock pulse inside me, his orgasm granting me permission to succumb to my own. The knowledge that I'd brought him pleasure sent me rocketing over the edge, and I screamed as I came. He drove in deep one last time, holding himself inside me as he finished. My inner muscles fluttered helplessly around him, ecstasy pulsing through me.

My arms shook, and my muscles turned to jelly. I collapsed onto the mattress, breathing hard. His arms closed around me, lifting me and repositioning my body so I laid on the bed, a pillow cushioning my head. He settled in beside me, pulling me close to his chest.

We lay there for a long time, holding one another. He stroked my back, and I lightly scratched his in the way I'd discovered he liked.

"I have to go," he finally murmured.

I propped up on one elbow, trying and failing to smother a small frown. "Can I at least get your number? We could text."

He trailed his fingers through my hair, his touch gentle and apologetic. "I can't do that. I'm sorry. But I'll see you when I can."

My frown deepened. "That's not fair. I can't just live my life waiting for you to show up."

His eyes tightened. "I don't expect you to wait for me. But I'll come back for you. I'll fight for you, if I have to."

"I don't want you to fight for me. I just want you to stay." I let out a shuddering sigh, steeling myself. "But I know you can't."

"I'm sorry. I really do have to go now. I've already stayed too long."

I swallowed against the lump in my throat and nodded. He got dressed, but I stayed tucked under the covers, lingering in the warmth of his body heat that had been trapped beneath the duvet.

He brushed a kiss across my forehead and turned from me.

I took a breath as he walked away, reminding myself that he'd promised to return.

CHAPTER 10

Giddy excitement raced through me when the buzzer to my apartment punctuated the silence. I set down my e-reader and rushed to the keypad. The camera outside showed what I'd hardly dared to hope: Scott, waiting to come in and see me.

It had only been five days since he'd last visited. Since he'd spanked me and fucked me hard enough that I was sore the next day, a sweet reminder of our time together.

I immediately buzzed him in, flinging open the door before he even stepped across the building's threshold. I beamed at him as he strode down the hall, closing the distance between us. He returned my smile. How did I keep forgetting how heart-melting his perfect grin was? And how panty-melting.

My sex grew wet with desire just at the sight of him. When he finally reached me, he caught me up in a tight embrace and captured my lips with his.

"Hi," I breathed against his mouth when he finally released me.

One corner of his lips tugged up in a cocky, lopsided smile. "Hi, yourself. Are you going to invite me in?" He leaned closer, so he could whisper in my ear. "Or am I going to have to fuck you in the hallway?"

I shivered and took a reluctant step back, allowing him to enter my apartment. "I'm not an exhibitionist." My banter was ruined by the way my voice shook. My emotions were raw, almost manic. I was flying high, and I never wanted to come back down. I loved how I felt when I was in Scott's presence: safe, revered, content.

“Neither am I,” he rumbled, his eyes glinting. “I want you all to myself.”

A delighted laugh bubbled from my throat. “You’re being silly.” I tried to puncture the sexual tension before I combusted.

His arm wrapped around my waist, and he pulled me close so I could feel his erection pressing against my belly.

“Does this feel silly to you?”

My breath caught, my levity instantly heating to lust. “No.” I licked my lips, feeling both vulnerable and powerful at the same time. The dichotomy was intoxicating. “I’ve missed you.”

He gave me a sly smile. “You missed me? Or my cock?”

“Both,” I said, my tone low and sultry.

“Good,” he half-growled. “Because I missed you. And your pussy. I need a taste.”

I bit back a wanton moan. I hadn’t liked oral in the past, but I’d become addicted to the decadent sensation of his mouth on me.

Still, guilt nipped at me. “You know I can’t reciprocate,” I said softly. “I just can’t.”

He sobered slightly, pressing a kiss against my forehead. “You don’t have to reciprocate. And you don’t have to talk to me about why, unless you want to.”

I shook my head. “I’d rather not.”

I didn’t want to ruin our time together by unpacking my baggage on him. Tucking my damage in a far corner of my mind, I leaned into him, cupping his nape so I could pull him closer.

“Fuck me, Sir,” I whispered.

His features tightened with hunger. “Good girls say *please*.”

“Please.”

He picked me up and tossed me over his shoulder, landing a sharp slap on my thigh. “Too late. I’m going to eat your pussy until you’re begging me to drive my cock into you. I’m not going to let you come until you really mean it when you say *please*.”

I squirmed in his hold, my body heating in response to his wicked promise.

He kept that promise. By the time he finished with me, I was trembling and boneless. He rolled off me and pulled me against his chest, cuddling me. I closed my eyes and drifted in my post-orgasmic haze as he gently stroked my back in the way I loved.

After a while, I stirred with a contented sigh. I started to trace little circular patterns on his chest, indulging in the warmth of his body against mine.

“When will I see you again?” I asked, trying not to sound too desperate. “I leave for Italy three weeks from today. I’m going to Sorrento and the Amalfi Coast.”

My heart twisted as I spoke. I was prodding him for information. Would I see him again, once I left England? Would he be able to visit me if I wasn’t a short train ride away? So far, he’d only been able to spend a few hours with me. International travel might not be possible.

“I’m not sure,” he replied, his tone ambiguous. I couldn’t read any emotion in his expression. “I can’t make any promises.”

“But you’ll come back, right?”

He shifted, moving me off him so he could get to his feet. “I should go.”

“What? So soon?” I knew I sounded needy, but I couldn’t help myself.

I frowned at him and folded my arms over my chest, a protective gesture as well as an annoyed one. “So that’s it?” I demanded. “You’re just going to fuck me and leave?”

He started pulling on his clothes.

“Talk to me.”

He met my eye, but his face was still impassive. “What do you want to talk about?”

I threw up my hands, exasperated. “I don’t know. Tell me something about yourself. Anything. Don’t go like this, without sharing anything with me. I’ve shared so much with you, and I don’t know anything about you, other than the fact that we have amazing sex.”

His features hardened to stone. “You know I can’t share anything like that with you.”

I sat up, my fists balling at my sides. “I don’t know that. And I think it’s bullshit. I’m not going to look you up or dig into your past. I’m not going to jeopardize your job if you share with me. It’s okay to be vulnerable around me.” I took a breath, trying to calm my roiling emotions. “You have been vulnerable with me,” I said, more quietly.

His jaw ticked, the motion almost imperceptible. He took a step back and finished buttoning his shirt.

“Please.” I resorted to begging, hoping that would sway him. “Trust me.”

“I do,” he said in a monotone.

“Then why won’t you talk to me? Really talk to me. I’ve placed my trust in you, and you’re not reciprocating. Tell me something real. Drop the stoicism and be real with me. Be vulnerable. I won’t judge you.”

This time, he flinched at the word *vulnerable*. He straightened to his full height, so he towered over me. “You’re asking for something I can’t give you. I have to go now.”

My chest tightened. He was going to walk away. He was shutting me out, because I’d pushed him too hard.

But what I’d said was true: it was bullshit that he wasn’t letting me into his life. It meant that he didn’t see a future with me.

I hadn’t allowed myself to really contemplate a future with him, but knowing he’d already closed the door on the possibility made my heart ache.

In that moment, I knew he wasn’t coming back for me. He might return to fuck me a few more times, but he wouldn’t come for me. Not in the way that really mattered.

“Goodbye, Addison.” With the clipped farewell, he walked out of my apartment, leaving me cold on the bed.

I couldn’t help fearing that I detected a note of finality in the words.

CHAPTER 11

Three weeks. Three long, painful weeks, and I hadn't heard so much as a whisper from Scott. While I'd been in his presence, I'd indulged in merciful hours of reprieve from the crushing weight of my depression.

The last twenty-one days had gone by at a glacial pace. I'd carefully scheduled meetups with different friends every night, so I could pretend I wasn't lonely.

Now that I was leaving England, I was faced with reality again: I was alone.

In a few minutes, the plane would touch down in Naples, and then, I'd catch the train to Sorrento by myself. I should have been excited, but the weight of regret settled in my gut.

With each mile I traveled, I was getting farther away from Scott.

And when I left Italy in a week, I'd be returning to Chicago. There would be an ocean between us, and he wouldn't be able to catch a train to see me for a few blissful hours, like he'd done when I was in York.

