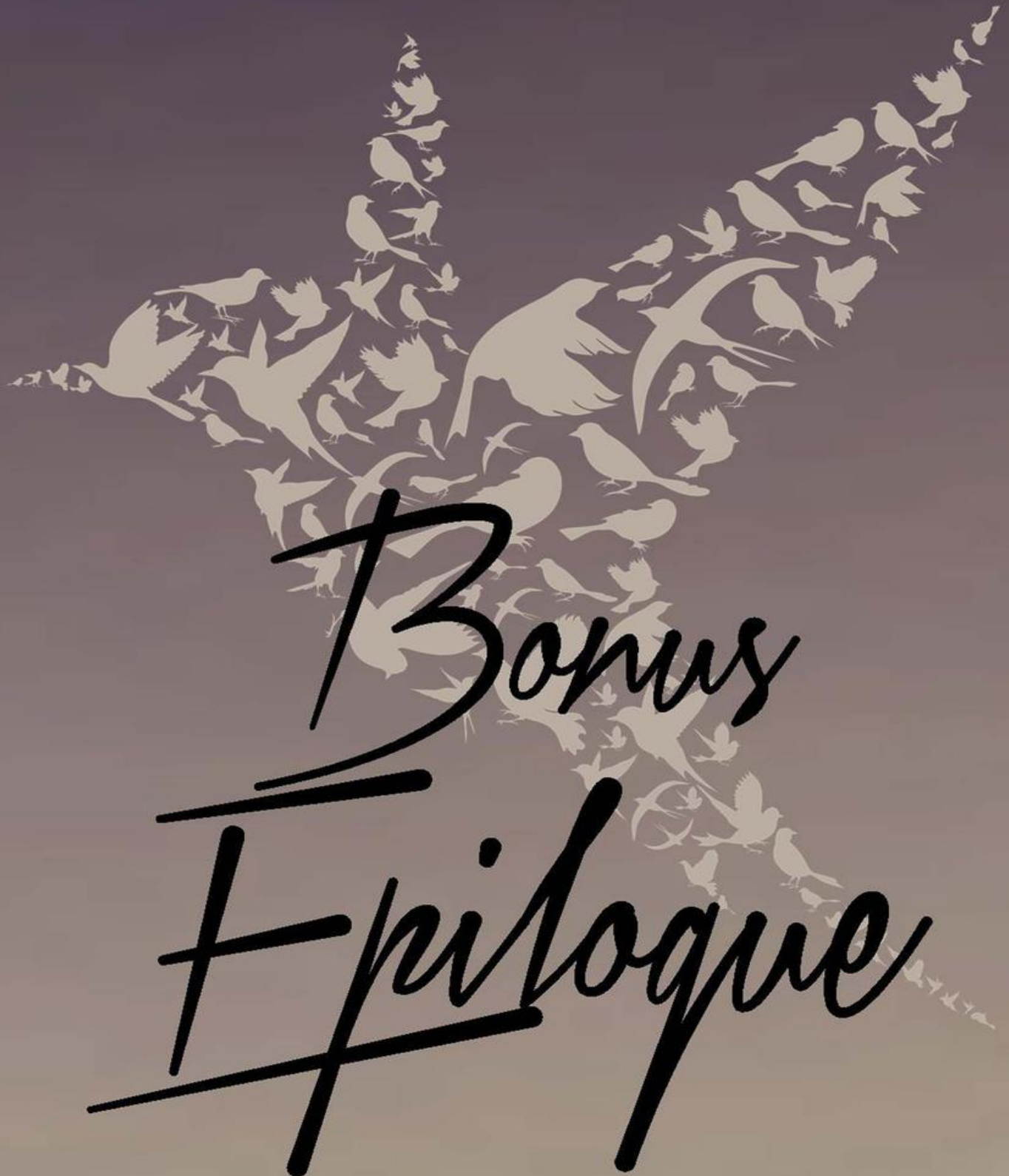


New York Times Bestseller

PEPPER WINTERS



Bonus Epilogue

TEARS OF TESS

MONSTERS IN THE DARK #1

Bonus Epilogue
Tears of Tess
Monsters in the Dark #1

by

New York Times Bestseller
Pepper Winters

Bonus Epilogue (Tears of Tess)
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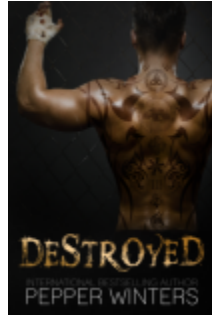


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Thank you.

***Words will never express how grateful I am for what words and readers
have given me.***

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Bonus Epilogue takes place after Q decides to welcome Tess back into his life at the end of Tears of Tess. Here is a quick snippet of Q's epilogue to re-jig your memory.

“YOU'RE THE ONE WHO wanted dark. I'll give you dark.”

And I did.

Thirty pieces of dark.

Thirty strikes of delicious temptation that made my life seem cosmically bright compared to the black I lived in.

Tess screamed and sobbed, but beneath it all was an undercurrent of sexual need. Her wetness trickled down her thigh, thicker, creamier than the champagne. She may hate it, but she loved it.

Once the last kiss smacked her perfect ass, I dropped the belt and in the same second, undid my fly, pushed my pants down, and pulled out my throbbing cock. “Spread,” I ordered, pushing her lower back, bending her to my will.

She obeyed, whimpering as my cashmere blazer rubbed against sore skin.

Then she wasn't crying anymore.

I plunged so deep, so fast, her feet left the floor and she slid on the champagne wet counter. “Oh fuck, yes,” I grunted.

Her back arched as a delighted scream erupted from her. I wrapped an arm around naked breasts, holding her upright. My hips dug into hers, trying to possess every inch. My cock was hungry, desperate, already rippling with the urge to fill.

She’s so tight, so wet.

I slid in and out, thrusting deep until my balls slapped against her.

“Oh, God I’ve missed this,” she cried. “Missed you. Missed the pain.”

“Shut up and take it, *esclave*.” I thrust, twisting her nipple, biting her neck. My jaw trembled with the urge to draw blood again. I went wild for her blood. It was the best drug. The elixir of the beast inside.

Her hot, whipped flesh burned my lower belly; I couldn’t think of anything else but fucking her. I lost control. Spreading my stance, wrapping fingers around her hips, I gave myself over to darkness.

“Take me, Tess.”

“I’ve already taken you, *maître*.”

I pounded into her, beyond caring her hipbones collided with hard granite, or knees bruised against cabinets. All I focused on was pleasure.

She cried out, thrusting back, urging me to go harder, *harder*.

I couldn’t breathe as a sharp band of release throttled my cock, demanding to spurt into this amazing slave. This woman who turned my world upside down. This woman... the key to my undoing.

I growled like a feral beast as I gave myself over to pleasure. Sensation exploded from my thighs, up my balls, and into my cock. I thrust like a monster with only seconds left to live, filling her with come, marking her, making sure she knew who her master was.

The moment I spurted, she clenched around me. “Fuck, yes, Q. Oh, God. Give it to me. I want you. I want all of you.” She came and came, fisting, milking, tearing every drop of come I had to give.

I spasmed and twitched as overbearing intensity replaced hot-arching pleasure, but I couldn’t bring myself to stop rocking inside her. I never wanted to leave her hot, dark wetness. It was where I belonged.

She went floppy, breathing like tormented blackbird. My legs grew weak and wobbly. I pulled her into my arms, heading to the floor in one jumble of sweaty, champagne sticky bodies.

She laughed as I laid her on my belly, protecting her nakedness from the cool tiles. Even though depleted, my cock never softened and every wriggle fired new life into it.

Would I ever get enough of her? Would I ever show her how dark I could go?

She went to pull away, but I lassoed my arms tighter. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“I thought I was crushing you.” She wiggled her ass, sending sparks into my balls. After a month of not having her, she wouldn’t get away that easily.

I gently smacked her belly, aware her ass was beyond punishment after the belt. “You think I’m done with you, *esclave*?” I nuzzled her ear, licking softly. “I’ve only just begun.”

**Continue reading for the BONUS EPILOGUE IN TESS'S
POINT OF VIEW**

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BONUS EPILOGUE

TESS

HE'S MINE.

Or was I his?

The past few hours had been a blur.

I couldn't separate the past few months with the past few minutes. The years of confusion and loneliness. The loss and heartache. All of that had vanished the moment I'd bowed at Q's feet and he'd finally, finally, *finally* accepted me into his dark, delicious world.

"Come. We need to talk." Q took my hand.

We'd eaten—thanks to a feast cooked by Suzette and Mrs. Sucre. They couldn't hide their smug faces over my reunion with Q. And we'd showered away the stickiness of champagne from our indulgent sex in the gaming room.

As hot water rained over us, in the same shower where Q put me back together again after the worst incident of my life, I expected him to touch me, stroke me, demand to take me again.

Yet he didn't.

He stayed away, his eyes glowing with feral mischief and his hands twitching to reach for me. We washed while never looking away from each other, drinking in the nakedness of a person who'd suddenly transformed from a stranger to a lover.

No.

More than just a lover...a soul mate.

“Where are we going?” I asked, allowing Q to take my hand and guide me from the chateau. The sun had set and the gravel driveway crunched beneath our boots.

After our shower, I’d raided the wardrobe that Q had restocked after my episode with the scissors and dressed in soft trousers with a comfortable large knit jumper. I was toasty even as our breath curled in the grey night.

“You came back, Tess. I think it’s fair you understand a little more about the man you came back for.” His eyes met mine, liquid love and harsh control equal measures. “Don’t you agree?”

I nodded, squeezing his fingers. It didn’t escape my notice that this was the first time he’d held me as an equal rather than a master. My heart fluttered.

“I’d love to get to know you, Q. However, I don’t want you to be afraid.”

“Afraid?” His nostrils flared. “Why would you say such a thing?”

“Because I know you.”

He snorted. “No, you don’t.”

“I know enough that you curse yourself and suffer guilt for who you are. I know that you don’t think you deserve me.”

He stiffened, his strides increasing and his fingers doing their best to loosen around mine.

I held him tight, keeping his pace. “Whatever you want to share, I’ll treasure. Anything you aren’t ready for, I respect. Q...I know enough to fully commit to this and wholeheartedly say I’m in love with you.”

He slammed to a halt.

Yanking me close, his hand untangled from mine to loop into my hair. His gaze burned with jade fire. “*Je t’aime, esclave.*” I love you. “I’ve never said such words before. Never fully understood the meaning. You’re so fucking selfless. You’re like a sacrifice, just begging me to destroy you.”

“You won’t destroy me. You can’t when you heal me.”

His lips smashed against mine. His tongue pried my mouth open and a simple kiss became war upon the front lawn. His hands swept down my body, clutching my ass and jerking me against his hard erection.

Pain and pleasure mixed beneath his touch.

His belt lashes from a few hours ago hadn’t stopped smarting.

But Q hadn’t forgotten.

If I had any doubt that he'd grabbed me and dug his fingers into my flesh without thinking they were dispelled as he breathed, "Does it hurt? Kissing me? Letting me touch you like this?"

I panted against his mouth, submitting to another furious kiss. "Yes, but you know I love it. I get off on it, and I'm not afraid to admit it anymore."

The kiss ended.

Q took a step back, raking his hands through his hair. "What am I going to do with you?"

I grinned coyly. "Oh, I can think of a lot of things."

Snatching my hand, he yanked me into a walk, muttering a French curse under his breath.

We moved slowly but peacefully down the driveway to the ridgeline of manicured trees acting as sentries to his estate. When we were far enough away, he pulled me closer and turned to face his pastel mansion.

In the darkness, the façade glittered with strategically placed lights while the adornment of plasterwork garnished a home of a monster with beautiful innocence.

"This is yours now," he murmured. "Every room, every wing. I don't want any secrets between us anymore."

My body stilled. "Secrets? You'll tell me everything?"

"Okay...maybe not everything." His face darkened in the night. "I'll find a way to reveal everything, eventually, *esclave*. I just need...time. This is all so fucking new."

"What's new? Sharing your life? Because you've done that for years with the slaves you've saved."

"No, that's different. I have to be strong for them. I have to be ruthless but kind. A figurehead of protection and nothing more." He glanced at me. "With you...I don't feel strong. I feel fucking weak and I don't like it. I don't like feeling as if I have no control over the way you make me feel because you own me body and fucking soul."

I sucked in a breath as he cupped my cheek. "I have to get used to that. Have to get used to sharing, not just my home, but my heart."

My gaze jumped from his lips to his eyes. "And if you can't?"

"Can't what?"

"Get used to it?"