He'd promised he'd come back for me, but now I knew that had been a lie. I'd never see him again.

I blinked against the sting at the corners of my eyes and told myself I wasn't desperately lonely. I'd left my friends behind in England, but I'd meet plenty of people in Sorrento. Plenty of strangers.

My ears popped as the plane began its descent, and I stared out the window. The stunning view did little to cheer me. It was as though I was watching the landscape grow closer in a movie. I was detached from the

beauty and awe of the experience; like this wasn't really my life.

I didn't want this to be my life. I didn't want to be traveling alone to yet another rented apartment.

I don't have a home, either. Scott's earnest admission tormented me. He'd cut straight to my core with those words. We'd bonded over our shared pain, finding a bittersweet connection that resonated in our souls.

Now, I was left only with the pain, robbed of the comfort of his strong arms around me.

The plane touched down, and I shuffled toward the exit. Moving on autopilot, I made my way through the airport and customs. The excitement I used to feel at getting a fresh stamp on my passport was absent. It was just another mark to prove that I had no roots, no home.

I plastered on a smile, telling myself that most people would be elated to visit Italy.

That didn't affect my dark mood. Berating myself for my self-pity only made my depression that much worse. I was self-centered, selfish. I should be grateful for this opportunity, but I was squandering it.

I didn't deserve this vacation, but here I was: visiting one of the most romantic cities in the world without a partner by my side.

The customs officer barely glanced at me before stamping my passport and waving his hand toward baggage claim. My feet carried me in that direction, but I was still detached, my reality dulled.

"Addison."

His voice rumbled through me, and I stiffened. My fantasies must be clouding my mind, because there was no way he was here. He'd said goodbye and hadn't come back. He'd shut me out and walked away.

His fingers brushed my bare arm, and my fine hairs immediately stood on end, his touch sparking across my skin like an electric shock.

"Hey," he said quietly, trying to call my attention to him.

Emotion surged as the world sharpened around me, everything jumping into painful relief.

Lust. Longing. Anger.

I rounded on him. "What are you doing here?" I demanded, even as tears formed in my eyes.

His brows drew together, as though he was puzzled by my ire. "I came to see you."

A half-mad laugh clawed its way up my throat. "You came here. To

Italy.”

He nodded, his eyes watching me carefully. His keen gaze took in the tears that spilled down my cheeks. “Are you all right?”

“No, I’m not all right.” I couldn’t stop myself from railing at him. He’d stripped me raw. And then, he’d abandoned me. “I haven’t heard from you in weeks, and now, you think you can just show up here?”

His eyes tightened. “I came as soon as I could.”

“Right. You couldn’t come sooner because of your job. Because of your secrets.” I ran my fingers through my hair. “I can’t handle this.”

My heart couldn’t handle any more. It had been shredded beyond repair long before I’d met Scott. Somehow, he’d worked his way into the tattered gaps and ripped them farther apart.

“You left me.” The accusation hitched in my throat. “You’ll always leave.”

He reached for me, wrapping his arms around me so I was trapped in his embrace.

I shoved at his chest, but I rested my cheek against his shoulder. My mind told me to push him away, but my soul told me to cling to him. The intimacy between us was too sweet to resist.

“Why are you doing this to me?” I asked on a strained whisper.

His hands stroked up and down my back. “Because I’m a selfish bastard. Because I can’t stop thinking about you. The way you taste; the way you fit in my arms; the way you understand me like no one else does.”

His fingers curled beneath my chin, and he tipped my head back so I was caught in his intense aquamarine stare. “I can’t stay away from you, Addison.”

“Then don’t,” I begged.

He answered me with a kiss, communicating his need with his hungry mouth on mine. His lips branded me, his tongue stroked in to possess me. My hands shifted from his chest to curve into his shoulders, no longer pretending I wanted to push him away. I wanted to be right here: in his arms.

He kissed me until my fingers tingled and my knees went weak, showing me no mercy.

The loud buzz of the baggage carousel finally tore us apart, and I gasped for air as I sagged against him.

“Come on,” he murmured. “Let’s get to Sorrento. I need to get you somewhere more private.”

I shivered at the implication. We'd been making a scene, but I wasn't remotely embarrassed. I didn't care what these people thought. All I cared about was being nestled against his hard body.

Now that I was back in his arms, my anger melted. Being with him felt too good, and I fell back into my default mode when I was with him: ignoring my uglier emotions and avoiding thinking about the future. About the emotional consequences I'd face when he inevitably left again.

He retrieved our bags and ushered me outside to the taxi stand. We caught a ride to the train station and bought our tickets for the first train to Sorrento.

Scott barely kept his hands off me during the entire process. His fingers trailed along my back, my nape, my thighs. I didn't want him to stop touching me. I couldn't bear to break our contact, either.

When we were seated on the plastic bench on the rickety train that would carry us down the coast, I finally gathered my wits.

"How did you know I'd be here?" I asked.

He rested his hand on my upper thigh, oh-so-close to my sex. Heat suffused my system, and I suppressed the urge to squirm in my seat. It was going to be a long ride to Sorrento.

"You told me you were coming here, remember? I took the first flight into Naples today, so I'd be here whenever your plane arrived. I've arranged a week's leave. I wanted to be with you for longer than a few hours."

I rested my head on his shoulder. "I want that, too. I'm glad you're here. Sorry I was kind of a bitch at the airport."

He pulled back so he could meet my eyes. The authoritative slant of his firm jaw made desire bloom in my belly.

"I don't want to hear you talk about yourself like that. You're not a bitch. You couldn't be a bitch if you tried. I understand why you were upset with me. You had every right to be angry. I didn't leave you on the best terms." His lips thinned. "Are you still angry with me?"

"No," I admitted on a contented sigh. "Not at all. I'm happy."

The declaration came as a surprise. I hadn't been truly happy in...longer than I'd like to contemplate. Probably years.

His kiss whispered across my cheek. "I'm glad," he murmured. "I'm happy, too."

The heavy way he said it made me suspect that I wasn't the only one surprised by this particular emotion. Even though he'd shared pieces of his

soul with me, I craved to understand him better. We had a whole week together. Surely, he'd open up at least a little in that span of time.

And hopefully, he was ready to open up to his kinky side more. My body burned to join with his, and I couldn't wait to have him inside me again, binding us together in the most intimate way possible.



AS SOON AS we checked into my Airbnb apartment, he fulfilled my desire. We lay together on the bed, sweaty and gasping for breath.

"That was amazing," I panted.

He grinned at me. "*You're* amazing. I love watching you come. How many orgasms was that?"

I struggled to sort through the pleasurable haze in my mind. "Um, like five? I think?"

He chuckled. "And I barely even spanked you."

"Hey, don't think you're going to convert me to a vanilla," I warned.

"You're converting me to a chocolate," he jibed. "Maybe we can swirl."

"Oh, my god," I groaned, slapping his chest. "That was terrible."

"The joke or the sex?"

"Definitely the joke." I snuggled back into him. "The sex was incredible."

"You're welcome."

I pursed my lips at him in mock-annoyance. "You're getting very cocky."

"And you love it." He wrapped his hand around my nape and pulled me in for a slow, sweet kiss.

We stayed like that for a long time, unable to resist touching each other, re-learning the contours of each other's bodies. After a while, I stirred.

"We really should get out of bed. We only have so many days to explore Sorrento."

He tugged me back into him with a sexy growl. "I only have so many days to explore *you*."

The comment elicited a fresh surge of lust, but it was layered with regret. "Only a few days?" I asked quietly.

His expression fell, his levity melting away. "I can't stay longer than a week. You know I can't."

Indecision tormented me. I could throw myself into his arms for the next

seven days, or I could put up protective walls and send him away.

I chose the former.

It wasn't a choice, really. I didn't have a choice when it came to Scott.

"Let's go exploring," I urged, putting on my best smile.

He allowed my deceptively cheery mood, not pressing me to confess my deeper emotions.

We got dressed—after fucking one more time in the shower—and headed out into the city.

Well, Sorrento was more of a town, really. It was even smaller than York. And just as charming.