He smiled softly. "I wouldn't worry about that. Already, I feel softer than I have in years. Whatever lives inside me, whatever bloodlust I suffer

and madness I might entertain, is collared whenever I'm around you."

Wrapping his arm around my waist, he tugged me toward the chateau. "Come. I think our walk can wait for another time. There's something I want to do."

* * *

"Wait here."

Q vanished from the room as quickly as he'd placed me into it.

The door clicked behind him, and I didn't have any choice but to obey. Drifting forward, I inhaled the pristine scent of foliage and feathers.

The aviary.

Q brought me to the aviary.

My heart squeezed.

This place held good and bad memories. Good because Q had finally cracked a little, revealing pieces of himself and his company. Bad because I'd been on my knees with Q in my mouth when the police arrived to take me away.

Why did he bring me here?

The question repeated as I kicked off my boots and padded toward the large gilded cage. Tweets and murmurs of sparrows and finches were few and muffled.

They'd roosted for the night and their tiny forms huddled together in branches of trees and imported palms.

I did my best to count the feathered friends in the low illumination. However, I didn't get past nineteen when the door opened and closed—hidden by dense jungle—and the tell-tale footfalls of my master echoed in the conservatory. "Q?"

"No...not right now." The French millionaire who I'd fallen in love with appeared. In his hands rested a bottle of amber liquor and two crystals shot glasses. "Right now...I'm your *maître* and you'll obey me as such."

A full shiver stole me.

My ass twinged in fear of what other punishment I'd be required to endure, but my core grew wet at the mere thought of Q losing a smidgen of control as he did this afternoon.

Lowering my gaze, I smiled. "As you wish, *maître*. What would you have me do?"

His finger pressed on my lower jaw, pushing my gaze to meet his. “First, never look away from me. Your submission comes in other ways. I don’t need you subservient.”

I bit my bottom lip as his touch slipped around my throat and squeezed. “This isn’t just about my pleasure.” His lips grazed mine. “This is about mutual bliss, and I have full intentions of enjoying every second.”

A gentle trill of bird song shattered the sudden tension.

I sucked in a breath, remembering my question. “Why did you bring me here? Last time, it didn’t end—”

“End well? That’s exactly *why* I brought you here.” Q strode away, motioning for me to follow. Leading me past the rattan furniture where I’d massaged his headache away, he guided me into a darker, damper part of the conservatory.

Here, a sturdy wooden table with pruning shears and bird seed rested under the moon-spangled sky.

“I want to replace memories of you leaving me with memories of you returning.” Placing the shot glasses on the table, he scooped up the bird seed and placed it on the ground, followed by the other debris. Once the table was clean, he snapped his fingers. “Undress.”

The command didn’t just sound in my ears, it echoed in my nipples and pussy. My fingers trembled as I tore off the jumper and slipped my trousers off. My simple white bra and knickers were shed just as quickly.

Nudity wasn’t something I feared anymore.

I didn’t flinch hating a certain stretchmark or stressing about a stupid flaw. Q looked at me as if I was his perfection. His queen.

He wanted me.

That was all that mattered.

The air temperature was tropical and muggy, so different to the icy outside world.

Standing naked, I waited for the next order.

Q didn’t disappoint. Pointing at the table, he growled, “Up.”

I hopped onto the warm wood immediately.

The second I sat, Q unstopped the liquor and filled up both glasses. Passing one to me, we clinked and I followed as he threw the alcohol down his throat.

His delicious, powerful throat.

The throat I had a terrible desire to bite and lick and mark.

I cringed as the fiery liquid blazed its punishment into my belly. There, a bonfire ignited, spreading warming, relaxing tendrils through my blood. “What is that?” I wheezed against the unforgiving sharpness.

“Cognac.”

“And we’re having shots of cognac, why?”

“Because inhibitions have a way of dying when a little persuasion is used.”

I blinked. Inhibitions? I had none. Not with Q. With Brax, I did. I couldn’t admit what I truly wanted and became tongue-tied whenever we were intimate.

But with Q?

I didn’t recognise this minx inside me. This temptress who relished in her master’s undoing because it meant she didn’t need to think or pretend or beg.

She just had to accept.

Because everything he gave was perfect.

My chest rose and fell as I bared my soul. “I don’t need alcohol to be myself with you, Q. I can admit what I want, what I like...what I need...because you make me powerful.”

He dropped his gaze, throwing back another shot without filling my glass. “Who said it was for you?” His narrowed eyes sent a clench through my system. “The night I strung you up in my bedroom—I would never have been able to do that without being drunk. That night was the first honest fucking thing I’ve done in decades.”

Placing the crystal on the table, he wrenched off his black t-shirt and unbuckled his jeans. Pulling the belt through the loops, he slapped the leather against his palm. “And you accepted everything with so much strength and desire that you fucking wounded me. You ruined me because I knew I was letting you go the next morning and you’d given me happiness for the first time in so many, many years.”

His face turned sharp and dangerous. “Hands.”

Instantly, I placed my wrists together and shot them in front of me.

I didn’t speak as he lassoed my wrists with his belt and buckled tight. The minute I was imprisoned, he poured another shot...this time into both glasses.

“You might not need liquid courage, but I sure do.” Holding the crystal to my lips, he didn’t look away until I’d swallowed every harsh drop.

Swallowing his own, he grabbed my nape and kissed me.

I sank into the kiss, never wanting it to end. His citrus taste was masked by the sharp liquor and the belt around my wrists meant I could only accept what he gave.

Never breaking the kiss, Q lifted my arms above my head and pushed. My tummy muscles engaged as he forced me from sitting to lying.

The hard wood bit into my shoulder blades, but I trembled with desire as Q shed his final piece of clothing and climbed on top of me, utterly deliciously naked.

I gasped as his heavy weight pinned me better than any handcuffs or restraints. His hard erection seared into my thigh, so close yet so far.

I was his prisoner. His slave. His returned bird who hadn't left him.

His hips thrust, driving his cock into my leg. "Christ, I want you."

My back arched as I rubbed my hardened nipples on his chest. "Take me then. You have me."

His body tensed as he fought whatever beast he lived with. Curtailing a growl, he snarled, "Not yet. First, I want to finish what you started before Suzette walked in on us."

My eyes flared.

A blowjob?

My mouth instantly watered.

But I was on my back. How...

He understood my confusion and smirked. "Leave the logistics to me." Sliding off, I whimpered as his warmth and sexual intensity disappeared. Moving flawlessly, he stood and drifted toward my head. With powerful hands, he rolled my tethered form to face him.

My lips parted.

I was the perfect height to accept the dark veiny hardness between his legs.

I squirmed as a shot of insane need rippled through my pussy.

"Ah, *esclave*..." Q's fingers teased my nipple before he pinched harshly. "You have no idea how much this turns me the fuck on."

I couldn't breathe let alone talk.

I was obsessed with his cock only a few centimetres from my mouth.

I wanted to lick him, suck him, and make him as desperate for me as I was for him.

"Do you want it?" he murmured.

I nodded. My fingers locked together, bound by his belt. I wanted to touch and stroke but that was denied.

“Suck me.” Q pressed forward, his cock bumping my lips.

The second his masculine heat was in licking distance, I opened my mouth and welcomed him.

He hissed as my tongue circled and lapped.

His fingers dug into the wood beside my face as his hips rocked in time with my sucking.

I wouldn't let him forget me. Never. Ever, ever, *ever*. I was his. I'd returned and he'd accepted me, and it was time he truly believed that this wasn't fleeting between us. It was for eternity.

I lost track of time. I didn't know how long I sucked him. I did my best to sheathe my teeth and give him a willing vessel to thrust into. However, saliva dribbled and my breathing became noisy the harder he became.

Lightheadedness made the aviary swim and I worried I wouldn't be able to finish.

But then he was gone.

I was rocked back onto my shoulder blades and the most exquisite, divine, world-shifting sensation erupted in my pussy.

I screamed as Q's tongue dived inside me, licking up every drop of desire I had for him and turning my need into something resembling insanity.

“There's nothing between us anymore, *esclave*.” His words disappeared inside me. His teeth bit and threatened. His hot tongue invoked an orgasm, warning it would shred me into pieces. “Try and leave me after I've had you like this. We'll see how far you can run.”

“Never!” My spine arched as he bit me. “I'll never run.”

“What if I *want* you to run? What if you *should* run?”

“I won't. I'm never running. I'm never leaving you.”

His licking stopped.

Our breathing rattled in the damp conservatory.

I waited for a switch, a whip, a spank, but Q's face was tight and dark. His eyes glazed with lust. His mind no longer here but with his monsters.

He wanted my pain. Needed it. But he was the one in pain this time. Pain with accepting that I'd given myself completely to him and he could kill me so easily. It was all about control. Love.

Could he love me enough to protect me from himself?

His anger faded just a little, revealing a softer side I'd only rarely glimpsed. "I want you so fucking much, Tess. I'm fucking petrified that this is all a dream. That I'll go to sleep tonight and you'll be gone. That everything that happened today, all the promises we made, all the happiness you've given me, will be gone."

"No, Q...don't think that." I struggled to sit up. "This isn't a dream. This is real. *I'm* real."

He looked away, tortured and distrusting. He broke my heart.

"Q... *maître*. Listen. I love you."

He flinched. "I know you do. That's what's so fucking terrifying."

I expected to fight and force him to stop shattering my soul, but he climbed onto the table and captured my throat. Both hands trembled as his thumbs traced over my chin to my mouth.

I opened, sucking both, tasting myself on his touch and his singular scent. "If it ever gets too much..."

I shook my head—or as much as I could in his hold. "It won't. But if it does. I've already promised not to let you break me."

His eyes turned unreadable and the aura of self-denial permeated our sexual haze.

He's going to stop this.

He was going to put an end to whatever passion we would have.

I won't let that happen.

With bound wrists, I fumbled between us and found his cock.

I stroked him hard, rolling my thumb over his crown. "Give me another drink."

His eyebrows knitted together, but he let me pump him as his shaky hand splashed cognac into two glasses. Swallowing his portion, he held mine to my lips.

I swallowed.

Droplets cascaded on either side of my mouth as I jerked while stroking him.

His erection grew thicker and harder, his eyes glowed darker and harsher. He growled, his hips pistoning into my grip. "Fuck, Tess. . ."

"You won't hurt me, Q," I whispered, guiding him back to me, recognising the spark that never left us. "You won't screw this up. I won't let you."

His eyes turned to emerald flints. "If I ever hurt you...*truly* hurt you..."

“*Maître....* Stop.” I reached to kiss him.

He was too high over me.

He could deny my kiss.

But he didn’t.

Taking a deep breath, he bowed, giving me, not just a kiss, but also power over him as he sank into my touch. His tongue caressed mine and his hips continued to thrust.

I squirmed beneath him, my body obsessed with what I held and how much I wanted him inside me.

I ached.

I burned.

I couldn’t take much more of this without joining with him. Without eradicating whatever darkness he lived in and reminding him that together we were light. It didn’t matter that we were slightly twisted and wrong.

That was what made us so right.

Our kiss switched from warm heat into a blazing fire.

“I’m going to fuck you, *esclave*.” His voice was a decadent purr as he swatted at my hands and shoved them above my head. “I’m going to take everything you’ve given me. Not because I want to, but because *you* want me to.”

My heart smarted. “Wait...you don’t want me?”

He chuckled as the tip of him entered me. “You truly have to ask that, Tess?”

We moaned long and low as his cock slid deep inside.

It was exquisite.

It was divine.

No, I didn’t need to ask that. I knew. He wanted me so much. Too much. He wanted me more than he would ever admit or show.

The dark fronds of palm trees imprisoned him in silhouettes as he thrust deeper.

We never looked away. His tongue licked his lips, tasting me from earlier.

His tentative thrust turned harder, faster. My body trembled around him, submitting to the heavy length as he forced me to surrender.

“Feel that?” Q’s teeth sank into my throat as he fucked harder. “You’ve got me so fucking obsessed with you; I’ll never let you go.”

I felt his every vow right between my legs.

The way he watched me...it came with furious promises and threats. He watched me with adoration and sex.

Mind-blowing, soul-confirming sex.

I moaned as his lower belly brushed my clit.

My thighs opened wider as my ankles locked over his back.

His spine flexed beneath my heels, rhythmically driving into me with short, possessive strokes.

I'd never known something could be as beautiful as a man in love. So boldly sexual or unapologetically monstrous.

A surge of emotion unravelled me. Tears came to my eyes with utter devastation. "I love you, Q."

He sucked in a breath, his eyes blazing. The power linking us only grew deeper and more poignant the longer we made love.

Made love.

This wasn't sex.

This had gone far beyond sex.

This was a forever kind of love.

His voice was a rasp as he growled, "Come for me, *esclave*. I need you to come."

The wideness of his cock demanded I do exactly what he'd commanded. His free hand swooped to my breast, pinching my nipple and kneading the heavy weight.

I groaned as his harsh breathing and possessing touch pushed me closer to the edge.

The ache inside turned into a throb, building and building and *building*.

"Yes, you're close." His teeth nipped my ear. "I feel you."

His left hand slammed by my head, his fingernails scraping against the table as he fucked me faster. "I won't come without you."

My heels dug harder into the globes of his ass. I gave in.

I didn't care about the noises I made.

I didn't care how shamefully wet I was.

All I cared about was coming for my master.

"Oh, oh...*oh*..." The orgasm detonated, and I had no way of stopping it.

Q grunted as I came apart, milking his cock, leaving my body for a split second as I hovered in utopian bliss.

"Look at me."

The growled command wrenched my glassy eyes open, and I locked onto his handsome face. His features were frozen in sexual rage as he followed me into heaven.

“Fuck, fuck...*fuck*.”

The hot release of him entered me, and I shivered as he collapsed on top, breathing hard. I expected him to relax and come down from our high. But he surprised me as his shoulders bunched and his mouth suddenly captured mine.

The kiss was dangerous.

Ravenous.

Forcing tired bodies to shed their release and clamber for more.

He tasted so wonderful.

His cock inside me felt so sensual.

His teeth nipped and dared to draw a droplet of blood.

I moaned, wrapping myself tighter around him. “Never stop, Q.”

He kissed me again. “I told you before, Tess. What we have...it will never go away. And now that I have you all to myself? I truly have just begun.”

Hope you liked this bonus scene!!

Don't forget to read the #dollarseries for another Dark Romance roller coaster!

Elder Prest will steal your heart from Q.

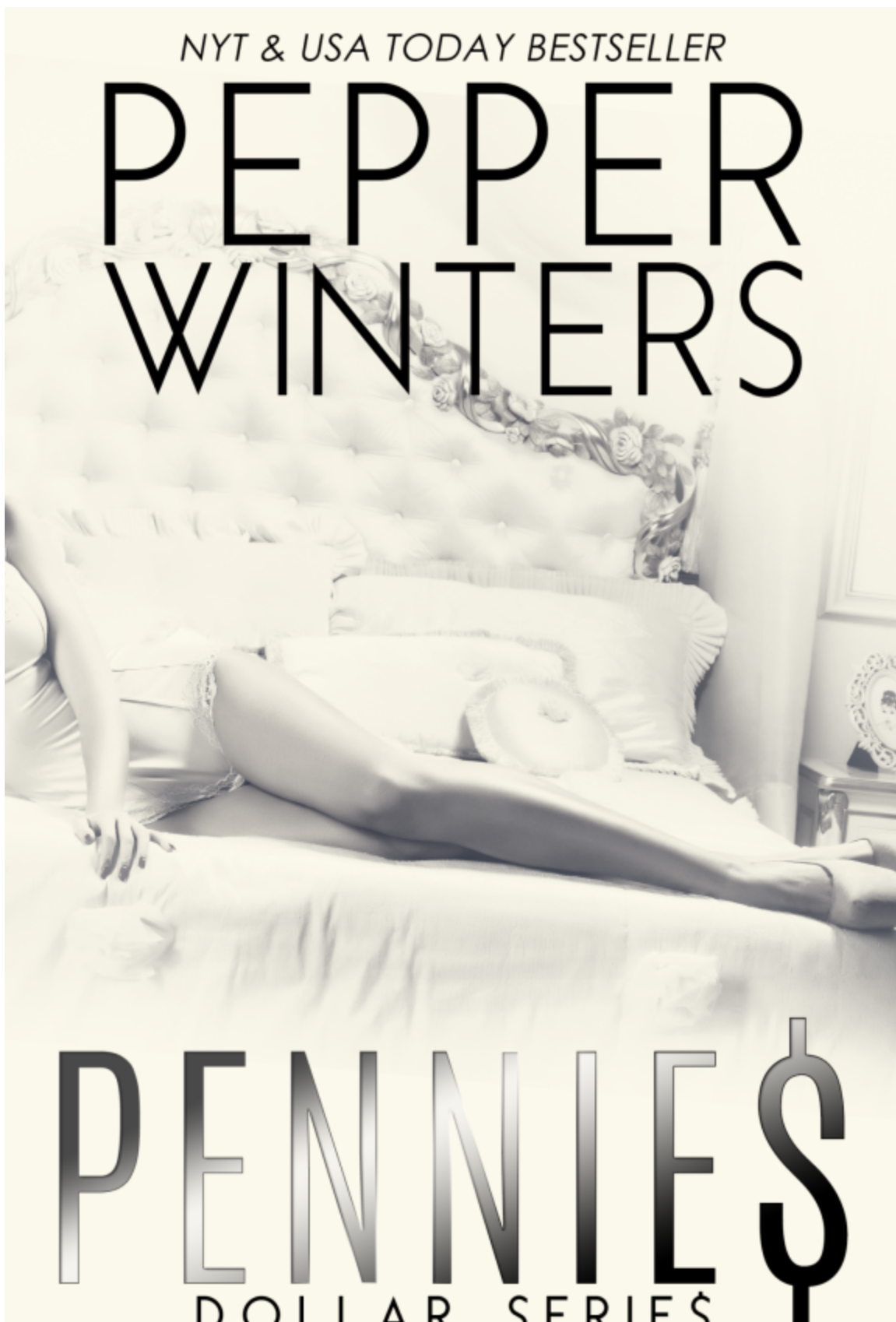
Here is a three chapter snippet to see what you think.

Pennies is only 99c and Dollars releases Oct / Nov 2016

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NYT & USA TODAY BESTSELLER

PEPPER WINTERS



PENNIES\$
DOLLAR SERIES\$

SOLAR SERIES

BLURB:

New York Times Bestseller, Pepper Winters, delivers another delicious Dark Romance.

"I'm not the hero in this story, girl. You'd do best to remember that."

At eighteen years old, I was murdered.

I wish my tale ended there.

However, my killer resuscitated me and sold me to the highest bidder, sentencing me to a world worse than Hell.

For the past two years, I've lived a life of torment as a man's property. I suffer in silence and wish for freedom, but I never break.

I can't.

I won't.

But then he arrives.

The first stranger since I was killed.

Elder Prest, a thief with a heart as black as his soul, arrives as a guest in our twisted home. He has business with my owner, but his interest lies in me. He pretends not to notice my bruises and hides his knowledge of what I am, but the way he watches me makes me feel more human than possession.

As his eyes tear through my walls and his voice demands answers, he challenges my owner for one night with me.

I've survived two years of torment because I no longer believe in hope, but Elder is the only man who promises me pleasure instead of pain.

Trusting him is dangerous, wanting him is deadly.

Is he my ticket to safety or my ultimate end?

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FREEDOM.

Such a modest word.

It carried very little importance for those who had it. But for those who didn't, it was the most precious, prized, and promised hope of all.

I supposed I was lucky to know what freedom felt like.

For eighteen years, I'd been free. Free to learn what I wanted, befriend who I liked, and flirt with boys who passed my rigorous criteria.

I was a simple girl with ideals and dreams, encouraged by society to believe nothing could hurt me, that I should strive for an excellent career, and no one could stop me. Rules would keep me safe, police would keep the monsters away, and I could remain innocent and naïve to the darkness of the world.

Freedom.

I had it.

But then, I lost it.

Murdered, resuscitated, and sold.

I lost my freedom for so many years.

Until the day *he* entered my cage.

Him, with the black eyes and blacker soul.

The man who challenged my owner.

And set my imprisonment on an entirely different path.

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DEAR DIARY,

No, that didn't sound right. Far too light-hearted for my tale.

Dear Universe,

Scratch that. Too grandiose.

To The Person Reading This.

Too vague.

To The Person I Wish Would Help Me.

That would get me in trouble. And I refused to sound weak. Not if these words were the only thing a stranger would remember me by.

To...

Tapping the broken pencil against my temple, I did my best to focus. For weeks, I'd been confined like a zoo animal being acclimatised to its new cage. I'd been fed, washed, and given medical attention from my rough arrival. I had a bed with sheets, a flushing toilet, and shampoo in the shower. I had the basics that all human and nonhuman life required.

But I wasn't living.

I was dying.

They just couldn't see it.

Wait...I know.

Inspiration struck as I came up with the perfect name to address this sad letter to. The title was the only right in this wrong, wrong new world.

To No One.

The moment I pressed those three words onto my parchment, I couldn't stop the memories unfolding. My left hand shook as I kept the toilet tissue flat while my right flew, slowly transcribing my past.

I WAS EIGHTEEN when I died.

I remember that day better than any other in my short life. And I know you're rolling your eyes, saying it only happened three weeks ago, but believe me, I will never forget it. I know some people say certain events imprint on their psyche forever, and up until now, I haven't had anything stick in such a way. You see, No One, I guess you could've called me a brat. Some might even say I deserve this. No, that's a lie. No one would wish this on their worst enemy. But the fact remains, only you know I'm not dead. I'm alive and in this cell about to be sold. I've been hurt, touched, violated in every sense but rape, and stripped of everything I used to be.

But to my mother? I'm dead. I died. Who knows if she'll ever truly find out what happened to me.

The scribbling of my pencil stopped. I sucked in a ragged breath, trembling hard as I relived what I'd been through.

My will to stay breathing had vanished. It'd taken them a while to break me, but they had. And now that they'd achieved their goal, I was nothing more than cargo waiting for the transaction to line their pockets.

For days, all I'd had for entertainment were my chaotic thoughts, awful memories, and overwhelming panic of what lay ahead. But that was before I found the chewed up, snapped in half pencil beneath the bed.

The find had been better than food or freedom; better because my traffickers minutely controlled both those things. I had no power to sway the regimented arrival of breakfast and dinner nor the ability to halt the fact I was being sold like meat to the highest bidder.

I had no control over being alone in a tiny room that had once been a hotel suite before its premises were bought for more unsavoury stays. The towels were threadbare with the sigil of some decade-ago establishment, and the carpet swirled with golds and bronze, hinting the décor hadn't been updated since the seventies.

Was that how long the pencil had lurked beneath my bed? Were the bite marks on the wood given by a rowdy toddler waiting for its parents to stop fussing so they could explore a new city? Or had a maid lost it while tucking starched white sheets with military precision?

I'd never know.

But I liked to make up fantasies because I had nothing else to do. I spent my achingly boring days going over every nook and cranny of my jail. They'd broken my spirit, washed away my fight, but they couldn't stop the

determined urge inside me. The instinct everyone had—or at least, I *thought* everyone had.

I'd been alone for so long now I didn't know what the other girls processed with me would do. Did they lie star-spread on the bed and wait for their future? Did they huddle in the corner and beg for their fathers to stop this nightmare? Or did they accept, because it was easier to accept than to fight?

Me? I ran my rubbed-raw fingertips over every wall, every crack, every painted and locked window frame. I crawled on my hands and knees, searching for something to help me. And by helping me, I didn't know if I meant as a weapon to fight my way out or something to end my struggle before it truly began.

It'd taken me days to go over every square inch. But all I'd found was this half-mangled pencil. A gift. A treasure. The nub was almost down to the wood, and I wouldn't have long before I had to find a way to sharpen my precious possession, but I'd worry about that another day. Just like I'd become a master at shoving aside my worries about everything else.

The one thing I didn't find was any paper. Not in the drawers of the weathered desk or in the cupboard beneath the non-functioning television. The only apparatus I could write on was toilet paper, and the pencil wasn't too keen on that idea, tearing the soft tissue rather than imprinting its silvery lines.

Nevertheless, I was determined to leave some sort of note behind. Some piece of me that these bastards hadn't taken and never would.

Taking another deep breath, I shoved aside my current conditions and clutched the pencil harder. Glancing at the door to make sure I was alone, I spread out my square of toilet tissue, making it tight and writable, and continued with my note.

I wish I could say a monster killed me. That a terrible accident caused this. And I can say that...to a degree.

However, the real reason I'm dead and a new toy about to be sold is mainly because of my upbringing.

That poise and confidence my mother drilled into me? It didn't grant me in good stead for a profitable career or handsome husband. It pissed people off. I came across as stuck-up, a know-it-all, and vain.

It made me a target.

I don't know if anyone will ever see this but you, No One, but if they do, I hope they forget what I'm about to admit. I'm an only daughter to a single parent. I love my mother. I do.

But if I ever survive what's about to happen to me, and by some miracle, I find freedom again, I'll keep this next part to myself when I recount my time in purgatory.