We walked past the basilica, which was painted pale yellow, accentuated by a white bell tower. The architecture was beautiful, and Scott agreed that we should visit the church the next day. For now, I wanted to learn the streets and see what the city had to offer.

Only a few yards from the basilica, we came to a pedestrian bridge. I paused, my breath taken away by the fantastic view.

To either side of the bridge, the ground dropped away sharply, leaving the pastel-colored buildings perched on high cliffs. In the distance, the Mediterranean Sea glowed navy blue, fading into the paler hues of the horizon. It was impossible to discern where the water ended and the sky began.

"Wow," I exclaimed softly.

Scott wrapped his arm around my waist. "Beautiful," he murmured.

I blinked up at him. He wasn't looking out at the view; he was staring down at me, his eyes alight with something like wonder.

I blushed and broke from his admiring gaze. He gripped my chin between his thumb and forefinger, redirecting my face to his.

"We really do need to work on you accepting compliments," he dictated.

"Thank you," I breathed, compelled by his stern gaze.

He brushed a soft kiss over my lips. "That's better." His cheek skimmed against mine as he leaned close to whisper in my ear. "Good girl."

My clit pulsed and my core heated, my body reacting to the praise with visceral intensity.

I licked my lips. "Don't."

"Don't what?" His fingers curled into my waist, reminding me how he'd gripped me while he'd fucked me hard from behind.

"We're in public," I protested weakly.

“No one would know I’d said anything to turn you on if you weren’t blushing so brightly.”

I dipped my head. “I can’t help it.”

“Are you blushing because you’re embarrassed? Or because I’m getting you hot?”

“Scott,” I scolded in an undertone.

“Sir,” he corrected me, the honorific teasing across my neck on his low whisper.

I shuddered as desire coursed through me. “Please,” I begged. “Don’t.”

He chuckled in my ear, a sound of pure masculine satisfaction. Mercifully, he pulled away, taking my hand so he could lead me farther into the city.

“I think you’re starting to like tormenting me,” I grumbled.

He shot me a sly smile. “Is that what I’m doing?”

“Yes.”

“Then I suppose I am enjoying it.”

I bumped him with my shoulder. “Bastard.” The word held a teasing lilt, and he didn’t take offense.

He simply shrugged with a wide grin that took years off his weathered face.

I blinked and tore my eyes away from him. I’d been staring in rapt fascination, entranced by his joy.

Instead, I focused on the city around us. We’d entered a narrow pedestrian street, lined with countless shops and restaurants on either side. Jewel toned awnings hung over many of them, the garish colors competing for shoppers’ attention. Yellow seemed to be the most predominant choice, and I noticed lemon motifs in several windows.

“What do you think the lemons are about?” I asked Scott, idly curious.

“Let’s find out.”

He ushered me into a souvenir shop. It seemed to sell mostly magnets, postcards, and jewelry. My attention caught on an adorable pair of glass lemon drop earrings as soon as we walked in. I touched their smooth, round surface, feeling their delicate weight.

Scott immediately picked them up and carried them to the counter.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Getting these for you.”

“I don’t need them,” I protested. He’d already bought me the stuffed

Hedwig plushy—and I'd slept with it every night he was gone.

I didn't need more gifts from him. His presence was gift enough.

"You like them," he replied, setting them down on the counter. He turned his attention to the shop owner. "So," he said conversationally, "What are the lemons about? We've seen them everywhere."

The man beamed at us. "You just arrived in Sorrento?" His accent was thick, but he seemed willing to speak to us in English.

"Yeah," I confirmed. "Sorry, I don't really speak Italian." I knew the basics, but I couldn't carry a conversation.

"It's okay," he reassured me. "The lemons are popular because of the limoncello we make here. Have you tried it?"

"No. Is it sour?"

"Here," the man said, picking up a small basket that I hadn't noticed on the counter. It was filled to the brim with individually wrapped hard candies. "Try."

I picked one up and unwrapped it dubiously. "This is limoncello? I thought it was a drink."

"It's inside. Try it," he urged again.

I popped the sweet into my mouth and sucked on it. At first, it tasted like a faintly sour lemon drop. Then, the hard coating cracked, and liquid oozed onto my tongue. The lemony flavor was tinged with the distinct burn of alcohol. I suppressed a grimace and swallowed.

Scott laughed. "Not your favorite?"

I forced a smile, not wanting to offend the shop owner. "Thank you," I hedged, not deigning to reply to Scott.

"We'd like the earrings, please." He slid them farther across the counter to indicate his intent to purchase them.

When the owner rang them up, I discovered they only cost twelve euros. I breathed a small sigh of relief. They weren't expensive, so I didn't have to feel too guilty about accepting the gift from Scott.

As we stepped out of the shop, I slipped the silver hoops in place so I could wear the earrings as we walked through the city.

Scott smiled and flicked one of them lightly. "Adorable," he approved. Again, he was studying my face.

"Thanks," I said, expressing my gratitude for the compliment rather than the gift.

He pressed a kiss to my forehead, communicating his pleasure with me.

“You’re welcome.”

We walked a little farther down the street, until the crowds began to thin out. I was about to suggest we turn back when I noticed white footprints painted on the pavement.

“I wonder where these lead,” I mused, following them.

“Down the rabbit hole, apparently.”

“What?”

Scott waved a brochure at me. I hadn’t noticed him accepting it from a woman who stood to the side of the street.

“This restaurant they’re promoting. Artis Domus. The leaflet says it’s like Alice in Wonderland. Apparently, they have peacocks and bunnies.”

“Bunnies?” I practically bounced on the balls of my feet, excitement thrumming through me. “Can we pet them?”

He laughed and kissed my forehead again. “Let’s find out.”

CHAPTER 12

“Not that I’m not enjoying watching this, but do you want to sit down?” Scott’s voice rumbled with mirth.

I turned and looked up. Way up. I was crouched low on the grass, and I hadn’t heard him approach. Now, he loomed over me, grinning down at me.

I flushed and stood, abandoning my attempt to summon the nearest bunny. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to make you wait to eat. He’s just so fluffy. I want to pet him.”

He cocked his head at me, his eyes twinkling. “Have I told you how cute you are?”

My cheeks burned hotter. “A few times, yeah.”

“Do you want to try to pet the peacock, too?”

I shook my head. “No. Peacocks are assholes.”

His laugh boomed through the garden, his head tipping back. The sunlight filtering through the leafy trees played over his defined features, softening them.

“Well, they are assholes,” I defended myself. “They won’t let you near them. They just sit there, looking all majestic from a distance. That one would probably peck my eyes out if I got too close.” I gestured to the nearest white peacock.

Scott took my hand, tugging me closer to him. “Sounds dangerous. Don’t worry, I’ll protect you.”

A thrill raced through me, even though I knew he was teasing. I liked the idea of him protecting me, far more than was probably healthy.

“You promise?” I tried to sound lighthearted, but my words were heavier than I intended.

He caressed my cheek, his expression dropping to something more serious. “Always.”

My chest tightened. If only he really could promise that. He didn’t have to promise me forever. We hadn’t known each other long, and I didn’t know if I even believed in forever.

But the uncertainty of what would happen when this week was over made my stomach twist.

I chose to willfully ignore it, pushing my concerns away so I could enjoy this time with him.

“I love animals,” I babbled to cover my discomfiture. “I kind of grew up with a menagerie at my house.”

Scott pushed in my chair for me and took a seat beside me. He was still smiling, oblivious to my moment of pain and uncertainty.

“Your house was big enough to host a menagerie?” He clearly thought I was exaggerating.

“Well, my house itself wasn’t that big. But we had a good bit of land. It’s right on the outskirts of the city, but there are several acres of woodland and pastures. At one point, we had four dogs, five cats, three ponies, and a goat. Oh, and a beta fish.”

He leaned forward with genuine interest. “How’d your family end up with that much land near the city?”

“It was my great-grandparents’ old farm house. Pieces of the farm were sold over time, but the heart of the property was still left.”

“Was? Isn’t it in your family anymore?”

My heart sank. I hadn’t meant to talk about my childhood home. I didn’t want to think about how it was now a crumbling ruin, its soul ravaged and its contents robbed.

“My family still owns it,” I replied. I didn’t say anything else.