I love my mother, but I hate her.

I miss my mother, but I never want to see her again.

I obeyed my mother, but I want to curse her for eternity.

She's the only one I can blame.

The one responsible for me becoming nothing more than a whore.

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TWO DAYS passed.

In the world I'd been stolen from, two days was nothing. Two alarm clocks, two lessons at university, two evenings of talking on the phone to my friends, and two nights of wonderfully protected sleep where I stupidly believed no one could harm me.

In this new world?

Two days was enough for me to scratch at non-existent itches just to feel something. Two days meant I wore down my pencil then slowly picked at the wood to reveal more lead so I had something to occupy my time.

Two days meant I continued writing my toilet paper novel, all the while not knowing that at the end of forty-eight hours, my brief stay in limbo was over.

My processing was over.

My sale date complete.

They came for me at dinnertime. Instead of the usual bland rice and chicken or watery stew shoved through the hole in the wall, the door opened.

The door *opened*!

For the first time in weeks.

I'd been so alone with only grimy mirrors reflecting my slowly sallowing complexion for company that the visit clutched my heart. When I'd first been taken, I'd been curvy with adolescent softness, perky breasts, and rounded tummy. My brown hair curled and dyed a rich chocolate thanks to an appointment with my personal groomer at my mother's demands to look my best for her charity function.

The same function I'd been stolen from.

Before, my thoughts had been superficial, wondering how to lose my puppy fat and apply my makeup like models on YouTube. Despite my prissy appearance, I was smart and had just enrolled at a prestigious university to study psychology—just like my mother wanted. Following in her footsteps like she'd arranged all my life.

Now, my appearance and thoughts were of an entirely different girl. No longer a teenager, but a woman. My hair had faded back to its normal dark treacle brown. My frame had lost its curves thanks to the low-calorie infrequent menu I enjoyed.

I supposed I would've been happy if I still had my freedom. I got what I wanted. I was a little skinnier and no longer cared about hair dyes and fashion. Instead, I hated my transformation because it added another chain to the proverbial collar webbing around my throat.

"Come." The man clicked his fingers.

Seeing another human ought to have filled me with some sort of relief. Something intrinsic inside me needed company—even if that company was my doom. But I couldn't see his eyes or mouth or nose. He was a phantom, a caricature, hidden behind the Venetian face mask of a black and white joker with tears dotting his cheek.

Were the tears for me? Or just a mockery?

I took a step toward him, hating the obedient cower they'd instilled in me the first few days of my imprisonment. The bruises had faded, but the lessons had not.

But then, I stopped, looking back at the toilet tissue sheets of letters. Letters telling my story.

A story that would forever change the moment I left this room.

I had nothing of value anymore. The rags I wore from so many previous trafficked women weren't mine. The pillows I cried myself to sleep on weren't mine. My life wasn't even mine anymore. The desire to keep my scribbled thoughts was nonsensical, but I refused to leave yet another piece of me behind.

If I must face this new trial, I would do it with my past fisted in my palm like a talisman reminding me if I could breathe it, I could write it, and when I wrote it, I would find freedom from it.

"Now, girl!" The man stalked into the room, his mountainous posture ready to hurt.

Before he could grab me, I scurried to the desk and scooped up the flimsy pieces of my life. Clutching them tight, I ducked around his large girth and vanished out the door.

Out the door!

I'm out of the room.

The familiarity of my imprinted space was gone as I padded barefoot down the corridor graced with the same gold and bronze carpet. The heavy footfalls of my captor thundered behind me.

He didn't grab me or force me to slow. He knew as well as I did there was no escape. I'd been blindfolded when I'd been driven here, but they'd let me have my sight back once inside the building.

As we moved past locked rooms like any normal hotel, I forced myself to stand taller and brace myself for whatever came next.

You can get through this.

They wanted me alive, not dead.

For some reason, that thought didn't give the intended comfort...if anything, it made my fear escalate.

"Get in the elevator. We're going down." The man's voice boomed in the claustrophobic space.

Turning left, I entered the open foyer where four silver doors sat two by two. I cursed the slight shake in my hand as I pressed the button summoning one of them to open.

The chime sounded immediately, the elevator groaning wide, welcoming me into a dingy mirrored box.

I couldn't look at my reflection as I stepped inside and turned to face the closing exit. My legs peeked beneath the faded yellow shorts I'd been given. My skinny arms held the last remnants of my juvenile age in the baggy moth-eaten grey t-shirt. I didn't care to look at myself because the outward body didn't portray the inward soul.

Yes, I looked broken.

Yes, I obeyed implicitly.

But inside, I'd somehow glued the parts they'd shattered into something I treasured. I was stronger now than when I'd first arrived. I was no longer the wailing girl who'd been stripped, rough-washed with angry paws, and catalogued with other women. I kept my screams inside because there, no one could hear me.

No one could use them against me. Silence was a weapon I could wield better than panic. And if it meant I never uttered another word until I found freedom, then so be it.

The man crowded beside me, pressing level four.

Judging from the numbers on the hotel room doors we'd passed, I deduced they'd stored me on level twelve. How many girls were locked behind those barricades? How many floors held prisoners just waiting to be sold?

The descent swooped a little too fast, gravity clutching my tummy. I held my breath as the elevator opened again, revealing an identical landing platform.

The man nudged me between my shoulder blades.

I shot forward. No stumbling. No begging. Not one question or plea.

There was no point.

I rubbed my cheek where I'd been punched within hours of my arrival all those weeks ago. I'd demanded all sorts of things. I'd promised them pain once my mother found them. I'd believed I was a princess with a regiment of knights who would chase after me.

I'd learned quickly with their boots in my stomach and fists in my face that everything I trusted was a lie.

"Down here." The man pointed at the left corridor.

Padding in the chosen direction, I shivered as the softness of the carpet did its best to comfort me. The hotel was the perfect backdrop of nothingness. The temperature hovered at comfortable, so I never shivered or sweated. The lights shone an even illumination, so I never squinted or strained. Every sense controlled until I forgot what the wind felt like on my skin and the sun's rays upon my face.

Would I be allowed outside now?

Where is he taking me?

The man paced in front of me, pushing open a door to the old gym. The hotel must've been a four-star establishment, once upon a time, before it'd been bought and shot to ruin.

Entering the female changing room, where ivory tiles had turned grimy and ancient hairdryers hung like gas masks, I stopped for further instruction. Hanging on the wall was a garment bag, zipped but translucent, showing a white dress. Even from here, the pearled bodice and diamante

scarf draped on the hanger spoke of finery not welcome in such a downtrodden place.

The man behind his Venetian mask muttered, "Shower, do your hair, and get dressed. I'll collect you in one hour."

One hour of primping?

For what?

He leaned in close, smelling of fried food and beer. "Don't get any thoughts of running." Cocking his head, he stepped back as two other girls entered the space. "Ah, company."

The recent arrivals' shepherd pointed at matching garment bags on the opposite wall. Their dresses were black and grey. "Get ready, both of you."

Just like every facet of sensation was stolen by regimented air, heat, and approved stimuli, so too were our wardrobes. White, black, and grey. Monotones with no spectrum of colour.

My handler nodded at his lion-masked colleague. "You stand guard. I'll tell the boss we're almost ready."

The girls glanced at me. I glanced at them. We all glanced at the men who held our fate in their dirty clutches. The urge to ask what would happen burned my tongue. But I didn't. Not because I daren't or lacked the courage, but because I already knew the answer: the cold laughter, the mocking undertones, and the cryptic reply meant to terrify rather than console.

No, I wouldn't ask.

But my conclusion didn't reach the girl closest to me wearing a tatty pink sun-dress with tangled blonde hair. "Why are you doing this? What's going to happen to us?"

Venetian Mask looked at Lion. Together, they advanced on her, backing her against the tiled wall. They let the force of their aura batter her rather than physically maul, leaving me to think they'd hurt us to control us at the beginning, but now, we were worth more unmarred.

After all, what good was merchandise if it was ugly and bruised?

"I told you already. You're going to be sold, pretty angel." Lion stroked her cheek. "You're going to be chosen and transacted, and when that sweet, sweet money lands in our hands, you'll be gone. Bye-bye. No longer our concern."

The other girl with lacklustre red hair tripped backward, her mouth parting in a silent wail.

As if they didn't know? As if they'd spent the same amount of time as I had locked and alone and didn't see something like this coming. Perhaps, I'd read too many dark books or watched too many crime shows on television. Either way, I wasn't stupid, and I definitely wasn't naïve anymore.

Just like I would never go to university to finish my psychology degree, these girls would never return to their lives. Unlike me, who blamed her mother for her mess, they might blame a bad boyfriend or idiotic decision of drinking too much and trusting the wrong person.

No matter what led us here, we were on the same journey. Just with different destinations, determined by whoever bought us.

Turning away from the tears and laughing captors, I stripped from my shorts and t-shirt, placed my precious toilet paper words on the counter, and walked straight into a shower. There were no blinds or screens. My nakedness remained on display as I turned on body temperature water and squirted un-scented shampoo into my hair.

Being nude in front of strangers would've petrified me a month ago.

Now, I no longer put stock in such things because I had no control over who looked or touched or ultimately raped and destroyed.

Don't think about that.

Gritting my teeth, I lathered shampoo into bubbles. No aroma or comfort came from the soap. I missed my watermelon body scrub and raspberry lip-gloss. I hankered for fizzy drinks and a soft fleece blanket after a long day of studying.

What I wouldn't give to smell again. Hear again. *Feel* again.

While the other girls mourned their lives and feared their future, I welcomed relief. I was glad this stage was over. Another hour in that room would've driven me completely mad. At least this way, I had something to do, someone to challenge, someplace else to go.

And who knows, maybe I'll find a way to escape.

The noise of the shower as I held my head under its stream blocked all sounds. I kept my eyes closed while lathering my hair and didn't turn until I'd washed, used the razor provided to shave, and wrapped yet another threadbare towel around myself.

The men and their masks had gone, and the women had copied me, each taking a stall and dutifully but tearfully washing.

This wasn't a simple cleansing or preparation.

This was a baptism into Hell.

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TO NO ONE,

My mother always told me that bullies are people, too.

She warned me never to judge first impressions or be superficial like others. She said it wasn't my place to critique—not knowing if they were hurting or living a terrible life while picking on others.

Well, I would disagree based on my current predicament, but then again, these men aren't bullies, they're monsters. So I guess my mother's rule is safe.

Don't judge. Listen.

She promised me it would keep me in good stead, and I'd make friends, not enemies. What she didn't tell me was nobody liked to be watched like a specimen, and everyone hated a compassionate know-it-all.

And that was why I was targeted.

Or at least...I believe it was.

You see, No One, it all started as a normal evening. I dressed in my bedroom opposite my mother's. I slipped into the low heels she'd chosen, into the off-the-shoulder gown she'd selected, and hopped into the taxi she'd arranged.

I was thankful to be included because normally I wasn't.

I was proud of my mother. Respectful, wary...but not adoring. She loved me but didn't have time for silly children, even if that silly child was her own. She made sure I was old and wise so I could fend for myself while she dealt with adult bullies on a daily basis. She sold her services to the State to ease the burdens of psychopaths and paedophiles.

She treated us all like guinea pigs, wanting into our minds—asking why I did something instead of reprimanding. Demanding articulated words

rather than messy displays of emotion.

My friends called me crazy for trusting my mother's guidance. But I was a good girl, a kind daughter, a child guided by a woman who earned her living by lifting the veil in which humans hide. She made me believe I had the same magic, and it was my duty to help those without such a gift.

She made me what I was.

I suppose I have to be grateful for that because, without her strict upbringing, I would be like the girls snivelling even now in the corner while we wait to be collected for whatever comes next. I'm thankful to the woman who birthed me for giving me these life skills, but it doesn't mean I'll ever forgive her.

From the hours of 9:00 p.m. to midnight, I was safe. I mingled with suits and entertained in whispers, representing my mother and her business with the poise she demanded.

Only, around that witching hour when rules relax and tiredness creeps beneath fun obscurity, I met a man. While my mother intoxicated benefactors with her wit and hard-edged charm, earning generous donations for her charity for the mental well-being of people on death row (why anyone would want to donate, I had no idea), a mystery man called Mr. Kewet flirted with me.

He laughed at my teenage jokes. He indulged my childish whims. And I fell for every goddamn trick in his dastardly arsenal.

While others skirted this man, instinctually noticing something evil, I made it my mission to make him feel welcome. I didn't let the voice inside my head warn me away; instead, I believed in the firm and fast rule of 'Don't judge. Listen.'

My mother taught me wrong.

She made me sympathise rather than fear.

She made me believe in good rather than recognise the bad.

I danced with my murderer.

I smiled when he corralled me outside.

I tried to soothe while he threatened.

And when his hands went around my throat and strangled me, I still believed I could redeem him.

He killed me on the balcony of the ballroom only metres away from my mother.

And the entire time he did it, I still thought he was the one who needed saving, not me.

“Time’s up. You’d better be ready to go.”

My pencil stopped hacking at my toilet vellum. I needed to write what happened after I fell unconscious into Mr. Kewet’s killer embrace. How he’d brought me back to life in a world I no longer recognised. How everything I’d known and everything that’d made sense was suddenly scrambled and utterly foreign.

But Venetian Mask had returned, crossing his arms over his huge untuned bulk. Even his voice was nondescript with no accent or hint. Without facial features or racial clues, I had no idea where I’d been transported and what country I would belong.

Scrunching up my handful of pencil-scribbled paragraphs, I stuffed the tissue down my pearl-beaded bodice. My fingers trailed up the decorative dress to whisper over my throat. Even now, the shadows of finger-bruises marked me. Being strangled was a painful death. And one that left remnants in both aches and contusions, always there to remind when glimpsed in a mirror.

He’d killed me. I hadn’t been able to stop him.

So why couldn’t he have left me dead?

Why couldn’t this have been over rather than just beginning?

Because you’re worth far more alive.

I straightened my back.

I’d blow-dried my hair and applied the mascara and lipstick provided. I didn’t know why I bothered. However, prettiness might be a curse that could grant me a kinder fate. In my unsettling rationale, I figured the more someone paid for me, the better my overall treatment might be.

Unless that backfires and a psychotic billionaire buys me for marksman practice.

My throat closed as my heart did its best to find a stepladder and climb its way out of my chest. I swallowed it down again. As much as I didn’t want to face this, I needed my heart beating if I stood any chance of surviving.

Clipping over the tiles, I smoothed my white gown as if being presented to the prime minster. The quaint buttons on the back had been secured thanks to the help of the redhead. The satin kissed my body with no underwear to protect the sensitive skin of my nipples and core and

whispered over the floor a millimetre from being too long. The measurements were exact, right down to the size five white heels on my feet.

I'd never been a fan of white. I much preferred to wear black—because it gave the image of authority (according to my mother)—or pastels and colours depending on my mood at class.

White was too high maintenance. It got dirty with life stains within moments of putting it on. But it also granted an innocence that I understood why my traffickers had dressed me in it. My hair seemed glossier; my green eyes bigger, my complexion prettier.

The girl gowned in black looked harsh and older while the redhead in grey seemed washed out and already begging for a grave.

If we were about to enter a wolf's den, I didn't want to smell of blood before the fight. Keeping my shoulders back, I strode past the guard and fell into step with Lion Mask.

Silently, I followed our shepherds and led the sad train of slaves down the corridor, into the elevators, and down to level two.

There, commotion welcomed with sounds of conversation, masculine laughter, and a softly played piano.

It'd been so long since I'd heard music or felt the warm buffet of bodies that I lost myself. Forgetting my need to remain aloof and untouched, I slammed to a stop. My forgetfulness earned me a swat to the side of my head as Lion Mask shoved me forward.

I stumbled for the first time since I'd answered back during the first beating I'd endured and suffered through the lesson all over again.

Eyes locked onto me from all corners of the room.

Hungry eyes.

Mad eyes.

Lust-filled, terrible eyes.

All peering from behind a treasure trove of paper mache and plaster of paris masks.

A spotlight moved from the glittering silver ball drenching the space with twinkling lights directly on us. The piano stopped playing as the two girls and I made our way to the centre of what used to be a dance floor under the guidance of Venetian and Lion.

Now, it was a market pen. Complete with podium for inspection and auctioneer with his gavel. The two girls I'd showered with sobbed quietly

as they were lined up in a procession of other women. Women who'd lived in this hotel with me, but I'd never seen. Women of all ages and ethnicities, all stolen from their rightful place and treated like livestock.

My friends wouldn't really miss me because they didn't understand me. I had no boyfriend to mourn me, no father to come search for me. As far as connections and family went, I was lacking.

I supposed it made it easier for me to switch off the desire to love and be loved, knowing I would never feel such a thing again. But it also hurt more because, at least, if I'd had those things, I could say I'd lived briefly; that I hadn't taken my freedom for granted.

Now, all I would know was captivity.

As a man in a perfectly pressed tux and black executioner's mask strode around the room holding a microphone to his hidden lips, the atmosphere hushed in expectation.

"Welcome, gentlemen, to the QMB, also known as Quarterly Market of Beauties." Sweeping his hand down the line of merchandise, he said, "As you can see, we have quite a turn-out for you tonight."

One by one, he pointed at us.

We were the only ones bare faced and on display.

One by one, we shrank into ourselves.

Twelve counted before me.

I was lucky thirteen.

Or was that *unlucky* thirteen? All I needed was a black cat, a fallen down ladder, and a witch's superstition to well and truly curse me.

The man strode proudly as if he'd personally created each and every one of us. If he was in charge of stripping us of everything and rebuilding us into nothing, then perhaps he had. Maybe he *did* own us and had full right to sell something I no longer recognised.

"As usual, we have a range of beauties available for your pleasure. You've all had time to peruse their files and photos we supplied."

Wait, what photos and files?

Had our rooms had cameras? Were we secretly catalogued and investigated? My chest rose and fell, pressing against the words I'd scribbled on the stolen toilet paper. Did they know about my tentative writing? Would they take it away from me?

My questions kept me occupied while the man cut over the dance floor and grabbed the first girl in the lineup. Dragging her forward, he forced her

onto the podium, holding her until she caught her balance.

The spotlight showed her every stress line, every terror, every tear. She couldn't hide anything beneath such an invasive glare. Her facial nakedness was made worse as no humanity stared back. Only animal masks and robot masks and all manner of creations.

I don't want to look like her.

I wouldn't let these assholes see my horror. If they refused to let us see them, I refused to let them see me. I didn't have feathers or diamonds to hide my true self, but I did have willpower.

It took four girls to school my features into a rigid, unfeeling shell. Another four girls for me to delete emotion from my gaze and grab what was left to stuff into a newly formed suitcase inside (or should I say soulcase) and slam the lid closed. It took the final four girls to find a way to lock that soulcase, banish all my secrets, hopes, and aspirations, and toss away the key.

My name was Tasmin Blythe, but as my turn rolled around and I was forced to stand proud and prideful on the podium, they gave me a new name. A name forever reminding me of where I came from but stripping me of everything else at the same time.

Pimlico.

After the London suburb where my mother's function was held.

No longer Tasmin. Pimlico...*Pim.*

I'm glad.

I no longer had to fake being strong and aloof; Pimlico was strong and aloof. Tasmin was locked deep, deep inside and forgotten as I blinked in the bright lights and heard the most damning thing of all.

"I'll pay one hundred thousand."

"I'll go two hundred."

"I'll outbid you all and double it." The room sucked in a gasp as a silhouette of a tall, slender man stepped onto the dance floor. "Four hundred thousand dollars for the girl in white."

My heart once again tried to build a parachute and escape. That was the highest bid of the evening.

It *disgusted* me.

How dare they decide my worth? What my fellow slaves were worth. No price tag existed on a human life.

My life.

I hadn't said a word since the third day of my incarceration. I hadn't answered their questions about my age or sexual history. I refused to share any number of invasive requests.

I'd taken that small power even though they no doubt knew everything they needed thanks to my driver's license and social media.

But now...here, on the eve of my sale, I had something to say.

Balling my hands, I glared at the indistinct man who wished to own me. My voice rang out, soft but pure, the only feminine sound in a nest of men.

"I bid one million. Let me buy myself, sir, and I will forget any of this ever happened."

The bought girls, already ushered and clung to by new masters, gasped. My audacity could shorten my life or prolong it. Either way, it was a gamble I willingly and knowingly chose.

I didn't have a million. My mother might if she sold our two-bedroom flat in London. But just like I pushed other worries to be solved on a later day, I pushed this one aside, too.

Money was just money.

Pennies added to dollars and dollars added to hundreds.

In the end, the prettily printed paper was worthless because inflation stole its numerical profit, unable to keep those who owned it happy.

My life, on the other hand, would increase in value, growing wiser and richer in experience the longer I survived. I was an investment, not a liability. And I would invest everything I had into giving myself a future.

The man stepped forward, cutting through the glare so his silhouette turned into physical mass. His dirty blond hair was the only thing visible behind the princely mask of some English Lord. "You're bidding on yourself?" His voice sounded foreign, but I couldn't place the accent. Mediterranean, perhaps?

Tipping my chin, the podium put me higher than him as I looked down as if he were my subject and I was his queen.

I would rule him. I would never bow.

"That is correct. I am too expensive for you. One million pounds, not dollars. I bid well over your pathetic amount."

The auctioneer fumbled, clearly uncertain what to do with this change of events. His business was in the money-making game. Selling women was high profit, but if he could earn more by selling me to myself, what did he care if certain corporate rules were broken?

He got paid either way.

Ignoring the man in his English Lord mask, I faced the executioner, begging his gavel to fall on my offer. "One million, sir, and I walk away and never mention this again."

What about the other girls?

My mother would curse me for the shame and guilt I suffered at the thought of leaving the sold women. But she'd also be proud because I'd chosen a path with decisiveness and conviction. Something she said I'd always lacked.

Happy now, Mother?

The room erupted in murmurs of deliberation while I stood in the sea of ebbing voices.

For a moment, I stupidly believed I'd won. That I'd played my hand at the perfect time and earned my freedom. But I hadn't learned my final lesson.

Pride goeth before the fall.

And I was about to plummet.

"I see your offer and raise you," Lord Mask murmured. "One million, five hundred thousand *pounds*, not dollars. What say you?"

Before I could reply—before I could increase my bid and change my circumstances, the dreaded gavel fell.

"Sold!" the auctioneer yelled. "To Mr. Lord for one million, five hundred thousand pounds."

* * * * *

To No One,

That was the last time I spoke. The last time I lost. The last time I knew what it was like not to live every day in pain.

From that day onward, I was Pimlico the Mute, the Voiceless Woman in White.

No matter what that man did to me, I didn't break.

No matter the beating he gave or the sexual punishment he delivered, I remained speechless and strong.

I'd like to say I found a way to escape. That I ran. That I'm writing this to you from a quaint coffee shop in London with a handsome boyfriend on my left and a best friend on my right.

But I've never been good at lying.

This toilet paper novel was never going to be fiction.

This is my autobiography so that one day, when my worth has been used, and every penny my master paid for me has been cashed, someone might recall the wordless slave who endured so much.

Maybe then, I'll be free.

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TESS HUNTER

Can't
TOUCH
This

Even though you really, *really* want to ...

BLURB:

I don't want to touch it.

I really, *really* don't.

**He's egotistical, crass, and my patient's owner—which makes him
totally off limits.**

Yep, that's right. He owns the wiener I'm currently working on.

A wiener dog—get your dirty mind out of the gutter.

**I've also worked on his Spoodle, his Cocker-shitzu, and a Cheagle—
don't ask. (And no, it's not a sexual position).**

**It doesn't help that he also represents most of my joint-owned
veterinary practice's small clientele. We'd only just opened the doors a
few months ago, and in he strode with a yelping Taco Terrier. One
haughty look at our sparkling new facilities, he'd demanded royal
treatment, even though I was currently finger deep up a squalling tom
cat.**

Ever since then, he expects me to serve him.

Any time. All the time.

Him and his revolving zoo of dogs.

**One of these days, I'm going to swat him for being such a pompous ass
but I can't deny the way he handles his charges makes me want to see
past the 'do as I say and don't ask questions' barking exterior.**

But then last week...he caught me staring at his um, *cough*, package.

His bossy commands switched to a cocky smirk.

**He gave me permission to do something I promised myself I would
never *ever* do.**

I can touch it.

If I want...

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CHAPTER ONE

Vesper

“OH GOD, OH GOD, OH God.”

“Wow, you’re feeling extra religious this morning.”

I looked up, glowering at my best friend and business partner, Polly Dartford. Yes, her name sounded as if she’d stepped from a musical and somehow ended up in a Jane Austen love story, but her head was screwed on so damn tight, I honestly didn’t know how we’d made it through university together.

I thought the key to a ‘dynamic duo’ was one was kooky and fun and not afraid to shag a few bad choices or drink a few stupid decisions, while the other was so straight-laced her life was a proverbial straight jacket.

We couldn’t both be so by-the-book and organised and disciplined—where was the fun in that? And how were we supposed to relax when we wound each other up with work stress and life worries?