The waitress arrived to take our order. I ordered prosecco and lobster linguine, and he requested beer and a pizza. I tried to formulate what I was going to say next to keep the conversation flowing.

He spoke before I could come up with anything.

“My family still lives in the house I grew up in,” he said when the server left.

I blinked at him. “What?”

“In Colorado. My parents still live there.”

“Are you actually telling me about your life right now? I mean, I’m not trying to sound accusatory. I want to know more about you. I’m just surprised.”

He offered a small smile. “It’s going to be an awfully long week if we don’t talk. I think I can trust you enough to tell you some things. I want to share with you. There are just a lot of things I can’t talk about. But I’ll say what I can. You were right to be pissed at me the last time I saw you in York. I didn’t want to open up, so I walked away instead of communicating. That’s on me.”

My heart leapt into my throat. I’d longed to know more about him, and I could hardly believe he was going to share with me.

“I hate lying,” he said solemnly, “but it’s part of my job. I didn’t want to lie to you.” He held my hand on top of the table, stroking my palm with his thumb. “I’ve never been able to say the things I’ve told you. Not to anyone.”

“I’m glad you can share with me. I want to know you better. I’d never violate your trust.”

I leaned forward, propping one elbow on the table. “What can you tell me about Colorado? I’ve never been. What’s it like?”

“It’s beautiful. I grew up in a small town located on the edge of Rocky Mountain National Park, so there are wonderful views of the mountains. It’s a bit of a tourist destination, but I was part of the local community when I was growing up.” His gaze turned inward, his expression a touch wistful. “I have a lot of family there. Tons of cousins on my mother’s side.”

“It sounds like you miss them.”

He blinked and focused on me again. “I love my family, but it’s not the same anymore. I’m not the same.”

“I understand,” I said softly. “In my own way, I understand.” He’d probably seen things—and done things—that made it difficult to slip back into civilian life. His reasons for feeling alienated from his home were different from mine, but that didn’t change the outcome: we both felt like we didn’t have roots anywhere in this world.

He nodded, acknowledging our shared pain. “I’m the only member of my family who doesn’t live there anymore. I go visit them sometimes. My parents, my brother, and my sister. They’re both married now. I have three nieces and two nephews.”

“That’s a big family,” I remarked. “What’s the age difference between

you and your siblings? I have two sisters, and we're really close in age. It made for a lot of fighting growing up—you know, lots of teenage hormones under one roof. But we're all close friends now." Despite my turmoil when it came to my childhood, I did love my sisters dearly.

"That's great. I'm not close with my brother and sister like I used to be, but we still keep in touch." He smiled, but a shadow passed over his eyes. "Gregory's two years older than I am. He had a bit of a big brother complex. It always had to be acknowledged that he was the oldest.

"Kelly was born when I was twelve. That came as a shock to my parents. Mom had to go back to work at the hotel to help support us. My dad was in construction. He worked hard, but we didn't have much growing up."

I thought of my own cosseted childhood, when I'd been provided with anything I could have wanted. But material things and privileges came with an emotional price, and I would have traded them all for unconditional love.

I decided not to talk about that. I didn't want to interrupt him now that he was finally sharing. And I didn't really want to examine my feelings about my childhood too closely. I definitely preferred to ignore how those experiences had shaped me in adulthood.

"How did that affect you? Your mom going back to work, I mean." I was pressing Scott for deeper emotional information, but I didn't think this would reveal anything that would jeopardize the secrecy of his job.

"It was okay," he replied. I believed him; he truly didn't seem bothered by my question. "I think it was hardest on Kelly, since she was so young. I ended up spending a lot of time taking care of her while my parents were at work. I didn't mind stepping up, though. I loved taking care of my baby sister."

There it was again: Scott was a natural caretaker. It was in his nature to protect those around him.

"And there was lots to do around the town in my free time," he continued. "There's great skiing in the area, and when it's warmer, it's always nice to go horseback riding."

"You rode horses?" I asked, excited at our commonality.

He smiled. "Yeah, but not like you. I rode Western, and I didn't compete or anything like that. I saved my competitive side for the football field."

"You, competitive?" I asked, sardonic. "I can't imagine that."

He squeezed my hand. "Are you getting sassy with me?"

I laughed. "Maybe a little. What are you going to do about it?"

“For now, I’ll indulge you. Later... We’ll see. Depends on how sassy you get.”

“I’ll make sure to bring my A game, then,” I said with a saucy grin. I wanted to goad him. Wondering how he’d respond once we were back in the privacy of our apartment sent a little thrill racing through me.

His brows rose, but our food arrived before he could issue a retort. We spent the next hour enjoying our meals and chatting. Well, mostly I chatted. I talked about my competitive horse showing days and my general lack of coordination when it came to contact sports. We both laughed at a few particularly ridiculous stories about my physical awkwardness. Scott found it especially amusing that I’d chosen to be scorekeeper at volleyball games so I could get out of a semester of P.E.

“But I’m sure you were a total jock.” I waved at his body, indicating his incredible physique. “I doubt we would have gotten along in high school.”

“I think we would have.”

I scoffed. “Right. The star quarterback would have noticed the socially awkward nerd.”

He captured me in his sparkling gaze. “I would have noticed you.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond to his intense declaration, and I was rescued from the intimate moment when the waitress brought the bill. I tried to split it, but Scott insisted on treating me.

“You can’t keep buying me things,” I told him. “I don’t expect you to pay for everything.”

“I know you don’t expect it. But I want to take my lady out for dinner and drinks. And dancing,” he added, spearing me with a significant stare.

I shifted uncomfortably. “I don’t really dance.”

“Yeah, I remember you told me that in Nashville.”

“Well, you should understand why now. I just spent the last hour telling you about my *maladroit exploits*.”

“*Maladroit exploits*? Look at you, pulling out the fancy author words. That won’t distract me, though. We’re going to dance tonight.”

“You know how uncoordinated I am,” I countered.

“Lucky for you, I’m very coordinated. That’s the trick: you just have to let me lead. And I know from experience that you like when I take the lead.”

“Scott,” I hissed his name in warning, glancing around to make sure no one was close enough to hear his innuendo.

He chuckled. “You’re so cute when you’re scandalized. No one heard me.

And even if they did, they wouldn't know what I meant." He leaned in and lowered his voice. "They wouldn't know I'm talking about how you love it when I spank your pretty ass and fuck you hard while I make you beg me for pleasure."

Something between a groan and a whimper slipped through my lips.

He kissed the tip of my nose. "You see?" he said with satisfaction. "Adorable."

He pulled back and stood, holding out his hand in offering. I took it immediately, more captivated by him than ever. When I'd first met him, he'd been brooding and anguished. The man who stood before me now was years younger, the careworn lines easing from his face. His eyes were no longer haunted; they glittered with satisfaction.

I went up on my tiptoes and pressed a quick kiss against his lips.

"What was that for?" he asked.

"I'm glad you're here with me." I didn't say all the heavy things that were on my mind. I wanted him to continue smiling and laughing. "Come on." I looped my arm through his. "Let's go find somewhere we can dance."

CHAPTER 13

The terrace of the Excelsior Vittoria hotel was like something out of a romantic dream. It was situated on one of the cliffs that jutted out toward the sea. From where we were seated, the hazy, purple mountains in the distance blended into the deep blue water. The horizon was more defined at this time of day. The sun sat golden and low in the sky, casting a glittering swath across the water. The gentle waves shined as they undulated with the pull of the tide.

The sweet music from the string quartet filled the terrace, the sound swelling to spill out over the cliff's edge and meld with the soft sighs of the sea.

I let out a long breath.

"Are you all right?" Scott asked, tracing the line of my jaw to call my attention back to him.

My lips curved in contentment. "I'm great," I replied. "I'm happy. That was a good sigh."

"I'm glad you're in a good mood. That must mean you're ready to dance with me."

The string quartet started up a new song, lilting notes floating through the air to sink into my chest and tug at my heart.

Stay with Me by Sam Smith.

I stood and offered Scott my hand. "I'm ready," I murmured, wondering if he heard the significance in the song like I did.

He grasped my fingers, his big hand swallowing mine. His crystalline eyes caught the setting sun, shining like pale gemstones. His lips were

twisted in a small smile, but his features were sharp with hunger and something deeper that was matched in my own soul: *yearning*.

We stepped out into the center of the terrace, so the endless sea vista stretched out before us. Glittering lights were strung from the balcony that ringed the cliff's edge, twinkling like fireflies on a warm night.

No one else was dancing, but I didn't care. I wasn't remotely self-conscious or socially awkward. All I wanted was to dance in Scott's arms, to lean on his strong frame and allow him to lead me.

He wrapped his arm around my waist and took my hand in his. I pressed myself against him, and he took our first swaying step. I hesitated for a moment, and his hand firmed on my lower back, guiding me to move with him. My body went supple, and I began to dance with uncharacteristic grace. It felt magical, impossible. I was soaring, tethered to the ground only by his strong arms.

Everything was perfect: the sunset, the music, the view.

I couldn't pay attention to any of it. Nothing was as captivating as his glowing eyes staring down at me with desire so keen, it was almost too much to bear.

The song ended, and he dipped my body. I clutched at him, but he supported my weight easily as he captured my lips with his in a long, slow kiss.

When I melted against him, he finally released me and helped me stand straight. People clapped around us, and I flushed.

Despite the heat in my cheeks, a small shiver raced across my skin as a cool breeze played through my long blue dress, lifting the hem so it floated behind me.

Scott rubbed at the goosebumps on my arm. "Are you cold?"

"A little," I admitted.

"I'll warm you up," he promised in a rumbling undertone.

I shivered again, and his arm draped over my shoulders to ward off the chill. I pressed my body close to his, allowing him to lead me off the terrace and back toward our apartment.

I expected him to sweep me up in a kiss as soon as we closed the door behind us, but instead, he kept his hold on my hand and led me into the bedroom. I followed eagerly, ready to fall into bed with him again. I was still faintly sore from where he'd fucked me that afternoon, but my core began to swell and heat for him, conditioned to respond to his nearness.

“Get undressed,” he issued the command gently when he had me positioned by the bed.

He didn’t have to say it twice. My fingers flew to the zipper at the back of my dress, and I shimmied out of the silky material. I slid my white lace panties down my legs, but I decided to leave my strappy black high heels on.

I straightened, displaying my body for him with pride. He worshipped my curves, and I felt like a goddess standing before him in nothing but my sexy shoes.

He’d been retrieving something from his bag while I undressed, but his eyes widened when he turned back to face me.

My eyes widened as well, and my breath caught in my throat.

Scott was holding a coil of rope.

“Where...” I licked my suddenly dry lips. “Where did you get that?”

“Online,” he answered simply, but his eyes were intense on me. He took a step toward me, and I remained rooted in place. “The way you describe rope in your books is...interesting. It’s not violent.”

He stopped when he was standing inches from me. I could feel his heat pulsing against my bare skin. My nipples pebbled with awareness, and my sex grew damp. I could smell the slightly earthy scent of the jute rope, and my body reacted with a surge of desire.

He was still studying me, his eyes intent on mine as he spoke, as though he was searching through my thoughts.

“You’re not scared of me, are you?” he asked, the weight of the words letting me know my answer could break him.

I caressed his cheek. “No. Never.”

He trailed the looped rope across my chest, rubbing the slightly rough fibers over my sensitized skin. My lashes fluttered, and a groan left my chest as lust suffused my system.

“You’re going to have to be very good for me,” he murmured. “I’ve been studying this, but I want to get it right.”

I blinked and struggled to gather my wits before the scent and sensation of the rope could send me floating off into subspace.

“You studied rope? When?”

“Over the last few weeks. I knew you liked it. I wanted to try.”

“I want to try, too,” I breathed. “I’ll be good.”

He pressed a kiss against my forehead. “Stay still,” he ordered softly, his lips brushing my skin.

I nodded my agreement, and he took a small step back. He uncoiled the rope and tossed out the length, the way I'd seen dozens of Doms handle it in the past. Had he really studied this for me?

My questioning thoughts were obliterated from my mind when he began to draw the rope through his hands, sliding it between his palms until he found the central point. The soft whisper of the fibers against his calloused skin quieted my brain. I drew in a deep breath, inhaling the scent of jute.

I slipped into my submissive headspace on a sigh, placing myself under his control.

He remained intent on his task, focusing on the rope rather than staring into my eyes. When his gaze did return to me, it honed on my body. He remained riveted on my chest as he drew the rope around my ribcage, just beneath my breasts.

I shivered when he stepped behind me, completely absorbed in his work. He drew the rope tight before looping over the top of my breasts. He worked slowly, methodically. I was familiar with the simple chest harness he was creating, but I'd never felt so connected to a rope Top.

My skin tingled with awareness, my brain buzzed with pleasure. I began to drift, my conscious mind receding. Nothing existed in my world except him: his touch, his scent. And the rope he wound around the back of my neck. It skimmed over my nape, making the fine hairs at the back of my neck stand on end.

I let out a happy hum, and he kissed my throat as he continued to work, threading the rope through the loops he'd made around my chest. He pulled it taut, and my eyes flew wide on a gasp as the harness tightened.

He tied it off behind my back, and my breasts grew heavy as my blood flow became restricted. My nipples tightened to hard peaks that throbbed for attention.

I began to draw in deep breaths through my nose, the rushes of oxygen adding to my high. I was detached from reality, but I was tethered to him.

He took the length of rope that remained and used it to bind my wrists together at my lower back, connecting them to the chest harness. I was tied. Trapped. Vulnerable to anything he wanted to do to me.

"How do you feel?" he murmured in my ear, his heated words fanning my neck.

"Safe," I sighed. The ropes hugged my body like a lover's embrace, both constraining and supporting me. I might be completely at his mercy, but I

knew he would never harm me. I was small in his shadow, powerless. But he would take care of me. "Protected."

He drew in a shuddering breath at the word and stepped to my front, so he could look into my eyes again. He cupped my jaw, lifting my face to his so he could study my expression.

My breaths turned shallower as I fell deeper into him. I started up at him, waiting to see what he would do next. Completely willing to do anything he asked of me.

In that moment, I was his.

"You are so beautiful," he murmured, his thumbs caressing my cheeks.

"Thank you," I whispered. "I think you're beautiful, too."

He closed his eyes and tilted his forehead against mine, as though the connection grounded him somehow. His fingers trailed over the ropes that held my body. I shuddered and mindlessly arched my back, thrusting my aching breasts closer to his touch.

He drew away slightly so he could watch my reactions. His hands closed around my breasts, squeezing gently.

Pleasure rolled through me, and my head dropped back on a moan. My knees sagged at the rush of bliss, and he caught my waist to support me. He easily maneuvered my body, lifting me and shifting me toward the bed.

"Kneel," he ordered.

Obediently, I folded my legs beneath me. He'd positioned me on the center of the mattress, and I anticipated that he'd join me.

Instead, he stepped away and started to undress. I watched him, my need growing impossibly stronger as he revealed his hard body. My desire dripped from my pussy, making my thighs slick.

When he was naked, he retrieved a condom from the nightstand.

"Don't," I begged, finding my voice.

He turned to me, a question in his eyes.

"I'm on birth control. I don't want to use a condom."

His jaw tightened. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," I promised. "I want to feel you inside me."

He cursed and closed the distance between us, grabbing me and crushing his mouth down on mine. I opened for him, conveying my willingness to accept him. All of him, without a barrier between us.

His fingers dipped between my legs, and they were instantly coated with my arousal.

He growled against my mouth. "I love how wet you get for me."

I whined when he moved away from me, positioning himself so he was stretched out on the mattress, his back propped up against the headboard. He gripped my hips and guided me to straddle him.

"Ride me," he commanded.

I hesitated. "I don't like being on top," I confessed.

"Why not?"

"I don't like feeling like I'm in control."

He pinched my nipple, and I cried out at the flare of pain. My breasts were so heavy, so sensitive. I tried to shift away, but he held me fast. My lust left me on a tormented whimper.

"Do you feel like you're in control now?" he asked calmly.

"No, Sir," I panted.

His huge cock jutted up toward me, straining for my swollen pussy. Compelled by his command and his hold on my breast, I lowered myself onto him.