She was supposed to be the funny one while I was the serious one.

But no.

There was no opposite in our girl bestie relationship.

“He just walked in. Didn’t he? I think I hear him.” I stood on my tiptoes, improving just marginally on my average height that I refused to jazz up with heels (screw that, they hurt my feet). I did my best to sneak a peek through the small window on the door to reception.

Polly rolled her eyes. “If you’re so freaked out about helping him, take my eleven a.m. appointment and I’ll do yours.”

Oh, really?

As if.

She didn’t do well with anything off track from her colour-coded diary. Hell, who was I kidding? I was the same. My phone regularly beeped with

reminders and friendly prods to stay on track with my responsibilities.

That was the reason (but not the only reason—oh no, not by a long way) why I could barely tolerate Ryder Carson.

Dropping my voice, I hissed, “Nice offer, but next time, actually put some enthusiasm and commitment behind it.”

Polly huffed. “Whatevs, it’s called being supportive.”

“Being supportive means actually wanting to do what you just said because it benefits your best friend.”

“Pffffttt.” She laughed. “Who would honestly want to deal with that man?”

“Exactly my point.”

She squinted at the window, trying to make out if it was him or not.

“It wouldn’t be so bad if he made a damn appointment.” I swiped hair from my blue eyes that earned a lashing of mascara in the mornings and that was it. No eyeliner, no colourful eye shadows—no beautification of any kind, thank you very much. After all, what was the point?

Most days I hung around females of the human variety and a menagerie of the animal kind. A four-legged friend didn’t care if I looked like a haggard twenty-four-year old or a botoxed diva.

As long as I cured them, that was all they needed to know.

“How about you put your foot down this time?” Polly finished wrapping the final dressing on the poor tabby’s leg that’d been hit by a car, and cocked her chin for me to grab the bottom corners of the medical sheet the unconscious pussy cat lay on.

Together (thanks to years of practice), we lifted seamlessly and ever so gently placed the kitty back into its cage for it to wake as the anaesthesia faded.

The setting of broken bones was easy these days. The sight of blood and scalpels had been my worst nightmare when we’d suffered our first practical classroom together at Trithorn University. We’d met at orientation—bumping into each other as we jotted notes into matching moleskin journals.

It had been love at first sight.

However, our chosen profession had not. We’d almost thrown up on that first practical, staring with tear-filled eyes at the frozen but now thawed mouse we had to dissect.

Funny how education, age, and time could turn even the timid of students into capable veterinarians.

Now, we could perform minor to major operations without breaking a rapid heartbeat.

“My foot *has* been down, Pol. Since the very first time he waltzed his stupid butt in here.”

Polly laughed. “And he does have a butt. A nice butt. But I don’t know if it’s stupid.” She cocked her head. “Besides, how does one’s anatomy go about becoming stupid when its only function is forward prolusion and a comfy cushion to sit on?”

“Shush it.” I massaged my temples. “Why are you thinking so in-depth about his butt?”

“Why are you bringing his butt into conversation?”

“Ugh, I can’t win with you.”

She giggled harder, arranging the drip and checking the cat’s mouth position while it slumbered in la-la land. “I’ve seen you looking at it.”

No way.

I haven’t.

I got an eye full when he put that Great Dane on the table but that’s it.

Polly wagged her eyebrows. “I hear your brain trying to come up with excuses. Just own it, Ves. You looked. You liked. You ogled.”

“I did not *ogle*.” My chin rose with a haughty sniff. “I’m a professional.”

“A professional who appreciates good looks.”

Like she could talk. Miss Innocence.

“You’ve looked at it, too,” I said.

She nodded sagely as if this fact was not only entirely obvious but utterly acceptable. Her chestnut hair, braided in a long fishtail down her back, swished on her baby blue scrubs. “I’ve looked but unlike you—I haven’t touched.”

My mouth fell open. “*Me?* You think I’ve *touched* it?” My palm planted over my heart still encased in surgical gloves. “Nuh-huh. I would *never* do such a thing. If I never saw that egoistical butt again, I’d be so much happier.”

Why the hell are we still talking about his butt?

We really needed to see other people. Maybe get laid.

I made a mental note to make a memo to arrange a new activity or go online and set up a date with a stranger. Odd things happened if you spent too much time working with no play.

Polly ignored my need to prove my purity. “So, you’re saying if he never brought another dog in here, never demanded in that sexy-as-hell voice for you to drop everything and look after his pooch because he can’t stand to see him in pain—you’d be okay with that?”

I crossed my arms, nodding resolutely. “Totally.”

“Good. Tell him that then.”

“But—”

“But nothing. Either tell him that he needs to make an appointment and I’ll deal with his zoo from now on, or suck it up. You can’t ask him to leave the clinic. We need his patronage.” Polly gave me her stern *‘this is what is going to happen because I know best’* look as she stripped off her gloves and headed toward the basin to wash up. “Your choice, Ves.”

So far we’d set a cat’s leg, had a consultation with an elderly blue-rinsed woman and her bad mannered Pookimo, and argued (Polly called it a discussion) about our need to hire another assistant—or if we could afford it, another vet.

My view was we didn’t have the income to expand the team just yet. Polly’s view was our practice was growing too fast and if we wanted to keep up with demand, we had to find a way to afford more salaries.

Even button tight and too like me in every sense of stuckupness, she was a little laxer with money when it came to things we needed than I was. My money was spent on other things.

“You suck,” I grumbled.

“Sorry, chicka, I only suck for the right guy.” She winked. “And last time I saw you naked, you didn’t have a worm in your shorts.”

“Eww, a *worm*?” I burst out laughing. “Seriously, Pol, who the hell have you been dating?”

“Um, Vesper?”

My shoulders rolled as our receptionist—a nineteen-year-old first year vet student, Amanda—stuck her head around the door. “Mr. Carson is requesting your services.”

Dangnamit, it is him.

“Oh, I bet he is.” Curtailing my laugh, I pointed at Polly to keep her thoughts to herself. “You...zip it.”

Polly held up her hands as if at gunpoint. “I wasn’t going to say a thing.”

“He said it’s urgent,” Amanda added. “He’s pacing. He says he won’t leave until you’ve done what he requires.”

Oh my God, that man and his high-handed demands.

Perhaps I should head out there on my knees already in grovelling pose, so his need for utmost obedience and servitude was fulfilled.

Tearing my gloves off, I huffed. “What does he have this time?”

Forearmed was forewarned, or was that the other way around? Either way, it wouldn’t make dealing with this man any easier. He was the thorn to my rose; the cloud to my sun.

He annoyed me, all right? I didn’t need a reason why. And I definitely didn’t need my business partner making me feel as if I cheated my own self-worth if I occasionally —*just occasionally*—slipped and looked at his butt.

It was a good butt.

Damn it.

Amanda looked over her shoulder. “It’s a wiener today.”

“Oh, no. Not again.” Flashbacks of our first meeting unravelled in my head like a bad horror movie. Him flopping the wiener on the table and growling for me to fix it. Him looking at my sparkling equipment and saying if I saved his wiener, he would be back with twenty more.

It had sounded like a crude pick-up line.

And who the hell had twenty wieners?

I hadn’t believed him.

Yet the next week, he was back with a Shih-mo and a Puggat (they sound exotically incredible but they’re just fancy names by breeders to sell cross-breed dogs for thousands of dollars). I didn’t condone the use of hybrid names but I did condone mixing bloodlines. There were too many mental and immune issues with purebred canines.

Poor Dalmatians were devolving in their mental capacity and becoming the equivalent of doggy rejects because they’d been inbred too many times.

But that’s beside the point.

He’s here with yet another pet project.

And I was his victim.

Polly burst out laughing as she patted my shoulder. “I bet he has a big wiener.”

I groaned. “Seriously, what are you? Twelve?”

“Would a twelve-year-old know that when I say wiener with sarcasm, I’m really talking about his cock?”

I plugged my fingers in my ears. “Ugh, I don’t want to think about his cock.”

I’m already thinking too much about his butt.

“Oh, please.” She yanked my elbow, dislodging my attempt at protecting my innocent ears and my brain from dirty thoughts such as Mr. Carson’s wiener.

I mean cock.

I mean...don’t think about his penis.

She giggled. “You really need to get laid.”

“I was just thinking the same about you.”

“Perhaps we can double date and fix both our problems.” Polly smiled.

“Ms. Fairfax!” A masculine growl came through the crack in the door behind Amanda. “I’m pressed for time and this dog needs attention. Can you hurry up and put the poor creature out of its misery?”

“Oh my God.” I slapped my forehead. “Does he have on/off switch? Can’t he have a second’s worth of patience like a normal person?”

“Do you want me to tell him to make an appointment?” Amanda tugged the end of her black haired ponytail.

“No!” Polly squeezed my shoulder before not so subtly shoving me toward the door and the most impatient, egotistical man I’d ever met.

“Vesper will do her job. Won’t you, Ves?”

Nope.

“You go do it.” I fought her pushy pushing. “Go play with his wiener.”

“No way. You’re the one who made him that way. First impressions and all that—this is your fault, and he’s your client now and always.”

“How the hell do you figure it’s my fault?” I whirled on her. “You’re seriously blaming this on me?”

She held up her hands. “Hey, you shouldn’t have been all ‘Why, yes, Mr. Carson, we were just closing but I’ll look at your Cockapoo right away.’”

“It wasn’t a Cockapoo.” I crossed my arms. “And it’s called a business. I was providing good service, Pol.”

She laughed. “Doesn’t matter. You let him dictate your time.”

This argument was getting on my nerves. “He was a new client. We’d only been open a few weeks.”

“All the more reason to remain nice to our customers.”

“Can’t I just be nice to the animals and not the humans?”

Polly smirked, pushing me unwillingly toward the door. “No.”

“Why?” I whinged as Amanda disappeared to tell him I was at the mercy of his numerous demands. The murmur of voices heralded me closer to yet another tense and embarrassing situation that I always suffered when Ryder Carson came to visit.

“Because the humans have the money. And we needz it.” Spanking my ass, Polly blew me a kiss. “Now shoo. Go and give that man’s wiener extra special attention.”

I flipped her the bird as I vanished out the door.

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CHAPTER TWO

Ryder

FUCKING FINALLY.

Took her long enough.

Pikachu wriggled in my arms as Vesper Fairfax blasted through the door separating the surgery to reception as if she'd been pushed from behind.

If this practice didn't have the best veterinary equipment in Thorn River (a tiny town located in Brisbane, Australia), and wasn't so close to my house, I wouldn't put up with the dilly-dallying of its resident vets.

"Ms. Fairfax, did you come via Canada? Is that your reason for the delay?"

Her cheeks heated with a mixture of embarrassment and rage.

I didn't care that I annoyed her. She'd annoyed me by being tardy. I had a dog in pain. Didn't that mean anything?

She glared. "I assure you that despite your unplanned arrival and urgent demands for care; I will do my best for your pet."

I huffed. "Your website says pop-ins welcome and critical care takes paramount. Are you saying those terms aren't correct?"

Her chin lifted, revealing the length of her milky throat and the sexy sharp angles of her cheekbones. Out of all the women I'd met, dated, and dealt with, she was the prettiest.

Which pissed me off.

I would've been much happier if she was a troll with sausages for fingers and warts on her nose—then, perhaps, I could focus on the reason (the only reason) I was in a vet's office.

The current poor beast in pain.

However, her blonde curls, slightly upturned nose, and damn pixie features meant my cock wanted to visit just as much as doing the right thing by the dogs I cared for.

The first time I'd seen her came back to haunt me as she glowered with ice blue eyes. What did I do for my first impression?

I tripped.

Literally, I tripped over my fucking shadow.

Not because she was drop-dead gorgeous in a nerdy librarian kinda way, but because she'd smiled so big and kind, she'd somehow removed the fear about my charge's agony and assured me it was okay to worry but she would hold that weight for a while.

Even though she'd just hung the closed sign, and clicked the lock for the night, she welcomed me in, booted up the computer, and assessed little Heineken (a rescue wiener from a family who deliberately fed him rat poison) and somehow managed to stop the diarrhoea and vomiting he endured.

The way she soothed both me and the dog caused memories of being cared for by my mum rise up and grab me around the throat. How long had it been since I'd been petted just for the sake of comfort? How many years had passed since I'd cared for another in the same way?

Too fucking long and I didn't know how to let my guard down anymore. I didn't know how to reciprocate simple kindness that didn't come with conditions or awful memories of death.

"Those terms are correct." The friendly sympathy she'd given me that first night had slowly vanished the more I was an asshole. "But it doesn't mean I'm yours to snap your fingers at and make me magically appear."