He tweaked my other nipple. "Slower."

I bit my lip and slowed my pace, moving with aching care as I slid my body onto his. He stretched me, inch by thick inch, until he'd entered me to the hilt.

"Stay there." He forestalled me from moving my hips.

Before I could puzzle out why, he reached around me. His fingers were still slick from my juices, but he gathered up more from my thighs. His touch explored farther, dipping between my ass cheeks to find my puckered bud.

I gasped and bucked, but he held me fast with one big hand gripping my hip.

I stilled on a whine, but I didn't protest when he applied pressure. His finger penetrated me, and dark pleasure lit up my system. I tried to squirm, but his fingers curved into my flesh at my hip.

"Stay still," he ground out, his words roughened by his own lust.

He pressed forward, his desire-slicked finger sliding deeper into me. With his cock in my pussy, I felt stretched and almost unbearably full. My entire body began to tremble, and my inner muscles contracted around the double intrusions.

"Don't come," he bit out. "Not yet."

I whimpered and squeezed my eyes shut, willing my orgasm to subside.

His finger slid all the way inside, his hand splaying against my ass. He

applied more pressure, forcing me to lift my hips.

“Ride me,” he ordered again.

I began to move over him, reveling in the feel of his cockhead brushing against my g-spot with every roll of my hips. He urged me on, his finger in my ass giving him more control over my pace. My thighs burned with strain, but I didn’t slow. I rode him, growing eager and greedy as I lost myself in lustful abandon. My heavy breasts bounced, making me aware of how they were constrained by the rope he’d used to bind me.

“Fuck,” he bit out. His abs rippled as his entire body tensed. I knew he was holding off his orgasm, but I didn’t want him to.

“I want to feel your cum inside me,” I panted, completely lost to intoxicating desire. “I want you to mark me. Make me yours.”

“Mine,” he snarled, slamming into me. His seed shot deep inside me, liquid heat searing my pussy.

I screamed as my orgasm ripped through my body with the force of a tidal wave, sudden and relentless. My pleasure was almost brutal in its intensity, my vision going dark as ecstasy flooded my system. His cock pulsed inside me, releasing the last of his cum into me. I ground against him, taking it all.

As I floated in bliss, one word echoed through my mind: *mine*.

CHAPTER 14

“*I*t’s so hot,” I complained, wiping a sheen of sweat from my brow with the back of my hand.

I glanced over at Scott. He was barely perspiring. If anything, his tanned skin seemed to glow golden under the Mediterranean sun.

I supposed he was probably accustomed to hotter temperatures and much more rigorous exercise. In contrast to his cool appearance, I was trying not to gasp for air, but we’d been walking up a steady incline for almost half an hour in the baking heat.

“We’ll stop and rest, then,” he offered. “We should have brought water with us. I didn’t realize what a hike this would be.”

We’d taken the funicular from the harbor up to the main town of Capri, but I’d insisted on walking straight through the bustling shopping district. I wanted to see the natural beauty of the island, not spend my day inside boutiques.

What I hadn’t realized was just how steep the walk would be. The woman at the tourist information booth had waved us out of town and toward this path, indicating that it was a short walk to Villa Jovis, the ruined palace where the Roman emperor Tiberius used to reside.

“Oh my god,” I groaned, catching sight of a map at the side of the path. “This says Villa Jovis is another half hour’s walk from here.”

“We don’t have to go,” Scott offered.

“No!” I replied vehemently. “I want to see Tiberius’ palace. He’s a fascinating emperor. I’m not going to have come all this way and not see it

just because I'm feeling lazy."

His brows drew together. "You're not being lazy. You're overheated, and you need some water. Come on." He tugged at my hand, indicating that we should fork off onto a flatter path. "Let's see if there's somewhere down here that sells water."

"Okay," I agreed, recognizing that I really was getting dehydrated. I probably resembled a sweaty tomato in this heat, and cooling off could only help my appearance. I hated for Scott to see me like this, but I'd promised myself that I'd see Villa Jovis while I was visiting the Amalfi Coast. It was only our second day in Italy, but I wouldn't have time to come back to Capri, if I was going to visit all the historical sites I wanted to see.

"Oh, pretty," I breathed when we stepped onto the new path. To our right, a lattice fence was covered in magenta flowers. Bright blue flashes of the sea peeked through the gaps as a breeze rustled the blooms.

"There's a restaurant up ahead," Scott pointed out, distracting me. "I bet the view's better from there. Do you want to get lunch?"

"Sure," I agreed easily, suddenly feeling much better now that I was no longer climbing uphill with no end in sight. A little rest before resuming our hike sounded like a great idea.

We approached the little white-painted restaurant. From a distance, it didn't look like much, but as we neared, I spotted more of the beautiful magenta flowers growing over the arched entrance. A small sign with the words La Palette indicated the name of the restaurant, but otherwise, it was an understated place.

"Best view in Capri." A new male voice jolted me, and I looked up to find a smiling server waving at us from the top of a short flight of stairs.

"Sounds perfect," Scott said, taking me by the hand and leading me up the steps.

I stopped in my tracks when we reached the top. "Wow."

Vibrant greenery spilled down the sharp hills below, flowing into the glowing cerulean sea. In the distance to either side of the vista, the rocky cliffs of Capri framed the view. The pastel buildings that made up the town's cluster of shops splashed the greenery with pale color, and yachts of varying size dotted the harbor.

Scott tugged at my hand, urging me toward a table at the front of the covered porch. "The view's just as good here," he assured me with a smile. "And you'll be in the shade. You're looking a little flushed."

Flushed was one word for it. I knew my face was probably glowing red.

"I'm just hot. It's not sunburn."

"I know. I put on your sunscreen," he reminded me with a sly smile.

The memory of his hands rubbing my body made me impossibly hotter. I reached into my bag and pulled out the folding fan I'd bought in Sorrento. The lemons hand-painted on the wood were pretty, but the purchase had also proven practical over the last few days. As a Georgia girl, I was used to the heat, but I didn't spend this much time outside of air-conditioned spaces on a regular basis.

The porch of La Palette caught the breeze, which helped cool my heated skin. Scott ordered a large bottle of water, and I eagerly gulped half of it down as soon as it arrived.

"One more, please," he told the server with a smile. "I'm glad we stopped," he said to me. "I didn't realize how thirsty you were. You should have said something."

I shrugged. "I didn't want to be whiny. It was my fault I didn't buy any water to bring with me. That was on me."

He cocked his head at me. "You don't have to do that, you know."

"Do what?"

"Take responsibility for every little thing. I've noticed you do it a lot. It's okay to lean on me sometimes. It's okay to ask for help or tell me if you need something."

I shifted in my chair. "I guess I'm just used to being responsible for myself."

I'm used to being responsible for everyone around me.

"Didn't your husband help support you when you needed it?"

I flinched. "No."

I didn't elaborate.

Tense silence settled over us, punctuated only when the server came to take our food order. I wasn't really hungry anymore, but I randomly selected the swordfish. Scott ordered gnocchi and handed the menus to the man with a brief "*grazie*."

His eyes remained fixed on me. "So, what's the next book about?"

I blinked at him, surprised at the change of subject. It should have been a relief, but this question was almost as hard as the one about my ex-husband.

I made a dismissive wave and cut my gaze away from his. "Oh, you know. I have a lot of things in the works. Mostly dark romances and romantic

suspense. I even have a vampire romance on the back burner. Lots of projects.”

“Is that what you usually do? Work on several books at one time?”

“No, not usually. I like to get into one project and write the whole thing from start to finish. I’m very linear. A total outliner.”

“So, what’s different this time? Why work on multiple books?”

I sighed, deciding to give him a ghost of the truth. “Well, I’m not really working much, to be honest. I’m kind of blocked right now. Nothing is flowing, so I’m writing bits of different projects when I can.”

“Blocked? Like writer’s block?”

“Yeah. It totally sucks. I can sit at my laptop for hours and not write a single word.”

“How long have you been blocked?”

“Since my divorce, okay?” I burst out in a rush of irritation. If there was one thing I hated, it was a man trying to get too involved in my writing. This was *my* career. I didn’t need a Dom to try to control what I’d built.

I took a breath.

That was damage from my marriage. Scott didn’t deserve my ire.

“Sorry,” I apologized. “I’m just touchy about my lack of productivity right now.”

He nodded, easily accepting my contrition. “I can understand how it must be hard to keep a schedule for writing when you’re uprooting your whole life. You had to move from England to America and get set up again. I’m sure that adjustment takes time.”

“It’s not just that,” I admitted. “It’s... Well, it’s hard to write about people falling madly in love when I’m not sure if I even believe in happily ever after. It just doesn’t make sense, you know?” I fell into my familiar rationalization. “Maybe we’re not meant to be monogamous creatures. Maybe there are multiple people out there in the world who I could share love with at different times in my life. I kind of like that idea: having a lifetime of Great Loves, instead of searching for One True Love.”

A beat of silence passed as he regarded me intently. “Do you really feel that way?”

I forced a superficial smile. “It makes a lot more sense, doesn’t it? Who really has fairytale true love? No one. The problem is, I have to sell it for a living. And if you don’t believe in it, it’s hard to write.”

“What do you want in life, Addison?” His eyes were steady and serious

on my face.

“Oh, you know.” I waved my hand in a show of nonchalance. “To hit the *New York Times* Bestsellers List.”

“That’s a goal,” he allowed. “But what do you want in life?”

My defenses rose, and I leaned away from him. This was exactly what I actively avoided thinking about. The last time I’d thought about my future too deeply, I’d ended up with a bottle of pills in my hand and an emergency phone call to my sister.

“I’m just focusing on my career right now,” I hedged.

“Your career can’t be your life. You deserve more than that.” The lines around his eyes deepened, and I realized his career was *his* life. He was telling me to live the life he couldn’t have.

But he didn’t understand how these probing questions would make me unravel. In the last months, I’d used travel to avoid the pain. Moving from one place to another was the only way I could continue existing; when faced with the reality of the lonely future that stretched before me, I crumbled.

Then, I’d met Scott. I willfully avoided thinking about the future when I was with him, because I knew we couldn’t have one. He was the best kind of drug, much better than traveling to distract me from the pointlessness of my existence.

“I don’t want to talk about this,” I said, my attempt at bravado ruined by the traitorous tears that spilled down my cheeks. I forced a smile and wiped them away. “Have I told you the latest drama in the Romance industry?”

He took my hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “No. Why don’t you tell me about it?”

I drew in a shaky breath, grateful that he’d decided to back off. For a few horrible minutes, the house of cards I’d worked so hard to build had almost come crashing down.

I clung to Scott’s hand more tightly as I began chattering, falling into the moment with him so I could forget about the mess that was my life. He was exactly the drug I needed right now.

CHAPTER 15

The steep, concrete steps leading down to the Baths of Queen Giovanna were slanted and broken, making for a treacherous path. Wet foliage half-covered the stairs, and I clung to the wooden railing to my right as I descended.

The trees suddenly thinned out, and the first glimpse of the baths came into view.

Awe distracted me, and I didn't look where I was walking. A slick, half-decayed leaf slipped under my heel. My leg went out from under me, and panic shot through my system as the steep drop to the sea loomed.

Scott's strong arms caught me before I could tumble over the edge. He hugged me close, steadying me. With my chest pressed against his, I felt both our hearts beating faster.

"You okay?" he asked, rubbing his hands over my body to check for injuries that weren't there.

I let out a shaky laugh. "Yeah. My butt didn't even hit the ground. Thanks."

He finally released me and stepped in front of me. "I'll go first," he announced. "Step where I step."

I caught his wrist. "But what if you fall?"

He shot me a crooked smile. "I'm more durable than you are."

I opened my mouth to protest, but he silenced me with a quick kiss.

"Don't argue. Let me take care of you."

Warmth suffused my chest. This was exactly what I'd always craved: to be taken care of. For someone to see to my needs, to protect me. I didn't

always have to be the strong one. Not when I was with Scott.

I nodded my agreement, and he smiled his satisfaction.

“Hold on to the railing,” he instructed as he resumed our descent.

My hand wrapped around the smooth wood, my knuckles nearly white with the strength of my grip. I didn’t allow myself to look at the view until we reached the bottom of the steps.

My jaw dropped. “It’s so beautiful,” I breathed.

I’d traveled the world, but this was one of the most breathtaking places I’d ever seen. Clear aqua water filled a deep basin, contained by high, rocky cliffs. They completely encompassed the pool, except for an arched gap at the far side. Through it, the deeper blue of the vast Mediterranean Sea stretched to the horizon. The scene was a study in various hues of blue, the color made all the brighter for the contrast with the cliffs, which glowed golden under the midday sun.

Scott’s hand captured mine, calling my attention back to him. “Be careful on the rocks,” he warned.

I noticed then that there wasn’t a sandy beach. Rocks lined the nearly nonexistent shore that was backed by cliffs, the stones worn slick and smooth by the rolling tides.

The cove was protected enough that there were no waves here, but the water lapped up onto the shore, occasionally splashing high up toward the cliffs.

We made our way around two couples who were wading in the shallows, but otherwise, we had the pool to ourselves. I couldn’t believe there weren’t more people here. It was gorgeous, but I supposed it wasn’t well-advertised as a tourist destination. The treacherous climb down probably mitigated the number of visitors, as well.

We set the beach bag I’d brought on a large rock that was high enough to protect our belongings from the surges of water that sprayed up when a boat passed too close to the entrance to the cove. Every few minutes, one appeared through the arched gap in the cliffs, sending wake flowing into the cavern. But the enclosure blocked the sound of rumbling engines, leaving us in a quiet haven.

The sea was chilly compared to the warmth of the day, and I shivered as we waded out into the water.

Scott launched himself deeper, immediately immersing his entire body. When he popped back up, he grinned at me.

“You have to jump in. You’re making it harder on yourself by walking in like that.”

“But it’s cold,” I shrieked the last word when a surge of wake brought the water up to my navel.

He laughed. “It’s barely chilly. You’ll adjust as soon as you dip in. It feels good after being out in the heat. Come on.” He lifted his hand above the water, beckoning me.

Bracing myself, I bent my knees and pushed off the rocks beneath my feet. The shore dropped away sharply, and I immediately bobbed down to my neck.

“Oh, brrrr,” I complained, maybe a bit dramatically. I really didn’t like being cold.

Scott chuckled and swam over to me, wrapping his arms around me. “You’ll warm up. Just give it a few seconds.”

I grasped his shoulders, leaning into his chest. My body began to warm in response to his nearness.

“I guess it’s not so bad,” I allowed.

He’d been right: it wasn’t really cold. The contrast with the heated air had made the transition a bit uncomfortable, but I was quickly becoming used to the new temperature. Within minutes, I began to enjoy the cool reprieve from the baking sun.

He swam out farther, but I hesitated. He turned back to face me.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t really like when I can’t touch the bottom,” I admitted. “I’ll just stay in the shallow area.”

“There’s a huge rock over here.” He gestured to the center of the pool. “You can sit on it, and you’ll only be a couple feet under the surface.”

Childlike excitement rushed through me, obliterating my trepidation. “A mermaid rock?” I asked eagerly, starting to swim toward him.

“What’s a mermaid rock?” His wide grin and twinkling eyes took my breath away.

I beamed at him. “You know, a rock for mermaiding. Like Ariel. Or the mermaids from *Peter Pan*. They’re kind of bitchy, but they’re so pretty.”

I reached the rock and lifted myself onto it, folding my legs beside me so I could launch my torso out of the water. It was my *The Little Mermaid* childhood dream come true.

“See?” I prompted. “Mermaiding.”

He propped himself up on the rock, settling in beside me. His hand cupped my cheek, his sparkling gaze studying me with something like awe.

I shifted under his scrutiny. "What is it?"

One corner of his lips ticked up in a half-smile. "You're so innocent."

I shook my head. "We've covered this before. I'm not. You've... Well, you know the things we've done together. I'm not innocent."

He captured my cheek with his other hand, bracketing my face to still the shaking of my head.

"You are," he said softly. His lips curved, his smile indulgent. "I know the things we've done. I know you love when I tie you up and finger your ass when I'm deep inside you. But that doesn't mean you're not innocent. Hold on to that. Don't lose it."