The more we met and stood shoulder to shoulder while discussing the symptoms of a sick poodle or spaniel, the more a wall went up between us.

It was my fault, even if I didn't mean to do it. And now, I needed a bulldozer to break it.

Not that I wanted to break it.

We had a professional relationship.

That was it.

That's all I want...I think.

"Oh no? I thought that's what money did these days."

Well, if I wanted to add another layer of cement for her hatred toward me, I just achieved it.

Great work, Ry.

"Did you seriously just say that?" Her hands slapped onto her hips. "Do you have no filter as well as no off switch?"

I had no idea what she meant by no ‘off switch’ but I would take responsibility for being a jerk.

“Look, I’m sorry—”

She cut me off. “What seems to be the problem, Mr. umm...Carson.”

The deliberate pause on my name was a stupid power trip. She damn well knew who I was. She’d known it the night I stormed in with a bleeding dog and had been nice to me. She’d listened with glowing concern and didn’t care that it was just us until well after ten p.m. by the time we’d flushed the poor dog’s system and ensured his vitals were good.

I’d liked her that night.

I’d liked her intelligence and caring and (yes, I will admit it) her perky rack beneath her light blue uniform.

The second visit had gone just as well. She’d listened to me with sincerity and the dog had fucking loved her. I couldn’t stop staring while her hands soothed the skittish creature and her peach lips regaled what she would do to help.

By the third visit, I was mildly obsessed with her and had full intentions of asking her out.

But then, she’d cooled.

And I had no bloody clue why.

The fourth and fifth appointment had been the same. She gave the dogs the best attention, scratched behind their ears, murmured to them in her sexy voice, but gave me no mind. I was just the wallet paying for said service.

Which was fine.

She wanted to be a shrew, I could be a...what? *What hunts a shrew?* A badger? A fox? Whatever stupid analogy. I would be a pissed off man and let her know I’d take my business elsewhere if she continued to be a brat.

Go where?

The other vet in town is a seventy-eight-year old man who can’t see around his cataracts and will probably cut off Heineken’s penis rather than his balls when it’s time to have him neutered.

Nope, I had to stick with Tales of Tails.

And because of that, it was time to chill out and remember how to be a gentleman and not an asshole.

Rubbing the back of my neck while holding the pooch like a soccer ball, I said, “Look, I’m sorry. I haven’t slept all night from rescuing this little

tyke.” I held up Pikachu like a white flag of surrender. “I need coffee and it seems like I need to avoid people until I’ve correctly installed my filter.” I half-smiled. “Truce?”

She tilted her head, her nostrils flaring as she deliberated.

“Look, if you’re wondering why I’m impatient, it’s because it’s not me I’m worried about...it’s him.” I jiggled Pikachu. “And the reason I’m being a jerk is because I don’t know how to transmit worry. It just comes across as nasty bastard.”

Accept my apology, goddammit.

I’d tried to be nice. I’d tried to thank her (to really show just how much her tenderness to mistreated animals meant to me), but my patience only stretched so far.

Her hands slid from her hips. “Nasty bastard, huh?”

Pikachu barked as if he understood our minor stand-off.

I shrugged. “Hey, if the description fits.”

“I wouldn’t say it fits.”

My eyebrow rose. “Oh? What would you say?”

She narrowed her eyes, assessing me. “Rushed, worried, empathic.” She sighed. “It’s me who should’ve given you some slack. I know what it’s like to wait while an animal is in pain.”

The tension between us faded.

My gaze dropped to her hands.

She had very pretty hands. Strong fingers with pale pink painted nails. Capable for delivering salvation. I wouldn’t admit it, but I had some nights where I fantasised about her petting me and not just the dogs I brought in.

My hug tightened around Pikachu as he trembled. If I could smell bleach and disinfectant, it must burn his sensitive nose.

“So this is the latest in need, is it?” She smiled at Pikachu who sniffed the air, trying to pinpoint her scent.

The wiener dog should’ve been called something like Bun Boy or Ketchup to play on his frankfurter shape, but his previous asshole owners didn’t care about names. They’d called him Shit Stain.

Which I refused to use.

So, I’d given him the nickname of the latest idiotic Pokémon craze after almost running over a few ‘poke ball hunters’ on the way here.

“Yep. He was found in an abandoned rental apartment where the owners were evicted a month ago. He’s been living on rotting food in the pantry

until he ran out and started howling.”

Whatever trace of annoyance she still held melted away as utmost sympathy filled her face. She drifted closer. “Oh no, you poor poppet. Did those nasty people not take care of you?”

The dog who’d been shivering as if I was about to put him on the BBQ with some fried onions instantly squirmed to get closer to her. His stupid banger-shaped body wriggled in need.

He whined as she kissed his nose. I did my best not to sniff her hair or perve down her top. Her closeness had muscles contracting and body parts swelling.

Christ, this woman did things to me.

Gritting my teeth, I let her pat the pooch. Her affection seemed random but her hands drifted from his ears, along his neck, to the stark skeleton beneath his faded chocolate coat.

“He’s severely dehydrated. How long have you had him?” She looked up. Having her so damn near and staring with intense concentration made my cock disobey and thicken in want.

I swallowed a groan as a stray blonde hair curled around her face from her loose ponytail. Normally, I went with women with more padding, more makeup, more interest in me and my little friend (excuse me, wrong word choice, *big* friend in my pants).

But there was something about this one. “Only a few hours.”

Thankfully, her eyes didn’t drift to my groin as her hands continued fluttering over Pikachu. “He needs to go on high vitamin diet and undergo some blood work to make sure the starvation hasn’t affected his kidneys. Are you okay with that?”

“Of course.” I cleared my throat. “Whatever you need to make him happy.”

“I guess I’ll just put it on your tab? Seeing as you’re our most frequent visitor.”

I stiffened. “Is there a law stating I can only visit every six months?”

She flinched. “Sorry, of course not.” Looking at Pikachu again, she asked, “Where do you get all these dogs, anyway?”

Finally, a question about me and not the welfare of the animals I brought in. A few meetings ago, I would’ve answered openly with no douche-baggery. But she’d been a cow to me first, might as well milk her a bit to see what sort of cream I could earn.

Another bad analogy?

So what, I wasn't a poet. Suck it.

"Oh, I can't help it if the bitches flock to me." I smirked.

She rolled her eyes. "That quip might've been smart if you only brought in female dogs." She clucked her tongue. "Unfortunately for you, your past few patients have been male." She cocked her head, her ponytail clinging to her shoulder in its curly glory. "Does that mean you're gay, Mr. Carson?"

What? Is that why she lost interest in me? *She thinks I'm gay?*

I narrowed my eyes. "Did you just think of that come back or have you been dying to inquire about my relationship status since we met?"

Her cheeks pinked. "I have no interest in your sexual or marriage status."

"Marriage? Jesus, who said anything about marriage?" I shoved Pikachu into her arms. "God, woman, if you think bringing around a few dinged up pooches is a proposal, I better get out of here stat."

A soft giggle sounded behind me.

Ah, yes. The receptionist. The impressionable young thing watching and listening to every erotic charged look between me and this stuck-up vet.

I didn't do young girls. Even though Ms. Fairfax was young, she'd lost that idealistic edge—the one that held fucking unicorns in their eyes believing that any guy they met was the one.

I wasn't the one. I was just a good time.

And I'd been willing to share that good time with this sexy woman currently cuddling my adopted sausage since I set eyes on her.

Backing away, she waved at the consultation room I'd been in half a dozen times already this month. "We can continue this discussion while helping your little friend."

My eyes glued to her ass. "Can I come too or do you intend to hold my hot dog ransom?"

"Depends? Are you going to garnish him with chilly and mustard?"

I couldn't stop it. My lips twisted into a smirk. "Dunno. If I did, would it entice you to go to dinner with me? He could be the main course. And I have plenty of ideas for dessert."

She slammed to a stop in the doorway, her eyes wide as the plate where such dinner would be served.

I tensed, waiting for her to shoot me down. The inevitable 'I have a boyfriend, asshole. How dare you step on his territory' or 'I've already been

pissed on by another tom cat thanks very much.'

However, she looked me up and down in the way only a woman can full of scorn and inconvenience, shoved Pikachu back into my arms, and headed into the room without me.

Well, that went well.

Following her into the small, sterile box where a stainless steel bench sat in the centre with charts of innards of canines and felines pasted the walls in happy festivities of medicine, I did my best not to stare.

Unfortunately, my eyes didn't get the order because they followed the contours of her legs, hips, back, before following her around the bench to the computer where she typed in my name and brought up the many files I'd opened due to my unusual occupation.

My gut tightened as she bit her lip, studying the screen. "Has this one been in before?"

"No." Hoisting the little wiener higher into my arms, he leaned into me for comfort. "This is Pikachu. He's new. Just like all the rest."

She nodded distractedly as she came closer and reached for the dog. Just before she touched him, she remembered whatever decorum the vet's handbook said they had to obey. "Oh, may I?"

"May you what?"

"Touch him?"

"Touch my wiener?"

She scowled. "Yes."

"You've already held him. I think you're past asking for permission." My lips twitched as stress trickled down my spine. There was something about this girl. She riled me up—made me want to act like an idiotic ten-year-old and pull her hair to tell her I liked her.

Be an adult. Get a fucking grip.

The idiotic ten-year-old inside me won. "You have to say it properly."

"Say what?"

"Can I touch your wiener, Mr. Carson."

She sighed, irritation bright in her gaze. "You truly need to install that filter we discussed. If you want someone to do the surgery to stop vulgar man thoughts from leaving your brain and vomiting from your mouth, I could recommend Polly if you want an impartial physician."

"Polly?" I wracked my brains. Thorn River was a small town but I hadn't met anyone called Polly before. And I would remember because all

parrots (especially ones belonging to pirates) were called Polly.

“Are you saying you wouldn’t be happy operating on me? You’d outsource my personality change to another?”

“Oh, you’d actually like me to do it?” She snorted. “And here I was thinking you didn’t trust my skills seeing as you have a death grip on your dog and refuse to let me inspect him.”

“Oh, you can inspect him. You just have to say the magic words.”

This is stupid.

Stop it.

But how could I stop when her reaction was so damn addicting?

Bending a little to bring our eyes in line, I murmured, “All you have to say is, ‘Can I touch your wiener,’ and then he’s all yours.”

“He, huh?” She rolled her eyes. “Rather convenient.”

I smirked. “It is convenient that Pikachu is a boy. Otherwise, the veiled insinuations of touching my cock would be odd if I referred to it as a girl.”

She pointed a finger in my face. “Ah ha, I knew you were talking about your...umm, manhood.”

I exploded in laughter, scaring the mutt. “Manhood? Oh shit, how old are you? Eighty and reading Fabio shirt rippers?”

She crossed her arms. “It’s a correct term for that part of a man’s body.”

“Sure it is. But cock sounds so much better.”

“How about dick?” She smiled sweetly. “That’s a common one and wouldn’t you know...it’s what you’re being right now.”

I couldn’t keep a straight face. I laughed harder. “Fuck, you’re adorable when you’re mad.”

She froze. “Who says I’m mad?”

“Your cheeks are pink and you’re yelling at me.”

“I’m not yelling.”

“Are too.”

“What are you? Twelve?”

I shook my head. “Nope. Older. In fact, I’m guessing I’m the perfect age for you.”

She swallowed hard. “And what exactly is that supposed to mean?”

“It means I’m probably slightly older than you which women seem to like and I’m taller—which is also a good thing from what I’ve heard, and I’m stronger. Therefore, I’m perfect.”

Wariness painted her face. “Perfect for what?”

“A date.” I held out Pikachu. “Go ahead and touch my wiener. But if you do, you have to go on a date with me. That’s the second time I’ve asked you. I deserve an answer—or an award for my patience.”

“Bah!” She wiped her hands on her scrubs. “No way.”

“No way you’re going to touch my wiener, or no way you’re going to go out with me?”

“Both.”

I hugged little Pikachu. “Shit, buddy, did you hear that? She’s refusing you basic medical care. I think we should report her.”

Her forehead furrowed. “I didn’t mean I wouldn’t touch *him*.” She waved her hand in my cock’s direction. “Just not that hot dog in your pants that you keep referring to.”

“Hot dog?” I grinned. “I’d say it’s more like a giant salami.”

She groaned. “You have no shame. Literally, no shame.”

“Glad you’ve learned something about me. I was beginning to think I was wasting my time.”

She shook her head. “I can’t work under these conditions.”

“Do you need a back massage?” I hoisted Pikachu under one arm, reaching for her shoulders. “I can do things with my fingers that guarantee to relax.”