His eyes clouded over on the last, and I knew dark memories were stirring.

I might not be his fantasy woman anymore, but impossibly, he still found value in my nature. He still cherished the good parts of me, parts I'd never acknowledged in myself until he held up a mirror to my soul.

"Why do you do it?" I pressed gently. "Your job. I know it must be hard. That's not a strong enough word, but I know it's hard."

"To protect people like you," he said solemnly.

"How did you decide that was what you wanted to do? How did you decide to risk your life to help keep others safe?" Shame tinged my admission. "I don't think I could do it. I'm not selfless enough."

His fingers threaded into my damp hair. "You're one of the most selfless people I've ever met. Just because you didn't join the Army doesn't mean you don't put others above yourself."

"You were in the Army?" I hadn't known what branch of the military he'd initially joined before becoming a special operator. I didn't know anything about his career.

He nodded. "I enlisted straight out of high school. My family didn't have much, and I wanted to go to college without burdening them or taking out loans. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life then, and the Army gave me a sense of purpose. Of worth."

"But why did you continue your service? Didn't you go to college?"

"No." He hesitated, but after a moment, he took a breath and continued. "I got married when I was nineteen. She'd been my girlfriend in high school, and I'd see her when I went back home on leave. I was young. Naïve. I

thought I was in love, but really, I was looking for something to fight for. Something to keep me going when things got...hard." He used my word, but it carried more weight.

"What happened?" I prodded him gently. "To your marriage, I mean."

"I saw things while I was in Afghanistan. I did things. They changed me. I'd come home, but I wouldn't really be there. I couldn't be the man she needed me to be, the husband she deserved. She fell in love with someone else."

Anger surged. "That's awful. You were out there, risking your life to keep your family—to keep all of us—safe. And she cheated on you while you were gone?"

His eyes tightened. "I don't blame her. She needed someone who could be there for her in the ways I couldn't. I knew then that I wasn't cut out to have a family. The Army was my life. I had a higher duty than to myself."

My eyes burned, my heart aching for him. He thought he was broken. I couldn't begin to imagine the things he'd seen and done, but they'd made him believe he wasn't worthy of love.

He wiped at my tears with his thumbs. "Don't cry. It's okay. I'm okay."

The way his expression shuttered made pain knife through my chest. He was compartmentalizing, denying his agony. His loneliness.

My own loneliness and sense of brokenness seemed selfish compared to his. He had a real reason to feel damaged. All I had was self-pity and an inability to carry on, just because I thought my life was difficult.

He was so much stronger than me. He deserved to be loved far more than I did. He'd allowed me to be vulnerable with him, but this was the first time he'd been truly vulnerable with me since our first night together in Nashville.

"It's okay for you to feel," I whispered. "You don't have to be so stoic." I placed my hand over his heart. It beat faster beneath my palm. "Feel with me," I begged.

"I do. I only feel when I'm with you. I haven't felt anything in a long time, but I'm different when I'm with you," he rasped, his eyes tightening.

"You make that sound like it's a bad thing. Like it's weakness. It's not."

"You're my weakness."

He sealed his confession with a desperate kiss, his hand cupping my nape to pull me close. My head tilted back, and I opened for him, giving him everything he deserved: tenderness, forgiveness, love.

I'd fallen for him, helplessly and completely. I wanted him to feel my

love, to know he wasn't alone in the world. It was too soon to say it aloud, our lives too complicated.

But that didn't change the way I felt. My heart might still be in tatters, but it was his.

CHAPTER 16

We stepped into our apartment, our bodies covered in sea salt. We'd dried off on the bus ride back to Sorrento from the Baths of Queen Giovanna, but my skin felt too tight.

I trailed my fingers down his chest, plucking at the top button of his shirt. "Do you want to take a shower?" I asked, my voice sultry.

His jaw sharpened, but there was something other than hunger in his eyes. Something darker that I didn't understand.

Before I could fully analyze it, he crushed his lips to mine, communicating the hunger I'd read in his features. There was something else in the kiss: desperation.

Did he feel as raw and exposed as I did after our intense afternoon?

We tore at each other's clothes, stripping down to nothing and making our way through the apartment in a primal frenzy. He fucked me in the shower, pinning me against the wall as he took me hard. He claimed me fully, biting my neck and pinching my nipples to the edge of my pain threshold. I took everything, gave him everything he demanded of me. When he came inside me, I saw stars.

The water started to go cold, and we finally got out of the shower and dried off. He abruptly left the bathroom, turning from me so he could get dressed.

Cold closed over me, leaving me shivering in the absence of his embrace. I followed him into the bedroom without bothering to put on clothes. I was too concerned with his sudden distance to go through my normal routine.

"What's wrong?" I asked, hating that he'd already covered his body.

He turned to me, his features schooled to an unreadable mask. “I have something for you.”

I stepped toward him, closing the distance between us so I could hold him. “What is it?”

He extricated himself from my arms and handed me a small black jewelry box.

I hesitated. “You really have to stop getting me gifts.”

“I wanted to get this for you. You need it.”

The answer was enigmatic, and my stomach dropped. Something was wrong.

My fingers trembled as I reached for the box. Dread flooded my gut, but I flipped open the lid.

My heart squeezed. “I can’t accept this. It’s too much.”

The Edwardian pendant I’d coveted in the window of Cavendish Antiques in York lay nestled in the black velvet lining of the box. Its elegant curves and shining pearls didn’t fill me with awe and longing as they once had.

“I want you to have it.”

I peeked up at him. His pale eyes were shadowed, his lips thinned. His jaw hard with determination.

“Why?” I feared his answer, but I couldn’t stop myself from asking.

“You said you wanted a symbol that you belong to yourself. You deserve to be free, Addison.”

A lump formed in my throat. “What if I don’t want to be free?”

I reached for him, but he caught my hand, denying me the contact I craved.

“I can’t be with you,” he said, his voice gravelly. “You were right, but I was selfish. I didn’t listen to you.”

“You can,” I insisted, desperate. “We can make this work.”

“No. I won’t do this to you. I can’t tell you when I’ll come back to you. I can’t even promise that I will. Anything could happen to me, and you’d never know. I don’t want you living your life waiting for a ghost. You deserve better than that.”

I flipped the box closed, the audible *snap* echoing my denial of his words.

“You don’t mean that.” Anger rose alongside my pain. “You think *you* don’t deserve better. But you do. You...” I choked on the words, but I forced them out. “You deserve to be loved.”

His expression hardened to granite. "I have to go."

"What? No! You said you'd stay for the week. It's only been three days."

He was pulling away from me, shutting me out like he had in York when I'd asked him to be vulnerable with me. He clearly thought he'd shared too much with me while we were at the baths, and now, he was putting up walls between us. He thought he was protecting himself by denying his vulnerabilities.

"This is bullshit," I seethed. "You're scared. You stopped being stoic for fifteen minutes, and you can't handle it. I've made myself vulnerable with you. I let you tie me up and spank me, but you can't fucking talk to me about anything real without shutting down."

His face hardened to stone, but he didn't reply. He took a step around me, and I moved to block his path. His hands closed around my shoulders, and he shifted me out of his way, tearing away the barrier I'd tried to form.

Tears blinded me as I spun around. He was walking away. He'd picked up his bag, and he was heading for the door.

"Coward," I seethed. "You're a fucking coward, Scott."

I couldn't even rail at him properly. I still didn't know his last name.

I didn't know anything about him, but I knew *him*.

He stiffened, and his steps faltered.

"Don't go," I begged.

I watched his shoulders lift as he took a deep breath and let it out again. He opened the door and stepped outside. He closed it behind him, locking himself out of my life.

CHAPTER 17

*Y*ou disappeared from my life that day.
So, I decided to write all this down in a book, in the hope you might read it and come back to me. Of course, I changed the names and key facts, but you know who you are.
Scott: If you're reading this, I'm waiting for you.

The End

Scott and Addison's story continues in *Mended Hearts!*

I wrote down our story in a book. I bled all over the pages, laying bare my scarred soul.

But I revealed your scars, too. Will you hate me? Or will you come back to me?

I told you I no longer believe in happily-ever-after, but that was a lie.

Scott: I'm still waiting for you.

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