She stepped backward. “Oh no, let’s just stay focused, shall we?”

“On the date? Good idea.” I cleared my throat, doing my best smouldering invitation. “Give me an answer. Go to dinner with me.”

CHAPTER THREE

Vesper

DID HE REALLY JUST ASK me out?

For the third time?

What the hell sort of date request was that? This was serious. He was here for the starved little creature in his arms. Not for his selfish needs.

Ugh, men.

This was why I didn't date. I didn't understand them and I had no time for things I didn't understand. I had important work to do—such as saving lives of dogs and cats and the occasion rabbit and budgie.

I didn't need a man moaning about my long hours or the stink of urine on my clothes from panicked puppies when I came home.

No way.

Not for me.

“Let's just do what you're here for, shall we?” I swiped back a runaway curl and grabbed a fresh towel from the stack we kept in the corner.

“Everything else isn't important.”

Not looking at him, I spread the towel over the stainless steel table and waited until Ryder placed the trembling wiener onto it.

I'd had a cat all my life and whenever she needed to visit a vet, the most stressful thing was trying to grip the slippery steel—unable to get good purchase while a stranger stuck fingers where they didn't belong.

I refused to let the animals I cared for go through such panic. The laundry of towels was a small price to pay for the animals who could sit calmly and have a stable foundation to face their worst nightmares.

Ryder Carson stood too close, but I didn't berate him. His hazel eyes hinted that he hadn't forgotten about a date but he was worried enough about the dog to let it go.

For now.

Without saying a word, he suddenly pushed off the table and headed toward the door where Amanda's voice trickled inside from another patient's arrival.

The soft click of the lock made my heart pound.

It was common practice to close the door.

We needed privacy to talk about delicate matters relating to the pet in question.

So why does it suddenly feel way too claustrophobic in here?

My heart hammered harder as my skin prickled in annoyance.

Yes, annoyance.

Not attraction or desire.

Not desire.

Definitely not desire.

"Will he be okay?" He moved closer to the table, placing his hands on the towel and smiling at the long skinny excuse of a dog. How anything like this survived evolution was beyond me.

Ryder's dark brown hair was messy and wild as if he'd run his hand too many times through the strands. His jaw held a five o'clock shadow that looked hard earned rather than a fashion statement, and his body gave off an aggressive but possessive aura that somehow frightened me and intoxicated me at the same time.

This man had hard edges and soft and the soft was only visible when he looked at hurting dogs and placed his trust in me to fix it.

His eyes burned a scorching hole through me as he waited for my reply.

I dropped my gaze. "He should be." Giving false hope was too easy in this business. As humans, we wanted to be the ones to offer hope and promises of being able to repair things. But in reality, sometimes we didn't have that power. I did my best not to make it sound like I could heal everything when sometimes that promise never came true.

That was the hardest part of this job.

Saying goodbye to a little soul who just wasn't saveable.

Grabbing my stethoscope, I held the wiggling body as he did his best to snuggle into my waist and listened to his heart.

The flurry was fast. I had to close my eyes to cut out the distraction of Ryder Carson and concentrate. Once I had the beats per minute, I finished listening and unhooked the stethoscope from my ears. "He's running fast,

but that's probably the adrenaline from being around people—especially if he's been abandoned and dumped into new sensations.”

Ryder didn't comment; merely nodded and let me run my hands over Pikachu's breakable bones and palpitate an empty stomach. “He doesn't feel hot or swollen anywhere, so I don't think he's hurt himself while on his own, but the lack of suppleness in his skin and dullness of his coat has me worried about his hydration.”

“You already said.”

My hackles went up. “Excuse me for repeating myself.” I smiled coyly. “After all, you are a man. Just being kind in case you didn't listen to me the first time.”

He bared his teeth, making his handsome face freaking drop dead gorgeous. With his messy hair flopping over his forehead and the three day scruff, he looked like any fuckable but perfectly acceptable bring-home-to-meet-the-family boyfriend material.

There was something about him that wasn't common in today's dating world. His green and brown swirled eyes didn't fit the persona of a playboy. I'd caught him checking out my boobs and even my ass, but he didn't give off that snaky, slimy vibe of wanting to get into my knickers just for the sake of tiddling his lizard in my kiddy pool.

He was intrigued by me but he wasn't going to lie about who he was to screw me.

Clearing his throat, he grinned. “You didn't hear a word I just said, did you?” He chuckled. “Wow, pot calling kettle black and all that.”

My shoulders tensed. “What does that even mean?”

“The kettle thing?”

I scratched Pikachu as an excuse to look away. I hadn't been paying attention. My damn uterus had stolen my brain function.

Stupid oestrogen.

Ryder smiled smugly. “I think it means, don't be hypocritical.”

My gaze shot up. “Did you just call me a hypocrite? You really are on a roll today.”

“Yep.”

“I'm not a hypocrite. That's a—”

“I just asked if I should grab some high strength puppy food to fatten him out and you zoned out on my—I don't even know what you were

staring at? My nose perhaps, it is rather good looking.” He patted the body part in question.

He was right. It was pretty proportional and dangnamit, I had to admit—it was a sexy nose.

“Shit, it wasn’t my mouth, was it?” He gasped overly dramatically. “Oh my, Ms. Fairfax, were you thinking about...” He leaned in, dropping his over-the-top act and sinking directly into sin. “...kissing me.”

“What?!” My cheeks switched from pale to bonfire. “No way.”

He inched around the table, coming closer with every step.

My eyes automatically dropped to his trousers where a very firm bulge made my mouth dry up.

“Maybe you *do* want to touch it.”

“Touch it?” My fingers squeezed the poor wiener, making him yelp. “I’m already touching it.” I patted the dog’s head. “See...touching it.”

He chuckled, knowing he’d rubbed a nerve and enjoying my reaction. “You know that’s not what I meant.” He stood with his legs spread boldly, giving me full view of what trouser snake he possessed. “You can squeeze my salami if you want. Poor Pikachu has been through enough, don’t you think?”

I threw my hands up. “Wow, you really are something else.”

“Something incredible, you mean?”

“Something delusional more like.”

He laughed. “You’re too easy.”

“Easy?!” How dare he call me easy? I wasn’t easy. I hadn’t had sex in sixteen months. That was the opposite of easy. I didn’t believe in internet dating and I had no life. I worked, I restocked the surgery, I went home to my pussy cat, and relaxed with a book or Netflix.

The end.

If I was easy, wouldn’t I be parading myself on line and going on tinder or whatever it was where sexual hook-ups took place these days? I mean, how did those sites even work? Had computer cameras advanced so far they delivered orgasms via the World Wide Web now?

The tense moment stretched.

Pikachu barked as his new owner encroached on my space, crossing the half-way point and into my territory.

Alert. Alert.

Mayday.

My heart went bananas as Ryder inched his fingers across the table toward mine.

I ripped them away.

I did the one thing a vet should never do.

I left my little doggy patient alone and unsupported on the table.

Panicking and feeding off the confusion in the room, Pikachu launched himself off the high ledge.

Everything happened in slow motion.

Ryder took a step back, his arms outstretched to catch the flying bratwurst. I threw myself forward, hoping to scoop the soaring sausage from the air.

He remained standing, I bent horizontal.

Horror ensured.

My face landed squarely on his cock.

Boom.

Nose to shaft, chin to balls.

I felt him.

Hard but soft. Hot but steel.

I felt him on my face!

Get it off.

Oh my God, what did I do in a previous life to deserve this?

A loud humph escaped his lips as victory replaced my shock. I caught the plummeting dog and saved the day. Standing up straight, I quickly placed the squirmy creature back onto the table and pulled out my script pad to jot down what he would need to buy.

He needs to leave.

Now.

I didn't care if Polly refused to look after him. She'd have to after this.

I'm mortified.

The poor guy was doubled over in pain, sucking in gasps of air.

By the time I'd scribbled a puppy formula and a few vitamins, he was able to stand upright. A loud laugh froze my fingers and I couldn't stop my head from tilting upward.

"You know..." He wheezed through another wash of pain. "I offered you the right to touch it. Not face plant into it."

He cupped the delicate meat and veg between his legs. It wasn't just snack size, either. It was banquet—need to go back for seconds and

possibly thirds—size.

Damn him.

Damn him and his sexy face and alluring cock.

Tonight, I wouldn't just be reading, I would be scrolling online for a vibrating friend to replace the broken one I'd put out of commission last month. I hadn't replaced it up till now because I didn't want to have the temptation every night.

Who had a relationship with her fun-for-one wand, anyway? Not a sane woman. But this sort of issue was *exactly* why a woman had a relationship with battery operated toys.

Because situations like this—face in crotch situations—wouldn't be nearly as awkward if she'd had an orgasm or three, and could withstand the nuclear superpowers of a virile single man sniffing around for sex.

Go away, superman, and leave me be.

However, if Ryder heard my silent request, he did the opposite. Leaning toward me, he inhaled.

Did he just *sniff* me?

He said, "You know, if you were interested, you only had to ask."

"I'm not."

"Not interested or not in the mood to ask?" He grinned. "Because really, you just took advantage of me in your work place behind locked doors. That's a case for the courts. Don't you think?"

"You wouldn't." I froze. "It was an accident. You know it was. You wouldn't dare—"

He buffed his nails on his white t-shirt beneath a faded brown bomber jacket—even his clothes were hot. Where did men like him shop? Sex-R-us?

"I would dare if you continue to annoy me."

My heart raced. I didn't know if it was from a threatened law suit or the sexual awareness fizzing my blood. "How am I annoying you? I do everything you ask. I drop my other patients when you show up. I give you discounts on supplements—"

"Only because I bulk order and give you a small fortune."

Well yes, but that's beside the point. "That doesn't mean—"

"That you're obligated to go out with me?"

I nodded.

“But it does mean that I’ve been nice to you—the perfect customer. All I wanted was safety and consideration when using your practice. What would the jury have to say if I told them you tried to extort me for more money by coming on to me?”

I couldn’t do this. “You’re insane.”

“I’ve been called that before. Doesn’t stop me getting what I want.”

Don’t ask.

Don’t be that stupid.

My mouth didn’t get the memo. “And what do you want?”

His smile turned into a shark. “You, of course.” Taking my hand that was firmly planted on Pikachu’s shoulders to prevent any more jumping mishaps, he curled his fingers around mine. “I accept your offer of a date. After all, that’s what your face on my cock meant, right? In some barbarian language, sniffing my man goods is code for ‘take me out, you stud?’”

I groaned. “Oh my God, did you just call yourself ‘man goods’ and ‘stud’ in the same sentence?”

He smirked. “Yep. And I’ve plenty more self-compliments to come. At dinner.”

“No dinner.”

“Yes, dinner.”

“I work late.”

“So unwork.”

I rolled my eyes. “This is my business. I can’t just play hooky.”

“Hooky is fun, now and again.” Moving back to his side of the table, the intensity faded and the crazy innuendoes vanished as if they’d never existed. He rolled his shoulders, sighing heavily. “Look, forget it. You know I’m joking. Just having a bit of fun.”

The sudden switch left me high and dry.

I knew it was a joke.

Didn’t I?

But that was the problem. He made me hate being so damn serious all the time. With him I could be stupid and say juvenile things. He offered a break from adulting and that was far too tempting.

“Okay, fine.” Forcing myself to focus on being a professional, I murmured, “Let’s just finish this.”

Ryder obeyed (for the first time) and our attention landed on the shivering wiener. I grabbed a sterilised syringe and drew blood while Ryder

kept him calm with soft words and petting.

Medical terms and recommended treatments filled my head rather than images of riding this intoxicating man reverse cowgirl in my office.

Once the dog's blood had been gathered and labelled for lab work, I said, "You'll need to feed him four times a day but in small amounts so his stomach doesn't explode."

"Hear that, buddy?" He scratched the mutt under his chin. "Don't want an exploding tummy now do we?"

The pooch yipped and licked Ryder's nose.

I melted.

I was no longer a girl but a puddle.

How did this happen?

This infuriating man and his jackass jokes turned into putty when he spoke to a creature with four legs.

Maybe, I should get on all fours and he'd be nicer to me.

The idea shoved aside treatment plans once again in favour of blow jobs and addicting kisses, proving to myself that I sucked as a vet and needed to either go back to university or never be in the same room as Ryder Carson again.

Polly can have him.

This business was half hers. She could take one for the team.

However, as Ryder grabbed his wiener and held out his hand for the script, the thought of him having the same kinky, heated conversation with Polly, instead of me, twisted my gut.

Shit.

I liked him.

And there was no room in my colour-coded diary for a dirty talker, pooch lover, and gorgeously handsome man.

Even if I did want to touch it.

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